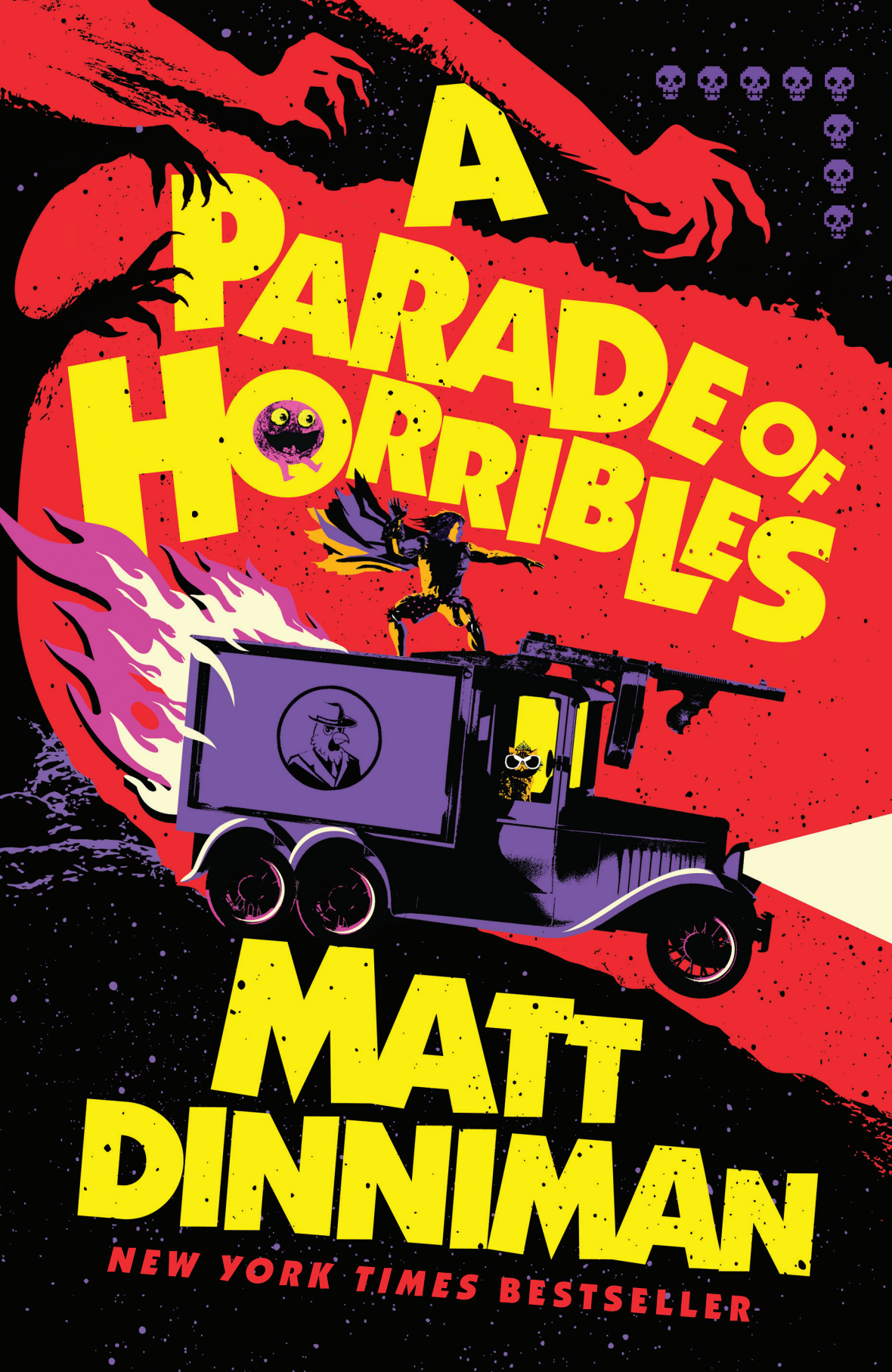

A PARADE OF HORRIBLES
MATT DINNIMAN
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

A PARADE OF HORRIBLES

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Dungeon Crawler Carl Series

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

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DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL BOOK EIGHT

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Thank you to all the crawlers who have helped
turn this silly book about a guy and his talking cat
into what it is today.
Also, I want to extend a special shout-out to the mods on
my Discord who have been there since the very beginning.
No words can convey how grateful I am
that you carry the torch for me.

And, Dwight . . . you only have yourself to blame
for what happens in this book.

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When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news,
my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers.
You will always find people who are helping."

—Fred Rogers

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PARADE OF HORRIBLES
(*plural* PARADES OF HORRIBLES)

Noun

1. A parade featuring a progression of people wearing comic and grotesque costumes, commonly accompanied by floats and models representing monsters.
2. (*law*, *informal*) Any rhetorical device presenting a series of terrible results that notionally might follow from an act, instead of confining the argument to the explicit terms of any applicable law.

See also

- fearmongering
- catastrophism

(Definition from Wiktionary, *"Parade of horribles," https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/parade_of_horribles)*

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SAMANTHA'S BOOK 7 RECAP

"Bucket Boy, come here," Samantha called.

The young Crocodilian was sitting on the couch in the personal space, talking to that weird bald guy with the gross scar on his head. Samantha didn't like him much. Or maybe she did? Maybe she was in love with him?

No, no. That wasn't right. Who was his mother?

Something, something, garbage truck. No, no, no. Not him. That scar was gross, though.

"What is it?" Bucket Boy shouted back. "I'm a little busy . . . Wait. Why are you in Carl's room?"

Why was she in Carl's room? Oh, yes, yes. She remembered now.

"I'm redecorating, and if you know what's good for you, you'll come here this instant."

The Crocodilian and the bald guy with no eyebrows—ew—approached. They stepped in, eyes wide.

"Yah, do you like it? It's not done yet," Samantha said, feeling proud. A dozen sluggalos were in the far corner, struggling with the new wallpaper. To Bucket Boy, she said, "Come here. I need help installing the chandelier. The sluggies are too small. Come along. Hurry up."

"Carl is going to kill you. This is his room. He says nobody is allowed in."

"He never comes in here, so I have claimed it for my own. Honestly, I feel as if it's my right. I won it in the breakup." She rolled over to the chandelier she had borrowed from the room next to Tish's room when she had done that thing she wasn't going to talk about because everyone would get mad. "This goes to the ceiling. Hurry up, now."

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"Wait," Bucket Boy said. "This is not a chandelier. This is a swing."

"Anything can be a chandelier if it lights up and you attach it to the ceiling."

"I can't do it," Bucket Boy said. "I promised Rosetta I would catch Tipid up on what happened during Faction Wars before he lost his memory."

Samantha neck-cootered the goblin drill onto the floor in front of the kid. "Oh, don't worry. I'll tell him what happened. You, get to work." She turned to . . . Tipid? Yes, that was his name. He was from outside the dungeon. He was a former crawler. His mother was probably long dead. She would never have had the chance to trick Samantha into . . . "You, don't worry, okay? I will explain it all."

Tipid, VERY SERIOUS, sat. Samantha was suspicious of people who were VERY SERIOUS.

"Yo, I want to hear this, too," Bigs the sluggalette said, sliming up.

Samantha liked Bigs even if she got orange goo all over her new carpet. Samantha had borrowed the carpet from the Larracos College of Magic. Sometimes Sam and Bigs had girl talk. Bigs was now invited to her bachelorette party.

Psamathe's baby was dead. She was there, and now she was gone. An overwhelming wave of . . . relief . . . washed . . .

Why was it her thoughts always got fuzzy when she remembered her child? Why did she always lose track of . . .

"Okay," Samantha said to Bigs and head-scar guy. "So the ninth floor of the dungeon was Faction Wars. Normally, it's this boring level with all these ugly, old rich people pretending to be warriors, and they fight and one of them takes a castle and wins and honestly it's really stupid and not important. But this year Carl and Donut had their own army, and the NPCs had their own army and they all started fighting over the castle, blah, blah, blah. A bunch of old crawlers from outside the dungeon came back to fight, which if you ask me was kind of stupid. I mean, what kind of suicidal morons were these idiots?"

"Uh," Tipid said.

"Exactly. And in the end, the NPC team and the whole city of Larracos got transferred to the cotton fields because one of those nerd-rock guys cast a spell. That sent all the NPCs to the Ascendency floor, and we probably won't see any of those guys until the twelfth floor. So not this tenth floor. I'm sure this will be a boring, filler floor where nothing important happens at all.

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"Anyway, the whole thing ended with Carl and Donut winning Faction Wars, but that was only because the NPCs went away. Oh, and there was this

other team that showed up at the last minute. They were called the War Mage Rebellion. They killed that orc boss guy. Not the one Rosetta beheaded but the younger one. Stalwart. They beat up Elle and stole the Gate of the Feral Gods from her. Their leader is a guy named Akuma, and Elle says if she ever sees that guy again, he'll be peeing ice cubes for the rest of his short life. But they stole . . . They took . . .

"Have you seen how pretty my room is? I'm trying to come up with a good name for it. The war mages were working with Agatha, the shopping cart lady, but they didn't like each other. She left when they did and nobody knows where she is, but Carl says the war mages want him to kill Agatha for some reason. Oh, and then Meatus came. He was a giant penis. A gross, stinky one like from one of those guys who gels his hair back and the only aspect of his personality that he works on is his duck facing. You know what I'm saying?"

"Totally," Bigs said.

Samantha sniffed at the guy. "Show me your penis."

"No," Tipid said.

Samantha growled. "Anyway, there was this goddess named Eris that came when Meatus the penis was fighting this other, boring god guy. Donut cast a spell and they all turned into a giant ball. Oh, oh, and then Yarilo showed up from the Nothing, and he was chasing me, trying to talk to me, but I didn't want anything to do with that weirdo after that last party before he got banished. Anyway, Donut took all the bad guys out of the ball and smooshed them through a Li Na chain, including Meatus, and it got in Rosetta's teeth. After that, Li Na couldn't heal and is all weird now. And her brother, Li Jun, died, which was really sad because I liked that guy. Oh, and Yarilo died too, but he was killed by the boring god guy.

