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# DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL



# MATT DINNIMAN

'Legit awesome' BRANDON SANDERSON

PENGUIN BOOKS

# DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL

Matt Dinniman is a writer, artist and musician (well, he's a bass player) from Gig Harbor, Washington. He is the author of several books, including the bestselling Dungeon Crawler Carl series.

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DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL BOOK ONE

# DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL

MATT DINNIMAN



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*This version of* Dungeon Crawler Carl *is dedicated*
*to the star of one of the greatest, most inspiring,*
*most amazing survival stories of our time.*
*Fiona.*
*Fiona the hippo.*
*Yes, I am dedicating this book to*
*a goddamned hippopotamus.*

*Sorry, Mom.*

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*Rome will exist as long as the Coliseum does;*

*when the Coliseum falls,*

*so will Rome;*

*when Rome falls,*

*so will the world.*

The Venerable Bede

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# DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL

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# 1



THE TRANSFORMATION OCCURRED AT APPROXIMATELY 2:23 A.M., Pacific Standard Time. As far as I could tell, anyone who was indoors when it happened died instantly. If you had any sort of roof over you, you were dead. That included people in cars, airplanes, subways. Even tents and cardboard boxes. Hell, probably umbrellas, too. Though I'm not so sure about that one.

I'm not gonna lie. You guys who were inside, probably warm and asleep and dreaming about some random bullshit? I'm jealous. You're the lucky ones. You were just gone. Splattered into dust during the transformation.

It was a Tuesday, and the calendar had just ticked over to January 3rd. A terrible winter storm had descended on North America, and half the country was buried in snow and ice. In Seattle we didn't have too much snow that night. But it was well below zero, which was unusually cold, even for January.

I'm sure in other parts of the world where it was warmer and not in the middle of the night, many more people survived. Many more.

I also bet most of them were probably wearing more clothes than I was at the time of the incident. And those assholes were smart enough not to go into the light.

Me, I didn't have a choice. Like I said, it was below freezing. I was outside. And I was wearing boxers, a leather jacket, and a pair of pink Crocs sandals that barely fit me.

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I was also holding a crying, scratching, squirming, and spitting cat named Princess Donut the Queen Anne Chonk. She was a tortoise-

shell Persian cat worth more than I made in a year. My ex-girlfriend called her Princess Donut for short. I just stuck with Donut.

So let me back up about ten minutes. I won't bore you with too much backstory, but some of these details may be important.

My name is Carl. I am twenty-seven years old. After a stint in the US Coast Guard, I ended up working as a marine tech, fixing electrical systems for rich assholes and their party boats. I, up until a few days before this started, lived with my girlfriend in our apartment in Seattle.

Her name was Beatrice. Bea. She went to the Bahamas for a New Year's thing with a bunch of friends. She didn't tell me her ex-boyfriend went along with her on the trip. I figured it out pretty quick when I saw the picture of her sitting on his lap on Instagram.

I don't like drama, and I don't deal well with it. Whether she was actually cheating on me or not, it didn't matter so much. She'd lied. So I called her up, and I told her we were done. I promised I'd have all her stuff ready for her to go when she got back. No drama. No fuss. But we were done.

She'd asked her parents to come get the cat, but they lived on the other side of the Cascades, and nobody was getting through any of the passes with this weather. So I promised I'd look after her until Beatrice got back.

So, let me tell you about Donut the cat. Like I said, she's one of those fluffy, flat-faced cats that look like they need to be sitting on the lap of a Bond villain. Bea and I shared a two-bedroom apartment, and one of those rooms was dedicated to the cat if that tells you anything. More specifically, the room was devoted to Donut's Best-in-Show ribbons, her Best-in-Breed ribbons, and countless trophies and framed photographs of her sitting on a table, looking all fuzzy and pissed off while Bea and a judge stood behind her. Bea probably had fifty of the pictures. She'd won a mess of ribbons and trophies and photographs pretty much every time Beatrice took Donut to an event. And Bea took that damn cat to a show almost every weekend.

