

THE GATE OF THE

FERAL

GOODS



MATT

DINNIMAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

THE GATE OF THE FERAL GODS

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THE DUNGEON ANARCHIST'S COOKBOOK
THE GATE OF THE FERAL GODS
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THE GATE OF THE FERAL GODS

DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL BOOK FOUR

MATT DINNIMAN

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*Thanks so much to everybody who has helped
make this series something really special,
including all my friends over on
Patreon and Royal Road.*

*Also, extra-special thanks to the person who
messed me a random picture of her (?)
foot with no message or explanation.
I've forwarded it off to the AI for you.*

*Capital punishment means those without the capital
get the punishment.*

Executed prisoner John A. Spenkelink

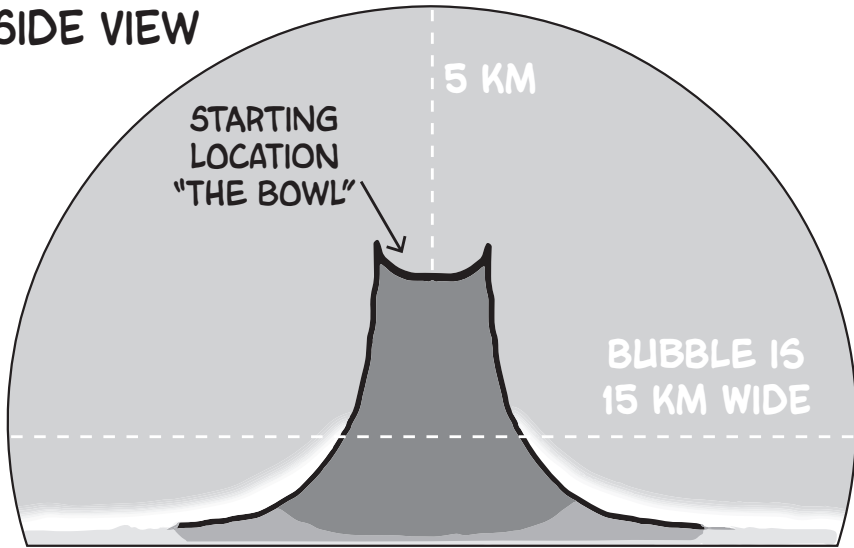
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BUBBLE 543 OF 1172

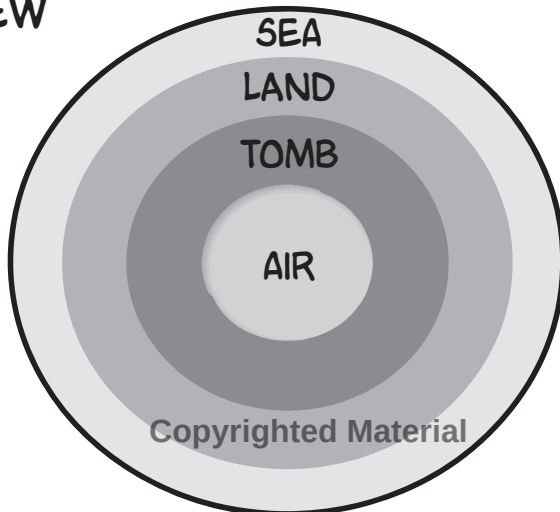
DESERT BUBBLE

SIDE VIEW



- EACH BUBBLE CONTAINS FOUR QUADRANTS: SEA, LAND, TOMB, AIR.
- EACH QUADRANT CONTAINS ONE CASTLE, WHICH CONTAINS A STAIRWELL.
- ONE MAY NOT LEAVE THEIR STARTING QUADRANT UNTIL THE CASTLE IS TAKEN.
- STAIRWELLS DO NOT OPEN UNTIL ALL FOUR CASTLES HAVE FALLEN.
- YOU MAY LEAVE THE BUBBLE ONCE IT "POPS," I.E., ALL FOUR CASTLES FALL.
- YOU MAY NOT ENTER OTHER BUBBLES UNTIL THEY ARE POPPED.

