

THE BUTCHER'S MASQUERADE



MATT DINNIMAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

THE BUTCHER'S MASQUERADE

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Titles by Matt Dinniman

Dungeon Crawler Carl Series

DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL
CARL'S DOOMSDAY SCENARIO
THE DUNGEON ANARCHIST'S COOKBOOK
THE GATE OF THE FERAL GODS
THE BUTCHER'S MASQUERADE
THE EYE OF THE BEDLAM BRIDE
THIS INEVITABLE RUIN

KAIJU: BATTLEFIELD SURGEON

The Shivered Sky Series

EVERY GRAIN OF SAND
IN THE CITY OF DEMONS
THE GREAT DEVOURING DARKNESS

Dominion of Blades Series

DOMINION OF BLADES
THE HOBGOBLIN RIOT

THE GRINDING

TRAILER PARK FAIRY TALES

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THE BUTCHER'S MASQUERADE

DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL BOOK FIVE

MATT DINNIMAN

PENGUIN MICHAEL JOSEPH

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*Thanks, everyone, for all your continued support.
A special thanks to the dude who sent nudes.
It's not necessary, but I appreciate it.
I hope you get the help you need.*

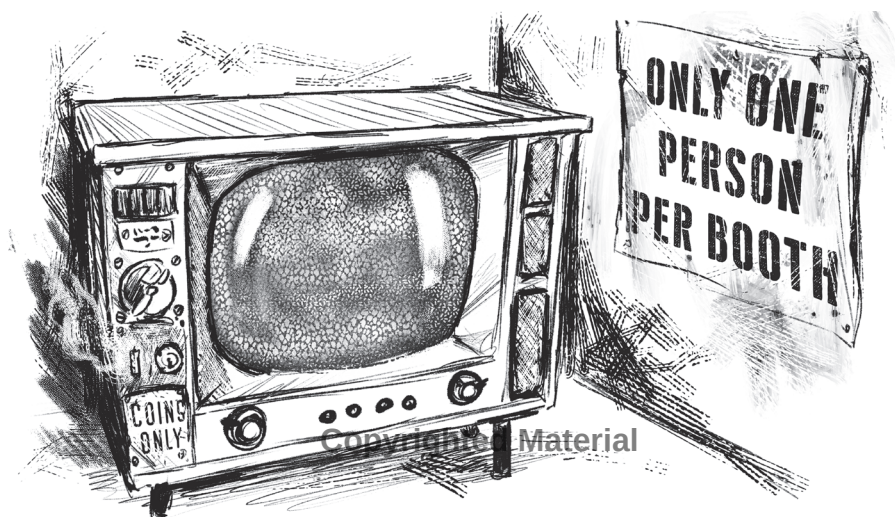
Surviving is winning. . . . Everything else is bullshit.

Michael De Santa, *Grand Theft Auto V*

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PART ONE

THE HUNT



1

TIME TO LEVEL COLLAPSE: 17 DAYS.

TIME UNTIL THE HUNT BEGINS: 30 HOURS.

Views: 512 Sextillion

Followers: 142 Quadrillion

Favorites: 23 Quadrillion

Leaderboard Rank: 1

Bounty: 3,000,000 gold

Congrats, Crawler. You have received a Platinum Venison Box.

Welcome, Crawler, to the sixth floor. "The Hunting Grounds."

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

Remaining Crawlers: 85,223

Remaining Hunters: 360

Grace Period begins now. All hunters have been transferred to the city of Zockau. They will be released in 30 hours.

Run.

Entering the Desperado Club.

I CAME INTO EXISTENCE IN A NOW-FAMILIAR OFFICE. THE HOODED FIGURE of Orren, the grim reaper–like Syndicate liaison, sat at his cluttered desk, staring at me, hands steepled in front of him. I caught a glint of the glass under his hood. I knew there was a parasitic worm floating in there. A type of creature called a Gondii, but better known to the universe as a citizen of the Valtay.

The last time I had been in this room was after I'd killed Loita the administrator. This guy was supposedly a neutral third-party observer and fact finder, but based on recent evidence, I knew some of these liaison guys played a little fast and loose with the term "neutral."

Katia also sat in the room. It appeared she'd been here for a few

minutes already, and she appeared bored. She was in her regular form. She looked at me and grinned, though I could see the worry in her eyes.

DONUT: CARL, CARL, WHERE ARE YOU? WE DIDN'T COME IN TOGETHER! IT'S JUST ME, CHRIS, AND MONGO. WHERE ARE YOU! WHERE'S KATIA?

CARL: It's okay. She's with me. We're back in the vice principal's office.

DONUT: WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? I NEED TO PICK A NEW CLASS!

"Tell your companions you'll be joining them shortly," Orren said. "This won't take long."

CARL: Have Mordecai help you choose. I'll be there in a bit.

DONUT: I DON'T LIKE THIS, CARL. WE'RE IN A LONG LINE WITH A BUNCH OF OTHER CRAWLERS, AND MONGO IS SCARED.

CARL: Donut, everything is fine. I'm about to get a talking-to by the liaison guy with the fishbowl head. Put Mongo away, talk to Mordecai, and then make sure you get everybody near you into your chat.

"As I already told your friend, you can only see and hear me, but there are multiple entities in on this meeting," Orren said. "We have a representative from Borant, a few members of the Syndicate Crawl sub-committee, and a few additional interested parties listening in. In addition, there is a designated media representative. The media rep will not be permitted to report on anything that occurs in this meeting unless a law is broken."

"Wow," I said, turning to Katia, who suddenly had a sour look on her face. "All of this for us?"

She was about to say something, but the liaison interrupted her.

"Actually, it's all for you," Orren said. "Crawler Katia Grim is only here because she's the one who had it in her inventory. We asked her if she considered herself the owner of the item; and she claims you are the true owner. She will return to the staging area now."

"Wait," she began, but she popped away with an audible *crack*.

CARL: Are you okay?

KATIA: Other than a headache, I'm okay. Carl, I think I accidentally got you into trouble. I didn't know what to say. They took the gate from me. I'm sorry. There was nothing I could do.

CARL: It's okay. See if you can find Donut.

KATIA: I see her. She's chasing after Mongo. Be careful.

Orren waved his hand, and three items appeared on the desk in front of him. The two watches and the winding box, the three pieces to the Gate of the Feral Gods.

"Do you remember what I said the last time you were in here?" Orren asked. He reached forward and picked up one of the watches, idly spinning it in his hand.

I sighed. I was exhausted. My brain buzzed. There was so much to do, and a part of me would welcome it if they just decided to get it over with and squish me. If not that, I needed sleep, and soon. I shrugged. "I don't really remember."

"I said if it were up to me, I'd have you removed. At the time, the kua-tin wanted to keep you, and the Syndicate Council was indifferent. After this last little stunt, nobody is indifferent anymore." He put the watch down closer to the edge of the desk. "The Dreadnoughts have up and abandoned their stake in faction wars. You wiped out the entirety of their army. The war chief's wife got stung by one of those pain-amplifier jellyfish, and the chief himself had to kill her in order to stop the pain. She's recovering now on a sedative yacht. But they've given up, and now there's an open spot, one that nobody can take because they won't be able to field an army." He just looked at me as if waiting for a reaction.

The Dreadnoughts were large, humanoid creatures with red skin. They rarely did well in faction wars because their preferred method of fighting was to just hit everything in front of them, tactics and magic be damned.

"Good," I finally said. "That was pretty much the plan. To fuck up all the armies." I looked up at the ceiling. "You guys gave me the ability to do it. I'm just playing the game."

He nodded. He jotted something on a piece of paper. "Borant didn't intervene because they thought you were going to attempt a different type of attack. And they assumed you'd lose access to the artifact afterward."

I eyed the three items on the desk. If I so much as bumped the table, the first watch would fall into my lap. “And that’s my fault?”

“It’s not. They are upset, but”—he turned in his chair to look to his left, raising his voice—“you likely made them more money than they lost.” He paused. “That said, we now have a problem. A problem with no easy solution. Actually, that’s not true. There’s a very easy and obvious solution to me. But the kua-tin don’t want to go that route. Yet. The council and the showrunners need your help.”

I felt my eyebrow rise. “My help?”

“We can’t forcibly take the gate from you. Despite what you might think, there are rules about the treatment of crawlers. At least in regard to their inventory items. Patching certain artifacts requires cooperation across all involved entities, and we do not have a consensus.”

I bit my lip.

Orren continued. “The system will not allow us to confiscate it from you.” That was interesting, considering they’d already taken it. “Borant wishes for you to remain in the game”—he again raised his voice—“despite the danger you pose to their tenuous hold on solvency. However, we simply cannot allow you to keep the Gate of the Feral Gods. We are asking for you to voluntarily give it up.”

“Is that a joke? What is this? You’ve already taken it.” I took a deep breath. My instinct was to reach out and pick up the items from the desk. I thought of the journalist. They wanted a witness. This felt like a trap. I kept my hands at my sides. I scooted my chair back an inch.

He chuckled. “When the item was first generated into the game by the system AI, do you know what happened? It set off a chain reaction of checks-and-balances subroutines so extensive, it crashed the entire system. The AI created the item in such a fashion that it circumvented its own rules.”

“Yeah, so?”

“That item has the ability to kill everyone on the floor. Borant already bent the rules the best they could to keep you from zeroing out the population on the previous floor. But this level is a little different. You can open a hundred portals and turn the dungeon into a wasteland in less than an hour.”

DONUT: I GOT THE WORLD'S GREATEST CLASS FOR THIS FLOOR.

KATIA IS BACK IN LINE WITH US.

I waved away the chat and waited for Orren to continue.

"Nobody expected you to get the item. There are rules in place we all must follow, so we can't remove it. We can, however, remove *you*. We must protect the integrity of the game. That leaves us with three options." He held up a finger. "One, I could create an order that would encase the floor in a protection spell that would remove all crawler access to portals. That would remove access to all personal spaces and clubs and break thousands of other little things. Teleport scrolls would cease to work. Certain movement spells wouldn't work. Your pet's carrier would no longer function. It would be chaos, and it would kill thousands."

He raised another finger. "Two. We accelerate you, which *will* result in your death, along with the death of anyone near you."

He let that sink in for a moment, and then he raised a third finger. "Or three, you turn the winding box in, I give you a receipt, and you get it back the moment you reach the ninth floor."

I didn't answer for several moments. My mind raced. *Goddamnit*. I needed that gate. How could I keep my promise to Juice Box without it?

I needed time to think. "Why was there a liaison helping Maggie cheat?" I asked. I looked up at the ceiling. I had no idea if he was telling the truth about the reporter, but if he was, they were the most important person here right now. "Maggie and Chris kept getting censored. They said it was a caprid. The creature was obviously working with the Skull Empire."

Orren's chair creaked. The watch wobbled. In the momentary silence, I could hear the distant boom of the dance floor. "Everyone here is aware of which you speak. There's an answer to that question. You're not allowed to hear it. But I'm glad you asked, because it's an important lesson. Exploits can work both ways. The forces working against you have had a lot more time to learn how to manipulate the system. Rest assured that particular issue has been dealt with in the same manner and swiftness as the one before us now. What's your choice? Will you hand the artifact over?"

"I want a lawyer," I said. "I'm not touching those things until I talk to one."

He grunted with amusement. I could tell, despite his mostly serious demeanor, he was enjoying this exchange. He looked back over his own shoulder to peer at the blank wall. "I told you. What did I say?" He returned his fishbowl head in my direction. "You just said the magic words, crawler."

ENTERING THE STAGING AREA.

I was hoping we'd teleport to our personal space and Mordecai would be the one who walked us through specialization. That's not what happened. This was like a football stadium, with a high ceiling and distant walls. It appeared every crawler entered into this room here or a place like this, waited in line, and then was forced to undergo specialization class selection. From what I gathered, everybody had to go through the line, even those whose classes didn't have the option to specialize.

By the time I arrived, the room was almost empty. Maybe three or four hundred crawlers remained, all on the far side of the room. I started walking toward them. I'd been in Orren's office for about an hour and a half, so not too long, but it appeared whatever this was, it was going by quickly.

CARL: I'm in the giant arena place. Where are you guys?

KATIA: Are you okay? What happened?

CARL: I'm okay. We lost the gate, but not permanently. It's a long story.

