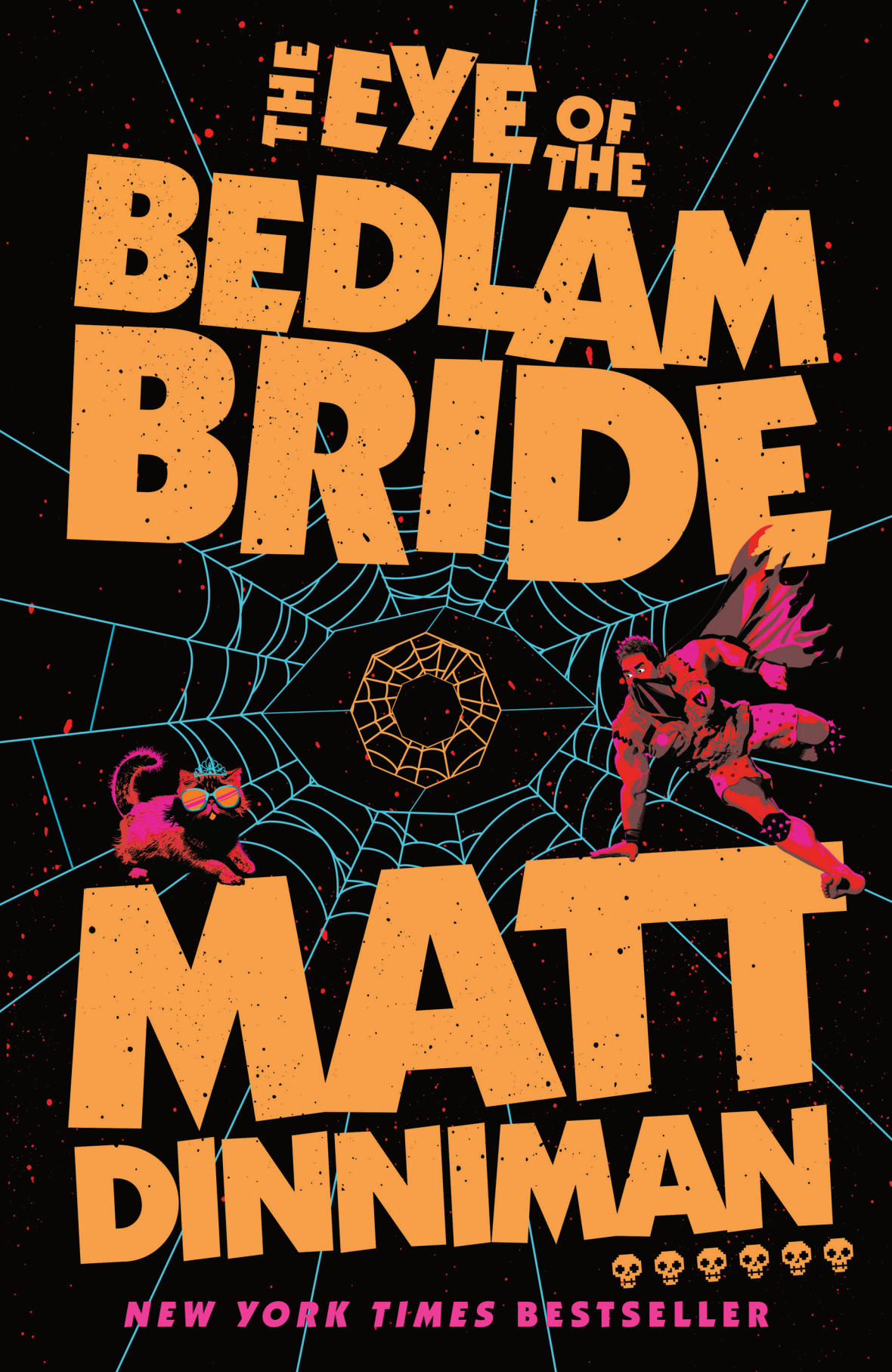
THE EYE OF THE BEDLAM BRIDE



MATT DINNIMAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

THE EYE OF THE BEDLAM BRIDE

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CARL'S DOOMSDAY SCENARIO
THE DUNGEON ANARCHIST'S COOKBOOK
THE GATE OF THE FERAL GODS
THE BUTCHER'S MASQUERADE
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DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL BOOK SIX

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"The moral of the story is:
I chose a half measure when I should have gone all the way.
I'll never make that mistake again."

Mike Ehrmantraut, *Breaking Bad*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

AS ALWAYS, THIS BOOK COULDN'T EXIST WITHOUT ALL THE FANS OUT there giving me support and kudos and love and weird 3 a.m. messages that may or may not be threats. I love you all. That said, love = respect. You don't send butthole pics to people you respect. Please stop sending them. Especially you, Dwight. Holy shit. You need to see a goddamned doctor. Rebecca, on the other hand . . . we good.

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OMG. WHAT A FLOOR!

Hi, everyone!

Thank you so much for signing up for the Princess Posse fan club newsletter! This is the only OFFICIAL fan club. I heard rumors of another group called the Donut Holes, and while I appreciate their enthusiasm, this is the ONLY place to get THIS newsletter. I absolutely DO NOT approve of the name Donut Holes.

Anyway!

My name is GC, BWR, NW Princess Donut the Queen Anne Chonk, and I am here to give you a quick recap of what happened on the last few floors. I know we should have been doing this the whole time, and perhaps I will talk Carl into going back and helping me write proper recaps of what happened in the past, but you're here now, and we're about to start the eighth floor. Here's what happened on the sixth and seventh.

The sixth floor started with Carl temporarily giving up the Gate of the Feral Gods to Orren the liaison because he was afraid Carl would get all Carl-y and use it to ruin the floor. I didn't see this happen, but I imagine Carl was all grumpy about it. It ended up being a good thing because we got Sledgie and three other cretin rock bodyguards to escort us for the next three floors in exchange! Isn't that great?

I got the most exquisite temporary class. I was a Legendary Diva! I could cast spells when I sing!

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(I hear my album will soon be available on tunneling platforms, so be sure to upgrade to Ultimate Supreme Fan Tier Three or above to get a free ten-second preview of each song before they're released!)

This was the floor where the stupid hunters were trying to kill us. That didn't work out too well for them, now did it? There was this one bug lady, and her name was Vrah. We killed her annoying little sister right in the beginning, and that made Vrah really mad. When Carl went to that lame CrawlCon later on, he met Vrah's mom and made *her* really mad, too. So mad she flew all the way to Earth just to participate as a god named Diwata.

Katia left the party so she could hunt down Eva, her player-killer ex–best friend, and that was really sad because I liked being in a party with Katia. She managed to get Eva in the end, though, and I really hope she'll come back to the party. I love Carl, of course, but it would be nice to have her back. I miss having her with us. I suppose now that she's in love with Daniel Bautista, he'd have to come with her. That would be okay, too, even if he looks like a generic-brand Tony the Tiger.

We learned at the end of the floor there would be a party with a talent contest and pet show for the hunters and the top 50 crawlers. It would be at the High Elf Castle, led by the mean Queen Imogen. The party was called the Butcher's Masquerade.

My Mongo met a few fellow dinosaurs, including a female mongoliensis named Kiwi. Honestly, I don't want to talk about how that started because it was highly traumatic for my brave, sweet boy, whose innocence was savagely ripped away from him. He's still healing.

Also, way back on the third floor, we met a bra-deficient elite named Signet covered in gross tattoos. You may have seen her show, as Carl and I were both guest stars. It was called *Vengeance of the Daughter*. Carl was contractually bound to continue with that story, which was to help her reclaim her crown and defeat Queen Imogen of the High Elves, who helped kill Signet's mother a long time ago.

My friend Prepotente and his former person, Miriam Dom, got in a bit of trouble, and, unfortunately, Miriam Dom passed away. But Prepotente was a very brave goat about it. Miriam used to have another goat, too, one named Bianca who is quite friendly when you get to

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know her. She's a demon-goat-dragon thing, and she and Prepotente are off on their own now.

I got into a little tussle with a crawler named Lucia Mar, and I killed one of her disgusting dogs, who absolutely deserved it. We later found out that there's something weird going on with Lucia Mar that I honestly just don't understand, but Florin, our Crocodilian friend who says he's from France but was in Africa and has an Australian accent, is determined to find out that full story. He used to hate her because Lucia killed his girlfriend, but now they're friends. I think. I'm not sure honestly.

We had a quest to find and help a giant allosaurus ballerina named Big Tina. It turns out Kiwi is Big Tina's mom, and they both used to be bears. They were changed when Scolopendra, the final boss of the whole dungeon, attacked a long time ago.

And then my ex-boyfriend, Ferdinand, just randomly showed up, thinking he could just waltz right back into my life and I would swoon over him. As if. He was now the pet of Queen Imogen of the High Elves.

All of this time, we were preparing for the Butcher's Masquerade. Mongo prepared for the pet show, training tirelessly, and I coordinated for the talent show. Carl figured out that Queen Imogen would be a country boss, and we had to be ready for it.

When the party came, all of this stuff happened at once. Signet finally got her revenge against Imogen, though it was really sad because she had to kill herself to do it. My Mongo and Kiwi killed Vrah, and I helped kill her mom with my *Laundry Day* spell. Carl killed the last hunter, meaning we got all of them. At the same time, YOU GUYS really pulled through! We used the funds from the fan club, and OMG WE DID IT. We bought a spot on Faction Wars!

Thanks to Carl and Sledgie, we got all of Signet's former tattoos and helpers, Kiwi and Tina, and all of the changelings into the elf castle, and we teleported the whole castle to the ninth floor, meaning we now have an official army. Ferdinand, too, though we don't know if he's going to help us when we get there. Carl and I are now ninth-floor warlords! Isn't that great? There's not much we can do about that on this new eighth floor, but because we're warlords, we can vote for stuff

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that happens on Faction Wars. Carl is trying to make it so we can all really kill each other. Nobody thinks that's going to happen. We'll see. Carl is good at making impossible things possible.

It wasn't all good. Lots of sad things happened. My friend Firas died. He was really nice. Another guy named Gideon died. I didn't know him very well except in the chat, but Carl was sad because he'd talked Gideon into helping us. Gwendolyn Duet died. This mushroom guy who was a really good singer died. The Popov brothers died, too, but then something amazing happened. They turned into babies and were kicked out of the game. Zev said they were okay! That made everyone happy.

Also, the crime of the century was committed during the Butcher's Masquerade.

An evil, vile, experience-hog crawler named Tserendolgor somehow managed to get her hands on the voting ballot box for the pet show and changed the votes, stealing Mongo's crown from him and handing it off to her disgusting meatball pet, Garret. I want you guys to continue to pore over the footage and find the smoking gun. I've seen some of your investigative efforts so far, and I'm looking forward to more. We need definitive proof! We *will* stop this injustice! #JusticeForMongo.

I, of course, found myself at the top of the crawler list after my performance at the talent show.

And then, right when we thought we were going to the seventh floor, Prepotente broke the whole thing! We pretty much went straight from the sixth to the eighth, but not before I briefly chose a new class. I was a Viper Queen for a few minutes.

And that's it. I know, I know. I'm missing so much. I didn't talk about Samantha and the body Signet gave her to use, or how Britney got burned, or how Tran lost his legs, or about how Zev got a promotion because the Borant government lost control of the crawl to the Valtay brain worms. Or that weird ring Carl got that I think is giving him headaches.

Nor have I talked about Miss Beatrice's return and appearance on Odette's program. It's not worth examining, and I haven't thought about it once since it happened, and there's nothing more to discuss.

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Anyway, thank you again for subscribing. Remember to pay your dues! If you forget, you stop getting the newsletter and all the other great benefits, and we don't want that. For an extra twenty credits a week, you get access to the super-exclusive Team Mongo Mommies, which grants entrance to the platinum private Mongo Mommies chat room, officially licensed Mongo merch, along with access to a very special song I wrote all about him! I love you all!

XOXO

Best in Dungeon, Current Reigning Champion, GC, BWR, NW
Princess Donut the Queen Anne Chonk
Co-Warlord of the Princess Posse Faction Wars Team

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PROLOGUE

WARNING: LEVEL COLLAPSE IS IMMINENT.

"IT'S TWO GODS," ODETTE CRIED. "GET READY!"

The twin monstrosities appeared, towering out of the mist like a pair of uneven mountains. One was almost three times the size of the other. Odette hadn't been expecting there to be two gods, but she wasn't surprised. The summoning box did that sometimes, especially this deep.

"Two gods?" Chaco shouted from his spot near the stairwell. "Is it still going to work?"

"Gods, I hope so," Odette muttered.

Her non-corporeal avatar floated between her crawlers and the two storm deities. She zoomed with her helmet, trying to see what gods they were. Relief flooded her when she focused on the smaller of the two. Dodola, which was whom Mordecai had been attempting to summon. The other, larger deity was Adad.

ODETTE: You need to get back here.

MORDECAI: I'm trying. I don't think I can fly in this downpour. Are they storm gods? Did it work?

ODETTE: It worked. Now hurry. Don't let them see you. Try your slake raven form.

Sizzling acid rain poured from the heavens, melting everything it touched. Odette zoomed in farther, watching the aura of both the gods. The hulking form of Adad was AI controlled. The smaller, female Dodola was sponsored. The name **Huanxin** blazed there with a little green dot, meaning the grixist sponsor was present and driving the storm goddess.