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Her whole family was into raising and showing Persian cats. Me, I didn't really know much about that whole cat show world. I didn't want to get too involved. Like I said, I don't do drama.

And let me tell you something about cat people. More specifically, cat *show* people.

Actually, never mind. Fuck those guys. All that's important is Bea and Donut were a part of this whole world I didn't want anything to do with.

I never considered myself a big fan of cats. But, if we're being truthful here, I *liked* Donut. That cat did not give two shits about anybody or anything, and I could respect that. If Donut wanted to sit on my lap while I was blasting away on PlayStation, then she sat on my damn lap. If I tried to pick her up, she hissed and scratched and jumped right back up there. And then she looked at me with a squished face that said, *What're you gonna do about it?*

I'd been tempted, more than once, to throttle the thing. But I'm not an asshole. Plus, I could respect the little monster's tenacity. Some of my buddies would give me crap about it, me spending all this time with a fuzzy cat that was probably worth more than I would make in a year, but I enjoyed it. I enjoyed having that ball of fuzz sitting in my lap.

One of Beatrice's ironclad, this-is-not-negotiable rules was no smoking in the apartment. So after our fight and breakup, I'd made a point of smoking as much as I could. I know, immature. But it was freezing outside. Donut didn't seem to like the smoke too much, and the smell clung to her hair. So, as a compromise, I would crack the window when I smoked.

So when I woke up at about 2 a.m., having been startled awake by a dream, I decided I needed a smoke. I pulled out my pack, cracked the window, and I lit a cigarette.

Donut, who had been sleeping right next to me on the bed, decided at that very moment that she wanted to—for the first time in her feline life—go outside and explore. She jumped up on my shoulder, and she leaped out the second-story window onto the tree

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outside my apartment. Just like that. I'd had that window open dozens of times over the past year, and she'd never even given the window a second glance. But tonight, on the coldest night of the year, the furry asshole decided to Lewis and Clark her way out of the apartment.

She scampered down the tree, sniffed at the sidewalk a few times, and then promptly realized it was cold as fuck. Her adventure over as quickly as it began, she rushed back up the tree and stared at me over the five feet from the window to the branch. The adventure all drained out of her, Donut decided not to risk jumping back inside. So instead, she decided to start howling at the top of her lungs.

I spent the next several minutes cursing at the cat, trying to coax her back inside. I opened the window all the way, sending gales of ice-cold air in the previously toasty apartment. The fuzzy black-and-beige-and-white cat just sat there, bitching and howling so much I feared one of my neighbors might wake up and shoot her.

I'd left my boots in the dryer all the way in the building's basement. I didn't know where the hell my running shoes were. So, in a momentary decision I would quickly come to regret, I squeezed my feet into a pair of my ex-girlfriend's Crocs, pulled a heavy leather jacket on, and I rushed outside to grab the cat. A part of me kept saying, *Screw it. It's not your cat. Let the fucker freeze.*

But, like I said, I'm not that much of an asshole. As much as Beatrice deserved it, she loved that damn cat. And poor, stupid Donut wouldn't stand a chance out here in the cold. Not for long.

Plus, again, the cat was right there, howling like someone was eating her children in front of her.

I rushed down the stairs, and I jumped outside, rushing to the tree that sat between the sidewalk and the building. I immediately regretted not taking the time to put proper clothes on. The cold, windy air sank its claws into my legs and feet.

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Donut was right there, sitting on a tree just out of reach, looking between me and the open window into the apartment. She continued to howl. A light popped on in an apartment on the first floor. I

groaned. Mrs. Parsons. Grumpy, I-like-to-file-complaints Mrs. Parsons.

"Donut!" I said. "Come on, you little shit!" I held out my arms.