TOP VIEW



1



STAGE 1 OF 4. THE GNOMES.

TIME TO LEVEL COLLAPSE: 15 DAYS.

Views: 1.43 Quintillion

Followers: 7 Quadrillion

Favorites: 2.4 Quadrillion

Leaderboard rank: 3

Bounty: 800,000 gold

Welcome, Crawler, to the fifth floor. "The Bubbles."

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

Remaining Crawlers: 178,887

Entering Bubble #543 out of 1,172. Air Quadrant.

New Achievement! The Quarry Sees Another Spring.

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

Reward: You have received a Gold Venison Box! Don't get too excited. It's just money. In addition, all bounties against you now and in the future will have a [$\times 2$] modifier attached.

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

"WHAT THE SHIT?" I SAID, SEEING THE NOTIFICATION. NOBODY HAD warned me our bounties would double. Mordecai hadn't mentioned it, nor had I seen it listed in the cookbook. I wondered if that was a new thing. *Those fuckers.*

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

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

Donut mewed with irritation from my shoulder. Hot wind blasted against us, and every time I breathed, my mouth and nose started to fill with sand. We needed masks. We could only talk using chat.

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

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

CARL: Mordecai. Help Donut choose. We're in an air zone.

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

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

**MORDECAI: The class choices keep getting better. We still need
to keep your constitution up. You just lost ten points from
losing your Football Hooligan. There's one that'll replace it**

and more. Glass Cannon normally forbids you from adding to your constitution upon level up, but it comes with a plus-fifteen constitution base, and it'll also greatly increase your training speed on all spells. It does not increase your intelligence, but it lowers the cost of all spells, which is almost the same thing. Your *Magic Missile* will be much stronger, and it's already pretty strong. You can't train constitution anyway, so it's a good choice, especially if we grind on your magic. But if you don't actually obtain some of those benefits, it could be a waste of a class.

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

DONUT: I CHOSE IT!

MORDECAI: Well? What did you get?

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

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

MORDECAI: Okay. We need to really focus on keeping Donut out of harm's way until we get her better armor. No more riding Mongo into battle.

Class choice out of the way, we started to move. Dust and sand swirled around us. The ground felt solid, though my feet sank to the ankles with each step. With the dust storm, I could barely see more than twenty feet in each direction. I looked up, and I saw nothing

but brown. I turned, and the door we'd just left was gone, replaced by a curved, rocky but uniform wall. It seemed to rise high and away, like we were standing inside of a crudely sculpted bowl.

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

DONUT: THERE ARE NO TUNNELS AT LEAST. I HATE TUNNELS.

I wasn't so sure about that. My chat was filled with people checking in with their surroundings. I minimized it until we were someplace safe, but I saw a few people mentioning tight, claustrophobic tunnels. Bautista was in one such passageway. Elle and Imani said they were on a round, floating island that was really a bunch of boats lashed together. They were being pelted with a hailstorm and had taken shelter in the hold of a cargo ship that was filled with level 29 fish monsters.

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

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

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

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

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CARL: Donut. Minefield.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CARL: I think you're right.

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

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

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

We did see one oddity as we trekked to the town. There was a twisted, burned-out shell of metal on the ground. It appeared it'd been there for some time. I couldn't determine what it used to be, but it might've once been a vehicle. The system didn't label it at all.

I touched the metal to see if I could take it into my inventory. It felt solid and light, but rusted. It was half buried in the sand. We left it and continued on our way.

We soon came to a tall, curved wall made of sheets of metal riveted together. The walls rose high, maybe twenty feet, and a fabric awning covered it above that. The thick blue-and-white-striped material whipped violently in the storm, threatening to rip away at any moment. The fabric curved up and away into the darkness. Every few dozen feet, large, dark boxes stood atop the walls. They appeared to be lookout towers. They were closed up against the storm.

