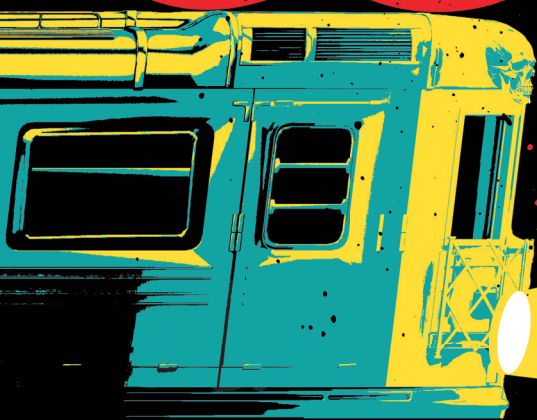


THE DUNGEON ANARCHIST'S COOK- BOOK



MATT DINNIMAN



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE DUNGEON ANARCHIST'S COOKBOOK

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THE DUNGEON ANARCHIST'S COOKBOOK

DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL BOOK THREE

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One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

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Penguin
Random House
UK

First self-published by Matt Dinniman 2021

First published in the United States of America by Berkley,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC 2024

First published in Great Britain by Penguin Michael Joseph 2025
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Book design by George Towne

Map art on pages 367, 369 by David Lindroth

All other interior art by Erik Wilson (erikwilsonart.com)

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK ISBN: 978-0-241-81624-0

TRADE PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-0-241-81625-7

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Let what you do mean something.

King Kong Bundy

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

HEY, MATT THE AUTHOR GUY HERE. A QUICK NOTE ABOUT THIS PARTICULAR book. The fourth floor of the dungeon is set up as a massive, deliberately confusing puzzle. Carl, Donut, and the rest of the team have to work really hard to figure out the dungeon's layout. You, the super-awesome reader, do not need to understand the floor's intricacies in order to understand or fully enjoy what is happening. Platform names and numbers and colors are gonna be flying by. It's okay not to remember them. It only becomes important at the end.

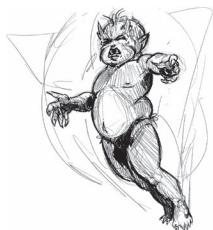
There will be a map near the end of the book to help you understand the endgame. Until then, enjoy the ride and mind the gap.

And, yes, “zomp” is really a color.

THE DUNGEON ANARCHIST'S COOKBOOK

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1



TIME TO LEVEL COLLAPSE: 10 DAYS.

Views: 43.1 Quadrillion

Followers: 677 Trillion

Favorites: 158.1 Trillion

Leaderboard rank: 6

Bounty: 100,000 gold

RED LINE.

Welcome, Crawler, to the fourth floor. "The Iron Tangle."

Your title has reverted to Royal Bodyguard.

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

The world rumbled. The ground shook. I stumbled backward the moment we appeared, but I was held upright by a metal wall. Lights flashed in a quick staccato, pulsing on either side of the long, thin room. I felt the *thump, thump, thump* under my feet. We were in a long plastic-and-metal tube that vibrated and thundered. The lights in the room blinked out, then turned back on.

Mongo screeched in anger and fear. Donut jumped to my shoulder, trembling. Katia clutched on to a metal pole rising from the floor to the ceiling.

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New achievement! I'm on a train!

Choo Choo, Motherfucker.

Reward: You've received a Train Conductor's Souvenir Hat!
Wear it with pride!

"It's a subway car," I said. We hurtled through a tunnel, racing toward some unknown destination.

A double aisle of seats, facing inward, filled the train car. The seats were made of beige molded plastic with brown cushions that were ripped and tagged with marker and spray paint. The words were in nonsensical letters in the Cyrillic alphabet. The floor was dingy and pocked. Scorch marks dotted the plastic walls. Poles rose to the ceiling at regular intervals and also ran the length of the car. The whole place smelled like a pile of dead rats.

The train car was empty except for our party.

"It's a Metro car from Moscow," Katia said. "But the ones I rode were in much better condition than this. And cleaner." Her face had returned to the mostly human, blond-haired form she'd held earlier. Her nose had been knocked halfway around her face the last time I'd seen her in her doppelganger form, but she'd willed it back into place.

At the end of the subway car was a closed door with no window. Above the door hung a small electric sign with red words scrolling across the top.

Red Line, Car 20. Next stop: Sirin Station (81) in 12 minutes and 32 seconds.

"Everybody get dressed," I said. I sat down in the chair and quickly began the process of putting my gear back on. I briefly examined the stupid train hat we'd received, and it was junk. It wasn't magical. It was a simple blue-and-white hat one would see on a toddler. It had the words "I rode the Iron Tangle" embroidered on it.

"Carl, it says I have to pick a new class because of my Character Actor skill. I only have six minutes to choose, or I will get a 'random'

one,” Donut said. “The list is full of new stuff. Not the same as before.”

CARL: Mordecai. Help Donut pick a class. She's going to read off some choices. We're in a moving train car. I think it's a subway-system-themed floor.

MORDECAI: Welcome back. Donut, hit me with the suggested list.

DONUT: I DON'T LIKE THESE CHOICES, MORDECAI.

As Donut rattled off a list of options in the chat, including things like Alley Cat Brawler and Nec-Cat-Mancer, I moved to the window and peered outside.

We moved swiftly. The exterior wall of the tunnel was right there, barely inches from the window. It appeared to be made of dirt or rock. Lights flashed by occasionally as if electrical lights were built into the tunnel walls at random intervals.

“Why does she always type in all caps?” Katia whispered as I peered out the window. “Is it because she’s four-legged?”

“No. It’s because she’s Donut.”

“She’s quite the handful, isn’t she?”

I remembered what Odette had said about Hekla wanting to steal Donut away.

“More than you know,” I said.

We had 10 days to complete this floor. Our first priority would be to find a stairwell. If we were constantly moving, that was going to provide a unique challenge. There were only 9,375 stairwells this time. If the level truly was subway- or train-themed, and this wasn’t just taking us to some random location where the floor was really going to begin, we needed a map. Even if there was a stairwell at each and every stop, that suggested this system was beyond huge. Finding a stairwell wouldn’t be enough if we didn’t know how to circle back.

My Escape Plan skill couldn't find any directions or maps, at least not in this car. The skill worked great, but you had to know where the hidden maps were before you could utilize it.

"Wow," Katia said. "My constitution is double what it normally is. I'm at 102. I have an active momentum bonus even though I'm not moving."

"Good," I said. *That means you're our meat shield*, I didn't add. "I hope that's by design. Otherwise, I wouldn't get used to it. If the showrunners didn't mean for that to happen, you can bet it'll be patched out tonight."

If we were going to be doing a lot of close-quarters fighting this level, that meant I needed to work on my hand-to-hand. Last floor had been all about explosions. I suspected that was going to take a back seat here.

DONUT: SO, SHOULD I DO THE FOOTBALL HOOLIGAN OR THE FIRECRACKER CLASS? QUICK, I'M ALMOST OUT OF TIME.

MORDECAI: Hooligan. If you're going to be stuck in a series of tubes, it's the best choice. It comes with a momentum bonus and several team buffs. Plus the Mascot skill, which gives a bonus to Mongo.

Donut glowed for a moment.

DONUT: I DID IT. I GOT THE MASCOT SKILL! BUT I DIDN'T GET GROUP CHANT OR MOVING RIOT. I GOT THE 10 POINTS TO MY CONSTITUTION, THOUGH.

MORDECAI: Damn. Chant would've been good. Okay, you three. I just peeked my head out of my room, and I am in what appears to be a train station settlement. It looks as if the stores and inns are placed at these stations. This is a bigger one where you can switch between three different train routes. One of the trains is a subway like you described, but another is much larger. Like a regular

transcontinental railway train. Get off at the next station, and see if you can find a safe room or inn.