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Odette opened a new chat window.

ODETTE: Infusing the summoning box with a chain-lightning potion worked. It's Huanxin like you said it would be.

The floor was almost done. The nine puzzle pieces had all been collected. They just needed one more activation, and the four crawlers could leave and enter the stairwell down to the eleventh floor. She looked nervously at the clock. It would be close.

ARMITA: I'm not certain about this.
ODETTE: This was your godsdamned idea. We don't have time. Tell her we're in place and that we have a deal.
ARMITA: I already did. She just wrote back. She wants a bigger cut. She says 10% is too little. She wants 33.
ODETTE: Godsdamnit. You tell that rich cunt we don't need her, then. She can just fuck off. We summoned two gods. We'll use the other one.

The bonus Odette received if Mordecai reached the eleventh floor would be just enough money that she could buy a residency berth in the inner system. She wouldn't be considered wealthy by any means, not like she would if Mordecai reached the 12th, but she would have just enough to get herself settled. She would be a citizen, guaranteed shelter and oxygen and food, which would allow her to finally be safe. She'd have access to free body regeneration, allowing her to regrow her legs. She'd finally be able to put this nightmare behind her.

She still had five seasons left on her indentureship, but per her contract, they'd knock nine seasons off if one of her crawlers reached the eleventh floor. If they opened that stairwell and Mordecai made it down, Odette would be free. Finally.

But if she paid 33% of her bonus to that raging bitch, she wouldn't have enough money. She'd have to settle somewhere as a non-citizen, always scrambling. It'd take another 100 cycles to earn enough, and only if she was lucky enough to get a job. It would never end. Even that 10% she'd already promised was cutting it close.

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She thought of Huanxin Jinx, the grixist heiress who sponsored Dodola every season. Odette pictured herself strangling the thin-necked, hairy bitch until all six eyes popped out of her head.

They could quadruple that bonus, and it would be nothing but a day's allowance to Huanxin. She wasn't doing this for the money. This was how she entertained herself. The Ascendency battles didn't start until the crawlers reached the twelfth floor or they were zeroed out, and the heiress was bored. Nothing more.

Armita, Odette's friend and former party member, had secured herself a gig as a Demigod Attendant for the Celestial Ascendency, and this whole scheme had been her idea. The AI subroutines didn't regularly monitor communications between NPCs, and they were legally forbidden from monitoring Ascendency sponsor communications. She was working as the go-between.

When it became clear that Mordecai's team was going to need the intervention of a storm god to survive, it'd been Armita who suggested talking to Huanxin. They'd ask the rich heiress if she'd be willing to drive Dodola to the door location and hit the puzzle with a spell. She'd agreed, for a price.

Without the bribe, the legality of having Armita break character and ask a sponsor for their assistance was sketchy at best. Once money became involved, it clearly became cheating, especially since Odette would be reaping actual credits as a result of the help. It was cheating, and it was fraud.

But what choice did she have? This whole tenth floor had been a disaster. From the start, the crawlers were given a choice of four tracks. Uzzi had blindly chosen the most difficult path. The location of the exit was revealed, but multiple steps had to be completed in order to open the door.

Less than 200 crawlers had survived the Faction Wars chaos, which was usual. The skyfowl seasons typically ended with a ninth-floor slaughter. The idiots always wanted to participate in the fighting. Half of the survivors had taken deals right at the beginning of the tenth. And then half of the rest had died making their way through the floor. Odette only knew of five others who'd made it to the eleventh so far.

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Mordecai still hadn't returned. His ability to change forms had made him the best candidate to place the summoning box and activate it.

He'd had to place it far enough away where they had time to prime the puzzle, but not too far so the god wouldn't notice them.

Behind her, Chaco, Hold Steady, and Uzzi worked furiously to prepare the final ritual. Chaco was a wolf-headed pterolykos. The other two had chosen to remain skyfowl, like 91% of their kind. Hold Steady worked his magic, keeping the puzzle pieces primed. Chaco plucked at the strings of his tar, attracting the attention of the gods with his bard magic. Uzzi guarded them both. The skyfowl warrior had limited magic, despite his Storm Commander class, but he had a party-protection spell that kept the caustic rain from burning them all.

The nine pieces pulsed red a few times before turning blue. It was ready. Only one last step remained. The puzzle needed to physically touch a storm god *or* be hit with god-tier storm magic. If either of those happened, the key would form and the door would open.

But it wasn't as simple as dropping the completed puzzle disc on the head of a god from afar. The puzzle needed to *stay* primed, constantly infused with magic, which required Hold Steady to remain nearby. And the puzzle had to remain within the circle of the stairwell.

This last part was next to impossible, and they'd all wanted to take a deal rather than risk not making it.

Odette had already earned her tenth-floor bonus no matter what happened. She'd convinced them to go for it, despite the difficulty. It wasn't all greed. She liked all the party members, especially Mordecai. It was never worth it to take a deal on the tenth floor. Never. They were better off dead.

They were close. So damn close.

ARMITA: I'm not telling her that, Odette. You know how petty she is.

If they could get either storm god to hit the puzzle with a spell—any spell—they'd be good to go. If Chaco's *Lightning Rod* song worked properly, any spells thrown in their general direction would hit the target. The problem was, the crawlers needed to remain nearby. The whole level was about to collapse.

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It was always a bad idea to stay in the vicinity of a god. Always.

Huanxin had the ability to enchant the rain. She could make it healing rain or turn each drop into a mob or a thousand other things. It was already raining. All she needed to do was cast the spell, the magic rain would hit the puzzle, and that would be enough. All four party members would make it to the eleventh floor, and then they could reevaluate their survival chances.

If Huanxin refused to help, they still had Adad. He was likely to summon a cloud of lightning-shooting bugs at any moment. With Chaco's spell, the bugs would still target the puzzle. It wasn't ideal, but it would work.

Warning: Level collapse will commence in minus three.

The number 99 appeared flashing in her interface. The units started to count down.

Odette cursed herself for getting involved in this. They could've done it without cheating. She hadn't trusted the team. This would've worked without the bribe.

ODETTE: What is taking you so long?

MORDECAI: I'm grounded, in a bipedal form. I didn't have enough power to choose anything else. I'm too far from Uzzi's protection, and I have to use my *Climate Refuge* spell.

ODETTE: Hurry your feathered ass!

MORDECAI: I think the two gods are about to fight!

ODETTE: Probably not this time. Dodola—

Odette didn't finish. She watched in horror as Dodola suddenly turned and stabbed something into the leg of the much larger Adad. The god disappeared. She'd teleported him away. She turned toward the three crawlers and started casually marching in their direction.

ARMITA: She says she's changed her mind again. Now she wants 50%, and if you don't agree, she's going to zero out the party. I'm sorry, Odette. This is all my fault.

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Godsdamnit.

She had to agree. What else could she do? She looked back at the three crawlers huddled by the exit. The round puzzle floated in midair with Uzzi and Hold Steady right behind it. Chaco stood to the side, still plucking at his instrument.

But then, a wave of anger washed over Odette. She thought of the dungeon AI forcing her to choose between saving Armita and Pieter. She'd only had seconds. Her best friend versus her cousin. She'd picked her friend. For Odette's entire life, people were taking advantage of her. Forcing her to submit, to choose. Telling her what to do. They'd taken her entire planet. Her people. Her family. Pieter was a good, sweet boy. But he wasn't as strong as Armita. They'd forced Odette to fight. Forced her to work in this dungeon for so, so long. Every step forward she'd made was only because she'd first had to ask someone else's permission to do so. She was tired of always being bullied. She was tired of being forced to choose between two equally terrible results.

She looked up at the approaching deity. Huanxin Jinx. Fuck that bitch.

ODETTE: Armita, tell her we don't have a deal.
ARMITA: Are you sure?
ODETTE: Yes.

She then moved to a new chat, but before she could type out the message, she was interrupted by Mordecai.

MORDECAI: Dodola is a sponsored god. She's not going to help us.
I'm sorry, my friends. I have a plan, but it's going to kill me.
Uzzi, see you on the other side, brother.
UZZI: Do not even dare.

Odette waved away her first message and moved to her private chat with Mordecai.

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ODETTE: What the hells are you doing?

MORDECAI: My Final Blow skill. It lets me target the puzzle. It's at the top of the list. Odette, I think this is what I'm supposed to do with it. It's why the AI gave it to me.

If Mordecai targeted the puzzle and then got himself hit with a spell from the god, the puzzle would also get hit by the spell. Up until now, the skill only allowed him to target individuals. He'd been using it to great effect, allowing him to find invisible and hidden mobs.

It was a desperate last act. He wouldn't be protected from the spell.

If Mordecai died, Odette's season would be done. She'd be stuck here for five more crawls at least.

The timer was down to 65 units.

ODETTE: Wait thirty units. Keep moving toward us. Let me try something first.

Before he could answer, she pulled that second chat back up.

ODETTE: Chaco, do you have the dart?
CHACO: Yes! But how can that help now?

They'd spent half of their time on this floor hunting down the priceless artifact only for it to be useless. When they'd learned that it had to be a specific type of god to unlock the puzzle, it'd ruined all of their plans since none of them had seen a storm god before this. This whole floor had been them choosing between four paths, and each time, they'd ended up picking the worst possible choice. They'd instead had to find the summoning cube, which wasn't much better.

If only it had been a holy grenade. They'd been everywhere on the previous floor.

ODETTE: There's only one way to survive. Worship Dodola and then use the dart.
CHACO: What? No. Who would I even use it on? Would that even work? She's already summoned.

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ODETTE: It'll work. We can't use it on Hold Steady because he's keeping the puzzle primed. The dart doesn't let you use it on yourself. You'll have to use it on Uzzi and then contain him with the cube.

CHACO: Have you lost your faculties? You want me to kill Uzzi? It's not going to happen.

ODETTE: You have to do it quickly.

CHACO: I don't think you heard me, Odette. Mordecai has a plan. He is doing it of his own free will. It's an honorable death.

ODETTE: If Mordecai dies, I go away.

CHACO: I don't care.

ODETTE: Godsdamnit, Chaco. Do you think you'll survive six units on the next floor without me? You don't just show up in the Outreach Guild like you did on this floor. You have to find one.

CHACO: Mordecai will kill me. And he'll leave the party anyway.

ODETTE: I have you in my chat. If you do this, I promise I'll help you no matter what. Without me, you will die. All of you will die. Uzzi will be useless without his brother. I'll talk to Mordecai. I'll convince him this was the best path. Dodola is a sponsored god. She knows what's happening. Mordecai's plan isn't going to work. This is the only way.

Dodola roared. She'd paused, not getting any closer.

ARMITA: She wants to know if you're sure. She sounds angry.

CHACO: Godsdamn you, Odette.

ODETTE: Do it now, Chaco.

This whole time, Uzzi and Mordecai were going back and forth in the group chat. The timer ticked down, slowly but inevitably plummeting toward zero. Odette knew if she actually told Uzzi what the plan was, he'd be on board. Skyfowl were like that. Proud to a fault. But they didn't have time.

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ODETTE: Mordecai! Abort! We have a plan that'll work. Get here now!

At the same moment, Chaco worshipped Dodola. He was the first in the party to worship a deity. Odette had told them from the start how dumb it was to tie yourself to one.

"What are you doing?" she heard Hold Steady cry.

"I'm sorry, my friend," Chaco said to Uzzi, who'd turned to regard the large bard.

The skyfowl looked down at the dart in Chaco's wolflike hand, surprised. The Dart of Ophiotaurus. Uzzi lifted his head to the raining sky and cawed. A war cry. He took a step closer to the puzzle and spread his wings in supplication.

He understood.

Chaco threw the dart right into Uzzi's breast. Behind them, Dodola roared in indignation and became unglued. She rushed forward, attempting to cast a spell. She vanished before she could.

"Steady, step back!" Chaco cried as he cast his level 15 *Circle of Containment*, locking the puzzle in with Uzzi, who'd fallen onto his back. His body pulsated and crackled.

"No," Mordecai cried, rushing up. He was in the form of a rat-kin brute, the first form he'd learned how to make. He stopped before the semicircle shell, falling to his knees. He placed his hands against the containment. "Uzzi! Uzzi!"

The skyfowl continued to convulse. Hold Steady cawed angrily as he concentrated on the puzzle, just on the other side of the containment.

One could cast spells on the things inside of the shell but not vice versa.

Uzzi's chest ripped open as the involuntary summoning completed.

Crawler Uzzi has fallen.

"No!" Mordecai cried.

Fifteen units before the collapse. The shell would end on its own in ten.

Dodola formed, hunched over in the shell, forced into the smaller size by the containment. The puzzle, trapped with her, shattered. A round glowing mote of light appeared. The key. It moved toward the stairwell portal, but it, too, was contained by the spell.

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ARMITA: Odette, what did you do? She just messaged that she's going to kill the both of us, starting with me.

Dodola raged. She fired lightning, but it just pinged about within the circle, spinning and circling, getting faster and faster. It passed harmlessly through the key mote, which was also made of lightning.

"Oh, Huanxin," Odette muttered. "You poor, dumb fool. That wasn't very intelligent, was it?"

