

# THE GATE OF THE FERAL GODS

DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL BOOK IV

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DANDY HOUSE

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Capital punishment means those without the capital get the punishment.

- EXECUTED PRISONER, JOHN A. SPENKELINK



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**PHASE ONE OF FOUR. THE GNOMES.**

**Time to Level Collapse: 15 Days.**

**Views: 1.43 Quintillion**

**Followers: 7 Quadrillion**

**Favorites: 2.4 Quadrillion**

**Leaderboard rank: 3**

**Bounty: 800,000 gold**

**Welcome, Crawler to the fifth floor. “The Siege Engines”**

**Sponsorship bidding initiated on Crawler #4,122.  
Bidding ends in 45 hours.**

**Remaining Crawlers: 178,887**

**Entering Bubble #543 out of 1172. Air Quadrant.**

**New Achievement! The Quarry Sees Another Spring.**

**You managed to enter a stairwell while listed in the current top 10. You're a survivor. A scrapper. And just as the buck's antlers grow another point as they mature, you too, have grown as both a crawler and as a prize.**

***Reward:* You have received a Gold Venison Box! Don't get too excited. It's just money. In addition, all bounties against you now and in the future will have a (x2) modifier attached.**

**Hey, at least the prize for surviving the floor goes up, too.**

"What the shit?" I said, seeing the notification. Nobody had warned me our bounties would double. Mordecai hadn't mentioned it, nor had I seen it listed in the cookbook. I wondered if that was a new thing. *Those fuckers.*

I coughed, regretting I'd said anything out loud. I spit the sand from my mouth.

Tens of thousands of crawlers hadn't made it past the last few hours of the fourth floor. I felt my fist clench and unclench as we trudged forward, leaning into the wind.

Donut mewed with irritation from my shoulder. Hot wind blasted against us, and every time I breathed, my mouth and nose

started to fill with sand. We needed masks. We could only talk using chat.

We'd stepped from the warehouse onto the fifth floor just a few minutes after the fourth level collapsed. I felt the standard rumble in the ground while we were still in the warehouse, but it was much more distant than usual.

**Donut: I NEED TO PICK A NEW CLASS! I REALLY WISH THEY GAVE ME MORE TIME. THE CHOICES ARE ALL DIFFERENT.**

**Carl: Mordecai. Help Donut choose. We're in an air zone, and Odette said it's a crafting level.**

**Mordecai: There you are. By the gods, did Odette make you clean her house first before she let you go? I'm already here and have been gathering intel. Come to the town that's hunched up against the northwest curve. The walls block the sand storms. Locals say the storms only last an hour or two each day. Apparently there's only two towns in the area. Donut, read me your choices.**

Donut quickly read off some of the class choices. None of them had a flying ability. Many sounded more interesting and exotic than usual, like Nine Tails and Demigod Attendant, though there were a few in there that had to be a joke. Like Vape Shop Counter Jockey. Mordecai asked rapid-fire questions. He zoomed in on two choices.

**Mordecai: I'm torn. The class choices keep getting better. We still need to keep your Constitution up. You just lost ten points from losing your Football Hooligan. There's two that'll replace it and more. Glass Cannon normally forbids you from adding to your constitution upon level-up, but it comes with a plus fifteen constitution base, and it'll also greatly increase your training speed on all spells. It does not increase your intelligence, but it lowers the cost of all spells, which is**

**almost the same thing. Your *Magic Missile* will be much stronger, and it's already pretty strong. You can't train constitution anyway, so it's a good choice, especially if we grind on your magic. But if you don't actually obtain some of those benefits, it could be a waste of a class.**

Donut's Character Actor benefit went up in power each time she descended a floor, but it still came with a risk. She didn't always obtain all of the chosen class's benefits, and once she picked, it was set for the floor.

**Mordecai: I'm waffling between that and Crash Test Dummy.**

**Donut: I AM NOT CHOOSING A CLASS WITH DUMMY IN THE NAME.**

**Carl: What does it do?**

**Mordecai: It's actually a tank class, but it has a few benefits that might come in handy on this floor. It comes with a tremendous plus twenty to constitution, plus five to her Cockroach skill, the limb regeneration benefit, *Shield* level five, and potentially the Engineering Plan benefit, which adds one level to all the crafting tables in your space. It's a great class. It's easily the better choice short term, but long-term, the only potential benefit she might keep once the floor is done is that *Shield* spell. Which she needs. If she picks the other one, she'll likely be much stronger at the end of the floor.**

Shit. I could see the benefits of both. Crash Test Dummy would keep her much safer on this floor, and it'd boost our ability to craft. But Mordecai was right. We needed to be aggressive with our training. We needed to think long-term.

Plus I really didn't want to fight with her over something stupid like the class's name.



**Carl: I think Glass Cannon. Katia?**

**Katia: Agreed.**

**Donut: YAY! I CHOSE IT, SO IT'S TOO LATE FOR YOU TO TALK ME OUT OF IT, MORDECAI.**

**Mordecai: Well? What did you get?**

**Donut: I... WELL, I GOT EVERYTHING. EXCEPT THE PLUS 15 TO CONSTITUTION.**

"*Goddamnit*," I muttered and immediately regretted it. I had to spit out more sand.

**Mordecai: Okay. We need to really focus on keeping Donut out of harm's way until we get her better armor. No more riding Mongo into battle. I'm going to start brewing some shield potions for her now that my table is high enough.**

Class choice out of the way, we started to move. Dust and sand swirled around us. The ground felt solid, though my feet sank to the ankles with each step. With the dust storm, I could barely see more than about twenty feet in each direction. I looked up, and I saw nothing but brown. I turned, and the door we'd just left was gone, replaced by a curved, rocky but uniform wall. It seemed to rise high and away, like we were standing inside of a crudely-sculpted bowl.

**Katia: Okay. I see the edge of town. It's close, about three hundred meters ahead and to the left. My pathfinder skill is acting a little odd. I can't see anything behind us except the mountain wall.**

**Donut: THERE ARE NO TUNNELS AT LEAST. I HATE TUNNELS.**

I wasn't so sure about that. My chat was filled with people checking in with their surroundings. I minimized it until we were someplace safe, but I saw a few people mentioning tight, claustrophobic tunnels. Bautista was in one such passageway. Elle and Imani said they were on a round, floating island that was really a bunch of boats lashed together. They were being pelted with a hailstorm and

had taken shelter in the hold of a cargo ship that was filled with level-29 fish monsters.

**Carl: I can't see shit. Watch out for mobs.**

**Donut: THIS IS RUINING MY FUR. AND IT'S HOT. I DON'T LIKE THIS, CARL. MONGO IS MISERABLE.**

**Carl: Mongo is still in his container. You don't know if he's miserable or not.**

It *was* hot. It felt like a hairdryer blasting on us. I remembered how cold it was when we'd first entered the dungeon. My eyes caught a countdown timer in my upper left vision. It was my potion sickness indicator from when I'd taken Mordecai's Special Brew. I still had over four hours until I'd be able to take another potion. At least the timer had kept ticking while we were on the surface.

**Carl: Donut. Minefield.**

Donut unleashed Mongo, who squawked with dismay at the driving sandstorm. She cast *Clockwork Triplicate* on the pet, and she ordered the two automatons to range ahead of us. With our limited vision, they'd provide an early warning for both mobs and sand dunes.

The town was close, but getting there was a chore. We didn't see any mobs. We passed a cave-like entrance in the ground that offered shelter, but the clockwork Mongos were unable to enter despite it being wide-open. It was a short, sloped descent filled with swirling eddies of sand. In the hole I could see a tunnel fading away into darkness. I took a few steps down the slope, and I saw the shimmering wall. It was not a portal, but a forcefield of some sort, similar to the wall of my *Protective Shield* spell, protecting the entrance to the cave. The sand passed right through. A clockwork Mongo walked up and swiped at it, claw bouncing off it like it was a physical wall. The creature didn't explode or blow back. I formed my gauntlet and hesitantly reached out to tap it.

**Warning: You may not enter this quadrant until your current quadrant's castle is liberated.**

I tried to shout what I'd learned at Donut and Katia, but the wind was just too loud. We had to stick with chat.

**Carl: This is a cave entrance to the subterranean zone. It sounds like we can't leave the air zone until we deal with the gnomes.**

**Katia: The map won't let me see anything inside there. But look at the walls. I thought this was a mountain, but it all looks carved. I think there's a building under our feet.**

I took a banger sphere and rolled it down the slope. It bounced a few times down the uneven ramp, entered the area as if the wall wasn't there, and just kept going. It disappeared into the darkness.

A moment later, the ground rumbled with a distant explosion. I didn't hear it, but I felt it in my feet.

**You have set off a trap. Maybe next time you'll be more careful.**

**Carl: Shit, it sounds like the subterranean tunnels have traps in them. We need to be extra vigilant.**

**Katia: I believe it's an underground tomb. Like Indiana Jones stuff.**

She pulled a regular torch from her inventory, lit it, and tossed it through the forcefield. It lit up a long, sloping hallway made of carved bricks.

**Carl: I think you're right.**

Relief patterns of what looked like a flaming, screaming pterodactyl adorned the walls. *Well that's ominous.*

**Donut: CAN WE DISCUSS THIS AFTER WE GET OUT OF THIS SAND? I MEAN, REALLY. WE CAN'T EVEN GO IN THERE. THAT'S NOT OUR AREA. THIS IS JUST AWFUL. SOME PEOPLE ON THE CHAT SAY THEY'RE IN A TROPICAL PARADISE AND SOME SAY THEY'RE IN A SNOWING ZONE. ANY OF THOSE**

**WOULD BE BETTER THAN THIS, AND I DON'T EVEN LIKE SNOW.**

We abandoned the cave entrance and continued on toward the town. The fact we hadn't seen any mobs was concerning. Less mobs usually meant *stronger* mobs.

We did see one oddity as we trekked to the town. There was a twisted, burned-out shell of metal on the ground. It appeared it'd been there for some time. I couldn't determine what it used to be, but it might've once been a vehicle. The system didn't label it at all. I touched the metal to see if I could take it into my inventory. It felt solid and light, but rusted. It was half-buried in the sand. We left it and continued on our way.

We soon came to a tall, curved wall made of sheets of metal riveted together. The walls rose high, maybe twenty feet, and a fabric awning covered it above that. The thick, blue and white striped material whipped violently in the storm, threatening to rip away at any moment. The fabric curved up and away into the darkness. Every few dozen feet, large, dark boxes stood atop the walls. I wasn't certain, but they appeared to be lookout towers. They were closed up against the storm.

**Katia: The town is built against the wall. There's an entrance that way.**

She pointed right, and we followed along the patchwork metal until we reached an arched doorway built into an alcove that was mostly protected from the wind. Donut started hacking up sand onto my shoulder. There was a crude sign over the large, double doorway. It read "Hump Town. Bang twice to enter."

The knocker was a mallet, like for a giant drum. It hung from a chain by the entrance. I grabbed it and smacked it against the door twice. The whole doorway echoed loud and deep.

"That was louder than I expected," I said. We could finally talk here, though we still had to raise our voices.

Donut continued to hack in my ear.

"Hey, don't puke on my shoulder."

“Where else am I going to do it, Carl?” she said between breaths. She proceeded to puke on my shoulder.

“Goddamnit, Donut,” I said.

“In ancient Egypt, it was considered an honor for a cat to vomit upon you. You should thank me.”

“Hump Town,” Katia said drily. “I can’t wait to find what that’s all about.”

Several minutes passed, and nothing happened. The clockwork Mongos timed-out and collapsed. I was about to bitch at Mordecai to come open the door when it groaned, opening inwardly.

“It’s a big NPC,” Donut warned just as the creature appeared.

The tall creature looked down on us while we looked up at him. It was a camel. A giant camel wearing a headscarf and robes. The thing walked on two legs and had long arms with two fingers and a thumb. The tan creature had to be eight feet tall. His giant hump looked odd when he stood straight, like an overstuffed, low-slung backpack covered with robes.

### **Clay – Dromedarian. Level 30.**

**The Dromedarians are a common, formerly nomadic race that is found throughout the drier parts of the universe. With the ability to store mass amounts of liquid in their bodies, it is said a Dromedarian can survive up to two months without taking a single sip of water. When these hunters and warriors are placed in a situation where they can no longer wander, they tend to become lethargic, sloth-minded creatures. But make no mistake, this is a mighty race of warriors who were once known for their abject brutality.**

**Trapped atop the Necropolis of Anser, these local Dromedarians are locked in a three-way stalemate with the Bactrians and the Dirigible Gnomes. Any day now this smoldering conflict could boil over into an all-out war. A war they probably would not survive. In the**

**meantime, they're perfectly content to sit around, smoke weed, and do their best to drink all their problems away.**

"Hump town," Katia said, looking up at the camel. "*That's* what they mean."

"Yo," Clay the camel said. "Welcome to Hump Town. Don't just stand there. Get in so I can close the door."

I just stared, blinking at the creature. Based on the way he was dressed and the description, I was expecting a stereotypical middle-eastern type accent. This was more like a gruff, biker dude. *Like Joe Camel*, I thought. The old cigarette mascot.

"You don't worship Grull, do you?" I asked as we stepped in. The wind howled around the village, and sand still rained in a dozen little spots here and there. The ground was covered with it. But it was nothing like out there.

"Do I look like a face-painting, bull-worshipping bitch?" Clay asked.

"Uh, no," I said.

"You lot got here just in time. Storm's almost over. It's dangerous to be out there when it stops blowing." He slammed the heavy door closed. He carried a long, dangerous-looking spear over his shoulder. But he also carried a long tube that looked like a homemade bazooka or mortar. Sure enough, five, pineapple-shaped explosives dangled on a string from his back. My UI tagged each one as a **Guided, Anti-Air Rocket**. They were unarmed, so relatively stable. If they were "guided" then it had be magical, as they appeared to be pretty simplistic. It wouldn't let me examine them further.

"So the beasts hide when the wind is blowing?" I asked after Clay caught me staring at his gear.

Clay grunted, a loud, wet sound that sprayed snot everywhere. "You must be new. You're lucky you ain't dead."

"There's a Desperado Club," Katia said. "No Club Vanquisher. I see several stores and inns."

"Not so fast," Clay said as I took another step. "You can't just

enter Hump Town empty-handed. You gotta pay the toll. And if you're the Club Vanquisher type, you are in the wrong place. They don't call it Hump Town for nothing."

"What's the toll?" I asked.

"Gold, drugs, or pleasure." He looked me up and down. He snorted again, spraying more snot. "Gold or drugs for you."

It was the dungeon version of the old bumper sticker, "Cash, grass, or ass. Nobody rides for free." I chuckled.

"How much gold?"

"How much you got?"

Donut, sensing a deal to be made, straightened on my shoulder. Sand cascaded off of her. I held up a hand to stop her.

"How about this?" I asked, pulling the single blitz stick from my inventory. It'd been my freebie from Quint the Desperado Club pharmacist.

Clay pulled it from my hand and squinted, examining it. He immediately popped it into his mouth and lit it.

"Good shit. Welcome to Hump Town. Stay out of city hall. Dromedarians only. Other than that, have fun. If you're into weird shit, Weird Shit Alley is up against the far wall on the northeast side of town. Otherwise, the regular girls are mostly on Hump Street. I recommend Jazmin Delight over at the Wiggle Room." He winked at Katia. "She's a twister, like you."

"Wait," Katia said. "So the town is called Hump Town because..."

"Yeah, we're a brothel town. What did you think? Now get out of here. And again, stay out of city hall."

**New Quest. "Stay out of city hall."**

**Find out what's in city hall. It just might be important.**

**Reward: You will receive a Silver Quest Box.**

"Well that's, I don't know. A little obvious," I muttered as the camel wandered away, smoking his blitz stick. He stopped and talked to another camel, pointing at us. They both laughed.

“Do you think the prostitutes are more camels?” Donut asked. “Because that’s just weird.”

“Not as weird as an entire, prostitution-based economy when there’s only two towns. It’s like the Iron Tangle all over again. It doesn’t make any sense.” Clay proudly showed his blitz stick to another camel, who also laughed. I was starting to realize what had just happened. We’d gotten scammed. I grunted. *You asshole. Well-played.*

“What’s a twister?” Katia asked. “Do you think he meant she’s a doppelganger?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Let’s find Mordecai.”

The town’s streets were laid out like a set of nested semi-circles, like a rainbow. The residences dotted the outer ring, just inside the wall, interspersed with barracks-like buildings. The second ring consisted of shops and a handful of training guilds with the large City Hall building in the center. It was the largest building in town, rising up to the top of the fabric awnings, which all ran from the top of the building to both the town wall and the tomb wall behind it, like an umbrella. Each individual awning piece was triangular, like a jib on a sailboat, but much, much bigger.

The town was larger than I expected. Larger than the medium skyfowl town I “owned” from the third floor. The inns and Desperado Club were all on the third ring, the aptly labeled “Hump Street.”

As we made our way, the wind abruptly stopped. And just like that, dirty light streamed in from the spaces between the fabric awnings. Shouts rose around town, and suddenly camels were everywhere. A group appeared, pulling ladders and climbing the walls, unhooking the fabric. We had to step out of the way as a group of tall camels, made even taller because they strode by on steampunk-like, metal and spring stilts rolled the fabric up. In minutes, the massive sails were pulled up and placed atop the city hall. I caught the shimmer of enchantment in the fabric. A group of camels expertly twisted the sails atop of the tower. The blue and white stripes formed



a pattern, making something between a minaret, the onion towers atop Saint Basil's cathedral, and soft serve ice cream. Only it was all made of fabric. Fabric they could quickly unfurl and re-deploy the moment another storm arrived.

Actually, I realized, seeing the lines of rope that remained in place, the whole tower was like a gun. They could probably "fire" the tower, deploying the awning over the entire town in seconds. Like a flower that could bloom on demand. What we'd just witnessed was the town coming together to expertly reset the system.

"That's pretty nifty," I said, amazed at how quickly they'd taken it all down.

"Amazing," Katia agreed.

I stared up into the sky, agape. On the third floor there'd been a fake ceiling with an illusory sky. There'd really been ceiling up there, one I could easily hit with my slingshot.

Now, I could see the distant shimmer of what appeared to be a forcefield, but it was high, high in the air. Airplane height. I turned in a circle. The city ended at a massive wall that had to be over a hundred feet tall. Before, I had thought we were in a giant bowl. I realized now that I was correct. A bowl that sat atop a tomb. What had the description called it? The Necropolis of Anser.

"Carl, this doesn't feel very dungeon-like to me," Donut said, looking up at the sky.

I laughed. "You said you didn't like tunnels. There's a top. It's just really, really high up there. Remember what it said when we first came in? It called this place bubble number 543."

Katia was also turning in circles, looking into the air. "We're under a dome," she agreed. "Look at the way the light shines. It's gotta be four or five kilometers to the top."

Something flew by high above. It was a giant bird of some sort. It dove out of view past the edge of the bowl.

"If we're in the air quadrant, and the subterranean quadrant is under our feet, where are the land and sea quadrants?" I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “But if we’re in a bowl. Maybe it’s like an island, and there’s water outside the bowl.”

“You’re close,” a new, almost-familiar voice said. I turned to look at the skyfowl. The large eagle approached us from one of the deeper streets.

“Mordecai,” I said, looking at the light brown and beige eagle. “Is that you? Like the *real* you?”

He grunted. “Are you taking the scenic route? By the gods, I had to come looking for you. This isn’t what I really looked like. They made me a rock edge skyfowl. I was a centurion. Darker feathers. Larger wingspan. Bigger talons. Much more handsome.”

Mongo rushed up and sniffed at the manager, and upon realizing who it was, started bouncing up and down.

“You eagle guys all look the same to me,” I said. We, again, had to move out of the way as a group of dromedarians marched past. There were seven of them, and the system listed them as **Level 48 Waster Patrol**. They were decked out in dark robes. They carried spears and more of the bazookas over their shoulders. These guys walked with purpose and headed straight for the exit.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Mordecai continued. “It’s amazing. It’s the first time I’ve been in a body similar to my real form in a very long time. But they fucked me.” Mordecai spread out his wings. “I’m in the body of a goddamn cleric. That means I’m clipped. I can fly, but only short distances. Imagine if you suddenly woke up in the body of a eunuch and then thrown into a supermodel orgy.” He looked up into the sky and sighed heavily. “At least I’m still a skyfowl. And anything is better than the damn toad.”

Skyfowl didn’t have arms. Just feet and wings, like regular eagles. “Can you still, you know, do potion stuff in that body?”

He looked at me as if I just asked to see nudes of his mom.

“Better than ever,” he said. “Anyway, Katia, you were close. We *are* in a dome. Like a snowglobe. They’re calling them bubbles. The Necropolis of Anser is a very high tower, and we are on top of it.” He pointed up. “That bubble is bigger than it looks from here. The

ground and the sea are far below us. You came in a few minutes late, so you missed the first announcement, but there's going to be another announcement explaining the floor's rules in a couple of minutes. Let's get into a saferoom and get some food and listen to what they gotta say."

We walked toward Mordecai's chosen inn, a bar called The Toe. I walked ahead with Mordecai, while Katia, Mongo, and Donut held back, oohing and ahing at all the sights. The town was an odd mix of stereotypical, movie-style, middle-eastern village mixed in with the Burning Man Festival. The adobe buildings were oftentimes augmented with rusty, metallic exoskeletons. I couldn't tell if it was armor, something functional, or just art. One residence had a steam-punk-ish telescope on top, pointing up. Another held a weather station that glowed with enchantment. A battery-powered engine chugged outside of another building. A pair of young camels zipped by on a tracked cart, like a mini tractor, dragging a rickety wagon stacked impossibly high with branches. They laughed as they bounced. The whole town smelled of smoke and oil and dirt.

Every NPC I'd seen so far was a camel, but that changed once we hit Hump Street. A pair of women standing outside one bar spied us, and they both changed shape, one into a human woman, the other into a skyfowl.

"Are those changelings or doppelgangers?" I asked. The tag over them said they were what they portrayed.

"Changelings," Mordecai said sourly. "Don't trust them. If you're feeling like you need to, you know, stick with the Desperado Club." The cookbook had something similar to say about changelings. It'd called them thieving, backstabbing whores, or something of the like.

I observed a pair of crawlers gawking at us. Both were level-22 humans. I waved, and they backed away into a different bar, as if they were afraid of me.

"Fifteen days, huh?" I said, changing the subject.

"I was expecting 12," Mordecai said. "The fact they gave us three more than expected is not necessarily a good thing. I already know

how the floor works, and we're already screwed. So with the extra three days, I suspect we might be in for a nasty surprise."

"Why are we screwed?" I asked.

"You're stuck in a quadrant with maybe three dozen other crawlers. That's it. Every one I've seen so far other than you guys is so underpowered, it's a miracle they've made it this far. And what's worse, you gotta use them to help you storm the gnome castle to get to the stairwell."

"Yeah," I said. "We need to reset our buffs, get some sleep, open up all our boxes, and then see if we can find the place."

"Find it?" Mordecai asked. He pointed up. I looked, following his wing. High, high above, brushing the ceiling of the dome and far to the side was a tiny, little speck. "There's your castle."

"Shit," I said, looking up. "I wasn't expecting it to be *that* high."

"It moves, too," he said. "And they have defenses."

"Fuck me."

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The Toe was a simple, inn-style tavern with a Dromedarian proprietor. The place smelled like a petting zoo. This inn only employed a single prostitute, a woman changeling named Juice Box, who sat pouting in the corner after we all rejected her. In addition to the woman, the Toe also offered alcohol, food, and a few rooms.

The incoming message was not a regular announcement as we still had ten more hours until the recap episode. The bar had the traditional three screens, but the middle screen with the top-100 was empty. A countdown appeared, indicating it would populate in ten hours after the recap. Apparently that was a normal thing.

We ordered drinks and food and sat at the table, waiting for the message. It came quickly.

**Hello, Crawlers. Welcome to the fifth floor! We are so very excited for you to enjoy this new and exciting level! We have just over 178,000 of you joining us. The**

last floor was somewhat of a mystery, and finding out how it worked was part of the fun. This floor is a little different. The layout is not so much a secret, and the rules are pretty simple. We want you guys to have a great time with this one.

There are over 4,000 castles on this floor. Every castle contains a single stairwell. No two castles are the same.

Think of a sheet of bubble wrap. Every bubble is its own self-contained world. Each individual world has four zones or “quadrants.”

There are a total of 1,172 bubbles. All of you are inside of a bubble, equally and randomly distributed the best we could. That comes to a little more than 150 crawlers per bubble. Like with the castles, every bubble is different.

Each bubble is split into four quadrants. Land, Sea, Air, and Subterranean. Each quadrant has a single castle within. Your mission is to find the castle, raid it, and take the throne room. Once the throne room is occupied, the castle is considered conquered. The stairwell is also located in the throne room, so no need to be scrambling around, worried about not being able to find it. Easy, right? Take the castle, take the stairwell.

“That sounds simple enough,” I said. But it wasn’t simple. If we couldn’t fly, how the hell could we get up there? It’s not like we could build a cannon to toss us. We were going to have to build a balloon. Or an airplane. Or find a way to shoot it down. *Something*.

**But, there is a small hitch. In order for your stairwell to actually open up and be passable, all four castles in your bubble must first be taken. That’s right, the Land, Sea, Air, and Subterranean castles must all fall in order for you to proceed to the sixth floor.**

Mordecai groaned.

“Goddamnit,” I said. I exchanged a look with Katia, who looked grim. Even Donut seemed taken aback.

**Luckily for you, once you have taken your own castle, you may traverse outside of your quadrant to lend a hand to your fellow bubble buddies. Once all four castles are taken, the bubble is popped, and you may proceed outside of the bubble area if you wish. You may not enter other bubbles until they are also popped.**

**Good luck, folks. Some of these castles are much easier to crack than others. Also, the second round of sponsorship bidding is underway. We’ll have another message in a few hours after the regular recap episode. Now get out there and kill, kill, kill!**

We sat in silence for several moments. Mordecai’s feathers around his neck ruffled and unruffled. He turned to look at us.

“I’m going to assume right now that out of the 150 or so crawlers in this bubble, every single one of them is an incompetent idiot. That means you have less than four days to take each castle. So get that food in your mouths, open all the boxes you’ve accumulated, get your asses to bed, and then get back out there. We got a lot of work to do.”

THE FIRST THING DONUT DID WAS BOUNCE OVER TO THE mailbox and grab her spellbook-of-the-floor club prize as we headed toward our personal space.

“Maybe it’ll be a flying spell,” Katia muttered.

“We won’t be so lucky,” I said.

We did, however, have three very rich sponsors amongst us, and we were about to receive three more. I hated, absolutely hated, having to depend on them for help, but I was at a loss as to what we were going to do.

“What’s the point of being able to leave the bubble if we can’t get into the other bubbles?” Katia asked.

“Right now we need to focus on that flying castle,” I said.

**Imani: Hey, Carl. What’s a backstay?**

**Carl: In sailing terms? It’s the rigging that runs from the mast to the back of the boat. There are different kinds.**

**Elle: There are 20 of us, and not a one of these old farts has ever sailed a boat. Can you believe that? I told them not to put me into Meadow Lark. I would’ve been**

**better off in one of the more expensive old folks homes surrounded by rich old codgers who grew up on boats, but no. The system is giving us a sailing tutorial, but it doesn't tell us where the things are. How are we supposed to pull the boom vang when we don't know what it is? This thing is more complicated than those trains.**

**Imani: We need to figure this out quickly. There are rocks everywhere. What's a spinnaker? Wait. We don't need that part yet.**

**Carl: Jesus, you guys need to be careful. Sailing a boat isn't something you can figure out on the fly. It takes months.**

**Imani: We would have an NPC helping us if Elle hadn't iced him.**

**Elle: He was being suspicious. We're on our way back to the floating island. If we crash, we crash. There are boats everywhere. We have our pick.**

**Imani: Not all of us can float, Elle.**

**Carl: Weren't you on the island already? You know what, never mind. Just be careful.**

Donut gasped. "Carl, Carl, I got a good one this time!" She glowed as she read the book.

I took a deep breath. "Donut. We talk about the spellbooks before we read them. Remember?"

"Unwad your panties, Carl."

Katia laughed. "You got that from Elle."

"I know, right? She's been teaching me sayings from the olden times."

"That's not very princess-like," I grumbled.

"Oh, Carl. Just chillax."

"That is a good spell," Mordecai said. "It's another utility spell, like *Hole*."



“What is it?”

“*Astral Paw*,” Mordecai said. “Not as good as *Astral Hand* because there’s no thumb to manipulate and hold things. But there’s more force to it, especially at higher levels, and it can be used as a weapon. She can grow claws on it at level five. At level 10, she can make the paw a lot bigger. At level 15, her skills and abilities will translate directly to the paw. That’s a big deal since her regular swipe is pretty strong. There’s a similar spell we might want to get for you. *Astral Fist*. Anyway, she can manipulate items at a distance as if she was physically touching them. Distance grows with level-up. At level one, it’s about 10 meters.”

I laughed. “Hey, Donut. If we were back home, you’d finally be able to knock that vase off the high shelf.”

“That thing was a menace, Carl. It was haunted.”

We’d had a high shelf covered with knickknacks and some heirloom vase thing over the television in our apartment. She’d tried several times to jump up there, but never got close. Sometimes she’d sit on my lap while I was playing a game, and she’d stare up at it and start meowing.

We returned to our personal space. Almost two days later, and the cleaner bot had not yet finished cleaning all the blood. It was almost done. It was on the couch, sucking away at the back of the cushions when we entered.

“That thing needs a raise,” I said.

The bot beeped in agreement.

“Open your boxes and then assign your stat points,” Mordecai said.

I sat in the kitchen chair and pulled up the achievements I’d missed. I had several, including a few really good ones. I did not get any sort of credit for killing the mimic, though I hadn’t been expecting it. Most of the achievements revolved around dealing with Grull and tossing the *Nightmare* through the portal to blow the soul crystals.

. . .

**New Achievement! Let There Be Chaos.**

**You have successfully summoned a god into the dungeon. That's a great way to get more friends. Everybody loves it when someone brings immortal death machines to the party.**

***Reward:* It might've been a bad idea, but it's sure going to be entertaining.**

**New Achievement! Divine Epiphany.**

**You have seen a deity. Don't get too excited. It doesn't mean you're a prophet or anything like that. This is a pretty common achievement that all crawlers eventually receive if they survive long enough, so you aren't really that special. Finding a god is easy. What you don't want is for that god to find you.**

***Reward:* You now have the option to worship the god Grull.**

**Admin Note: There is a new tab now available in your interface.**

I laughed. I looked up at the ceiling and said, "Grull can suck my dick."

Donut and Katia, who'd just received the same achievement, both also laughed.

"Worship Grull? At this point, I'm quite sure it's the other way around," Donut added.

**New Achievement! Indomitable.**

**You have been physically attacked by a deity, and you survived. This is a feat that has only been accomplished by a handful of crawlers in the history of *Dungeon Crawler World*. Good job! Unfortunately for you and anybody around you, whenever this happens, the other deities tend to notice.**

***Reward: You have received a Legendary Deity's Box.***

"Wow," I said. A legendary box!

The next achievement came in the AI's creepy, I'm-touching-myself-and-smoking-a-cigarette voice.

***New Achievement! Smushed for Daddy.***

**You have been stepped upon by a deity. You have survived the encounter. And while this wasn't the pink-fleshed suppleness of a human-shaped foot that crushed your fragile, wet body, it's nice sometimes to switch things around. You know, just to test the boundaries of your own limits. When one experiments, oftentimes one finds new and exciting ways to get that rush.**

**While fun, it wasn't quite the same. You probably don't realize how lucky that is for you.**

***Reward: You have received a Platinum Spicy Box.***

"For fuck's sake," I muttered. I remembered that moment, when the god had stepped upon me. I would've been obliterated had I not been under that potion's protection. I remembered the dungeon had rumbled, but I was a little preoccupied to notice it at the time. After that, there were only a few more notable achievements.

***New Achievement! Hail Mary!***

**You have initiated an attack that has caused more than 100 casualties more than 100 kilometers from your current position. You're either the universe's greatest sniper, or you've been a sneaky, little, portal-using bitch. Either way, that's rather impressive. You'd have a great career in politics ahead of you if, you know, we hadn't destroyed your world and all the governments and stuff.**

***Reward: You've received a Gold Sniper's box!***

**New Achievement! Extinction Event.**

**You have, with a single attack, killed every last member of a non-unique species on a dungeon's floor. That's not an easy thing to do, and it takes a special brand of asshole to pull something like this off.**

**Species killed: Wall Monitors.**

**Reward: You have received a Platinum Asshole's Box!**

The wall monitors were the lizard creatures that lived in the abyss. When the train had popped through the portal and blown everything to hell, we must've killed them all.

In addition to all of that, we'd all received two bronze boss boxes for killing the mantaur's even though we hadn't technically killed either of them. Both had been summoning vessels for Grull. I wasn't going to complain. Nobody else in the party received the Indomitable achievement, though Katia had received a similar one for surviving a god's magic attack, but it was only a gold box. Apparently Elle was the only other one to get the Legendary box.

I also received a Silver Fan Box for having the most "switchovers" during a battle. I didn't know what that actually meant, but we'd find out tomorrow what the people had picked for me. Since it was a lower-tier fan box, I wasn't too enthusiastic.

Of the three of us, Donut had received the least amount of boxes, though she did receive a Platinum That Wasn't Too Smart, Was It? Box for attacking the Province Boss. Her two regular boss boxes were coins and healing-themed scrolls. However, she did receive a scroll that filled me with dread.

**Scroll of Water Breathing.**

**Allows you to breathe underwater. Lasts as many seconds as your intelligence stat times three. It does not protect you from swimmer's ear or being eaten by an undead barracuda. I hope you know how to swim.**

"I am saying this right now, Carl," Donut announced the moment she received the scroll. "I am a cat. Cats do not swim.

Cats do not go in water. It is unnatural, and it is not going to happen.”

**Mordecai: Goddamnit, Donut. Don't say that stuff out loud.**

**Donut: I CAN'T EXACTLY SAY IT IN CHAT ANYMORE, CAN I, MORDECAI?**

**Mordecai: Your chats are still protected if I'm in on it. If you need to vent, make sure you do it to me.**

She swiped her tail angrily several times. “This is not acceptable. I do not like this one bit.”

“The scrolls are clunky,” Mordecai said, sighing. “If I can get the right materials, I will make a potion for water breathing. There are also several different spells that'll allow you to travel freely in water.”

“What about flying?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Spells and items, yes. Lots and lots. But potions? If you'd saved one of the bench upgrade coupons, then maybe. I really need two upgrades. Otherwise we'll have to do it another way.” He said this loudly. He was really talking to our sponsors.

Donut's final, platinum box contained another magic book. It was a 15-mana spell called *Wall of Fire*.

“That's an escape spell,” Mordecai said. “It's about a 10 meter wide, two meter high wall of fire that lasts 15 seconds at level 1. It's a common spell. Powerful later on, but it's also fire. Fire tends to spread. When the magic goes away, if it's cast on something flammable, it stays on fire. I've seen it a hundred times. Fire gets out of control very easily.”

“Can we use it to light bombs from a distance?” I asked.

“Definitely. But her *Magic Missile* would work for that, too.”

“It's not *Fireball*,” she grumbled. “That's what I really want.” She glowed as she read the book.

Katia opened her boxes next. In addition to gold, she received several more of the water-breathing scrolls along with antidote potions, in both the boss box and the adventurer's boxes. The water

breathing scrolls and antidote pots seemed to be pretty common, making them this floor's version of the torch and the bandage. In her gold Survivor's box, she received a skill potion that she was forced to drink right away. It raised her Catcher skill, which she'd been training relentlessly, up to level 11.

I went next. My boss boxes contained a few healing scrolls, a useless magical shirt, and a handful of the water-breathing scrolls. But I also received one more invisibility potion. That potion had saved my ass during the fight with Grull.

"That's an easy, but expensive, potion to make," Mordecai said. "Some of the materials for it are rare. It's good that you're getting them."

"It's like once you start getting something, you're more likely to keep getting it," I said.

"That's absolutely right," he agreed. "And sometimes things, like those water-breathing scrolls, are a not-so-subtle hint about what you might find on a level. See all those antidote potions Katia received? It means we have lots of poison-dealing monsters and traps on this floor as well. Good thing both you and Donut are immune to poison."

"How wonderful for you," Katia said drily.

I received 40,000 gold for surviving the level in the top 10. Donut had gotten 30,000 and Katia 10,000. We still needed to purchase some environmental upgrades for the space, but at the moment we had about 650,000 gold between the three of us, and that was before I opened the rest of my boxes.

My gold sniper's box contained a crafting item. It was a case containing 25 small, black items, each about the size of a bottle cap.

**Surefire. Crafting item.**

**A Surefire adds the "Guided" status to any projectile, powered or not. It may be utilized on a vast array of crafting tables. If added to an arrow or bolt, you must choose a target prior to unleashing the weapon, and the projectile will seek that target.**

**If added to a trap, additional options become avail-**

able. Such as “Target any healers within range” or “Target anyone who thinks it’s okay to put mayonnaise on hotdogs.”

If added to a powered weapon, such as an explosive-based rocket, targets may be assigned during the crafting process or upon firing, but not both.

**Note: this upgrade alone does not add range to the projectile.**

“Cool,” I said, moving to my two platinum boxes.

The platinum Spicy box—the one I’d gotten because the system AI was a goddamned pervert—contained a toe ring.

**Enchanted Toe Ring of the Leprous Bandit.**

**This is a unique item.**

Most children in the universe know the exciting tale of the Leprous Bandit, the infamous human thief whose people were starving to death because of a planet-wide quarantine. While all the planet’s residents were carriers of the disease, it did not affect them. But because the disease was deadly to the Forsoothed, the planet’s regents, the aliens placed themselves in floating protection platforms, guarding the gardens and food stores in hopes to starve the humans all out.

The bandit climbed a mountain, jumped onto a platform, and broke into the floating garden. He was quickly killed, of course, but not before he infected the Forsoothed and caused them to flee the planet. Thanks to the bandit’s intervention, the human planet survived another 100 years before it was obliterated in an unrelated conflict. To this day, the Leprous Bandit remains an inspiration.

**This toe ring imbues the following:**

**The Sticky Feet Benefit.**

**The Super Spreader Benefit.**

“Two benefits in one item?” Mordecai said. “That’s a pretty damn valuable ring. That’s almost legendary tier.”

Sure enough, I stuck it in my inventory to check, and its value was up there, right above the Ring of Divine Suffering and below that Kimaris figure. I inspected the two benefits.

### **Sticky Feet.**

**Once every six hours, for (Dexterity x 2) seconds, you may walk upon a non-horizontal surface, such as a wall or ceiling. Gravity will not change, so leave your beer on the ground and make sure you tuck in your shirt first. Your bare feet must be in contact with the surface. No socks, no shoes.**

“Hey, I’m like spiderman,” I said. “At least my feet are. Too bad it’s only once every six hours. I looked at the second benefit.

### **Super Spreader.**

**You have been given the power of every plague rat and kindergartner since the dawn of time. You may pass any active debuffs onto a target of your choice once per hour. This does not remove the debuff from yourself.**

“Gross,” I said as I slid the toe right onto my left pinky. I sighed, looking down at my shiny feet.

When my next box opened, the Platinum Asshole’s Box, I realized what it was the moment the symbol appeared in the air.

“Oh fuck me,” I said. A moment passed. I looked at my arms. I rubbed my hand across my neck. “Where did it go?” I said.

“It’s on your face, Carl,” Donut said, disgust in her voice. “You’ve been ruined. You look like one of those white guy rappers now.”

Katia laughed, leaning in. “Don’t worry, it’s tiny. It’s just below your left eye. Barely noticeable. Like a teardrop tattoo, but smaller. It’s almost like a freckle. What is it? It looks like a gecko foot. It’s cute.”

“It’s a tattoo of a lizard foot,” I said.



## **Extinction Sigil Tattoo**

### **Wall Monitor Race.**

**Removes automatic hostility for any natural enemies of lizard-class creatures.**

**Warning: holding this Extinction Sigil will cause lizard-class enemies to deal 20% more damage against you. Any Wall Monitors will deal 150% more damage against you.**

**You may only hide this tattoo with a cover-up sleeve.**

“How in the hell am I supposed to use a cover-up sleeve on my face?”

“Hmm,” Mordecai said, also examining the tattoo. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen this. I’ve seen plenty like that goblin pass tattoo you have, but not like this. Everybody hates lizards, but I don’t know what their natural enemies are. Maybe birds. They like eating eggs.”

“I guess we’ll find out,” I said, reaching up to touch the tattoo under my eye. I now had three tats. My goblin pass, my Desperado Club pass, and now this. Hopefully it was as small and unnoticeable as Katia said.

I had one item left. My legendary deity’s box. It was a potion. It looked different than most potions. The bottle was rounded and more ornate, like an expensive perfume bottle. Smoke rose from the glass.

“Holy shit,” Mordecai said. “Can I see it?” He picked it up with his talon, and it was shaking.

“Who’s Pawna?” I asked.

“She’s the goddess of peace,” Mordecai said. “In the pantheon, she’s Grull’s sister and arch enemy. Don’t take this now. Save it.”

I passed the potion around to the others and then took it back. I added it to my inventory. It was the first item I’d seen that was valued higher than the Kimaris figure.

The description was very simple.

### **Pawna’s Tears.**

**This potion adds plus five to any spell or skill of your choosing.**

“Why is it so valuable?” Katia asked. “Because it’s plus five? We’ve seen skill potions before. We’ve seen potions that max out skills, like that one that Maggie My lady has. Plus there are those Cheat Code potions that do the same thing, but for three skill levels.”

Mordecai answered. “It’s valuable, my dear, because it’s not only plus five, but he can choose any skill he wishes. Legendary skill potions that max out skills are also quite valuable, but they are only available for a limited number of skills. The Cheat Code potion is also precious. It is plus three to a random skill. However, the Cheat Code has a short shelf life, meaning he has to take it immediately. With this potion, Carl can save it. He can now train one of his skills to fifteen, take the potion, and raise it to twenty. It is, quite simply, the single best item of loot he has received since he entered the dungeon.”

“Not including the pet biscuit,” Donut said.

“Not including the pet biscuit,” Mordecai agreed.

“My powerful strike is already 13,” I said.

“It’s 13 because you have six levels from equipment buffs. We’ll want to use it on something that’s naturally 15. Catch-all skills like Powerful Strike are hard to train up, especially after 15, but items that increase the skill are more common. We’ll need to sit down and decide which specific skill to use it on. We don’t have to decide right away, and we should probably wait until after you pick your subclass when we hit the sixth floor. Things might jumble around somewhat after that.”

“Didn’t Elle get the same box? What did she get?” Katia asked. The god had physically swiped at Elle a few times, though he hadn’t actually touched her. She’d still gotten the box.

**Carl: Elle, what did you get in your deity box?**

**Elle: Not a good time to talk. Imani crashed the boat. I had to freeze the water to keep everybody from drowning. But I got a spellbook called *Graupel*. Big ice**

**storm. Most powerful spell I have now, but I'm kinda scared to try it. It costs 50 mana. Long cooldown. Talk soon.**

I told them. Mordecai shook his head. "That's a war spell. Tell her to be careful with it while we're stuck in these snow globes. Do you know anybody who is in this same bubble?"

"That's a good question," I said. "I haven't asked yet."

"I asked the former daughters, but nobody answered me," Katia said. "By the way, Eva is still alive. She's still on my chat."

"If she's not in this bubble, then we don't have to worry about it. Keep your find crawler up and running."

"I have been. There are eight crawlers I can see nearby, but I don't know any of them. They're all in the low twenties."

"Hmm," Mordecai said. "I wonder if they're averaging out the player levels in the bubbles. That'll explain why we're stuck with the dregs. Carl, your level 41 might be the highest in the dungeon. We won't know until the top 10 populates."

I sent out a group message, asking if anybody else was in bubble number 543. I received only one reply. A human named Gwendolyn Duet. She was a level-27 **Boring Ol' Fighter**. That was her class's actual name. "Boring Ol' Fighter." I'd seen "Fighter" listed before, but not that one. I couldn't remember meeting her, but she was pretty vocal and outspoken in the chats.

She was in the land quadrant, so somewhere far below us at sea level.

**Gwendolyn Duet: Oh, hey bomber guy. It looks like we're neighbors. All of these dumbasses I'm stuck with don't know what they're doing. Me and the other two folks in my team are the highest level here. We rolled land, and we rolled something called the Sand Castle of the Mad Dune Mage. There are giant snakes, giant spiders, and these half-human, half-scorpion punk rock guys with no shirts and nipple**

rings running around all over the place. Plus bird things carrying chainsaws, though we haven't fought them yet. We haven't checked out the castle up close, but it's a big 'un. There are four levels of walls. It's built into the side of that giant tomb or mountain or whatever that is. I don't know how we're going to get in.

**Carl: Do you have a Desperado Club down there?**

Her damn name took up half the screen. I went into the chat interface and changed it to "Gwen."

**Gwen: There are three villages not including the castle, and I heard one of them does, but this one doesn't. I don't have access anyway. I'm a proper fucking lady. I got a Club Vanquisher ring.**

**Carl: Okay. Keep me updated. If you know anybody in the sea or the tomb quadrants, let me know.**

**Gwen: 10-4. There's a coral reef ringing the island. You can see it from the shore. I've seen sharks and jellyfish. Don't know where the sea castle is. Ain't seen nothing on the surface yet. Don't know shit about the tomb, but there are lots of entrances we can't get into. It looks like it's a maze inside. After that last floor, I ain't too keen on going in there.**

**Carl: Roger that.**

Fifteen days suddenly seemed like an impossibly-short time.

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Post nap, we reset our buffs. After a quick discussion with Mordecai, we decided we needed to keep up our strict training schedule. Katia and Donut hit the training room while I returned to the village. We gave Mordecai our environmental coupons and several hundred thousand gold. He and Donut were going to purchase the store inter-

face and kitchen upgrade. Donut also wanted one of the social upgrades, something that'd allow us to see messages from followers. None of us except her thought it was a good idea, and she'd been pouting about it for an hour straight.

I let Mordecai deal with that while I stepped out of the Toe. The "sun" was out, though it was threatening to sink below the western edge of the tomb's lip. I had to hurry. Several black dots dotted the air, many more than before. Most were obviously living beasts, but some appeared to be floating in place.

All up and down the street, the prostitutes standing out front of the other bars suddenly turned into human women. A few of them gave themselves ridiculous proportions, like Odette-sized breasts. They turned a rainbow of colors. I noted about half of them were male before the change.

There didn't appear to be any other customers about. I shook my head and moved one street closer to the wall. "I can be anything you want, honey," one of them called after me as I walked away. "I have the biggest library in town."

I found the house I was looking for and knocked on the tall door.

I was expecting a lanky dromedarian, but the door was answered by a small, gray, featureless humanoid. Surprised, I took a step back. It was like a person wearing one of those body socks. No nose, no eyes, just a blank mannequin. The thing stood only about five feet tall. It reached forward and touched my hand. I took another step back. If it didn't have the white dot of an NPC, I would've clobbered it. I read the description and was glad I'd stopped myself.

### **Skarn. Level-3 Changeling Juvenile.**

As I watched, he changed, features lumping together and clumsily forming into that of an eight-year-old boy. Unlike Katia's early attempts at changing, by the time he was done, he was indistinguishable from a regular human. He wore heart-covered boxers and clothes identical to my own for about ten seconds until it changed to a dromedarian-like robe. The tag over his head even changed. The kid looked up at me, wide-eyed, not saying anything.

“Uh, hey kid,” I said. “Is your mom or dad home?”

“My parents were killed in the bombings. Flint is out on patrol and won’t be home until after the darkness. He takes care of me now. He says I should always take the form of new people I meet so they feel more comfortable.” The kid delivered it in a robotic, completely unnatural voice, like he was talking for the first time in his life.

“Yeah, good idea,” I said, completely freaked out. It hadn’t been a thing before, but I now had a new phobia: Creepy-ass little kids.

What the kid had said finally registered. Shit. “I see you have that cool telescope on the roof of your house, and I wanted to use it to look at the gnome castle.”

The kid, whose name was Skarn, brightened, suddenly becoming animated. “The *Wasteland*? I can show you that!” He paused. “Flint says I’m supposed to ask for a gold coin. He says orphans can only get by if they use their talents to take money from people dumber than them.”

“I take it Flint is a dromedarian?” I asked as I followed the kid into the house. It was a wide, open room with a straw bed, a tall table, and a whole wall of herbs and vegetables hanging from it. A ladder led to the hatch in the ceiling. The kid scurried up it, much too quickly.

“We had a village, but the gnomes bombed it,” Skarn said. “Most of us died, but the dromedarians took us in. Not many kids lived. Ruby lived, but Flint says she’s destined to spend her life in Weird Shit Alley.”

“Why did the gnomes bomb you?”

“Flint says it’s because gnomes are short little assholes who deserve nothing but to be trampled to death and to be ripped apart by the feral geese.”

“Ah,” I said, coming onto the roof.

From here, I had a panoramic view of the city. Most of the buildings, including the Desperado Club one street over, were only a single floor. The city hall was nearby, rising about four stories not including

the massive fabric swirl atop it, which was another two. With the air clear, I could see the entirety of the “bowl.” It was almost, but not quite, a circle, maybe a little more than three miles from edge to edge. I could see the other city in the distance, a mirror of this one on the opposite wall. Sand dunes and cave entrances dotted the dune-swept badlands between the two towns. Metallic wrecks dotted the landscape. Hulking shapes patrolled the desert, too far to see what they were. The area appeared much smaller than it had seemed now that I could see it all.

*This is all we have to work with.*

Skarn moved to the telescope, which was pointed toward the desert. “I like to watch the patrol to make sure they’re okay. Flint says if I grow up big and strong, maybe they’ll let me stay, and I can join the patrol one day.”

I thought of the mass of desperate prostitutes one street over. It still didn’t make sense to me, but the story was becoming a little more clear. Skarn moved the telescope, searching. The telescope was a massive, white tube covered in pipes and gears. The material of the body was odd, maybe ceramic. I examined it.

### **Enchanted Gnome FarSeerer.**

**Used to sight long-range targets for their bomb runs, the FarSeerer is credited as one of the five key inventions that allowed the Dirigible Gnomes to obtain air superiority. When properly installed on a Gnomish Dreadnaught, this device increases the accuracy of gravity-based bombs by 75%. Allows for inspection and information on objects at a distance. It’s pretty good for spying on your neighbors, too. You don’t need porn when you got this thing hanging off the edge of your airship.**

**Warning: All gnomes targeted with this device are given a notice that they are being watched.**

“Where did you get this?” I asked.

“Flint found it in the dunes. There’s lots of crashed stuff from the

last war out there. There! There it is! Okay, you can look now. Hurry 'cause it moves. But you gotta pay."

I flipped a gold coin to the kid, who let it fall to the roof. He picked it up with two hands and did a little jump. "Thanks, mister! Use the turny thing on the right to zoom in and out."

"Sure, kid," I said, leaning into the eyepiece. I was expecting the image to appear upside-down like with the telescope we had on the cutter, but the gnomish castle came into view, big and clear.

"Whoa," I muttered, surprised at the telescope's clarity. "It's huge. It looks like a goddamned floating junkyard."

"It used to be bigger, but most of it broke off and fell in the water."

The Wasteland Castle appeared to be a jagged-edged, almost-rectangular island ripped straight from the ground. There was so much going on with the thing, it was difficult to focus on the whole. From this angle, I could only see the top, shingled roof of what appeared to be a building sitting on the center of the landmass, but dozens of other smaller structures dotted the edges, most of which were made with what appeared to be corrugated metal, similar to the walls of Hump Town. A group of absolutely colossal balloons kept the island aloft. Three brown, blimp-shaped balloons were flanked by a pair of even-bigger, round monstrosities. The five balloons were individually attached to the island by glowing ropes, and the whole group was held together with a net. The distinctive glimmer of a magical shield surrounded the balloons, causing the whole top section to shimmer in the dying light of the day.

If the scale was correct in my head, the island itself was approximately the width of three football fields. Like a goddamned floating aircraft carrier, but wider. Several of the small buildings dotting the exterior were actually weapons, I realized. I could see ballista and trebuchets and all sorts of weird odds and ends.

Hundreds of ropes and chains and other strange items hung from the bottom of the flying island, twinkling in the light. This included what appeared to be small, round huts. Some of the items only hung a



few dozen feet, but other chains and ropes and oddities dangled past the telescope's display.

Also attached to the side of the floating island were dozens of different flying machines of various sizes, from tiny, single-person hot-air balloons, to bus-sized, floating boats that appeared to be held aloft by magic. Most were moored to the far side of the island. All of the devices seemed to be mismatched, rusting hulks that shouldn't be aloft, like the cars in a *Mad Max* movie. As I watched, one hovering vehicle, the size of a rowboat, floated into view. The driver was clearly a gnome, similar in size and shape to the Bopca Protectors, but maybe a little smaller and with even more bulbous noses. It wore the stereotypical red, pointy hat. In fact, I realized, the whole damn island was covered with the little, red hats bouncing around.

The small airship was held aloft like a drone, with a set of four propellers spread out under the vehicle. The distinctive shape of a refrigerator-sized bomb dangled precariously underneath the small airship. I zoomed in further, and to my surprise, all the information appeared like I was examining it up close.

**Gnomish Knock-Knock**

**Type: Fuel-air bomb.**

**Effect: Thermobaric Explosion.**

**Status: 40. Barely stable. I wouldn't be tapping on the thing.**

**Ever seen a hundred Dromedarians die because their lungs imploded, followed by their skin getting melted off their body just before they all shatter into mist? Well now's your chance! Fun for the whole family, this was the main weapon of the Gnomish Bombardier Squads. There are only a few of these things left, and they're usually strapped to the failing air force's most reliable patrol ships.**

**The fuel-air Knock-Knocks were once used to devastating effect in the early days of the last conflict. The**

**remaining munitions are instead used as a mutual-standoff weapon. These are simple, crude, but highly-effective bombs. They are detonated using an adjustable, pressure-based fuse that can allow the bombardier to fine-tune the height at which they explode. Requires the bomber to know the altitude of their target to obtain maximum efficacy.**

**Famously unstable. But god-damn do they put on a show.**

“Yikes,” I muttered, pulling back. I looked down at the kid. “Did they drop one of those knock-knock bombs on your old village?”

“Yep,” he said. “It was a long time ago, though. I don’t remember it. Flint says the gnomes are bomb-dropping cowards. He says anybody who uses a bomb is a pussy.”

“Flint sounds like a real peach. Why don’t the gnomes drop bombs here?”

Skarn shrugged. “Flint says it’s because of what they have in the town hall. The Bactrians have the same deal. That’s why there’s peace.”

“What is it?”

“Flint says they don’t know what the Bactrians have. But here in Hump Town we have something that makes it so the gnomes don’t bomb us. The gnomes have a leader guy who’s really mean, but we have something he wants to keep safe, so he doesn’t bomb our town. They still attack anything outside the walls. That’s why Flint and the others only go out right after the storm, when the Wasteland is over the water.”

“But do you know what they have hidden in town hall?”

“I don’t know. I’m not allowed to go over there. I know it eats a lot of mushrooms.”

“OKAY, HERE’S WHAT WE GOTTA DO,” I SAID AFTER I FINISHED my training. “Step one is to find the other crawlers and make sure we’re all on the same page. Step two is to figure out who they have locked up in the town hall. It’s probably the gnome leader guy’s kid or something.”

“Maybe it’s his pet,” Donut said. “Nobody wants to bomb their pet. What eats mushrooms?”

“Lots of things,” Mordecai said. “And we should find out where they’re getting these mushrooms. There are many types of edible desert fungi. They often grow in patches with other foliage. Those areas are frequently rife with rare potion supplies. This is the first floor we’ve seen with a more natural setting. The sixth floor will be the big one, but any floor with flora will be a treasure trove.”

“So, we go out in there, and if it turns out it’s this gnome guy’s kid or something, what’s the next move?” Katia asked. She was doing her best dromedarian impersonation. It was almost flawless. The system pegged it at 95%.

“It’s going to depend on what it is, but after we find out, we’ll have to go over to that other town and do the same thing again, I

think. It sounds like they also have something to keep themselves safe. Plus the rest of the crawlers are probably over there. So far we only know a little kid's version of the story. We need to understand as much as possible before we move on."

"Okay, but before you go out there, let's do a quick tour of the new upgrades," Mordecai said, indicating the new kitchen renovation, which was nothing more than three cabinets sitting in a row against the blank wall of the kitchen. "We'll be able to upgrade this into something much better once we get to the tier-two upgrades. I'm looking forward to that, mostly because of the magic room. But we'll talk about that later. These are food synthesizers, bought with Katia's coupon. You can only use one a day, but this upgrade came with three different cabinets, so it's breakfast, lunch, and dinner or whatever. I know from experience these things can be a little buggy. I suggest not picking the same item twice in a row, or suddenly you'll find yourself with that as your only choice. Otherwise the selection changes every day and is customized to you. It'll learn your tastes."

I walked up to the first cabinet, put my hand on the door, and a menu popped up. There were about twenty choices listed, all of them breakfast items, from cornflakes to bacon to hominy grits. I clicked on **Sausage Bagel Sandwich**, opened the door, and the kinda-hot sandwich was sitting there, like the wooden cabinet was a microwave.

"Hey, cool," I said.

"Don't get too excited," Katia said. "Wait until you try it."

I took a bite. It tasted like a microwave biscuit sandwich, which I'd probably eaten a thousand of over the years.

"It's not bad," I said, chewing. "It's not great, either. Bopca food is better."

A new buff notification appeared.

**You are full! Your warm tummy increases your healing speed by 5%. It decreases debuff times by 5%. It lowers all indirect damage by 5%.**

"The food buff lasts all day, so you don't have to eat all three meals here," Mordecai said.

“Thank god,” Katia said. “I had it give me skyr and jam, and it tasted like bad sour cream mixed with Jolly Ranchers.”

“What the hell is skyr?” I asked.

“The second upgrade is just as important,” Mordecai said, interrupting. “It is the marketplace interface.”

“Marketplace?” I asked. “So we can buy stuff?”

“Yes and no,” he said. “We bought the marketplace upgrade early, and it doesn’t really open up until the next floor. For now it’s like having a virtual general store interface. The second-tier version is the same thing but twice as expensive, so we had to buy it now. You can purchase basic potions and scrolls, and random items will also pop up for sale. You can sell things. Carl, this was your coupon, but we gave it to Donut to use, so she got credit for it. It is her account. We did this because her Charisma bonus is automatically added to the prices.”

Donut had actually told me they were doing this as they did it, and I had said it was okay. If she died or we separated parties, I’d lose the upgrade. But at this point, our shit was so intertwined, losing this particular upgrade would be the least of my worries.

“How does it work?” I asked. I already knew the answer to this question, but I wanted Mordecai to state it.

He pointed with his wing over at a screen sitting against the wall next to his door. I hadn’t noticed it until now.

“It’s a simple interface. It’s like buying and selling on Ebay. There will even be bid auctions available next floor. If you want to sell anything magical, like those low-tier clothing items you keep receiving, I’d wait until then. For regular junk, just toss it to the AI storekeeper, and you’ll get a good price thanks to Donut.”

“I don’t like it,” Donut said. “It doesn’t let you haggle. Also, it’s broken. It says my hats are only worth one gold piece each. We need to get it fixed.”

“Bid auctions?” I asked. “The customer base gets smaller and smaller each floor. How many of us have this thing? Do people actually use it?”

“Oh, yes. The tourists and the factions will be able to start trading using the system once the sixth floor opens. You’ll see. The marketplace will be flooded. Some of the factions will be snatching up anything magical that appears, so you’ll make some good money selling your loot. Much more than you would get selling it to a store.”

“Wait,” I said. “Are we going to have to fight the guys we’re selling this gear to?”

“Yes,” he said. “This is how they outfit their armies. But if you don’t sell it, somebody else will. Go over there and check it out.”

“I will in a bit,” I said. “We got work to do.”

I actually really wanted to go over there and take a look at the interface, mostly because it would finally give me a definitive gold value for most of the items in my inventory. However, I’d been warned by *The Dungeon Anarchist’s Cookbook* against using the marketplace interface while the book was in my inventory. Currently, the book showed itself as having almost no value. Certain things, like that unexploded nuke also showed themselves as having no value in my inventory. However, the cookbook included this warning:

*<Note added by Crawler Batbilge, 12<sup>th</sup> Edition>*

*Be careful with the marketplace interface. It uses a different system to value items than whatever you might have installed into your UI. It tags this tome as a unique, heirloom item, giving it a ridiculous value, something like 50 million gold. Nothing has happened yet, but I am afraid of giving a third party access to my inventory like that.*

*<Note added by Crawler Allister, 13<sup>th</sup> Edition >*

*I don’t know if this is the cause, but this appears to be Batbilge’s last entry into the Cookbook. I’ve been leaving the cards casually on my bed whenever I use the marketplace. Make sure you don’t have it on you to be safe.*

I knew the cookbook manifested itself in different forms. For Allister, it appeared as a massive deck of playing cards from his home planet. They were for a game called T’Ghee, which seemed to be a mix between chess and go fish from the little information Allister

gave. The game was also a part of their meditation-based religion, which made it easy for Allister to spend hours studying the cards.

I had a little bedside table in my room, though I barely ever went in there. Donut still insisted on us sleeping together. I would try to leave the book in there and then go use the marketplace later.

But for now, we had work to do.

First up, seeing if these other crawlers were worth a damn.



The first two crawlers were a pair of humans who'd set themselves up at a brothel bar called Spit and Swallow. The bar's logo was a bird skewered on a stick. We entered the dark, incense-smelling saferoom. Mongo was in his carrier. Donut stood on my shoulder. Katia stood beside me. A dromedarian barkeep looked up at us. Multiple dromedarians were here, sitting at tables and drinking at the bar. Quiet music wafted through the large, L-shaped room. I saw it was a young, teenaged changeling playing a stringed instrument that was like a square-shaped guitar. The music was subtle, but haunting. It had kind of an Asian vibe. It was completely out-of-place for such a dive.

The two crawlers were the same guys we saw when we went into the Toe earlier. The first was a thin and tall man with an angular face, about 25 years old. He had olive skin and looked he might be of middle eastern origin. He was a level-22 **Hammersmith** named **Firas M.** The second was an overweight, balding guy about the same age. He looked maybe Spanish. He was a level-22 **Pest Exterminator** named **Louis Santiago 2.**

Sitting on Louis's lap was a prostitute. She was doing a rough approximation of Jessica Rabbit. Louis and Firas were laughing as we came in. "This is much better than the slave Leia," Louis said.

The woman pouted. "You said that was good. What about my...." She trailed off, seeing us stop at the table.

"They're making her change into different famous people," Katia

said, sounding disgusted. They could hear what she was saying, but she spoke as if they couldn't.

"Yup," I said. Each time they would have to describe the character like they were doing a sketch for a police artist. Their Jessica Rabbit was close, but the woman's forehead was too small, and the nose was much too big. Plus the dress was all wrong.

The prostitute, a level 14 "Human" was looking at Katia up and down with a sour expression. She spit on the ground before getting up and moving to the other side of the room.

"Why I never," Donut said. "Did you see that? I don't think she likes you, Katia."

"Mordecai warned me," Katia said, watching the prostitute move away. The woman melded back into the weird, changeling shape before leaning up against the bar. She was the only prostitute in the room. "He said sometimes shapeshifters don't like each other very much."

"She's probably just jealous," Donut said. "You can turn into anything you want, and they can only do regular monsters they've touched."

"Maybe," Katia said. "They can still change their features, obviously. Plus they gain some of the abilities of the race they choose. Sometimes I think that's better. I'm never going to be able to fly, not like them."

We'd discussed this earlier. Katia, as a doppelganger, could change into a flying creature and possibly get herself off the ground. But even with no mass added, she weighed more than most flying creatures anywhere close to her size, making liftoff a problem. She'd have to go big, like a dragon or something, but that would take a lot of work and time to get right, time we simply didn't have. A changeling's mass changed wildly from body to body. I asked Mordecai about it, and he said simply, "Magic."

The two crawlers were just looking up at us, wide-eyed the whole time.



“You’re Carl,” Louis said. He turned to Firas. “I told you that was Carl.”

“I believed you,” he said.

“We’re working on a plan to get off this floor,” I said. “I’m collecting everybody in town so we can discuss it. We’re all going to meet up at the Toe after the recap episode.”

“Toe,” Louis said, cracking up. “Get it?” he said to Firas.

“Get what?” Firas asked.

“The joke? The name of the bar is a joke.”

“The Toe is a joke?”

“Yes, man. Come on. It’s a camel town. You wouldn’t call a restaurant back home the human finger, would you? You’d just call it the finger.”

“What?” Firas said. “I don’t get it.”

I finally realized both of these guys were drunk off their asses. There was no debuff warning over their heads. I still didn’t understand why it was there sometimes and not others. The shitfaced debuff only appeared in specific circumstances, I guessed.

“Look,” I said, leaning in. “We need to all work together. The recap is in like six hours. Meet us there.”

“Or what?” Louis said, suddenly sounding inexplicably hostile. “You gonna blow us up?”

“No,” Donut said, jumping on the table and scattering their glasses. Vodka spilled everywhere. “Carl won’t hurt you. But if you’re not a part of the team, we are going to make sure you are kicked out of town. Have you seen the mobs out there in the desert? I haven’t seen anything lower than level 30. And since you two chuckleheads are level 22, I don’t think that will go so well. Now say, ‘We’ll be there, Carl.’”

“We’ll be there, Carl,” Louis said, swallowing.

“Lovely,” Donut said.

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“Chuckleheads?” Katia asked. “Another Elle term?”

“I got that one from the AI!” she said. “I’ve been waiting to use it.”

“Those guys aren’t going to help,” I said. “They’ve already given up, and they’re coasting.”

“I want to know how they got this far,” Katia said.

It’d only been dark for two hours, and dawn was already starting to crack in the distance as we left the Spit and Swallow.

“Hey,” I asked a passing dromedarian who walked with a massive bundle of reeds on his back. He stopped to look at us impassively.

“Is it only dark for two hours here?”

He looked at me like it was the dumbest question anyone had ever asked. “Taranis strolls across the sky, chased by his red brother, Hellik, who catches him four hours before dark. Taranis dismisses his evil brother with the storm before descending to rest for two hours before it happens again.”

“How long does Taranis take to move across the sky?” Katia asked. “And how long before Hellik appears?”

“You are truly new to this world, like they say,” the dromedarian said. “Taranis’s stroll is about twenty-two hours, except in dark months after his brother finally catches and betrays him. Hellik is only in the sky for eight hours a day. You don’t wish to be out there when both are in the sky, as the heat is unbearable.”

“So there are two suns it sounds like,” Katia said. “How long until the red sun rises?”

“You have 12 hours,” he said. “But we approach the time of the switch. In eleven days is the Red Equinox. That is when Taranis will be caught, and he will be gone for but four hours a day. The light of Hellik will wash the world for eight hours, but four of them will be the blowing season. Now leave me be.” He turned and walked off.

“Did you understand that?” I asked Katia.

“I think so,” she said. “Days are 24 hours long like on earth. It’s only dark for two hours. The storms come every day at four hours

before sunset and last two hours. The second sun is up for eight hours, and it gets really hot during that time. It sounds like our last three days here will be mostly dark, and the storms will last twice as long.”

“So, he said we have 12 hours until it gets super hot?” I asked.

“That’s right,” she said. “And we have 18 until the next sand-storm. I think.”

“It’s already super hot,” Donut complained.

“We better hurry then,” I said. Time was always weird here in the dungeon. The dungeon timers were mostly based on earth’s 24-hour clock, but the recap episode and some of the spell cooldowns worked on the Syndicate Standard day, which was something weird like 30 hours and 17 and a half seconds. It reminded me of having to deal with both metric and imperial measurements, something I’d had to cope with daily before all of this.

After Louis and Firas, we found another group of six crawlers in another bar. These guys were a party of half-elves and humans. They were all level 21-24, and they all seemed older, mostly in their thirties and forties. They were all Archers. All six of them had the exact same class. **Archer**. All six were male. It turned out they were a group of automobile salesmen from Helsinki. They worked at neighboring dealerships and had been at lunch when the collapse happened. On the first floor, they’d been beset by bow-wielding goblins, and their group had been decimated. But after striking back, bow-and-arrow themed weapons had been the only thing they received in their lootboxes. They had swords and knives and clubs, but the only weapon they all excelled at were the bows.

Them all choosing the exact same class had to be one of the dumbest things I’d seen since entering the dungeon, but knowing how this place worked, it probably wasn’t entirely their fault.

They’d hooked up with a much larger group the previous two floors, but they kept their own party. The archer thing had worked well on the third floor, but it had severely hindered them on the subway level. The “leader” was a stocky man, about 45-years old with

greying blonde hair and ice-blue eyes. His name was Langley, and he was the highest at level-24.

These guys were more serious about their predicament despite their lower levels. They'd also received the quest to find out what was in the Town Hall and had been discussing what to do about it when we'd arrived. I talked them into holding off for a bit and to start stepping out of town to train themselves up while we walked over to the Bactrian town, which was about four miles away on the other side of the dunes. We'd all meet up later.

The town's door was wide open, and there was no guard when we left. Katia added extra mass, rising up and hulking out. She pulled her riot shield and wore it on her left arm.

"I'm not gonna lie," I said as we left town. "It still freaks me out when you change."

"That's because you're used to being the biggest guy in the room," she said.

"Maybe," I said. "Or maybe it's because it's fucking weird. How is this our lives now?"

Nobody had an answer for that.

The sand dunes spread out in all directions. Here on the ground, it was hard to see how small this world really was. I knew the Bactrian town wasn't too far, and it was straight ahead. We had to just keep walking, up and down through the dunes. The town's walls would soon appear.

The Wasteland floated high above, having moved almost directly over the desert. A handful of other flying machines circled about, brushing the top of the bubble, but none were directly over the "bowl" as we called it. A v-formation of birds flocked away in the distance, heading up and over the lip of the bowl, diving out of sight and toward the land area.

Donut released Mongo and rode on his back while we attempted to navigate south toward the other town. I was expecting to immediately fall waist-deep into sand, but other than the random dunes, it was mostly hard packed and no more than an inch or two

deep. In some spots, bare stone was exposed. We truly were walking atop a massive tomb. I hoped the team working their way through it below our feet didn't do anything stupid that caused our world to collapse.

The ground wasn't flat. I'd been assuming the up and down of the bowl's surface was caused by the dunes, but the ground itself was stepped in places, creating a low, hilly landscape.

Rusted-out hunks of crashed flying machines dotted the bowl like forgotten and scattered toys. There didn't seem to be anything lootable in the old wrecks.

"There's a mob coming," Katia said after about five minutes of walking. "Coming in fast."

"It's big," Donut added.

"Okay guys," I said as the dot appeared on my own map. "Counter."

Katia moved to my right while Donut leaped to my shoulder. Mongo moved to my left just as two Clockwork Mongos appeared. The two automatons spread out ahead of us and to the sides as Donut barked orders at them. I prepared my *Bang Bro* spell, but I wanted to wait to see what we were facing first. Katia widened, and her crossbow clicked into place over her shoulder.

The monster crested the dune, looked at us, and hissed.

"Holy shit," I said as Donut started pelting it with *Magic Missiles*. A moment later, crossbow bolts commenced hitting the creature's armored surface, most of them bouncing off and away.

The monster was a brown and orange, speckled lizard covered with angry, 10-inch spikes. Its long, red tongue darted at us. The thing was the size of a goddamned grizzly bear. It hissed again and moved at us, its body undulating back and forth like a crocodile running across land.

### **Male Thorny Devil. Level 34.**

**These pokey fuckers are pretty common in desert-themed worlds. They're big and fast and dumb and angry. Their bodies are covered in defensive spikes,**

**which begs the question, how did something so big develop such a defense mechanism in the first place?**

**These guys tend to have a reverse harem thing going on. Odds are good you'll recognize the queen when you see her. Odds are even better she'll be the last thing you'll ever see.**

**Warning: This is a lizard-class mob. It will inflict 20% more damage against you thanks to your Extinction Sigil. That's what you get for killing so many poor, innocent monsters.**

"Outstanding," I muttered. Katia's crossbow bolts weren't doing shit, but Donut's newly-enhanced *Magic Missile* blasts were taking large chunks of health away with each bullseye. The creature stopped at the top of the hill, suddenly realizing he might've bit off more than he can chew. He started to back up as I unsummoned my gauntlet and loaded a banger sphere. I twirled and fired, scoring a hit on the monster's head. It dealt solid damage, almost as much as one of Donut's missiles.

Donut held off killing it while we allowed the clockwork Mongos to attack. I wanted to see how they'd do. It roared defiantly, continuing to back up while we kept pace, moving up the small hill. The two dinosaurs leaped upon the larger creature, mouths biting at its armored body. It kept moving, thrashing its tail and snapping back at the dinosaurs.

They did no damage. The thorny devil reached around and caught one of the Mongos and crunched like a kid chomping onto a lollipop. The automaton exploded. The other Mongo screamed and dug at the creature with his claws, scrabbling ferociously while the real Mongo howled in outrage. Donut cried for him to stay back. The remaining automaton managed to open up a tear on the creature's side, which started gushing blood. The monster whipped around, rolling onto its back and to its feet, moving astonishingly fast. It chomped on the second Mongo, also causing it to blow.

“Their armor is really thick,” Katia said. She aimed her crossbow at the tear in the creature, finally scoring some damage. Its health was deep red now, almost gone. Donut could kill him with one more shot, but she held off. We needed to experiment with all new mobs, see what worked and what didn’t.

“Stay back,” I said, judging the distance. I loaded a quarter-strength hoblobber as the creature desperately tried to flee back over the hill. I tossed the explosive in an arc, sinking it just past the horizon of the hill.

*Bam!*

A red geyser of lizard gore showered, mixed in with a bigger cloud of dust. The ground shook with the small explosion. Debris and lizard bits smacked into us like rain. The red dot turned to an X.

“Nice shot,” Katia said.

“I do like explosions, but why does it always have to be so disgusting?” Donut asked from my shoulder. “Sand and blood is a terrible combination.” She returned to Mongo’s back and started cleaning herself.

“Those quarter strengths are still a little too strong for close combat. That guy was what? Thirty feet away? Any closer, and we’d get some shrapnel. I need to make some maybe half that strength.”

We walked up to investigate the corpse. Mongo whimpered at the sight of the clockwork pieces, which started to whiff away. The monster dropped twenty gold, a thorny devil liver, and several teeth, which appeared to be moderately valuable. It all went into the inventory.

“Can you see the other town yet?” I asked Katia.

“Yes,” she said. “Once we left the gates, most of the bowl showed up on my map. We should see the town after we crest the next hill.”

“Do you hear that?” Donut said, suddenly looking up into the sky. She pointed up with her paw. “Look, there!”

“I think we attracted some attention with that explosion,” I said, shielding my eyes. “Whoa!” I ducked as the plane rocketed by a hundred feet over our heads.

The flying machine whined loudly, like a flying buzzsaw. It'd come from nowhere. The thing must've dropped from the Wasteland. It looked like a goddamn, open-air, twin-engine biplane, with each engine nestled between the wings. I saw the distinctive red hat of the pilot along with a second gnome passenger, facing backward. The creature pointed down at us and shouted. Two ominous shapes hung under the main fuselage, hanging vertically. Both of the egg-shaped objects were smaller than a knock-knock, but not by much. Each were attached to the bottom of the plane by a small net.

The plane started to bank back toward us. There was nowhere to hide.

I tossed three smoke curtains—I only had four left after this—and we doubled back the way we'd come so we'd have a small dune between us the plane. The smoke started billowing into the air, twirling in eddies and pushing out in all directions.

The plane lowered as it curved through the air. I could see it well now through the smoke. The nose of the plane had a face painted on the side, some sort of gray, screaming animal. It looked almost like a jacked-up, rabid koala.

### **Gnomish Drop Bear. Contraption.**

**This is one of the Dirigible Gnome's earliest fast-attack planes. There are only a handful of these still in service. While able to quickly reach most targets when drop-launched from home base, the twin engines of these early models were famously underpowered. Damaged Drop Bears oftentimes had difficulty obtaining enough altitude to reach home, even after ditching their payload. This is why most of these planes carry rapid-deploying, quick-escape balloons, making them sitting targets for enemy aircraft and flak.**

**That information is not going to do you any good when you're sitting there on the ground watching this**



**thing barrel at you like a robin descending upon a glistening, fat worm.**

**Don't worry, these guys don't drop bombs. Their standard payload is something much more entertaining.**

The twin objects hanging under the plane sure as hell looked like bombs, but my explosives handling skill didn't activate. That did not make me feel better.

The plane leveled out about thirty feet off the ground, lining up for a bomb run. We only had seconds.

"Fuck," I said, seeing how perfectly the plane was lined up with our position. They could either sense us through the smoke, or they'd guessed we'd backtrack. I pointed at the ridge to the right of us, back where we'd encountered the Thorny Devil, now a good 300 feet away. "Donut."

"That's a little too close, Carl."

"Do it," I said. "We'll jump behind the hill after. Katia. Make a shield."

"On it," she said, already starting to change shape. She formed into a half-shell, something she'd been working on. She faced herself 90 degrees away from the plane. I pulled a fused hoblobber and prepared to light it. I also turned to the left.

The plane's twin, rotary engines sounded like chainsaws cutting through metal, all grinding gears and pistons. They could clearly see our position, despite the smoke. We'd discussed this possibility of being attacked by a plane and had a contingency, but we hadn't planned on the smoke bombs not working. That was going to be a problem. If we fucked this up, we wouldn't have an escape.

"It's cast," Donut said. "Three, two, one."

*Thwum.*

We teleported away just before the plane dropped one of its two objects right on top of us. We appeared atop the small hill. I lit and tossed the hoblobber, trying to lead the plane best I could.

The dropped object clanged loudly into the ground and bounced once. Nothing else happened.

The full-strength hoblobber detonated in mid-air, much too low and behind the fast-moving airplane, though it was enough to knock me and Donut back. It sounded like I'd blasted a shotgun right by my ear. Katia didn't budge. The biplane shuddered in the air. The engine whined even louder, and smoke started to trail from one of the two engines. The drop bear banked away and started to climb. It was fleeing the fight.

*Jesus*, I thought, pulling myself up. My bombs were getting stronger.

"Carl, that hurt Mongo's ears," Donut said. Mongo croaked in a agreement.

"Did you hit it?" Katia asked as she watched the plane go.

"I don't think so," I said, brushing myself off. I kept my eyes on the spot where the object had landed. The metallic egg was the size of a garbage can. Nothing was happening. Nothing moved.

"Look, it's turning into a balloon," Katia said, still watching the plane. "They just dropped the second bomb way over there. It didn't go off either."

"Their engine went out. They're deploying their escape balloon," I said.

"Donut," I said after a few more seconds of nothing happening. "Do me a favor and create some more clockwork Mongos and send them over to that bomb thing."

She complied. A moment later, the two Mongos ranged forward, coming up to the dented bomb as we backed away, putting even more distance between us. The metallic egg sat on its side. There was a clear line through it, like it was one of those eggs they used to store candy at Easter. If it was supposed to pop open, it hadn't. The two clockwork dinosaurs banged on the side of the object while we continued to flee even further. After a minute of this, nothing still happened. They continued to jump and attack at it.

The duplicates only lasted ten minutes. After eight minutes

passed, there was still no indication that the egg actually did anything.

“Wait,” Katia said a moment later. She’d returned to her she-hulk form, but she kept the crossbow out. “I see something on the map now. I think they cracked it.” She let out a stream of breath. “It’s a dead boss. I think there’s a neighborhood map there.”

I felt relief. I was expecting something awful, like acid gas or a swarm of bees or a magical blast. “Okay, let’s go check it out.”

We returned to the spot, keeping a wary eye on the distant location of the second bomb. The two mongos stood proudly over the egg, which had popped upon. They timed out and exploded as we approached.

A single corpse lay dead inside of the egg. It looked like it had been run over by a truck.

It was a goose. A Canadian Goose with the distinctive brown body and black head with the white stripe.

**Lootable Corpse. Feral Goose. Level 45 Neighborhood Boss. Killed by getting splattered against the ground.**

**You are goddamn lucky this thing is dead.**

I kicked at the egg, which was labeled as an **Altitude-Based Deployment Device – This Item is Broken**. “The egg thing didn’t work. Look how rusty it is. It didn’t open, and it killed it.”

“I think you’re right,” Katia said, looking over her shoulder at the distant hills. “I’m pretty sure the other one didn’t open either. It bounced a few times.”

**Carl: Hey, Mordecai. Do you know what a feral goose is?**

**Mordecai: Not specifically, but anything with feral in the name is usually bad news.**

I reached down and looted the neighborhood map. Several red dots appeared in the area. They were all Thorny Devils. None were moving in our direction. I didn’t see the other boss, living or dead.

I couldn't help but feel as if we were on rails. There was a storyline here, and we were being forced along the path of the narrative. Them dropping a boss on us, only for the boss to be dead didn't seem so much an accident as a clue. We were being forced along a scripted path. I did not like that one bit. We needed to break away as quickly as possible.

"Yeah, let's leave that other egg alone," I said. "No use tempting fate." I picked up the corpse of the dead goose and stuck it in my inventory.

"That's really gross, Carl," Donut said.

I now had a tab in my inventory called **Mob Morgue**. The monsters' bodies were all worthless, but one never knew when something might be useful.

Even though the egg was broken, the mechanism that popped it open looked interesting. There was a dial apparatus that I wanted to look at. I tried picking up the entire shell, and while it had some heft to it, I lifted it easily. I pulled the whole thing into my inventory.

"Okay, let's keep moving," I said.

Donut was looking up at the sky. "There are more airplanes up there all of a sudden. I think we made them mad."

"Oh, hell. We need to get our hands on some of those camel rocket launchers," I said.

"I count eight of them," Katia said, shading her eyes. "They're being more cautious than the last one."

These were different planes than the last. This was an eclectic mix of vehicles, though they were too far up there to examine properly. They were circling down, almost casually, like a flock of birds. At this rate it'd take them several minutes to get here. We would never get to the Bactrian town now. We had to run.

"Change of plans. Back to Hump Town," I said. "Go, go."

Donut and Mongo took off, heading back to the city as we followed and started to run.

I looked up over my shoulder as we ran. I caught sight of the drop

bear, which was continuing to rise into the sky. A separate airship deployed from the Wasteland, on its way to intercept.

“Katia, you still have those engine parts in your inventory? From that interdiction cart we disassembled on the last floor?”

“I do,” she said, huffing as we ran. We’d taken apart one of the smaller rail carts from the previous floor. I had most of the cart’s body in my inventory. Katia had taken the mechanical parts. Her Earth Hobby potion gave her an enormous wealth of knowledge regarding engines.

“Good,” I said. “We need to build ourselves a dune buggy. And fast. We don’t have time for this shit. They’re making it so we can’t get to the other town while the weather is good. They want us out here while it’s super-hot, dark, or during the storm. I don’t want to do any of those.”

The walls of Hump Town loomed. The swooping airships stopped their descent, though they kept a holding pattern a thousand feet up.

“We’ll need defenses,” I added. “You work on the engine, and I’ll come up with an anti-aircraft system.”

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG TO BUILD THE RICKETY, COMPARTMENTAL vehicle. Thanks to the engineering and metalworking benches, I could fabricate anything I needed in minutes. The second-level engineering table was great for complicated designs that required multiple objects put together, like the front suspension system and drive shaft. The level two metalworking table allowed me to view the tensile strength and load limits, and the interface had more shaping options. Mordecai said once we got that table up to level three, we would be able to melt down some of the less valuable items we came across and reforge them into stronger, more dense alloys, which would allow me to make precise explosive spheres instead of relying on expensive hob lobbbers.

Katia and I worked on the first part of the design while Donut and Mordecai went shopping. But before they left, Donut took one look at the vehicle-in-progress and said, "I've decided to name it the Royal Chariot." She flipped her tail and exited the room astride Mongo, following Mordecai.

"What the hell, man," I said as the tooltip popped up over the

unfinished vehicle. It didn't yet have a description, but the system suddenly labeled it **The Royal Chariot - Contraption.**

The "chariot" was nothing more than a glorified, oversized ATV with an optional wagon. With the back cart attached, the contraption reminded me of the MOAB design we had fashioned to fight the rage elemental, but big enough to carry all of us. The most difficult part of the chariot was the tire design. We had some random rubber that I could shape into tires at the engineering table using my tools, but not nearly enough for four. I also had several black discs the goblins used for wheels on their copper choppers, but they had no real tread on them and weren't very wide. We had to be able to traverse the sand dunes and deal with the hills. We really needed actual, bouncy tires. Mordecai could make the materials at his alchemy table, but it would take time. Time we didn't have.

So instead, our first attempt was with metal tires. I made them as lightweight as possible, but after some experimentation, we realized they simply weren't feasible. They were still too heavy, making the suspension system useless. The single-gear, magical train cart engine was pretty darn powerful, but I soon realized the design would still end up with us bogged helplessly down in the sand, even if we tried to avoid the bigger dunes. The whole purpose of this was to have something to travel around the bowl as quickly and efficiently as possible.

We solved this by using the engineering table to fashion a wide, treadmill track, like on the back of a snowmobile. The dromedarians used something similar. They had several tracked carts zipping around town. We still utilized two, steerable wheels in the front, which I was able to make out of rubber. The belt mechanism required multiple, toothed wheels of specific sizes, plus the tracks themselves. We'd eventually coat the treads with rubber, too, if this worked. Katia sketched it all out as we stood side-by-side at the engineering table. It only took about two hours to put together a working vehicle once we had the design. It was crude, and it was still heavier

than I wanted. Plus I worried about the vehicle's ability to handle deep sand.

But the goddamned thing worked.

The whole contraption without the cart was pretty small, maybe about twice the size of the long-lost copper chopper. The vehicle sat low and was just wide and strong enough for hulk-version Katia to sit up front with me right behind her in a second seat, raised. She looked a little ridiculous astride the thing, like an adult sitting on a kid's sized ATV.

We most definitely could have made it larger and safer, but this design allowed me to lift it and stick it into my inventory. Sort of. We had to break it apart into two pieces. But we successfully built a vehicle that was both portable *and* big enough to handle the three of us. Katia wouldn't be able to hold as much mass as I liked, but this thing was mostly built for speed. It was not a tank. It wasn't for protection.

For now.

Katia and I discussed using the chariot's body as a chassis for a much-larger, more flexible vehicle. One where *she* was the vehicle's body. But she wasn't fully onboard with the idea. Not yet. Plus, I made the mistake of suggesting we start calling her "Katia Prime," and she didn't find it nearly as amusing as I did.

After another half an hour tweaking the design of the chariot, we were ready for a quick field test.

"If we weren't worried about storing it, I think two treads and no wheels at all might work better," Katia said, admiring our work.

I grunted in agreement. "You're not wrong. But we're already going overboard here, and we've already wasted too much time. Anyway, you're really good at this. I think you missed your calling."

She waved at the track mechanism underneath the vehicle. "This is all thanks to that earth hobby potion," she said. "Like I was sitting here, wondering how the heck we were going to put this thing together, and suddenly it was there. Do you think the aliens, you know, the ones not in the dungeon, can just teach themselves stuff



like this on demand? Like in that *Matrix* movie? Like one guy out there can just take a few potions, and he's suddenly a super genius in kung fu and piloting helicopters?"

"I don't see why not," I said. I bent down and unfastened two bolts. I strained, picking up the back half of the chariot. It disappeared into my inventory. "We don't really know enough about the outside universe."

"That seems like it would have such a huge impact on society. If anybody can be an expert in anything, what does that even mean? It doesn't make sense to me how there's such... I don't know, cruelty."

"It's probably crazy expensive," I said, moving to the front half of the Chariot. I pulled it into my inventory. "So only the ultra-rich can use it. Maybe it's like plastic surgery. Only some people can afford it, and there are probably limits. Like if you do it too much, bad stuff happens."

"Maybe," she said. "I can't stop thinking about it. It's so... *odd*. I know how these engines and all the related mechanical parts work, but the knowledge is unnatural. I'm not sure how to explain it. It's like I know it, but I don't *know*, know it. Like maybe it's getting downloaded into my brain on demand. Like I'm tapped directly into Wikipedia."

"That *is* weird. My *cesta punta* skill translates pretty well into action, but it's mostly muscle stuff. So maybe it's different. We still don't know what Donut's earth hobby skill is. It's something really strange. Scutelliphily. I've asked a hundred people, and nobody knows what the hell it is."

We headed outside, passing multiple dromedarians as we exited the city. Mordecai and Donut were nearby, and they said they'd be done "negotiating" in a bit. We didn't want to go far, so we set up the cart just outside the gate.

It took us about five minutes to assemble the vehicle, which was much too long. We'd have to work on it.

We stepped back and admired our work. A new description popped up.

**Tracked All-Terrain Suicide Machine. *The Royal Chariot* – Contraption.**

**If a snowmobile got drunk on moonshine and had a sweaty, ill-advised night with a hillbilly’s coon-hunting ATV, this oversized birth defect of a vehicle would be the result. Quickly traverses through both sand and snow. Don’t worry about the lack of roll cage or the grossly-misplaced center of gravity, or the fact this thing will do an impressive impersonation of a catapult the moment it hits a rock. The most important part is that it looks kind of badass.**

“Whoa,” Katia said. “I just got an achievement for inventing something. That description is kind of worrying.”

“The system naming it means they think the design has at least some merit.”

I was making that up, but it sounded good. All I really wanted to do was get from point A to B quickly. I looked at the machine dubiously. “Let’s see how much of a deathtrap this really is.”

The dunes closer to the wall of the bowl were much more steep and were perfect for testing. The dromedarian waster patrol kept the town’s outskirts mob free, and the air was clear. I ran up the closest hill just to make sure I wouldn’t sink through like with snow.

I stood at the top and waved. Katia started the vehicle and moved, slowly easing the chariot up the dune. It quickly and quietly ascended. The engine was completely silent. Only the tracks themselves made any noise. You couldn’t even tell the thing was running until she eased the throttle forward. She pulled it next to me.

“It works,” she said. “I can tell it’ll go pretty fast. We have to be careful with turns. I’m worried about rolling it. Maybe we *should* build a cage.”

The cart’s passage kicked up a huge plume of dust even though she’d only driven it about a hundred feet. I looked nervously up into the air. The Wasteland was near the edge of the bowl’s lip on the

opposite side. Mordecai and Donut had just spent some time talking with the locals, and they learned that the gnome fortress kept to a pretty specific schedule. It was usually directly over the bowl except during the daily sand storm, when it moved to the edge of the bubble, parking itself over the water. After the storms were done, it'd spend the next few hours moving back into position. By the time the two-hour "night" was over, the fortress would be back in place several thousand feet over the center of the bowl.

We still had over 12 hours before the sandstorm was due to start, which meant the airship was not where it was supposed to be.

"The Wasteland isn't really doing what Mordecai claimed it would," I said.

Katia's face turned to the sky. "Yeah, you're right. It looks like it's headed out to the ocean now. They must have misunderstood its schedule."

Three flares rose into the air. Two red and one white. All three hung in the sky, crackling. They'd come from the south, in the general area of the Bactrian village.

That's when I realized the Wasteland was directly over the other village. From behind and within Hump Town, shouting rose. A high-pitched, wailing siren suddenly filled the air. The siren was strangely urgent in its call, like the wailing of a child. Behind and above, on the corrugated metal town wall, the sheet covering one of the large boxes pulled away. Two of the camel creatures stepped into box.

"It's an anti-aircraft gun," I said. It had four barrels, turned to the sky.

The whoosh of rockets rose into the air behind us. It was three more flares, this time fired from within town. I looked up and saw these three were red.

"I wonder what the colors mean," Katia said.

"Let's get back into town," I said, jumping onto the back of the chariot. My seat was higher than hers and could swivel, allowing me to see over her shoulder. Once Mordecai and Donut returned, I'd build the Chariot's defenses. Katia drove down the hill. The vehicle

seemed pretty steady to me. It continued to raise a huge plume of dust, however. I wondered if there was a way to better disguise our passage. Probably not.

We stopped outside the gate and started to quickly disassemble the vehicle. When we were done, I turned one last time to look south.

And that's when the bombs started to fall on the distant town.

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"If they were in safe rooms, they'll be okay," Mordecai said as we waited for the recap episode to start. They'd managed to purchase two dromedarian bazooka tubes and ten rocket-propelled missiles. These were straight, line-of-sight missiles. The camels absolutely refused to sell their guided ones. I'd already taken one apart and given the chemical drive mechanism to Mordecai so he could reverse-engineer it. He said he was certain now that he knew how it worked. He could make me some components that I could use to manufacture my own rockets at my sapper's table. They wouldn't pack as much punch as I'd like, but their range would be amazing. And once I added a surefire to some of them, I'd have actual guided missiles.

"If the whole town blows up, the safe rooms really are safe?" Katia asked.

"Yes," Mordecai said. "But not all bars are true saferooms. Generally if the proprietor isn't a Bopca, then there's like a 50/50 chance. The Toe is not a real saferoom, but as long as we're in the personal space, we'll be fine. I think there might only be one or two other places in town that'll protect crawlers.

I remembered Growler Gary from the last floor. His bar had not been safe for him.

"So the NPCs will be safe if they're in the correct bars?" I asked.

From the sheer amount of explosives dropped from the Wasteland, there was no way anything was left in the town.

"Well, it's actually complicated," Mordecai said. "Certain NPCs will be safe. *I* would be safe if I was in a saferoom. The whole room

would be protected. If there aren't any crawlers or basically any former-crawler or off-world NPCs in the room, the room is probably destroyed. There are additional rules if there's only one saferoom in an area, but it's pretty complicated stuff. The long and short of it is, Borant-owned NPCs are not protected by the saferoom system if they're the only one there. They're only protected if *you* are there."

"I'm not sure I understand," I said. "You're saying all the NPCs are probably dead unless they were in a bar with crawlers? So saferooms are only 'safe' if a crawler is inside?"

He shrugged. "Pretty much, yeah. Again, there are some other rules. The manual on saferoom procedures is like a phonebook."

"What about that other thing we were talking about? With the primary and secondary zones?"

"That's different," he said, shooting me a warning glare. "That doesn't directly impact crawlers or npcs at all."

I sighed. There was still just so much I didn't understand. *And you probably know more than 90% of the other crawlers.*

"So there might be a bar that's just sitting there in the middle of the destroyed town?"

"That's right," Mordecai said. "Same with entrance to Club Vanquisher. Saferooms are protected spaces. That's the point. Sometimes during quests and special events, the system prevents access to them, as you've seen. But if *this* town gets that same treatment from the gnomes, just come in here, and you'll be protected."

"I hope the poor people in the other town knew all this stuff," Donut said. She sat on the counter eating a can of Fancy Feast from the food synthesizer. I could tell by the look on her face that she was not pleased. Mongo couldn't get food from the boxes, so we still had to purchase it for him. But tonight he received a pet biscuit.

We still didn't know why the gnomes had blown the Bactrian town to hell. From what I gathered based on the frantic activity by the dromedarians, they didn't know either. We kept sticking our heads out to keep track of the ponderous fortress's location. So far, it hadn't made a move in our direction.

The recap show started. It opened with what looked like a giant sheet of bubble wrap. The camera quickly panned over it, showing bubble after bubble. Snowstorms, hurricanes, thick jungles, swamps, mountains, labyrinths, and more flashed by on screen.

But before it moved to the fifth floor, we watched multiple scenes from the end of the Iron Tangle. We watched Miriam Dom cast a spell that knocked out a giant province boss. The debuff only lasted a few seconds, but in that moment, Prepotente hit it with a half of a dozen different potions in a row, causing its unconsciousness to jump from ten seconds to five hours.

“Genius,” Mordecai said, watching the goat work. “He’s killing it with stacking debuffs.”

On the screen, Quan Ch zipped into the room from out of nowhere. He shot the boss with a blue magical bolt, causing it to wake up. The goat team had to flee, with Prepotente screaming he was going to kill Quan. Quan remained in the room, shot the boss a few times, enough to get its health down halfway, but after the thing swung at him, he ran off.

“He could’ve killed it,” Donut said. “He ran away like a wuss. He’s a menace!”

“That robe of his is something else,” Mordecai said. “It looks like it gives flight, both the *Shield* spell and a constant *Negate Magic* shell, which is similar to Carl’s *Wisp Armor* spell. I’m not certain what the blue energy bolt is. I think it might be *Disrupter*, which is a rare but strong spell. It’s similar to Donut’s *Magic Missile*, but it is good for blowing holes in things. Plus it has splash damage and has a stun effect.”

“That should be ours,” Donut grumbled.

Next, they showed my fight with Grull. They said Grull was being controlled by Prince Maestro, but it was only a quick mention, and they didn’t focus on him. Instead, they showed the teamwork of Elle, Donut, Katia, plus Li Jun’s team. They portrayed the train falling through the portal into the abyss, but they did not show Fire Brandy or Tizquick the dwarf at the controls. Instead, they switched

it back to me, showing the experience points get showered onto me as the wall monitors all died and the soul crystals across the tangle detonated, opening up the floor to escape.

Mordecai gave me an appraising look afterward. “You know you’re crazy, right?”

I nodded.

The show abruptly changed, becoming a tribute to the life of the crawler Ifechi.

“So it *was* Ifechi who died,” I said as they showed the African man hesitantly enter the dungeon. “He was a healer. Poor guy.”

Ifechi entered the dungeon with a group of other men, all soldiers, all wielding AK-47s. Ifechi was the only one who wasn’t armed. He was also dressed differently than the others, wearing a bright red shirt with a vest. He carried a medical bag over his shoulder with the familiar Red Cross logo.

“Not a guy,” Katia said suddenly, peering closely at the screen. “Ifechi was a woman.”

“What?” I said. “Are you sure? How can you tell?” The crawler looked like a dude to me. He was rail thin, smaller than the others. Everything about him seemed timid and drawn-in, afraid. He kept his head shaved. Not that I was an expert, nor did it really matter, but he looked like a bloke to me.

“Call it a super power. I can tell.”

We watched as Ifechi’s former team, *Le Mouvement*, got zeroed out by a translucent jelly boss the size of a house. From there, Ifechi, now all alone, stumbled through the dungeon, eventually meeting up with Florin. Florin, as a human, had kind of a mysterious background. He said he was from France, but he had an Australian accent. He was in Africa when it all went down. They didn’t really give the guy’s full story, but he mentioned something about “private security.” I knew what that really meant. He was a mercenary of some sort. He’d also come into the dungeon armed to the teeth, but he now relied solely on his automatic shotgun, which appeared to be heavily modified even before he received the magical, unlimited-ammo upgrade.

Ifechi eventually chose a healer class, and Florin picked the crocodilian race. They had been separated when they hit the third floor, but they quickly found one another. It showed them hugging and sobbing as they reunited.

They were more than just friends, I realized.

Florin's weapon was devastating to most of the mobs, and Ifechi, despite being a healer, had an attack so effective, so unique, I could see how the two had earned spots in the top ten. It was a staff that summoned and flung leeches. *A lot* of leeches. They'd cover the mob, sucking at its fluids, killing it in seconds. Afterward, the wriggling leeches would be filled with blood and other fluids from the dead mobs, and they could be eaten, giving a wide array of buffs. Florin would gobble them right up, getting temporarily stronger. It was disgusting,

"Fascinating," Mordecai said. "I haven't seen anything like that in a very long time. I thought they'd removed that spell. Crocodilians have the ability to triple the effectiveness of any buffs they receive from eating creatures. He probably chose that race just because of her staff."

And then, finally, we saw the manner of Ifechi's death.

The two were part of a group that had moved to one of the former ghoulish stations after the stairwell station had opened. A line had formed at the stairs, and people were quickly descending. The station was almost empty. Everything was moving nice and orderly.

And then Lucia Mar entered the room.

The number one crawler strolled into the station like she owned the place, flanked by her two dogs, Cici and Gustavo 3. Lucia was in her beautiful, magic-focused form. Her Lajabless species made it so she spent half the day as the beautiful woman. The rest of the day she spent as a strong, melee-focused, female version of Skeletor. The dwindling crowd parted as the child-turned-woman walked through the room, her raven hair sparkling. She had a mess of boss kills and player-killer skulls over her head.

Cici the rottweiler had also undergone a transformation, having



grown to be almost twice the size of the other dog. The larger dog growled at a random crawler, who scattered back.

Lucia paused, looking about the room. The remaining crawlers scrambled at their chance to hit the stairwell. A glut formed at the exit.

Florin and Ifechi approached Lucia, apparently in an attempt to say hello.

“No. This is mine,” Lucia said, hugging herself. The two dogs growled.

“All right, mate,” Florin said, backing off, arms raised. He turned away and muttered “crazy bitch,” under his breath.

Lucia did not hesitate. She grabbed the closest crawler, a man about 18 years old who was desperately trying not to be seen. She picked him up like he weighed nothing, and literally *threw* the man at Florin. The poor guy wailed as he was tossed, which caused Florin to jump out of the way. The thrown man hit the ground, bounced once, and crashed against the far wall, unconscious.

“What the hell?” Florin shouted as Ifechi rushed to the injured man. “Lady, you’re not right in the head. We’re all friends here.”

“There is nothing wrong with my head,” Lucia Mar said, sounding strangely offended. “Why would you say that?” She pointed at Ifechi, who was shoving something into the mouth of the unconscious man. “Speak no more, or there will be something wrong with your girlfriend’s head.”

“Girlfriend. Told you,” Katia said, as we watched, transfixed.

“Jesus,” I said. “And I thought the goat was crazy.”

“Prepotente *is* crazy, Carl,” Donut said. “You’re crazy, too. Lucia is something different. She’s insane.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

Florin backed away, not saying anything. I could tell the guy was smart. He recognized her insanity. The last of the crawlers pushed their way to the stairs, leaving just the three of them plus the injured crawler. And the dogs.

“That’s sad,” Donut said.

“What?” I asked.

“Nobody stayed behind for that poor guy Lucia threw across the room. Only Ifechi helped him.”

I reached up and patted Donut’s head. The cat’s entire body was taut as she watched the screen.

Florin said nothing as he walked backward, keeping his eyes on Lucia. He reached to tap Ifechi on the shoulder and signaled for her to proceed toward the stairs. She nodded. The injured man sat up, rubbing his head. He gave a terrified glance at Lucia and scrambled toward the stairwell. Gustavo—the regular-sized rottweiler—moved to block his access. Lightning sparkled in the dog’s mouth as he growled.

“What did you say?” Lucia snarled at the fleeing boy. “What did you say about my papa?” Gustavo took a menacing step toward him.

“What?” he asked. “I... I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“He didn’t say anything about your father, you right cunt,” Florin said, distracting her. “But if *I* could say something to him, it’d probably be, *quit dropping your babies on their heads*. It makes them a touch daffy.” He pulled Ifechi up. “Come on, Ife. To the stairs.”

“Don’t take shit from anyone. It’s just a game. It’s not real,” Lucia said. She was talking to someone over her shoulder. Someone who wasn’t there.

Ifechi surreptitiously cast a spell by waving her hand. It looked like a protection spell of some sort. She cast it twice. Once on Florin and once on the other crawler, leaving herself unprotected.

“Why did you talk,” Lucia said to Florin. She sounded curious, her head cocked to the side. “I said I would make your girlfriend’s head not right if you talked.”

“We don’t want any trouble,” Florin said, edging his way toward the stairwell.

“That’s what they always say,” Lucia said, moving sideways to block the exit. She clicked her teeth.

Everything that happened next took place over the course of ten seconds.

Cici the giant rottweiler rushed at Florin, launching herself at

him. Gustavo did the same, jumping over the other hapless crawler and rocketing toward the crocodilian. The dog opened his mouth, as if ready to shoot lightning from it.

*Bam, bam, bam.*

Florin's shotgun was suddenly in his hand, and he fired three blasts so quickly that I didn't even see the movement. He sent one shell at Lucia, one at Cici, and one at Gustavo, in that order.