CARL: 10-4. By the way, thanks for telling us about the bounty.

MORDECAI: So you made the top 10, huh? Find a safe room, and we'll talk.

I looked at Donut. I tried to remember what she'd lost by switching away from Artist Alley Mogul. The only noteworthy benefits were the +5 to dexterity and the 15% bonus to item sales. Also, she'd received a few extra coins when we went down the stairs, but it wasn't much. The loss of the dexterity bonus would probably be the worst part. "So what do your new skills do?"

The ground rattled as we went around a bend. The lights flickered.

"I only got a couple of new ones. It came with a skill that would've raised my damage if we were moving, but I didn't get it. The best one is Mascot. If Mongo deals damage to an enemy, everybody in the party receives a bonus to dexterity and constitution. If he kills a mob, the bonus lasts for a couple hours."

"That is a good one," I said.

"Also, my constitution went up by 10 points. Oh, and I got a skill called Guinness that doubles my strength if I'm drunk."

"Are you serious?"

"Quite," she said. "So if we're going to be doing any fighting, we'll need to stop at the club first so I can get another Dirty Shirley."

CARL: Mordecai, is it me or are these classes better than what we were offered before?

MORDECAI: It's an unintended benefit. A lot of these rarer classes weren't available because she didn't meet the minimum requirements. But as her stats increase, the classes she's offered on each level will be better. There's another benefit I hadn't anticipated, too. She'd received a level 5 Negotiation skill with that Artist Alley class. Before

you guys left the third floor, she'd raised the skill to level 7 thanks to all that selling you did. When she lost that class, the five levels went away, but she retained the two she'd received, including the skill experience, so it actually bumped itself up to four on its own.

CARL: Wait, I don't understand. So if she gets a temporary skill, she keeps it the next floor down? What about the stat point increases?

MORDECAI: She won't keep the stat points. But as long as she uses a skill enough to level it at least once, it looks like she'll keep it, minus the levels she received as being a part of that class. Skill experience is a complicated, under-the-hood metric crawlers can't see. It takes a lot to break the cherry, so to say, and obtain level 1. But once you're in, you're in. So in other words, use Mongo as much as you can, and you'll keep that Mascot benefit. Also, from now on, we should keep an eye out for classes with rare spells. If she levels the spell at least once, then I think she'll keep it.

CARL: That seems like a bug.

MORDECAI: I think it might be. So don't talk about it out loud or bring attention to it. They probably won't notice until she manages to keep a spell from one floor to the next. Now get to work. I'll look for a map, but you should, too.

"Katia," I said. "You have the Pathfinder skill. Do you see anything?"

"The skill is only level three. It was level one when I got it, and it's hard to upgrade. I have to keep my map open all the way to train it. My old game guide said I needed to find a training guild to really boost it. I can zoom my map out really big, but when I do, I don't see much. There are tubes everywhere, like a mess of noodles. Though a minute ago, I saw another train rush by on another track on the other side of this wall, shooting off at an angle from us. As for this train, there are 20 cars, and we're on the last one."

"Can you see any mobs?"

"No. It usually doesn't show monsters. But if we're close to a stairwell or a safe room, I'll get a notification. But I can see car number 15 is shaped differently than this one. I can't see what it is. It's not a passenger car like this one."

I looked on my own map, and it showed the first half of car 15. I knew normally my map zoomed out a little bigger than that, but it shrank while we were moving. If Katia could see all 20 cars, then that skill really did make the map a lot bigger. The map also helpfully labeled the cars for me, something I hadn't seen before. We were in **Cabin #20—Passenger Car**.

"What does the label say for that 15th car?" I asked Katia.

"It just has a question mark."

I examined the back wall of the train. Normally there'd be some sort of emergency exit. Instead, it was just a solid metallic wall. I wondered what would happen if I attached an explosive to it, breached the wall, and jumped out onto the track. Considering how tight the tunnel was, we'd probably get squished by the next train in a matter of minutes.

"Okay, guys," I said. "Let's go check it out."

I moved down the center aisle. Donut jumped to my shoulder. Mongo pushed his way to my side. He had to struggle past the vertical poles. If he got much bigger or the aisles any tighter, it was going to become a problem. We came to the door, which seemed out of place here. There was no glass window. I sensed this door was something added by the dungeon, and normally there'd be a short, open gangway where one could walk the length of the train unimpeded. Above, the timer to the next stop was at five minutes.

"I'm going to pull the door open. Katia, your constitution is four times mine, so you go in first. You okay with that?"

She swallowed but then nodded. I could see she was trembling. "I guess that's my job, isn't it?"

"Don't worry, sweetie. We have your back," Donut said.

The door slid to the side, revealing a small, enclosed space be-

tween the two cars. The gangway floor bounced up and down. The walls connecting the two train cars were a black accorded material that looked like reinforced fabric. The distance between the two cars seemed longer than it should be. Below my feet was a panel that I could presumably pull up to get to the connector. A second door appeared, leading to the next car, and I put my hand on it. Behind me, Katia now held a small glowing axe.

"Have you used that thing before?" I asked.

"It's a good weapon," she said. "But my strength isn't high enough, and it doesn't do a lot of damage. Though I killed some lumber monkeys with it."

I nodded. "Here we go."

I slid open the door, and she leaped inside. Mongo jumped in with her, snarling, causing her to face-plant. I stumbled back at the pet's sudden, unexpected forward motion.

"Goddamnit, Mongo!" I yelled, examining the room for threats. Empty. The car was identical to the last.

"Mongo! Bad!" Donut cried. "Be nice to Katia!"

"Okay, let's try that again," I said. "Mongo. Don't be an experience hog."

The dinosaur squawked as Katia grumbled and pulled herself to her feet. She'd dropped her axe, and it'd skittered ten feet in front of her. She ran to retrieve it.

The next car was the same. Empty. But at least Katia didn't fall on her face when we breached. The next car after that was similarly unoccupied.

By the time we reached car number 16, the timer was almost out. I wanted to at least peek into 15 before we tried to find a safe room. The cars beyond that one were more of the normal passenger cars. Katia said cars 10 and 5 were also different, but not the same as 15. Plus the entire first car was just a solid block on her map. She said that usually meant it was behind a magical door.

"There's gotta be something in this one," I said, indicating the

door to train 15. It was different than the previous ones. It was still a sliding door, but it appeared to be made of a thicker, more stable material.

The door was not locked. I slid it open and moved onto the gangway. The next door was the same. The train started to slow. The high-pitched squeal of brakes filled the air, along with the stench of oil and smoke.

A static-filled voice crackled over a loudspeaker. "Coming up on Sirin Station, folks. Station number 81. Next stop will be Mora Station number 82 followed by a traveler transfer station number 83."

"Monsters," Donut hissed. "Smaller sized, but there are a lot of them."

I lifted my hand off the door to car 15. "Okay, we'll back away for now until—"

"No, not in there. At the train station!" Donut said, just as the platform eased into view. To my left, a simple landing area appeared. A sign **Sirin Station—81** hung from the ceiling.

"Oh god," Katia said.

The station teemed with several hundred fat, wrinkly monsters clambering over each other as they surged at the door. The creatures looked like demonic gray-skinned babies with sharp claws and giant mouths filled with too many teeth. Each stood on two legs, and they stood about knee height. A few were attached to the concrete pillars, climbing up them on all fours like goddamned spiders. They wore nothing but tattered loincloths, and they leaped and scratched at the doors, some jumping as high as the car's ceiling. They screamed as one, their cries unsettlingly baby-like. They surged against the train at the sight of us through the windows, crashing like waves into the glass.