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

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

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

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

Donut continued to hack in my ear.

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

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

"Goddamn it, Donut," I said.

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

"Hump Town," Katia said drily. "I can't wait to find what that's all about."

Several minutes passed, and nothing happened. The clockwork

Mongos timed out and collapsed. I was about to bitch at Mordecai to come open the door when it groaned, opening inwardly.

"It's a big NPC," Donut warned just as the creature appeared.

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

Clay—Dromedarian. Level 30.

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

Trapped atop the Necropolis of Anser, these local Dromedarians are locked in a three-way stalemate with the Bactrians and the Dirigible Gnomes. Any day now this smoldering conflict could boil over into an all-out war. A war they probably would not survive. In the meantime, they're perfectly content to sit around, smoke weed, and do their best to drink all their problems away.

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

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

I just stared, blinking at the creature. Based on the way he was dressed and the description, I was expecting a stereotypical Middle

Eastern-type accent. This was more like a gruff biker dude. *Like Joe Camel*, I thought. The old cigarette mascot.

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

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

"Uh, no," I said.

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

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

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

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

"Not so fast," Clay said as I took another step. "You can't just enter Hump Town empty-handed. You gotta pay the toll. And if you're the Club Vanquisher type, you are in the wrong place. They don't call it Hump Town for nothing."

"What's the toll?" I asked.

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

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

“How much gold?”

“How much you got?”

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

“How about this?” I asked, pulling a single blitz stick from my inventory. I’d received a couple of these from Quint, the Desperado Club pharmacist.

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

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

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

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

New Quest. “Stay out of city hall.”

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

Reward: You will receive a Silver Quest Box.

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

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

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

“Let’s find Mordecai.”

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

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

As we made our way, the wind abruptly stopped. And just like that, dirty light streamed in from the spaces between the fabric awnings. Shouts rose around town, and suddenly camels were everywhere. A group appeared, pulling ladders and climbing the walls, unhooking the fabric. We had to step out of the way as a group of tall camels strode by on steampunk-like metal and spring stilts. We watched as they rolled the fabric up. In minutes, the massive sails were pulled up and placed atop the city hall. I caught the shimmer of enchantment in the fabric. A group of camels expertly twisted the sails atop the tower. The blue and white stripes formed a pattern, making something between a minaret, the onion towers atop Saint Basil's Cathedral, and soft-serve ice cream. Only it was all made of fabric. Fabric they could quickly unfurl and redeploy the moment another storm arrived.

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

"Amazing," Katia agreed.

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

Now I could see the distant shimmer of what appeared to be a force field, but it was high, high in the air. Airplane height. I turned

in a circle. The city ended at a massive wall that had to be over a hundred feet tall. Before, I had thought we were in a giant bowl. I realized now that I was correct. A bowl that sat atop a tomb. What had the description called it? The Necropolis of Anser.

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't know," she said. "But if we're in a bowl, maybe it's like an island, and there's water outside the bowl."

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

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

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

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

"You eagle guys all look the same to me," I said. We, again, had to move out of the way as a group of dromedarians marched past. There were seven of them, and the system listed them as **Level 48 Waster Patrol**. They were decked out in dark robes. They carried

spears and more of the bazookas over their shoulders. These guys walked with purpose and headed straight for the exit.

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

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

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

“Better than ever,” he said. “Anyway, Katia, you were close. We *are* in a dome. Like a snow globe. They’re calling them bubbles. The Necropolis of Anser is a very high tower, and we are on top of it.” He pointed up. “That bubble is bigger than it looks from here. The ground and the sea are far below us. You came in a few minutes late, so you missed the first announcement, but there’s going to be another announcement explaining the floor’s rules in a couple of minutes. Let’s get into a safe room and get some food and listen to what they gotta say.”