DONUT: WE'RE ALREADY DONE. YOU HAVE TO GO THROUGH THE SMELLY LITTLE ROOM, AND THEN YOU COME BACK OUT. EVERYONE IS GETTING SCATTERED, BUT ALL THE PARTY MEMBERS ARE COMING OUT IN THE SAME PLACE. ALSO, WAIT UNTIL YOU SEE WHAT MORDECAI LOOKS LIKE.

KATIA: This world is similar to the third floor but with a lot more trees. You should come out just outside a medium dryad settlement. Find a pub called Die Kirschbommen.

CARL: Did you guys get class upgrades?

KATIA: I got something. It didn't change my Monster Truck Driver class name, but I could pick one of three "endorsements." They only give you ten minutes to pick, and you can't use chat while you're in the little room. I got the HAZMAT endorsement.

DONUT: THEY SAID I COULD PERMANENTLY PICK ANY CLASS I ALREADY HAD, BUT MORDECAI SAID THAT MIGHT HAPPEN AND TOLD ME NOT TO DO IT. SO I DIDN'T. BUT IT'S OKAY BECAUSE I ALREADY GOT A NEW CLASS JUST FOR THIS FLOOR, AND IT IS GREAT.

CARL: What did you get?

DONUT: I'LL TELL YOU BUT ONLY IF YOU PROMISE NOT TO GET MAD. KATIA SAYS YOU'RE GOING TO BE MAD.

CARL: Donut. What did you pick?

DONUT: I'M A BARD! ISN'T IT GREAT! IT'S NOT A NECROBARD LIKE THEY OFFERED ME BEFORE, BUT IT'S BETTER. I'M A LEGENDARY DIVA. THAT'S WHAT THE CLASS IS CALLED. LEGENDARY DIVA. I SING!

CARL: You sing.

DONUT: I SING SONGS AND THEY CAST SPELLS. I GOT A BUNCH OF THEM. I'M PRACTICING ALREADY. MONGO LOVES THEM AND THE TREE GUY AT THE PUB SAID I CAN HAVE A GIG FOR THE LUNCH SHIFT TOMORROW.

KATIA: He said you could sing *after* the lunch shift.

DONUT: DON'T RUIN IT, KATIA.

I took a long, deep breath.

CARL: Okay, I'll see you in a bit.

Velvet crowd-control ropes snaked back and forth, attached to little brass poles, like in a line to buy tickets at a movie theater. Hundreds of single-door exits dotted the far wall, and as I watched, the remaining crawlers all walked one by one into individual rooms and disappeared.

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I picked up one of the barrier things and tried to add it to my inventory.

Warning: You may not use your inventory in this area.

I grumbled and then walked around the rope, pushing my way to the very end of the line.

CARL: Mordecai, please tell me the Bard thing is a good class.

MORDECAI: It's great, in theory. It comes with multiple spells and a new spell system, and if she practices enough, she'll keep it. She managed to keep her buffed Hole, Magic Missile, and Puddle Jumper skills thanks to her Glass Cannon class from the last floor. This new class gave her a handful of enchantment spells and a decent constitution buff. Her Character Actor skill is level six now, and she received all the starting skills of the Legendary Diva class plus a few upgraded ones. That skill is going to be a real asset from now on. Just be glad she didn't choose it as her permanent class.

CARL: She has to sing? Have you heard her sing yet?

MORDECAI: Everyone has heard her singing.

CARL: Oh god.

By the time I arrived at the front of the line, there were only a handful of crawlers left. None were ones I'd met before. I exchanged fist bumps with them all. The second to last was a human named Ajib. His level 29 seemed pitiful compared to my level 47. His class was something called a Prodromoi, which I gathered was some sort of dexterity-themed fighter. He hopped forward in line, and I realized he was missing the bottom half of his left leg.

"I had to jump through the portal just as the floor collapsed," he said. "But we did it. We popped our bubble at the end."

"I'll build you a prosthetic if you need it," I said.

"My team is already on it, but thank you," the man said before hopping forward and disappearing into one of the rooms.

A group of NPCs—a mix of Crocodilians, cretins, and robed elves—was waving people toward the little doorways against the far wall. There were hundreds of the workers, but they were mostly standing around idle by the time I got to the front of the line. I was the very last crawler.

"Pick any one. They're all the same," one of the elves said.

I strolled toward a door near the end of the row, examining it as I approached, and it was just a regular portal. I took a quick screenshot, and it appeared to be an airplane-bathroom-sized room with a screen on the wall. It looked almost like one of those peep-show-room booths.

I was about to enter when the announcement came. I paused.

Hello, Crawlers!

Welcome to the sixth floor! We are so happy to have you here!

Like the third floor, this sixth floor is a *Dungeon Crawler World* tradition!

It's the Hunting Grounds! This floor is almost identical in layout and size to the third floor, but the abandoned ruins have been claimed by hundreds of years of foliage. What secrets and mysteries lie hidden in the jungle? You'll have 17 days to find out! But this time, you won't be alone.

We currently have 360 hunters on deck, and they're raring to go. In a little less than 28 hours, they will be unleashed and will begin hunting you for your gear. Due to recent events, we are keeping registration open until the very last moment, and we expect that number of participants to double or even triple by the time they are released! But be warned! Some of these hunters have been here for weeks now, and even though they're currently sequestered, their minions and traps are still out there waiting for you. A few of you have already found this out the hard way!

Traditionally, all hunters start out at level 30 and are able to train themselves up as you make your way through the lower floors. It's no secret that you're here sooner than usual. In the spirit of fairness and as an incentive to gain more last-minute participants, we have given all hunters a bump of 20 levels, so they all start out at 50.

We'll have more information about the hunt after the next recap message, but I wanted to thank you all for your participation. I know that last floor was tough, and we did lose a few more crawlers than we anticipated. We will all have to work together to make sure your incompetence doesn't continue.

There are 2,344 exits leading to the seventh floor. There is at least one unguarded exit in the city of Zockau along with more in the valley beyond. In addition, some city boss and larger mobs will have an exit nearby. The rest are hidden, but should be easy to find.

Your final sponsorship slots are now open to bidding. That's all for now. Now get out there and kill, kill, kill!

While the announcement was going, the NPCs got to work cleaning up the room and shutting down the arena. A group of Crocodilians started gathering up the velvet crowd-control ropes. A cretin walked around with a broom and a dustbin as a group of the elves started rolling up the red carpets. The sight seemed absurd.

A hooded elf approached as I listened. He was dragging an empty cart that would presumably be loaded up with the rugs. He paused to regard me as I listened to the message. I examined the man warily.

Ian—Bush Elf. Level 30.

Registration Arena Attendant.

This is a Non-Combatant NPC.

You know those perpetually depressed emo kids from high school who always sat on the floor during lunch? If they participated in extracurricular activities, it was always either drama, year-book committee, or the dreaded anime club. They planned on changing the world with some bullshit cause. They all had jobs at the smoothie place. Then after high school, they just kinda got absorbed by the world, like pouring a dark drink into a rushing stream. You blinked, and they were just gone, along with all of their black hair dye and all of their dreams.

That is a Bush Elf. A once-proud people, almost physically indistinguishable from the ruling-class High Elves, Bush Elves are the regular joes of the forest. If you look really close, you can see the wrinkles around their eyes, or the very slight hunch to their backs. A sign of their defeat. They tend to favor druid magic and jobs at places where they're in cubicles.

Sometimes they remember how strong of a people they once were.

"Sir, we're closing this area. You need to go into a changing room."

"Sorry, just listening to the announcement."

"No problem, sir. Good luck out there."

"Thank you," I said. "You, too. Might want to keep your head down after today."

The elf paused, regarding me. "You're Carl, right? The one who bombed Larracos?"

"That's right," I said. "Word travels fast here."

"I heard them talking about it. The other crawlers, I mean. They said you unleashed a feral god on the armies. They said you're going to do it again on this floor."

"I didn't. That's what they thought I was going to do. Instead, I helped flood the city of Larracos. I was going to throw a god at them in a few days, but they took my toy away."

Ian nodded thoughtfully. The creature had a wistful look on his face. "They do that. If you gain a little bit of power, they take it away. Next time you need to use it while you can. Now you best get moving. If you go in the jungle, stay on the trail. Stay away from the city of Zockau, even after the countdown is done. It's all the way to the north. That's where the aliens are. They don't fight fair, so be careful. Last hunting season, one of them killed my brother for no reason. Was working a food stand. Ripped his head right off, and since the guards didn't see it, they did nothing."

"You remember the previous seasons?" I asked, suddenly intrigued.

"I was a human, like you. I was a crawler a very long time ago. I'm usually an attendant at Club Vanquisher, but this season they got me on urban janitor duty. They pulled us all away to work the opening arenas. Everybody you see here was once a crawler. I think. Sometimes it's hard to tell. I gotta say, this is the smallest group I've ever seen. I ain't supposed to be talking like this, though. I get in trouble if I break character. You better get moving."

I nodded. "I'm going. Do you know which hunter killed your brother? Are they back this year?"

Ian visibly shuddered. "Oh, yes. She is here. She is always here. Vrah. A mantis. There's a core group of about 20 regulars who are here every

season. Vrah takes the heads of those she kills and wears them upon her body. Stay away from her, friend. Her death count is in the thousands.” He jerked as if shocked. Without another word, he put his head down and pushed his cart away.

I turned, and I entered through the door.

THE ROOM WAS SUFFOCATINGLY SMALL AND SMELLED OF LYSOL. I WONDERED how some of the bigger crawlers, like Chris, fit in here. There was an old-school television against the wall with a glowing coin slot. Static played on the screen. I had to peel my feet off the floor as I stepped inside. A handwritten, stain-covered sign in English hung on the wall. “Only one person per booth.” I realized with dismay this place was exactly what it looked like.

The screen flickered, and a 10-minute countdown appeared. Words formed on the screen and were also spoken out loud.

Welcome, Crawler.

You have ten minutes to choose your class upgrade. Your class, Compensated Anarchist, is required to pick a specialty. You will have three choices. Choose wisely as your choice will be permanent. If no choice is made, a random choice will be applied. You will retain all of your previous class upgrades.

The robotic, almost emotionless voice was unusual for the dungeon. The three new classes appeared.

Revolutionary.

Guerrilla.

Agent Provocateur.

I couldn’t click or interact with the menu. It just appeared and played on the screen, and I was forced to watch. Mordecai and I had already discussed what the most likely choices would be, and these were all pretty close to what we expected. All three came with an unexpected stat point boost.

Revolutionary.

You are in the streets, in the front against the barrier. You can take a tear gas canister to the chest and keep ticking. When they come to break the line, you're the first to start swinging your fists. This specialty increases your training speed with melee fighting skills and greatly increases your strength.

Revolutionaries receive the following benefits:

An additional +1 to strength upon level up.

+2 to Unarmed Combat.

Immunity to Cloud-Based attacks [already obtained via upgrade patch].

The Blend into the Crowd benefit.

Faster melee training.

The extra strength benefit alone made this one worth it. My Unarmed Combat was similar to Powerful Strike. It currently sat at nine, and it was very difficult to train up. Getting it to 11 would likely give me an additional advantage since it pushed it over ten.

The screen gave a quick rundown of each benefit and skill.

The Blend into the Crowd benefit caused guards to forget who I was once I was out of sight for a while. I could've really used that skill on the third floor. While great, I suspected this sixth floor was the only remaining floor where that skill would be useful.

Guerrilla.

Unlike a Revolutionary who stands front and center, you take your fight to the jungles. You cease to be the face of the revolution and instead become the tip of the sword. Using your superior trap-making and ranged-weapon skills, you kill the enemy before they even know you're there.

Guerrillas receive the following benefits:

An additional +1 to dexterity upon level up.

Access to the Advanced Trap Maker's Workshop.

Plus *Camouflage*. **Copyrighted Material**

+5 to the Crossbow skill.

Faster trap-making training.

I had no desire to learn the crossbow, but it would be a good skill to have especially since Katia was leaving the party. I'd been working on explosive crossbow bolts, but she was afraid to use them. *Camouflage* was a spell similar to what Maggie My and Frank had used to hide themselves from other crawlers. It worked well, but it required you to stay in place. The Trap Maker's Workshop was a specialty crafting table, one that I really wanted to get. However, there was another upgrade I wanted even more.

Agent Provocateur.