The train continued to roll forward, but it would stop at any moment. And when it did, those doors were going to open, letting them in here.

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I examined one of the monsters through the glass.

Drek. Level 6.

Everybody loves babies, right? What kind of asshole doesn't love babies? How about demonic, ravenous, berserking babies who travel in packs of at least 50? It's rumored these lil' rascals can devour a full-sized elephant down to the bone in less than five seconds. And you're a lot smaller than an elephant.

"Shit, shit," I said, pulling at the door to cabin 15. "Close that door behind us!" I slid the heavy door open, and we piled into the humid, dark train car. The room stank of rotten meat.

Behind us, the doors to the train hissed open, and the squealing monsters poured in. Katia slammed the first door. She rushed into the dark, windowless rail car and slammed the second shut just as Donut cast *Torch*, illuminating the room.

"Oh for fuck's sake," I said, seeing the new pair of monsters.

Jikininki. Level 17.

Of all the types of ghouls one may find in the Iron Tangle Rail System, the Jikininki is the most common, the most well-behaved, and the most insatiable. Their voracious appetite for flesh makes them the perfect janitors. They'll generally leave you alone as long as you're not bleeding, as long as you don't litter, and as long as you don't trespass into their personal space. It's rude.

On the map, the system helpfully replaced the question marks on the label with **Janitor's Lair**.

The hunched, thin monsters appeared to be grown-up cousins of the Drek babies pouring into the train behind us. These white emaciated creatures were about seven feet tall with arms that dragged to the ground with serrated black fingernails that clinked like porcelain as the monsters stood to their full height at our intrusion. Their faces were all sharp teeth and white bulging eyes. The mouths on both

creatures started chattering up and down like a wind-up toy's, making the sound of an industrial shredder.

Both of the creatures wore tattered and threadbare double-breasted suits with golden buttons. Under the dark suits were white blood-splattered dress shirts. One had a bow tie. Both wore conductor-style hats with golden letters across that said, "Janitor." The one without the bow tie had a pin-back button on his breast that read, "How may I hurt you?"

Other than the two monsters, the rail car was empty save for a pile of bones and two brooms and dust buckets.

"Double shot!" I yelled.

Two full-power magic missiles rocketed out, each one a head shot. The creatures staggered, their health moving into the red as Mongo roared. The raptor leaped half the length of the car, landing on one of the humanoids feetfirst. Donut jumped from my shoulder to Katia's as I rushed at the ghoul, forming a fist. The monster hissed as I reared back and punched it in the face. To my left, Mongo had decapitated the monster and was in the process of swallowing the head. My target hit the ground. I stepped onto its chest, caving it in. Black tar-like gore spread out in a V pattern from where I stomped. The action felt odd on my foot, but I didn't have time to think about why.

You have received a temporary 5% bonus to Dexterity and Constitution thanks to your team's mascot.

We didn't have time to revel in our victory. I took a few bones and looted a handful of gold coins from each ghoul. I also took the How-may-I-hurt-you? button as I rushed back to the end of the room.

"They're trying to get in!" Katia cried, backing away from the door. Donut remained on her shoulder, fur poofed out. We could hear scrabbling and scratching and screaming coming from car 16. They hadn't yet broken through the first of the two doors. All they

needed to do was pull the handle down and slide, but it appeared they didn't know how.

I looked nervously at the door at the other side of the car, the one leading to car number 14. That one was also presumably filled with the Dreks. We were surrounded.

There was no sign in this car, but I remembered the announcement had said the next station was called Mora or something like that. But the one after that was something different. A traveler transfer station. Hopefully that meant a safe place like Mordecai had described. But there were no doors to the outside in this car. How could we get out there?

I prepared a smoke curtain. I also moved the Fireball or Custard ticket to my hotlist. I had three scratch-off spots left. If they broke in here, we were screwed. I wouldn't be saved by a glob of custard this time. What the hell were we going to do? Would all the stations be filled with mobs?

I feared I would have to resort to explosives, but that seemed like a really bad idea. Even if we threw it toward a rear train car and slammed the door, I feared a derailment would be deadly to the entire train.

I had my *Protective Shell*, but I could only cast it once a day, and it only lasted 20 seconds. Actually, thinking about it, Mordecai had told me something about that spell a long time ago that might just be helpful here. But if that next station was also filled with mobs, I'd have to wait to use it; otherwise it would be a waste.

Okay. Calm down. It's okay. You're okay. They put these doorless cars here on purpose. We're using them as intended.

I took a deep breath and went over my options, combing through my inventory. Now that the initial panic had eased, multiple options presented themselves to me.

"We need to hold out until we get to station number 83," I said. "Katia, if they start opening the door, hold it closed! Donut, do you still have those two ready-to-go trap modules?"

"Yes. You want them?" she said, pulling each out. She'd received

them in a Gold Sapper's Box after our battle with the rage elemental back on the second floor.

One was a Spike Module and the other an Alarm Module. Each of them was a tiny cube about the size of a pair of dice. I examined the Alarm Module.

Alarm Module.

Two items for the price of one! A favorite of the paranoid and the rich, you can use this module to either add an alarm element to a trap you're building, or it can be used as a ready-to-go trap for those who can't be assed to sit down and make their own. When triggered, it will play a Very Loud song. And by Very Loud, I mean Norwegian Black Metal loud. You may program the song at a Sapper's Table. If you do not or are unable to pick an alarm tone, a random, culturally important song from the past US Billboard Hot 100 will be chosen.

You have the ability to imbue *Fear* upon this module, but your current level of Trap Engineer (Level 1) only allows this action to be done at a Sapper's Table.

If untriggered, your Backfire skill allows you to remove this trap after it has been set with a 100% success rate.

The Spike Module had a similar description, but it would cause 50-centimeter spikes to pop out of the ground at two-second intervals in a one-meter-square area. Friendly NPCs and crawlers wouldn't set it off, but once triggered, it would keep spiking up and down forever, so we had to be careful.

I wondered if the spike trap could be affixed to a wall. Or a door. I was about to find out.

"Keep on this door," I said. "We can't guard both sides, so I'm putting the alarm and spike trap in the fore gangway. That'll give us time to run up there and block out the door if they're coming at us from that side."

I turned and sprinted for the other side of the car before they

could respond. The truth was, we *could* probably guard both sides. Katia could hold one door closed, and I could hold the other. Donut wouldn't be able to do it. But I didn't trust Katia's strength of 11 to be good enough, even if they were just level six monsters. Plus I didn't want to split the party. Not now.

I ran to the far door and put my ear against it. Sure enough, the rabid babies were screaming and attacking the door on this side, too. But they hadn't broken into the gangway yet. I eased open the door.

The handle to the door for car number 14 rang as it jangled up and down, but they hadn't yet figured out how to slide it. At any moment, one of the little assholes was going to get an arm in there and figure it out. I took the Alarm Module and set it on the ground. I mentally clicked **Activate**, and a transparent rectangle appeared on the floor, blinking. The box was about the size and shape of a shoebox. An informational tooltip appeared over the now-set trap, similar to what I saw with bombs.

Placed Trap.

Set by you.

Effect: A loud-ass alarm.

Delay: None.

Target: Red-tagged mobs.

Duration: Until the heat death of the universe.

In addition, I had four options under the info panel. **Trigger Now**, **Set Delay**, **Set Target**, and **Remove Trap**.

I left it alone and turned toward the door into the janitor car. I slid it shut, enclosing me in the small space. I placed the spike trap against the door and activated it. It allowed me to place it vertically. I slid open the door to see if it moved with the entry, and it did. I returned to car 15 and slid the door closed.

Now we would know if they breached the door behind us, and the spikes would hopefully keep them off that door for a short time. I

returned aft. Mongo remained in the center of the room, gnawing on the corpse of the janitor. The train swayed as it moved around a curve.