We walked toward Mordecai’s chosen inn, a bar called the Toe. I walked ahead with Mordecai, while Katia, Mongo, and Donut held back, oohing and aahing at all the sights. The town was an odd mix of stereotypical, movie-style Middle Eastern village mixed in with the Burning Man festival. The adobe buildings were oftentimes augmented with rusty metallic exoskeletons. I couldn’t tell if it was armor, something functional, or just art. One residence had a steampunkish telescope on top, pointing up. Another held a weather station that glowed with enchantment. A battery-powered engine chugged outside of another building. A pair of young camels zipped by on a tracked cart, like a mini tractor, dragging a rickety wagon

stacked impossibly high with branches. They laughed as they bounced. The whole town smelled of smoke and oil and dirt.

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

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

"Changelings, like me," Mordecai said sourly. "Don't trust them. If you're feeling like you need to, you know, stick with the Desperado Club."

The cookbook had something similar to say about changelings. It'd called them thieving, backstabbing whores, or something of the like.

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

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

"I was expecting twelve," Mordecai said. "The fact they gave us three more than expected is not necessarily a good thing. I already know how the floor works, and we're already screwed. So with the extra three days, I suspect we might be in for a nasty surprise."

"Why are we screwed?" I asked.

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

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

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

"Shit," I said.

THE TOE WAS A SIMPLE INN-STYLE TAVERN WITH A DROMEDARIAN proprietor. The place smelled like a petting zoo. This inn only employed a single prostitute, a woman changeling named Juice Box, who sat pouting in the corner after we all rejected her. In addition to the woman, the Toe also offered alcohol, food, and a few rooms.

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

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

Hello, Crawlers. Welcome to the fifth floor! We are so very excited for you to enjoy this new and exciting level! We have just over 178,000 of you joining us. The last floor was somewhat of a mystery, and finding out how it worked was part of the fun. This floor is a little different. The layout is not so much a secret, and the rules are pretty simple. We want you guys to have a great time with this one.

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

Think of a sheet of Bubble Wrap. Every bubble is its own self-contained world. Each individual world has four zones or "quadrants."

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

Each bubble is split into four quadrants: Land, Sea, Air, and Subterranean. Each quadrant has a single castle within. Your mission is to find the castle, raid it, and take the throne room.

Once the throne room is occupied or the quadrant's boss is killed, the castle is considered conquered. The stairwell is also located in the throne room, so no need to be scrambling around, worried about not being able to find it. Easy, right? Take the castle, take the stairwell.

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

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

Mordecai groaned.

"Goddamnit," I said. I exchanged a look with Katia, who looked ill. Even Donut seemed taken aback.

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

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

Copyrighted Material

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

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

THE FIRST THING DONUT DID WAS BOUNCE OVER TO THE MAILBOX and grab her Spell Book of the Floor Club prize as we headed toward our personal space.

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

“We won’t be so lucky,” I said.

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

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

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

IMANI: Hey, Carl. What’s a backstay?

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

ELLE: There are 20 of us, and not a one of these old farts has ever sailed a boat. Can you believe that? I told them not to put me into Meadow Lark. I would’ve been better off in one of the more expensive old-folks homes surrounded by rich old codgers who grew up on boats, but no. The system is giving us a sailing tutorial, but it doesn’t tell us where the things are. How are we supposed to pull the boom vang when we don’t know what it is? This thing is more complicated than those trains.

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

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

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

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

IMANI: Not all of us can float, Elle.

CARL: Weren't you on the island already? You know what? Never mind. Just be careful.

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

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

"Unwad your panties, Carl."

Katia laughed. "You got that from Elle."

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

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

"Oh, Carl. Just chillax."

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

"What is it?"

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

physically touching them. Distance grows with level up. At level one, it's about 10 meters."

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

"That thing was a menace, Carl. It was haunted."

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

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

"That thing needs a raise," I said.

The bot beeped in agreement.