"That's a lot," Tipid said. "Maybe we can start over and—"

"The scary Lucia lady only had one doggy left, and he almost ate Mongo, but little Rend saved him and the doggy died! It turns out, she has like a ton of children trapped inside her head, and if she dies, they die, but I say kill her anyway because children are so much trouble. Also, the floor was really tense because Katia and Donut both put the same hat on, and it made it so they both had to kill a snake lady. So Katia and Carl and me went to kill the snake lady, but when I got there, my plan was to go say hi to and possibly kill my own mother—her name is Theia—but when I went to her place, it really wasn't her but some skyfowl dude, which really has a way of messing with a girl's

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head. And he was all 'Look, I'm not really your mother,' and I was like 'No shit, bucko. You're a creepy bird dude,' and he was all 'No, I mean, Theia isn't,' and I was like, 'Yeah, okay, weirdo.' But then the whole club went nuts and got pulled into some really creepy demon shit because Li Na has totally gone cuckoo.

"Oh, and before that, Louis was in trouble, but I saved his life and selflessly gave my very body to keep him alive. Now he has gills and is my cousin."

"I remember that part," Tipid said. "I remember everything that happened after my memory was wiped. The Dream warlord inhabited Louis's lungs. We used the body of the flesh golem to replace it."

"Kiwi and Mongo's babies!" Samantha gasped. "They're so adorable. We won't see them again until we get to the twelfth floor. Or all the other NPCs, like Holger and Edgar the turtle and Big Tina the dinosaur. But after that part, the most important thing that happened is that Louis broke up with Juice Box so we can have our torrid affair."

"And Katia left," Tipid said.

"Oh yes. Louis, being so virile, made Katia pregnant just by standing near her, and she got shuffled off to a nunnery or something. I wasn't paying attention. Someplace outside the dungeon. And then me and Emberus had a little talk, and then Justice Light the skyfowl dude broke the Nothing so all the demon ladies who hate me are now loose and it's probably going to cause a problem. Oh, and Scolopendra, the big bad centipede thing at the bottom of the dungeon, woke up."

Tipid sighed. "Yeah. I think I'm good."

"I thought you explained it perfect," said Bigs.

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INTERLUDE | CHANDRA

"Hello, Donut," Princess Chandra, Esquire, said.

Across from her, the blood-soaked, wild-eyed creature thing looked madly about the blank room. Chandra could smell the gore, and she immediately flicked off the receptors in the control panel.

Chandra was coiled aboard the communications room in the *Ventilator*, a class-C rapid-attack battle cruiser fresh off the shipyards. The Naga warship had sustained a large amount of damage during the short but violent and tumultuous coup that had removed the king and ultimately placed her uncle on the Naga throne. Her uncle, the former opposition leader of the Gilt Party, was calling himself "Sultan Protectorate of the New Reformer" or something equally inane.

It would be cycles before this all sorted itself out, for which Chandra was glad. She'd waited her entire life to find an opportunity like this, and she'd jumped at the chance when it presented itself. It was risky, yes. But if the next few weeks went as she hoped, it would all be worth it. And as long as the political upheaval stabilized long enough for her to collect her money and leave her home system, it didn't really matter what happened next.

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She didn't care about power, or titles. She didn't care who was in charge of what. She just wanted out of her home system. That was why she'd become a lawyer in the first place. It'd been a way out.

She suppressed a bitter laugh. At least she now had a plan. A good plan.

And it all hinged on this disgusting, warm-blooded, fur-covered rodent before her now. Donut. "Princess" Donut. What a joke.

This creature wasn't even a true life-form, but a barely sapient, invasive cyst that had artificially formed itself on a seeded planet.

No different than mold, really. And more dangerous. If they didn't need these things to die to help fuel the center system, Chandra would be all for the original soother proposal to eradicate all the seeded worlds.

Still, this one was valuable. She'd already signed several contracts on the creature's behalf and was already collecting royalties. The "Donut Holes" licensing fees alone made it all worth it.

Still, there were always rumblings when any contract originated in the Naga sector. Chandra was sick of how her kind were treated. How they weren't trusted. Or worse, looked down upon as inferior. They were sometimes even lumped in with the Nullians. Absurd.

That was why Chandra wanted out. Why she wanted to move to the center system. Once she paid the visa fees, she wouldn't have to worry about political upheaval ever again. She wouldn't be constantly ashamed of her own people.

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At least Vinata was dead. *Her* plan had been to flee into the frontier. To start over. Chandra couldn't even imagine such a thing. Why would one flee away from society? It was practically the same thing as devolving. She tried to imagine herself working the dirt of an uninhabited planet. Preposterous.

The thought of wide-open skies was suffocating to her.

Chandra couldn't wait to get away from it all. Her idiot late husband had been constantly involved in the court's machinations, and where had that led him? Murdered by a crawler while playing a game.

That one action had turned out to be the luckiest turn of events in Chandra's life.

Chandra had reluctantly accepted the noble title of princess when her uncle came to power. She didn't want attention brought to herself, but the title was necessary if she wanted to claim Widow's Rights.

The path that had presented itself to Chandra had appeared all at once, as if by magic. As if a divine entity had seen how much she'd suffered, the humiliations she'd had to endure, and thought: *Enough. Now is your time.*

All it required was for Carl and Donut to survive for just a little longer.

It was so simple. It was meant to be. All her suffering. All that hard work. The humiliation of being a second wife. It would all be worth it.

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Once this was all done, Chandra could possibly be one of the richest private citizens in the galaxy.

And all because of a fucking human in his underwear and his pet rodent.

The first few steps in the plan were already done. This first part had happened so fast. It had been literally just a few hours' worth of legal work and filings to get started. She'd done it from this tiny room in the *Ventilator*. It was done before Faction Wars were finished. Even as the dwindling royal battleships had fired their last salvo, she'd not felt even a tingle of danger. It was amazing how much one could accomplish while sitting in a tiny room with wideband tunnel access. In hours, she'd changed the course of her own life.

She'd asserted her Widow's Rights and claimed Carl as her husband in Naga court. She'd had a moment of terror when the judge had thought it worthwhile to put the matter to public jury. But, apparently, the idea of "punishing" Carl by forcing him to marry her was amusing to the uneducated peasants, and they'd voted overwhelmingly to allow the union. They'd even added the traditional wedding gift–the holdings of the defeated–as Carl's "prize" in a fan box.

Either way, now that was done, Chandra, as Carl's wife–and therefore his signatory in most legal matters–had already gotten the burners fired up on multiple contracts. Carl's own lawyer, a Nullian named Quasar, had done a surprisingly competent job building the legal entities required for the Princess Posse fan group to collect money. Though she still had a case pending to withdraw half of their profits early.

Where this Quasar had failed was in not asserting Carl's rights over all of Donut's earnings. Donut's species was not yet recognized as a legally competent racial entity by the Syndicate and therefore all of her assets should have been placed under a conservatorship. Carl was clearly the best

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choice as custodian. And not just a custodian, but a true beneficiary. She'd filed on her new husband's behalf to be recognized as such, and it was granted automatically.

The will wasn't necessary. As his wife, she would automatically get everything upon his inevitable death, minus any taxes. But she filed one anyway. Better to be safe.

And then, after a short conversation and a discreet payment to a district judge's reelection campaign, Chandra had found herself assigned as Princess Donut's attorney, effectively giving herself access to both Carl's and Donut's financial empires.

She was currently in the process of threatening the second fan group, the Donut Holes, with obliteration should they not immediately assign 38% of their profits directly to Donut's conservatorship. Their newest product, the Princess Palette eye makeup kit, was already the highest-earning crawler merch in the history of the crawl.

The Donut Holes group had recently won the auction for Princess Donut's open sponsorship slot. There was yet another court case pending on whether or not to allow it. Chandra's assistant was writing a brief asserting that the claim should be allowed, but only if the Donut Holes agreed to pay the licensing fee to the conservatorship. With 60% already going to the Syndicate, the 2% left over should have been more than enough for them to keep operating. And either way, she really wanted to take a look at their books. That group had much more money than they should have. There was something going on there, and she needed to get to the bottom of it.

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If the Donut Holes didn't agree to the 38%, Chandra would have her two Taurin associates call on the families of the

founders of the unauthorized fan group. It was always easy to get people to agree to things when one exerted pressure in the proper place. Especially when they had small children.

She'd have them do that as soon as they were done with their first assignment: eliminating her biggest threat. Quasar. She'd paid the fee, and they were already on their way to pay him a visit.

But all of the legal issues with the Donut Holes could wait until tomorrow. For right now, Chandra needed to make certain the rodent didn't take a deal. She didn't think this would be difficult.

"Who are you? And why do I feel funny?" the creature asked. She shook her head, splattering red ash over everything. Chandra had missed what'd happened at the end of the previous floor, though she was glad to hear Donut had survived. The oddsmakers had had her survival rate at 40% the last she'd checked, but Chandra had known the creature would pull through. Rodents had an uncanny ability to come out on top.

Chandra spent a moment examining the ugly thing. She didn't understand how this creature had captivated so many people. It resembled and had the same coloring as the long-haired pack voles from her world, but with an annoying flat face.

That thought made her stomach rumble.

"My name is Princess Chandra, Esquire, and I have been assigned as your attorney," Chandra said. "You feel funny because you're in a type-A containment zone. Most of your enhancements are turned off. It's like a zero zone, but designed to accommodate certain types of crawlers who might have issues in regular zero zones."

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"Princess?" The creature straightened on her chair. "And my attorney? I thought it would be Quasar."

"Then you thought incorrectly."