ODETTE: She can't kill you if she's not in the game anymore.

The dart worked much like the holy grenade, but with two differences. The holy grenade made it so no vessel was required to make the summoning happen. With the dart, they'd been forced to pick someone. There were no living mobs left on the floor. It had to be Uzzi.

The second big difference was that the god's immunity wouldn't commence until five units after they fully formed.

Dodola was immune to the lightning bolt itself, but not the area attack it inflicted at the end of its run.

"Cover your eyes," Odette called.

The spinning level 20 *Lightning* spell exploded within the shield. The light was that of a supernova.

The god died. Not even sound escaped the containment. Just the light.

A deity has fallen. The heavens tremble with rage.

Behind her, Chaco gasped. A glowing laurel leaf appeared over his head. He'd jumped ten levels. They'd given him credit for the kill.

"No," Mordecai continued to say over and over.

"What did you do?" Hold Steady asked, looking at Chaco. "You murdered Uzzi."

"I . . . No!" Chaco said, looking at his claws.

"Wait, what? What is this?" Mordecai said, looking up, confusion on his rat face. "Did you use the dart? On my *brother*?"

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The containment spell whiffed out.

Dodola's dead form slumped over and then dissipated into ash. The key, unaffected by all of this, moved to the stairwell, opening it up.

ARMITA: I have three seasons left, Odette. She's here every year. Killing me would be nothing to her. You're getting out. But I'm not. What did you do?

ODETTE: I'm sorry, friend.

"You motherfucker!" Mordecai cried, crashing into Chaco. He tackled him, both of them tumbling into the stairwell. They both disappeared. Hold Steady called out and flew after them both, also disappearing, leaving Odette alone.

Silence followed.

Chaco would be fine. With the Godkiller achievement, he'd be able to make a good deal. She'd lied to him. The Outreach Guilds were always right there on the eleventh level. He'd generate right inside the guild. It would be just like the tenth floor. He wouldn't have to ever see Mordecai again.

I made it, she thought as the level started to collapse. *I'm free of this nightmare. Finally free.*

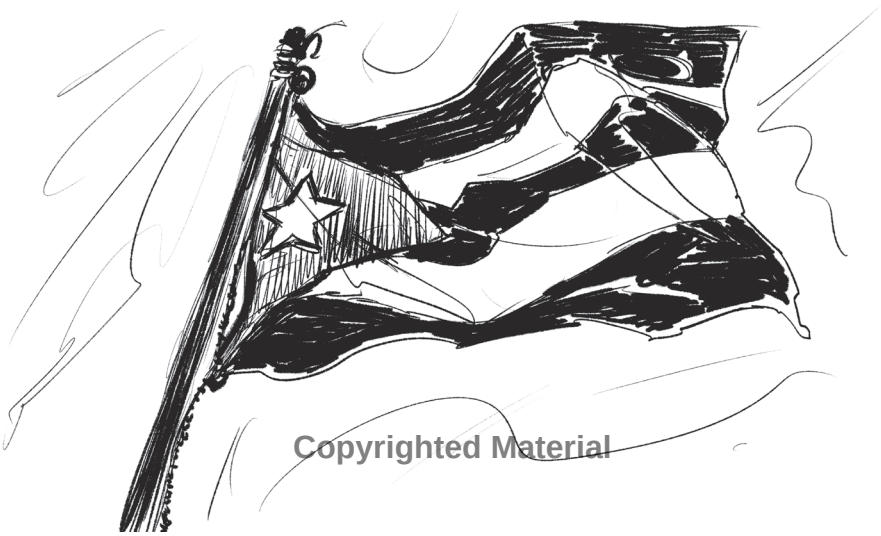
MORDECAI: I am going to kill you, Odette. I am going to get free of this place, I am going to find where you are, and I am going to kill you.

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PART ONE

HAVANA



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1

Welcome, Crawler, to the eighth floor. "The Ghosts of Earth."

TIME TO LEVEL COLLAPSE: 21 DAYS.

Views: 13 Septillion
Followers: 331 Quadrillion
Favorites: 41 Quadrillion
Leaderboard Rank: 3
Bounty: 2,000,000 gold

Congrats, Crawler. You have received a Platinum Venison Box.
Remaining Crawlers: 38,532
It is December 10th.
Your squad has six open slots.
Entering *El Capitolio Nacional de Cuba*.

DONUT AND I STEPPED THROUGH THE DOOR OF THE GLOBE CHAMBER into the rotunda of a large, empty room made of marble and tile. I was instantly reminded of the US Capitol building, which I'd visited once long ago.

Blue and magenta floor tiles spread in both directions. Enormous arched windows dotted the walls at regular intervals. The curved half-pipe ceiling was also tiled with bronze squares in relief. In the center was a round divot leading to an enormous cupola. It was pitch-black outside, and the room was lit by what looked like streetlamps placed at intervals, giving the room a warm yellow light.

This wasn't the US Capitol building. It was similar in architecture, but not quite. This was *El Capitolio*. The historic capitol building in downtown Havana.

Cuba.

We were the only ones here.

"Listen," Donut was saying as we explored the empty hall. Her voice echoed. "As the party leader and dungeon's number one crawler, I just felt that throwing ourselves right into the Bahamas was a bad idea, so I

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picked someplace close. Do you really think it was a coincidence that they gave you a book about the Bahamas when that's where Miss Beatrice was? It was quite obviously a trap . . ." She suddenly gasped. "Hey! I went down to number two! Carl, I lost my top spot!"

"I'm not surprised," I said, taking another step into the large room. I focused on the windows. My map showed nothing outside. I focused on one of the brass lamps and the red-and-green ribbon hanging from it. It was a Christmas decoration. "Did you see that notification when we got here? It said it was December 10th."

"Carl, I need to pick a new class! Hey, I have more time to pick now. I now have ten minutes to choose!"

"Good," I said.

CARL: Mordecai, are you there? Donut needs help with her new class.

MORDECAI: Holy shit, I'm here. It just blinked, and now we've skipped a floor. I heard what the announcement said. By his left tit, what did you guys do?

CARL: I had nothing to do with it. That was all Prepotente. Talk to Donut. She picked something on her own last floor, but she only had it for a minute.

DONUT: VIPER QUEEN WAS A GREAT CLASS, AND I'LL HAVE YOU KNOW I KEPT MY ABILITY TO SPIT POISON EVEN THOUGH I NEVER USED IT. I DON'T KNOW WHY EVERYBODY ALWAYS GETS GRUMPY WHEN I MAKE MY OWN DECISIONS. CARL IS ALWAYS MAKING DECISIONS WITHOUT ASKING ME. I STILL HAVE ALL MY BARD ABILITIES, TOO, THOUGH I FORGOT A COUPLE SONGS.

MORDECAI: Donut, hit me with your choices.

Donut jumped to my shoulder as I explored. As they went back and forth, I continued to examine the room. There were multiple doors, but they were all locked. At the end of the hall was a door, and there was a level stairwell behind it. I walked to the door and tried to open it.

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You need a key to open this door.

Damnit.

I moved to one of the tall windows and put my hand against it.

This area has not yet been unlocked.

I put my face against the glass to look outside, but I couldn't see anything. It was just swirling black smoke.

IMANI: Everybody check in. Where are you? We picked the western United States, and it looks like we're in some indoor water park in the middle of nowhere. Some place called the Great Wolf Lodge. We can't go outside yet. Elle and I have been placed in different squads, and they made us pick the starting location separately, but we both picked the same place.

KATIA: We're in Iceland. We can't go out, either. There's a stairwell here, but we need a key.

CARL: Same. We're in Cuba. Havana.

ELLE: Cuba? Prepotente picked Cuba? Why would he do that?

CARL: He dumped us before this level started. I don't know where he is. He never answers my chats, but I suspect he might be in the Bahamas.

ELLE: So Donut picked Cuba? Or was that you? Are you looking for cigars or something?

LI NA: We are in the Galaxy SOHO building in Beijing. There are hundreds of crawlers here with us.

IMANI: Is Chris still in your party? He never went back to mine.

LI NA: He is with us.

KATIA: Florin, where are you?

IMANI: I thought Florin was in your party.

KATIA: He left just before Carl and Prepotente broke the last level.

ELLE: Yeah, that was really fucked-up, Carl. You need to warn us next time. I don't know if skipping levels is good for our health. Not all of us are as trained up as you.

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CARL: I love how you guys just assume I had something to do with it. That was 100% Pony. I had no idea that was going to happen.

FLORIN: I am in Ecuador.

I continued to explore the floor, but there didn't appear to be a way out.

DONUT: I AM ABSOLUTELY NOT PICKING SOMETHING CALLED AN AGONY URCHIN, MORDECAI. THAT SOUNDS DISGUSTING. IT CHANGES THE WAY I LOOK, AND I WILL NEVER PICK A CLASS THAT CHANGES THE WAY I LOOK. I HAVE AN IMPORTANT IMAGE TO MAINTAIN.

MORDECAI: It's a great class. It's either that or Master Telephone Psychic. That one is pretty good, too, especially with your charisma, but you didn't do so well with psionic attacks on the previous floor.

DONUT: THAT SONG WAS VERY HARD TO SING.

MORDECAI: Well, those are your two best choices by far. Urchin will help keep you safe and Psychic will make your mapping ability better and give you some offensive charm spells.

DONUT: I'M PICKING PSYCHIC.

Donut glowed.

DONUT: HEY! I GOT EVERYTHING LISTED AND A FEW ADDITIONAL SPELLS! THIS IS GREAT!

MORDECAI: Your Character Actor skill is powerful now. What spells did you get?

DONUT: SO, I STILL HAVE THE VENOM SPITTER SKILL FROM THE LAST FLOOR, BUT IT'S ONLY LEVEL 3. MY MAP CAN SEE A LOT BIGGER AND MORE STUFF. I CAN SEE THE WHOLE BUILDING. IT'S ALMOST LIKE WE ALREADY HAVE THE MAP FROM A NEIGHBORHOOD BOSS, BUT I DON'T SEE ANY MOBS AT ALL. IT'S EVEN BETTER THAN THAT PATHFINDER SKILL. I GOT A SPELL CALLED *BRAIN FREEZE* AND ONE CALLED *BAD ATTITUDE* AND ANOTHER CALLED *WHY ARE YOU HITTING YOURSELF?* THAT ONE IS GREAT! IT MAKES PEOPLE STAB

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THEMSELVES IN THE FACE! MY INTELLIGENCE WENT UP FIVE POINTS, TOO!

I relaxed. That was pretty good.

MORDECAI: *Bad Attitude* is similar to Carl's *Fear* spell, but it'll be a lot more potent in your hands. If you work it together, it'll be a great combo. *Fear* tends to affect dexterity while *Bad Attitude* drains intelligence and lowers resistances. *Brain Freeze* does the same thing, but it targets only one mob and drains health. It also makes them temporarily blind if you can get it up to 10.

DONUT: IT STARTED AT LEVEL 8.

MORDECAI: Good. You'll want to train that one.

CARL: Can you see anything? We're locked in a large room.

MORDECAI: No. I tried to open the door, but it says "Exit isn't yet available. Wait for the level announcement."

We didn't have to wait long.
A new timer appeared in my vision.

Time Until Phase Two: 14 days.

It started to count down.

Cascadia started the announcement. I immediately noted she wasn't nearly as chipper as she usually was. She pushed her way through the announcement with the enthusiasm of a kid being forced to mow their own lawn.

Hello, Crawlers.

Welcome to the eighth floor. The Ghosts of Earth.

This is going to be a long message. This floor is simple, but the environment requires a small amount of explanation. Not that you twits are going to understand either way.

You have all picked one of 293 different regions. We have just over 38,000 crawlers joining us, and of the groups, you are occupying 205 of the regions. Unlike the bubbles of the fifth floor, you are

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not distributed evenly. But just because you don't see anybody else, it doesn't mean you're alone. Each region contains two stairwells, and you have been generated near one of the two.

The theme of this floor is broken up into three parts. Phase two starts in 14 Earth days. You will not be able to obtain an exit key until then. Thank the gods. For the next two weeks, you will be stuck within your starting area.

All crawlers have been placed in squads of no more than five. If your party is six or more, the party members have been split into equal-number squads of less than five. These squads are not able to be broken. If you leave your party, you will *not* leave the squad. You have to work together to survive.

You'll notice your squad has six more spots than the number of crawlers. So if you're by yourself, it'll have seven spots total, and if your squad consists of five crawlers, it'll have eleven spots total. Your job for the next 14 days is to fill your squad. You will be required to fill your squad before you will be allowed to proceed to phase two. If you do not fill your squad before the timer runs out, it will be filled randomly. Trust me. You don't want that. We'll get to that in a moment.

In 14 days, you will be given at least two options on where to send your squad for the second phase. It will be a different geographic location than where you've started. You, along with your full squad, will be required to fight your way to an exit key. This will not be easy, so it is in your best interest to make certain your squad is as powerful as you can handle. More details on the assault phase of this floor will be forthcoming.

This is how phase one works.

All of you are inside a large structure within your starting area. As soon as this message ends, the doors will open, and you will be allowed to proceed outside.

Each region is limited, but you will have plenty of area to investigate. In most cases, you will be allowed to explore in a circle of about 99 kilometers from your starting location in any direction. If this causes an overlap with another region, this distance will be shortened. If you are on an island, you will not be able to venture more than six kilometers offshore.