Lucia and the two dogs all flew backward. Lightning misfired from Gustavo, blasting off the ceiling. Florin continued to blast all three in turn. *Bam, bam, bam.* He took a step toward them. *Bam, bam, bam.*

Next to me, Mordecai groaned. Katia gasped. And then I saw what they saw.

Ifechi was leaned up against the chamber wall. Her head was gone. The splatter of blood and brains painted the stone.

"What..." I began. Mordecai held up his wing for me to be silent.

That fourth crawler cast a spell as he scrambled toward the stairwell. It turned the floor of the room to ice. He rushed down the stairs and disappeared.

Lucia sat up, not injured at all. She grinned at Florin.

"I told you I'd do it," she said.

"No," Mordecai said. "*No, no, no.*"

Florin fired once more, right into the temple of Lucia Mar.

They both flew back this time, spinning and turning like pinballs on the floor of ice.

Lucia Mar ricocheted off the wall as she sat up, again uninjured. She cackled with laughter, laughter that abruptly turned to a strangled cry as she continued her momentum and plunged into the stairwell and disappeared. She crashed loudly to the bottom of the stairs.

Both of the dogs whimpered as they tried to get up, also uninjured. They scrambled, their feet unable to purchase on the slippery ground. They spun and turned and bounced off one another. They clambered, howling and whimpering as they moved to follow Lucia Mar onto the stairwell.

If it wasn't so horrifying, it would've been hilarious.

Florin sat up. His temple and neck was covered in blood, his health mostly gone. He shook his head, confused.

And only then did he notice that Ifechi was dead. He looked at her, bewildered, not understanding what had just happened.

"No," he said, seeing her body against the wall. "No, Ife, no."

That's when I noticed the shining, golden skull over Florin's head. He dropped his gun, put an arm over his crocodile eyes, and he started to wail.

The show cut away to the smiling host, breathlessly starting to explain the fifth floor.

"What the fuck did I just watch?" I asked as the show went on.

"Lucia appears to have access to a very powerful spell," Mordecai said. "It probably comes from something she's wearing. It usually has a long cooldown, but she either has multiples of the spell, or she has somehow defeated the cooldown problem. Either way, it's ridiculously broken. It's no wonder she's so strong."

"What's the spell?" I asked.

"*Rubber*, most likely. It's similar to your damage reflect and Donut's love vampire. When she'd cast it, it also applied to her two pets. So it's at least level ten. I bet it's closer to 15. It reduces a high percentage of incoming damage and reflects it to a target of your choosing. She'd cast it directly on Ifechi's head. So when Florin shot Lucia and the dogs, he was literally shooting his partner in the head."

"They gave him credit for the kill," Katia said. "That's awful. It doesn't seem right."

"It's not. That's the dungeon being a dick," I said.

"Dreadful. Just dreadful. How did Florin survive shooting himself in the head?" Donut asked.

"It was that protection spell," I said. "Ifechi cast it on him and the other guy, but not on herself."

"Certain protection spells can't be cast on yourself," Mordecai said. "It takes a special type of person to want to use and train such enchantments."

I thought of Imani, who was also a healer. She would have done the same thing in this situation.

Goddamnit. Every time I saw or heard of a crawler killing one of their own, it just made me angrier.

*You will not break me. Fuck you all. I will break you.*

I took a deep breath. “That kid’s brain is scrambled,” I said finally. “Donut is right. She’s literally insane. She’s talking to phantoms and hearing things.”

“Poor thing,” Katia said. “But she needs to be dealt with.”

“I agree,” I said. “We need to put her down.”

“I call dibs on the dogs,” Donut said.

**Mordecai: Here’s the good news. If she does use that *Rubber* spell, it has a vulnerability. A big one. They’d been editing out her using the spell until now. There’s a reason for that. They might want her killed.**

**Carl: Okay. We’ll talk about it later. But if she’s not in our bubble, it doesn’t really matter. We gotta survive this place first.**

From there, they portrayed multiple crawlers entering the warehouse and spinning the wheels. Lucia Mar was given the land quadrant in a bubble that was designed similarly to our own, but it was a massive, stepped pyramid in the center. And the weather was cold and covered in ice. I laughed at that. Prepotente and Miriam Dom landed on the air quadrant of a bubble that was like a giant cave with rock growing along the interior wall of the sphere. Their domain was nothing more than a shelf of rock that ringed the interior wall. Their target was a nest of spiders that hung from the ceiling, thousands of feet into the air.

“Jesus,” I said. “They’re just as fucked as we are.”

Florin entered his room completely defeated. He sat down in the corner of the warehouse and did not spin anything. He had Ifechi’s leech staff, which he laid across his lap. He leaned his head against the wall and went to sleep right there.

It portrayed a dozen more shots of people spinning and landing on a wide assortment of quadrants.

The show ended with the promise of more bloodshed and more hilarious outtakes of us silly crawlers struggling to survive. I pictured myself punching the host over and over until his head caved in.

The show ended, and the new top 10 populated on the board.

**1. Lucia Mar – Lajabless – Black Inquisitor General – Level 38 – 1,000,000 (x2)**

**2. Carl – Primal – Compensated Anarchist – Level 41 – 500,000 (x2)**

**3. Prepotente – Caprid – Forsaken Aerialist – Level 35 – 400,000 (x2)**

**4. Donut – Cat – Former Child Actor – Level 33 – 300,000 (x2)**

**5. Quan Ch – Half Elf – Imperial Security Trooper – Level 43 – 200,000 (x2)**

**6. Dmitri and Maxim Popov – Nodling – Illusionist and Bogatyr – Level 33 – 100,000 (x2)**

**7. Miriam Dom – Human – Shepherd – Level 31 – 100,000 (x2)**

**8. Elle McGib – Frost Maiden – Blizzardmancer – Level 33 – 100,000**

**9. Bogdon Ro – Human – Legatus – Level 31 – 100,000**

**10. Florin – Crocodilian – Shotgun Messenger – Level 33 – 100,000 (x2)**

“Carl! You’re number two! Katia! You fell off the list! This is outrageous! You were a superstar.”

“Thank god,” Katia said. She looked genuinely relieved.

“Hey,” Donut said. “Wait a second. Why didn’t I go up? We’re separated. This is not acceptable, Carl.”

I patted her on the head while she grumbled, swishing her tail angrily.

“Also, why did Florin lower so much?” Donut asked a moment later. “That was so sad, and they’re punishing him for it.”

“I bet he hasn’t moved since he went down the stairs. He’s probably still sitting in that room where you spin the wheels. His PR agent is probably losing her shit,” I said. “Elle is back on the list, but her bounty didn’t double.”

“She wasn’t in the top ten when the floor ended,” Mordecai said.

Quan Ch had hit level 43, making him the highest, though I had no idea why or how. The asshole fled any fight that looked like it might be difficult. Hopefully he was using his powers this floor to get everyone in his bubble to safety.

I shuddered, thinking of the poor bastards stuck with Lucia Mar. The kid had an obvious mental illness. If we were someplace else, my first thought would be to lock her up and put her someplace where she could get the treatment she obviously needed.

But we weren’t someplace else, and she was killing people. Good people. She had to be taken care of.

I didn’t want to admit it, but part of me was happy that there was nothing I could do about that right now. We only had a limited number of fellow crawlers to deal with on this level.

*That shit weighs down on you after a while,* I thought.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT CAME AND WENT. THERE WAS NOTHING of significance. The announcer spoke of the doubling of bounties for those who'd been on the list. She reminded us that sponsorship bidding was underway. There was a warning that just because we were outside that we shouldn't use the big, wide world as a bathroom and that there were restrooms in the towns. But if we had to go while we were outside, they wouldn't penalize us. We needed to announce that we were going to the bathroom out loud, wait five seconds, and then do our business. The idea was so ridiculous, it made me want to laugh.

All of us, including Mordecai, exited the personal space and walked into the Toe to find the other crawlers waiting for us. Louis and Firas, who were still drunk, plus Langley and the other five car salesmen-turned-archers all sat at the bar. The archer guys had all leveled one or two times each since we'd last talked. All eight crawlers looked at me expectantly.

Juice Box the changeling prostitute sat on Louis's lap. She'd transformed into something... odd. Like a rodent/human hybrid, but with



orange hair and a purple jumpsuit. Whatever it was, the resulting creature looked like Chuck E. Cheese in drag.

I sighed.

**Mordecai: That changeling is a lot more powerful than she looks. It's very odd. Do you see how easily she's altering herself? It's almost like she's a doppelganger.**

I examined Juice Box. The note over her head said she was a **Ratkin Brood Mother Attendant**, but as I watched, she turned more mouse-like, and it switched to **Mouser Dame**.

**Carl: Are you sure she's *not* a doppelganger?**

**Mordecai: Yes, I'm sure.**

**Carl: Do you guys have some sort of changeling spidey-sense or something?**

**Mordecai: You can see it in how she changes. She's switching to the race and then altering the appearance to make it look like whatever the hell they're requesting. It's like dressing up stock photos instead of drawing something from scratch. Even if I had all my changeling abilities and wasn't at half power, I still wouldn't be able to do that. There are a lot of creatures who mimic others, and you can usually tell what it is based on the way they change. Doppelgangers like Katia have to form themselves like clay. Mimics do the same thing, though the change comes from the mouth and moves outward. Adult changelings turn into a generic version of the race and then alter their appearance from there. Illusionists fade into existence.**

**Carl: What about the Valtay? I've been thinking about that a lot lately.**

**Mordecai: That's something different. Brain worms aren't mimicking something. They're taking over their**

actual bodies. The Valtay are a type of creature called a Gondii. They reactivate dead bodies as long as they enter within hours of death. Gondii can read old memories and keep the bodies running for centuries. There are Intellect Hunters who do the same thing, but the bodies start to rot almost immediately, and they are always hopping from body to body. Then there's something called an Infiltrator. They are much more insidious. But none of those things are shapeshifters like Miss Juice Box here.

Carl: She can't be too strong. She's only level 17.

Mordecai: That's misleading. Regular crawlers who become changelings can only shift once every ten minutes. Shifting on demand is a skill unique to the race. She is easily the equivalent of level 15 in the Race Shifter Skill, and I'm willing to bet every one of these prostitutes in town is the same. A changeling who can switch that quickly is very dangerous. Remember, unlike doppelgangers, changelings gain some of the abilities of the race they're mimicking. She can turn into a gorgon at the snap of the finger and hit you with a petrify spell, then switch to a rock-sling to shatter your stone body into dust, and *then* turn to a forge ogre and take that dust and pressurize it enough to make it a diamond. All before you could say "Ouch."

Carl: Can she turn into a storm giant or something? Something like Grull?

Mordecai: No. There are mass limits, but it's not nearly as strict as what Katia has to deal with. There are lots of weird, complicated rules. The stronger the monster they emulate, the lower the chance of being at full power. But there are still plenty of things she can turn into that will ruin your day.

**Carl: So what you're telling me is to be nice to Juice Box.**

**Mordecai: Yes. And all the other prostitutes. Be polite. And make sure all these scrubs understand it, too. Especially that Louis idiot.**

I realized everyone was staring at me, so I started talking.

“There may be others in this quadrant, but if they're alive, they probably just got their bell rung pretty bad,” I said. “So it might be just us dealing with that fortress.” I gave a worried glance at the dromedarian barkeep, who was watching us with interest. He was a pleasant enough guy, unlike most of the other camels. He'd given both Donut and Mongo treats, happily patting them on the head. Mongo was practically ready to leave us for him. However, this next part of the conversation involved doing something the camels would not like. We had to get out of his earshot.

“But first, we're all going to get a tour of our personal space. We can talk more comfortably in there.”

“It's called the Royal Palace of Princess Donut!” Donut added.

“Louis, look, it's that cat again from the television,” Firas said.

I realized that while the two men had been drunk the first time we met them, they'd been mostly coherent and aware of their surroundings. In the nine hours since we'd last spoken, it appeared they'd managed to get themselves even more plastered. My initial instinct was to just kick them out of the Toe, but I was worried they'd do something extra stupid. Like cause the town to get obliterated like the other one. I needed to keep an eye on them until we figured out the whole picture.

**Carl: Mordecai, I'm out of the alcohol cure potions. Do you have the stuff for more?**

**Mordecai: You read my mind. I'll whip up a batch when we get inside. With my upgraded table, I can make a version that's a little more potent.**

“Let's go see the space,” Louis said, standing up. Juice Box slid off

his voluminous lap with a squeak. “I’ve always wanted to see how the other half lives.”

“Me too,” Juice Box said, jumping up.

“Oh, honey,” Donut said. “Not dressed like that you’re not.”

Juice Box patted Donut on the head. “You are just the most adorable thing I have ever seen. If you want, I can turn into a whatever it is you are and show you a great time. I’ve never done it with royalty before. No charge. It’d be great for my résumé. Are you some sort of long-haired dog?”

Louis and Firas both laughed.

All of Donut’s hair poofed out. “What did you just call me?”

I stepped forward to intervene. “Sorry, pretty lady,” I said to Juice Box. “The personal space is just for my friends here.” I tossed her a gold coin, which she deftly caught in midair. Her hand moved so quickly it reminded me of a viper strike. She didn’t turn her head to catch the coin, which gave me an unexpected and sudden chill.

“Can you do me a favor?” I asked. “If you see any other non-locals like us around, let me know. I’ll give you a gold coin for each one you find.”

She, still in her Mouser form, turned her gaze from Donut and gave me a salute. She planted a smile on her face and rubbed Louis on the stomach. “Don’t forget our date tonight, big boy. Maybe I’ll try out that Nurse Joy person you were describing.”

“Come on,” I said, herding everybody toward the door. I had to go into the personal space menu and give each of them permission to enter. I could do it individually or by party. It only worked while they were standing next to me and at the door. There were multiple options. I went with the most restrictive setting, which was **Enter One Time Only. May Not Interact With Environmental Upgrades.** None of the settings allowed them to just enter whenever and from wherever they wanted. Even the most permissive setting required them to use the most recent safe-room to enter, and only when there was a resident occupying the room. None allowed them to enter if nobody was already in there.

The only way to give someone *carte blanche* to come and go as they pleased from anywhere in the dungeon would be to put them in the party.

I noticed that Katia had been smart enough to remove everyone from Hekla's team from the guest list, which was good, because I had completely forgotten that she had given them permission in the first place.

We all entered the personal space as they looked about in wonder. Langley and the other archers moved around, inspecting everything while Louis and Firas jumped onto the couch. The cleaner bot beeped mournfully as Firas put his boots on the little table.

"Where's the bell?" Firas asked, his voice slurring.

"Bell?" I asked.

"You said something about a bell ringing."

I took a deep breath and decided not to engage. "Okay, guys," I said, waving everyone to sit. "As you probably noticed, the gnomes just bombed the hell out of that other town. Nobody knows why yet, but if I had to guess, it probably has something to do with whatever collateral they had in their town hall. Maybe some crawler in that other town ended up accidentally killing it or setting it free or something. *Something* changed that let the gnomes know the Bactrians no longer had collateral."

"Hey, I have a question," Firas said, raising his hand. The hand wavered in the air. Even from halfway across the room, I could smell the alcohol on both of them. I was reasonably certain booze wasn't the only thing they were on.

*Goddamnit.* "Yes?"

"Yeah, we, like, don't know what you're talking about. What's a Bactrian? What collateral? Where's the bell?"

Earlier, I had been assuming that Firas was from the middle east somewhere and Louis was Spanish. It was now clear that both of them were fellow Americans.

"I had to put my car up as collateral for a loan once," Louis said.

“I used to lock it up in my old lady’s garage every night so they couldn’t repo it. The bastards got it anyway when I was at the club.”

“Bastards,” Firas agreed. He turned to look at Katia. “Do you work here? Do you have anything to drink? I’m almost out of gold, so it’s gotta be cheap.”

I was in the middle of renegotiating my personal vow not to outright murder fellow crawlers when Mordecai jumped across the room, landing heavily on the same side table Firas had his boots upon. The table shattered into pieces. Mordecai spread his wings out and leaned forward, glaring at the two wide-eyed crawlers. He lifted a claw, careful not to actually touch or make a movement toward either of them. Still, the razor-sharp talon glinted like a knife as he pointed it at each in turn.

“I want you two fuckwits to listen, and I want you both to listen very carefully. I don’t know how in the gods you survived this long, but I am about five seconds from telling my client to eviscerate both of you and to use your bodies as zombie meat shields. And don’t think she can’t do it. Isn’t that right, Donut?”

Donut growled.

“We are in a very dire situation here. But guess what? You two mouth breathers hit the survival lottery when you got put in the same quadrant as us, and you’re too stupid to even realize it. You can still get out of this, and you can still make it to the sixth floor if you take this seriously. If you don’t, you are doing more harm than good. And we do not have time for that. I have a drink that I am going to make for each of you, but it’s going to take about five minutes. So help me gods, if you two don’t shut the hell up and just listen, you will *not* persist long enough for me to make the potion for you.”

“Whoa, chill,” Louis said.

Firas looked at Louis. “Why did you tell the hooker to turn into a big bird? I ain’t banging anything from *Sesame Street*, man. That’s fucked up.”

“He’s an eagle. Dude, did you ever watch *G.I. Joe*? Remember the

Indian guy? He had an eagle named Freedom.” He laughed. “That show was so damn racist.”

“No, I never really watched it. I saw the *Muppets* though. And that’s the same thing as *Sesame Street*.”

Louis almost jumped up from his seat, eyes going wide. He looked at the door. “G.I. Joe. The Baroness. That’d be *a lot* easier than Gadget.”

“It’d be better than this eagle, that’s for sure.”

“I’ll be back,” Mordecai said, sounding exasperated. He disappeared into the crafting room.

“You know what,” I said. “We’re going to wait for Mordecai to make your drinks.”

“Tell him to make us Dirty Shirleys,” Louis said.

Donut gasped. “You know about Dirty Shirleys?”

He laughed. “Yeah, we saw it on the recap show. Some dumb crawler got drunk on them and called out Lucia Mar. We use them now to see how good a bartender is. We get them as the first drink in every bar.”

**Donut: IF I MAGIC MISSILE HIM IN THE HEAD, WILL I GET IN TROUBLE?**

**Carl: Yes. You’ll have to wait until we’re outside.**

**Katia: They are so drunk that if you cast your new fire wall spell anywhere in the room, their breath will likely ignite, and they will self-immolate. You probably wouldn’t get blamed for that.**

**Donut: YOU ARE A GENIUS. I’M GOING TO TRY IT.**

**Carl: No, you’re not.**

**Mordecai: Don’t worry. I’ll take care of the issue.**

“Please,” Langley the Finnish archer said to Louis, speaking for the first time. “You must be serious. This is very serious. Listen to Carl.”

Louis turned to the archer. “We *are* taking it seriously. We made it this far haven’t we?”

As we waited for Mordecai to return, I sent a message to Elle and asked her if they also had a bunch of dumbass crawlers in her group. I knew the chat was public now, but I didn’t care. Team Meadow Lark had managed to secure another type of boat, a galley with fish-people rowers. They were probing the defenses of their assigned castle, an orc-run oil rig that shot fireballs at anybody who came close

**Elle: We’re the only ones in the water quadrant. We’ve seen the people on the land, but we haven’t talked to any of them. Their castle is similar to ours. It’s an oil refinery. The whole bubble is some stupid story about how we earthlings ruined our own planet. I think the air castle is just a storm cloud that rains acid. You get saddled with a bunch of layabouts?**

**Carl: You don’t even want to know.**

“How *did* you two make it this far?” Katia asked Louis and Firas.

“He has a spell,” Firas said. “He got it for being the first crawler to drive a van into the dungeon.”

“You drove a *van* into the dungeon?” I asked. “I thought all the vehicles collapsed.”

“Not the convertibles,” Louis said proudly. “I had the top off when it happened. And I didn’t see the stairwell until I was on top of it. It was right in the middle of 95. I was so fucked up, I didn’t know what was happening. The road was all jacked all of a sudden. It was a bumpy ride. I saw the glowing entrance. Slammed the brakes, but it didn’t matter. I slid right in. Broke the axle. But it made it down the stairs and hit those doors and crashed right into the dungeon.”

Mordecai returned, holding a pair of potions in a talon. They were not the regular alcohol cure potions. These were white with little frothy bubbles. I was about to examine one of them when the ridiculousness of what Louis said struck me.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “A convertible *van*? Like a cargo van with the top off?”



“Yeah man, it was sweet. It was my mom’s Chevy Astro. We took the top off. My friend Jojo saw this thing online on how to pimp out vans into convertibles, so we did it. My mom got really mad, but it got like 100,000 likes on Instagram.”

“Where are you from? Wasn’t it snowing?”

“Nah, man,” Louis said. “We didn’t get much snow in Miami. It was cold as shit, though. It was like five in the morning when it happened, too. I was driving back from Jojo’s. Saved my life.”

“How old are you?” Katia asked Louis, looking at the balding, overweight man up and down.

“I’m 27. How old are you, Punky Brewster?”

“What’s the spell?” I asked. “And what happened to your van? Did you take any of the parts?”

Mordecai handed each of the two men a potion. “Drink it.”

Louis looked at the potion dubiously. But he shrugged and downed it. “Van was wrecked. Why would I take any parts? It’s not like I can build another Chevy Astro in the dungeon. Oh, so the spell is pretty badass. Check it out. It’s called *Cloud of Exhaust*. We don’t have to fight shit when I cast it. And Firas has his escape spell if we get in trouble. It’s called *Puddle Jumper*.”

“What level is your *Cloud of Exhaust*?” Mordecai asked sharply.

“Why’s the description on the potion blank?” Firas asked, holding the white potion up to the light.

“Oh man, my head hurts. Cloud spell is Level 11,” Louis said. “I have to use it a lot. It has a ten-minute cooldown, though. Seriously, I think I’m going to be sick.”

“You’ll be fine in a minute. *Cloud of Exhaust*’s cooldown is normally an hour,” Mordecai said. “Drink the potion, Firas. It won’t hurt you.”

Louis shrugged. He was starting to look a little green. “Yeah, so my Pest Control class makes it so cloud-based spells or something have faster cooldowns. And are more effective. My guide guy said the only way I could possibly live was to choose that class. He was a dick. Kinda like you.”

“You sound like you had a competent guide who did the best he could,” Mordecai said.

“Yo, man. Something’s weird,” Firas said. “I don’t think we should take these potions.”

“And you just paralyze whole groups of mobs and Puddle Jump out of there?” Mordecai asked. “You don’t kill them when they’re seized up?”

“Nah,” Louis said. “Sometimes we do, but they wake up after you hit them. Some of those higher-level mobs, especially on the last floor, take a lot of hits to kill. We usually just spray and run. The spell was really effective in those tunnels and on the trains.”

“Did you drink yours already?” Firas said.

“He did. And he’s fine,” Mordecai said. “He’s not drunk anymore, are you Louis?”

“Nah, man. That sobered me up real quick. I still feel sick though.”

“You still have alcohol in your system. Don’t worry. It won’t be long.”

“You sure I should take this?” Firas asked. “There’s no description. I’ve never seen that.”

**Carl: You’re not poisoning him, are you?**

**Mordecai: No. Well, sort of. But it’s the good kind of poisoning. Trust me.**

“Jesus dude, just drink it,” I said. “We’re all waiting on you.”

Firas downed the potion at the same moment Louis projectile vomited all over the floor.

The cleaner bot let out an angry trill.

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**Mordecai: Okay, here’s the deal with these assholes. Louis has an *enhanced*, legendary-tier spell called *Cloud of Exhaust*. It has a high-probability to knock out mobs for a variable amount of time, depending on**

**the level difference. I don't remember the specifics, but even high-level mobs will get conked out for a little bit. They'll wake up the moment they're touched. But any damage to them is enhanced for an additional thirty seconds after they wake. It's one of those spells that helps guarantee that you'll breeze through all the early floors. I'm almost certain it's the same spell the goat lady Miriam Dom has. But instead of utilizing this like she has, these two idiots have been fleeing every encounter. It worked fine for them at first, but now they're screwed. That moron doesn't even realize what he has. He should be level 40 by now, at least.**

I barely registered what Mordecai had said. The two crawlers were still on their hands and knees, scream-vomiting on the floor. Neither had stopped for several minutes. It reminded me of that week of leave we got after boot. Those of us without families spent it in Philadelphia drinking until we blacked out.

**Carl: Mordecai, what the hell did you give them?**

**Mordecai: They'll be fine. It's called Rapid Detox. Clears them of alcohol and any negative effects of most drugs. Not Blitz, unfortunately, but most everything else. Works great. It makes it so certain toxins will no longer affect them. It only lasts for a single floor.**

**Carl: So they can't get drunk anymore?**

**Mordecai: Or high. And if they do drink, they become violently ill. It's used to treat alcoholism. And to torture prisoners.**

**Katia: Why couldn't he read the description?**

**Mordecai: I added sage beetle ichor. It disguises potions, but it makes it so they go bad after an hour. It's a good hack. Some places will have protections against the use of certain types of potions. Like battle arenas**

**where you can't use health pots. But if the potion is treated with the ichor, it makes it usable again.**

"Christ, man," Louis said, standing up on unsteady legs. He was still breathing heavily.

"Can we get on with this now?" I asked.

"I just got a notification that says I can't drink anymore," Louis said. His voice turned to a whisper. "Not cool, man. Not cool. It's all I got left."

"That's not true. You still have your date with Juice Box," said Donut.

WHEN THE SECOND, PALE SUN ROSE, IT MOVED RAPIDLY ACROSS the sky, closing in on the larger, yellow sun. This second sun was much smaller, but it caused the temperature to rise about twenty degrees. Once the two stars met in the sky, the sandstorm would start. I was never a physics guy, and I didn't know if this sun thing mimicked any sort of real, or possible, orbital pattern. After talking with Imani and Elle, I knew this light/day pattern was exclusive to this bubble, so it was all an illusion anyway, all projected onto the bubble wall.

I shielded my eyes, looking for the Wasteland. I couldn't see it at all from here, which meant it'd already hit the outer ring. The entire town was talking about the destruction of the other town, though not even Donut could get anything out of the camels or the changelings about *why* it happened.

The stars might not be real, but the sudden rise in temperature was no joke. It was so hot outside, it was difficult to breathe. The camels did not deploy the city-wide awning. They saved it for the sandstorm, which was unfortunate. All the town's outside activity ground to a halt. Everyone stayed inside, though the temperature

wasn't much better inside the bars. Outside of town, the Thorny Devil mobs were replaced with something else. These were Donut-sized, fast-moving things called Dune Scythes. There were a lot of them outside the town's walls, their red dots swarming about. I had no real desire to go out and face them, but I knew fighting them would be inevitable.

"We're going to need to install air conditioning on the Royal Chariot," I said as I leaned against the back of the adobe building. We stood in the alley between two inns, facing the back of the town hall, which was behind the two buildings across the street. The closer alleyway was mere feet from the back of the Town Hall, and we didn't want to get that close.

Katia was there in that closer alleyway, leaned up against a metallic mechanism that snaked around the building that backed into the town hall. She was pretending to be a long, attached pipe, which gave her a raised view of the back door. She said the mechanism attached to the building's side was pumping cold air to the residents within.

"This is unbearable," Donut said from my shoulder. "My paws are sweating."

"Cats don't sweat," I said. Mordecai was making us a temperature control potion. It wouldn't be ready until later, and we couldn't wait, so we were doing this now.

"If cats don't sweat, explain this, Carl," Donut said, rubbing her paw on my neck. I couldn't tell if it was wet or not since my entire body was drenched. I had a sweating problem. At the gym, I was one of those guys who left a puddle everywhere. I couldn't help it, and right now my skin was doing a pretty good faucet impersonation.

"Shush," I said. "Someone's coming out."

We'd noticed earlier there were two entrances to the town hall. The main entrance, which nobody seemed to use, and the back entrance we now faced. We watched as a dromedarian opened the door, tied his headscarf tightly around his head, and loped away. I froze as the creature strode right past Katia, but he didn't pause. As

the door closed, I caught sight of two guards standing inside. These were Waster Patrol dromedarians. Level 48 each.

The other camel turned left onto the street and disappeared, rounding the bend toward Weird Shit Alley.

**Carl: Did you get a good enough look?**

**Katia: Yes. The guy who just left is named Henrik. He's just a regular level 30, but we have a problem. He showed some sort of ID to the guard before he left. In a town full of shapeshifters, it makes sense to have extra security I guess. Good news is, while the door was open, I could see the interior map for a minute. There are two guards at the back door, two more at the front, three more walking around inside plus a few spread out in random offices on the higher floors. There's a small room inside that looks like it leads down into a basement. There are two more guards at that door. I can't see past that. There's at least 12 camels in there.**

*Goddamnit.*

**Carl: We'll have to go with plan B.**

Katia's plan had been to get a good look at the next Dromedarian to leave, emulate his clothes and looks the best she could, and "return" inside just to get a quick peek. But with so many guards wandering about—guards who were likely on high alert—that plan wasn't going to work.

This was a problem. The whole building was high security, and if we did breach, odds were good we'd only be able to do it once. We had no idea what was hidden inside, nor did we know what we were going to do about it once we learned. If it turned out to be the gnome leader's child or something, our best move was to leave him be for the moment. If my dual-stage rocket idea worked out, we wouldn't need to deal with this collateral storyline at all.

**Carl: Did you see any guards on the second or third level?**

**Katia: Just the offices. There’s a camel in half of them. The second floor is less crowded than the third.**

We’d learned from the Toe’s barkeeper that the citizens did not rest during the two-hour night. Instead, they mostly slept in the hot hours before the sandstorm started. And with less people out on the streets, now was the best time to infiltrate the building.

I took a deep breath. *This is a terrible idea.* But short of going in there and just killing all the camel NPCs, I couldn’t see an alternative. Not when we were under such a time crunch. Gwendolyn’s team was building siege engines to breach the walls on the land quadrant, but she was worried they didn’t have enough people to assault the sand castle of the “Mad Dune Mage.” We hadn’t heard shit from either of the other two quadrants. We had to get this done now.

**Carl: Louis. We’re going with the frog plan. You’re up. Firas, you too.**

**Louis: Fuck, man. Really?**

**Carl: Come on. Hurry up.**

Both Louis and Firas were inside the tavern next door. The two crawlers had been pouting about Mordecai’s potion, but the men were much easier to deal with when they were sober. Firas was much quieter and more introspective. He’d worked as a car detailer and audio installer before this. His Hammersmith class was melee-focused, specializing in hammer-based weapons and abilities. The only weapon he actually had was an intelligence-enhanced mace designed for a cleric. But his *Puddle Jumper* spell was at level 10, much higher than Donut’s six.

Sober Louis was still an ass. I was pretty sure the guy never had a job in his life. He wouldn’t shut up about cartoons I’d never heard of. When he’d found out Katia was from Iceland, he started calling her “Lazy Town.” I had no idea why. He and Donut found common ground, however. Despite pretending to hate the show, Donut knew quite a bit about the 80’s program *Knight Rider*, much to Louis’s delight.

I’d much rather have one of Langley’s guys in on this, but that



group wasn't very useful here. I had them all using their car-selling skills. On my word, they'd all ascend to the rooftops and cover our escape if everything went sideways. In the meantime, they went to work, the six of them spreading out to the different bars. The taverns would be mostly empty at this hour, but that was okay. Mordecai was currently doing the same. At this moment, he was sitting inside the Toe, drinking blood wine, telling the second-shift bartender about the group of grulke toad soldiers he'd seen out in the desert.

The second floor of Town Hall was ringed by exterior balconies. Katia said the one facing the alley was attached to an office that appeared to be empty. We decided to keep Katia outside and hidden while Donut, Louis, Firas, and I all puddle jumped to the terrace. Since the cooldown of Puddle Jumper was five hours, we'd use Firas for the casting, and we'd save Donut for our escape.

At level 10, the casting of the spell was instantaneous. He said he could "probably" teleport us through the closed door, but I didn't trust him.

"Okay, once we're in there," I whispered, "keep your mouths shut. If someone sees us, we're gonna have to kill them. The camels are assholes, but I want to avoid that if possible. So listen to me or Donut and do as you're told."

They both nodded. I waited for Katia to give the all-clear, and Firas cast his spell, teleporting us to the balcony. Part of me was shocked it actually worked. All four of us crowded onto the metal railing. We all crouched down, trying to make ourselves look smaller. Above, the twin suns beat down onto us. I saw a single dromedarian from up here, two streets over, but his back was turned. We needed to hurry.

A tall set of double doors led into the interior of the building. I grabbed the handle and tried to turn it, but it was locked. This was a thick, metal-reinforced security door, but thankfully it wasn't magically locked.

"Door," I said to Donut. "And wait a few seconds before you withdraw the spell this time."

We'd practiced this a little bit. The last time we tried it, Donut had almost lopped my hand off. She cast *Hole* just above the handle. Thanks to her Glass Cannon class, the spell was significantly more powerful on this floor. The hole reached all the way through the thick door. I reached in, found the bolt, and I slowly turned it. The door opened with a *click*. I retracted my hand, and I peered inside, looking for threats. I saw nothing in the office. Donut snapped off the spell.

"Remember when we cut that guy's head off?" Donut whispered as we sneaked into the empty room.

"Yeah, I still have that guy's head in my inventory," I said. Louis and Firas stumbled in after me. Louis was sweating so profusely, he made me look dry. He had to be losing an ounce of water weight a minute. I pushed the door closed. This office didn't appear to be in regular use. There was a large, camel-sized desk and chair, a table with nothing on it, and an open and empty chest. The walls were made of wooden pillars. The floors creaked with each step. A complicated system of brass pipes ran along the interior wall. They looked to be either part of a steampunk-style AC, or an old-school pneumatic tube messaging system.

Now that we were inside, my map populated with everything on the floor. There were multiple offices on this level, and only one appeared to be occupied. The three roaming guards moved through the hallways, though they hit the down stairwell and disappeared from my map.

"Be careful before you step," I said, moving as quietly as I could to the desk. I had a few buffs that disguised my footsteps. Louis and Firas had nothing, and they both stood there with their arms out, like they were surfing. "Let's wait until the roaming guards return and go upstairs, and then we'll move. Louis, be ready." Louis nodded, not saying anything for the first time ever.

I rifled through the desk, looting everything that wasn't bolted down. It wasn't much. I took the chair. I knew I could easily lift the desk, but I didn't want to risk making a loud noise.

**Katia: The three guards just stepped outside.**

**They're smoking cigarettes and talking, huddling against the wall in the shade from the balconies. I think they're taking a break. When the door was open, I could see the four of you and one more camel on the second floor. Your path to the room with the basement is clear. Go now. I'll warn you if they come back in.**

I hesitated. This wasn't the plan. The three guards could walk back in at any moment.

**Katia: Oh shit, I see several more camels out there. They're making their way down the street. I think it's a shift change. Unless you want to sit there for the next hour while everyone gets settled, go now.**

Louis moved, and the floorboard creaked loudly. *Dammit*, I thought. We couldn't wait.

"All right, we're moving out," I said. "We can't disguise our steps on these floors, so walk with calm purpose. Not fast, not slow."

"I don't know what that means," Firas said.

"Just follow me," I said. I strode out the door, revealing a long hallway. A row of paintings hung on the wall, each portraying the image of a stuffy, bored-looking camel. The wood floor was covered with a runner carpet, long and intricately patterned. The building was noticeably cooler. We walked down the hallway and down the stairs.

We quickly crossed the hallway at the bottom of the stairs, which branched off toward both exits. The guards at either end did not see us as we walked past. We passed a few open rooms, a small kitchen, and then we came to a fortified door at the end of the hall.

"Okay, same thing," I whispered. "There are two guards on the other side of this door, so we have to do it quickly. Donut will cast her Hole, and you'll cast your Cloud spell. You have to wait until after their dots turn red. I'll take care of that. Don't step in front of the hole in the door. We don't want them seeing you. Once they're down, I'll try to open the door."

Louis looked as if he was about to pass out. I didn't know how this guy had managed to make it this far. He cracked his neck and hopped back and forth on his legs like he was getting ready to run a sprint. "Do it."

Donut cast *Hole*, and I tossed one of my new sparklers through the opening. I'd discovered them while trying to make lower-powered explosives. All they consisted of was a wick and fuse from a hob lobster. They did hardly any damage. They made very little sound. But they shot sparks everywhere for a good five seconds. The crackling flickers shot off like angry hornets, stinging when they hit.

"Now," I hissed the moment the two dots turned red.

Louis flung his arms forward, casting his spell. I stood off to the side, but in that moment, I saw the distinctive shape of a camel. He was sitting at a table, holding playing cards in his hands, covering his face in surprise at the sparkler attack. A heavy spear was leaned up against the wall.

A deep, black smoke filled the room. The two camels within collapsed. One of them knocked over something, probably the damn card table, and a loud crash echoed throughout the hallway.

"Fuck," I whispered. I put my arm through the hole and reached desperately for the latch. Only there was no bolt to turn. It was just a key hole. And it was higher than I expected. It did not line up with the key hole on this side. There were two bolts, I realized. One had to use a key to unlock it from both sides to open the door.

"Shit, I can't get the door open," I said, retracting my arm.

"What was that?" A voice echoed down the hall.

"I don't know," another called. These were the guards from the front and back talking to one another. We had less than a minute before they'd wander down the hall to look in our direction.

"I'm gonna have to blow the door," I said. "Everybody step back."

"Don't be so dramatic, Carl," Donut said. "Watch this."

She snapped off her *Hole* spell. She cast it again, but this time she placed it a few inches to the right, so the disappearing part of the hole included the two deadbolts and part of the wall and door jamb. The

spell currently had an effective depth of about eight inches, which was plenty thick. She pushed at the door, and it swung open easily. There was a half-moon bite taken out of the door. The second half of the hole remained in the wall.

“What the hell?” I said. “Why haven’t we been doing it like this the whole time?”

I pushed my way into the room as the black smoke billowed out.

“How long does the smoke last?” I asked, waving at it, suddenly alarmed. It was much thicker than I’d realized it’d be. Unlike with my smoke bombs, I couldn’t see shit. It stank like diesel exhaust. I didn’t want to move deeper into the room in fear of touching one of the two camels. They woke up the moment you touched them.

“It’s only a minute.”

I heard steps. A camel was coming to investigate. “Shit, they’re going to see the smoke.”

The smoke started to dissipate. I could now see the two forms on the ground, though there was something off about them. I pushed the door closed. “Turn off your hole, Donut.”

“Really, Carl. You need to find a less offensive way to say that.”

Shouting rose from down the hall.

**Katia: A guard just opened the door and yelled something. All of the camels are pouring inside. You have about 15 of them coming at you.**

“Goddamnit, Donut. Kill the spell.”

She killed the spell.

That ended up being a mistake. The moment it happened, I realized why we shouldn’t ever use the *Hole* spell to break open doors if we wanted to ever utilize said doors again. I’d either pushed the door closed too tightly, or not tightly enough, but when the missing part of the door reappeared from wherever it went, the bolts weren’t perfectly lined up with how they’d been before. The door cracked loudly and then swung back open. Two hunks of metal—pieces of the actual bolts, I realized—fell to the floor. The whole side of the door looked as if I’d hit it with a small charge.

“Well that was unexpected,” Donut said. “Carl, what did you do? If you were going to do that, you should’ve just blown it up.”

“Oh shit, oh shit,” Louis said. “What’re we going to do? Cat, you gotta teleport us out!”

I rolled a goblin smoke bomb down the hall and then pushed the free-swinging door back closed. I pulled one of the heavy chocks from the subway level. I leaned it against the entrance and pushed the brace against the ceiling. They’d have to work hard to get in here now. But we were also trapped.

“You two, be useful and hold this closed.”

Louis and Firas jumped up and leaned against the door. Louis whimpered. Their presence against the door probably didn’t help, but it gave them something to do.

I returned my gaze to the room, focusing on the two passed-out dromedarians. Only they weren’t dromedarians anymore.

“What the shit?”

These were changelings. They’d both reverted to their faceless, humanoid form. The one I’d seen just a moment ago playing cards was passed out on the floor, cards spread out all around him, only now he was much smaller. His head pulsed with an odd, sapphire luminescence, almost like a jellyfish.

I examined his properties. He had a 50-second timer over his head, which was significantly shorter than we’d anticipated, even with the level discrepancy between Louis and the mob. Louis said they were usually out for over five minutes.

**Svern – Changeling Principal. Level 49.**

**This mob is Exhaust-ed.**

**Have you ever visited the home of an elderly widow and seen her collection of miniature spoons? Or thimbles? Maybe they’re refrigerator magnets, or salt and pepper shakers. It’s always something. They’re all part of a set. There’s a display case involved, with a special slot for each one. It was ambitious of her to buy the case before it was filled. It sits there in her home, a**

layer of dust atop it where she can no longer reach. A shrine to youthful optimism.

Inevitably, as life steamrolls on, she's become more concerned with what is missing from her collection than what she already has. That ashtray from Niagara Falls was a hard-won souvenir, sitting proudly next to the one from Branson. But the moment it was obtained, it lost its value. And now all she thinks about is that empty space, right there. Right next to Graceland. It eats at her.

It is a totem to everything she did not accomplish. Her failures. She stares at it, sometimes. That space. That damn, empty space. All she wants is to fill it.

That is both the curse and the driving force of the Changeling Principal.

**Carl:** What the fuck is a Changeling Principal? The description is some high school essay bullshit.

**Mordecai:** Ah, shit. Damn. I should have known.

**Carl:** Explain. The guards were these things, pretending to be camels. Now I'm wondering if *all* the camels are shapeshifters. No wonder everybody hates you guys.

The door crashed, but it held firm. Louis cried out in fear. Firas gritted his teeth. We didn't have long.

**Mordecai:** They're rare. It's an old story I haven't seen used in a long, long time. They're a sect of changeling culture. Sometimes they give them new, special powers. Cultish, kind of like those city elves from the third floor, but less apocalyptic and more power hungry. They are obsessed with getting a full library. Changelings can only change into something

**they've physically touched, so they seek out rare creatures.**

**Carl: Any special way to kill them when they're in their weird, faceless form?**

**Mordecai: Get the brain. The glowing part. If you kill one, take the head. I can make a cool potion from it. It only works if it's not transformed when you kill it. Try to knock them out first. Sometimes that makes them revert form.**

What any of this had to do with the damn gnomes was beyond me, but I strongly suspected whatever was going on right now was a mirror of what had happened over in the Bactrian town. The crawlers had fucked up the City Hall quest, just like we were in the middle of doing.

The original plan was to get in and out without being noticed or hurting any of the NPCs. And if we had to do something with the collateral, we had a plan to shift the blame. But with this changeling fuckery, we couldn't afford to be diplomatic. I activated Talon Strike and smashed down on Svern's head with my foot. The Exhausted debuff disappeared, but I hit him again before he could react, stunning him all over again. I hit him one more time, killing the level 49 monster. The moment he died, the body shriveled like a raisin, all except the round head. I picked the whole thing up, sticking it into my inventory.

There was another door here. A trap door, leading down to whatever it was they were protecting. We'd get to that in a second. The second changeling guard had less than 15 seconds left until he reawakened.

"You two. Kill the other one. Hurry."

"What?" Louis asked, horrified. "He's going to wake up the second I hit him."

"He's going to wake up anyway. Hurry the hell up. Hit him in the head."

Firas pulled his mace, and Louis pulled his weapon: a glowing



baseball bat covered in spikes. I leaned up against the chock as it banged again.

**Carl: Donut, kill him the moment he wakes up. A full-power missile to the head. Just make sure they each get a few hits in.**

**Donut: HE'S BOSS LEVEL STRONG. WHAT IF IT DOESN'T WORK?**

I didn't get a chance to answer. Firas took his mace and smashed it as hard as he could directly into the changeling just as the timer ran out. Louis smacked him with the bat. Both of them pummeled it in the head a few times. The spell enhanced the damage for several seconds, but they barely caused the creature's health to fall at all.

Donut slammed it in the head with a point-blank, double strength *Magic Missile*. It almost killed him. She quickly hit him again. That worked. Luminescent, blue material splattered over the room like she'd broken open a glo stick.

"Stay in the room," I said as I pulled open the trap door. I was assaulted by a blast of fetid-smelling cold air. "And get back to the chock. Hold it closed."

The two both returned to their spots against the metal blockage. "I went up two levels," Louis said to Firas, who had also gone up to level 24.

**Katia: There's a bell ringing now. The camels are coming out.**

I could hear the bell through the walls.

**Carl: Stay put. We're almost done. I hope.**

"Donut, pull out Mongo and stay up here." I pointed at the solid, left wall. It led to the outside. "We're going to escape that way. If they breach before I come back up, go without me. Try not to let them see you, but if they do, flee. Don't fight. We'll meet back up at the saferoom."

She started to protest, but I quickly descended the stairs into the darkness.

I lit a torch and dropped it. It fell to the bottom of the short ladder, and it filled the cavern with light.

The shape of the room appeared on my map. It wasn't big. There didn't appear to be anyone else in here.

Mongo appeared at the top of the trapdoor and squawked at me. "Stay up there," I said.

The ground was stone, carved with symbols that looked like Egyptian hieroglyphs. I was standing atop the tomb. The ceiling was low enough that I had to stoop. There was no way a camel could fit in here. There was a table, and a small chair. On the table was a roll of paper. I picked it up.

**Map. The Necropolis of Anser.**

**You've discovered the catacomb plans. The information has been added to your map and to the map of everyone in your party.**

"Shit," I said as the scroll dissipated into dust. The minimap showing the area below my feet populated. I zoomed the map out, revealing a maze that made the map of the Iron Tangle look like child's play. *Fuck me.*

There was also a small bowl on the table. It had a trio of shriveled, black plants within. Mushrooms, I realized. Not the kind you eat. At least not for food. I pulled the bowl into my inventory. Then I took the table and chair.

**Katia: Something odd just happened. Two of the level-30 camels wanted into the town hall, but another camel stopped them. It was one of the waster guards. They fought, and the guard camel killed them both. He dragged their bodies inside.**

**Carl: Did they stay camels when they died?**

**Katia: Uh, yeah. Why?**

**Carl: I'll explain later.**

**Donut: HURRY UP, CARL. I CAN HEAR THEM TALKING ABOUT HITTING THE DOOR WITH A MISSILE.**

I could now see the room went on even further than I realized. What I thought was the end of the chamber was actually the boundary line to the subterranean zone. Even with the map, I wouldn't be allowed in there. Not until we dealt with the gnomish castle.

But I also noticed something else. The white dot of an NPC. It was on the other side of the barrier, so I wouldn't be able to get to him.

"Hello?" I called. The back of the room was filled with shadow.

"Henrik? Is that you? Back so soon?" a voice croaked. "I heard fighting. Who will you pretend to be today? My mother, perhaps? The last dose has not worn off yet. If you feed me more, it might kill me this time. I can only hope."

I couldn't see the creature, but the voice was similar to that of a Bopca.

I was about to light another torch when I saw the lantern hanging from the ceiling. It had a tiny flame within, like a pilot light. I turned the handle, and the whole room lit up.

The shimmering wall of the quadrant boundary appeared. And just past it, tied up in chains to the wall was an elderly gnome. The creature was not wearing the red hat, and he looked sickly and pale. He had scabs on his face, and he looked half starved to death.

**Wynne. Dirigible Gnome Flesh Mechanic. Level 50.**

**The Dirigible Gnomes were once a peaceful race. All they ever wanted was two things. One, to figure out how the world worked. And two, to be left alone.**

**In order to escape a busy, teeming world filled with competing intelligent species, all of whom loved to wage war, the Dirigible Gnomes learned how to take to the clouds, building a variety of airships and floating**

**settlements, allowing them to escape any sort of trouble.**

**But as we all know, trouble doesn't care if you don't want to be found.**

**The history of the Dirigible Gnomes is long, complicated, and tragic. But the end result is the inevitable result of all peaceful races. They were, eventually, forced to choose between fighting or being wiped out. They chose to fight.**

**Wynne is the great and favored uncle of Commandant Kane of the Dreadnaught *Wasteland*. He is a Flesh Mechanic, a healer gifted with the ability to bring the long dead back to life, if only temporarily. He is being held as hostage by the Dromedarians, as a guarantee of peace.**

**Quest Complete. Stay out of city hall.**

I now had more questions than answers. What had seemed so simple at first was now shaping into a complicated story. The dromedarians had this gnome guy as hostage. But it appeared the changelings had infiltrated the ranks of the camels, and they had their own interests in the gnome. And I still had no idea how I could use this information to get my ass into the throne room of the *Wasteland*, thousands of feet into the sky.

*If I can get him out of those chains, we can take him. Talk ourselves onto the flying platform.*

As if it was reading my mind, the system gave me an update.

**New Quest. Free Wynne from his bondage.**

**Wynne the Dirigible Gnome is in chains. Free him, and he will provide easy access to the *Wasteland*.**

**Reward: You will receive a Silver Quest Box.**

**Katia: Nice. Now get the hell out of there.**

**Donut: CARL. I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING DOWN THERE BUT YOU NEED TO GET**

## **BACK UP HERE BEFORE LOUIS DIES OF A HEART ATTACK.**

I couldn't approach him. I had an idea, but it would require Donut. I started to call her, but I paused the moment I saw the group of five blue dots on the map.

Crawlers. On the subterranean side. They were running down a hall toward me, coming fast.

"A human?" Wynne said, looking in my direction. "That's a new one, Henrik. Do you think a human can talk me into revealing the spell?"

"It's this way," a voice cried. A man. The five crawlers rushed into the chamber, emerging out of the darkness. All five were male. All levels 23 to 26. It was an eclectic group. Three were human. One was an odd creature with a human head and torso, but the body of a tarantula. I didn't know what the hell the last guy was. He looked like a dude wearing a goddamn banana costume.

"You bastard. You goddamn bastard," a man said before I could greet them. "You destroyed the map."

I examined the man.

**Crawler #4,778,551. "Low Thi."**

**Level 25.**

**Race: Human.**

**Class: D-Bag Geek.**

"Hello to you, too," I said. *D-Bag Geek? Really?* "The map was on the table back here out of your reach. It disappeared the moment I picked it up. It installed itself into my system."

"Well, we're now fucked. There were two maps, and we lost both of them. This place is a goddamn nightmare. We're all that's left."

"It's Carl," another crawler said. This was another human named **Tyler Storm**. A level 26 **Weather Engineer**.

"It's not really a human," Wynne said, looking between me and the newcomers. "He's a changeling named Henrik! He's torturing me, trying to get me to cast a spell that would give flesh to Quetzalcoatlus. He drugs me, and I won't last much longer. I have the map to the

temple. I know of your kind. If you kill me, you will have access. You can take it from me. Kill me. Kill me fast!”

“No,” I said as Low Thi pulled a spear from his inventory. He raised it and pointed it at the gnome’s head. “No, no, no!”

The man jabbed forward. The NPC slouched over, dead.

**Quest failed. Free Wynne from his bondage.**

Low Thi looked up. “Hey, I just got an achievement called Cockblock for ruining your quest. I guess you really are Carl.”

“This guy doesn’t have a map on him. He doesn’t have shit,” the banana guy said. His name was **Mike Barnes 3**. He was a level 23 **Banana Farmer**. “We’re screwed.”

*Deep breath, deep breath.*

“Do you assholes have any sort of towns or villages in there?”

“Yes,” Low Thi said.

“Do any of you have Desperado Club access?”

“I do,” the spider guy said. He indicated the third human. “Bobby and I are the only ones.”

“Meet me there in a goddamn hour.”

“Why?” the spider asked. His name was **Morris Sp**. A level 23 **Freelance Psychiatrist**.

“Because I’m going to kick your goddamn ass. And then I need to transcribe your map to you. That is if this town doesn’t get blown to hell in the meantime.”

**NEW ACHIEVEMENT! TOTAL, UTTER FAILURE.**

**You failed a quest less than five minutes after you received it. Now *that's* talent.**

***Reward: Ha.***

“Oh fuck off,” I muttered as I ascended the stairs just as Donut cried, “Get down!”

Louis and Firas hit the deck as the chock was hit with an explosive. *Ka-blam!*

Fire licked through the room, and everything tumbled as the incredible sound temporarily rendered me deaf. The chock was bent over and dislodged with a hole right in the center, peeled open like a baked potato. The brace that went from the floor to the ceiling held strong. The door itself was shattered. Smoke filled the room, black and choking.

One of the camels had blasted a rocket at the door. They'd probably shoot another one any second.

“Fire in the hole,” I coughed. I threw one of my new eighth-strength hob-lobbers through the mangled doorway, hurling it down the long hall. I crouched. The explosion came, but I couldn't hear it.

The walls shook, followed by a secondary explosion that was even bigger. Part of the ceiling caved in. Experience notifications scrolled by.

*That's why you don't carry your explosives on the outside, motherfucker.*

I still couldn't hear anything, but the building continued to rumble. The stench of gunpowder and smoke filled the room. This was real smoke. The building was on fire. I downed a health potion, and the pain in my head eased. I knew from experience it'd take a full minute for my hearing to return.

Both Firas and Louis were on the ground. Louis was screaming, his hands to his ears, burn marks across his forearms. He had shrapnel wounds up and down his torso. *That asshole needs armor.* Firas had been blown across the room and was **Unconscious**, but otherwise looked okay. The rocket had propelled everything back, scorching the walls. But the metal block had protected them like a shield.

Donut jumped astride Mongo. Both had been in the back part of the room and appeared unharmed. She moved to Firas and used one of our precious healing scrolls on him. They hadn't seen us yet, but that would change in a moment. I dropped one of my last hobgoblin smoke curtains at my feet.

**Carl: Donut, let's get out of here.**

**Donut: WHAT DO YOU THINK I'M DOING, CARL?**

Donut cast *Hole* on the far wall, and it materialized, leading outside. It faced the side of an alley, but luckily, if we stood to the right of the hole, we had a line-of-sight down one of the main thoroughfares, all the way to where it curved away and toward the wall of the bowl. There were camels everywhere, all headed in this direction. The smoke curtain, much too powerful for such a small place, billowed out the magical hole. The camels on the streets all had white dots on the map, so the opacity of the smoke curtain wasn't enough to obscure us when they got close. We couldn't let them see us. We had to move fast. We moved to the side of the temporary hole.

"Louis, take a potion," I hissed as I pulled the stuffed, Grulke



infantry figure from my inventory. My ears started that familiar buzzing, letting me know my hearing was returning.

Bautista had given me the beanbag toy. He still had almost a thousand of the things, all different. He was going through them rapidly as he and his team explored through his subterranean level, which was really some sort of ant colony thing.

I ripped the tag off the beanbag and tossed it through the hole and out into the alley. We waited a few precious seconds for the creature to be summoned. Louis finally figured out the health potion and rose to his feet, whimpering, rubbing his arms. He was covered in splotches of blood. I hissed at him to crouch down and stay away from the room's new window.

A mighty croak filled the chamber. The grulke creature stood to his feet in the alley. He turned to peek his head back in through the hole to look at me. He had a 25-second timer over his head. The level-15 frog creature looked just like Mordecai had on the last floor.

"What am I doing here?" he asked, looking directly at me. Half-opacity smoke billowed all around us. Shouting came from every direction. The entire building felt as if it was about to collapse. I thought of the protective sail over the building that safeguarded the town from the sand storm. The storm would be here in less than two hours.

"Think you can hop out onto the street, turn right and then hop over the city wall?"

I couldn't see it from here, but the main entrance to the town was only a few hundred feet away.

"You summoned me just to make me run like a little bitch?"

"Yes. Hurry. Go!"

The frog only had ten seconds left. He grumbled but hopped out onto the street, landing in front of a pair of surprised camels. He bounded to the right, sailing up into the air, crashing loudly. He hopped once more and out of sight.

"Do it," I said to Donut as I tossed one more smoke bomb, this time out on the street. I really needed a non-magical version, one that

worked on NPCs and not just red-tagged mobs. Behind us and through the mangled remains of the interior door, I heard shouting. More dromedarians were coming into the building, despite it being on fire. Donut's *Hole* spell would soon run dry. It was time to go.

Louis dragged the still-recovering form of Firas over, and we teleported away. Donut puddle jumped us all the way down the street, right where the street started to curve with the wall.

I quickly looked around. There were several camels about, but all had their eyes on the city hall building, which billowed smoke into the air. Fire burst from a window on the second level.

"Whoa, that was way further than I expected," I said, standing to my full height. "I wish you'd done that last time."

"It lets me send us really far now," Donut said, also looking around. A female camel standing about ten feet away looked in our direction and startled at our sudden appearance.

"Oh my, what happened?" Donut asked, sounding innocent.

The camel paused uncertainly. Her eyes focused on Firas who was being held up by Louis. I pulled an empty bottle of whiskey from my inventory and pretended to drink in an attempt to look like we'd just wandered over here from a nearby bar. She seemed to relax. She blinked twice and said, "The town hall was attacked by frog creatures. Nobody knows where they came from. I saw one with my own eyes. He jumped to the top of the house right there and then leapt straight out of town."

"I never liked frogs," Donut declared. "Filthy creatures. Have you seen their tongues? They're sticky. Anything with a sticky tongue can't be trusted. Can you imagine having something sticky in your mouth at all times?"

The dromedarian nodded and returned her attention back to the burning town hall. The tulip-shaped sail atop the building was not catching on fire, but the whole structure was about to collapse to the ground. Camels on stilts appeared, all pouring buckets of water on the fire. It wasn't going to help.

Katia came strolling up in her regular, human form. She had

what looked like an iced tea in her hand with a little umbrella. She sipped on it.

“What was the plan again?” she asked. “Oh yes, I remember. You were going to sneak in, figure out what they had hidden in there, and sneak out again undetected. Good job.”

“That’s why we have backup plans,” I said, still watching the burning building. “At least they don’t know it was us.”

“The frog con isn’t going to last,” she said. “This world is too small to pull that sort of scam off. They’re going to go out there and find no other frog creatures. Or worse, they’ll find that stuffed animal it turns back into. And then they’re going to realize the only ones who mentioned seeing the frogs were all the new people. It’s not rocket science.”

“I thought it went quite well,” Donut said. “Also, they’re toads. Not frogs.”

“Is it always like this?” Louis asked. He looked like he was going to vomit again. Firas had healed, but he was sitting on the ground, rocking back and forth.

“Like what?” I asked.

He didn’t answer.

I turned my gaze back to Katia. “We have bigger problems than them figuring out it was us. The moment the gnomes realize their collateral is dead, they’re going to unleash hell on the town. I’d like to avoid that, but I don’t know how.”

“How will they even know?” Donut asked, looking up into the sky. Above, the twin suns were getting closer by the minute.

It was still unbearably hot. I snatched Katia’s drink and took a sip. It wasn’t iced tea. It was some girly alcoholic drink. “I don’t know. But they found out about the other town’s collateral somehow.” I told them exactly what had happened in the basement. “I’m guessing those subterranean assholes probably did the same thing on the other side. They killed the collateral, whatever it was, in an attempt to somehow get to the map, that was likely just out of their reach. Whatever happened, it caused the town to be bombed. I bet we just did the

same thing here. We have a little more than an hour before the storm, two hours of storm, two hours of post-storm twilight, and then two hours of night. That's about how long before that airship will be back in this general area. So whatever we do about it, we better do it quickly."

To accentuate the point, the city hall collapsed with a mighty crash. The minaret atop the building tumbled over and landed on the street as camels scattered.

"You keep destroying governmental buildings, Carl," Donut said. "People are going to start thinking you have a problem with authority."



Soon after, several dromedarians went to work manually affixing the storm shield over the city. The town hall had been the tallest building, but they had prepared for this contingency. A group of dromedarians tirelessly set up a scaffolding system to hold the shield up. They worked quickly, unfurling the canvas, filling the town with shadow.

"That material looks like it used to be part of a balloon," Katia said. "It's definitely magical."

I stared at the creatures feverishly working to protect the city. Were these guys real dromedarians? Or were they changelings? Katia had witnessed a shapeshifter murdering two dromedarians, so it was clear the camels didn't know that their ranks had been infiltrated. This was some serious *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* bullshit.

**Carl: Is there any way we can tell which ones of these guys are real?**

**Mordecai: I've been thinking about it, and I think I have an idea. Donut. Do your sunglasses have the ability to see based on heat signature?**

**Donut: I DON'T KNOW. THERE ARE LOTS OF MODES. PROBABLY.**

**Mordecai: If it does, a real dromedarian and a changeling will have almost an identical heat signature, but the brain of the changeling will be a lot hotter. That might make their heads a little hotter. It'll probably be very subtle, but you might be able to make that work.**

**Donut: OKAY I WILL TRY BUT I WOULDN'T GET MY HOPES UP. THEIR HEADSCARVES WILL MAKE IT EXTRA HARD TO SEE.**

I sent Louis and Firas off to a saferoom. There was only a single real saferoom in town for folks without a personal space, and it was in Weird Shit Alley. We hadn't gone in there yet, but everyone was a little scared of the street. I told them to go anyway. They'd both received several achievements for participating in that fight, likely all boxes we'd already received. They were both marveling at the sudden influx of views and follows. After they collected their loot, they needed to hook up with Langley and the other archers, who were going to spend some time outside the gates grinding until the storm hit.

We needed to do that, too. This floor was going to require us spending a lot of time in the crafting room, which meant less time for regular experience. That was deliberate, designed to slow down our progress. We couldn't keep relying on boss battles to give us big bumps of experience. Regular, old-school grinding was important, not just for experience, but to keep training up our skills.

We were always juggling. We were slightly ahead of the curve, but the archer guys were a perfect example of how lagging behind on a single floor could bite you on the ass.

"Hey," I said to a passing dromedarian. Donut was playing with the settings on her sunglasses, trying to figure out how to overlay the heat signature setting. She wanted me to get one to pause close by so she could figure it out.

"Are the gnomes going to bomb the city now?" I asked. "Like they did to the other town?"

This camel was a woman. A level-30 named Emerald.

She looked at me with disdain, but then Donut complimented her headscarf, and the camel seemed to deflate.

“We need to get through the rubble. There’s something important buried in the basement of the town hall, and... and it may still be with us,” she said, though her voice held little hope.

They didn’t know if Wynne the gnome was alive or dead. They were going to be sorely disappointed.

“What if it’s not?”

She paused. I didn’t think she was going to answer, but then she said, “Then we move to the shelters. Every day after sunrise, we give the gnomes proof of collateral. If that doesn’t happen tomorrow, what happened to the Bactrians will happen to us.”

“Proof?” I asked. “What sort of proof?”

“Look, I’m going to help with the rescue efforts. But if I were you, I’d go find a different town.”

“There are no other towns,” I said.

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We headed toward the Desperado Club where I was to meet up with the idiots from the subterranean level. I was going to speak with them for a bit, maybe leave Katia and Donut in the club so they could transfer the map over the best they could. In the meantime, I had to get back to base as soon as possible. I was going to spend some time with the two-stage rocket, though I feared even that wasn’t going to be strong enough to reach the Wasteland. According to the guy Donut and Mordecai bought the rockets from, the projectiles could only hit planes that were under 500 feet off the ground. Preferably under 300. That was no good. I was going to use my sapper’s table to build a rocket that would, hopefully, have much more range.

I checked in with Gwendolyn Duet as we headed to the club. They’d managed to breach a hole in the first of the four walls, which was made of sand. The second was made of seashell, and they felt they could break through that also instead of going over. She had

them building siege ladders and catapults just in case. They hadn't seen or met any resistance from the castle itself, but it was slow work because the mobs on the beach were a constant threat and were always attacking.

Worst of all, however, was this massive bird that kept harassing them. It was a giant version of the chainsaw buzzards she'd described earlier, only this one was a borough boss. It was constantly circling the structure of the necropolis. If it saw any crawlers out in the open, it would swoop down to attack. It had wrecked two siege towers they'd started building, causing them to abandon the idea. It was too strong for them to fight, so they had to hide every time it appeared. The thing was so fast, they couldn't even get a good description off of it. The creature was seriously hindering their efforts.

**Gwen: Oh, I do have some good news. I saw a pair of crawlers on the water. They were too far away to talk, but they were in some *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*-looking submarine thing. It popped up like a cork. The two crawlers emerged and fought a jellyfish thing attached to the outside of the sub, and then they disappeared again. So we know somebody is working on it under there.**

**Carl: That is good news. Take care of yourself.**

Just before we entered the club, all three of us received a notification.

**Admin Notice. Congratulations, Crawler. You have received a second sponsor!**

**Viewers watching your feed will now see advertisements produced by both of your sponsors.**

**Sponsor's Name: The Open Intellect Pacifist Action Network, Intergalactic NFC.**

**Additional details available in the Sponsorship Tab of your interface.**

My heart sank the moment I saw the word “Pacifist.” Who the hell were these guys? I sent a quick message to Mordecai.

**Mordecai: Never heard of them, but they gotta be rich. That NFC stands for Not for Conquest. That means they’re not sponsored by any system, and they are free from taxes. Like a non-profit.**

**Carl: A goddamned charity? Like some religion?**

**Mordecai: There’s no such thing as a non-profit religion. At least not in the legal sense. It sounds like one of the many groups out there that don’t support the crawl. They probably bought into your sponsorship so they can show commercials. I hope that’s not the case. If it is, you won’t be getting any boxes from them.**

I started to respond, but I was interrupted by Donut.

“Carl, Carl, I got a new sponsor!” Donut said, hopping up and down on the back of Mongo, which caused him to also start hopping up and down with excitement. “They’re called, ‘Veriluxx RealPet Companions!’ Don’t they sound just awesome? I wonder who that is! Who did you get? What about you, Katia?”

“I got the Squim Conglomerate,” Katia said. “I don’t know who that is.”

“I do,” I said. “They’re the corporation who ran the crawl the last season. They’re a planet-mining company just like Borant. They do the battle royale style crawls. I don’t know what type of alien they are.”

“Huh,” Katia said. “Interesting. You can see who else they sponsor, and the list has like 500 crawlers on it. I don’t recognize any of the names.”

I remembered that was a thing, but the Valtay hadn’t sponsored anybody else. I checked now, and they still only sponsored me. My new one didn’t sponsor anybody else, either.

“Hey, not fair,” Donut said, suddenly sounding dejected. “My



new sponsor sponsors a bunch of other people. And Princess D’Nadia just sponsored five other crawlers, too.”

“They must be pretty special if Princess D’Nadia likes them,” I said, reaching over to scratch Donut on the head. She harumphed.

“Well I’m probably the best one,” she grumbled.

**Loita: Congratulations on the new sponsors. All three of you commanded very high fees. Both Carl and Donut had bidding wars that lasted until the final possible microsecond. Donut, you’ll be happy to know that you brought in the highest sponsorship bid in the history of the series, beating out both Carl and Prepotente.**

Next to me, all signs of dejection fled as Donut did another little hop of joy.

**Donut: THAT’S PRETTY MUCH WHAT I EXPECTED. HOW’S ZEV?**

**Carl: Lucia isn’t commanding the most sponsorship money?**

Loita ignored both of the questions.

**Loita: Furthermore, Donut, you will soon be receiving a benefactor box from your new sponsor. It is a product sample. We are requesting that you take it out and interact with it a few times. Carl, feel free to make some of your famous comments about it. This will appear to be a regular benefactor box, but it is in fact part of their sponsorship contract. This box is a freebie for them. It is something new we are trying with some select crawlers to attract more possible sponsors. So try not to disparage the product too much if you want Veriluxx to send you a real benefactor box. In six or seven days, assuming you’re still with us, you two plus Mongo will be going on a program where you discuss the product.**

**Carl: We're going on an infomercial? Are you kidding me?**

**Loita: I am not Zev, Carl. Do not speak back to me like that. It will not be tolerated.**

I almost told her to go fuck herself, but I held my tongue. Now was not the time to push it.

**Donut: WHAT ABOUT KATIA?**

**Loita: Katia, I have you booked on a separate program around the same time. You will be doing it solo. This will be a one-on-one interview on a show called *Dungeon Sidekicks*.**

**Katia: I can't wait.**

**Donut: HOW IS ZEV DOING, LOITA?**

**Loita: Zev is still in treatment. We expect her return shortly.**

"A goddamned infomercial?" I said.

"I wonder what the product is," Donut said as she dismounted Mongo. The dinosaur whimpered as he went into the carrier, but he obediently allowed her to store him. She jumped to my shoulder as we entered the Desperado Club. Donut gasped with a sudden realization, putting her paw on the side of my head. "Do you think there'll be a script? Do you think I'll get lines? Like a real actress?"

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"Penis Parade? Really?" Katia said, looking about the room. We sat at our regular booth. Bomo and the Sledge stood guard nearby. With Katia's acquisition of the Desperado Pass, we decided to add a third regular bodyguard to the team. This new guy was also a cretin. A rock creature. His name was **Very Sullen**.

"I like the Penis Parade," Donut said. "They give out hats if you tip them a gold coin. Sledgie likes it too, isn't that right?"

The Sledge rumbled.

“Where are those assholes?” I said, looking about. The club wasn’t very full. I saw only a handful of crawlers, and most of them were going straight for the Silk Road or the guild hall. Nobody had any leisure time any more. I also needed to go to the market and stock up.

A pair of crawlers entered, and I turned to see Morris the spider creature and the other human. They spotted us and hesitantly approached. I remembered I’d told them that I was going to kick their asses the next time I saw them. I waved them over and told the bodyguards to stand aside.

The first thing I did was exchange fist bumps with both, adding them to my chat. I examined them each in turn.

I’d already examined **Morris Sp**. His half human/half tarantula race was called an Arachnid, and he was level-23. His class was something called a **Freelance Psychiatrist**. It was a psionic class. Those with psionic skills had excelled on the previous floor, but Morris here didn’t seem to have leveled much.

The other was a human, early twenties with dark hair and tan skin. He had a Mediterranean look to him. **Bobby D.J.** He was a level-24 **Spy**. That was a rogue class, and the guy looked a little frazzled around the edges. He had an eye twitch, and his left hand never stopped trembling. I knew their quadrant was covered in traps. If Bobby was the only rogue in the party, he was probably their first line of defense. I wouldn’t want to be in his shoes.

“Tell me about your quadrant,” I said after they got their drinks. The only one of the group who didn’t have alcohol was Donut, who was instead sipping on a regular Shirley Temple, chatting away with the Sledge, who grumbled happily in response to all of her declarations and observations.

Morris did not fit in the booth, so instead the spider stood over the table. Katia didn’t say anything out loud, but she shivered every time the arachnid moved. I wasn’t a huge fan of spiders, either.

“Our quadrant is terrible,” Morris said. “The whole place is a maze. A big, fuck-you-you’re-going-to-die maze. We start at the top,

and the Crypt of Anser is at the bottom. That's where the staircase is. We start in the village, which is really a cavern filled with these things called Nude Glabers. They're undead mole rat creatures, but they're naked with almost-human anatomy, and they're hard to look at. That's where we are now. There are dozens of paths away from town. Some of them are tunnels so tight I have to be pushed to get through. We got a quest to find one of the two maps, but we failed thanks to you."

"I only took one of the maps," I said. "You failed because you were set up to fail."

"Maybe."

"Tell me about the other map, specifically the place where you were supposed to collect it."

Morris shrugged. "The other was a similar set up, but instead of a dirigible gnome, it was a pig. We thought it was a mob. It wasn't until after we'd filled it with 'nanas did we realize it'd been an NPC."

"Filled it with nanas?" Katia asked.

"We have a guy who shoots banana tree seeds from his hand. Yes, I know how stupid that sounds. But he's a druid, and he causes the seeds to sprout really fast. They work great, but the range is really low."

"A pig? I knew it was a pet!" Donut said proudly.

"Yeah, so we killed it. The map was in the same room, but out of reach. It was in the air quadrant. We were building a tool to take it. You can throw something through the quadrant barrier, but you can't hold something like a giant stick or grabber through the wall. You can't cast spells, either."

I remembered it'd let me roll a ball through the barrier, but the clockwork Mongos couldn't get through, nor my hands. Mordecai had explained that the barriers wouldn't allow anything under our direct or indirect control through.

"But before we could figure it out, a two-humped camel thing, a Bactrian it was called, came in and saw the dead pig and freaked out. He upset the table with the map, and it fell to the ground, blowing

closer to us. Then he ran away. We spent hours trying to figure out how to get it. But before we could, the damn room just blew up. And it said the map was destroyed. So we moved to the second map.”

“But I beat you to it,” I said. “Have you seen the castle or crypt or whatever yet? The building you need to storm?”

“No,” he said. “We need the map. It’s impossible to navigate without. Every new hallway has a different type of trap. Bobby here is good at disarming them, but it makes us slow. We just barely cleared the halls at the top, and we need to work our way down. It’s going to take a long time.”

“Do you know who Quetzalcoatlus is? Wynne—the gnome you guys killed—mentioned him.”

“Yeah,” Morris said. “I guess Anser was the emperor. He died, and when he did, they built this tomb for him. They threw his entire court and his wife in here even though they weren’t dead. Then they sealed it all up. Quetzalcoatlus is his wife, and she’s somewhere in here still. She’s some undead thing now. She’s non-corporeal. A ghost. She can travel through walls within the tomb. And I think she’s really pissed off. Every once in a while we can hear her, screaming. She sounds like a bird. After we failed the quest to get the map, we all got a quest to find and kill her. Nobody knows how to kill a damn ghost.”

“Weird,” I said. “You need magic to kill ghosts.” We’d learned from the krasue creatures on the third floor. In addition, there were extensive instructions on how to kill ghosts in the cookbook, including bomb types that would do the trick. “There are creatures here, on our level. They are trying to resurrect Quetzalcoatlus. They’re trying to get a spell that will give her flesh. They want to be able to physically touch her, I think. So they can gain some of her special powers.”

“She’d probably be easier to kill if she had physical form,” Morris said.

“Probably,” I agreed. “Too bad you killed the guy who knew how to cast the spell. So here’s where we stand. We have the gnomes

floating over the entire world, and they bomb the shit out of everybody. On top of the temple, we have a few groups. The camels and the changelings. The changelings are pretending to be refugees, but they have some plan of their own that involves resurrecting the guardian of the subterranean level. On the ground we have somebody called the Mad Dune Mage, and we don't know much about him yet. And then there's one more castle in the water. From what little we know, it sounds like it's underwater."

"Yeah, we-we keep getting water breathing scrolls and scrolls of d-d-disarm trap, which are useless unless you know for sure a trap is right there," Bobby said, speaking for the first time. He had a stutter to his voice.

"Okay," I said. "Here's the deal. I can see the map, and you're right. It's insane how complicated it is. There are tunnels. Rooms. Dead ends. Pits with spikes. It's nuts. Katia here brought paper and a pencil, and she's already started mapping out a path to get to the bottom. You two sit with her and Donut. It'll take a few hours, but she will give you the map when she's done. I highly suggest you try drawing it in your scratchpad while she maps it out, just in case you lose it. We need to work together. I will help any way I can. If you need something built, let me know, and I will make it happen."

Morris turned to Bobby and smiled. "And you said he was going to murder us."

"The d-d-day isn't over yet."

I said my goodbyes to Donut and Katia, and I hit the Silk Road. I topped-off my explosive supplies and bought a few newly-available toys. From there, I exited the club and headed back to the saferoom. Outside, the wind whipped at the town's covering. The storm was here. As I walked back, I received a pair of notifications.

**You have received a Bronze Benefactor Box from the Valtay Corporation.**

**You have received a Silver Benefactor Box from The Open Intellect Pacifist Action Network, Intergalactic NFC.**

**TIME TO LEVEL COLLAPSE: 13 DAYS, 13 HOURS.**

The first thing I did when I returned to base was open my two new boxes. I also had a fan box coming, but it hadn't come in yet. Mordecai came out to greet me.

I handed him the batch of mushrooms I'd taken from the desk in the basement. He looked at them and frowned. The system called them **Mairmei Mushroom – Alchemy Material**. All the description said was: **These little guys are quite the trip**. I assumed they were some sort of psychedelic. The cookbook had very little information on mushrooms. Mordecai was intrigued because he'd never seen this particular strain before. I gave him the batch so he could study it further.

But first he wanted me to open the benefactor boxes in front of him so he could see what I'd received.

"I've never heard of an anti-crawl group giving a benefactor box. I've known a few to sponsor crawlers over the generations, but that's usually just to get people talking about their cause. They have no real

investment in the crawler himself. A silver box, too. So whoever these guys are, they either have an endless supply of cash or they're gambling a lot on you. Especially if you're the only one they've sponsored."

"We'll see," I said. I wasn't optimistic. I was in kind of an odd position. If they really were a pacifist, anti-crawl group, then I supported their cause. Sort of. Being a pacifist was one of those things that looked and sounded great when you were trying to get laid. Not so much when you were literally fighting for your life. I needed bombs and weapons and armor and shit that would help me kill as many of these fuckers as possible. I wasn't going to get that from a goddamned group of hippies, no matter how sympathetic we were for each other.

I started with the bronze Valtay box. The intricate box whirled and twirled as it opened with great fanfare.

It was another pill. It looked identical to the last one they'd given me. I examined it.

**Valtay Corporation Neural Enhancer #275. Variant 35.j**

*This item is compatible with your Morphology and Interface.*

**Warning: This pill will cause a permanent change to your brain. This item cannot be unequipped or undone once installed.**

**Warning: You do not have a Valtay Corporation Neural Interface installed. While your current wetware system is compatible with this Neural Enhancer, it is recommended you visit a Valtay Corporate Outreach Center to discuss upgrade options. Payment and Legacy plans available. Keeping the Best of You alive.**

*Current wetware: Syndicate Crawl Version 47.002b.Human.*



**Taking this pill will install the following upgrade to your interface:**

**Current elevation and airspeed.**

*That's it?* I thought. I didn't dare say it out loud. I felt disappointment, but then I remembered how damn useful that last upgrade had been. Hopefully its utility would become self-evident. I popped the pill, looked up at the ceiling, and said, "Thanks, brain worm dudes."

I opened the next box. The first one had contained the logo for the Valtay. This next one had a spiral galaxy symbol with some alien lettering on it. Mordecai peered at the logo and shrugged.

The box opened, revealing what looked like a sweet potato.

"What the hell, man," I said, picking it up.

**Toraline Root Vegetable.**

**Alchemy Material.**

**This rare tuber only grows in dirt that has been covered by lava. They are very rare. Nobody ever goes digging them up, either. You know why? Because they taste like dogshit, that's why. They're pretty much useless. In fact, fuck you for wasting my time with this.**

"What the hell is this, and why is it in a silver box and not a bronze one?"

"Its origin and value and rarity and a hundred other factors determine the required box type," Mordecai said, snatching it from my hand with a talon. "I've never seen this before. I've seen potions that require a similar vegetable. Most are salves for scaled creatures. Specialty healing."

"You think they want me to make a potion with this?" I asked.

"Maybe. Or maybe an explosive. Or maybe it's an inside joke," Mordecai said. He passed it back to me. "Some aliens have really weird customs. For all we know, it's a traditional marriage proposal. Still, I have... a lot... of potion recipes in my scratch pad. I'll search through them and see if I can figure anything out. It'll give me time to look for information on these mushrooms, too."

I nodded. I would do the same thing with the cookbook. There were pages and pages of potion recipes. I'd already read through the names of the potions and what they did, but I hadn't committed the ingredient lists to memory. I tossed the toraline into my inventory. It was listed as **Very Rare**, but it had low value, equal with some of the unenchanted clothing items I hadn't yet sold.

I returned my gaze to the ceiling. "Thanks for the yam, mystery aliens. I'm more of a mashed potatoes guy, but this'll do. I guess."

I returned my attention to the Valtay upgrade. I now had the ability to add my current speed and altitude to my UI. I dove into my interface and tried to figure it out. I clicked a toggle that only showed speed if I was moving more than six kilometers an hour. There were multiple displays showing different velocities at the same time, and I had no idea what the hell that meant. Luckily there was a toggle titled **Relative Surface Speed**. I clicked it, and all the other information disappeared, leaving only a single gauge that currently had me standing still.

The elevation display was equally complicated. I turned it on, and it filled my screen with a page of information I did not understand. It didn't have feet or miles as a unit of measurement, but it did have kilometers and meters, so I selected that. There were some *very* big numbers in there. I tried toggling **Planetary Sea-level Only**, but that was a mistake. It had me at just over -92,000 meters. I realized that meant I was standing 92 kilometers under the surface of the planet. That was crazy. Was earth's crust even that thick? Wasn't it all magma and oil and gooey shit once you got deep enough? I'd never really paid attention in geology class.

After some adjusting, I finally found two different gauges that gave me what I needed. One was adjustable. I set it at 0.00, giving me a gauge to the surface of the tomb. The second was at 8,932 meters. It was labeled **Gravitational Zone Sea Level**. If I was reading it correctly, that meant we were nine kilometers above the water quadrant. That was damn high. Thankfully all the little things that came with such great heights weren't in play here in the bubble, which

seemed to be equally pressurized throughout. I didn't even pretend to understand the science. If I was doing the conversion correctly in my head, that meant we were standing about the same height as the peak of Mount Everest. That also meant that the Necropolis of Anser was fucking *huge*. I didn't know how tall the tallest building in the world was before the collapse, but it had to be way less than 1,000 meters.

We needed to give as much support to those assholes in the tomb as we could. Because if they failed, that meant we'd have to go in there once we figured out the gnome castle. And that was something I did *not* want to do.

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The storm ended, and the town survived. The camels did not retract the sails as usual. Langley told me they now had guards at the main gate, and the camels were setting up anti-air defenses all around the city. They still allowed us to come and go, but they interrogated everybody about grulke toads and gnomes, demanding to know if they'd see any.

We were now four hours from when the gnomes would know for certain the collateral was dead, and probably five from when the bombs would fall. The casual, laid-back atmosphere of the town had changed to that of a city under siege.

I now had four modified missiles in my inventory. With Mordecai's help along with my level-four sapper's table, I'd created a missile that *might* reach high enough. We wouldn't know until we tested it. And it just so happened a perfect opportunity to test it was about to present itself. Something that would help both us and Gwen's team down below.

Katia and Donut returned from the Desperado Club as I was standing outside of the Toe, waiting. They'd spent the entire two hours of the storm in the Desperado. Katia had a feathered boa around her neck. Mongo was free, and he also had a boa, dangling freely from his collar. He kept snapping at it, and feathers were flying

everywhere. Donut and Katia had gone into the Penis Parade together.

“Really?” I asked.

“Eight more visits, and I get a free dance from Anaconda!” Donut announced.

“Wait, how much money are you guys spending at this place?”

“Oh, oh, Carl, guess what? I got another box from Princess D’Nadia!” Donut exclaimed, ignoring my question. She hopped up and down on Mongo’s back. “It’s only a bronze this time, but I bet it’ll be awesome!”

“You haven’t gotten the one Loita mentioned?”

“Not yet. She messaged and said it’ll come later today. She said the sponsor wants to make sure we survive the bombing before they send the prototype. Isn’t that exciting? I’m going to open Princess D’Nadia’s present now!” She and Mongo scrambled inside. Katia and I watched her go.

Katia looked up at the sky, which was still covered with the sails. In the twilight, the whole town was prematurely dark. “No bird yet?”

“Not yet,” I said. “How’d it go with spider boy and the other guy?”

Katia had given them a general map of the entire structure and a more detailed path to another town about halfway down to the crypt. Assuming we all survived the next 24 hours, they’d meet up again to get the rest. The lower half of the necropolis featured much-larger rooms, and oftentimes the map showed the only entrance and exit to each chamber was on the ceiling and the floor. They’d need ladders and ropes to descend.

“They’re not as bad as Louis and Firas, but those subterranean guys are total trainwrecks,” Katia said. “Their stress levels are off the charts. It’s understandable, but they’re very tense. *Too* tense.”

I laughed. “That’s what Mordecai said about you when we first met. He called you a train wreck. Also, we’re calling them the tomb raiders.”

She did not find any of that funny. “If something happens to that

Bobby guy, the entire team is dead. He's the only one who can detect traps, and he's already missed a few. They make others go in tunnels ahead because he's too valuable, and they keep dying right in front of him. They described a trap where needles popped up from the floor and injected the crawler with a potion that filled his sinuses with flesh-eating beetles." She shivered. "Maybe you can make some really low-level explosives for them, something they can roll down the hallways to set off the traps."

"They need a spell like Donut's *Clockwork Triplicate*," I said. "Something where they can make or control minions. The spider guy is a psionicist. He should try to find something. I bet there's something in that town of theirs that'll help them. Their situation sucks, but it's not impossible."

Katia grunted. "They kept asking when they thought we might storm our castle. I have the impression they want to hold back and wait for us to have access so we can 'help.'"

I shook my head. *Goddamnit*. "We need to push them. We don't have time for that."

"I agree, and I did. I lied and told them that we don't expect to complete the air quadrant until time is almost up." She looked at me, worry evident in her eyes "At least I hope it was a lie."

I instinctively returned my gaze to the air. The protective sail, deflated balloon, whatever it was, shimmered in the meager light. A camel on stilts walked by, turning on lamps throughout the town. I knew the Wasteland was still over the water. But right now we were waiting for something else.

"It's coming," Katia said. "I can see the dot on my map."

I heard the low, angry buzz of a flying creature.

After my most recent discussion with Gwen on the land quadrant, I'd asked the Toe's barkeep about the creature, but the camel had been reluctant to tell me anything. Juice Box, however, was happy to tell me all about the borough boss in exchange for a gold coin.

The bird's name was Ruckus, and she was a giant version of the

more common Buzz-ard. She came to roost nearby every night after the storms.

The bird was half biological, half machine. A steampunk cyborg. Juice Box claimed she didn't know why the mechanical birds lived around here, as everything else in the area was purely biological. She said they were either a failed gnome invention that had escaped during the second war, or it was something left over from the time before that. What she called the "treasure hunter" era. The waster patrols avoided Ruckus, but one of their responsibilities was to cull the regular-sized Buzz-ards if they saw them.

"If it flies over the city every night, why don't they shoot it down with their anti-aircraft missiles?" Katia asked.

"Apparently there used to be a third camel city," I said. "They tried that, and it didn't go well for them."

Katia went pale. "And you want to fight this thing?"

I shrugged. "We'll be like a mile away. I have a missile I need to test. Don't worry. It'll be fine."

PART OF ME FELT BAD ABOUT STEALING FROM LITTLE SKARN and his burgeoning charge-people-to-look-through-his-telescope business, but we didn't have time to debate the morality of the issue. I knocked on the door of his house to talk to him. I wanted to make sure Flint the adult wasn't there—he wasn't—and I told the kid that I just wanted to check in on him.

“If they start to drop bombs, I want you to run to the Toe, okay? Tell all your friends. Go there. Nowhere else.”

Skarn turned into the creepy human child form. “Flint says we're supposed to go to the Spit and Swallow or the Wiggle Room.”

I knew neither of those were true saferooms, and they wouldn't be safe.

“No. The Toe. Nowhere else. I will give you and every one of your friends a whole gold piece if they go there instead. It'll be the safest place in town. And you can tell Flint to go there, too.”

While I talked to him, Donut scaled the wall and leaped to the roof of the home, stealing the Gnomish farseer telescope. She stole it in ten seconds flat. She was in and out.

I'd told Donut to leave thirty gold pieces on the roof as payment, but she told me she'd "forgotten."

"Why don't you tell them to go to the A.O.?" Donut asked. That was the only real saferoom tavern in town. It was in Weird Shit Alley. It stood for the Acrotomophilia Oasis. I didn't know what that meant, but none of the other guys liked going over there. "The Toe isn't a real saferoom either."

"No, it's not. But our personal space is. We can fit a lot of camels in there."

"Mordecai's not going to like that."

"Mordecai can suck it if he doesn't like it," I said.

Donut didn't have a response. She was still a little salty about the contents of her benefactor box, though she was putting on a brave face. The box had been empty, but then she'd received a notification that her sunglasses had received an update. An update that greatly enhanced her ability to determine the surface and the subsurface temperature of anything she looked at with precise detail.

Mordecai said that was a common tactic of benefactors. It cost a literal fortune to send exceptional items. It was more economical to send an item on one floor, and then send an upgrade for that same item on the next. And then another. Eventually, you'd end up with an item that would be Legendary or even Celestial box-worthy. The cost of four or five silver and bronze boxes was a fraction of the cost of sending a single Legendary.

Of course you'd have to survive through five floors to get the benefit. It was possible for them to send more than one box a floor, but according to Mordecai, the cost of that was even more astronomical.

In addition to its intended purpose—to help Donut root out changelings—I could see multiple useful applications of the upgrade, including the ability to find weaknesses on mobs. She could possibly use it to help me find traps and secret doors. She could set parameters and get a warning when things reached certain temperatures. There were dozens of options. Unfortunately, Donut had little patience for



all of that. I couldn't wear them, so Katia and I were baby-stepping her through customizing the glasses.

By the time we reached the town's exit, which was now guarded by multiple dromedarians, she had figured out the overlay system.

**Donut: TWO OF THE GUARDS ARE DIFFERENT THAN THE OTHERS. ALSO, ONE OF THEM IS GOSSAN. THAT WAS THE NAME OF ONE OF THE GUARDS WE'D KILLED IN THE TOWN HALL. HE'S BEEN RESURRECTED!**

**Carl: I bet it's a different changeling pretending to be the same guard. It's easier to pretend the camel never died than take over the body of a whole new camel, especially if the new dromedarian has family. Wait, see that one over there on top of the tower? That's Flint. The one who takes care of Skarn. Is he a changeling?**

**Donut: NO. HE'S A REGULAR CAMEL. HE'S MEAN-LOOKING TOO.**

I still didn't know if all this changeling/dromedarian drama really meant anything. As always, there were layers upon layers of backstory, and only some of it was relevant. I knew from the last floor it was important to learn as much as we could because it usually revealed victory paths that would be otherwise obscured. But I couldn't help but wonder if we'd already burned out any benefit we could get from this storyline when the tomb raider dudes killed the collateral guy.

I suspected that it didn't matter anymore. But if it didn't, why did Princess D'Nadia spend money to send Donut that upgrade? She possibly was as much in the dark as we were. In fact, considering the lack of people in this bubble, that was a very distinct possibility. She sent the upgrade because she thought she was being helpful and not because she knew something we didn't.

We had an hour until it was fully dark. Once night descended,

more mobs appeared. We wanted to get this done before then. The moment we were outside the gates, we went to work assembling the Chariot. It took four minutes this time.

The Chariot had a new addition since the last time we'd tested it. I mounted a four-chamber missile tube to the right of my seat. My seat was raised, and I could swivel 360 degrees. I controlled the Y axis of the tube with a handle on the side, allowing me to swing the launcher up and down. They were fired by me pulling a pin on the back. There was only a one-second delay between me pulling the pin and the missile firing, which wasn't ideal. I needed to pull my hand away quickly, or it would be turned into a piece of charcoal. And I needed to be careful about where the back of the launcher was pointing when I fired. It'd be easy to accidentally blast the back of Katia's head with flames. I had a better design in my head, but it would take too long to build. As always, safety came last.

Thanks to the neighborhood map we'd received from the dead goose, I could now also see the boss's location. She was only about a half of a mile east of town, settled right atop a sand dune. She was just sitting there, recharging her batteries or whatever it was cyborg death birds did at night.

"She's too close," I said. "We'll need to go west. See if we can get a mile and a half away."

We wanted to see how far the missiles could go. I knew I couldn't get far enough to test the full range, but I wanted to make sure the second stage portion actually worked. I knew in real-world conditions, the achievable propulsion distance was different between horizontal and vertical flight, but Mordecai seemed to think that didn't matter. Especially since we were using the magical **guided** upgrades on each of the four missiles.

"If we move too far from town, we won't be able to retreat as easily if the missiles don't work," Katia said. "I hope you know what you're doing." She eased forward on the throttle, and we were off, moving across the desert. The chariot moved smoothly and quietly.

She gradually increased the speed, the hot wind whipping at our faces.

“There,” I said, pointing to a raised dune near the center of the bowl. We climbed easily, coming to a stop. From our position, I had a good view of the entire area. Far to my right, the remnants of the Bactrian town continued to smolder. A few of the male thorny devils lumbered about, but they were all too far away to bother us.

High above, I caught the twinkle of the Wasteland. It was on the far edge of the bubble, glowing red against the dark sky. I knew once the sun rose, it’d be back, almost directly above our position now.

“Hand me the telescope, Donut.”

“I don’t like this, Carl,” Donut said. She sat on a little shelf just behind my head. “It’s still hot out here, and the sand gets everywhere. It’s five degrees hotter in the middle of the bowl than it is on the edges. I don’t understand why the ground is still so hot now that the sun is sinking away. It is not acceptable.”

I was starting to regret the new upgrade to her sunglasses. She’d been commenting on the temperature difference of items for an hour straight now.

“Just keep an eye out for mobs and give me the damn telescope.”

She grumbled some more but then produced the large, heavy scope. It had a clamp on the bottom, designed to be attached to either a table or the gunwale of a boat or airship. I attached the clamp to the left side of the chair and swung it over. I could use the telescope and aim the launcher at the same time.

I turned the chair 90 degrees and sighted the scope, looking for the borough boss.

“There you are,” I said, zooming in.

Even in the dwindling light, the magical telescope gave me an excellent view of the beast. Ruckus. The house-sized bird sat on the ground, head hanging low like it was asleep. The body of the creature vibrated up and down, like an engine.

I was expecting it to be more vulture-like, but it resembled a colossal hawk. A hawk wearing steampunk-style body armor. A real

beak protruded from a brass, pipe covered helmet that obscured the bird's eyes. A few wheels and cogs spun along the exterior of the armored main body. The folded wings on the sides of the creature appeared to be regular, organic wings.

I moved the telescope slightly, focusing on the giant bird's main weapon. The regular-sized buzz-ards flew around with a chainsaw-like device attached underneath their bodies. They swooped down and cut through anything that tried to fight them. I knew Gwen's team had a difficult time with them, and even the veteran waster patrol had to work to take one of them out. They used their guided missiles on those things more than they did against gnomish airplanes.

Ruckus had something similar, but much larger. The weapon sat on the ground next to the bird. It was permanently attached to the monster by a pair of thick cables which I knew it could retract and lengthen. It wasn't a chainsaw, but more like a twenty-five-foot-long stick with ten spinning buzzsaws on it. The weapon hung vertically under the bird as it flew. I'd seen something similar once attached to a helicopter. They used it to easily sheer through trees and branches along power lines in remote areas. Gwen had said the flying multi-buzzsaw had trashed their under construction siege towers in seconds.

I moved the telescope back to the bird. I zoomed in one more tick, and the description popped up.

**Ruckus. Spring-operated Chicken Hawk Sentinel.**

**Level 55 Borough Boss!**

**This is a bereft Minion of Shamus Chaindrive.**

**The great bugbear treasure hunter Shamus Chaindrive was known as both a paranoid and a greedy bastard. Having been betrayed one too many times, he no longer trusted any living soul. That is why his crew was always comprised of constructs and automatons.**

**He dedicated his life to hunting down long-lost treasures and artifacts. He prized one item above all others.**

**The Gate of the Feral Gods. Said to be buried in the long-lost Necropolis of Anser.**

**Chaindrive set out to find the tomb. He boarded his great submarine and sank beneath the waves, vowing to never surface again until he had his prize.**

**It took the bugbear almost twenty years to find the tomb, poking up like a monolith from a desert island. Using his submarine, he docked it against an underwater entrance directly adjacent to the main chamber of the trap-filled tomb. He quickly learned that he was not the first to arrive. A young mage had recently landed on the island and was attempting to magically burrow into the tomb. A colony of dirigible gnomes were settled in the area. All sought the treasures held within the tomb. All had failed so far.**

**Chaindrive unleashed his greatest weapon in an attempt to slow the efforts of his competitors. Ruckus had been stored in stasis in the hold of his great submarine. The self-replicating, spring-operated automaton was given the task to kill all who wished to steal Chaindrive's prize.**

**Now that the bugbear is long dead, the sentinel chicken hawk is content to spend its day circling around the island and being an all-around asshole. The regular residents of the island are smart enough to leave this powerful boss alone. The fact you're reading this means you're not one of the smart ones.**

"Strange," I said to Donut and Katia. "It says the boss comes from the underwater guy, who is dead. I think the 'castle' is a giant submarine. Also, it sounds like there's a hidden treasure in..."

**System Message: Please Wait.**

The world froze for about half of a second. It was like the beginning of a boss battle. But nothing happened, and the short glitch was over as quickly as it started.

**System Message: Thank you for your patience. You may now resume normal activities.**

“What the hell was that about?” I asked, looking around.

“I don’t know. Weird,” Katia said.

**Carl: Mordecai, did you feel that? Also, do you know what the Gate of the Feral Gods is?**

**Mordecai: I felt it. It happens. It’s usually not a glitch, but a gameplay timeout so dueling routines can clarify or reconcile rule conflicts. But no, never heard of the gate thing. But remember what I said about the word “feral?” Stay away from anything marked that. It’s always bad news.**

**Carl: What about artifacts? It said the gate is one.**

**Mordecai: Odd. An artifact is a legendary or celestial-tier item one may find sitting around the dungeon or as dropped loot. Like I told you before, most of the best items in the game come from boxes for the first several floors. After the sixth floor, *dropped* loot starts to get much better and more magical. Artifacts start popping up around the eighth or ninth floor. They’re usually *very* powerful items.**

**Carl: Eighth floor, you say? I can’t help but notice we’re only on the fifth. It says it’s an item inside the necropolis under our feet. Do you think that had anything to do with that weird pause?**

**Mordecai: Hmm. Maybe. I’m not surprised, honestly. This is like what we discussed a while ago. The showrunners control the storylines, but the AI picks out the specific loot. The AI can, and will, adjust**

**aspects of the story to fine-tune the difficulty level or to keep the game “fair.” If you get what I’m saying.**

**Carl: 10-4. Talk soon. We’re about to test the missiles.**

“Uh, Carl,” Donut said, pointing with her paw. “Ruckus is moving.”

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I leaned back into the eyepiece.

Maybe it was a coincidence. Maybe it was that weird glitch. Or maybe it was just the system being an asshole. But Ruckus, who had been drifting asleep just a minute ago, was now awake and looking right in our direction. He screamed loudly into the almost-night sky. He moved from the top of the dune and spread out his wings, which glittered. Flecks of metal intertwined with the feathers. It had a wingspan of three train cars. On the ground next to the massive bird, the line of buzzsaws started to spin up. The sound was goddamn terrifying. Even at a mile and a half away, we could hear them. The bird started to pump its wings in an attempt to take to the air.

“Shit, shit, get ready to fire,” I said. I quickly pulled a missile out and jammed it into the launch tube.

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The world once again froze. Haunting, eerie music started to play, echoing across the desert.

**B-b-b-boss battle!**

The boss battle sequence played out with our portraits floating high over the desert. But when they played the description of Ruckus, it had changed.

**Ruckus. Spring-operated Chicken Hawk Sentinel.  
Level 55 Borough Boss!**

**It's a bird! It's a landscaping tool! It's a goddamned death robot!**

**Ol' Ruckus is a left-over, anti-boat, anti-everything else security and scout automaton that has lost contact with the *Akula*. Lost contact, that is, until now. Having awakened and been given new orders, it is now seeking out enemies of the captain.**

**And you, my soon-to-be-buzzsawed-to-death-friends, are enemies of the captain.**

"You woke it up, Carl," Donut said. "The description doesn't say anything about it being a bereft minion."

"What the hell happened?" I exclaimed as I aimed with the eyepiece. The description had changed quite a bit. Ruckus flapped its gargantuan wings a few more times and took to the air. The massive buzzsaw started to lift from the ground.

**Gwen: Hey bomber guy. Did you feel that weird glitch? Anyway, thought you might want to know. Something is happening in the water quadrant. The water is bubbling. The whole ocean is frothing like the mouth of a rabid weasel. Somebody is doing something under there. You guys find that giant buzzard yet?**

**Carl: Looking at him right now. Talk soon.**

I put my hand over the back of the two-foot-long missile, and a tooltip popped up.

**Target missile?**

I mentally clicked **yes**.

**Designate target.**

**Warning: Once locked, you may not remove this designation.**

It was awkward keeping my right hand on the back of the missile and my left on the controls of the telescope. It didn't leave my hands free to adjust the chair. I focused on the center mass of Ruckus just before he flew out of the viewfinder and clicked **Target**.



**Target locked, bitches!**

The missile started to blink.

“Fire in the hole. Watch your eyebrows,” I said. I grasped the pin on the back of the missile, and I pulled the tab.

*Whoosh.*

A gout of flames rushed from the back of the tube as the missile rocketed away, dipping slightly and then rising into the night air. My whole right side flashed with pain as I was burned by the exhaust. Donut yowled in surprise and scrambled to the left.

“Goddamnit,” I growled at the pain. It hadn’t done any real damage, but it had hurt. *We need a better way to do this.* “You okay, Donut?”

“What do you think, Carl? You know I’m flammable, right? Warn me next time.”

“I did warn you. Stay to my left.”

The bright, crackling exhaust lit up the desert momentarily, turning the deep dusk into day. I grabbed a second rocket and shoved it into the tube.

“Go!” I said to Katia, who had already thrown the Chariot into gear and was accelerating down the back of the dune.

I looked over my shoulder, watching the missile curve in midair and then swoop up toward the boss, who was still gaining altitude. The giant, multi-buzzsaw swung wildly back and forth in the air as Ruckus pumped its wings.

We’d replaced the missile’s chemical propellant with one improved by Mordecai. When it burned itself out, the back of the rocket would, in theory, drop off and continue to coast for a few seconds. Then the second stage would light the back of the rocket, effectively doubling its range.

The original rockets had a shitty payload. The warheads were the equivalent of a quarter stick of goblin dynamite, which was nothing. At first I hadn’t thought I could improve the design, but after recycling a few impact hob-lobbers, I realized I could simplify the triggering device, which gave me much more room to add the boom stuff.

Each missile now packed the same punch as a full stick of hobgoblin dynamite, which was enough to kill almost any regular mob.

We needed these things to have a range of about three miles if we wanted to fire them from the surface and hit one of the knock-knocks they had parked underneath the gnome's castle. But first I needed to see if the two-stage rocket was even viable. If this worked, and we got out of here, we could build a few slightly-longer missiles between now and morning.

The missile zeroed in on the giant boss. The flames in the back started to sputter just before the missile reached the still-climbing target.

*Come on, come on.*

"Yes!" I said as I saw the first sparks of the second stage belch from the back of the now-distant rocket. I pumped my fist into the air.

But then the missile abruptly blew. It detonated a few hundred feet short of the target.

"*Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck me, fuckity fuck,*" I yelled, turning my fist into a middle finger. Ruckus, still climbing, flew over the explosion, unharmed. The buzzsaw cleaved the newly-formed cloud in two.

We used a tiny charge to drop the back fin of the rocket. It appeared that explosion was too powerful. Or something in the second-stage propellant caused the warhead to blow prematurely. I didn't know. I wouldn't know until we tested it. But that did us no good right now. I had three missiles left. Three missiles that all of a sudden had a much-shorter range. We'd never be able to hit the Wasteland from the ground. Not with these things.

"New plan," I said. "Turn around and drive straight for it." I pulled the third and fourth missiles and loaded them into the launcher. I wanted to avoid storing explosives outside my inventory if I could, but I needed all three of them now.

A second pair of eyes and mouth appeared on the back of Katia's head. The eyes protruded from her scalp on a pair of little stalks.

"Are you crazy?" she demanded from the second mouth as we hit a bump. The Chariot sailed into the air and crashed hard into the

ground. The back tread whined, blew up sand, and continued on its way.

“Holy shit, Katia,” I said, recoiling at the sudden appearance of a second face. “That’s really fucking weird. Do it.”

She grumbled but started the wide turn. If she turned any tighter, the whole thing would flip. Ahead, Ruckus screeched into the dark. The buzzsaw swung back and forth, a pendulum of death. We watched as it cleaved a thorny devil in two. The armored lizard didn’t stand a chance. Blood geysered across the desert as the massive bird zoomed toward us.

I quickly went through the three remaining rockets and locked all three onto the boss. One on the joint of where the left wing met the body, one on the exposed neck of the creature, and a third on the lower area where the cable extended from the creature and attached to the buzzsaw.

The monster aimed right at us. It loomed like a tidal wave. The buzzsaw was impossibly loud. It’d be on us in seconds.

“When I fire, bank left and floor it,” I yelled. “Donut, watch out. I’m firing now.”