Donut spent a long moment examining her. "Very well," she finally said, sounding hesitant. "So, you're a princess, then? I certainly hope you don't hold what happened against me and Carl. I do hope the dead snake lady wasn't your sister or something."

Chandra chuckled. "I wasn't considered a princess until most recently. There's been a recent change of government, and my uncle is now the Sultan. I was of no relation to the late Vinata."

Donut brightened. "Well, then congratulations are in order! I suppose that means Carl and I are partially responsible for your ascension. If you need any advice on being a princess, I will, of course, be happy to give you tips. I must say, Princess, your golden brown pattern really is a nice shade. Vinata was quite stunning with her cobra hood and white and gold scales, but Carl says she really wasn't white and gold, but gray, and she'd been hiding it. Was that a scandal when people saw it? I bet it was a scandal."

It actually was quite the subject of conversation, much to Chandra's irritation. The literal king had been deposed and a new government put in place via a bloody coup, yet that particular scene had dominated the news cycle. The vid of Vinata, insane, ashen scales on full display, beating on Carl as she bled out, only to be finished off by a slug, had been shown over and over.

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Chandra had taken no small amount of pleasure at the sight of Vinata's death. Chandra had worked hard for everything

she'd ever had, and Vinata had been born into it. The late crown princess had basically won the genetic lottery by getting born into that family, and she still couldn't hold on to what she had. She hadn't even been killed by a fellow Naga, but by a crawler. And not just a crawler, but a crawler's pet slug. What a disgrace.

The sight of Vinata losing it all had been so . . . satisfying.

The rodent continued to ramble. She was not making any sort of point. She sat there, talking and talking, absently wiping her paw on the side of the table.

". . . One should be proud of who they are, I say. I would be lying if I said people don't judge based on coloring, but one should never pretend to be something they're not. It's true, yes, that tortoiseshell coloring is not as 'desirable' as an all-white Persian in some circles. And, yes, people say 'tortitude' makes some cats difficult to work with, but you know what I say to those snobs? Look at my pedigree and my points and tell me I'm not as desirable. Tell me I'm not a champion. As bad as Miss Beatrice was, she did have an eye for exceptionality, and nobody can accuse her of not shooting for the stars, at least on the cat show circuit. Do you really only have two arms? Vinata had six. And you're much smaller. At least you probably save a lot at the nail salon." She examined Chandra's hands, and Chandra instinctively hid her dirty nails under the table, strangely ashamed.

Chandra bristled at her own reaction to this thing.

"Stop," she finally said, making a point to hold up her hand. "For the sake of the gods, stop talking. We have a lot to go over."

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Donut nodded. "I know you have a job to do, but I'm telling you right now, I have no intentions upon taking a deal at this point."

Chandra nodded. "Very well. You have several offers, but I agree that none of them are even worth looking at." That actually wasn't true. While most of the crawlers, even Carl, were getting worse-than-usual offers, likely due to the large number of survivors, she'd taken a glance at all the offers they had for Donut. There was one where she could have cohosted the prize carousel with Carl if he also picked the deal. There was a game guide, with a fifteen-season commitment. That was unheard-of for someone on the tenth floor. Most of Donut's deals were quick, safe assignments but with nasty royalty-snatching clauses buried deep inside. They were basically offering her an easy out in exchange for all the money she'd already earned. These were likely a direct result of Chandra's recent movements. Most crawlers died intestate, and their earnings went straight to the Syndicate anyway, but now that Donut had competent representation, they'd lose out on a significant amount of money once the rodent finally died. These offers were trying to claw some of that back.

It was interesting, considering that the entire show seemed to be self-destructing all around them. Honestly, Chandra hadn't been paying attention this season. She'd only taken notice a few weeks back when someone had suggested that her husband, Rishi, and his first wife both were in mortal danger. And they were in danger because of that same crawler who'd stabbed her husband's cousin in the neck with a pen.

But if Chandra were being honest with herself, and if she didn't have a literal interest in Donut lasting at least a little

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longer, she would have recommended that her client take the deals.

Donut whisked her tail. "Carl says he's not going to take a deal, so I'm not going to take one."

"Done," Chandra said, closing the folder, relieved she wasn't going to have to waste time explaining everything. On her interface, she selected Crawler Refusing a Deal. There was a chime.

"So, are we done here?" Donut asked.

"Not quite," Chandra said, pulling out a second folder and opening it. She'd had her assistant print off and label all the new filings and rulings. There were dozens of pages. She took a breath, feeling oddly nervous all of a sudden. Why did she feel like this? She'd just survived a missile barrage against the warship she was sitting in, yet this nonentity was causing . . . what? Apprehension? Ludicrous. It was something else. Maybe she was anxious that this idiot was going to screw it all up for her.

Chandra sat straighter. "We need to have a conversation about something else. Several somethings, actually. You're not going to like what I'm about to say, but you need to know there's absolutely nothing you can do about it. And the sooner you come to terms with that, the sooner we'll be able to move on. Do you understand?"

The creature seemed to narrow her eyes. In an instant, her posture changed. "What're you trying to say, Princess?"

Chandra produced the court order laying out that Princess Donut had been put under a conservatorship and that Carl was named her guardian. She slid it over.

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Donut stared at it for several moments. The rodent sighed. "Question. Is this meeting being broadcast to the universe?"

"It is not," Chandra said, "but the negotiations of all the top-ten crawlers are available live to media accounts, so we are likely being watched by many right now."

The rodent nodded. "Well, let's see the rest of them, then."

Chandra was mildly surprised. She was expecting the rodent to immediately lash out. Instead, she just quietly went over each page. *She's beaten and she knows it.* That was a relief. This was going to be easier than she had thought.

Donut continued to examine the papers without additional questions. The lawsuit that rerouted all future funding and royalties into Chandra's trust account. The seizure of the Princess Posse's accounts, including the Faction Wars prize money. The first draft of the brief regarding the challenge to the Donut Holes being a sponsor. The formation of a corporation to seek out and attach damages to all those who were using Donut's likeness for profit. The subpoena for the Donut Holes demanding to see their books.

The only time when Donut paused was when she'd read the marriage ruling and certificate that announced Carl was now Chandra's husband. She had invoked Widow's Rights. This was the old Naga law that stated a Naga royal widow could claim her husband's assassin as her new husband. This right usually only extended to the "primary" wife, but because that bitch of an obsidian had died alongside Vinata, Chandra had moved to the primary slot, even if it had been only for a few hours.

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Rishi had had five more wives after Chandra. She knew some of them were now dead, but she didn't know who.

She didn't care. She'd hated them all. She'd hated Rishi, too.

The final sheet, which basically laid out how all the money both Carl and Donut were earning was now being stored in multiple interest-bearing accounts at Kindred Bank, remained on the table. Donut took a few moments looking at the bottom line.

"I suppose that goddess was correct when she said Carl was married," Donut finally said after several minutes of reading. "Is this bottom line correct? This is how much money Carl and I have earned?"

Chandra was surprised at the question. "Yes. And this is before we go after the crawl itself. They haven't been following some of their own rules, and there are some penalties buried in there that should see us getting a few percentage points from their 60%."

The creature nodded again. She kept rubbing her paw on the table.

"You know," Donut said after a moment, "Carl has some legal papers just like this. He got them on the eighth floor from his father's trailer. He pulled them out and left them on the table in my room where we sleep, but I don't think he has even read them. I believe he's too scared to look. But *I* read them. Do you know what they say?"

"I don't care," Chandra said. "All pre-collapse Earth rulings have been rendered invalid."

"Exactly," Donut said. "Invalid."

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Chandra felt herself blink. "What? What does that mean? *These* are valid, enforceable legal documents."

"Did you know," Donut said, "that every Naga we have met so far has been a raging psycho? For about five seconds I thought maybe you'd be a nice one, but it appears I was incorrect. And that's really sad. The only nice one was Manasa, and she was a worm head. I must say, you guys really are doing a terrible job of being ambassadors for your species. It's no wonder they say all those nasty things about your kind on the internet."

"What does that have to do with anything? What does that have to do with the Earth legal papers?"

"I thought you didn't care what the Earth legal papers said." Donut tsked. "If you must know, it was a remarkably similar set of documents. Earth jargon is just as stupid and boring as your stuff. Carl's grandparents had set money aside for Carl, and the father was attempting to get access to it without Carl knowing. And there was a marriage certificate in there as well, though that one was for Carl's father and his new wife. There were also a few court documents for Carl's dad regarding several arrests. Nothing too important, especially now. But, in the end, when you put them all together, they do something interesting. They paint a very distinct picture of who Carl's father was as a person. Much the same way these papers paint a picture of who you are, *Princess* Chandra." Donut let out another sigh. "What a sad little snake you are. I pity you."

The words hit Chandra so hard, she felt as if she'd been slapped. It took her a moment to recover.

I am not *little. I am* not *sad. I* deserve *this.*

She knew this creature had an acid tongue. She'd promised herself she wouldn't react. She needed to keep up her emotionless, matter-of-fact delivery. She had a plan.

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Chandra forgot all of that as the red-hot anger overwhelmed her. She had lived her entire life in the shadow of the undeserving. She had worked for everything she ever had. And for this . . . thing to call her "sad"? To call her "small"?

How fucking dare she?

"Listen to me, you vile rodent. I don't care what you think. This is all going to happen no matter what you do or say. I am showing you these papers because as your attorney, I am required to show them to you. I only want you to live through this next floor because if you survive, it makes *me* money. After, I don't care. Either way, your financial legacy is now in safe hands."

Donut scoffed. "Let me ask you a question. Why do you think they rendered all the Earth stuff invalid?"

"What sort of question is that? Earth no longer exists."

Donut, who'd been sitting on the chair, suddenly jumped to the table. She stood on all fours right in the middle of the table atop the pile of papers, her body overlapping and combining with her folder. Chandra had to force herself not to shrink away.