The cat could jump into my arms. It was something I'd trained her to do. I could shake a bag of cat treats, and she'd jump right up there. I could make a *pspspsps* sound, and she'd sometimes jump up on my shoulder. I cursed myself for not bringing cat treats out with me.

The window on the first-floor apartment slid open. "What in god's name is going on out here?" Mrs. Parsons called, sticking her head out the window. The old woman had her head wrapped in some sort of towel, making her look like a swami. Her beady eyes focused on me. "Carl, is that you?"

"Yes, Mrs. Parsons," I said. "Sorry. My cat got out, and I'm trying to get her in before she freezes to death."

"It looks like you're the one who's going to freeze to . . ."

Mrs. Parsons never finished the sentence.

*Slam*.

It happened so fast.

The building smashed down to the ground. I watched it happen. The seven-story apartment building was there one moment, and then it was gone. But it hadn't disappeared. I was looking right at Mrs. Parsons when it went down. It was like the building was a massive tin can that had been crushed by a giant cosmic boot. I saw it, and I heard it. Wind rushed at me, and it was instantly dark outside. The streetlamp just to my left was gone. The buildings all around me were gone. The cars on the street were gone, too.

Everything was gone except the trees and the bicycles in the bike racks, and Marjory Williams's moped, which was still booted by parking enforcement.

I looked around, the freezing weather momentarily forgotten. In the dark, overcast night, I could barely see anything. In the distance—a distance I could now see thanks to the lack of buildings—a fire burned.

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There was utter, complete silence.

"What the hell?" I said, spinning in circles.

A couple random things remained. Like the bike rack. The stop sign was there, but the street sign next to it was gone. It didn't make sense. Where the cars were parked on the road, car-shaped indentations of dirt appeared, as if they'd been pulled down toward the center of the Earth, being ripped directly through the asphalt.

Donut jumped into my still-outstretched arms. I looked at the cat, not knowing what to do or say.

"What the hell?" I said again.

All that remained of my building was a rectangle of churned dirt and rocks.

And then I saw it, right near my feet.

It was Mrs. Parson's head. In the dark, it was hard to discern. But I immediately knew what it was.

It hit me, at that moment. The sudden shock of the buildings was one thing. But there were people in those buildings. It was almost everybody in the damn city. Hell, even most of the homeless people were in shelters. There'd been a whole thing on the news about them rounding everybody up because of the extreme cold. It was two in the damn morning on a Monday night. Everyone would be in bed. And that meant everyone was dead!

I kept spinning in circles like an idiot, not knowing what to do. I felt sick to my stomach. Donut started to squirm, having decided I was useless. She clawed at me, but I wouldn't let the cat go.

Then came the voice. A male, robotic voice.

It spoke in my mind. The voice was like a physical thing. A spike in my brain scratching me. It wasn't speaking English. But I understood the words. As the person spoke, the text also appeared floating in front of me.

**Surviving humans, take note.**

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"What?" I said out loud. "What's that? Who's there?" I kicked at the floating words with my foot, and the too-small Croc went flying.

I hopped over and quickly shoved my foot back in. The words moved with me, floating just a few feet in front of my face.

Even the letters weren't in English. They crawled down, not across the screen. But I knew them, understood them like I'd been reading the language my entire life.

**Per Syndicate rules, subsection 543 of the Precious Elemental Reserves Code, having failed to file a proper appeal for mineral and elemental rights within 50 solars of first contact, your planet has been successfully seized and is currently being mined of all requested elemental deposits by the assigned planetary regent.**

**Every interior of your world has been crushed and all raw materials—organic and inanimate—are in the process of being mined for the requested elements.**

**Per the Mined Material Reclamation Act along with subsection 35 of the Indigenous Planetary Species Protection Act, any surviving humans will be given the opportunity to reclaim their lost matter. The Borant Corporation, having been assigned regency over this solar system, is allowed to choose the manner of this reclamation, and they have chosen option 3, also known as the 18-Level World Dungeon. The Borant Corporation retains all rights to broadcast, exploit, and otherwise control all aspects of the World Dungeon and will remain in control as long as they adhere to Syndicate regulations regarding world resource reclamation.**