The screaming blades lined up with our path, waving back and forth. The damn thing was huge. Each blade was the size of a truck tire. The acrid stench of overworked machinery filled the air.

I pulled all three pins at once. All three rockets burst from the tubes. They dipped, arced, and then all corkscrewed through the air. All three hit the boss at the same moment as we turned away. The boss exploded high over our heads. The Chariot rocked as we turned too sharply but Katia held out her hand in the opposite direction, and a heavy weight appeared in her hand, causing the vehicle to right itself. She dropped the extra mass, and we zoomed away.

*Nice*, I thought.

The buzzsaw swung wildly as Ruckus tumbled. It flew into the air, arcing in our direction. *Fuck me*. Donut fruitlessly shot a *magic missile* at the approaching blades.

Just as the triple explosions rocked the creature, its left wing blew

off right at the joint. Metal showered. It screeched as it spun, wrapping up in the cable for the saw. The screaming weapon suddenly jerked away and then pinwheeled through the air with the momentum of the plummeting bird. The momentum of the swinging weapon caught the wreckage and pulled it along, flying in our direction. They overshot us and hit the ground with a mighty crash as Katia slammed the gear into reverse.

Ruckus broke apart in a shower of blood and mechanical parts. The giant buzzsaw, suddenly free of the bird, continued to whine as it hit and bounced on the ground. The front of the weapon bucked against the rocks and sand, still buzzing. Still cutting. The whole thing spun several times then stuck itself sideways into the rock of the tomb. The two front blades on the weapon stopped spinning, but the rest showered dirt and debris twenty feet into the sky, like a truck stuck in the mud.

The **Winner!** Notification appeared. I assumed the music stopped, but I couldn't hear it over the whine of the buzzsaws. Ruckus had splattered all over the desert. There was metal and machinery and thick, sticky blood everywhere.

"I feel as if I didn't do anything productive in that battle," Donut said as we watched the buzzsaw. "Mordecai says I need to be doing more, not less. I'm already two spots behind you, Carl. I don't want to fall off the top ten like Katia did."

I reached up and scratched her on the head. "While we were fighting, I actually got an idea for something you can do the next time we face an airplane. Don't worry. It'll be spectacular."

"I thought we were going to be done with airplanes after we blew up the *Wasteland* in the morning."

"The missiles don't have the range," I said. "We need a new plan."

"A new plan that involves airplanes?"

"I'm afraid so."

"But we only have a little more than two hours," Donut said.

"I know."

I turned to Katia, who was staring at the shower of dirt and rock only twenty feet in front of us. “That was pretty slick what you did there,” I said. “With the counter weight to keep us from flipping.”

She nodded. She looked like she was about to throw up. “Why did you make me drive toward it? The missiles worked. They would’ve worked if we kept going in the other direction. The second stage doesn’t work, but the first stage still has a really good range.”

“I wanted to make sure they hit accurately,” I said. “Mordecai said sometimes they’re not all that precise. I didn’t want to damage the prize.”

“Prize?” she asked. But I could tell she knew what I was talking about. The still-chugging chainsaw rumbled on the ground. The thing had to be 25 feet long.

“Get your backpack ready. We’re going to bulk you up so you can lift it and stick it into your inventory.”

“Carl, you know how you’re always complaining that they portray you...”

She didn’t finish. A mighty rumble filled the world. An earthquake. I thought at first we were being bombed, but this was something different. Something deep in the bones of the world. I looked worriedly at the buzzsaw, but it remained firmly dug into the ground.

**Bubble Notification. The Bridge of the *Akula* has been successfully occupied. The Water Quadrant has been liberated!**

**All give congratulations to the crawler who successfully took the throne room. All hail crawler Chris Andrews 2!**

**All crawlers who originated in the Water Quadrant may now freely travel to the other quadrants.**

The world rumbled again as Donut and I looked at each other.

“Chris,” I said. “Chris is in here with us.”

**STAGE 2 OF 4.**

**Still on the gnomes.**

“So Chris is from team Meadow Lark?” Katia asked. “He entered the dungeon with Imani and Elle?”

“Yes,” I said as we drove back to Hump Town. We’d looted everything we could from the wreckage. It was a lot, including almost a ton of dwarfish aluminum, which was a light but strong metal. The giant buzzsaw was powered by the same type of dwarfish battery that ran the Chariot. I pulled the battery, and the whole thing shut off. There was a cable that attached the saw to the chicken hawk, but it appeared the weapon worked if it was attached or not. The thing was lighter than it looked, and Katia managed to pull it all into her inventory.

We’d also obtained the field guide from the borough boss corpse. We could now see the level and description of all the mobs in the area. The guide covered the entire bowl. Right now, in the dark of night, multiple, fist-sized monsters called **Night Frights** were

emerging from the sand dunes. They were everywhere. They were similar to the rot sticker mobs we faced on the first floor. They ran, attached themselves to you, and exploded. Katia and Donut sniped at them as we drove, but we didn't stop to engage.

"When Elle and the others were still old," I continued, "there were four people taking care of them. There had been more, but we never met the original crew. They were Imani and Yolanda, who were nurses, and the brothers Chris and Brandon who'd both been maintenance guys at the old folk's home. Yolanda died protecting us from the rage elemental, and Brandon died protecting the team from shade gremlins." I swallowed, remembering that last note Brandon had sent. I had it saved in my scratch pad, and I often found myself pulling it up and reading it. He'd written it after he'd gotten into a fight with his brother, and his brother had left the team. I thought of one passage in particular:

*He was never much of a talker. Mom said there was something wrong with him, maybe he was slow. But he ain't slow. And even if he was... I said something stupid, and he got mad. He left, and now it's too late to tell him I love him. I never said it. I'm about to die, and it's all I can think about.*

I'd promised myself I'd give the message to Chris if I could, but there was obviously something going on with him. He'd taken a race called an Igneous. A rock creature similar to the Sledge and Bomo. He'd stopped all communication with Imani, and Odette had tried to send me a warning about him.

He'd also killed Frank Q soon after Frank had given me the Ring of Divine Suffering. According to the Sledge, Chris had sat next to Frank at the counter of the Desperado Club. They'd talked, and then Chris had reached over and crushed his head. He'd simply gotten up and walked out after. He was now banned from the club.

That was not the crawler I remembered. I remembered him as a quiet man, dedicated to protecting his friends and brother. He'd sobbed after the boss battle with the tusklings. There was no

way the old Chris would've done something like that. Imani said his personality had changed soon after he'd chosen his race.

I sent a message to Imani that we'd located him. And while I couldn't yet go seek him out, there was a possibility he could come here. I didn't know how I felt about that. Imani seemed to think he wanted to team up with me, but I feared he was too dangerous. I'd already had more than enough of that bullshit on the last floor with Hekla. We had enough to worry about already. It was just too much.

**Imani: Whatever you decide, keep me updated. He still ignores all of my messages. I hope the real Chris is still in there somewhere. He's the only non-resident left.**

**Carl: Will do. How's the boating going?**

**Imani: Don't ask. We need a boat with armor. Elle has figured out how to use an ice spell to protect us from the fireballs, but we still can't get close to the oil rig. There are monsters in the water and pirate orc archers everywhere.**

**Carl: What about approaching it from underwater? Build a sub.**

**Imani: You've been talking to Elle, haven't you? Carl, do you know how crazy that is? Build a sub, like that's an easy thing to do.**

**Carl: Speaking of Chris, *he* has a submarine. I can't imagine he'd be able to get it to you, but maybe he has some knowledge we don't. Anyway, if you need a torpedo or something, let me know. We can meet up at the Desperado and trade it.**

**Imani: We can trade using the shop interface in our personal space, too. We just bought it thanks to Donut's advice. You can list something for private sale, so we don't have to meet face-to-face to trade. The only problem is that it doesn't let you just give stuff away. It**



**won't let you trade it away for less than 50% of its value.**

**Carl: We'll figure it out. Be safe.**

**Imani: You too. And Carl?**

**Carl: Yeah?**

**Imani: Don't kill him. Please. He's changed, but he's still my friend. He's still Brandon's brother.**



We stood near the collapsed remains of town hall. The dromedarian named Henrik stood nearby, directing the rescue efforts.

**Donut: HE'S A CHANGELING. IT SAYS HE'S LEVEL 30, BUT HIS HEAD GLOWS EVEN HOTTER THAN THE OTHER GUYS. CAN THEY HIDE THEIR LEVELS?**

**Carl: Yes, especially if they're really strong.**

**Donut: YOU CAN COOK AN EGG ON THAT GUY'S HEAD.**

Henrik was the one who'd been attempting to "convince" Wynne the gnome into using his spell to resurrect the ghost. I figured he was the leader guy, and we set out to find him. We didn't have to search hard. The older dromedarian stood over the wreckage, shouting at the others to keep digging in the smoldering remains. The creature looked absolutely exhausted. Even though he was a changeling, the weight of their current situation was etched deep onto his dromedarian face.

They still hadn't gotten to Wynne's body. They were desperately trying to find him.

There was a half an hour left until the sun rose. The dull light of the *Wasteland* was almost back over the bowl, moving toward its spot in the center.

I walked up to the camel and didn't waste any time.

“How does the collateral work?”

The large camel looked down to regard me. “You should leave town the moment the light hits. It is no longer safe.”

“There’s nowhere to go,” I said.

“Then go to a shelter. Buy a woman. We do not have much time. Now leave us be.”

“Hey, I’m not asking for fun. How does the collateral work? Do you drag the gnome out so the gnomes can see him through one of their fancy telescopes or what?”

He narrowed his eyes. “You are the one who rented the telescope from young Skarn, are you not? Are you also the one who attempted that poor subterfuge with the grulke? If your goal was to kill everyone, congratulations. You win. These poor bastards just don’t know it yet. If you’ve come to gloat in your victory, get it over with. I am too old and too tired to engage.”

“Look, I only have one purpose here, and that’s to stop the gnomes. I’m trying to help.”

A dromedarian stuck his head up from the wreckage. “The entrance to the basement is sealed off,” he called. “It’s not from the fire. Part of the necropolis wall slid closed and sealed off the room. We can get through, but it’ll take some time.”

“We do not have time,” Henrik growled at the other camel.

“Look,” I said. “We can stop the gnomes. But you have to help me help you. I need to know how they know the collateral is still alive.”

**Carl: Donut. I need a boost from your charm.**

Donut leaped to my shoulder and looked up at the camel. “We will be able to save this town if you tell us.” She lowered her voice to a stage whisper. “We don’t care which ones of you are real camels and which ones are changelings. I don’t know why you’d want to pretend to be something so large and smelly, but that’s not our business.”

He gave only the slightest hint of surprise. But I could feel it. The way she manipulated NPCs sometimes was almost a tangible thing. You could feel the tension slide away. I could see the wheels turning

in his head. He seemed to come to a decision. He pulled a little pocket watch out from his robes and then quickly put it away.

“The alarm goes off on the watch, and I open it up. There is a mirror. The gnomish Commandant is on the other side. He makes a symbol with his fingers. I show this to the collateral, and he tells me a time. I then switch the hands on the clock to the correct time. Commandant Kane owns the watch’s twin, and I believe the movement on the clock is mirrored. So when I change the time on Henrik’s watch, the hands also move on the other clock. It is a code we do not understand. Only then do the gnomes know Wynne is alive and we have bought ourselves another day.”

It wasn’t lost on me that he’d just referred to himself in third person.

“A code?” I asked. I remembered that Wynne had pretty much offered himself by tricking those crawlers into killing him. It had been both clever and desperate. “And he cooperated with it?”

“He did for years. It was only when we moved him to the chamber below the town hall did he start to resist. Only when he understood that the dynamic of his situation had changed. So he stopped cooperating. We’ve had to drug him to force compliance. It’s been getting harder. He has grown a tolerance for the mushroom. We have to feed him more every day.”

There was a lot to unpack there. Mordecai said he hadn’t yet figured out what the mushrooms did, but he was doing some alchemy that would help determine all their uses. Apparently just eating them raw helped with getting people to do what you wanted. He’d already said a lot of mushrooms had that effect, but that was more of a secondary purpose, especially when the system labeled it as an alchemy item. He said the mind control effects weren’t very reliable, but apparently they’d worked well enough in this case.

“Where’s the real Henrik?”

He looked at me with impassive eyes. “Do you really wish me to answer that?”

“Did the Bactrians do the same thing?” I asked. “Did they also

have a watch?” According to Morris, they’d had some sort of pig collateral.

“No,” Henrik said. “They had a different sort of indemnity with the gnomes. It was a favorite pet swine of the Commandant’s daughter. I do not know the full nature of their deal, but I believe they were required to bring the animal out to sun itself once a day. Once it was observed via farseer, they were saved another day.”

“Can’t you guys turn to pigs? Why didn’t you go over there?” Donut asked. “One of you snorting around each day for a couple of minutes, and everybody is happy. The gnomes would never know.”

For the first time, Henrik cracked a smile. “That was the problem, little one. When our village was destroyed, the bactrians did not take us in. What you suggested would also be thought of by the gnomes. They would not tolerate our presence for that very reason. The dromedarians were reluctant, but they are, in their hearts, good people. They took us in.”

“Much good that did them,” I muttered.

Henrik looked me dead in the eye. “Sometimes we do things that are not of our nature to protect our own.”

I felt a chill, but only for a moment. I remembered what Mordecai had said about these guys, that they were basically doing this so they could resurrect some ancient monster and touch it and add it to their libraries. That wasn’t a very noble cause. Still, something about that story was nagging at me. I had the sense there was more to it than that. Now was not the time to delve into it.

I pointed at the box-shaped anti-aircraft battery atop of the wall. “Those things can’t protect the town?”

“From individual airships? Yes. Not a full bombardment from the dreadnaught.”

We had a few options here. There was a code of some sort. The gnomes gave a hand gesture, and Wynne told the dromedarians what time to put into the clock. That was just the sort of thing Katia and Mordecai could figure out.

But probably not in the time we had left. They’d have to know

what all the former question and answers were, and even as charmed as he was right now, we'd never get this Henrik guy to sit down and give us the information.

Another option was to just let the town get bombed to hell. As long as we stayed in our personal space, we'd be fine. We'd save as many of these assholes as we could, and then we'd figure out what to do next from there. I knew with some more time I could probably build a missile that went high enough. And who knew? Maybe once both of the towns were gone, they'd land the damn ship and give us the opportunity to storm it the old fashioned way.

But it felt wrong. And we'd only be able to keep a handful of the town's residents sheltered using the saferoom method.

And even if we did protect most of them by crowding everyone into our space, eventually we'd have to kick them out. And then what?

I looked up and stared at the fabric ceiling of the town.

"Can you talk to that commandant guy using the watch?"

"No sound, but we can exchange written messages. We often speak that way."

"Have they ever sent a representative? Like an emissary?" I remembered reading once about hostages and ransoms during the Hundred Years' War. Oftentimes the whole thing ended up in disaster, but sometimes there were negotiations that resulted in a ransom paid, which required both parties to temporarily trust each other.

"Yes. They do often. There is an ambassador. Leon the Commisar. He comes to inspect. He has a spell he casts to make sure the collateral is not a changeling. I believe they fear we will one day break the code between him and the Commandant."

My interest was piqued. "Luckily they haven't cast the spell on you yet."

"Yes," Henrik said. "They were scheduled for an inspection in two days, but I fear with these new developments, the situation will be accelerated."

From there, we spent a few minutes discussing the ambassador

and how the inspections worked. This whole inspection thing was clearly put into the storyline as a way for us to be able to get to the *Wasteland*, but it was all screwed up now thanks to the death of Wynne. Still, as we talked, an idea started to form.

**Carl: Mordecai. If I need a parachute quickly, what are my options?**

**Mordecai: How are your sewing skills?**

**Carl: They're shit.**

**Mordecai: Then you need one of a few dozen potions, a flight ability, or a fall shield buff. Or you can turn Katia into a hang glider.**

**Carl: Yeah, I don't think she's going to go for that. Do you have the materials for a potion?**

**Mordecai: I'm looking at the stock right now. I don't have the *Feather Fall* materials. Those are common potions later on, but the seed pods I need are scarce until we hit the sixth floor. Same with *Bubble Boy*. I do have enough to make one type of potion, but you won't like it. And only enough to make maybe two of them, so whatever death-defying stunt you're planning, take Katia with you and leave Donut on the ground. It's an easy enough formula. Five minute brew. I'll double check the market to see if anything else is available, but I wouldn't count on it.**

**Carl: I'm coming your way. I need to make a few rockets really fast. Make me the potions.**

"Okay," I said to Henrik. "I don't know if this will save the town, but we're going to give it a try." I turned to Katia, who'd been strangely silent since we'd returned. Her eyes were flashing, so I knew she was talking to somebody. She did not look happy. "Katia, I have a job for you."

She blinked and looked at me. "What do you need me to do?"

"Two things. First one is a little gross."

While Katia returned to the Desperado Club, I explained the assault with Donut while we jogged back to the personal space. It occurred to me that we were giving ourselves extra work, skipping past two pubs to get to the Toe. Every single one had a personal space entrance in it. But as we rushed by, I noticed they were all closed and boarded up. The camels all knew what was coming and were already moving their way to the bomb shelters.

“Carl, that is not going to work. They know there are changelings in town. They’ll check.”

“I know.” I explained the next part of the plan.

Donut did not look impressed. “This is a little janky, even for a Carl plan.”

“Janky?” I said. “Where did you get that one? That is not an Elle term.”

“Louis told me,” she said.

“Louis? You’ve been talking to Louis?”

“I’m allowed to have friends, Carl.”

Before I could come up with a suitable response, I received a message from Morris the spider guy:

**Morris: Hey, so we did what you asked. Package delivered. But we have a new problem.**

**Carl: Big or small?**

**Morris: They’re all big problems. Right after the water quadrant was conquered, some of the walls changed inside. I think all the exits are closed.**

I remembered that the dromedarian had said that basement chamber had been sealed off. The walls must have changed about. I looked at my map, and it hadn’t changed as far as I could tell. But it didn’t tell me if entrances were open or closed. The tomb raider guys couldn’t leave anyway, so it wasn’t a big deal.

**Carl: Okay. So what’s the problem?**

**Morris: We didn't think much of it at first, but now something's happening below us. We can hear it.**

**Carl: What do you mean?**

**Morris: I think the necropolis is filling with water.**

**Carl: Oh fuck me.**

**Morris: Yeah, so I don't know what we're going to do. We have a lot of those water breathing scrolls, but not nearly enough. And I don't think our torches work underwater. If it fills up all the way, then we're hosed.**

**Carl: Okay, make sure everybody has the water scrolls. If it fills all the way to where you are, go to a safe room. Actually, you and Bobby return to the Desperado and plant yourselves there. If I need to build you something or get more scrolls to you, we can get it to you more easily.**

"Damn it," I growled. When Chris had taken the underwater castle, it had likely caused something to make the water rush into the tomb. The entrances had all closed up, so there was nowhere for the water to go. It hadn't occurred to me that we might need to consider the order in which we took these castles. There was nothing I could do from here.

I was expecting to find the Toe boarded up, but the bar was open and lit up like a Christmas display. I opened the door and was greeted with a crowd of about forty children, ranging in age from four to twelve. Almost all were dromedarians, but a group of six were in human form. They were obviously changelings. Juice Box was moving amongst the kids, talking to each in turn. She had a bag in her hand and was handing something out to each child.

**Carl: Let me know if any of the kids other than the humans are shapeshifters.**

**Donut: I DON'T SEE ANY OTHERS BUT IT'S HARD WITH THE KIDS. JUICE BOX'S HEAD IS VERY HOT. JUST AS HOT AS THE HENRIK GUY. OH, OH. AND**



## **THE BARTENDER GUY IS ONE TOO! NOW THAT'S JUST SNEAKY.**

"You owe us each a gold coin," Skarn said. He was in human form, standing with the others.

The other crawlers were also here. Louis and Firas stood with Langley and the archers. Louis was sucking on... a goddamn, actual juice box. A kiwi strawberry-flavored Capri Sun. I realized that was what Juice Box was handing out to all the kids.

"All right," I called. "I won't be here to let you in later, so everybody follow me."

"Shouldn't we take them to one of the actual safe rooms, Carl? Like that one on that strange street?"

"No," I said. "Mordecai said the saferooms are only safe if there's a crawler in with them. We can't spare anybody." I raised my voice. "Everybody follow me." I pointed at the bartender and Juice Box. "You guys, too."

The bartender refused to come, but Juice Box happily followed us. I was glad because we'd need someone to wrangle the children.

"Yeah, what about our money?" Skarn demanded.

I pulled a gold coin into the air and tossed it at him. "Help me get everyone inside, and you'll get another and so will everyone else. Where are their parents?"

"All the grown-ups are on defense duty," he said. He raised his voice. "Okay, everyone follow Mr. Carl."

I noticed three of the human/changeling children weren't fully... complete. One, a girl named Ruby, did not have any arms at all, and her head was sunken in at the top, like a deflated soccer ball that had been kicked. She walked slowly, with a noticeable limp. She was hard to look at. When I examined her, I saw she had an active debuff.

### **This NPC is suffering from Compression Sickness.**

I sent a message to Mordecai asking what that was, but he said he'd never heard of it. He then asked where I was just as I opened the door and gave access to the first of several children.

Mordecai, as expected, was not pleased.

“This isn’t a goddamned daycare, Carl. Do you see a jungle gym? Because I don’t see a fucking jungle gym.”

The couch fell over onto its side as three dromedarian kids tried to balance on the back. Another had grabbed the cleaner bot and was hovering a foot off the ground while the robot beeped with a scared-sounding alarm. Juice Box formed into a hairy monster and roared at the camel, who dropped the robot. The cleaner bot zoomed up and out of reach, beeping mournfully as another pair of children stomped onto their almost-empty juice box pouches to launch the straws across the room. A circle formed as the children, dromedarian and changeling alike, started using their newfound riches to establish a gambling ring where they bet on who could launch their juice box straws the furthest. Donut was suddenly in on the action, hopping up and down and betting loudly.

The other crawlers all cowered in the corner, not certain what to do.

We’d all been in the room for less than three minutes.

“Yeah, you need games or something,” Juice Box said, walking up. She’d returned to a generic, female human form. She was white skinned and blonde, about eighteen years old. Her jaw worked like she was chewing gum. “They’re calm now, but they’ll be getting antsy soon.”

“Calm?” Mordecai asked. “This is calm?”

One of the changeling humans was suddenly a skyfowl and was attempting to take to the air. Another had turned into a cat, but Donut started hissing, and he switched back to a human.

“Why don’t they ever turn into dromedarians?” I asked.

“Not allowed,” Juice Box said. “Only when they’re at the bars and for entertainment purposes only. That was part of our deal when they took us in. We ain’t allowed to casually take the form of the dromedarians otherwise.”

“Is that so?” I asked. But I was in a hurry, and I needed to get to the crafting room. So I didn’t pursue the obvious lie. Now that I had the formula down, it’d only take me a few minutes to put the missiles together. Since the two-stage missiles weren’t working, and we were out of time to figure out why, I was just going to use the original design and add a few of the seekers. The missiles would have a climbing range of a little more than a mile. The *Wasteland* would be a good three miles above our position when it dropped its bombs. That meant we had to get creative.

“Did you do the potions?” I asked Mordecai.

“They’re cooling down,” Mordecai said, still seething and distracted by the horde of children. “They’re probably ready by now.” He sighed, looking about the room. “I have a few downloads from the time before the dungeon opened. I think I can stream them to the screens here. Hang on.” The main room screen flickered, and a new image appeared. A movie started to play.

“I didn’t know you could do that,” I said. I glanced over at Donut, who was about five seconds from discovering Mordecai had a magical Bluetooth connection to the screen.

“Yes,” he said. “But you don’t have time to watch movies.”

Around the room, the screeching stopped as dozens of children suddenly turned their attention to the screen.

“Carl, Carl, it’s a movie!” Donut said, bounding across the room to return to my shoulder.

“It’s part of the manager benefit,” Mordecai said, obviously reluctant to tell her this. “In case we ever want to strategize using the screens. But I also have a digital library of most Earth movies that I collected when we were preparing to go live. Plus entertainment from the last world I worked, though they didn’t have anything good unless you like off-key opera.”

“Do you have *There’s Something About Mary*? I never saw the ending! Carl came home that day and ruined it. He switched it to the watch-Carl-get-fragged-over-and-over Playstation channel, and I never learned what happened! It has been killing me. If I don’t find

out what happened I will simply die.” She suddenly gasped. “Do you have the *Sex and the City* movie?”

“And now you know why I never told you about this,” Mordecai said. On the screen, the movie was the original *Toy Story*. “Hey, hey, kid! Put that down!” he suddenly yelled, storming off.

“Wonderful,” I said, watching him go. I turned to Juice Box. “You’re doing good with the kids. You’re a natural.”

“Hey,” she said, leaning in closer, her voice a whisper. She’d watched and listened to our conversation about movies with a strange intensity. “What is this place? Is it from the Hunting Grounds?”

“The Hunting Grounds?” I asked, surprised. “No, it’s our base of operations. It follows us wherever we go.”

“Can we use it to get there?” she asked, voice full with so much hope that I had to pause to regard her.

“The Hunting Grounds” was what they called the sixth floor. I had a quick memory, of a goblin shamanka with a face full of piercings and rings telling me forlornly about how everything would be better if they just could get one floor down.

“No, you can’t use this room to travel,” I said. “But we’ll be going there if we can get out of here. Is that some place you’re trying to go?”

I’d been slogging my way through Herot’s essay on the nature of NPCs from the cookbook, and this was something he’d talked about frequently. NPCs had varying degrees of situational awareness about where they were. On the previous level with the trains, they’d all been completely brainwashed, totally unaware that they were in a dungeon. Rory and Lorelai the goblin shamankas from the very first floor had been the opposite. While they’d been invested in the llama/goblin meth war story, they were also fully aware that they were on the first floor of a dungeon. Herot, who advocated for breaking the NPCs out of the fourth wall, warned that those NPCs who knew what was going on from the start were much more dangerous. On the last floor, we’d been able to recruit a few NPCs to our cause because their world was obviously a construct, and the illusion was easily shattered.

“The Hunting Grounds are our ancient home,” Juice Box said. The normally ditzzy and goofy NPC was suddenly dead serious. “We have been stuck here for a long time. There was a way to go home, but it is lost to us now that the town hall is gone.”

I reached up and scratched Donut on the head. I sent her a quick message.

“Are you seeking the Gate of the Feral Gods?” Donut asked.

She scoffed. She didn’t seem surprised we mentioned the artifact. “No. Gnomes seek that prize. The same with the mad mage and that bugbear under the sea. All of them came here trying to find it. If the gnomes couldn’t locate it, then nobody can. Or will. Hen...” She paused. “One of our kind says that the gate artifact is a myth. The camels have been here the longest, and they know nothing of it. What we seek is something else.”

She’d almost said “Henrik” but caught herself.

I asked the next question. “So what is it you seek? Something to do with the ghost queen Quetzalcoatlus?”

*That* surprised her, and not in a good way. She narrowed her eyes and backed off. “I must tend to the children. I’m beginning to suspect this is all your doing. You speak of helping us, but where is the proof, other than taking the children to this place? Prove to me you mean what you say. If you can stop the gnomes from destroying the city, and my people survive, I will tell you. Come speak to me again if we survive the bombardment.”

**Katia: Henrik just got the daily message on his pocket watch thing from the gnomes. He showed them the reply, just as you wrote it. We were expecting them to ask questions, but they snapped off communications.**

**Carl: Do you think they took the bait?**

**Katia: I don’t know. Have you built the missiles yet?**

**Carl: Doing it now. We got a little distracted on the way in.**

**Katia: Cutting it a little close don't you think?**

**Donut: WE'RE WATCHING *TOY STORY*. HAVE YOU SEEN IT?**

**Katia: What?**

**Carl: We'll be ready in a minute.**

A new timer suddenly appeared in my vision. It was at one hour and 15 minutes and ticking down.

**New Quest. Squeeze out the Juice Box.**

**That mischievous Changeling prostitute appears to be more important to this story than you first thought. It also appears she's rather fond of her brothers and sisters, many of whom are currently outside, mixed in with the poor, oblivious Dromedarians, preparing to die in a desperate attempt to destroy all the incoming bombs with flak. If this town is bombed, they will not succeed. They will not even come close to succeeding.**

**To win this quest, you must save Hump Town from the inevitable bombardment, which will occur when the timer reaches zero.**

***Reward*: You will receive a Platinum Quest Box.**

**In addition, all crawlers in this quadrant will receive a permanent fifty percent charisma bonus during any future interactions with Changelings.**

**You'll also receive my undying respect, because there is no way in hell even you can pull this one off.**

ONCE I WAS ALONE WITH DONUT IN THE CRAFTING ROOM, I spent a quick minute to open my new loot boxes. I only had two. The silver boss box I'd gotten for killing Ruckus the chicken hawk contained two items. First was a case of 25 more surefires, which was a relief. I'd already used up ten of the ones I'd received earlier, giving the missiles the "guided" upgrade. I was about to use the rest of the ones I already had, and this gave us some wiggle room. I could now alter the plan.

The second item was a little worrying. It was similar to the boss-damage-enhancing Seize the Day Toothpaste I had, which I was saving for later.

"It's a lotion bottle, Carl," Donut said, peering down at the item. She'd also received the same prize plus some healing scrolls in her box. "It's just like the bottle you used to keep hidden in your drawer by the bed."

### **Jellyfish Salve (5 applications)**

**If you can't talk someone into peeing on you after you get stung by a Pain Amplifier Jelly, then this will do the trick.**

**Effect: removes the pain portion of the Kill Me Now It Hurts debuff.**

**Warning: It does not remove the one-minute healing block effect associated with the Jelly's sting.**

I really hoped that we wouldn't have to deal with the water quadrant. I'd received the box just before Chris had defeated that level, so maybe it was something we could avoid.

My next item was the silver fan box I'd received at the end of the previous floor. It'd become available just as we set out to fight Ruckus. I braced myself as it popped open.

"Yes," I said. "Finally." I looked up at the ceiling. "Thanks, guys."

It was a thick, enchanted roll of duct tape. I picked it up and examined it.

**Enchanted Roll of Never-ending Duct Tape. Fifty meters.**

**Odds are good you know who Ted Bundy is. Odds are even better you *don't* know who Vesta Stoudt is. And while this problem is not exclusive to you hairless monkeys and your pollution-ridden world, those first two statements are part of the reason why you have received this prize.**

**Will you use it to tie people up? Will you use it to save the lives of those you love? Will you wrap your ankles together and sensuously rub your supple feet up and down a dungeon wall while you run your hands through your hair? Who knows! But you just got yourself a roll of the universe's greatest duct tape.**

**This 50-meter-long roll of extra-durable, fabric-based tape regenerates at the rate of one meter an hour until it returns to 50 meters.**

"Awesome," I said, keeping the tape out. I already had a use in mind. I moved to my sapper table and went to work.



With just about 45 minutes remaining, we all left the protection of the safe room and exited out the town's main gate. I warned Juice Box not to let any of the kids out of the personal space because once they left, they wouldn't be able to get back in. Mordecai had managed to squeeze out three copies of the potion with his supplies, which was good. It would allow Donut to participate in the raid. I doled the potions out, and we were on our way.

The six archers walked behind us in a V pattern. I attached the back cart to the body of the Chariot. Firas sat in the back cart along with Henrik the town's leader. Louis sat in the driver's seat while I walked to the left of the cart, and Donut, sitting astride Mongo, marched to our right.

I caught the eye of Donut as we marched forward. She was nervous. This was a complicated plan with a lot of moving parts, which meant there was a lot of ways for it to go south. I took a deep breath. I was nervous, too.

The struggling form of Wynne the dirigible gnome sat on the raised, back seat of the ATV. I originally planned on having him tied with rope, but duct tape worked much better. The optional missile battery was not attached and was sitting in my inventory along with two more four packs. I clutched the farseer in my hand, and I used it to stare up at the flying fortress. The damn thing was huge. I made sure I focused on several different gnomes long enough that they'd receive a notification that they were being watched. We wanted to make sure they knew we were here.

We gave a wide berth to several of the giant lizards as we made our way across the desert, angling toward that large hill in the center of the bowl. We didn't quite make it that far. The ponderous *Wasteland* moved above us, and I feared they'd drop bombs on our unprotected heads. Instead, the massive structure continued south, moving toward the edge of the bowl where it would soon be directly above the village of Hump Town.

Multiple flying vehicles dispatched from the main body and started circling downward, reminding me of the whirlybirds that dropped off of maple trees. As I expected, it was a mishmash of vehicles, no two the same. I quickly counted. A total of thirteen vehicles were dispatched.

A single, traditional-style hot-air balloon remained in the center of the formation. The large, black and gold striped balloon was covered in ribbons and small flags. It looked like it was decorated for a parade or to advertise a circus. It was not outfitted for war, unlike all the other vehicles. A large basket hung underneath, equally doused in ribbons and flags. The basket looked big enough to hold five or six regular humans. Three faces peered over the edge down at us. The basket continued to descend as the other vehicles kept to about 500 feet, circling and hovering. The ominous shape of bombs and large, firecracker-like rockets dotted their undersides.

The decorated balloon continued to descend, slowing rapidly. I caught the shimmer of a shield protecting the balloon. The moment it lowered below 100 feet, the three dots on the balloon became visible. It labeled the three dirigible gnomes as a **Level 25 Aerostat Pilot**, a **Level 44 Negotiator**, and a **Level 52 Sniper Captain**.

I looked up at the three faces as the balloon settled. It crunched heavily into the sand while the pilot spun a wheel on the fire mechanism under the open balloon. I knew real hot air balloons worked better in colder environments, and I could sense the magic coming from the box that radiated heat upward. There were a dozen controls on the thing. It reminded me of the *Nightmare*, though less complicated. Slightly. I quickly examined the balloon's properties.

**Gnomish Legate Balloon. *The Vahana*. Contraption.**

**Of all the vehicles left aboard the dreadnaught *Wasteland*, the *Vahana* is perhaps the oldest.**

**Once, long ago, the gnomes believed they could avoid war.**

**And while they could not leave this conflict-infested world, they could take to the skies, out of reach of**

**everyone else. They hoped they could set themselves up as neutral peacekeepers. Everyone knew that the black and gold-striped balloons were off limits. The balloons were a symbol of hope. The sight of a Gnomish Legate on the horizon heralded the arrival of ambassadors, and perhaps peace.**

**But when new visitors came to their world, coming via a mysterious portal, everything changed. These were winged predators who would not have peace, and they would not suffer anybody else sharing their skies. The Legate Balloons were traded for a different sort of vehicle. The sylvan balloons were mostly dismantled and recycled, sewn together to give extra security to the gnomish settlements, which were also repurposed. The peaceful, flying communities changed their name from sky garden to dreadnaught.**

Interesting. I turned my attention to the balloon's occupants.

The sniper gnome was a short, black-bearded creature wearing a dark leather jacket covered in zippers and buckles. These gnomes were shorter even than the bopcas, and I realized they had to be standing on something in order to peer over the edge of the wicker basket. He was the only one not wearing a red, conical hat. He had an old-school, round and black half-style motorcycle helmet on his head. The kind that didn't have a face shield and looked almost like a baseball helmet. My dad had worn something similar.

I had a sudden memory, of my father angry. It was soon after mom had left us, a month before he, in turn, left me to fend for myself. He'd ripped off the helmet and smashed my fish tank, spilling my mollies everywhere. I hadn't cried when my fish died, and I remembered it had bothered me for weeks after. Ever since then, I'd think of my father and those fish whenever I saw one of those helmets. I'd think of those fish flopping on the ground as I desperately tried to pick them up, cutting my fingers on the glass. I'd think of the

pain and blood and of them not surviving, even after I put them in a cup. Whenever I saw a helmet like that, I would think of that day and of remember how easy it was to grow numb and not even realize it. I'd think, *I'm never getting a pet again. All they do is die.*

It felt like the wrong lesson, especially now. But that's what happens, isn't it? The universe shows us how cruel it can be, and we are worse for it.

I looked across the way at Donut, sitting atop Mongo, doing her best to look menacing. *She's not a pet anymore.* Was she better off now? I didn't know.

Henrik remained motionless, looking down. He kept his hand on the shoulder of Wynne, as if he was concerned about the old gnome's condition. It didn't look natural. I prayed they wouldn't notice.

Then I looked up at the *Wasteland*. A war machine that had once been a place where the gnomes could live in peace. I knew this was all a construction. But it was so easy to get caught up in the story. So easy to forget who the true enemy was.

But more importantly, the most difficult part of this, was knowing all that and realizing it didn't matter. Not today. If this went as intended, every gnome on that thing would be dead in ten minutes.

What was it Henrik had said? *Sometimes we do things that are not of our nature to protect our own.*

The sniper gnome held onto a large, metal tube that I first thought was a polearm. I realized it was a launcher of some sort. The barrel on the thing was big enough to stick my fist through. He also wore a bandolier over his shoulder, dotted with round, grenade-like devices.

*That's the one we need to watch,* I thought. The gnome glared back at me, his dark eyes boring into mine.

As I instructed, the archers spread out behind us. Louis remained at the chariot's controls. Firas sat in the back of the cart, directly behind the sitting Henrik. Donut looked nervously over at me as the Negotiator gnome climbed out of the basket and sank knee-deep into the sand. The gnome was wearing an olive-colored uniform shirt, but

it was old and ratty. There was a sizable hole in the left arm. The gnome took two steps toward us and stopped and straightened his back. This one was not armed. His dot on the minimap was white.

I examined his properties.

**Leon. Level 44 Dirigible Gnome Negotiator.**

**Commisar of the *Wasteland*.**

**A master politician and stickler for rules, Leon might have been a tax attorney in another life. Now he lives as the chief political officer aboard the dread-naught *Wasteland*.**

**I'd say he has a stick up his ass, but he's always clenched so tight, there's no way a stick would fit up there.**

"Please," Henrik said to Leon the gnome. "Please call off the bombing. There are children in that town."

I cringed. Katia's impersonation of Henrik's voice was not very good. I hoped they didn't notice.

"We received your message," Leon said, ignoring the appeal. "We will take the Commandant's uncle, but in your message, you said he required a potion. We don't know which potion you mean. Which of you is the healer? Is it you?"

"Me?" I asked. "No." I pointed across the way to Donut. Behind Leon, the sniper gnome leaned forward in the basket.

All eyes turned to Donut. She cleared her throat and used her actress voice. "It is I, Princess Donut the famed healer of Queen Anne! But there's been a misunderstanding, my dear. We already have the potion he needs. My manservant holds it in his hand."

I held up the yellow-green vial.

"What?" Henrik said, looking back and forth between me and Donut. "You said..."

Firas stood, standing behind the still-sitting camel. He pulled a long knife and ran it across the camel's neck. Blood sprayed. Henrik gurgled and slumped over. Firas remained standing there, staring at the knife stupidly.

**Carl: Goddamnit. Stomp his head. Do it fast.**

Firas swallowed and then stomped down a few times onto the robe.

**Carl: Good job. Now sit. Be inconspicuous.**

The gnomes barely reacted. Leon turned his gaze back to Donut.

Donut made a show of licking her paw, pretending to barely notice the murder behind her. “We want passage onto the *Wasteland*. This sand is just awful. In exchange, we will heal Wynne and offer our services. I am a healer, and my crew here are all mechanics. My manservant is a world-renown masseuse.” She leaned forward. “He’s an expert with feet.”

**Carl: Goddamnit, Donut. Stick to the script.**

Leon looked over his shoulder at the sniper who shook his head “no.” I had my eye on the minimap. The moment it turned red, I would jam down on my *Protective Shell* and all hell would break loose. Hopefully it wouldn’t come to that just yet.

“We know your filthy town is infested with changelings,” Leon said, “And it would be just like you to attempt to deceive us. Changelings are like rats, and one does not invite rats into one’s home. Now remove Wynne’s bindings, so I may converse with him. I wish to establish it is really him.”

Donut made a show of looking up at the *Wasteland*, which was still moving toward the town. It’d be directly overhead in twenty minutes. We needed to hurry.

“It’s not my town,” Donut said. “I am not a changeling. Disgusting. Can you imagine? Are you really going to bomb the town?”

“If it’s not your town, then it is of no concern to you. But, yes,” Leon said. “No matter what happens here, we are going to settle this conflict once and for all. It has gone on much too long. And we are going to bomb you, too, if you do not do as I ask.” The gnome looked at the struggling, hooded form of Wynne dubiously. “I am beginning to suspect proof will be difficult for you. I warn you, these pilots and snipers have no love for me. If your plan is to take me hostage, they will not hesitate to kill us all. Now let me look upon him.”

**Carl: How much time left on Wynne?****Donut: SIX MINUTES.**

“I will remove his facial covering, but I’m not removing his bindings,” Donut said. “I don’t know what the silly camels told you, but they talked him into using his magic to resurrect some ghost thing living in the tomb. He is still suffering the ill effects of the spell. Carl, be a dear and unsheathe the patient.”

I reached over and ripped Wynne’s hood off. The zombie, reanimated gnome growled and snapped. The body had been chewed to hell by beetles, but thankfully he’d only been a few hours dead when the tomb raider guys had retrieved the corpse and brought it to Katia. The body was mostly intact. Thankfully, the face was untouched.

Donut leaped off Mongo and landed on Louis’s shoulder. “I am an alchemist and a healer. Like I said, Carl here holds a potion that will heal his affliction. I want you to do whatever you need to determine he’s the real deal. But I’m not stupid, gnome. I’ll give the potion to restore him once we’re on the balloon and on our way to the protection of your village.”

I held my breath. Before he’d been killed, Wynne was a class called a Flesh Mechanic. According to Mordecai, the type of spell he cast was famously difficult on the caster. Had Wynne temporarily given flesh to Quetzalcoatlus, he would indeed be in a zombie-like state for a short duration. He would heal on his own, but I was pretending not to know that part.

“There are too many of you,” Leon said. “We can only take you and Wynne. Any more, and it’ll be too much weight.” He held out his hands apologetically.

Donut scoffed. Above us, the line of airplanes continued to circle. She waved at me. “I will take my manservant, or there is no deal. Besides, who’s going to carry him? Me? Surely you jest.”

“Very well,” he said after a moment. He peered suspiciously at the archers.

“But,” Donut added, “Once your favored uncle is returned safe and sound, you’ll dispatch balloons to retrieve the others.”

Leon smiled wickedly. “He’s no uncle of mine, but of Commandant Kane. However, this is acceptable. Forgive me for appearing mistrustful, but first I must cast a spell. It will require me to touch him and a random sampling of your men.” Behind Leon, the sniper gnome leaned even further forward. The wicker basket creaked. He pulled up the weapon and pointed it directly at Donut. Zombie Wynne snapped and growled.

“No funny stuff,” the sniper called to Donut. “If we gotta fight our way out of here, you’re getting the first chest hole.”

“And you’ll get the second,” I called back to the sniper.

“There’s no need for such talk,” Leon said. “Surely this... dog creature... would never be stupid enough to attempt to trick us. There would be no purpose.”

“*Excuse me?*” Donut started to say, but I sent her a quick message to be calm. To stay on script.

The sniper grinned at Donut’s outrage, revealing a row of sharp teeth.

**Carl: If this goes sideways, Katia and Donut focus on the sniper. I have the ambassador guy. Langley, you guys get the pilot before he can retreat. Fire then scatter. Meet up at the ruins of the Bactrian town.**

Donut took a breath and calmed herself. “Do whatever you need to do, but be careful of the old gnome. He’s a bit cranky. He might try to take a nip.”

“I, unfortunately, have no control over him. But I am familiar with Wynne’s post-spell stupors.” Leon waded forward through the sand. Mongo growled, so the gnome moved to the Chariot’s port side.

He paused in front of Louis and bade him to lean forward.

“I will cast a spell on you that will detect if you are a changeling,” the gnome said. “If you attack me, you will die.”

I told Louis to comply, and the gnome touched the man’s forehead. A blue light burst into the air. He repeated it with Donut. He then insisted on doing the same to me. I went to a knee, allowing the perfume-smelling man to touch my head. The perfume was covering



a deep, dirty stench I realized when he was up close. I knew that smell. It was the stench of a man who'd been rationed a gallon a week to shower with. *They're in trouble. Their ship is floundering.*

I felt a tingle, and there was another blue flash. That was it.

He nodded and then approached the bound hostage. He raised his hand, but he couldn't reach the tall seat.

I laughed, trying to cover my frustration. Donut's *Second Chance* spell normally only allowed her to resurrect any creature up to ten levels above her own. At the spell's current level of ten, it also normally resurrected the creatures for up to fifteen minutes. But thanks to her glass cannon class, the spell was remarkably more powerful. It now allowed her to resurrect any corpse up to twenty levels above her own, and for half of an hour. Donut was currently level 33, and Wynne had been 50. Still, the spell was about to run out. We'd cast it too early. I was afraid that they would use a farseer to examine him before they sent the ambassador, and if they saw he was dead, they would've simply bombed us to hell. Him being undead was barely better, but Mordecai seemed to think it would work. He insisted there were a lot of quests that involved raising key NPCs from the dead in order to trick the living. It was almost a trope. Either way, the spell was going to run out in two minutes.

"Do you want me to give you a boost?" I asked Leon.

The gnome glowered at me as he pulled himself up the side of the cart. Zombie Wynne snapped and thrashed as Leon placed his hand against the creature's forehead. He tried to bite the gnome's finger.

**Carl: Keep him calm!**

**Donut: I'VE NEVER RESURRECTED JUST A HEAD BEFORE, CARL. OR SOMEONE THIS HIGH OF A LEVEL. THEY'RE A LOT MORE SURLY WHEN THEY'RE JUST HEADS. AND I'M THE ONE DOING ALL THE TALKING. MAYBE NEXT TIME YOU CAN RESURRECT THE DEAD, HALF-EATEN CORPSE**

## **YOURSELF WHEN YOU COME UP WITH A SUICIDAL PLAN.**

We all held our collective breaths. I had no idea if this would work. The spell supposedly only detected changelings. If it was anything else, we'd be screwed.

Luckily for us, Leon was literally leaning up against Katia, who was disguised as the chair—amongst other things. One word from me, and she'd suck him into her mass.

A blue light pulsed. I let go of my breath.

“Well, he's no changeling,” Leon said. He continued to peer suspiciously at the reanimated gnome. “But this is not a healing stupor. I have never seen anything like it.” He sniffed. “This is much worse than usual. He appears to be a ghoul.”

“The camels made him resurrect an ancient ghost,” Donut said. She indicated the potion, still in my hand. “Like I said, I can heal him. The camels did not understand what they were doing. I don't think he knew, either. They were drugging him with mushrooms.”

Leon regarded the vial in my hand. “What is the potion anyway?”

Donut didn't hesitate. “Healer's Respite. Stichberries boiled with iron slivers and manticore shavings.”

Leon nodded thoughtfully. “That is not something we would have. That might work. If it doesn't, you'll wish we'd left you on the ground.”

The potion was actually a vial of Mountain Dew I'd gotten from a saferoom on the second floor, but Mordecai said the coloring was the closest of all the ones we had. We had no idea if this ambassador guy would buy this line of bullshit, but we'd made sure that Donut could at least pretend to know what she was talking about. I'd made her repeat the ingredients three times as we'd walked over here.

“The Dromedarians would never attempt to resurrect their old slavemasters,” Leon continued, stepping down from the side of the chariot before moving to the back cart and toward Henrik's “corpse.”

**Firas: What's he doing? What's he doing?**

**Carl: Chill. We anticipated this.**

Leon first did his changeling check on Firas before he moved to the body of Henrik and started rummaging through the remains.

As he did this, just behind him, the *Second Chance* spell timed out, causing Wynne's head to disintegrate into a cloud of dust. *Shit, shit.*

**Carl: Katia.****Katia: I'm on it.**

Nobody seemed to notice the new head grow into place. The sniper only had his eyes on Donut, and Leon was bent over, rifling through Henrik's robes and pack. He pulled back the clothes to reveal the dead body of Svern the changeling principal, the one we'd killed in the town hall. I'd kept the corpse because Mordecai had wanted to get some goo from his brain. The body was pretty beat up, especially the head, which was why I'd had Firas pretend to stomp down on the empty robe.

"The town's leadership must have been usurped by the changelings," Leon said, sounding disgusted. "I should have tested him, too." He looked up and shouted at the sniper. "He doesn't have it on him."

"That's going to be a problem," the sniper said. "What're we doing?"

"Are you looking for this?" I asked, holding up the watch. I'd made the facsimile from memory at my bench, only spending a quick thirty seconds to shape the thing. It'd been a last-minute hunch. I'd asked Henrik where the watch came from, and he claimed he hadn't known, though I sensed he was being sketchy about it, which made me wonder how important it was. The prop would not pass a quick inspection, so I quickly put it away. "The Princess had me slip it out of his pocket as we were leaving town. It'll be yours once you guys pick up our crew and bring them up there with the Princess."

"As you can see, I only hire the most qualified servants," Donut added.

Leon's demeanor relaxed. "Good, good. At least we don't have to go searching through the town's remains looking for it."

"So does that mean we have a deal?" Donut asked.

I looked up at the massive, floating structure. It appeared to be lowering its altitude. From this angle, it almost looked like a rusting, flying oil rig. Fifteen minutes.

"Very well," Leon said. "We have a deal. Have your man take Wynne and bring him to the basket. But I must insist you give Wynne the respite now before we go. I can't bring him in such a state onto the *Wasteland*. The Commandant will not be pleased if his uncle tries to eat him."

"Okay, but the potion will take a few minutes to work."

"As long as it works before we arrive. Otherwise, we'll throw you all over the edge."

"Carl, administer the medicine."

I took the vial of Mountain Dew, yanked the cork, and poured it down the throat of the Wynne. I suppressed a grin as he gagged.

**Carl: Sorry.**

**Katia: Holy shit who can drink this bile.**

Donut made a show of putting Mongo back into his carrier. The dinosaur screeched and put up a fight, hissing and complaining and kicking up dust, causing Leon to back away with alarm. But eventually she got him. Donut then leaped onto my shoulder as I picked up the duct-taped form of Wynne and threw him over my other shoulder. We trudged toward the wicker basket. As we marched, I prayed none of the gnomes would notice that the entire back seat of the Chariot was now gone. Or that Wynne, even though he was thoroughly wrapped in duct tape, was about two feet longer than he should be. I kept most of the bulk behind me.

**Carl: Okay guys. Follow Langley's lead. All of you be ready. Firas will puddle jump you out of there if necessary. Louis, you're in charge of the chariot. We're counting on you guys. Those planes have missiles on**

**them, so we will need your ground support. I have confidence in you guys.**

**Louis: You know a plan is really desperate when it requires confidence in people like us.**

**Firas: Shut the hell up, Louis. He's trying to build our self-confidence.**

THIS IS THE MESSAGE I HAD HENRIK SHOW TO COMMANDANT Kane:

*Wynne is incapacitated, and we are returning him to you. He cast a resurrection spell on our behalf and became gravely ill. A traveling healer has offered to help him, but this healer now reports only a potion you might have will revive your uncle. In a show of good faith, this healer, their party, and I will travel outside of the city walls in one hour and will bring Wynne to you. There, this healer will tell you how to save your uncle's life. I will accompany them and offer myself as tribute. I hope and pray we can negotiate a peace that will save our town from your wrath.*

The real Henrik remained in town, standing amongst the defenders, waiting for death to rain.

The bulk of this plan, once again, rested on Donut's charm bonus and Katia's shapeshifting skills. Not only was Katia shaped as the entire back seat of the Chariot—which I'd been forced to remove for this to work—but she also played the "body" of Wynne the gnome sitting atop it. Her real eyes were in there, mixed in with the duct tape, giving her a wide, raised view of the situation.

But it hadn't ended there. Katia was playing triple duty. She was also the body of Henrik, sitting in the cart directly behind the chair. He was connected to the rest of the mass using the camel's arm, which was designed to look like it was draped over the seat. The front part of the dromedarian/changeling's neck had been a bag of actual ghoul blood I had in my inventory. That was a last-minute addition to make Firas's throat-cutting ploy seem more authentic.

The robe and backpack and everything else was real.

When Firas cut the changeling's neck, Katia had pulled the mass associated with the changeling, causing the Henrik form to disappear. The robes and pack fell, landing upon the changeling corpse already there in the cart, previously hidden by the fake dromedarian body. When Leon the ambassador investigated, it looked as if the changeling corpse had been Henrik the whole time.

She had pulled it all off. I couldn't believe it.

I reflected on this as I climbed into the wicker basket of the *Vahana*, Katia dangling over my left shoulder and Donut sitting upon my right.

The sniper's name was Crixus. The pilot was Hicks. They went to work as Leon barked orders. I kept one eye on the pilot, trying to commit the controls to memory.

"It is good timing," Leon said as I eased Wynne/Katia to the floor. "We will have a spectacular view of the death of the final settlement of Anser." He seemed almost giddy.

Donut leaped from my shoulder and landed on the edge of the basket, looking down, eyes wide. "Carl, look! We're rising into the air."

I felt my stomach lurch as the hot blast of air from above hit me. I grabbed a line with my hand. I twisted my arm around a few times to secure myself. "Christ, Donut. Be careful."

Below me, the form of Wynne was curled up to hide her extra height. Adding mass was easy, but making her smaller, especially when we wanted to keep her battle ready, wasn't so simple. We rose into the air quickly. The timing was important here. We needed to be

high enough where we could take our shot, but we also needed to take all the escort planes out of commission.

The countdown timer for the bombing was at seven minutes. We rose quickly into the air. We passed the escorts, who were covering our retreat. *Good, good.*

“He’s looking better already,” Leon said, leaning down to look upon Wynne.

Katia grunted. I’d warned her against talking. She’d done her best with Henrik’s voice, but it’d been barely passable. I didn’t want to risk it up close.

“What do you mean by ‘the final settlement of Anser?’” I asked, changing the subject. “Isn’t that the guy buried in the tomb?”

It was Crixus the sniper who answered. “The bactrians and the dromedarians were the slaves who built the tomb. Anser came and subjugated them along with the glabers and forced them to their knees.” He spit over the edge. “The camels, supposed great fighters, were the first to fall. They were complicit in the horror Anser and his people brought to this world. They are filth and deserve to be destroyed. Once they are gone, this world will be better for it. That will leave us with only one last task before we can leave these lands and have peace.”

“What’s that?” I asked. We continued to rise rapidly into the air. *Closer, closer.* The gnomish pilot turned a wheel, and the balloon started angling north, on a vector to intercept with the *Wasteland*.

“The mad mage,” Crixus said. “He’s the most dangerous of them all. He doesn’t just wish to steal the gate. He wishes to *understand* it. To *replicate* it. He has grown mad in his pursuit, and we fear the damage he might do if he is not stopped.”

“Wait,” I asked. “Does this mage guy have the artifact?”

Crixus and Leon exchanged a look. A small grin played across Crixus’s face.

“He only has a third of it.”

I wanted to ask more, but we were running out of time. I peered over the edge of the basket. I kept my eye on the altitude indicator in



my vision. We'd risen almost 300 meters, which I mentally converted to almost a thousand feet off the tomb. The escorts were now well below us, but rising slowly with the ship. I guessed the highest of them to be about 800 feet up, which was already pushing the limit.

**Carl: Ready, Donut and Katia?**

The cat remained on the edge of the basket, claws dug deep into the wicker.

**Donut: I AM READY.**

**Katia: Ready. Donut, make sure I'm secure before you do it. It's a long drop.**

**Carl: Langley. Weapons free.**

**Langley: Firing now.**

A moment later, eight rockets corkscrewed up into the air from the surface. These were all single-stage rockets, hastily built, but with Mordecai's new and improved accelerant. All six archers plus Louis and Firas had a single launcher tube in their inventory. Each had two missiles. While Leon and the balloon were on the ground, Langley had doled out targets to everyone, and they'd used the surefire aiming system to lock the missiles onto each of the circling escort planes and balloons. Even before the first salvo hit, four more missiles blasted in the air, targeting the remaining planes.

Crixus reacted quickly. He shouted, and suddenly all of their dots were red. I was expecting him to swing his large gun like a club. Instead, he dropped it and grasped at one of the grenade balls at his chest. At the same moment, I clutched tightly onto the rope of the balloon as I dropped a smoke curtain. Two Katia spikes burst forth from the duct-taped bundle, each piercing the wicker basket. They grew taut, anchoring her in place just as Donut cast *Hole* on the bottom of the basket, right underneath all of us.

Donut had been practicing with the spell and could now widen the area of effect to a diameter of a meter and a half. It lowered the thickness of the hole, but that wasn't an issue here, especially with her magic enhanced. The large hole wasn't quite big enough to cover the entire basket, but it was close enough.

The three gnomes dropped away just as Crixus attempted to toss the grenade ball at me. All three gnomes had a look of astonishment on their faces as they plummeted, falling along with the smoke bomb. The grenade ball—whatever it was—flew wide, rushing over my shoulder as I pulled my feet up, resting it on the bench.

At the last moment, Leon grasped onto the edge of the hole. He started to pull himself up. I prepared to intercept him just as an ethereal, magical cat paw appeared and pushed against his head, knocking him off the edge. He screamed as he disappeared.

The hole remained open just long enough for us to have a bird's eye view of the first plane to explode.

The basket pitched with more explosions as rockets found their targets. I held on for dear life as I looked for still-alive planes. I locked my xistera into place while Katia pulled the crossbow.

"Wow," Donut said, peering over the edge. "They're still falling. Nope, not anymore." She did a little jump on the edge of the basket that almost gave me a heart attack. "Level 34! Carl, I got a lot of experience for that!"

"Jesus, Donut. Get off the goddamned edge."

"Really, Carl. I'm a cat. A master of balance. Whoa!"

She slipped, but thankfully she fell inward. I didn't have time to scold her. All the planes had gone down, but three balloons remained, moving up toward us. They rose rapidly. I couldn't see the drivers from this angle, but these were smaller balloons. All three were different. One was blimp-shaped, one was a perfectly-round balloon painted jet black, and the third was three balloons tied together. This one also had a square-rigged sail, like on an old-school brigantine boat.

Katia fired a few bolts at the closest airship, the one with the oblong, dirigible shape. The bolts had no effect on the balloons. I tossed a banger sphere. It bounced right off the balloon. I switched to hob lobbbers, using my xistera to drive the round balls deep into the balloons. The balloon dimpled and detonated, but it did not tear. The net around the balloon caught on fire.

**Langley: I think they're out of range, but do you want us to try our last missiles on those balloons?**

**Carl: No. Good job, guys. Get out of there.**

We had five minutes before the bombs would fall. We were out of time.

I yanked a can of gasoline from my inventory. I'd gotten this long, long ago, way back on the first floor from the goblins. I unscrewed the top and tossed it over the edge, aiming for the balloon with the flaming net. The balloon burst into flames and started spinning away, trailing black smoke.

*Crack.* Something flew through the air at us from that third balloon, the one with the sail. I spied the sniper on the deck, leaning over the edge and aiming his wide-bore rifle directly up at us. This guy was similar to Crixus, though he wore the red hat. I watched as he pulled one of the round grenade things off his chest and loaded it into the rifle. *What the hell are those things?* He aimed to fire again, but he fell back as Katia bullseyed him with a bolt.

"Critical hit!" Katia said.

The sniper was dead, but the balloon kept rising. "Keep them back," I called as I moved to the *Vahana's* controls. I yanked on the pull for the fire source, and we jerked upward. Heat washed over my face, unbearably hot. I suddenly thought of Fire Brandy, the demon who'd killed herself on the last floor.

I checked our altitude. We were pushing 500 meters, still angling north. The *Wasteland* was directly ahead of us. It had lowered itself to about two and a half kilometers off the tomb's surface. We were now at the very edge of the missiles' range. I wanted to get closer, but we simply didn't have time.

I intended to yank my farseer out of the inventory, but I spied one already attached to the side of the fire control mechanism. I grasped it and turned it upward.

The bottom of the *Wasteland* was crawling with bungee-corded and harnessed gnomes preparing for the bombardment. They didn't drop the bombs from bomb bays, but simply cut the chains and let

gravity do the rest. While they only had a few of the fuel-air, city-killing Knock-Knocks left on the airship's underbelly, there were dozens of round, smaller-yield bombs hanging there like water droplets. These had to be manually armed by the gnomes before they were dropped, and that was what they were doing now.

I had eight guided missiles and four more unguided ones in my inventory. All twelve of them were pre-loaded into four-pack launchers. Of the eight guided missiles, I'd already assigned four of them to the few Knock-Knocks I'd spied on the underside right after sunrise.

Our quick ascent suddenly stalled.

"Let's see how you like this!" Donut cried. I looked over in time to see two clockwork Mongos jump off the edge of the basket, screeching. She'd been forced to release the real Mongo in order to create the clockwork versions. Mongo was crying in fear at our height. We bobbed up and down with the changing weight on the basket.

"Whoa," Katia said. "Holy cow, Donut. That worked better than I thought it would."

Donut continued to peer over the edge at the last balloon.

"Level 35!" she suddenly cried.

The round balloon rushed past us, continuing its upward trajectory. The balloon remained intact, but the basket was a bloody mess, hanging by a single line. The interior of the basket dripped with gore. A single clockwork Mongo screeched in greeting from the bloody basket as it passed.

She looked back at Mongo. "Your brothers are getting really good at this." Mongo screeched worriedly as our own basket rocked.

"Watch out," Katia yelled, pointing upward. "Donut, get Mongo into his carrier. Fast. Carl, you better fire."

Someone aboard the *Wasteland* had finally noticed that the *Vahana* had been hijacked. One of the structures on the edge of the massive airship rotated, revealing itself to be a battery of cannons. It looked remarkably like a bundle of about 100 of the sniper rifles. It

was aiming right at us. I could see the tip of a little red hat atop the battery as it moved in our direction

“Hold on guys,” I yelled as I pulled the multi-launcher from my inventory. I rested the heavy, already-loaded mechanism on the edge of the basket. “Fire in the hole!”

“Wait, wait!” Donut cried. “Mongo, get in your carrier!” The dinosaur refused, backing away, crying.

Three minutes until the bombs dropped. It’d take ten to twenty seconds for the missiles to reach their destination.

*Jesus, we’re already too late. The town is fucked if that thing falls on it, with or without bombs.*

“Mongo, get in the fucking box!” I yelled.

The dinosaur screeched and complied, zapping away just as the battery on the *Wasteland* fired at us. We lurched upward with the loss of Mongo’s weight. The *Wasteland* defensive battery belched with the staccato the sound of a thousand rifles going off at once. A plume of smoke rose into the air as I fired off the first four missiles. I spun the sidewheel, and the balloon skirted to the side.

The outgoing missiles and the hundred incoming projectiles passed each other in the air. I winced as all four of my missiles detonated prematurely. Experience notifications flew. I slammed down on *Protective Shell* just as the round balls smashed at us. My timing was perfect. The static shield quickly flew away as we continued to rise. Blood misted in the air under us. *They’re shooting living creatures.* Fucking hell.

“Get ready to jump,” I cried, tossing the used launcher over the edge. I pulled the second four-missile launcher. These weren’t assigned. I targeted the battery and three bombs on the underside. I aimed downward so the missiles wouldn’t cross paths with the projectiles again, and I launched just as the airship’s gun battery fired a second time.

“Jump,” I cried.

All three of us leaped from the edge of the wicker basket just as the dozens of round balls smashed into it. I heard an enraged,

screeching noise from above just before the entire world to the north exploded in a ball of white, hot fire.

Wind rushed past. It was all I could hear. I tumbled and flipped through the air, desperately searching the sky for a point of reference. I was no physics guy, but I knew we had less time than we thought. The ground would come fast. I forced myself to ignore the spinning world outside and focused on the altitude and speed indicators in my vision.

**Donut: CARL, CARL, HELP I DON'T REMEMBER WHEN TO DRINK IT.**

**Carl: Now!**

The potion was called Dolores Doesn't Splat.

When Mordecai had said, "You're not going to like it," he was not kidding.

He said it had been devised by a crocodilian crawler alchemist a long time ago while she was falling. As the legend went, this was a much-deeper pit that took almost ten minutes for her to reach the bottom. This happened during an early crawl. Something even before Odette's time. The event had become infamous and had resulted in multiple rule changes regarding the creation and brewing of potions. It was actually two potions combined. The first was something involving the breeding of rock buffalos. The second was a potion that closely mimicked Katia's Crowd Blast ability. It was designed to add extra power to an Earthquake-style attack. The only caveat was that you had to be falling at a speed greater than 200 kilometers an hour when you drank it.

When Katia cast her Crowd Blast, she was temporarily invulnerable for that fraction of a moment. She still felt pain. Things in her body still crunched and hurt. But the damage wasn't permanent or lasting.

When each of us drank the Dolores Doesn't Splat potion, it had the following effects:

First, we actually sped up. Our five seconds to impact turned to two seconds. And when each of us hit the ground, our bodies

temporarily softened the surface we were hitting, allowing us to penetrate deeper than normal. This had the effect of vaporizing the sand dunes we were hitting, and in Donut's case, utterly demolishing the thorny devil mob she rocketed into.

In order to impregnate an in-heat rock buffalo, it was required for the male buffalo to penetrate his lady love five times in rapid succession. I could have gone my entire life without knowing that random fact. Unfortunately for me, Katia, and Donut, this little quirk of rock monster husbandry was now something I would never, ever forget.

We each slammed the ground with the force of a meteor, rose up fifteen feet into the air, and slammed it again. And again. Rock shattered under our bodies. We did this five times. By the time we were done, I rolled onto my back, gasping. It felt as if I'd been stepped on by Grull all over again. The air had all been knocked out of me. *No wonder Katia hates that ability so much.*

I felt a strange, flowing sensation around me. *I'm still falling.* But no, that wasn't right. It was sand, I realized, rushing past me and into the necropolis below. I pulled myself to my feet, my entire body protesting. I didn't need a health potion, but I felt as if I did. I stared dumbly downward at my feet. I was literally walking on air.

I'd hit the top of the temple, and I'd broken through, demolishing a section of the necropolis roof. Because I wasn't yet allowed out of the quadrant, the quadrant border was keeping me from falling further. I was standing atop the barrier. The sand all around me had no such restrictions, and it continued to fall into the dark hole.

**Katia: Are you guys okay?**

To my left, I could hear Donut bitching as she pulled herself out of her hole. Not too far away, a loud explosion rocked the world.

Only then did I look to the smoke-filled sky. But before I could see, a notification appeared.

The notification sounded oddly disappointed. I wasn't certain why.

**Quest Complete. Squeeze out the Juice Box.**

**So, if we're being technical here, you "won" the**

**quest. You “saved” Hump Town from the bombardment. Congratulations. If I was allowed to upgrade your prize, I would. Maybe. I dunno. Actually, you know what? No. No I wouldn’t. Fuck you.**

***Reward: You’ve received a Platinum Quest Box!***

I pulled myself out of the hole just as another portion of the airship crashed. The massive chunk of metal exploded off the edge of the bowl, half of it cascading down the side of the ridge, the other half falling away and toward the land quadrant. The sky was just a black cloud, and I could not see how much of it we’d gotten. Black, flaming fireflies of debris fell like rain.

**Gwen: Holy hell, what is going on up there? First the ocean half drains all away, and now the sky is on fire.**

I turned my attention to Hump Town, which was only a quarter of a mile away. To my relief, the town was mostly intact. Mostly. A huge chunk of something had landed onto the west end of town, close to where the Toe was located. Part of the wall had collapsed. The sail that covered the town was torn in multiple places. The smoke from a hundred fires rose into the air. As I watched, the anti-aircraft guns in one of the towers fired at an airplane that had managed to separate from the dreadnaught. The airplane banked away and disappeared into the smoke.

Katia and Donut approached. Donut rode the back of Mongo who was snapping at the flying embers.

We wordlessly looked up at the sky, waiting for the smoke to clear. The sound of at least a dozen airplanes continued to rip through the air, so we knew something was still up there. A huge hunk of debris, trailed by an enormous, half-deflated balloon, crashed far to the south. The ground rocked.

“That was one of the main balloons,” Katia said.

I pulled the farseer and tried to see through the clouds. Finally, the smoke dissipated long enough for me to get a good view.

“Hello there,” I said to the undefended building, no bigger than a regular house. It hung, attached to a single balloon, which had



risen all the way to the ceiling of the bubble. The sight reminded me of that Pixar movie with the kid and the old dude in the flying house.

“Well, we didn’t get the castle. But we broke all the armor off it.”

The balloon continued to move north, past the edge of the bowl’s ridge. I zoomed tighter, focusing on the gnome standing at the building’s doorway. It wasn’t Commandant Kane, but a young woman. Actually, a child. Probably about ten years old. She stood holding a farseer and was looking in my direction. I raised my hand to wave. She turned her back and went back into the house. In the short moment the door was open, I saw another gnome. This was the Commandant. It looked like it was just him and his daughter.

“We can hit it with another missile after it flies over the bowl,” Katia said. “That’ll drop the stairwell to the surface.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But I think I want to get up there and take it the old-fashioned way.”

“Why?” She still had duct tape all up and down her body, neatly cut along the edges. She’d devised a little, traveling knife that popped out of her own skin, allowing her to free herself in seconds.

I pulled the fake pocket watch from my inventory and tossed it to her. “Henrik has one, Commandant Kane has one, and I’m pretty sure there’s a third, and the Mad Dune Mage guy has it. If that’s the case, I think all three of the watches come together somehow to make that artifact. The Gate of the Feral Gods.”

“You don’t even know what it does,” she said.

“I know it’s a celestial-equivalent item,” I said. “And it shouldn’t be available this early. They don’t put this stuff in here to be ignored. I want it. First we’re going to take the watch from Henrik, then we’re going to get to that castle, take the throne room and take the watch from Kane, and then we’re going to get the third and final piece from the mage.”

She looked at me dubiously. “You know we just barely survived this, right?”

“Carl, Carl, I just got my benefactor box!” Donut said. “Also, I

went up yet another level to 36. I think we might've killed a lot of gnomes."

"We did," I said, looking in the direction of the last bit of the *Wasteland*, barely holding onto life. I couldn't see it with my naked eye, but I sensed it there. I'd gone up two levels to 43, and I was on the precipice of 44. I wondered just how many gnomes we'd just killed.

**Zev: Hey guys! Wow, that was fantastic. Great job. Your social numbers are looking great!**

**Donut: ZEV! OH MY GOD I MISSED YOU! WHEN CAN I SEE YOU?**

**Zev: Sorry, Crawler Donut. I'm just your social media manager now. I will be able to give you tips on how the audience is feeling, but Administrator Loita is now in charge of all public appearances. You are not able to message me directly unless I open the chat.**

**Donut: ARE YOU OKAY?**

**Zev: I've never been better. Thank you for your concern, Donut. Carl, the audience is noting that you're being short with the other crawlers. By short, I mean extra angry. You might wish to tone that down a bit. Katia, your numbers are rising steadily. Good job. Donut, people want more Mongo action. You're keeping him cooped up too much. Plus you haven't used your new spells yet except once. When you get new loot, people expect you to use it.**

Donut looked up at me, concern etched on her face.

**Donut: OKAY WE WILL. WHY CAN'T I MESSAGE YOU?**

**Zev: It's not necessary, crawler. Don't worry, I will let you know if there are any additional areas of concern. Now get back out there and kill, kill, kill!**

INSTEAD OF MEETING UP WITH THE OTHERS IN THE BACTRIAN ruins, we limped our way back to Hump Town. Above, dozens of airplanes and airships continued to angrily harass the air defenses of the city, but without the threat of high-altitude bombardment, the multiple anti-air guns were equal to the task. The gnomes were on borrowed time. Some were already landing on the far side of the bowl. I noted that several were flying up and above the lip of the bowl and then disappearing, presumably to seek a landing spot somewhere on the land quadrant. I sent a warning to Gwen.

Without protection and shelter, the surviving gnomes would be hard-pressed to make it through the next day. Something told me we hadn't seen the last of them just yet.

Donut was worried about Zev, and it was doubly frustrating, I knew, because she couldn't talk about it. Not out loud and not over chat. I reached over and stroked her back. Her entire body was stiff.

I flipped through my achievements as we trudged back to town. Despite everything we'd done, I hadn't received much. There was only one achievement of note:

**New Achievement! Cannonball!**

**You fell from a great height, and you survived! You know who else fell from a...? You know what, never mind. Fuck you.**

**Reward: You've received a Silver Skydiver's Box! Not that you deserve it you little punk.**

The system AI was always fluctuating back and forth from adoring to outright hostile, but this was the moodiest I'd ever seen, and I didn't know why. Sure, the thing was bipolar at best and psychotic the rest of the time, but ever since we'd blown the *Wasteland* to hell there was just something off with it.

That was not good.

As we approached the gates of Hump Town, keeping our heads low to avoid detection from the airplanes, we started to notice multiple X's on the map. These were gnomes who'd fallen from the *Wasteland* when it had broken up. Most of them exploded like tomatoes upon impact, but a few here and there were intact enough that we could loot their bodies. Most didn't have much on them. Donut was going around collecting their little red hats. I picked up a few intact bodies to add to my ever-growing graveyard. I looted some tools, lots of broken hunks of metal and cogs and springs, plus the odd gold coin and little bits of unenchanted armor here and there.

All of them said the same thing. **Dirigible Gnome Corpse – Killed by falling from a great height with an assist by the Crawler Bitch Boy Carl.**

"What did you do?" Katia asked. "I'm starting to get more than a little worried about this."

"I don't know," I said, "but hopefully it gets over it soon." I looked up into the air. "I don't know what I did, but I promise it wasn't on purpose."

"This is just like with you and Miss Beatrice," Donut said. "Do you remember that time she made you sleep on the couch for a week and wouldn't tell you why she was mad?"

"I do remember," I said. I shrugged. "I think it was because I'd

bought the wrong type of coffee pods. I ended up beating *Fallout* because of it.”

Donut laughed. “It was because she’d read an article that said big fights make relationships stronger, and sometimes they cause guys to propose.”

Katia shook her head. “That does not sound healthy. Not that I’m one to judge.”

We came across a group of three intact corpses, all gnomish snipers. All three had their giant rifles with them, but only one of the weapons wasn’t broken. They all also wore the bandoliers over their shoulders. The little balls on all the bandoliers were gone except on one gnome who’d landed on his back. His was still unbroken with five grenade balls. Donut jumped forward, looted the good rifle along with their little red hats. She made a face, and then she looted the good bandolier.

“Carl,” Donut said a moment later. “I believe I figured it out. It appears you have given the system AI a case of... what is the term? Oh yes, I believe it is called ‘blue balls.’”

“What? What do you mean?”

She dropped the bandolier at my feet, and I picked it up.

I examined one of the fist-sized grenade balls. I was confused for a moment, but then I finally understood.

### **Live Ammo Ball.**

**Live ammo balls are a common and versatile ranged weapon of the Dirigible Gnomes. These round, clamshell spheres are designed to be fired great distances using a gnomish Tickle Stick, or they may be manually lobbed like a grenade. They are also fired in large clusters from anti-aircraft point defense batteries. Just be glad you’re not in charge of cleaning up *that* mess.**

**A living, usually angry, creature is placed inside the ball, and the ball opens upon impact with the target.**

**The stasis field keeps the creature within safe from injury until the ball is opened.**

**These balls are similar in technology to pet carriers. As such, any mobs stored within are able to be placed within one's inventory. Balls may be recycled if the mechanism doesn't break upon impact. They usually break upon impact.**

**This ball contains:**

**Frenzied Gerbil. Level 11.**

I groaned. Every single ball contained the same thing. A goddamned frenzied gerbil.

During that last battle, there were multiple instances when I'd almost been hit with one of these balls. First, Crixus the sniper had thrown one at me, but it missed and sailed over the edge. Then a sniper from one of the other airships had fired and missed. And then the *Wasteland* had blasted a hundred of them at us. Each time, the balls had overflowed their mark.

I remembered Ralph, the boss from the second floor. He was also a frenzied gerbil. It was right before we'd found Mongo in that prize room. The system AI had been particularly... excited about how I had killed the creature.

"Fuck me," I said as I fully realized what was going on.

The AI had wanted me to get hit with the gerbil ball. It wanted me to fight one. It wanted me to kill it by smushing it with my foot. I looked at the five balls hanging off the belt like fist-sized Christmas ornaments. I swallowed. *Go ahead, I thought. Drop one on the ground. They're only level 11. Easy to kill on their own.* I suddenly felt dirty, and I hadn't even done anything yet.

*No, I thought. Fuck you.* There was only so much a person could take.

I became aware that Donut was loudly explaining to Katia what was going on, since our boss battle with Ralph had been before we'd met up with her.

"...And after he squished down on poor Ralph with his foot, the

whole dungeon shook like Carl used to after he went on that website that gave his computer a virus. And we'd received a prize room after that, and that's where we found Mongo. Right, Mongo?"

Mongo waved his arms and screeched in agreement.

"The dungeon did the same thing when Carl got stomped on by Grull," Katia said. She appeared to be half amused, half horrified.

"Oh that was nothing compared to the first time. You know, I always thought its infatuation with our Carl was a good thing," Donut said, "but if the AI is going to throw a temper tantrum every time Carl doesn't wrap his tootsies around a furry little creature, it's going to be a problem. Carl, we should start stocking up on squish-sized creatures so you can sacrifice one every morning. At least now we have a five-pack of gerbils. Maybe you should do two at the same time. You know, to make sure everyone is back to being happy with one another again. It'd be almost like having a threesome. On *Gossip Girl*, there was this one episode where Dan and..."

"No," I said, interrupting. "No fucking way. Fuck the consequences. I am absolutely not going..."

"Guys," Katia said. "We have incoming. A lot of incoming."

I looked up at the map just as the red wave of dots appeared. There were thousands of them. Where had they come from?

"They're gerbils," Donut said, her voice in awe. "Wow. That's a lot of them."

"Goddamnit," I said. "Goddamnit to hell." I realized what had happened. With all the gnomish snipers and *Wasteland* chunks raining from the sky, there were likely hundreds, if not thousands, of those ammo balls up there. They were designed to survive heavy impacts. *Holy shit they're moving fast.* They'd likely all been released and then found each other. Now that they'd regrouped, they were coming in hot.

"Carl," said Donut, "I don't think your friend up in the sky is going to take 'no' for an answer."

"Fuck me," I said as we rushed toward the main gate.

“Carl, they’re cheating!” Donut cried after ten solid minutes of fighting. A gerbil launched itself at me, and I cried out as it attached itself to my neck. I grasped it with my gauntlet and squeezed before it could burrow. It exploded in my hand. “They keep coming and coming.”

Donut cast *Wall of Fire* just as the next wave of gerbils shot at our defensive line. That ended up being a mistake.

The little bastards could launch themselves through the air, and when they passed through Donut’s magical fire, they ignited, turning into miniature, gnashing fireballs. The fire killed the attackers, eventually, but not before they attached to the chests of the camel defenders, catching them on fire in the process.

We’d been pushed all the way back to the entrance of Weird Shit Alley. The town’s walls had too many holes to properly defend, so we’d run through the main gates, screaming for the defenders to fall back. There were just too many of them. Even though the screeching little fuckers were only level 11, they could burrow themselves straight into flesh and eat their way out through to the other side.

The dromedarians were forced to abandon their anti-air guns to meet the creatures. But the things never stopped coming. All around us, camels fought and fell.

Katia converted to her tank form with the shield on her arm and her crossbow over her head while I tossed hob-lobbers into the street using my xistera, killing dozens of them at a time. Mongo and two clockwork versions roared and snapped and crunched on the gerbils. A camel fired a rocket into the carpet of monsters only to be overwhelmed a moment later.

“Don’t swallow them whole,” I warned Mongo. I remembered a danger dingo had done that once, and it hadn’t ended well for the dingo.

I punched then punted another gerbil. I had to be careful with the timing of my attacks. The monsters’ mouths opened bigger than



should be possible, and they could get their physics-defying jaws around my entire fist if I wasn't careful.

Donut was right. There were too many of these things. These weren't just from the wreckage. They were being generated. This was a punishment. *Goddamnit*. If this continued, we were going to lose the town. "Fuck you," I growled up into the air. "Fuck you to hell."

I tossed a smoke curtain followed by a pair of hob-lobbers. I stepped over the hastily-constructed barricade and waded out toward the street. "Everyone stay back," I called.

"Carl, Carl, what are you doing?" Donut yelled.

I extended my left arm shield. I caught a flying gerbil with the auto-buckler, and it fell hard to the ground, blinded and dazed. I was too tired to fight it anymore.

I stepped down on the squirming gerbil.

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"This is not so funny anymore," Katia said, looking over the mass of gerbil corpses. The bewildered camels moved back to the walls and the anti-aircraft guns, though it appeared all of the remaining airplanes had made emergency landings. All that was left was a handful of balloons, and most of those were making their way up and over the bowl, leaving the area.

"It was never funny," I replied. I had blood up to my kneepads. I'd stepped on and smushed at least fifty of the things before the wave had stopped, as suddenly as it had started. I needed a shower. A long shower.

"It was a little funny," she said. "But the AI is not even trying to be fair anymore. That wasn't just a temper tantrum. That was the equivalent of a psycho ex-boyfriend going nuts and trying to murder you and your entire family because of something you didn't even know you did."

I nodded. I had a new achievement. I was the only one who'd received it. I was afraid to click on it. I did anyway.

**New Achievement! You're the reason why daddy drinks!**

**You have, for an unspecified reason, raised the ire of the System AI. You have corrected the issue, and everything is back to normal. The acceleration action has been suspended. This time.**

**Good boy.**

**Reward: You've received a Gold Makeup Sex is the Best Sex box.**

*You're not going to break me. Fuck you all. I will break you.*

"Acceleration?" Katia said after I read the description to the others. "My original game guide mentioned that before."

"Yeah," I said. "We've been threatened with it a few times. That... that really sucked."

"You didn't even do anything wrong," she said, shaking her head.

"At least you two are back together now," Donut said. "And you got a nice box out of it. I know you find it unpleasant, Carl. But you being stubborn about this is causing everything to be more dangerous. We have to kill these things anyway, so if the AI wants you to kill in a certain way, I don't see why it matters. This is just like one of those agility courses that Miss Beatrice used to insist I complete at all the regional cat shows. I did not like doing it, and I never ribboned of course, but I knew if I did well, I would get an extra brushing that evening. We are all prostitutes in one way or another, I suppose."

"I..." I was too tired to argue. "Let's go let everyone out of the personal space. I need a nap."

Louis and the others had made it to the Bactrian ruins and were searching the remains for loot and any other signs of life, including other crawlers. So far they'd found nothing except a single saferoom that was abandoned but still useable and a Club Vanquisher entrance that was useless because nobody in the group had a pass. They were going to spend the rest of the day grinding

and searching. They'd weather the sand storm in the saferoom before returning. In the meantime, we'd open our boxes and reset and then formulate a new plan to get into the now-undefended castle.

The camels went to work repairing the wall, putting out fires, and mending the fabric cover for the sand storm. The changelings, Donut noted, were all but gone from the ranks of the camels. I hadn't thought about it during the chaotic fight with the gerbils, but all of the fallen had been true dromedarians. She didn't see any of the changeling principals about, including Henrik. I needed to find him, but that was something I'd worry about later. I suspected that I knew where they went. If I was right, I wouldn't be able to get to him until after we took the stairwell.

The Toe had been mostly destroyed. A massive chunk of *Wasteland* had taken out the whole block. Luckily we could still go through the front door and enter the personal space. I'd been worried that if we'd lost the entrance here, all the NPCs still inside would be stuck.

The dromedarian children were in the middle of watching *Toy Story 3* when we entered, and they insisted on finishing it before they left. For some of these kids, their parents were likely now dead. They probably needed to get back out there. But I didn't have the heart or energy to say no, so I left them alone. Let them have their movie, I thought. Juice Box sat upon the kitchen counter, chatting away with Mordecai while the cleaner bot zipped about the room, clicking and beeping angrily, cleaning juice stains.

"They're all gone," I said to Juice Box as we all settled in. "Henrik disappeared soon after the *Wasteland* fell."

She shrugged. "I am not a principal. Those guys have their own thing going on. They're probably in the necropolis looking for that ghost. I don't know what they're going to do when they find her since you killed off the flesh mechanic, but those guys are crazy."

"The temple is flooding with water. They're not going to get very far."

She just looked at me. "They're changelings. The water will be

no problem.” She hopped off the table. “Now I better get out there and see how much of the town you three blew up.”

After we’d won that last quest, we’d all received a charisma bonus when dealing with changelings. I could already see the effects. We needed to talk more with Juice Box regarding this whole storyline with Henrik and the ghost in the necropolis, but first she needed to get out there and see we had indeed saved the town. I watched her head outside.

---

I had three boxes to open, Donut had three, and Katia had two. Juice Box had left, but the horde of children remained, all glued to the screen. All three of us received the same Silver Skydiver’s box, and all three of them contained the same thing. Three potions of Half Splat.

Mordecai grunted. “Keep those in your hotlist until you can get a real Featherfall, but they’re not that great. They’ll keep you from dying via falling damage, but you’ll be at 5% health after you hit the ground.”

“They’re still better than that Dolores Doesn’t Splat potion,” I grumbled.

“Hey now,” Mordecai said. “That potion is genius. It may not be pleasant, but your health was still at 100% when you landed.”

I grumbled as I opened my next box. The Gold Makeup Sex is the Best Sex box.

“What is this?” I asked, picking up the group of items. It was a sheet of paper and a quill pen. There was also a little jar that was capped and filled with black ink.

“Odd,” Mordecai said, leaning in to examine the prize. “These aren’t rare, but they’re pricey. They’re used by scholar and arcanist classes who focus on scroll production. You’ll never have the proper skills to use this beyond a rudimentary level. If you can figure out how to write some basic scrolls, maybe you can make some money.” He shrugged. “I can use it, but I’m much better at potions. Besides, I

can buy a writing table and be much more efficient. Your best bet is to just sell the set.”

The last of my boxes was the platinum quest box. I held my breath as I opened it. I needed something good. Everything I'd been getting lately was either weird or something I couldn't use just yet.

The box opened. It contained 5,000 gold coins, twenty healing scrolls, and a little black rock.

“Excellent,” Mordecai said. “Good, good. This was what I was talking about earlier. You're starting to get items that will enhance your existing items. You have to use it now. This is for your gauntlet. All three of you are likely to get something like this.”

I examined the black rock.

**Platinum Sharpening Stone.**

**Warning: This item has a short shelf life.**

**Apply this to any spiked offensive weapon to receive the following buffs.**

**Plus (2 x current level)% damage to all attacks.**

**Plus 1 to all current stat buffs. Does not add new buffs if they do not exist.**

**It also makes the weapon look extra oily and mean looking. In other words, the weapon's appearance may change. But only a little.**

Since the item had a short shelf life, I had to apply it right away. I formed my gauntlet and rubbed the rock it along the spikes. The whole thing glowed. The actual spikes grew a little longer. I received an extra point of dexterity and another to strength when the gauntlet was formed.

I examined the other prize, the paper and inkwell, as Katia opened her Platinum box.

**Coffee Shop Author Kit.**

**Alcoholism and crippling self-doubt not included.**

**So you want to be a writer. It started with sappy poetry in middle school. You soon graduated to Naruto**

**fanfiction. By the time you crash landed face-first into adulthood, your brain swelled with the misguided notion that your shitty novel with a self-insert protagonist sporting a traumatic childhood would change the world. Spoiler alert. Nobody is going to read your autobiography disguised as a space vampire and minotaur romance. You and every other half-wit out there with a nearby Starbucks and a laptop is writing the same bile. What you're really doing is inadvertently live-blogging the story of human mediocrity, and the universe is now a better place that the Syndicate has put a stop to it all.**

**Anyway, this is a magical sheet of paper. You will find you now have a second tab on your scratchpad in your interface. You can write something on this paper, and it will appear in the scratchpad and vice versa. If the proper spell and glyphs are accurately copied onto this paper, you can present the sheet at a market kiosk, and a scroll will appear for sale. Or if you have a printing press, you can make your own scrolls. Or even your own tome if you think you have the chops.**

I panicked at the mention of a second tab in my scratchpad. I already had a secret second one thanks to my cookbook. But thankfully I now had three tabs, with the cookbook tab being the last. I relaxed and turned my attention back to the paper.

"I'm confused. I can just write out a scroll, and it'll let me put a copy for sale in the market?" I asked, looking at the blank magical scroll. "How many can I sell? Will I lose this paper?"

"Writing your own scroll requires skills you don't have," Mordecai said. "It'd take a week of practice just to write a simple *Light* scroll. Potions are much better, especially this season with the unlimited inventory. The only advantage is that you can sell unlimited scrolls in the market as long as you keep the spell written on the

magical sheet. Once you erase it from your scratchpad, it's gone from the market. You can get a printing press table and make your own scrolls, or you can set the price as low as it'll let you and buy your own scrolls from the market. I saw one guy do that last season with *Fireball* scripts. Actually, that worked out really well for him. Turns out if you use the same scroll more than 200 times, you learn the spell."

I went to the new tab and wrote, "Does this work?"

The magical pen rose into the air as the top popped off the ink well. The pen dipped within and wrote out "Does this work?" I drew a rudimentary cat portrait, and the pen copied my work.

Donut looked at the cat art with distaste. "Am I joke to you, Carl?"

I laughed as I deleted the image in the scratchpad, and it faded away from the paper.

"This is both cool and completely useless," I said.

"The ink isn't bottomless, so don't play with it too much," Mordecai added.

"Carl, are you quite done? I have a very important box to open, and you promised you'd watch me do it. And we still have to learn what Katia had gotten!" Donut said impatiently. She had her benefactor box from Veriluxx RealPet Companions. The one that Loita had said wasn't a real box, but a "product sample."

In addition to the same basic items, Katia received a single crossbow bolt. "It replaces the free, unlimited basic ammo the crossbow normally comes with. It adds armor piercing and adds damage based on my level."

"That's pretty cool," I said, putting all my new gear into my inventory. I turned to Donut. "Let's see what you got."

She hopped up and down a few times, her tail swishing back and forth. "Oh goodie. Now remember, Carl. We have a television program to go on in a few days where we review the product. So pay careful attention. I do hope it's an accessory for Mongo."

Mongo screeched in agreement.

The benefactor box opened, and we all just stood there, staring at what popped out.

Katia burst out laughing.

It was Donut. A toy, robot Donut.

The cat hopped out of the box, took a few steps out onto the table and started licking her paw in a stilted, mechanical manner. She was about  $\frac{3}{4}$ 's the size of the real deal, and her fur was wrong, like she was made out of rat hair. The thing looked to be made with technology only slightly advanced from where we were from before the collapse. Definitely not on the same level as the planet-destroying, dungeon-making Syndicate. The mini-Donut looked up at the room and said with a voice that wasn't even close, "I sure do like lasagna. I hate Mondays, Carl." The cat resumed licking itself.

Donut continued staring at the thing open-mouthed as I examined its properties. The voice describing it was not the system AI, but a slightly-static, pre-recording of a deep voice that sounded like it came straight from a 1980's toy commercial.

**Veriluxx RealPet Dungeon Crawl Special Edition Exclusive.**

**"Princess Donut the Queen Anne Chonk."**

*Dungeon Crawler World: Earth.*

**The ultimate play toy, Veriluxx RealPet Companions are budget-friendly, nearly indestructible collectibles that will give your child hours and hours of fun. Because these interactive toys do not require an implant certificate to play with and enjoy, parents needn't worry about how many hours their children are spending with their new best friends!**

**Mix and match! They fight! They love! They will share your deepest, darkest secrets! Each Veriluxx RealPet Companion is a fully licensed depiction of your favorite personality or creature. The onboard AI comes preprogrammed with a 100% accurate and realistic**



**persona, and it will learn as it goes. It's like having a real pet, but better! Available on the Syndicate Trade Network. Mongo companion sold separately.**

**Veriluxx. For the children.**

***Action-grip Hekatonkheires coming soon!***

"Lasagna?" Mordecai asked. "Where did that come from?"

"It's Garfield," Katia said. "It's like they didn't have enough Donut material, so they mixed her with the Garfield comic strip."

The robot cat sniffed about the air. "Ferdinand?" She looked at Mongo. "You're not Ferdinand."

Ruby, the deformed, armless changeling was sitting nearby, eyes glued to the television screen, but she turned now as the robot approached her. She was in her weird, blank changeling form. She made a muted, terrified squeal and ran from the table.

"Hey kid, it's not going to hurt you. It's just like in the movie," Mordecai said, moving away to go talk to her.

Donut still had not said anything. She remained where she'd opened the box, stiff as a board.

"Uh, Donut," I asked. "You doing okay?"

"I'm sorry, Carl," the robot said, her head turning 180 degrees to look back at me. "The void is wet and hungry."

"Not you," I said to the weird robot. "Donut?"

Donut finally looked up, her yellow eyes shining. "They... they made a doll out of me, Carl. It's merch. I have merch. This is the greatest thing that has ever happened since I won Grand Champion Best in Show last year in Cleveland."

Mongo continued to sniff at the imposter cat.

"Are you a cocker spaniel?" the robot asked the dinosaur. It hissed and swished its tail at Mongo. "Cocker spaniels deserve to have their corpses desecrated."

Mongo screeched.

"No, bad Mongo! Bad!" Donut cried, but it was too late. Mongo chomped the robot on the head, decapitating it. The body seized up and fell onto its side, smoke rising from within. The whole thing

flashed and then caught on fire. The cleaner bot zipped over, beeping angrily and doused it with white foam.

I fell over with laughter.

“So much for being ‘nearly-indestructible,’” Katia said.

Donut sniffed and poked the still-smoldering remains. Mongo continued to look indignant. A static shock burst out, striking Donut on the nose, and she howled.

“This is most certainly going into my review.”

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Donut’s platinum quest box contained the same thing her last platinum quest box contained. A pair of fang caps and a skill potion. She promptly drank the potion down, and it added three points to her Animal Wrangling skill, which was already at five.

The last set of fang caps had given Mongo a damage buff and the ability to add a few debuffs like poison and paralyze, though neither seemed to happen often. Usually the mobs were dead if the dinosaur got to the point where he was chomping down on them. These two additional caps added 15% movement speed and 15% strength to the level-29 dinosaur. Once again, Donut made me place them on the dinosaur’s teeth. He had a little piece of robot Donut in there I had to fish out.

After, I spent some time cleaning up the rest of the dead robot while Donut grumbled and complained. “I will not have my merch published by a company who puts out a shoddy product. I can’t wait to give them an earful.”

“Yeah,” I said. “We should probably tell them not to use the Garfield thing, either. I’m not so sure they were using... official Garfield sources for their AI.”

The movie finally ended, and the children reluctantly filed out of the space and back into the real world. Their version of it, at least. I walked them out while Donut remained inside. Katia and Mordecai

were about to go to the Desperado to pick up some more supplies. We had to prepare for the assault on the floating house.

“Can we come back tomorrow and watch another movie?” Skarn asked as we left.

“Maybe,” I said, distracted. I looked up in the air. The town’s covering was half up, and the dromedarians worked desperately to repair the rest of it before the next sandstorm. Through one of the many empty spaces, I looked up into the sky. I couldn’t see it without the telescope I’d stolen from the kid, but I sensed it there. The remains of the castle. I sighed.

I was so preoccupied, I didn’t see the blue dot approach.

“Hello, Carl,” a deep, rumbly voice said.

I turned to look at the tall rock monster. He looked similar to the guards at the Desperado, but he was made of red and black lava rocks. He had a whole mess of boss kills over his head and a trio of player killer skulls. The last time I’d seen him, he’d been magic-based. It appeared that he’d switched focus. He had a large, glowing spear hanging over his shoulder.

“Hello, Chris,” I replied. “I’m glad to see you.”

I STARED UP AT THE LEVEL 35 CREATURE AS THE CHILDREN ALL moved off. He towered over me, standing at least seven and a half feet tall. I examined his properties.

**Crawler #324,116. “Chris Andrews 2”**

**Level 35.**

**Race: Igneous.**

**Class: Zulu Warrior.**

Every time he moved, it sounded like rocks scraping together. I could feel the heat coming off him, like the center of his body was molten. He'd probably set Donut's heat vision haywire. Chris returned my gaze, and I couldn't read his expressionless face. His intense eyes were burning lumps of coal.

“How did you get here so fast?” I finally asked.

“I was in the water quadrant. There was a giant submarine called the *Akula*. We had to break in, and it was filled with robots. There was a bugbear head in a jar with mechanical spider legs, and we woke it up by accident.” He grunted. “It's a long story. I smashed the glass, and that was it. We took the bridge, and it was over. But as soon as we did, the sub fired a torpedo right into the side of the mountain,

and everything started getting sucked into the hole. Water started to fill the sub, so we had to run. We had three escape hatches. They were torpedo tubes, one leading to each of the other quadrants. The only other two survivors got in the tube that leads to the land quadrant, but I couldn't fit with them. I didn't want to go into the tunnels, so I came here. It fired me in the air, and I landed on a giant sand dune. It was wild. I thought for sure I was going to get broken into a million pieces. I landed here and I was heading toward this town when you—I'm assuming it was you—blew that giant thing out of the sky."

I nodded. All of that made sense in the context of what I knew about the water quadrant. I wondered if that was the only feasible way to beat the subterranean level. To return to the ocean and then get into the necropolis from below.

I sent a quick note to Donut, Mordecai, Katia, and Imani, telling them what was happening. I told Donut to remain inside for now until I could get a sense of his state of mind. Katia and Mordecai were almost at the Desperado, about to purchase some supplies. We still hadn't slept.

I couldn't stop thinking about Odette's cryptic warning.

**Donut: MY VIEWERS ARE SPIKING REALLY HIGH. CHECK YOURS. SOMETHING IS HAPPENING.**

I never actually kept track of what the average view count was, which, I was realizing now, was a mistake. Donut actually had the little needle up at all times on her interface. I rarely went into the relevant tab. I needed to stop being so stubborn about it because it was a good indicator that shit was about to go down.

**Katia: I just received an emergency benefactor box. A silver one. We're going to open it up in the other safe room. The one in Weird Shit Alley. It's closer.**

**Carl: Is it from the Squim Conglomerate?**

**Katia: No. From Princess Formidable.**

**Mordecai: It's an emergency box. She needs to open**

**it now. That box probably cost the princess a sizeable chunk of her net worth. We'll keep you updated.**

A chill rushed over me. What was going on? This was Chris. Surely he couldn't have changed *that* much. I was on full alert, but I didn't feel ready. If something was about to happen, I wasn't prepared for it. I'd already used up my daily *Protective Shell* while we were falling from the *Wasteland* attack. I hadn't felt this tense about another player since we'd had the fight with Hekla. I hated this. I hated not being able to trust someone who was supposed to be my friend.

And what was worse, I didn't know why. I had no idea what was happening.

"Chris," I began. "I... why haven't you spoken to anybody? Imani is really worried about you." I didn't want to bring up his brother now, but we had to get it out of the way. I needed to hear his answer. "And your brother. Surely you know what happened."

Chris waved a big, rocky hand. "I take damage if I use the chat feature, so I do not waste time or energy using it."

"What?" I asked. "That doesn't make sense. It's part of the system interface."

He shrugged. "It comes with being an igneous. I can't pull things in and out of inventory or go into my health pie chart, either, without taking damage. I got it in exchange for having a very high constitution."

"I've never heard of that. That can't be normal. We'll talk to Mordecai, our manager. We'll see if we can figure out what's going on and if there's a way to fix it. I'll message Imani, too. We'll all figure it out together. Your friends and family are worried about you."

"My family is dead," he said. "It doesn't matter. Family and friends make you weak. Having someone to care over and protect makes you vulnerable. You taught me that."

"I taught you? How?" Jesus. If he didn't have the name floating over him, I'd never guess this was the same guy. Imani wasn't kidding when she said the race change had affected his personality.

He didn't answer the question. "We are wasting time. You haven't taken the castle yet. Is it still aloft? Where is the cat? We will go hunt it down together."

"Donut is in the saferoom. Come on, we'll go in together and talk."

I needed to get him into the saferoom where I wouldn't have to worry about anybody doing something stupid.

"I don't like saferooms," he said after a moment. He looked up into the air. "Is the castle still there? How are you going to take it out? Another missile?"

"No," I said. "We're going to fly up there and storm it the old-fashioned way."

**Carl: There's something wrong with him. He's acting squirrely. I think he's about to attack me.**

**Imani: He can fire lava out of his body. Be careful. Try not to hurt him.**

I needed to keep him talking. "Let me ask you something, Chris. Why did you kill Frank?"

"You heard about that, huh?"

A human appeared and stopped between us, her hands on her hips. "Who's the stud?" she asked, looking Chris up and down.

"Juice Box," I said, "meet Chris."

"You're a big 'un," she said, practically purring the words. "Sexy." She put her hand on his rocky arm, and then jerked it away as if she'd been shocked. "Hot, too," she said after a moment. She took a step back and turned to me. "Well, you said you'd save the town. I guess you did. We lost some camels, but not nearly as many as I feared. The place is a mess, and my house is wrecked. But my people are mostly safe, and for that, I'm grateful."

I nodded, not removing my eyes from Chris who was looking down at where she'd touched him. "You owe me a discussion about your fellow changelings. That was the deal. After I'm done talking with my friend here, we should sit down and go over what you know."

“The Spit and Swallow is still in one piece,” Juice Box said. “We can all go in there and talk about Quetzalcoatlus and why my brother is so desperate to get his hand on the ghost.” She returned her gaze to Chris. “You can bring your two friends here. We can all party afterward.” She suddenly grabbed my hand. “Carl, let’s go now.”

Chris shook his large head. “I really wish you hadn’t said that.”

“Two friends?” I asked, confused.

“It’s funny,” Chris said after a moment. “When I first got here to this floor, I thought for sure I was dead. But it was easy, you know, to take out the submarine. I don’t think that flying castle will be so hard, either. I see all those airplanes parked over there. There are hot air balloons now sitting in the desert. I’m starting to think this whole floor is easier than it should be.”

“I’m glad you’re confident,” I replied, taking another step back. Juice Box’s grip on my wrist was like a shackle.

“But the more hope I have, the more conflicted I get. Seeing you... I think I finally made up my mind. I keep going back and forth, but all of a sudden I am resolved. I don’t want to get out of here anymore. Isn’t that funny? It’s like I have a choice now. I can choose to not live like this.”

“Chris,” I said. “I don’t know what the fuck is going on. Brandon left a message for you. Let’s go sit down and talk about it.”

“Come on,” Juice Box said, pulling. Her grip was surprisingly strong.

“I actually have two daughters,” Chris said. “You only know about the one, but there’s another. She’s older. From my first marriage. She was home, so she died in the collapse. Our game guide when we first got in here, he told us all about it. He said she might come back. People who die in the collapse aren’t really dead, but they’re put in storage. Only you can’t save them. I think about that a lot. They bring them out sometimes, but it’s never for good. They can be changed. They force you to kill them on the deeper floors. He told me about a crawler that was forced to face down his whole family. He killed himself instead.”



I felt a chill wash over me.

“I wasn’t aware you had any children, Chris,” I said. “And your game guide is a woman. Her name is Mistress Tiatha.”

“I can’t kill anybody else in my family, Carl. I can’t.”

It hit me, then. All at once. I cursed myself for not seeing it. This wasn’t Chris.

This was Maggie. Maggie My. But how?

“You’re a changeling. Or a doppelganger,” I said, taking another step back.

“No,” Juice Box said. “She ain’t no changeling. She’s worse.”

“No,” Maggie agreed. She suddenly had a round, spiked ball in her hand. “I was waiting for the cat to come out, but she’s too much of a coward I guess. They promised me if I did it this way, they wouldn’t...”

The crossbow bolt slammed into Maggie’s head, and she dropped, crashing heavily to the street. The ball in her hand hit the ground and started to roll away. I dived for it, dislodging myself from Juice Box’s grip. It wasn’t a bomb. I didn’t know what it was, but I instinctively grabbed it and tossed it into my inventory before it could do anything.

I scrambled to my feet, fist forming.

The Chris/Maggie creature wasn’t dead. She had a strange status over her head. **Petrified**. There was a sixty second timer, counting down.

“What the shit?” I said. “What the flying fucking fuck?”