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

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

New Achievement! Let There Be Chaos.

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

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

Copyrighted Material

New Achievement! Divine Epiphany.

You have seen a deity. Don't get too excited. It doesn't mean

you're a prophet or anything like that. This is a pretty common achievement that all crawlers eventually receive if they survive long enough, so you aren't really that special. Finding a god is easy. What you don't want is for that god to find you.

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

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

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

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

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

New Achievement! Indomitable.

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

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

"Wow," I said. A legendary box!

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

New Achievement! Smushed for Daddy.

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

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

Reward: You have received a Platinum Spicy Box.

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

New Achievement! Hail Mary!

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

Reward: You've received a Gold Sniper's Box!

New Achievement! Extinction Event.

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

Species killed: Wall Monitors.

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

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

In addition to all of that, we'd all received two Bronze Boss Boxes for killing the mantas even though we hadn't technically killed either of them. Both had been summoning vessels for Grull. I wasn't going to complain. Nobody else in the party received the Indomita-

ble achievement, though Katia had received a similar one for surviving a god's magic attack, but it was only a gold box. Apparently Elle was the only other one to get the legendary box.

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

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

Scroll of Water Breathing.

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

"I am saying this right now, Carl," Donut announced the moment she received the scroll. "I am a cat. Cats do not swim. Cats do not go in water. It is unnatural, and it is not going to happen."

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

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

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

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

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

“What about flying?” I asked.

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

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

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

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

Katia opened her boxes next. In addition to gold, she received several more of the water-breathing scrolls along with antidote potions. The water-breathing scrolls and antidote pots seemed to be pretty common, making them this floor’s version of the torch and the bandage. In her Gold Survivor’s Box, she received a skill potion that she was forced to drink right away. It raised her Catcher skill, which she’d been training relentlessly, up to level 11.

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

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

“It’s like once you start getting something, you’re more likely to keep getting it,” I said.

“That’s absolutely right,” he agreed. “And sometimes things, like those water-breathing scrolls, are a not-so-subtle hint about what you might find on a level. See all those antidote potions Katia received? It

means we have lots of poison-dealing monsters and traps on this floor as well. Good thing both you and Donut are immune to poison.”

“How wonderful for you,” Katia said drily.

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

My Gold Sniper’s Box contained a crafting item. It was a case containing 25 small black items, each about the size of a bottle cap.

Surefire. Crafting item.

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

If added to a trap, additional options become available. Such as “Target any healers within range” or “Target anyone who thinks it’s okay to put mayonnaise on hot dogs.”

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

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

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

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

Enchanted Toe Ring of the Leprous Bandit.

This is a unique item.

Most children in the universe know the exciting tale of the Leprous Bandit, the infamous human thief whose people were starving to death because of a planetwide quarantine. While all the planet’s residents were carriers of the disease, it did not

affect them. But because the disease was deadly to the Forsoothed, the planet's regents, the aliens placed themselves in floating protection platforms, guarding the gardens and food stores in hopes to starve the humans all out.

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

This toe ring imbues the following:

The Sticky Feet Benefit.

The Super-Spreader Benefit.

"Two benefits in one item?" Mordecai said. "That's a pretty damn valuable ring. That's almost legendary tier."

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

Sticky Feet.

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

"Hey, I'm like Spider-Man," I said. "At least my feet are. Too bad it's only once every six hours." I looked at the second benefit.

Super-Spreader. Copyrighted Material

You have been given the power of every plague rat and kindergartner since the dawn of time. You may pass any active

debuffs on to a target of your choice once per hour. This does not remove the debuff from yourself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Extinction Sigil Tattoo.

Wall Monitor Race.

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

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

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

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

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

“I guess we’ll find out,” I said, reaching up to touch the tattoo under my eye. I now had three tats. My goblin pass, my Desperado

Club pass, and now this. Hopefully it was as small and unnoticeable as Katia said.