The mysterious Agent Provocateur prides himself on being invisible. This class specialty focuses on being the ultimate saboteur. These wily troublemakers put less emphasis on individual traps and fighting in the street and instead focus on mass-casualty bombs and bomb making.

An Agent Provocateur receives the following benefits:

An additional +1 to intelligence upon level up.

+1 skill level to a Sapper's Table.

+2 to Explosives Handling.

Access to the Advanced Bomb Maker's Workshop.

Faster explosives training.

Even though the names were similar, the Trap Maker's Workshop was just a table while the Bomb Maker's Workshop was an entire room. I didn't need this class to get the regular version of either, only the "advanced" version. The advanced Trap Maker table was required to build some of the best magical-based traps, but the Advanced Bomb Maker's Workshop would allow me to precisely tune my explosives and to eventually make much more specialized bombs.

My Explosives Handling was another skill that had stalled out. This would send me over the hump.

We'd pretty much known I'd be given the options of fighting, traps, or explosives. Thankfully, none of them added any penalties to the other two. Mordecai was insistent that I choose the melee option. Still, I hesitated. I wanted that Advanced Bomb Maker's Workshop. I *really* wanted

it, especially since I had a few recipes sitting in my cookbook that required that room to work.

I wasn't a huge fan of that +1 to intelligence, however. Still, the more I thought about it, the more I realized I'd been neglecting that stat for far too long. With my boxers and jacket but before the daily buffs, my intelligence sat at only 17. I always liked to keep a buffer that would allow me to cast *Heal* a few times if I needed. If I wanted any more spells, that stat really needed to go up.

I only had a minute left to choose. The little orange light on the coin slot started blinking as the timer on the screen counted down.

I reached up and touched the filthy screen, clicking directly on the third choice.

"Sorry, Mordecai," I muttered.

Congratulations, Crawler. You are now Carl, the level 47 Agent Provocateur.

ENTERING THE SELVA.

I left through the same door I entered, and I stepped into the pouring rain. Thick foliage filled the area. Bushes with wide kite-sized leaves encircled me. The rain splashed off the fronds, splashing up into my face. It sounded like a thousand little drums. Despite the rain, the trill of animals surrounded me along with the thick buzz of insects, even louder than the rain. The air was so muggy, it was almost choking. My lungs felt heavy and wet after just the first breath.

The rain stopped. Just like that. A single beam of sunlight illuminated a thin trail. Everything continued to drip. The leaves and fronds bobbed up and down. I looked up, searching for the ceiling, but I couldn't see anything through the trees. While the air remained oppressively humid, I caught the scent of flowers.

I turned, and the door I'd come through was an actual porta potty, just sitting there in the jungle. I hesitantly opened the plastic door, and inside was just my regular bathroom. I closed the door and examined my surroundings.

A trail led through the forest. A pair of white dots appeared on my map, only about twenty feet away, but I couldn't see them through the foliage. I already knew what to expect from Donut and Katia. They'd also appeared right here, just outside of town.

I headed toward the two white dots. Both dots had a blue hue around the edges, which meant they were both equipped with magical gear.

A bamboo wall about ten feet high materialized, along with a gate. A pair of guards stood sentry just within, each holding a massive spear

about a foot taller than the tops of the walls. I paused, examining the twin creatures. My initial impression was thin, tall samurais with white-painted faces, but I blinked and saw them for what they really were. Mushroom men. Two arms, two legs, but no neck. What I'd originally thought were conical Asian-style coolie hats were actually the mushroom caps. The slender, flaxen-colored creatures did not acknowledge me at all. Their white-painted, vaguely human faces stared straight forward. Each stood about eight feet tall, completely rigid as I hesitantly approached. Each wore a black but red-highlighted flowing robe tied around their "stalk" just below the face. Water dripped from the tops of their mushroom caps.

Funeral Bell—Level 95.

I would apologize in advance for this description, but an apology would imply that I'm sorry. I'm never sorry!

These mushroom dudes are not fun guys.

Funeral Bells are the guards who are tasked with protecting the smaller settlements of the sixth floor. Unlike the swordsmen guards from the Over City, these creatures have no sense of humor. Also, they are on duty day and night. You should avoid making them angry.

"Hello, gentlemen," I said as I strode toward the gate. Just beyond, I could now see a good-sized town within the circle of the bamboo wall. It buzzed with activity. Multiple elves and treelike creatures walked about. Multistory shops and pubs filled the streets, many attached to trees. Some buildings were in the trees. It was like a German-style village mixed in with a bunch of tree houses. Small furry monkey creatures scuttled about the branches. The spire of a Club Vanquisher rose in the distance against the back wall. The golden tip of the spire gleamed in the fading light.

Entering Medium Dryad Settlement.

I paused to drink it all in and smell the air. This seemed like a beautiful place. A perfect place, if it hadn't been stuck in this hellhole. I thought of my dream. My distant, forever-lost dream to one day get a job as far away from the ocean as possible and work in the forest.

It was a silly dream, really. Getting a gig as a park ranger. I'd never done anything to become one. I'd had plenty of time to maybe go to school. Take classes. Something. I never even knew how one got that sort of job. It didn't matter. Not anymore.

To my left, the first of the two guards fell over. One moment he was just standing there, and then he tipped forward like a tree that had been cut at the base. He crashed in front of me, blocking my path. His mushroom bell of a head smashed when it hit the ground, crumpling in on itself like a can. The giant spear clattered away on the stone street. I just stared. The guard wasn't dead. The debuff **Paralyzed** blazed over its head.

The second funeral bell made a croaking noise and dropped his spear. The guard also fell over.

What the hell?

My instincts took over, and I slammed onto *Protective Shell*.

An angry, hissing noise ripped through the air, and the edge of my spell sparked. *There's something invisible there.*

I tossed a smoke curtain, hoping to see movement through the eddies of smoke. I wanted to toss a small hob-lobber, but I didn't know what direction. NPCs were everywhere. If I hurt one, the guards would come after me. I needed to injure the monster. Most invisible creatures showed themselves once they were hurt.

Behind me, a horn sounded. Shouting rose across the town. My shell sparked again. I still couldn't see what was causing it. I reached down and picked up the massive spear dropped by the guard.

Warning: You receive a penalty when you use bladed weapons.

CARL: I need help. At the village entrance.

I swung the spear like a club in a wide arc at the air just past the edge of the shell, trying to hit the damn thing. What was this? It couldn't be a hunter, as they were all stuck in that other city. It had to be a mob. It'd incapacitated two level 95 guards like it was nothing.

Invisible mobs were always a worry, but Donut's sunglasses could see them. That did me no good now. I had to act fast. I dove into my inven-

tory as I swung back and forth, hitting nothing. The shell would run out in seconds.

I had an idea. Gunpowder. I still had a dozen sacks of the stuff. Each bag was the size of a pillowcase. I dropped the spear, pulled a sack, and tossed it just as the shell dropped around me. The sack spun in the air, black powder spilling out. The sack hit something solid, and the powder formed a shape.

"Shit!" I cried, ducking. It hissed as it sailed right over me. It was smaller than Donut, and it was fast. It hit the ground, shook once, and dislodged the dust, though I could still almost make it out. Behind the invisible creature, a line of funeral bell guards approached, moving slowly.

In that moment, a dot appeared on my map. It wasn't red. It was orange. A pet. But that didn't make sense. The shell shouldn't have worked against pets. *Unless . . .*

Of course, I thought. I should've tried this first. I found my new *Ping* spell on my list, and I cast it.

Pling.

The noise sounded much like a sonar burst from a submarine. It shot forth, and my map flashed. It highlighted every non-mob or crawler in the area. The creature remained right in front of me, ready to pounce again.

"Oof," I cried as the second orange dot slammed me from behind. I felt a pair of hot teeth sink into my neck.

You have been paralyzed!

I crashed to the ground, frozen. I tried to take a healing potion, but it wouldn't let me. This was what they'd done to the guards. They'd paralyzed them.

"I'm coming, Carl!" a voice cried out. Donut.

I couldn't move. A five-minute timer appeared. *Five* minutes. That was a long-ass time. My limbs felt as if they were on fire.

A magic missile shot out. It slammed directly into the first creature, the one I'd doused in gunpowder. It flipped onto its back and screeched as its fur popped and sparkled and the powder cooked off. The creature's invisibility dropped. Its health had gone down by half.

It was a fuzzy, jet-black, ferret-like monster with six legs and a whole bunch of teeth. Its sharp teeth were way too big for its face, jutting every which way. Donut shot it again, leaving it with only a sliver of life. Its fur continued to pop and sizzle like bacon in a pan. Donut shot a third missile at the second monster, the one who'd bitten my neck. This second creature cried out with a hiss. I couldn't see it, but I heard it hit the ground and start to scramble away.

Mongo cried out with a shriek, sailing over my head as he attacked the second monster. Donut was perched on Mongo's back, and she screamed along with her dinosaur as they moved to pursue.

I couldn't move at all. The first injured monster hit the ground a few feet from my face. It was still alive. The creature hissed pitifully at me and started to drag itself closer, using a single leg, its jaw ravening. Smoke rose off the thing. *It's going to bite me. Shit, shit, not the face. Not the face! It's going to bite me in the goddamned face.* The creature was almost dead, yet it still fought, its jaw cracking rapid fire. It sounded like a rat trap snapping over and over as it inched closer and closer.

I tried to send a call for help. The system wouldn't let me.

I examined the creature as I inwardly cringed.

Tootsie. Night Weasel Scout. Level 25.

This is a pet of Hunter Zabiti.

Have you ever seen one of those videos of a bunch of dogs having a pool party? It's usually a scene of pure chaos and joy as the golden retrievers and Labradors and other doggos run circles around the pool, jumping in and out and playing and splashing and having a great, hectic time.

Now imagine your body is the pool, and the Night Weasels are the dogs in this scenario.

Not many pack hunters answer to an alpha who isn't of the same race. It requires ultrahigh charisma to tame a pack of these living meat grinders. It's said a hunter who can control a gang of the invisible Night Weasels can take down prey of any size.

Their method of stalking is simple. A typical gang consists of approximately 20 weasels, including two or three seeker scouts, a group of huntsmen, and a pack leader. The scouts can sniff out prey

from hundreds of kilometers away. They track down and disable the target, rendering it immobile. Once the prey is down, the rest of the weasels move in, their movements coordinated by the gang leader.

I'd describe what happens next, but this is a family show.

A dark, rocky leg slammed down, crushing the pet just as it pulled itself close enough to chomp my nose. Gore splattered onto my face.

Chris. He rumbled something and then stepped over me. Behind me, I could hear Mongo squeal with delight as he chomped on the second weasel.

"There's more coming!" Donut cried. "A lot of them!"

"Drag Carl into the safe room," a new voice called. Katia. "They're hunting him. Let the guards take care of it."

I felt myself rise up into the air, and I realized Chris had picked me up. His lava-rock body burned my skin. He easily lifted me over his shoulder. My entire body was stiff, my hand frozen awkwardly up in the air.

"The guards can't see them. They're all invisible!" Donut yelled. I heard the familiar zap of a spell being cast, followed by a second spell. A weasel screeched. Donut had raised the pet from the dead and cast *Clockwork Triplicate* on it.

"Get 'em!" Donut yelled as I was bodily removed from the area. Chris strode into a pub. I caught sight of a treelike creature looking at me as we moved into the personal space. My head banged into the entranceway as we went through the door. He unceremoniously dumped me onto the couch. I faced up into the air, still unable to move. I sat there, not doing anything as the timer ticked down.

I felt something climb up onto me. A fuzzy face looked down at me, scowling just as the timer counted down to zero. My limbs still burned, but I could move them.

I looked up at the furry, buck-toothed, teddy-bear-like face glaring down at me.

"You had to go and challenge all the hunters. Now look what happened," Mordecai said, trying to sound angry. "And that doesn't look like a melee class to me."

I burst out laughing. I couldn't help it.

Mordecai—Pocket Kuma. Level 50.

Manager of Crawler Princess Donut.

This is a Non-Combatant NPC.

Wow! This pint-sized fuzz ball is adorable!

The rare Pocket Kuma is a magic-infused half-fairy creature originally designed as a pet for the elite High Elf royal court. When it was discovered these creatures were intelligent, High Elf King Finian, of course, ordered them all executed. Only a few of the little rascals managed to escape into the jungle.