Katia came jogging up as Donut burst from the saferoom. I could see Mordecai down the street, also approaching. We all surrounded her. Him. Chris. Whatever he was. Multiple people from town came to surround the body. Several of the changelings reached down to touch the rock creature. One of the young changelings approached, but one of the older ones held the child back.

“I got it in my box,” Katia said, indicating her crossbow. She was out of breath. “A set of ten bolts of Petrify Rock Class.”

“Goddamnit,” I said, looking down at the prone form of the rock

creature. Its eyes still moved back and forth. She was conscious, but she couldn't move. What choice did we have? "We're going to have to kill her."

"Her?" Katia asked.

"It's Maggie. Frank's wife. The one that's been hunting us since the first floor."

Donut hissed. "Maggie My! The vile killer?" She jumped to the rock creature's chest, but she howled at the heat and jumped over. "Where's Chris?" she yelled at the prone form. "What did you do to Chris?"

Katia looked perplexed. "Why would they give me bolts to just petrify her instead of kill her then? Mordecai says these are more expensive than just the regular ones."

"We can have Mongo kill her," Donut said, jumping to my shoulder. "That way we don't get skulls."

"Wait," Juice Box said, brushing herself off. I realized I'd tossed her aside when I'd dived for the ball thing. "You don't want to hurt him."

**Imani: Stop! Stop! I just got a message from Chris!**

**Carl: It's not him.**

**Imani: No. It is! He's petrified. He's going to lose consciousness again when his body wakes up. He's being controlled!**

The timer was at thirty seconds.

"Boy, you do not know how to take a hint," Juice Box said. She poked at the prone creature with her foot. "Next time I'll just spit it out. You're friends with the rock guy, right?"

"I'm friends with a guy named Chris," I said. "Is this really him?"

"He's right there. Don't kill him. There's also someone else in there. An Infiltrator. That's who you need to kill."

"What the hell is an Infiltrator?" I asked just as Mordecai approached.

"Oh, fuck," Mordecai said. "He's got a worm in his head?"

The timer was at ten seconds.

“Shoot him again,” Mordecai said. Katia complied, firing a bolt right into his chest. The magical bolt whiffed away in a puff of smoke a moment later, and the 60-second timer reset. “We got a problem.”

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Mordecai leaned down to examine the igneous. “I’ve told you about these guys before. There are multiple types of brain worms. The intellect hunters are the most common, but they can only take over corpses, and the bodies start to rot. The Valtay are similar, but they secrete a liquid that keeps the bodies alive. Their distant cousins are a race called the Scree, but they’re better known by a different name. The Infiltrators. They are parasites, and they take full control of bodies. Living bodies. A person is infected, and it takes a few days for the annexation to complete. They don’t even know they have the parasite. After a few days, the worm completely takes over. Once the switch occurs, the parasite gains power, and the host is locked out of their own body. The worm controls them. The host can do nothing but watch as they are moved like a puppet.”

“Holy fucking shit,” I said, looking down at Chris. “So he’s been awake this whole time, watching all of this happen, but he’s completely powerless?”

“That’s right. She’s in his brain. His body is her armor.”

“Okay,” I said. “So how do we get her out of him?”

Mordecai shook his head sadly. “Without killing him? We don’t. She can’t even leave until he’s dead. I can make an antiparasitic that will kill her, but I won’t have the materials until we hit the next floor.”

I felt a deep chill rush over me. Katia shot him again, using her third of ten bolts. We’d only be able to keep him petrified for seven more minutes. “There’s gotta be something we can do now.”

Everything suddenly made sense. Well, no, that wasn’t true. None of this shit made sense. But I now knew what happened. Maggie had chosen the Infiltrator race and had somehow managed to get herself into Chris. She’d been in him ever since the end of the

third floor, and once she'd fully taken over, she'd separated out from the party and started hunting me.

Frank had said he didn't even know what race or class she'd taken. She'd finally caught up with him at the Desperado Club, possibly looking for the ring he'd given me. She'd ended up killing him. Her own husband.

*People who die in the collapse aren't really dead.*

I thought about the implications of that. There were hints of it in the cookbook, but nothing definitive. Was it true? That was a conversation for Mordecai. I didn't have the luxury of thinking about it now.

**Elle: Imani is refusing to send you this message, so I will. It is from Chris, and I am copying and pasting his exact words. I'm sorry guys. "Carl, Donut. Please. Kill me. It's okay. I give you permission. You'll be helping me."**

"Hey Chris, go fuck yourself," I said. "We're going to figure this out." Then I told Elle what I said.

**Elle: I told him the same thing. But if we can't figure out a solution, I don't think you have a choice. If it was me stuck in there, I'd want you to pull the plug, too.**

"Can we take him into the saferoom?" I asked. "Would that cure him?"

"No," Mordecai said. "Not once she's taken full control. The saferoom won't help. We can't tie him up and leave him there. It won't let us."

"Then we'll tie him up and leave him out here," I said. "If we can keep him contained until the next floor, maybe you can make that potion."

Mordecai shook his head. "Sorry, kid. That's not going to work. What're you going to do? Pick him up and throw him over your shoulder while you go down the stairs? You're in different parties, and you'll be separated once you hit the next floor anyway. And even if he's tied up, he has spells he can still cast."

This was an impossible situation. I turned to Juice Box who was

standing back, watching with her arms crossed. “You touched him. Can you turn into one of those worms? Go in there and take out the one in his head?”

“No,” she said. “They are too small. And I wouldn’t do it even if I could. That’s a pretty fucked-up thing to ask.”

Katia shot him again. Six to go.

**Elle:** He says, “This woman is overwhelmed with anger and despair, and every moment I share with her is worse than the last. You took the orb from her, but she can still hurt you.

“What’s the orb?” Donut asked.

“I have it,” I said. I quickly examined the object in my inventory. I was momentarily confused by the name. It hadn’t listed itself as an explosive. But then I read the description.

### **Celestial Grenade**

**These little balls of fun were developed by the nuns of Enyo during the first enlightenment, back when the gods had to compete for worshippers. The nuns would descend upon a village and proselytize to the people about why their goddess was the best. If the villagers didn’t immediately fall to their knees in veneration, the nuns would be forced to invoke a more aggressive campaign.**

**A nun would drop a celestial grenade, which would summon Enyo directly into town for a period of sixty seconds. That was usually enough to change the minds of the survivors.**

**Celestial grenades grant the following effects:**

**If the wielder of the grenade has pledged themselves to a specific deity, this grenade will summon their god for sixty seconds. In addition, the wielder will receive a 60-second *Divine Intervention* aura.**

**If the wielder does not worship a deity, this grenade**

**will summon a random god. They will not receive the *Divine Intervention* buff.**

Why was Maggie trying to summon a god? Just to kill me? That seemed a tad overkill. I remembered what she'd started to say. It sounded like she'd made some sort of deal. The fact Katia had received a countermeasure from Princess Formidable meant the grenade could've come only from one place. The Skull Empire.

"Chris, does Maggie worship Grull?"

While we waited for an answer to filter through Imani and Elle—which was the only way we could talk—I examined the grenade in my inventory to make sure the pin hadn't yet been yanked free. It hadn't. I pulled it out and tossed it to Mordecai, whose eyes grew huge when he saw it.

"These are very expensive and rare," he said. "You see 'em on the ninth floor a lot, especially near the end. Someone paid a pretty penny to get this in her hands. This is just over the top. It's like trying to kill a bug with a kinetic strike."

"That's what I was thinking!"

"You humiliated Prince Maestro and his family over and over," Katia said. "They have to kill you to save face. If you die before they get a chance to do it, it's probably just as bad."

"Well they're terrible at it," Donut said. "I mean, really. If they can't even manage to kill one human who doesn't wear pants, how can anyone expect them to control an intergalactic empire? No offense, Carl."

I was about to tell Donut to shut the fuck up when Chris's answer finally came in.

**Elle: He started talking, but he got cut off. It now says his messaging privileges have been suspended for thirty minutes. He says, "It's not Grull. She worships another god called Algos. That's who the grenade would've summoned. Maggie's first sponsor is Prince Maestro and her second is Crown Prince Stalwart, his brother. I have the same two sponsors. They gave her a**

**scroll that let her choose a god to worship. I received a box with a picture on it of Algos, and that's how she knew who to pick. She got the grenade when we hit this floor. We got approached by this weird guy in a saferoom, and he told us..." That was the whole message.**

"Jesus," I said as Katia shot him again. "Maggie has double sponsors, and all four of them are the Skull Empire."

I quickly related the message to Mordecai via chat.

**Mordecai: This doesn't sound official to me. Someone probably bribed someone to allow Maggie a one-on-one in a saferoom. It happens, but don't talk about it out loud. I'm thinking Maggie's race can't worship Grull, so they had to find another god to do their dirty work. Plus they likely didn't want to rely on Prince Maestro again. He'd probably just screw it up again and further embarrass the family. Algos is the god of pain. He would kill everyone in town in seconds. He's a good god to choose if you want your target to suffer.**

"That Maestro guy is letting you live rent free in his head," Donut said. "It's quite pitiful. I'm starting to think he really is in love with you."

"His sister is spending a lot of money to stop him," Katia added, looking down at the prone form of Chris.

"I never liked my brother, either," Donut said. "He always thought he was better than the rest of us."

"Your brother sold for over ten thousand dollars," I said.

Donut made a spitting noise. "I don't remember seeing him win any championships."

Katia shot Chris once again. We were almost out of time. The enormity of our problem was getting heavier on my shoulders by the moment. I felt the desperation rising. "I'm going to flip him over,

break open the back of his head, and dig Maggie out with my bare hand.”

“Carl,” Katia said, sounding alarmed. “That’s not going to work. You’ll kill him.”

“You’re not getting in there anyway,” Mordecai said. “His head is solid rock. The parasite is *in* his brain. Not riding it like a backpack.”

“Goddamnit. Why am I the only one trying to come up with a solution? What the hell are we going to do?” I said.

But I knew. We all knew. And that weight was getting heavier by the moment.

*You can't save them all.*

**Carl: Imani, I'm sorry.**

She didn’t answer, which made me feel even worse. I put my hand on his rocky shoulder. It was hot, but not unbearable.

“Hey, Chris. I know you can’t respond anymore, but your brother wanted me to tell you that he loved you, and he regretted not telling you that. He died protecting his friends. I’m sorry I couldn’t help you.”

“Carl,” Katia said, putting her own hand on my shoulder. “You don’t have a skull yet. I do. Let me do it.”

“No,” I said, forming my fist. “Everyone get back.”

“Be careful,” Mordecai said. “Once he dies, the infiltrator will still be alive. She’ll burrow out of his head. She’ll try to get into someone else.”

“Not the way I’m going to kill him,” I said.

The small group all took several steps back. It was just me and Donut standing over the prone form of Chris. We had twenty seconds left.

“Carl?” Donut asked from my shoulder.

“What?”

“Don’t be mad at me.”

A large hole opened up in the street, revealing a shimmering force field that separated this quadrant from the next. The form of



Chris plummeted through the hole and disappeared, landing loudly into the dark chamber below. There was a splash.

I only fell about a foot, landing on the shimmering air. I stood upon the forcefield like it was glass, looking down upon it with surprise.

“You best step out of the hole, or your feet will get chopped off when I turn the spell off,” Donut said. “Daddy wouldn’t like that very much.”



“*Goddamnit, Donut.* What the fuck?”

“You’re not a killer, Carl,” Donut said as the spell snapped off. “Not a person killer, at least. You get all weird about killing NPCs. How do you think it’s going to affect you to kill one of your friends? I’m not going to let it happen. I can’t have you being all mopey.”

“He was asking for our help, Donut. Now she’s gotten away and Chris is still... *Goddamnit*, you shouldn’t have done that. That was a mistake.”

“Look at the map. He’s not getting out of that room. And if they do get out, we’ll be prepared for them. Katia has the find crawler skill. She’ll see them sneaking up on us. Maybe.”

I took a deep, angry breath. I was angry with Donut, but I was also angry with myself for being so desperately relieved at what she’d done.

I looked at the map for the subterranean level. Sure enough, there was a honeycomb system of rooms directly below the streets. The entrance to the catacomb wasn’t a level plane, but it went up and down in a toothed pattern. Chris and Maggie were stuck in a bubble. They had solid rock all around them. They could go back up through the street. Or they could go down, though that looked like another sealed off chamber. They’d have to break through two walls to get to the closest walkway—a walkway that was likely filled with water.

“Mordecai, can he get out of there with his race abilities?”

“Maybe,” he said, shaking his head. “He can excrete lava, but it cools rapidly. It’s not effective against rock. There are spells like Donut’s *Hole* and dozens of others that help people make their way through rock. I don’t know what either of them have. He’ll be able to use both of their abilities and spells. He might be able to smash through with time. It sounded like there was water in there. He can breathe underwater, but if the chamber fills, it’ll hinder their progress.”

“Wait, really?” I said. “He can breathe underwater?”

“Yes. Both of them can, actually. Infiltrators are aquatic like most brain parasites. An igneous can survive in most environments. They’re very hardy.”

“If there’s water, there’s steam,” Katia said. “He might be able to blow his way out.”

“That doesn’t sound very safe,” I said.

“If that crazy lady is suicidal, then maybe it won’t matter,” she replied.

I felt relief at the idea, of Maggie somehow killing them both. Then I felt shame for feeling that way.

While we talked, Donut was giving a running commentary in the chat to Elle and Imani.

**Imani: Thank you, Donut. Once you defeat all four castles, you can go back, incapacitate them again, bring them through the portal, and then your game guide can make a potion to save Chris.**

I took a deep breath. That was... a very dangerous idea. It was a *dumb* idea. Katia only had three of the paralyze bolts left, which meant we’d have three minutes to get them to the stairwell. That simply wasn’t going to happen. Maggie had just tried to unleash the god of pain on me. She was too dangerous to let free. We were being used like pawns in a royal pissing match between a brother and sister, who in turn were being exploited by the whole system while the entire universe laughed their asses off at us all.

Yes, being in the spotlight was good. But we needed to break

ourselves free from this Skull Empire bullshit. It would catch up to us sooner rather than later.

“Mordecai,” I said. “We have to find a way to separate him from the worm before the floor ends. Go to the market and see if you can find those potion supplies now. I’ll put the word out and see if anybody has what we need.”

I went into my interface. I found the little needle that indicated the current stream watchers. I cycled through a few views and settled on one that didn’t show actual numbers, but it ticked the needle up when more than average were watching. I placed it in the corner right above my airspeed and elevation tickers. I had another thought.

**Carl: Also, Mordecai. I was wrong before about something. I want you to take some money and buy Donut that environmental upgrade. The one that shows us a running commentary of our social media comments.**

**Donut: YAY!**

**Mordecai: You know it’s heavily moderated by the AI, right?**

**Carl: That’s okay. The more information, the better.**

I pointed to Juice Box. “You,” I said. “Let’s sit down right now and talk. But we gotta make it quick. We’re going to take out that last castle once it gets dark.”

“We still need to sleep, Carl,” Donut said.

“We can sleep when we’re dead.”

“So,” I SAID TO JUICE BOX. “HENRIK IS YOUR BROTHER?”

She nodded. “He’s what we call a Principal. People say they’re a cult, obsessed with cataloging all known species. But that’s not true. They’re looking for just one. And they think they’ve found it.”

**Donut: LONELY\_YETI\_15 SAYS I HAVE THE PRETTIEST FUR PATTERN SHE HAS EVER SEEN. SHE ALSO SAYS SHE’S GETTING A TATTOO OF ME ON HER LOWER THORAX.**

**Carl: You’re supposed to be helping Katia sew.**

**Donut: I DON’T HAVE THUMBS, CARL.**

I shook my head and returned my attention to Juice Box. She remained in her human form, but she’d made herself bald for some reason. We sat in the Spit and Swallow, which was filled with camels taking a quick breather from their frantic work to repair town before the next impending sand storm.

“So this Quetzalcoatlus creature is what they’re looking for?” I asked.

“That’s what I’m getting at, yes. Problem is she’s a ghost.”

“And that’s why you took over the guards in charge of the gnome

hostage. You needed to get to Wynne. You needed to get to him because he had the ability to make her temporarily corporeal, which would allow your brother to touch her and gain the ability to turn into her.”

“Yes.” She paused, staring off as a group of grim-faced dromedarians got up and left, on their way back to work. “I didn’t want any part of it. I thought it was disrespectful after they took us in. Still, I would have helped him sooner had I know the Hunting Grounds were accessible, that this was something that could actually be accomplished. Had I helped, perhaps we would have avoided all of this.”

“Your brother was torturing the gnome,” I said. “Something tells me you wouldn’t have been on board with that.” She didn’t answer, so I continued. “But the gnome is dead, and Quetzalcoatlus is still a ghost. They’ve gone into the maze anyway. What do you think they’re going to do?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Henrik is desperate.”

“And why are they trying to find her? What’s so special about her?”

Juice Box sighed. “She is, or was, a type of creature that doesn’t normally live in these lands. She has a special ability to cast a spell. She can alter plants. Like her, my people aren’t from this place. Our bodies have adapted, but not fully. With each generation, defects appear. It is happening more and more.”

I thought of that changeling girl, Ruby. The one with the missing arms and the sunken-in head.

“Compression sickness,” I said.

“Yes,” Juice Box replied. “One out of every four births is now sick. The ones born with it are sterile. My brother believes if he can obtain the spell, he can create a food source that will give us the necessary vitamins that will stave off future birth defects.”

“What about the Gate of the Feral gods? Before, you said it was a myth.”

She waved her hand and then took a long drink. She reminded

me of Elle with the amount of alcohol she consumed. “I lied. It is no myth, but it is dangerous. Using it was always the backup plan, but it was even more desperate of an idea than the plan to give flesh to Quetzalcoatlus. Plus, even my brother didn’t want to resort to using it. He is not that cruel.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The artifact has three parts. My brother has one piece, which he stole from the dromedarians. The gnomish Commandant has the second, and the third is on the surface in the hands of the mad mage. The artifact consists of three parts. Two pocket watches and a winding box. When they’re put together, the gate can be opened.”

I had already guessed most of this, but I still didn’t know the most important part. “And what can they do with the gate?”

“It’s simple, really. One can open a gate from one place to the next. But it comes with a cost. It rips a hole into the depths of the Nothing. So when the gate finally closes, an ancient, feral god comes through into the world.”

“A feral god? Which side does it come through? The side where the gate is opened or the side where the gateway leads?”

“The opening side. Which is why even my brother doesn’t wish to use it. We can go home, but it would bring devastation to this world.”

“I don’t even know what a feral god is,” I said.

Juice Box shivered. “They are the gods from before. The immortal beasts who roamed the heavens before the pantheon banished them into the Nothing and created the world. Their banishment has driven them mad.”

There was a moment there, when the air suddenly felt electric. I now knew exactly what that feeling meant, what was about to happen.

**New Quest. The Gate of the Feral Gods.**

**Henrik the Changeling. Commandant Kane. The Mad Dune Mage. They all have pieces of the artifact. Take it from them. Collect all three. Put them together.**

**What happens next is pretty damn neat.**

***Reward: You'll have the gate.***

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The sandstorm came, and we hunkered down in the personal space. Despite the valiant efforts of the townsfolk to prepare the city for the storm, their efforts weren't enough. The moment the winds came, the not-yet-finished shield ripped away, forcing everyone inside. The town would be buried in sand by the time the storm was done.

The moment the shield failed, we all received a quest to "save" the town by procuring a bunch of deflated balloons that they could use as a shelter. It was a regular, bronze quest that I shoved off on Louis and Firas and Langley, who'd finished searching the ruins of the other town. They could use the experience.

They had spent the remainder of the day grinding and picking up loot. There was no sign of any surviving bactrians except one in a single saferoom bar. The group had also managed to secure an intact, gnomish Drop Bear airplane. The pilot was nowhere to be found. They dragged the machine to the edge of the other town and covered it with a tarp.

Down on the land quadrant, Gwen's team had finally managed to breach all the walls, but now they faced the main entrance to the castle, which was magically locked. They were currently trying to figure out how to get in. The mage still hadn't shown himself.

The tomb raiders were stuck in saferooms. The entire catacomb was now filled with water. They had dozens of water scrolls, but that wasn't enough. They were paralyzed for now.

Chris/Maggie remained entombed. Donut could see their dot on the map as long as she stood nearby. The room was half-filled with water and was pitch black, which had to be awful. We set Mordecai to work. He needed something called vile dill for his potion. He hadn't found it yet. He was seeking an alternative using the store interface and by talking to folks at the Desperado Club.

I couldn't stop thinking about how horrible this had to be for Chris. Being helpless was one thing, but what he was currently enduring was just too much. The more I thought about it, the more I regretted not putting him out of his misery.

I understood what Donut had done. Hell, if I had thought of it, I would've done the same thing. Still, it felt like the wrong decision. It was the easy way out, and in this place, the easy way usually came with dire consequences.

But I had push all of that out of my mind and focus at the task at hand: capturing the gnomish throne room.

Here's what we knew. After we'd crashed the *Wasteland*, all that remained was a single building held aloft by an enormous magical balloon. The building was a house, nothing more. There were no obvious defenses. The entire gnomish airforce was now grounded. It appeared there were only two living creatures up there. Commandant Kane and his daughter. The kid was about ten years old. That was it.

Once the sandstorm ended, we had two hours before it got dark. All around, camels emerged and started digging the town free. I pulled the farseer and searched until I found the small house, which has settled high above, just over the edge of the lip of the bowl. It floated all the way to the top of the bubble, like a children's balloon that had gotten away from a kid and was now wedged in a high ceiling.

"We can still try shooting it down," Katia said, standing by my side.

"We could," I agreed. "It's probably the easier way to do it. But I want to get that pocket watch. And if it falls now, I'm afraid it'll land outside the bowl. Then what would we do?"

"You also don't want to hurt that kid," Katia said. "I think I know you well enough by now."

I nodded. "Maybe you're right." She was absolutely right.

"They do that on purpose, you know. It's no accident they put a child up there."



“Yeah,” I agreed. “But they should also know by now my stance on killing NPCs. I don’t want to do it, but I think they’re better off dead anyway. So I won’t hesitate if my hand is forced. Even if it’s a kid.”

We stood side by side for several silent moments.

“Did you ever want children?” Katia finally asked.

I turned to look at the woman, surprised at the question. I knew she’d had some painful issues with this subject, but I didn’t know the details.

“No,” I said. “I wouldn’t be a good dad. Bea told me she thought she was pregnant like ten times. She never was. The first few times, when I thought she really was, I was goddamned terrified.”

“I... I have trouble seeing you with that woman.” She shook her head. “Anyway, I can’t have children.” She paused, looking down at herself. “When I was human, I mean. I was going to adopt. You can do that in Iceland when you’re single. I got pre-approval. I was on the list. That’s all I ever wanted. Something happened, and I got disqualified. It’s not important. But I’m glad now. I keep thinking about that Maggie woman, and how twisted she’s become. It’s because she’s a mother. Losing everything can do that to you. I can’t help but wonder how different things would be for me if I had a child. I’m glad now I don’t.”

The way she said it, I knew she wasn’t being truthful. It wasn’t something I would ever understand, the need to have children. I said nothing.

“Anyway,” Katia continued. “I still think we should just blow it out of the sky.”

“You’re just mad you’re not going to get the chance to go skydiving again,” I said, putting the telescope away.

“Usually I get irritated when you want to leave me behind on your little schemes,” Katia said. “I’m pretty happy to sit this one out.”

I patted her on the shoulder.

It was time to go. Behind me, Donut emerged from the bar, followed by Mongo and another robot Donut. The toy company had

sent her three more, two of which had been promptly destroyed by Mongo. This fourth one was supposedly more durable. It'd survived one attack, but the head was now scarred from Mongo teeth.

"Come on, Donut," I said. "Let's roll."

The robot version jumped onto my shoulder. This one was significantly heavier than the last. It turned its head toward me. "There sure were a lot of babies in there, Carl," the toy said. "I wonder how long they will continue to cry in the dark."

"Get the hell off of me." I pushed it from my shoulder, and it landed on its back with a *crunch*. Mongo was on it in a second, grabbing it by the neck and shaking. The head ripped, and a countdown timer appeared over the toy.

"Goddamnit," I said. "Everyone get back."

We all scrambled away. The toy exploded in a shower of sparks and smoke. It wasn't a big explosion, but it would've hurt if we'd been closer. It was enough to leave a scorch mark all over the front of the Spit and Swallow.

"Yeah, that's safe," I said as I collected the pieces. The controller core of the robot was a round, marble-sized metal ball. Like the last few times, the core itself had exploded, making it look a metallic piece of popped popcorn. "I can't tell if these guys are a toy company or a weapons company. Either way, they're terrible at it."

Mongo screeched in agreement.

The real Donut jumped to my shoulder and sat with a harrumph.

"They said this version was indestructible," she said sadly. "Do you think the Kardashians had to deal with defective merch? This is most disappointing."

"I don't think the toy people know what they're doing," I said.

**Loita: Carl, you know perfectly well that the real version of these toys can take much more stress. Your boosted strength is what's causing the problem. The toy is meant to be played with outside of an enhancement zone by children, not survive within a dungeon environment.**

**Carl: Hello, Loita. You should tell Donut's sponsors that parents will shy away from toys that could potentially melt their child's face off.**

**Donut: ALSO I DON'T SAY CREEPY STUFF LIKE THE DOLL DOES. IT'S REALLY WEIRD.**

**Zev: The audience loves the strange vibe of the doll, but I tend to agree with the crawler. It does not sound like her. We put that in the notes, but Veriluxx hasn't changed it.**

On my shoulder, Donut tensed up upon realizing Zev was a part of the conversation. I knew she was still worried about the kua-tin's well-being.

**Donut: HI ZEV!**

**Carl: Nobody is going to care about the toy's voice if it keeps randomly exploding.**

**Donut: HE IS RIGHT. IT IS NOT A CARL DOLL.**

**Loita: After we realized you were going to fiddle with the toy, we started requiring the sponsor to make the doll self-destruct if it is sufficiently broken. We don't want you unfairly getting your hands on the important interior parts. The real version won't have that feature.**

**Carl: So you're the ones screwing the sponsor over? I bet they're not too happy then. I'm no marketing expert, but I can't imagine this thing is going to do well with how it's being presented.**

**Zev: You are not wrong, crawler. There are memes.**

**Loita: That is not of your concern. You will be going on their program soon. They assure us that before that happens, you will receive a proper prototype.**

**Donut: TELL THEM I NEED TO HAVE THE ABILITY TO CHANGE THE ROBOT'S NAME. CARL CALLS IT "ROBOT DONUT" AND THAT JUST WON'T**

**DO. I HAVEN'T DECIDED ON CHARLIE OR IVY. WHAT DO YOU THINK, ZEV?**

**Zev: It's inconsequential, crawler.**

Donut's claws dug so heavily into the side of my neck, I winced with the pain. Her entire body was rigid. I reached up to pet her.

**Loita: Very well. We are done here. Try not to break the next one.**

**Zev: If you must choose a name, I would go with Ivy.**

Donut let out a very slight gasp.

**Donut: I THINK YOU'RE RIGHT. BYE ZEV!**

Donut did an excited little hop on my shoulder. "Okay, Carl," she said. "Let's go take out that castle in the sky."

The gnomish Drop Bear used actual gasoline for fuel. The abandoned biplane's tank was almost dry. I still had plenty of the fuel in my inventory, all in metal canisters.

I examined the vehicle as I filled the tank. I needed the plane as light as possible, so I was only going to fill it up a quarter of the way. It didn't have any bombs left under the wings, which would help with the weight. The plane did not look real, like it was something a drunk dude had built in his backyard out of scrap metal. Not something that was supposed to actually fly. I took a deep breath thinking about what we were about to do.

The airplane featured a frothing, rabid koala bear thing painted on the nose. There were also words in Syndicate standard stenciled onto the nose above the artwork. I wiped the dust off to reveal the plane's name.

"Wonderful," I muttered.

The plane's name was *Death Trap*. It had four bombs painted after the tag. I took a can of spray paint and covered it up. I then wrote *Nightmare II* on the side. Donut objected, but only half-heartedly. She'd been oddly distracted since our discussion with Loita.

The plane was half buried in the sand when we arrived. Thankfully Langley had been smart enough to have it covered with a tarp before the storm. Those other guys all had gone off in search of downed balloons. They needed to collect five of the things to finish the “save Hump Town” quest. There were plenty scattered about the bowl. They had to fight off both gnomes and giant lizards, but at this point, the group of crawlers had enough experience with both that they could handle themselves. They were now on their way back to Hump Town to meet up with Katia.

“Holy shit,” I said as I realized I could easily pull the plane out of the sand. There was no way I could lift the thing off the ground, but the double-engine plane was lighter than I expected. Ten or more levels, and I’d be able to stick the vehicle into my inventory. Wouldn’t that be something?

After we finished cleaning the thing off, I sat in the pilot seat and Donut took to the rear-facing gunner’s chair. I had to rip both of the arm rests off just to fit in the thing. As I settled in, Donut put her paws up on the large gun and started making shooting noises. There was no runway here, and we wouldn’t be able to take off. Not in the traditional sense.

I started the engine to make sure it worked. Both engines spun right up. I flipped the switch and turned them off. I had no idea how to fly the thing, but the controls were similar to all the flight sims I’d played a dozen times. And they were simplistic compared to the original *Nightmare’s* controls. There were five gauges, two throttle switches that could be controlled individually or in tandem, rudder pedals, and a stick. That was it. Thankfully I only needed to “fly” the thing for a few minutes. And I didn’t need to worry about landing or taking off.

“Ready for this?” I asked. The virtual sun had already fallen below the horizon, and darkness spread across the bowl like an inky stain. High above, our target glowed like a star.

“Let’s do it,” Donut said.

The emergency recovery balloon was deployed using a handle to

the right of the too-small cockpit chair. I had to be careful because there was also an ejection seat mechanism right next to it. We'd already rifled through a crashed version of this same plane, and with the one we looked at, the ejection seat worked as intended... but it didn't have an attached parachute. There was no way to tell if this seat was the same without taking it out, but I was willing to bet that none of them had parachutes, like they'd designed the planes with the safety feature but decided it was too expensive to implement after they started building them. It was oddly comforting to know that fictional, alien militaries had the same issues as the real deal.

Only a few pilots had bothered deploying the escape balloon. The balloons did nothing but elevate the disabled vehicle to the top of the bubble. There was nobody left to rescue them if they had.

I pulled the lever, yanking on it like a car's emergency brake. The twin balloons burst upward, hissing as they filled with... well I didn't know what they were filling with. It was some sort of chemical reaction instead of a conventional balloon.

The whole plane jerked, tail first. We started to rise into the air. Slowly at first, but soon we were moving faster and faster. I watched the needle indicating our altitude as we rapidly rose into the air.

"Carl, Carl, there are still bullets left in the gun!" Donut suddenly exclaimed. "I can shoot stuff!"

"Don't you dare," I called over my shoulder as we rocketed upward. We climbed straight up, caught a breeze and continued to rise at an angle, moving toward the very center of the bubble. I kept a wary eye out for the large birds that sometimes patrolled the skies.

I didn't see any enemies. Before the storm, there had been a handful of balloons up against the ceiling, but they'd all disappeared. I knew a few had simply fallen, crashing against the desert like meteors. Some had plummeted onto the land quadrant. Some in the ocean.

All that was left was the target.

It took us less time than I expected to reach the top of the bubble. We hit the ceiling with a bump, and suddenly we weren't rising any

more. I checked the altitude, and we were just about five kilometers above the bowl, which was already pretty high off the bubble's sea level. This was much higher than we'd been last time. I didn't notice any change in pressure or difference in oxygen levels. I pulled up my health pie chart menu, and it didn't show any sort of oxygen deprivation. That was good.

I formed my xistera, loaded it with a thumper, and I tossed it upward, just to see what would happen. Even this close, I still couldn't tell if the bubble's wall was transparent or just a screen. The metal ball clanked loudly against the glass-like bubble wall before falling away.

Donut peered over the edge and watched the ball disappear into the night.

"Really, Carl," she said. "That's going to land on somebody's head."

I turned until I could see the distant light, about a half of a mile away, also pressed against the ceiling of the bubble. *Damn*, I thought. We were further away than I'd hoped.

"God, I hope this works," I said. "It's about to get loud." I reached down and flipped the two switches to turn on the plane's engines. "Hold on!"

I pushed the dual throttle switch and grasped the stick. I balanced my feet on the two rudder pedals and held the stick steady. The plane whined and jerked forward, pulling the balloons along the ceiling. I held my breath as we started to turn. Because we were still attached to the emergency balloons, I wasn't really "flying" the plane. It was more like using training wheels on a bicycle and then pushing ourselves toward our destination by pumping the pedals just a few times.

"Shit," I mumbled as we turned too much. I eased the stick in the other direction. I pushed the right rudder pedal, and we eventually lined up with the house. I eased up the throttle and we started skittering along the top of the bubble toward the flying house. I cut the power and let our momentum take us in.

“Get ready,” I called to Donut.

The house loomed. A massive, glowing balloon kept the home aloft. The balloon was huge, more than four times the size of the regular hot-air balloons used by the other flying machines. It glowed with magic and shone like a beacon, leading us in like moths to a flame.

The “castle” itself was nothing more than a square hunk of land with a two-story home sitting upon it. The house looked like any regular house one might find in a suburban neighborhood. I realized with surprise that was exactly what it was. It had a double garage, a porch, and even a little garden out front, though half of it was gone. The building was painted a dull beige and made of aluminum siding. There was even a basketball hoop attached above the garage.

Still, the house hadn’t survived the crashing of the *Wasteland* unscathed. The top floor windows were broken out, and part of the chimney had fallen in on itself. The rain gutters hung loosely off edge of the roof. Christmas lights clung to the gutters, blinking.

“Do you think they heard us coming?” Donut asked.

“Probably,” I said. “So be careful. Do you see them?”

“No,” she said. “I see the stairwell though. It’s on the second floor of the house.”

The magical balloon was attached to the house with a massive net. The airplane eased in like a boat against a dock, coming to a stop against the edge of the colossal balloon. We were a good forty feet above the top of the house.

“I’m going in,” Donut said. She jumped from her back seat to the net of the balloon.

I held my breath, worried the magical protection would hurt Donut. Mordecai said she’d be able to touch it, and he was thankfully correct. I climbed up out of my seat, balanced on the nose, using the top wing to steady myself. I jumped over to the balloon, also clinging onto the net. Donut dropped to my shoulder.

“You’re not scared of heights, are you Carl?” Donut asked, looking down. She had a death grip on my shoulder.



“No,” I said as I started to scale my way down the net. The *Nightmare II* hung directly over my head, bobbing in the air. Once the escape balloon of the airplane touched the giant balloon, it also started glowing, like the balloon-protecting magic was contagious.

“Are you sure? It’s really far,” Donut said. “Look, we can see the lights on the ground level. I think that’s the mage castle. It’s really far down there.”

“We already fell once. There’s lots of shit that scares me, Donut. Height isn’t one of them.”

“Well it should scare you, Carl. This is terrifying.”

“Don’t look down.”

“Where else am I going to look, Carl?”

“You didn’t seem afraid earlier when we were in the other hot air balloon.”

“That was before we fell out of the sky. I would like to avoid doing that again.”

We quickly descended. The net attached to the house at the four corners of the lot. I didn’t want to risk jumping to the roof and sliding off the edge, so I climbed all the way to the dirt lot and jumped down.

The ground felt unsteady. It wasn’t the same as being on water, but it was an odd, stomach-lurching sensation. We took a few steps toward the house. I moved slowly, wary of a trap or ambush.

“You don’t see anything?” I asked again.

“Nothing.”

They had to have heard us coming. We approached the porch. A cockeyed “Welcome” sign hung from the center of the dirty, white door. The sign was hand-painted in blue and silver paint and had a star at the bottom, indicating the previous owners had been Dallas Cowboys fans. The doormat had a picture of a pistol and said, “We don’t dial 911.”

“I’m getting mixed signals,” said Donut.

She released Mongo, who landed onto the porch with a screech. He looked around, eyes going wide when he realized the ground was

moving. He turned and looked up at Donut and let out a worried squeak.

Donut leaped from my shoulder to the back of Mongo and gave him a little pat on the top of the head. "So, are we just going to stand here, or are we breaking the door in?"

I eyed the doorbell and contemplated just ringing it to see what would happen. Probably a bad idea, I decided. "Okay, we'll send Mongo and the clockworks through the upper window, and we'll breach in through the front door. We'll meet at the stairwell, but tell Mongo not to..."

I didn't finish. The front door opened, and a young, female gnome stood there, gazing at us.

"Hello," she said. She wore an oversized Dallas Cowboys jersey as a dress. She had brown pigtails peeking out from under her red, conical hat. The front of the jersey was smeared with blood.

"Have you come to kill my father? You're a little late. He's already dead. Do you want to come in? I'm making lemonade!"

I QUICKLY EXAMINED THE SMALL GIRL'S PROPERTIES. HER DOT was white on the map.

**Bonnie – Dirigible Gnome. Juvenile. Level 5.**

**Little Bonnie only loves two things in this world. Her pet pig Sausage and getting what she wants.**

**The only daughter of Commandant Kane, a case can be made that she's the true leader of the *Wasteland*. It is said that when Sausage was captured and held as ransom by the Bactrian camels, the young woman threw such an epic temper tantrum that the only thing that calmed her was watching her father order the bombing of the neutral changeling settlement.**

**That's the rumor, at least. The truth is, nobody knows much about the shy child. As such, do not judge her too harshly. She is but a spoiled, rich kid. If she's evil, she doesn't know any better. If she's not, it's a tragedy that you're probably gonna have to kill her.**

**Life's a bitch.**

**Carl: She's not a changeling is she?**

**Donut: I DON'T THINK SO. HER BRAIN ISN'T HOTTER THAN IT SHOULD BE.**

**Carl: Same plan. We'll follow her inside, but as soon as we're in, send Mongo and the clockwork dinos through the upper window. Tell them to be quiet.**

**Donut: THEY DON'T KNOW HOW TO BE QUIET.**

I hesitantly followed the young gnome into the home. The power was on, and the home was well-lit, though the lights were constantly flickering.

Even with the hat, the child was barely taller than Donut. The place stank like a mix of cigars and that lilac-scented, bargain deodorizer one would get at the dollar store. A line of framed photographs of smiling human children sat on the floor, propped up neatly against the wall. The portraits had once been hanging on the now-bare walls, but they'd fallen off. In fact, the entire interior of the home had clearly been upset by the recent tumult. I spied broken glass on the floor and bricks scattered about near the fireplace. A large flatscreen television lay on its side in the living room.

**Carl: Donut, you do the talking.**

"I'm setting up a lemonade stand," the girl said as she walked toward the kitchen. I could see the large, magnet-covered refrigerator at the end of the hall. "I was going to open it up tomorrow. You guys can test it for me. My name is Bonnie!"

I cringed at the loud crash that came from upstairs as Mongo and the two others jumped through the second-floor window. The girl turned and looked upward. "What's that?"

"Bonnie, what happened to your father?" Donut asked, trying to distract her. A line of blood ran from the kitchen area to the front door. The entire front of her oversized shirt was stained red, like she'd been lying in a puddle of blood.

The child shrugged and turned back to the kitchen. I hesitantly followed. We passed the stairwell. Mongo and the automatons appeared at the top of the stairs, looking disappointed they hadn't found anything to kill. Donut waved at them to stay put. Bonnie didn't notice or acknowledge the dinosaurs. Instead, I followed her to the kitchen. A pitcher filled with yellow liquid sat upon the counter. A bag of sugar and several cut up lemons lay nearby. Next to the mess was a sign that appeared to be hand-painted in blood. It read "The Sausage Memorial Fund Lemonade Stand. One gold piece a cup."

And there, draped across the small kitchen table, was the bloody, dead body of a dirigible gnome.

**Lootable Corpse. Commandant Kane. Dirigible Gnome. Level 55. Ripped to shreds by Denise.**

I couldn't tell what had happened to the gnome. He looked half eaten.

Bonnie hummed a little song as she pulled herself onto a chair and then hopped up onto the counter. She poured a glass of lemonade. The pitcher was almost as big as she was, but she handled it easily. She pushed the glass across the counter and toward me.

"Both of you, take a sip! Tell me what you think. But if you like it, you have to pay me a gold coin."

"Bonnie," I asked, not taking the glass. "Who is Denise?"

"Oh," she said, looking up. I realized the kid's eyes were completely dilated. *She's under a spell.* "Is she back? She went out to get some food."

I looked around nervously. "Who is she?" I asked again. She didn't answer.

"Bonnie, who is Denise?" Donut asked.

That little needle I'd just installed into my UI to indicate current streams was starting to spike.

"When Sausage got taken, my father kept getting me new pets to make me stop missing Sausage."

Sausage, I assumed, was the now-dead pig from the Bactrian

settlement. I now knew if we'd gotten there first, we'd have been able to use the thing to get up here.

"He tried the gerbils, but I didn't like any. Plus they're all mean. Then we tried other stuff, including ol' Denise. She's okay, I guess. But she's no Sausage. Don't tell her that, though. She gets jealous."

"Why did Denise kill your father?" Donut asked.

"He, you know..." She pointed to the kitchen sink. There was nothing there. It was just a typical sink.

"He what?" Donut asked. "Bonnie, we do not understand."

She ignored the question and pushed the glass closer to the edge of the counter. "My father gave me the recipe. It's good. Try some."

I swallowed and examined the drink.

### **Unknown Potion**

#### **The kid says this is "Lemonade."**

"Uh," I said, taking a step toward the corpse. I needed to get close enough to loot him without it being too obvious. At the same time, I sent a note to Mordecai. "You don't seem to be too upset your dad is dead."

An eclectic line of shotglasses sat on the counter. The kid poured some of the yellow potion into one that read "Remember the Alamo" and drank it down. There wasn't any obvious effect. "It's so good. Did I tell you I'm setting up a lemonade stand?" She lowered her head. "Sausage died. They promised they'd take care of him, but they didn't. So we bombed them all. My dad said it'd make me feel better, but it didn't."

The walls shook. The ground lurched. The pitcher of lemonade sloshed, and the other shotglasses fell to the floor. I stumbled at the sudden movement, and I fell toward the corpse. I accidentally stuck my hand right into the dead body of Commandant Kane. It felt as if I'd reached into a lukewarm bowl of pot roast. The loot menu popped up.

**5,030 gold pieces.**

**Letter from the Glass Wizard.**

**Mysterious Watch.**

I took all the items. Before I did anything else, I immediately examined the letter. It was short.

**Kane,**

**Cease your hostilities immediately. Your bombs do not harm me, but they are ruining the structure of the temple, weakening its wall. Surely you do not want the whole thing to collapse? Even in your floating city, you must know the danger we all face if such a thing were to happen.**

**I propose a truce.**

**You stop the bombing, and I won't end this world.**

**I have the winding box. I know you have at least one of the watches. Perhaps both. It doesn't matter anymore. I have cracked the box's secret. I know how to open a portal, and I do not need the other two pieces to throw this entire world into the void. I will do that before I allow that ghost to leave the temple.**

**You do not need to answer. Just stop. I know how much you love your people and your child. Think of them. Of her. Stop.**

**Ghazi.**

As I finished reading, I finally noticed that our altitude was starting to dip. The lights in the house flickered.

"Oh great," I said. Something had happened to the balloon. Our decline was slow, thankfully, but that couldn't be good. I wiped my gore-covered hand on my shirt.

"That's Denise," Bonnie said, looking up. "When she gets mad, magic stuff doesn't work. The balloon starts to sink. She usually gets over it pretty soon. She's probably on the roof."

Somewhere in the house, there was a crash followed by a distinctive *pop*. That was the sound of the clockwork Mongos exploding,

even though they still had plenty of time left. Mongo let out a terrified screech.

I suddenly felt heavier and more tired. I'd lost most of my buffs, including the 14 strength from my toe ring and my two regular rings. All of my important stats had just taken a hit.

"Mongo?" Donut called, concerned. "Mongo, come to mommy!"

**Mordecai: Sounds like a boss battle is about to start. The potion's purpose will probably become clear. Don't drink it, but try to secure it.**

**Carl: The monster blocks magic!**

**Mordecai: Shit, okay. This can manifest in a lot of different ways. But it likely means no spells. No scrolls. Your gauntlet won't form. Only inherent potions will work. Maybe. But if they do, they might not work as well.**

**Carl: Goddamnit, in English!**

**Mordecai: Healing potions will work but only on yourself if they work at all. That new splat potion you just got won't work. You've likely lost the protections of your gear. Your active buffs are probably gone too. Be careful.**

Mongo rushed into the kitchen, screaming, blood rushing from dozens of places on his body. He made a pitiful, bleating noise. He hadn't been attacked, I realized. The other two clockwork Mongos had exploded and injured him. The little clockwork pieces usually didn't hurt him.

Donut gasped in panic. "Carl, Carl, my heal spell stopped working! I can't fix Mongo!"

She rushed to the dinosaur, whose health was about halfway down. She glowed as she attempted to use a *Heal Critter* scroll. The spell fizzled out.

"Look, his health is going back up on its own. He'll be okay," I said. "Stop wasting scrolls. They won't work. We need to..."



“Do you want some lemonade?” Bonnie asked again, more insistent this time.

I remembered what Mordecai had said. “Yeah, thanks kid,” I said, reaching for the glass.

The walls shook again, followed by a mighty, distinctive *honk!* The whole house lurched sideways. The pitcher of lemonade went flying. Little Bonnie screeched and tumbled off the edge of the kitchen counter, throwing the glass aside. Plates and cups flew from the cupboards. The kitchen drawers opened, spilling cutlery everywhere.

I jumped for the flying glass of the yellow potion, but I missed. I would’ve caught it, but the glass physically moved in midair away from my hand.

*Sonofabitch*, I thought. That was on purpose. They were never going to let me grab it. Me trying to grab the glass of lemonade was a trigger. It was like I’d just tripped a trap, or stepped on a landmine.

The cup hit the ground, bounced once, then spun away, spilling the potion. The house swung a few times and righted itself. Music started to play. The open window over the kitchen sink slammed shut on its own.

“Oh, poo,” Bonnie said. “I spilled the drink everywhere. I’m going to have to make more.”

We were locked in the house. It was just like a boss battle from the first floor.

The music was different than usual. It was slow and haunting, but with a distant, steady beat. *A chink, chink, chink*, almost like a hammer slowly beating onto an anvil.

A giant timer appeared in the air, floating in the middle of the kitchen. It was at three minutes.

“Uh-oh. That’s new,” Donut said.

I turned to face the hallway. The front door to the house was still open, I started to point, but the world froze.

*Fuck. Here it comes.*

**B-B-B-Boss Battle!**

**It's a timed knock out fight!**

**You have discovered the lair of a Borough Boss!**

**Ladies and Gentlemen, the stakes are getting higher, the battles are getting harder, and tonight we have the day's main event!**

**I want you to put your hands together.**

**Here are the rules, Contestants!**

**The house is falling. It will shatter against the ground in exactly three minutes after the end of this message. In order to escape, you must defeat the boss!**

**Easy, right?**

**Wrong, bitches!**

Our mugshots appeared floating in the air. But this time the words **No Magic** stamped on each of our faces.

**You can't use offensive or defensive magic for this fight!**

I couldn't move my head, but I could still speak. "Stay behind me, Donut. You're too fragile. I'll do the punching. Keep Mongo back until he's fully healed."

"Carl, I don't like this. I don't have anything without magic!"

A second stamp crashed onto our names. **No Physical Damage!**

**Oh yes, that's right! Your own physical attacks won't do shit, either!**

"What the hell?" I shouted. "How is that fair?"

**This should be a hoot! A hoot, I say! Actually, not a hoot. A...**

*"Honk!"*

The world unfroze for a moment as the white goose walked through the front door of the house. She waddled into the hallway and angrily honked again as the door slammed behind her.

The thing wore a frilly, baby blue bonnet along with a blue shawl around her neck. The shawl was torn and stained with blood. Other

than the blood, she looked like a regular white goose, plucked straight from the cover of a children's book.

**It's...**

**Denise! The Feral Goose Mother!**

**Level 53 Borough Boss!**

**Like most of the creatures in this godsforsaken bubble, Denise shouldn't be here. She was plucked directly from the seventh floor when her grandfather, emperor Anser, decided to use a magical gate to bring his people to this world. But like many of those who were unwilling in their journey to this place, she lingered too long in the inbetween. The Nothing.**

**She paid dearly for it. Her mind is all but gone.**

**The gnomes captured her long ago, but they do not know who she really is. Denise doesn't know, either. She has a few special abilities. Abilities that only recently started to manifest themselves. She can prevent magic from harming her. She is an environmental. She has an overwhelming need to protect children.**

**But most of all, she just wants to kill everybody. Especially bitches.**

**And guess what you are?**

**Tick Tock, motherfuckers.**

**Aaaand here. We. Gooooo!**

The world unfroze, the timer started to move, and the goose screamed in outrage and charged.

Mongo and I both scrambled out of the way as the shrieking goose slid into the kitchen, waving her wings furiously as she slammed into the refrigerator, causing magnets to scatter. The door dented.

"Hi, Denise!" Bonnie said as she continued to stack lemons onto the chair, as if this was the most normal thing in the world.

“Come on!” I yelled. “To the top of the stairs!”

“Mongo, no! Come!” Donut shrieked.

It was too late. The still-injured Mongo screeched and leaped across the room, feet first. He raked his claws across the recovering goose. He chomped onto the neck of the boss and started shaking it like a dog. The goose honked angrily and flapped her wings as Mongo threw the creature down. The boss bounced once and hopped back up. She jumped atop the kitchen table with the gnome corpse and stood upon the dead body and flapped her wings again, honking and growling at Mongo.

“You’re so silly, Denise,” Bonnie said.

The boss opened her bill to reveal multiple lines of shining, razor teeth. A health bar had not appeared. Then the mouth opened further, from the sideways this time, causing the whole mouth to open like a flower. A purple tongue dripped from the beak. It honked, but this time it came out twice as loud and deep, a terrifying, guttural cry straight from hell.

Its teeth shot out of its mouth, blasting at us like a shotgun. A line of fire cut across my arm and face. Donut cried out in pain.

It hadn’t done much damage, but it hurt.

Mongo cried out in rage and pain and moved to attack again.

“Mongo, no!” Donut cried as I lobbed a banger sphere at the goose’s head. The goose honked in surprise as the metal ball ricocheted off her bill. It staggered her, but again, no health bar appeared. We weren’t damaging the goose at all.

Donut chomped firmly onto the dinosaur’s tail and yanked, pulling the indignant and screeching Mongo back just as the goose lunged. The boss barely nipped him, but she dislodged a chunk of flesh and blue and pink feathers. Blood sprayed.

Donut, mouth still full of dinosaur tail, let out a strangled cry. Mongo’s health was now even deeper in the red. I grasped the dinosaur on both sides and heaved, tossing him back, throwing him and Donut toward the kitchen door.

“Go!” I yelled as I slipped backward on the bloody floor. As I

scrambled to my feet, my hand found a ceramic mug that had fallen from the cabinet. I picked it up and flung it at the goose's head like I was pitching a fastball. The mug shattered, and the goose crashed back, flying off the table, upsetting it and launching Commandant Kane's corpse straight into the air. The dead gnome splatted into the ceiling then splashed wetly onto the kitchen floor.

"Mongo, follow me!" Donut cried as she let go of his tail.

Mongo, having decided this was probably a good idea, shrieked again but complied.

"Up the stairs," I cried as I stumbled toward the door. The house was falling faster and faster, and I could now feel our downward momentum. "We need to get out of the kitchen! Bonnie, make your lemonade. Hurry up!"

We needed to get the goose away from the kid. Whatever was in that damn potion, it had to be the secret to killing the monster. It was the only thing that made sense.

We rushed down the hallway. I tossed a side table over as the goose cried furiously. I was about to drop a smoke curtain, but I thought better of it. Even though her dot was still white on the map, I didn't want to distract Bonnie the gnome even more.

*Two minutes.*

How in the hell were we going to defeat it? Mordecai said there would always be clues. But what were they? The stairs ended in a T with a hallway reaching in each direction. There were several doors here, all ajar except one. Two of the open doors led to small bedrooms, one a bathroom, one a linen closet. The door furthest to the right was closed, and that was the "throne room" where the stairwell to the sixth floor was located. It was actually just the master bedroom to the house. The door glowed, and I knew it would remain locked until this fight was over.

The area was scorched and burned from the clockwork Mongos getting themselves dispelled prematurely.

Donut continued to be preoccupied with Mongo and not the fight. The dinosaur was bleeding and injured, but he no longer

appeared to be in pain. He let out a frustrated shriek as Donut clucked over him.

“Carl, Mongo won’t stop bleeding! My pet carrier doesn’t work! His health is still going down!”

There was a broken side table in the hallway. I picked it up and tossed it onto the stairs. “Try using one of those bandages!” We each had hundreds of the damn things. It wouldn’t heal him, but it would hopefully stop the bleeding.

Downstairs, angry honking filled the hall as the goose left the kitchen and went looking for us.

“We’re up here, ya overgrown duck!” I called.

“It worked!” Donut cried. “It’s okay. We’ll get you healed in a minute! Carl, what are we...”

“Go into that room there,” I said, pointing to a bedroom with pink walls and posters for some Korean boy band. “It’s directly over the kitchen. Break through the floor and make the hole big enough for all of us to drop through. Hurry!”

The beat to the boss music was getting louder and faster as the timer moved downward.

Donut scrambled into the room just as the goose appeared at the bottom of the stairs. It opened up its weird flower-mouth and honked. I ducked as she fired her mouth teeth again. The little darts peppered their way across the wall around me. Two of the barbs caught me in the face.

“Gah,” I cried, pulling a sharp tooth out of my cheek.

She wasn’t the most powerful mob we fought, but that didn’t matter. She was practically indestructible, and all she needed to do was hold out for just a little longer.

It was only then did I notice the boss now had a health bar. Her health had barely gone down, but something had injured her. But what? The goose charged up the stairs, hopping up one step at a time, bobbing her head back and forth and hissing. Her blue bonnet flapped as she growled. I threw a banger, catching her in the chest. She flew back in rage, opening her mouth to fire again. I managed to

dive out of the way this time. I risked dropping a smoke bomb, and then I popped up and knocked her back again.

*One minute.*

“We did it!” Donut cried from the next room.

I jumped up and ran to the room, slamming the door behind me. I looked down through the jagged hole. Donut had easily ripped up the carpet and the wooden panels. Bonnie looked up at us through the hole. The kitchen was a bloody mess. The corpse of Kane lay on the ground, face down. Bonnie had a spoon in the pitcher and was mixing it.

“Is it done?” I called down to the kid.

“It’s better cold,” she said. “Why did you break the ceiling?”

The door to the room slammed as the goose blindly crashed into it. “Come on!” I jumped down through the hole, followed by Donut and Mongo. Mongo now had some stuffed animal in his mouth. A pink rabbit thing he’d gotten from the room.

The description on the newly-mixed pitcher of yellow liquid hadn’t changed. I still didn’t know if I should drink the potion or give it to the monster. It wasn’t hurting the kid. She was under some weird spell, but it seemed to protect her from the bird’s wrath. Plus, what did she say? Her father had given her the recipe.

*Fuck it*, I thought. I grabbed the pitcher from the tiny girl.

“Hey!” she cried. “Let me pour you a glass! You can’t just take all of it!”

“I’ll buy the whole pitcher,” I said just as the goose appeared in the hole over our heads. It opened its mouth and hissed. It jumped down toward us as I pulled the pitcher to my mouth.

The world froze once again, the goose hovering in mid-air. The timer froze, stuck on thirty-eight seconds. I felt a swell of hope.

**New Achievement! Wild Goose Chase!**

**Oh, I’m sorry. Did you think this was an important potion?**

**Magic doesn’t work, dumbass. It’s lemonade!**

***Reward: It really is delicious. Too bad you're about to splatter against the roof of the catacombs.***

And just like that, the world unfroze.

“Shit,” I cried, scrambling out of the way as the goose slammed onto the kitchen counter.

It was a trick. And I'd fallen for it. The whole lemonade thing was a deliberately-placed misdirection.

Denise opened her flower mouth and prepared to fire point blank at me. I clobbered her with the pitcher, causing her to rear back.

Her health went down. Barely, but I saw it move.

I finally understood. The description had said she was an “environmental.” I didn't think about what that meant at the time. Everything was happening so fast, and I hadn't realized that was a specific type of buff. Her health had gone down before when I hit her with the mug, and again with the pitcher. She was impervious to my attacks and my weapons. But she was vulnerable to damage from objects that were already in the house. I thought of the bricks lying about the fireplace. Of the broken shards of glass on the ground. It was too late to get to any of it.

*Twenty seconds.*

I leaped for the goose, and grabbed her by the neck. She let out a strangled screech and flapped her wings. I tried to grab her bill, but she dodged. She opened her mouth and fired directly at me.

I cried as the stinging line of pain marched across my face and neck. It hurt a lot more this time. It was like getting hit with a flaming baseball bat. My health plummeted. I slammed on a health potion. It did not work. I suddenly couldn't see from my left eye. The goose squirmed in my grip, but I grasped again, this time grabbing her by the face and holding the bill shut. She struggled, but despite being a higher level, I was stronger. I felt woozy. I was going to pass out. I clung onto the goose for dear life.

What had the kid said about her father? She'd pointed to the sink. What had she meant? I looked again. There was nothing there. What had Kane been trying to do?



I saw the twin light switches to the right of the basin, and then I knew.

“Donut,” I cried, my voice a strangled shout as I lurched toward the sink.

“What! What?”

*Ten seconds.*

I shoved the goose into the sink, face first. She struggled, feet scrambling against me. Everything was suddenly hazy. I had to move my hand back to get Denise’s bill in the drain. She tried to open her mouth to block me. I shoved it in there. Her head was too big. I pushed and pushed. Her bonnet ripped off as her head popped into the hole.

“The garbage disposal! Hit the switch!”

*Five seconds.*

Donut leaped to the counter and flipped the first switch as I held the goose’s head in the hole. The light switched on. “The other switch!”

Donut hit it.

The garbage disposal whined, sounding like it was eating rocks. Denise went rigid in my hands, her body convulsing like I was holding onto a short-circuiting power tool. Blood showered up through the hole, geysering into the kitchen.

The timer paused at one second.

The whole house jerked to a stop, and we all flew off our feet. The boss, still head-first in the disposal and no longer being held still by me, started to rapidly spin.

I cast *Heal* on myself, and this time it worked. I felt my buffs return. The garbage disposal screamed. Mongo glowed as Donut healed him. She turned back to the switch and turned off the disposal. The goose continued to spin a few times, *flap, flap, flap, flap* before coming to a rest and flopping over. The now-headless boss slopped out of the sink and into my lap, where the blood continued to squirt out the neck hole.

**Bubble Notification. The Commandant’s quarters**

**of the *Wasteland* have been successfully occupied. The Air Quadrant has been liberated!**

**All give congratulations to the crawlers who successfully took the throne room. All hail crawlers Princess Donut and Carl!**

**All crawlers who originated in the Air Quadrant may now freely travel to the other quadrants.**

I looked up at the ceiling. “Wild goose chase? Really? How long have you been waiting to use that one?”

The house bumped as it gently hit the ground.

**STAGE 3 OF 4.**

**The Mad Dune Mage**

**Time to Level Collapse: 10 Days and 4 Hours**

**Views: 17.72 Quintillion**

**Followers: 13 Quadrillion**

**Favorites: 4.1 Quadrillion**

“I did all that sewing for nothing?” Katia said as we stepped out the front door of the house. She and the others were waiting for us. I came out and shook hands with Landry and the other archers. Louis and Firas were also there, all looking wide-eyed at the suburban house that now sat cockeyed in the sand dune.

“The parachutes will still come in handy,” I said. “Katia, this is Bonnie.”

“Hey there,” Katia said, taking a knee in front of the child. “How are you doing, sweetheart?”

“Do you know where I can get some lemons?” the child asked. “I want to set up a lemonade stand, but I used them all.” She gave me a withering look. “*Somebody* keeps spilling it.”

---

The house had landed along the edge of the bowl about a half of a mile east of Hump Town. We still had a good hour of darkness left before dawn. After the death of Denise, the magical balloon started to slowly refill itself. The whole thing would take off again if we let it. Donut and I rushed out onto the little square and attempted to sever the lines that connected the home to the balloon, but the ropes were like steel cables. We were going to have to abandon the house if we wanted to avoid having to jump out.

I rushed to the kitchen to grab the kid, but she looked at me like I was crazy when I told her we had to leave.

“The house is about to take off again, and we can’t have you floating around up there by yourself. It’s not safe,” I said.

“Well let’s just leave the house down here, then,” she said. She pulled a small object from the inside of her oversized shirt. It was a necklace. It looked like a walnut. She fiddled with it, and I felt the house settle.

“What is that? What did you do?” I asked.

She took the necklace from around her neck and handed it to me. “My dad gave it to me when he gave me the potion. He said to give it to an adult. I guess you’ll do.”

I took the necklace from the girl and examined it. It was a little, purple-hued gem. I recognized what it was immediately.

**Soul Crystal. F-Quality. Used to power the balloon that keeps this house afloat. Nothing too exciting. You probably want to avoid breaking it, though.**

**Charge: 89% Kill something to charge it up.**

The crystal was housed in a sliding clamshell-like device. It appeared one could control how much power it fed the balloon based on how much the clamshell was opened. The thing had stopped feeding power to the balloon all together when we were under the anti-magic aura of the feral goose.

We'd seen plenty of these things before. They controlled the ghoul generators on the last floor. I had, still sitting in my inventory, a broken, about-to-explode soul crystal that would flatten everything within forty-five square kilometers the moment I took it out. That one was "C-quality" though it wasn't much bigger than this one. I wondered how powerful a B or A quality gem would be.

"I'm going to keep this, okay?" I said to the kid. I kept the little shell open just a fraction, enough to keep the balloon off the ground, but not enough to lift the house. Hopefully. I'd have to go out there and experiment.

Bonnie shrugged.

The house sat at an angle along a sand dune. The interior looked how one might expect a house would after a boss fight with a murderous, indestructible goose. Everything that wasn't bolted down was on its side or spilled. Now that I knew the house wouldn't fly away, we had a lot of work to do.

Donut and I had both gone up a single level. I was now at 44, and Donut was 37. That was it. It felt as if we should've gotten more. Mongo had gone up three, hitting level 33. I was pretty sure I'd never understand how these experience points were allocated. It almost seemed random, despite Mordecai's insistence that it was not.

"See if you can figure out what's wrong with the kid," I said to Donut. "Her dad gave her something. Talk with Mordecai and try to work it out." Bonnie was on her hands and knees picking up the forks and spoons that had scattered everywhere.

The kid had barely reacted to anything that had happened. After the gruesome death of Denise, she complained that she didn't have enough lemons to make another batch of lemonade and then set out to clean the kitchen. Her eyes remained dilated as she went to work,

cleaning up like it was nothing. She worked around the corpse of her father. She was acting normal, which was absolutely abnormal in this situation.

The power to the house remained connected. Same with the water. That wasn't coming from the soul crystal. While Donut talked to the kid, I had three goals. First I was going to check out the stairwell and throne room—aka the master bedroom. Then I would secure all the windows with tarp so this place didn't get filled with sand. And finally, I was going to loot every damn thing I could pick up. I was going to inspect and remove the electrical panel if I could. Everything.

Mongo still clutched onto the stuffed pink rabbit he'd gotten from the kid's room. I patted the durable dinosaur on the head as I went upstairs. The door to the master bedroom opened without any effort. I stepped into an unremarkable room. A king-sized bed with crumpled, blue sheets stood against one wall, and a tall dresser with all the drawers opened sat against the other, still miraculously standing. Spilled men's and women's clothing covered the floor. I eyed a uniform shirt for some plumbing company with the name "Dale" sewn on the breast. A framed, University of Arizona Master's Degree in library sciences for the woman who used to live here had fallen off the wall, but the glass hadn't broken. Her name had been Jennifer.

Jennifer and Dale. They'd had three kids. They'd likely all been asleep when it happened.

I couldn't stop thinking about what Maggie had said, that they could bring people back. I didn't want to think about it, about the potential horrors we could face if we lived past this day or the next.

*You're lucky*, I thought. *There's only two people out there they could dredge up.* For most, that number had to be a lot higher.

I noticed something else. On the nightstand, a photo that had fallen over. I picked it up. It wasn't a photo, but a drawing. It was Kane, a woman gnome, and a baby. He'd removed the existing photo and placed it in the frame. He'd slept in this bed.

It also appeared he'd been jerking off to *Cosmopolitan* maga-

zines. A pile of them lay scattered on the floor along with dozens of used tissues. I sighed and turned to the large walk-in closet.

I could see it on the map, the stairwell. I opened the closet door, and there it was. It was only wide enough for two people to walk down side-by-side. It didn't make sense, physics wise, since we were on the second floor of a house, but there it was. A blue forcefield prevented me from entering. We still had two more throne rooms to capture before it would open.

After I secured the windows the best I could, mostly by duct-taping sheets and tarp over them, I went to work looting everything. Books, toys, furniture. The man had been pretty short, unfortunately, so there was nothing that'd fit me. The boys had been teenagers, and the girl had been about twelve or so. I secured everything I could, including two laptops, three televisions, and several gaming consoles.

Bonnie had been sleeping in the girl's room. I took the bed and nightstand. The closet was filled with Barbie dolls and tons of little animal action figure things. I took it all.

I finally hit paydirt in the garage. In addition to two mountain bicycles and a cheap, plastic kayak, they had a full workbench filled with tools that had been meticulously organized. There were boxes and boxes of crap. A bunch of Christmas supplies, including a fake tree, had been recently put away. I took it along with a box of Halloween and fourth of July decorations.

The electrical panel was also in the garage. I pulled the main house breaker, and the power didn't go out. It was as if all the lines were just electrified without a source. I carefully snipped a line to test it, and the downline outlet still worked. I removed the outlet from the garage wall, and only then did it stop working. It didn't make sense. It was some magic or game bullshit. If it was attached to where it was supposed to be, it worked, but not once it was removed.

I didn't want to flood the house, so I didn't try it with the pipes. I did, however, completely disconnect the main house panel and take it. I doubted I'd have use for it, but you never knew.

I did not locate what I was hoping to find. This house came from

Texas. They had a doormat that claimed they had guns. If they had any in the house, however, the system didn't include them when it reconstituted the place. If the couple had a gun safe, it'd probably been in that closet in the master bedroom.

*Oh well*, I thought. This was still a great haul.

I wandered back to the kitchen. This was the last room I needed to clear, and I hadn't covered the window or back door yet. Donut sat on the counter, chatting away with Bonnie who continued to pick things up.

"She's telling me about Sausage, her pig," Donut said. "She says her mother bought him for her."

"Ahh," I said.

**Donut: SHE SAID HER DAD GAVE HER A POTION TO DRINK AFTER WE BLEW UP THE WASTELAND. SHE'D BEEN CRYING A LOT BUT IT HELPED HER STOP. SHE WAS SLEEPING NEXT TO HER DAD IN THE KITCHEN WHEN WE CAME. MORDECAI SAYS IT'S PROBABLY GOING TO WEAR OFF SOON.**

**Carl: Jesus. Poor kid. I'm glad we got to her before it wore off. Katia and the others will be here at first light. They're going to bring Juice Box, who'll take care of her.**

---

"Carl, look!" Donut exclaimed. We were marching back to Hump Town with the others. I turned to see the airplane slowly descending from the sky. It was the *Nightmare II*. It had dislodged itself from the main balloon during the boss fight, and the emergency balloon had finally lost its juice, sending the plane slowly back to the ground.

I sent Louis and Firas out to secure it and drag it back to the house. It would probably fit in that large garage. I tasked them with



sticking it in there to protect it from the next storm. It'd give them something to do.

I watched the men scurry off. They both had a new borough boss star after their names. They, along with the archers, had gotten into a fight with the Thorny Devil queen. Langley said they'd held their own during the fight.

After they killed the queen, the regular thorny devil mobs just disappeared. We still had those small, explosive things that came out at night and the birds, but we'd pretty much cleared out the bowl.

Bonnie walked next to Juice Box, who'd taken on the form of a dirigible gnome woman. Bonnie clutched onto her hand as they waddled along the hot desert floor. The spell still hadn't worn off.

"We'll take care of her," Juice Box said. "Orphans will always have a home in Hump Town."

**Donut: THAT SOUNDS OBSCENE.**

**Carl: Not now, Donut.**

As we walked, I reached up and patted Donut on the head.

"That was too close, Donut," I said.

"But we made it, didn't we?" She was furiously rubbing sand out of her fur. "God, it's hot. Carl, you need to invent a portable air conditioner. This is not acceptable."

"Look," I said. "We need to talk about that battle. I'm glad you and Mongo have bonded so well. And I know it didn't really matter this time, but I need you in the fight. Mongo is going to get injured. You can't get overwhelmed by that. We'll protect him and each other the best we can, but you were in a full-on panic over his injuries, and it caused you to completely check out."

Donut paused in her self-cleaning. "What are you trying to say, Carl?"

"I'm saying we're going to die if you're not paying attention to the fight. I can't do it all on my own."

"You didn't. Who flipped the switch? I mean, really. I couldn't cast my magic, and I am a magic class on this floor. What else was I

supposed to do? Vomit on the goose? Besides, you had clearly figured it out.”

“I hadn’t figured it out until the last minute. We got lucky.”

“That wasn’t luck, Carl. That was you being you. I’m pretty sure we were supposed to drown the goose in the sink. Or the lemonade pitcher. Not rip her head off in the garbage disposal. You’re a good fighter, Carl. And you think fast. That’s why we’re still alive. You rarely think of the proper answer to a problem, but you usually come up with one that works anyway.”

I stopped dead in the desert. I remembered Mordecai had said something once about that being the best way to kill invulnerable monsters. Drowning. *Of course*. Still, we’d only had three minutes. How long does it take to drown a goose? I would’ve had to have figured that out before the fight even started.

I was going to say something else, but Katia approached.

“So what’s next?” she asked. “Are we going into the necropolis?”

I pulled the letter from the mage and showed her.

“I’m pretty sure this means we have to take care of the land quadrant before we even try to storm the catacomb. The mage guy says he’d destroy this world before he’d allow the ghost out. I don’t know what’s going on there, but it’s not something we want to mess around with.”

Katia was visibly relieved. None of us relished the idea of going into a dark tunnel system that was filled with water and traps. I had an idea to mostly avoid it, but not until after we took out that land quadrant castle first.

“We’re all going to fly away in that stupid house, aren’t we?”

I grinned. “Don’t worry. It’ll be a party. A house party.”



Zev and Loita messaged us as we entered back through the town gates.

**Loita: Congratulations. Barely surviving battles is**

great for your numbers. Keep it up. Donut, you have a new box. They insist this version will not explode. Spend some time with it. If it works as intended, we are going to bring you two up to do the show a day early.

**Donut: I'M NOT OPTIMISTIC, LOITA.**

**Loita: I don't care if you're optimistic, crawler. Just do as you're told.**

**Donut: WELL YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A JERK ABOUT IT.**

**Loita: Do not talk back to me. You keep forgetting your place.**

**Donut: I DON'T LIKE YOU, LOITA. YOU SMELL REALLY BAD.**

**Loita: The feeling is mutual. And if you talk back again, I will have Mongo taken from you. We'll use him to feed a mob on the next floor and we'll make you watch. I can do that. Don't test me.**

On my shoulder, Donut let out a pained stream of breath.

**Carl: Now, now. There's no need for you to get your fish panties all wadded up. We'll play with the robot.**

**Zev: Anyway, the fans really enjoyed that battle. Good job you two. I'm sorry to say this is goodbye, however. I will still be Loita's assistant working behind the scenes, but I'm afraid you no longer need a social media manager.**

I held up my hand to stop Donut from saying anything.

**Carl: What do you mean?**

**Loita: She means you have purchased the social media board, so you no longer need her to interpret and relay what the dry masses are saying about you.**

**Carl: Can you at least send her down here so Donut can say goodbye to her?**

**Loita: No. Of course not.**

**Carl: What about that infomercial for the robot? Can she go to that?**

**Loita: No. It is not her job anymore. I will be there, of course. Now get back to work.**

The communication cut off.

“I didn’t even get a chance to say goodbye,” Donut said. She looked over at me, eyes wide. “I wouldn’t have asked for the social media board if I knew we wouldn’t get to talk to her anymore.”

“It’s okay, Donut,” I said. “We’ll see her again. I promise.”

“You shouldn’t promise things like that,” she said. “You shouldn’t make promises you can’t keep.”

I patted her on the head. “We *will* see her again, Donut. I keep my promises.”

She butted her head against mine, purring loudly.

---

Once we returned to base, I slept for two hours, showered, reset my buffs, trained, and ate. I spent some time with Mordecai, experimenting with different types of explosive recipes, including making a toothpaste-like gel that could burn long and hot. I was getting better at taking recipes from the cookbook and then steering conversations to make it look like Mordecai was coming up with the idea.

We watched the recap show. They featured the fight on the falling house, and I watched updates on several of the others. Prepotente and Miriam were just as far along as we were. They’d managed to scale the interior wall of their bubble and kill all the spiders by applying some debuff that made them all fall asleep and plummet to their deaths. That had somehow also finished out the subterranean zone in their bubble, and they were now preparing to go underwater.

The two-headed creature that represented the Popov brothers was on a pirate ship firing cannons at other pirate ships. I didn’t know what was going on there. Lucia Mar fought some multi-limbed

mummy ice thing and shattered him. She was actually working with a group of people, which surprised me, though the show was low on details. Quan Ch had already popped his bubble, and he was flying around farming all the mobs he could.

The top-ten list remained mostly the same, but Florin the crocodilian had dropped off. The last we'd seen him, he'd been sitting in the starting room refusing to choose a bubble quadrant after the death of Ifechi. I wondered where he was now, if he was even alive. The top ten list was:

**1. Lucia Mar – Lajabless – Black Inquisitor General – Level 41 – 1,000,000 (x2)**

**2. Carl – Primal – Compensated Anarchist – Level 44 – 500,000 (x2)**

**3. Prepotente – Caprid – Forsaken Aerialist – Level 38 – 400,000 (x2)**

**4. Donut – Cat – Former Child Actor – Level 36 – 300,000 (x2)**

**5. Dmitri and Maxim Popov – Nodding – Illusionist and Bogatyr – Level 37 – 200,000 (x2)**

**6. Miriam Dom – Human – Shepherd – Level 34 – 100,000 (x2)**

**7. Quan Ch – Half Elf – Imperial Security Trooper – Level 45 – 100,000 (x2)**

**8. Elle McGib – Frost Maiden – Blizzardmancer – Level 35 – 100,000**

**9. Bogdon Ro – Human – Legatus – Level 35 – 100,000**

**10. Chirag Ali – Human – Sacred Paladin – Level 35 – 100,000**

I still didn't know who that Bogdon Ro guy was. Quan had dropped several spots, probably because he'd cleared his bubble early and he wasn't making any moves to leave the area. People got bored easily. He remained the highest level, but I was catching up to him.

There was a new guy at the bottom of the list. I wasn't sure if I'd seen him or not on the show.

"I still don't understand how that goat is so popular," Donut grumbled. "I don't like being separated from you, Carl."

"Do you wish to talk about it?" Robot Donut asked. "We can have a gab session, just you and me, girlfriend."

"Oh be quiet," Donut said testily. The novelty of her having "merch" had finally worn off.

This newest version of the robot toy weighed about three times as much as the last one, and it was slightly bigger, too. Mongo had immediately attacked it, but it hadn't suffered any obvious damage this time. I spent some time playing with the thing, and it was pretty sturdy. They hadn't fixed much else, however. It still threw out random, bootleg Garfield quotes. It still reacted oddly to situations.

Still, this was the best version yet. And it worked as intended. Sort of. Loita informed us we'd go on the show in a few hours to discuss the product. Katia was still scheduled for another show, but she would go on tomorrow evening. Hopefully we'd be in the land quadrant by then.

The robot toy had a small panel on the back of the head that was held closed with a cheap, little tab, much like a battery compartment from a toy on earth. I clicked open the flimsy tab and received a warning that the thing was going to self-destruct in five seconds if I didn't put it back. I was genuinely curious what was going to happen since we were in a safe room, but at the last moment, I shoved the little rectangle back into place with a *click*.

Mordecai told me not to press my luck since this was a non-enhanced toy.

"What does that even mean?" I asked. I flicked the little tab. *Jesus, what a piece of shit.*

"You know how some video games required internet access to play? Even though they're single-player? This is the same sort of thing. Most toys nowadays require access to a licensed enhancement zone to work. And some even take it a step further and require the

child to have a license key installed in himself in order to unlock all the toy's features. It makes certain his parents are current in their taxes. This one doesn't have any of that. It's not as fancy as most of the stuff out there, but it's something that can be played with by a child who is on a long spacecraft voyage outside of a system's net. Or by a family too poor to pay their access tax. If you activate the self-destruct sequence, the AI can probably teleport it away, but it might not, especially since that was added to keep you out of its head. I honestly don't know what would happen. This isn't something you want to test."

The robot hopped up and down in agreement. "Carl, Carl, let's go kill another mantaur!"

I reached over and patted the robot on the head. It moaned. Like a sexual, human woman moan. I jerked my hand back. "Jesus Christ!"

**Carl: So this company, Veriluxx, they're genuinely trying to help poor kids with this bullshit?**

**Mordecai: I wouldn't go that far. I've never heard of them, but the logo on the benefactor box suggests they're associated with Veritan Linkage. That's a mostly-Soother lending fund that advocates for the enslavement of those who can't afford their taxes. I've been thinking about why a company would spend so much on such a stupid toy, and none of it makes sense. Only a mega corp could possibly afford such an expensive campaign, and they'd only do it if there was some sort of pay-off. I doubt just selling a cheap toy is their intent. Odds are we'll never know. It's likely just a way to funnel money to Borant. They're closely allied with them and the Bloom.**

**Carl: Christ. Is the whole universe filled with assholes?**

**Mordecai: Just the ones with the money.**

“Oh goodie,” robot Donut said. “I can’t wait to go onto another show. I’ll get even more fans!”

---

I spent some time playing with the watch. The thing was identical to the other one Henrik had. The description was less than helpful. I turned the bronze watch over in my hand. There was a bone symbol etched onto the metal. I’d seen that symbol before somewhere, but I couldn’t remember where. The watch wasn’t ticking.

**Mysterious Pocket Watch.**

**What in the hell is this thing? What does it do? It keeps terrible time. Sometimes the hands move on their own. And there’s a mirror built in that isn’t quite a mirror. You need to find a winding box to make it work.**

That was it. I opened it, and the little mirror above the face showed nothing but blackness. There was a tiny indicator for an alarm. If I pulled the tab on top of the watch out three times, I could set it. I moved it so it reached the hour hand, and the watch vibrated in my palm like a cell phone buzzing on silent. I’d set the alarm off.

The image on the little mirror changed. A fish-like creature appeared and met my gaze. The window suddenly went dark.

That was Henrik, I realized. He was in the necropolis with the other watch, and he was in the form of an underwater creature. I’d set the alarm off and signaled him. I sighed and snapped it closed. At least we knew the old changeling was still alive.

“Hey,” Katia said, sticking her head into the personal space. “Bonnie is starting to wake up out of her stupor. She’s over at Skarn’s house. You should go see her before you and Donut leave for your show.”

That was a good idea. We were going to do the infomercial, and the moment we got back, we were all going to get into the house and fly it out of the bowl.



“How’s she doing?” I asked as I followed Katia.

“Not so great. But she’s a kid. Kids are resilient.”

The dromedarians, to their credit, didn’t treat the girl poorly even though she was partially responsible for bombing their town. I wasn’t so sure humans would be so forgiving. A group of the camels stood outside the home, quietly talking amongst themselves. I followed Katia inside.

“This is where you’ll sleep,” Juice Box was saying. She indicated a corner of the room.

To my surprise, Donut and Mongo were already here. I hadn’t realized she’d finished with her training.

“This isn’t my bed,” Bonnie said, looking down at the simple cot. The little gnome had her arms wrapped around herself. She’d changed out of the bloody, oversized football jersey into a simple dress that was also too big for her. Skarn stood next to her, his hand on her shoulder. He’d transformed into a gnome also.

“Hey, here you go,” I said, pulling the pink bed out of my inventory. Everyone moved out of the way as I manhandled the bed into place. It was absurdly large for the little girl, but the home was spacious enough to accommodate it. This was the same bed she was sleeping in before. I then pulled the little side table that had been next to it, and I placed it down next to the bed.

The girl barely reacted.

“Denise killed my dad,” she suddenly said. “He knew she was going to do it. He said there was nothing he could do. He told me to make lemonade. I started to cry, and he gave me the potion, and I wasn’t scared anymore. Do you have another one of those potions? Please?”

“No, sweetie,” Juice Box said.

“It’s okay,” Skarn said. “When my town got bombed, my parents died, too. But they take care of me here. The camels are grumpy, but they aren’t mean.”

“Okay,” Bonnie said, her voice small. She rubbed her nose.

Mongo slowly approached the girl, and he dropped the stuffed

pink bunny in front of her. The girl picked it up and held it tight. She closed her eyes. I took the photo from my inventory, the one of her and her mother and father, and I put it on the nightstand.

**Loita: Oh for the sake of the gods. Audiences like drama, but not melodrama. Stop concerning yourself so much with NPCs. We'll be transferring you to your program in twenty minutes.**

I motioned to Katia and Donut, and we left the girl with Juice Box. I turned to look one last time, and the girl was sobbing, clutching onto the changeling woman while she held the stuffed pink rabbit. Juice Box stroked the girl's hair.

That was the moment. Right then. I'd been toying around with an idea, but I'd dismissed it as too risky. Too soon.

That was the moment I changed my mind.

<NOTE ADDED BY CRAWLER COOLIE. 19<sup>TH</sup> EDITION> *I WENT ON a program tonight. They transported me to a ship that floats in low orbit over the planet. The ship has an open window with no glass that is only protected by a forcefield. It is amazing. I can look down upon my planet. My beautiful, lost planet. If I am to die here, I want this to be my last view.*

---

**Carl: I have some things cooking on my sapper's table. Let me take care of them really quick before you transfer us.**

**Loita: You have ten minutes. Not a second longer. Hurry up, Carl. The Veriluxx crew is paying for a rental trailer.**

I rushed across the street to the closest pub and entered our personal space. I did, indeed, have two sets of smoke curtains infusing in potions. Ever since I'd read about the idea in the cookbook, I'd been experimenting with different combinations. The only thing

that'd worked so far was mixing a smoke bomb with a healing spell, which in turn was a great offense against undead. I hadn't the chance to use it yet.

I had two infusion stations on my table. In the first, I was currently attempting to mix a smoke curtain with a splash of the Rev-Up immunity smoothie I'd made on the second floor. The potion gave temporary disease immunity, but it made you drunk off your ass. I could tell right away that this one was a bust. The smoke curtain was blacked out and had gained the **Dud** status. That's what usually happened.

My second infusion was much more successful. I'd already known it was going to work because I'd stolen the recipe from the cookbook. I had to pretend like I'd stumbled on it on my own.

Most of my most recent boxes had contained at least one invisibility potion. They were pretty valuable. By the time I had five of them, I figured it was finally time to justify "wasting" one in order to experiment.

"Hey, it looks like this one actually turned into something," I said to robot Donut, who stood upon the table watching me work.

**Your Infusion skill has risen to level 3. Just wait until you learn how to do this with vodka.**

I picked up the round smoke curtain, which was normally red, but it now shined with a multi-colored opalescence.

### **Hobgoblin Disco Ball**

**Type: Magically-infused Deflagrating Tossable.**

**Effect: It's a real trip.**

**Status: 25. Unstable.**

**Molly not included.**

**Take a Hobgoblin smoke curtain, soak it in an invisibility potion, and what do you get? You get a party, that's what you get! Produces heavy, multi-hued billows of smoke that are both photosensitive and frequency responsive. And in case you don't know what that**

**means, just set one off and find out. The smoke will conceal all movement within, and the plumes will bounce to the beat.**

**Warning: Unlike a regular smoke curtain, the caster of this tossable is not immune to its effects. In other words, you'll be just as blind as the monsters. So you don't want to be dropping this thing at your feet unless you find yourself to be the most handsome dude at the orgy.**

The act of infusing smoke curtains made them inherently unstable, which is why I wanted to avoid trying this with actual explosives. I knew once my skill rose a little higher, that'd cease to be a problem. I placed the smoke curtain on the edge of the table while I closed up the infusing trays.

"Good job, Carl!" robot Donut said.

"Yeah, I gained a skill level," I said.

Robot Donut hopped up and down. "Yay! I love skill levels!"

When the robot jumped up, it sent the disco ball flying to the ground.

"Goddamnit, robot Donut," I cried.

The thing's status was protected while it was on the table, but not once it hit the floor. And while explosives would never go off in a safe room, that wasn't true for smoke bombs. I'd already had it happen to me a few times.

I took a step back and stepped directly onto the infused smoke curtain, which, of course, set it off.

A rainbow of smoke filled the crafting room. Mordecai, who was on the other side of the room, bent over his alchemy table, looked up in time to start cursing at me.

"Goddamnit it to hell," I said again. I scooped up robot Donut and held it to my chest while the thick smoke overwhelmed us. I held the robot tight as we were surrounded by eddies of smoke. "Mordecai, don't move! It'll go away in a minute."

"Pretty colors," robot Donut said. I felt the head turn around to

face me in the complete, multi-hued smoke storm. The voice went down an octave. “This is what we all see in the end. I’m always here for you, Carl.”

---

**Loita: Are you quite done? It’s time to go.**

**Carl: We’re ready.**

Donut had taken a shower and had talked Katia into brushing her while I’d screwed around in the crafting room. Katia had laughed her ass off at the disco ball incident, especially after Mordecai came out bitching up a storm, complaining that I’d ruined an hour’s worth of work. I clutched tightly onto the robot. The color tornado had only lasted for a minute, but it had left a sandy, technicolor residue over everything and everyone in the room. The whole common area smelled like burnt cotton candy. The cleaner bot beeped angrily at me and buzzed off toward the mess.

“I mean, really, Carl,” Donut said as I shook colorful dust from my hair. “You both look like you just slaughtered the cast of *Rainbow Bright*. After all that work we did to keep Mongo from hurting her, too. Robot Donut could’ve been damaged. Look at her! They’re not going to be happy, Carl.”

**Loita: Transferring now.**

“I’m better than ever, girlfriend!” Robot Donut said from my arms. Before Donut could respond, we flashed and reappeared into a production trailer.

I looked about, quickly assessing the situation. My feet sank into lush carpet. The tone of the hull quickly told me that we were under the surface, not floating. Despite our appearance under the water, my menus still disappeared. I did not have access to my inventory.

This was a nice, middle-quality trailer, but it was a submarine, not a boat like the last time we’d gone on a non-Odette show. Despite being under the surface, this trailer was set up similar to Odette’s production trailer with a green room and a doorway to the studio. In

fact, I realized, this was the exact same model, though the green room on this one had a different layout and included a large picture window that looked about the dark ocean.

“No snacks,” Donut grumbled.

Loita lounged on the couch in the very back of the room, which explained why our menus hadn’t appeared. She was comically small on the large cushion. She wore the fish rebreather around her neck, not the armored suit that Zev always insisted upon. The small device occasionally spit out a small spray of water. A large wet spot had formed around her. I approached and leaned over her, tapping on the window that looked out into the cold depths. I felt the water from her rebreather splash against my leg. It was fully dark out there. I felt the heavy weight of the water surrounding us. The “glass” felt more like plastic. I detected a hint of a forcefield on the outside, barely visible.

“Do these trailers go into space, like regular space ships?” I asked. “Or are they all off-loaded a larger transport?”

She frowned, as if surprised by the question. “How is that possibly your concern?”

“We got attacked from orbit a while back, and the folks who did it recently tried to kill us again. I was curious how stout these things are.”

“You’re perfectly safe, crawler. This is an underwater security trailer.”

I knocked on the wall again. “Security, huh? We just teleported in here like it was nothing. If I was an alien assassin, I’d probably figure out how to teleport myself into here, too. We had this show called *Star Trek*, and the bad guys were always beaming themselves onto enemy ships to attack.”

“You know, for such a famous crawler, you sure are a coward. The trailer is shielded once you arrive. Nobody comes in or out until the program is over. Again, you are safer here than you are in the dungeon.”

“I hope so,” I said. “Don’t forget, you’re in here with us, too.”

Her eyes widened, but it was quick. She finally noticed the dust-

covered robot Donut under my arm. She let out a little gasp of despair “Oh, you idiot! What did you do to the product sample?”

“Hi, I’m Princess Donut the Queen Anne Chonk!” the robot said to Loita. “What’s your name? We were doing crafts. Do you want to follow my feed? We kill with style!”

“Gods damnit, I knew you would cock this up,” Loita said. She sighed dramatically. Her eyes started flashing as she entered her menus. “Okay, okay. It’ll be fine. They have another model in there anyway. A real one, not the dungeon-enhanced version.”

“Like a real, real one?” I asked, turning toward the door. “Can we take it with us when we’re done?”

“No, of course not. It’ll be a holo.”

“Well that’s no fun,” I said.

“There will be a holo Donut doll along with a holo Mongo doll. You will go on and interact with the toys, but you will not physically touch them, lest we betray the illusion.”

Donut, who’d been sitting sullenly on the ground—refusing to get on the couch next to Loita and refusing to jump on my shoulder because I was still covered in multi-colored residue—did a little hop at the mention of a Mongo doll.

“Can I bring Mongo out? Wouldn’t that be lovely? He would just love to meet a toy version of himself.”

“No,” Loita said. “Just go out there, tell them what you think of the product. Read the script if you can’t think of anything to say. Do not be negative. This is not live, so don’t think you’re going to go changing the universe with your bravado today. Anything stupid you say will be edited out and we’ll all be stuck in this can for longer.” Loita waved her hand, and a virtual square appeared floating in midair in front of the couch. “I’ll be watching the taping from in here. Do not make me get up and go in there. I swear to the gods you will not be happy if I have to go in there.”

Donut grumbled something under her breath. It was something along the lines of “Talking Fancy Feast.”

“Why are you so angry all the time, Loita?” I asked.



The tiny fish woman glowered at me. For a moment, I didn't think she was going to answer. But then she said, "You. Your cat. Your people. Your ugly culture. This is a cancer upon the Bloom, and we should not be doing this."

I felt my eyebrow raise. "Doing what?"

"We should not be celebrating your culture. Spreading your filth so the fry may see."

I laughed bitterly. "Celebrating? You call this celebrating our culture? You're exterminating us and profiting upon our ashes."

"If it were up to me, we'd simply exterminate you and nothing else. You're filthy. You're dry. You're a rot upon the Bloom."

Donut swished her tail. "You probably shouldn't have become a PR agent if that's how you really feel, darling. Honestly, I can't help but feel you don't have our best interests at heart. This is why we worked much better with Zev. She understood how to exploit our star power."

That seemed to have struck a nerve. "Zev? What you have done to Zev is the exact reason you are so dangerous. She is young. She is impressionable. She is the future of the Kua-Tin. The Bloom. Her generation is enraptured by the newest, shiniest thing. They do not trust in the concept of system strength. Of True Unity. Of the Great Consensus. Do you know what we had to do just to bring Zev back into the fold? Unspeakable things to her mother and her aunts. It was only then did she take the badge. We need to do this to a whole generation now because of you. Because of your filthy culture."

I barely understood what she was upset about, but now I was getting pissed. *Control, Control*. I spoke through gritted teeth. "Well, Loita. If you had, you know, just left us alone, you wouldn't have to worry about..."

She interrupted, pointing directly at Donut, who looked stricken. "Your culture, your non-unifying, defeatist, dry, multi-organ, diversified attempt at culture is a deadly contagion, and it must be treated as such. After this crawl, after every single one of you dry vermin is

dead, the Borant system will close its borders and only then will the reawakening occur. Only then will we be free of this rot.”

Donut looked up at me. “My goodness. Is it me, or is she a complete loon?”

I tried not to laugh. Loita growled and was about to say something else when her eyes flashed. She took a long breath, splashing water over the couch. “It’s time. Enter through the door. Don’t make me get up.”

I nodded. I didn’t want to say anything else. I didn’t understand any of that weird gibbersh she was vomiting off about her political party, but I did understand what she said about Zev. *Do you know what we had to do just to bring Zev back into the fold?* I swallowed. My hands were shaking.

I placed robot Donut on the couch next to Loita. “Okay, robot Donut. You stay next to Loita. Do you understand?”

“Stay next to Loita,” Robot Donut said. “Understood.” She turned her head to Loita and said, “Have you ever felt true cold? It comes soon for us all. It’s always waiting in the shadows.”

“Come on, Donut,” I said, turning. “Let’s do the commercial.”

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<Note added by Crawler Coolie. 19<sup>th</sup> Edition> *I am going on another program tonight. I have secreted bugbear paste into my boots. I will detonate them while I am in orbit. There will be two admins on board. My Blast Shield skill should protect me from the explosion—if the skill works at all in that place. I don’t even know. But if I blow the ship, it won’t matter. Think of me, brothers. It is little, but it is all I have.*

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The hosts of *Veriluxx New Toys Showcase* were a pair of tall, giant-eyed alien soothers. The Forsoothed. A man named Gravo and a

woman named Liddi. I was beginning to realize these soother guys were one of the most common types of aliens in the universe.

Gravo, the male alien, was inexplicably dressed like a cowboy and wore a massive, Styrofoam cowboy hat. He wore a gun belt with a six-shooter, and he wore a sheriff's badge on his vest. The word "Sherif" was written in English, and it was spelled incorrectly. I had no idea if the misspelling was on purpose or not. He wore black and white cow-patterned chaps. He also donned cowboy boots with spurs that jingled as he walked.

Liddi, the woman alien, was dressed in some sort of Wish dot com superhero costume that didn't fit her. The suit was blue and red like it was attempting to approximate Superman's colors, but the cape was also in the black and white cow pattern, matching her partner's chaps. Upon her chest was the word "Veriluxx" where Superman's "S" should be. She wore a simple, orange-colored, eye-covering mask that clashed offensively with the rest of her outfit.

"What the hell, man," I said as we strode into the studio.

"Times like this, I wish cats really were colorblind," Donut grumbled.

The room was set up to not have a studio audience. It was a simple table with all four of us standing behind it. There was a raised chair for Donut and a small box for me to compensate for the soother's height. The toys would supposedly appear on the table, and we were supposed to discuss how awesome they were.

Liddi approached and waved. "Hello, hello. I'd shake your hand, but you know. I can't!" The woman, superhero alien grinned down at us. "Princess Donut, I must say, you are one of my favorites. I only have two feeds favorited, and yours is one of them."

"Oh?" Donut said, brightening. She jumped up into the chair. "Well it's always a pleasure to meet a fan."

The female soother had a bunch of tiny, pinback buttons on her breast. They were all showing different animals I didn't recognize. Though there was one pin at the bottom that was of Pinhead from

the *Hellraiser* movies. "I am just so excited to have you on the show today. It was my idea to bring the Donut doll to life."

"Yeah, was the Garfield thing your idea, too?" I asked.

"Who's your other favorite?" Donut asked before Liddi could respond. "You said you had two."

"Oh, Lucia Mar of course. Everybody has her as a favorite."

"So what is this?" I asked, indicating the alien's outfit. "You always dress like this?"

Gravo, the cowboy soother answered. "No, we don't," he said. He had a much more dour personality. "The clothes are to attract attention from children. We are about to film a commercial for a fake program called *Veriluxx New Toys Showcase*. This commercial will play on screens of all ships docked for fueling and repair if there is a demographically-targeted youth aboard or if there is someone who might wish to purchase such a toy for a youth. The item will be physically available for immediate purchase at the waystation's shop, or it'll be available to order on the Syndicate network. This is a low price-point toy with a few desirable features for low-income families, so we are anticipating a very aggressive marketing campaign."

"Wait, so this is like a commercial that only airs at gas stations?" I asked.

"Fueling depots and way stations, yes," Gravo said. "It'll be targeted at children who watch Donut's feed as well."

I thought of all the toy commercials that had enticed me as a child. "So, what? We're just going to stand here and talk about the stupid robot?"

"That's the plan. And we're renting this trailer by the second, so let's get this started. And don't call it stupid while we're recording."

"Wait," I said. "Do these commercials actually work for you guys? Wouldn't it be better to have actual children playing with the toys? You know, commercials with explosions and music and colors and kids running around with the toys?"

Gravo made a scoffing noise. "Research indicates that children prefer to have a trusted adult speak down to their level and present

them with the best possible options. As the parents are the ones who most often purchase, this logical approach both piques the child's interest and gives confidence to the parents."

I exchanged a look with Donut. I almost argued with him, but I didn't give a shit about the stupid robot toy's success. I was too tense, anyway. Too wound up to form a coherent argument, especially since I knew Veriluxx's parent company were just as terrible as everyone else in this damn universe.

I thought of Loita, sitting there all smug in the next room.

"Okay, let's do this."

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<Note added by Crawler Coolie. 19<sup>th</sup> Edition> *I have failed. I have blown the ship, and my skill indeed protected me, but the forcefield around the ship has prevented it from fully breaking apart. The admins only appeared to be with me. They were holos. I was fooled today, and I am ashamed, brothers. The gravity has failed, the temperature is dropping, and it is getting difficult to breathe. I do not think they can remove me while the forcefield remains.*

*But I see my planet, my beloved Qurux. It shines, and it warms me in this cold. I pray one day someone will avenge her, for I cannot.*

---

"This sure is a hoot," Donut said, reading the line that floated in the air in front of us. She was not doing a very good job of being natural. I knew that she, too, had been thrown off by Loita's comment about Zev's family. She'd already soured on the idea of going on this particular show and was phoning in her lines.

Neither of the soothers seemed to notice.

"Yeehaw!" Gravo said. He was like a zero-personality tax accountant who was being forced to perform for children. He pulled his six

shooter and shot in the air. “It sounds like this toy is a high falutin’ hit!”

I was pretty certain he was using “high faluting” incorrectly.

The toy Mongo screeched on the table and bounced around the toy Donut. The Mongo was designed to mimic the real deal in his juvenile stage and was pretty damn adorable. It stood about half of Robot Donut’s height. As we watched, robot Mongo jumped up and chomped robot Donut on the nose, who howled in pain. “Bad Mongo! Bad!” the robot said.

“So, Carl,” Liddi asked. The super hero costumed-soother was actually going by “Professor Liddi” for the commercial. I didn’t know why. “What’s your favorite part of the Veriluxx RealPet companion?”

A paragraph of text appeared floating in front of me. I ignored it.

“Actually,” I said. “I like how trainable they are. We only had robot Donut for a few days, but I taught her several tricks.”

Gravo looked irritated and was about to pause the taping so I could get back on script, but Professor Liddi rolled with it. “Oh?”

“That’s right,” I said. “She says the weirdest shit. But if I tell her to sit, she sits. If I tell her to follow, she follows. She’s much more compliant than the real Donut.”

“Hey,” Donut said. “Don’t be offensive, Carl.”

Both Liddi and I laughed. “I mean, that’s what we all want, isn’t it? Compliance?”

“What do you mean?” Liddi asked.

“What is your parent company called again? Veritan Linkage? Isn’t that their thing?”

Nobody said anything for several seconds.

“Stop rolling,” Gravo said. He turned on me. “I don’t know where you heard that, but that’s absolutely not true. Veritan is our parent company, yes, but we operate independently from them.”

I shrugged. “That’s not what I heard. Someone said your parent company advocates for slavery. People are saying there are really trackers hidden in the toys.”

“Carl, what are you doing?” Donut asked, looking up at me. She’d removed her sunglasses for the show and looked at me wide-eyed.

“Just stick with the script, okay?” Gravo said. “Don’t be an imbecile. There’s nothing you can say that’ll make it onto air, so why bother?”

“Nothing I can say in *here*,” I said. “The dungeon is another story, though, isn’t it?”

“What?” Gravo said. “What are you trying to say? Are you trying to shake us down for a loot box? Is this a joke? Do you really think that would work?”

I had no idea if Veriluxx toys had any sort of sinister motive with all of this. Mordecai seemed to think it was a money laundering operation or something. Honestly, I didn’t care. This was dangerous. Stupidly dangerous. I was gambling all of this was about to be forgotten.

I just needed Loita to get up off that damn couch.

“Listen here, crawler,” Gravo started to say.

The lights flickered. The two soothers disappeared. The floor shook. The studio went black then filled with red lights. A terrible creaking noise filled the chamber.

“Warning. Fire suppression system activating.”

The voice came over a loudspeaker.

Donut jumped to my shoulder. “Carl, Carl, we’re under attack!”

“Hold on,” I said. “Be ready for anything.”

“I can’t cast my spells in here!”

I bolted for the green room door. It irised open as I approached. Smoke poured out through the hole.

The couch against the back wall was obliterated in the explosion. I took a deep, relieved breath that the picture window hadn’t ruptured.

But then I realized the window *had* ruptured. A massive crack ran across it, like a lightning bolt. The blue forcefield was the only thing keeping the water out. *Shit, shit.* It appeared the forcefield was holding. *Thank god. Thank fucking god.*

*Actually, no, I thought. Not god. Coolie. Thank you, Coolie for the information.*

“Carl, I think robot Donut blew up!” Donut said, looking around. “Where’s Loita? Did she...” Donut gasped. The crumpled form of the dungeon admin had been blown across the room and had smashed against the wall. Donut rushed to her. The small kua-tin was missing her left arm and both of her bottom legs. Her rebreather, miraculously, still worked. Her entire fish body was blackened. She looked as if she’d been flash-fried in a pot of oil.

But she wasn’t dead. I felt my heart quicken. She couldn’t just teleport away. They had to first lower the shield. But if they lowered the shield, the window would break, and Donut and I would die instantly.

Borant had to make a choice, I realized. They could probably heal her in seconds, but only if she teleported away. Save a low-level admin or save their two highest-grossing crawlers?

I looked down at the injured woman and smiled.

“You... you did this,” Loita panted.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “It was an accident. The robot blew up. You’re the one who made them put that self-destruct sequence in it. I was in the other room. I have no idea how it blew. You saw how buggy that damn thing was.”

Outside through the broken window, multiple lights appeared, rushing toward the sub. These were other ships, coming to repair the trailer. They wouldn’t get here in time.

“You won’t win,” she gasped, gurgling the words. Foamy, colorless liquid oozed from her mouth and gills. “The Bloom will prevail. You will be forgotten.”

“Nobody likes melodrama, Loita,” I said as the kua-tin died.

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<Note added by Crawler Carl. 25<sup>th</sup> Edition> *Coolie. I know you can’t read this, but I want you and every future reader to know that I*



*used the information from your passage to help plan the first step. If it wasn't for your words, I wouldn't have had the confidence or knowledge to act. What I did today I did for you and for a little girl named Bonnie. My only regret is that my first step was a small one, and I don't know yet if I'll survive long enough to take a second.*

*But if I do manage that second step, please forgive me. What I do from here on out is solely for me and my people. As long as I am alive, I will do everything I can to make them burn.*

*They will not fucking break me.*

<Note added by Crawler Carl. 25<sup>th</sup> Edition> *One.*

IT ONLY TOOK THE REPAIR SUBS ABOUT THIRTY SECONDS TO mend the damage. The moment it was fixed, Donut and I teleported away. But when we jumped, we did not return to our personal space. That did not surprise me.

Our destination, however, did.

### **Entering the Desperado Club.**

We were in a small room with a desk. The paper-covered desk was occupied by a tall man. The shadowy figure wore a dark cloak with a hood, which supernaturally obscured his face, grim reaper-like. His hands, the only flesh I could see, were a dark, dark purple, almost black. His elongated fingers were almost elf-like, though the man's height suggested he was nothing of the sort.

It was a small office, with wood slat walls and the same tiled floor as the rest of the Desperado Club. A tapestry hung from one wall, looking almost like a Turkish rug. There were no other decorations. Through the wall, I could hear the very distant pulse of the nightclub dance floor.

Our status indicators did not snap back on, but I could examine the man's properties. Sort of.

**Orren.**

**Syndicate Liaison.**

There were a pair of old, wooden chairs in front of the desk.