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

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

"Who's Pawna?" I asked.

"She's the goddess of peace," Mordecai said. "In the pantheon, she's Grull's sister and archenemy. Don't take this now. Save it."

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

The description was very simple.

Pawna's Tears.

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

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

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

“Not including the pet biscuit,” Donut said.

“Not including the pet biscuit,” Mordecai agreed.

“My Powerful Strike is already 13,” I said.

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

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

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

ELLE: Not a good time to talk. Imani crashed the boat. I had to freeze the water to keep everybody from drowning. But I got a spell book called *Graupel*. Big ice storm. Most powerful spell I have now, but I’m kinda scared to try it. It costs 50 mana. Long cooldown. Talk soon.

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

“That’s a good question,” I said. “I haven’t asked yet.”

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

“If she’s not in this bubble, then we don’t have to worry about it. Keep your Find Crawler up and running.”

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

“Hmm,” Mordecai said. “I wonder if they’re averaging out the player levels in the bubbles. That’ll explain why we’re stuck with the

dregs. Carl, your level 41 might be the highest in the dungeon. We won't know until the top ten populates."

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

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

GWENDOLYN DUET: Oh, hey, bomber guy. It looks like we're neighbors. All of these dumbasses I'm stuck with don't know what they're doing. Me and the other two folks in my team are the highest level here. We rolled land, and we rolled something called the Sandcastle of the Mad Dune Mage. There are giant snakes, giant spiders, and these half-human, half-scorpion punk rock guys with no shirts and nipple rings running around all over the place. Plus bird things carrying chain saws, though we haven't fought them yet. We haven't checked out the castle up close, but it's a big 'un. There are four levels of walls. It's built into the side of that giant tomb or mountain or whatever that is. I don't know how we're going to get in.

CARL: Do you have a Desperado Club down there?

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

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

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

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

CARL: Roger that.

Fifteen days suddenly seemed like an impossibly short time.

POST-NAP, WE RESET OUR BUFFS. AFTER A QUICK DISCUSSION WITH Mordecai, we decided we needed to keep up our strict training schedule. Katia and Donut hit the training room while I returned to the village. We gave Mordecai our environmental coupons and several hundred thousand gold. He and Donut were going to purchase the store interface and kitchen upgrade. Donut also wanted one of the social upgrades, something that'd allow us to see messages from followers. None of us except her thought it was a good idea, and she'd been pouting about it for an hour straight.

I let Mordecai deal with that while I stepped out of the Toe. The "sun" was out, though it was threatening to sink below the western edge of the tomb's lip. I had to hurry.

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

There didn't appear to be any other customers about. I shook my head and moved one street closer to the wall. "I can be anything you

want, honey,” one of them called after me as I walked away. “I have the biggest library in town.”

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

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

Skarn. Level 3 Changeling Juvenile.

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

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

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

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

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

The kid, whose name was Skarn, brightened, suddenly becoming animated. The more he talked, the more personality he formed. “The *Wasteland*? I can show you that!” He paused. “Flint says I'm supposed

to ask for a gold coin. He says orphans can only get by if they use their talents to take money from people dumber than them.”

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

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

“Why did the gnomes bomb you?”

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

“Ah,” I said, coming onto the roof.

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

This is all we have to work with.

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

I thought of the mass of desperate prostitutes one street over. It

still didn't make sense to me, but the story was becoming a little more clear. Skarn moved the telescope, searching. The telescope was a white tube covered in pipes and gears. The material of the body was odd, maybe ceramic. I examined it.

Enchanted Gnome FarSeerer.

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

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

"Where did you get this?" I asked.

"Flint found it in the dunes. There's lots of crashed stuff from the last war out there. There! There it is! Okay, you can look now. Hurry 'cause it moves. But you gotta pay."

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

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

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

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

The *Wasteland* Castle appeared to be a jagged-edged, almost-rectangular island ripped straight from the ground. There was so much going on with the thing, it was difficult to focus on the whole.