**Upon successful completion of level 18 of the World Dungeon, regency of this planet will revert to the successor.**

**A Syndicate neutral observer AI—myself—has been created and dispatched to this planet to supervise the creation of the World Dungeon and to ensure all the rules and regulations are properly followed.**

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**Please pay careful attention to the following information as it will not be repeated.**

Per the Indigenous Planetary Species Protection Act, all remaining materials—estimated to be 99.999999% of the sifted matter—is currently being repurposed for the subterranean World Dungeon. The first level of this dungeon will open approximately 18 seconds after the end of this announcement. The first-level entrances will be open for exactly one human hour and one hour *only*. Once the entrances are closed, you may no longer enter. If you enter, you may not leave until you have either completed all 18 levels of the World Dungeon or if you meet certain other requirements.

If you choose not to enter the World Dungeon, you will have to sustain yourself upon the surface of your planet, and this may be the last communication you receive during your lifetime. All previously processed matter and elements are forfeit. However, you are free to mine and utilize any remaining and naturally occurring resources for your own benefit. The Borant Corporation wishes you luck and thanks you for the opportunity.

For those who wish to exercise their right of resource reclamation, please take note.

There will be 150,000 level one entrances added to the world. These entrances will be marked and easy to spot. If you so choose to enter the first level of the dungeon, you will have five rotations of your planet to find the next level down. There will be 75,000 entrances to level 2. There will be 37,500 entrances to level 3. 18,750 to level 4. 9,375 entrances to level 5 and 4,688 entrances to level 6. The number of available entrances to the next lower level will continue to decrease by half, rounding up until the 18th level, which will only have two entrances and a single exit.

Crawlers who choose to enter the World Dungeon must find a staircase and descend to the next level down before the allotted time is up for that level. Once the time has passed, the level will be reclaimed and all remaining matter in the level, organic

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**and inanimate, will be forfeit. Generated loot and other matter that is not gathered and claimed may be placed in the Syndicate market.**

**Each lower level will have a longer period of reclamation. Additional rules come into play once any crawlers descend to the tenth floor. These rules will be explained when and if any crawlers reach this level.**

**If you so choose to enter the World Dungeon, it is highly recommended you immediately find and utilize a tutorial guild. Multiple tutorial guilds will be seeded throughout the dungeon on levels 1 through 3.**

**If you have any additional questions, or you wish to file an appeal, such requests must be submitted in writing directly to the closest Syndicate office.**

**Thank you for being a part of the Syndicate. Have a great day.**

My brain could barely parse any of what the voice had said, so bewildered was I at everything that had just happened. I could no longer feel my legs. I had been outside much too long, and I was in serious danger of freezing to death, of losing toes to the cold. I had to get inside, and I had to do it now.

But there was no inside anymore. There weren't even any cars. I eyed the fire that continued to rage a few blocks over. I needed to get over there, and fast. I turned, and I started to shuffle-run.

The wind, which had been a light breeze before the buildings all disappeared, was now a constant, freezing gale that stank of the ocean. Donut twisted in my arms, scratching at me, trying to get free. She chomped onto my shoulder, but my jacket protected me. I clutched the cat tighter.

Was this a dream? Had I accidentally been dosed with some sort of hallucinogen?

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World Dungeon? What the actual hell? What did that even mean? My mind continued to race. I immediately thought of *Pathfinder* and *Dungeons and Dragons* and other games I hadn't played

since I was on active duty. I couldn't see a single damn person. I was surrounded by only the sound of the wind.