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You will *not* be able to enter any other regions during phase one.

Your starting area is an exact replica of Earth's surface area as captured on the indicated date. This includes all the geographic features, buildings, vehicles, and yes, the people.

That's correct. You will be fighting and exploring in a precise facsimile of Earth in the weeks before the collapse.

There are a few important caveats. You're living inside of a memory. In most cases, you will not be able to interact with mobile biological entities within the replay. They will not appear on your map. Think of them like intangible ghosts. They can't see you, and if you touch them, you will go right through them. They will be going about their lives just as they did on the day of the recording.

However—and this is very important, so pay attention—all non-biological, non-attached items will be tangibly present and *will* maintain their mass and momentum until physically interacted with by a crawler or a mob or an unexpected environmental factor.

You can enter buildings. You can use non-automatic doors in most cases. You can break windows. You can get hit and killed by a vehicle. You can go to a grocery store and take all the onions. You can allow a person to walk through you, which will likely rip the clothes from their bodies. The visible portions of their bodies will continue on their way. The people and animals are ghosts. Everything else is not. Complex machines may or may not work, depending on what they are. You can pick an onion or piece of tofu out of a ghost's hand and throw it at a mob. The ghost will continue to eat, but the onion will now be on the ground. You can place a barrier in a street, and a car will crash into it, but the ghostly avatars of the drivers will continue on their way, floating toward their destination as if the accident never happened.

"Onions and tofu?" Donut asked. "Is that what she thinks we eat?" I waved for her to be quiet. My mind was swirling with the possibilities.

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In other words, you can destroy the environment as much as you like. You can move mountains if you have the power. The physical items will only move as they did on that date if they are in the exact

place and condition they were at the time of recording. The world is your literal playground.

Note: Anything you loot on this level that comes from the Earth memory will turn to dust upon the collapse of this level. You will *not* be arming yourselves with the content of your local military base for use on the ninth floor.

I groaned. That was exactly what I'd been thinking.

That's the environment. Now let us get to the squads.

Your area is seeded with mobs and bosses and legendary creatures that are exclusive to the folklore of the region which you inhabit. For example, those of you in Romania will be dealing with vampires and werewolves. Those of you in Ireland will have leprechauns and banshees. Those of you in Japan are just plain fucked.

The farther out from your starting area, the more difficult the monsters and bosses you will face. These monsters will also be interacting with the environment, so it's likely their locations will be obvious, especially if the mobs are unintelligent, as they will be attempting to attack the non-corporeal locals.

At the end of this message, your Squad Leader will receive a set of twenty flags containing your squad's logo, which has been automatically created by the system.

If you plant the flag within the body of a living entity while they are at less than 5% health, they will be transformed into something called a T'Ghee totem, which will be added to the Squad Leader's inventory.

My breath caught in my throat. I tried not to outwardly react. I knew exactly what that was thanks to the cookbook.

If it is a non-corporeal monster, the flags will still work. Flagged monsters will automatically join your squad and will automatically be minions of whoever summons them. They will follow the summoner's orders.

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That is, they will follow orders to a certain extent, depending on the level difference and nature of the monster. While you need a squad that's as powerful as possible, it might not be in your best interests to build a team that's a little *too* strong. You may dismiss mob squad members if they don't work out by ripping the T'Ghee totem in two.

If you run out of or lose your twenty flags before your squad is filled, they will not be replaced, so be careful with them. You may collect more totems than squad spaces. You may trade totems with fellow crawlers. You may steal totems from fellow crawlers.

Upon the start of phase two, all non-placed totems will dissipate. All surviving squads may choose a single T'Ghee card to keep upon the collapse of this floor.

That's it for now. More details on phase two and phase three will become available in a few days. Furthermore, fighting with T'Ghee totems comes with a few additional rules, which will be explained after the next recap episode. I'm supposed to explain that part now, but honestly, you monkeys think you're so smart and clever, I'm certain you can figure it out on your own.

Now get out there and kill, kill . . . you know.

I took a deep breath. I had so many questions about how this worked. Especially the environment.

MORDECAI: Do either of you chuckleheads know anything about Cuban mythology? Or have someone on your chat who does?

DONUT: I KNOW THEY HAVE FLAT SANDWICHES HERE. AND ISN'T THIS WHERE THAT GUY FROM *I LOVE LUCY* WAS FROM? OH, AND THAT TRE GUY FROM *BOYZ N THE HOOD* IS FROM HERE, TOO, I THINK.

I was about to bitch, again, about Donut choosing Cuba, but there was nothing we could do about it now. The usefulness of the *Book of Lore* was painfully obvious. I understood Donut's logic, but she'd been wrong. If we were starting this on December 10th, that meant we'd be moving away from this location on the 24th. Bea and her friends had flown there

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on the 26th, which meant there was no chance we'd have seen their ghosts if we'd chosen the Bahamas as our phase one location.

But now, because we were going to be moving to a second location for phase two, they'd have plenty of time to engineer a scene where Donut and I were forced to watch Bea get railed by some other dude. I had no doubts that they'd be angling to get us over there for phase two.

They couldn't physically use Bea, but this was still a way to fuck with us. They were likely going to try this with multiple squads, sending us all to places where we could watch loved ones like we were in a fucked-up version of *A Christmas Carol*.

That was something I'd have to worry about in a few weeks. For now we needed to focus on squad building.

"Carl, did you understand anything that lady was talking about?"

"I think so," I said. "Do you remember when I used to play that Pokémon game on the Nintendo? I think it might be a little like that."

CARL: Mordecai, do you know what a T'Ghee totem is?

I wanted to hear what he had to say about this. I already knew quite a bit because of Allister, who'd written the 13th edition of the cookbook. For him, T'Ghee was a religion, and it had nothing to do with capturing and summoning monsters, but I could already see how this was going to work.

MORDECAI: I do. They're similar to Bautista's stuffed animals, but they're in the form of large playing cards. They're kinda like your tarot cards, actually. They're reusable, even if the summoned monsters die. I've seen them used in a few different ways over the seasons, so we'll have to wait until the next announcement.

"Carl, I just talked to Prepotente, and he *is* in the Bahamas!" Donut said. "He wants you to read the lore book to him!"

"I'm shocked," I said drily.

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"He says there's probably some crossover with Cuba, so the book won't be completely useless to us."

The entire room blinked, and a new door appeared where there'd been none before. New light filtered through the windows. The new door was an entrance to our personal space.

"Tell him I'll read him whatever he wants in exchange for half of those Size Up potions he has. He can sell them to us using the store interface, or he can join the guild and do it face-to-face. Come on, Donut," I said, heading toward the door to the safe room.

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2

"OH, MAN," I SAID TO MORDECAI AS WE ENTERED THE SAFE ROOM. HE sat at the counter with Bomo, the sole remaining member of our four bodyguards. The other three cretins had gone down with the High Elf Castle to the ninth floor.

Mordecai had been a tiny cute creature the previous floor. Something called a pocket kuma. He was now the same size as the rock bodyguard. He was large, pink, bald, and he had a single blinking eye in the center of his cone-shaped head.

"A cyclops?" Donut asked, looking him up and down. "You turned into a cyclops? And why are you so chunky? You look like a knockoff version of that starfish guy from that Krusty Krab cartoon, but with only one eye. Great, now I'm going to get the theme song stuck in my head. Do you have any depth perception?"

"Not really," he said, standing to his full height. He even sounded like Patrick from *SpongeBob SquarePants* when he talked, which made him come across as stupid. He was just as tall as he'd been when he was an incubus, but like Donut said, he now had a wide belly, stretching his white shirt to its limits. His skin was a bright pink, and his bald, cone-shaped, furrowed forehead glinted dully in the light. His single brown eye was the size of an ostrich egg. A caterpillar-like eyebrow stretched across his head. His fingers looked like wrinkly sausages.

I'd only seen one other cyclops creature before, and that had been a bartender somewhere. Mordecai was a different kind. I examined him.

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Mordecai. Hills Cyclops. Level 50.

Manager of Princess Donut.

This is a non-combatant NPC.

Of all the cyclops-style monsters populating the dungeon, the Hills Cyclopses are both the weakest and the dumbest of the lot. These shambling pinheads tend to spend their days working as shepherds, herding their sheep and goats. They're always dishevelled because they can't see their own reflections in mirrors. At night, they can be found at the local drinking establishments, getting into fistfights and drinking contests with their imbecile friends. They're mostly harmless as long as you don't mess with their flock and/or their girlfriends. I was going to add a joke about those two being the same thing, but I'm trying to be more mature.

Just kidding. These dudes definitely fuck their sheep.

"It's better than the form I'd taken for the ten minutes the seventh floor was open," he said. "I was a slime. I had no goddamned arms."

"Oh, shit," I said. "I didn't know they could do that to you."

He grunted. "I was a kua-tin once, and I had to spend the floor in a glass pitcher. Another time I was a skreich ghast, and I kept teleporting away against my will."

"Hey!" Donut shouted from across the room. She'd jumped to the top of the mailbox that sat in the corner. "There's only one spell book in here! I didn't get my Book of the Floor delivery from the seventh floor!"

"Nope," Mordecai said. "You snooze, you lose."

"This is an outrage! Carl, you need to send a message to your lawyer this instant!"

"What did you get?" I asked as I sat down at the table. Holy cow was I tired. I needed to go into my room and reset my exhaustion level, which would only take a minute thanks to the Instacot 60 bed upgrade from the guild.

"It's a spell book for something called *Mute*. That sounds boring."

"Good," Mordecai said. "That's on our list. You can stop monsters from casting spells. Learn it and practice it. Didn't you get another random spell book at the prize counter?"

"I did, but it's in a box. I haven't opened yet." She glowed as she read the new spell book.

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Donut let Mongo out of his box, and he screeched, running about

the room. He looked out the door into the main guildhall area. He screeched again.

"Mongo, who are you looking for?" Donut asked. "Mommy is right here!"

Mongo made a sad little squawk.

"Carl," a voice called, rolling in from the training room, "what has taken you so long? We need to go back out there and find a Pulpmancer!"

"Samantha!" I said. "You took off! I didn't know where you went."

The last time I'd seen her, she'd been blown up and burned to hell multiple times. She appeared to have gone back to normal. Her hair had returned, and her scorched latex skin appeared clean and shiny.

"She came back to the safe room," Mordecai said. "She *flew* here. Pushed her way through the brambles to get to the door."

MORDECAI: We need to have a talk about her. Something is obviously happening.

CARL: Yeah, no shit. You said she'd never be able to do any of this stuff.

MORDECAI: I don't understand it, which makes it extra dangerous. Withering spirits shouldn't be able to do this. She won't shut up about that flesh golem you have in your inventory. Don't give it to her until we figure out why and how she's gaining this power.

"My cousin gave you her mother, and we need to find a mage to animate her! I need my body back! Come on. Let's go right now, Carl!"

"Samantha, we just landed on a new floor. Don't worry. We'll figure something out. Let's get our bearings first."

"I'm going to kill your mother."

"And I'm not going to help you if you keep threatening me."

She started growling. She rolled off to chase Mongo.

ELLE: Holy shitballs, guys. Have you opened your boxes and achievements yet?

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DONUT: NOT YET. THEY DIDN'T GIVE ME MY SPELL BOOK OF THE FLOOR PRIZE, AND I'M QUITE UPSET ABOUT IT.

ELLE: That's some bullshit right there. You should make Carl's lawyer sue them over it.

DONUT: I KNOW, RIGHT?

"Do you think anything is going to happen to Prepotente?" Donut asked as she watched Mongo rush after the doll head. "They got mad at Carl for having the Gate of the Feral Gods because they thought he might break a level, but Prepotente actually did break one."

"I think he'll be okay," Mordecai said. "I was just talking to Mistress Tiatha, and she filled me in on what that crazy goat did. This one is on the engineers. They fashioned that level so it was just like the fairy tale. The kid in the story did the exact same thing the goat did, but it took him thousands of years to figure it out. They should never have built it that way. This isn't the first time a level was doomed from the start. I think I told you about the bacterial infection incident from the previous Borant season. There was another one where the crawlers had to hand-build bridges, but the provided materials made it impossible, and the council had to step in. This was the first time that it failed so quickly, I think. The Valtay are likely irritated with the Borant engineers who designed the level, but it sounds like there's plenty of blame to go around. The Apothecary and the Plenty are probably on their shit list for providing the means, not that the showrunners can do anything about that. The whole thing was a political maneuver to make a lot of money for those two sponsors, all at the cost of the Valtay and the Syndicate as a whole. It's all a game to them, and it's nothing new."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "I thought the Apothecary and the Plenty were losing ungodly amounts on benefactor benefits?"

"I'm not even going to pretend to understand most of it, but the sheer amount of money the Syndicate pays just to use the tunnel system to live stream all of this is enormous and paid in advance. If an entire floor is skipped, it's not refunded. Plus . . ."

He trailed off. He looked back and forth between me and Donut. He was looking up at the spinning star over Donut's head.

"You did it?" he asked.

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"Oh, yeah," I said, grinning sheepishly. He'd known that we were talking to my attorney, and he'd known what we were planning. But

everything had happened so fast at the end of the last floor, we hadn't had the chance to tell him it had worked. And this was the first time we were able to talk about it out loud.