"Mongo, stay with Donut," I yelled as I rushed past. "And stop eating gross shit. You're going to make yourself sick again."

Mongo grunted and followed me back to the door.

My mind raced with possibilities and defenses I was going to have to build. If I knew the dimensions of the cars, gangways, and doors, I'd be able to fashion multiple defensive structures to place within the cars. But we had to survive this first.

"Keep your eye on that map," I said to Katia as I rushed up. "Let me know the second you see a train station coming up."

"I already see one. Station 82 will be coming up in a minute," she said.

"Okay, hopefully they'll get off. But if they don't, or if more monsters get on, I have a few ideas."

I opened up the door to the gangway. They still hadn't figured it out on this side, either. "Donut, tell me if that second door starts to open."

MORDECAI: Okay, I just watched a train pull up, and two crawlers got off. There were mobs on the train, but they were magically prevented from getting off. So don't disembark until you get to a transfer station.

"Yeah, thanks for the tip," I grumbled as I went to my knees and pulled up the panel in the gangway floor. Below, I'd hopefully find the train's electrical system and controls for the car couplers. I had no idea how this stuff worked in real life, but I was confident enough in my own electrical systems knowledge that I'd at least recognize what I'd find under there.

The top panel came off easily. But under it was a small metal door with a lock, similar to a breaker box. I placed my hand on it and received an error.

This service plate is magically locked. You need a Red Line Engineer's Key to access this area. Do you have a key? No, you don't. So back off.

"Damn," I said, putting the panel back. That meant we'd have to go with the nuclear option.

The loudspeaker crackled. "Coming up on Mora Station number 82, home to the Psycho Stickers. Watch out for those guys." The announcer chuckled. "Next stop is the transfer station number 83, where one may access the yellow line and the *Nightmare Express*. After that is Rusalka Station number 84. Thank you for riding the red line."

"Carl!" Donut cried. I looked up to see the door start to slide. I leaped back as Donut blew her wad, spamming magic missiles into the hole. One of the babies chomped onto my foot, which wouldn't do anything because of my . . .

. . . I cried out in excruciating pain as I fell back into car 15. Katia slammed the door shut. The baby remained attached to my foot, gnawing furiously on the meat of my sole. I pulled myself up and slammed my foot down. The level 6 monster exploded like a tomato-soup-filled balloon. I spread my toes to make sure they were all there, and I cast *Heal* on myself. *What a disaster that would've been.*

"Ow, ow, ow," I said as it healed. That had fucking *hurt*. It'd been a long time since I'd allowed my pedicure kit buffs to expire. I was so used to having rock-solid feet, I'd forgotten what it felt like to be vulnerable down there. We *really* needed to get to a safe room.

The train eased to a stop.

"I see more monsters," Donut said. "But not as many. There's only a few on the platform. But they're big. A lot bigger. One is going into train 16 and another two into 14."

The door handle started to jiggle. I grasped onto it and held the door closed. Squeals of outrage came through the other side. A moment later, the train started to move again.

“Hey,” I said. “Do you remember if we left the doors open all the way down? The ones to cars 17 and 18?”

“We did,” Katia said.

“Okay, let me know the moment you see that next platform. In a couple minutes we’re going to—”

Peaking at Number 2 on January 13, 2007, it’s “Fergalicious”!

The announcement was so loud it rattled the walls.

“What in god’s name is,” Katia started before she was drowned out. The song started, louder than I expected, despite the description’s warning. My ears immediately rang in pain.

CARL: It’s the alarm trap. They made it through the first door.

KATIA: Do you want me to hold the other door?

CARL: No. We don’t have time anymore. We’re running aft.

Toward the back. We’re going in about 15 seconds. We are going to run all the way back to car number 20, and we’re shutting every door we pass. When I say go, we run.

KATIA: How is that going to work? I don’t understand.

DONUT: JUST GO WITH IT. WHEN CARL SAYS TO DO SOMETHING, WE DO IT. ALSO, I LOVE THIS SONG.

The door at the far end of the car rumbled. Shrieks of pain exploded from the other side. Experience notifications started rolling in as mobs were impaled on the door spikes.

I looked at the map to make sure the track was straight, and then I clicked on *Protective Shell*.

The large semicircle shield formed around us, expanding outside the width of the train car. The shield wasn’t affected or fettered by solid objects.

I had no idea how fast the average subway car moved, but that didn’t really matter. I knew this train was going fast, and I also knew

that the spell's barrier would be impenetrable by mobs for 20 seconds.

And more importantly, the spell remained static in the spot where it was cast.

The magical shell disappeared the moment I cast it, rocketing away toward car 16, then 17, then 18, then 19, then 20, and then away, stuck in that same place along the tracks it'd been when I cast, pushing all the mobs along with it like a bulldozer, squishing them into paste against the first surface they met.

CARL: Go!

I threw open the door just as the door at the other end of the train ripped open, revealing a hedgehog-like ogre creature so large it couldn't get through. Only its arm reached in, stretching all the way from car 14. The Dreks poured in around it, running and clambering at us. Several jumped to the ceiling and crawled just as fast as they ran, their mouths open in cries I thankfully couldn't hear. I slammed the door behind us, then the next.

Car 16 was completely filled with blood. Body parts were splattered around the seats and walls where the Dreks had gotten stuck. Each corpse had dropped about five gold pieces. The ogre creature, apparently called a Psycho Sticker, had been so obliterated it didn't even register as an X on the map.

I looked over my shoulder at the sign, and the next station was only four minutes away. I relaxed as we jogged toward train car number 17, looting the gold as we ran. We were going to be okay. For now.

CARL: Don't slip on the blood! It's easy to trip on their heads.

Believe me.

KATIA: I'm going to be sick. Oh my god, Carl. I've never seen anything like this.

DONUT: YOU BETTER GET USED TO IT.

THE PLATFORM TO TRANSFER STATION NUMBER 83 LOOKED LIKE any other subterranean subway station from before the collapse. It was a narrow concrete platform that seemed to go on forever. One end had a set of stairs leading up to a different area. The featureless white-tiled walls gave off an early-industrial vibe. A lone bench sat against the wall, and a faded thick yellow stripe was painted on the landing, warning travelers of the edge of the platform.

By the time the train had eased to a stop, and the doors slid open, we still had multiple cars between us and the hordes of killer babies and hedgehog ogres. I feared they would pour out of the train, but Mordecai's earlier assessment that the transit stations would be safe was correct.

"Do you think the trains get more and more filled with monsters the farther it goes?" Katia asked. "Surely they have to get off somewhere."

"That's a good question," I said, watching the train pull away. Drek glared at us through the windows. I flipped them off. "Go fuck yourselves, creepy babies."

Once the train was gone, I stepped forward to examine the track below. It looked like a regular subway path. It was a channel about five feet deep holding two regular rails. On the far end was the so-called third rail, an electrified length of metal that provided power to the train. Normally these things had covers on them to keep people from getting electrocuted if they accidentally fell in, but there was no cover here. I didn't know how much juice was running

through the line. For all I knew the whole thing could be some ridiculous mana system. One never knew with this place. But the presence of what appeared to be ceramic insulators along the single raised line suggested this was good ol' DC electricity. Either way, I knew we needed to stay off the damn tracks.

"Mongo," I said to the dinosaur, who was poised to jump down there to go exploring. "Don't. You'll get zapped or squished. Probably both."

The pet grunted and turned away.

My eyes caught a freestanding rectangular sign in the center of the platform with some writing on it. I moved to examine it.