"Oh, honey, let me explain something to you. Whatever happens to me next, it doesn't matter anymore. You're not trying to just rob me and your husband, who, by the way, snores like a chainsaw. I hope that weird snake head of yours can wear earplugs. I also hope you like biscuit sandwiches. No, sweetie. You're attempting to steal from the Princess Posse. And the Princess Posse is more than just myself and Carl. Didn't you see what just happened?

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You think you being out there outside the dungeon is protecting you?"

The creature let out a little laugh.

"We are everywhere. Yes, Earth is destroyed. Yes, Carl's dad's legal documents mean nothing. What do you think is going to happen to your little marriage certificate and your money transfers when *you* are destroyed?"

Chandra laughed bitterly, trying to sound more confident than she suddenly felt. "There is nothing you can do. And it's not stealing if it's done legally."

"Hmm," Donut said. "So, as my lawyer, if I offered someone fifty million credits to stop you from doing this, by any means necessary, would that be legal?"

"Of course not," Chandra snapped.

Donut looked up into the air. "Then to any reporters watching this, I want it known that I am *not* offering fifty million credits to anyone who finds this snake and turns her inside out on my behalf. And I am most definitely *not* offering an additional five million to someone who takes that head of hers and turns it into a hat for me. Though if I was, I would be willing to cancel the order should she change her mind about attempting to steal from the Princess Posse."

A strange, unexpected terror washed over her.

Chandra suddenly had a blinking message from her Taurin associates on her own interface. Their fee was only sixty thousand credits, plus expenses, for the job to find and

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eliminate Quasar. The message coming in at this very moment was a coincidence. It had to be. How could they possibly be watching this? Why would they have a media pass?

But the new message rattled her.

By the gods, what's come over me?

She clicked the message.

Chandra. We have questions about the job. What are your coordinates?

Terror came over her.

I have to get out of here. This isn't what was supposed to happen. How could everything change so fast? Chandra gathered up the folders. Of course they wanted to ask in person. All their meetings were in person.

To gather the final folder, she'd have to reach through the creature standing on the table. She'd never seen eyes like this. She'd never seen such intensity, not even in her uncle when he'd told her that he planned on taking the sultanate for himself.

She couldn't bring herself to reach through the illusion of the creature to grab the last folder. Princess Donut took yet another step toward her, and it was everything she could do not to let out a yelp. Shame and fear overwhelmed her at the same time.

Donut leaned in toward Chandra and let out a low growl, like she was going to pounce. The crawler whispered, "Since you're new to this, let me give you your first lesson on being a

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princess. Lesson one, don't put yourself in situations where you're so afraid that you piss yourself. It shows a lack of decorum."

Chandra, shaking, looked down. She hadn't soiled herself, yet she'd still looked, and for that, she was humiliated.

"I . . . I didn't."

"Not yet," Donut said.

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HORRIBLE ONE

CONTROL

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1

Welcome, Crawler. Welcome to the tenth floor.

TIME TO LEVEL COLLAPSE: LEVEL TIMER HAS BEEN TEMPORARILY SUSPENDED FOR THIS FLOOR. PLEASE WAIT FOR THE ANNOUNCEMENT FROM THAT INEBRIATED FISH IF WE CAN MANAGE TO WAKE HER UP FOR THE DETAILS.

Views: 933 Septillion
Followers: 3.5 Quintillion
Favorites: 971 Quadrillion
Leaderboard Rank: 3
Bounty: 3,200,000 gold

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

Remaining Crawlers: 5,501

Entering your garage.

Warning: The next heat starts in five minutes. Safe room access is blocked until the heat is over.

I HIT THE TILED FLOOR WITH A HEAVY *THUMP*. ONE MOMENT I'D BEEN sitting in the zero zone, talking with Quasar about that psychotic Naga woman, and the next I was here.

I stood, wiping myself off. I was still covered in blood and gore and red ash from the end of Faction Wars. This was a large room with a black-and-white-checkered tiled floor and corrugated metal walls, like a smaller-sized airplane hangar. It was cold. I turned to face the only other creatures in here. They were a pair of white-tagged gremlins standing in the back corner, both wearing overalls.

I blinked at the NPCs just as Donut appeared next to me with a yowl. She hit the ground sideways, yelped, and then jumped to my shoulder.

"Carl, I'm atop the leaderboard again! I'm number one!"

"I'm very happy for you."

"So, I met the new wife."

"Yeah, I heard," I said. I gave her a pat. "I haven't met her, but Quasar filled me in. I heard you grabbed the upper hand pretty quickly."

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"Don't be racist. It's upper *paw*. But yes. If she thinks she can just

slither in and take advantage of the Posse like that, that legless bitch has another thing coming. And I thought Miss Beatrice was bad. You sure know how to pick them, Carl."

There was an ominous countdown timer in the upper left of my vision. It was at four minutes and thirty seconds and counting down. We needed to figure it out before we did anything else.

DONUT: MORDECAI, I HAVE TO PICK A NEW CLASS! HELP ME WITH THE CHOICES.

MORDECAI: There you guys are. You have four minutes to get your vehicle ready. Donut, you're back as party leader, so pick a class quickly.

I turned in a circle. At the front of the garage was a massive roll-up door. A chain pulley system crisscrossed the ceiling. I'd seen plenty of similar systems in both car shops and dry dock repair bays. The two gremlins started jogging toward us.

I already knew some of what was going on out there because Quasar had told me, but even he hadn't known everything. I clicked through my messages and pop-ups, my heart still racing. I briefly paused at that number "5,501." That meant 75% of us had taken deals.

I took the briefest of moments to let that sink in. Such an overwhelming sense of secondhand relief flooded me. I didn't blame anyone for tapping out. Each and every one of them had earned it.

Part of me wished I had the luxury.

I was stalling, even if just for a second. I already knew what the next message was. A message reminding me why I would never be able to take that path. I took a breath.

JUSTICE LIGHT: I am not sorry. Peace to you all, brothers and sisters.

This message is from a deceased mercenary.

Sadness overwhelmed me. I already knew Justice Light was dead. Quasar had told me. Still, the sight of those words was like a kick to the stomach.

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You crazy asshole. What did you do? What did that trap do?

A response to his message appeared on the group chat.

ROSETTA: Rest well, comrade. We are not far behind.

She was still in here in the safe room, as was Tipid. They'd both been converted to hired mercenaries.

Quasar hadn't really known the specifics. All he knew was that the Nothing was "broken" and that everything was in chaos on the twelfth and eighteenth floors. And furthermore, the outworlders on those two floors were protected from really dying by the system AI. They could get hurt on the eighteenth floor, they could still "die," but they would immediately get brought back to their rooms in the club. A club that was physically inside of the now-awake dungeon boss. The system wasn't letting anyone eject.

Some of the things that had leaked from the Nothing were using this to their advantage. It was like what we'd done to Growler Gary, but worse. Much worse.

Quasar had only given me a quick version. So far, the now-awake Scolopendra hadn't yet done anything other than move around a lot. Apparently, the tourists on the eighteenth floor had the ability to move themselves to the sixteenth floor, where it was safe, but they first had to make their way through the seventeenth floor for some reason, where it was not, and anyone who even attempted it got turned to mince and immediately brought back to life on the eighteenth, where the worst of the worst were stalking the hallways.

Forgotten gods. Demons from hundreds of former quests. All sorts of other horrific creatures. Several had made their way to the eighteenth floor, but, luckily—or not luckily, depending on how you looked at it—these creatures all appeared *inside* the final boss. And not just *inside* the monster's guts, but inside the club, where they immediately set themselves on the guests. Guests who couldn't die, no matter what was being done to them.

The cameras had gone dark after the first few hours.

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Those on the twelfth were faring better, considering they were in the bodies of gods with god powers. Though apparently the non-sponsored

gods were all suddenly acting quite strange. That's all Quasar had known.

I hoped the city of Larracos and all those who'd gone with it to the twelfth floor were doing okay.

More messages came, but I didn't read them in detail other than to note who was here and who wasn't. Elle. Imani. Zhang. Florin. Louis. Chris. Britney. Bautista. All checking in. Prepotente had some rant about Jurgen.

So many of my friends *hadn't* taken deals.

DONUT: OMG, THESE CLASSES STILL COME WITH ACCESSORIES!

She gasped.

DONUT: SOME COME WITH *PET* ACCESSORIES! THE LAS VEGAS SHOWGIRL COMES WITH A FEATHERED HAT FOR MONGO!

MORDECAI: This class might be better.

DONUT: I AM NOT PICKING ZOO WARDEN. MY GOODNESS. OHHH, WHAT ABOUT THIS ONE? PROBLEMATIC INFLUENCER? IT COMES WITH AN UPGRADE TO MY SOCIAL MEDIA BOARD! WAIT, THERE'S ANOTHER TAB! LOOK AT THIS ONE!

MORDECAI: Holy shit, I see it. Uh, we should probably study these further before you pick one from this tab. These are in association with your other deity titles. This is all new to me.

DONUT: WE *ARE* IN A HURRY, BUT THESE ARE MUCH BETTER. THIS ONE COMES WITH A *HEALING* AURA AND A HAT. I'M PICKING IT.

Donut glowed.

DONUT: HEY! I JUST GOT A REALLY NASTY MESSAGE FROM KHEPRI. ISN'T THAT THE WEIRD BUG GOD THAT CARL AND KATIA FOUGHT ON THE LAST FLOOR? IT SAYS HE'S FORMING A "DEATH CULT" IN MY NAME. WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

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MORDECAI: Nothing good.

"What did you pick?" I asked.

"Assassin of Sekhmet," she said. "It comes with accessories for every pet in the party, and all sorts of great spells and other stuff!"

Warning: The next heat starts in two minutes, and you don't even have a vehicle or mount. You're not allowed to walk, dumbasses.

"Carl, what is a 'heat'? That sounds obscene."