A horn, like a trumpet, sounded, blasting through the night air. I stopped dead, looking around. What now? *It's the dungeon appearing,* I thought. *This is happening. Holy shit, this is really happening.*

Less than a hundred feet to my left, right in the middle of what had once been a thrift store, a spotlight burst into the air. I saw an additional spotlight appear about a mile away. I turned, and I saw a few more littered throughout the city.

Even from this distance, I could feel the warmth radiating from the brightly lit hole in the ground.

I didn't think about it. My head still swam with all the information that had been thrown at me. The pink Crocs barely fit on my feet. The distant fire was farther away than I thought. I had seen firsthand what hypothermia did to people.

So I turned toward the light, and I ran.

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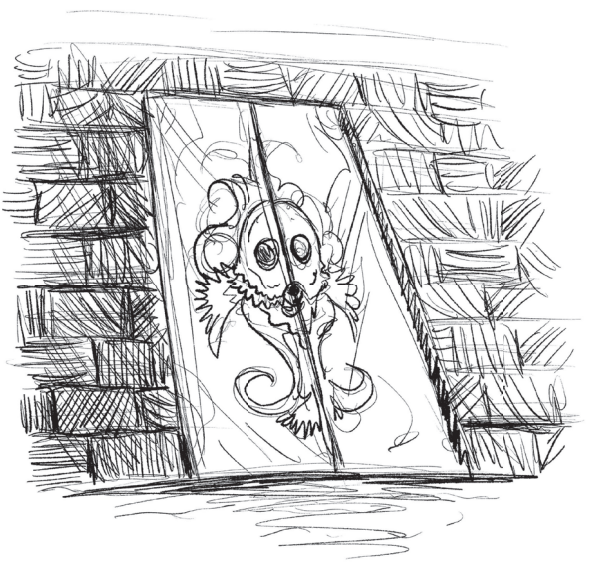
# PART ONE



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# 2



## DUNGEON FLOOR 1.

**TIME TO LEVEL COLLAPSE: 5 DAYS.**

AN ORNATE STAIRCASE LED DOWN INTO THE LIGHT. EACH STEP APpeared to be made of wrought iron, and the whole thing was wide enough to accommodate twenty people walking side by side. Glowing warmth radiated from the hole. I took a step, falling down a little farther than I anticipated. My footfalls echoed into the brightness.

This was a city of almost a million people, and I was the only one here.

Donut, who had stopped fighting, clutched onto my shoulder and started growling as we descended toward the bright light. Welcome, glorious warmth beckoned me deeper. My legs and feet, which I hadn't been able to feel, were now starting to burn. I hadn't been out in the cold long enough to sustain any real damage, but I was frostbitten to hell.

The stairs seemed to go on forever. The iron steps were carved in an odd pattern depicting what could've been fish. Or maybe demons. The almost Asian-looking carvings gave me an uneasy feeling. These stairs weren't here just a few minutes ago. *This whole thing is made of the buildings and cars and people of the world*. Who did this? *How* did they do it?

By the time I reached the bottom of the stairs, the temperature had risen to a humid, balmy 80 degrees Fahrenheit or so. The metal stairs ended at a marble floor and a hulking door that stood about

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thirty feet tall and was just as wide. The wooden arched door was carved in the shape of a massive fish demon, like the stairs.

I looked up at the double doors.

"What the hell is this thing?" I muttered.

As I stared at the door, an information box popped up over the door. The box appeared so suddenly and unexpectedly that I stepped back. It was like I was in a game, or maybe wearing special contact lenses that popped up informational tooltips. It even had a little X in the corner to close it out.

**This is a rendition of a kua-tin, the dominant species of the Borant system and principal owners of the Borant Corporation. Make sure you recognize these guys. There'll be a test later.**

Was that last part supposed to be a joke? I focused on the X in the corner and mentally closed the box.

*Huh,* I thought. I looked up at the carving again and I felt something, almost like a slight haptic tingling in my brain. The information box popped up again. I closed it.

Weird. I could control the information with my mind. I could open information boxes on certain items by focusing on them. I could close the boxes by mentally clicking the X with my mind.