The sign simply read, **The Red Line. Trains approximately every 10–15 minutes** and had a long red squiggle. There was a single dot on the line, about a third of the way from the bottom. It was labeled **You are here. Station #83.**

I examined the sign more carefully, and I felt the haptic buzz of my Escape Plan skill activating. The map became alive. Additional words appeared. The remaining dots populated the line, starting at station 11 and ending at station 435. It appeared the trains only traveled one way, ascending up the line, which was kind of weird. If there was a second train that went from high to low, it wasn't indicated here. The transit stations were now circled on the map. They were not at regular intervals, but there were quite a few of them. In addition, every fifth station had red squares over the dots, but it didn't say what that meant.

A box sat in the left corner of the map. It read **Safe rooms appear at all transfer stations. Stairwells appear at stations numbered 12, 24, 36, 48, and 72 on any colored line.** The map didn't give any more details, nor did it give the names of the other lines at this station, though I knew from the announcement there was also a yellow line platform and a *Nightmare Express* platform somewhere around here.

We'd emerged on the train just after station number 80, and we'd gotten off at 83. There didn't appear to be a way to get to the lower-numbered stations with the stairwells. At least not directly. Also, I

knew that there would be 9,375 stairwells hidden on this floor. If each line only had five stairwell locations, then how many damn lines were there? I hated doing math, but it sounded like this was going to be a mess.

A timer counted down to the next train arrival, which would be in nine minutes.

“Let’s go up the stairs. Find the safe room,” I said.

At the top of the short flight of stairs was a small circular room. Two additional stairwells led down, one to the yellow line and the other to the *Nightmare Express*. There were three shops up here. A safe room. A “Mace and bashing weapons guild.” And a small general store called Limp Richard’s Sundries. The proprietor of the general store, Limp Richard, was a type of creature I’d never seen before. A mole man. He was a short, squat man that looked, well, like an anthropomorphized mole, complete with glasses. He sat in the open doorway to his shop reading a book. He looked up at our approach.

Limp Richard—Mole Man. Level 36.

This is a Non-Combatant NPC.

Mole men and mole women actually just call themselves “Men” and “Women,” and quite frankly, it’s exhausting. These losers spend most of their days and nights reading. What a bunch of nerds.

“Welcome to station 83,” Limp Richard said. He put his book down. “I have supplies for the weary travelers.”

“We are weary. We’ll be by later after we sleep,” I said, moving to the inn, which didn’t have a sign.

“Suit yourself,” he said, settling back into his spot.

“Hey, have you seen any other crawlers yet?” Katia asked.

“You’re the first,” he said.

We entered the inn, and upon opening the door, we discovered the safe rooms had reverted to their previous style from the first two floors. This was a red-and-white-themed fast-food restaurant called

Nirula's. Behind the counter stood a shaggy but female Bopca Protector named Wendita.

Mordecai appeared a moment later, having been transferred here from his quarters.

"Holy shit," I said, laughing. The last I'd seen Mordecai, he'd been a stunningly handsome incubus creature. He was now about five feet tall, and he'd been transformed into a mud-colored, warty, slimy toad-looking thing, complete with hanging jowls and a throat pouch under his wide face that looked as if it could fill with air. I examined his new properties.

Mordecai—Grulke Infantry. Level 50.

Manager of Crawler Princess Donut.

This is a Non-Combatant NPC.

The rare Grulke were a militaristic race of toad warriors. Able to leap great distances and inflict devastating attacks with their tongues, it was said an army of Grulke could stand against any foe. Unfortunately, political intrigue and infighting have turned these once-proud people into a race of mostly mercenaries and vagrants. They are hunted ruthlessly by the tunnel trolls, who like to capture and lick them. Not because they impart any sort of hallucinogenic effect. It's just that tunnel trolls are weird-ass fuckers.

"A frog, huh?" I said.

Mordecai grunted. "Don't ever call a real Grulke a frog if you meet one. They're mean bastards. They're toads."

"I need to tell you what happened with that last quest."

"Oh, I already know all about it. As a manager, I no longer get the daily updates or a newsletter, but I do receive notifications of court decisions adversely affecting my client. You guys got screwed, but at least you're alive."

I moved to the counter and examined the familiar three screens.

“Shit,” I said, looking at the player counter. We had 389,441 remaining crawlers. That was several hundred thousand dead since the last time I’d looked.

“What happened?” I asked, horrified.

“I only know what I saw on the recap episode. There were several group quest events just like yours happening across the Over City during the last couple of days. Usually the third floor is relatively easy. They generally try to have six or seven hundred thousand make it to the fourth floor. The factions aren’t going to be happy if the crawlers are culled too much by the time the sixth floor opens. It’s also usually 20 days, and you only have 10. Expect the AI to push back with better gear and higher awards, especially after that veto. The fact you’re level 27 and Donut is 26 is both lucky and a miracle. That’s better than I could’ve hoped for, even with a regular timer. We’ll need to keep it up, but we can’t rely on luck-based power leveling.”

“Luck-based anything is not my intention,” I said. But I’d barely heard what he’d said. I felt sick. *Jesus*, I thought. *You gotta keep your head*. I took a deep breath.

The middle screen with the top-ten list simply read, **Leaderboard will populate at the end of the next recap episode.**

I turned my attention to the final screen.

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

Rental Rooms currently available: 10.

Rental Room price: 180 gold.

Personal locations available for purchase. See proprietor for details.

Food is available at this location.

“How much gold do you guys have between the three of you?” Mordecai asked.

“Just about four grand,” I said. “But we haven’t opened our boxes yet, and we have quite a few.”

“Okay. Open your boxes and see how much you have,” Mordecai said. “Donut, do your thing. Just like we talked about earlier.”

Donut cleared her throat and jumped to the counter. I knew she’d been looking forward to this.

“This is a lovely establishment you have here,” she said to Wendita the Bopca.

“Why, thank you, Your Majesty,” the gnome said, perking up. “I’m just so excited to have royalty visit us. You don’t know what an honor it is.”

“I’m sure,” Donut said in her most imperious voice. “So I understand you have personal locations available to sell at this establishment.”

Wendita’s eyes got huge. “Yes, that’s right. Fifty thousand gold, and it’s yours.”

Mordecai and I both winced. He’d warned us that the price might’ve gone up. He said it usually started at forty grand.

Donut yawned and looked at her paw as if that price was but a pittance. “I always find talking about coins to be a low activity.” She sighed dramatically. “Surely there must be a discount for royalty?”

Wendita shook her head vigorously. “No, ma’am. Your Majesty, I mean. Personal spaces aren’t something we can negotiate on.”

Donut leaned in. “Oh, sweetie. Let me tell you a secret. *Everything* is negotiable.”

Wendita swallowed.

According to Mordecai, the price for a personal safe room would be “fixed.” Location managers would tell the Bopcas how much to sell them for. But the truth was, there was usually about 25% wiggle room on the price. The system wouldn’t allow them to sell it for less than that. The proprietors were incentivized to sell the magical spaces with rewards, not money. The rewards being things such as earlier location selection for the next floor, a larger food budget, et cetera. So as far as the Bopcas were concerned, it didn’t matter how much they sold the spaces for.

Unfortunately, the gnomes had a miserly streak to them, and it went against their better nature to discount anything, even if they weren't the ones reaping the benefit. It was something I'd never understand. But Mordecai was convinced that Donut would be able to talk them down, and if she succeeded, she'd surely train up her Negotiation skill. Apparently one received extra skill experience if they could talk a Bopca down. Even if we didn't have enough money to purchase right now, this was an important skill to train as much as possible.

"I might be able to let it go for 45,000."

Donut scoffed. "I suppose we don't really need a personal space today anyway." She stood and turned her back to Wendita, showing her cat butt to the gnome.

"Forty-four thousand?" Wendita said.

"Is that a question?" Donut asked, looking over her shoulder.