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

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

Hundreds of ropes and chains and other strange items hung from the bottom of the flying island, twinkling in the light. This included what appeared to be small, round huts. Some of the items only hung a few dozen feet, but other chains and ropes and oddities dangled past the telescope's display.

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

The small airship was held aloft like a drone, with a set of four propellers spread out under the vehicle. The distinctive shape of a

refrigerator-sized bomb dangled precariously underneath the small airship. I zoomed in farther, and to my surprise, all the information appeared like I was examining it up close.

Gnomish Knock-Knock.

Type: Fuel-air bomb.

Effect: Thermobaric explosion.

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

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

The fuel-air Knock-Knocks were once used to devastating effect in the early days of the last conflict. The remaining munitions are instead used as a mutual-standoff weapon. These are simple, crude, but highly effective bombs. They are detonated using an adjustable pressure-based fuse that can allow the bombardier to fine-tune the height at which they explode. Requires the bomber to know the altitude of their target to obtain maximum efficacy.

Famously unstable. But goddamn do they put on a show.

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

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

"Flint sounds like a real peach. Why don't the gnomes drop bombs here?"

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Skarn shrugged. "Flint says it's because of what they have in the

town hall. The Bactrians have the same deal. That's why there's peace."

"What is it?"

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

"But do you know what they have hidden in the town hall?"

"I don't know. I'm not allowed to go over there. I know it eats mushrooms."

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

"Maybe it's his pet," Donut said. "Nobody wants to bomb their pet. What eats mushrooms?"

"Lots of things," Mordecai said.

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

"It's going to depend on what it is, but after we find out, we'll have to go over to that other town and do the same thing again, I think. It sounds like they also have something to keep themselves safe. So far we only know a little kid's version of the story. We need to understand as much as possible before we move on."

"Okay, but before you go out there, let's do a quick tour of the new upgrades," Mordecai said, indicating the new kitchen renovation, which was nothing more than three cabinets sitting in a row against the blank wall of the kitchen. "We'll be able to upgrade this into something much better once we get to the tier-two upgrades. I'm looking forward to that, mostly because of the magic room. But we'll talk about that later. These are food synthesizers, bought with Katia's coupon. You can only use one a day, but this upgrade came

with three different cabinets, so it's breakfast, lunch, and dinner or whatever. I know from experience these things can be a little buggy. I suggest not picking the same item twice in a row, or suddenly you'll find yourself with that as your only choice. Otherwise the selection changes every day and is customized to you. It'll learn your tastes."

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

"Hey, cool," I said.

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

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

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

A new buff notification appeared.

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

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

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

"What the hell is skyr?" I asked.

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

"Marketplace?" I asked. "So we can buy stuff?"

"Yes and no," he said. "We bought the marketplace upgrade early, and it doesn't really open up until the next floor. For now it's like having a virtual-general-store interface. The second-tier version is the

same thing but twice as expensive, so we had to buy it now. You can purchase basic potions and scrolls, and random items will also pop up for sale. You can sell things. Carl, this was your coupon, but we gave it to Donut to use, so she got credit for it. It is her account. We did this because her charisma bonus is automatically added to the prices.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes,” he said. “This is how they outfit their armies. But if you don’t sell your gear, somebody else will.”

“So Prince Stalwart has one of these interface things, too?”

“Actually, no,” Mordecai said. “The factions on the ninth floor don’t get the interface. The funnel city of Larracos has actual stores with NPC proprietors, and the faction leaders have to physically go to the store and buy or bid on the items. Once you crawlers get there, everybody gets kicked out of Larracos and the fighting begins. So you make the most money selling your gear on the sixth through eighth floors. Once the ninth floor opens, the factions are no longer able to buy new gear and can only take it from the other armies. I’ll explain all of that when you get there.”

“I don’t like the idea of selling shit to people who’ll use it against us.”