The gremlins were suddenly there, both looking worried. One was a female gremlin named Hedy, and the other a male named Waldrip Chris. They both started talking at once, shouting about us having to quickly make a choice. These shouts turned to a scuffle, and then, out of nowhere, they were beating the shit out of each other as they continued to shout at us. I could barely understand either of them. The woman gremlin had been lugging a red toolbox, but she'd dropped it to the ground the moment they'd started to fight. The man had some sort of vegetable in his hand. It was a tan-colored gourd, and he was now attempting to bash it over the head of the woman gremlin.

I quickly examined them.

Hedy. Gremlin. Level 30 vehicle mechanic.

This is an applicant to be manager of your garage.

This is a non-combatant NPC.

Hedy is an expert in all things mechanical. If you choose a mechanical-based vehicle, she will be in charge of your garage. Don't let her appearance fool you. She's about as experienced as one can get when it comes to engines. If you can limp your vehicle back to the garage, rest assured it'll be good as new by the time the next heat starts.

Warning: Just because Hedy is a non-combatant NPC, it doesn't mean she's invulnerable. If something happens to her, your vehicle will not get repaired between heats.

Hedy is not allowed to enter your safe room.

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The second description was similar.

Waldrip Chris. Gremlin. Level 30 animal trainer.

This is an applicant to be manager of your garage.

This is a non-combatant NPC.

Waldrip Chris is an expert in all things biological. If you choose a flesh-based vehicle, he will be in charge of your garage. From a minor case of the sniffles to appendage amputation, he will make certain your trusty mount is ready for the next heat.

Waldrip Chris had the same set of warnings.

The two gremlins continued to roll across the garage floor. Waldrip Chris had Hedy pinned and was smacking her over the head with his gourd thing as she blindly reached for her toolbox.

As soon as I finished reading both descriptions, a new message popped up.

Your party leader must choose the manner of vehicle. Mechanical or biological. Once you choose between the two, you will spin the wheel for the specific vehicle chassis or creature.

"A vehicle?" Donut said incredulously. "I have the *Twinkle Toes* spell and a level 15 *Heal Critter*. Mongo won't like another animal in the party, but it's probably the best choice."

"Pet spells don't work on special mounts," Hedy the gremlin gasped from the floor. She managed to grasp her toolbox and reach inside. She pulled out a mallet that was much too big to have fit in the box. With a shout of triumph, she swung the giant mallet, clocking the other gremlin. She remained on the floor, panting. "Neither *Twinkle Toes* nor *Heal Critter* will work on them!"

The other gremlin growled as he scrambled up. He bled profusely from a cut on his head. He still held the gourd. "Don't tell them that, you bitch!" He jumped at the prone woman like a wrestler leaping from the ropes, gourd held over his head before he smashed it on his opponent's face. The vegetable thing broke into pieces, and tiny bugs spilled out and crawled all over her. The woman gremlin shrieked, wiping them off with her free hand as she writhed. She blindly swung her mallet, almost catching me in the foot.

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"It's the truth, jackass," she called as she sputtered.

"Carl, what is happening?" Donut demanded.

"Uh, I think they're both applying for a job."

We had one minute left.

"My goodness, you two. Quit fighting!" Donut called. "Carl, I'm starting to feel the definition of 'non-combatant' is very loose."

"What did you call me, you unshaven hedge creeper?" Waldrip Chris bellowed as he punched Hedy in the face with a closed fist. There was a terrible crunch.

"What about *Repair* and *Fix* scrolls and potions?" I asked.

"Nope," Waldrip Chris said triumphantly as he continued to pound her. He grunted with each punch. "All vehicles are proprietary to the arena. Ever seen a Charm Wombat? You can't get better handling than one of those furry bastards. And with a few upgrades . . . Ooof!"

He didn't finish before the mallet once again connected with his head with a wet *smack*. He tumbled away.

Hedy sat up and sneezed, sending blood and beetles everywhere. "If you have any other pets in your party, a mechanical vehicle won't ever try to eat them."

And there it was.

From next door I heard the revving of a high-octane engine. The walls of our garage shook.

"You," Donut said, pointing at Hedy. "I choose you."

"Ha!" Hedy shouted.

"Wait, wait, please," Waldrip Chris said, backing away, still holding his head. "You could get a Cloud Cheetah. With their speed and agility—"

"I'm quite sorry, Waldrip Chris," Donut said, "but we are in a hurry. I'm afraid we will be going with something that's not going to eat my Mongo. We choose mechanical. And just a word of advice for your next job interview. I would refrain from—"

Blam!

Waldrip Chris exploded in a spray of red and green mist.

"Gah!" I called, jumping back as Donut yowled.

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Mechanical has been chosen. Your Mechanic is Hedy.

2



HEDY THE GREMLIN DIDN'T REACT AT THE SUDDEN DETONATION OF HER co-applicant. She was already running for the front of the garage. She leaped and grabbed the chain, pulling the door open. "As soon as it appears, jump in! You come in last place, you die just like Waldrip Chris! Me, too, so get your asses in gear! Only one of you touch the steering wheel or controls. You can't drive two heats in a row, and there's only two of you! Don't come in last! Do whatever you can to not come in last!"

Before either of us could react, a giant wheel appeared, plopping into existence over the soupy remains of the exploded gremlin. There were a hundred-plus spots on the round apparatus, and each spot consisted of a vague cartoon silhouette of a vehicle. I only had time to see a few before it started spinning. One was a literal school bus. Another appeared to be a Hummer. These were all Earth-based vehicles of various sizes. I caught sight of what looked like a moped followed by a massive dump truck.

"Do we need speed?" I called. "Or something armored?"

"You get what you get," Hedy called as she struggled with the door. As she pulled it up, a black asphalt road was revealed. It was dark outside. Multiple shapes were emerging, both driving and walking as they pulled up to a line. "The track conditions and hazards are gonna change each time! First three races will all be paved!"

As the wheel turned, the countdown timer suddenly froze with twenty seconds left. The dungeon loudspeaker crackled to life. The wheel continued to spin.

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A familiar voice called out into the garage.

You're all going to die. You should already be dead. You idiots should have all taken deals. You did it to torture me, didn't you? Why are you fighting it? Why? Why are you still alive? Why am I still alive? Why won't you let me die?

The button remained pressed for several seconds, and we could hear the sound of her just sitting there, bubbling.

Everything hurts.

There was a blare of feedback, and then the intercom cut off.

"Uh, Carl," Donut asked. "Was that the 'kill, kill, kill' lady?"

"It was," I said.

The wheel slowed.

The loudspeaker crackled a second time, but this time it was clearly Zev's voice. She sounded harried as if she'd had to dive for the loudspeaker.

Uh, hello. Everyone. It looks like we have just over 5,500 crawlers who survived Faction Wars and decided they wanted to continue on. That means there were almost 15,000 who took a deal, which is fantastic, and a record. The system AI has asked me to tell you to ignore what's happening on any other floors and to—and this is a quote—"Focus on the floor like everything is normal. Because everything is normal. Ignore all those armies trying to literally vaporize the solar system. F-you if you think overwise." Uh, okay, okay. "Fuck you if you think overwise." What my, uh, colleague was trying to say just before is, this is the tenth floor. The floor is called "Don't come in last." I guess you can figure out what that means. The floor will consist of seven heats, or races, starting with nine teams each.

You've been split into teams no bigger than four, and if you're solo, you've been teamed up with one or two other crawlers. It looks like the final number of teams is exactly 1,800, which is a lot more than we originally planned, as you can imagine. And since every track is different, we've had to allow the AI to design most of these tracks. So, uh, keep that in mind.

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As Zev spoke, the wheel slowed. The choices all came into view. Snowmobile. Something I was pretty sure was a library bookmobile. The Popemobile. It kept slowly moving. A forklift. Some sort of military missile launcher. Zev continued.

Your vehicle or creature will always be 100% repaired or healed between races as long as your garage attendant remains alive. At the end of each heat, you will be able to choose an upgrade for your vehicle or creature. If you come in first place in a heat, you can choose *three* regular upgrades or one Golden upgrade. At the end of the fourth heat, everyone gets one Golden upgrade of their choice. Also, if you come in last . . . well, second to last, then the audience gets to vote for your upgrade. You'll always get a hint of what the next heat will be, and you'll need to pay attention because you might need an upgrade that will help you survive the next environment.

"Oh shit," I said as the wheel hovered over what was either a floor polisher or a goddamned Zamboni. It clicked one more time before settling on the square shape of a box truck. A box truck with windows.

"Carl, what is that?" Donut demanded.

The wheel disappeared with a *pop*, which caused more Waldrip Chris bits and gourd pieces to splatter. The truck crunched into place, bouncing up and down on squeaking shocks.

I sighed. "It's a food truck," I said.

It did not have the exact same shape as the silhouette. This was much more . . . festive than the image on the wheel.

"Is that a real gun on the top?" Donut asked.

"I don't think so."

The colorful, gleaming truck appeared to have come right off the assembly line. It was about twenty feet long. It was, at first glance, a typical large-sized food truck. At least the body of it was. It was basically the same body of a package delivery truck, but presumably with a small kitchen within. The now-familiar logo of a chicken with a fedora and red tie was painted on the side under the bullet-hole-ridden logo.

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Big Shot Chicken. I'd never heard of the restaurant chain before we'd

entered the dungeon, but Donut and I had spent some time stuck in a Big Shot Chicken safe room on the second floor while we'd been trapped by the rage elemental. The whole restaurant was, apparently, a small chain from somewhere in the Southwest of the United States. A chicken restaurant with a 1920s gangster theme.

The truck was clearly a modern model, though the front was replaced with a faux-1920s-style hood made to mimic a Prohibition-era truck, complete with curved fenders made of shining chrome and round fluted headlamps. The whole front had kind of a plasticky, fiberglass look that gave the impression that maybe this food truck wasn't really meant to be driven at all, and it normally sat at an amusement park or state fair somewhere, more for show than mobility.

Which gave me a very, very ominous feeling.