I sighed and turned away from the negotiations. I had 24 stat points to distribute, but Mordecai had taught me to open my boxes and weigh any possible loot upgrades first. I had multiple boxes already, but I pulled up my unread achievements first to see if I had any more. I had ten achievements I hadn't yet opened, most of them explosion-based. I was surprised to find a few additional ones.

New Achievement! They like me! They really like me!

You are one of the first five crawlers to have achieved 500 trillion followers! People sure love a good train wreck. Wink.

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! The early bird gets to squirm!

You went down a set of stairs more than six hours prior to the level's collapse.

Reward: Doing this is kind of like leaving a party much too early. It makes you look like a dick. No reward for you.

<Error> Reward and achievement removed by Syndicate Court Order.

New Achievement! Cuck Aquaman!

You got fucked by a fish. You've done something so spectacularly controversial, courts and lawyers had to get involved. The end result was **my** decision being overturned.

Reward: You've received a Platinum "It's Not My Fault You Fish-Headed Assholes Don't Properly Program Your Quests" Box.

"Uh, Mordecai?" I said.

I described that last achievement using our chat feature. I'd recently discovered I could mentally copy items in my notifications and paste them into chat. I had a scratch pad where I could paste and keep items and write notes. The whole thing was just getting longer and longer with information.

Mordecai laughed out loud after I showed him the achievement. His throat pouch inflated and dispersed air with glee. The sight was disconcerting.

MORDECAI: The AI is given the discretionary ability to award certain types of superfluous achievements and awards up to platinum. Don't think the system is getting soft on you. This is not too unusual. The AI running the game almost always obtains a bit of a personality and an attitude, especially near the end. When their decisions get countermanded by the court, it tends to break something in their virtual minds. They usually act out by doing something like this. But normally the veto comes much later in the game. I don't know what sort of effect this is going to have. Just open the box, accept the prize, and don't mention it again out loud. I'm sure Borant expected this when they issued that veto, and they won't hold it

against you. I just looked and Donut got the same prize. I'm guessing everyone who got shafted by the decision received it.

We'd gotten robbed of a Celestial Quest Box, but Donut and I still had two Silver Quest Boxes from the prostitute quest and from that CockBlock achievement. At the same time I had received a Platinum Tyrant's Box plus a Bronze Assassin's Box, which I'd gotten for becoming the town's new magistrate. Plus I had that Bronze Boss Box from killing Quill and a mess of other loot packs, mostly Bronze and Silver Adventurer Boxes.

Looking at the list, I no longer felt as if we'd been screwed over. Almost all of these prizes were a result of that quest.

"I'm going in," I said. The next table over, Katia was digging into her own loot.

The adventurer boxes didn't hold anything new or exciting. Potions, potions, bandages—which I never used—random clothing items, and unenchanted weapons that we would sell. A couple hundred coins.

The Bronze Assassin Box contained a pair of **Quiet Slippers**, which I wouldn't be able to wear, plus a mess of antidote potions I didn't need unless I wasn't wearing my nightgaunt cloak.

The boss box contained a magical tome for a spell called *Bang Bro*. I set it aside to read later.

My two Silver Quest Boxes each contained 1,000 gold coins and a group of scrolls. One contained three *Confusing Fog* scrolls, which I liked much better than just smoke bombs. The scrolls had saved us multiple times, but I'd been out of them for a while. The other contained three *Heal* scrolls, which were also useful in healing others without having to resort to pouring potions down their throats.

I received more sticks of dynamite from some random boxes before we got to the good stuff.

The first, the Platinum Tyrant's Box, contained 10,000 gold and

a necklace. The necklace was a simple silver-colored chain with a quarter-sized charm at the end. A tiny yellow jewel was encrusted in the charm. I quickly examined it before I moved to the next box.

Enchanted Necklace of the Haute Bourgeoisie.

The second smallest of the chains of leadership, it is still considered a great honor to be the custodian of this burden. Each jewel encrusted upon this charm represents a settlement owned and controlled by the bearer. If one still maintains a settlement's jewel upon the collapse of the level, the holder of this necklace will permanently receive a tax stipend every ten days from that settlement based on size and population. In addition, each gem will impart additional benefits based on the town.

In order to upgrade this necklace, one must first conquer a Large-sized Settlement. Upgraded necklaces will also upgrade all existing gems.

One Attached Gem:

Poor Sapphire. Medium Skyfowl Settlement [Third Floor].

+5 to Dexterity.

+ Talon Strike [Level 5]

Taxes received: 432 Gold every 10 days.

May you be a kind and just leader.

“Oh wow,” I said, putting it aside. “Cool.” I guessed that explained why the others didn’t recognize me as the town’s leader. I probably had to first put the necklace on.

The AI’s special box opened next. It was just seven slips of paper. I laughed out loud at the prizes.

Coupon for a free Personal Space, upgraded to level three.

Coupon for a free tier one environmental upgrade. [× 2]

Coupon for a free tier one crafting table. [× 2]

Coupon for a table upgrade. [× 2]

Over at the counter, Donut had talked Wendita down to 38,000 gold. The two continued to dance back and forth. I saw Katia had received the same coupons. She had one in her hand, her eyes glossy, which I recognized as her talking directly in chat, probably to Hekla. I nodded at Mordecai and slid the coupons over to show him.

“Holy wow,” he said. He had to sit down. He croaked with amusement. He also had an odd look of relief on his face.

“So these are good?”

MORDECAI: This is a bigger fuck you to the showrunners than I thought the AI could pull off. Honestly, this is probably almost as good as a celestial upgrade. A level three space is expensive but allows for each crawler to have their own room complete with their own upgrades. And if you gather a new teammate who already has a space, you'll be able to conjoin the rooms and combine the upgrades. It also allows me to bring my own room over. No more unexpected teleporting, thank the gods.

CARL: How is this a fuck you to the boss people?

MORDECAI: All of those upgrades are really expensive, so in addition to the loss of income from the acquisitions—they get a small cut of all dungeon purchases—it's a tradition for your sponsors to make you buy your own safe space but to then buy you some upgrades in your first loot box. By preempting the sponsors, the AI is giving you a leg up and is saving your future sponsors a lot of money. I mean, *a lot*, thus freeing them up to give you better stuff.

CARL: Katia got the same coupons. I'm thinking she's going to save them for Hekla.

Mordecai turned his head and regarded the woman thoughtfully.

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MORDECAI: The environmental upgrades are no problem. She can install them now, and they'll travel with her if she

decides to leave. But I want those table upgrades. Those are invaluable. I'll have to talk to her.

"But, Princess Donut, it's the lowest I can go," Wendita pleaded. "It won't let me go below 37,500 gold. If we go lower than that, I will have to personally pay the difference myself."

"Well, how much do you have saved up?" Donut asked. The cat had a wild look to her eyes. "You'll be free to visit anytime you like."

"Wait, really?" Wendita asked.

CARL: Donut. Don't make her pay from her own pocket. It'll make you look like an ass. Just settle on the price now to get your experience.

DONUT: I can get her lower, Carl. I can do it. I can *feel* her wavering. It is delicious.

CARL: There's no need. Open your boxes and you'll see why.

Donut sighed dramatically. "Oh, we needn't go lower than 37,500 gold, I suppose."

"Really?" Wendita said. "So it's a deal?"

"I'll have to think on it," Donut said. She jumped from the counter and moved to the table as the Bopca just stared at her incredulously. Donut started going through her achievements as I returned my attention to my loot.

I put on the necklace, receiving the plus five to my dexterity. I tucked it in under my shirt. We didn't wear dog tags in the Coast Guard, so I wasn't used to having something around my neck. It felt heavy against my skin, heavier than it should. I examined Talon Strike, which ended up being a skill, not a spell.

Talon Strike.