Mordecai grunted. “They’ll mostly be using it on each other. Now go over there and check out the interface.”

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

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

<Note added by Crawler Batbilge. 12th Edition>

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

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<Note added by Crawler Allister. 13th Edition>

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

I knew the cookbook manifested itself in different forms. For Allister, it appeared as a massive deck of playing cards from his home planet. They were for a game called T'Ghee, which seemed to be a mix between chess and Go Fish from the little information Allister gave. The game was also a part of their meditation-based religion, which made it easy for Allister to spend hours studying the cards.

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

But for now, we had work to do.

THE FIRST TWO CRAWLERS WERE A PAIR OF HUMANS WHO'D SET themselves up at a brothel bar called Spit and Swallow. The bar's logo was a bird skewered on a stick. We entered the dark, incense-smelling safe room. Mongo was in his carrier. Donut stood on my shoulder. Katia stood beside me. A dromedarian barkeep looked up at us. Multiple dromedarians were here sitting at tables and drinking at the bar. Quiet music wafted through the large L-shaped room. I saw it was a young, teenage changeling playing a stringed instrument that was like a square-shaped guitar. The music was subtle, but haunting. It had kind of an Asian vibe. It was completely out of place for such a dive.

The two crawlers were the same guys we saw when we went into the Toe earlier. The first was a thin and tall man with an angular face, about 25 years old. He had olive skin and looked like he might be of Middle Eastern origin. He was a level 22 **Hammersmith** named **Firas M.** The second was an overweight, balding guy about the same

age. He looked maybe Spanish. He was a level 22 **Pest Exterminator** named **Louis Santiago 2**.

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

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

"They're making her change into different famous people," Katia said, sounding disgusted. They could hear what she was saying, but she spoke as if they couldn't.

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

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

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

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

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

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

We'd discussed this earlier. Katia, as a doppelganger, could change into a flying creature and possibly get herself off the ground. But even with no mass added, she weighed more than most flying

creatures anywhere close to her size, making liftoff a problem. She'd have to go big, like a dragon or something, but that would take a lot of work and time to get right, time we simply didn't have. A changeling's mass changed wildly from body to body. I asked Mordecai about it, and he said simply, "Magic."

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

"You're Carl," Louis said. He turned to Firas. "I told you that was Carl."

"I believed you," he said.

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

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

"Get what?" Firas asked.

"The joke! The name of the bar is a joke."

"The Toe is a joke?"

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

"What?" Firas said. "I don't get it."

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

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

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

"No," Donut said, jumping on the table and scattering their glasses. Vodka spilled everywhere. "Carl won't hurt you. But if you're not a part of the team, we are going to make sure you are kicked out of town. Have you seen the mobs out there in the desert? I haven't seen anything lower than level 30. And since you two chuckleheads

are level 22, I don't think that will go so well. Now say, 'We'll be there, Carl.'"

"We'll be there, Carl," Louis said, swallowing.

"Lovely," Donut said.

"CHUCKLEHEADS?" KATIA ASKED. "ANOTHER ELLE TERM?"

"I got that one from the AI!" she said. "I've been waiting to use it."

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

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

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

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

"Is it only dark for two hours here?"

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

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

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

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

"You have 12 hours," he said. "But we approach the time of the switch. In eleven days is the Red Equinox. That is when Taranis will be caught, and he will be gone for but four hours a day. The light of

Hellik will wash the world for eight hours, but four of them will be the blowing season. Now leave me be.” He turned and walked off.

“Did you understand that?” I asked Katia.

“I think so,” she said. “Days are 24 hours long like on Earth. It’s only dark for two hours. The storms come every day at four hours before sunset and last two hours. The second sun is up for eight hours, and it gets really hot during that time. It sounds like our last three days here will be mostly dark, and the storms will last twice as long.”

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

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

“It’s already superhot,” Donut complained.

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

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

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