A Kuma is a type of bear. A Pocket Kuma is a different sort of creature, though they are distantly related. You take a small bear, crossbreed it with a capybara spirit, pick out the runt of the litter, and then breed it further down with a sugar glider. The resulting bug-eyed creature is what you see before you now.

They can't fight for shit. They can barely walk. But holy shit are they disgustingly cute.

I bet they smush really well.

He was a fuzzy, brown-and-white, knee-height, chubby, bipedal bear thing with elf ears and a monkey tail. His eyes were ridiculously huge, making him look like a baby. He had a pair of buck teeth that didn't help the illusion. The tail waved back and forth angrily.

"Laugh it up," Mordecai said, pissed. "Get it out of your system."

"Your voice," I said, falling off the couch as I continued to howl, causing him to yelp and leap off of me. He used his tail to keep himself from lurching back. I had tears rolling down my cheeks. "Holy shit. Will you be able to work at the alchemy table like this? Do you want me to build a booster chair for you?"

"Go fuck yourself, Carl," Mordecai said. He leaped across the room and landed on the kitchen table, huffing. Chris stood nearby, watching impassively.

Donut and Katia finally returned to the room. "The guards used their *Poison Cloud* attack to . . ." Katia began. She saw me there on the ground, laughing. A grin spread across her face, and she also started to laugh. "He really is funny-looking, isn't he?"

Mordecai glowered from the kitchen table. He jumped sideways,

sailing through the air and landing on the ground in front of his room. He tried to storm in, but he couldn't reach the doorknob. He had to jump up and grab it. He dangled helplessly for a moment before the door opened on its own. He dropped to the floor, went inside, and slammed the door.

"You shouldn't make fun of someone just because they're small and adorable, Carl," Donut said. She leaped onto the couch and looked down at me as I sat up and wiped my eyes. "I'm small and adorable, and I just saved your life."

"You're right," I said, still laughing. "Thank you, by the way. All of you. It was just so . . . unexpected. They really screwed him over this time." I took a moment to compose myself. "Did the guards get all the weasel things?"

"I'm not sure," Donut said. "I started hitting them with low-powered magic missiles, which made them visible. Eventually one of the guards spewed Poison Cloud, and we had to run."

"They were hunting you, Carl," Katia added. "They were just the first. There will be more. A lot more."

"I know," I said, sobering. "When the hunters are released, all hell is going to break loose."

We all sat there in silence for a few moments. I was so damn tired.

There was a knock at the door. The door to the personal space.

"What in god's name?" Katia asked. "How . . . Who is that?"

"Ahh, yes," I said, standing up and striding toward the door. "It's a delivery."

"Of what?" Katia asked.

"Collateral," I answered.

"I WOULD LIKE SOME TIME ALONE WITH MY CLIENT," MY NEW ATTORNEY had said the moment he appeared in the room. I'd just asked for a lawyer, Orren had stopped everything, and a moment later, a new creature appeared, standing next to the liaison.

"Alone?" Orren asked, grunting with amusement. "This is my office. I will turn off the feed to the others, but you'll have to suffer my presence."

I was so astonished that asking for an attorney had actually worked that I barely registered this exchange. Everything I'd read implied lawyers didn't become a thing until the tenth floor.

I studied the newcomer. The system didn't give much information.

Quasar.

Advocate of Crawler #4,122.

The small creature glowered at Orren as I examined him. I was pretty certain the alien wasn't really in the room with us. I wouldn't know for certain unless I touched him.

He was a gray alien. I knew from reading descriptions in the cookbook what this creature was. A Nullian, though they were mostly just called "the Null." I'd seen their kind once or twice in talk show audiences, but they seemed rare. This race was similar to the much taller Forsoothed, but this guy was only about four and a half feet tall. He looked just like a stereotypical cartoon Area 51 alien with the gray skin, large eyes, and bulbous head. He wore a tan suit with a tie. The tie had

what appeared to be an image of a Nullian hula girl on it. The hula girl gyrated back and forth.

Unlike the halting speech of their soother big brothers, this guy had more of a gritty, rapid-fire New York sort of accent that was somehow even more unnerving.

"You're gonna have to step out of the room," Quasar said to Orren. "The rules are clear. I get to speak to my client alone."

"I will turn off my auditory receptors. How is that?" Orren said. "I'm not leaving. You and your client are welcome to step outside yourselves, but I wouldn't recommend it. There are Desperado Club entrances in Zockau."

The threat was clear. There'd be hunters out there on the dance floor.

Quasar sighed dramatically. "All right, but if you do listen in, the sys AI will know, and we'll file a grievance. That last one we filed didn't go so great for your coworker, now did it? Also, get those items out of here. My client isn't going to touch them until we got an agreement."

"You have five minutes," Orren said as he gathered up the watches and winding box. They disappeared. He reached up and touched the side of his head, presumably to turn his headphones or whatever off. Nothing appeared to happen.

Quasar made a spinning motion with a long finger, indicating he wanted Orren to turn his chair around. The liaison grumbled but complied. The fishbowl-headed creature produced what looked like a rubber ball and started bouncing it off the back wall, deftly catching it each time it ricocheted back toward him.

The Null watched Orren for a moment and then shrugged. He moved to the front of the desk and leaned against it, facing me. He pulled out an item that looked like a vape pen, and inhaled. The smoke pixelated as it spread away, confirming he was a holo. "Okay, buddy. We gotta be quick. You are balls deep in the wrong hole, and Mom is pulling into the driveway. You get me?"

"I . . . What?" I asked, trying to make sense of the metaphor. I couldn't take my eyes off the alien hula girl on his tie. The goddamned thing winked at me. "I . . . So you're a lawyer? Do you work like a regular lawyer from Earth?"

“Look, pal. If you’re going to be a babbling idiot this whole time, we’re going to have a very short courtship. I have no clue how lawyers work from your world, but in my experience, they’re mostly the same everywhere. We’re in a hurry, so we need to get past the first-date finger-bang jitters and move straight to the part where we argue about me smoking too much. Got it?”

A million questions swirled in my brain. I just nodded.

“First off, don’t buy anything this worm head is trying to sell. Most Valtay are tricky fuckers, but the naked ones are the worst. If they ain’t riding a body, that’s usually a sign there’s something wrong with them. And if they’re a liaison . . . yeah. Growing up, you ever know a kid who’d rat you out to the adults just because it wet his receptors? That’s the type of fuck stick who becomes a liaison. Fuck those guys.” He took a deep drag from his vape pen. “You hear me? Liaisons are all fucks.” He raised his voice at that, testing to see if there was a reaction from Orren. There wasn’t. “From now on, anytime you get hauled in front of one of these chodes, say nothing except ‘I want to talk to my lawyer.’ Got it? And for the sake of his left tit, don’t touch anything until I get there. You did good. They were trying to get you to pick up the artifact while it was under administrative hold. It would’ve deleted the item.”

“Jesus,” I said, looking at the spot on the desk where the gate pieces had been sitting.

“Yeah, that mudskipper admin guy was having a conniption. Those idiots actually want you to keep the artifact even though you fucked them over. I gotta tell you, pal. I’m moderately impressed.”

“So, are you my lawyer from now on?”

“That’s right. My name is Quasar, by the way. I am your attorney. Nobody else’s. So I ain’t representing the cat or the weird lady who turned into a shovel. Just you.”

“And your job is to represent me? My best interests?”

“Best interests?” He made a scoffing noise. “When a crawler hits the tenth floor, he gains a teeny, tiny bit of autonomy over his fate. He’s officially a citizen of the Syndicate. The moment anybody becomes a citizen, the Syndicate bends them over and fucks them. I can’t stop you from getting fucked. But I am the condom. You guys have condoms on your world? Of course you do. Everybody has condoms. Your ass is

gonna hurt no matter what, but at least you won't have tryptic genital mites after."

"And what do you get out of this?" I asked.

"What do I get out of this? Tits, pal. You mean, besides a headache? I get credits. Not a lot. But it's enough to keep me in receptor tugs and gelatin swabs. But in case you've been living on a backwater planet, you might not have noticed I'm a Null. Not too many outfits hire my kind. So here we are."

I was still trying to decide if I was better off with or without this guy. I suspected I wasn't going to be given a choice. "What's to stop you from getting bribed by the Skull Empire to fuck me over?"

He barked with laughter. "I love the way you think, pal. You humans are almost as paranoid as my people." He took another hit from his strange vape. The device pulsed with each drag. "You mean, besides the sense of ethics and pride I have from working and studying for twenty cycles straight just so I can scabble for scraps by representing condemned assholes such as yourself? The short answer is, there ain't nothing stopping some interested third party from attempting to bribe me. The good news for you is that you're already fucked. To screw you over, I just need to do nothing. So if I'm doing the bare minimum, that should be a sign to you that King Rust hasn't been whispering sweet into my ears. Yet. And not that you'll believe me, but I do have my pride. The day I take a bribe from some pig-faced imperialist fuck is the day I wither."

"Our manager said lawyers don't usually come into play until the tenth floor. Why now?" I asked.

"Look. Is this really what you want to spend your time talking about? Your manager is correct. But most crawlers usually aren't subject to liaison action, either. Let alone a meeting where the subminister of the Native Species Agency takes an interest. There are a lot of moving parts of the Syndicate government, and there is a bureaucrat and or a committee for each and every one of those parts. And each one of those suits and committees is beholden to rules and laws and regulations that can date back tens of thousands of cycles. And all these moving parts and interlocking teeth are all grinding their way forward through time, trying to gain some sort of upward momentum. It's a perpetual motion

machine that will only stop once the universe implodes in on itself. And how is that machine greased? The universe's four lubricants. Blood, tears, taxes, and lawyers."

By the time I realized he hadn't actually answered my question, he was already moving on to the next subject.

"But as much as I'd like to bore myself to death with pointless questions, we need to deal with the issue before us now. Nobody wants you to break the game. They're not allowed to take your artifact. Their solution is simple. You can just fuck off and die, and if you were a regular crawler, you'd already be goblin kibble. The good news is, you got something important. Leverage. Your sponsorship and entertainment value offsets the damage you might cause. It's Remex the Grand all over again. So the mudskippers would prefer if we come to an amicable solution. The problem is this liaison fuck sitting right here pretending to be deaf. If he determines we're at an impasse, he has limited authority to create solutions. And these rat fucks crave power so much, they'll manufacture problems just so they can take out their magic dick wands and start zapping shit."

"So what do we do?" I asked, my mind swimming. I still couldn't tell if this guy knew what he was doing or not, and that terrified me. "I don't want to give up the gate. I need it."

"We'll come up with a proposal," he said. He put his vape away and suddenly had a tablet in his hand. "You sure you don't want to give it up? I bet I could get you a deal. Too bad we ain't on the tenth floor. I'd probably be able to get you something really sweet."

It hit me, then. This was the guy who'd help negotiate my exit from the dungeon if I made it down that low. I felt ill.

"We're not selling it," I said. "Orren said I could have it back on the ninth floor. I don't know how it works in the universe, but in my world, if someone is borrowing something, they usually give collateral. Something they won't want to lose."

Quasar grinned. "Now we're talking."

"OH, MY GOD, SLEDGIE!" DONUT CRIED AFTER I OPENED THE DOOR. "What're you doing here?" The four cretins: Bomo, the Sledge, Clay-ton, and Very Sullen all lumbered into the room. The moment they entered,

a new door appeared on the wall next to Mordecai's chambers. It was labeled **Mercenary Quarters**. The four white dots blinked and then changed color, obtaining a green cross.

"We received four free mercenaries. They're part of the package deal we negotiated in exchange for temporarily giving up the Gate of the Feral Gods."

Donut jumped to the Sledge's shoulder, and the rock monster gave her an affectionate pat. Chris came to stand before Clay-ton. The lava-rock monster was almost the exact same size as the granite-colored NPC. Chris made a noncommittal grunt, and Clay-ton answered with a similar noise.

Mongo, who'd never met any of these guys, started running in circles around them, hopping up and down with excitement.

"Bomo and Sledge stay with us, Very Sullen goes with Katia, and Clay-ton will stay with Chris."

"How are these guys collateral?" Katia asked. "What if something, uh, happens to them?"

"We have them on floors six, seven, and eight. That's it. If they die, they will regenerate, but not until the next floor. You guys should bring Clay-ton and Sullen with you when you venture out, but Bomo and the Sledge are too valuable to risk, so they're staying in here."