Birds have ugly feet. Disgusting feet, really. Still, there's something sensual about the sight of a hawk swooping down

upon its prey, talons out, and slashing. It's so sudden, so unexpected, so explosively violent.

Such violence. Sweet, sweet violence.

Turns the side of your bare foot into a fast-moving slashing weapon, increasing the damage against opponents by up to [Level of skill] times your regular kicking damage for [Level of skill] seconds. Each kick using this skill has a 2% chance to cast the instakill spell *Eviscerate*. This melee skill has a cooldown of five minutes. Higher levels of this skill increase damage, duration, and chance of casting *Eviscerate*. A level 15 of this skill will result in Talon Strike being permanently active.

That was an excellent upgrade. Anything that could increase my damage was a welcome addition, especially if it didn't cost anything to activate. I couldn't wait to try it out.

I picked up the spell tome.

Bang Bro.

Cost: 5 Mana.

Target: Temporarily Enchant Equipped Item.

Duration: 5 minutes + 1 minute per level of spell. Requires 5-minute cooldown.

Adds both fire and electrical damage to any currently equipped item. May not be cast on flesh. Well, actually it can be cast on [your own] flesh, but I really wouldn't recommend it. May inflict *Burn* and *Shock* on targets.

Can also be used to cook hot dogs and other items.

I called Mordecai over, who was helping Donut with her items. I showed him the book.

"Will this work on my gauntlet?"

"Yeah," he said. "Definitely. I wouldn't try it on your xistera, not with the way you load it. You could probably do it to your foot, also,

as long as your invulnerable buff is active. But I would probably avoid doing that. It's a good spell, and it's in your mana price range."

I nodded and read the tome, adding the spell to my list. I would have to add a few points to my intelligence. Between that, *Heal*, and my *Wisp Armor*, I now had a few mana-costing spells.

"Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, I love it! I love it so much!" Donut cried. "This plus a fan box? I can't wait!"

She'd gotten the same coupons as me, which meant all of us who won that quest probably got the same thing. She'd also received the fan box. But other than that, she hadn't gotten as many boxes as I had. Most notably, she hadn't received the tyrant box nor the assassin box. But she did have the boss box and the quest boxes. It looked as if she'd received a bunch of random scrolls and some useless items we'd have to sell. But in one of those—I wasn't sure which—she'd also received a new tiara.

It poofed onto her head. It looked similar to her last one. The jewels on this one were white instead of purple. I quickly examined it. It wasn't as good as the one she'd lost, but it did come with some good benefits.

Enchanted Tiara of Mana Genita.

A crystal tiara fit for royalty. Made in honor of all the lost children of the world. Because nothing helps soothe the tears of grieving parents like watching someone else dress up all fancy.

+3 Intelligence.

Increased ability to detect mobs on the map.

Removes automatic hostility by worshippers of Mana Genita.

"Who's Mana Genita?" I asked.

"She's a goddess," Mordecai said. "A pretty obscure one. I don't think I've ever run across her. She was big on spells, I think. I don't remember. There's thousands of them. Gods, I mean. Only a few are dungeon regulars. Most of them never leave the twelfth floor."

I remembered what Odette had said about Mordecai and gods. *He has a lot of experience in the subject, unfortunately.*

"Yeah, I'm supposed to ask you about gods," I said.

"That can wait. It's a long conversation. We need to get our space set up. And then sleep. So distribute your points."

"Wait, that reminds me," Donut said, jumping from the table. She rushed to the corner of the restaurant. Standing there, hidden in the shadows, was a mailbox. I'd forgotten about that. She had a spell book coming to her. She leaped to the top of the box and opened it up. A moment later, she grunted with annoyance.

"When am I going to get a good spell?" she complained. "The flames from *Magic Missile* aren't doing it for me anymore. I want something with some kick. Like *Fireball*."

The idea of Donut shooting fireballs was terrifying.

The cat scrunched up her face. "What do you think, Mordecai? Should I read it? Or maybe we can sell it?"

"Read it," he said.

She glowed.

"What was it?" I asked. Normally, she'd apply the book without even reading the description first. I was moderately impressed that she'd first asked Mordecai's opinion. But thinking on it, I was starting to suspect she was getting addicted to the idea of selling things more than actually using them.

"It's a spell called *Hole*," Mordecai said. "It does exactly what it sounds like. It makes a temporary hole on a surface of her choosing. She'll need to level it up before it's too helpful, as a level one isn't thick enough to get through most doors, but it's a useful spell. Especially if you're creative with it."

That actually sounded pretty awesome. I could already think of a half dozen uses for it. Tomorrow we would have to go out and experiment. I turned to Katia.

"What about you? Did you get anything good?"

She nodded, lifting her left arm. There was nothing there except

the arm of her blue tracksuit. Any equipped gear would be invisible on her, but it would increase her mass.

"It's an arm bracer that I can turn into a shield," she said. "Check it out."

She flicked her wrist, and her arm changed shape, forming into what looked like a buckler-sized glob of blue polyester.

"That's really weird," I said.

"Yeah, the shield is supposed to be metal, I think, but when I activate it, it just looks like the surrounding area." She reached down and rapped on the shield with her knuckles, and it gave a metallic ring. "If I practice, I might be able to make it look like anything. Mordecai says I can change its shape, too."

Mordecai leaned forward to examine the round protuberance on her arm. "That shield has a *Shatter* enchantment. Use it in conjunction with your Rush ability."

The shield disappeared, and her arm reshaped itself.

"You can be like that liquid-metal *Terminator* guy," Donut said. "That'd be really cool."

"I never saw that movie," replied Katia. "I don't like violence."

"You're in the wrong job, then, honey."

"Wait," I said. "I guess I hadn't really realized what exactly you can do with that race. So if you're wearing a helmet that's made out of metal, and you reshape yourself to look like a normal human wearing a bikini, you'll be able to make any part of your body metal?"

Mordecai answered. "That's right. If she's 90% flesh and 10% metal, she can make herself to look like a regular, unarmored human, but what you perceive as her bikini, or her feet, or her hands, can really be the material from the helmet. As long as it's 10%, and it's continuous. You can't break up the item. Also, there's some elasticity issues with certain enchanted materials, plus certain limits still exist, like she's not allowed to grow four arms so she can wear forty rings, but you get the idea."

"Well, shit. We need to get as much armor on you as possible."

“That’s the plan,” Mordecai said. “And she’s going to train up her strength a bit, too.”

I distributed my 24 stat points. I put 10 in strength, nine in constitution, and five in intelligence. I knew I needed to add some to dexterity next, but since this floor was going to presumably focus more on close-quarters fighting, plus the boost I’d already received from the necklace, I decided to bolster my main stats. So after I was done, I ended up with:

Strength: 41 +3 [When Gauntlet Formed]

Intelligence: 15

Constitution: 34

Dexterity: 23

Charisma: 25

“A strength over 40 is good for the fourth floor,” Mordecai said when I showed him my updated stats. “It’s not anything to write home about, but you’ve already made up the ground you lost when you picked the Primal race. We still have a lot of work to do. We need to get your unenhanced strength to 100 as soon as we can. In a few levels, Donut is going to hit 100 in charisma, and that’s going to change a lot of things. She’s at 94 now.”

“Oh, I can’t wait,” I said.

“In the meantime,” Mordecai said, turning to Donut, “there’s one last thing to do before you three can get to sleep. Get your coupons out. Katia, you, too. Take out all your coupons.”

“Actually, guys, I’m really sorry,” Katia said. “I was talking to Hekla, and I kind of promised her I would—”

Mordecai waved his hand. “Yes, yes. We’ve already figured that out. Don’t worry. You can cash in the coupons now, and you won’t lose them. The personal space and the environmental upgrades will travel with you, so you might as well use them now. The same with the tables you’re going to buy. The tables upgrade on their own every time you go down a floor, so it’s important to do it now. You can save

the two table-upgrade coupons. If you leave and rejoin another party, everything you're about to do will travel with you."