"We kick-started a war!" Donut announced. "Isn't that great?"

"Who's your warlord adjutant?" he asked. "Have they assigned him or her yet?"

"Uh," I said. "I don't know what that is."

He grunted and shook his head. "By his left tit. You two . . . You know what? We'll talk about it later. Open your damn boxes."

DURING THE BUTCHER'S MASQUERADE, I'D STOOD UPON PREPOTENTE'S personal space cube for a minute and opened a few boxes, but I'd deliberately not checked my achievements, which would've added several boxes to the pile and I wouldn't have had time to open them all. We hadn't been in an actual safe room since before the party. I had literally dozens of achievements and boxes, including a legendary boss box and two different quest boxes for the Vengeance of the Daughter and the Recital quest. The vast majority of the achievements were for stupid things, like riding in an elven carriage and using a goodwill ballroom. The notable ones were:

New Achievement! Oh shit! A country boss!

You ever have one of those jobs where there's a big boss somewhere in the building, but you've never actually seen them? There's rumors that he's a complete douche with an epic temper, but you're so far down the totem pole, the very idea of having anything to do with the guy is just ridiculous. People speak about him with frightened whispers, and it's almost like he's some invisible, terrifying urban legend. Then *BAM!* One day you're coming out of the bathroom, wrestling with a stuck zipper, and he's right there looking at you like you should be ashamed of yourself just for existing. How dare you throw yourself in his line of sight, you worthless piece of shit?

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That's the position you're in right now.

Second only to the infamous floor boss—which doesn't show up

until the tenth floor—this is the biggest, baddest bitch one can come across in *Dungeon Crawler World*.

Reward: **You know how this goes, you worthless piece of shit.**

I'd received that one when Imogen had suddenly appeared in the convoy to the castle.

New Achievement. The Scourge.

The Butcher's Masquerade has started. You have collected the most hands. You have caused more mothers to cry, more children to hate than any other crawler before you. You are the champion murderer supreme. You are number one. If only your own mother wasn't already dead so she could see you now.

Reward: **You have received a Legendary Hunter Champion Box.**

A legendary box!

New Achievement. Marked for Life.

You were marked for death by a god. That god entered your realm, yet you somehow survived. That's quite the achievement right there. Too bad the god will probably try to kill you even harder next time. You are so fucked.

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

That was great, but my breath caught in my throat the moment I saw the next one.

Finally, I thought. *Fucking finally.*

New Achievement. Apex Predator.

Holy shit.

They're dead.

All of them.

Every. Last. One.

Not only did you kill more hunters than everyone else, but you killed the very last one. One could fill a very stinky swimming pool with the blood you spilled on the Hunting Grounds.

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You have become a very scary dude. Maybe I should be calling *you* "Daddy" instead of the other way around.

Reward: Nothing!

. . .

Just kidding. You have received a Celestial Predator Box.

My hands shook. I could barely pay attention to the next group of achievements.

New Achievement! Ménage à Quatro!

You survived a four-way boss battle! Wow! In addition to the boss box you got from this, not to mention that Apex Predator Box you're still probably freaking out about, you've gotten another prize. It's like Christmas!

Reward: You've received a Platinum Orgy Guy Box.

New Achievement! Fuck This Floor.

You went down the stairs less than an hour after you arrived upon the level. Who needs to grind and grow in strength? Let's see how that works out for you.

Reward: You've received a Platinum Here's-Some-Good-Shit-Because-You're-Gonna-Need-It Box

New Achievement! Pacifist!

You survived an entire floor without hurting a single poor mob.

That's not how this works. Nobody likes you.

Reward: You've received a Gold Pacifist Box.

New Achievement! Collective Bargaining!

More than 1,000 crawlers have received the exact same box at the exact same time.

Working together, huh? We don't know if we like that. Better toughen up the rules a little. Better break a few extra kneecaps. Better bury a few more bodies.

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Reward: You've received a Gold Scab Box.

"CARL, CARL, I GOT LEGENDARY BOXES! I GOT A LEGENDARY BEGUILer's Box for charming Ferdinand and a Legendary De-Sleeving Box for what we did to Diwata! And that's on top of the legendary boss box. I also got a bunch of boxes for singing! And an orgy box! And a fan box I can open tomorrow! Mongo! Mommy got a bunch of great boxes!"

Mongo made an excited squeak.

"Carl?" Mordecai asked, looking at me.

"I got a celestial," I said.

Donut stopped dead.

"What?" she asked. "And I didn't get one? I helped kill a god!"

I reached over and gave her a pat. "It wasn't for that. It was for killing the last hunter. I got a fan box, too, but it was for getting a bunch of viewers when Britney and I met Queen Imogen. We'll open them up later together."

She harrumphed.

"Well, don't just sit there," Mordecai said, his voice soft. "Let's see your prizes."

And so we did.

Donut went first.

The boxes appeared, a line of them that stretched all the way across the room. The first dozen were Bronze and Gold Adventurer Boxes, filled with good healing and mana potions along with a few potions of Phase Through Walls, which Mordecai was pretty excited about, along with dozens of junk clothing items and weapons.

Donut hadn't received a quest box for the Vengeance of the Daughter storyline. It was one of the few quests that had only gone to me. But for the Tina quest, she received a coupon for a free Town Upgrade. That was something we'd be saving for the next floor. I knew I'd be receiving the same thing for that quest.

She received a skill potion from the Gold Pacifist Box which was for upgrading her Love Vampire skill. In the scab box, she received an upgrade to her brush, **the Enchanted Fur Brush of the Ecclesiastic**, which added an additional ten percent to her constitution on top of the measly two points it normally gave for getting brushed each morning.

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The masquerade prize counter box she'd bought from Chaco opened, revealing a few items and a spell book. The Platinum Good-Shit Box contained a potion that was pink and frothy. Mordecai whooped.

"Cosmic Buff potion!" he said. "Raises a random stat by 10 points."

He'd mentioned these before. These were a different kind of potion than the standard buff potions that one could only take a limited amount of.

MORDECAI: If you get one of these, too, you should allow me to examine it for a bit at my table before you drink it. We'll want Donut to drink hers straightaway.

CARL: Okay.

The Platinum Orgy Box contained a coupon for a free mercenary purchase. The legendary boss box contained gold, healing scrolls, and something called a Flawless Jeweler's Gem.

"Hmm, yellow," Donut said, examining the large jewel. She did not sound impressed. "Yellow orange, really. I think it's a citrine. Not exactly my color. It clashes with my fur."

"Oh, wow. That's for upgrading your tiara," Mordecai said. "We can't just apply it, though. We'll have to go to a jeweler. They have one in the Desperado."

I laughed when the beguiler's box opened, revealing a single shining nipple ring. It glowed red.

"This is not funny, Carl," Donut said, spitting with disgust. It disappeared before I could examine it.

The de-sleeving box contained 100,000 gold—which was a lot for a box—and a strange type of spell book I'd never seen before. The book was thick, like a dictionary, with a bumpy leather cover. It was chained shut with a lock, and it bounced around on its own. Purple wisps of smoke came off it. I was immediately reminded of the book from the *Evil Dead* movies.

Next to me, Mordecai let out a gasp.

Donut took all the gear out and lined it up on the table. She immediately pushed all the lower-tier stuff away. We'd add it to the equip-

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ment pile for the next floor. She let me examine a Phase Through Walls potion, which would allow us to pass through wood, stone, or metal walls, but Mordecai warned that we should only use them in extreme emergencies. They were very dangerous to use, especially if we were fighting someone with any sort of counter to it.

Her Love Vampire skill, which she'd received for reaching 100 in charisma, had never worked really well until she'd used the temporary tiara on the previous floor that had effectively doubled her charisma. It normally allowed her to charm one intelligent opponent, and all damage upon her would be reflected to that opponent. The problem was, the opponent could easily break away. However, when she'd increased her charisma to an epic level, it not only worked much better; it ended up working without her even having to think about it. It just happened automatically, plus it charmed up to five mobs at a time.

We probably weren't going to get it to that level again anytime soon, but the skill potion added three levels to the skill, bringing it up from three to six, which would make it more powerful than it had been. But most importantly, it made it so it would cast automatically in certain situations.

The first spell book, which we'd also gotten from Chaco's prize booth, was a strange spell. It was a team buff called *Rigorous*. It was basically a damage-reflect spell, but only for debuffs and afflictions. Similar to my *Super Spreader*, but it didn't actively give the target the ailment, just the effect. Mordecai said that was an important distinction. Donut was not impressed, but she read it anyway on the guide's insistence.

The mercenary coupon was interesting. It was just a piece of paper with a buff flexed arm on it. I picked it up.

Mercenary coupon! The bearer of this instrument is entitled to 100,000 gold worth of mercenary services at any participating Meat Shields location.

"Meat Shields?" I asked.

Mordecai shrugged. "Probably the name of the mercenary markets on this floor. There's one in both the Desperado and Club Vanquisher.

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And there probably was one in Larracos, too. Speaking of, you need to purchase a mercenary training arcade for the guildhall. I'll talk to Imani about it."

Donut downed the Cosmic Buff potion. Her entire body sparkled with glitter. Then she harrumphed. "Dexterity? I was hoping it'd be charisma! Lame."

"Not bad," Mordecai said. "I was hoping for constitution."

She pulled out the glowing red nipple ring. She made a little disgusted sound while Mordecai whistled. "Now that's an . . . interesting prize."

"This is the most sexist description I've ever read, Mordecai."

He grunted. "Just ignore it and look at the stats."

Donut slid it across the table. I picked it up to examine it.

Enchanted Nipple Ring of the Superior Fire Demon's Hand Maiden.

This may only be equipped on a quadruped.

This may only be equipped on a female.

Warning: Unless you're planning on getting a lot of weird and unnecessary surgery, you ain't equipping this.

All nipple rings must be manually affixed the first time they are equipped.

Oh boy. Let me tell you about Superior Fire Demons. These bitches are crazy. Worse than the minor demons. I know, I know. That sounds chauvinistic and rude. You can't get away with saying shit like that anymore. Here's the thing. These bitches *are* gods-damned crazy. Full stop. You look that shit up on Wikipedia, and it'll be the first line. It'll say, "These bitches are three pugs short of a grumble." It's not an opinion, but an absolute fact.

We have a whole matriarchal hierarchy of demons who exist and fight and vie for control on the fifteenth level, all trying to catch the eye of one of the four brothers, and these Superior Demon nutjobs are always causing the most chaos, which is saying *a lot*.

You got the lesser demons, who are generally normal, though I wouldn't break up with one over text or call her fat or anything like that. Then you got the more powerful minor demons. Those bitches are something else, but they're nothing compared to Superior Fire

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Demons. These ladies are so batshit, the demon lords and queens require all of them to be "chaperoned" by hellspawn familiars everywhere they go, whose job it is to protect them from each other and themselves. It's Sheol's version of a Xanax.

These familiars need to be protected from the Superior Demons. This nipple ring is one of the items they utilize.

Wearing this nipple ring offers the following benefits:

Allows the removal of cursed items.

User is impervious to natural fire.

User is impervious to lava attacks.

User is resistant to fire-based spells.

User will not lose health while inside Sheol.

All spells with a fire attack now deal (Intelligence)% more damage.

User may cast *Bitch, What?* once a day.

We'd met two demons so far. Fire Brandy, who'd been giving birth inside the *Nightmare Express* train on the fourth floor, had been a lesser demon. Slit, the makeup-encrusted kaiju-sized demon who wanted to kill Samantha, had been a feral minor demon. I could only begin to imagine what a superior demon looked like.

"Wow," I said. "We're putting this on you right away."

"Errr," Mordecai said. "It's great, and I agree she needs to wear it. But we need to talk about that spell it comes with."

I looked up the *Bitch, What?* spell.

Bitch, What?

Type: Berserking Spell + partial invulnerability.

Target: Self only.

Cost: Item based.

Duration: Twenty seconds.

Cooldown: Once every 30 hours.

Effect: You ever seen an angry, on-fire weasel tossed into a room full of chickens?

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You catch on fire. You are invulnerable to blunt damage. Then you get really angry and kill every godsdamn thing in the room. This

is a Berserking Spell. Don't cast this inside of a Denny's. Or anywhere near people you like.

"Wow," I said again, suddenly feeling uneasy. "Mordecai, have you ever seen that spell in action?"

"I have, and so have you. Remember that rage elemental? They're perpetually in that state. It's actually called *Fire Berserker*. They've been changing the names a lot more than usual. Donut, only cast it when you're by yourself. You have three fire spells now. *Fireball*, *Magic Missile*, and *Wall of Fire*. All three of them are going to be much more intense. So, be very careful. It's good, but it's still not as good as your spell book."

The chained spell book did a little hop on the table, as if it knew Mordecai was talking about it.

Donut raised her paw and did an uncertain slap onto the book. It was a very catlike move. "Why is it quivering?" she asked. "You know how I feel about things that quiver."

"That happens sometimes with the more powerful tomes," Mordecai said. "Especially summoning ones."

I picked it up. The book was squishy and warm. It wriggled in my hands, like I was holding a puppy.

Tome of *Legionnaires of the Damned*.

Type: Summoning Spell.

Cost: 25 mana.

Duration: (spell level × 2 + intelligence level) seconds.