The most distinctive feature of the truck was the massive, clearly plastic tommy gun on the roof of the thing. The gun's most distinctive feature—the gigantic round drum magazine—partially obscured the windshield to the point where the truck would be dangerous to drive. This pretty much confirmed what I'd already suspected. That this thing wasn't street legal.

I hoped it had an engine.

Zev spoke with more urgency.

You may attack other vehicles, but you cannot steal them. You can't use movement spells such as *Teleport* on your vehicle, and you can't use movement spells to bring yourself *into* the vehicles of your opponents.

We'll have more details soon! Use your garage attendants! Every heat must have a different driver, so only one of you touch the steering wheel or hold the reins, especially if it's just two of you. Also, try not to kill more than one team, because if more than two teams don't make it to the finish line—

The speaker abruptly cut off.

The timer continued to tick down.

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"Get in! Get in!" Hedy called. "Only one person drive!"

"Carl, how am I supposed to drive this thing!" Donut demanded as

I rushed into the driver's seat. There was no passenger's seat at all. Just a gleaming metal floor with a no-slip mat. There was no divider between the front and the back, and a brand-new aluminum kitchen filled the back space.

I turned the key, and, thankfully, an engine rumbled to life. A good, healthy engine.

"Hang on," I called.

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3

THERE WAS A LOUD HORN, PRESUMABLY INDICATING THE START OF THE race, and a device on the dashboard lit up.

I held my breath, and I hit the gas. The whole truck lurched. Donut yowled as her claws dug into my shoulder. I had to sit really low in the seat to see out the front because of the goddamned gun thing on the roof. Ahead, several opponents zoomed off at the sound of the horn.

The panel on the dash gave a few beeps. It was a navigation system of some sort. It was a square box with the words **Navitron 1000** over it. A map appeared on the flat-screen but minimized itself, and then words popped up, speaking in my head like it was an item description, but the words also spoke out loud into the cabin of the truck.

This was a distinctly female, strangely familiar voice I couldn't place:

Heat number one of seven.

Driver: Carl.

Navigator: The Champion of Nekhebit, Harbinger of Doom, Assassin of the Great and Feral Sekhmet, Princess Donut, She Who Is Foretold to Bring the Gnashing of the Teeth and the Woe of All Who Harbor Hope and Is Known as the Oak Fell to Those Who Dare Utter Her Name.

Distance: 53 kilometers.

Track: Asphalt-paved road. Mostly flat.

Tasks required to complete: Just get to the finish line.

Environment: The Caves of the Screeching Death Manatees.

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Hazards: Not yet discovered, but I'm going to go out on a limb

here and suggest the Screeching Death Manatees might be a problem.

Time Limit: 6 hours.

Current ranking: Unknown. Upgrade me to get real-time ranking updates.

It was pitch-black out. I scrambled to find the headlights. I found them and pulled the knob, but nothing happened.

"Carl, do you see what that thing is calling me!"

"Light! I need light," I yelled.

Donut waved her paw, almost casually, and the entire area in front of us lit up brilliantly with her *Torch* spell.

Only some of the vehicles ahead had lights. One—already way off in the distance—was clearly a muscle car of some sort, but it was either a convertible or it had the roof ripped off. I could see two tall shapes in the thing before it disappeared. Right behind it was a fuzzy, four-legged bearlike creature that loped at breakneck speed. Yet another bug-like creature skittered, right on their tail. A minivan that made me think of Louis rumbled off.

Something jumped over us and evaporated into the darkness, melding into the shadows. I didn't get a good view, but Donut hissed, "Dog."

We tore over the checkered starting line, passing by what appeared to be a giant tumbleweed.

The strange round bush just sat there, unmoving in the middle of the wide road. The prickly thing was tall—just as tall as our truck—and it was a round tangle of weeds and brambles. I did a double take. Sticking straight out the center of the entire mess was the head of a goddamned unicorn. A unicorn ripped straight from a little kid's Lisa Frank notebook. All I could see was the head, but it was a white horse with a rainbow-hued mane, which looked as if it had just been brushed. A horn that glittered like an opalescent seashell rose from the thing's head. The head was about the size of a regular horse's head, and it stuck out the top center of the tumbleweed as if it were wearing the brambles like a coat. I couldn't tell what the hell I was looking at. The unicorn's head appeared way too high for it to be standing on the ground.

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Some sort of pinkish-red fuzzy rodent sat on the head of the unicorn,

but I couldn't tell what it was in the dark. The unicorn started shouting something at us, but my window was rolled up, and I couldn't hear.

"I only saw six opponents," I called, trying to look into the side mirror before realizing there were no side mirrors. "Donut, how many did you count?"

We knew at least one was behind us, assuming the unicorn tumbleweed was an opponent.

"I can't see anything!" she shouted.

Ahead, the road was just a straight black highway with no markings. Despite the brightness of Donut's spell, I couldn't see anything on either side except random sickly-looking trees. There was an occasional glitter, implying there was water out there.

I tried to look at my minimap, but I received an error.

Your minimap is disabled while you are moving.

The GPS *did* have a map. But it was just a mostly straight line with no other features.

"It says we're supposed to be in a cave," I said. I could clearly see stars out the windshield.

The GPS didn't answer or react.

I had the accelerator pressed all the way down, and we were moving about 70 miles per hour, which translated to about 112 kilometers per hour. The heavy truck didn't seem to want to accelerate past that. I couldn't see anyone in front of us at all. At this rate, we'd hit the finish line in just about twenty-five minutes if we didn't stop.

Donut unleashed Mongo into the passenger's side and jumped to his back. The dinosaur screeched in fear at appearing in such close quarters. He waved his wings, smacking me in the face, causing me to swerve.

"Careful!" I shouted. Mongo's tail feathers reached all the way to the back of the long truck. He let out another fearful screech.

"It's okay, Mongo," Donut said. "Mommy needs you as a seat so I can look outside for bad guys."

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Mongo peeped again, but this time it had a different tone. I knew that tone.

"Don't let Mongo puke on the dashboard!" I yelled.

Mongo puked on the dashboard.

We hadn't had a break. We'd gone straight from the frantic chaos of the end of the ninth floor to our lawyers to this without a rest. I had dozens of boxes to open. Achievements to go over. A fan box. An impossible god quest that was about to come to a head. Friends to check on. War mages to worry about. An Agatha problem.

Lucia Mar, who somehow had over 100,000 kids in her head. I didn't even know if she was still here.

It was too much.

For the moment, I ignored it all and pretended like I was driving. Just driving and nothing more. Not racing for our lives, though even that part was strangely okay. It was so absurdly normal compared to the army-sized fights of the last floor that I felt a strange calm come over me. There was comfort in this straightforward anxiety. This danger—at least for the moment—was just between myself and Donut.

Right now, if I made a mistake, I would die. Donut would die. And that's it.

There was not a thing I could do at this very moment that would result in the death of thousands, and I could have cried at the relief I felt.

But I knew. I knew that feeling was both temporary and false.

Slam, slam, slam.

No. Don't think of that.

But how could I not? How many times now in just the past five minutes had Donut wiped her paw on something? How hard was I trying to ignore it?

Slam, slam, slam.

Peace to you all, Justice Light had said. How? How?

But then I thought of Katia, finally free. I remembered those who'd taken deals. Of that moment when they'd rained streamers and flowers on me and Donut, all of us pretending to ignore how much was at stake.

There was hope. There was escape. And if not, as Justice Light had shown, as all those who'd come to our aid on the previous floor had shown, there was also the possibility of vengeance.

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But first, we had to survive this goddamned tenth floor.

I mentally counted the opponents again.

The muscle car. The bear. The bug. The minivan. The dog. The tumbleweed.

I was missing a few of them. Nine teams. I didn't know if they'd zoomed out ahead of the muscle car, or if they'd been like us and were still stuck in their garage when all this started.

It was already clear we weren't going to be winning this heat. What had Zev said? First place got to pick three upgrades. Whoever won would immediately have an advantage. We certainly couldn't afford to lose, but from the sounds of it, second-to-last place would be almost as bad. We couldn't afford to let the viewers pick our upgrades, either. The viewers were all dicks.

Something loomed up ahead, but still in the distance. Something dark. I glanced at the GPS again, and nothing had changed.

"Donut?" I asked.

"I see it," she said. "It's the entrance to a cave. It's very big. I see movement, but I'm not sure what."

A new message came in. One I instinctually read before I could push it away.

PREPOTENTE: Carl, Donut, everyone else, I come with a warning. Obviously you do not want to come in last place. But do not, I repeat, do not kill or otherwise prevent any of your opponents from crossing the finish line. In fact, I suggest you help any wayward stragglers should one have already fallen.

DONUT: HI, PREPOTENTE! WHAT DID YOU PICK?

PREPOTENTE: I went with the obvious choice, and I chose biological. One would have to be an imbecile to have picked mechanical.

I exchanged a sour look with Donut as I gave the other messages a glance. From what I gathered, Zhang—who was with Li Na—was the only other one who'd picked biological, Elle and Imani had picked mechanical. Chris, who *had* been in Li Na's party but had apparently left

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near the end of the previous floor, had also picked mechanical, as had Louis, Britney, and Bautista, who were all together.

Florin hadn't yet answered what his choice was, though it sounded like it was just him and Lucia Mar—who, as predicted, had not taken a deal—which likely meant Lucia had been the one to choose. I'd thought that Jurgen was also in their party, but he was somehow now paired up with Prepotente.

CARL: What happens if not everybody finishes the race?
PREPOTENTE: While I don't know for certain quite yet, I strongly believe that the pool of opponents for each heat is set in stone. That means if only one opponent falls during the current heat, then that will be fine. However, if two or more fall during the heat, there won't be enough for the next race. As a result, they will have to mix and match with other groups that are missing a full heat.

I felt cold, and the moment he said it, I knew he was right. For this first race, all eight of our opponents were NPCs.