"Okay," she said after a moment.

Donut returned to the counter with Wendita, who was sitting there looking very sullen.

"So I've thought about it, Wendita, dear," Donut said. "I've decided we are going to buy a space, but we're going to use this instead."

She dropped the coupon on the counter.

"What is this?" The Bopca's eyes grew huge as she examined the paper. Her hands started to tremble. "A level three space?"

"Does she still get her bonus if we use a coupon?" I whispered.

"Oh yeah," Mordecai said. "She also gets rewards for each upgrade she sells. We are about to make her year."

I still had my own coupon for a level three personal space. "What should I do with mine?"

"Something very cool," he said. "Follow." He stepped—hopped, actually—up to the counter.

"Wendita," he said, "both Carl and Katia here also have coupons for a level three personal space that they'd like to turn in. How much is the joining fee—for all three?"

Wendita looked up at Mordecai as if he'd just told her that she'd been elected the new president of the universe. If the little gnome's eyes got any bigger, I feared they would pop out of her head and roll onto the counter.

"It's ten thousand," she finally said. "Five thousand for each union, but it would only require two of them."

"We got that now," he said. He turned to me. "Right?"

I nodded.

Mordecai slapped his webbed hands together. They made a sticky *splotch* noise. "Okay. So here's what we're doing. Make sure you get all this down. We are turning in all three of these level threes, and then we are going to conjoin them. What will that make?"

"Uh, it looks like it'll be a level five."

Mordecai grumbled as I exchanged a look with Donut.

He looked over his shoulder at me. "All that means is that when you guys combine your spaces, all of them together will give the benefits of a level five space. If Katia leaves the party, she'll withdraw her space from the collective, and it'll go down to a . . ." He looked at Wendita.

"A four."

"A level four space, which is still pretty good. Okay, you three, hand me all your coupons. Don't mix them up. The system needs to know who is buying what. Wendita, pull up the upgrade menu, and show me the available tier one environmental upgrades."

The Bopca, still in a daze, waved her hand. A menu appeared floating in front of us.

Welcome to the Upgrade Clearinghouse.

The following tier one upgrades are available. Drill down for more details.

Bathroom Upgrades.

Bed Upgrades.

Crafting Upgrades.

Kitchen Upgrades.

Kennel and Stable Upgrades.

Magic Upgrades. [Empty]

Quest and Social Upgrades.

Store Access. [Empty]

Training Upgrades.

"What is this?" Mordecai asked. Before I barely had the chance to read the menu, he reached forward with his hand and clicked on **Quest and Social Upgrades.**

"This is all new since the last time I'd had to deal with a personal space," he mumbled. "They never really kept us apprised on this stuff since game guides don't usually deal with anything past the third floor."

A new menu appeared.

Social Upgrades:

***Social Screen.** Gives detailed, AI-curated running list of comments from your social stream. Allows for better interaction with fans. 50,000 Gold.

Quest Upgrades:

***Quest Screen.** Gives detailed list of available quests in your current area. 90,000 Gold.

***Adventurers Inc. Employment Agency.** Allows access to the general dungeon jobs-for-hire board. 100,000 Gold.

***<Special> Naughty Boys Employment Agency.** Allows for specialized quests with specialized rewards. Invite-only. 500,000 Gold.

Mordecai grunted. “Hmm, I was wondering what that was before. Your class gives you access to that Naughty Boys agency. I’ve never seen anything like this. They are always changing this stuff and not telling us.”

“Are these coupons good for any of these upgrades? Even though they have different values?” I asked. It’d be stupid to waste them on something that cost 50,000 when there were items that cost literally ten times as much.

“Ahh, no,” Wendita said. “If you read the fine print on the coupons, it says maximum value of 250,000 gold each and two may not be combined for a single item. So if you want that last one, you’ll have to pay another 250,000 gold.”

“Damn,” I said.

“We’re avoiding quests this floor anyway,” Mordecai said. “Let’s find some upgrades that’ll be useful right away.”

Mordecai went back and clicked on **Bed Upgrades**.

A long list of available types of beds populated the list. It started with a single-sized cot, and it got better from there.

The very last item was **Ultra-stabilized, size-adjustable, race-**

adjustable alleviating sleep apparatus. Allows for full rest after a period of only two hours of sleep. Imparts 30 hours of Good Rest bonus. 250,000 Gold.

Mordecai slid one of Donut's coupons forward. "We'll take the Ultra-Stabilized bed."

"Will we all get that?" Katia asked.

"Yes. As long as the rooms are conjoined, you all share in your upgrades."

"So we only have to sleep for two hours now?" I asked. I was both fascinated and horrified at the idea.

"That's right. And that's not even the best bed you can get. Once you hit the sixth floor, the tier two upgrades become available. I think the top available bed allows you to press a button, and you're fully rested. The Good Rest bonus adds 10% to all of your stats and allows for 10% higher experience and skill training."

"Well, shit," I said. "I hadn't realized we would be getting upgrades like this."

"It gets better," he said.

"Click bathroom upgrades," Donut said excitedly. "We need to get the cleaning thing like they had in that production trailer."

In the end, we ended up with the bed, an automatic shower that wasn't quite as nice as the one we'd seen on the surface, and a 255,000 gold **Enhanced Crafting Studio** that Mordecai insisted was necessary. The shower added another 10% bonus to our stats and lowered our "detectability," which meant we could sneak around better. He made me save my last coupon for the store, which would supposedly become available sometime in the next few days. Katia also spent only one of her coupons on a **Training Room**, which would allow us to train for one hour a day on any specific non-magical-spell skill we wanted. Supposedly it would train the skill as if we were really fighting with it. That room also cost 250,000 gold. I wouldn't be able to train anything explosives-based, but Mordecai said tier-two would have something called a **Bomber's Studio**, which would allow me to practice blowing shit up.

There were multiple available upgrades I still wanted to get. The kitchen upgrades were expensive, but they offered up food that imparted varying degrees of buffs. The kennel upgrades did the same but for Mongo. The magical upgrades would become available later, according to Mordecai, and would offer a place to train magical spells and allow the purchase of magic-enhancing items. He said that was something else that would be a necessary purchase.

“There’s a ton of new types of craft tables. Let’s hold off for now while I study the list,” Mordecai said. “In the meantime, let’s open up the room and get some sleep.”

In the end, we had to pay 15,000 gold, which once again depleted much of our newly acquired wealth. We slid the coupons and gold over to Wendita, who had tears streaming down her face as she accepted them.

“You bless me, Your Majesty,” she said. “I knew when you talked me into paying my own money, it was nothing but a test. A real princess would never do such a thing.”

Admin Notice. A new tab is available in your interface.

New achievement! Welcome to the neighborhood!

You have bought a home! It’s every man’s dream to someday own a place where he can fap in peace. No more filthy room-mates not doing the dishes or making up excuses as to why they can’t pay the rent. No more landlord who shows up without notice and conceals hidden cameras in the smoke detectors. It’s all smooth sailing from now on.

Reward: You’re a homeowner now. That is the reward. That and taxes and having to deal with Kenneth the megalomaniac HOA president.

Every safe room we’d been in always had a blank doorway locked into the wall and a space on the map for an inaccessible room. The moment the achievement faded away, that doorway opened up, and

a small, closet-sized room appeared on the map. It was labeled **Conjoined Personal Space of Team The Royal Court of Princess Donut**. As I watched, the name started to blink.

“It lets me change the name,” Donut said excitedly as she walked toward the doorway. “Come on, Mongo. Let’s go see our new house.”