Cooldown: One minute. May only have one active instance of this spell at a time.

Target: May only be cast on recently unequipped armor or weapons. Total targets allowed varies based on multiple factors.

Effect: There are a lot of angry souls out there. Like, a lot. It's said if one has the ability to actually see all the wailing souls that filter through the edges of our world, one would go quite insane.

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The AI gave an unsettling giggle.

Quite, quite insane, actually. All that death spiraling down, down, down into the drain. Where do they go? Why are they always screaming?

Uh, anyway. This spell reanimates physical weapons or armor pieces for a period of time with an undead wailing spirit plucked straight from the river of falling souls. These will be temporary minions of the caster. Strength of the summoned symbiotes varies, depending on multiple factors.

Warning: In most cases, armor and weapons utilized with this spell will disintegrate upon the completion of this spell. Certain cursed and enchanted items may react in an unpredictable manner upon the completion of the spell.

"Remember the swordsmen guards on the third level?" Mordecai asked. "This is kinda like that, but scarier. Wailing spirits are creepy. Now that Donut has level 15 in that *Laundry Day* spell, she can sow a lot of chaos with just those two spells. If she trains this one up, she can remove all the armor off a group of mobs and then reanimate their own armor with the spirits, and they will tear through the unarmored monsters like wildfire."

"Holy crap," I said. I slid the still-wriggling book back to Donut. "You just got a lot more badass."

She glowed as she applied the book. It let out a little scream as it disappeared in a puff of purple smoke.

"I've always been badass, Carl."

Mordecai nodded in agreement. "All of these loot items are really good. Like, really good."

"Yeah," I said. "My whole feed is filled with people who are getting some really good shit. Elle got an ice staff she won't stop talking about. Bautista got a shape-changing ring."

"Bautista can change shape now, too? I bet he and Katia will be having some really weird sex," Donut said.

"Part of it is the AI compensating for the skipped floor," Mordecai said, ignoring Donut's quip. "But you got some of these boxes before that even happened, so it's likely in response to the Valtay ramping up the difficulty."

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"My stuff is good, but I didn't get anything for Mongo," Donut said. "And I didn't get a celestial box, either."

Mongo peeped in sad agreement.

"That nipple ring is practically a celestial. Same with the spell," Mordecai said. He turned to me. "But now it's Carl's turn."

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3

I TOOK A DEEP BREATH, AND THE LINE OF BOXES APPEARED IN FRONT of me, moving all the way to the back of the room. The celestial box sat at the end, physically huge. It was in the form of a giant rotating skull with glowing eyes. My view counter was completely spiked, which was unusual for being in a safe room.

The line of adventurer boxes started opening, giving me several good healing and mana potions, a bunch of those Phase Through Walls potions, invisibility potions, and tons of junk items.

The quest box from the Tina quest was the same item Donut received, which was a coupon for a free Town Upgrade. That wasn't something we'd be able to use right now.

The Vengeance of the Daughter quest had said the reward would be the ability to loot the High Elf Castle, but we'd zapped the place down to the ninth floor, and it had likely landed someplace inconvenient. I'd also received a Gold Quest Box for it as well.

The box opened, and a group of items came out. I recognized what they were immediately.

"Carl, is that what I think it is?" Donut asked with disgust.

"I believe so," I said as the stick-and-poke tattoo kit entered my inventory. These were the same items Edgar the tortoise used to place the magical tattoos onto Tsarina Signet.

"Disgusting," Donut said.

"I agree," Samantha said. She'd suddenly appeared on the table, watching the boxes open. She had a Mongo feather in her hair.

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The Gold Pacifist Box contained a small upgrade patch for my jacket.

It was a round peace symbol. Donut made a scoffing comment about the quality.

The Gold Scab Box contained a skill potion that disappeared before I could examine it.

The orgy box gave me another one of the mercenary coupons.

The Platinum Here's-Some-Good-Shit-Because-You're-Gonna-Need-It Box also contained the same thing Donut had received. A Cosmic Buff potion. I nodded to Mordecai, who could barely contain his excitement. He wanted to examine it at his table before I used it.

The Platinum Apostate Box, which I'd received for not getting killed by Diwata, contained a ring. A nipple ring.

"Ha!" Donut said triumphantly. "That's what you get!" She looked up at the ceiling. "Now that his nipples are full, there are other places he's not pierced yet."

"Yeah," I said. "Wait until I receive a legendary spay-your-cat-at-home kit."

"That's not funny, Carl. Don't even make jokes like that."

I had three boxes left. *Here we go.*

The legendary boss box for killing Imogen moved before me. Little metal bands around the box slipped and moved, opening with a ridiculous amount of fanfare.

The glowing leather wristband fell onto the table with a heavy thump. It disappeared into my inventory.

The Legendary Scourge Box opened with the same gaudy fanfare. This one I'd received for killing the most hunters on the previous floor. It contained 20,000 gold, two crafting table upgrade coupons, and a steampunk-style chest that hissed with clockwork gears.

"Weird," I said. "A box inside a box."

"It's a crafting table kit," Mordecai said. "It'll contain a bunch of rare supplies for one of your tables."

"Huh," I said. That didn't seem legendary quality to me, especially compared to what Donut had received.

The Celestial Predator Box appeared in front of me. It was in the form of a glowing and sparkling demon skull the size of a barrel. It spun in circles, twisting faster and faster as the top rose off of it. Lights shone

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out of it. Donut and Samantha oohed and aahed at the light show. Mongo made a terrified peep and ran to the back of the room.

The skull on the box opened its mouth and made a hissing noise as the whole box exploded into a display of fireflies, which rushed away and disappeared.

All that was left was a patch.

A full-sized back patch designed to be placed on the back of my jacket. That was it.

I grabbed it before it could disappear. Donut stepped forward and sniffed at it. She made a face.

"The stitch quality is just divine," she said. "But the image itself is quite disgusting. Are you really going to put that on your back? And there's some odd stitching on there that's transparent. I can't tell what it shows. You're going to look like one of those punk rock people. You're not a punk rock person, Carl. You don't have the right skull shape for a Mohawk."

"Interesting," was all Mordecai said.

My sleeveless jacket was called the Enchanted Anarchist's Battle Rattle. Before I even examined the patch itself, I knew this was a good prize, no matter what it was. I received +1 to all my stat points for each patch I affixed to my jacket. I had five total: the Earth symbol, the arrows, the bomb symbol, the anti-vampire Midnight Epicure patch, and the new peace-symbol one. Affixing a full-sized back patch to the jacket would double the stat-point-boost benefit.

The celestial patch was a thick black piece of fabric embroidered with a white pile of skulls from various creatures rising up into a pyramid. I rubbed my hand across it, and the entire fabric was covered in clear stitching, almost like it was sewn with fiber-optic wire.

The Scavenger's Daughter.
Upgrade Patch. Back Patch.
This is a divine item.
This is a unique item.
This is a fleeting item.
You may only affix one back patch at a time.

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This patch depicts a pile of scary skulls, all stacked up nice and neat. I wonder if there's a story there?

If this upgrade patch is affixed to an eligible garment, it will imbue the following upgrades:

(Hidden until it is affixed and then worn.)

Warning: Upgrade patches are fleeting items. You may remove them, but they will be destroyed in the process.

Warning #2! This is a divine item. This means it gains differing abilities, buffs, and possibly debuffs depending on your proximity to certain deities and demons. It makes for new and exciting combinations!

"What the hell, man?" I muttered.

I'd have to install it to figure out what it actually did. As I slid the patch over to Mordecai, along with the Cosmic Buff potion, I received a new achievement.

New Achievement! Fashion of the Gods!

You've received a divine item! This is an item that might've once been worn by a god. Or sneezed on by a god. Or used to wipe a god's booty, etc. You get the point.

Divine items behave differently than normal ones. They usually hide what they do until you equip it. The good news is, these upgrades are usually great and plentiful. They also gain new and exciting powers when one is in the presence of divinity and certain demons, too.

The bad news is, certain deities may inflict nasty debuffs on you instead. And there's no rhyme or reason to it. Don't worry, we programmed out the head-exploding debuff this season. That one was caused by Yarilo. At least I think we programmed it out. Actually, I don't remember.

Reward: You now have something new to be anxious about.

"Shit," I muttered.

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"Divine items are the best items," Mordecai said. "Don't worry about the potential debuffs. In my experience, they're almost always a good

news/bad news thing. Like they'll temporarily debuff you but will give it all back and then some at the end."

"It really is ghastly," Donut said.

"I like it," Samantha said. "It's something Louis would wear on a date."

"What?" I asked as I pulled out my new items.

The upgrade potion was for plus three to my Find Traps skill, which moved it to 13. I would see pretty much any trap in the dungeon unless it was placed and deliberately hidden by a trapmaster. That was good.

I pulled out the group of items for the tattoo kit. It was a long, sharp needle. Some ink. A few stick things. A thing that looked like a piece of sandpaper. I had no idea how any of this worked.

Enchanted Prison Tattoo Kit.

So, you're doing time. Hey, I'm not one to judge.

You wonder, "How did I get here? How did I mess my life up so much?" You figure, "Now is the day I'm going to turn everything around. Now is the day I'm going to make certain I get on the right path. I'm gonna get out of here and get a job and make my family proud. Let me commemorate this important occasion by letting SkullFuck from the next cell come over and etch a poorly drawn dragon on the side of my face."

This kit allows an artist to create a tattoo of their choosing upon the skin of a willing or unwilling target. Tattoo artistry is a skill that can imbue all sorts of magical buffs and upgrades. Or it can just make certain that your next mug shot goes viral. It all comes down to the talent of the artist.

"What the hell am I supposed to do with this?" I asked.

"Well, I certainly hope it's not give yourself another disgusting tattoo," Donut said. She paused. "Hey, the dungeon stole my joke! I said the viral thing when you got one of your other tattoos!"

I grunted. "They say the sincerest form of flattery is when someone copies you."

Donut scoffed. "No, Carl. That's just something thieves say to make themselves feel better about stealing other people's stuff. The sincerest form of flattery is when people cry when they meet you."

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I put it away for now.

I picked up the peace-symbol patch. It was small and round, almost identical in size to my Earth patch. It was just black with a white screen-printed peace symbol on it.

Upgrade Patch. Small.

This patch depicts a peace symbol. Ahh, isn't that cute?

Buzz off, dirty hippie. Go be smelly somewhere else. The Grateful Dead sucked. And so does Phish.

If this upgrade patch is affixed to an eligible garment, it will imbue the following upgrades:

Neutral mobs are less likely to fall into aggro.

+10% to Dexterity.

+10% skill in playing the bongos.

Warning: Upgrade patches are fleeting items. You may remove them, but they will be destroyed in the process.

"That was unnecessarily rude," I said.

"I don't like Phish, either," Donut said. "Angel the cocker spaniel's owner was always listening to them and smoking weed. It made Angel even more paranoid, and let me tell you, that was the last thing that dog needed."

Donut continued to talk about the dog as I picked up the large steampunk chest. The thing was ridiculously heavy. I hesitantly lifted the lid and peered inside. The description came in a different voice, like a television commercial.

Doctor Ratchet's Automaton Build-It Kit!

This kit contains enough items to create over fifteen automatons! Fun for the whole family! From personal servants to flame-throwing sentinel droids, this kit has a little of everything. The only limit is your imagination. And your insurance policy.

It then listed off dozens of parts. I recognized several of them as things I needed for some of the recipes in that instructional book I'd stolen from the production facility.

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"Excellent," I said.

The next item was a forearm bracer. This one was black and short and covered with little buckles. I already had two. The one that formed my Grull gauntlet, and the one on my left arm formed a buckler shield that supposedly disarmed opponents 1.5% of the time, but I'd never gotten it to work. I'd gotten that one from Katia. If I wanted to equip this new one, I'd have to ditch one of those two.

Enchanted Right Back Atcha Personal Shield.

You ever meet one of those dudes who is always super quick to take offense to everything? You gotta walk on eggshells around him. Has some job where he wears a shirt and tie even though he looks like he just woke up in an alley somewhere.

He's always saying, "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" He hits on anything with a pulse. He wants people to call him T-Bone or Bulldog or something. He dies of a heart attack in his mid-forties.

You get my drift.

Well, this little auto buckler is the armor version of that. This auto-deploying, overly enthusiastic small-sized buckler has a chance to catch both physical and magic bolt attacks and toss them right back at the caster.

It's not perfect, but who the hell are you to judge?

Equipping this small buckler imbues the following effects:

Catch physical attacks. (Success percentage based off user's dexterity.)

Catch magical bolt attacks. (Success percentage based off user's intelligence.)

All stopped attacks have a 75% chance to reflect back to attacker.

All successfully reflected attacks have a 25% chance to double in power.

Attacks must be caught with the buckler in order to work.

"That's much better than your existing shield, and the bracer matches your other one better," Mordecai said.

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"Agreed," I said as I pulled the Enchanted Auto Buckler of the Peach

Pit off my left arm. I'd toss it onto our growing pile of weapons and armor for our Faction Wars team.

I picked up the small nipple ring. It was a silver ring with an eyeball hanging from it. I tried not to sigh out loud. Donut was correct. It served me right for making fun of her own ring. I'd gotten this one from the Platinum Apostate Box.