"What?" Donut asked. "Sledgie can't go adventuring with us? Why not?"

The Sledge made a disappointed noise.

"Did they give you the spells?" I asked Bomo.

The rock monster rumbled. "Yes. The Sledge has the second."

I nodded. Excellent.

"Sorry, guys. We need to keep these two safe," I said. "Since we were losing the gate, I wanted to be able to replicate two of the gate's abilities. The first thing I asked for was a teleport spell, but they wouldn't give it to me. Not directly. They didn't want to give me anything that I could just keep after we got the artifact back."

"They really said you could have it back when you hit the ninth floor?" Katia asked.

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"Yeah. They seem to like the idea of me being able to sow chaos during faction wars."

“Or they think you’re going to do something really stupid between now and then and die first,” Donut said.

Katia walked up and patted Very Sullen on the arm. This guy was Katia’s regular bodyguard when she entered the club. The rock monster’s face was thinner than that of the other two, and his eyes were tiny emotionless dots. I’d never heard this one talk. “Wait, so these guys can teleport now?” Katia asked.

“Not your guy, but yes,” I said. “Sort of. They agreed to give me a mercenary upgrade and access to four bodyguards. Then they gave two of them extra spells. Bomo now has a level 15 spell called *Teleport to Stairwell*. We can pick a stairwell from a list and teleport there. It has a ridiculous cooldown. Like twenty-five days. Still it’s a pretty powerful spell because it lists all the exits on the entire floor. It’s not something they want me to have access to later on, so it’s in their best interest to make sure we get the gate back.”

“And the other spell?” Katia asked.

“The Sledge’s spell is also teleportation, and it’s even more impressive. This one was my lawyer’s idea.”

“Your lawyer?” Katia asked, looking at me sharply. “Back up. What?”

“Yeah, the lawyer thing is a long story. But he suggested it. It’s a spell called *Zerzura*.”

“*Zerzura*?” Donut asked. “Sledgie, you got a new spell? I just got one, too! Actually, I got a bunch of new ones. I am now a singer, and my voice casts spells. Do you want to hear one?”

The Sledge rumbled happily.

“What does his spell do?” Katia quickly asked, cutting Donut off.

“It’s . . .” I trailed off, finally noticing Katia’s level. So much had happened since the end of the last floor, I hadn’t even thought about the aftermath of what we’d done. “Holy shit, Katia. What the hell?”

She grinned. “I was wondering when you were going to notice. I finally got my base constitution over 100. Got something called Steely Skin. The lower my health, the thicker my flesh.”

Katia had been level 44 when she opened the Gate of the Feral Gods onto the ninth-floor city of Larracos, sending a frothing mass of sharks

and jellyfish flooding into the metropolis. Apparently she'd gotten a bunch of experience for it. She was now level 52.

"Did you get any good gear?"

"I got a few boxes, including a Platinum Asshole's Box. It gave me a gambling chip for the Desperado Club and an upgrade to my Find Crawler skill. Also . . ." She trailed off as if she was about to say something but changed her mind. "You still didn't answer my question. What does the Sledge's new spell do? What was it called? *Zerzura*?"

My hand found my necklace. I fingered the small charm with the yellow gem. It was warm to the touch. I thought of the crazy story Quasar told me about Remex the Grand and what he'd done with the *Zerzura* spell.

It was glorious, Quasar had said. Shame how it ended for Remex. They made us study the exit deal he made in school. But the mudskippers cleaned up that season. It was a real windfall. You ask for this spell, and they'll fall over themselves to give it to you. And you want to know the beautiful part? All those other pricks won't interfere. Everyone will want you to pull it off. All the factions. All the fans. The showrunners. The AI. Everybody. That spell always leads to carnage. Everybody likes carnage when it's not them.

I SLEPT TWO HOURS AND CAME OUT TO FIND MORDECAI STANDING ON the kitchen table quietly conversing with Chris and Clay-ton. The other three cretins were leaned over my *Frogger* cabinet.

If Mordecai was still pissed at me for laughing at him earlier, he didn't show it now. Which was good because I had to work really hard not to bust out again.

"We need to purchase some upgrades for the space," Mordecai said, "But I think we should wait until after the recap. If they're really going to open up the guild system, I want to know how it works first. They've tried this a few times over the cycles, and it's different every time. There are multiple upgrades we need."

"Okay," I said, moving to the food box and dialing in a breakfast sandwich. "There's something I want to buy right now if we can afford it."

"The bomber's studio?" he asked. "It's not too expensive, and that venison box had what, 300,000 gold in it?"

"Yeah," I said. "The *advanced* bomber's studio." Between me and Donut, we now had just about a million gold. I had a suspicion we were going to need it all.

I eyed the small shrine in the corner of the room, bubbling merrily. It was a disc and a cup. When I was in the room, the cup boiled over with water. Apparently it stopped when I wasn't around. I still needed to do my daily blood drop into it. Thanks to my new religion, I also had to drop 5% of my "looted" gold into the cup. A number appeared floating over the shrine, helpfully telling me exactly how much I owed. Unfortunately, the shrine's definition of "looted" included the gold I'd received from surviving the previous floor while on the top-ten list. I'd dropped the gold in there when Donut wasn't looking. She'd noticed anyway and complained for five minutes straight.

"It'll probably be okay if you buy the bomber room right now along with the magic studio, which will be expensive. We'll get them as soon as Donut is ready."

Katia emerged from her room and moved to the food box. She and Chris along with their two new mercenaries were going to head out on their own after her daily training. Louis and Firas had managed to recover the flying house, the *Twister*, from the changeling refugees. A group of crawlers—including team Meadow Lark, Bautista's team, and several others—was meeting up in a large settlement that was a few hours south of here. Katia wanted to make sure she met up with them before the hunters were unleashed.

She was going to remain in the party until after we figured out the guild system, which was fine by me. I still hadn't fully come to terms with her leaving the group, but I'd already decided it was for the best, especially after considering what I was planning on doing today.

Donut emerged from the space, all poofed out and clean. Mongo padded behind her. She hummed the theme to *The A-Team*. "Carl, I think I've figured out the melody I'm going to use for my *Standing Ovation* spell."

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"Great," I said. I exchanged a look with Mordecai.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go buy those two rooms."

"YOU GUYS BE SAFE. STAY ON THE TRAIL," I SAID.

"We're taking the caravan. We'll be okay," Katia said as she, Chris, Clay-ton, and Very Sullen exited the safe room. "We'll see you guys later."

"Bye, Katia! Bye, Chris!" Donut said. She was attempting to be enthusiastic, but I could hear the sadness in her voice. Katia leaned over and kissed Donut on the head. Donut sniffed.

Mongo squawked mournfully.

"See you tonight," I said.

Katia held my eyes. "Don't do anything stupid."

"I won't," I lied.

As soon as they left, Donut and Mordecai were going to hit the town and go shopping. There was no Desperado Club here, and it wasn't yet safe for me to attempt to enter Club Vanquisher, so they had to rely on the local shops for the supplies they needed.

We only had 100K gold left after purchasing the two new rooms, and we needed to find a *Shield* spell book for Donut. Mordecai also wanted to find an item with something called a *Golden Throat* enchantment, which was apparently the dungeon's version of auto-tune.

Donut's new Bard class didn't use mana. All she needed to do was sing, and the bard spells would be cast. That was great, but there was a problem. A big problem. The song had to be in key. And until we found that item, her new class was useless.

Why?

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Because Donut sounded like a helium-drunk cat being crushed by a steamroller when she attempted to sing—that was why. And even

though she wasn't that bad of a dancer, when it came to making a song emerge from that tone-deaf gullet of hers, her rhythm was that of a drunk three-legged donkey trying to negotiate its way down a set of ice-covered stairs.

There were two types of songs. For some of the spells, a group of lyrics appeared floating in front of her in midair, and she had to sing the words, karaoke-style. She had to make up the melody herself. Apparently it didn't matter what the melody was, as long as it was consistently in key.

For two of the spells, however, it was different. She'd select the spell, and the melody would start playing on its own. She had to make up lyrics on the fly. It didn't appear to matter what the lyrics were as long as they, again, were sung in key.

I didn't know which one was worse.

Not that it stopped Donut from attempting to cast them. Over and over and over again.

The first three spells were party-support spells: *Standing Ovation*, which increased everyone's dexterity and made our regular spells more powerful. *Entourage*, which created multiple illusionary versions of each party member, and *Encore*, which was a *Heal Party* spell that could also remove multiple debuffs. Mordecai was pretty stoked about that *Encore* spell.

She could manage to cast all three of these if she sang the lyrics in a steady monotone voice. Each song was a relatively short paragraph. Unfortunately, the spell's power was based on how well she sang it. So until she got that auto-tune buff, the spells were pretty weak.

The other two songs were offensive spells, and neither was going to be feasible for now. One was a psionic attack, and the other was an Elle-style ice attack.

Donut had also received one additional regular spell, thanks to her Spell Book of the Floor Club. A spell called *Laundry Day*, which removed an item of armor from an opponent and caused it to fall to the ground. The higher the level of the spell, the more powerful it was. At level five, she'd be able to remove breastplates and other chest armor. At level 10, she could strip an opponent bare. At 15, she could cast on multiple opponents at once.

Thanks to our new magic workshop, we could train our spells up much like with the training room. Unlike the regular training room, however, only one person could use it at a time. The room was also required for some of Mordecai's higher-level potions, but I wasn't clear yet on how all that worked. Mordecai had already mapped out a strict schedule. He had Donut pushing her *Magic Missile*, which had stalled out at level 11 despite her constantly using it, and me working on my *Fear* spell, which hadn't moved past level five.

I'd sent a message to Donut and told her to work on *Laundry Day* instead. She didn't question it.

"What if something happens to Katia and we can't protect her?" Donut asked after they left. "Mongo would never forgive me if something happened to her."

I scratched Donut behind the ear. "Her staying away from us is probably for the best right now."

"Come on, Donut," Mordecai said. "Let's go shopping."

The Sledge moved to follow them out the door, but Mordecai held up a fuzzy hand. "Not this time, big guy."

"It's okay, Sledgie," Donut said. "You stay here. We won't be gone long."

The cretin grunted and then turned back to the *Frogger* game, which we'd had to shove over and place next to the television screens. With the addition of the two new rooms, the wide space was starting to look much more cramped. We could still fit one or two new rooms depending on the size, but anything after that would require us to figure out how to unlock the second level of the space.

I made a beeline toward my new room, the advanced bomber's studio. The small room was only about ten feet wide, but it was long, making me feel like I was standing in a private bowling alley.

Most of the work still happened at my sapper's table, for now. This new room had two separate functions.

The first was that I could now virtually "copy" a design or an existing explosive and bring it over to the studio, where I could place it and set it off. There were no actual explosions involved inside the studio. Everything in the testing area was virtual, like it was a game. I could create a miniature virtual person or group of people or even a whole

village, place the bomb, set it off, and see what would happen. I could pause the explosion and see what way it would blow based on its position. I could use the information to go back and tweak the design or the method of delivery and fine-tune the yield.

The system wasn't perfect, however. Sometimes it gave a range of possibilities. The cookbook stressed this point. Just because it blew in a certain way in the simulation wasn't a guarantee it'd actually go up that way. There were literally thousands of small environmental factors that could affect the way an explosive went up.

Thanks to this being an "advanced" bomber's studio, I could also test bombs and other incendiaries that I didn't actually have. I could build a virtual bomb and see if it'd work. For now I could only use items I had in my inventory, but hopefully that'd change after I gained some more experience.

The room's second function was the crafting table in the very back. One where I could tweak actual explosives. This was a specialty workbench, and at level one, it wasn't as good as my level five sapper's table in terms of building explosives from scratch. At least not yet.

However, the table was designed to be able to examine and dissect explosives, and it was absolutely required to engineer certain large-scale bombs.

I stood at the new bench now, shaking. I, for the very first time since I'd grabbed the thing, took out the Carl's Doomsday Scenario bomb and placed it onto the table. The small bench reshaped itself to accommodate the glass reaper case, which glowed like a miniature sun. The bomb was a microsecond from exploding, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. But I could examine it. I copied it using the bomber studio interface so I'd be able to play with it safely using the simulator. I placed the bomb back into my inventory, my hands still trembling.

One day I would use that thing. One day.

Okay, I said to myself. Quit screwing around. Back to work.