*That means they're in your head. Maybe this isn't really happening. Maybe you're asleep, and this is all some sort of high-tech simulation. Like in the* Matrix *movies.*

The pain in my warming-up legs and feet reminded me that simulation or not, it didn't matter. Not when I could hurt.

With my one free hand, I pushed at the door. It opened easily inward, revealing a long hallway lit by multiple torches. The hallway was just as wide and tall as the door, more like a tunnel for a double-lane roadway than for someone to walk through. In the distance I could see several branches leading off the main hall. A blinking light appeared near the first branch. It seemed to be a sign of some sort, but I couldn't read it from here.

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*"Oww,"* I cried as Donut chomped down on my hand. I dropped the cat, and she bounded forward into the hallway. She stopped about ten paces in, looking around with a confused, startled look on her face.

I stepped toward the cat, and the doors slammed behind me. The light from the entrance room cut off and was replaced with a dusk-like dimness.

**Welcome, Crawler. Welcome to the First Floor.**

This was a new voice. It was male, sounding overly enthusiastic, almost like a game show host. It wasn't the same person or speaker from the original announcement. The words appeared floating before me and were simultaneously spoken in my mind. Unlike the tooltip-like box, I wasn't able to close it out. This was more like subtitles.

A timer appeared in the upper right of my vision. It was at **4 days, 23 hours, and 48 minutes** and counting down. I, again, swiped at the characters. They didn't go away. I closed my eyes, and the information disappeared. It was unsettling and it gave me a slightly queasy feeling to my stomach.

Donut remained in her spot several paces in front of me, but the chunky cat was swiping at the air in front of herself. *She sees it, too,* I thought. *Holy crap.* Whatever this was, it was happening to the cat just like it was to me.

"Donut," I said, calling to the cat. "Stay with me."

The cat, being a cat, ignored me. But as I looked at her, I felt that same almost imperceptible tingle I felt when I'd looked at the door. I focused more tightly, and an information box popped up over the cat.

**Crawler #4,119. "Princess Donut."**

**Level 1.**

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**Race: Cat.**

**Class: Not yet assigned.**

I took a step forward, painfully aware that I was wearing Crocs that didn't fit.

More text assaulted me.

**You have been designated Crawler Number 4,122. You have been assigned the Crawler Name "Carl."**

**You are assigned the race of Human. You are currently level 1. You may choose a new race and class as soon as you descend to the third floor. Your stat points have been assigned based on your current physical and mental profile. See the stat menu for more details.**

Menu? I wondered how to pull a menu up. But before I could even try to figure it out, I was bowled over by a wall of text.

**Congratulations! You've earned your first achievement: Crazy Cat Lady.**

**You have entered the World Dungeon accompanied by a cat. Ahh, isn't that sweet?**

***Reward*: You've received a Bronze Pet Box!**

**New achievement! *Trailblazing* Crazy Cat Lady.**

**You are the *first* crawler to have entered the World Dungeon accompanied by a cat. You must really love that thing. Too bad you're both probably going to die a horrible death at any moment. Or maybe not. Look at the prize you just received!**

***Reward*: You've received a Legendary Pet Box!**

**New achievement! Early Adopter.**

**You are one of the first 5,000 crawlers to enter a new World Dungeon. Sucker.**

***Reward*: You've received a Silver Adventurer Box!**

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**New achievement! Empty Pockets.**

**You didn't bring any supplies. None. You know you still gotta eat, right?**

***Reward*: You've received a Bronze Adventurer Box!**

**New achievement! Why Aren't You Wearing Pants?**

**You entered the dungeon wearing no pants. Dude. Seriously?**

***Reward*: You've received a Gold Apparel Box!**

**New achievement! Unarmed Combat.**

**So. You just gonna waltz right into something called a "World Dungeon" and you're not even going to bring a weapon? You're either braver than you look, or you're just an idiot. Good luck with that, Van Damme.**

***Reward*: You've received a Bronze Weapon Box!**

**New achievement! Loner.**

**You entered the dungeon without any human companions. Didn't anyone teach you there is safety in numbers?**

***Reward*: None! Haha. You are so dead.**

I stared at those last words as they faded away.