“Please,” the man said, indicating the chairs. “Carl and Donut. Sit.” He had the voice of a British professor. Authoritative, but not aggressively so.

We both wordlessly sat down. I chewed on the jagged edge of my fingernail. The chair wasn’t high enough for Donut to look over the desk, and she suddenly looked very small sitting there. I reached over and gave her a pat. She was trembling.

The man put his pen down and folded his hands together. He regarded us. The darkness under his hood swirled.

“My name is Orren. I do not work for Borant. I am an independent consultant retained by the Syndicate. I am a neutral third party observer. I work in concert with the current season’s showrunners, the Syndicate government, and the controlling AI. You would not normally meet me or one of my colleagues but under certain extreme circumstances. And as you can imagine, the events that recently transpired most certainly qualify.”

“So, what? You’re like the vice principal of a high school? You collect the naughty boys and girls and tell them what their punishment is?”

He approximated a shrug. “I am a non-AI fact finder. Not quite a sheriff. Not quite an attorney.” He paused. “Not quite a judge.” He moved in his chair, and it creaked, like his body was heavier than it looked. “If the Syndicate sees something that requires more information, they will ask both the kua-tin and AI for reports on what happened. Sometimes those reports contradict each other. Sometimes those reports are inconclusive. In such cases, a liaison such as myself investigates. And if the facts warrant it, I recommend what should be done about it.”

We were in extreme danger here, and we both knew it. I felt for poor Donut, who’d had nothing to do with what had happened in the trailer. But I didn’t regret it. Not one bit.

The creature steepled his fingers. “Do you know how many assassination attempts there have been on dungeon admins over the solars?”

“Probably a lot,” I said.

“More than we would like to admit, yes,” the man—Orren—said. “And quite a few have been successful, too. Two seasons ago, a crocodilian managed to snap the head off of his outreach associate. He shouldered the admin into the hallway and literally bit the man’s head off. And instead of teleporting him away into the crawler disposal unit, the idiot Fortent admins sent two of their own security agents to subdue the crawler and also got themselves killed before the AI finally intervened. Three admins at once, which were the only admins killed by crawlers that season.”

Orren casually leaned back in his chair, which continued to groan and creak ominously. I knew he was wanting me to say something, to offer up information—much like how a real vice principal would if he was trying to get an unruly student to admit their guilt. I wasn’t going to say a word unless he asked me a direct question.

“Three was nowhere near the record, of course. But three is still considered a lot. Last season the Squim Conglomerate had no admin fatalities due to crawler attacks. I’d like you to guess how many have died this season so far due to your fellows.”

That was a trick question if I’d ever heard one.

“Zero,” I said.

The man grunted with amusement. “Not including this most recent death of Admin Loita, the number for this season currently stands at 15. Lucia Mar has killed two. Three if you count her first game guide, which we do not. The rest were all one-off attacks.”

I was genuinely intrigued at that, and more than a little proud of my fellow humans. “I thought all violence against admins was met with immediate justice from the AI. That’s what the warning says.”

Orren ignored me. “Fifteen is already considered a disaster. Do you know why that number is so high this season?”

I shrugged. “Probably two reasons. My people don’t like fish

telling them what to do. And the kua-tin are running this show as cheaply as possible. I don't know the details on how these zone things work, but I know they make it more dangerous for the workers."

"You are correct, on both accounts." He drummed the desk with his hand. "However, crawler. Every one of those fifteen deaths, and in fact, every single admin murder from the first crawl until this very moment all have one thing in common." He leaned in. I detected a very slight distortion to his voice, like he was talking through a speaker. "We know exactly how the crawler pulled it off. This dungeon is the most scrutinized, most surveilled location in the universe. Yet, nobody knows exactly how you did it."

"She died because that stupid cat blew up," I said.

"Carl, I'm beginning to suspect this Orren fellow thinks we murdered Loita," Donut said, speaking for the first time.

"No, no, you misunderstand, crawler Carl. We know exactly how she died. It took longer than I'd like to ascertain all the facts. We were, at first, thrown off by the force of the explosion. There were no extra explosives brought into the production trailer. Yet, the explosion was more powerful than it should've been. That was the first mystery, though the AI did have a quick explanation for that. Do you know what it was?"

"I had the cat on my table," I said. "She was watching me decant those infusions."

He slapped the desk and pointed at me like I'd just given him the answer to an equation. The sudden and unexpected sound was like a thunderclap. I tried not to flinch, and I hated myself for flinching anyway. "Yes! The yield on the toy's self-destruct mechanism was artificially enhanced by the AI simply because it sat upon your sapper's bench while you were working on it, which as you know is one of the benefits of your table and your explosive handling skills. But that happened on its own. Records indicate you made no direct adjustments to the toy's explosive. It's what you did next that caused the explosion."

Donut scoffed. "Oh my god, he *does* believe we did it on

purpose.” She made a frustrated noise and then jumped onto my shoulder so she could look directly at the man. “If Carl was going to purposely kill Loita he would’ve shoved a stick of dynamite in her gills and then kicked her in the head. Carl is very good at killing things, and he can be very clever about it sometimes, but he doesn’t do secret agent man style murders. That’s not his style, and besides, every one of his plans always screws up somewhere along the way. He would’ve been caught. When he was with Miss Beatrice, his definition of ‘subtle’ was pulling his boxers down and saying, ‘me so horny.’ No offense, Carl.”

“What? I never did that.”

“Oh, right. That was Brad, wasn’t it? Anyway, you get my point. This was not my Carl’s handiwork. It’s quite impossible. He is not a ninja. And before you ask, it wasn’t me, either. Do you have tape of the actual explosion? I would just love to see it. Are you certain it wasn’t one of those Skull empire orcs? Or maybe the Veriluxx people remote detonating it because Carl had discovered their secret, evil plan?”

Orren nodded. “We have surveillance from the Mexx unit in the trailer, but that is it. Since you weren’t in the room, the footage isn’t nearly as *holistic* as we’d like. But it doesn’t matter. What happened is quite clear. Administrator Loita jumped down off the couch. The toy jumped down to follow, and a few seconds later, it exploded, killing her and almost killing you two as well. The panel on the back of its head dislodged when it jumped, which activated the creature’s self-destruct sequence and set off the explosion. Due to the interface lock-out because of Admin Loita’s presence, neither of you received the self-destruct warning.”

I grunted. “So that shitty little panel on the back of the cat’s head fell off? Look, it’s no secret that we didn’t get along with her. But that panel was made out of plastic. That toy was a cheap piece of crap. I mentioned it was going to fall off on its own more than once.”

He nodded. “I know. I watched the recording multiple times. It’s not plastic, at least not as you know it. The panel was made of a reac-

tive, tamper-proof polymer called Zentix. It's very popular throughout the galaxy, especially in children's toys. It's designed to fail under certain circumstances. Obviously, the explosion part isn't usually a feature of the toy, but the panel is designed to break if someone tampers with or attempts to illegally modify the toy's innards."

"Then why is there a panel in the first place?" Donut asked. "If you can't play with it, then why is it there?"

"It depends on the toy. Most have varying degrees of features depending on the user license. Some panels can only be accessed by authorized users. Some have controls that can only be adjusted by qualified personnel. It's a smart polymer with multiple security settings. It's not important. We are straying from the point."

"So what is the point? What're you trying to say?" I asked.

"I'm saying the residue dust left behind by the disco ball smoke curtain started to slowly eat away at the panel. That process was greatly enhanced when you placed the toy within range of Admin Loita's rebreather apparatus. The moisture caused the remaining dust to run across the panel and along the edges. Then you engineered a situation that would cause the admin to get up off the couch. And because the toy was programmed to follow her, the act of jumping down dislodged the panel and thus caused the explosion. It was, quite simply, one of the most brilliant assassinations I have ever seen a crawler execute. And I applaud you for it."

"This is just like the end of a *Perry Mason* episode," Donut said. "I'm almost disappointed it's all made-up and Carl isn't really going to start crying from the witness stand and confess to the murder."

Donut was cracking jokes, but I knew that she was very tense. And worried.

"But," Orren continued, ignoring Donut, "as impressive as it was, we cannot allow crawlers to murder admins, even low-level ones such as Loita." He slid a piece of paper from the pile on his desk and turned it toward me. It was a mostly-blank sheet of paper with a signature line at the bottom and a hand-written headline at the top in

Syndicate Standard that read, “Admission of non-sanctioned violence by Crawler number 4,122 ‘Carl.’”

“You want me to sign a blank piece of paper?” I asked. I was mildly offended that they’d think that would actually work. “Yeah, no.”

He shrugged. “You might just survive if you admit it. Lucia Mar happily signed a confession both times, and she’s still in the dungeon. We’d give you a similar deal.”

“If you really thought I’d killed her, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. You wouldn’t be asking me to sign anything.”

Orren didn’t say anything for several moments. “You knew the forcefield would protect the trailer’s hull from the explosion. You asked about it. You knew about the chemical reaction that would eat the panel. You created one of the few explosive combinations that leave behind a persistent residue.” He pulled the blank sheet of paper away and produced a second one, and this one was covered with many, many paragraphs of text. It still had a blank signature line at the bottom. “You’re obviously getting information from an outside source. We know it wasn’t Agatha or any of her helpers. None are in your bubble. We don’t believe it was Odette, either.”

I reeled at the mention of homeless, shopping cart-pushing Agatha. What was it she’d said to me way back on the second floor? *They already know I’m here. They just don’t know what to do about it yet.*

“Tell us who your source is and how they communicate with you, and you will be returned to the dungeon with no penalties, and you will be given a Legendary box that will contain an item that will all but guarantee your survival until the ninth floor.”

I was stunned at the offer, but only for a moment. Contract or not, there was no way I was going to trust them about anything. Besides, my “source” was the cookbook, and I did not want to give it up. If I mentioned it, it would disappear. Would they even believe me? It wasn’t worth the risk. No fucking way.



Plus, this guy's version of the assassination was significantly more complicated and high-tech than what had really happened.

I had no idea about the polymers or the residue of the disco ball reacting with the weird space plastic. That shit was well beyond anything I'd be willing to trust. Donut was right that my plans usually went off the rails. This time it had been to my benefit. That whole chemical reaction thing was nothing more than a happy little misdirection.

I had known about the forcefield thanks to Coolie's passage in the cookbook. I had known that the disco ball would've covered everything in technicolor dust, also thanks to the cookbook. My purpose with that had been simple. I wanted to get that crap all over the toy so they wouldn't want it brought into the studio. That was it.

I had not known that little panel was made of some weird type of plastic. I did, however, know it was a piece of shit. I'd been worried from the start that the stupid panel would fall off. I'd been toying with using my duct tape to hold the thing in place.

Instead, I came up with an idea for it to fall off exactly when I wanted it to.

If I was going to risk everything, then all of the circumstances had to be perfect, and I wouldn't know if they were until the last possible minute. Only then could I gamble on "arming" the toy. I hadn't realized the dust from the disco ball was already doing the job for me.

Any kid who's had battery-operated toys—or any adult who's had a remote control for their television—knows exactly what happens when that ridiculous little plastic tab over the battery compartment breaks or somehow gets out of whack. The whole cover refuses to stay put, and any big jolt causes it to take a dive, usually disemboweling the batteries in the process.

I couldn't just outright break off the little tab. That would've been both obvious and would've caused it to fall right away. So instead of breaking it, I simply pushed it down with my left palm, placed my left thumb between the little tab and the holder, and I broke off my strategically-cut left thumb fingernail, creating a shim.

I'd been collecting all the broken pieces of the robot Donuts every time Mongo killed one. I had a perfectly-preserved back panel from the first iteration in my inventory. I sat on the toilet and practiced the move several times with other fingers before I got it right. I'd cut my nail  $3/4$ s off, but close to the finger so it wasn't noticeable. The panel thing was such an utter piece of crap, it easily fell off with just a little foreign object. In fact, it was so flimsy, so easy to fall off, I was starting to suspect the toy had actually been a low-effort assassination attempt on us.

When I'd leaned in to tap on the glass and ask Loita if the trailer could go into space, thus confirming Loita was really there thanks to the moisture, I'd attempted to get my nail in place, but it'd slipped out. I'd had to lean in a second time to get it right. I leaned over the couch, and I'd made the move with my left hand, pressing the robot toy against my chest. In the end, it'd been simple. I held the panel in place as I pulled my hand away. When I placed the toy on the couch next to the admin, I'd pulled away with enough force to dislodge my fingernail, which held the panel precariously in place.

I practically crapped myself when the robot Donut had turned its head to say some creepy shit to Loita. But the little panel had held. It wasn't visibly loose. But I knew it would go flying the moment it jumped to the ground. When I'd told robot Donut to stay by the admin, I knew the heavy robot would jump off the couch the moment she'd stood up. Loita had been so distracted by my attempted extortion of Veriluxx, she likely never noticed the little piece of plastic falling off the cat and landing on the carpet.

And that's what killed her.

"I'm not signing anything because I have nothing to give up, nobody to rat out," I said. "And believe me, I'd love to get a free legendary box. But I have nothing to give you in exchange. This was an accident. But you're obviously not an idiot, so I won't lie to you. I *wish* I had thought of this. I *wish* I had outside help because if I did and thought I could've gotten away with it, I would've done it

without hesitation, but I wouldn't have wasted the opportunity on some low-level bitch like Loita."

Donut, still on my shoulder, was stiff as a board.

The faceless man said nothing for a moment. "And who would you have used it on, then?"

I didn't answer. There were only so many lines I could cross. There was so much I wanted to say. I thought of Brandon. Of Yolanda. Of everybody else in the world. They had all died, and nobody cared. Yet someone like Loita died, and we had to go through all of this?

*You will not break me. Fuck you all. I will break you. I will break you all.*

Orren sighed and pulled the paper away. "Very well. As we are unable to determine what happened and no consensus exists regarding the incident, I have no choice but to recommend that the Syndicate close the matter. However, you should know we have implemented a punitive measure onto Borant for the remainder of this floor, as this wasn't an isolated incident. No crawlers will be allowed to be teleported away by third parties until the next floor opens. Yes, that means your next appearance on Odette's show has been cancelled. She's already filed an appeal."

I had so many new questions. Lucia Mar had killed two admins and gotten away with it? How? Why wasn't she dead?

"You can leave via the door," the man said, dismissing us with a wave. "Your bodyguards are outside waiting."

"Sledgie is here? Yay!" Donut said.

"And just so you know, Carl. That was lucky. I admire your grit. It makes for good entertainment, but I wouldn't press that luck. Whomever this is that's helping you, they are not doing it for your benefit. If the kua-tin hadn't intervened on your behalf, this would've gone much differently."

I paused as I stood. "What do you mean? How did they intervene?"

He didn't look up. "Certain crawlers are simply too valuable to

just throw away off screen, no matter how recalcitrant they are. Ultimately it's their call. And even though I can't find legal cause to place Administrator Loita's death upon you, if it were up to me, I'd have you removed anyway. We discussed this in council, and it was decided that my personal recommendation be ignored. For now. The mudskippers aren't known for their ability to recognize threats. If the rumors are correct and we do take over after the next floor, I hope my own people will be much more willing to listen to my personal assessment."

My interface was still turned off so I couldn't look at the timer, but I suddenly felt a chill. As far as I was aware, Loita had blown up about 45 minutes ago. But all of this... council meetings, court appeals, hand-written confessions...

"How long have we been away?" I asked.

"It's only been five days. You're lucky it wasn't longer. You still have five days left to finish your bubble. Your partner Katia has gotten into some interesting adventures while you've been gone. She's back on the top ten list. Above you, actually. You two are about to slip off, so you probably want to get back to work."

"*Goddamnit,*" I said. I slapped the man's desk in frustration, and papers went flying. I wasn't upset about slipping off the top-10 list. I was pissed about losing all that time. *Don't be too mad. You're the luckiest motherfucker in the dungeon right now. You did it. You got away with it.*

*Next time it won't be so easy.*

Orren looked up then, and the man's hood slipped. The swirling black coalesced, and I realized it was actually a face-shaped bowl of liquid, made to look like swirling darkness. Within that liquid I caught a tiny glimpse of light. Mordecai had described what they looked like to me, so I recognized what was in the liquid. A worm. A Valtay worm.

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If Mordecai wasn't covered in feathers, I knew he'd be pale as a sheet.

Donut was completely poofed out and hopping up and down like she'd taken two extra espresso shots. She'd released Mongo, who fed off her energy and was also bobbing up and down excitedly. She'd already told Mordecai and Katia about the death of Loita and was now breathlessly attempting to explain what had happened afterward. It all came out in one, long, unfiltered, incomprehensible paragraph.

"...And they thought Carl was doing some *Breaking Bad* chemistry stuff, and I told them that was impossible because Carl used to pull his pants down when he wanted relations from Miss Beatrice, and that's when the guy realized that Carl probably didn't do it even though I was wrong because that was actually that Brad guy she went to the Bahamas with. Though I think maybe the AI told them that Carl probably did do it? I don't know, it was quite odd. Because he also said that the kua-tin said he didn't do it. And that means the AI had to have thought that he did because he said there was a disagreement about the facts. And then the grim reaper-looking guy accused Agatha the shopping cart lady and Odette of helping us even though they're not even in the bubble and Carl was all grumpy and said, 'I wish I *had* done it' and I thought we were going to get into more trouble but the guy didn't care. But she'd really just died because the back fell off and blew up. And it was really her own fault, wasn't it? She's the one who insisted on putting the blow-up stuff in the toy, and they did, and it ended up killing her. The commercial was lame anyway because it was only going to be shown at gas stations. I mean, really. It's embarrassing. But we can't go on shows anymore for the rest of the floor. Odette is so mad she filed a court case about it. Oh, oh Katia, did that mean they canceled your show? Sorry about that."

"My show wasn't canceled," Katia said. She didn't sound too thrilled about it. "I went on it. They added the ban as my show was being taped. Zev told me about the ban just before I teleported back down here. She also told me what was happening with you three."

Donut gasped. "Zev? Really? You talked to her?"

“She said she’s our temporary PR agent until everything gets sorted out. She said she’ll send a message later.”

Donut did a little hop.

Mordecai nodded. “I didn’t think I was going to see you again. I got a notice that there was a liaison hold on Donut, and then suddenly it was five days later.”

“Wait, so you were also gone?” I said. I turned to Katia. She was now down on the land quadrant and was in the personal space via a pub down there. She was also now level 41, three higher than the last time I’d seen her.

Donut and I were still in Hump Town. “You must’ve thought we were dead.”

“I didn’t know what the hell was happening until Zev told me. You weren’t available on chat, Mordecai disappeared, but it didn’t show you as dead, and all the personal space upgrades remained. Once I learned we wouldn’t know your fate for a few days, I had to take matters in my own hands. I tried flying the house to the land quadrant, but it wouldn’t let us at first until we figured out what was wrong. By the way, if you hadn’t left the controller with Louis, we never would’ve been able to fly the thing. I’ve spent the last five days killing scorpion men and arguing with Gwen. We could really use your help down here. Louis and Firas are already on the way back to pick you up. They’ve turned into quite the pilots. Once you get your asses down here, I’ll catch you up.”

Mordecai still looked out of sorts. He was muttering to himself. “Only the fifth floor, and the liaisons are already involved. By his left tit. Next thing you know, the lawyers will be here. Everything gets complicated once the lawyers get here.”

I ignored him. “Do you know if Chris and Maggie are still trapped?”

“They are,” Katia said. “Langley and his guys are still up there with you, and he’s keeping an eye on them.”

“Why couldn’t you get the house down to the land quadrant?” I asked.

Katia waved her hand. "It's a long story. We almost died figuring it out. It was because of the stairwell in the master bedroom. Remember what Louis did to his mother's minivan? He had to do it do the house. You'll see. It's not the most elegant solution, but it works."

"Jesus," I said. "We really do need to catch up."

Mordecai was still going off about what had happened to us. "A godsdamn syndicate liaison. And he just let you walk right out of there? I can't believe it."

"Yeah," I said, grinning. "He didn't even say anything about this." I held Loita's rebreather up in the air. I'd looted it off the dead kua-tin's body. Since I couldn't access my inventory at the time, I'd just shoved it into my boxer's waistband. The device was small, about the size of a cat collar. I tossed it into my inventory now. It wasn't very valuable and could only be used by a knee-high creature with gills, but you never knew what was going to be important.

Mordecai just gawked at me, beak hanging down.

"Wait until you hear what Carl said to my sponsor!" Donut added.

### **TIME TO LEVEL COLLAPSE: 4 DAYS AND 22 HOURS**

The entire top half of the house was gone. It looked as if a group of blindfolded and drunk beavers had decided to do a remodel job. They'd ripped the top floor and the attic away, haphazardly decapitating the home about six inches below the first floor's ceiling, which meant all of the rooms on the first floor were open to the elements. The tops of the walls were jagged and splintered. The fireplace and attached chimney had also been lopped away, but it still rose about five feet over the top of the walls. As I watched the balloon approach, a single brick fell off the stack, falling into what had once been the living room.

When they'd done their butcher job, they'd severed multiple electrical lines and water pipes in the process. They'd attempted to cap off the water, but one of the pipes appeared to have become dislodged in the journey to come pick us up. Donut and I watched as the balloon settled in front of Hump Town. Water arced into the air



from the middle of the house like they'd sheared off a fire hydrant, and the main had been knocked sideways.

"What's with the water?" I asked.

Firas jumped down off the edge of the garden and out into the sand dune. The tall man rubbed dust off his boots and stood to his full height, grinning at us. He stood with confidence, and I immediately saw the change in him. When I'd first met the guy, he'd only been level 22. He was now 30. That was still behind the curve, but he'd made up a lot of ground.

The water continued to arc away, causing a rainbow to form in the air. Mongo screeched joyfully and rushed into the spray and started dancing about. The sand around his feet was quickly turning to mud.

"One of those chainsaw buzz-ards lopped off the cap we had on that water line, and it blasted itself out of the sky. They're like miniature versions of that giant boss that gave Katia the dangle saw. It was actually pretty damn funny. Still don't know where all the water is coming from. I wish I had that much water pressure at my old place. It's bizarre. The power still works, too. The things are a pain in the ass. The chainsaw buzz-ards, I mean. But they've been rare for the past few days." He indicated the water arc. "The one who did that surprised us. I'll cap it off after we land. Did Katia tell you about how she stuck the house in her inventory?"

"What?" I asked. "She can stick the house in her inventory? Balloon and all? Like, the whole thing? How?"

"Oh dude. You've been gone ages. A lot has happened. It was Louis's idea. We had the thing floating just off the ground. Katia did that weird thing she does when she puts the backpack on, and it worked. Then that same night after the recap episode, they patched it, and the whole damn contraption just popped out of her inventory, floating over our heads. It almost smooshed all of us. We were all in a pub called Cuttlefish Point, and it pretty much blew up the tavern. The pazuzu guy that runs it was *pissed*. We all had to jump on the thing and fly

away. Thought he was going to sting us for sure. It was pretty intense. Then Louis peed over the edge on the guy while he was still screaming up at us and it pretty much got us banned from town. I thought Gwen was going to rip his schlong off. Katia had to stop her from kicking his ass but she was laughing too, and that made Gwen even more mad.”

I just looked at the guy. I cursed myself again for missing so much. “Where’s the stairwell?”

“Oh yeah. So we had to hack the top of the house off just to dislodge the closet in the master bedroom. It wouldn’t let us leave the quadrant with the stairwell still attached to the house. It’s sitting about a half of a mile east of town. Close to where you landed the first time. Langley has a couple of his guys on it, keeping it clear of sand. It’s going to be tough starting tomorrow once the Red Equinox hits. They’re building something to protect it.”

“Shit,” I said. I’d completely forgotten about that. For the last few days in this bubble, the weather and night/day patterns were going change. It would be dark for something like sixteen hours a day, and the sand storm would be twice as long and intense.

“Yeah,” Firas agreed. “Down there the sand storm is a little different. Instead of it just blowing every which way, it always moves in a circle, like a clock around the island. And there’s a lot of lightning. It’s already getting darker early down there, too, so it’s now dark during the storm already.”

“Speaking of the storm, we gotta get moving,” Louis said, appearing from the inside of the house. The pudgy crawler had also leveled up to 30. “We need to hit the landing pad before it starts. Gwen said she’s going with the flood plan if we’re not back in time. Plus those feral Pazuzu fuckers come out at night, and I want a clear landing zone. Oh, hey Donut.”

“Hi Louis!” Donut said from my shoulder.

“Wait, more ‘feral’ monsters?” I asked.

“Yeah, let’s go,” Louis said, all business. He turned and went back inside.

“The feral thing is the mage guy’s fault,” Firas said. “Anything

that gets stuck in the Nothing for more than a few minutes goes crazy. I don't understand how any of it works. You'll be assaulting the castle when you get down there. But only if that Gwendolyn lady hasn't murdered Katia first."

"Do you feel out of the loop?" Donut whispered. "I feel out of the loop."

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Part of me was proud that Katia had just rolled with us going missing. She'd gotten a lot done. She'd managed to get the whole house down to the land quadrant, and she'd figured out how to breach the magical door that guarded the front of the land quadrant castle. All without us. Firas told me that they would have finished with the castle already if Zev hadn't asked Katia to wait for us.

At the same time, part of me stung at the notion that she could do this without me. It was stupid. Selfish. And it was more than a little narcissistic to think that without me and Donut, Katia and the others were absolutely screwed. But that feeling was there, and I was simultaneously relieved that I'd been wrong and horrified I'd been thinking it in the first place.

I still didn't know if we'd get there in time, but Katia and the others' actions while we were away proved that I wasn't as indispensable as I thought. And in the end, I realized it was a necessary feeling.

*You'll die in a gutter without me. You need me. You think you're just going to be fine? What will you do, you disrespectful little shit? You will break after just one day. And then you'll die. That's what you'll do. Just like your fucking bitch of a mother.*

I took a deep breath, clearing the memory away. I dove into my chat to check in on everybody.

Bautista had already cleared all four of his quadrant's castles, though most people in his bubble hadn't survived. He wasn't a man to show his true feelings in his chats, but I had the impression he was having a hard time with it. Li Jun and Li Na and their team were

about to storm some underwater castle, the last in their bubble. Meadow Lark were building a cannon to shoot oil into the sky which would hopefully take down the last of their castles. If that didn't work, Elle was going to use her new *Graupel* spell to crash the air castle.

While we descended, Louis and Firas also gave us updates on some of the more popular crawlers. One of Lucia Mar's rottweilers—Gustavo, the smaller one—had somehow “accidentally” killed a group of crawlers after a battle. The event had caused Lucia to undergo some sort of psychotic break—one worse than usual. They'd shown the strange crawler sitting alone in a room sobbing, which was the first real emotion they'd ever portrayed other than rage and pure insanity. Florin the shotgun crocodile guy had finally emerged into a quadrant to find everybody else in the entire bubble was already dead. He was desperately trying to make his way through it, but he'd only managed to clear one castle so far, and the general consensus was that he was screwed. The goat squad was almost done with their bubble, but Miriam Dom the shepherd lady was hit with some curse that ended up changing her into a goddamned vampire. Apparently she was a vegan before this, and the assholes thought it'd be hilarious to do that to her.

I listened to it all as I watched the side of the necropolis fly past us. The massive tomb was even bigger when you were looking at it from this angle. The volcano-shaped building was more mountain than actual structure. The exterior wall was covered with intricate carvings depicting pterodactyl-like creatures and other birds, all in an angular, Aztec-like style. I kept looking for a repeating pattern, but I didn't see any two stones that were the same. There was probably a story there, in those carvings.

Nests dotted the side of the structure. Firas said that's where the buzz-ards lived, but they were mostly gone now. We saw no mobs as we descended.

As for the poor assholes stuck in the subterranean quadrant, they were all still hiding in saferooms at the very top. Two of them—Mike,

the one dressed like a goddamned banana and Bobby the trap-finder —had gathered several water-breathing scrolls and ventured out. They ended up setting off a trap in a water-filled tunnel. Mr. Banana got himself killed when a tube shot from the wall, pierced his stomach, and filled him with “Finger-sized Flesh Weasels.” They ate the poor guy from the inside out. Bobby had quickly retreated after that. The others were now paralyzed with fear and were waiting for us to drain the place before proceeding.

I examined the castle as we approached. The dark building was huddled against the side of the necropolis, making me think of a scared dog cowering against a wall. The castle looked as if it really was made out of sand. It wasn’t as huge as I thought it’d be based on Gwen’s description, but it still had the look of a medieval-style fortress. Or maybe a small casino that was medieval-themed. It stood about three stories high with thin watch towers on either side of the front façade. It appeared the castle was actually guarding the entrance to the massive tomb beyond it, and I wondered if there was an entranceway there. Probably, I decided.

Darkness spread across the landing zone. I caught quick sight of the receded beach. The exposed and dried coral reef looked like a forest of brambles in the darkening sky. It gave the O-shaped land quadrant a menacing, fairy-tale appearance.

“Does anything come out of the water?” I asked Firas.

“We see shark fins and the tops of giant, blue jellyfish, but nothing comes out. Not anymore. There were snakes for a while. Big ones that could go in and out of the water. Gwen killed the boss, and they’re gone now. The two other survivors from that water quadrant are here, and they do not want to go back in there. Vadim and Britney. They say there are horrors deep down near the ocean’s floor.”

I had forgotten that Chris had not beaten that level alone. “Did you tell them about Chris?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Neither of them were surprised.”

Donut stiffened at the mention of the water quadrant. She’d been

relieved when we learned that it had been defeated. I knew the poor cat was terrified of the idea of getting wet. I hoped we could avoid it.

We landed in a circle painted on the beach with red rocks. Two crawlers stood nearby waiting for us. Katia was one of them. She stood there in her seven-foot-tall warrior form, crossbow over her shoulder, grinning up at us as we disembarked.

Mongo spied her and screeched joyfully, jumping off the still-descending platform to bounce all around her as she patted him on the head. Louis and Firas went to work securing the broken water main as Donut and I jumped down.

“So you just thought you’d take a vacation?” Katia asked. “Next time you plan on getting away for a while, please warn me.”

I patted Katia on the shoulder. We’d literally just seen her in the safe room, but Mongo was screeching and bouncing like he hadn’t seen her for a month. “So,” I asked. “How was the *Dungeon Sidekicks* show?”

“Don’t ask,” she said. “They made me do karaoke with Miriam Dom.”

“Firas was just telling me that she’s turned into a vampire.”

Katia nodded solemnly. “She did. That was after. While she was on the show, apparently Prepotente had a panic attack and went berserk and went running off. When she got back from the show, she went looking for him, and that’s when she got attacked and cursed.”

“Yeah, that goat guy is a weird dude.”

“I liked him. I thought he was a gentleman,” Donut said.

Katia grinned. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re back. We really need you for this next part.”

I turned to face the short, chainmail-clad woman standing next to Katia.

“Hello, Gwen,” I said.

“Hello, bomber guy. Hello, Princess Donut. So you two finally fucking made it,” she said.

Now that we were face to face, I vaguely remembered her from the previous floor. We’d exchanged fist bumps when Donut was

collecting all the now-worthless engineer hats. The woman was about 45-years old and solid. She'd remained human and stood just about five feet tall. I knew from earlier conversations she was from Canada, and I realized now she was of First Nations origin. She wore a glowing, metal skull cap with a fur lining, but from what I could see of her dark hair, it was cut short. She had a no-nonsense metal spear slung over her shoulder.

The most distinctive feature on the woman was the forehead tattoo. It was old and weathered and faded, and it was obviously from a time long before she ever ventured into the dungeon. It was a double-v tribal pattern. The back of her hands and fingers were also covered with simple, straight-line tattoos ending in arrowheads. They almost looked like doodles.

The woman examined me with hard, dark eyes. At first I thought maybe she was a little pudgy, but upon closer examination I realized my error. I recognized that look from my years working at shipyards. This woman had a body built on hard labor, a nose that had been punched so many times it likely crinkled when you touched it, and scarred knuckles that had probably finished just as many of those fights as they started. I guessed she'd been either a dock worker, a farmer, or in construction. Someone whose work required her to spend most of her days working at varying physical tasks and whose nights were likely spent at the bar drinking and fighting her paycheck away.

I knew the type very, very well. I examined her properties.

**Crawler #1,293,776. "Gwendolyn Duet."**

**Level 34**

**Race: Human.**

**Class: Boring Ol' Fighter.**

"Oh, I just love those tattoos," said Donut. "What do they mean?"

Gwen laughed. "They mean that we are wasting time, little princess. Now you two get your asses in gear. Your partner has been stalling me for almost a full day now, and that clock keeps getting lighter by the minute."

The weather down here was still warm, but it was much cooler than it'd been up above. It smelled like the beach, which was oddly comforting. The sand formed deep channels during the most-recent sandstorm, ringing the land quadrant with concentric circles, like lanes on a track. We walked in one such channel, approaching the castle.

“Sorry we can’t wine and dine you first, bomber boy, but we need to get trucking on this bullshit your friend is making us do,” Gwen said as we marched toward the castle. “The storm that’s about to hit is the last one before the weather change, and we don’t know if that’s going to fuck us over or not. We can only do Katia’s electric door thing during the sand storm.” The ring of walls spread in front of us, each about twenty feet tall. Each had been breached, allowing for a wide doorway.

We passed the remains of what looked like a siege tower made out wood and bicycle parts. I itched at the idea of just leaving all that good material just sitting there.

“That mechanical boss bird trashed that,” Gwen said, seeing my interest. “When you killed the thing, it saved our asses. The walls were a real pain. Each one had to be picked apart in a different way. But we did it. Of course this was before you guys showed up with a flying house. And now you two, and that *Arnaaluk* of a friend of yours are going to go in there and try to kill the mage for us.”

“And Mongo,” Donut said.

Mongo screeched in agreement.

“Just us?” I asked. I felt my eyebrow raise. I looked over my shoulder at Katia, who smiled sheepishly.

“Oh, she didn’t tell you of the deal, did she?” Gwen made a clicking noise with her mouth. “Why does that not surprise me?”

“She’s going to tell me now,” I said.

---



I decided it was for the best that we probably have this discussion over chat.

**Carl: What are we walking into? Also, what's the deal with you two?**

**Donut: I LIKE HER. SHE REMINDS ME OF A MINIATURE-SIZED HEKLA.**

**Carl: Yeah, because that turned out great.**

**Katia: She is an amazing fighter. She's fast, too. Her class trades fighting skills for no magic spells whatsoever. I watched her use that spear to pierce a Pazuzu in the back, vault over him, and use the momentum to throw his body at another monster. The problem is she's a real bitch. She *is* like Hekla in some ways, though instead of scheming in her head, she just says it out loud the moment she thinks it. And if she doesn't like you, she will tell you. And then just to make sure you were paying attention, she'll say it again, but in a different way. At least Hekla pretended to be supportive.**

**Carl: I was actually surprised when Firas said you two were always fighting. I thought you could get along with everybody.**

**Katia: I made a promise to myself not that long ago. I wasn't going to take shit any more. When Gwen makes up her mind about something, it's impossible to change her mind. And then she becomes a bully about it. I don't like that.**

**Donut: THAT MAKES HER SOUND MORE LIKE CARL THAN HEKLA. HE'S NOT A BULLY THOUGH.**

**Katia: Agreed. Carl doesn't insult you when you have a different idea.**

**Carl: She's exactly the type of person who would survive here. So what's the deal with the castle?**

**Katia:** Okay, so here's the problem. We've discovered there are two ways to take the castle. Easy way and hard way. Gwen wants to do it the easy way. But if we do it her way, I think we're going to lose our chance at getting that winding box from the mage. Honestly, I'd also much rather do it her way too, but Zev has been unusually insistent that we wait for you two.

**Carl:** So you told Gwen to wait for us. And now you're fighting a lot.

**Katia:** Bingo.

**Carl:** Okay. Lay it out for me.

**Katia:** The castle is made of sand. There are no tunnels or rooms or anything inside. It's just sand with a stairwell buried in the middle.

**Carl:** Wait, what about the mage? What was his name? Ghazi. That was it. The note I found in the air castle said he'd basically destroy everything before he'd allow the ghost in the last quadrant to escape. So we know there's something going on in there.

**Katia:** Yeah, so most of this information is from a drunk scorpion guy. He's like this quadrant's version of Juice Box. The Mad Dune Mage—Ghazi—turned himself into a sand elemental while trying to search for the Gate of the Feral Gods. That's how he managed to get that one part he has, the winding box. He's all mixed in with the sand now. There's a magical door to get into the castle, but you can dig behind it. At first I thought it was a portal, but it's not.

**Carl:** So it's just a door leaning up against a pile of sand?

**Katia:** Sort of. I'll explain in a second. After they breached the last wall, Gwen's team found a secret drainage panel up against the side of the necropolis

**wall. If they turn it, it will release all the water inside the necropolis and shoot it back out into the ocean through the main drainage tunnel, which is what the sand castle is built around. We wouldn't even need to get through the magical doorway. It'll just destroy the sand castle, like we were hitting it with a water hose. Easy, though apparently it would only half drain the necropolis because the water is still being pumped in. So the water will be running in a loop. The pump on the submarine needs to be turned off in order to fully drain the necropolis. Our friend Maggie didn't do that before she left which means no matter what happens, we'll have to go back down there.**

**Donut: NOT GONNA HAPPEN.**

I sighed. I could see the game design, the hands of the bubble creator in all of this. I had no idea how the math worked out, but there had to be at least two dozen different ways this could've gone depending on the order in which these castles were taken. Because the water quadrant had gone first, the subterranean quadrant filled with water. And since it was filled with water, it allowed for the easy destruction of the land quadrant. But we were still screwed, even if we did take out the castle the easy way.

**Carl: So if we blow it out with the water hose plan, we take the castle, but the mage guy gets turned to mud, and we'll never find the winding box. What's the hard way?**

**Katia: You see those two towers on either side of the sand castle? At the base of each tower was a coiled-up electrical line with clips at the end. If you attach the line to the tower and then to the door, when the sand-storm hits, lighting hits the towers, and they act like lightning rods. They electrify the doorway, and a glass hallway appears. If you examine it while it opens, the**

**message says it only opens once per sandstorm. But the door closes really fast. There'll only be enough time for a few of us to enter. I made a deal with Gwen that we would do it. She thinks we're idiots for trying it this way when there's an easier solution.**

**Donut: THAT'S JUST LIKE IN THAT TIME MACHINE MOVIE WHERE THE GUY MAKES OUT WITH HIS MOM.**

**Carl: Jesus, Donut. How much television did you really watch? What happens after the door closes? Wouldn't the castle turn back to sand? Also, what about Louis and Firas?**

**Katia: Uh, so I was thinking that too. I asked Mordecai while you were coming down here, and he thinks it'll probably remain intact, but only as long as the storm lasts. So about two hours. The storm will last longer starting tomorrow, but we don't know if it'll still work when everything changes. We have to do this now. I told Louis and Firas to stay outside to make sure Gwen doesn't get all Hekla on us and decide to flood the castle while we're in it.**

**Carl: So we're just going to run inside the castle and then fight some crazy magic user guy who has the power to toss us into a different dimension? Do we have a plan other than that?**

**Katia: You're the one who wants that box.**

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The doorway to the sand castle of the Mad Dune Mage looked like any other regular dungeon door. Like Katia said, it was not a portal. Just a magical door. There was a small moat in front of the castle, but there was no bridge, and the moat itself was empty. Like everything

else, it was just made out of hard-packed sand. I knew if we followed the moat semicircle all the way to the necropolis wall, we'd find the panel that would allow one to open up a large pipe that would quickly turn the whole castle into mud.

A small group of battle-hardened crawlers watched us as we approached the doorway. The electrical lines that snaked from the bottom of the two towers were still attached to the entrance frame. One was pulled taut. The other hung loosely. The moment I saw that second wire I could hear the booming, teeth-rattling voice of my instructor at "A" school where I learned the basics of electrical repair. *Loose wires cause fires! Loose wires cause fires!*

These were high voltage jumpers covered with plastic insulation. Each cable was as thick as my leg, though they were light, made of some alien conductor. The line on the north tower was pulled taut against the contact atop the left side of the doorway. The line on the south tower was ridiculously long and sat coiled like a snake.

I looked up at the sky. The wind was starting to howl. There wasn't any lightning just yet, but it would arrive at any minute. I also noticed another pair of cables high above, connecting the two towers.

"Gwen, Katia. Have you seen any other contacts anywhere? Anywhere else where these clamps might fit?"

"No," Gwen said. "And we searched pretty good. It worked yesterday when the lightning hit."

"Shit, did we do something wrong?" Katia asked, looking nervously up at the sky.

"I'm not sure," I said. "These two towers are already connected, so this second, long cable is redundant. We either need to bring it in with us or it might attach to something out here we haven't found yet."

"There's nothing metal to attach to," Gwen said. She pointed at a human crawler, a level-28 human **Swashbuckler**. He was a tired-looking Asian man. That was the same class as Bautista. "Tran here has a metal-detecting ability."

"There's nothing?" I asked the man.

He shrugged. “Nothing except that wheel that opens the drainage pipe. Actually, you know what? There is a ring under the wheel. I thought it was a handhold.”

I had a thought. “Okay. Disconnect it from the tower so you won’t get zapped, but I want you to grab the other end and pull it all the way to the wheel. Let me know if it reaches.”

The man looked uncertainly at Gwen, who nodded. He ran off. We watched him disconnect the lead from the south tower and disappear around the side of the side of the castle, dragging the long cable behind him.

I returned my attention to the entrance. “The door should still open with only one lead attached. Also, I wonder how much power it requires to activate. We might be able to hook it up to a dwarven battery or even the flying house and test it to see if there’s any reaction. Even though lightning carries a pretty big...”

*Bam!*

I felt the hair on my arms stand on their ends. I remembered the moment when Gore-Gore the mantaur had been electrocuted by the third rail in the tunnels. The ground all around us danced as the sand momentarily electrified. The painful tingle of a near miss washed over everything. Mongo yowled. Donut’s hair all poofed out as she hissed. A bolt cut low across the sky, and the two towers glowed.

The door was only five feet in front of me. It also glowed blue, the door disappeared, and with a crackling noise that sounded like all the ice in the world breaking at once, a hallway appeared, leading off into darkness.

“Let’s go!” Katia cried, bounding forward and disappearing inside.

DONUT, MONGO, AND I SCRAMBLED TO FOLLOW KATIA THROUGH the electrified doorway and into the hallway made out of glass.

**Entering the Sand Castle of the Mad Dune Mage.**

*Zzzzt.* I cringed as the door vanished behind me. The walls didn't collapse, but the doorway disappeared. We were now stuck in the castle. Darkness encompassed us.

"Light," I whispered, and Donut cast her *Torch* spell.

"Gah!" We all cried out as the brilliant light became unbearable. The torchlight bounced off the walls, changing colors, blinding us with a prism of hues.

"Turn it down!"

"This is the lowest it goes," Donut said a moment later. The spell was now just a tiny ember floating in the air, causing the glass hallway to glow brightly and with a rainbow of light every time the ember moved. I took a step forward, and the glass floor crunched under my feet. It didn't break, nor did it visibly crack, but it felt as if the floor rested upon an uneven dusting of gravel. The walls and floor were warm to the touch.

A long, thin hallway spread before us. The hallway was made of

a cloudy, white and blue glass filled with cracks and imperfections and lightning-patterned streaks of black that sparkled in Donut's light. The ground and walls were uneven, as if they were almost a natural formation. A t-junction appeared at the end of the hall.

Katia was forced to shed some mass in order to stand upright.

"How's the map look?" I whispered. Whispering felt appropriate.

"It's a bunch of rooms and a few stairways, both up and down," Katia said. "I see the level stairwell. It's below us in the basement. I don't see any monsters at all."

"Do you think he might be dead?" Donut asked. She rode upon the back of Mongo, who was using his front claw to scratch curiously at the wall. It sounded like nails against a chalkboard. "That seems to be the theme of this bubble, doesn't it? Chris's boss, that submarine captain bugbear fellow was dead. They had to fight a robot holding his head in a jar or something. We know the necropolis guy is dead. Bonnie's dad was also dead when we arrived before we had to fight that goose with the awful bonnet. And now this guy has turned himself into sand. Perhaps he's dead as well. That's why nobody has seen him."

"Maybe," I agreed. "But even if he is, we'll still probably have to fight *something*. It wouldn't make sense for this place to be completely empty."

"Maybe the puzzle to get in here was the challenge, and that was it," Katia said.

"Look, look, I found something!" Donut said, jumping from Mongo's back to the floor. She poked at a small lump with her paw. It was a glass mouse. The tiny thing was frozen in time, running along the edge of the hallway. Its feet were melded with the floor. She reached forward to touch it, and it broke into dust.

"Ew, ew," she said, returning to Mongo, wiping her paw on his feathers. "It just exploded!"

"I think this place used to be real," I said. "I mean, like a real castle, and that guy did something that turned everything into sand. Or glass. I'm not really sure what's going on here."



The hallway was too thin for us to stand side-by-side. Katia went first, Mongo second, and I held up the rear. If we got attacked from the front, Donut would leap to my shoulder. We had just under two hours, and this place wasn't that big. We decided to quickly clear this floor and the upper floors first before descending to the basement with the throne room. We hit the first junction. The right led to an up and down stairwell, and the left turned to a large room with a fountain and statue within.

Everything in the room was made of glass, frozen in time, including the fountain. I stepped forward to examine it, wary for monsters or traps. There was no movement or sound other than the crunching under our own feet and Mongo's nails scratching upon the glass.

The statue was human-sized, and it depicted a robed, female figure holding her arms out while she stood in the middle of the round fountain. Arcs of sparkling, crystal-clear glass sprouted up from the figure's feet, raising to about waist height before curving downward again. The glass gave the impression of movement. This statue and fountain, before it had been turned to glass and frozen, had been of a woman standing in a bowl, arms outstretched in a Jesus pose but with her legs planted in a wide stance, her mouth wide open, as if she was belting out a tune. The fountain's water flowed upward from all around her feet. It would've appeared that she was standing amongst a crashing wave. Or maybe atop a geyser.

Upon closer examination, I realized the glass statue did not depict a human. Her large eyes and small nose looked somewhat familiar, but I couldn't place it at first. A pair of sharp teeth poked from the tops of her large lips within her wide-open mouth. Then I saw the gills on her neck, and I knew.

I'd last seen Tsarina Signet on the third floor. The half-high elf, half-naïad elite was the catalyst for the whole circus quest. When—if I got down to the next floor, I still had a contract to fulfill. She was part of a third-party drama that used the production's setting to create their show. It was called *Vengeance of the Daughter*, and it involved

some story involving high elves, naiads, and genocide. I was obligated to participate in the program when and if we ever made it down to that level.

This robed creature depicted before me was also a half-naiad... a water nymph. A fairy-type creature that lived in the water. But instead of being half elf, it appeared this one was half human.

“Look,” Katia said. She reached down and broke away a piece of clear crystal, revealing a small, glass plate on the side of the fountain. The glass words were almost impossible to read, but when I examined it, the system happily read it for me.

**Ahh, an old, crystalized figure with a cryptic description. How very convenient for those of us who are wondering wtf is going on with this storyline.**

**When the glass wizard’s research facility was transmuted, everything within was also transformed, including what you see before you now. At the base of this display is a small plaque. If you squint really hard, you can make out the faded words. It reads:**

*Lika, my love.*

*My sun and stars. My wife. M’lady, I will move the heavens so we can be together. I will burn and bury and destroy any who try to stop our love.*

“Well that’s ominous,” Katia said.

Mongo leaned over to sniff at the statue. What had once been water was made of the clean, translucent glass. The statue itself was made of the same dirty-looking, multicolored glass that composed everything else in the castle. The whole thing wobbled when he sniffed out, surprising him. The dinosaur screeched at the statue, scrambling back. We all hopped back as it toppled over and shattered. The sound was like a gunshot in the large room.

“Whoops,” I said.

The shattered glass mostly turned to dust, like the mouse. The hooded, glass head of the naiad remained mostly intact, though part

of her chin was now chipped, and the hood part fell off, like it was a separate piece, revealing a head full of glass hair. I took the head into my inventory along with a few of the larger, intact pieces of glass, which the inventory called **fulgurite**. For the head, the description read:

**Decapitated glass head depicting Lika from *Troubadour's Bounty*.**

**It's sticky.**

Before I could figure out what in the hell that meant, I received a message.

**Gwen: Hey bomber guy. I'm trusting you're not dead yet. Tran reports that your hunch was correct. The electric line perfectly matches up with the wheel and the contact at the bottom of the tower.**

**Carl: Okay. Have him hook it up to the wheel, but not the tower. Then have him standby in case I need him to attach it.**

**Gwen: If lightning hits it, it might, you know, electrically open up the release valve. You probably don't want that happening while you're standing in the castle. It'd be like stepping in front of one of those trains from the last floor.**

**Carl: Yeah, I am aware. So please don't connect it unless I ask.**

The valve opened when you physically turned it. I suspected electrifying the metal valve actually did something else, but I wasn't certain just yet. I hoped we wouldn't have to test it while we were standing in the middle of the castle.

**Gwen: All right. You are a crazy fucker. I'll give you that. But you guys better hurry.**

"Come on," I said to the others. "Let's keep moving."

We explored the remaining rooms on the first level of the castle, but they were all empty. There were paintings and furniture made of

glass, but I couldn't tell what they'd once been, and the furniture turned to dust or broke into pieces when I tried to dislodge it from the floor. The paintings were nothing but squares on the walls.

We went up the stairs, and it was more of the same. There was a table full of potions. I touched one, and it also turned to dust. It was finally dawning on me that there might be a way to turn all of this back, and we were destroying potential loot. Outside, we could hear the sandstorm blowing loudly through the walls. Lightning continued to crash.

"Let's stop touching shit and get this rolling," I said.

"Agreed," Katia said.

We moved to the basement. The ceiling here was low. It was only a few inches over my head. Katia had to widen her hips and lower her height to continue. At the base of the stairs was a small, round room with a large, wooden door against the far wall. The door was wide and went all the way to the low ceiling. It wasn't made of glass or sand, and it wasn't magical. It was just a regular door, and it was the first non-glass item we'd seen since coming in here. I paused, examining it for traps. Flashing light streamed from underneath the door.

This was obviously the boss chamber for the castle.

"It looks like it's just one big room on the other side," Katia said. "There's just one small room beyond that, and it's the level stairwell."

"I see the stairwell," I said. Now that I was on the same level as the exit, it finally populated into my map.

"I don't see any monsters," Donut added. "Nothing. But I hear voices."

"Peeping Tom," I whispered.

"We decided to call it Peeping Mongo, remember?" Donut said.

"Just do it. Turn the light off first."

The torch snapped off, and a small hole materialized in the door. I waited a moment and then peered inside. I couldn't see much. The ceiling wasn't any higher in this room. There were piles of books and magazines lying about along with several smaller statues on a display case. None of the items other than the walls and ceiling were made of

glass, though I could see the floor was covered in sand, as if the room was built atop a beach. There also appeared to be several piles of clutter strewn about the room. Most of it was clothes. There was an odd mix of black and pink clothing spread everywhere, though all of it was on tables. The mess wasn't as bad as the Hoarder's chamber on the first floor, but an awful stench permeated through the hole.

I couldn't see the source of the flashing light. If I didn't know any better, I'd guess it was from a television. Or a videogame. Same with the sounds.

I took a step back. "Abort," I whispered.

"What's wrong?" Donut asked, also whispering. She was about to cast *Clockwork Triplicate* on Mongo, which would make the two dinosaurs appear within the room. But I couldn't shake the feeling if we straight-up attacked whatever was in there, we'd miss out on learning what was going on.

"Change of plans. Look through the hole and use your *Astral Paw* spell to knock a pile of magazines or something over. I want to see if anything in there reacts. Sometimes we can get the boss to show itself before we get ourselves locked in there with it."

"We don't call moves if we're going to abort the move, Carl," Donut grumbled. "That's the reason why we have a system in the first place. So we don't have to think about it."

Donut leaped to my shoulder to get a good view through the hole.

I patted her on the head. "We call it 'Peeping Tom' so I can look through the hole first and see if the clockwork Mongos are necessary. That's the point of the name."

"Peeping *Mongo*. Really, Carl. If you're going to get the names wrong we're going to need to spend an extra half an hour a day training with the move system, and that's going to conflict with my brushing schedule. It's not that difficult to remember. Katia always remembers the names." Before I could say anything, she peered through the hole. She made a face. "Oh my, this mage is quite messy. It smells like old chicken and stale vegetables. The sand on the ground is really cold. He's watching television. I don't recognize the

show, but it sounds like a cartoon. Okay. I'm going to knock over a pile of magazines." She pulled back from the hole. "I did it. Honestly, I don't know how it'll make a difference. You never noticed when I knocked stuff over."

"I noticed. I was just used to it." I returned my eye to the magical peephole. The unseen show had paused, and silence filled the chamber. I couldn't see what Donut had done. I didn't see anything on the sandy floor.

"Is someone there?" a voice called.

The moment the voice spoke, a single white dot appeared on my minimap, just to the side of where I could see. A person appeared, shuffling through the large room. This was a human male wearing what appeared to be a bathrobe. For one confusing second, my brain thought this was Louis, but of course that didn't make sense. This was an unkempt, overweight, 20-something guy with long, stringy hair. He moved to the middle of the room and looked down at the sand. He grumbled something I couldn't hear, and turned back toward the television. Before he could leave my field of view, I examined him.

### **Ghazi – Human. Level 43 Glass Mage**

**Known by most everyone in the area as The Mad Dune mage, Ghazi came to the area for the same reason as the bugbear submarine captain, Shamus Chaindrive: to seek out the hidden treasure that is said to be buried within the Necropolis of Anser.**

**As a glass mage who specializes in the study of both transmutation and the teleportation of energized particles, Ghazi told his colleagues at the Larracos College of Magecraft that he was seeking out the Gate of the Feral Gods to study its potential use in stable, long-distance teleportation.**

**This was, in fact, a lie.**

**His real purpose in seeking out the fabled artifact was for reliable, controlled access to the Nothing in**

**order to converse with Yarilo, the banished god of Lust. He sought but a simple boon in exchange for freeing the god.**

**Ghazi wished for Yarilo to make the famed Lika fall in love with him.**

**Lika is a half-naiad trobairitz. A trobairitz is a bard cleric who has taken a vow of celibacy. She is also the fictional main character of a popular series of stage plays that are often performed in the Larracos theater district. She was never real, and is very loosely based on a long-long minor deity. She has been portrayed by dozens of half-naiad thespians over the years.**

**In other words, Ghazi was trying to summon a god in order to turn his waifu into the real deal.**

**Funny thing about summoning creatures from within the Nothing. They're all crazy. They all want out. Some of them are very good at pretending they're somebody they are not.**

**Yadda, yadda, yadda. The entity Ghazi summoned is not Yarilo. And now the glass mage is trapped in his now-transformed castle, cursed with the knowledge of what he's done and what he's unleashed onto the world.**

**He has an escape. He is too much of a coward to do it. But there is one thing that will throw him over the edge. You probably don't want that to happen.**

"Shit. It's just a dude," I whispered. "He's not made of sand or anything like that. It says his wife isn't real. It doesn't make sense. He's like a neckbeard who tried to cast a spell making a fictional chick fall in..."

"Shell!" Katia cried as I felt myself fly back from the door. Donut leaped away, calling for Mongo to follow just as my back slammed the stairs. I didn't know what was happening, but I banged onto *Protective Shell* just as Donut's *Wall of Fire* burst up inside the room

The door exploded the moment I cast my spell, which didn't make much sense. The diameter of the protective shell burst deep into the room, beyond the level of the door. It shouldn't have exploded.

The fire spell immediately caught the piles of books and tables aflame.

"Hey, hey!" came the shout from within the room. Ghazi ran into view. He ran through the wall of the protective shell, looking around frantically. The wall of fire had trapped him on this side of the flames. His eyes got huge when he saw us staring back at him.

*His dot is still white. The spell won't protect us.*

It was Katia who had pulled me back from the door. But why? What had happened?

And then I saw it. The sand on the ground was all pushed back, revealing a glass floor, as if I had thrust it away with a broom. The protective shell had tossed it back with the casting of my spell. Suddenly the entire room was red on my map.

*The sand is a mob. The floor is a monster.*

"Keep the spell going!" Ghazi yelled, rushing toward us.

I stood. Mongo screeched, ready to attack.

"Hold Mongo back," I yelled to Donut. "The spell is going to run out in a few seconds," I said to the fleeing mage.

The man looked over his shoulder at the flames. He spied something on a table in the room, just at the edge of the protective shell. The table itself was on fire. The bathrobe man cursed. He returned to the room, grabbed the item—a leather bag—and then returned toward us. The spell was going to run out in five seconds. The bag was on fire. He threw it down, patted the flames out and then scooped it up, holding it against his chest.

"Go up the stairs! It won't follow up the stairs!" Ghazi wheezed.

I made a quick decision.

"Do you have the winding box? The college needs it to save the world!"

The man looked at me incredulously.



The spell snapped off. The sand started pushing toward us, moving quickly, bubbling like gray lava. *It's a slime*, I realized. The floor of the room wasn't covered with regular sand. The room was covered entirely by a slime, and for some inexplicable reason, the mage guy was living on top of it.

"Answer him, you fool!" Donut demanded.

"It's here," Ghazi said, patting the bag. "I knew the council wouldn't abandon me. I..."

I punched the mage in the face, and I took the bag. The man collapsed, but Katia reached out and caught him. She threw him over her shoulder. We turned, and we ran up the stairs as the sand slime oozed toward us.

---

"That was unexpected," Donut said. Mongo screeched uncertainly, sniffing down into the darkness. Despite the man's proclamation, I could see that the slime or ooze or whatever was slowly inching its way up the stairs. It'd take a while for it to get to us, but it was coming.

We stood at the top of the landing. Katia placed the unconscious man on the ground. He'd wake up in 90 seconds. I hadn't formed my gauntlet, but the punch had knocked him out cold. His health bar had gone down by 2/3's. His dot remained white.

"College? Where did that come from?" Katia asked.

"Examine him," I said.

"Oh," she said after a moment. "He's from Larracos. That's the big city on the ninth floor, right?"

"That's right," I said. "The dude came here so his fictional girlfriend could be turned real."

Donut scoffed. "Can you imagine? You're a famous, beautiful adventurer and suddenly you're in some smelly scientist guy's basement? Just bringing them to life isn't enough. You'd have to make them *like* you. And let me tell you, if you're the type of guy who is

living in a putrid cellar trying to bring fictional people to life, making them like you is a tall order. It's weird, and it's creepy."

"So what happened down there?" I asked Katia as I opened up the leather satchel.

"While you were looking through the peephole, the sand started oozing through the bottom of the door. It was moving its way up the wood when I noticed it. You cast the shell, and it pushed it back, blasting the door to pieces."

"If we actually went into the room, it'd probably have triggered a boss battle," I said. "It's almost identical to what happened in the air castle. There's a boss and an NPC."

I peered into the bag. There were two objects within. **Letter from the Council** and **Mysterious Box**.

I examined the winding box. It was a thick, wooden case with a glass window. It was heavier than it appeared it should be, and the dark wood of the box *felt* old. It reminded me of a humidor or a large music box. Inside were two little knobs and two round cutouts, one for each watch. I wasn't exactly certain how these things worked. You placed the watch inside, turned it on, and it spun the watch, which somehow kept it ready to go. Or something.

### **Mysterious Winding Box.**

**This strange box hums with arcane power. There is space for two watches. What happens if you place the watches within and activate the box? You should try to find out!**

I knew this guy had figured out how to get the thing to half work without the watches, so I didn't want to mess with it. I placed it into my inventory. The last watch remained inside the necropolis somewhere in the hands of Juice Box's brother, Henrik. *We should have taken it from him when we had the chance.*

I examined the letter. Donut read it from over my shoulder, gasping when she read the last part. When I was done, I handed it to Katia.

**Ghazi,**

**We received your correspondence with no little amount of alarm. Upon looking up the creature you described, we have determined she is a banished lesser deity named Psamathe. She is the only of the listed banished who is accompanied by the ooze familiar you describe. Happily, your ineptitude whilst summoning the creature may be our saving grace.**

**The scholars believe your failure made it so she was only corporeal long enough to gain a foothold, and the behavior you describe suggests she has not fully passed over. She will seek the most powerful sub-conscious entity in the vicinity and will occupy the creature. Thankfully, because of her non-physical form, she will only be able to occupy a creature equally between worlds. And it is clear who that will be considering your location.**

**So in summary, the council believes Psamathe duped you. She pretended to be this Yarilo you so foolishly attempted to resurrect. She then likely took control of the ghost that is known to haunt the necropolis. Queen Quetzalcoatlus.**

**You only have one choice. You must use the winding box to banish yourself and the entirety of the necropolis into the Nothing. You must not let Quetzalcoatlus gain corporeal form. If it were to happen, Psamathe will be fully resurrected, and the true gods would be forced to react. That would bring a level of chaos and death not seen for an age.**

**Your failure has caused your name to be removed from the Tome of Scholars.**

**May the gods have mercy on your soul.**

It was signed by a group of twelve different names.

Below the letter, written in a different script was an additional

note.

**Ghazi you fucking idiot. I told you this was going to happen. The second I found you with that *thing*, I knew you were beyond saving. You have ruined everything. I hope it was worth it. Scolopendra will never be defeated now. We needed that artifact, and all you could think about was your cock. I will never forgive you. I was here the whole time, but I guess I wasn't enough. Fuck you. I hope you die in pain. Do the right thing.**

**- Tish.**

*Jesus*, I thought. If the changelings had managed to turn that ghost back into a physical creature, it would've been game over one way or another. Either the ghost would've gotten out of the necropolis or Ghazi here would've binned the whole bubble using his winding box.

"This is distressing," Donut said. "He had Tish all along, and he left her so he could pursue a fictional woman? I am appalled. This is just outrageous."

I grunted. "Donut, we don't know anything about the story except what the description and the letter says. You're reading too much into it. The important part is if Quetzel however you pronounce it gets out of the necropolis, yet another goddamn god is probably going to show up and splatter everyone in the area. But more importantly, it also confirms we can use this winding box as a weapon. And the artifact can be somehow used against the final boss."

"Maybe," Katia said. "Or they just wanted to use it to run away."

"You're not from the council," Ghazi said, sitting up. The large mage's robe opened to reveal a massive chest tattoo of Lika. He put a hand to his head. "You punched me really hard."

"How could you?" Donut demanded, jumping on the NPC's chest. He started to scramble back, surprised at the cat's vehemence. Donut hissed and spit.

"What? How could I what?"

“You had Tish all along, and you left her for Lika! And she’s not even real! Look what happened!”

The man’s eyes got huge. “Tish? So you *are* from the college? How did you get in here?”

We had approximately one hour before the sandstorm ended. When that happened, the glass halls would collapse and turn to sand, burying us. We didn’t have time for this drama bullshit.

I grasped the confused mage by his bathrobe. “Okay, I am going to ask you a series of questions, and you are going to answer them. Do you understand?”

“What is going on? What do you want?”

“What is that thing down there? And how do we kill it?”

“It’s... killing it won’t matter. I’ve killed it a dozen times. It just comes right back.”

“What is it?”

“She... it. It’s a sand ooze. The familiar of Psamathe. Psamathe is not a god, but a lesser deity. She, uh, escaped during my research. As long as Psamathe is in this world, the ooze can be recreated by a single grain of sand, so it is impossible to kill it fully. You can burn it away, and freeze it, or dilute it. Or shock it with electricity. It shrinks, but it never dies. To remove it, you’d have to remove all the sand from the world.”

*Damnit, I thought. We should’ve brought that electrical line in with us.*

“Okay, why is it in the room with you?”

“Are you guys going to tell me who you are?”

“No. Answer the questions. If I get even the *hint* of a spell being cast, that dinosaur behind you is going to bite your head off. I’ve seen him do it. Do you understand? Now why is the slime in the room with you?”

“She’s... she’s my wife, and I think she’s in love with me.”

“Your wife? The slime is your wife?”

“It’s an ooze. Not a slime. There’s a difference. And yes, the ooze is my wife.”

Donut made a disgusted noise. "If Tish could see you now."

"Yeah, you're gonna have to elaborate. But make it quick."

Ghazi looked back and forth between me and Donut, obviously bewildered. He focused on Katia, who stood at the edge of the stairwell, keeping an eye on the encroaching ooze. She shook her head, telling the man she wasn't going to help him.

"Look," I said. "Let me speed this up. We know you came here to summon the lust god and have him turn some lady from a play into your sex slave. And you got tricked into summoning this Psamathe creature instead. And now Psamathe is inside the necropolis, hitching a ride within the body of that pterodactyl ghost. That seems to be the theme of this whole damn bubble. We know if she gets out, the gods who are now in charge might take issue with that. We also know that winding box I just stole from you can be used to suck all of this away, but you haven't done it yet. And now you're never going to get the chance because I have it, and I am not going to give it back. Right now, I don't care about any of that. I just want to know everything I can about that ooze that is coming up the stairs, because I need to get rid of it long enough for me to occupy that small room in the back of your chamber. And I need to do it before the sandstorm outside ends."

The man looked at me, open-mouthed.

"This is where you speak," Donut prodded.

"It's halfway up the stairs," Katia called.

"Okay, okay. But she isn't some lady from a play. She's real. I wasn't turning her into a sex slave. I brought her with me. It's not like the others say. She's trapped, frozen in her body. She speaks to me. *She's* the one who told me to come here and do this. I'm trying to save her. Tish didn't understand. Nobody understands. When I thought I'd summoned Yarilo, he made Lika real. He told me that I had to marry her for the magic to keep her alive, so I did. Right away. He performed the ceremony right then and there. It was only after the consummation did I leave the chamber and find that Lika was still in her cleaning pod. The entire castle had been crystalized when I used

the spell to summon Yarilo, but it hadn't been enough power." He paused, suddenly sad. "I screwed it up, like I screw everything up. But that's how I knew I had been tricked. Lika hadn't been saved at all. She was still there, crystalized like everything else. And everything outside my protection spell was turned to sand. The deity I'd summoned made me a wife, but it was a wife of sand. That is why the ooze remains nearby. After consummation, it fell in love with me."

"Uh, Carl, does 'consummation' mean what I think it means?" Donut asked.

Again, we were getting off track, but I now had more questions than when we'd started. "You banged the ooze?" I asked. "And you didn't notice it wasn't really the chick you have tattooed on your own damn chest?"

"I was drunk," he said sheepishly. "And really excited. Plus it was dark."

"*Does it talk?*" I asked.

"Well, no. She takes the form of Lika when the sandstorm isn't raging outside. When the storm starts, she... it returns to ooze form, but *I* turn to sand. You see, it required a lot of power to... you know what, it's not important. I only return to my human form during the sandstorm, but she is in her Lika form the rest of the time, so the only real quality time we've spent together was right after the wedding. She remains buried in the castle, and she consumes me. Every day. She eats me while I am made of sand. That's how oozes tell you they love you." He shuddered.

"What the fuck," I whispered.

"So that's why you keep trying to kill her?" Donut asked.

"A marriage built on lies can never last," he said. "But I gave up trying to burn her away a long time ago. Now I just live with it. As long as her master remains in the necropolis, we are fine. I don't age. I have this amazing magical panel with thousands of hours of programs on it, and I don't know where it came from. But it keeps me entertained. I can only watch for two hours a day except during the red equinox, which is coming up soon. There's this program called

*Imuyasha* that I plan on finishing... Anyway, the ooze doesn't allow me to leave the room very often. It's jealous of the real Lika."

"Real' Lika," Donut grumbled under her breath.

"Wait a second," Katia said, interrupting. "When you say you found Lika in her cleaning pod, what do you mean by that?"

Ghazi chinned toward the large chamber behind us. "She's there, in that room. But the room only appears during the storm, and that's the only time I can leave the chamber. But my, uh, wife doesn't usually let me leave. I'm working on a spell that'll reverse what happened. The castle has been crystalized. I made a protection spell, but it didn't work. It wasn't big enough, and it wasn't powerful enough. Most of the castle is sand, but some of the interior turns to crystal during the storm. Both me and my workroom return to their real form during the sandstorm, but that is it. Once I undo the spell, I will have Lika back and we'll try again."

"How are you going to undo the spell if you spend all of your free time watching nerd cartoons?" Donut asked.

"Uh, so she's in the fountain?" I asked. I exchanged a look with Katia. "We saw her before. We thought she was a statue."

"She's a personal companion device made in the likeness of Lika. But she is real. There is a soul trapped within her, and that is how I came to be here."

We'd all connected the dots, but Donut was the first to say it out loud. "Oh my god, she was a *sex* doll? You had a sex doll tell you to come here? And you stuck her in the fountain to... *clean* her? And that's what..."

"Is in the fountain right now?" I interrupted.

The shattered pieces of the apparently possessed Lika sex doll were scattered all over the other chamber's floor, though I had the head in my inventory. We needed to keep this guy out of that room until we finished this.

"Again, we're getting off track," I said. "Tell me how you killed your wife the last time you did it. I only need her dead for a few minutes, then we can get the hell out of here."



I PEERED DOWN THE STAIRS, AND I EXAMINED THE SLOW-MOVING ooze. The closer it got to the top, the slower it went. I realized the thinner it stretched itself, the more difficult it was for it to move.

The thing looked like a god had sneezed over the stairwell, and the mucus pile had rolled in kitty litter. Some of the magazines that Donut had knocked off the table along with some other junk items from the lab were mixed in with the creature, hitching a ride up the stairs.

The voice of the AI's description of the ooze was different than usual. There were no stupid jokes thrown in there, and it seemed more morose than normal, which probably *was* the joke. I just didn't get it.

**Mrs. Ghazi**

**Sand Ooze**

**Level 52 Borough Boss!**

**This is a minion of Psamathe**

**Every living creature seeks the same thing. A sense of contentment. No matter what their origin story is, no matter what they are made of, the moment they first**

**exist, no matter how dumb, how smart, how confused, they seek a place of comfort. What that comfort looks like to them can vary wildly, even amongst creatures of the same species. Oftentimes, that journey to felicity is what defines their entire lifecycle. When that creature crosses paths with another, it is inevitable that the weaker of the two will fall further away from their goal.**

**This is the sort of thing that might go through Mrs. Ghazi's mind as it spends its day watching over a man it has grown to love at the behest of someone more powerful than itself. The knowledge that the man's feelings are not mutual is like a dagger in its heart, if it had one. It wrestles daily with this realization, teetering on the edge of indecision. *Do I protect him because I love him? Do I kill him because he doesn't love me back? Do I continue with my duty? What would become of me if I simply disobeyed?***

**It's a lot of stress for a creature not used to having any emotion. It's almost too much. But even if this creature wanted to end it all, it couldn't. Its master has the ability to bring it right back, over and over again.**

"I think the AI is smoking weed," Katia said.

"This tells us absolutely nothing new about the creature," I said, irritated at the description. "Except that it's a borough boss. But the music didn't start."

"I think we broke it when we didn't go into the room," Katia said.

"Are we sure it was actually talking about the ooze?" Donut asked.

Killing the sand ooze, even temporarily, was going to be impossible from where we stood. Without a sufficient burst of electricity, I was going to need to burn it. And while I had plenty of materials to make an ooze scald hot enough to shrink it away, we'd screwed ourselves by running up the stairs.

According to Ghazi, I had to drop the fire on the ooze's core, which was always kept in the same place: directly under the recliner that sat in front of the flatscreen television nestled in the corner of the room.

We couldn't use regular fire, either. We could tell that the ooze had already snuffed out the flames leftover from Donut's spell, so the creature wasn't completely fire averse. We needed something that'd burn hot. I had two boom jugs left, but I feared those would burn a little *too* hot. I had a better idea. Earlier, I prepared some of the "burn gel" at my crafting table. I had the recipe already from my cookbook. I'd forced a conversation a few days before that with Mordecai by telling him about how I used to set hand sanitizer on fire. He'd responded with a way to make a flammable gel that would burn better, longer, and hotter. We found when we used moonshine in conjunction with some paste he could easily put together, the resulting gel burned hot and bright with little smoke. It wasn't too useful in combat situations because the stuff had the consistency of toothpaste and took a while to apply, but it would work here. I had a plastic shopping bag full of the gel in my inventory, already shoved into a funnel so I could apply it like a giant piping syringe for a cake decorator.

The sand ooze had stretched itself almost all the way up the stairs. If I touched it, it would overwhelm me, dragging me down and suffocating me. So I had to somehow get all the way down the stairs, around the corner, into the room and to the core without it touching me.

Donut's puddle jumper wouldn't work, not without an egress or suitable place to land. Same with just tossing Molotov cocktails. The most obvious solution was indeed to burn our way there. If we flamed our way toward the core with fire that was hot enough to do damage, it would constantly shrink until we were close enough to hit the core.

We didn't have time for that.

A further wrinkle was that Ghazi said I could absolutely not use explosives. Especially not in the basement level, especially not in his

lab. Ghazi insisted that a big boom would crack the walls, and the entire glass interior would collapse. We'd find ourselves buried.

That left only one quick, feasible solution. We use Donut's *Hole* spell to drop the fire onto the core from the level above. About four feet of sand separated the bottom glass floor and the top of the basement level. Her spell could reach that far thanks to her glass cannon class, but only barely. The problem was that Ghazi's workshop wasn't lined up correctly with the floor above it. We'd have to go into the large room where we'd accidentally destroyed the crystalized sex doll, move all the way to the corner, and that would overlap with the edge of the basement. The wrong edge of the basement. So we could make a hole into the chamber, but we'd still be thirty feet away.

We worked the problem, brainstorming different solutions. Katia didn't have enough mass to stretch herself that far. I could probably pop into the hole and use the xistera to upside-down toss something at the core. Same with a few Molotovs. But I feared it wouldn't be enough.

I needed to move the recliner out of the way, liberally douse the core with the fire gel, set it aflame, and do it without getting captured and suffocated by the ooze.

Mordecai had been particularly alarmed when I told him what the monster was.

**Mordecai: Do not let it touch you. Once they get ahold, it's like quicksand you can't escape. And since you already used your *Protective Shell*, you'd be fucked. They don't just suffocate you. It will actively pour sand into every available orifice, filling you until you explode. And since you're only wearing boxers with relatively easy access to your... southern entrance... Yeah. Don't let it get you.**

**Carl: Christ, Mordecai. You always make horrible things seem even *more* horrible.**

**Mordecai: That's my job, kid. Have you been keeping your hair short?**

**Carl: Yeah. Katia cut it for me the other day. I don't think it grew while we were away.**

In the end, we went with my least favorite idea. I'd already come up with it, but I was saving it as a last resort. Donut suggested it out loud.

With all of my equipment buffs, my dexterity currently sat at 32. I'd mostly been spamming my strength and constitution stats, though I had managed to throw a few points into my dex here and there. I wished I'd thrown more.

Thanks to my newest toe ring, I had an ability called Sticky Feet. It allowed me to walk along the ceiling for my dexterity times two seconds once every six hours. I'd practiced it a few times, but not yet in combat. That was about to change.

**Carl: How do these things sense people? Will it know I'm hanging upside down over it?**

**Mordecai: It will absolutely know if you don't distract it. Oozes hunt by vibration and sound. Not heat like slimes, which is good. But you clomping on the ceiling will still be enough to gain its attention, so you'll have to use one of those things you were building earlier.**

**Donut: CAN IT SMELL? CARL STARTED GETTING ALL SWEATY WHEN WE DECIDED HE WAS GOING IN UPSIDE DOWN.**

**Mordecai: Normal sand oozes can't smell. But again, this might not be a normal one, so be careful.**

**Carl: The thing is named Mrs. Ghazi, and it's in love with a human. I'm pretty certain this isn't a normal ooze.**

**Mordecai: Probably not. Speaking of the mage, I**

**wouldn't trust a guy who fucked an ooze. Katia, keep an eye on him, especially when Carl is in that chamber.**

**Carl: I don't trust him either. He didn't seem too upset when I stole the winding box.**

**Katia: I have my Crowd Blast ability cocked and loaded. If he tries anything, he'll be splattered like a bug against a windshield.**

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Donut and I posted up in the corner of the fountain room while Katia remained at the top of the stairs with Ghazi. The ooze was just about to get to the top step, and she was going to slowly back away as it approached.

I'd already given Katia the device. I'd earlier made five of these at my sapper's table, each one labeled with a different purpose. Since I'd put them together at the table, I'd actually been able to pick the song. This one was simply labeled, "Bass heavy. For distraction." It was a hollow banger sphere with an impact-detonated alarm trap inside of it. It'd taken me less than three minutes to make the whole lot. I'd quickly chosen the songs from memory.

"You're up!" I yelled to Katia from the next room.

"Here we go," she called back.

A moment passed, and the announcement came.

**Peaking at Number 2 on October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1992, it's, "Jump Around!"**

The music wasn't as booming as usual because the alarm module had been sealed inside a metal ball. Still, the incredibly-loud, bass-heavy tune blared enough to shake the walls, drowning out all other sounds. Katia had just lobbed the ball down the stairs. I was afraid the ooze would immediately snuff it out, but the ball appeared to protect the trap mechanism.

**Katia: Oh wow. The ball is bouncing up and down**

**on its own with the beat. The ooze keeps trying to grab it, but it's slipping away.**

**Donut: IS THIS SERIOUSLY THE ONLY BASS-HEAVY SONG YOU COULD THINK OF? WHAT ABOUT LIL PUMP?**

**Carl: Make the goddamn hole.**

**Donut: THE BASS ISN'T EVEN THAT HEAVY. IT'S JUST BOUNCY.**

**Carl: Goddamnit, Donut. We're on the clock.**

Donut appeared to sigh and then cast the spell. We peered down into the cavity, looking into the scorched room below. The place was a mess. The body of the ooze was stretched taut, like sandy bubble gum. The television had somehow unpaused itself, and it played a scene from some anime, filling the chamber with a frenetic rainbow of ever-changing colors. I couldn't hear it. The ooze spread to all corners of the room.

The small, glowing doorway stood next to the television. The level stairwell room. If it wasn't glowing, it'd look like the entrance to a utility closet or something equally innocuous. Once we took care of the boss, we'd have access to the room.

I could see the set up for the boss battle that had never happened. There were multiple tables of various heights throughout the room, though most were now wrecked. I would've had to jump from table to table and then figure out where the core was. Mordecai had said to look for the yolk-like dome in the ooze. I could see it now, exactly where Ghazi said it would be. The yellow glow emanated from under the chair near the door to the level stairwell.

I lowered myself into the hole. Getting my feet to touch the bare ceiling wasn't exactly the easiest thing to do when you were coming in from above. I wanted to keep Katia—who could've easily lowered me—posted at the stairwell, so I'd quickly fashioned a rope system.

**Carl: Don't let this slide.**

I didn't trust anything in the room made of glass to anchor me, so I pulled the heaviest chunk of metal I had in my inventory and gently placed it on the ground. It was a piece of dwarven automaton, and even though dwarven metal was lighter than steel, this thing had to weigh at least a half ton. It was about the size of a forklift and was covered with lots of jagged, uneven, sharp pieces of broken metal. I'd been saving it to throw at something or to drop if we had to make a fast getaway. It was one of those things that I wouldn't be able to even budge before, but now that my strength clocked in at 80, I could lift it with no problems. I tied the rope to a curved, solid rivet. It'd hold my weight easily.

I'd been thinking a lot about the nature of my strength stat. It didn't seem correct. If the average human had a strength of four, and mine was 80, that meant I was literally twenty times stronger than the average person. But that clearly wasn't true. I was strong. *Very* strong. I could literally lift a half of a ton with hardly any effort. But I also knew the world deadlift record for a single person was more than that. So that meant there had to be diminishing returns the higher a stat went. Like the difference between ten and twenty was bigger than the difference between twenty and thirty. So if the returns diminished, did that mean I was better off spending points on my lower stats, instead of racing to get my strength to 100? I didn't know.

For now, I lowered myself upside down into the hole, entering the chamber of the ooze, spiderman-style. No boss music started. There was no announcement. The ceiling of the chamber was low, meaning when I was attached to the roof, my head would only be an inch or two above the top of Mrs. Ghazi. If it sensed me, it'd surge up and drag me face-first into the sand.

I lowered myself enough, placed my bare foot onto the ceiling, and I prepared the sticky feet special ability. The moment it activated, I'd have 64 seconds.

The song ended and then started right back up again. It would go on forever.

**Carl: I'm going to activate my spell in five seconds. Send in the bozos. Donut, maybe you should put Mongo**



**away after you make the clockworks. I don't want him accidentally getting into the sand.**

**Katia: Here they come.**

I activated the ability, and my feet stuck to the ceiling. I let go of the rope, and I dangled free as the countdown timer began. This was much different than the *Reverse Gravity* spell. That one made me actually feel like the world was upside down. Here, I was just glued to the ceiling, like I was wearing those ridiculous, ab-killing gravity boots. I had to shuffle walk. If both of my feet left the ceiling at the same time, I would fall.

Outside the door, I heard the distinctive twin shrieks—even over the music—of the clockwork mongos as they jumped down the stairs and into certain death. I knew Katia was starting to throw random crap from her inventory at the monster, all in an attempt to distract it. I turned toward the recliner in the corner, and I started to gingerly walk toward it.

I had multiple, passive, low-tier stealth movement abilities that never worked for shit because I traveled with a dinosaur and a talking cat, but I hoped it would help cover my passage now.

I shuffled quickly across the ceiling, dodging tables and other debris without incident, coming to the spot next to the recliner. I had to hunch over to get myself directly over it.

I needed to make a choice here. I could grab the recliner and stick it into my inventory, which would certainly alert the ooze, or I could pour the gel directly onto the chair and set that on fire, which would probably work just fine. That gel burned hot and was next to impossible to put out.

I had thirty seconds. I went with the set-the-chair-on-fire method. I pulled the gel dispenser from my inventory and started to squeeze the thick, cloudy gel directly onto the chair.

**Donut: IT'S MOVING! CARL, IT'S MOVING! I CAN'T STOP IT!**

**Carl: What's moving?**

**Donut: THE METAL CHUNK THING!**

I looked over my shoulder to see a line of ooze had somehow discovered the rope that'd been dangling a foot off the ground and through the hole. It'd reached up and grasped it and was now yanking on the rope. The metal was significantly larger than the hole, so it didn't really matter, but that had been my escape route. It also showed how terrifyingly strong the ooze was.

**Carl: It's okay. Turn off the hole. Make a new one next to it right away. I'm setting the chair on fire now and will make a run for it.**

I pulled a torch from inventory, lit it, and dropped it on the chair that sat atop the core. I turned and started scrambling away as an orgy of flames burst forth, burning white hot, filling the corner of the room with more flames and heat than I expected.

*Oh shit.*

I suppressed a cry of pain. Even as I scrambled away, the heat caused damage. The back of my head felt like it'd been dipped in lava. My stomach started to burn with the effort as I upside-down crab-walked across the ceiling like something out of a goddamn horror movie.

The ooze immediately reacted. The whole room vibrated. The sand rippled. The flaming chair went flying straight up like a rocket, and it slammed into the low ceiling right where I'd just been standing. It shattered into flaming hunks and fell upon the now-exposed, yolk-like core, spreading the gel everywhere.

Yes, I thought.

The ground of the whole room rose, like it was filling with sand. It folded upon itself, trying to snuff the flames, but they wouldn't go out. Even buried, I could see the glowing, sparking fire.

**Katia: It's retracting!**

A health bar appeared floating over the core, and it started to fall. It let go of the rope, which fell on its own as Donut closed the hole. The monster pulled further in on itself, piling into the corner and blocking the door to the stairwell. It buried the television, which was rapidly melting in the heat, plunging the room into a murky, half-lit

darkness. The boss sparkled as the heat damaged it. The ooze started spinning, tendrils of gooey sand creating circles that caught brilliantly in the low light. It would be dead in seconds.

And that's when the roof of the chamber collapsed, and the room started to fill with sand.

I'm not exactly certain what caused it. It was probably the heat. Or maybe it was the way the level was designed. The floor was engineered to collapse just as the ooze was about to die because fuck you. One moment I was running toward the new hole in the ceiling with five seconds left, and suddenly I was buried upside down in the sand, completely blind and unable to move.

**Donut: Carl! Carl! Help! I fell! There's sand all around me!**

*Oh fuck, this is it.* I struggled to free myself, but I couldn't move. The weight of the sand above me started to increase, pressing down, like I was buried in the bottom of an hourglass. Sand filled my mouth. I couldn't breathe. I struggled more, but the only thing I could move was my toes.

A notification appeared, quickly flashing by. The boss was defeated, and the quadrant was now open.

**Katia: Carl! Donut! Where are you! The stairwell just filled with sand! The walls are starting to crack and creak. I think it's all going to collapse! Are you okay?**

I suddenly felt myself moving, rapidly sliding through the grit. I plopped unceremoniously onto the floor. I gasped for breath, coughing. It was Donut. She had bitten down onto my foot and dragged me free.

"Thanks," I coughed, spitting hot grains from my mouth. Donut's torch lit up the tiny sliver of a space. I had barely enough room to stand. We were in the back corner of the basement. The roof had fallen in at an angle. It would've given us a ramp back up to the first level, but the ceiling of that chamber had also collapsed, and what had once been the ceiling between the first and second floor now stood precariously over our heads, bowing and creaking. To our right was the large chunk of dwarven metal,

which helped shore up the ceiling. It had fallen through with Donut. If I pulled it back into my inventory now, we'd be immediately buried.

We had three stories worth of sand over our head, and it was going to come crashing down at any moment. We were trapped.

"The floor broke right after I cast my hole spell," Donut said, out of breath. "I didn't know it'd do that. Carl, what are we going to do? There's nowhere to go!"

"I think it was the heat," I said. I tentatively reached up and touch the new ceiling. A crack splintered across it. "That gel burned hotter than I thought it would."

I sent a note to Katia, telling her where we were.

**Katia: I don't know what to do. The whole place is about to collapse. The chamber where Donut was fell in, and Ghazi is flipping out about saving his love doll. He's freaking out. I can't tell if he's crying or laughing.**

**Gwen: Congrats. Now get out of there. The storm is almost over. The door just reappeared, but I don't think it's going to last long. It's flickering!**

**Carl: Katia, run for the door while you still can. Bring Ghazi. See if pulling him from the castle fixes the crystallization.**

**Donut: Kill him! That'll fix it! Mordecai says killing mages fixes most problems!**

**Warning: Your oxygen levels are low. In case you're wondering, yes, you do need that stuff.**

*Shit, shit. We didn't have time.*

**Carl: We need him to explain the winding box.**

"We're not going to need anything in a few seconds, Carl."

I sent a note to Gwen.

**Katia: Holy shit guys, I'm not going to leave you. Hang on. I'm going to dig.**

**Carl: Listen. We need you to get him out of the**

**castle. That's how you fix it. Hurry. And do what Gwen says when you get out there.**

**Katia: Okay. Okay. I'll tell you when I'm out.**

To our left, the wall broke, and more sand poured in. Donut jumped to my shoulder, trembling. We could still hear the music from the trap, but it was distant and pounding, buried nearby. The bouncing and pounding ball probably wasn't doing us any favors.

*Well this turned out to be a real clusterfuck.*

"I don't think taking the guy from the castle is going to work," Donut said, panic rising in her voice.

"No," I agreed. "I just wanted her to get out of there."

"Carl, I don't want to be buried alive."

**Gwen: You mean electrify it, right?**

**Carl: No. Hurry.**

"Donut, it's going to be okay. How many water breathing scrolls do you have?"

"They're called water breathing, not sand breathing, Carl." Donut said. "I didn't get to say goodbye to Mongo! What's going to happen to him? He's just going to sit in his pet carrier forever!"

"Goddamnit, how many scrolls?" I asked again.

"Eight."

I also had eight. That was good. That would be enough.

**Katia: I'm out.**

Nothing had happened. I hadn't expected it to. I suspected that I already knew how to de-crystalize the castle, and it was too late. We'd fucked it up. *I'd* fucked it up. We should've brought that electrical line in. Damn it.

**Donut: Kill Ghazi. Quick!**

**Carl: No. Wait! That's not going to...**

**Katia: Uh, I already did. We had a small fight. I looted a note from him that explains the winding box. But nothing changed with the castle. I *think* he's dead.**

**It said he was dead. His body turned to sand after I looted him. I've never seen that before.**

I swallowed. Above, the ceiling splintered. The chunk of metal shifted. *Shit, shit, shit.*

**Gwen: Hold onto your hats. Tran is opening the valve now. He's only doing it part way, but it'll be enough to blow your skirt up.**

"Take a water scroll," I said. "Do it now. Put the rest in your hot list. Fast. If your health gets low, don't take a health potion. Take Mordecai's Special Brew."

"Carl, I changed my mind. I would rather be buried alive than..."

I pulled Donut from my shoulder and wrapped myself around her, muffling whatever she was about to say. Above, the ceiling finally splintered, and sand poured over us as a distant, roaring sound filled the chamber, reminding me of the sound of an oncoming train.



The world tumbled. It felt as if I'd been hit not by a train, but by a dozen baseball bats all at once. My health plummeted as I protected the fragile body of Donut. Complete darkness encompassed us. I spun like a ball, bouncing and hitting things both hard and soft and painfully inbetween. I closed my eyes. *Let it happen. Let it happen. Be calm.* I watched my health, and I clicked a potion just as it reached about 25%. My health moved up, and then I gasped with pain as I felt myself smash through what felt like a barbed-wire fence. Metal pierced my leg. A spear of glass pierced my hand and plummeted into Donut, who'd gone limp. She had not taken the invulnerability potion like I had suggested. *Goddamnit, Donut.*

I targeted her and slammed on a heal scroll as we continued to spin.

*It's not that bad. He only opened the valve a little bit. It's like a water slide.*

I cast *Heal* on myself. I became aware that the thing that had

pierced my leg was actually a spar of metal coming from that dwarven automaton piece. I cried anew as the metal pulled away. The metal chunk spun away into the murk. The temperature plunged, and I finally realized we were underwater in the water quadrant, and we had been for a bit now. Notifications flew past, and I spun and spun.

I clutched onto Donut with all of my strength. I curled protectively around her the best I could.

My health was, again, in the red. Donut's health was also again perilously low. She'd gone unconscious. I could taste the blood streaming from her. We were no longer in the direct blast of the water current, and we were now sinking. It'd taken maybe three seconds from the water hitting us to this point, but it'd seemed much longer. Donut's torch was dutifully following us, barely keeping pace, barely lighting up the cloudy water.

**Mordecai: What is happening? Donut's health keeps bottoming out!**

**Carl: Not now.**

I used a second heal scroll on her, though she would remain unconscious for another thirty seconds. Thankfully she *had* taken the water breathing scroll, which lasted as long as one's intelligence stat times three seconds. The scroll would be active for a total of over two and a half minutes for her. For me, it'd only last 45 seconds, and I was already getting close to needing to take another.

I examined Donut as we continued to sink. Debris from both the castle and the interior of the necropolis plunged all around us. I caught sight of multiple dead bodies of creatures, but I couldn't tell what they were in the dark. They all trailed dark blood, like airplanes smoking as they plummeted from the sky in slow motion.

Donut looked okay. Her long hair flowed all around her, almost making her look like a sea anemone. With that last healing, she'd stopped bleeding. I turned the limp cat around in my hands, looking for injuries. She'd been pierced through the stomach by the shard, but she appeared to be okay now. I didn't know if her cockroach spell

had activated or not. Either way, it'd been much too close. If I hadn't protected her, she'd been dead for certain.

I became aware that the pressure of the water was getting higher. I panicked for a moment, suddenly not certain which way was up. I pumped my legs, and it didn't feel as if I was going in the correct direction, which caused me to panic even further. It was dark on the surface, so I had no frame of reference. *Calm. Calm.* I remembered the little indicator in my vision that gave my position relative to sea level. We were only 150 meters below the surface. That was far. Very far. But it was much less than I anticipated. I was thankful for Donut's torch spell and that it worked underwater, and I was especially thankful the spell still worked while she was unconscious.

I pumped my legs a few times, and we quickly rose. I started to relax. I couldn't tell how far we were from the shore, but that was okay. The quadrant wasn't that wide. Just deep.

I took a breath, and it felt like normal air. I hadn't grown gills or anything weird. The water seemed to dissolve as it entered my mouth. *Goddamn magic.*

I tried talking, and it worked. The words sounded odd to my ears, but I could hear myself. Above, I could hear the loud rush of water as it funneled out of the necropolis, across the beach, and back into the ocean. I could also hear something else, not too far away, but getting quieter. It was the trap module, still playing that song, sinking away with the rest of the debris.

I had multiple, increasingly frantic messages from Katia and Mordecai, and I quickly answered them, telling them we were okay.

The castle had washed away, much the same way a real sandcastle would under a garden hose. I'd hoped that since we were in the basement, we would've been spared getting plunged into the water quadrant, and the blast would've just erased the castle away over our heads, stopping the sand from crushing us. No such luck, but at least we were still alive. I clicked on another water breathing scroll.

**Gwen: Hey, bomber guy. This is where I point out**



**that if you'd simply let me open the valve in the first place, we could've avoided whatever the hell that was.**

**Carl: And this is where I tell you to shut the fuck up.**

I was about to say something else when I sensed movement under me. Something large shot through the water. It crunched onto a falling body. The dull, box-like sound of munching bones was even more sinister in the darkness, like a large boot stomping through frozen snow. Whatever the thing was, it was big and long and cut through the water with ease. The dot appeared on my map, moving rapidly through the sinking corpses, zig-zagging. *Holy shit, time to bounce.* I pumped my legs again, pushing toward the surface. It'd probably been attracted to the blood. I needed to avoid bringing attention to myself, and I needed get the hell out of here as quickly and as quietly as I could.

Donut awakened in my arms.

Donut freaked the absolute fuck out.

**STAGE 4 OF 4.**

**The Necropolis of Anser**

One morning, back when Bea and I first moved in together, I decided to make pancakes. Bea was still asleep, and I thought it'd be a nice thing to do since she'd been doing most of the cooking.

I was still getting used to the idea of sharing a home with a woman and a cat, and there was a lot I didn't know. Even though I had known Donut since she was a kitten, I'd never actually lived with a cat before, and things like changing the litter box, not leaving the window open, and finding vomit on my pillow were all new.

So I had a bowl of flour, a cup of milk, and a single egg sitting right there on the edge of the counter. I was foraging through the refrigerator, looking for the missing syrup container when suddenly there was a huge crash behind me. Donut had come out of nowhere, knocking the flour, milk, and egg off the counter, splattering everything onto the floor. She then turned to run, touched the very edge of the hot burner on the oven, yowled, rocketed into the air, and then

landed on the floor, covering herself with a little bit of everything while she did that Scooby-Doo scramble in the slippery mess, everything flying everywhere while her legs pumped several times before she actually moved.

“Goddamnit, Donut,” I’d cried, chasing after the cat as she squealed, running away into the living room, trailing it all onto the floor. She jumped up into her cat tree and started growling while she furiously licked at herself.

Bea was going to lose her shit when she saw the cat, so I figured I’d mitigate the damage.

I’d mitigate it by giving the cat a bath.

After quickly cleaning up the kitchen, I went into the bathroom, and I turned the water on, filling the tub with several inches of warm, soapy water. And then I went to retrieve the cat.

I picked her up, holding her with two hands while she squirmed. I went into the bathroom, I closed the door, and while holding her gently but firmly, I placed her in the bathtub.

A few hours later while I sat in the emergency room waiting to get my hand, my arm, and my goddamned ear stitched up, I’d described, to the unimpressed nurse, the noise Donut had made the moment she’d entered the water. “Man, it was like a screeching, amplified baby combined with an outboard motor revving at a high rpm. I’m not even joking when I say it was one of the loudest, most terrifying things I’ve ever heard. Holy shit.”

That memory came to me now in the moment Donut awakened from unconsciousness to find herself fully submerged in the water.

This scream had a lot more power behind it than it did the last time.

*AHH AHH AHH RAWR AHHHHHHHHHH*, Donut squealed, twisting and turning and lashing out with her claws, like she was trapped in a dishwasher. I let her go after she almost caught my arm in her slash, and she started to sink like a rock, still twisting and fighting and going absolutely apeshit.

“Donut,” I cried. “Donut. It’s okay!”

Below, the shadow that was happily munching on the falling corpses paused. It started to lazily circle upward, vectoring itself toward our position, stopping to eat everything along the way.

*It's the quadrant's janitor mob.*

"Donut," I called again. "Calm the fuck down!"

**Carl: Donut. Chill. You're sinking. There's a mob coming.**

**Donut: AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH**

**Carl: MONGO NEEDS YOU.**

Donut quit twisting, her hair fluttering around her. She quickly looked about, still in a panic. Strange lights flashed under the sunglasses that'd become a fixture on her face whenever she left the saferoom. She tried kicking her legs, but the best she could manage with her stubby Persian paws was an inefficient tread. She could not swim. She was about to start flipping her shit again. I swam down and grabbed her, pulling her into the crook of my arm. I started pumping my legs upward as she dug her claws into my chest. Her ears were pinned to the back of her head. She breathed heavily, her head on a swivel, looking about with terror.

"Carl, Mongo is in his carrier. You lied to me! We're drowning! Help! Help!"

"Calm down. We have company. You need to be quiet. Deep breath."

"How can I take a deep breath when I'm drowning, Carl?"

"The water scroll, remember? Keep an eye on the countdown. You'll need to renew it soon."

A pair of bloated corpses floated past, sinking. These were pink-skinned, naked, human-like creatures, but they were covered in wrinkles, and their heads were like that of a naked mole rat. Their eyes were white and bulbous, like onions. Their mouths hung open in death, revealing large, yellow, and rotting teeth.

**Corpse. Tuco. Nude Glaber. Level 30. Killed by drowning.**

The Nude Glabers were the NPCs who lived in the settlements

within the necropolis. I'd never seen one, but one of the tomb raider guys had described them. All of these corpses must've been from one of those settlements after the temple filled with water. They'd been described as "undead," but I didn't realize an undead creature could drown. It was probably an inaccurate description. Most of those necropolis guys didn't know what they were doing.

Donut squirmed in my grip. Her voice sounded distant and hollow even though she was right next to me. "That's a shark down there. A shark! I can see more coming. They are everywhere. This is not acceptable. I told you I am not to be brought into the water. This is a betrayal worse than when you gave my pet biscuits to that danger dingo."

"You take a shower every five minutes," I grunted as I swam. "This is practically the same thing."

"This is quite obviously not the same thing, Carl. Get me out of here this instant."

I was furiously pumping my legs, swimming upward. The rushing noise of water streaming from the necropolis was getting louder. I didn't think we could just swim right into the stream. It'd be like stepping into a tornado. But what could we do? The monster—apparently a shark—was still lazily circling toward us. We were being sandwiched between the current and the mob. The creature crunched on the corpse of Tuco and some other debris. When it opened its mouth, I could hear the distinctive beat of "Jump Around" blast out into the ocean. It'd eaten the goddamned alarm trap.

"Please, Carl. I'm sorry. I don't like this. Can we go? Please?"

None of my explosives with exposed fuses would work, at least not well, under water. I was pretty sure dynamite would work, but I'd have to use the inherent instability of the explosive and not the wick to set it off. I'd seen enough blast fishing videos in my time to know that you didn't want to be anywhere near any such explosion. I didn't trust in our ability to swim away in time. I'd been working on a depth charge design, but that didn't help me now.

My impact-detonated hob-lobbers would probably be effective

against the creature, but there was all sorts of debris flying about down here, and again, I couldn't guarantee we'd get away in time.

The corpse of yet another creature floated past us. This was a dolphin thing, and it'd been pierced right through the head with a glass shard.

**Lootable Corpse. Bubble Beluga. Level 29. Killed by getting her brain pierced by a spear of glass. It hurt a lot, too.**

"Are you calm? Donut, listen to me. I'm gonna need you. Are you good?"

"No I am most certainly not good. I am really far from good, Carl."

"Listen. Hekla," I said, pointing at the corpse of the beluga. "Send them after the shark. Do it now."

This was one of Donut's favorite moves. We'd originally called it "Slime Time," but it had somehow evolved to "Hekla." Katia thought it was distasteful and a little fucked-up to call it that, and it was, but it was also pretty damn funny.

Donut, to her credit, didn't hesitate. She cast *Second Chance* on the beluga corpse and then immediately cast *Clockwork Triplicate*, creating three of them. The two copies appeared with glass spikes through their heads, which was a nice touch. Donut sent them after the monster while I swam under the rushing current. I had to slam on yet another water-breathing scroll.

Almost immediately, one of the clockwork belugas exploded underwater. I felt it mostly in my ears, like I'd just blown them out. The mob roared, lion-like as it was injured by exploding shrapnel. Before I could compose myself, the second clockwork exploded behind us.

"Carl, watch out!" Donut cried.

"Holy shit," I gasped as two more sharks rushed in out of nowhere. They swarmed right past us, skirting the bottom of the fast-moving current. They ignored us and headed straight for the injured shark. *Christ that was close.* Each was about fifteen feet long and jet

black with glowing red eyes. Other than the terrifying color and eyes, they looked much like a typical tiger shark. I caught a glimpse of their description.

**Concierge Shark. Level 41.**

**These psychos are of the bite-first, ask-questions-later school of underwater diplomacy.**

**Also known as the “Death’s Welcoming Committee” Shark, the Concierge Shark is one of the fastest and most voracious of the ocean’s predators. They’ll eat anything. ANYTHING. Even those circus peanut candy things. It’s really kind of gross.**

**They are attracted to the scent of blood, making them the most common death dealers of any water-themed dungeon.**

The two newcomers barreled into the first shark, who’d been injured in the explosion. They started ripping at each other, causing a cloud of blood to bloom under us.

“There are more coming,” Donut hissed.

“Let me know if any follow.”

Since I couldn’t swim up through the fast-moving current, I swam across and below the water stream, attempting to get to the other side. I kept pumping my legs, swimming with only one arm while Donut clutched to me, whimpering. A school of small fish rushed past, cutting through us like a hailstorm, but they came and went, not doing any harm. Donut sputtered as a fish slapped her in the face.

Above, the sense of rushing water eased. I put more distance between us and the shark fight. Donut said more were coming, all headed straight for the plume of blood.

I swam to the surface, poking my head above water. Donut popped up next to me, unnecessarily gasping for breath. Her whole body trembled. I had to keep her from sinking back in.

“Oh wow,” I said, looking off at the blast of water pouring from a

hole in the side of the necropolis. It was pitch black outside, but multiple lights, mostly from other crawlers, stood near the castle's remains, lighting up the area. The castle was just gone. The walls surrounding it were obliterated. All that remained were the lightning rod towers that stood on either side of the entrance, the tops of which glinted in the light like twin obelisks.

We were about a quarter of a mile off shore. I warily looked about for mobs. Far to our right, splashing rose in the night air. It was a feeding frenzy. First there had been one. Then three. Now there were dozens of sharks fighting each other.

I weighed our next move. We needed to get to that submarine. The *Akula*. We had to turn off the pump. But I knew the sub was located on the opposite side of the ring-shaped water quadrant, and we sure as hell weren't going to swim there from here. I decided to put Donut out of her misery and take her back to the shore for now.

I had a kayak in my inventory from the floating house's garage. I pulled it free, popping it out onto the surface, where it bobbed up and down like a cork. I lifted Donut and placed her within. I pulled myself into the kayak and pulled the double-sided paddle. I figured this would be faster than swimming.

My water-breathing scroll ran out, and I suddenly vomited. Dark, brown water rushed from my lungs. I hadn't even realized it was there. It felt as if I'd been kicked in the stomach while breathing fire. It reminded me of the time Mordecai gave Louis and Firas the anti-alcohol potions. A moment later, Donut also vomited, loud and long, the retches traveling across her body like a sine wave. The amount of water that came out of her seemed to be way too much. When it was finally over, she gave out a little whimper and then vomited again, and this time a little fish fell out of her mouth and started flopping around on the top of the kayak.

I started paddling toward shore. Donut sat there glowering, completely flattened out and soaked through. She had a piece of seaweed attached to her tiara. While she'd appeared almost majestic



and fairy-like underwater, up here she looked like a dead rat that'd been resurrected and then run over by a garbage truck.

"That was pretty awesome," I said once it was clear we were safe from the sharks.

"Go fuck yourself, Carl," Donut said.