CARL: Goddamnit. I think you're right.
PREPOTENTE: Quite. If you kill more than one opponent, then it's possible the next heat will have an opponent team consisting of fellow crawlers. By the end, I fear there will be multiple crawler-versus-crawler races, possibly races where all the opponents are crawler teams.
ELLE: Well, that's just fucking peachy.
IMANI: We can avoid this if we keep all our opponents alive. Avoid killing those you're racing against.
ZHANG: Shit. Guys . . . Na already—

"Carl, watch out!" Donut called.

Just inside the mouth of the cave, the minivan was on its side, flaming, blocking the road. A bugbear was crawling away from the wreckage as another one of the vehicles—a bus-sized ladybug—squealed in pain

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as it was dragged off the road by the biggest manatee I'd ever seen. One of the riders of the bug ran away from the scene, screaming.

I couldn't tell what manner of creature the bug rider was because the rider was on fire. But it didn't matter because a second later, the house-sized manatee crunched down on the bug, killing it, and the on-fire creature had a notification appear over it for just a second before it exploded much the same way Waldrip Chris the gremlin had.

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4

The Trauco Triplets have been eliminated due to the expiration of their mount. Eight teams remain in the current heat.

OUR TRUCK SKIDDED AS I LEANED ON THE BRAKES. THE SOUND OF spilling pots and pans rattled. The truck stopped just short of the crashed, on-fire minivan. A second bugbear appeared as I hit reverse and backed up a little, shouting and pointing at the manatee that continued to munch happily on the giant ladybug.

Prepotente's warning was still echoing in my head. The van was on its side, and it was on fire. But the bugbears, two of them at least, were still alive, fighting to save it. One of them was using what looked like a blanket to put out the fire in the engine compartment.

"We can't lose another team. We gotta get that fire out," I called, jumping out of the truck. "Leave Mongo inside! Mongo, don't let anyone in. Donut, what do you got for the fire? I'll deal with the manatee!"

"Do I look like someone designed to put out fires!" Donut yelled as she jumped heavily to my shoulder. The heat from the fire washed over us. "Goodness, Carl. Why don't *you* put out the fire?" She gasped as she looked up at the manatee. The massive creature loomed over us. "As the number one crawler at level 135, I'll take out whatever the heck this thing is. Goodness, it smells just awful."

The enormously fat creature rose out of the water like a dolphin doing a trick, only this was clearly in defiance of physics. Its flippers waved. White liquid oozed down the manatee's giant face.

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Miss Talulah. Level 90 Screeching Death Manatee.

This is a special guest creature for the 10th and 11th floors.

You're probably going to find this hard to believe, but not only are these things sort of real, but that name they have—Screeching Death Manatees—is the *actual* name of record for this particular species. They were regular manatees, not unlike the *Trichechus manatus* most people from your world know and love. These guys were added to a former Land War world undergoing reparative terraforming when the company in charge of the project suddenly went bankrupt. The orcish owner had a bad run at sports betting, which resulted in his entire company and family all getting tossed into an indentureship program.

It took a whole generation before the vultures—in this case, the Operatic Bankers' Federation—picking apart the orc's assets thought to actually check up on all the not-yet-finished terraforming projects to see what was what. One of those worlds was found to have an uplift satellite program that was malfunctioning and running amok.

This satellite was not an intelligence like myself, mind you. This was a passionless, non-sapient artificial intelligence system that had its chubby finger pressed hard on the fast-forward-evolution button. Honestly, it was a godsdamned nightmare.

Anyway, yadda, yadda, yadda, a planet filled with nightmare monsters was born. The Operatic reclamation team, run by a group of guys collectively named Otto Banking Unit 3 (remember that name), originally decided it was best to just poison the whole planet and start over, but an economic-feasibility study came up with an interesting idea. This is a planet filled with nightmare biological creatures. Why let the mantids have a monopoly on theme parks? Why not turn it into a horror-themed safari planet?

The planet was renamed "Red Terror Place of Family Adventure."

And that's where the name "Screeching Death Manatees" comes from. Pretty much everything on the planet was given a name like that, at least according to those dweeb slimes. The raccoons are Doom Crier Beasts. The cockatiels are called Fuck-Off Cockatiels.

This place is still open to this day.

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Also of note is that a third of Otto Banking Unit, Otto himself, is currently a registered guest of Club Scolopendra.

Anyway, these manatee things have been changed slightly to reflect their given names. They're a real danger to any passing vehicle or mount, but both of you guys are so OP at this point that Miss Talulah is hardly a threat.

The moment the long description ended, Donut shot the creature with a pair of magic missiles. The whole thing just sort of gargled and collapsed, with a pair of soccer-ball-sized holes in its chest. It fell into the dark water as ladybug pieces fell from both its mouth and the pair of massive holes in its stomach. The water splashed over the road and receded, leaving a sticky film over everything.

From behind, Mongo screeched.

Jesus, I thought. Donut had just one-shot a level 90 monster.

There was a lot there in that description of the manatee that I didn't have time to figure out. The real threat right now was the destruction of the minivan. I turned my attention to the two bugbears.

"Carl, Carl, I have a weird notification," Donut called from my shoulder.

"What is it?" I asked as I quickly searched for the *Temporary Water Source* scrolls in my inventory.

I had to attach the water spell to something solid, and I grabbed the first thing I saw from the junk pile. It was just a regular bucket I'd looted from somewhere. I pulled it out and cast the scroll, and water started gushing from it. I tossed the bucket at the large bugbear, who took it wordlessly and turned toward his smoking van. I made a second one, this time using a kitchen bowl. The smaller bowl caused the water to gush out faster, like from a fire hose. I gave the bowl to the second bugbear.

"It says it's a special guest creature," Donut said. "I have to choose the fate of my kill. What does that even mean? There are two choices. I can keep it dead, and I get regular experience. Or I can let the audience vote on its fate. They have thirty seconds to pick, but I don't know what those choices are! It says I should pick the second choice because it'll be more fun!"

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"What?" I asked, with a rising sense of dread, as I watched the two bugbears dance around their van. They were making a real mess of it,

despite the water. This was a late-90s Pontiac minivan painted bright red. The fire was in the engine compartment. Even if we got this thing upright again, it wasn't going anywhere.

Still, the system hadn't yet torched the bugbears like it had the drivers of the ladybug. With a living mount, it was clear when something was out of commission. Dead was dead. But with a vehicle . . .

"I picked the second choice!" Donut called. "It says 'Results pending!'"

The bugbear with the bowl screeched anew as his arm caught on fire. His friend turned his bucket on him, and the on-fire bugbear dropped the bowl. It spun off like a rocket, smacking against the far wall of the cave entrance and dropping into the dark water.

Thankfully, the other bugbear soon gained the upper hand, and the fire finally stopped.

The bugbear with the burned arm sat on the ground with a defeated huff. I examined him.

Radoslav. Bugbear. Level 75 Jack of All Trades.
One of three (well, now one of two) from Team Free Love.

The other one was only level 65. His name was Jasha.

Both of them were wearing tie-dyed T-shirts and beaded necklaces. Jasha had a tie-dyed headband. Neither was wearing pants. Their look reminded me of Cheech and Chong, though that look was not mirrored in their pained expressions.

DONUT: THEY'RE BOTH DRESSED LIKE HIPPIES, BUT SOMETHING IS OFF. THEY'RE MORE LIKE THE HIPPIES YOU SEE ON THE PACKAGING FOR HALLOWEEN COSTUMES. YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN? LIKE THEY'RE UNDERCOVER COPS.

I warily eyed the bugbear sitting on the ground.

"You doing okay there?" I asked.

I met eyes with Radoslav the bugbear for the first time. I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was momentarily taken aback at the pure emotion in the NPC's face. This guy was terrified.

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"First race. First obstacle, and we're already crashed," he said. "Alevtina

was in the back, and she broke her neck when that damn bug knocked us over." He produced a pack of cigarettes and he pulled one out with his mouth. He offered the pack to me. I hesitated, but I declined. The other bugbear, Jasha, seemed to give up on pouring water on the van and settled next to him on the asphalt. He pulled a cigarette from his friend's pack. Jasha produced a lighter and lit them both.

"She's dead. I checked," Jasha said to the other bugbear. He itched at his headband and then, with a disgusted huff, ripped it off and tossed it. On my shoulder, Donut shifted. She wanted to jump down there and take it.

"She's dead. We're dead," Radoslav said, taking a deep drag. "I never thought we had a real chance anyway."

"She did," Jasha said, indicating the overturned van with his cigarette. "She thought we had a good chance."

Donut jumped from my shoulder and walked up to the pair. The headband disappeared into her inventory. I suppressed a grunt of amusement.

She sniffed at Radoslav.

"I'm sorry for your misfortunes," Donut said. "I am Princess Donut, and that is Carl. Is there anything we can do for you?"

DONUT: THEY DON'T EVEN SMELL LIKE HIPPIES, EVEN WITH THE DISGUSTING CIGARETTES.

CARL: How do hippies smell?

DONUT: THEY SMELL LIKE ANGEL'S OWNER. THEY SMELL LIKE PATCHOULI MIXED WITH FARMERS MARKETS MIXED WITH SO-CALLED NATURAL BODY DEODORANT THAT JUST GAVE UP TEN MINUTES INTO THE JOB. THESE GUYS SMELL LIKE SAD, WET DOGS.

CARL: Yeah, but they never said they're hippies.

DONUT: THEY'RE WEARING TIE-DYE. THEY'RE CALLED TEAM FREE LOVE. IT'S FALSE ADVERTISING. YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT FALSE ADVERTISING, CARL. I'LL BE NICE TO THEM FOR NOW, BUT I'M TELLING YOU, THERE'S SOMETHING SUSPICIOUS GOING ON.

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"Is good to meet you both," Radoslav said. "But now is a bad time for us." He offered a cigarette to Donut.

"No, thank you," she said.