Enchanted Nipple Ring of the Defiler.

This may only be equipped on a crawler who has been Marked for Death by a god.

Hey, that's you!

All nipple rings must be manually affixed the first time they are equipped.

Wearing this ring imbues the following effects:

Instantly know the religious affiliation of all nearby mobs and crawlers.

Allows the destruction of church shrines without further ill effects from deities.

+25% damage against all clerics.

The ability to cast *Black Nimbus* once an hour.

Li Na could do all of these things already. I already knew what this spell was going to say when I pulled it up.

Black Nimbus.

Type: Involuntary Abjuration.

Cost: Item Based.

Duration: Instantaneous casting. Affected target will suffer the effects of this spell for (30 + [Caster's Intelligence + Constitution] - [Target's Intelligence/2]) seconds.

Cooldown: Once every hour.

Target: Single target.

Effect: Has the same effect as wearing a shirt for the band Cattle Decapitation to church. Instantly removes target from the blessing of their deity and all associated buffs and effects. Will make it so target is unable to physically enter church or temple while the

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spell is in effect. Higher levels of this spell increase the possibility of forcing a smite upon the target.

Warning! You probably don't want to cast this on members of the same religion more than two or three times in a row.

"Hmm," Mordecai said. "Lots of divinity-themed items. That's never good. But you all got good stuff. Carl, get that patch on the jacket and see what it does."

"I'm already on it," I said as I pulled off my jacket.

"REALLY, CARL," DONUT SAID AS I LEANED OVER THE TABLE. SHE SAT on my shoulder and made little noises of disapproval each time I stuck the needle into the jacket. "You might as well have Bomo or Samantha sew this on. Or maybe we can blindfold Mordecai and get him drunk and have him do it. It's not that difficult. Your stitching is just abysmal! No, no, no! The angle of entry is crucial!"

"You know what?" I said through gritted teeth. "Why don't you go check on your social media board while I do this? See what the Princess Posse is saying about our Faction Wars team."

She gasped and bounded off. Samantha and Mongo both rushed after her. I watched their dots move off on my map. As I did, I realized there was the white dot with a green cross of a hired mercenary on the local map. An extra dot.

"Mordecai," I asked, "who the hell is in your room?"

"Oh, yeah," he said sheepishly. "I was gonna tell you about that. With my upgraded quarters, I was able to hire a room attendant. She has her own space off to the side of my quarters. It's not important."

"Who is it? Did you like hire a hooker or something?"

"No," he said, sounding offended. "Don't even say that. Of course not. It's nothing like that. Concentrate on your sewing. It is possible to ruin the item, so you do need to be careful."

I grunted. I'd placed the peace symbol on the bottom of the jacket next to the bomb symbol. I was pretty sure it didn't matter in what order these were affixed, but I wanted to be double certain that the back-patch effect caught all regular patches, so I did the small one first.

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I flipped over the jacket and smoothed out the divine patch. It hummed with potential energy. I waded through my messages as I sewed. Donut was already in the message groups, live-narrating some of the posts she'd received on the intergalactic internet. She was in the middle of telling everyone that there was a new fan group dedicated to Elle, which was comprised of mostly males. Apparently the whole old-lady-turned-into-a-dominatrix-fairy trope was a thing. Elle was not impressed.

Florin received another shotgun upgrade. I wasn't clear exactly what it was, but he was pretty stoked about it. He wouldn't answer any other questions about his situation. Just that he was in Ecuador and that he was in contact with Lucia Mar.

Katia had received an item that allowed her to move really fast. Neither Louis nor Britney—who were both on Katia's team—had opened their boxes yet. Both were still broken up about the death of Firas.

KATIA: I'm worried about Britney. The burn on her face still hasn't healed, and she hasn't stopped crying. She's just sitting there, clutching on to Louis.

CARL: Maybe have Imani talk to her. She's pretty good with that stuff.

KATIA: Yeah, I already asked her to come over. We'll see if it helps.

DONUT: WE BETTER KEEP AN EYE ON HER. I KNOW A VILLAIN ORIGIN STORY WHEN I SEE ONE.

Li Na had received some robe upgrade that increased her chain-throwing ability.

Tran, who was also on Katia's team, was in a terrible state. He had lost his legs in the final moments of the last floor. Daniel Bautista was with him, helping him deal with it. Katia said Tran was more upset about the loss of his friend Gwendolyn Duet, whom he'd been with since early on. I sent him a note asking if he was okay, but he didn't respond. Katia said he'd opened his boxes and had received a floating wheelchair in his pacifist box. It was the same sort of thing Odette used to zip around when she was in her human form.

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I was starting to get a little worried about all this great gear. Mor-

decai thought it was in response to the rising difficulty. But just how much more difficult was it going to get? We needed to get out there and find out. So far, not too many people had started venturing out.

"Hey, Mordecai," I said as I rounded the last corner on the patch. I was using thick white thread and spacing the stitches the best I could. "Do you think Samantha's presence will have an effect on my jacket?"

"Doubtful," he said. "She's only half formed, and she's not a true deity anyway. I could be wrong, but I doubt it."

"We'll see," I said as I affixed the last stitch. The Scavenger's Daughter patch glowed for a moment, indicating it had been properly installed. I released a breath. I pulled the jacket on. I immediately felt my strength increase. A new bar appeared in my interface directly below my mana. It was in the same place the blood bar had been on the previous floor, and it looked similar. The bar was empty, and it was labeled **Soul Essence.**

You have equipped a divine item.

There are no deities in the area.

The Scavenger's Daughter Patch has gained the following upgrades:

All patch stat point benefits are now doubled.

In addition:

Plus 25 points to Dexterity.

Plus 25 points to Strength.

You will receive a notification every time a deity enters the area.

The Climb benefit.

The Soul Reaper benefit.

The Mysterious Bone Key benefit.

This patch will imbue additional varying benefits when it is in the presence of divine entities.

"Huh," I said as I explored the three benefits.

"So, what'd you get?" Mordecai asked.

"Climb, Soul Reaper, and Mysterious Bone Key."

Mordecai blinked at me with his single eye.

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"Oh, shit. Soul Reaper?" he asked, his voice full of wonder.

"That's what it says. Is that good?"

He nodded. "Oh, it's good all right. But you gotta be careful with it. It can be more dangerous than that berserking spell Donut got. Read the description for yourself. I dunno what that last one does."

I only knew what the first one did.

Climb.

You can climb stuff better. Ya-hoo. What an *exciting* benefit. I guess that makes you a monkey.

I grunted and clicked the next one.

Soul Reaper.

Yeah, baby. Now we're talking.

For every creature you kill with a melee attack, the Scavenger's Daughter Patch is charged with the essence of the fallen. Once fully charged, you may transfer this energy to a single melee attack, which will completely drain all the essence. This attack will have varying effects depending on the nature of the essence stored.

The associated essence bar is now visible in your interface. The total amount of soul essence you may store increases each time your essence bar is topped off and then drained. In other words, the more stuff you kill, the stronger you get.

Warning: You know how asbestos is really bad for you? Like, it doesn't hurt you immediately, but it builds up in your lungs and eventually screws you over? Actually, you know what? Just ignore this warning. Forget I said anything. Carrying corrupted essence around on your back builds character. You already have a ring that's doing much worse to you anyway.

"Just make sure you drain the essence bar each time it fills up, and you'll be fine," Mordecai said. "That skill is ridiculously powerful. Just don't store the stuff for too long. I once saw a crawler kill a group of

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Gorgons and fill her essence reserve with their souls, and then she turned around and killed a country boss with a single attack. It turned the whole thing to stone and then shattered. Now read me that last benefit. I don't know what it is."

Mysterious Bone Key.

This benefit may only be used once for obvious reasons.

Creates a onetime-use key to open a lock. Any lock. Any lock in the dungeon.

WARNING! (Notice how I used ALL CAPS for the warning?) Using this benefit will destroy both the patch *and* the item it is attached to. That means the jacket and all those ugly little patches inexpertly sewn to it.

Uh, it also uses a bone from the user's body to create the key. The more difficult the lock, the bigger the bone it uses. It might just be a finger. Or your clavicle. Or your femur. No biggie.

This bone will not grow back. So make sure it's a lock you really, really want to open.

"Uh," I said after reading it to Mordecai. "We're gonna mark that as a last-resort item."

There actually was a note about a similar item in the cookbook, I remembered, but I couldn't remember the circumstances. I'd have to go looking for it.

"That back patch is really, really good," Mordecai said. "But it's going to be hard to use. It's not as straightforward as Quan's celestial robe. That happens. This has the potential to be much better. It just won't be easy."

"It never is."

DONUT: THIS IS AN OUTRAGE.

I sighed.

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CARL: What is it this time?

"This is an outrage!" Donut repeated as she burst from her room. She jumped onto the table. "Carl, do something."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Our flag! They were talking about it online, and I forgot that each squad gets a bunch of flags to stick into the bad guys on this floor. We don't get to design the flag. They do it for us! Look at this!"

The small flag appeared and landed on the counter.

I started to laugh.

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4



Monsters Collected: 0 of 6.

THE "FLAG" WAS A LITTLE BIGGER THAN MY HAND, LIKE ONE OF THOSE flags you give to kids to wave at a parade. It was a miniature pair of heart-covered boxers. Not a flag with an image of boxers on it, but an actual pair of heart boxers flying sideways, like they were dangling off a clothesline. Embroidered onto the flag on the top and bottom was a motorcycle-club-style patch that read, "The Royal Court of Princess Donut." Centered on the boxers over the crotch area was an embroidered bomb patch, identical to the one on my jacket.

It really was tacky.

"Elle says her squad's flag has a bag of adult diapers on it. Imani's squad flag has a butterfly, and it sounds just lovely. Why couldn't we get something like that? Have you seen the stitching on this? It looks like *you* sewed it. This is outrageous."

"It is pretty stupid," I agreed, laughing again. It was so dumb, I couldn't help but find it funny. "What did Katia get?"

"She didn't answer. She says it was something dumb, too. Carl, we need to tell them to change it. Something with Mongo would be much better than this."

"It doesn't matter," I said, picking the flag up. The flagpole, stick, whatever was a glowing metal spike maybe about a foot long. It was enchanted, and it would stick into any sort of creature, even ghosts, as long as the health was below 5%. I wrapped my hand around it and made a jabbing motion. It would be difficult to use these things. The metal would be slippery if there was a lot of blood. And there always was a lot of blood.

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I stood and wiped myself off. I looked over at Bomo, who had an

oddly depressed look on his rocky face. He almost looked . . . lonely. Like he missed the Sledge already.

"Hey, buddy," I said, "there should be another stairwell location here in the city. Can you see where it is?"

He grunted as his eyes went glossy. He had a spell that could teleport us to any stairwell location on the entire floor. The spell still hadn't reset from the last time he used it, but he could still load it up, and it showed him all the stairwells. It was a ridiculously powerful spell I was hoping to get my hands on somehow since we'd lose him the moment this floor ended.

"I only see two," he grunted.

"That's because we're not really sitting in Cuba right now," Mordecai said. "Each little area is its own location. Kinda like the bubbles on the fifth floor. When part two of this thing opens up, he'll probably be able to see everything."

"Why are we looking for stairwells now?" Donut asked. "There's one right outside, and we can't get to it anyway."

"Because if there's anybody else here, they're gonna be at the second stairwell. After we nap and reset our buffs, our first step is to find out if we're alone or not. Step two will be to map out the area and figure out where the best monsters are."

"Stairs not too far," Bomo said, tracing a rocky finger along the counter. "Still in big city near coast."

I'd never been to Cuba, or even looked at a map of Havana, and I had no idea how big this city really was. I had a general idea of the location of the city on a map of the small island country, but I knew nothing about the city itself. "Okay. Do me a favor and sit down with Mordecai and try to map it out a bit on a piece of paper. We're gonna keep you in the safe room for now, but we might have you come out with us later."

Bomo made a sad rumble, and I patted him on the arm. "I still have an old GameCube from that house I haven't hooked up yet. I'll make a compatible controller for you. We have a few cool games for it."

He made a noncommittal grunt.

"See if you can find a real safe room with a Bopca, too," Mordecai said. "I'm gonna try to get my eyes on the dungeon newsletter and see what's happening."

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"Eye," Donut corrected. "You only have one eye now."

He snorted. "Things are looking a little different in my menus, and I'm not certain what's changed. There's likely been some fallout from skipping that floor, and we want to know what that is."

"What about me? What about me?" Samantha called, hopping up and down.

I grinned. "You want us to find a mage for that body of yours, right?"

"Yes! Right away!"

I nodded. "We need a monster map of the whole area. The fastest way to do that will be to find a borough boss and get the field guide map. Once we do that, we'll see if we can find anybody that'll help you. You're going to be our recon specialist."

LESS THAN AN HOUR LATER, WE WERE READY TO GO.

I wanted to get into the craft room and play with my new automaton pieces, plus my bomber's studio had just been upgraded, and I wanted to go into there. Mordecai was already making noises about my crafting table upgrade coupons, but I told him we wanted to get our bearings first.

The first thing I did was go back into the capitol building, and I surrounded the exit stairwell with traps, including alarm traps and a few teleports. I set the activation condition as **Crawler not a member of the guild Safehome Yolanda**. Just in case. I returned to the safe room to collect Donut.