*You are so dead.*

Donut was, again, swiping at the air.

"Menu," I said out loud. Nothing happened.

"Stats." Nothing.

How the hell was I supposed to look at my information? It said I'd "received" multiple . . . what? Loot boxes? That's sure as hell what it sounded like. Which meant I had some sort of inventory. I remembered something from the initial announcement, something about finding a tutorial guild. I looked up at the neon sign about a hundred meters down the dark tunnel. Would that be it?

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I started to shuffle-jog down the tunnel toward the blazing sign. I passed Donut, who sat upon the ground, licking her paw and rubbing it against her forehead. After a moment, the cat seemed to sigh and decide to follow.

The neon sign read **DA TUTORIAL GUILD** with an arrow pointing down a thin, dark alleyway. I shuffled to a stop. The swish of my footfalls echoed in the large, empty tunnel. I peered into the darkness. It was pitch-black in there.

Behind me, Donut meowed with concern.

I stepped into the alley.

**New achievement! Fall into an Obvious Trap.**

***Reward*: Well, if there's a heaven, and if you haven't been too much of an asshole, maybe they'll let you in. Because you about to meet your Maker.**

Three lights flipped on, blinding me. I covered my eyes and took a step back. Something mechanical hissed, and what sounded like a steam engine roared to life. I heard laughter, high-pitched and squealing.

I turned, and I ran. Both of my pink Crocs went flying as I turned down the main tunnel, heading away from where I'd come down the stairs. Donut yowled and rushed after me.

I hazarded a look over my shoulder and saw the contraption rocket out of the alleyway, almost crash into the far wall, and then slowly start to back up and turn, facing me.

The machine was the size of a tractor and ran on treads, like a tank. The thing was built out of mismatched rusting hunks of metal, and it looked as if it would fall apart at any moment. A spinning spike-covered wheel dominated the front of the death machine. On top of the tractor three green-hued humanoid monsters stood, screaming and pointing in my direction. Each of these monsters looked to be about four feet tall and was dressed in leathery rags. One appeared to be wearing a kitchen pot on his head. He grunted

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and screamed as he worked the controls for the tall machine. Black smoke billowed from several pipes. The spinning wheel whirred even faster as the machine righted itself and started barreling toward me.

A tooltip popped up.

**Goblin Murder Dozer. Contraption.**

**A goblin-built, steam-powered machine designed to mow down and slaughter unsuspecting dungeon crawlers. I hope you're up-to-date with your tetanus shots.**

Three more tooltips popped up over the three riders. Two of them read:

**Goblin. Level 2.**

**Small, green, and smart. What goblins lack in physical strength, they make up for in pure spunk.**

The third goblin, the one with the pot on his head and driving the machine, had a different description:

**Goblin Engineer. Level 3.**

**Engineers. The incels of the goblin world. They have a hard time finding a date, which makes them extra angry. If there are any females in your party, they will attack them first.**

I didn't have time to think about the stupidity of the jokes or the fact I was, for the first time, looking upon a group of real, live monsters trying to kill me. I rushed down the hallway and reached another junction. I could go three ways: forward, right, or left. Right was another half-lit hallway about half as wide as the last, but still plenty big enough for the goblins to follow. Left led into a tight, dark hall that'd be way too thin for the bulldozer.

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The obvious choice would be to flee down the dark hallway. I paused. It was *too* obvious of a choice. I sensed another trap. I couldn't

go straight because the next junction was too far away, and the machine would catch me for sure.

I turned right. Donut followed, choosing to stay by my side, which was very un-Donut-like behavior.