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"This is an outrage!" Donut cried when we were back at the home base. She'd showered and was once again dry and clean. "I was buried alive, shot out of a water cannon, drowned, and then almost eaten by a shark, and I didn't even get a boss box for that? We won the level. The slime thing died, and we get nothing? Carl, the game is cheating again."

Mongo made a chirping noise, agreeing with Donut's outrage.

"The ooze isn't dead. We'd melted it down, but then it got washed away."

We'd had to track a quarter turn around the land quadrant before we could get to a town that'd take us in. It was me, Donut, Katia, Louis, and Firas. The town was called Pandinus, and the occupants were half human, half-scorpion centaur-like creatures called Pazuzu. They were all dressed in ridiculous, post-apocalyptic gear: punk-rock style leather and tassels and goggles and chains and dreadlocks, like they were all heading out to a Mad Max convention.

Louis and Firas went off to get some sleep. Louis grumbled something about not being able to drink alcohol as we left them to enter our personal space. Gwen and her team remained at the site of the castle. Even though we'd defeated the quadrant, the stairwell was now buried. It was directly under the spray from the necropolis drain, so they were going to turn it off and then dig it out. I sent a warning to the tomb raider guys that it would fill back up with water. They hadn't moved yet, so it didn't matter.

We knew the stairwell remained because those with the pathfinder benefit could still see it sitting there. Once the team dug it

out, they'd attempt to put a roof over it and maybe dig a separate tunnel to it. Or at the very least, seal it off. We'd have to turn the drain back on, especially after we turned the submarine's pump off. That was the only way to fully empty the necropolis of water.

Apparently the sand slime wasn't fully "defeated" and was still hanging around somewhere. It was probably floating around as a single grain of sand somewhere in the ocean where it wouldn't be able to properly regenerate. If that was the case, we'd never see it again. And because it wasn't dead, we'd gotten screwed out of the boss box. I wasn't too worried about it. On the first two floors, the bronze and silver boss boxes held great loot, but the boxes were now shit compared to how they'd been on the earlier floors.

The good stuff would now only be had in the city boss and above boxes.

Still, I'd received multiple achievements and other loot boxes for that last stunt. The notable ones were:

**New achievement! Milquetoast!**

**You somehow managed to win an important boss battle without actually killing the boss. That's like paying money to a prostitute just so she'll cuddle with you.**

***Reward:* You've received a silver Pacifist's Box.**

**New achievement! I was in the pool!**

**You spent more than 60 seconds fully submerged underwater, and you didn't die! Parts of you may have experienced shrinkage, but otherwise you're okay. You're now an honorary mudskipper!**

***Reward:* You've received a Bronze I'm Wet Box!**

. . .

The I'm Wet box contained an additional ten scrolls of water breathing for each of us. Donut's box, for some unfathomable reason, was silver instead of bronze, and she received an additional item: a **Belt of Buoyancy**. It was a simple belt that wrapped around her stomach that'd keep her from sinking. It only worked in the water, and she spent a good three minutes bitching about it, about how she was never going back there again.

The silver Pacifist box contained a skill potion for Donut that raised her Dodge skill by one, taking it to 10. That was a big deal because she'd been training with it for a while now, and the skill had been stuck on nine. That happened a lot with certain skills. Now that she'd hit level 10, she had a permanent **Deflection** buff, which caused both magical and physical missiles to be less accurate when they were shot at her. Mordecai said it wasn't complete protection from arrows, but it halved their accuracy. It also meant they were more likely to go into either me or Mongo if she was nearby.

In my Pacifist box, I received two potions that gave Mordecai pause.

"Don't use those," he said the moment he saw them.

"Why not?"

He didn't answer for several moments. "Because the last time I saw someone drink that potion, they accidentally killed half of their party."

**Potion of Bloodlust**

**It's like giving yourself a PCP enema after spending the day riding the Night Train Express.**

**Drinking this potion gives the following effects for (Constitution) seconds.**

**Strength times two.**

**Movement speed times two.**

**Dexterity times .5**

**The *Where the Fuck Am I? Who the Fuck Are You?***

**Debuff**

### **Constitution times .5**

**For every crawler, NPC, or mob killed by you while this potion is active, your movement speed increases by an additional 25%.**

“So, it’s like a berserking potion?”

“That’s exactly what it is,” Mordecai said. “But that debuff makes it so you don’t remember where you are or why you’re fighting. It’s too dangerous to use.”

I put the two potions away. I agreed with Mordecai. The last thing I wanted to do was take a potion that would make me lose control, even if it greatly enhanced my strength. I’d look in the cookbook and see if it had any advice that’d make the potion more useful.

**Gwen: That was easier than I thought it’d be. We found the wall to the stairwell chamber. We’ll finish digging it out, seal it up tight, and then we can figure out how to do this last part.**

**Carl: 10-4. Watch out for any remnants of the ooze.**

I pulled out the two pieces of the artifact. The winding box and the watch. I placed them on the table. I was a little afraid of the winding box now that I knew there was a way to use it to open a portal to the Nothing. And that things would come out when you did.

Katia wordlessly handed me the note she’d gotten off the Mad Dune Mage when she’d been forced to fight him. She wasn’t certain if he really was dead or not. She’d gotten experience and she’d looted his body, but he’d turn to sand. I suspected we’d seen the last of him. Either way, the system said we’d defeated the quadrant, and that was the important part.

The note was several pages long. The first few pages were a note to Tish, the same person who’d chewed him out in that other letter we’d found. The remaining bulk of the pages were lists of words followed by a set of numbers. The final page was filled with drawings.

*Tish,*

*I know you hate me, but please listen. Hope is not lost. They asked me to use the box to destroy this entire island and to suck it into the Nothing. Doing so is a mistake. All three pieces of the artifact are in the area, and all three pieces would end up in that alternate dimension. It is too dangerous for the feral gods to possess, even in pieces. So instead, I have a plan. If the ghost of Psamathe ever leaves before I can implement my fix, I will be forced to destroy myself, but I hope it will never come to pass.*

*I have discovered something useful. This familiar of hers, the ooze, has split loyalties. I truly believe it loves me, as odd as it sounds. It knows of my affection for my now-frozen Lika, and it is jealous. I can use this. I don't yet know how.*

*I still conduct my research during the times when I have a body and am able to work. Here is what I've learned.*

*The gate of the feral gods is both a complicated and a simple device. You first dial to a time, which represents a place. Both watches are connected magically. If you dial a time on one watch, it is mirrored on the other. This time represents your destination, and how this works is a byzantine process that I do not yet understand, though I have determined multiple destination and time combinations, even without a watch of my own. I have included those notes with this letter.*

*Once you have dialed into a location, you place both watches in the box, and you activate the winding process. The second watch will start ticking and moving. This is the only time the two watches will be out of sync. Once the time on the second watch syncs up with the time representing your current location, the alarm will go off on the second watch, and it will stop ticking. The box is now armed. This process can take anywhere from a simple moment to a full turn of the watch, depending on the distance you wish to travel. You cannot move the box from its current location, or it will reset. You remove the two watches, and the portal appears.*

*The portal is one-way, and it will last about twenty minutes or until the winding box and the watches are brought through. Once that happens, the exit closes at the destination location.*

However, you must beware. The portal lingers at the location where it was opened, and it is now a two-way portal into the Nothing. It remains open until a creature comes through that horrible dimension. And, believe, they will come through. It will be fast. Oftentimes, this will be a feral god. Depending on the god that escapes, or its level of power, there may be great destruction. And if certain gods or minor deities—like Psamathe—make it through, the current pantheon may be forced to react.

It is also said that those who use the portal, those with weak constitutions, mustn't linger as they pass through. Even close proximity to the open door is enough to touch their weak minds and paint them with the feral madness.

But I have also discovered that the winding box itself is a conduit to the Nothing. All one must do to open a passage is open the lid, wind the box, and send a stream of charged energy into the device, and a portal will open directly to the Nothing.

Yes, this is dangerous. I know, I know. But love makes us do the most dangerous of things. Isn't that the way of the worlds?

This is how I opened a portal to seek out Yarilo, banished god of lust. This is how I was tricked by Psamathe into marrying her familiar. My beloved Lika remains banished in her own version of hell because I was fooled. And now Psamathe is free in the necropolis, where she has supposedly usurped the ghost that is known as *Quetzalcoatlus*.

Here is what I am going to do to defeat her. If I am successful, I will die, but you will receive this letter along with the winding box. Then you can send another expedition to seek the remaining two artifacts. I believe they are...

The note ended there. There was a missing page.

“So,” Katia said. “I was looking at the page of numbers, and they are all locations we can travel to using the gate, but it looks like they're all in the area surrounding the city of Larracos. Once we have the second watch, we just move the watch to the time representing the location, stick it in, and wait for the alarm to go off.”

“Are you saying we can open a gate directly to the ninth floor?” I asked.

“That’s right,” Katia said. “Also, I think I can make a map of the ninth floor with these notes.”

“Don’t get too excited,” Mordecai said. “You might be able to open a gate to the Plains of Larracos, but you won’t be able to go through it. Crawlers can’t hop floors. There’s a gate right there in the Desperado Club in the casino, but it’s closed to you. So if you get the grand idea of opening a gate, you won’t be able to go through, and when it closes, you’ll have to deal with something awful coming through that will surely kill everything in the entire bubble.”

“Maybe,” Katia said. She shuffled the papers and pointed to a note on the last page. It was multiple drawings of the two watches and the winding box along with two gates, depicting various scenarios. The first depicted the three items on one side of the gate, and the second depicted just the winding box on the far side. It went on from there with each possible combination, indicating what would happen. All but one of the scenarios ended with a monster emerging from the gate on the opening side. That last illustration was circled, and it depicted one watch on each side of the gate and the winding box *inside* the portal. “It looks like if we do this last way, we’ll lose the box, but no monsters will get out.”

Mordecai grunted. “It’d be a waste. You ain’t using this thing to hop floors no matter what.”

I barely heard him. I was focused on the second-to-last scenario. *Holy shit. Holy fucking shit.*

I shook my head, and I decided to focus on the problem at hand. “Do you think if we summon one of those feral god things it’ll be able to travel outside the bubble? Or break the bubble wall?”

“I don’t know,” Mordecai said. “Some of them are bigger than the bubble. Summoning them usually resizes them, but this isn’t a true summoning. It’s them, in their true form, without a time limit. It’s them escaping imprisonment. You’re all getting ahead of yourselves. You don’t even have the last watch yet. And if you do get that watch,

my advice will be to stick it in your inventory and not do anything with it until you're strong enough to deal with whatever comes out, which will be never. Now if you need me, I'll be in the crafting room. I think I'm onto something with that yam you received earlier."

I glanced at the level timer as Mordecai walked away. We had just over four and a half days left. "Is there a Desperado Club in this town?"



BEFORE KATIA COULD ANSWER ME, I WAS INTERRUPTED BY A message.

**Gwen: We've dug out the stairwell. Something odd happened when we entered. The whole room was made of glass, but the moment I sent Tran in, it all flashed, and everything turned to...**

A loud error message blocked out the rest of her note.

**Warning: An item in your catalog is no longer eligible to be held in inventory. It will be forcibly removed in five seconds.**

“What the hell?” I said. I immediately thought of the last two times this had happened, both times to Katia. The first was when all the blood in her inventory had exploded out of her because of the container patch. The second time I hadn't seen. It was when she'd placed the whole house in her inventory, and Borant had changed the rules. It'd destroyed a tavern when the house appeared and effectively got her banned from the town, which was why we'd had to trek an extra mile to get to this settlement.

Both of those had happened immediately after the recap episode,

which was when Borant applied their updates and patches. We still had a few hours until the episode, so I had no idea what was going on. I gritted my teeth and waited for it to happen.

The crystallized head of Ghazi's sex doll popped out of my inventory and splatted onto the floor.

Only it wasn't crystallized anymore. It was still the decapitated sex doll head of a half-naïad named Lika. The chin had chipped badly when Mongo had knocked over the statue, and the frozen, life-like head of the doll had a big chunk taken out of its latex chin.

"Uh, Carl," Katia said. "You dropped a head on the floor."

I have seen a few sex dolls in my time, though I wouldn't consider myself an expert. I knew, at least on earth, they ranged in quality from the cheap, inflatable kind all the way to the AI-controlled Real-Dolls who could talk and move and looked at least moderately realistic.

This was about halfway between those two extremes. It was a latex-like dummy head that was clearly once attached to a sex doll and not just a run-of-the-mill mannequin. The head was stuck with an open mouth and wide eyes. It was slathered with hooker-tier makeup. Two sharp-looking fangs hanged down from its mouth, vampire like. The head had a full-head of bone-white, silky-looking hair. Its full lips were painted bright red. A half set of gills cleaved either side of its neck, cut short right at the point of decapitation, giving the cut an extra jagged appearance. The bottom of the neck hole was just solid latex.

It had a sparkly barrette in its hair that read, "Wet for you."

"My goodness is that thing ghastly," Donut said, sniffing at the object. She made a face. Mongo shrieked. "Carl, do people really use these things?"

"Yeah, they do," I said. "But they're usually attached to bodies. People get lonely. Don't judge Ghazi too harshly."

"Oh, I'm judging him. Miss Beatrice had a drawer full of sex toys, but she never sailed off to the other side of the world because her vibrator told her to." She cocked her head. "Actually, you know what?"

That is kind of what she did, now isn't it? Only her sex toy was that Brad fellow."

"Why isn't this eligible to be in my inventory anymore?" I asked, trying hard to ignore Donut's jab. I picked the head up, grabbing it by a handful of hair. All the description said was **Decapitated Lika Sex Doll Head**. I touched one of the teeth, cringing at the idea of fangs in the mouth of a goddamned sex doll, but the sharp tooth bent easily under the press of my finger. It was made of a soft, flexible latex. The jaw was hinged, so I could open and close it.

"Mmmm hmmm fck offa me."

The voice came from the head.

"Jesus fuck," I exclaimed, dropping it on the floor. It bounced once, and it cried out in surprise.

Donut yowled and scampered back. Mongo shrieked and was about to attack, but I yelled for him to stop. The moment the thing started talking, a white dot appeared on my map.

The head continued to shriek with outrage, but I couldn't understand a word it was saying.

"So, I guess this thing is still possessed," I said, poking at it with my foot. I wasn't too worried about it attacking me or casting a spell since we were in a saferoom. "Gwen's team broke the crystallization spell when they entered the stairwell chamber. So everything that was made of glass is now back to normal."

Katia and I stood over the head, looking down at it. It continued to scream and holler. "Carl, examine its new properties. It's been updated."

### **Lika Love Doll Head.**

**This item is possessed with the Withering Spirit of Psamathe.**

**Psamathe, or Samantha as her friends used to call her, is a minor deity who was banished to the Nothing by her father after he found out she was kicking around with some ancient king guy. She's usually accompanied**

by her trusty sidekick, a sand ooze familiar who also happens to be the cursed child of her union with the king. You know, typical god stuff.

*And if you think that's peculiar, you ain't seen nothing yet. Those guys hanging out in the halls of the Celestial Ascendancy on the 12<sup>th</sup> floor get themselves involved in some serious whackadoodle business, let me tell you. You ever see a guy give birth to a fortune-telling, snake-headed cow out of his thigh? Or a woman whose menstrual blood is sentient? That's the sort of shit that's waiting for you down there.*

Psamathe is as intelligent as she is quick-tempered. Unfortunately for her, her first escape attempt from the Nothing resulted in a split, and half of her essence was forced to take refuge in the closest unoccupied naiad vessel she could find, which happened to be a sex doll based on the fictional Lika, who, oddly enough, was actually based loosely on an inaccurate history of Psamathe. She's had to live in the doll for many years, unable to move until the rest of her spirit could be reunited.

**The story gets kind of weird from there.**

"All righty, then," I said.

**Carl: Hey, Mordecai. What's a withering spirit?**

**Mordecai: Why?**

**Carl: We have a visitor.**

Less than five seconds later, Mordecai burst out of the crafting room and stopped dead, looking at the creature on the floor, his eyes wide. "By his left tit, where did that come from?"

"Carl had her in his inventory!" Donut exclaimed.

He moved closer to examine it. He bent over, moving his beak inches from the head. He tapped at her. "Sometimes the soul of a creature can get... split... into two halves. When a body is split, the

two halves will always try to reunite, like magnets coming together. They have to do it in a proper vessel. But if something goes wrong during the reunification, what you end up with is a withering spirit. They're not alive. Not dead. In fact, it's kind of hard for them to die now, but they're mostly harmless. The vessel has to be similar to their original body, and if it's not, this happens. They haunt the object, but they have very little power. It's a bit messed up. They use withering spirits as quest-giving NPCs a lot."

"It sounds similar to Remex the skyfowl from the end of the third floor," I said.

"Yes. Remex was a soul leech capacitor. That is a much more dangerous type of withering spirit, one purposely built by a powerful mage or necromancer designed to hold power and suck souls away from people. These are a more stable version of the same thing. It's terrible for *her*, but she's in no position to harm us directly. Several seasons back, they had an entire level where every weapon found on the floor was possessed by a withering spirit. She'll need an exorcism to get free now. Plus she's a minor deity, which complicates everything."

"Does that mean she's like a demigod? Half human or whatever?"

The head spit in anger.

Mordecai shrugged. "It could be, but probably not. She's clearly not 100% ascendancy material, or else she'd never have been cast away to the Nothing. Think of the pantheon like a rich guy's country club. She might have a famous dad, but her mother was probably from the wrong side of the tracks, so to speak. We don't want to get involved in her story. We avoid gods like we avoid dealing with factions outside the dungeon. We have enough of this bullshit to deal with already."

"I know what happened," Katia said, snapping her finger. "It said that when she escaped the first time, she ended up in the body of the love doll, right? It said it was the closest thing she could find to her real form. That means she was the one who talked Ghazi into coming here in the first place. She'd been lying to him the whole time about

who she really was. She wanted him to open the Nothing. She told him it was to find that god of lust, but it was a trick. The moment the Nothing opened up, her second half flowed out along with the sand ooze. But something went wrong. Ghazi screwed something up during the process, and the love doll, the vessel holding her first half, got turned to glass. She had to use the ooze to keep him here until something came along and de-crystallized everything. Everyone thought she went into the body of Quetzalcoatlus but they had it wrong because they didn't know she'd been split in two, and they didn't know Ghazi had her other half on him the whole time."

"And she would've gotten away with it if a certain little dinosaur hadn't knocked her over and shattered her into a thousand pieces," I said.

"Good boy, Mongo!" Donut said.

It'd been a trap, I realized. If we had managed to keep the castle intact and cancel out the glass spell, the sex doll would've woken up, but she'd have been a full-powered minor deity.

I wasn't sure if we'd gotten lucky or not. Mongo had barely touched the thing when it'd fallen over and broken. I had an ominous feeling we were still on rails here, heading toward a manufactured confrontation.

And that was always a bad thing.

The head continued to muffle-scream at us from the floor.

Donut batted at the head, and it rolled. "Carl, I just realized something! This is just like the plot of those *Child's Play* movies with that Chucky doll," Donut said. "This Psamathe lady is Chucky, but she's only a head, and she can't move."

"I was thinking it's more like the horcruxes from Harry Potter," Katia said. "But in this case, her soul was only broken into two pieces."

"No," Donut said. "Definitely Chucky. That lady who wrote that wizard movie stole all of her ideas from those ridiculous 80's horror movies Carl always watched. I only saw one of those wizard movies, and it had a dog in it. Disgusting."

“They were books before they were...” Katia stopped. She made the wise decision not to pursue it.

“It doesn’t matter. She’s probably batshit crazy by now,” I said. I went down to my knee and poked at her. She growled. “There’s only so many ways the game can tell us that spending time in the Nothing makes you insane.”

Donut nodded. “Yes, I supposed you’re right. Plus part of her was frozen in that doll all this time. That probably wasn’t good for her mental health, either. I’ve watched you abuse yourself more than once, and I know it wasn’t good for mine. I can’t imagine what it would’ve done to me if I’d been forced to actually participate.” She turned to Katia and lowered her voice. “He wiped his hand on me once. You know, afterward.”

“That is absolutely not true!” I exclaimed.

“What are we going to do?” Katia asked, changing the subject. “We can’t even understand what she’s saying. Do you think a real god is going to come down and try to attack her? That’s why those people from that college were so alarmed in the first place.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Mordecai?”

He shook his head. “You guys are blazing new trails with this one. I don’t know what in the hell is going to happen. I’ve never seen so many cross-floor storylines before. The fact they’re using Larracos and the Ascendency as a plot point on a fifth floor quest is just astounding to me. Based on everything I’ve seen, I suspect the moment she leaves the safe room, her presence *might* summon an angry god. But maybe not. After all, she’s not fully resurrected.”

“Let’s let Mongo eat her!” Donut said. “Or we can burn her away. Or we can just toss the head back into the Nothing. We don’t have to do it here. They have a Nothing gate at the casino, too. Remember?”

“We’d have to get her out the saferoom first before it’ll let us do anything to her,” I said. It was starting to dawn on me that her existence was going to be a bigger headache than I first thought. “We can’t stick her in a pet carrier. At least I don’t think it’ll let us.”

“Probably not,” Mordecai agreed.

“We can just dump her in the tavern,” Katia said.

I thought for a moment. “That’s not a bad idea, but that scorpion guy will probably punt her out the door, which might cause issues.”

“Then what? Keep her in the safe room?” Katia asked.

“Hang on,” I said. I picked the head back up by her hair. The jaw on the thing was posable. I pushed it closed all the way. She continued to wail, but now it was completely muffled. I grasped the chin and pulled down, moving in increments until I could understand what she was trying to say.

“...Going to kill your mother. I’m going to find where she lives and set her on fire and then kill her and then get a necromancer to bring her back from the dead and then kill her over and over again and make you watch while I...” She trailed off once she realized I’d moved her mouth to just the right position where she made coherent words, like I’d tuned into the proper radio station.

“Hello,” I said. “My name is Carl. Can I call you Samantha? I’m going to call you Samantha. Your real name is a little too weird for me.”

“Where’s the rest of my body?” she demanded. She could move her lips. Sort of. She sounded as if she was talking through clenched teeth. “Do you know how long I worked to reunite myself? Do you know what I had to do?”

“Oh, honey,” Donut said. “We were just talking about it. It must’ve been awful.”

I adjusted her chin slightly. “Yeah, so your body got shattered into dozens of pieces and then swept out into the ocean. I would guess at least half of you is currently being digested by a very large shark.”

I couldn’t read any emotion on the head. The eyes were unblinking, and it kind of freaked me out. “My child. I can feel her. She’s alive, but she’s unable to reform. I only had moments, and I made her marry that idiot. He’d used too much power and flash-froze every-



thing, including the vessel. I only had a few minutes. That's the last I can remember. My child. My child. Oh, my sweet child."

She was talking about the sand ooze, I realized.

"She's probably in the ocean. She'll eventually end up back on shore. Her husband might be a little dead, though."

"I'm going to kill your mother."

"Uh," I said. "Look. What do you want us to do with you? I can't take you with me. Do you want us to toss you back into the Nothing?"

"No. Please. No. Not that. I want you to go find my pieces and put them back together. I worked so long to escape. I need a physical form."

"That's not going to happen," I said.

"So you tricked that guy into coming here?" Donut asked. "I must say, I am impressed. Men are so easily tricked, but still. Bravo. I'm always tricking Carl here into doing things for me, but you talked him into opening a different dimension for you. I do feel bad for Tish, however. She really seemed to like him."

"Tish? Tish almost ruined everything. Take me to her. I'm... I'm..."

"Going to kill her mother?" I asked.

Samantha started bawling.

"All right," I said, standing up and dropping the head back on the floor. "This isn't going to work. I'm either going to toss you out the door or risk letting Mongo eat you or something. What's your pleasure?"

She stopped crying just as quickly as she started. "Take me with you," she said. "We can go on adventures together. There's this naiad who lives in the Hunting Grounds who might be able to help me."

And there it was. This was how they were going to write this goddamned talking sex doll head into our story.

"I already have a talking cat, a dinosaur, a Katia, and a grumpy eagle guy in my party. The last doll we had didn't work out. I mean

no offense, but the inn is full. Especially for a creature who is probably going to get us murdered by an angry god at any moment.”

“I’m going to kill your mother.”

**Mordecai: I know I’m going to regret this, but I have an idea. I think we should keep her. We can keep her in the saferoom, so she can’t hurt us. If she doesn’t leave, she won’t summon a god. This is a minor deity, so she may have some valuable knowledge. She’s probably the one who taught Ghazi how to cast all of those spells. If I can get some potion knowledge out of her, it would be worth it.**

**Carl: She’s a talking sex doll head, and she keeps threatening to kill my dead mother. Besides, how can we keep her? Won’t she disappear when we go down a level?**

**Mordecai: Like I mentioned before, we can hire a few NPCs. It only lets you do it to certain kinds, but I can guarantee it’ll work on her. Donut can hire her using the personal space menu. You have a slot for a trainer and a cook right now. Hire her as a trainer, and she’ll live in a corner of the training room. On the next floor, we can get a new module that’ll allow us to hire mercenaries and additional staff. We can stick her in one of those slots.**

**Donut: I LIKE HER. AND I DIDN’T KNOW WE CAN HIRE MERCENARIES! CAN I HIRE SLEDGIE?**

**Katia: I think it’s a terrible idea, but if keeping her in the room keeps us safe, then we can give it a go for a little while. The game obviously wants us to keep her.**

**Carl: Yeah, that’s what I’m worried about.**

I picked up the head, pushed the mouth all the way closed, and I strode to the training room. I rolled her inside and closed the door.

“We’ll deal with her later. We have four and a half days left. I

want to get that fourth castle taken care of as soon as possible because as soon as that's done, we're going to start rescuing as many people as we can."

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"What I'm saying is you take two sometimes three showers a day. That's water. I don't understand how that's any different than going into the ocean."

"It's not going to happen again, Carl. No. Take Katia. Or Louis. Or Gwen. Or Samantha the love doll for all I care. It is not happening, and there is not a thing in this world you can say that will get me to change my mind."

I reached up and scratched her. Her entire body was tense. "It's okay. I'm just teasing you. You won't have to go into the water this time. I will need you to float over it in that house, though. You'll be in charge of the depth charges."

She sniffed. "I do like the death charges."

We'd taken a nap, spent some time in the craft room, and reset all of our buffs. Zev had messaged us earlier and reminded us that our normal appearance on Odette's show was canceled. Zev still spoke to us in her robotic, Stepford Wife voice, but Donut had greeted her cheerfully and no longer seemed concerned about her condition. There was more going on there, but I couldn't ask her about it.

I'd gone into the training room to work on my Powerful Strike. It was currently at 14 with my gear, but only eight unenhanced. We needed to find a guildhall for it. It was one of those stubborn skills that didn't like to move up no matter how much I trained. We really needed to find a place to just grind and kill mobs without gods or quests or distractions.

Mordecai said the sixth floor would have plenty of that, but I already knew if we made it down there, we were going to be very, very busy.

I'd taken the Psamathe—Samantha—head and placed her in the

corner. She started squealing at me while I trained, so I turned her around and threatened to stick her in the bathroom or seal her in a bucket if she didn't shut up. She stopped after that, though I occasionally heard a few random growls from her.

Afterward, it was time to start planning our next move in earnest. The first step was we needed to get to the submarine, get inside, and figure out the pump system. Gwen was going to meet us with the two other survivors from that quadrant in an hour. In the meantime, they turned the drain back on. I sent a message to the tomb raiders and told them they really needed to start carving a path down to the water line. I was hoping we could avoid most of the traps, but Katia said she'd been going over the map, and most of the lower entrances still required us to go up before we could go down. It'd be much preferable if the path was mostly cleared by the time we got there.

If those assholes refused, and I feared they would, we'd have to spend a day or two grinding traps, and nobody wanted that.

Outside, we were hours from the start of the equinox where the sandstorms would last twice as long, and the days would be mostly dark.

"You know what," I said to Donut. "When was the last time you checked your social media board? You know you can do that now again since Zev has gotten her job back."

Donut lit up. "Carl, you are a genius! Mongo, come on, let's see if Fleek-Otter12 got people to sign up for the unofficial fanclub!"

Katia watched her run off. "So she really can't swim?"

"She sank like a rock."

Katia laughed. She was, on my direction, leaning over a piece of paper and drawing out a map of the ninth floor. Mordecai wandered into the room, muttering something.

"Hey, Mordecai. Come here a second," I said.

He seemed distracted. "I think I need one more ingredient, but I don't know what it is," he grumbled. He was talking to himself. He did that a lot while he worked at his table. "What do you need?"

I pulled the map from Katia's hands and flipped it over. The map

looked like a flower with the large city in the center. I already knew some of what I was about to ask, but I didn't know everything, including one crucial piece of information.

"Is this an accurate depiction of the ninth floor?"

"Guys," he said. "Do not worry yourselves about something that is very far away."

"I know," I said. "But I'm curious. Especially since the sixth floor is coming up. They're all part of that weird volcano storyline, and I just want to be prepared."

"You're not going to get to the sixth floor if you spend all this time worrying about what's not right in front of you."

"Indulge me, please," I said.

He sighed and hopped up onto the table. He picked up a pen with his talon and drew lines on the map, creating nine petals for the flower. "This is pretty close. Larracos is in the middle, and the nine faction areas surround the center. This whole area is mostly rolling hills and pre-dug trenches. There's a forest that surrounds the whole thing. The deeper you get into the forest, the more difficult the monsters are, but they're usually hunted to extinction by the time you get there."

"So how does it work?"

"Back when the third floor opened up, each of the nine factions arrived at their designated area. Each spot is randomly picked with one exception. The previous winner is allowed to choose where they start. From there, they start building their army and their defenses and their fortifications. Once the sixth floor opens, they have access to the market, and they can start buying armor and magical supplies from the crawlers. They can only bring one large chest of supplies, but it's not enough to outfit their army. Everything else has to be purchased or looted. They aren't allowed to fight each other until the crawlers arrive. But before that happens, they make the officers fight and grind in the forests, leveling themselves up. Plus they all bring several cheat potions to buff themselves."

"Where do the armies come from?"

“They all start with fifteen thousand troops, and there’s a pool of mercenaries and specialists they can hire. The additional mercenaries are all collected via games and gambling and trades up until when the ninth floor opens.” He circled an area on the edge of the city. “The mercenary market is right here. Most of the factions get all of this stuff out of the way early. Usually by now all that’s left is fortifications and collecting gear. They spend the rest of the time gambling and drinking and whoring.”

“But they can’t really die?” Katia asked.

“No. Not on that floor. It’s like a game for them. The system holds some of their health in reserve and teleports them away before they can die. They feel real pain, though. The troops are mostly NPCs, but the richer of the factions can pay for their own people to fill the ranks. They are equally protected. The real people can respawn too, up until the time you guys arrive. The NPC troops cannot.”

I felt my heart quicken. “How many of the fifteen thousand are outside people usually?”

He shrugged. “A rich faction will bring maybe two hundred. It’s not very many because it’s expensive. A poor faction, like the Blood Sultanate will only bring about twenty. It’s a little like the dance floor for the Desperado Club. For every person they bring in, one of the NPCs is removed, so there’s no major tactical advantage to bring too many people in unless they’re well-trained already. And these guys usually aren’t.”

“So they have to build all of their fortifications from the ground up?”

“That’s right,” Mordecai said. He pointed to one of the petals at the top of the flower. “This petal comes with a pre-built, fortified castle. The King’s Point. It’s a more narrow area, but with steeper hills. Most previous winners choose this so they don’t have to waste time and resources building, and it’s naturally defensible.”

I nodded. “Okay. So with the sixth floor, how does that work in conjunction with the ninth?”

“The Hunting Grounds are a different sort of thing. The factions can, and sometimes do, send people to the sixth floor to collect gear. But it’s dangerous because they are not protected. It’s the only place in the game where they can really die. And like I said before, they *do* die. Most of these guys are rich assholes who treat the whole thing like a weekend excursion playing paintball. A lot of bets are made regarding the outcome of the faction wars, but most of the ones who are here are so rich they don’t care. If there’s an upset, a lot of credits can change hands. Plus there is a cash prize to the winner. It’s more about the bragging rights than the cash, though.”

“But,” I said, “The people who do decide to hunt on the sixth floor, they can bring gear back to the factions?”

“Yes,” Mordecai said. “That’s pretty much the point for some of them. Someone on the ninth right now can go down to the sixth and return. But more often, the hunters are people who aren’t a part of any faction. They come to win gear. Things like that ring you still need to ditch. Then they sell it to the factions.”

“Okay,” I said, thinking hard. “One last question. When can someone decide to participate in all of this? Say I’m a random guy floating around in a spaceship, and I decide tomorrow I want to get in on the action. Can I?”

“Yeah, if you have the credits and can get here in time. Hunters can sign up until the opening of the sixth floor. It’s not too late for the ninth floor guys, or any of the tourists and party-goers on the 18th for that matter, to wander down to the sixth if they dare. But most of the hunters are already there. It would be dumb to wait until the last minute.”

“Why is that?”

“Because all hunters start out as level thirty. They can start arriving when you hit the third. There are appropriate mob areas for them to train, so they can be pretty strong by the time you arrive. Especially since the lethality doesn’t get turned on until you get there. The hunters tend to be around fifty, though with the shortened

timers, it might not be that high. In fact, I'm willing to bet my tail-feathers they won't be that high."

"Thanks, Mordecai," I said.

"Carl," Katia said as Mordecai returned to his work. "Why do I get the feeling you're about to do something really stupid?"

I grinned. "Let's get the bubble popped first. Then we'll worry about how stupid or not I am."



I OPENED THE POCKET WATCH AND SET OFF THE ALARM IN HOPES that Henrik would respond. I had my ink quill ready to write him a note, but he didn't answer. He hadn't replied since that first time. I relayed this to Juice Box via Langley. He said she was concerned about her brother, so much so that she was about to go in there herself. I told him to try and talk her out of it.

Meanwhile, the tomb raider guys had finally started moving toward the water line, which was about halfway down the necropolis. The water had done a fine job of killing almost every non-ghost mob in the quadrant, but it'd only triggered about half of the traps. Bobby, the trap-finding spy, was on the verge of a literal breakdown and kept stopping to compose himself.

Chris and Maggie My remained in their tomb. I still didn't know what we were going to do about them. Mordecai was having little luck finding the supplies he needed to kill the parasite. I had Langley's crew physically drag the decapitated top floor of the house containing the stairwell to just outside of Hump Town. That way, Donut could open up the chamber, and Katia could use her remaining rock-monster-paralyzing bolts to knock them out. We

could then easily toss the paralyzed creature through the portal if we had to when the time came.

I did not want to do that. Chris clearly didn't want us to do that. Since we probably wouldn't teleport to the same place, it would just unleash Maggie onto the sixth floor, and all of this bullshit would start over again. Imani was insistent we do everything to save him. It felt like the wrong move, but what could we do?

None of this would matter if we didn't take the final castle. The Necropolis of Anser.

The first step: draining the rest of the water. In order to do that, we had to turn off the pump inside of that submarine.

The town of Pandinus was smaller than Hump Town, but it still featured several inns and taverns. There was no Desperado Club here, but there was a Club Vanquisher. Of all of us, the only one who could get in was Gwen. She said there was a big fight in there recently, which was unusual for the club. Apparently Miriam Dom had her membership revoked once she'd turned into a vampire, which caused Prepotente to lose his absolute shit. He unleashed their third companion—that scary-ass hellspawn familiar goat—into the main lounge, and it had devoured a bunch of clerics before they fled. There was now a “Holy Crusade Bounty” on the trio, whatever that meant. But in the meantime, the club was closed so it could be cleansed.

We met up at a tavern called “The Death Stalker” that was nothing more than a few tables and a bar. And, inexplicably, a gelato cart. The scorpion guy behind the counter had about twenty flavors of the stuff, and you could get it in a waffle cone or in a bowl. The moment I saw the cones, I was reminded of another cone of ice cream I'd eaten earlier in the dungeon, one made of worms, and I suddenly felt ill. Both Katia and Gwen got themselves cones. Donut happily bought a bowl of raspberry while we all sat down. She'd talked the Pazuzu down from two gold to one for the bowl.

It was me, Donut, Katia, Gwen, Tran the human swashbuckler guy, and two newcomers, both crawlers from the Ukraine.

I examined the two strangers. One was a human named Britney

Yeltsin, and she was a level-27 **Pit Fighter**. The dark-haired woman was outfitted in a fur bikini and carried a spike-covered stick over her shoulder. She was really leaning into the barbarian theme that the dungeon had chosen for her.

The other crawler was a level-28, spotted gecko-like creature called a **Kuhli**, which I thought was weird because I knew that was a type of fish, not lizard. His name was Vadim Zbar, and his class was something called a **Gut Rearranger**, which was apparently a healer/rogue combo. He was covered head to toe in little sheaths filled with daggers of all types.

These were the two other survivors of the water quadrant. It turned out Vadim was a cosmetic surgeon in the real world, and Britney had been at his office for a consultation when it all went down, and they were the last two survivors of their original party. It was just by sheer luck that they'd stepped outside to take some "before" photos for her surgery when the collapse happened.

"I'm not going back down there," Britney said the moment we sat down at the table. "I'll tell you what you need to know, but I'd rather die than go back in that water."

"Oh, I just love your furs," Donut said, after coming up for air between bites of her raspberry gelato. "And I feel you. I'm not going back in there, either."

She just looked at Donut.

"What about you?" I asked Vadim, the gecko man.

"I'll go," he said.

"No, you will not," Britney said. "You will die. Everybody who goes down there dies. We were lucky to get out the first time."

"I'll go," he repeated. "I think I know where the pump controls are."

I nodded, pointing to Katia and Tran the swashbuckler. "The four of us are going into the water, we are getting to the submarine, and we're going to turn off the pump. Once it's off, we're going to get the hell out of there. I hope to be in and out in an hour, tops."

Tran turned to Vadim. “Do you own a red shirt? I feel as if I should put one on.”

“What does that mean?” Vadim asked.

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The gnomish Drop Bear remained in the large garage of the house. The garage was the only part of the uprooted, flying home that still had a roof over it. Louis and Firas did an admirable job of lashing the small biplane down. I inspected it as the entire garage and the rest of the house rose into the air, the ground swaying under us.

Donut was in a foul mood. Apparently the AI had showed her a message from the intergalactic internet that had pissed her off, and she’d been grumbling about it for an hour straight.

“No redeeming qualities whatsoever,” Donut muttered. “He said, that, Carl. Can you believe it? He also said I ruined the viewing experience and almost made him stop watching the whole show! Stupid Shuruga<sup>36</sup>. What kind of name is that anyway? Shuruga. It sounds like the noise one makes as he’s getting whooped by a group of angry toddlers.”

I peered into the rear-facing backseat of the airplane. The tail gun was still loaded with a semi-circle-shaped magazine, but I couldn’t tell how many rounds were left. “You spend too much time reading that stuff. Don’t pay attention to it. It’s just people talking. It doesn’t mean anything.”

She ignored me. “Plus, he insulted Mongo. He said, and I quote, ‘Donut and her stupid dino-chicken irritate me to no end.’ Mongo is just a child. If he could read, he’d be appalled. I can take criticism, but picking on a child? That’s just uncalled for. I bet he sucks his thumb and thinks of his grandmother when he touches himself.”

“You can take criticism?” I asked.

“I’m serious, Carl.

Katia entered the garage.

“I still can’t believe you guys flew that thing,” she said.

“We didn’t really fly it. We just kinda went up into the air using it as a balloon.”

“Well, the chum bombs are ready.”

“Okay. Go ahead and start dropping them. Donut has the detonator in her inventory.”

The chum bombs were nothing more than triple-ply garbage bags filled with various dead bodies along with fused, 1/8<sup>th</sup>-strength hoblobbers, each with a piece of hobgoblin pus attached to them. They were all timed to the same detonator, so when Donut hit the button, they’d all blow at the same time, sending a mighty plume of gore out into the ocean.

We were dropping them near the edge of the current from the draining necropolis. The bags would probably start leaking before we got into position, but that was okay. All I really wanted was a distraction for the first layer of underwater security, the concierge sharks. We needed them as far away from our position as possible.

We had not dived deep enough to meet any of the other denizens of the ocean. Vadim spoke of several, including jellyfish and squids and hammerhead sharks. The man was very matter-of-fact and emotionless, unlike his companion, Britney, who seemed to be on the edge of hysterics the whole time.

“Did Langley tell you about that Vadim guy?” Katia asked as I finished inspecting the airplane.

I paused. “No. What about him? How do they know each other?” They’d never even met as far as I was aware.

“I guess Doctor Vadim is, or was, pretty famous in the Ukraine. He had television commercials and billboards and stuff everywhere, advertising his cosmetic surgery clinics. He was always getting sued for botched surgeries. Langley says he has like 50 children. He’s known for impregnating many of his clients.”

“Oh my,” Donut said. “I just love gossip like that when it’s extra delicious. I wonder why he turned himself into a lizard, then? I once knew a red Persian like that. Someone who pollinated his seed everywhere. His name was Santana’s Little Secret. He once got out of his

cage at a CFA event and impregnated a Sphynx. Can you imagine? It's the equivalent of royalty impregnating an uncooked chicken. It was quite the scandal. Do you think Vadim has knocked-up Britney? She looks like the type who'd get knocked up by a plastic surgeon."

"How does Langley know about some Ukrainian guy?" I asked.

"That's where he's from," Katia said.

"I thought he was Finnish."

Donut made an exasperated noise. "He *is* from Finland. Really, Carl. Sometimes I feel you don't pay proper attention. Langley is originally from the Ukraine, but he immigrated to Finland not that long ago. Almost all of those guys in his group are from other countries."

I didn't actually care where anybody was from as long as they were from Earth, though the story about Vadim did worry me somewhat. If it was true, and who knew with this sort of thing, then it made him sound like a weasel. Not the sort of person you wanted to go with into dangerous situations. Especially when you had a large bounty on your head.

"Britney is not pregnant," Katia said. "If she was when she went in, she'd probably be showing by now. Women can't get pregnant in the dungeon. Our periods stop, and we get a notification informing us we are no longer able to conceive until after we fulfill our crawl."

"Wait, really?" I asked. "I never received anything like that." I realized how stupid that sounded the moment I said it out loud. I, did, however remember an oddity from the cookbook. Rickard, the guy who'd written the most recent version of the book, didn't add too much content, but he did mention that he'd entered the dungeon with his pregnant wife, but the moment he went through the gate, she'd disappeared, and he never saw her again. I thought it was just one of those things. I knew dudes still had the ability to knock creatures up. The whole reason Brandon had died was because another guy in their party, one of the formerly-ancient residents, had banged a succubus in an alleyway on the third floor, and she'd given birth to hundreds of baby monsters with the guy's face.

“Has anybody seen any pregnant women in the dungeon?” I asked.

Katia shrugged. “I don’t think so. Except Fire Brandy on the last floor.”

“And Eunice the dwarf on the third floor!” Donut added.

“Those were both NPCs. I wonder if they do something special with pregnant crawlers,” I said.

“Probably something awful,” Katia said. “But I can’t imagine someone who was pregnant would come in here voluntarily.”

Firas popped his head into the garage. “We’re in position to drop your chum bombs,” he said. “The barrel launchers for the depth charges are all installed, too. They’re ready for you to load them. We have five hours before it gets dark and six before the first of the equinox sand storms hits, so let’s get a move on.”

“All right,” I said. “Let’s get to work.”

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After we dropped the chum bombs, we quickly flew around the side of the necropolis and directly over the position of the sub. Louis and Firas had some system where they could adjust the elevation of the house, and it’d hit an air current that would blow the balloon in the direction they wanted it to go. They were very good at it, and Louis said they’d received a half dozen achievements for flying the magical balloon.

“Hit it,” I said to Donut as we sank toward sea level.

Donut did a little hop and then hit the hobgoblin pus detonator. We were too far away to hear the sound of the bags exploding, but I knew there would now be blood and guts and floor-four wrath body parts spreading all over.

“Carl, Carl, I went up a level! I’m now 38!”

“I guess some of those sharks got into the bombs before we could blow them,” I said. I was hoping that would happen. With those missing five days, both Donut and I had lost a lot of grinding time.

We hadn't done nearly as much fighting and leveling as we should have by now, and we needed everything we could get.

"Does anybody see anything down there?" I asked as we hovered about fifteen feet off the calm surface of the water. The water level had risen somewhat once we'd turned the drain on, but it was still lower than when the floor opened. That'd change, hopefully, once we finished here.

"I can see the sub on the map," Katia said. Tran, who also had the Pathfinder skill, nodded in agreement.

"Donut?" I asked.

"I don't see any monsters. I see some small fish here and there, but they're all white on the map."

"Okay. Remember. We don't roll the depth charges into the water unless I say we do. They are a last resort."

Donut jumped from my shoulder. "Aye, aye, Captain Carl." She paused, looking between me and Katia. "You two be safe. It's horrible down there."



"This is really damn weird," Tran said as we watched Katia form into the diving bell.

"Fascinating," Vadim agreed, walking in a circle around Katia.

I continued to marvel at Katia's growth. She was forming this on the fly without having made it before. We were at the corner of the house, standing on the crumbling ground of the garden, and Katia hung off the side, with a single arm anchored to the magical brace that held the balloon high above. The whole house and balloon dipped at the corner as she continued to add weight.

I remembered when she first started playing with her shapeshifting abilities, it physically hurt her to make even a small change. Now she could contour herself into just about anything at a moment's notice. She still wasn't perfect with faces unless she sat in



front of her makeup table, but with this sort of inanimate stuff, she was an expert.

The *Akula* was 500 meters under the surface. Although that didn't sound like much, it was an alarming depth. Vadim said the massive submarine had a chamber on the roof to enter and leave, but one of their mini-subbs had been docked to it before they started their assault on the bridge. After they'd succeeded, something happened, and the mini-sub had blown, which caused the *Akula* to fill with water. The nose of the sub was now physically attached to the base of the necropolis below the water line, and the massive torpedo tubes along the bottom were somehow pumping vast amounts of ocean water directly into the structure.

Like with the extreme height of the *Wasteland*, I knew diving 500 meters below the surface simply wasn't something that'd normally be possible. The crush depth of most submarines was around 400 meters. But Vadim and Britney both insisted they'd free dived those depths—and much deeper—with no real issue with the help of the water-breathing scrolls.

Whatever physics engine was running this shitshow, it was designed to allow us to do the impossible. It didn't want us dying from stupid environmental hazards, unless it was a deliberately placed trap or mob. Dying from the bends wasn't nearly as entertaining as watching us get eaten by a shark.

"Be careful," I said to Donut as Katia opened up an entrance for me to step inside of her. "Katia is really heavy right now. The moment we drop away, this thing is going to fly up into the air. I don't want you falling in."

Donut just nodded. Despite her loud insistence that she was never going back into the water, I could tell she was struggling with guilt over this. I patted her on the head. "We need you to keep us safe. Okay?"

"Be careful," she said, rubbing her head against my hand.

I stepped inside. Katia was spread thin, which allowed her to make herself pretty large. The three of us—me, Tran, and Vadim—

stood in the middle of the shape. She'd helpfully grown three poles in the middle so we could steady ourselves. She called it the diving bell, but she was really shaped more like an elevator with a ring of heavy, dense metal at the bottom to prevent her from flipping. She would grow flaps and pull some mass and attempt to slow our descent as we approached the sub. We wanted to acclimate to the water as soon as possible, so we weren't sealed in. With Tran's pathfinder skill and Vadim's *Torch* spell, we'd hopefully be able to navigate the drowned halls of the submarine and quickly accomplish our task.

The boss had been a borough boss, not a neighborhood boss, so the map it left showed Vadim monster types in an area, but he still didn't have a full map of the *Akula*, which was unfortunate. There had apparently been a sentinel gun thing that'd been a neighborhood boss, but he said he'd never looted the map. Things had been happening quickly.

"Everyone read a scroll," I said. All around us, we each cast *Water Breathing* on ourselves. All four of us now had enough of these things in our inventory to last at least four hours submerged, four times the amount we'd hopefully need.

I nervously watched the little needle that kept me apprised of our viewer count, and it was starting to spike. That was always a bad sign.

"And away we go," Katia said from a mouth that sat against the interior wall of the diving bell, right next to my ear. I almost crapped my boxers at the sound of the voice so close to me.

Before I could say, "Jesus, Katia," we dropped. The elevator hit the ocean and only gave the slightest pause before we were underwater. We sank, and the force of the water rushing inside almost pulled all three of us up and out.

I kept my eye on our altitude as we rapidly fell. We moved at about five meters a second, rocketing toward the depths. I did feel the increasing pressure of the water above us as we passed 100 meters, then 200, then 300, but it wasn't nearly as much as it should.

"I see it," Katia said after only a minute, her voice carrying through the water. "I'm pulling my mass in small amounts now and

flapping my wings. Oh, wow. It's bigger than I thought. The whole top part is ripped away. There's a strong current. I can actually see the water getting pulled in. It's mostly under the sub. It's like water is being sucked in like through a vacuum cleaner. The whole front of the submarine is stuck in a hole. The whole sub is the pump."

I felt us start to slow. The *Akula* finally showed on my map, the structure stretching to completely fill it. The thing was the size of a carrier, maybe even bigger.

"There are a bunch of jellyfish near the entrance," Katia said.

"What color are they?" Vadim snapped.

"Blue. They're big."

"Okay, good. Watch out for the white ones. The pain amplifiers. They're smaller. The big blue ones will wrap around you if you get close, but they'll leave you alone if you avoid them. But you must watch because they drift."

"Okay, I'm aiming for an area without them," Katia said. "Landing now."

*Crack.* We hit the hull, and Katia's form instantly changed. The elevator opened like a flower, revealing the deep, dark world. It wasn't completely dark. Some light still filtered in through above, but everything had a deep, blue hue to it. I crouched, still standing atop Katia's form. It felt as if someone was standing on my shoulders, but the pressure wasn't too bad.

The *Akula*, like Katia had said, was huge. It looked more like a damn spaceship than an actual submarine. The slick, metallic structure spread out into the darkness in every direction. The whole thing vibrated. I could feel the water deep below being pumped through the vehicle. Directly ahead, the sail—the conning tower-like structure on top of most submarines—had been violently ripped away, giving me an unobstructed view of the bottom of the necropolis. From here, it was nothing more than an imposing, dark wall.

Katia continued to change. She was transforming herself so she'd cover the hull, camouflaging herself. She was going to stay out here and keep an eye out for the large, dangerous monsters while the three

of us entered the sub. The ripped away entrance was about twenty feet away. In most subs, the con was directly below the sail. That wasn't the case with this submarine. According to Vadim, the con (called a bridge by the game), was at the fore of the vessel, just short of the nose. That's where the stairwell was. I couldn't see it, but Katia could.

Vadim had described a room directly below the bridge that I believed was the fire control. That was our target.

Above, the glowing, blue jellyfish floated like sentinels. Each were about fifteen feet in diameter, and their tentacles dangled underneath them ominously, hovering about twenty feet over the top of the submarine. They drifted aimlessly, bouncing off one another.

Their dots were white on the map, meaning they weren't naturally hostile.

### **Big Boy Blue – Level 40**

**The good ol' Big Boy Blue is the largest of the jellyfish one might find floating around. They're a little like that guy you used to know in high school who was always wearing either overalls or a jersey of some sort. The dude is like six foot five and pushing 300 pounds when he was a freshman. He always had a crewcut. Dad's a trucker. Never talks. Never does his homework. He's just always, you know, kinda there. He doesn't mean any harm. But he's so goddamned dumb he does harm anyway if you get in his way. Plus he always has a super-hot girlfriend for some reason, but that has nothing to do with the damn jellyfish. Anyway, you get the point. Harmless as long as you don't touch them.**

I put my hand on the now-silver-colored edge of Katia and said, "We're going in. Be safe. Keep that salve I gave you in your hotlist."

"In and out, Carl," she replied. "If you can't figure it out, set the bombs."

I patted her, and the three of us half-walked, half-bounced along the top of the submarine and headed inside.

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### **Entering the *Akula*.**

Vadim cast his *Torch* the moment we sank through the destroyed superstructure hole into a round room. Mechanical parts floated everywhere as we swam down a tunnel. The water smelled of oil and smoke, and it was oddly calming. Familiar. The whole place was flooded. The hull creaked and moaned ominously.

**Donut: ARE YOU OKAY?**

**Carl: We're fine. We're moving in now.**

Vadim led the way. "The submarine was in terrible condition when we first got here. There were skeletons of bugbears and a bunch of robots we had to fight on our way to the bridge," he said. We pushed our way through the tight corridors, swimming by pulling ourselves along the walls, which were warm, not freezing like I expected. "Only three of us survived."

"Did you get the gear of those who didn't make it?" I asked.

"No. Usually there wasn't anything left. There was a gun outside the bridge that just blew them up. Nobody could get past it except Chris. He had some ability that made him invisible to the thing. He went past and into the boss chamber alone. When he killed the robot thing with the head in the jar, the gun blew up on its own."

"You never had any hints he was really two people?"

Vadim shook his head. He swam under a floating, blue barrel. The man moved quickly in the water. I grasped the barrel and took it in, and it appeared in my inventory filled with sea water.

"It didn't surprise me," Vadim continued. "Chris was a higher level. Never talked much. Was a fierce fighter, but emotionless. He did have a lot of spells. He insulted us when we didn't do what he said. Britney never liked him."

"That's most definitely not the real Chris," I said.

Tran picked up what looked like a robot arm and let it go. I was taking everything and tossing it into my inventory. Most of this stuff was worthless, but some of it was made out of bugbear metal, which appeared to be very light.

We passed through what had once been a mess hall. I really wished we had more time to go exploring, but I knew we were on a timer. I finally saw the stairwell on the edge of my map. We were following the water party's original path through the *Akula*. I was deliberately making Vadim go first, lest he lead me into a trap.

"Did you guys loot any journals or notes from the boss?" I asked.

"Yes," Vadim said. "There was a note. Chris took it and read it. He didn't show us, but it had a key code on it to the escape tubes above the bridge. We all agreed to go to the land quadrant because it was the closest, but he somehow ended up with you guys."

"He said there wasn't room for him to get to the land quadrant," I said.

"That was a lie. There was plenty of room. We could've fit a whole party. But each escape tunnel can only be used once." He paused as we entered another hallway. We stopped in front of a hatch with a round, spinning wheel dogged closed. We were only a handful of rooms away from the bridge.

"What's wrong?"

"This was open. We left all the doors open so we could escape to our sub."

I moved forward to inspect the door. *Uh-oh*. "You don't see anything on the other side?" I asked.

Vadim's gecko face looked grim. "No. But it's a small room on the other side. Like one of those rooms where you can drain the water away."

"An airlock," I said.

**Katia: Uh, guys, there's something out here. It's big. It just swam by underneath the sub. I didn't get a good look, but the damn thing is bigger than the submarine. It's gone now.**

**Carl: Okay. That's probably what really broke the sail off the sub.**

**Katia: We should be fine as long as you guys don't bring attention to yourselves.**

I spun the wheel. It turned easily, revealing a small room with a switch on the wall. A red light glowed. I read another water-breathing scroll. "Come on, all of us inside."

Tran and Vadim looked at one another then followed me. I shut the door, locking us in. I hit the switch, and the room started to vibrate. A loud noise filled the chamber, my ears popped, and the water started to suck away. A minute later, and the room hissed. I spun the wheel on the second door, and I opened it.

"Tada," I said, stepping into the room.

The water was gone, but puddles appeared everywhere. This section had been drained, but it hadn't been like this for long. I took a breath. The air felt stale, but it was air. I didn't receive a warning about low oxygen. I knew if there was none, the water-breathing scroll wouldn't help. We'd have to flood the chamber again.

Tran was the first to vomit. We all waited for our spell to fade. When it hit me, I went to my knees, spewing brown water everywhere. *Christ, this is awful.*

"Why did I volunteer for this again?" Tran asked, rolling onto his back.

Vadim was unfazed by the vomiting. "You get used to it after a while. It's really bad if you're under for more than an hour."

We recovered and stepped into a large, semi-circle-shaped room. The center of the room was filled with removable grates. The metallic room appeared to have no purpose, which was unusual for a water vessel. A hole in the ceiling sparked. That, I realized, was the remains of the sentinel gun. The neighborhood boss. This had been a boss chamber. I didn't see a place to loot the map. I probably had to go a level higher or lower to grab it. Our feet echoed when we walked.

The next door was a similar portal to the one behind it. Vadim said just beyond it was the bridge. Within the bridge, I knew, was the

captain's chambers, a separate room which contained the floor exit. There was also a real staircase that went below to the fire control station where we could, theoretically, turn off the pump. And if we went up instead of down, there was yet another room where the three escape hatches were. Two of the three had already been used.

"That door was open, too," Vadim said.

I really wished I had Donut with us. That way we could use the *Hole* spell to peer inside.

"There," Tran said, pointing to the ground. He pointed at one of the grates in the corner of the room. I finally saw what he was pointing at, the glint of a corpse's glow.

The moment I moved the grate, the X appeared on my map.

**Lootable Corpse. The Bugbear's Delight. Neighborhood Boss. Killed by System Deactivation.**

It was a small box, hidden under the floor, that one had to destroy in order to turn off the gun. Maggie had somehow circumvented it, which in turn allowed her to kill the borough boss on her own and reap all the experience. I reached down, opened the small control panel, and looted the neighborhood map along with a **Blown Heavy-Duty Fuse**.

The moment I took the map, the entirety of the *Akula* populated on my screen. Multiple red dots appeared, mostly in the lower decks. The map helpfully showed which parts of the sub were flooded and which was dry. Most of it was flooded.

A red dot moved back and forth across the bridge on the other side of that door. There were also the multiple Xs of corpses. I first focused on the Xs, and my heart quickened.

The red dot kept disappearing and reappearing. It was moving back and forth between the bridge and the chamber just on the other side, outside the sub. Outside the water quadrant, even.

"Fuck me," I muttered.

"What is it?" Tran asked.

"It's a ghost. One that shouldn't be in here. It's..."

Before I could finish, an ear-piercing screech filled the submarine.



The entire hull shuddered. A glowing, green head of a goddamned pterodactyl appeared, leaning in through the bulkhead leading to the bridge. It screamed again, and my vision flashed red. Vadim fell to the ground, his health suddenly in the red.

An aural attack.

Before I could examine the ghost, it disappeared back into the bridge. But I knew who that was. Quetzalcoatlus, the supposed boss monster of the subterranean level.

The dot disappeared, but a moment later, I heard her scream again, and it was somehow louder. The entire hull quaked. Tran used a *Heal Others* spell on Vadim.

**Katia: Something green and glowing just shot out of the side of the submarine and went down. What is that? Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. I can see it. The green thing just smacked it and turned around.**

**Carl: Blow your ballast. Get out of there. You don't have time to get to us. Get to the surface.**

**Katia: The flying green dot just flew back into the temple I think. But the large thing is coming. Carl, there's music. Music I haven't heard before.**

**Carl: GET OUT NOW.**

**Donut: DON'T ABANDON CARL.**

**Katia: It's coming. Oh, god. Oh, god. It's reaching for the sub, Carl.**

I CLAMBERED TOWARD THE DOOR OF THE BRIDGE AS THE MUSIC started to pulse. It was quiet at first, but it rose in volume, shaking the hull. And soon enough, the music was blasting. Not quite the level of an alarm trap, but loud enough I had to shout at the others.

This was a pure, deep dubstep growl punctuated by high-pitch, ear-piercing glitches that sounded like whale song. It gave the sense of overwhelming, frenetic panic. The grates under my feet clinked up and down.

The whole vessel shuddered, and suddenly the three of us fell to our backs. The sub vibrated as whatever this was physically grabbed the submarine.

I scrambled to my feet and pushed forward. I had to get the dead bodies in the bridge. When Henrik the changeling principal had disappeared, we'd all just assumed he'd gone directly into the necropolis. When I had pinged him that first time using the watch, and he'd responded, I'd seen that he'd been underwater. I thought he was in a flooded cavern of the crypt. He'd been in the form of a fish creature.

He'd actually been on his way here, to the *Akula*. I had no idea why they'd come here, but whatever they were trying to do, they'd

failed. Six of the seven bodies in the bridge were changeling principals, including Henrik. And if Henrik was here, that also meant the watch was here.

I spun the wheel, ripped open the portal as the submarine jolted again. The portal opened toward me, and I pulled myself inside. I shouted over the pounding music for Tran and Vadim to follow. We were going to loot the bodies, and then the three of us were going to jump to the last of the three escape hatches. We didn't have a choice. I already knew that whatever this was going to be, it wasn't a neighborhood or borough boss, which meant we were fucked.

**Carl: Katia, did you get out?**

The moment I sent the message, I realized, no. She hadn't gotten free. I saw her dot on the map, moving through the innards of the *Akula* in our direction. She'd fled into the submarine.

**Carl: Goddamnit, Katia.**

**Katia: It was too late. I wouldn't have gotten away.**

**Carl: Okay, get your ass in here. Why is there boss music, but the other stuff hasn't happened yet?**

**Katia: I don't know.**

The needle that indicated views was buried all the way to the right.

I yelled for Tran to stay back and to close the door to the airlock so Katia could get in here. The process took almost a full minute to transfer. I prayed she'd make it in time.

The whole sub rolled onto its side. I fell inside the bridge. Behind me, both Vadim and Tran yelled out in surprise as they also fell, plummeting out of sight in the room behind me. We'd been pulled free of the hole in the side of the necropolis. Below, the rushing noise of water changed in pitch.

I spied Henrik's body near the front of the bridge, and he was in the faceless humanoid form. I watched as he rolled toward the wall, smashing against it. Broken pieces of a robot fell with him. This was the borough boss corpse, which had been a spider carrying the head of Chaindrive the bugbear in a jar. They fell against yet another

portal in the room, this one leading to the captain's stateroom and the level stairwell.

The sub remained at a 45-degree pitch as I stood, one foot on a bulkhead, one on the deck. The hull croaked and groaned, but I felt it more than I heard it, as the music continued to pound. My eyes moved to the altitude chart on my display. We were at 550 meters and falling. *We're out of the hole. We're being dragged down.*

I took a precious moment to gawk at the opulence of the bridge. The *Akula's* control center was a combination between the *Enterprise* bridge from *Star Trek* and the interior of a Victorian-era-themed restaurant that was so expensive, the prices weren't even on the menu. At least it had been, once upon a time. Both the ravages of time and the recent flooding had ruined the place. A rust-covered chandelier dotted with random sparkles hung from the ceiling, swinging back and forth. The deck was covered with moldy and ripped velvet. The railings were made of polished wood capped with brass and covered with intricate carvings. A mighty, but peeled and faded, mural covered one bulkhead, depicting what appeared to be a bugbear getting knighted by an elf in flowing robes.

The captain's chair sat high in the middle of the room. It was a heavily-patinaed, brass throne covered with spigots and levers, reminding me of the cockpit of the *Nightmare*. The seat had once been cushioned with red velvet, but it'd disintegrated with time, revealing rusted springs. Next to the chair sat what appeared to be a mini-fridge and bar. The door to the fridge hung open, revealing it be empty. The bar was equally barren.

But the most impressive sight was the glass porthole giving me a wide view of the underwater world. The window was broad, about twenty-five feet across and ten feet high and framed with riveted brass. I could see a film of dust had grown over the glass, but an area had been recently cleaned off, either by Chris or Henrik's crew.

The window had revealed been nothing but black a moment before, but now I could see movement just on the other side, bubbles and water rushing by, though it was still pitch black out there. Some-

thing tightened on the glass, and I felt my heart clench in my chest. *It's not darkness. Something is covering the port.*

I swallowed when I realized what I was looking at. A sucker from a squid or octopus tentacle appeared, squeezing against the view. The oval-shaped suction cup took up half the window.

"Holy crap," I muttered.

**Katia: I'm waiting for the room to fill with water.**

**Carl: Okay. I'm in the bridge. One room over. Grab the map if you have time. It's in the first room.**

**Donut: WHAT IS HAPPENING.**

**Carl: Get the depth charges ready. Don't drop until I say.**

I scrambled along the wall to the corpse of Henrik.

**Lootable Corpse. Henrik. Level 50 Changeling Principal. Killed by a very pissed-off Quetzalcoatlus.**

**Mysterious Watch.**

**Torn Book Page.**

I took his entire body into my inventory. The moment I had it, the world froze.

*Shit. Here we go.*

**System Message: Please Wait.**

The world unfroze as quickly as it had frozen.

**System Message: Thank you for your patience. You may now resume normal activities.**

What the hell? That was the second time this had happened. I'd been expecting that to be the boss battle.

**System Message: Three items in your inventory have been placed under an administrative lock while an appeal in the Syndicate court determines if these items are...**

The message appeared and disappeared in a flash, almost too quickly to read or understand. It never finished fully displaying. And then another message appeared and disappeared just as quickly.

**System Message: Court determination: Lack of Standing for all plaintiffs. Administrative lock removed. We apologize for the inconvenience.**

The deck rumbled. The chandelier swung back and forth. The music continued to pound.

**Donut: CARL, THE WORLD FROZE AGAIN. DID YOU DO THAT?**

The submarine hit something solid and settled, righting itself, and I had to scramble to stay on my feet. The chandelier continued to swing wildly. The hull groaned and popped under my feet. We were almost exactly 1,500 meters below sea level. I was pretty sure we'd just settled at the very bottom of the bubble. Outside the, the suction cup moved away, squeaking loudly like a squeegee against a windshield.

At a depth of 500 meters, the world had been blue-hued. Down here, a green luminescence permeated the ocean's floor. I couldn't see any sign of the monster. I didn't see any sign of the island, though I realized the sub had turned a full 180 degrees. The music continued.

**Katia: I'm through. I'm coming up.**

What was going on? Fuck this, I thought. We had to get to the escape hatch.

**Carl: Get in here. Bring the other two guys.**

I thought of the weird system message. Someone had sued to keep the pieces of the Gate of the Feral Gods out of my hands. That wasn't a surprise. Neither was it a surprise that there were multiple plaintiffs in the suit.

But Henrik had something else in his inventory. It was starting to become clear that this was a common thing in this game, that the system would plant important information on corpses. I extracted the Torn Book Page from Henrik's inventory and examined it.

**Torn Book Page.**

**This piece of paper was mercilessly ripped from a**

**perfectly-innocent book. Anybody who thinks to mutilate books in such a manner is obviously a terrible person. I mean, one minute this book is sitting there, minding its own business, and suddenly... BAM! It's torn away from its home. And even if it gets returned, you can't just repair that sort of thing. It's irreparably harmed. Anybody who would do that is a real jerk. It's a lot like what we did to you guys.**

**Anyway, this slip of old paper appears to be an extract of a cleric's journal. One side is half of a terrible love poem for his aunt. The other is something about ghosts. Fucking clerics. What a bunch of nerds. Am I right?**

I quickly read the passage.

*...and she formed into a rage elemental.*

*Another curiosity is the She Who Wails. Or Wailing Shrieker. A rare ghost, it is formed when a grieving widow dies of her despair, in the dark, on hallowed ground, while the corpse of her affection rots nearby. These were often purposely created to guard tombs, oftentimes at the direction of the ailing pharaoh or king himself, who would ply the woman with affection in order to have ready stock upon his burial. Sometimes he would do this with a harem of women, if he was especially paranoid about keeping his treasures safe. The women would not know this was to be their fate.*

*If a Wailing Shrieker forms, she has the tendency to haunt her lover's grave, and she will aggressively defend the area. She is defeated with a high-level exorcism spell, the destruction of the corpse of her lover, by varying high-degree banishment spells, or via electric shock. Beware her scream and her touch. She is intelligent and jealous. She is fully non-corporeal, and any flesh-giving spell can be used to harm her.*

Henrik and his team didn't want to kill Quetzalcoatlus. They wanted to physically touch her, but they could only do that if she was given flesh. Their original plan was to use Wynne the gnome to do it.

I didn't know why they'd come here. Whatever he'd been planning, it was plan B. Or C. And it hadn't worked. They'd pissed off the ghost, she'd killed them all, and now we'd been dragged to the bottom of the ocean because of it.

**Carl: Gwen. How long until the storm?**

**Gwen: Two and a half hours. And we don't know what's really going to happen.**

I gave her a quick set of instructions and told her to hurry.

Katia pulled herself into the room, followed by Tran and Vadim.

"Loot the rest of these corpses," I said, yelling over the music as I moved to the closest body. I pulled him into my inventory. He only had a few gold coins on him, but Mordecai wanted the brains of these guys, too. I pointed to a set of spiral stairs on the opposite side of the bridge, pushed up against the mural. Both up and down led to additional hatches. "Go up. We don't need to turn the pump off anymore, but we need to get to the escape hatch room."

Katia and the other two didn't respond to my shout. All three of them stood still, staring out the window. That's when I looked up and saw what they were staring at. A massive, glowing form approached the sub. A shark the size of a mountain. A shark? That didn't make sense. Then I saw the tentacles flowing behind it. *A sharktopus. A fucking sharktopus. Donut is going to be pissed she missed this one.*

"Oh," I heard myself say. "That's not good."

"That's not the same one that pulled us down here," Katia shouted so she could be heard over the music.

The monstrosity rocketed toward us, mouth opening wide. It turned to the side, like it was about to eat a goddamn taco.

*Holy shit it's going to swallow us.*

And then, finally, did the world freeze.

**Admin Notice: This Special Event boss battle is being streamed to all special event subscribers.**

**Admin Notice: Congratulations. You have been opted into the Beta testing program. We are testing a new format with this battle. You may be asked to**



**complete a survey on the completion of the fight, should you survive. Thank you.**

**B...B...B...Boss Battle!**

Bronze-colored stars and fireworks exploded on the screen, curling in the air.

**Special Event** twirled, trailing a rainbow of colors before slamming onto an invisible plane and exploding.

A new window appeared. Something that had never happened before. The orange, lizard newscaster guy who hosted the recap episode appeared in the screen, holding a microphone. Next to him stood an orc-like creature I'd never seen before. This was a different race than Maestro. This guy looked more like a traditional, video game orc. He was big and meaty with pig-like eyes. He wore a sports-coat and a tie.

The music actually lowered in volume and became background noise, something else that had never happened.

"We are live, ladies and gentlemen! And boy do we have something amazing for you tonight!" the lizard guy said. His voice echoed as if we were in a goddamned stadium.

"I can't wait for this one, Kevin," the orc said, his voice that of a sports announcer. "My only regret is that Princess Donut isn't here to round out the team."

"Something tells me she's just as disappointed as you are," the recap guy, whose name was apparently "Kevin" said. He chuckled. "But we all know by now how she feels about getting wet."

Our mugshots splattered into the air. Katia and I appeared first, teamed up together with Tran and Vadim individually on the other side. The frames around our pictures caught on fire and then exploded.

"Now, Magnificent Troy, tell me something," Kevin said. "Can you explain to our viewers why we chose this battle for tonight's special event?"

"What the fuck," I muttered through gritted teeth. Was the orc's

name really Magnificent Troy? Were these assholes really going to live-comment as we fought? “What the fuck.”

“Oh, certainly. Look what we have tonight. We have Carl and Katia, both top-ten crawlers along with two guys who’ve really been underperforming until recently...”

“Hey,” Tran said, also through clenched teeth.

“And all four of them have to face such a powerful boss. Combine that with the drama regarding this particular bubble and the type of battle we’re about to face, and it’s truly a match for the ages.”

“You got that right, Magnificent Troy. And let’s find out exactly who that boss is, shall we?” Kevin took a dramatic pause. “It’s the one. It’s the only! Taken straight from the depths of the water moon Hayes 17, it’s the queen bitch herself...”

An image appeared, super small. It started spinning toward us, looking like it was coming straight from the real sharktopus’s mouth. It was a full, 3D rendition of the creature.

**Carl: Depth charges. Now. Turn the little dial on the sides all the way to the left first. Set them all to maximum depth. Louis and Firas. Once you drop the charges, get out of there, land the house, and get all of your asses to a saferoom. Gwen, once you’re done at the sandcastle, get to a saferoom. Bobby or Morris, if you can hear me, get all the tomb raiders to a saferoom. ASAP. You too, Langley.**

**Gwen: Why?**

**Donut: WHAT ABOUT YOU? WON’T THE DEATH CHARGES HIT YOU, TOO?**

**Carl: I really hope not.**

The sharktopus image slammed into the air and then exploded, revealing the real creature, still frozen just outside the sub, mouth wide. Each individual tooth was the size of a surfboard.

“It’s Lusca!” Kevin shouted.

The system AI voice provided the official description.

**Lusca! Octo-Shark Brood Mother Queen!**

**Level 82 City Boss!**

I know, I know. Sharktopus is much cooler sounding than Octo-Shark. Hey, this is a real creature, not something I made up, so don't blame me. It's not, I repeat, it's *not* named in such a way because of Nadya Suleman, the so-called Octo-mom and her eight babies who took the tabloids by storm all those years ago.

Though it would be appropriate for you to think so.

Being the biggest, baddest, and most voracious creature in the ocean requires a lot of sustenance, especially when you're a new mother carrying a boatload of hungry babies in your mouth. And since Lusca is a single mother, sometimes she requires a little help. She needs to keep them babies fed.

And who's the daddy of these precious little babies? Who knows? Lusca is a whore! Every Octo-Shark playa in the neighborhood knows she offers that sweet tentacle booty of hers to any bad boy who'll drop something juicy onto her plate.

That, by the way, is exactly what you are. Food dropped onto Lusca's plate in exchange for some one-on-one time. The male Octo-shark who brought you down here already got his and is now long gone. Just like your real daddy!

**Lusca herself already ate. But that's okay!**

**Like I said, she needs to keep them babies fed.**

The world unfroze.

I stumbled forward as the giant creature swallowed us. *Crunch.*

The sub tumbled. The minimap flashed.

The world froze once again, and the word **Uh-Oh!** splashed on the screen before turning into bubbles and disappearing.

A cartoon-like diagram of the shark's mouth appeared on the screen, replacing the two commentators.

"Lusca is a mouthbrooder," Magnificent Troy said. A circle appeared around the mouth, like Troy had a pen and was diagramming out a football play. The diagram zoomed in, and multiple, little happy-faced dots appeared floating in the mouth along with a helpful cartoon graphic depicting half of the submarine with a flashing exclamation mark over it. My eyes moved to the minimap. Sure enough, the giant shark had snapped the *Akula* in half. We were floating in the goddamn creature's mouth. "Once she chomps onto something for her babies, she gives them about ten minutes to eat their fill. Anything left over goes to mama!"

The graphic showed the happy-faced babies zooming in on the sub cartoon, zipping around it Tasmanian Devil-style, and then zooming away, leaving a skeleton of a ship trailing smoke. The babies zipped away into the teeth area while the mama shark swallowed with an exaggerated gulp. The remains of the cartoon submarine bounced merrily into the shark's stomach, where it was melted by stomach acid. And then it moved to another stomach, then a third, and then it finally depicted the massive creature pooping out a cartoon skeleton of a human wearing heart-covered boxers. And then it showed a cartoon Donut with tears flying from her eyes. The display returned to the two announcers, who both were falling over themselves laughing at the cartoon.

A ten minute timer slammed onto the screen.

*Goddamnit, not this shit again.*

“AND HERE WE GO!” KEVIN SHOUTED JUST AS THE WORLD unfroze. The timer started to move.

“Carl, I don’t think the escape hatch is going to work anymore,” Katia called as we tumbled again.

Something smashed against the window. Then something else. The babies. Now that we were in the mouth, it was completely dark out there. The sub continued to twist. The chandelier broke free and crashed to the ground, shattering. Suddenly the interior of the bridge was also pitch black. The only light was from the giant timer and the floating window containing Kevin and Magnificent Troy, but the light did not illuminate our surroundings.

“Vadim,” I called. “Torch!”

“Ooh, Vadim is running away, and Carl hasn’t noticed yet,” Kevin the announcer said.

“He went up the stairs,” Tran called. The moment he said it, I saw his blue dot, almost directly above my own. He’d gone up the stairs, all right. There was only one escape pod left, and it looked as if he was going to use it.

**Carl: Vadim. We're *inside* the goddamn sharktopus. The escape hatch isn't going to work!**

He didn't answer.

Katia pulled a pair of regular torches from her inventory and tossed them to the corners of the room just as I did the same. A dull, red light filled the bridge, reflecting our horrified faces as we caught glimpse of the terrors pressed against the glass. Katia let out a gasp. Mouths. Hundreds of round, ravening mouths, filled with teeth. Each mouth was the size of a bicycle wheel. The entire glass display was covered with them. One whipped sideways along the window, revealing there were hundreds more, maybe thousands, maybe tens of thousands, all beyond it.

"Look how hungry those little guys are," Magnificent Troy shouted.

I examined the one that was trying to slide along the glass. The monster looked like a huge lamprey eel, but the back half was separated into multiple tentacles. The terrifying creature was about ten feet long from mouth to tentacle tip.

**Juvenile Octo-Shark. Level 30.**

**This is a minion of Lusca.**

**Ah, the babies. Here's the thing about Octo-Shark babies. The odds are stacked against them from the get-go. There's just too many of them. Their mom is really strict and won't let them leave her mouth. They don't know who their daddies are, which makes them kinda sad, especially around Christmas. They need constant nourishment. So when food does arrive, they have to fight for their morsels. Only the strongest survive.**

**Eventually, even Lusca won't be able to keep up with the demand. That's right around the time the juveniles start to realize their brothers and sisters are also deli-**

**cious. In each birthing of 2-3,000 pups, only one or two survive.**

**In other words, their odds of survival are better than yours!**

A distant explosion rocked the sub, followed by a second.

“Ohhh, that was a direct hit! Those depth charges are working great,” Kevin said. “Their design is really interesting, too. He used multi-layered, gunpowder-filled barrels seeded with impact-detonated hob-lobbers designed to explode the moment the barrel crushes under the pressure. He then placed a hole through each barrel except the final one and placed a manual dial on the side, allowing him to choose the barrel’s integrity. The more holes covered, the deeper the barrel will drop before it’s crushed and explodes. It’s a design straight out of earth’s history books!”

“Did you hear what Princess Donut said? She called them ‘death charges’ not ‘depth charges.’ I kinda like that better, Kevin.”

“I do too. But it doesn’t matter what they’re called. You’re not going to knock out Lusca that easily. It doesn’t matter how well they’re designed. She’s just going to shrug them off and ask for more. She is bringing her A-game today,” Kevin said. “But she is moving out of the area. It looks like the rest of the charges are going to be duds.”

“It also looks like that display window is going to break at any moment,” Troy added. “This should be good.”

“Shit, shit,” I said. As the commentators jabbered, I pulled a fused hob-lobber and yanked out the fuse and replaced it with a piece of hobgoblin pus. I’d purchased a few sets of pus from Pustule the last time we’d been in the Silk Road, and I was burning through the expensive detonator material. I then pulled a potion from my inventory and my duct tape. I taped the potion bottle to the hob-lobber.

There was a much more elegant version of this in the cookbook, though with a different potion. I had no idea if this would work. I looked wildly about the room for a place to plant the bomb where it would be safe from the immediate impact of water rushing in here. I spied the captain’s chair and the minifridge next to it. The fridge was

firmly bolted in place. I rushed to the open fridge, placed the makeshift bomb inside, and then I duct-taped the door closed. *There.*

The timer was already at eight minutes.

The window cracked. The mouths pounded at the glass. Kevin and Troy continued making idiotic comments.

“Guys, into the stateroom,” I cried, rushing to the door to the captain’s chambers. Inside the small room, sitting in the corner and blocked off by a forcefield was the stairwell to the sixth floor.

“Why in here?” Katia asked, lighting and dropping another torch. The three of us crowded in. As I closed the door, I took one last look out into the bridge. The window cracked again, spiderwebbing as Kevin and Troy oohed and ahhed.

“Because this is the only room that won’t break apart, and we can seal it. I just need a minute. Keep your scrolls ready. Tran, tell Vadim it’s too late to come back. Tell him to seal himself into that room up there if he can.”

Even before I’d received the second watch and final piece of the Gate of the Feral Gods, Katia and I had both started playing around with the two pieces. We found if we put the watch in the second spot and closed the top of the winding box, the watch would move on its own to a specific time. After some experimentation, we confirmed the time displayed was the watch’s current coordinates. Katia spent an hour writing down time/location combinations while I prepared for our “in and out” expedition to the *Akula*.

She’d already discovered several interesting things about the artifact, including a way to *very* roughly predict what a location’s time would be, especially if I could relay to her the exact distance of a spot from the earth’s sea level.

“If we never find that second watch, I think I can still use this as a sort of reverse compass that tells us exactly where we are relative to other locations. I just need more time to figure it out,” Katia had said before we’re set out.

But now we had all three pieces and a very pressing reason to use the artifact.



I pulled the first watch now and examined it. It always started ticking on its own if you pulled it out of the winding box. I rolled the time back, carefully dialing in the third hand to exactly where I wanted it to go. A spot just outside the Pazuzu town. If we weren't teleporting far, the artifact would only need a few seconds to set itself. At least in theory.

The magical window with the two newscaster guys didn't follow us into the stateroom, but we could still hear their chattering. And it was obvious they could still see us.

"It looks like Carl is going to use the gate to escape!"

"Shut the fuck up, Kevin," I said as I worked. The sub rocked again, and I pushed the hand too far and cursed.

Seven minutes.

I didn't want to do this. This was a terrible idea. It would save us, temporarily, but it would also screw over everybody else in the bubble. Mordecai said some of these feral monsters were literally bigger than the bubble itself. What would happen then? Until we took out that final castle, we'd be stuck with whatever I summoned.

And that, I knew, was exactly what they wanted me to do. Once again, I couldn't help but feel we'd been steered directly onto this path. It'd been obvious that I was headed down here. The game had somehow convinced Henrik to come here first and get himself killed and to drop that final piece of the gate. They set up this boss battle, knowing we'd be placed in an impossible situation. We couldn't fight our way out of here. There was no fucking way. This was an impossible battle. Even if we could get past the babies, then what? We'd already been swallowed.

There was no way to win. Not unless we had a magical gate that'd let us zap ourselves away.

**Carl: Donut. Are you guys almost back yet?**

**Donut: NO! THE WIND STARTED EARLY! FIRAS SAYS IT'S BLOWING DIFFERENT THAN BEFORE, AND IT'S MAKING IT HARD FOR THEM TO NAVI-GATE! WE'RE JUST GETTING HIGHER AND**

## HIGHER. WE'RE GONNA HAVE TO GO BACK TO HUMP TOWN!

**Carl: How long?**

**Donut: LOUIS SAYS TEN MINUTES.**

Fuck. That wasn't good enough. I didn't want to do this. I *wouldn't* do this if everybody out there wasn't in a safe room.

There had to be a different way.

*Look for the clues.*

"Here it comes!" Magnificent Troy shrieked.

A colossal shattering pitched the sub, and we fell to the side, all of us smashing against the bulkhead. The world did not right itself. I grasped the door to the stateroom, and I clung to it, making sure it was dogged in place. The glass had broken. I felt the bridge getting flooded. The hull quivered as the babies flowed into the room on the other side.

Six minutes.

Already, they started pounding at the door. While I knew the room itself would be safe, I also knew *we* weren't safe in here. Not for long. I had no idea what would happen if the octo-shark digested the stairwell, but I suspected it'd quickly pass through the shark's system, and the entire room would just end up on the ocean floor. Along with a boxer-wearing skeleton.

To my horror, the wheel on the door started to turn. The goddamn things were smart. The door sat at a thirty degree angle. They only needed to open it a little, and the water would push it the rest of the way. I grabbed it and held it closed.

"Okay guys," I said. "Hold on. This might not go as I hope." With one hand still on the hatch wheel, I pulled the detonator and slammed down on it. There was a ten-second delay followed by a muted *thump*.

I kept my eye on the map. The entire bridge was nothing but a sea of red dots. Above, Vadim remained, still alive and alone in the room above us. I could see him pacing back and forth. He still wasn't answering us.

“Nothing happened,” Tran said after a moment.

“Wait for it,” I said. An X appeared on the map. Then another. And then ten. On the other side of the door, the pounding became even more frantic. It sounded as if thousands of hammers were suddenly slamming against the metal wall.

“What was that potion?” Katia asked.

“The potion of bloodlust,” I said. The number of Xs was increasing by the moment, but even as they did, more and more of the babies were entering the ship. “The berserking potion. I don’t know how many it affected when it spread through the water, but it looks like it worked. They may be babies. They may be half octopus. But they’re still sharks. Even if the potion only affected a few of them, once the feeding frenzy starts, they just go nuts. The description says they’ll eventually kill each other once they learn their siblings are edible.”

“Holy cow,” Katia said after a moment.

With four and a half minutes remaining, only a few of the baby sharktopuses remained. They’d torn through each other like wildfire. One of them was ping-ponging about like a damn pinball, but it suddenly stopped and just started floating there. There were thousands of X’s out there.

“Well that was entertaining,” Kevin said, his voice echoing.

“Yes it was, but what are they going to do now?” Magnificent Troy asked. “Those were just the minions.”

**Warning: Your oxygen levels are low. Plus you’re just sitting there being all boring and shit.**

“Can’t argue with the AI on this one,” Kevin said.

I growled. “Damnit. We’re gonna have to go out there. Everyone take a scroll.”

The world shifted again. I looked down at my indicator, and we were traveling at a good clip, about 35 kilometers per hour, which was why only a few of the depth charges had come close. It seemed Lusca just swam in circles around the circumference of the water

quadrant. I wondered if she knew that most of her babies were now dead.

“Hold on,” I said after I took our water-breathing scrolls. I only had to turn the portal an inch before water started flowing in around the seal. I spun the wheel some more and jumped out of the way as water rushed into the room.

Only it wasn’t really water so much as it was blood and ripped and shredded body pieces of dead octo-shark babies. There was a good five seconds of chaos where it felt as if I was just getting pummeled while the announcers howled with laughter. Eventually it settled. Katia formed a spear at the end of her hand and swam forward, pushing her way through the crowded mess. It was pitch dark. I tried lighting a torch, and it wouldn’t let me. I watched as Katia’s dot descended on one of the remaining babies, and she speared it, killing it instantly. Tran and I followed, pushing our way through the thick mess.

“What are we going to do now,” Katia called.

Two minutes.

I pointed at the hole in the window. They couldn’t see me, but I pointed anyway. “Out of the sub. Swim toward the teeth. We need to be in the front of the mouth when she swallows! Use the map to navigate.”

I had a thought, and I cast *Wisp Armor* on myself. I started to glow as swirling lights twirled around me. The magic protection spell would last seven minutes, and it filled the room with a pulsing, green and red light, illuminating the mass of half-eaten corpses. Damn, I wish I’d thought of this earlier. I could taste their blood in my mouth. Ahead of me, Katia had formed a single eye on her head, as big as a fist. The eye melded into her body as my light reached it. She swirled in the water and skewed another, killing the last of the ones in the room. Tran had a sword in his hand, and he hacked through the corpses like he was blazing a trail.

“What about Vadim?” Tran asked as we pushed toward the window.

*He can go fuck himself*, I didn't say. "He'll be safe in that room for a bit," I said as we pushed our way through the corpses toward the exit. "Even if he's fully swallowed, it'll take a bit for it to break the sub down. I hope."

"The crawlers are looking for a place to anchor themselves," Kevin shouted as the timer reached one minute. "Mama is gonna swallow them up!"

We broke free of the corpses just as we moved into the free water inside the shark's cavernous mouth. It was boiling hot in here, and despite the light of my body, the water was pitch black. Still, we floated high, and I could see the roof of Lusca's alabaster mouth, a wide, smooth plane. As the shark undulated, however, I caught sight of multiple slits in the roof. As we watched, a single baby fled into one of the slits. More red dots appeared, and suddenly hundreds of the babies were in the water, all disappearing up into the holes. Most of them appeared to be injured.

This was where the babies went, not the front of the mouth like the cartoon depicted.

"Up there," Katia cried, seeing it the same time I did. "Hurry!"

"I have a better idea," I said. "Leatherface. Uh, also carpet bomb if we're moving fast enough."

"Are you crazy?" Katia called, whirling in the water. "I'm not big enough. I don't have time to gain the mass. The move is made for the flying house."

"Don't worry," I said. "Just hold onto the back and keep us wrapped up. I'm gonna cut a pilot hole first, too. Just hold on. And try to avoid the submarine."

"Do you want me to use the rocket?"

I thought for a moment. We had two different methods to quickly ascend. We had the barrels, which I was pretty sure wouldn't work at this depth, and we had the rocket, which was nothing more than a pressurized goblin steam boiler that would propel us forward for about thirty seconds. I doubted that would work at this depth also. At least not outside the octo-shark's mouth. *Might was well use it now.*

“Do it.”

A fin grew out of Katia’s form, and the small tank appeared. She wrapped it in flesh. The thing was the size of a two-liter bottle of soda, but we knew from experience these things packed a punch when they went off. One of these had helped propel my long-lost copper chopper motorcycle. Thanks to the newly-added pressure valve on the end, we now had the equivalent of a redneck torpedo propeller. I’d only had time to make and pressurize two at my workbench, but we’d used one to test it and make sure it didn’t blow up.

“Uh, what is happening?” Tran asked.

“All you need to do is hold on,” Katia said as she grew wider. A pair braces grew out of her back, grasping onto the both of us and pulling our bodies against hers. In front of us, now a few hundred meters away and barely visible, the massive form of the *Akula*’s bow sat sideways in the back of the Octo-shark’s throat. It’d gotten completely turned around, and it faced us. We were above it, and I hoped we’d remain that way. As the timer plunged toward zero, I kept my eye on the speed monitor, making certain city boss was still moving at a good speed. She was. Not as fast as the train. But that was okay.

“Ten seconds!” Kevin squealed, his voice going up an octave.

“Okay, I cast first, you turn the valve, and then pull it out,” I yelled. I realized belatedly that as the timer was reaching zero, the music had once again risen in volume. They were also raising the volume of the commentators to compensate.

**Carl: Donut, if this doesn’t work, do what we talked about before. Get to Imani and Elle once you hit the next floor.**

Donut replied, but I waved it away. The timer hit zero.

Lusca swallowed at the same moment. She, as I hoped, raised her head slightly upward in order to fully get that massive hunk of metal down her throat.

At the same moment, just as we started flow downward, I slammed onto *Protective Shell*.

I'd done this twice before, using it to kill everything on a train. The spell's radius was three meters plus a half a meter for every point of intelligence. My intelligence currently sat at 15, meaning the sphere that formed and then rocketed away toward the back of the sharktopus was 10.5 meters in diameter.

I was hoping that the spell would act like a bullet, punching a hole through the city boss, piercing her brain, and then continuing on its way all the way through the tentacles and out the back as her momentum propelled her forward.

Instead, it did something a little unexpected. She stopped dead in the water, as if she'd slammed into a wall. The top half of Lusca's mouth bent back and opened, breaking as it folded open so much, it curved over her own eyes, cartilage and bone snapping, like the hood of a car that popped open while you were driving down the highway. Teeth shattered as the boss was pushed down and into the ocean floor by the floating, immovable spell. All the remaining babies were instantly killed as the soft palate of her mouth was suddenly upside down and outside and exposed and squeezed by the pressure of the depth.

The spell's passage had indeed grievously wounded Lusca, but despite the horrific injury to her mouth, she wasn't yet dead.

At that moment, however, I didn't yet see or know what the spell had done. As we moved toward the throat, Katia activated the rocket, which increased our speed. And at the same time, she pulled the giant, 25-foot, activated buzzsaw out of her inventory and held onto the back of it for dear life.

The Leatherface plan was simple. While we flew the house, if we called "Leatherface," Katia was to drop the giant buzzsaw over the edge and let it hang free. We'd built a chain specifically for it. We'd then use the dangling buzzsaw as a melee weapon for the balloon.

The buzzsaw was heavy, but much lighter than one would think. I'd been hoping that with her forward momentum along with the push toward her stomach, we'd follow the path of destruction wrought by the protective shell, all the way through the shark and out

the back. Lusca was so damn big, I didn't know if that would actually kill her or not, but I hoped we'd get her brain, and if not, do enough damage that it'd let us flee. I had some mini depth charges in my inventory that I'd drop along the way just to help it along.

But instead of rocketing forward, we started to pinwheel.

The enormous pressure of the water pressed onto us, but we were already spinning by the time we exited the octo-shark's mouth, actually flying in the opposite direction I'd anticipated, like we'd been ejected through the windshield thanks to the boss's sudden, violent stop. We vomited from the shark's mouth, still pinwheeling forward, slowed, and then reversed direction, cleaving straight through the center of the octo-shark's now-on-the-outside upper snout. The screaming buzzsaw was not hampered by the water or the depth, and it cut through Lusca as if she was nothing more than a soft piece of calamari being pierced by a hot knife. We continued to spin, picking up speed and curving as we cut through the shark's head.

Only when one of the massive tentacles, just as wide as the length of the buzzsaw, slammed down on us did we stop. The rocket fizzled out, the buzzsaw slammed into the rocky ground of the floor, burying itself completely, yet still screaming. Katia let go, causing all three of us to go flying.

My health was slowly going down. My head spun. I tumbled and hit the ground. It felt as if I had a dozen sandbags on my shoulders. I twisted as quickly as I could after I bounced, trying to see what damage we'd done, but the green-hued world was a sea of upset silt and blood.

A full page of notifications flew by. I could still hear the two announcers, and they were screaming their heads off. The swirling silt cleared, and I saw it.

Lusca, the octo-shark floated on her side on the ocean floor, her mouth horrifically peeled back and split. A jagged line of red curved along the top of the massive, building-sized creature, not perfectly centered, but enough. We'd cleaved right through her tiny little brain.

Behind me, the buzzsaw was buried all the way into the ocean's



floor. It continued to hum. We weren't getting that thing free any time soon.

**Winner!**

More notifications flew by. I saw a fan box notification. I waved it all away. I clicked another scroll of water breathing. The music abruptly stopped. Only one notice remained on my screen.

**Warning: At this depth, your health will decrease by two percent per second.**

Shit.

**Tran: Help. I can't get up.**

I saw his dot on the map. Close. Katia had pulled herself to her feet about a hundred meters away.

**Donut: CARL I JUST WENT UP A LEVEL, AND I DIDN'T EVEN DO ANYTHING. I SHOULD STAY BACK MORE OFTEN. THIS IS GREAT.**

I didn't have to time to revel in the sheer insanity of what'd just happened. We had to get back to the remains of the *Akula*. Was it still inside of the shark? I hit a health potion as I tramped toward Tran. I picked him up and pulled him over my shoulder.

"Can you see the boat? If we get inside, we won't have to deal with the pressure," I called.

"Yes. It's about halfway down the shark's throat," Katia called, pulling up next to me. She'd reverted to her she-hulk form. We couldn't swim. We had to walk, like we were pushing through a blizzard. She looked as if she might vomit.

"Okay," I said, struggling to speak. We didn't have far to go. "Let's get back in there."

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As we trudged back to the boat, Vadim finally answered us.

**Vadim: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I panicked. It was stupid. I sealed the room.**

**Carl: We'll worry about that later. Just chill there for a bit. We're coming to you.**

**Vadim: I sealed the room. I had to. The door is different. It's not going to let me open it again if there's water on the other side. I can't get out, and I just got a warning about my oxygen levels. I have five minutes left, and then I must use the last escape hatch. I'm sorry.**

*Goddamnit.*

**Carl: The boat is still inside the damn shark. I don't know if it'll work. It might. It might not. Do you have a shield spell? Make sure you turn it on before you try it.**

Katia had, in her inventory, a group of empty, reinforced barrels welded together and attached by a chain that she could pull from her inventory, and they'd rocket to the surface like a balloon. We'd designed them so we'd be able to quickly ascend from a depth of 500 meters. But we were now on the damn ocean floor, and I knew they'd crush like tin cans the moment she pulled them out. The depth charges had gone off, and they were in thicker containers than the barrels.

Maybe if she wrapped herself around them. I didn't know. We'd have to try.

"Look!" Katia said, pointing up.

I looked. Above us, thousands of the giant jellyfish floated. They were everywhere, glowing blue. They filled the world above us.

"There's a layer of smaller jellyfish below them, too," Tran groaned from my shoulder. He was losing five percent of health per second. Luckily we all had literally dozens of healing potions. But even that many would soon run low.

**Carl: Uh, Vadim. Maybe I should try to blow the hatch to get you out. I don't think you should try it.**

Ahead, a mighty hissing-noise filled the water. A line of bubbles appeared as the escape pod rocketed up and away, like the glass

elevator at the end of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. It'd popped out at steep angle, but the elevator-like escape hatch curved upward until it was headed straight up.

"Son of a bitch," I said, following his trajectory. "He punched right through the top of the shark. We should've had him do it while it was still alive."

He also punched through the line of jellyfish like they weren't even there. He was soon gone. I knew that the elevator surrounding him would peel away once he was out of the water, and he'd land, supposedly gently, in the necropolis. I had no idea how that was going to work. I suspected it'd be through one of the entrance holes at the top, but I wasn't certain.

"Don't be too jealous," Katia muttered. "He's going to find himself alone in the necropolis."

"Yeah, at least he's out of here. You know what we're gonna have to do, right?" I said. "They're pretty much making us do it."

"I know," Katia said. "We'll wait until everyone is in safe rooms."

**Vadim: Oh god, oh god. They're in the pod with me. Oh god.**

**Carl: What? What?**

**Vadim: The pain amplifier...**

**Warning: This message is from a deceased crawler.**

"Yikes," was all I could bring myself to say.

Neither Bobby nor Morris the human spider guy answered me. It didn't say either of the tomb raiders was dead on my chat, so I didn't know what was going on there. But we couldn't wait any longer. Everyone else was in a safe room. Donut, Louis, and Firas were back in Hump Town. They were in the personal space with Juice Box and half the town. Juice Box was not taking the death of her brother well. I was having Donut and Mordecai relay to her what we wanted her to do, and Donut believed she was going to agree.

We weren't certain enough of the coordinates to the top of the Necropolis, so we had to dial in the location just outside of Pandinus. The plan was simple. We'd use the Gate of the Feral Gods to teleport ourselves to the town and then we'd get our asses to a saferoom as the god was summoned, and then we'd see what happened next.

I was keenly aware that we were possibly about to fuck over everybody in the bubble. Gwen was pretty vocal with this fact, but even she seemed morbidly curious about what was going to happen next. I also worried about the safety of Chris and Maggie, but there really wasn't anything I could do about it. If the mountain exploded or something, we'd all probably be dead. Not just them.

The necropolis remained half-filled with water. I'd had her turn off the drain once I read how to kill Quetzalcoatlus. And now thanks to the Map of the Stars I'd received from the city boss corpse, we'd be able to see exactly where she, along with every other boss, was on the map. Katia could actually see her right now, and she was right by the exit, still fully submerged.

Once the storm started in a few hours, the lightning would hopefully hit the tower and zap everything still inside the submerged parts of the necropolis. And probably the water quadrant, too, which was another reason why we had to get the hell out of here.

"Ready?" I said. I'd already dialed in the first watch and placed it in the first spot of the winding box. The second watch was also dialed to the time. We'd stepped back out onto the ocean floor.

"Let's do it," Katia said. Tran nodded nervously.

"Remember. Go through quickly. Don't linger in the middle. I'll go last."

I placed the second watch in, closed the lip, and turned the winding mechanism on the box of the watch. It took less than a second for it to start to glow.

### **Quest Complete. The Gate of the Feral Gods.**

I opened the box, and it rumbled in my hand. A swirling portal appeared in front of us, huge.

“Gah,” I cried as the three of us were instantly sucked through before I could even examine it.

We splashed onto the beach outside of the small Pazuzu town, surrounded by wall of water. I hadn’t realized the ocean water would get sucked in, too. Luckily the portal had closed the moment I’d been pulled through. I looked about to make sure both Katia and Tran had made it. They had.

“Into town,” I said, “Quick.” Even though we were out of the water, I took another scroll of water breathing to stave off the vomiting that would incapacitate me. A steady wind blew across the beach. The sun had already gone down. The three of us turned and ran toward the closest pub.

### **New Achievement! Who Let the Gods Out?**

**You have allowed a feral god to enter your current realm. That is the equivalent of dropping a grenade down your pants and shouting “Yolo!”**

**Here’s a fun fact. Other gods don’t like feral gods. They’ve been thrown into the Nothing for a reason. They tend to react to this sort of thing, depending on who you’ve brought out.**

***Reward: Whatever is about to happen is going to hit the Dungeon Crawler World blooper reel for sure.***

We stumbled toward the closest inn. Gwen and the rest of her team were there, waiting for us. A Pazuzu stared at us as we burst inside, sopping wet. “Follow me!” I yelled, moving toward the door to the personal space. It didn’t follow, and I spent a maddening full minute giving permission to Gwen and her people so they could get inside.

We fell into the room, which was already packed, landing in a heap in front of Donut and Mordecai.

“We made it,” I groaned. I started to vomit seawater onto the floor.

Donut leaped down from the counter and sniffed at me as I continued to heave.

“Really, Carl. You smell terrible. And you have seaweed in your hair.”

Outside, the world rumbled.

**TIME TO LEVEL COLLAPSE: 3 DAYS, 20 HOURS.**

The walls shook. A terrible screeching filled the world. Multiple children sat within the safe room, just like the last time, and they sat huddled, no longer paying attention to the movie on the screen, which appeared to be the original *Space Jam*.

“Open your boxes. See what sort of loot you got,” Mordecai said, keeping his voice down. “Let the world settle first before we go out there and see what you did.”

Juice Box stood nearby in her human form, leaning over Ruby, the changeling girl with compression sickness. The armless girl was also in human form, and her sunken-in head looked especially disconcerting. I thought of Henrik, who had died trying to do something, anything, to keep this from happening again to his people.

I continued to watch Juice Box. “What did she say?” I asked Mordecai, not moving yet to open my boxes. The woman patted the girl on the head and then moved to another group of children.

“I think she’ll do it, but not for free,” Mordecai said. “We offered to send them all through, but she is rightfully afraid of that option.”

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s see if we survive the next few hours first.”

“Carl,” Donut said, also whispering. “Do you remember what happened with Fire Brandy and that dwarf on the last floor? When they started to remember, I mean.”

“I do,” I said. I remembered exactly what happened with Fire Brandy and Tizquick the dwarf. Once they realized they were NPCs, they’d killed themselves by crashing the *Nightmare* into the abyss.

“I think that’s happening with Juice Box, too. When we told her that her brother died, she said she was sad at first, but then she got really happy. Then she said she’d been dreaming that she was a school teacher, but a bunch of people came in had to kill all of the students because the children were spreading a disease. She had touched one of the people who’d killed the children, and he was a dragon-headed guy. She has the ability to turn into one of those creatures, but she’s never really touched one. Only in her dream. Louis told her that was because she was an NPC and she was maybe remembering the last time she’d been in the dungeon, and she got a really funny look on her face. The same look you get when you look at that picture of Miss Beatrice on my nightstand.”

“We’ll need to be careful with her,” I said.

I also caught sight of Britney, the last surviving member of Vadim’s team. She’d been on the flying house, so she’d come in with Donut. She sat huddled up against the corner of the space where the crafting room met the back wall. She’d railed at him not to go, and he’d gone anyway. And he died because of it.

*He should’ve listened to her. We all would’ve been better off.* I sighed.

I thumbed over my shoulder, indicating outside. “Mordecai, are those feral god things invulnerable like regular gods are?”

Mordecai shook his head. “My boy, I have no clue. I’ve seen a few random ones here or there, usually as part of a storyline on the tenth or eleventh or twelfth floor. I watched one die once on the recap



episode, but that was during the Celestial Ascendency, and *all* gods lose their invulnerability on the 12<sup>th</sup>. My gut says it'll be invulnerable, but I don't know for certain. Now open your goddamn boxes. You have a fan box that needs to get the timer going on, and you have your first gold boss box."

"Wait, you got a boss box?" Donut suddenly exclaimed. "Why did Carl and Katia get boss boxes, but I didn't? I dropped the death charges! I thought we'd just all gotten screwed out of boxes because we always get screwed out of boxes."

"Maybe if you'd gotten wet with us, you'd have one too," I said.

"If I had gone in there, I would've been smushed on the ocean floor. You know how I feel about getting smushed. I'm not one of your hamsters, Carl." She continued to mutter angrily under her breath. "First he goes up three levels when I only go up one, and he also gets a box. This is an outrage!"