"Come on, Samantha. Donut, we're keeping Mongo locked up," I said. "Let's figure out how this world works before we unleash him."

Donut started to protest, but I held up my hand. "This is a city, and there are going to be cars everywhere. They won't stop, and if he gets hit, he'll get squished like your cousin Baron Bear Claw or whatever his name was."

Donut harrumphed as we moved to the heavy double doors. Samantha rolled underfoot, weaving back and forth excitedly. I pulled the doors open, revealing early morning on a warm, humid day. We stood at the top of a long stone stairwell. The world outside bustled with activity.

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Entering Old Havana.

"*Her* name was Baroness Éclair Exquisite, and she got smushed by a tractor because she ran into a field. She never was the brightest cat. Miss Beatrice was most upset when she heard the news, as was I. I never liked the baroness much, but it's always distressing when royalty dies in farm accidents. It's embarrassing to the whole family."

"Yeah," I said. "Bad things happen to cats who jump out windows."

"I saved your life when I went out that window, Carl, and I have yet to be thanked for it." Donut looked about at the scene spread before us. "Carl, none of these people are on my map. And isn't it supposed to be December? It's quite warm!"

I barely heard her. The scene hit me like a sledgehammer.

This is what we lost, I thought, taking it all in. *This is our world.*

The river, which I had thought I'd left behind on the previous floor, made itself known. *Stay down,* I thought. *Stay back. Not until I need you.*

I took a deep breath. The air was humid and smelled of flowers and ocean and the usual smoke of a city. The buzz of insects and cars and life filled my senses.

It appeared to be about eight in the morning. At the bottom of the stairs were a wide sidewalk, a busy two-lane road, and then a wall of brick and stone buildings. Beyond that, the densely packed city spread before us. Multistory and multicolored Spanish Colonial–style buildings spread out in every direction, most of them made of brick and multicolored aging stucco.

Various cars and scooters and buses zipped up and down the roadway. It was a mix of cheap Chinese and Russian vehicles with several classic American cars. A bright yellow 1950-something Ford Fairlane with the top down rumbled by. The shining car looked brand-new. A moment later, a 1950s Chevy Bel Air passed. I realized the car was a taxi.

"Okay, Samantha," I said. "Try to stay out of traffic. We don't want you crashing any cars or scooters, okay? Especially not near here. Head south and just keep going. Every time you see a monster, let us and Mordecai know what it is. We're building a monster map."

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I originally wanted to toss her the distance using the xistera exten-

sion, but she returned back to me the moment I removed it from my hand, and I didn't want to walk around with the thing all day, so we decided to let her roam freely. I was hoping for her to get as far from the safe room as possible and gauge the strength of the monsters at the far edge of the area.

"Okay, I will fuck up any monsters," she said.

"No, you'll observe and report. You're recon, and that's it. Got it?"

She growled. "And we need to find a mage."

"That's right," I said. "Now get going. You can float now. I saw you do it, so stay above the traffic and people. Try not to touch anything."

"Okay. I got this. I will fly." She bounced a few times and then bounced down the stairs like a basketball. She did not fly.

"Fly," I yelled.

She ignored me. "Hey," she shouted as she rolled away, narrowly avoiding a strolling couple. She stopped to look at them. "Yoohoo! Are you a mage?"

"Samantha," I yelled, "they can't hear you. Remember? They're not really there. Just their clothes. And stay off the goddamned ground."

She growled and rolled away.

I cringed as she crossed the busy road, picking up speed. Luckily, nothing hit her. She turned and then zipped down an alley, disappearing. I could still hear her shouting, looking for a mage.

I sighed with relief when she disappeared. That would keep her busy for a day or two. I just hoped she didn't cause any major issues.

"Carl, she's not very good at following directions," Donut said. "It's a wonder she—"

"Whoa," I said, stepping out of the way as a group of people suddenly appeared, also coming out of the building. They materialized out of nowhere. It was a group of five people. Tourists, by the look of them. From Asia. They'd been in the same building, but for whatever reason, our starting area wasn't a part of the replay. They just appeared at the top of the stairs and walked right through us.

"Help! Carl, help!" Donut shouted, suddenly rolling away. One of the ghosts had kicked her as he strode by. The shoe, sock, and pants just ripped right off the body as the man continued on his way. Donut rolled up in the trousers and fell down the stairs, screeching bloody murder.

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She *thump, thump, thumped* down the stairs and hit the ground and stopped just before she rolled into the street. I rushed toward her.

The man—now pantsless, underwearless, and with only a single shoe and sock—continued on his way, oblivious. The parts that had been covered with clothes now appeared as a wavy translucent outline, not fully realized like the rest of him. The illusion was strange, but I was grateful that we wouldn't be treated to a bunch of naked people walking around.

"Are you okay?" I asked, coming up to her. She pulled herself away and shook herself off. She hadn't really been hurt, despite falling down the stone stairs. Just surprised.

"Why, I never," she said, glaring off at the man, who stopped with his friends. He was now holding his hand up, like he was looking at a phone, but there was no phone in his hand. "You should be ashamed!"

"He can't . . ." I began, trailing off. She knew perfectly well he couldn't hear her.

"Carl, I think he dropped his wallet! And his cell phone!"

I picked up the brown pants, which had wrapped around Donut. I shook them so the whitie-tighty undies fell to the ground. Sure enough, there was a wallet and an iPhone in his pocket. I picked up the phone, and it was working, but I couldn't get into it. It said "No Service" in Spanish. It had a sticker on the back indicating it was a rental. I looked back over at the guy, and he was pointing at something on his nonexistent phone while his companions looked over his shoulder. They turned and walked off south along the sidewalk toward a palm-tree-lined park.

"Weird." I stuck the phone into my inventory. It seemed wrong that the phone was actually turned on and working. It would turn to dust the moment we left this floor.

His wallet contained a few credit cards and several euro banknotes along with a few American five-dollar bills. There wasn't any Cuban money. I pulled one of the credit cards. Thanks to the system, I could read the Chinese characters. The man's name was Bingwen Zou. I took it all, along with the sock and shoe.

I hesitated; then I took the underwear, too. I didn't want to leave anything behind. We needed to leave as small a footprint as possible, especially near the safe room.

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"Gross, Carl," Donut said.

"Do you see any mobs or NPCs?" I asked. "Come on. Let's get out of the way."

Donut jumped to my shoulder, and we stepped out of the way of a strolling couple. A scooter thing that looked like a driving lemon zipped by on the street. Music blared as it passed.

"No," she said. "And it's going to be hard to get through that without touching anybody. There are people everywhere. It smells really good here. I thought it was going to smell disgusting. I don't smell a single cigar."

"What about safe rooms?"

"Nothing," she said. "But there are bathrooms."

"Okay, hang on." I cast *Ping*.

The sonar sound spread out, moving out into the city. The spell was supposed to have a range of a little more than three kilometers, but I knew it would be less in the city, especially with such tall buildings. It wouldn't show mobs or other crawlers, but it would show me all the white-tagged NPCs. Several dots appeared on my map, including Samantha, who'd already gone a good distance, plus some white dots in the ocean north of us. It was showing non-hostile animals, I realized, and I adjusted it. Only a handful of actual NPCs appeared, and none of them were close. If they were in safe rooms or even regular buildings, I knew *Ping* wouldn't work very well.

I had no idea how it worked with NPCs when they were mixed in with all this chaos.

We needed to go about six miles east. The walk would take us maybe an hour and a half or two hours under normal circumstances, but if we were going to be dodging everyone, it would be impossible to do it quickly. We started moving north along the wide sidewalk, evading tourists and vendors. There were people everywhere.

We passed a pair of men, one holding open a paper map, examining it. I reached over and plucked the map out of his hands. His wedding ring went flying off his hand, plinked twice, and fell into the gutter.

"This would be much easier at night," I said. I decided to leave the ring there, and we continued on our way. I examined the map as we walked. It was in English, and it showed the whole downtown area along

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with transit instructions to outer neighborhoods. As I suspected, we were walking in the correct direction. We were headed toward a different neighborhood outside of Old Havana called Miramar.

"I don't see why we have to dodge people," Donut grumbled as we walked. There was a highway that traced the northern coast. We were going to get there and skirt the highway east toward the other stairwell. It looked like there was a sidewalk. If there was, this trip wouldn't be as bad as I originally thought. "The clothes don't hurt us when they hit us. As long as we're not hit by a car, I don't see what the problem is. And frankly, I don't think getting hit by a car would be that bad with our constitution."

"We already have reports of people getting injured by moving objects. They're cheating, giving things more force than they're supposed to have. If we were really on the surface, and I got hit by a car with my stats, I'd barely move. The car would get obliterated, but that's not how it works here. I'm worried about chain reactions." I paused to watch an honest-to-goodness 1920s Ford Model T rumble by. "Remember the Iron Tangle? Crashing one little train screwed everything up."

"Yes, Carl, but that was different. These people aren't really here. Just their clothes. I say we throw a big rock in the road and get it all over with. We wait for a car to crash into it, which will cause all the other cars to crash, and in a little bit, the road will be free because they'll all be crashed at that one spot. It'll just be weird, glowing ghosts floating around the place. And once they move through the crash, they won't have anything on themselves to hurt us. You still have the Royal Chariot in your inventory. We'd have an empty road!"

"We'd end up paste if we tried to use the chariot. Do you see those buses? They're everywhere. A roadblock won't get everything right away."

Donut sighed dramatically. "All this walking is very bad for my fur."

She remained sitting on my shoulder.

She continued. "I do like it here, though. It's very pretty, and I like the smell of all the street-food vendors. I didn't know there'd be so many people selling things. Or so many tourists. I thought the country was closed off."

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"This place is a huge tourist destination," I said. "Or it was. It was

hard to get here directly from the US, but people from all over used to come here all the time. Supposedly the beaches are great."

"Well, I thought this was a Communist country and such things as street vendors and beaches weren't allowed. I thought there'd be tanks on every corner and men in olive uniforms shooting guns into the sky and parades where everyone is smoking cigars while children wait in line for a single piece of bread. And what about those boat people going to Florida? I feel as if *The A-Team* lied to me."

"We're not going to be talking about politics," I said. "That's not why we're here. Nothing good ever comes from talking politics, especially when neither of us knows what the hell we're talking about."

Donut scoffed. "Carl, have you been sniffing glue? You are boxers deep in politics! We are sponsors now, and as the former number one crawler, it's my duty to—"

She suddenly hissed and poofed out. A pack of three or four street dogs strolled by and ran into the street, crossing it, moving toward a street vendor selling fried egg sandwiches of all things. The dogs were part of the illusion.

"Anyway," I said, changing the subject, "I think you might be right about blocking the road. But if we do it, we need to be really careful about the location. One little crash will cause every car that moves through there to start piling up, and soon it'll be like that pit of trains. It'll have a cascade effect, and the crash site will get bigger and bigger."

"It's going to happen whether you like it or not. Especially with Samantha out there. Carl, look!" Donut said, pointing.

A man floated by on the road, wearing only sunglasses. He came from the north, the direction we were walking. Only his head and his arms looked fully corporeal. The man just floated down the road. He'd been riding a scooter, but something had happened to it. He'd lost the scooter and all of his clothes. Whatever it was, it had occurred off the main roadway.

"Well, shit," I said, watching him go. I wondered if Samantha caused it.

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CARL: You doing okay, Samantha?

SAMANTHA: NOBODY IS TALKING TO ME, CARL. I DON'T LIKE BEING IGNORED. IT HURTS MY FEELINGS. I AM VERY SENSITIVE.

I grumbled under my breath.

CARL: Again, Samantha. The people aren't really here. It's an illusion. We're inside of a dream, and they do not see you. And why aren't you flying?

SAMANTHA: I AM GOING TO KILL THEM. AND IT TAKES A LONG TIME FOR MY MAGIC TO BUILD UP. I HAD A LOT OF MAGIC WHEN WE WERE FIGHTING ON THAT LAST FLOOR, BUT I DON'T HAVE MUCH NOW. WAIT, I SEE A RAT MONSTER! IT'S WEARING A HAT.

DONUT: WHAT KIND OF HAT?

SAMANTHA: OH, YOU WOULD LOVE IT. IT'S VERY BIG. WELL, IT'S SMALL. IT'S A NORMAL-SIZED RAT, BUT THE HAT IS BIG FOR HIM. MUCH TOO BIG FOR ITS LITTLE HEAD. HE'S VERY CUTE. OH NO, HE'S RUNNING AWAY! HE'S REALLY FAST!

I sighed and opened a new chat window.

CARL: Hey, Katia, Imani. Are you guys seeing any chain reactions yet?

IMANI: We're in a rural area, but I-5 is nearby, and only a handful of actual cars have gone by from the south toward Portland. Lots of floating heads and arms. I think something is blocking the freeway down there. Cars are still coming from the north.

ELLE: It's really weird. I just saw a goddamned bigfoot cross the road. He almost got splattered. The thing was wearing Bermuda shorts.

DONUT: WHAT ARE BERMUDA SHORTS? THAT SOUNDS LIKE AN OLD-PERSON THING.

ELLE: Well, it ain't a Sasquatch thing, that's for sure.

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KATIA: It's the same here. The moment we walked out of the safe room, I saw a Nykur. It's a type of horse, and it's supposed to