We had 21 hours until the hunters would be released and about six or seven until darkness descended on the jungle. I pulled a stick of hobgoblin dynamite and started to carefully slice it into twenty different pieces.

THEIR SHOPPING TRIP HAD BEEN MOSTLY A BUST, BUT MORDECAI HAD purchased a ton of herbs and supplies from the town's vendors. He'd even picked some plants from the ground. But they hadn't found a *Shield* spell book nor any magical gear with a *Golden Throat* enchantment. There still wasn't anything good on the shop interface, either, though that would change over the next few days.

Mordecai wanted us to go out and start looking for some special type of small mushroom that only appeared at night. "These will appear at the base of the trees in town, so don't wander out into the jungle. It's just like the third floor. Stay out of alleyways. Keep a lookout for more of those pets. There's a caravan coming through town in the morning, and I think you should get on it. It heads deeper south and ends up in a larger settlement than this one. From there you can start building a defensive zone and grinding. The *Vengeance of the Daughter* production is probably going to rope you into something pretty soon, too, assuming the show hasn't been canceled yet, so I want to make sure you're in a good position for when that happens. But for right now, I need those mushrooms."

"Yeah, we'll be on the lookout for your herbs. We're going to head out now," I said. "Bomo, can you come?"

"You sure you wanna bring him?" Mordecai asked.

"We're keeping Sledge locked up," I said. "Bomo is worth the risk."

"DO YOU THINK THE HUNTER GUYS CAN SEE WHAT WE'RE DOING?" Donut asked as we stepped outside into the town. It smelled like rain. It was already pitch-black out here. A pair of tree creatures strode by, not acknowledging our presence. A pair of monkeys rode in their upper branches. Donut moved to cast *Torch*, but I waved her down. "Like, can they cheat and have their friends watch the show from outside and follow us and then tell them where we are at all times?"

"Well, in theory, people outside the dungeon aren't supposed to talk to those inside, even the tourists, but we all know that's bullshit. The

fact they sued us for our plan on the previous floor means they're obviously watching our every move. I think it's safe to say they'll eventually know what we're doing. I don't think they have a direct line, especially since the Desperado Club access got all messed up for those on the ninth floor. But they'll still know eventually. So any plan we have needs to be kept as much of a secret as we can make it. By the way, do me a favor really quick. Can you put Mongo away?"

"We'll need a plan first before we can keep it a secret," Donut said. "Mongo, come on. Into the cage. No, put that down. I think that's mushroom poop. Come on, do what Mommy says. Good boy! Good boy, Mongo!" She returned her gaze to me. "But it's nice not to have to be all top secret for a day or two. It'll give me time to practice my singing. Why did I just put Mongo away?"

"Don't practice your singing in town," I said, putting my hand up on Donut to scratch her. "We don't want to set the mushroom guys' aggro off. Also, I'd like to apologize for what's about to happen."

"Apologize for what? Aren't we hunting for herbs?"

"We're going hunting all right. This is gonna go quick. Get ready."

CARL: Bomo. Cast your spell. Send us to the stairwell in Zockau.

Do it now.

<Note added by Crawler Forkith. 20th Edition>

Based on some of these previous passages and my own observations, I think I've put together a good idea about the layout of the Hunting Grounds. They say it's the same every time, but that is not true. Herot spoke of those tall creatures who bellow into the sky each night, rumbling the world. Azin described the kite birds always flying overhead. Ikicha wrote of the ice and cold weather. None of those are here, not in this iteration. Most of the world is jungle. That is a constant. But the monsters within change, so be careful taking advice from previous editions of this book regarding this floor.

However, the map appears to be the same each time. The “political landscape” is the same, too. It is a round world with a single named metropolis and dozens of other unnamed cities of varying sizes like on the third floor. This world, according to the story, was half metropolis and half jungle before Scolopendra's nine-tier attack, whatever the hell that even means. After the attack, most everyone died, and the jungle ran rampant, swallowing the ruins. However, after a few hundred years, the survivors have started to rebuild. The named city is always in the same place. In the north, near the edge of the map and overlooking a clear valley filled with lower-level monsters, placed there so the hunters can train while the crawlers make their way through the lower floors. All the way to the southeast is the high elf city, which is in the thickest part of the jungle. Stay away from the elves. They are powerful magic users, and they attack everyone. Even the hunters stay away.

Before the cataclysm, this world was rich. The city was under control of a multi-race council. The jungle was under control of the high

elves. They hated each other, but there was mostly peace. A river separated the two districts.

That river still winds through the map. There are bridges in regular intervals. Stay out of the water. The naiads live within and are just as bad as the elves.

The named city—whose name appears to be different each time—will always be under control of a single race. It doesn't matter which one. The moment the hunters arrive, one of them always hunts down and kills the NPC leader, which gives them control. I think it's the only city they're allowed to do this in. Otherwise they'd have control of them all by the time we arrive. Either way, once the floor opens, the low-level valley will be hunted to extinction, the existing government of the named city will have been wiped out, and one of the hunters will have set themselves up as Grand, the title given to mayors of the biggest settlements.

Stay out of the big city. The guards will attack you on sight.

"IT CAST," BOMO RUMBLED. THE SPELL WOULD TAKE THIRTY SECONDS to activate.

"Carl, Carl, what are we doing? Are you crazy?" Donut cried as I checked my gear.

I slipped the Ring of Divine Suffering onto my finger. This was the ring Frank Q had given me. All of my stats rose by 5%. The way the ring worked was slightly different depending on the floor one was on, but the end result was the same. If I marked someone—either a crawler or a "non-dungeon generated combatant"—and then I killed them, I would receive +1 to one of my stat points, based on their current highest stat. That bonus would increase the more I killed.

The problem was, once I marked somebody, I would receive a nasty debuff that wouldn't go away until I killed my mark. I wouldn't be able to heal. I knew from the cookbook that debuff was called "Left to Fester."

I examined the ring's properties to make sure it was working as intended.

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Current Marks killed: 0.

Current Mark benefit: +1 Stat Point.

Current floor cooldown: There is no cooldown on this floor.

Marks form instantly on this floor.

Happy hunting.

"Fifteen seconds," Bomo rumbled.

I looked down at the second toe ring on my left foot, the one I'd gotten for getting stepped on by Grull. The ring came with two benefits. I'd used one of them, Sticky Feet, quite a bit. The toe ring had a second ability that I'd yet to try.

"Carl," Donut said, "I really think we should be discussing our plan right about now."

"When we hit two seconds, Predator," I said.

"That's not a plan, Carl. That's a move."

"We'll be okay. Just stay with me. It'll go fast."

Predator was one of our newer moves. I'd been collecting a lot of invisibility potions recently, and I made sure Donut always had a few of them. The move was simple. As soon as I called "Predator," we both went invisible, and Donut switched to infrared vision using her sunglasses. We no longer talked out loud, and she remained on my shoulder, constantly calling out anything she could see that I might not.

"Sorry about this, Bomo," I said. I smashed an invisibility potion against the side of the NPC's head. The rock monster disappeared.

I drank down an invisibility potion just as the timer hit zero. Donut did the same.

We blinked, I had the now-familiar tug of nausea, and then we were there.

Entering Zockau.

DONUT: CARL, IF WE DON'T DIE, MORDECAI IS GOING TO KILL YOU.

We appeared in a quaint little park with manicured green grass. A circle of trees and a well-maintained hedge surrounded the large stairwell. The exit to the seventh floor was right there, and I could feel the heat coming off it. Cobblestones led up to the glowing exit. Light shone up into the air like a searchlight, rising about fifty feet before stopping

against the artificial ceiling. Nighttime had fully descended on the area, but it was still early evening. There was nobody in the small park, but I could see multiple dots on my map, a mix of white, red, orange, and a new color. Purple. The white dots were the regular NPCs, the red appeared to be the city guards, the orange were the pets, and the purple were the hunters. I could only see three of the hunters. None were close.

The city guards were not the mushroom guys, but tall, muscled humanoid bears in heavy armor. A group of them marched down the street and away.

Nobody appeared to know we were here. Yet.

A large statue stood nearby, also depicting one of the bear-headed humanoids. A little plaque described who it was, but we didn't have time to stop and read. Commercial buildings surrounded the town square, giving the impression of a downtown area of a small American town from the 1950s. Electric-style lights circled the park in regular intervals, giving off a dim yellow glow. Directly across from us and on the other side of the street was a line of pubs all in a row. Raucous laughter emanated from the window of one. Music played from another. The distant *thwum* of a spell being cast shot through the night, followed by a crash and even more distant laughter.

As I watched, a purple dot stumbled from the doorway of one pub. He stopped, fell to his knees, and started vomiting on the street. This was a tall, lanky alien race I didn't recognize in the dark. He pulled himself up and stumbled into another bar.

Standing at the end of the line of pubs was what I was looking for. The tall, opulent entrance to the Desperado Club. The entrance was three stories tall, and twin spotlights swept back and forth in front of the building. In the Over City, the club entrance had a 1920s style that clashed with the medieval vibe of the village. This time, the club's architecture fit with the town's aesthetic. Instead of a 1920s art deco, this was more of a 1950s mid-century modern. A concrete archway covered the entrance, flanked by an angular façade with wings on either side, like eyebrows, almost giving the impression that the club was a massive drive-in diner. The sign "The Desperado Club: So Fun It Hurts" blinked, the words spelled out with dozens of little light bulbs. A statue of the dagger logo spun atop the building.

CARL: Bomo, walk toward that bar at the end of the street. The little one with the broken sign. That one appears to be mostly empty, and it's the only one that's a real safe room. Stay in the shadows until your invisibility runs out. Once it does, just casually walk inside and go straight to the personal space. If you're attacked, run. Do you understand?

BOMO: Understand.

I couldn't actually see the rock monster, but I heard him clomp off through the grass. There were dozens of NPC cretins on this floor. Nobody would notice him unless they stopped and read his description, which said he was a member of the Royal Court of Princess Donut.

I pulled the multi-launcher from my inventory and placed it on the grass. I had 25 of the surefire homing missiles in the box, all lined up in a five-by-five grid, pointing directly upward. Their targets were already programmed in. These were all single-stage rockets, so they were much smaller than the ones we used on the previous floor. The entire box was the size of a poker table. I placed it right against the inside of the closest hedge. I marked the timed trigger using my Remote Detonator skill.

CARL: Donut, if this goes south, just jump down the stairs. We'll regroup on the seventh floor.

DONUT: IT'S ALREADY GOING SOUTH, CARL. WE DON'T ATTACK THE MAIN BAD GUYS IN THE VERY BEGINNING. THAT'S NOT HOW THIS IS SUPPOSED TO WORK.

I examined my map. There was a total of seven pubs, not including the Desperado. Each one was its own separate building with a small alleyway between them. The one Bomo was walking toward was the smallest. Only that one was a true safe room, though all seven would have entrances to our personal space within. The largest of the regular pubs on this street was called the Ladies Love It, and from within this bar came the loudest music and most laughing. The sign was a large wooden placard depicting a grinning bald man with "Ladies Love It" tattooed over his upper lip. A spotlight shone directly on the leering

mouth. This bar was not a real safe room. It stood right next door to the Desperado, which curved around the next corner.

DONUT: THEY ALREADY KNOW WE'RE HERE. THE GUARDS' DOTS ARE RED.

CARL: That just means the mayor of the town has been killed by one of the hunters, and they have ordered them to attack crawlers on sight.

DONUT: I HOPE YOU HAVE A PLAN TO GET US OUT OF HERE.

I took a step toward the row of bars.

WARNING. DEAD MAN WALKING!

I cursed, and I stopped, my foot hovering an inch off the ground. I retracted my foot and then crouched down. I focused, and the problem became evident. A haphazard minefield of traps lay scattered about, filling the park that surrounded the stairwell. There were dozens of them. Most of them were alarm traps, but I saw a few I didn't recognize. One was called a **You Aren't Going Anywhere Trap**. There were likely others. My Find Traps skill wasn't super reliable just yet.

I quickly examined this first trap.

Placed Trap.

Set by Hunter Ontario.

Effect: A loud-ass alarm.

Delay: None.

Target: Crawlers. That's you.

Most of them appeared to be placed by this Ontario person, but there were others mixed in, too. Bomo, being an NPC, hadn't set them off.

I easily disarmed this first alarm trap and pulled it into my inventory. I had to drink another invisibility potion. Donut's invisibility would last another minute. We didn't have time for this.