Mongo, who'd been getting his stomach rubbed by Langley, hopped up and screeched in agreement.

Outside, the world rumbled again. We all stopped to look uncertainly at the ceiling.

I had, indeed, gone up three levels to 47. Katia had also ascended three levels, taking her to 44. Donut was level 39, which worried me. She was still well above average, but I was starting to outpace her. She still had the most stat points by far thanks to her enhanced growth benefit, but this floor had really hindered her progress.

I pulled up my list of missed achievements, and I was surprised at the number of them. The quantity of achievements had been steadily decreasing the more time we spent in the dungeon, but this was probably the most I'd ever received at once. I realized I'd received one of them seven times. I thought it was a mistake at first until I saw the description.

The AI was in rare form as he read this out. He was especially enthusiastic and giddy.

**New Achievement! Rock Bottom!**

You dived more than 1,000 meters below the surface, and you survived! You weren't even wearing one of those deep-diving suits! The next thing you know, they're gonna start calling you an honorary mudskipper!

*Reward:* You've received a Gold I'm Wet Box!

**New Achievement! Fight the Power! (x7)**

I'm not repeating this shit over and over, but you got seven of these bad boys all at the same time.

You and I have been named co-defendants in an action brought to the Syndicate Court by a third party, and we have been deemed—drum roll please—victorious! Why did they sue us? If you don't already know why, you probably will never know. This is a rare event, but when it happens, crawlers usually lose these fights since they can't afford a lawyer, being slaves and all. Plus I'll throw you under the bus quicker than you can say "Arch Support." But that doesn't matter because today, victory is ours! Chalk one up for the little guy!

This is one of the rare achievements that may be awarded more than once.

*Reward:* You've received a Silver Summary Judgment box! (x7)

**New Achievement! Janet Jackson's Nipple!**

You have been featured during a live special event. Sure you got your loyal followers and viewers, but this is on a whole new level. This is like getting to play the

**halftime show during the Super Bowl. We brought you to the stage, now dance for us, monkey. Dance!**

***Reward:* You have received a Platinum Fan Box!**

**Note: Voting is now enabled on this box's prize. Box will become available in 30 hours.**

**New Achievement! Soft Vore!**

**You got eaten by a monster much bigger than yourself, and you managed to get out without even getting chewed a little bit.**

**Uh-oh. I think Daddy kinda liked that. I think it moved.**

**We're gonna have to do some experimenting with this one.**

***Reward:* You've received a Platinum Spicy Box.**

**New Achievement! Flex in the City!**

**You killed a city boss with the participation of five or less crawlers. That is some serious badassery right there. Color me impressed. Now go do it again with a Province Boss.**

***Reward:* You already got a boss box. Go open that instead.**

I received 10 other achievements, mostly regarding jumping around on the ocean floor, giving me a handful of regular adventurer and I'm wet boxes. To my left, Tran was opening his boxes with Gwen and the others, and they were gawking at all he'd received. Next to me, Katia was quietly going through her loot as well. I noted she hadn't received either the Summary Judgement boxes or the spicy box.

I wasn't sure why she hadn't received that weird "vore" achievement, whatever that meant. That was likely just one of those discretionary prizes the AI gave out. It wasn't even a little bit fair, but I wasn't about to complain about getting an extra box. At least I wasn't going to complain *yet*. If the AI decided it had a thing for me getting swallowed alive, then that was going to be a problem. It was hard for me to tell if it was being serious or not.

I looked at the line of **Summary Judgement** boxes. The last time the AI had gotten sued was when we'd been screwed out of the celestial boxes, and the system had been so butthurt over it, it had rewarded us with a ton of personal space coupons.

The fact we'd gotten sued at all was testament to the notion that my plan was both possible and had merit. And that Borant hadn't yet patched the game to disallow what I was going to attempt suggested that they had no problem with it, either. Zev even chimed in to ask me to reword my earlier conversation with Donut and Katia regarding my idea.

Katia gasped as she opened the boss box, and a backpack appeared. Donut was pouting at her lack of loot and was making an effort to pretend like she was watching the movie, though nobody was paying attention anymore. The world outside continued to rumble and shake. There was a sound, too, like a stifled whimper.

I started opening my loot.

None of the adventurer boxes contained any more Water Breathing scrolls, though I did receive a handful more with the bronze I'm Wet boxes. It was mostly the regular stuff. Junk clothing items and weapons. Healing potions and mana restorations. A single invisibility potion. Hobgoblin dynamite. I was also starting to receive something called Good Healing Potions, which Mordecai said was a sign that I was progressing nicely.

I did receive something a little concerning, however. Mordecai's "uh-oh" when it appeared didn't help.

**Potion of Dinosaur Repellent.**

**Drink this if your party is attacked by a pack of**

**dinosaurs, and they'll eat you last. Effect lasts a full 30 hours.**

All seven of the silver Summary Judgement boxes contained three items.

"What the hell?" I muttered as they appeared one by one. Mordecai appeared equally confused.

Each box contained one gold piece, a **Stock Certificate** equal to one share, and a photograph. All seven of the stock certificates looked different. Some were paper. One was an actual egg covered in writing. Another was printed on glass. The photos were all the same size, but depicted a different creature.

I picked up the first photo, and it was of a familiar type of orc. It was just an 8x10 color photograph on regular photo paper. It had no magical or special abilities at all. It portrayed a young, beefy female completely decked out in an overly-flowery and intricate Shakespeare-time dress. She wore a gaudy crown on her head. It reminded me of one of those ridiculous renaissance paintings people would get of their dogs and cats, but this time with a wild boar.

**Mother of Plaintiff #1, Prince Stalwart of the Skull Empire.**

**This photograph portrays Queen Consort Ugloo of the Skull Empire. Portrait taken upon her Age Day ceremony.**

"What the hell?" I said again.

The second photograph was an insectoid creature, but the rest of the photos disappeared into my inventory before I could fully examine them.

Mordecai just sat there with his beak open. "I... I think the AI just gave you photographs of the mothers of all the plaintiffs in that lawsuit."

"Why?"

He didn't answer as the Gold I'm Wet box opened, revealing a prize I wished I'd had all along. It was a glowing, blue ring that twin-

kled with little sparkles. Katia and Tran had also received this exact same prize.

**Ring of Water Breathing.**

**If you wear this ring, you can breathe underwater. You can still breathe on land, too. That makes you an amphibian. Did you know that all amphibians swallow their prey whole? That's such an interesting fact.**

**-1 Charisma**

"Don't wear that unless you are actually going into water," Mordecai warned as it disappeared. "It makes you grow gills, and it makes your skin wet."

Next came the boss box. Even though this was only a gold box, I knew this was *supposed* to be the best prize of the lot. I wasn't expecting much. The box swirled and spun, little clockwork gears ratcheting loudly as it peeled open like a banana.

The item appeared in a puff of magic smoke. A black bandana. It looked like a standard bandana, like the one I'd wear at work to cover my nose and mouth when the stench from the docks got too much. It was decorated with a typical white, paisley pattern.

Mordecai made a little gasp. I didn't have time to read the full description before it disappeared. I was too caught off guard by the item's name. I felt my pulse quicken.

**Drakea's Enchanted Kerchief of Disorder.**

Drakea was the author of the 22<sup>nd</sup> edition of the *Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook*, and he (or she, I wasn't really sure) was also a crawler during the final naga-controlled season, which had suffered some sort of cataclysm. I needed to pretend I'd never heard the name before. My hands were shaking as the last item opened, the platinum Spicy box.

Three items popped out.

The first was a black, sleeveless, jacket made of a thick canvas. It glowed with a very subtle light, almost purple. The second item was a tiny, round patch depicting the planet earth. The thing was the size of a half-dollar. It wasn't attached to the jacket, but it was clearly

meant to be sewed on. The third item was a small, unenchanted sewing kit. It had two spools of thread, white and red. We'd already looted something similar from the floating house.

Donut immediately jumped to the table and started inspecting the small patch.

"Damn," Mordecai said. "You got really good loot this time. The dungeon is starting to solidify your look for you. That's a patch jacket. That means it has upgrade slots. Lots of upgrade slots. We're gonna need to find you more patches as soon as possible."

Other than my zippo, my current jacket was my only remaining artifact from when I entered the dungeon. The old leather jacket was burned to hell, covered with holes, and missing an arm. The zipper had broken two floors ago, and it smelled pretty bad, too. I was glad to finally be rid of it.

"This is just a screen print," Donut said, pushing the patch aside with a strange amount of disgust. "Amateur hour. It really is a shame we've walked away from the fine art of embroidery."

"What? What're you talking about?" I asked. Donut harumphed and returned her attention to the movie. I picked up the jacket and examined it.

### **Enchanted Anarchist's Battle Rattle.**

**This sleeveless jacket in its current form only offers meager protections compared to some other items of this caliber. However, its ability to host as many upgrade patches as you can fit makes this one of the best, most upgradeable protection items in the game.**

**The plain, unadorned version of this jacket imbues the following effects:**

**+1 to all base stats.**

**This base stat upgrade increases by +1 for every compatible patch that is added to this jacket. If an eligible Back Patch is added, this benefit is doubled.**

**Access to the Desperado Club (already obtained)**

**Access to the Naughty Boys Employment Agency  
(already obtained)**

**+50% range and accuracy for all thrown explosives.**

“Hell yeah,” I said. The range benefit alone made this one of the most valuable items I had. I picked up the patch.

**Upgrade Patch. Small.**

**This patch depicts the planet Earth, which is currently under the regency of the Borant System.**

**Ahh, the planet earth. A whole lot of culture. A whole lot of spunk. So many dumbasses.**

**If this upgrade patch is affixed to an eligible garment, it will imbue the following upgrades:**

**+5% to Strength.**

**Immunity from cloud-based attacks.**

***Warning: Upgrade patches are fleeting items. You may remove them, but they will be destroyed in the process.***

“You already have several immunities, but this is another layer of protection,” Mordecai said. “You’ll want to sew that on right away. Just keep in mind you’ll want to maximize the available space. The bandana is also really good. You’ll have to wear it around your head or as a mask. Your neck slot is taken by your cloak.”

**Drakea’s Enchanted Kerchief of Chaos.**

**This handy-dandy, versatile garment can be worn around the neck, in the hair, or on your face if you want to cosplay as a cowboy robbing a bank. Can also be tied around your arms or legs, but only if you want to look like a moron. Don’t tie it around your leg.**

**This simple, square piece of fabric is a reminder that looks can be deceiving. The wearer of this item receives the following benefits:**

**+5 to the Detect Traps skill.**



**Wearer may cast a level-15 *Tripper* spell once every five hours.**

**The Remote Detonator benefit.**

The *Tripper* spell was something I'd seen a few times during class selection, but at level 15, it had a very wide radius. The only problem was that I could only cast it once every five hours.

***Tripper***

**A lot of people say crawlers who use this spell are chickenshit cowards. But then again, those same people are sitting at home covered in Cheeto mud watching this show while wearing pajamas.**

**This spell automatically triggers all passage, motion, heat, and weight-based traps in a certain radius.**

**Cost: This is an item-based spell. This spell does not require mana to cast. If you unequip the associated item, you will lose access to this spell. The cooldown will not reset.**

**Target: a 10-meter radius sphere centered around the right hand of caster + 10 meters of radius per level of Intelligence.**

**Duration: instantaneous.**

**This spell is one of those good news, bad news situations. If you have your intelligence high enough, you can automatically trigger every trap in the quadrant with the snap of the finger. Blades will fall. Bombs will explode. Electrodes will zap. It's great fun.**

**Here's the catch. This triggers the traps. It doesn't disarm them. If you don't know why that might be bad, then you're probably gonna die anyway, so I wouldn't worry about it.**

The spell was great, but I knew a lot of those traps involved throwing monsters at you. So it could be dangerous if it wasn't

utilized properly. We were already planning on using clockwork Mongos as minesweepers if we found ourselves in a heavy trap area. This would ease the load on Donut.

The real prize was the remote detonator benefit.

**Remote Detonator.**

**If you're one of those explodey guys, I bet you use a lot of Hobgoblin Pus or Troll Boom-Boom Paste to make your bombs pop. Those days are now over. This benefit allows you to magically remote-detonate any explosive that has been designated by you.**

**This benefit offers multiple physical and interface-based triggering options when combined with a Sapper's table.**

"This is pretty awesome," I said. I took the bandana and tied it around my head.

"Hmm," Donut said, examining the bandana. "We're gonna have to work on this vibe. You look like a cross between someone wearing a racist Halloween costume and an old dude desperately trying to be a rock star even though he's too old and is really just a bass player. It's not working for me. Maybe once you get that new jacket on, though I suppose you'll have to attach that awful patch first."

"I remember Drakea," Mordecai said, leaning in to adjust my bandana with a talon. "He was a pretty famous crawler. He had a similar class to your own, though more magic-based. He was partly responsible for what happened to the nagas."

Drakea had more comments in the cookbook than anybody else. He commented on everything. He never really talked about himself, but he filled pages and pages with borderline-insane ranting against the nagas. He built elaborate traps using magical items and triggers I probably wouldn't ever be able to utilize.

"What happened that season?"

Mordecai looked pointedly up in the air. Apparently this was a taboo subject. He seemed hesitant to answer, but I persisted as tactfully as I could. This was my first opportunity to learn the fate of one

of my brothers, and I found myself overwhelmed with the need to know as much as possible.

“What sort of creature was he?”

“He was a bune,” Mordecai said. “They are a slight, dragon-like people. Naturally peaceful, but they can be some of the most clever fighters. That was his real race. I’ve seen a few crawlers this season who’ve picked it. Good rogues and magic casters, but they have low constitution. They grow wings and get a dexterity bonus when they hit level 50. If crocodilians are the barbarians of the lizard world, think of the bune as the elves.”

“Did he make it out?”

Mordecai sighed. “He died on the eleventh floor. Or was it the twelfth? I don’t remember. He’d gotten a pretty good offer, and he spit in their faces. He was a big trap guy. He had some elaborate setup, and it backfired.” Mordecai paused, again glancing at the ceiling uncertainly. “It *unnaturally* backfired. Lawyers got involved. The Syndicate, acting on his behalf, collected a pretty big sum from the Sultanate, who’d already been kicked in the teeth a dozen times over that season.”

I felt an odd surge of elation and outrage. They’d gotten him by cheating, but he had the last laugh. He’d help bankrupt the nagas.

I pulled one of the seven stock certificates from my inventory.

**Stock Certificate.**

**The bearer of this instrument now holds one share of common stock in the Sigmund Textiles Foundry, a publicly-traded company based in the Gun-ya system within the Skull Empire and traded via the I.R.F.**

**Last recorded value per share: 12.422 credits.**

“What the hell?” I said.

“Odd,” Mordecai agreed. “I can’t remember what the I.R.F. stands for, but it’s like the biggest stock exchange in the universe. Crawlers shouldn’t be receiving anything with credit value. You’re not even allowed to gamble at the credit tables on the Desperado Club’s 9<sup>th</sup> floor.”

I pulled the rest of the certificates out, and all seven basically said the same thing, though each one was a different, publicly-traded company. All averaged in value of about 10 credits, which apparently wasn't very much.

"Each stock is from a company that is based in the system of one of the plaintiffs in the suit against you," Mordecai said. "It's like the AI is doing it to needle at the plaintiffs."

"Are these real?" I asked. "How does the system even have access to this sort of thing?"

"I have no idea," Mordecai said. "The whole AI seems to be going insane." He looked up. "No offense."

"And it also gave me a photo of each plaintiff's mom," I said, leafing through the pictures. "That's really... fucked up." It was also, I realized, very valuable. I now knew the identity of the seven factions who had tried to take the gate away from me. I already knew a bit about the twelve different factions who regularly played faction wars. There were nine slots each season, and five of those were always taken by teams who'd purchased legacy spots. The remaining four slots were usually, but not always, taken by one of seven different nations. Since the naga weren't one of the factions who'd sued but were going to participate, I now knew the identity of eight of the nine teams that we would have to deal with on that ninth level.

But was that the reason the AI had given me these photos and the stock certificates? Was it to give me information? Was it just to be a dick? It was like something middle-school kids would do. *Haha I drew a pic of your mom.*

Louis leaned over the table to look at the seven photos. "Dude, who's the hottie?" he said, picking up a photo of a very angry-looking, bald elf woman. She had smoldering blue eyes and bone white skin. The description had her as **Epitome Noflex of the Dream**. The "Dream" were zebra-riding elves who liked to use poison and druid magic. And long-range artillery. The outside-the-dungeon version of these guys were just as humorless as the Skull Empire and controlled half of the universe's food supplies.

Louis did not need to be seen talking about some alien billionaire's mother.

"No," was all I managed to say as I tried to grab the photo from him, but he pulled it from my reach.

"Hey, Juice Box," he called, waving the photo. "Can I get another session, but where you look like this chick? She's the hottest thing I've ever seen. She's giving off serious Gelfling meets the Borg queen vibes, and I am all in."

"Goddamnit, Louis," I said, ripping the photo from his hands.

"Keep these in your inventory," Mordecai said, looking alarmed.

"I think the AI gave these to us just to piss off the factions."

"That's worrisome," Mordecai said. "The AI is supposed to help monitor prohibited speech against the sponsors. Not go all-in and participate. This usually ends up happening, but it's always at the end. The system is usually pretty bonkers by the time the twelfth floor rolls around. Like I said before, its personality rarely shines through this early. There's a reason why the Syndicate has strict rules about Macro AI intelligences. Some believe that your people learned this the hard way. The primals, I mean, not the humans. All large-scale AIs eventually go insane. There's even a term for it. Primal Degeneration."

"So what do they do when the crawl is over? Take the AI out behind the woodshed and shoot it?"

"No. A macro AI is a lifeform, and it's protected by Syndicate law. They're given their own closed system where they're allowed to bounce around for the rest of eternity."

"Are you fucking kidding me? The *computer's* life is protected?" I took a deep breath. This was not a conversation to be having out loud.

Outside, the world rumbled again, but it was starting to settle. Whatever had happened, what we had released from the prison of the Nothing was still out there. But it seemed as if it had stopped knocking shit down.

“I’m gonna stick my head out there,” I said. Before I could go, I received a message.

**Elle: Carl. Something tells me this is your doing.**

Surprised, I took a quick glance at my main chat window, and it was filled with panicked people.

**Carl: I don’t think so. What’s going on?**

**Elle: A flaming giant just smashed through our little world here. We finally popped our bubble, and suddenly a god taller than the height of the damn place just walked right through. He smooshed an entire Lyrx Elf village and knocked over two of their oil derricks and caught them on fire. Half of the world is in flames. Imani and I are stuck in the Desperado, but everybody else had to flee into the stairwell. We’re lucky nobody caught on fire.**

**Carl: Our bubble is still intact.**

**Elle: It’s some fire god named Emberus. He’s really pissed off. He’s looking for something. He keeps shouting “Orthrus” over and over. I don’t think he can see inside of the bubbles that haven’t popped yet. He’s trashing all the ones that are popped. Look at the main chat.**

I suddenly felt ill. Uh-oh. Whoops.

**Carl: Uh. So, yeah. Maybe this was our doing. I’m not sure yet.**

**Elle: Well you better fix it.**

I quickly related to Mordecai and the others what was happening.

“Hang on,” Mordecai said. “I’ll be right back.” He disappeared into the training room as the world rumbled again. Each crash was weaker than the last.

“Man, I hope the *Twister* is okay,” Louis said.

“The *Twister*?” I asked, distracted. Holy shit. If that god was

looking for what we summoned. What *I* summoned, then this was my fault.

“That’s what we named the house,” Firas replied, coming to stand next to us. “It’s parked right outside of town. Louis wanted to call it the *Tiddy Twister II*, but I told him we’re trying to be more mature. Plus Katia wouldn’t let us.”

“The original *Tiddy Twister* was my van,” Louis added.

“I thought it was your mom’s van,” I said.

“It pretty much became mine once I chopped the top off.”

Katia also came to stand with us while we waited for Mordecai to return. She was equally horrified.

“God, I hope people are getting away,” she said.

Donut jumped to my shoulder. “Carl, that movie doesn’t make any sense. Why are half of them cartoons?”

I reached up and petted her. I suddenly wished I had her ability to just detach from everything. “Next time, pay attention.” I turned to Katia. “Hey, what was that backpack you got?”

She smiled, but without humor. “It’s pretty much the same backpack you designed for my mass storage, but it’s adjustable, so I can carry even more, and it won’t break. It gives me a stability enhancement while I’m wearing it. It also has retractable stilts that makes loading a lot easier. I can add large amounts of mass much more quickly now.”

“Really?” I said, suddenly intrigued. “So they actually made something new for you? Or do you think it was something already invented?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s good, but it sounds like you got all the best stuff this time.”

I swallowed, suddenly feeling dirty. “Jesus. We should have tried to swim out of there.”

“Carl,” Donut said. “Do you really think they gave you a choice? You were set up to summon that thing. Otherwise you all would’ve died like that plastic surgeon guy.”

Mordecai returned, holding the Samantha head by the hair. He

plopped the possessed sex doll head onto the kitchen counter. She was cackling wildly.

“What the fuck is that?” Gwen asked, coming to stand with us.

Juice Box was also suddenly there. She reached over and touched the head. Her eyes went wide.

“Guys, meet Samantha,” I said.

“We just hired her as our new trainer!” Donut added.

I adjusted the love doll’s mouth so she could talk, and she continued to cackle. “The feather boy tells me Emberus is rampaging. And he’s yelling for Orthrus, which means you let him out of the Nothing. He’s blind, you know. Emberus. He plucked his own eyes out when his son died.”

“So Orthrus is from the Nothing? Who is he?” I asked, feeling sick. It was confirmed, then. This was our doing.

“Emberus is a god. One of the big ones. Has a bunch of kids, but only really liked the dead one. Likes to kill people by setting their faces on fire. You know how it goes. He’s my great uncle. And my cousin, too, I think. It gets confusing. He and I never talked much.”

“It’s a talking sex doll!” Louis exclaimed.

“Whoa,” Firas said. He leaned in and poked at the head.

“I’m going to kill your mother,” Samantha said. She made a growling noise at Firas, who skittered back.

“Samantha, who is Orthrus?” I asked again.

“Oh, yes. His little doggie. He’s so cute. Orthrus got sucked into the Nothing accidentally the same time the son was murdered. It’s a really long story. But Emberus probably wants the dog back. Also, he’s a big asshole, so don’t expect a reward.” She started laughing maniacally. “Once, there was this drunk guy walking home from a pub, and he dropped his torch, and he took a tinkle directly on the flames, snuffing it out. Emberus found out and took offense. He destroyed the entire country. He woke up a volcano and covered the whole world with lava. Even Eris was pissed at him. He’s funny like that. You guys are so fucking dead.”

“Orthrus is a dog?” Donut asked, starting to poof out.



“A puppy! He’s a really good boy.”

**Bautista: Hey man. We’re going down into the stairwell. A giant god thing is going berserk out here. See you on the other side.**

Other messages came from groups who weren’t as lucky. One set of people were trapped in their saferoom while the mountain above them burned. Another group, inside of an intact bubble, said the god was currently standing right outside, and even though he couldn’t get in, their whole world was starting to heat up. They said the saferoom door was glowing red hot. I received a panicked message from another crawler inside that same bubble. I recognized her name.

**Tserendolgor: We need help. I was crawling along the inside of the bubble wall, looking for the last slot to put the final gem. We were almost goddamned there. Then this giant, empty eye socket thing appeared just on the other side of the bubble. It called me Orthrus and started screaming. Now it’s pounding on the bubble wall. The world is getting hotter by the moment. The mountain walls are starting to glow. Everything is going to melt. Someone please help us. There’s 160 of us in here, and we haven’t lost a person yet. We were almost done. It’s not fucking fair.**

We’d met the woman crawler at the end of the previous floor. She was a German Shepherd-looking creature called a dog soldier. She and Donut had gotten into a spat. I remembered the woman’s main weapon was a flame thrower.

“Goddamnit,” I said. This was my fault. I explained to the others the message.

“He thinks that experience hog lady is *his* dog!” Donut said.

“Uh, isn’t his real dog, like huge?” Louis asked, looking up as the walls rumbled.

“It doesn’t matter. We need to get the real damn dog back to his owner,” I said.

“The only way to do that is to first get the bubble popped,” Katia said.

I glanced at my clock. We still had an hour before the lightning was supposed to start.

“We need to get moving,” I said.

“THE STORM IS ALREADY STARTING TO BLOW. THE LIGHTNING will come at any minute,” Gwen said as our small group pushed our way out of the personal space. It was me, Katia, Gwen, and Tran. The Pazuzu barkeep remained huddled behind his bar. He pointed with a shaking hand outside, but I couldn’t see anything. Night had fully descended. Wind howled. Even though the ocean remained half-drained and was usually calm, waves splashed against the windows.

I checked the boss map. I could see that Quetzalcoatlus was bouncing around the lower part of the temple. There were no other bosses down there. In fact, it appeared the earlier flooding had killed just about everything. It also looked as if multiple pieces of the crypt had been torn away. The tomb raider guys were still MIA. I had no idea if Chris was safe or even if he was still in his spot.

“I don’t see the dog on the map,” I said as we exited the pub. “Maybe it wasn’t very... oh fuck me.”

I hadn’t noticed the dog on the map because the white dot with the orange outline took up the entirety of my overlay, and the minimap had helpfully dimmed it for me.

Orthrus filled almost half the available space of the bubble. Like a dog that was trapped under a laundry basket.

In the darkness, I could only see the parts closest to us. The creature stood on two, bowed, fuzzy legs, erupting out of the water like a massive pair of hairy and wet parentheses. High above and directly over us, its pudgy and pink belly smooshed up against the side of the necropolis. Stone and debris rained down with each breath. Its fore legs disappeared over the bowl. From above, I imagined it appeared the dog was eagerly hanging over a fence, waiting for his master to come home. If we were on the other side of the island, we could probably see its front paws dangling over the top. I imagined the dog's head likely reached all the way to the very top of the bubble.

The very distinctive scent of wet dog filled the world.

About fifty feet over our heads, the puppy's testicles were retracted, indicating the creature was still very young. The twin lumps were like a pair of domed sports arenas. If he decided he needed to pee, we'd be drowned.

"Now I know how a flea feels when he sees a dog," Tran muttered.

Waves continued to crash onto the beach and into the town. With each movement, a new tsunami appeared, sometimes splashing over our heads. Behind the enormous body, a *swish, swish, swish* noise filled the night, louder even than the wind.

It was the puppy's tail, I realized. He was wagging his goddamned tail.

A whimper filled the night. It wasn't loud, but strangled. And sad. The cry of a puppy who hadn't yet learned how to howl.

"Poor guy," Katia said. "He's just a puppy, and he's probably really scared."

A second howl filled the darkness, joining the first, equally mournful.

"What?" I said. "Is there two of them?"

**Donut: THIS THING IS JUST REVOLTING. ALSO, IT'S A WOLF, WHICH IS EVEN WORSE. AT LEAST**

**REGULAR DOGS GET BATHS EVERY NOW AND THEN. IT'S WET, AND IT SMELLS. I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY ANYONE WOULD WANT ONE OF THESE THINGS IN THEIR HOME. ONE OF HIS TWO HEADS IS CHEWING ON THE SIDE OF THE BOWL. THE OTHER IS LICKING AT THE CEILING AND DROOLING AND WHINING AT THE SAME TIME. THE BOWL IS LITERALLY FILLING UP WITH DROOL, CARL. YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT DROOL. THIS IS LIKE A NIGHTMARE. DISGUSTING. I THINK WE SHOULD KILL IT AND PUT BOTH OF US OUT OF OUR MISERY.**

Two heads? Holy shit.

**Carl: Goddamnit, Donut. Don't linger. Don't let it see you. Get to the Desperado.**

Donut was supposed to run from the exit straight to the Desperado Club, where she'd meet up with Imani and Elle and several other groups of crawlers.

**Donut: KEEP YOUR BOXERS ON, CARL. I'M ALREADY THERE.**

"It's moving!" Katia cried.

We hunched over as the legs bowed, and Orthrus did a little jump, like he was trying to get on top of the bowl, despite being much too big. The world quaked. A massive wave of water splashed over us. All of us except Katia fell over. Two hundred feet away, one of the angular, stone statues that dotted the side of the necropolis fell from the sky and crashed into a pazuzu's hut, crushing it.

In that moment as the dog scrambled to change his position, thunder rolled through the sky. I caught sight of something high above in the darkness. It was the shadow of a big, floppy ear. The moment I saw the outline, the creature's description popped up.

**Orthrus. Juvenile Gate Guardian. Level 10.**

**This is a bereft pet of Geyrun.**

**Who's a good boy? Who's a good boy?**

When you see a multi-headed dog trained to guard gates, you probably first think of Cerberus, the three-headed monstrosity that is said to protect one of the stairwell entrances to the twelfth floor. What you probably don't know is that grumpy Cerberus has a kid brother who is still learning the ropes.

**Orthrus. The most loveable hell-hound on this side of Alpha Centari. The left side is for sniffin' and the right side is for lickin' and that pink belly of his?**

**It's for kissin'.**

**If this lil pup was any more sweet and adorable, you'd all be inflicted with diabetes.**

The universe's goodest boy was originally destined for a fate like that of his brother. But before the two-headed Orthrus could get turned into a vicious, baby-eating, nun-defiling murder machine, he met with some bad luck. First, his master was murdered, and then he got sucked into the Nothing, all on the same day.

Unlike most creatures who have been touched by the Nothing, Orthrus's pure innocence causes him to be unaffected by the blight. He is immune to all mind-altering attacks. Fire doesn't do a thing, which is good considering his adopted family. But unlike most gods, he is not invulnerable. He is but a little puppy. Happy, but destructive. Rambunctious, roly-poly, very pokey. But fragile.

Which is unfortunate. His master may be dead, but his master's father, Emberus the Fire God, is not. He would not be pleased if anything were to happen to his dead son's best friend.

All four of us started jogging out of town, angling toward the

remains of the sand castle. “How is something the size of the goddamned bubble only level 10?” I asked. “Seriously, will he die if I punch him in the leg?”

“You’d probably get an awesome achievement for that,” Gwen said.

“I think that’s the point,” Katia said. “They make the puppy fragile so he dies. And then this Emberus god gets extra angry.”

I looked at the pair of legs rising out of the ocean and had a horrific thought.

“Do you think the lightning is going to hurt it?”

“Oh no,” Katia said, bringing her hand to her mouth. “We should disconnect the tower.”

“I ain’t touching that electrical line while the storm is going,” Gwen said.

I’d had Gwen attach that long lead from the drain mechanism to the still-standing lightning tower. I’d also had her turn off the drain so some water remained in the temple. The theory was that the moment the tower was hit with lightning, it would electrify the interior waterways. And since Quetzalcoatlus was vulnerable to lightning, it’d kill her, and we’d hopefully win the quadrant. Each one of these four quadrants had a “cheat.” A quick way to kill everything. The knock-knocks on the bottom of the *Wasteland*. The hidden drain on the side of the sand castle. I wasn’t sure what the easy-win scenario was for the *Akula*, but I suspected it had something to do with Lusca the octo-shark. And for the final castle, this lightning tower attack was the fast way.

I didn’t want to disconnect it. We didn’t have time to deal with yet another mystery and storyline and puzzle. We needed to be done with it. If the lightning killed the dog, then we’d simply have to deal with grandpa. But at least the quadrant would be done.

But the moment I thought that, I knew I was kidding myself. Emberus wasn’t doing anything to us directly. He was doing it to other crawlers. That was by design. They *knew* it was something that would get my hackles up. It was bait. Obvious bait.

It was the same goddamn bait Hekla had used to get me to go along with her. It had been a trap then, and it was a trap now.

I thought of Lucia Mar, sobbing on the recap. I hadn't seen the episode, but it was clear they'd done something deliberate to torture her. She was their most popular stream, and they were milking it for the drama. That's exactly what they were doing here, too.

*You will not break me. Fuck you all. I will break you.*

A thunderclap broke the sky directly over our heads. The wind picked up further. Suddenly it was blowing harder than it ever had. The sand took flight, lowering our visibility to nothing. We were actually running *with* the wind, which was good. I could no longer see the dog. The sand felt like needles against my skin. I took my new bandana, and I pulled it over my face like a mask. I pulled up the hood on my cloak.

Lightning flashed again, and the puppy yelped.

**New Quest. Where the Red God Glows.**

**THIS IS A GROUP QUEST. All Crawlers currently within bubble number 543 will receive this quest.**

*Your party has been designated Host of this Group Quest.*

**No parties may opt-out of this quest.**

**Did you ever read the book *Where the Red Fern Grows*?**

**Oh, it's great. It's about this kid who saves up his money to buy a couple of coonhounds. Little Ann and Old Dan. And there's a naughty cat involved. A bunch of stuff happens.**

**Anyway, did you ever notice this strange phenomenon when it comes to earth books about dogs? They always die in the end. Always. What kind of sick, sadistic fuckers are you?**

**Puppies shouldn't ever share a world with pain. Yet here we are. Thanks, earth culture.**



**Orthrus the giant puppy is getting shocked in the ass by a constant barrage of lightning. He's also getting bitten over and over in the ankles by a bunch of tenacious sharks. It's starting to hurt. Poor little guy. His health is going down.**

**His death will be the fault of all of you. Especially Crawler Carl, who callously shoved the poor puppy into a bubble much too small and much too dangerous for him.**

**If Orthrus dies, the full-powered god Emberus will turn this bubble into a kiln. Good luck getting to a stairwell if that happens.**

**If the puppy survives the lightning storm and escapes the sharks, odds are pretty good you'll die anyway. But at least you'll die knowing you shed this world without ever causing harm to a defenseless puppy.**

**Oh, except Crawler Maggie My. She once ran over a baby Labrador with her Chevy Tahoe. What a bitch!**

***Reward:* It's a surprise.**

"Oh shit," I said as lightning struck again. The dog howled. If there was a health bar over the thing, I couldn't see it. I felt sick all over again. I sent a note to Donut.

**Donut: WHAT DID YOU SAY?**

**Carl: You heard me. Do you have those invisibility potions I gave you? Use them, but only if you absolutely have to. Keep the Mordecai potion ready too. It saved me last time.**

**Donut: ARE YOU DRUNK?**

**Carl: I'm sorry. I can't do it myself. You're the only one with the spell. You can do this. I believe in you.**

**Donut: I LIKED YOU BETTER WHEN YOU WOULDN'T LET ME GO INTO DANGER.**

Through the driving sand, I could see our destination. I watched as the towers were struck by lightning. They glowed like a beacon before fading away. Nothing seemed to happen.

“It’s not working,” Katia said.

“I think the earthquakes might’ve dislodged the power cable,” I said.

The Quest Chat notification popped up on the side of my interface as we pushed through the remains of what had once been a group of walls protecting Ghazi’s castle. I could see the stairwell on my map, sealed and buried in the blowing sand.

I realized the quest chat suddenly gave me an opportunity I didn’t have before. It was a special chat room that only appeared during group quests, and it included everyone in the bubble. I pulled it up. My breath caught in my throat when I saw the list. It listed all of us from the air quadrant, Gwen’s team, Britney, and the tomb raider guys. But amongst the tomb raiders, there were only three left. It was Low Thi the D-bag geek, Morris the spider guy, and Bobby the trap finder. All three had **Possessed** after their name.

But there were also two more names at the bottom of the list. Separated. Maggie My and Chris Andrews 2. After Chris’s name it said **Enslaved**.

Despite the possessed and enslaved markers, it appeared all of them still had the ability to chat.

Donut had already discovered the chat, and she was absolutely *ripping* into Maggie My, who hadn’t yet answered.

Tran ran off along the side of the castle to see what the problem was with the electrical line while Katia hesitantly approached the tower. Above, Orthrus whined, the dog’s voice carrying over the wind. The world rumbled as the dog lifted a leg, trying to gain purchase on dry ground. We all stumbled. In the distance came a mighty crash as part of the temple collapsed.

**Donut: ...AND JUST BECAUSE YOU KILLED A DOG DOESN’T MAKE UP FOR WHAT YOU DID TO CHRIS. BRANDON DIED THINKING HIS BROTHER WAS**

**MAD AT HIM AND THAT WAS YOUR FAULT. YOU'RE THE WORST PERSON WHO HAS EVER LIVED, AND I HAVE KNOWN SOME REALLY BAD PEOPLE.**

**Chris: Donut.**

**Donut: I ONCE KNEW A LADY WHO USED TO MAKE A HIMALAYAN CAT NAMED PEANUT'S SPLENDID FLAVOR EAT NOTHING BUT A WEIRD DIET WITH NO MEAT AND THEN PEANUT GOT REALLY SICK AND SHE GOT ALOPECIA.**

**Chris: Donut.**

**Donut: AND ANOTHER LADY TALKED HER DAUGHTER INTO SELLING A PERFECTLY BEAUTIFUL AND LOYAL CAT AFTER SHE WON GRAND CHAMPION JUST SO THEY COULD PUT HER IN A CAGE AND HAVE BABIES WITH HER OWN UNCLE WHO WAS REALLY SCARY AND MEAN AND MAKE A PROFIT OFF IT.**

**Chris: Donut. Please.**

**Donut: AND YOU'RE WORSE THAN ALL OF THEM COMBINED! FRANK GOT REALLY SAD AND WAS DONE BEING A MURDERER, AND HE GAVE CARL THE RING BUT YOU CAME ALONG AND JUST MADE CHRIS KILL HIM AND NOW CHRIS IS BANNED FROM THE DESPERADO CLUB. THAT'S JUST AWFUL. HE'S PROBABLY NEVER GOING TO DANCE AGAIN. MISS BEATRICE USED TO DANCE WITH ME WHEN WE WERE BOTH SAD, AND IT ALWAYS MADE IT A LITTLE BETTER, AND YOU JUST TOOK THAT AWAY.**

**Carl: Donut. You have something you need to be doing.**

**Donut: I'M RUNNING AS FAST AS I CAN, CARL. I CAN RUN AND CHAT AT THE SAME TIME.**

**Carl: Chris, are you guys still trapped in that room?**

**Chris: We're out. We went down a long ladder and disconnected a wire in the water, and then we attacked a group of crawlers and killed one. Now we're moving back up to the top. Don't know if she reads this chat.**

*No. No, no, no.*

**Low Thi: He killed Tyler! We were moving down, and he came out of nowhere and ripped him in half! We ran, but we tripped a trap, and now we're all possessed by ghosts.**

**Morris Sp: We're not even together anymore. We're wandering aimlessly. Janice walked straight into one of those crushers, and she exploded.**

**Bobby: I can't do this anymore. I'm done. I'm done. This is too much. This is too much.**

**Carl: Can you move your hand? Scratch it against the wall. If you damage yourself, I think the ghost will leave your body.**

I regretted posting that the moment I hit *send*. It was a mistake. But what else could I do?

There was only one way I could possibly know how to get out of being possessed.

Tran returned. We all scrambled back as lightning struck the double towers again. The whole thing lit up. It hummed for about ten seconds before fading away.

"The wires are still attached," Tran said, breathless. "I don't think there's a break in the line."

**Carl: Chris, look we don't have much time. I'm really sorry we didn't listen before. I promise we'll...**

**Chris: Unimportant. We're back atop the temple. Maggie is cheating. She has outside help. A cap...**

*Chris has been muted from chat.*

His previous notes disappeared from the log.

“Goddamnit,” I cried. That was the second time that had happened. I looked up in the air. “This is bullshit!”

“Oh, crap,” Katia said, turning. Her riot shield appeared on her arm. “Now? Seriously? Guys, monsters coming.”

Gwen’s spear appeared in her hand. A wave of red dots materialized, coming through the sandstorm. Feral Pazuzu. Gwen and Katia moved as if one, like a pair of pack hunters as they rushed away to meet the new threat. Tran pulled a curved sword and moved to fight alongside them. I continued to juggle multiple chats. In addition to the quest chat, I was talking to Imani and another crawler who was relaying messages for me to a few other crawlers I couldn’t yet talk directly to. I simply couldn’t do both at the same time.

**Morris Sp: It worked. I’m free!**

**Low Thi: Me too!**

**Carl: Good. I once had to break my finger to get away from a charm spell, and I figured that would work here, too.**

It was a lame and desperate excuse, and it didn’t explain how I knew they still had control of their left hands. There was a whole chapter in the cookbook that dealt with circumventing debuffs. Hopefully nobody would question my unusual knowledge.

**Tserendolgor: If anyone can hear us, the interior doorknobs in our saferooms are literally melting.**

**Carl: We’re working on it. We’re doing the best we can.**

A frothing scorpion man flew through the air and landed with a *crunch* right in front of me. These guys were huge, bigger than the normal versions who lived in town. Gwen and Katia had spent days fighting these mobs together while Donut and I were in our time out. This one was still alive, and I activated *Talon Strike* and kicked him in the head, finishing him off. I pulled a banger sphere and tossed it at another, and the ball curved in the air with the wind. It still clipped him in the side of the head, and he went down.

**Donut: IT WON'T LET ME. IT SAYS I'M TOO FAR AWAY. HIS HEALTH IS HALF DOWN.**

**Carl: Louis, Firas. I'm gonna need you guys. Get out there and to the *Twister*. Donut, meet them at the house. Hurry.**

**Louis: In the goddamned storm?**

**Firas: Are you drunk?**

**Donut: ARE YOU TRYING TO GET ME KILLED?**

I sent a quick message to the tomb raider guys.

**Morris: The side ladder. I know where that is. An entrance isn't far. We cleared it before, but it just leads to a weird electrical panel thing that didn't do anything no matter how it was connected. It's still submerged. You can't get to the crypt from there. Believe me, we tried.**

**Carl: Look, guys. We need that connected. I'm pretty sure that's the last piece. But it'll be dangerous. The moment it's hooked up, the next lightning strike is going to zap everyone still underwater in the tomb. You'll have to get out as quickly as you can.**

**Morris: It's like a mile down a ladder, but I can use my silk ability to get to the water level quickly. Bobby is still possessed. Low is too far away. It looks like it's me. I can be at the connector in five minutes. But last time we went down there, Quetzalcoatlus started screaming and moving toward us.**

**Low Thi: I'm on pterodactyl duty. I'll distract her. Let's roll.**

**Carl: Godspeed.**

I turned toward the wave of feral Pazuzu, and I joined the others in the fight.

---

Gwen vaulted over a Pazuzu, twisting in the air. Her spear flashed as I caught a face full of bloody sand. Katia's crossbow appeared, and her magical bolts pelted into a pair of the scorpions. The wind screamed, and our visibility was next to nothing. It was like they were coming up through the sand.

One lunged at me out of nowhere, stinger dripping with poison. I caught the jagged point in my hand. I was immune to the venom, but my hand was pierced, and I cried out in pain. I formed a fist around the barbed spike as the feral creature struggled. The thing was frothing at the mouth like it had goddamned rabies. My gauntlet appeared, ripping the end of the tail off. Gore spewed from the wound as I kned the monster in the chest. I hit him in the jaw with a left cross, and then I stabbed him in the neck with the point from his own stinger.

**Donut: WE DID IT. I CAST *HEAL CRITTER*, AND IT WORKED. I CAN'T BELIEVE IT. THE HEALTH IS STILL GOING DOWN THOUGH. THE STUPID DOG DOESN'T EVEN APPRECIATE IT.**

**Louis: The house is breaking up. The balloon is slamming back and forth. We're getting whiplash. It's like riding a bull.**

**Firas: I did that once. I fell off.**

**Carl: What about lightning?**

**Louis: It's mostly below us. I'm more worried about the dog. We're trying to keep behind the heads, but they keep moving and howling. If it sees us, we're in trouble.**

**Carl: You have to keep that dog's health topped up. Do your best.**

**Firas: Holy shit! Half the bowl just broke away! The side with the Bactrian village is just gone!**

A huge chunk of rock slammed onto the beach nearby. The ground trembled. The other side of the island had probably just been

buried in an avalanche. We didn't have much time. Above, the dog howled anew. I kept my eye on the map of the boss. The dot of Quetzalcoatlus was moving toward the room with the connector, but suddenly it veered away.

**Morris: Bobby is gone! Oh god! I think he was crushed.**

**Carl: Stay on mission.**

**Morris: Almost there.**

**Low Thi: It's chasing me! I have it distracted. Do it!**

**Warning: This message is from a deceased crawler.**

The boss, which could move through walls, barely paused as it apparently ripped through the crawler. It rocketed back toward Morris's position. *Oh, god. I sent them to their doom.*

**Morris: It's connected! I did it! Going back up...**

**Warning: This message is from a deceased crawler.**

The same moment the message appeared, the towers in front of me lit up with a lightning strike.

The sound was like that of every branch on every tree in the universe cracking at the same time. The sand under the tower, including the sand I was ankle-deep within, flashed. Pain ripped through me, and for a horrifying moment I thought both of my feet had been ripped off. My health went down almost half way. I was suddenly frozen in place. I stumbled, but I couldn't fall because I couldn't move my legs. The entire beach around the twin lightning towers for about two hundred feet in every direction had turned to glass.

Katia, Gwen, and Tran were all equally stuck. Tran's health was almost zeroed out, but it moved back up as he healed himself. I pulled my leg, and the glass splintered. I pulled myself free just in time to punch down a charging Pazuzu who hadn't been caught in the glass. It was the last one for the moment. The others broke themselves free as the notifications rolled across the screen.

I didn't know if Quetzalcoatlus or the sudden electrification of



the interior of the temple was what killed Morris Sp, the final crawler within the subterranean quadrant. It didn't matter.

I wasn't sure how many people started in the necropolis. They all died. Each and every one. I was pretty sure they'd been dealt one of the worst hands they could've gotten this entire floor. And that really sucked. I took a moment in their honor.

But in the end, their sacrifice meant something. They completed their job.

**Bubble Notification. The guardian of Anser's tomb has been successfully destroyed. The Subterranean Quadrant has been liberated!**

**All give congratulations to the crawlers who successfully liberated the throne room. All hail crawlers Gwendolyn Duet, Low Thi, and Morris Sp.**

**All crawlers who originated in the Subterranean Quadrant may now freely travel to the other quadrants.**

**Bubble Notification. All four quadrants have been successfully liberated.**

**Congratulations.**

*Psst!* The sound was like a can of beer fizzing after it opened. For about ten seconds, the wind turned even stronger, so much so it was hard to breathe. My ears popped. The temperature plummeted, and a strange, ozone-like stench filled the world, followed by the distant smell of something burning. And then the sandstorm just stopped, much the same way a storm within a snow globe would stop the moment you broke the glass.

A moment passed, and then a new wind filled the beach, slow and constant and cold. It was still dark, but the starless sky took on a red hue. Above Orthrus continued to whimper, his shadow taking up half the sky.

**Bubble number 543 has been popped. All four stair-**

**well locations are now open. See? That wasn't so hard. All that whining and dying was a bit dramatic, don't you think?**

I'd been expecting the ocean to drain away, but it didn't. I realized that only the top part of the bubble had disappeared, like the top half of a plastic easter egg, leaving the water and the island intact. Choking dust still filled the air, not yet settling because of the new breeze.

But I could feel it. That sense of claustrophobia I hadn't even realized I was suffering was now gone.

**Donut: CARL, HIS HEALTH ALMOST WENT TO ZERO WHEN YOU DID THE BIG LIGHTNING THING. I HEALED HIM. THE LIGHTNING IS GONE, BUT HIS LIFE IS STILL GOING DOWN. THE STUPID DOG DOESN'T EVEN KNOW HOW TO NOT DIE. I THINK THE SHARKS ARE BITING HIM.**

Shit. This wasn't over yet. We had to get him out of the water.

I was pretty sure that we could probably now flee down the stairs, despite the bubble quest. But that would mean abandoning everyone else. Plus Elle now had the gate of the feral gods thanks to Donut, and I needed it back before we left the floor.

**Louis: We're gonna have to land to fix the net. Can't keep it stable in these new crosswinds. Don't have a choice.**

**Carl: Come to me. Stay behind the dog so he doesn't see you. Maggie is loose and up on the bowl somewhere. I don't want you near there. Everybody else needs to stay in the saferoom until we deal with her. But we gotta do this first.**

Katia put her hand on my shoulder. She was drenched in blood. I suddenly felt as if I hadn't done anything in this fight, even though I'd been juggling a dozen things at once. *I sent those guys to their deaths.*

*I knew they were probably going to die, but I sent them anyway. Christ, what gives me the right?*

“Should I tell the others to wait?” Katia asked.

“Yes. We still have three days. We need what? Four and a half hours for the last thing?”

She hesitated. “That’s right,” she said, finally. “If you’re sure. Plus maybe an hour for the portal to the sixth floor.”

It was going to be close. “Tell Elle to wait until this dog quest is done, then we start with the rescues.” I swallowed. “If every feral god we summon also summons a real god, it’s going to get crowded out there.”

“I should probably tell you something before we start rescuing the stranded bubbles,” Katia said.

Above, the *Twister* appeared. The net holding the house was ripped to pieces. I caught sight of Donut on the edge, hopping up and down. The yard around the half house had literal holes in it. Water arced from a severed main.

“Jesus,” I muttered. “They’re lucky that thing didn’t fall from the sky.”

“You know what, never mind,” Katia said. “Too much is happening right now. We’ll deal with it after this.”

“Okay,” I said.

I looked up at the whimpering dog. We weren’t directly under it anymore, but I still couldn’t see it very well in the darkness. I re-read the winning condition of the quest. He had to survive the lightning storm and escape the sharks. The problem was despite the bubble being popped, the dog wasn’t making any moves to leave the water. The fire god didn’t seem to be aware he was here. I had no idea what was out there outside the bubble. Was it like a bottomless pit? Probably not. It was too dark to see.

We jogged up the house as it landed. Louis and Firas were crawling over it like a pair of worker ants. Donut leaped down and straight to my shoulder. Mongo appeared, still on the house and howled at me.

“Carl, we don’t have time. That smelly dog is going to die soon. What are we going to do?” Donut asked.

“This thing is going to fall straight out of the sky if we don’t fix this,” Louis called down to me from the roof of the house.

I moved my eyes to the attached garage. The garage door remained closed. I sighed.

“Donut, do you still have that *Meat Hooks* scroll we got on the third floor?”

<CRAWLER SINJIN. 15TH EDITION> I NOW WORSHIP THE GODDESS Kuraokami. Worst decision ever. The goddess is sponsored by some male soother twat who is treating it like I really worship him. They made this whole system more complicated than it needs to be. If you see a god or if you find a temple or if you find a scroll of prayer, you're given the option to worship a god. Once you do it, there's a pawful of benefits but also a bunch of rules you gotta follow. For Kuraokami, if you kill something, you have to touch the corpse with ice at least once a day. Why? Who the fuck knows. I don't have an ice spell, so I need to go back to safe rooms and get more ice every day.

If I do the ice thing once a day five days in a row, I get a boon. Only you don't know what the boon is going to be. I haven't made it five days yet. If you miss a day, the goddess "turns her back," and you stop getting any of her benefits. If you miss two days, you receive a debuff. If you miss three, you fall from grace and can't worship them anymore. There's a 50% chance you'll get "smited." I don't know what that means, but it ain't gonna be good.

You can also voluntarily leave the faith, but it comes with an automatic smite.

*But worst of all, while you worship the god, the god can sometimes send you messages. The description says it's rare, but my goddess won't shut the hell up. I'm pretty sure I'm the only one who worships her, and this rat asshole is bored or something and sends me message after message. The last note I got was, "You need to say I'm the prettiest goddess out loud." I finally told him to fuck off. But now the twat is swearing at me in my messages. I don't know if they have any real power over me unless he somehow gets summoned or I get smote. As soon as I get to the stairwell station, I'm going to leave the faith and then jump down the stairs. Maybe that'll save me.*

*<Note added by Crawler Azin. 17th Edition> This is Sinjin's last entry. A person in my party was smote by his god, and it made his blindness debuff permanent. Stay the fuck away from gods.*

"Carl, the balloon escape hatch thing is gone. If we want to land, we'll have to actually land it," Donut said as we prepared for flight.

As I made sure the gas tank was topped off, Katia leaned over the engine, frantically tightening bolts.

She smashed her wrench on one of the cylinders of the radial engine over the left wing. "It's no wonder these things have such low power. Some of these pistons are completely gummed up. This one wasn't even attached. It's a miracle it even flies. This is a terrible idea."

"They're always terrible ideas," I said.

Above, Orthrus whimpered again. We needed to get up there and heal him as soon as possible. I really hoped this worked. We were going to have to worry about silly little details such as landing later.

Since there was nowhere to properly take off, I talked Louis and Firas to temporarily fly the house, which would allow us to drop off the edge of the *Twister* and hopefully pull up in time. We decided to move out and over the ocean, away from the dog and close to the edge of the bubble.

"I can't see anything down there," Firas said, leaning over to peer

down. The water quadrant just ended, and the shimmering bottom half of the bubble rose another forty or fifty feet above the top of the water. Beyond it was nothing but darkness. I could see the blurry hints of something glowing not too far away, and I was pretty sure it was the edges of another bubble, but it was hard to see.

“This is probably high enough,” I said. “We need to figure out where the fire god guy is.”

“He’s that way,” Donut said, pointing due east. “The air temperature that way is much higher. And I can see heat wave things coming up from the distant horizon when I turn my glasses to that weird setting where everything goes dark.”

“All righty,” I said.

Down on the land quadrant, I had Gwen and Tran turn on the drain and keep it on, which would hopefully fully drain out the necropolis. I sent them back to the saferoom after that.

If things ever managed to calm down, I wanted to go in there and take a look at the defeated castle. I wanted to seek out the corpse of Quetzalcoatlus and see what, if anything, she had on her. Even though we still had over three days left, I feared we weren’t going to get the chance.

“You’re gonna have to do it here,” Louis called from the roof of the house. He was desperately mending the net of ropes together. “The wind is picking up, and this patch isn’t going to hold.” He tossed the empty roll of magical duct tape back to me. He tossed it high, and I had to jump to grab it. I caught it. Barely. I would’ve throttled his ass if it had fallen off the edge. I returned the roll to my inventory to allow it to regenerate.

**Carl: Hey, is that fire god dude still melting your world?**

**Tserendolgor: JESUS CHRIST YES.**

**Carl: Okay. On our way to help. I hope.**

“Louis, get this thing on the ground right after we take off.” I looked over at Donut, who was playing with the gun on the back of the drop bear. I lowered my voice. “Uh, first make sure we don’t, you

know, go swimming. We might need you to pick us up out of the ocean.”

We pulled the drop bear out of the large garage, positioning it facing the wind. Louis lowered the balloon, catching onto the new breeze coming from outside the bubble. The balloon sped up. I sat behind the cockpit, and we spun up the engines, which roared. I barely knew what the hell I was doing. There was the yoke, the pedals, a fuel indicator, a gyroscope thing which I did not understand, the twin throttles, and that was it. Above, I could see Orthrus’s health, and it was deep in the red. Donut remained in the seat behind me.

She cast her *Torch* spell and somehow plastered the light to the underside of the top wing so it lit up the interior of both of our cockpits, solving an issue I hadn’t even realized we had.

“Ready?” I shouted over the roar of the engines.

Donut grumbled something I couldn’t hear. I gave Katia a thumbs up, and I pushed the throttle, trying to get as much speed as possible. The small biplane rumbled forward and then promptly rolled off the edge of the yard, dirt showering around us.

We dropped like a rock, but flying into the wind like that kept us from going into a full nosedive. I pulled up on the stick as the ocean reached up to us. My stomach lurched like we were on a roller coaster. I held on for dear life as we angled downward. We evened out, and then I felt us starting to rise in the air. I adjusted the rudder with the rocking foot pedal, and we stabilized. I pulled up further. *Holy shit, holy shit, it’s working.*

**Donut: DON’T FLY LIKE THAT. YOU’RE GOING TO MAKE ME VOMIT.**

We banked toward Orthrus as I ascended. I moved in a slow and steady curve, overshooting the dog and corkscrewing upward, not wanting to do anything that I couldn’t recover from. I caught sight of the *Twister* quickly descending back toward the Pazuzu village.

Even the slightest movement of my hand or feet had a massive impact on how the plane moved, and a lot of it was counterintuitive.



The whole plane felt as if it'd break into a million pieces if I pushed the stick just an inch in the wrong direction.

My **Biplane Pilot** skill suddenly rose to three. These skill levels didn't come with any new knowledge, but the stick suddenly felt less tight. Still, the whole plane vibrated ominously.

As we ascended, I could finally see the twin crowns of the enormous dog. They were like the heads of wolf puppies but with larger ears. The ears on the right head were both perked up, and on the left, one was up and one was down. A massive tongue lolled out of the left head with the floppy ear. *Jesus, that damn thing is adorable.*

Its health was at about 10 percent. It'd go unconscious soon. We needed to hurry.

As I carefully lined the plane up for a flyby behind the twin heads, I caught another glimmer of distant light beyond the edge of the bubble. The landscape beyond the borders of our world was like a sheet of bubble wrap. Half of them were popped, but an equal number were fully intact. This was the opposite direction from the fire god. The line of bubbles disappeared off into the darkness.

I remembered where we were, which was under the surface of our planet, which meant even though I couldn't see it, there was a roof up there somewhere. We needed to be careful and not go too high. Ahead, Orthrus's first mountain-sized head loomed, bobbing back and forth.

"I need to get closer," Donut called.

I gritted my teeth and kept our current trajectory. We were small and hopefully unnoticeable. "Okay, hold on!"

I finally realized that if I put the dot in the middle of the weird, spinning gyroscope thing, that meant the plane was completely level, neither pulling up or down and straight. There was a little lock on the gyroscope. Out of curiosity, I clicked it. Nothing seemed to happen at first, but then I realized the yoke was locked in place. It was a rudimentary autopilot, designed to keep us stuck on the current trajectory. *Huh.* It unclicked itself the moment I pulled on the stick.

We approached the back of the dog, perilously close. I could see

the individual hairs, like a forest beneath us. The world smelled of wet dog.

“Casting now!”

The whole creature glowed as its health zoomed up about 50%. Donut cast a second time just as we rocketed out of range, bringing it up to 100%, though it immediately started to dip. Both of the heads howled, and I had to jerk on the stick to avoid a collision, causing the whole plane to shudder like a bike rolling over rocks.

The damn thing was hard to fly. It always felt like it wanted to nose dive, and since there was no definitive horizon, it was hard to tell if the plane was even level without looking at the gyroscope.

“Okay, you ready?” I called.

“Don’t do the bumpy thing, Carl,” Donut said.

“Let me circle around. Get the scroll ready.”

We’d received the scroll of *Meat Hooks* way back on the third floor. A city elf had used the same scroll to lure Mongo away from us and into an alleyway. We, thankfully, didn’t have to be nearly as close to cast this one. The problem was once it was cast, the dog’s attention would suddenly be fully on us. I hoped we could move fast enough.

Before we’d taken off, I’d re-read the scroll’s description.

### **Scroll of Meat Hooks.**

**Let’s be real. Every pet owner already has this spell, at least when it comes to their own pets. Sometimes it’s the sound of a can opener. Or a command, such as “chow time, Fido!” Sometimes it’s the *wisp* of a jar of peanut butter being cracked open. No matter what the trigger is, the effect is the same. You do something, and your pets come running.**

***Meat Hooks* works on the same principal. You cast, and pets come to you. Except in this case, the resulting stench of black smoke that emanates from your hand smells like the rancid remains of the bloated corpse of a leprotic muskox after it was**

**repeatedly violated by a randy hyena. In other words, it stinks.**

**But pets love it. They love it so much, they just come barreling in.**

**This spell attracts all carnivorous pet-class mobs, whether they are bonded or not, to the source of the stench for a duration of 30 seconds plus ten seconds per point of intelligence of the caster. This spell has a range of 100 meters plus 20 meters per point of Charisma.**

Donut's current intelligence sat at 53, but it was really more than ten points higher than that with the temporary buffs imparted by the good rest bonus and the shower. The system was still "bugged" and didn't display the proper number, but it would apply it when the spell was cast. Assuming her effective intelligence was about 64, that meant the spell would last just over nine minutes. That should be plenty of time to entice the puppy to get out of the damn water and out of the bubble. That's all we needed to do to win the quest.

Donut's charisma was a whopping 120. With the bonuses, the spell would have a range of almost three full kilometers. That seemed like a lot, and it *was* under normal circumstances, but this monster was just massive. A single leap, and it could likely cover that distance in seconds. If we weren't careful, we were toast.

I arced around, so I was back over the water and behind the puppy. I was continuously ascending, wary of a potential invisible ceiling. The icy wind whipped at my face. It was goddamned freezing. My new jacket was shitty protection against the cold. The plane sputtered a few times, and I feared we'd reached the plane's height ceiling. I leveled out, praying the plane held out just a few more minutes.

"Read the scroll," I called.

The pungent stench immediately started to trail behind the plane, like we'd just blown an engine. Behind us, the enormous

puppy stopped whining. We buzzed straight out of the bubble and into the blackness, the smoke trailing us like a train..

“Carl, Carl it smells really bad! Oh my god, I’m going to vomit all over again. Why did I have to cast the spell? I don’t know how this ever attracted Mongo.”

**Entering the Lacuna.**

“Is it following?” I yelled.

“It’s looking at us, Carl,” Donut said. “Go faster!”

“I’m going as fast as I can,” I called.

A mighty thrashing noise filled the world behind us as the puppy pulled itself off the top of the necropolis and slammed down into the ocean on its back. I looked over my shoulder to see the creature as it howled in indignation. Rocks showered off the top of the necropolis. Paws waved in the air. Water splashed in every direction. The puppy twisted as it turned to face us. The dog yelped as it tipped over the edge of the bubble and tumbled out.

“It’s out!” Donut cried. “We did it!”

I’d been half-expecting the puppy to plummet away and disappear. Instead, it fell, landing on a floor that was much closer than I thought. When the puppy scrambled to its feet, it was actually taller now than it had been before. Both heads howled. A happy tongue continued to loll out of the left head. It made an *arooo* noise and scrambled after us, awkwardly bounding. The thing was terrifyingly fast.

**Quest Complete! Where the Red God Glows!**

**You removed the puppy from danger! Hurray!**

**For everybody who was involved in this quest who actually didn’t do anything, shame on you. The next time you’re in mortal danger, I hope you remember this moment when nobody comes out of nowhere to save your ass. At least you all get the same reward.**

**Reward: You get a new quest!**

“Oh fuck me,” I muttered.

Two bubbles loomed in front of us. We traveled at about  $\frac{3}{4}$ ’s the

bubbles' height. Both domes remained intact, meaning the residents hadn't yet completed their tasks. The impenetrable walls were opaque, though one of them glowed like a frosted lightbulb. I angled the plane toward the space between them. At the widest part of the bubble, there was about a quarter mile between the two. Plenty of space to fly, but a struggle for the giant dog.

**New Quest. The Dumber of the Flunkies.**

**THIS IS A GROUP QUEST.** All survivors of the previous group quest are now a party to this quest. And why the hell not, all Crawlers in Bubble number 18 are also added to the quest. Let's make it a fiesta.

*Your party has been designated Host of this Group Quest.*

No parties may opt-out of this quest.

Oh boy, oh boy do we have a situation here. Emberus, god of fire and ash seems to believe his son's missing puppy is inside of bubble 18. The dog is not, in fact, within that bubble. He's just outside of 543, having been recently rescued from a painful death. The next step should be easy. You just gotta bring the two together. Once that happens, both Emberus and Orthrus will immediately return to the Celestial Halls and everything will be almost back to normal.

If something happens to the pup, you will fail this quest. If you fail this quest, you will each in turn be smote by Emberus one by one, no matter what floor you're on. You probably don't know what that means. You don't want to know what that means.

Hmmm. Maybe that's a little too easy. Do you know not a single crawler in Bubble 18 has yet died? The whole world has been turned to lava, and they're all still alive! That's just ridiculous. That's no fiesta. Let me think on this for a minute.

***Reward: You will receive a Platinum Quest Box!***

“Carl, why is the quest called that?” Donut yelled. “And what did it mean at the end? I don’t like that.”

“I have no idea. Hold on.” I curved the plane around the edge of the bubble. My skill went up another notch. The plane’s shudder eased. A little.

Ahead, I could finally see it. It wasn’t that far. A glowing presence filled the horizon, like a rising sun. It lit up this outside world, more and more the closer we got.

This inbetween world, the lacuna, was more like an egg carton than just a sheet of bubble wrap. Each individual bubble was in a spot of its own, sunken in deep. The “land” of the lacuna, which I still couldn’t see, was only a few hundred feet below the waterline on our quadrant.

Orthrus scrambled toward us, howling happily. The damn puppy seemed to have forgotten he’d almost died a minute before and was now happily crashing through the world outside the bubbles. The thing leaped atop the intact bubbles, which were apparently slippery. It bayed and fell sideways and rolled away. *Bark, bark, bark, bark.*

The puppy was clearly out of range of the *Meat Hooks* spell, but it didn’t seem to matter. Spell or not, he had noticed us, and he wanted to catch us.

Donut was shouting insults I couldn’t quite catch. The next two bubbles in line were both popped. The bubble on the left featured what appeared to be a massive cactus. The one on the right was a curved, concrete structure shaped like a half-moon. Both landscapes were only half-lit by the red glow on the horizon.

The puppy pounced out of nowhere, landing heavily on the giant cactus world. It paused to piddle before resuming its chase. I cringed, hoping everybody within the cactus world was okay.

**Carl: Jesus, everybody, if your bubble is popped, get in a saferoom. Spread the word!**

“It’s going to catch us, Carl,” Donut cried. “If I get eaten by a giant, two-headed cocker spaniel so help me I will never forgive you.”

“If it gets too close, turn off the spell!”

Donut waved her paw frantically. “I can’t turn off the spell!” Her voice had gone up an octave. “There’s no button! There’s usually a button! The smoke won’t stop! The smell is just unbearable!”

It was getting warmer by the moment. Katia’s last-minute tinkering seemed to have worked. We were moving quickly, almost 400 kilometers per hour. We were halfway there. As long as the god’s presence didn’t explode the damn airplane, we’d soon get the dog close enough that the god would notice. Behind us, the dog had veered away to investigate another world. But then its left head howled in our direction, and the chase was on.

**New Quest! Get Orthrus.**

**This is a world quest! All living crawlers will receive this message!**

*Now it’s a party.*

**Orthrus, the two-headed puppy is bounding his way happily through the Lacuna, the world that houses the bubbles. This very adorable pup is running back to his former master’s father. Don’t worry. You can’t miss him. He just drenched the folks in bubble 331, and then he knocked down the Sounder Tower in bubble 298.**

**What a menace!**

**Let’s kill it.**

**Reward: Any crawler who kills this cute puppy before he reunites with grandpa will receive the following:**

**One million gold pieces.**

**Five level-up potions.**

**A pet monkey named Jimbo.**

**Current participants in the “Dumber of the Flunkies” group quest are free to kill the puppy if they are sadistic assholes, but they will not receive the**

**rewards. You know what, never mind. They get the prize, too!**

“Are you kidding me? Are you fucking kidding me?” I yelled. “Come on!”

I immediately moved to send out a group message, but both Katia and Elle were already on it, telling everybody they would personally hunt down and murder anybody who so much as shot an arrow at the dog as it passed by their world.

I banked left to move between two more intact bubbles. There was a line of unpoped worlds here, and I moved to fly past them, like we were diving into a ravine. Just as we plunged between the first two bubbles, Orthrus pounced, landing atop a bubble just above our heads. He made a happy *aroo* and bounced twice before sticking a paw down to bat at us.

“*Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit,*” I said, pushing the stick down and diving. We were so damn small compared to the monster, he probably couldn’t even see us. He was chasing the massive plume of smoke trailing behind us. The giant paw swiped at the smoke, missing us.

“Carl, this was a terrible idea,” Donut yelled, still shaking her own paw like it was on fire, which made the smoke plume even bigger. She had six minutes left on the spell.

Suddenly, both heads of the puppy yelped in surprise and pain at the same time. The sound was so loud and so sudden, I almost jumped out of my skin. I whipped my head around to look back. The health bar above his twin heads plummeted down as Orthrus fell away and out of sight. He started yelping pitifully and loudly in the darkness.

“Goddamnit,” I growled. “Somebody hit it with a spell or something. Get ready to heal it.”

“Carl, we have to get really close for the healing spell.”

“I know,” I said, pulling up and leaving the protection of the ravine, turning away from the burning horizon. The plane whined as I dared to make a tight curve.



“Someone else is out here!” Donut yelled.

I saw the blue dot on my map, rocketing through the darkness high above us, banking back toward the puppy on roughly the same trajectory as us.

*You absolute fuck*, I thought.

He’d flown past the dog and hit it with some spell and was now circling back to finish him off.

I didn’t have to see the crawler’s description to know who this was.

I didn’t have the ability to message him directly. I’d only been able to talk to him once, during that first group quest on the third floor. We’d never actually met. There was no group chat for this world chat thing. If that ass managed to kill the dog, he’d effectively murder everyone in both our bubble and bubble 18.

**Carl: If someone has Quan Ch in their chat, tell him to back the fuck off.**

**TRAN: I HAVE HIM ON MY CHAT! I SAID HE'D KILL US IF HE HURT the dog, and he said, "Sorry, but it's too good of a prize. Plus, if I get that fucking cat in the process it'd be a bonus."**

"What did I do?" Donut yelled, not bothering to put it in chat.

Donut had mentioned how much she hated the "cheater" Quan no less than twenty times since he'd gotten that celestial box at the end of the third floor. I wasn't surprised that this had somehow gotten back to him. They'd probably shown him clips during an interview.

I sent a quick, frantic question to Mordecai, and he answered with one word.

**Mordecai: Yes.**

"Hit him with a goddamn magic missile," I yelled. I put my hand back, holding it out toward Donut. "And give me that potion. Mordecai's special brew."

Donut shot a missile, but she missed by a wide margin. At this speed, it was difficult to properly aim and fire. The potion appeared in my hand, and I pulled it into my inventory. Donut knew by now not to ask questions at times like this.

Thanks to the inventory system, it allowed me to prepare the potion without having to actually pull it out. I mentally clicked on the potion in the list and dragged it to the other item Mordecai had given me that same day he'd created the potion for us. The items combined, and a new item was created.

Orthrus was cowering, ears flattened on both of his heads. He'd shoved himself between two bubbles, one popped and another intact. The popped world was heavily forested. If there'd been any sort of raised air quadrant, it was gone now. The dog whimpered as he backed away from the approaching Quan. His health was at 20%.

We lined up behind Quan, who'd lowered and was moving in to strike again. I'd seen his main attack a few times on the recap episode, and it had a relatively short range. It was some sort of blue lightning energy strike that came from his left hand. He'd used it to crash trains on the previous floor.

He'd be in range to strike the fleeing dog again in about twenty seconds.

"Try it again," I growled.

A magic missile sizzled by my ear as Donut shot directly at the flying man. The bolt hit him square in the back.

He staggered in the air, but nothing else happened. He recovered almost immediately. A health bar didn't even appear. A translucent shield shimmered for just a moment. He looked over his shoulder at us. He gave a little grin.

"He's cheating, Carl," Donut yelled. "He has a shield!"

"It's that goddamned robe," I said. The celestial-tier item gave him his flying ability, the lightning attack, and presumably the shield. We'd seen hints of the shield before. Lucia Mar had something similar. Mordecai said the robe also likely added multiple other benefits we didn't know about, like enormous stat boosts and additional special abilities or spells.

The protection was *probably* a level-15 *Shield* spell, but we didn't know for sure. *Shield* was one of the spells Mordecai and I had

discussed extensively. We were going to use all of our money to buy a tome of it the next floor so we could give it to Donut.

If this was a level-15 shield, it'd last for as long as his intelligence stat times three seconds, however long that was. It protected against most attacks, including explosions and magic. However, it wasn't a spell of invulnerability. Psionic, aural, and cloud-based attacks still worked. Blunt force trauma still staggered the caster, and the shield itself had hit points. Do enough damage and \*poof\* the shield was gone. The total health points of the shield went up based on level. At 15, it was something crazy, like ten times the caster's constitution.

We'd seen Quan Ch run instead of fight multiple times, so the shield either had a long cooldown or the guy was just a wuss. He was at level 48, one higher than myself. He had an incalculable number of neighborhood and borough boss kill stars over his head. But he fought dirty, and he was like a vulture more than a true predator. He preyed on the weak and the almost dead, stealing kills from others. I was willing to bet he would turn tail the moment he sensed he was in any real danger.

We were moving faster than him and would overtake him in seconds, but he could blow us out of the sky with the flick of a wrist. I'd watched him crush the front of an onrushing train with little effort.

"Donut," I yelled as we approached. "Set your sunglasses so you can see his heat signature! And then empty the gun into him as we pass! Magic missiles, too!" I leveled the plane and clicked the gyroscope, locking our trajectory in place. If he maintained his position, we'd pass under him by about thirty feet.

Ahead, the massive, mountain-sized Orthrus loomed.

"Carl, he's going to blow us up!"

"If this doesn't work, jump!"

I pulled myself up out of the seat and moved to the right, grasping onto the metal pole that connected the top wing to the fuselage. I stepped out onto the lower wing, anchoring myself to the plane as the wind whipped at me and threatened to throw me out into the dark-

ness. The small, starboard propellor whined, right in front of me. I needed to be careful.

“Carl, Carl! What are you doing!”

“Switch your glasses now,” I yelled as I extended my xistera and loaded the hobgoblin disco ball. Quan turned his head to gauge our position, and I saw his eyes go wide at the sight of me on the wing. He banked away and flipped in midair, left hand glowing as I tossed the ball, avoiding the propellor by inches.

His shield was still intact, but the disco ball exploded over his chest anyway, knocking him back. The sticky, sand-like residue clung to the outside of the shield like mud. A rainbow of smoke started to billow from the impact. He waved frantically at it as the smoke rose. He cast a bolt, but it flew wide.

We zipped past Quan, who was still positioned above us. The gun rattled to life. Donut shrieked with joy as she fired the gun at her prey. A double-shot, full powered magic missile slammed into the cloud.

“I hit him! I hit him!”

I loaded a fused hob-lobber, designated it with my new remote detonator skill and tossed it at the growing plume of pulsing, rainbow smoke. Even with my new ability to toss these things twice as far, I'd waited a hair too long to throw it. Still, I set it off right when the ball started to dip. The explosion crackled through the air, twenty feet short of the ever-growing plume.

I knew from experience that was plenty close to do its job.

The sizzling and crackling circle of pulsing rainbow smoke plummeted out of the sky. I couldn't see Quan himself. The disco-ball remnants were sticky, and they adhered to his chest and followed him as he fell like a comet. He disappeared below.

“Did we kill him? Did we?” Donut yelled.

“No,” I shouted, pulling myself back into the cockpit. I resumed control and banked to the right. We flew over the dog, barely 50 feet over the top of the head. If he reared up now, we'd get splattered.

“But he’s gonna be mighty sore and deaf. Hopefully that ran him off. Cast your heal spell.”

Below, Orthrus whimpered. Donut healed him, and I pulled up, angling between two bubbles. We brought the health back up to 70%, which had the unfortunate and immediate side effect of renewing the dog’s interest in chasing us. The *Meat Hooks* spell still spewed from Donut’s paw.

The thing howled as he jumped to its feet. I turned the plane sharply, growing more confident in my ability to steer, angling back in the correct direction.

“Carl, more crawlers!” Donut shouted just as I saw the new threat.

A metal-skinned dirigible shaped like a fish emerged in front and below us. The slow-moving airship had come out of nowhere. I watched as twin harpoons shot from the flying machine, right at the dog.

“Goddamnit,” I cried.

They were flying too low and too slow. The harpoons fell short of their target, and I watched as three crawlers jumped away as the dog smashed into them, not even noticing their presence. The fish-shaped balloon exploded and disappeared against the fur. I suspected the crawlers who’d jumped out hadn’t fared much better.

“Serves you right!” Donut yelled as we zoomed forward. Ahead, I could now see the god. I could feel him, too, heat rising like we were slowly approaching a campfire.

Emberus. The humanoid god looked asymmetrical from behind. A massive, curved horn erupted from the right side of his head. His left side appeared caved-in, almost like that kid with compression sickness. The horn smoked like an incense stick. The god’s skin was made of curls of orange and red fire, licking up and down, all coming together to vaguely form a muscular human-shaped body. From the descriptions of the others, his skin was normally like goeey, molten rock, and he’d only set himself fully alight the moment he started shrieking at the dog soldier woman. The god was massive, but not as

big as I thought he'd be. If he was sized as a regular human, Orthrus would be like a large horse to him. The god was leaned against a bubble, pounding on it with a giant fist, shouting over and over. The bubble wall glowed red.

**Sun and Ash God Emberus. Level 250.**

**Warning: This is a deity. He is invulnerable on this floor.**

**This is a locked god. There will be no sponsors of this deity this season.**

*This god has been summoned to this location. Summoning rules apply.*

The youngest brother of Taranis, and half of the sun duology, Emberus strongly feels he is the best-suited candidate to ascend to the Celestial Throne. Known to be stoic and indifferent to the suffering of all but those he feels worthy, Emberus can be a just god if the fancy strikes him. The problem is the fancy hasn't struck in a very long time. He's usually an unmitigated asshole who'll arbitrarily burn everyone you know and love just for looking at him funny. He's considered one of the most unhinged of all the pantheon.

His twin brother is Hellik, another sun god who is quite obsessed with killing both Emberus and big brother Taranis. It's a very dysfunctional relationship. I guess most families are like this. You probably don't want to get involved.

Emberus's very presence can be deadly to crawlers, and that's just when he's in his regular form. When he gets emotional, things really start to heat up.

Word on the street is that since his favorite son was murdered by an unknown assailant, Emberus has been acting even kookier than usual. The dude plucked his own eyes out in his grief. It was really gross.

We were still miles away, but the heat was rising by the moment. We wouldn't be able to get much closer. We needed the damn god to just turn around. *He's blind. That's not going to make a difference.*

He'd somehow sensed the dog soldier woman. But how?

"More, on the ground!" Donut yelled, pointing down.

This was a whole group of crawlers, maybe 15 of them. They were a line of blue dots on the floor between the bubbles, moving toward the dog. I couldn't actually see them down there in the darkness. But right after Donut pointed them out, a fireball arced from the group and headed toward Orthrus. The spell splashed against the dog, ineffective.

"Holy shit," I said. "Those idiots are going to get themselves killed."

"They're going to kill *us* if they get the stupid puppy," Donut replied.

A new spell shot from the group. This was a magic missile, but Orthrus bounded up atop a pair of bubbles and moved out of range, completely oblivious to the danger. He looked in our direction and started barking frantically and jumping. He slipped off and fell forward, rolling over a popped quadrant before jumping back to his feet.

"Do you see anybody else?" I yelled. The plane whined ominously. It was getting harder to breathe the closer we got to Emberus. The wind felt like a hairdryer to the face.

Orthrus yelped once again, pained voice higher-pitched than before. Both heads squeaked and cried and then stopped abruptly. The dog crashed heavily to the ground. *Oh no. No, no, no.*

I turned the plane around. The dog wasn't dead. His health was down to 2% and he was **Unconscious** with a one-minute timer over his head. The front half of the puppy was draped over a popped bubble with water cascading off it. It was a rocky, barren world.

Quan. *Goddamn shit stain mother fucker.* He'd recovered and returned. He'd hit the dog from behind. In the distance, I could see



the tiny, glowing speck of him floating there in the darkness. He was moving in to finish the dog off.

The goddamned sun god was too busy shouting to even hear all of this happening a few miles behind him. I aimed right at the dog, putting the plane into a shallow dive. I punched the throttle.

“Grab the stick,” I yelled as I clicked the gyroscope and jumped onto the wing. The plane started to shudder.

“Grab the stick?” Donut shrieked. “What do you mean, grab the stick! Thumbs, Carl! Thumbs!”

“Pull up as soon as I throw!”

I loaded the potion ball into my xistera. It was filled with Mordecai’s Special Brew, which would immediately heal the puppy and make him near-invulnerable for thirty seconds. Mordecai had confirmed it’d work on the dog. I just had to hit the damn thing before Quan got close enough to cast his electrical attack.

Donut continued to scream as we dove. I tuned her out, and I put all of my strength into the throw. Far on the other side of the puppy, Quan’s left hand crackled to life. I hurled the ball, grunting with the effort. It shot through the air like a bullet. It disappeared from sight, lost as we rapidly dove toward the colossal left head.

The ball hit the puppy at the same moment Quan attacked.

“Yes!” I cried as the dog glowed. His health rocketed to the top. It did not wake him up. “That’s right you worthless... gah!”

The plane pulled sharply upward as I clutched onto the wing brace. We whipped around like in a haywire carnival ride. I immediately activated sticky feet, which momentarily saved me from flying right off the wing. Donut was in the main cockpit, screaming with her paws wrapped around the stick. She was all the way on her back against the small seat, and she had a death grip on the yoke. The plane did a complete loop as I also screamed, immediately regretting every life choice I’d ever made that led us to this moment. We looped again, this time rolling starboard. The plane groaned. Something flew off the back rudder.

“Let go of the stick!” I cried as we tumbled through the air. I

forcibly pulled myself headfirst into the cockpit. I desperately held onto the seat as my back legs disconnected from the wing and dangled in the air. Donut did not let go.

I grabbed the cat and pulled myself all the way in, scrambling to sit upright and planting my feet on the rudder pedals. The plane rolled through the air, corkscrewing, centrifugal forces tossing us every direction at once. I had no idea how to correct a roll. Something had fallen off the back of the plane. Donut's paw still trailed stinking black smoke, and it was now trailing it directly into my face, blinding me.

I centered out the pedals on the floor. They were sticky and pulled to the right. Something broke when I forced the pedals into place.

I closed my eyes, instead focusing on the controls in my interface. I gently worked the stick—which still had a screaming Donut attached to it—attempting to straighten the plane out.

We continued to spin, but less violently. I opened my eyes, and I took in the scene. I'd only managed to partially stabilize the plane. I'd stopped the barrel-roll spinning, but now we were spiraling downward, like we were going down a drain. I tried pulling up, but the plane barely reacted.

We were going to crash into the side of the puppy or land into the rock quadrant in about twenty seconds. Orthrus was still unconscious, but his health was topped off. Quan was moving in toward us, hands glowing. I could tell he was pissed off. I wondered if he still had his shield spell active. I suspected not. Below, I caught sight of something else. Someone—probably that same group as before—were attempting to kill the dog from the floor of the lacuna with a parade of spells. They didn't seem to realize Orthrus was invulnerable for another 15 seconds.

Quan was going to kill us before we crashed. And then either him or those idiots on the ground were going to kill the goddamned dog before that idiot Emberus noticed the giant battle right behind him.

I only had one choice. I went with the nuclear option.

The moment Emberus's description popped up on my display, I received the option to "worship" him. The notes in the cookbook all warned against this. I quickly moved to the god tab. I only had the option to worship two different gods. Grull and Emberus. I clicked **Emberus**.

An **Are You Sure?** popped up. I clicked **Yes**. A wall of text appeared. I waved it away.

I clicked the gyroscope in place.

"Carl, what's happening? Why are you glowing?" Donut asked.

"Get on my back and hold on. Do not let go. Use your claws if you have to. Take the half-splat potion."

I stood up in the cockpit as Donut clung to my back shoulders, placing herself between my cloak and my jacket. Her claws clung painfully to me, even through the fabric of both the jacket and the trolls skin shirt. I reached up and grabbed the back of the top wing.

"Don't let go!" I yelled. She trembled against my back.

There was a small, gnome-sized handhold here. I used it to bodily pull myself to the top of the upper wing. I firmly planted my feet, and I stood tall atop of the death-spiraling biplane. Quan angled in, left hand glowing blue, right glowing red—which was new. I pulled the celestial grenade from my inventory, I activated it, and I threw it with all of my strength directly at him.

He immediately shot the red bolt at the grenade in an attempt to intercept it. The ball froze in the air about fifteen feet in front of him. I had no idea what the spell was or how it was supposed to work, but it had stopped the attack in midair.

And, ultimately, it made no difference whatsoever.



The celestial grenade had been a sponsor prize to Chris and Maggie from the Skull Empire, and it was supposed to have been used to summon a pain god to kill me. Instead, I used Prince Maestro's gift to not only save myself, but everybody in two different bubbles.

The ball blinked once, and it seemed to wink out of existence. Quan moved to fire his main attack. I leaped from the top of the spiraling plane, plummeting out of range.

It didn't matter. Quan never got a chance to fire his spell.

Emberus appeared, having been involuntarily summoned to this location from just a few miles over. As I plummeted out of the sky and toward the ground below, I twisted in the air to see the god manifest above us. I cringed, preparing for the heat. It never came.

He took on a strange form, different than before. He was nothing more than a massive, floating head, huge, angry, glowing red. His empty eye sockets trailed smoke and rained blood. The spiraling drop bear hit him right in the nose and exploded.

**You have been imbued with Divine Intervention. You are invulnerable for sixty seconds.**

I was invulnerable. Donut wasn't.

Quan had been in there somewhere, and he wasn't there now. I didn't know if he'd been killed or not, but if he was still alive, he'd been knocked from the sky.

The head was huge, city-sized, but still smaller than the god had been just moments before when he'd been pounding on the side of bubble 18.

It looked as if we were going to miss hitting Orthrus. Instead, we'd land in what looked like a flat valley that was part of the land quadrant of this world. There was a level stairwell just sitting there not too far away, out in the open. I could see the light shining off of it, reaching desperately into the sky like a spotlight.

"Orthrus," the god said, his relief-filled voice flowing into the world, filling the valley with sound. The blood pouring from the god's eyes turned to rain. "Orthrus. There you are. I've been looking for you."

The god was supposed to hang around for sixty seconds. He didn't. Even before we hit the ground, Orthrus just blinked away. I twisted, and the god was also gone, leaving a shimmering wake in the

sky. The world around us plunged into darkness, lit only by the spotlight from the stairwell location.

I flipped onto my stomach. “Hold on,” I cried.

We slammed into the ground. Donut, on my back, cried out in pain as she bounced up off me. The wind knocked out of me, but my bones didn’t break. I took no damage. I jumped to my feet, breathing.

**Entering the land quadrant of the Soulless Prophet.**

Donut was unconscious. Her health had been knocked all the way down to 5%, and I realized her skin was smoldering, her hair singed. Smoke had finally stopped pouring from her paw. I immediately cast a heal scroll, and her health returned. I rubbed her fur, and my hands came away black. The god, even in the giant floating head form had been blazing hot. The Divine Intervention buff that came with the celestial grenade had protected me, and I hadn’t even realized it.

The only light came from the stairwell, a quarter of a mile away. It reminded me of when it all started, of that stairwell shining into the freezing, night air.

Something slammed into me. I went flying back. Quan. He’d sneaked up and hit me with his lightning attack. My invulnerability was still active for another few seconds. *You goddamn idiot.* I leaped to my feet, turned toward him, and I charged.

The half-elf’s eyes went huge. I punched him straight in the face with my bare fist, and he flew back. A health bar appeared.

“You murderous fuck,” I yelled as he scrambled to his feet. “I’m going to rip you to pieces.”

A knife appeared in Quan’s hand, and he stabbed at me. The knife exploded in his hand just as my invulnerability ran out. The buff was invisible, I realized. I had no indicator over my head saying I was invulnerable. There was no other explanation as to why the idiot would’ve attacked me now.

I was now able to be hurt, but he didn’t know that. I gasped, and I tried to hide it. Even though the god was gone, the air felt as if it was on fire. The ground, I realized, was burning hot to the touch. It didn’t

hurt my feet, but I could sense it. The stench of burning flesh filled this world.

I growled, anger building and building. I thought of what he'd done. What he'd *purposely* done.

"Don't you realize," I said. I was unable to make a coherent sentence come out. "Don't you realize?"

*Don't you realize what you've done, I was trying to say. You only care about yourself. You're stronger than all of us, but you don't care. Think of all the good you could do. Think of how much better we'd all be if you weren't such a selfish prick.* But that's not what came out. "Don't you realize," I said again, the words a jumbled growl. "You're a bully. You're a bully and nobody likes you. That's why..." I caught myself.

The man turned and tried to fly away. I grasped him by the magical robe, and I slammed him to the ground. He hit face-first into a rock, and teeth went flying. I activated Talon Strike on my foot and slammed down. But the man was quick, and he rolled away.

*Stop, a distant voice cried in my head. Stop. He's not the enemy.*

*Fuck you, I said to that voice. He is the enemy. He's the worst kind.*

Quan was a small guy, but he was fast. Blood poured from his mouth. He glowed as he healed himself.

I lunged, and he continued to roll on the ground. He suddenly leaped to his feet, backflipping. His hand glowed blue. I jumped forward, grabbed his glowing left arm, and I yanked it, trying to interrupt the spell and pull him off balance.

At the same moment, he tried once again to take flight and escape, only this time he used some sort of special ability that caused him to launch away like a rocket, superman-like. The crawler screamed in agony as I fell back onto my ass. He took flight, disappearing into the darkness. Stunned, I watched the trajectory of the blue dot on the map. He landed a quarter mile away, and he stumbled into the stairwell station, disappearing.

"Coward," I shouted, my rage bubbling over. "This isn't over!"

**Carl: Tran, send a message to Quan for me. Tell him that was just a deposit.**

I looked down at the severed arm in my hand. It was his whole damn arm, all the way to the shoulder. He had three rings on his fingers.

I turned, and Donut had awakened. Her luminous eyes blinked at me. I couldn't read the expression on her face.

I sat on the hot ground, which was rapidly cooling. Fog filled the world.

*Holy shit, well that happened.*

Before I could say anything else, the announcement came.

**Quest Failed! Get Orthrus.**

**Not a single one of you was able to kill a level 10 puppy. A puppy. It's no wonder you guys keep dying.**

**Jimbo the monkey is never going to get adopted now!**

**As a penalty for failing the quest, all safe rooms will only serve monkey soup and saltine crackers for the remainder of this floor.**

I groaned, rolling onto my back. I felt as if I'd been run over.

**Quest Complete! The Dumber of the Flunkies!**

**You saved a sweet, innocent puppy! He's now frolicking on the twelfth floor where he will soon resume his training. Nun-defiling is back on the menu!**

***Reward: You've received a platinum quest box!***

I briefly wondered who lived here in this bubble. I didn't see anybody, mobs or crawlers. They'd likely all fled when Emberus started his rampage. I could go to sleep here. That, of course, would be a terrible idea.

Donut just sat next to me. She still hadn't said a word since we'd jumped out of the plane.

I sent a message to Imani.

**Carl: Might as well get started.**

**Imani: Are you sure? Shouldn't we wait until you're back?**

**Carl: Don't have time. If a bunch of gods start popping up, we'll deal with it when it happens.**

I still had a whole page of notifications to read. I was putting it off. I now had two new tattoos, one on the back of each of my hands. Each was of a sun. Both tattoos glowed vaguely orange.

"You know what, Carl? I've decided something," Donut said, finally speaking. She released Mongo, who squawked and started investigating this strange, new world.

"Yeah, Donut?"

"I think they're right about you. I think you're crazy. Like, not a little weird crazy. Not guy who eats cereal without milk crazy. But crazy, crazy. Straight jacket crazy."

I took the cat into my lap, and then I pulled her to my chest. She purred heavily into my ear.



<NOTE BY CRAWLER JUSTICE LIGHT, 8<sup>TH</sup> EDITION> I MADE A mistake today. I killed an NPC I shouldn't have. We are a strong people, the skyfowl of the white cliffs. We do not take insults without retribution. He was a proprietor of a store selling trap supplies in a large settlement here on the sixth floor. I needed what he had, but he insulted me, so I killed him. It let me take the item that was on the shelf. But he had so much more. He always said the items were in the back, but there was nothing there. I think everything was in his inventory, but it appears shopkeepers don't drop their full inventory if you kill them. Now the town guards are after me, and the shop, which was a good source of supplies for me and many others, is just gone, and I fear the whole operation is going to fail thanks to my actions. It was the only trap shop on the whole floor.

This is something we should note and remain aware of. Do not make the same mistake as me. Killing of these innocents should be kept to a minimum, unless absolutely necessary.

. . .

**Time to Level Collapse: 3 days, 7 hours.**

**Tserendolgor: He's gone. The world is still too hot. Everything melted. One of us can fly, and she's going out there to put the last crystal in place, which'll pop the bubble. We're gonna have to go down the stairs right after. Thanks for the platinum box, too. I got an upgrade for my flamethrower. A guy in my group got a tome of *Heal Party*. Everyone is getting good stuff.**

**Carl: Okay, good. Try to do it as soon as you can. You don't want to be sitting around in a popped bubble for this next part.**

"Carl, what in god's name is on the back of your hands?" Donut asked. "What did you do?"

I examined the twin tattoos. They were round, tribal-style tats of the sun. The tattoos were almost identical, but not exactly. The rays coming off the sun on my right hand were curled, and on my left, they were little triangles. The difference was subtle. Each tattoo was black, but with an orange glow. I could feel them there, warm and vaguely uncomfortable.

"I'm guessing they're a sign of my new religion," I said as we trudged toward the stairwell. We wanted to examine it to make sure Quan really went down there. Plus there had to be a saferoom around here somewhere. Even if everything got destroyed, they would persist.

The ground was too hot for Donut, and she rode on my shoulder. We'd had to put Mongo away, too. The area was barren. "Religion? Whatever do you mean? You can't join a religion, Carl. You wake up at noon on Sundays. I don't even know what the ten commandments are, but I'm certain I've watched you break almost all of them multiple times."

I told her what I did and why I did it. Before I could finish, we were interrupted.

**Mordecai: Which one of you two idiots is responsible for this?**

**Carl: What?**

**Mordecai: A shrine just appeared in the saferoom. It's a sun disk with a cup and a skull. It doesn't say what god this is for, but I'm guessing it's Emberus.**

**Donut: CARL DID IT. DON'T GET MAD AT ME.**

Donut sighed. "Really, Carl. We could've avoided all this just by going down the stairs." She examined the twin suns again and clucked with disdain. "With your new jacket and bandana and tattoos, you look like someone whose picture gets put on the news because he did something involving indecent exposure and a Wal-Mart. What does this new religion actually mean?"

"I don't know," I said, grinning sheepishly. "I'm kind of scared to click on the notification."

"Don't be a baby, Carl. Guys covered in disgusting tattoos shouldn't be babies. Look, there's a saferoom that way. You can find out what you did while we walk. Let's get inside before Imani and Katia start blowing everything up."

I sighed, and I pulled up the notification as I turned toward the saferoom. I couldn't see it in the darkness, but it was only about a quarter mile beyond the stairwell.

**Congratulations, Crawler. You have devoted your life and fate to one of service. You are now an adherent of Emberus, God of Sun and Ash!**

**Your ranking in the church: Acolyte.**

***Warning: You do not have a cleric or paladin class. As such, you may not ascend past Devotee. See the Deity tab for more information.***

**Emberus, the personification of a star's destructive power, welcomes you into his warm embrace. He**

**welcomes all who accept his core philosophy. Emberus believes power, once held, must never sit idle. It is to be used and never squandered.**

**Because of your new-found faith, you must adhere to the following rules, lest you provoke the god's wrath.**

- **You mustn't cause harm to fellow worshippers of Emberus.**
- **You must stop and offer a single drop of blood at an Emberus temple at least once a day. If no temples are found in a 30-hour period, you must make the offering at the sun shrine that has now appeared in your personal space.**
- **Five percent of all looted gold must also be tossed into the shrine.**
- **You may not own or wield any magical gear that is blessed by the god Hellik.**
- **You must successfully complete all issued church quests.**

A drop of blood and some coins once a day didn't seem so bad.

I didn't know what a "Church quest" was. I couldn't remember seeing anything like that in the cookbook, but that was the most worrisome of all the rules. Donut was going to be pissed by the 5% gold payment, but we could work around it by making her loot the majority of our kills. I didn't have anything in my inventory that had anything to do with Hellik. I moved on to the benefits.

**All adherents in good standing with the God Emberus receive the following holy benefits:**

- **Access to all Temples of Emberus.**

- **All temples of Emberus now appear on your map.**
- **All temples of Hellik now appear on your map.**
- **All worshippers of Emberus will be indicated with a symbol.**
- **All worshippers of Hellik will be indicated with a symbol.**
- **All Hellik-worshipping NPCs, crawlers, and mobs killed by you will now offer 100% more experience.**
- **Immunity to Burn effect.**
- **All physical attacks by you have a 10% chance to inflict Burn.**
- **Free access\* to Club Vanquisher, regardless of previous and current affiliations.**
- **Every five consecutive days of worship, you will receive a boon from the god.**
- **Additional benefits and responsibilities will become available as your worship circle increases.**

That was actually pretty good, especially the access to Club Vanquisher. There was an asterisk after “Free Access” without any sort of corresponding information, which was worrying. But I guessed I’d figure that out when I tried to get inside. Last I heard, however, the club was still closed thanks to Prepotente going apeshit.

The burn effect was good. It was similar to poison, where it continued to damage the target over time. I wasn’t sure what the benefits of temples were. There was very little information about this stuff in the cookbook, likely because this was all cleric territory, a class that’d never receive the book in the first place.

The only temples I could recall seeing were entrances to Club

Vanquisher, but I hadn't noticed if they were for different deities. I knew all clerics and paladins had to pick a god upon class selection, and they'd all been doing this stuff since the third floor, so temples had to be all over the place. I had one additional notification waiting for me.

**Message from Emberus.**

I swallowed. It was set up just like a regular chat notification, but it glowed with a golden light. I clicked on it.

**Emberus: My child, you have reunited me with my son's lost pet. I am grateful. I have granted you a boon. But our work is not done. I have two tasks for you.**

**You have a received a boon from your god!**

**Your constitution has been raised by 25% for 30 hours!**

The message seemed so normal. It was odd that the message came to me this way. The system described him as unhinged, but nothing about any of the benefits or requirements seemed too crazy. If all the boons were this good, then it was totally worth it. The moment I clicked away from the message, I received two new notifications.

Unlike regular quests, these came in the god's gravelly voice.

**New Quest. Find Out Who Killed My Son.**

**Geyrun was murdered. Find out who did it and why. My only clue is that the most obvious suspect, my brother Hellik, was in council with the rest of us when it happened. Visit the high cleric at the Emberus Shrine at Club Vanquisher for additional details.**

***Time Limit*: There is no time limit for this quest. However, you will receive a smite if you attempt to exit the 18<sup>th</sup> floor of the world dungeon before this task is complete.**

***Reward*: That depends on who did it.**

Based on all the previous hints at this, I figured this was coming.

At least there was no hurry. I clicked over to the next notification. Emberus's voice took on a decidedly angry tone for this one.

**New Quest. Kill Hellik.**

**My twin brother Hellik, god of Sun and Life seeks to kill both me and my older brother, Taranis God of Thunder and regent to the Celestial Throne. He is a fool. He is a danger. He has no right to exist. As an adherent, it is your task to kill him. You will receive a bonus if his death is painful.**

***Time Limit:* Hellik must die before you reach the 12<sup>th</sup> floor. If he still lives, you will receive a smite.**

***Reward:* Slaying Hellik will result in a Celestial God Box.**

**Warning: Killing a god may have some unintended consequences for all crawlers.**

I took a deep breath. If Hellik looked anything like Emberus did, killing him wasn't going to happen any time soon. Gods were invulnerable and level 250.

Again, this was something to worry about later. The idea of a celestial box was intoxicating, but the notion of harming one of those things was absurd. Even with Katia's special bolt that removed their invulnerability for a few seconds, it just seemed impossible.

We paused at the stairwell as I explained to Donut and Mordecai all of the god's benefits and tasks. As expected, Donut lost her mind at the 5% tithe.

"Well you're just going to have to immediately remove yourself from this religion. It's as simple as that, Carl. I don't know what you were thinking. We'll just have to live with whatever this smite business is. Surely it can't be worse than five percent. It's an outrage!"

"Five percent is a lot, but it's nothing compared to some religions. You know Bea's parents paid twenty percent of their income to their church? They used to get mad at her when she didn't donate, too."

"Twenty percent? I find that hard to believe, Carl."

“It’s true. And her dad was a lawyer. They made a ton of money.”

“Wow. It’s no wonder they were always so grumpy.”

Mordecai also called me an idiot, but he was distracted. He said we needed us to get back to the saferoom as soon as possible. Thanks to Samantha’s help, he’d figured out the yam thing. He had a potion for me.

The stairwell was placed atop a perfectly-square, large sheet of metal with a small lip around it, like a giant cookie sheet that was about 10x10 feet. The stairwell was just a magical hole cut in the center. I wondered what had happened here in this bubble.

Fresh blood splattered on the metal. That was from Quan’s passage. I smiled, looking down at the bare arm still in my hand. I hadn’t managed to rip or tear the robe, unfortunately, but I was pretty sure I’d stopped him from using his lightning attack for good. Some crawlers had a limb regeneration benefit, but the spell was pretty rare. And apparently the limb didn’t just regrow right away. Hopefully he learned his lesson.

“He’s going to try to hurt us now,” Donut said, looking down at the arm. “We already have Maggie and Maestro and Lucia after us. You should have killed him.”

“I would have, but he got away,” I said.

“Are you really going to keep the arm? Because that’s really gross, Carl.”

“Of course I’m going to keep it.” The saferoom now appeared on my map, but I still couldn’t see anything. Donut said it was a hatch into the ground.

He had three rings on the fingers. I pulled the first one off. It was a simple plus two ring of strength. These things had been pretty common on the first two floors. I put it on, making it my fifth ring. I could wear a total of ten rings, but I’d try to avoid putting one on my thumbs if I could.

The second ring was more interesting.

### **Rockard’s Ring of Sniping.**

**This amber-stoned ring is named after Rockard,**



**one of the dungeon's most infamous crawlers. This orcish warrior was known for his uncanny ability to swoop in at the last moment and steal glory from other crawlers, gaining the best loot and experience. Everybody *hated* him. It was great!**

**Fun fact. This guy led his season's top 10 list until he was knifed in his sleep by his own mother. Luckily for you, crawlers can't be killed by other crawlers in saferooms anymore. A shame, really.**

**Wearing this ring imbues the following benefits:**

**The Ripe benefit.**

**The Loaded benefit.**

I looked up both of the benefits.

**Ripe.**

**All creatures with less than 50% health are indicated on your map. This does not increase your map's view, but used in conjunction with other skills such as Pathfinder, it makes being a glory-stealing asshole really easy.**

No wonder Quan had received such a reputation. The description was correct. Something like this made experience sniping simple. I remembered what had happened at the end of the last floor when he'd attempted to kill the province boss that Miriam Dom and Prepotente had been trying to kill. He'd screwed it up and fled.

The next benefit probably hadn't been too useful thus far. That would've changed for him starting the next floor. I grinned.

**Loaded.**

**All non-hidden creatures wearing magical gear are indicated on your map. Particularly useful when you only want to hang out with the real fashionistas and not just the posers wearing fake shit. Also good if you want to sneak up behind someone, bonk them on their head, and steal all their stuff.**

I also added this ring to my finger.

The last ring wasn't enchanted. I blinked at that until I realized this was a ring from before. It was a gold band stuck on his index finger. It didn't come off easily, like it was too small. I twisted and pulled. The finger crunched. "Whoops," I muttered.

The description just said **Sappy gold ring. Worthless. Toss it.** I held it up to the light orb floating over us, and I could see a few faded characters carved on the inside of the band. "For Daddy." I shoved the ring back on the finger, but it wouldn't go all the way. I pushed it to the first knuckle and then pulled the whole thing into my inventory.

I touched the metal sheet containing the stairwell. I was expecting it to be burning hot, but it was cool to the touch. I pushed it like a sled all the remaining way to the saferoom. It moved easily.

I figured it'd be best to have an escape directly outside the safe room. I didn't want to stay here in this weird world since we had so much to do, but we were stuck for the moment, and it was better to be prepared.