"Thank you for stopping, friends," Jasha finally said, looking between me and Donut. "There is nothing you can do for us. We can't pass the finish line unless we're in our van. You better get moving. You can't come in last place anymore, but you can come in second to last. And there is a time limit."

I turned to examine their van. My bucket was there on the ground, having finally run out of water.

"You're one of them, no?" Radoslav asked. "A person from this world?"

It was my turn to pause.

"Yes," I finally said. "We are. We're crawlers, and everyone else in the current heat are NPCs."

Neither said anything for several moments. They just smoked as they looked at their crashed van with their dead friend inside.

Jasha flicked some ashes. "She was so excited about all this. Thought we was going to win whole thing. Get this great prize."

"Wait," Donut asked. "What's the prize?"

The two bugbears looked at each other and then at Donut.

Jasha let out a small sad laugh. "Don't you know? If we win, we are given freedom. We are taken from here and moved to some other place where we don't have to fight anymore. Maybe you get offered a different prize since you're 'crawlers.'"

I immediately thought of Rory and Lorelai, the goblin shamankas from the very first floor. I remembered the forlorn quality to Rory's voice when she talked about moving from the first to the second floor. And here we were on the tenth, and these guys were no different.

Donut swished her tail. "How do you know all this?"

"Because this is what they told us," Jasha said. "We are all volunteers. Sort of volunteers. Last I remember, we were in the slime mines defending the air pocket, and we killed a guy like yourselves. He was a bune. A crawler. But before he died, he said he just wanted to go home. So Radoslav asked him where this home was, and the bune told us that

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this was all a game. And the moment he said this, it was like there was a click, and I just knew. I just knew what he was saying was right." He indicated the other bugbear. "Radoslav here used to be my brother. Then my enemy. But usually my cousin. We were in the slime mines. We were on the submarine. We were in the rope city. Every time, a different place. And we didn't remember. We didn't remember until we did."

"And there were other times, too," Radoslav added. "When we weren't anywhere. We're not supposed to remember the cold, either, but we do." He shuddered.

Jasha nodded. "It all came at once, these memories. And once we realized this, there was a voice. And then we were in a big room, and the voice gave us a choice. We could go back into the cold, or we could race for our lives. And if we won, fair and square, we could be free. That there was a place. A real place for us to live and never go to the in-between ever again."

"And if we don't win," Radoslav added, "this is okay, too, because it means it will be over. Finally." He sighed. "But Alevtina really wanted to win. She wanted to start a family. Maybe with me."

"Or maybe with me," Jasha said. He made a sad laugh. "But probably with you."

Jasha took another drag, letting the moment hang. "Today is a bad day."

Christ, I thought. "Listen, guys. You're not out of this yet. If you were, you would've been disintegrated or whatever like that other team was."

"Their mount died," Jasha said. "Rules are different for mounts. Look at our van. We're not going anywhere."

I was already sifting through my inventory. I had the materials to build a flatbed cart, but I'd have to do it manually. I couldn't remember if there was a tow hitch attached to the back of the truck. I assumed there wouldn't be.

"We're going to tow you to the finish line," I said.

The two bugbears looked at each other and then at us.

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"Why would you do this?" Jasha finally asked.

I was ready to make up some bullshit, but instead I just told them

the truth. That if more than one team didn't finish the race, we were pretty sure we'd have to race against our friends in further heats.

Jasha nodded. He stood, cracked his back, and tossed his cigarette into the water.

"This is a good reason. And is an honorable reason. Do you have materials to tow?"

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5

I HAD A LONG PLANK OF WOOD OUT, AND I WAS IN THE PROCESS OF reinforcing it and attaching the wheels. I had pulled Rend out of storage, and the large meatball immediately moved to the side of the road and fell in the water, trying to eat the pieces of manatee gore. I'd had to jump in to haul him out. The damn thing weighed a literal ton. Now I had him sitting on the cart, using his weight while I secured a crossbeam. He giggled furiously every time the drill made the board vibrate. Donut was complaining loudly about how much he now smelled because he'd gotten the bug's innards on him.

I had Donut keep Mongo in the truck. We weren't allowed to steal each other's vehicles, but it was good to have security just in case. Mongo was not a fan of the arrangement. He had discovered the horn on the food truck and he kept banging into it.

Unfortunately, the horn wasn't a normal honk, but a recording of a gangster's voice saying, *Make way for the big shot*, followed by a chicken squawk and the rat-a-tat shooting sound of a tommy gun.

It was funny the first time. By the twentieth time, I was ready to go over there and rip the whole horn out.

Across from me, the two bugbears were energized with the thought of not yet dying. A part of me felt bad about this arrangement because I knew I was helping them now, but I wouldn't think twice about letting them die during the next race. I supposed that was the point. The cruelty of this all was a feature, not a bug. At least they knew this, too, and that somewhat eased the small amount of guilt.

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It felt like regression, having to fight against NPCs, especially after the chaos of the last floor. They were using awakened NPCs for this floor

because it actually helped the storyline, not hurt it. If the NPCs knew they'd be "safe" at the end of this, many would be willing to do anything to win. But at the same time, the very nature of the floor meant most would end up dead. It was like a purge of the problem-causing components.

We still had five hours to complete the race, and so far nobody else had come down the road.

"Who are the other teams?" I asked the bugbears as I quickly worked.

"It was dark, and we didn't get a good view of them," Jasha said. "We only met the triplets, who are now dead, and the other team. Team Sparkles."

"Team Sparkles?" Donut asked. She was peering back the way we'd come. "Was that the unicorn? I think they're coming now."

Sure enough, a light appeared a moment later. My minimap didn't have them, but I could soon see the outline of the tumbleweed thing with a unicorn head coming up.

"That's them," Jasha said.

As the silhouette approached, I tried to figure out what I was looking at. The "tumbleweed" part wasn't rolling but just moving along the ground, like it was magically gliding. Not fast, but at a steady pace. The head of the unicorn popped out the top, and the second, smaller, rodent-like creature rode on the unicorn's head.

"What *is* that thing?" I asked.

"The mount is biological," Jasha said. "It's an Avernus Creeper. A plant that walks on the ground with thousands of little feet. Almost like bug."

"A *plant*?" Donut asked as the thing approached. She moved to the center of the road, keeping the under-construction trailer behind her. Her tiara glittered, and I knew she was using her Sniper ability to examine it better. The light was coming from a *Torch* spell similar to Donut's. "I bet Mordecai would know all about it."

"Don't know how that thing is steering it, honestly," Jasha said.

"So the unicorn isn't the mount? It's the racer?" I asked, watching it approach. "That's weird."

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As soon as I spoke, it was close enough for me to properly examine it.

Avernus Creeper.

This is the biological mount of Team Sparkles for the purpose of the tenth floor.

This is a tangle of not-quite-sentient vines. Under normal circumstances, these things are pretty bad news. They're loosely related to the Gehenna Brambles you guys loved from the sixth floor. They're almost impossible to kill because even a tiny branch or thorn off one will rapidly grow to full size. Luckily for us all, this particular shrub is limited to half size and is being prevented from procreating outside their garage.

"Names are Dwight and Lucienne," Jasha said. "We met just before the race. Lucienne is the small one. She's got a mouth on her."

The round bunch of brambles came to a stop. Donut remained in the middle of the road.

"Yo, fatty, get out of the road," the unicorn shouted down at Donut. He had a surprising voice that did not match his colorful exterior. It was a deep, surly, three-packs-a-day Boston accent.

"Fatty?" Donut asked, incredulous. "Are you talking to me?"

The pinkish furry thing on the unicorn's head had a tail wrapped around the base of the opalescent horn, presumably anchoring it in place. The thing was just a little smaller than Donut. She was like a mix between a rat and a chinchilla. She had two legs, two monkey-like arms, and a rodent head. She'd have been cute if her vein-covered, red eyes hadn't been bulging out of her head, giving the impression she was on the verge of literally exploding. She also wore a mini race-car-driver helmet that was white with a blue stripe down the center.

When the fuzzy, bug-eyed creature spoke, she had a high-pitched French accent completely at odds with the voice of her partner.

"Who else would he be talking to, you corpulent swine?" the rodent shouted. "Move before we are forced to make you roadkill."

The creature whispered something to Dwight the unicorn, who laughed.

"What? What did you say?" Donut yelled, getting more outraged by the second. "If you think I'm going to allow myself to just get insulted by a tumor donkey and a crack-addict Mickey Mouse, you both are in

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for a rude awakening. I'll have you know I am practically twice both of your levels, and I'm quite sure that stupid mount of yours is flammable. In fact, let's test—"

"Donut," I called before she did something stupid, "let them go around."

I examined the two creatures, starting with the rat.

Lucienne. Mandagot. Level 81 Fink.

One of two members of Team Sparkles.

Warning: This creature worships Diwata and will be automatically hostile toward you because Diwata HATES your ass.

A mandagot is a Fairy-class creature that comes in many shapes, though most are stomach-churning monstrosities that are supposed to be "cute." These things are a combination of two or three fuzzy woodland creatures. Legend has it that they are born of regular fairies who've had relations with forest animals, which is a pretty common occurrence with the freaks who worship Diwata. They have multiple magical abilities and can punch well over their level class, so be wary.

I grunted as I moved my attention to the larger of the two. The unicorn.

Dwight. Sparkling Unicorn. Level 87 Enchanter.

One of two members of Team Sparkles.

I bet you already know what a unicorn is. A *sparkling* unicorn is pretty much the same thing, but they sparkle because they have even more magic permeating them. Their horns are quite valuable to certain parties, so if you kill him, it's recommended to grab the horn as quickly as possible.

Most unicorns are regarded for their beauty and their grace and their childlike innocence. They're generally known for their overly gentle manner.

But not Dwight. Dwight is known for being a complete prick. He's the type of guy who would call the police on a kid setting up a lemonade stand. He's the type of guy who would one-star an upcoming

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