Ahead, I saw Bomo suddenly appear. He crossed the street and en-

tered the dive bar with the broken sign. Nobody seemed to notice or care. He walked right past a group of NPCs, and they didn't give him a second look.

CARL: Donut, puddle-jump us out of here. We're surrounded by traps. Put us in front of the alley between the Desperado and that other club.

DONUT: WHERE ALL THE HUNTERS ARE?

CARL: Yes.

DONUT: IF I HAVE TO TAKE A MANA POTION, IT'LL MESS UP ME TAKING THE NEXT INVISIBILITY POTION BECAUSE OF MY POTION COUNTDOWN.

CARL: I know. Send us now.

Donut grumbled. Three seconds passed, and we jumped, appearing in the space between the Ladies Love It and the Desperado. A pair of elven NPCs strolled down the street. One looked sharply in our direction at the noise of us cracking into existence, but she didn't stop to investigate further. Three doors down, a hunter appeared. An orc. An NPC female dwarf rode him piggyback, and they were both laughing. They drunkenly lurched into an alleyway.

My heart pounded. Our view counter was spiking, which meant at any moment someone was going to raise the alarm. I still had no idea how efficient these guys were with their communications. I hoped and prayed we'd have another few minutes at least.

I examined the tight alleyway between the Desperado and the Ladies Love It. It was pitch-black in there. Donut didn't see any mobs. I moved to step inside, but I stopped, seeing yet another alarm trap. *Christ*. I hadn't been expecting that.

Fuck it, I thought. I looked around to see if anyone was looking in our direction, and then I pulled the barrel from my inventory and placed it on the ground in the space between the two buildings, just in front of the trap. I marked the bomb using a second Remote Detonator and also added this trigger to my hotlist. We needed to hurry. The thing said it was a bomb, so if anybody examined it, they'd see it for what it was. I quickly moved to the next alleyway down.

Donut took her second invisibility potion as I took my fourth. For Donut, the invisibility lasted just about two minutes. Her potion sickness countdown was much better than it used to be, but it was still at one minute and forty-five seconds, which meant she couldn't keep her mana topped off and remain invisible. She had two slices of mana toast in her inventory that we were keeping for an emergency. The toast would top off her spell points, and it wouldn't count as a potion. I didn't want her to use it unless absolutely necessary.

Donut trembled on my shoulder, and I reached up to give her a reassuring pat.

I skipped the next alleyway and moved to the one after that. These bombs were pretty big and didn't need to be that close. I dropped a barrel right on the sidewalk. We skipped the next alleyway, which contained a grunting orc and dwarf, and I moved to the following entrance. I placed the third barrel.

Just as I rolled the fourth one into place, a dragon-headed hunter emerged from this last bar, just a mere five feet to my left. This was the same bar Bomo had entered. It was the only true safe room of the lot. The sign was broken, so I hadn't been able to read it from across the street, but I could now see the place was called the Scuttlebutt.

I examined the hunter.

Chin'Dua—Draconian. Level 50. Striver.

This is an Unaffiliated Hunter.

It didn't describe either the Draconian race or the Striver class. The creature stepped unsteadily from the bar. He stopped right next to me and leaned up against the barrel. The tall, scaled creature held a glass with a little purple umbrella in it. Multiple cherries floated in the red drink. He remained there, leaning on the massive bomb. He wasn't doing anything to it, but his very presence was causing the item's stability to slowly decline on its own. The hunter started to snore, but he clutched the drink tightly in his clawed hand. He snorted and then woke himself up.

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"I ain't paying," he said, grumbling.

DONUT: CARL, CARL, I THINK HE'S DRINKING A DIRTY SHIRLEY!

CARL: I wouldn't be surprised. I think you might've made the drink famous.

DONUT: WHY ARE THEY ALL DRUNK?

CARL: They're all going hunting tomorrow. This is their last time to party. We gotta be careful. Not all of them will be wasted.

DONUT: HE'S GOING TO SEE IT'S A BOMB. WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?

A light appeared in the sky, coming from deep within the large town and rising into the air. It moved in our direction. A spell shot out from the figure, and a group of white flares burst out in each direction like fireworks, streaking out across the sky, lighting up the night.

Shit. Whoever that was knew we were here. I didn't know what that spell was, but they were obviously looking for us.

I pulled up the menu for the Ring of Divine Suffering, and I found the name I was searching for.

I took a deep breath. *There's no going back after this.*

You have marked Chin'Dua.

Chin'Dua's highest stat is Dexterity.

You have been infected with Left to Fester! This debuff will not go away until your mark is dead!

Happy Hunting, killer.

The drunken alien looked up as I allowed the invisibility potion to expire. He blinked at me.

"You . . . you're not supposed to be here," the creature said. It was almost a whisper. It was a miracle this guy was still on his feet. He was just as drunk as Growler Gary the gnoll had been when we started cutting off his hands. He brought his drink to his lips, and he slurped in a cherry.

Behind him, the barrel's integrity continued its downward momentum.

Copyrighted Material

"Your name is Chin'Dua?" I asked. I put my hands on his shoulder

to steady him, pulling him off the barrel, which caused the bomb's integrity to stop at about 30%. Above, one of the flares stopped to hover over us, illuminating the square. Multiple hunters emerged from the bars up and down the street, but they were all looking up.

Chin'Dua didn't appear to have any magical gear on him, which was unfortunate. He'd probably only been here for a few hours and hadn't had a chance to collect anything.

"That's Xindy," Chin'Dua said, lifting his head to the sky. "Why is she all worked up?"

Down the line, a pair of alien hunters was standing right next to the first barrel, but they hadn't noticed it yet. These were large blue-skinned humanoids wearing leather armor.

I leaned in. "Wanna hear a secret?"

"What?" Chin'Dua asked, whispering. His eyes fluttered.

DONUT: CARL, HURRY UP. YOU'RE TAKING TOO LONG.

"I'm using you as bait. That's how you're going to die. As bait."

There was a shout, and at that same moment, I cast *Ping*.

An audible tone spread out, filling the town with the noise. My map came alive as every nearby NPC, hunter, and pet appeared on my interface. Above, the shining light started rocketing toward us. I could now see the flying purple dot on my map moving in our direction.

"Damnit," I muttered under my breath as I quickly searched the dots. I was hoping that this flying hunter would also be the town's mayor. The Grand. They weren't. I wouldn't be so lucky. I looked frantically about for the purple dot, which would be indicated on the map with a star. I didn't see them, which meant they were either in a safe room, they were asleep, or they were out of range.

I was expecting to be immediately assaulted. Instead, most of the hunters scrambled away, rushing back into the bars. A few of the smart ones scrambled into the Desperado.

I quickly sorted through the list, seeking out the highest-level hunter. There was a 63 two streets over quickly running in this direction. They were too far away. I instead focused on the flying hunter. Level 61. Good enough. I mentally clicked on the dot.

Hunter Xindy—Mantis. Level 61. Blood Tracker.**The Dark Hive.**

I focused on my toe ring, and I pulled up its second ability. Super Spreader. Its range was dependent on my map. They had to be close enough that I could see their name. Because of the *Ping* spell, that range was greatly increased. I scrolled down the list until I found Xindy, and I clicked **Activate**.

The flying alien stopped dead in the air. On my shoulder, Donut fired a pair of magic missiles at a hunter who shrieked and ran away. Above, Xindy started to rapidly retreat as she realized she'd been hit with a debuff. She was now in the same boat as me. She was infected with Left to Fester, and it wouldn't go away until poor Chin'Dua was dead.

More shouting rose. I was hit with a *Ping* spell identical to the one I'd just cast. A yellow light jumped into the air. A half block away, a swarm of orange dots moved in our direction. Behind me, the bear guards had turned and were running toward us.

I mentally clicked the first of the two remote detonator triggers in my hotlist, and the rockets started corkscrewing into the air one by one. I had them programmed so they'd take off at three-second intervals in groups of five, each focused on the "Fastest-moving Hunter-class creature."

All five of the first group of missiles rocketed away, streaking toward the retreating form of Xindy, who'd, in a panic, started to rapidly fly away. A shield appeared around the fleeing hunter as the first missile slammed into her.

The second and third missiles hit her in quick succession. The fourth exploded prematurely as a bolt cast from one street over shot right into the missile. I watched the shield fail just as the fifth missile slammed into the hunter, and she exploded. I saw her purple dot turn into an X as her flaming corpse plummeted from the sky. Even before she hit the ground, the next missiles were spreading off into different directions.

"Whoa. Did you see that?" Chin'Dua said, looking up into the air as I waved away the page of notifications that'd just appeared. "That was Vrah's little sister."

I punched him in the chest, and I felt the satisfying crunch of bones. He gasped, looking at me with both surprise and an odd sense of betrayal. I punched him in the face. Then again. He crashed to the ground, knocking over the barrel, which started to rapidly deteriorate again. His half-full glass of vodka went flying. Little cherries rolled down the sidewalk as I crushed his head with my foot.

The orc and the dwarf from one alleyway over stood there on the sidewalk, ten feet away, gawking at me.

I wanted to mark this orc next, but I didn't have time. The orc's health was at 95%, and I would've had to heal him first. The barrel was going to blow. *Damnit. Damnit to hell.* I didn't have time to find someone else.

"You better run," I said as Donut and I jumped into the Scuttlebutt.

I never got the chance to click on the second trigger in my hotlist. The moment we landed inside and closed the door, the barrel went off.

Despite us being in a safe room, Donut and I were blown back and into the bar. Chairs fell over. Bottles cascaded off shelves. Three more explosions ripped through outside. I heard shouting from the other side of the bar. It was a Bopca crying out in surprise.

"Are you okay?" I asked Donut, who was all poofed out.

"Carl, I think I want to go to Katia's team now," Donut said, her voice dazed.

"Okay, but we gotta get out of here first," I said, pulling myself back up. "Back to my shoulder. Quick."

I rushed toward the personal space door. I was momentarily surprised to see there was actually a long hallway here with five other doors. I moved to the one marked **The Royal Court of Princess Donut**, and I burst inside to find Bomo and the Sledge standing there.

"Protect!" I shouted.

"What in god's name is going on?" Mordecai said from the counter, where it appeared he was eating a banana split sundae. He had the ice cream all over his fuzzy face.

"Are we going back out there?" Donut asked, incredulous.

"We have to," I said, breathing heavily. "If we don't get out now, they'll just guard that exit and trap us in Zockau."

“Zockau? *Zockau?*” Mordecai cried. “You motherfuckers are in the goddamned capital?”

The Sledge cast two quick magic shells around each of us. Blue light swirled. Bomo cast *Shield*, and a translucent spell appeared. Both would last for five minutes or until they were dispelled by damage.

I turned and bounded back outside with Mordecai shouting after us. One of the other doorways opened, and we passed by a wide-eyed dark elf hunter coming out of his own personal space.

“Boo,” Donut yelled at him, and he stumbled backward. I caught sight of two more elves within the room.

We rushed back out into the Scuttlebutt, which now had two more hunters within. Both were level 50 tentacle-faced Saccathians.

We burst past the surprised creatures and back out into the night. We jumped into burning, smoky chaos.

The entire block was now on fire and blown to shit. A thick fog filled the area. Bodies were everywhere. The barrel explosives had been crammed with gunpowder and hobgoblin dynamite and delay-detonated smoke curtains. I’d packed them in a way that caused the most destruction. They were unstable as shit, but a single one could take out an entire block. We’d only been saved because we’d hidden inside of a real safe room.

The entire façade of the Desperado had collapsed. The entrance bar was gone. Those that were in the real club were now trapped, and they would remain trapped. None of the others would be able to get in, at least via Zockau.

Despite the mass destruction, we were surrounded by red, orange, and purple dots, though most were a few blocks away. Most of the traps in the blast radius had been tripped on their own, and dozens of different songs blasted into the night. I caught snippets of everything from Aretha Franklin to ZZ Top.

I pulled yet another bomb from my inventory and tossed it. It hit the ground, rolled, and started firing hobgoblin smoke curtains in regular intervals. I mapped out the closest path to the edge of town. It was a good quarter mile away down a residential street. We both took invisibility potions, and I started to run.

The invisibility did not hide the twin swirling protection shells

around ourselves, but that was okay. It hid our dots on the map, and amongst all this chaos, we just needed a minute to get out of town. We'd be relatively safe once we hit the jungle.