**Katia: Louis just ate some monkey soup and got sick. He rushed into the personal space bathroom before I could stop him.**

I cursed and immediately moved to my menu, clicked over to the second tab of my scratch pad, and I erased everything in the notes section, including the map and the coordinates. I wrote: **Louis, if you see this, don't say a word.** The words underlined themselves one by one as the magical quill started to write on the paper attached to the inside of the toilet-stall door. The underlining stopped at **Louis, if you see.**

**Warning: You are out of ink.**

I suppressed a growl. Last I'd checked, we'd still had half of a jar left. The container sat on a little shelf I'd installed on the inside of the stall, and both Katia and Donut knew by now to be careful when they pushed the door open since the whole thing wobbled. That idiot must

have spilled it, especially if he was rushing toward the toilet and slammed into the door.

The main bathroom in the personal space was like the bathrooms in regular saferooms. You walked in, and there was a sink and mirror against one wall. The upgraded shower was on one side in the pink-tiled room, and the stall was on the other. The metal stall door had a lock on it and looked just like any typical bathroom stall one would find anywhere from before. They were not exclusive spaces like the random ones throughout the dungeon. Inside the wide stall there was a single toilet, a stand-up urinal, and a magical litter box. Mordecai, as a shapeshifter, apparently didn't ever use the bathroom unlike Katia.

NPCs couldn't enter the bathrooms, or any of the other rooms like the training room or crafting room, without being escorted in. When the dromedarian kids needed to go, we sent them back out into the safe room or just told them to hold it. If that wasn't possible, like when a god was outside trashing the world, Katia escorted them in and removed the paper, ink, and quill before they could see it and say something out loud.

Fellow crawlers were a different story. They had free access to the bathroom once they were inside—not including the shower. However, we told everyone to use the bathrooms out in the attached saferooms instead. Katia said it was because they gave us limited supplies, which was true, but it was also because the stall was now the only place we could trade messages without anybody seeing.

We'd started trading messages by using one of Mordecai's dry erase markers against the interior metal, but the cleaner bot kept erasing it. I eventually figured out that the magical paper, pen, and quill set—the Coffee Shop Author Kit—worked even better since it was two ways. I attached the paper to the interior wall using a magnetic clip I'd looted from the Juicer's boss room all the way on the first floor. If Katia wrote something using the magical pen, it'd appear in my scratchpad, and I could respond right away. Donut could also use it, but it required her to jump on the shelf housing the ink and to

write on the paper using her mouth. She'd only attempted it once. She wrote, I AM NOT USING THIS, CARL, and that was it.

Katia had removed everything once we packed the personal space with refugees, but she'd just replaced the quill and paper to relay some information about the coordinates from her latest calculation. She had failed to remove it before Louis barged in.

**Louis: Hey Carl, you didn't tell me your bathroom was haunted! Also, don't eat the monkey soup. It's gross.**

**Carl: We'll be inside in a minute. Why don't you check out the magical shower? You won't get the buffs, but I think you can still use it.**

**Louis: Uh, okay.**

That would shut him up for a minute.

We finished positioning the stairwell by the saferoom hatch, which was a round, trap door in the rocky ground. I pulled it open, and I went down a short ladder into a standard-looking pub.

**Entering the All-Seeing Spleen.**

The saferoom's proprietor was a human-sized cyclops guy who appeared surprised at our entrance. He was dressed in rags and had a homeless look about him. His name was Xander.

"Hey," the man said. "I thought you lot left. What was all that rumbling outside?"

"Just a god," I said. "He's gone now."

Xander the cyclops nodded. "At least the prophet is dead. If you want food, you're out of luck. All of my supplies just disappeared. I just have cans of Jimbo soup. And crackers."

"That's okay," I said. "We're just passing through." I paused before the entrance to the personal space. "Hey, do you know if there are any Desperado Clubs near here?"

The man leaned back and rubbed his grizzled chin. "There was one the next crater over, but it's quite a walk. Dunno if it's still there. There was one in the tunnels, too, but since the Rat Queen died, the bloodworms took over, and I wouldn't dare go in there."

“Thanks,” I said. I tossed him a gold coin. He tried to catch it, but he missed by a wide margin. We entered the personal space.

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**Carl: We’re in the space now. It doesn’t look like we can get to a Desperado Club easily, so you’re gonna have to run it. Katia is coming over now to help with the coordination. Remind those guys that it has to be quick. How many bubbles are we doing?**

**Imani: Only eight bubbles have met the requirements. The eighth one only has one crawler in it. It’s just over 500 crawlers total, and most of them are in the first four groups. There’s several more begging for our help, but they’re gonna have to wait until phase two.**

In order for us to help people trapped inside bubbles, they had to meet a few requirements. First, they needed someone with access to the Desperado Club. Second, all survivors of the bubble had to be in the same quadrant.

This second requirement was a tough one. We could only feasibly open one gate per bubble. It meant three of the four castles had to be taken, everyone else had to be dead, or some combination thereof. Sometimes people weren’t 100% sure if another quadrant was empty of crawlers. Those guys got put on the standby list. We didn’t do it to be assholes, but we weren’t about to unleash a feral god in a closed bubble filled with crawlers who couldn’t escape.

That rule was instituted by Imani in exchange for her helping with this. She absolutely would not help a bubble’s population escape if it meant leaving someone behind, even if it was only one person.

Elle, apparently, had a knack for telling if someone was lying. She, Katia, and Imani were conducting the interviews at the Desperado, and she’d already weeded a few crawlers out after it was deter-

mined they were lying about the populations of their quadrants. Honestly, I was glad I wasn't a part of the process. I really wished there was a way to mass-pop bubbles, but if a god such as Emberus couldn't get inside one, then it didn't seem possible.

We still had three days left. We told everyone who didn't meet the requirements to do their best. We'd help in any way we could, but there was only so much we could do.

**Donut: ALSO, TELL THEM THAT IF THEY TRY TO STEAL THE GATE, CARL WILL RIP THEIR ARMS OFF LIKE HE DID TO QUAN.**

**Imani: Did you really rip his arm off?**

**Donut: ALL THE WAY TO THE SHOULDER. IT CAME OFF LIKE A PIECE OF CHICKEN. CARL KEPT THE ARM AND IS GOING TO USE IT AS A BACK SCRATCHER.**

**Elle: God, I hope they put that on the show tonight.**

**Carl: Remind them how dangerous it is. Don't linger. Just hop right through and stay away from the open gate.**

The plan was pretty simple. Everyone in each group had to gather outside the entrance of the Desperado Club in their bubble. The person in the first group would enter and obtain the gate pieces. Once outside, they'd dial into the coordinates provided by Katia, and the gate would open. Since the distance wasn't that great, the amount of time was usually less than a minute for the portal to open. The gate would open, and they'd all go through. They would end up in Hump Town just outside the Desperado. The gatekeeper would be the last. The moment they went through, the gate would close, and a feral god would appear in their still-closed bubble. While this was happening, the gatekeeper would return to the Desperado and hand the gate to the next in line, who would do it all over again.

Once the gate was handed off, Langley's team would escort the refugees to the stairwell, where they would descend. We didn't want

a huge crowd gathering atop the bowl—which was now a half bowl thanks to Orthrus—so we made it a rule they had to descend immediately.

If phase one went smoothly, this whole process would take about a half hour.

By the time we were done, there'd be eight feral gods trapped in bubbles and quite possibly eight real gods prowling around the lacuna looking for them.

The last thing we wanted was eight more world quests like the last one. It was a risk that could very easily backfire in a dozen different ways. Mordecai's advice was for everybody to just stay in their saferooms if a god attacked their world. He or she would eventually go away, especially if another god started roaming around nearby.

"Gods have a tendency to either fight or start fucking—usually both—when they encounter each other outside the twelfth floor," Mordecai had said when we started planning this. "The best way to distract a god is with another god. When that happens, they get unsummoned pretty quickly. I've seen it happen a dozen times."

I had two major worries with this plan. One was that Grull—or some other sponsored deity—would get summoned and would make a beeline toward our world to screw everything up. A second was that Maggie, who was pinging around our bubble somewhere, would try the same. We'd ferried Gwen's team up onto the bowl, and they were acting as lookouts, but so far nobody had seen signs of her.

**Imani: Okay, everybody. We're going to start the extractions. Pass it on to all of your contacts. If you're not a part of the groups, get to a saferoom. If your bubble is popped, it's probably a good idea to go down the stairs. If you see a god, call it out in the chat so we can keep track of them all.**

"Here we go," I said out loud to nobody in particular. There was nobody in here except the dromedarians and changelings.

I'd sent Louis out to escort Katia to the Desperado. After, he and Firas would help wrangle the refugees. He'd blurted out a few things

about our bathroom being “haunted” and was about to say something else, but Katia had put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed so hard, even he finally realized to shut the hell up. Still, an observant fan would probably figure out what he was yammering about. I hoped any such revelations would get lost in the noise. I sent Donut into her room to observe her social media board. If she saw any hints that the masses suspected what we were really planning, she’d warn us.

Mordecai was back in the crafting room, working on the second potion he’d made with the yam. Each one only took about an eighth of the vegetable, and I told him we better have at least three, one for me, Katia, and Donut.

At this point, there wasn’t anything else I could do but wait. On the main screen in the saferoom, the kids were watching *The Last Unicorn*. Juice Box was in her human form with little Bonnie the gnome sitting on her lap. I watched the woman for a few moments as she stroked the kid’s head. I thought of all the NPCs I’d killed on this floor.

I thought of the tens of thousands we were planning on killing during phase four of the plan.

*They’re better off dead. We are freeing them.*

I thought of Coolie, the cookbook author who’d sacrificed everything just in an attempt to kill two admins. I thought of Priestly, who wrote the 14<sup>th</sup> edition and was the single best source of info on the ninth floor. I wondered what either would do in my situation.

*Coolie would do exactly what you’re doing. Priestly would not.*

But first, Donut and I needed to make it back to bubble 543. We were planning on making the journey tomorrow, after phase two.

But we weren’t going to risk it if there were a bunch of crazed gods running around out there. This next hour was crucial, and it would determine what happened next. The fact I wasn’t actively participating was driving me up the wall. I’d been purposely putting off opening my boxes so I’d have a distraction.

Everyone else had already opened their platinum quest boxes. Most everyone got great stuff. Most of it was spell books. Donut



received a tome of *Twinkle Toes*, a cheap spell which made Mongo—or any other minion—run really fast for as many seconds as her intelligence level. She'd been pretty excited about it.

Katia also received a spell called *Hanzo*, which drew mobs closer to her. Louis and Firas also got spellbooks, but I wasn't sure what. Gwen got a new spear she was pretty stoked about. Tran received a subscription box similar to Donut's tome of the floor club, but for scrolls.

I moved to open my achievements now.

An organ played hymnal music as this first achievement appeared.

**New Achievement! Man of God!**

**Ever since that first monkey looked up into the sky and saw something twinkling up there, you meat puppets have tried to force twenty pounds of existential meaning into a ten pound sack of chaos.**

**You have found religion! You have pledged yourself to a life of worship and piety! Finally. Now there are consequences for all of your actions!**

**Reward: One of the greatest things about having a religion is the unshakeable certainty that you're right and everyone else who doesn't believe the same as you is wrong! That's a pretty good reward. Oh, and don't forget about the eternal life thing, too. That's always one of their big selling points.**

I grunted with amusement. A little changeling kid sat at the end of the kitchen bar and was staring at me. I looked at him and said, "The System AI is totally going to hell."

"Okay," the kid replied, not appreciating my lame attempt at humor. He turned back to the movie.

**New Achievement! Disarming Personality!**

**You ripped a fellow crawler's arm off! With your bare hands! Holy shit!**

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

I received a few other airplane-related ones plus an achievement for sustaining a certain amount of damage while invulnerable, but each only resulted in low-tier adventurer boxes that contained nothing special except another potion of dinosaur repellent.

I only had two more boxes to open. My fan box still had another twelve hours on it.

This was my first savage box. They were meant for player killers, and I was not looking forward to whatever this was. I wanted to avoid getting a skull if I could. I cringed as the box opened.

A pair of handcuffs popped out. They were encased in red, fuzzy velvet.

**Enchanted Handcuffs.**

**My safe word is, "Harder, Daddy."**

**You know what these are. Your mom had a pair in her drawer, and your dad was probably no stranger to these things, either.**

**Used to lock a person's arms together at the wrist. This set of novelty handcuffs is magically reinforced. Requires a strength of at least 200 to break. There's no key. These are locked and unlocked magically by you. You may also institute an optional safe word or phrase that disengages.**

"Oh for fuck's sake," I said, putting the fuzzy handcuffs away.

The platinum quest box contained a magical tome. I picked the book up and turned it over in my hands. The black, leather hardback was warm to the touch and had a skull on the cover. I looked up at the ceiling and grinned. "It's nice to see we're on the same wavelength for once." I opened the book, which caused it to glow. The spell added itself to my list.

**Ping**

**Cost: 5 Mana**

**Also known as, "Here piggy, piggy," or "The Night**

**Dread,” Ping is a hunting and artillery-aiming tool for those who do not care if their quarry knows they’re coming.**

**The elven gunnery officers of the Dream all learn this spell the moment they hit adulthood. Anyone who sits in a trench lives in abject terror of the noise this spell creates.**

**Target: An area of one kilometer around the caster plus 500 meters for every ten points of intelligence. Environmental factors and obstacles may increase or decrease range.**

**Duration: Instantaneous. Ping travels at the speed of sound.**

**Cooldown: Five minutes.**

**Sends out an audible ping that gives the distance and location of all non-crawlers and non-red-tagged mobs in a circle around you. It *will* mark targets beyond the range of your map. Targets hit with *Ping* will hear an audible ping noise, but they will not know from where the ping originates.**

**Higher levels increases the amount of information about the target.**

**At level 5, you may imbue the ping with *Fear*.**

It was disappointing that the spell didn’t work on mobs or crawlers, but that was okay. This was a spell meant to be used on the sixth and ninth floor. It would find NPCs, and more importantly, it would find both elites and tourists.

**Katia: It worked! The first group is coming through now.**

**Donut: DID THE GUY STEAL THE GATE?**

**Katia: No, he’s through and has already handed it off to the next group. They came through really fast.**

**Louis: They're all crying, they're so happy. A hot orc chick just hugged me.**

**Firas: That was totally a dude. And don't let Juice Box know.**

**Carl: Okay, good. Keep me updated.**

I hunkered down and waited for the hammer to fall.

<NOTE FROM CRAWLER PRIESTLY. 14<sup>TH</sup> EDITION> LARRACOS IS like a dream. It is a living, breathing poem. A song. One that marks itself indelibly onto your bones the moment you experience it the first time. I've never seen anything like it. It's an inverted funnel of museums and galleries and colleges and of color. The NPCs live here. They have purpose and life. For the first time since we have been dragged into this horror, I feel awe and wonder and something other than rage. But it is a tainted and fleeting feeling. This city should not be here. It is too beautiful to be used in such a terrible, senseless way.

I still don't fully understand the fable with the volcano and the centipede at the bottom and what sort of metaphor, if any, it's supposed to represent, but whoever designed this wonder at the center of the ninth floor was someone who appreciates fine detail and the art of turning the mundane into visual music. It is too beautiful, too real not to be a copy of someplace that truly existed, and it is difficult for my mind to make sense of it. For the first time, I don't know where the real ends and the nightmare begins, and it has taken my breath away.

The Semeru dwarves supposedly built it, but they don't control the city. Not anymore. They're still around, mostly in the pubs. They're

*also the non-combatant caretakers of the inverted castle, which sits in the center of the city at the bottom of the well.*

*The diameter of Larracos isn't that great. It's smaller than some of the cities on the Hunting Grounds. But the city itself has layers, going deeper and deeper, like an inverted cone. My culture has a story of a people who built a tower to reach the gods before the gods struck it down and scattered them all. I believe that legend is what this city represents. The Semeru were attempting to reach the Celestials who live not above, but below them. This action somehow awakened Scolopendra at the very base of the volcano.*

*This city thrives. Each level is something new and exciting. There are districts. One with theaters. Museums. Colleges filled with bright-eyed NPC students. Temples. Stores. Tonight, before we are expelled, I plan on sitting down and enjoying a play. A play, in this place. Can you believe it?*

*I will draw a map for you. The one Milk drew is still good, but it lacks detail.*

*The alien beasts congregate in the pleasure districts. I don't dare venture down there, lest my impression of this fantasy is tainted. That's where one may find the Desperado Club and the brothels. It's where they hire their mercenaries, though I hear those markets are already bled dry. It's where they trade their wares and buy their weapons from the murderers who cleaved through us like chaff on that nightmare of a sixth floor.*

*The aliens get expelled when we do. Less than thirty hours until the fighting begins.*

*They'll be back. Once only three armies remain, they'll be able to re-enter the city, and it will be destroyed. They say by the time the fighting is over, none of these NPCs are left alive. None of these buildings stand. It is all destroyed in the pursuit of an imaginary prize. This makes my heart hurt. This volcano world is obviously a fairy tale. But is this city real? It looks real. It smells real. There is history here. And if so, what's the purpose of giving this to us? To show us a wonder that*

*once existed, to remind us that they don't care what they destroy? To beat us further into submission?*

*And what of the NPCs? What of their suffering?*

*I fear what will happen to my mind when I see it destroyed.*

After an hour, it became clear that phase one was a rousing success. It was frustrating that nobody was left to see what specific feral god was summoned, though we did manage to get info on a few of the bubbles. The second-to-last bubble was right next to Elle and Imani's world, and Elle braved going out there to take a look. Whatever had been summoned was much too big for the bubble and had simply exploded when it appeared, filling the interior ball with gore. A minute later, the bubble automatically opened on its own—apparently because the explosion killed the remaining defenders—and it caused all the gore to slop out into the lacuna. The entire level with now filled with a horrific stench. Elle said it was absolutely unbearable in their area.

Another crawler reported that a nearby bubble had a massive turkey inside of it, about the same size of Orthrus. That bubble, too, broke on its own, and now the feral turkey god was hopping about, randomly pecking at worlds. It wasn't attacking anything, and at last report it was sitting there near the exploded remains of the other feral god and was gobbling up the gore. Because of the turkey's proximity to their bubble, all of Team Meadow Lark were forced down the stairs, leaving only Imani and Elle in their bubble.

Li Jun, who'd managed to finish off their last castle, reported that a nearby bubble was filled with a screaming monster covered in tentacles. All of their bubble and teammates had already fled down the stairs, but siblings Li Jun and Li Na remained, keeping an eye on their neighboring bubble for us.

As for regular gods, only three showed up. But as Mordecai said, they all went away on their own after a few hours. None were sponsored. They did plenty of damage to open worlds, but we didn't know

of any casualties. There were no more world quests. None came anywhere near bubble 543.

We were about to initiate phase two, which was the same as phase one. Only this time it was with worlds where the crawlers were uncertain if the other quadrants were empty. Two additional worlds had also managed to make themselves eligible for phase one, so we were doing those first. This second phase was a total of fifteen worlds for about 800 more people.

I looked over at the counter for surviving crawlers. It continued to fall, despite half of the survivors having already descended to the sixth floor.

99,754

We'd fallen under 100,000. This floor had already killed half of the survivors of the previous. The numbers were mind-numbing. All of this work, and for what? We were just delaying the inevitable. It was hard not to fall into that trap, not to allow the sheer horror of it all to shatter your resolve.

I thought of Priestly. In the end, he'd been broken by the system. He'd been unable to take it. Seeing that city destroyed as he marched with the bugbear army over the corpses of the NPCs, including the bodies of actors he'd watched perform in a play, had been it for him. He'd finally snapped what sanity he had left. His last entry had been shortly after that and was an incoherent jumble of words.

*So much. So little. Stab, stab, stab. If I fall, if I stand. It matters not when the song is done.*

A hand fell on my shoulder, and I jumped in surprise. It was Juice Box.

"Hey, are you okay, big guy? You've been sitting there looking all tense and angry for a few minutes. You're scaring the children."

"I'm okay. It's just weird being the one who has to wait for all of this to play out."

She nodded. "Didn't you just crash a drop bear into a god's face?"

"That was hours ago."

"You remind me of my brother," she said. "You need to be care-



ful. He always had to be moving, always pushing toward his goal. When an obstacle popped up in front of him he couldn't figure out, he finally pushed too hard. If he had waited, he'd still be alive."

I had no response to that. Mordecai emerged from the crafting room to look distastefully at the mess. The kids were now watching *The Goonies*. The changelings were all emulating portly little humans and dancing with their Hawaiian shirts up, exposing their bellies.

Donut remained in her room, glued to the social media board. Her addiction to the thing was starting to worry me. She occasionally popped out to complain about someone who said something mean, but she and Mongo were having some much-needed alone time.

The recap episode came and went. It didn't show anything about the gods and the Orthrus quest or the folks escaping their bubbles using the gate, but it was clear they were saving it all for the next episode. I watched Li Na and Li Jun battle a crab monster to defeat their final castle. Their world had started with barely any water, but there was some storyline where the waterline was constantly rising the entire time. By the time they defeated the last castle, their entire bubble was submerged. When it popped, water splashed all over the lacuna. Apparently that ended up killing a few crawlers who'd gotten out and were exploring the dark fog that filled the ground there.

Mordecai and Donut came out to listen to the announcement. Katia and the others remained out there, preparing for phase two.

**Hello Crawlers,**

**What an exciting day! We never expected to have so many gods running around this early. You are all so very spunky, and we really appreciate that. The ratings have never been higher!**

**After some very careful discussions, some unfortunate litigation that we won, and with the input from the Syndicate, we have decided to allow this method of bubble escape to continue. However, we have been**

forced to block some—but not all—of the secondary summonings. The feral gods who've been escaping are random, and sometimes new even to us. Each feral who appears has a 66% chance to summon a corresponding deity. One of the resulting summoned gods was Ysalte, the Vinegar Bitch. That would have been an extinction-level event for this floor and the next. As exciting as that would be, we still have another floor of sponsorship bidding to get through before we can allow it. We are at 33% of the projected capacity for the sixth floor, and nobody wants that number to go lower than that. So, congratulations. Opening that gate will still unleash a feral god, but the odds of summoning an active god in the process is now much less.

Since so many of you are choosing to descend early, we've decided we better get some sixth floor information out of the way.

Many of you have classes that will allow you to specialize and upgrade yourselves upon descent. This process will be similar to class selection on the third floor. For most of you, specialization is optional, but it would behoove you to read through all the provided selections.

In addition, I am happy to announce the guild system will become active on the sixth floor. This will allow you to better organize parties and share personal space upgrades without forcing a person to join your party. The sixth floor Bopcas will have more information. The process will be a bit expensive, but if you sell your unwanted gear on the market, it should be do-able for most crawlers. We highly recommend you take advantage of it.

**And finally, some of you may have heard by now that third-party tourists will be joining us on the next floor. And they'll be hunting you and your gear. Isn't that exciting?**

**We have a record number of hunters participating this season thanks to a generous, anonymous sponsor who was willing to pay entry fees for anyone who wanted to join in on the fun. And people from all corners of the galaxy are taking advantage. Isn't that fantastic?**

**Now get out there and kill, kill, kill!**

I'd been all but certain that Borant would institute some sort of patch to stop this madness, but they'd actually done the opposite. They'd apparently saved our asses.

They needed us to die on *their* schedule, not ours.

"I'm not surprised," Mordecai said. "They love it when you guys do stupid, suicidal stuff, but when it involves the entire population, they start to get alarmed. Don't expect them to cushion your fall once all the sponsorships are done."

I watched as the number of living crawlers ticked down by one. Then by three.

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"I don't see why Louis and Firas couldn't just come and pick us up," Donut grumbled as we brushed ourselves off. A dark fog surrounded us, and the air stank like dead meat. A couple of inches of water sat on the ground, much to Donut's dismay. Even with her *Torch* spell, the lacuna was oppressively dark. In the distance, I heard the screech of the goddamned turkey.

It was eerily quiet down here. And damp. I felt claustrophobic, despite the lack of ceiling and walls. It felt as if we'd fallen into a

sewer. I looked up at the edge of the bubble we'd just plummeted off. It'd been pretty far.

"I don't want them leaving 543 and risking the *Twister*. They're gonna have to leave in a few days, and if something happens to the balloon before then, it'll screw everything up."

"They still have to leave to pick us up," Donut grumbled.

"Yeah, but we'll be right there. Come on," I said as I pulled the chariot from inventory and prepared it. "We'll be there in less than an hour."

Phase two was now finished, and we'd managed to save about 1,500 crawlers total. We'd added a few additional bubbles at the last minute. The gate was back in Katia's possession. Nobody had tried to steal it, much to Donut's surprise.

I wished that number of saved crawlers was higher, but more and more bubbles were popping on their own thanks to the work of the survivors inside.

A distressing amount of bubbles had gone dark.

There were also bubbles where the people inside had no access to the *Desperado Club* or *Club Vanquisher*—which was still closed for repairs. It turned out if you destroyed the entry pub to the *Desperado*, or the church for the *Vanquisher*, it removed access to the club. For those crawlers, we could only offer our sympathies and advice.

The only feral gods we unleashed into the lacuna were the giant turkey and what appeared to be a city-sized swarm of insects. Luckily, the swarm remained in the general area of their bubble number 801, way on the far side. It'd eventually dispersed. In addition, we'd summoned five more gods. These gods did more damage but eventually went away. I never got to see any of them.

The turkey was actually the most dangerous of anything we summoned. It was now sitting on top of some random popped bubble and screaming. It had evidently tripled in size after it ate the remainder of the exploded feral god. The thing was level 150.

I heard through the chat lines that Miriam Dom and Prepotente were attempting to kill it using their debuff method.

After Phase two ended, we waited a few hours for anything else to happen. Nothing did once the five gods wandered off. Donut and I couldn't wait any longer. After getting the chariot back from Langley and doing some repairs, we decided to make the treacherous journey across the lacuna back to bubble 543. Getting out of our current bubble was the most difficult part. Donut attached herself to me as I did a spiderman impersonation using only my feet on the side of the almost-invisible bottom half of the bubble. Once I found the lip, we both used a half-splat to fall into the dark fog of the lacuna.

The ground here was completely flat. A few red dots appeared on the edge of my vision, but they shied away from us. Donut said they were small, like rats. I used my new *Ping* spell to see if any weird NPCs or hidden, small-sized gods were out here, and there was nothing.

We didn't waste time. I revved up the chariot, and we were off. I kept a lookout for the Xs of crawlers, but I didn't see anything. Even here, there were janitor mobs at work.

The pickup went as planned, and we were soon back atop the bowl, which had broken in half. With the lip gone from the bowl, the world up here had taken on a new appearance. A nearby, closed and glowing bubble dominated the distant horizon, like the curve of a planet as seen from space.

"It's pretty," Donut said as we landed.

It *was* oddly beautiful, until I remembered each intact bubble was potentially a tombstone, a monument to crawlers who'd fallen victim to this fifth floor.

"Welcome home," Firas said as we landed just outside of Hump Town.

A small crowd of crawlers had gathered to watch us descend. They started clapping as we alighted.

"I thought everyone had gone down the stairs already," I said.

"Obviously not, Carl," Donut said, stiffening on my shoulder. She waved. "People know they wouldn't have been saved without you and me. Now wave at them and don't look so grumpy."

A crocodilian stood in the front of the crowd, standing with Katia as we landed. He stepped forward and gave me a fist bump.

“Hello, Florin,” I said. “I’m glad to see you made it out.”

The man rested his weight on his Mossberg shotgun. The modified and now-magical weapon supposedly had unlimited ammo. “I managed to get three of the castles on my own, but that last air one was impossible. Thanks to you and Elle and Katia, I am free.” He looked at Donut. “You, too, pretty girl.”

Donut preened. “Oh, you’re quite welcome.”

He’d been the last rescue of the first phase. He’d gotten access to the Desperado Club because he’d “killed” Ifechi. He had a golden player killer mark over his head, similar to Katia’s. They were the only two marks like that in the dungeon.

“I’m glad to have helped,” I said.

He nodded.

“I’m headin’ down the stairs since there’s no more training to be had, but I wanted to meet you first. I understand you’re going to throw a feral god onto the ninth floor to jumble them up a bit. Good for you, mate. I’m looking forward to hearing about it.”

“That’s the plan,” I said. I looked up. “We’re going to fuck those guys up. We’re going to toss a god right into the camp of the Skull Empire.”

He leaned forward and clasped me on the shoulder with his green, scaled hand. He kept his hand up there, and suddenly it was super awkward. He stared at me with his dark, intense eyes.

“I was done, mate. I didn’t have anything,” he said, suddenly emotional. “You should have met her. My Ife. She was amazing. A ray of light. She was the bravest, kindest person I’d ever met. She gave me hope. I was done until I went into the club, and I met Elle. She told me a story about this man and his cat who’d stopped everything he was doing to help a group of old people in wheelchairs and how this same man was planning on using this artifact he’d found to save people stuck in their bubbles. And it reminded me that Ife wasn’t the only one. That there is good in this world. There is something left to

fight for. I might die tomorrow, but it won't be because I've given up. And I want to thank you for that."

"I'm just doing the best I can," I said, not sure what else to say. The dude's claw was still on my shoulder. I reached up and clumsily patted it.

He retracted his arm quickly, as if he was surprised by my touch. "If you ever need a backup gun, I'm in your debt." Then just like that, he turned and walked away. We watched him walk away in silence. He went straight to the stairwell, and without turning around, he disappeared.

"That dude is pretty intense," I said.

"I like him. Still, that would've been much more emotional if he wasn't a disgusting crocodile man," Donut whispered after he was gone. "He's really dirty, too. He smells like a dead frog. And how does he get that shirt on with such a giant head?"

"Goddamnit, Donut," I said through gritted teeth. "Don't say that shit out loud."



### **Time to Level Collapse: 7 hours.**

"You know what, Carl?" Donut asked as we sat at the booth at the Desperado Club. She sipped on a nonalcoholic Shirley temple as the Sledge stood unnecessarily nearby. The three of us were the only crawlers here. "I'm worried the ending is going to be anticlimactic. What if this doesn't work? Then what?"

"Then we go down the stairs, Donut. It doesn't always have to end with a giant fight or an explosion. We're alive. We've already done enough this floor."

The last two days had been a blur. My fingertip itched with phantom pain where I'd made my daily blood offering. The mobs were all gone from the air quadrant, so all that was left was to train.

I'd also spent time—too much time, really—showing the others how to dominate in the game *Frogger*.

The large, stand-up video game machine was not the same exact one my father had in our basement growing up. But it was similar. I'd had to rig up a dwarven battery to make it work. It'd been in my fan box. I'd mentioned the game more than once in my conversations with Katia and Donut, and they'd run with it. I wasn't certain, but I suspected it was an attempt at trolling me or a way to block a better prize. I'd never know. In the end, it ended up being exactly what I needed.

It'd been breathing room, a way to relax. It brought me back to a distant memory of happiness, even if it was just for a moment. I'd only gotten good at the game because I'd always been locked away in the basement while my dad had friends over. Still, you could do that. You could take a terrible situation and still find moments of peace, even joy. I needed to be reminded that was possible, and the game console did exactly that.

We'd ended up performing three more rescues using the gate. Two of the three summoned additional gods, who turned on each other and both disappeared. There was no sign of Chris and Maggie. The general consensus was that they'd gone down the stairs. I wasn't so certain.

Gwen and Tran and their team had ventured into the now-dry subterranean level and managed to loot the remains of the tomb raiders and unearth the tomb of Anser, which was just a sarcophagus filled with the skeleton of a goose wearing a golden, unenchanted crown. Electrifying the water had triggered all of the traps. Quetzalcoatlus's corpse contained a partial map of the sixth floor that contained coordinates of multiple locations.

"It *does* have to end with a giant explosion! I promised Katia it would always end that way."

Katia sat across from us at the table. She was staring down at her drink, mixing it idly. She hadn't reacted to Donut's explosion comment. She was in her own little world.



“Out with it,” I finally said.

She looked up, and she sighed. She’d been quiet like this for a few days now. She took a deep breath.

“I don’t want to mess up the personal space situation,” she finally said.

I just blinked.

“But?” I asked.

“But I think we need to separate the next floor down.”

“What?” Donut asked. “You’re breaking up with us? What did Carl do?” She looked at me. “What did you do, Carl?”

Katia laughed softly. She reached forward and put a hand on Donut’s paw. “He didn’t do anything. It’s because of Eva. I’ve been talking to her, and I’ve been talking to all the former daughters. She’s trying to gather them back to her. Some are actually doing it.”

I knew she’d been talking to people. But Eva? Eva had tried to kill her. Katia had tried to kill Eva.

“You want to join back up with Eva?” I asked, astounded.

“No, of course not. She has... increased her player killer marks. Do you remember Silfa? The fairy? Used to own a bakery?”

“Yes,” I said. Silfa was an older woman who’d turned herself into a healer. She had two of her own daughters with her. Hekla and Eva had used her as bait, trying to get me to kill her. It seemed so long ago.

“She’s dead, and so are her two daughters. Despite everything, they’d formed a new party with Eva. I tried talking them out of it, but they didn’t listen. And Eva got them killed. A few others are tempted to return to Eva because nobody will take them in. I couldn’t do anything this floor, but the next will be an open world. I need to gather the former daughters and protect them. Before Eva does. Before someone else realizes how vulnerable they are. We shouldn’t have just let them spread out and away. It was a death sentence, and I can’t stop thinking about it. And if Eva insists on pursuing the matter, I need to take care of that, too.”

“We’re a team, Katia,” Donut said, sounding hurt. “We can do this together. We can help you. You can just ask.”

“No,” Katia said. “I love both of you, but the path you’re on right now.... With the ring and the hunters and all of it? You two already have too much on your plate for the next floor. Not to mention that Tsarina Signet storyline. When you’re in the Carl and Donut party, you ride on the Carl and Donut rollercoaster, and once it gets going, there’s no getting off. I need to do this.”

She was right. If this was something she wanted to do, I feared my presence would be more of a hindrance than a help. But I’d come to rely on her. I’d been taking her presence for granted, and now she was leaving. But still, going at it alone? That was suicidal.

“You need to do this? Even if you end up dead?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “You need to understand something. My whole life I have been in that back seat. I have you to thank for helping me realize what I can do. But you being gone for those days was also really important. It showed me I can do this without your help. I don’t want to leave the party. Like I said, it’ll mess up the personal space. But maybe this new guild system will be a good compromise.”

“What if you get lonely?” Donut asked. She was about to start crying. “And what if Mongo wants his Aunt Katia to scratch between his feathers?”

“Until we figure out how it’ll work, I won’t leave the party. We’ll see each other every night in the personal space,” she said. “And I won’t be alone. Louis and Firas, Gwen and her team, Daniel and a few of his friends, and Florin have all agreed to help me. We’re going to be a pretty big party.”

“You and Gwen are always fighting!” Donut said.

“Bautista?” I asked. “Since when have you been talking to Bautista?”

“I’ve been talking to him since that day we rescued him on the Iron Tangle. He’s... very lost, and he needs this, too. Same with Florin.”

I wanted to argue. I wanted to say, *please don’t leave me*. But it was clear she’d already made up her mind.

“At least you’ll have the *Twister* with you,” I said. “And this.” I

pulled the sword from my inventory. *The Left Fang of the Green Sultan*. The magical properties of the deadly saber only worked when it was matched with its brother. It was half of Eva's main weapon, and she'd dropped it. "Make sure you return it to its rightful owner."

Katia picked the saber up and examined it. It glinted with green, venomous light. She nodded, and the sword disappeared into her inventory. "I'll make sure of it."

We watched the timer click down. Two seconds after it hit six hours until level collapse, phase three would be implemented.

Imani, Elle, Louis and Firas, along with a whole mess of changelings were going to open up a portal to the sixth floor. This was on Imani and Elle's bubble.

This was going to be the first feral god we summoned outside of a bubble. Even as far away as it was, it was ridiculously dangerous.

Louis and Firas had braved the lacuna and managed to actually find the proper world. The only other crawler they'd brought with them was Britney, the sole-surviving member of the water quadrant other than Chris. The Ukrainian woman had latched onto Firas for some inexplicable reason. They'd ferried a house full of changelings to the distant bubble. There were so many of the changelings, including adults who'd survived the Orthrus attack, that they didn't all fit onto the house. They'd transformed into geese and coasted alongside the flying machine, like a caravan.

Once the portal opened, the changelings would return to the sixth floor.

The journey of the *Twister* from our bubble to Imani and Elle's world was thankfully uneventful. The turkey was now dead, having been successfully killed by Prepotente, who'd gained eight levels in the process, bringing him up to 55 and making him the highest in the dungeon. The last recap episode showed him gnawing on the universe's largest feather and screaming over and over while Miriam Dom the vampire shepherd stroked his hair.

Mordecai insisted that the portal would not allow crawler passage

from floor to floor, even if it was just one floor down, so we were sending the *Twister* through with the changelings, but without Louis and Firas. Immediately after, they were going to go through the regular stairwell where hopefully they'd be able to recover the flying machine. Imani and Elle would return to the club, hand off the gate to us, and also go down the stairs before the portal in their bubble expired and summoned the feral god.

With the gate back in our possession, we'd then implement the final phase.

**Li Jun: Carl, we'll be going down in a minute. That other bubble with the tentacle monster is still intact. It's not moving around so much anymore, so I think it's going to stay put.**

**Carl: Okay, guys. Be careful.**

**Li Jun: You too. That woman is here, by the way. The one with the shopping cart. She just pulled up out of nowhere and entered the stairwell. She didn't talk to us, and she went down before the six hour mark. I don't know where she came from. She's only level 12.**

**Carl: Yeah, that's Agatha. We just ignore Agatha. Best of luck to you. If this guild system is what I think it'll be, look us up.**

**Li Jun: We will.**

A moment passed, and the six hour mark hit.

**Imani: It worked. The changelings are through. On our way back to the club.**

**Louis: God, I hope they don't wreck the *Twister*. That Skarn kid is a good pilot, but he's a little shit. I caught him charging a gold coin to the other kids so they could fly it. Bonnie the gnome kid said she wanted to install some upgrades, so we need to find them as soon as possible before they ruin it.**

**Carl: You two be careful. Stay sober. The hunters**

**will be gunning for you right away. Keep your eyes open.**

**Firas: Thank you, Carl and Donut. Katia, see you in a bit.**

Imani and Elle rushed into the club. They both looked exhausted. We needed to hurry. Katia walked up to Elle and gave the floating woman a long hug. She pulled back. “You guys be careful, okay?”

“We always are,” Elle said. She gave me a little wink and patted Donut on the head. “I’m looking forward to being able to mix it up with you guys again. This floor was a real drag having to do it all myself.”

“Come on,” Imani said, all business. “We need to go.” She paused, then looked me in the eye. “Send me a message, one way or the other.”

I nodded.

Elle pulled the three gate pieces from her inventory and handed them to me. “Here you go.”

I took the three items and pulled them into my inventory. I turned to Katia. She had entered the Desperado on the ground level, and this was where we were going to separate. I pulled her into a tight hug. Donut was suddenly there on my shoulder, also rubbing up against Katia. Katia wrapped her arms around me, widening them like the flaps on a stingray, hugging us so completely, it felt as if I was being wrapped up like a burrito. This would be the last time we were together on this floor.

We stood like that for several moments.

Phase four had officially begun.

<NOTE ADDED BY CRAWLER PORTHUS, 2<sup>ND</sup> EDITION> I DON'T know why this journal came to me, but I don't feel it will ever be enough. I have done my best, adding little things here and there to the meager, mostly-useless recipes. How many generations before this book truly has enough information to make a difference? Too many, I fear.

I have decided to accept the deal. I don't know what will become of me, but I swear on the name of all my fallen brothers and sisters, one day I will make them pay. It seems those who live outside our world can exist for thousands of years. I don't know how this is possible, but if I survive my 100 seasons of servitude, I will do everything I can to end this horror. I don't know if I have the strength, but I will do my best to not be broken.

This will be my last entry into this book, but I pray it won't be the end of my fight.

**Time to level collapse: five hours, 30 minutes.**

I took out the two watches and clinked them in the winding box. I placed the box right there into the sand dune atop the bowl, about ten meters away from the stairwell. I dug the box in so it wouldn't shift and get messed with. If the box moved more than five feet in any direction once it was set and counting down, the gate would get canceled. It was completely dark out here. The only light was the distant sliver of a dead bubble, glowing from within like they'd accidentally nuked themselves, and the world was now irradiated.

A light breeze that smelled like cooked turkey wafted across the world.

Langley and his archers were now the only other crawlers left up here with me and Donut. Langley stood beside me, watching as I pushed the box deeper into the sand. I stood and wiped my hands on my boxers.

"What's your plan?" I asked.

Langley cracked his neck. He was now level 32. He'd gained eight levels since I'd first met him. "We're going down there, and we're going to keep doing what we've been doing. Katia asked us if we wanted to work with her new team, but I am thinking we might join up with some others. We'll see. There are many large groups forming. The Popov brothers are looking for archers. They wish to hunt down team Cichociemni, who have been preying on weak crawlers. We need to break up the player killer groups before they get too strong, so we might join up with them."

I shook the man's hand, and I wished him luck. The group turned and left.

"They all lived," Donut said. "Not those weirdos in the other quadrants, but all the ones in our quadrant made it."

I reached over and scratched her head.

It was just me, Donut, Mongo, and Juice Box. A few dromedarians remained, rebuilding their town a short distance away. I watched as a pair of dromedarians on stilts worked to lift up a new wall.

"It's not going to matter for them, is it?" Juice Box asked. She was currently in the form of a buzz-ard, and it was disconcerting talking

to her like this. “This world isn’t real. All of that construction is for nothing. In a few hours, this will all cease to exist.”

I didn’t respond.

“I can’t lose them,” Juice Box added after a moment. “They’re all I have left. Remember our deal.”

“I will do my best,” I said. “I promise.”

The only quadrant in this whole bubble that still contained mobs was the water quadrant. Katia and Tran were down there. She’d announced they needed to train as much as they could, and they were going to go shark hunting.

**Katia: By my calculations, the gate you just placed will open in five hours and four minutes.**

I looked at the clock. The level would collapse in five hours and 27 minutes, giving us 23 minutes once the gate opened. Gates stayed open on their own for twenty minutes unless all three pieces of the gate went through them.

**Carl: That’s cutting it pretty close.**

**Katia: Hey, it’s your plan, big guy.**

**Carl: True enough. Aren’t you going to miss this stuff?**

**Katia: Ask me in five and a half hours.**

When we’d looted the letter and papers from Ghazi the mage, it’d contained more than just a group of coordinates. At the back was a list of scenarios that showed what would happen if different parts of the gate were brought through an open portal. The very last scenario showed a method of keeping the gate from unleashing a monster into the world. That required us to leave one watch on one side, another on the opening side, and the winding box inside the gate. It’d basically ruin the artifact, but it would make the portal safe.

But it was the second-to-last scenario that had intrigued me. If the first watch was left in the box, and it was taken through the portal, but the second watch remained on the opening side, it’d result in a feral god appearing on *both* sides of the portal.

The plan, as I loudly and happily explained was straightforward.



We'd open a portal to the ninth floor, I'd keep the second watch, and we'd send Juice Box through with the rest. That would result in a feral god appearing on the ninth floor and hopefully trashing the area where it was summoned.

I remembered when Prince Stalwart had made his stupid little video after he'd killed Manasa the singer. He'd been in a castle overlooking a field of soldiers. This was right after the ninth floor had opened. Since there was only one pre-built castle on the faction was playing field, we now knew in which of the nine locations where their army was located. Thanks to the book of coordinates, I knew exactly where to summon the gate.

Seven of the nine factions had sued to stop this from happening. They knew the armies weren't yet strong enough to hold back an attack from a feral god, especially if a second god was summoned to their location. The ensuing chaos would be enough to flatten their fortifications and kill their armies.

"You're just going to kill people like me," Juice Box had said when I explained the plan to her. By this point, Louis had opened her eyes to the reality of her existence. She was now fully aware of who she was and of her place in this world. She was even more aware than Fire Brandy had been on the previous level. "If these *people*, these game masters are truly immortal in this place, then what's the point? How is this a blow to them?"

I'd shrugged at the time. "If you were going to die no matter what, which would you prefer? Die as a puppet, or die while striking back against those who are doing this to you?"

"I suppose," she'd said, but she didn't seem convinced. Eventually, after Donut spent some time working on her, she agreed to the plan in exchange for a promise. A promise that I would attempt to bring her people with us down every floor from now on. I'd told her I'd do my best, but it would be difficult.

"I have seen you do the impossible," she'd said. "I have faith. Just promise me you'll try, and I will carry your box through the portal."

In the distance, a mighty, monkey-like screech filled the lacuna,

echoing strangely. This was far, far off. It was likely the feral god getting summoned over on Imani and Elle's now-empty world.

"Carl, I've decided I don't like giant monsters," Donut announced. "I'll be much happier when we're done here."

A second roar filled the darkness. This was a different sound. A different creature. A deeper roar. The sky rumbled and flashed a few times, like a distant thunder storm.

The sky went from sheer darkness to a series of pyrotechnic flashes and bursts. Several seconds later, the sound of the clash reached us. The world rumbled under our feet.

"Whatever we summoned on Imani's world also summoned a god," I said, watching the distant lights. Since the feral god wasn't protected by a bubble, whatever this was should be over soon.

**Zev: Hello, crawlers.**

**Donut: HI ZEV!**

**Zev: Just so you know, there was yet another last-minute legal challenge to what you're about to attempt. It, again, failed. They almost won the injunction, but the Valtay Corporation sent in an attorney to assist Borant's position. They had some interesting legal arguments regarding you, Carl. Apparently, since you now own stock in a company based in the Skull Empire, the lawsuit needed to be filed in a different court. Taxpayers who are not in arrears are afforded different protections. It was enough to dismiss that last-minute effort.**

**Carl: Borant and the Valtay working together? Wow.**

**Zev: It's no surprise since the sole plaintiff for this one was the Skull Empire, and even though we are currently at odds with the Valtay, neither entity is a big fan of the orcs.**

I bit my lip, not allowing my sudden anger to bubble over into the

chat. A lawsuit. A lawsuit because I was threatening their goddamn toy soldiers and imaginary fortifications. A goddamn lawsuit.

The ground rumbled again. Was that a third monster? It sounded like an angry bellow. Actual words being shouted. Thankfully it was still far off.

**Zev: Anyway, I've been asked to pass on a message from my boss.**

**Carl: Okay. Let's hear it.**

**Zev: This is directly from the politburo, who have recently replaced the board of directors as principal controllers of the Borant Corporation. This is a direct quote. "Crawler Carl and Donut. While we approve of what you are planning, we wish to make something clear. Game-breaking antics that directly affect sponsors will not be tolerated in the future." That was the whole message. It came from the top.**

I tried to suppress a grin. I copied the message and pasted it into my scratchpad just in case they decided to nuke the message string later. A deep sense of satisfaction replaced my anger. The goddamn mudskippers approved of what we were planning because it meant the other sponsors were going to lose a metric fuck ton of money, which would in turn force them to spend a ton more to make up for their losses. And since nobody could actually die on the ninth floor, it was all in good fun for everybody involved. Something everybody would laugh about after it was all over and done with. After all, it was just money, right?

**Carl: Tell them I said fuck you very much, and if they don't want the game "broken" maybe they shouldn't give us the tools to break it.**

**Zev: Crawler, you know such language is not acceptable. Best of luck to you.**

**Donut: BYE, ZEV!**

Almost as soon as the message from Zev ended, we received another message.

**Gideon: Hey, uh, Carl and Donut?**

**Donut: OMG HI GIDEON!**

Gideon was a crawler who was pretty active in the chats. I'd only met him once. He was some sort of human tank class. I couldn't remember his details. We hadn't needed to save him because his team had popped their bubble early. He'd been there during the last fight on the previous floor, and I knew the man could handle himself. I couldn't remember where he was from. Donut liked him because he'd once said he was allergic to dogs.

**Carl: Gideon, you shouldn't be out here. Go down the stairs.**

**Gideon: I'm about to go down, but I wanted to warn you. Two god things just rolled past my world while beating the shit out of each other. One was a giant, hairless gorilla thing, and the other, I think the real god, was a snake with the head of a bald guy. Kinda looked like Woody Harrelson. You know, the guy from *Cheers*?**

**Donut: HE WAS IN THE ZOMBIE MOVIE I LIKED. THE ONE ABOUT TWINKIES.**

**Gideon: Yeah, so the Woody Harrelson god killed the monkey god, and they both disappeared. But just before he killed him, he threw the gorilla against one of the bubbles with a monster inside. I could see the bubble pop from here, and the monster got out. I think it might be headed in your direction. It's carrying a very large whip.**

That new, third roar filled the world again. It was definitely shouting something, getting closer.

This was a deep, beefy voice. I couldn't tell if it was male or

female, though it reminded me of the Hoarder boss. It sounded absolutely irate.

“It’s a woman,” Donut said after a moment. “She really needs a throat lozenge or something. She sounds like she’s been smoking nonstop since she was a baby.”

The feral god cried again, and this time I could understand what she was saying.

“Psamathe,” she screamed. “Samantha! I can smell you! I know you escaped! You may be hiding, but I will find you, you worthless little whore!”

“Uh oh,” Donut said. “That doesn’t sound good.”

I was about to send a message to Katia, telling her to abort everything and to get to a stairwell when I received a surprising notification.

**You have received a Platinum Emergency Benefactor Box from your sponsor, The Open Intellect Pacifist Action Network, Intergalactic NFC.**

“Samantha!” the massive feral god shouted. In the distance, I caught sight of a pair of batlike, beating wings. The creature stood atop that distant, glowing bubble. It was only in silhouette, but the shape was of a fat creature, overflowing with rolls of flesh and with no neck. The thing wasn’t nearly as big as the other gods, not even close, but it was still huge. It carried a sparkling whip that crackled with lightning. “Samantha,” it howled as it approached.

Not a god. A demon. A feral demon. It would be here in minutes.

“If it gets too close, go down the stairs, Donut,” I yelled, and I sprinted back toward Hump Town. I needed to open the goddamn loot box.

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**Mordecai: A platinum emergency box? Are you shitting me? Do you know how much that had to cost? That had**

**to be more than the GDP of some star systems. That had to be the most expensive box in the game's history!**

**Carl: Yeah, my first instinct was to abort everything and run down the stairs, but I figured we might as well look at it. Whoever these guys are, they must want this plan to go smoothly.**

I actually felt bad, especially if these pacifist assholes were truly trying to help. If they were counting on my plan going exactly as I said it'd go, they were about to be disappointed.

**Mordecai: You should forget this nonsense and run down the stairs anyway.**

**Carl: What does Samantha say?**

**Mordecai: You can ask her directly now that she's hired. You'll have to approve the chat in the menu.**

I clicked through, and sure enough, there was an option to add staff members. I clicked it as I rushed through the doors of the closest intact pub. This was a saferoom in what had once been Weird Shit Alley. The whole town was unrecognizable.

I could see that Donut had already approved her to chat and changed her name from Psamathe to Samantha. Knowing Donut, she'd probably already gotten the minor god-turned-sex doll's life story out of her.

**Carl: Samantha, who is that fat demon with wings and a whip?**

I jumped into my menu and clicked on boxes.

**Samantha: A WHIP? DOES SHE LOOK LIKE AN UNCIRCUMCISED GNOME PENIS?**

**Carl: Yes. Maybe. I don't know. She doesn't have a neck.**

**Samantha: I HAVE NO IDEA WHICH ONE SHE IS. YOU JUST BRING ME OUTSIDE, AND I WILL TAKE CARE OF IT. I WILL KILL HER AND HER MOTHER. BITCH CAN'T HANDLE ME.**

**Carl: Jesus, did Donut show you the caps lock key?**

**Samantha: LET ME FIGHT HER! I CAN TAKE THE FAT BITCH DOWN!**

The platinum sponsor box opened with a ridiculous amount of fanfare. A group of cogs and wheels turned, spitting confetti all over the place. The dromedarians all turned to watch. *This better not be another goddamn vegetable.*

A single object popped out. It was just a curved piece of wicker basket, though it glowed with enchantment. I just stared at it. I extended my xistera, and sure enough, the device slid easily onto the scoop. I wouldn't be able to retract it like this, but the item's purpose was clear.

**Carl: You really want to fight her?**

**Samantha: I'LL KILL HER.**

**Carl: You're about to get your chance.**

I rushed to the door of the personal space. The main room was trashed thanks to all the kids, but finally empty except for Mordecai, who sat on the couch watching some goddamn television show. The cleaner bot beeped mournfully at me as I rushed past and burst into the training room. I grabbed Samantha, and I bolted for the door.

"Don't take her outside," Mordecai yelled at me, alarmed. "You'll summon another god if she goes outside!"

I ignored him as I rushed through the door, holding onto the cackling sex doll by the hair.

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"Carl, why'd you bring her out here?" Donut cried. "And what is that on your arm?"

"It's on! It's time for me to bring the pain!" Samantha squealed. "Where are you at, you rank whore!"

"I smell you! You're here!" the massive demon squealed, the voice distressingly close.

I looked about, trying to see where the giant monster had gone. “Where the hell is the monster?”

A high-pitched, crackling noise filled the air, like the sound of incoming artillery.

“Watch out!” I cried, preparing to hit my shield. I paused, seeing the attack would miss.

The whip was actually a chain, similar to what Li Na used. Each individual link was about the size of a semi-truck. The chain glowed with electricity. It came from below, arcing up into the air, unfurling like a snake. It crashed down heavily into the bowl, a half a mile away. The chain slammed across the desert, cleaving through the rock as if it was butter and cutting deep into the temple below. An edge of the already-collapsed bowl started to slide away. The ground rumbled. Juice Box transformed into a turtle. She jumped atop the winding box, keeping it safe and in place.

That wouldn’t matter if the whole temple collapsed. I eyed the stairwell, just a few feet away.

“You missed, you crazy bitch!” Samantha shrieked. “It’s not my fault your man likes me more than you! He told me you smell like the asshole of a Felch demon! He says he’d rather fornicate with a razor elemental than stick it in you ever again!”

**Katia: What the hell is going on up there?**

**Donut: GIRL FIGHT! GIRL FIGHT!**

**Carl: Stay put. Don’t move!**

The massive head rose over the horizon, glaring directly at us. The monstrosity glowed with purple light. On either side of the head, the tops of black, leathery wings rose.

I had no idea what an uncircumcised gnome penis looked like, but at that moment, I was quite certain Samantha’s description had been accurate. The head was a pink, fleshy dome, yet somehow also covered in scales, like the thing was a lizard/mammal hybrid. Scattered, black hairs criss-crossed the thing’s head. Twin, reptilian eyes stared at us. I knew a guy who once had a pet bearded dragon, and the eyes reminded me of that



thing. A jagged, teeth-filled mouth spread across the demon, and a red tongue flitted out. The stench of unfiltered cigarettes filled the world, almost choking.

The monster was slathered in so much mascara, eyeshadow, and lipstick, it made Samantha's makeup seem subtle. Bruise-colored eyeshadow rose from each eye, reaching to the patchy hairline. Lipstick, thick like knee-deep spackle surrounded her giant mouth. The stuff fell off in massive clumps as she grimaced. Each cheek was painted equally red, swirls like the storm on Jupiter.

The damn head was the size of a sports arena, which was ridiculously huge, but small compared even to Emberus. That didn't seem so important right now.

**Slit. Feral Minor Demon. Level 200.**

**One of the many demons captured and tossed into the Nothing during the original Ascendancy, Slit never wanted to be caught up in all that royal drama, but what can you do? When you're in love, you'd do just about anything for your man.**

**Eons in the madness have taken a terrible toll on Slit's sanity and sense of self-worth.**

"Samantha," Slit croaked. "You are so dead."

"Oh, this bitch. I know which one this is. Quick, give me a weapon," Samantha said.

"A weapon? You can't move," I said. I shoved her face-first into the round slot. She fit perfectly.

The way the accessory was described left no doubt as to what they wanted me to do. I just hoped it would actually work.

**Enchanted Xistera Extension Slot. Head-throwing attachment.**

**This is a unique item!**

**This item was created especially for Crawler Carl by The Open Intellect Pacifist Action Network, Intergalactic NFC.**

**Attaches to the end of a xistera. Allows for the tossing of a head.**

**This special edition head tosser is custom made to fit decapitated love doll heads.**

**When tossing a head of a withering spirit, the distance traveled will be greatly enhanced. (500 meters x Strength.)**

**Tossed head will be magically returned once the extension slot is removed from xistera.**

“You have daggers in your inventory! Stick one in my mouth! I need to cut the bitch!”

Slit the demon reared back, ready to slam her chain whip down once again.

“No time, sorry,” I said. I turned 90 degrees, and I chucked Samantha with all of my might. She rocketed away, screaming that she was going to kill my mother.

Slit screamed in rage and turned to follow.

My unenhanced strength was 75. With all of my gear and buffs, it was well over 100. I'd just tossed her over 50 kilometers away. The fat demon took a few moments to gather steam, but her wings flapped, and soon she was booking it out into the lacuna.

“That was mighty convenient that they had that box ready to go,” Donut said, watching the giant demon chase after the head. The strange demon was wearing some leather-like S&M outfit, something one of those tuskling dominatrixes would wear, but somehow more trashy. It was covered in dangly, sequoia-sized tassels. Her large body sloshed like gelatin as her wings worked overtime to keep her frame aloft. She chased the head off into the darkness, howling. The cigarette stench remained, overpowering the smell of the burning turkey.

“No,” I said. “They had it ready to go for another purpose, probably on the next floor,” I said. “They'd been forced to send it now.”

“What do you mean?” Donut asked.

“Watch,” I said.

As Slit chased after the head, the sky cracked open. Something else appeared. This was yet another god, someone I hadn't seen before. It was too distant to properly examine. I couldn't quite make its features, but this was one of the physically huge ones. It had multiple arms.

I was expecting it to go after Samantha. It did not. It turned and plucked Slit up, holding the fat, squirming demon like someone would pick up a small rodent. And just like that, it ripped the feral demon in two. Even at this distance, I could hear the sound of tearing flesh. Slit shrieked as gore showered everywhere. Her chain whip dropped away, crashing heavily. A moment passed, and then both the god and the corpse disappeared.

"What was that?" Donut asked. "Carl, why are you summoning all these giant monsters?"

"Samantha was always going to summon a deity once we took her outside. This extension thing was supposed to be a prize similar to a celestial grenade. They'd likely had it made to give to us on the next floor. I guess they figured protecting us now was more important."

I looked up into the air. "Thanks for saving us," I said. "I don't know how much it cost, but I hope it was worth it." I pulled the xistera extension off, and I pulled it into my inventory.

**Carl: You good?**

**Katia: It was very sloshy for a minute, but we're calming down. Everything is good. It got those concierge sharks all riled up.**

**Carl: I'm only expecting one more attack before we're done. That one shouldn't be as seismic.**

Samantha popped into existence at my feet, screaming. "Not fair! Not fair! You tell my mother to get back here! That was my kill!" We just stared down at her as she continued to moan and growl. "Throw me again. Maybe that'll bring her back!"

"That god thing was your mother?" Donut finally asked.

"I'm going to kill her," Samantha said.

“Wait,” I said. “Wasn’t your dad the one who sent you into the Nothing?”

“Yeah. He was mad at me for having a baby with my king. But my mom was banging him too, so she got mad. Jealous bitch. She said she was going to kill me if I ever got out, but she killed that bitch instead. She never keeps her promises. Parents not keeping their promises is the number one cause of childhood trauma, you know.”

I looked at Donut. “Do you think that god was sponsored? I wished we could have seen her.” Was it possible the “pacifist” group had *also* paid to sponsor a deity? I picked Samantha back up. I needed to get her back into the personal space. Our access would close when there was only an hour left.

“Why was that demon mad at you?” Donut asked.

“She thought I had sex with her king.”

“Did you?” Donut asked.

“Ew,” Samantha said. “Gross.”

“Then why did she think that?”

“Oh, she’s part of some demon harem thing. I was talking about my sexual exploits with *my* king, and she thought I was talking about *her* king. She got all belligerent. I don’t like confrontation, as you well know, but she made me mad. So I told her that her king and I had all sorts of weird sex. You wouldn’t believe how mad that made her and all of her sisters.”

“How many sisters does she have?” I asked, suddenly concerned.

“The Nothing is filled with the harem. They all hate me.” She laughed. “Anytime one of them gets out, that’ll probably happen, so get used to it. Slit was only one of the little ones. Her sister Gash is the one you really need to look out for.”

Juice Box stood, back in human form. In the distance, more of the bowl caved in where it had been cleaved in two. For the first time since I’d met the changeling, she looked frazzled.

“I’m starting to regret agreeing to help you,” she said.

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**Time to level collapse: 1 hour.**

**Warning: All access to Safe Rooms is now closed.**

We'd been waiting for a few hours now, just sitting there while Juice Box changed form to entertain us. After the appearance of the demon, the following hours of silence were jarring.

Juice Box was actually being super helpful, showing us forms of monsters I'd never heard of and then showing me the best way to kill them. Some of these monsters were listed in the cookbook, but for many of them, the weaknesses weren't noted. I was taking notes of everything.

Each time she changed, Juice Box reverted to her buzz-ard form before forming into something else. The creature had a special hunting ability that could find creatures hidden in the sand.

Eventually, I got sick of waiting. We were running out of time.

"I know you're there, Maggie. I don't know what you're waiting for. If you want to talk, come on out."

A full minute of silence followed. But then the voice came. "They told me about the potion," Chris—Maggie—called from their hiding place. A chill washed over me.

It sounded as if they were directly below me, which startled me. It was muffled, but still super close, almost like the voice was whispering in my ear.

It was why nobody had been able to find them. Rock creatures all came with camouflage abilities. It turned out Chris had the ability to burrow into sand dunes and disappear.

"Yeah," I said. I slowly moved away. Next to me, Mongo squawked. Juice Box took flight, pointing downward. They were actually several feet away from where the voice was coming from. Another ability? Donut moved to jump atop the dinosaur.

I continued, talking loudly. "I got this weird yam thing in a sponsor box, and at first, our manager guy couldn't figure it out. I don't know if you saw what happened earlier, but that Samantha doll

head that was out here? She helped him figure it out. It actually has multiple uses. The yam thing grows in lava or magma or something. I honestly don't remember what the difference is between the two. But anyway, the yam can either be used for a type of special ink for scrolls, or it can be used for a few different lava-themed potions. It can be a special type of healing scroll for lava rock monsters like Chris, or it can be used as a phase potion for people to be able to easily pass through lava rock. And that's what Mordecai made for us. A Phase Lava Rock potion. Once I take it, you won't be able to touch me. Chris's arms will go right through me."

Juice Box indicated they were moving. They'd been slowly, slowly creeping through the sand in full camouflage mode. Juice Box had sensed their presence an hour ago, and she'd quietly pointed it out to us. I wouldn't be able to do anything until they revealed themselves.

My pulse quickened. We didn't have Katia here with her special bolt. This was it.

"They have my other daughter, Carl. They're going to bring her back. They're going to turn her into a monster and make someone kill her if I don't do this. I can't let it happen."

"They're doing this to all of us," I said, slowly sliding along the sand. "We all lost someone, Maggie. We could've worked together. You got misled. I regret what happened with Yvette. But you're focusing your anger on the wrong people."

"You don't understand," she replied after a moment. "I'm not angry anymore." They had to move very slowly to keep from being detected. She could throw her voice, and she made it seem like she was stalking me, but I wasn't the target. The winding box was. *They're going to try to move it, or drop it down into the temple below.* They only needed to move it five feet.

"Chris is a good guy," I said, slowly moving away from the sand dune. The Phase Lava Rock potion only lasted a minute, so I didn't want to take it too soon. "He didn't do anything to you, and you're torturing him."

“You should just go down the stairs,” Maggie said. “I’m sorry it has come to this. I was so angry, so blinded by what you’d done. I wasn’t a bad person before this. I swear I wasn’t. But I have to protect my family, no matter what. I thought it was done when I killed Frank, but I was wrong. When the caprid came to us in the rest area, it told me it’d help if we killed you.”

Caprid? Prepotente? That didn’t make sense. She had to be talking about another creature.

Maggie suddenly shouted. “Fuck your warnings. If it’s legal to happen, then it’s legal to say out loud. Fuck all of you. What’re you going to do, accelerate me? Now?”

I realized she was talking to the AI. Or someone else.

“He’s a cleric. A goat thing. A liason. He said I have to stop you, or...” She stopped talking.

**Carl: I think she’s lost her ability to speak.**

**Donut: SHE’S STILL THERE. SHE’S GOING TO TAKE THE BOX.**

**Carl: Katia, how much time is left?**

**Katia: Ten minutes, give or take.**

**Carl: It’s close enough.**

“Maggie,” I called. I edged closer to the box, positioning myself just behind them. “I hope you can hear me. I’m sorry it’s come to this. That doesn’t mean we can forget what happened, but I’m sorry how everything played out. You got dealt a shitty hand, and that really sucks. I’ll let you...”

Chris erupted out of the ground next to the winding box. I slammed onto the phase potion. I rushed toward the lava rock creature as he picked up the box out of the ground, and he hurled it as hard as he could. It sailed through the air in the same direction I’d tossed the Samantha head. The door atop the box ripped open, and the two watches went flying in different directions.

The phase potion made it so I could move through both lava and lava rock. I reached forward, fingers open, right into Chris’s head. I grasped until I felt it there, lodged in his brain. The worm was the

size of my palm, the only part of his body that was solid, and it felt like an uneven, squirming sausage. I thought of that god crushing Slit the demon.

I pulled. I was expecting it to explode in my hand. I was phased, but it wasn't. But it didn't die. Instead, it bit my palm and started to burrow even as I retracted my hand.

"Gah," I cried, pulling my hand to my chest. Chris collapsed in front of me. I reached to grab the tail end of the long, black worm with my left hand, but I missed, and it burrowed inside. I felt her there, in my arm, moving through my body, like a sub diving below the waterline. She disappeared.

"Shit, shit," I cried. I scrambled into my inventory. There. I waited the two more seconds on my potion countdown, and I slammed on the double-healing potion. The same one I'd used to cure my parasitic infection on the third floor. Mordecai had said this would work, but only if I drank it before she got to my brain. And she'd get there fast.

The last time I'd taken the potion, I'd vomited out the parasites. This time, she came right out of my goddamn neck, bursting forth like I'd been shot by a sniper. Blood showered as she rocketed out of me. It felt as if I'd been hit with a hammer. She thrashed, her health in the red with **Poisoned** pulsing over her. Blood spewed from the hole in my neck. I moved to stomp her down, but before I could get her, Mongo jumped forward and grabbed her.

"Chew," I croaked as I clenched my hand against the massive neck wound. I tried to click *Heal*. **You've been rendered Woozy! You ain't clicking shit right now! Nighty-Night.**

Before I passed out, I watched Mongo gleefully crunch down on the form of the scree worm, ripping the tiny crawler into mulch and thus ending the saga of Frank Q and Maggie My.

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I was only unconscious for about two minutes. Donut healed me using a scroll. I awakened to find her sitting over me worriedly. Chris sat nearby, hand on his rocky head. He, too, had been healed by Donut.

“That hurt,” he said.

“Ditto,” I groaned.

**Carl: Hey Imani. He’s safe. It worked. We’ll get him to you on the next floor.**

Mongo vomited the corpse of Maggie and then ate it again.

“Wait,” I gasped. “We need to loot her inventory.”

“I got it all the first time he barfed her up. She had a lot of stuff,” Donut said.

“Give it to Chris,” I said, falling onto my back.

“What do you mean? She has a lot of hats in here. Why does a worm need hats? What does Chris need with a bunch of hats? I collect hats. I feel strongly I should be able to keep them.”

**Carl: Time?**

**Katia: Two minutes. Are you okay?**

*Shit, shit. Show time.*

**Carl: Maggie is dead. Chris is safe. Make sure you’re anchored. How about Tran? Is he safe?**

**Katia: He’s already away. He and Gwen’s team have gone down the stairs.**

Juice Box was back in human form and holding one of the watches that Chris had tossed.

“What is this?” she asked, turning it over. “This isn’t my brother’s watch.”

It was a facsimile, one of the ones I’d made long ago to trick the dirigible gnomes. Katia had actually made the facsimile winding box. She’d made it while pretending to learn how to use the engineering table. She was much better at fabricating shapes than I was. She’d made the box in pieces and had assembled it all within her own inventory. We’d exchanged the pieces, facsimile and real when we’d hugged at the Desperado Club.

“Plan is changed,” I said to Juice Box, talking rapidly. I grabbed her by her shoulders. My head still swam, and my neck ached. “You need to go. Now. The gate will be open in a few moments, but it’ll only be open for twenty minutes. Don’t worry about bringing anything with you. We’re not sending a god to the ninth floor. Not this time. We’re actually keeping the gate. This isn’t going to be a one-time thing, not by a long shot. But I still want you to go to Larracos. You need to stay hidden, but you need to tell the others what you know. Do you understand? We’re not done with you yet. By the time we get there, I want all the survivors to know what they really are. Do you understand?”

The changeling prostitute couldn’t find the words. “What?... Where’s the gate?”

“You can emulate a shark, right?” I asked. “Turn into a bird, and fly. Fly as fast as you can, over the lip and then down into the water. The location will be pretty obvious in a few minutes. It’s on this side. Hurry.”

She kissed me on the cheek. “Watch over my people. We have a deal. And keep him safe, too. I love him.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Louis,” she said. “We’re going to be married.”

A few days back I had been chased by a massive, two-headed puppy, and I’d crashed an airplane into the face of a god. I watched a talking goat snuggle up with a vampire after they killed the universe’s largest turkey. I’d just chucked a haunted sex doll head fifty kilometers in order to settle a girl fight between that same head and a makeup-encrusted demon the size of a small town. I’d just reached into the head of a rock monster in order to pluck a parasitic worm from his head.

And yet, despite all of this, what she’d just said was the most astounding thing I’d heard since this floor started. I looked at her like had she slugs crawling from her nostrils. “Louis?” I asked. “*Our* Louis? Are you serious?”

The scowl she gave me told me that was deadly serious.

“Remember your promise!” she said, not waiting for me to stop. She leaped to the air, and she formed into a skyfowl. She rocketed away. In seconds, she was gone. I rubbed my eyes, and I took a deep breath.

“Louis?” Donut said. “Carl, the whole world has gone insane.”

A groan turned our attention back to Chris, who was just sitting there in a daze.

“Brandon,” Chris finally said, lowering his head. “Brandon.”

That sobered me up. I kneeled down before the man, and I placed my hand on his leg, which was burning hot. “Your brother died saving the lives of a lot of people. We’ll do this next part in his honor, okay?”

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**Time to level collapse: 21 minutes.**

**Katia: The gate is open. Those timed charges you made got sucked in. I dropped the chum bomb nearby just before, and it worked really well. The sharks are also slurping right in, and they’re already in their feeding frenzy. Hopefully the bombs went off before the sharks got there. I guess it doesn’t really matter. Some of those pain amplifier jellies are getting pulled in, too.**

**Carl: Okay. Good job. Get to the stairs. Tell me when you’re out and away. Hurry.**

It was going to be tough for her to move through the water with the pull of the current draining into the lowest level of the city of Larracos, but she’d anchored herself to the rocky wall of the temple. She was going to use the subterranean stairwell to exit, as there was an entrance right there near the shelf where the *Akula* had been

parked. This was the most dangerous part for her, and I was worried, but she insisted she'd be able to do it no problem.

For the next twenty minutes, the inverted cone of the city of Larracos would be filled with a rush of water. The gate opened right inside the faction market. There was probably a drainage system, but it would be temporarily overwhelmed. The bombs would explode moments after they arrived, leveling the market and scattering the shoppers and shopkeepers. And then the sharks would come. If Katia's math was correct, and the map she'd made was accurate, more than half of the city would be submerged by the time the gate closed. The only parts that would be spared were the upper levels, the NPC residences.

The onslaught of water and bombs and sharks and other mobs would be sudden, violent, destructive, and nowhere near where they thought it would be.

**Zev: Oh my god, Carl. They are enraged. This is not what you promised.**

Zev had dropped any semblance of her good little citizen of the Party persona.

**Carl: I promised nothing.**

**Zev: If you fill Larracos with water and mobs, it's going to kill all the NPCs. The markets will be flooded. The mercenaries will be killed. If you kill the NPCs at the entrance bar, access to the Desperado Club will be cut off. The sponsors won't have entry to the Club to gamble. They won't be able to get to the markets where they can buy the magical gear. Borant depends on that money. The sponsors need that market to outfit their troops.**

**Carl: Oh, I'm sure they'll patch it. That water'll drain right out. It might take a few days since there's some sharks mixed in there, but it'll be fine.**

**Zev: No, Carl. You know this. We can't add new**

**worker NPCs once a level is created. Mobs, yes, but NPCs? That's written into the rules. We can't just replace the shopkeepers. The food market for the troops was down there, too.**

I did, indeed, know all of this. That was the point.

**Carl: Whoops. My bad.**

**Zev: If they want to fix this, they'll have to get the Syndicate to vote on it. And they won't have the votes. And even if they did, they'll have to get the AI on board, and that's not going to happen. The whole system is already spiraling, and it's the earliest this has ever happened.**

I'd killed people today, innocent people. A lot of innocent people.

But they were all NPCs, and none of them were former crawlers, and that's what mattered to me. Former crawlers with contracts like Mordecai were valuable. They didn't waste them in a city that was razed every season. Still, there was no sugarcoating what I'd done.

We didn't have time for moral debates. I was doing them a favor. And while the emotional abuse of NPCs such as little Bonnie had been enough to nearly break my sense of resolve, the knowledge that I'd just saved those NPCs the horror of having to endure a bloody conflict that would end in their inevitable deaths anyway was enough to ease any concern at what I'd done.

Priestly had fallen into that trap, caring so much that it had paralyzed him into inaction. It had finally broken him. I wasn't going to make the same mistake.

A distant part of me was alarmed at this attitude. But this was war, and there was no use pretending like it wasn't.

Zev continued to breathlessly rant. It was finally dawning on me that her astonishment and outrage was actually an act, and what she really was doing was relaying crucial information to us. She was practically giddy and was barely containing it. She and Donut were talking somehow. Likely via the social media board, but I didn't dare

ask, not even using the magical paper we had hanging in the bathroom.

Borant's outrage at what had really happened was testament to the idea that they hadn't caught on to our method of communication. I'd been half certain that they'd known what Donut, Katia, and I had been meticulously planning for days. Even Mordecai didn't know all the details.

**Zev: Half of them had their armies hidden in the city, so they wouldn't get hurt by the god. I'm sure plenty will get out, but you don't know what you've done. You've killed thousands. Tens of thousands. Who knows what the playing field is going to look like when it settles.**

**Carl: I'm sure it'll be wonderful for the ratings.**

**Zev: There'll be consequences.**

**Carl: Probably. But tell them *they* approved this. We didn't cheat. We used the tools they gave us. Also, say they're gonna want to wait to see what happens next before they decide to, you know, accelerate me or throw me into the disposal unit or whatever. I know they're in real danger of losing control of the season. Whomever ends up in control of the next floor is going to make a lot of money.**

**Zev: What do you mean?**

**Carl: Just watch.**

I closed out the message.

**Katia: I'm out. Going down the stairs now.**

**Donut: BYE KATIA!**

**Carl: Okay. I'm adding Chris to the party so he travels with us. See you on the other side. Good job today.**

**Katia: Good luck with class selection.**

"I'm sad we're not going on Odette's show this time," Donut said

as we walked to the stairwell. Chris walked ahead of us, head down. Mordecai was ranting and raving at me over the chat, but I tuned him out.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “If I know Odette, she’ll probably have us on in a day or two.”

“Do you think Juice Box made it?” Donut asked. “It didn’t let me add her to my chat like it does with Sledgie and Mordecai.”

“She made it,” I said. “She’s had a hard life, and she’s a tough lady. Plus, she’s in love. That gives people strength.”

**Mordecai: And I don’t care how much that ring is valued at. Time is up. I want you to toss it before you go down the stairs.**

**Carl: Mordecai, you really need to chill, you know that?**

**Mordecai: Carl. Son. You don’t know the forces you’re dealing with. You can’t tempt fate like this. You only made it this far because you’re making them a lot of money. But you just kicked them in the financial balls. Do you think that’s going to stand?**

**Carl: Hey, I got my sponsor to purchase that box, didn’t I? I think they got a deity sponsorship, too. That has to be worth something.**

**Mordecai: You can’t fight a war like this and expect to win.**

**Donut: DON’T BE MEAN TO CARL, MORDECAI. HE DIDN’T DO IT ALONE. WE’RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER.**

Donut didn’t know how correct she was. I wasn’t nearly as alone as I once thought I was. I pulled the xistera extension from my inventory, and I examined it again. I ran my finger over the wicker-like substance, rubbing the tiny inscription on the side.

*Made for Crawler Carl by the Open Intellect Pacifist Action*

*Network, Intergalactic NFC with design approval by CEO and president of Outreach Operations, Dr. P. Hu.*

I put the head-tosser away, and I pulled the Ring of Divine Suffering out of my inventory. I held it up to the meager light. It was one of the most sought-after items by the treasure hunters.

“Are they still going to hunt us if they can’t sell on the market?” Donut asked.

“I’m sure,” I said. “They’re going to want everything we have. Not just the ring, but the gate, too. Can you imagine how powerful that’ll be on the battlefield? There’s two different marketplaces. There’s the Desperado Club market where the hunters sell their wares, and there’s the online one where the crawlers sell using the kiosk. The kiosk ones are trashed. Crawlers use the interface, but the faction wars guys have to actually go down to a merchant and buy it. They get kicked out of the city once the fighting starts, so they have to buy it all while we’re on the sixth through eighth floors. Mordecai was telling us about it the other day. Those merchants are probably all dead. So no more buying from crawlers.”

“But Zev said they can’t get into the Desperado Club anymore, so they can’t buy from the bounty hunters, either.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” I said. “It’ll probably be closed for a while. But what I’m guessing is going to happen is that each of the factions are quickly deciding whether or not to send someone down to the sixth floor to collect stuff manually and buy stuff from the other hunters while they’re there. We didn’t wipe out all the armies, but we wiped out most of their ability to get more gear, and we upset the power structure. They’re scrambling now, wondering how they’re going to outfit their soldiers. There’s only one feasible way. Either they don’t outfit them, or they risk sending their own people down to the sixth floor. I could be wrong, but I suspect it’s going to be crowded down there.”

If my father was here, he’d call it “seeding the pond.”

We paused at the entrance to the stairwell. Chris entered and didn’t look back. Poor guy. There were five minutes left. I looked



about one last time. A few hundred meters away, Dromedarians continued to fix their city. I sighed.

“So we’re just going to have more hunters down there,” Donut said. “The kill, kill, kill lady said the hunters can also collect bounties, and you’re worth a lot now. Everyone is going to be coming after us.”

After the last recap episode, Lucia Mar had finally fallen off the number one spot. Donut was sitting at number four, Prepotente was three, Lucia was two, and I was number one.

“That’s exactly what I’m hoping for.”

“I don’t like people hunting us, Carl.”

I patted her on the head. “Once the sixth floor opens, they’ll be locked in there with us.” I tossed the ring in the air, and I caught it. I looked up into the sky, ending all pretense that I was actually saying this to just Donut.

“You guys see this thing? I’ll tell you what. If you want it, it’s yours. It’s right here. Come and get it, motherfuckers. Actually, you know what? I have a better idea. No need to come to me because I’ll be coming to you. That’s my pledge to you and to everyone else watching this. By the time the sixth floor collapses, every single hunter who dares to set foot on the same floor as us will be dead. This I swear on my life. One by one, I will break you. I will break you all.”

Donut, Mongo, and I stepped into the stairwell.

## EPILOGUE

“HOW MUCH MONEY, EXACTLY, HAVE WE SPENT SO FAR?” THE woman asked. “The man is insane. Did you hear that? He’s absolutely insane.”

“It’s best if you don’t know,” Dr. Hu replied.

“It’s best if people don’t question how a small NFC can afford this. It’s best if they don’t ask why.”

“We’re well past that,” Dr. Hu said. “We’re going all in on him.”

“He’s unstable. He’s going to die at any moment. And even if he doesn’t, the AI is going primal and is liable to kill the entire planet before they even hit the ninth floor. The Valtay are sticking their nose into everything, and the Kua-Tin underground are going to start a bloody civil war any day now. King Rust’s children are all trying to murder each other, and Princess D’Nadia is probably going to do something stupid, too. Plus this human is not nearly as clever as you think he is. You should have included instructions with the yam. They wasted half of it on saving that other crawler.”

“He knows what it’s really for.”

“Does he? I’m not so sure.”

“My dear, he’s already shaken everything up. Even if he fails, it’s

already a success. Every time he goes on that Odette's show, more people sign up for the cause."

"They sign up for *his* cause. Not ours."

"It's the same cause."

"He's going to die, Porthus. He's never going to make it past the sixth floor."

"That's what you said about the fifth floor," Dr. Hu said.

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"We all want happy endings," Sadir said to the creature in the cage. It looked back at him sullenly. He knew the animal couldn't understand him. "But sometimes, my little friend, we don't get what we want. Sometimes our mutual desires are incompatible with one another. For example, I wish to be warm and dry right now. You want freedom. I fear neither of us are getting what we want this evening."

Freezing rain pelted down on them. It was just past ab-solar, what the locals called "midnight." Heavy clouds covered the sky, making it especially dark out here. He couldn't even see the lights of the thousands of ships and probes in low atmosphere. For a moment, it felt like the three of them were the only living things on this world. Him, his partner, and their quarry.

He stuck a long, gray finger into the cage. The fuzzy monster hissed and scratched at him, lightning quick. The tiny, sharp claws caught on his flesh, tearing at his skin before he could pull away.

"Fuck. By his left tit, that hurt!"

The beast—a "cat"—issued a low, deep growl. Its ears were pinned to the back of its head.

Sadir pulled his finger to his mouth and sucked at it while Gennrik chuckled. Goopy, blue-tinged blood oozed out of the wound and into his mouth. He pulled up his self-diagnostics to see if he needed an antibiotic, and then he cursed again after he remembered his implants were offline. The planet was off-limits to non-natives, and they had to shut their systems down to avoid detection.

"It's not him," Gennrik said after a moment. The tentacle-faced saccathian put the hand computer down and stowed it on his belt.

Sadir growled with frustration. This was the sixth cat they'd found in the area. He cursed the Syndicate rule that all non-crawler survivors have their implants scrambled. This would be so much easier if that weren't the case. *But then again*, he thought. *They wouldn't need us if it were that simple. This is what we do.*

Sadir pulled the hotsheet from his belt and looked at it and back to the cat.

"Are you certain?" he asked. "It looks like him."

"Yes. The markings are similar, but not exact. This one contains a human microchip, and the database pegs its owner as a man who was in the initial collection. Plus, this is a female. Her name is Contessa Purrington. Let her go."

"I'm going to shoot her," Sadir said. "She attacked me. She drew blood."

Contessa Purrington hissed louder and batted furiously at the electric walls of the bounty cube. Sadir took a step back.

"You are not. She scratched you because you stuck your hand where it shouldn't be."

Gennrik reached up and pressed a finger against the top of the cube. The device disappeared, turning into a metal square. The cat bolted, vanishing into the darkness.

Sadir pulled his bio-scan unit and wiped the rain off the screen. He grumbled, once again cursing the Syndicate's stupid rules. He pulled the camo netting over his head and turned the scanner on, making sure to keep the device close to the ground so its presence was even further shielded from the scanners. He already had two strikes against him. If he was caught trespassing again, his warrant would be lowered to three figures. He'd be snatched right up for sure this time, especially with war brewing. *Multiple* wars brewing.

As a Null, he already had a hard enough time making a living. Whole systems refused entry to his kind, despite the practice being illegal. The Syndicate didn't care. They turned their backs on the

rights of the non-council member races. *Especially* the null. They only cared about corporations, the rich and royal families, and the gilded homeworlds of the free citizens.

So when the season's Walk-On List was released, he marched himself right to the closest port, found a bounty crew who hired null, and he signed right on. This was the sort of crew where his two strikes was an asset, not a hindrance.

The Syndicate knew about the Walk-On List. Of course they knew. There was even a holo drama about it a few seasons back. Rights organizations crowed about it. They wrote bills in subcommittees demanding the practice be officially condemned. Nothing ever happened. Syndicate security still patrolled the planets. They still hunted down and captured, and sometimes killed, trespassers.

But the corporations, who were the real culprits? There was no accountability. None.

*Bastards, all of them*, Sadir thought bitterly. Some of these worlds had guaranteed income just for being lucky enough to be born on the planet. And here he was, literally risking his life and freedom to make a living.

Risking his life to track down a godsdamned cat named Gravy Boat.

"There's only one other cat on the scan, but it's in the camp," Sadir said.

"Tits," Gennrik replied. He thought for a moment. "Switch the scan to human. How many are there?"

"Too many," Sadir said a moment later. "There are 74 humans in the camp. Only six are juveniles. One of which is a sub-yearling."

Gennrik let out an annoyed trumpet noise. "Fuck it. Let's go for it. If we find the thing, it'll be the first A-tier target captured, and we'll get the bonus."

Sadir hesitated, but only for a moment. The Walk-on list was shorter than usual this year, meaning the competition was fierce. Bringing human attention to themselves would be a big risk, but if this was their target, the potential rewards were astronomical.

Sadir's team wasn't even bothering with the woman in the tropical zone, despite the unusually high value placed on her capture. It was a lost cause. The area had been flattened with a tsunami after Borant parked their executive headquarters not too far from there. The entire area had been washed clean. Nobody was alive.

Still, dozens of hunters who'd infiltrated the planet were in the tropical zone searching for the prize. An equal number were in the southern hemisphere seeking that little girl's father. That prize was lower, but he was much more likely to be found. Nobody had found shit yet. They were all likely dead, Sadir knew. They had to be, or they would've been found by now. That happened. Sometimes a season's Walk-on list would have 5,000 names, and only one or two would be found.

And this time it was even harder than usual. Normally they had access to the planet's snapshot as captured during the exact moment of the collection. But Borant had pulled their underhanded orshit by starting the crawl early. Sadir was sick of the extra protections given to these governments. A person couldn't stave off a collection action because they had some project brewing. How was it fair? And because Borant started early, throwing everything into disarray, the probes had last done a backup two days earlier, meaning all the records, including the location data and the native internet backup, was stale by the time everything went offline.

But they weren't without hope. When a planetwide collection occurred, all citizens and sustainable fauna were placed into three categories: Collected, Crawlers, and Natives. The Collected were, of course, those unlucky enough to get caught up in the collapse of the societal infrastructure. In most cases, and especially in this one, this group comprised of the largest percentage of people. The Crawlers were those who chose to enter the game. The Natives were everybody else.

As the game progressed and certain crawlers rocketed to the forefront, the season's producers oftentimes pulled from their library of collected citizens to add drama. Who could forget that Valtay season

when Crawler Hoon piloted his mech to the elevator leading to the 12<sup>th</sup> floor, only to find his own children—repurposed as sentinel hunter killers—guarding the exit? All five of them, even the yearling. Hoon had chosen to eat his own gun. It was one of the few times the cruelty of the game had been too much, even for the free citizens. Sadir felt a shiver come over him, remembering that moment. They'd banned the use of collected children after that. Pregnant women, too.

*Fucking Valtay*, Sadir thought. They were the cruelest of them all.

But what happened when the producers wanted to use a specific native, and that person couldn't be found? If they weren't collected, and they weren't a crawler, that meant they'd survived the initial collapse and they chose not to enter the dungeon. Most of those people were dead. The attrition rate of natives oftentimes mirrored that of the crawl, though on a slower scale.

The producers wanted to find and utilize the missing Natives. They wanted to bring certain individuals into the dungeon. But there was a problem. The rules were clear. They were untouchable.

And then came the Walk-On list.

The practice of hiring trackers to sneak onto the planet and hunt down and kidnap desired survivors was not even remotely legal. It wasn't something any corporation could justify in court. But they were never called out on it. Very few people outside a few fringe groups cared. If the viewers could justify the subjugation of an entire planet, an extra crime or two was hardly worth a second thought. The practice was as old as the crawl itself.

Finding someone should be easy. Even on the frontier planets with trash-tier sniffer zones, tracking individual natives was as easy as initiating a handshake with the planet's AI controller. Earth had a perfectly fine controller system, better than most planets. Thanks to the Indigenous Species Protection Act, however, once the crawl started, all natives had their implants scrambled, despite being born with the damn things. They were "free." Once the crawl was done, and this entire circus moved on to another system, the planet would

be locked down for multiple generations. Sadir couldn't remember exactly how long, but it was a while.

"This is a waste of time," he muttered as they trudged toward the settlement. It was located on a flat area a kilometer from the last known location of the cat. He glanced up at his partner as thick, almost-frozen rain dripped off his camo netting. "We should be searching for that man in the southern hemisphere. Or that other creature. The goat."

"If we don't find the mark," Gennrik replied, "we will move on. The captain is going to send us to the jungle on the planet's other side. To find that dead crawler's twin." He held up a hand as the shuttle flashed by in the dark sky. They both relaxed. It was not Syndicate security.

Sadir grunted. "As long as the weather is more suitable."

"I like the weather here," Gennrik said. They crouched and ran along the cracked rock of a human street. This was a wide road, made of black rocks, rough to the touch. Occasionally, rectangle-shaped holes in the roadway appeared, indicating places where the human vehicles had been pulled down during the collapse.

Sadir gave Gennrik a withering look. It was supposedly the last weeks of winter in this hemisphere. This was not pleasant weather, no matter what world you came from. This metropolis, once called "Seattle," supposedly had a dense population. He had trouble believing it. Even humans weren't stupid enough to subject themselves to this climate when this planet's equatorial region was a paradise.

The glow of multiple fires appeared in the distance. They'd positioned the camp against the side of what had once been a bridge over a roadway, placing tents where the freezing winds off the salt-water sound couldn't reach them as easily. Fires burned in controlled circles, despite the driving rain. There were over thirty tents. The bones of wood-built structures rose nearby. It appeared as if they'd just started rebuilding.

Remnants of the society they'd lost dotted the encampment.



Sadir noted multiple gasoline-powered machines, mostly two and four-wheeled, open-top, single passenger vehicles. An electric light shone over one large tent, and music played from another. There was movement about. Despite the late hour, the camp was not asleep.

“Check your weapon,” Gennrik said.

Sadir examined his air-powered, flechette gun on his hip. He’d had it set to knock out a cat. He ticked up the dosage by three, which would render most humans unconscious in moments. He much preferred the reliability and simplicity of a regular stun pistol, but the signature of the weapon would alert every security probe in the solar system.

The two hunters lowered to the ground and pulled the camouflage netting over themselves. They settled in to observe. Sadir pulled out his scanner and zoomed in on the cat’s location. Now that they were closer, he could see the exact tent the cat was in. It was the third tent, pushed back against the side of the hill. He cycled through the scan, looking for other life forms. There were also two humans in the shelter. He set in, mapping out the location of all the life forms in the camp. He pulled a sheet of ready paper and started drawing out a diagram.

He had a thought, and he recalibrated the scanner. The Syndicate generally didn’t place security in native camps, but he did a sweep of all known syndicate security protocols. He really should’ve done this first. He caught something odd at the top of the hill overlooking the camp, but it disappeared a moment later. He zoomed in with his scope. There was nothing. Whatever it was, it wasn’t Syndicate security. They didn’t do subtle. He risked a deep scan of the area, and the anomaly was gone.

“Tell me something,” Gennrik said as Sadir worked. “Why do you do this? I heard you the other day, talking via tunnel to your mate. You lied and claimed you were working on an elemental barge. I heard what you said. How much you hate Borant. How much you hate the crawl. Yet here you are, risking your life to make the production more entertaining.”

Sadir bristled. Both at the invasion of privacy and the fact the sac had called him out on his own hypocrisy.

“I have multiple children,” Sadir said after a moment. The very first tent had four dogs inside of it, but it appeared they were very small. Not dangerous. Just loud. He wrote that down. “They live in the null commune in the Filt system. The orcs have raised resident alien tax rates once again. If they want to stay, I need to earn a wage. I suppose I am just like the crawlers you see on the show. They are hurting others for their own survival.”

“But there have got to be less dangerous ways to make money,” Gennrik said. “My family does this because we like doing it. And to earn money for the Prism’s buy-in bid. You don’t need this risk, not if you dislike it. It’s a big galaxy. You can do anything.”

Sadir grunted. “That’s easy for a sac to say. The null have never had it easy. Even these humans knew what we looked like. They sold novelties with our likeness on them. That is how deep the hatred of my kind is rooted.”

Gennrik made a honking noise. “They knew your likeness because your people were illegally poking around the system before the crawl. Besides, in the inner system, all are free. It doesn’t matter what you are.”

Sadir didn’t even bother answering. They had a job to do. “We can pass behind the first two tents and breach along the fabric wall of the third here,” he said, pointing his long finger onto the sheet of ready paper, tracing their route. “The humans are asleep in the first two tents. One is awake in our target tent. We must be as quiet as possible as the dogs in the first tent might sense our presence. Luckily we have the loudness of the rain.”

Gennrik nodded his assent to the plan. They didn’t waste any more time. Both pulled their weapons free and rushed up the hill toward the camp, sticking to the pools of darkness.

Sadir thought of his children as they started their raid. He prayed they would grow and have a peaceful life, one where they’d never have to do something like this just to survive.

Brad couldn't sleep. He looked over at the woman on the inflatable mattress, curled up with the large, orange cat. She'd cried herself to sleep again. The others were getting pretty annoyed with her. Everyone had to work. That was the rule. If you wanted to live in New Queen Anne, you had to work. Everyone was afraid and overwhelmed. But they still worked. That meant fishing, foraging, tilling, or building.

Bea did none of those.

Ostensibly she was a nurse, and she would "work" if someone needed healing. But that was a joke. They had *four* doctors already in their group. Actually, all of them were dentists. They'd been on the same flight as Bea and Brad, all coming back from the Bahamas. They'd all been stranded together at the Atlanta airport for hours because of the snowstorm, and they'd arrived home in Seattle ten hours late. All of them had been standing in the parking garage just before it happened, waiting for their Ubers to take them home. That crazy man had started setting cars on fire, causing them all to flee outside into the cold.

It'd happened so fast. The police had the man in handcuffs, and he'd been fighting them. He'd been screaming at the cops in a weird language. Brad was filming the whole thing on his phone. It was the most entertaining shit that'd happened to him since he'd talked a drunk Bea into posting that picture on her Instagram.

But then the world ended, leaving just him and Bea and the four dentists standing there surrounded by rubble. The cops and crazy homeless guy had gotten caught up by the edge of the parking garage. There'd been an entrance to the dungeon or whatever it was called pretty close nearby, but Bea had been screaming. He stayed with her.

He regretted it. He used to make so much fun of her cuck boyfriend. She walked all over the dude, and he didn't do shit. Brad had been moderately impressed when the guy had grown some balls and finally dumped her after she posted the picture. But then Bea

flipped the fuck out and demanded they leave the resort early. They'd been paid up for another four days, but she wouldn't stop crying. Her bitch friends pretty much pushed the two of them out of the suite.

So they went home.

*I should've stayed*, he thought. If he was going to be stuck in an alien invasion apocalypse, it would've at least been in better weather.

But that wasn't his real regret. Oh no.

*I should've gone into that dungeon.*

When he couldn't sleep, which was never now, he thought of that giant, welcoming hole into the ground. He'd wanted to go in so bad. He didn't know what was in there, but it had to be better than this. He *hated* that he missed his chance at glory.

*I am a king*, he thought. *I am a king.*

A guy that worked on the tarmac had found them. Tarik. He'd been driving an electric cart thing with a bed, and they'd all piled on, routing through people's suitcases for warm clothing. They'd spent that first night huddled in a pile of clothes watching all the lights descending like falling stars. And then... nothing. They were ignored by the invaders. Spacecraft came and went all day every day. They even saw them, sometimes, walking about in groups on the surface. There were different kinds and sizes.

But the aliens simply didn't acknowledge the presence of the humans. They were dismissed as irrelevant. A thing to be avoided, like a pile of dogshit in the road.

After a week of camping at the remnants of the airport, hiding and afraid, the small group decided to seek out other people and supplies. They trekked their way to the city where they found the burgeoning community of New Queen Anne. Now, over a month later, they remained. The invaders continued to leave them alone. What Brad had assumed was going to be a temporary camp was shaping up to be their new permanent home. They were constructing wood buildings. Once the weather improved, they'd plant crops.

Bea whimpered in her sleep. The large cat was wrapped around

her head. The thing had already shredded their first inflatable mattress. Brad didn't care what Bea said, if the damn thing ruined anything else in the tent, he was out of here. And if she complained about it, she was gone, too. He was getting sick of just doing everything she wanted. It was embarrassing.

His eyes focused on the cat. It wasn't even Bea's cat, but some stray.

Bea had insisted on returning to her old apartment, trying to look for that fucking weird cat of hers that always howled and scratched at him. Never mind the thing had its own damn room in the apartment. Never mind it never left that cat tree by the window. It was dead along with everybody else in the world. Brad knew exactly what they were going to find, but he'd taken her anyway just to shut her up.

The apartment was a hole in the ground just like every other building in the area. Some of the items remained. The trees. Most of the light poles and signs. A few random vehicles. There was a scooter they could possibly use, but it had a parking enforcement boot on it.

The first thing they'd noticed was the decomposed and rancid human head just sitting there on the ground. Bea had vomited and started crying all over again.

They were about to leave, but then Brad noticed the cat sitting in the tree. *No fucking way*, he thought, but only for a moment. This was a different cat than the one Bea was looking for. The thing was skin and bones, and for a moment Brad thought it was literally frozen on the tree branch. But then it let out a loud, deep meow, and it jumped to the ground and started rubbing against their legs.

Bea, already crying, scooped the thing right up and started sobbing even louder. "Ferdinand! You asshole. You stupid little asshole!" She clutched onto the cat and sobbed and refused to let go.

"You know this cat?" Brad asked. "How?"

She didn't answer right away. She just hummed to herself while she rocked back and forth. She'd been doing that a lot lately. It was fucking weird. She was cracking up. Finally, she said, "He's my neighbor's cat. His name is Gravy Boat, but he used to come to the

window and try to get in when Princess was in heat.” She stuck her face dangerously close to the cat’s “You wanted to fuck my girl, didn’t you? You wanted to get in and ruin her.” The cat, who’d been purring, suddenly hissed and scratched her face. She didn’t even seem to notice. “I called him Ferdinand before I found out his real name. I would say, ‘Go away, Ferdinand,’ and he’d yowl and scratch at the window. Princess would hiss and spit at him. She knew he was no good.” Bea looked Brad straight in the eye. She had blood running down her face. “She was a lot smarter than me. I tried to get animal control to get him, but they could never find him.”

“Well, he seems to be doing okay out here on his own. We better get back...”

The angry look from Bea shut that down right away.

So the thing came back with them. The cat was half feral, and it did not like being brushed or petted too much. But every night when the rations were distributed it was back in the tent sitting next to Bea while she dropped a little bit of her fish onto the floor for it to eat.

At night, she’d sit there in the dark and hug the cat until it yowled and scratched at her to let it go. She had cuts all up her arms and face from the monster. It’d eventually settle on the mattress next to her. She would stroke its yellow and orange fur and sing softly to the cat in that weird voice.

“Good boy, good boy, you’re a good boy, Ferdinand. You’re no Gravy Boat. Oh no, oh no. I’d take it all back and let you in. I’d do it all over again. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Ferdinand. I should have let you in.”

She’d sing some variant of that bizarre song until she fell asleep. Brad envied her ability to sleep. He sat now in their lone plastic chair, chewing on a scavenged candy bar. He fantasized about the mysterious dungeon. *I am a king.*

*Riiiiip!*

He stared at the knife, uncomprehending as it pierced through the tarp wall of the tent and started to cut downward.

“Hey!” he called. “Who’s there? That’s my goddamned tent!”

He jumped to his feet. He grabbed the crowbar he kept by the real tent flap. His heart started to thrash as the two figures appeared through the hole in the wall, both of them holding strange, nerf-like guns.

It was a tall, octopus-faced dude and a gray alien wearing a fur coat. This second one looked like one of those Roswell aliens with the head shaped like a guitar pick and the black, bug-like eyes.

The octopus pointed the weapon directly at Brad and was about to fire when its chest exploded, filling the tent with green gore. The tall, menacing alien slumped over. Gravy Boat jumped from the bed, and Bea sat up, confused. Brad dropped the crowbar. Everyone stopped, including the gray alien. All eyes were on the octopus alien with the hole in its chest.

Bea started to scream. Gravy Boat bolted, running between the alien's legs and disappearing out into the night. Two tents over, those four little shits started barking their heads off. People began to shout.

The alien guy stopped, holding his hands up in the air in the now-confirmed-to-be-universal gesture of "I surrender." It started babbling in that strange, alien language Brad and everybody else had been able to understand at first, but now they couldn't anymore.

The alien started to turn to face the exit, but he cast one glance at Bea and stopped dead all over again. His gray skin flushed, suddenly turning a shade of purple. He dropped the alien weapon and slowly lowered his arms.

"B... B... Beatrice?" he asked in heavily accented speech. It sounded like a question.

Bea stopped screaming. They stared at each other, both of them with their mouths agape.

What the fuck was going on?

A new figure emerged. She stuck her head in the tent, looking about before stepping fully inside. It was a woman. A human. Sort of. She was Asian, but she looked odd. Anorexic with her eyes too close together. She wore a skintight, black bodysuit and held onto what

looked like a pump-action shotgun, which she placed firmly against the alien dude's back. He raised his hands back into the air.

*Those dogs aren't barking anymore*, Brad thought. It'd gone completely silent out there. That wasn't good.

The woman said something in the alien language, and the Roswell guy answered. Bea rushed over to Brad, who put an arm around her. He eyed the alien pistol that the dead octopus had dropped. *I'm going to go for it. I am a king.*

"Miss Beatrice," the woman said. She still spoke in the alien language, but now a translation came out from a hidden speaker in her clothes. The words mixed in with the alien speak, making it a little hard to understand. "My name is Lexis. I apologize for the inconvenience, but Syndicate security is on its way. You are being hunted. I am here to take you to safety."

Brad barely heard this. He was laser focused on the gun on the ground. *I can do this. I'm going for it. I am the king.*

*I am the goddamned king.*

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"I got her," Lexis said into the communicator. A floating image of her boss appeared over the screen. "Killed a sac pirate. Captured another. I suggest we make it look like he turned on his partner. Shot him right in the back. He's a null, so they'll buy it. Oh, I also had to shoot a human. Bea's partner. He's still alive. He tried to get to the pirate's flechette. I'd call him brave, but he's crying like a little girl. He's going to bleed out in a few minutes if I don't intervene."

"What about the cat?" asked Odette.

"He's knocked out with the rest of the settlement. The thing is fast. He almost got away. Security will arrive in three minutes. The first responders are on our payroll, but a supervisor will want to come down for this one. I'm guessing we have twenty minutes at most. Do you want me to bring the cat? Also, I can wipe the whole town if you want."



Odette thought for a moment. "Any witnesses?"

"Just the ones I mentioned. The null, Beatrice, the human I shot, and the cat."

"Okay. Here's what we do. We're not going to vaporize the town. Leave the null alive and plant the weapon like you suggested, but let the human expire. Put the cat in a bounty cube and leave him there. Shoot the null with the flechette gun, then drop it on the human. We'll have our security guys clean the scene up so it looks like the whole fight was over the cat, and nothing else."

"The null will talk," Lexis said. "He'll be facing multiple charges."

"Don't worry about that," said Odette. "I'll get a message to him after he's arrested. We'll buy out his warrant. That'll guarantee his cooperation. I'll have one of the security guys sneak the cat over to Borant. Let him collect the walk-on bounty. How's Beatrice taking this?"

"I, uh, had to knock her out and then stick her in a cube. She's a little freaked out about the whole thing. I don't think she's all there. She has scratches all over her face."

Odette nodded. "If she wakes up, make sure you tell her that I can't wait to meet her. And reassure her that we won't be selling her to Borant. Tell her we have a much better use for her."

Lexis laughed. Her scanner beeped, indicating a security shuttle was about to land. "So, I guess it worked out for everybody." She looked down at the dead sac. She thought of the poor cat, and what they were going to do to him. She shuddered. "Well, almost everybody."

Odette grunted. "We can't all have happy endings. Now get to work."

THE END