From my shoulder, Donut started to sing. Her voice cracked.

"The shadows cold. The eyes and the smile. I see shadows in my mind, trying to be gone. Shadow in my mind. Carl, quit bouncing around, you're making me mess up the lyrics!"

"What are you trying to cast?" We rushed past the town square and into a tight street. The first several rows of buildings here were all half-caved-in. Debris littered the street. I jumped over the groaning body of an elf NPC.

"Sorry, buddy," I called over my shoulder.

It looked as if every window in town was blown out. Farther down, multiple NPCs started to wander from their homes. I didn't see any purple dots. We rushed down the middle of the street.

"I'm trying to cast *Entourage*, which makes a copy of us, but you keep messing me up. I have to read the lyrics, but I can't when we're running! It's like trying to do karaoke while I'm on a roller coaster!"

WARNING! WATCH YOUR DAMN STEP!

"Goddamnit," I said, sliding to a stop. It was too late. A countdown appeared. I'd already stepped on the trap. Two traps. The first was an alarm trap right in the middle of the street, and the second was a cheap spike trap. I jumped out of the way before the spikes activated, but there was nothing I could do about the alarm.

Peaking at Number 27 on January 27, 1990, it's "Kickstart My Heart"!

I cast *Tripper*, which set off every trap in a wide radius. Multiple songs and small explosions rocked all around us, but the Mötley Crüe song was blasting right next to us so loud that we were both racked with pain. I reached down and physically picked up the small cube-sized trap. It wouldn't let me disarm it now that it'd been set off, but it did allow me to pull it into my inventory, cutting it off. My ears rang.

Donut was screaming something, but I couldn't hear her. I pulled out my second rocket box. This one only had ten rockets within because I'd run out of surefires. This one was preset to kill the "Closest Hunter Class Mobs."

You have been deshrouded! Invisibility negated!

My shield sparked as something slammed into it. A shield health bar appeared in my UI, down halfway. A second, then a third item hit the shield. Crossbow bolts. I searched for the source, but I couldn't see our attacker.

DONUT: ON THE ROOF! INVISIBLE!

A magic missile shot forth from Donut, hitting the top of the building as I dropped a smoke curtain, loaded a hob-lobber, and threw it.

**DONUT: WE MISSED! IT CAN FLY! IT'S THE SAME TYPE AS THE
LAST ONE!**

My *Ping* spell had five seconds left before I could cast again. I scrambled away down the street toward the looming line of trees. Above, an orange dot appeared, some sort of flying pet coming from a different direction. It rocketed toward us, screeching. A large hawk. A bolt slammed the pet's head, and it tumbled away. The hunter shot it. *He's protecting his kill.*

My shield sparked again as more crossbow bolts slammed into me. The shield failed. I cried out in pain as yet another crossbow bolt buried itself into my shoulder. *So much for my anti-piercing resistance.*

Poison Negated.

I instinctively ducked, and another bolt slammed into Donut, who was still protected. She flew from my shoulder and bounded ahead, hitting the street and rolling. She leaped to her feet and ran.

I hit *Ping*, and the dot finally appeared on my map. High above. I saw the star around the purple dot. The mayor. The Grand. Finally.

I activated the missiles, and they burst into the air behind us. I didn't turn to look. I ran. The hunter, who was level 70, arced away, dodging the missiles.

Another bolt slammed into the back of my thigh just as we reached the edge of town. The barbed front of the projectile shattered my leg, bursting out the front and opening up like an umbrella. I screamed as we jumped over the border.

Entering the Selva.

I healed myself as I dragged myself toward the trees. These guys couldn't leave the city, but I didn't know if their weapons could fire beyond the borders.

The moment we left the town, all the dots on my map snapped away, as if the city was protected. I turned to look over my shoulder as I dragged myself away, and the border was opaque. The street was mere feet behind me, but I couldn't see a thing.

"Carl, we gotta go! We're too close! There were more orange dots coming!"

I pulled myself to my feet, but I collapsed again. I looked stupidly down at the crossbow bolt still sticking through my leg. I'd healed myself, but it hadn't pushed the bolt out like it usually did. I had a second one in my shoulder. Both of the bolts were causing my health to continue to plummet. They had a bleed effect.

"Uh-oh," I said. The world started to get fuzzy around the edges. A debuff notification flashed on my interface.

An orange dot appeared on my map. Next to me, Donut gasped. It came from the woods, and it was huge. I couldn't see it, but it crackled with heat. I tried to focus, but I felt as if I was staring at a television screen turned to static. I felt dizzy, dizzier than I'd ever felt before. I realized the sound of all the traps had also cut off the moment we'd left the town's borders. I was falling into a fog. I managed to click a healing scroll, and it healed me, but it didn't do anything to my brain, which continued to swirl with confusion.

There were more people here. Donut was saying something. These were blue dots. Crawlers.

I can't tell the orange pet dots apart, I thought. Crawler or hunter. That's a bug. My leg burned. I thought of my *Frogger* game. I wondered if Bomo or the Sledge was better at it. I remembered the day I found my mother in the basement. I thought I was going to get a bike that day, and I never did.

This is my birthday present to you.

Where was I?

"Again! He did it again! At least he's about to perish," a familiar voice said. "Level 54! How did this idiot get so high? What are those knife symbols over his head?"

"Help, help!" Donut said to the newcomers. "Carl needs the arrows pulled out!"

"Mother, you should feed on him before he dies."

"Pony, I am not going to feed on Carl. Now help me with him," a new voice said.

"I say we let him die. He ruined my spell. Again. You need blood."

"Stop, Donut, sweetie," the woman said. "Do not touch the bolts. Oh my. That is a lot of debuffs. I will help. Don't you worry. He will be okay. We are safe here. Trust me."

Somebody screamed.

<Note added by Crawler Everly. 5th Edition>

We ended up hiring five mercenaries. I got four from the merc guild on the sixth floor of the Desperado Club, and another party member got a healer from Club Vanquisher. It was and continues to be a disaster. My guys cost us 1,500 gold a day each, and I'm not sure if it was worth it. First off, you have to be very careful with them. If they die, you can't loot their bodies, and our contract stipulates you have to pay their daily rate for the rest of the damn floor. It's outrageous. The healer charges per spell cast. Second, getting them from one place to the next is difficult if you use a personal space. It's easy to lose them. If they leave with me, it's fine. The door opens, and we walk out together. Otherwise, it automatically defaults to the last place they entered, as if they were a regular crawler. So if they're not right there with you when you exit, they could end up three or four safe rooms away. One of our guys left and never came back. He's still alive, as I can see him in the chat, but the prick is just wandering around some town having a good ol' time and I can't even fire him because you have to bring them back with you to let them go. Plus their levels mean next to nothing. My level 40 orc is a significantly better fighter than my level 50 dwarf, who is now dead, by the way. Got hit by a chair, of all things, and he died. Twenty-two more days at 1,500 gold a day. The whole thing is a scam.

MY EYES FLUTTERED OPEN. I FELT AS IF I'D BEEN TRAMPLED BY ELEPHANTS. Everything hurt. I still had a page of notifications, and I blinked them away.

Donut sat on my chest, looking down at me worriedly. We were moving. I felt gravel crunch underneath me. I was in the back of a cart. I stared up into the night sky. It was still dark outside, but the air above us shimmered with an opalescent sheen, like the skin of a soap bubble catching the light. A magical shell of some sort, I realized. I was under the dome of a spell.

"He's awake!" Donut said. She looked up and said, "His health is still going down."

"The debuff runs out soon," the woman said. "The worst is beyond us. Do not worry, little one."

"What happened?" I groaned. "Did we get any of them?"

"You almost died, Carl," Donut said. "And you would've deserved it, too. What in god's name was that anyway? From now on, I'm not participating in a Carl plan unless I know what I'm getting myself into. Mongo is quite upset with you."

I felt a warm glow, and my health moved back up. The woman had cast something. I felt my health immediately start to seep out of me again, like I was a leaky pipe. Whatever this was, it was a slow, painful debuff. I moved over to my health menu and looked at my current debuffs.

Sore as Shit and Blood Trail.

Sore as Shit was one I'd seen before. It popped up every time I'd been severely injured. It was exactly how it sounded. It usually lasted for about an hour, but this time it was at six hours and counting down. I didn't have anything to remove it. It didn't affect any of my stats directly, but everything hurt while it was active.

Blood Trail was a new one. It was about to run out, but it was an insidious debuff.

Blood Trail.

A favorite of game hunters and medical debt collectors chasing after deadbeats, this magical bleeding debuff is usually applied to ranged weapons. Your health seeps downward at a slow, steady pace. You may heal, but all open wounds at the time you receive this debuff will continue to weep, allowing for you to be tracked easily. It also makes you smell really bad. Or really good, depending on who's doing the sniffin'.

I'd been hit with a half dozen other debuffs, too, but they'd all expired.

"How long was I out?" I asked, trying to sit up. I was completely soaked in blood. "I know we got two. Did we get more?"

"Don't get up yet," the woman said. She put a gentle hand on my shoulder, pushing me back. I winced.

"You were in a coma!" Donut said. "It was only for a half hour. If we hadn't gotten out of the city, you'd be dead right now. Miriam, Prepotente, and Bianca saved you."

I felt myself groan.

"You need to rest for a few more minutes, sweetie," the woman—Miriam Dom—said. "We'll be at the town in about an hour, and then you can get to your safe room and sleep."

"Where am I?"

"We're in the back of a cart," Donut said. "It's being pulled by Bianca, and Prepotente is ahead of us, making sure the road is safe. Miriam has been helping you heal, so you need to say thank you."

"Thank you," I said. My head was still swimming. The fog was lifting away, but I felt as if I was waking from a long sleep.

DONUT: ALSO, I DON'T THINK PREPOTENTE LIKES YOU VERY MUCH. HE SAVED YOU, SO YOU GOTTA BE NICE TO HIM.

A hand touched my forehead. Her fingers were ice-cold. She stroked my hair. "You just rest for a minute, okay?"

You have been Soothed! Everything hurts a little less. Debuffs are 10% less effective.

Donut leaned in. "Seriously, Carl. What, exactly, was the plan there? Go into town and then blow everything up and then run? You may have killed a lot of them, but all you did was make them extra angry. This is why you tell me the plan first, so I can point out why it's stupid."

"I wanted to block off the entrance to the Desperado and see if I could identify the mayor and maybe kill him. Or her. The mayor was Vrah, a woman. She's a race called a mantis. If I killed her, I'd become

the mayor and then I was going to order the city guards to kill all the hunters." I gasped. "Jesus, why am I so tired?"

"You were knocked comatose accidentally," Miriam said. She sat behind me and was stroking my hair. It felt weird and kinda nice all at the same time. "It was a Woozy debuff from the crossbow bolt, but it was enhanced because of Pony's spell."

"Sorry I messed it up," I said.

"It is okay," Miriam said. "It was taking much too long, and I believe we'd been discovered. Someone was casting a countermeasure, and it likely wouldn't have worked in time."

"That's because they're cheating," I said, raising my voice. "The hunter guys have people who are watching the show and feeding the information to them."

I heard a distant scream.

"Pony captured something," Miriam said. "Your Bleed debuff is all better now. I am going out there to feed. You just stay here and rest, and I will be back to check on you, okay?"

I grunted. I felt her stand behind me, and I watched as the dark-haired, robed woman floated out of the cart and away.

"She can fly?" I asked.

"That's new," Donut said. "She's a vampire now. She can float, but she has to drink a lot of blood to survive. She's still a healer. It's very strange. She'll only drink blood from something that Prepotente has just killed. She has to do it fast. I don't know if she can turn into a bat or if sunlight hurts her. Or if she's allergic to garlic. I hope not. She's Italian, so that'd probably be extra terrible if she couldn't use garlic anymore."

I just sat there, breathing. As long as I didn't move anything, it didn't hurt. The crunch of the trail under the cart was oddly familiar. I thought of riding in the very back of my parents' car. I heard a snort, like from a horse; then it was followed by a bug-like chittering noise. I finally thought to look at the map. We were moving through a dense, wooded area. There was a massive orange dot right in front of us, and the two blue dots of Miriam and the goat were up ahead, along with a few mob X's and a red dot. Donut remained in the cart with me. I didn't see anyone else.

"Mordecai wants to know if you used that ring," Donut said after a