This hall was only as wide as a regular road with a smooth, fifteen-foot ceiling. Green lichenlike growths glowed on the brick walls and ceilings, giving the tunnel an odd glow. Behind me, the goblins squealed as they struggled to maneuver the murder dozer. The thing had a wide turning radius, and it would take them at least a minute to pursue.

Ahead, another group of junctions appeared. But just before the intersection, I spied a single plain wooden door built into the wall. A simple sign was attached to the wall above the door. The words were painted the same color as the dark red bricks of the wall, and I could barely read it. It read **TUTORIAL GUILD**. The words were in that same odd language.

The moment I read the sign, a glowing green box appeared, highlighting the name.

**New achievement! You've Discovered and Read an Official Dungeon Sign.**

**Wow. You can read. Whoopee.**

***Reward*: All official dungeon signage will now be highlighted and easier to spot. Nearby guilds will appear on your minimap.**

A minimap? I really needed to figure this out. Behind me, the murder dozer had gotten stuck on the corner, and one of the level two goblins was shouting and beating on the pot helmet of the engineer with what looked like a stick. The third looked at me and shook a fist.

Would they follow me into the guild? I didn't know. I grasped the brass door handle and tried to turn it.

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It didn't open. Locked.

"What the hell?" I said. I banged on the wooden door.

"Hey," I called. "Is there anybody in there?"

The two level two goblins seemed to give up on waiting for the bulldozer to negotiate the tight turn, and they hopped off and started jogging toward me. They were unarmored, but both wielded what appeared to be wooden sticks with a pineapple on the end of it. They'd catch up in a minute. Next to me, Donut started to growl and hiss.

From behind the door I heard the rattling of chains and turning of locks. The door cracked, only pulling open part way. A single chain remained, keeping the door from opening farther.

A bearded ratlike creature appeared in the doorway. I could barely make out his features, but he was about a head shorter than me. So taller than the goblins, but not by much.

"Whaddya want?" the voice said. "You mobs ain't allowed in here. You know that!"

"Hey, this is a tutorial guild, right? The thing said I was supposed to go in here."

The eye widened as it looked at me.

"You're . . . you're a crawler? Wait." The rat creature stepped back as if to get a better look at me. I was immediately reminded of Master Splinter the rat sensei from *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. "You are! By his left tit, we opened up and I didn't even notice! I must have slept through the announcement. Nobody tells old Mordecai anything! There used to be a newsletter. It was delivered every few cycles, reliable as can be. But then it just stopped. Budget cuts, I'm guessing. They're always cutting corners. I thought we weren't opening for another two years!"

"Hey, let me in!" I interrupted. I turned to face the two goblins who jogged to a stop. One moved to my left; the other moved to cut off my retreat.

"Open the damn door!" I cried.

One of the goblins said something to the rat man behind the door, whose name appeared to be Mordecai. I couldn't understand the goblin language. It was grunts and squeaks. Mordecai responded in the goblin language. They both laughed.

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"Sorry, Crawler. You took too long," Mordecai said through the chained door. "I can't open up if there are mobs directly outside. Rules are rules."

"*I* took too long?" I said. I moved to a fighting stance. One of the goblins feinted, swinging at me with his club. The pineapple at the end of the club fell off when he swung it, and it hit the ground with a splat. The goblin cursed and kicked it away. I took a step back. Donut stood between my legs, hissing and spitting.

"At least tell me how to open these damn loot boxes!"

Mordecai was silent for a moment, as if he was contemplating on whether or not to tell me.

"It's in the Awards and Boxes tab of your inventory menu," the rat man said. "But you can't access it yet, kid."

"How do I get access to the inventory menu, then?"

The second goblin—the one who still had a pineapple on the end of his stick—swung at me, missing by a wide margin. Up close, the goblins looked much like they did in movies and video games. Short, green, mostly bald with pointed ears, angular faces, and sharp teeth. I briefly wondered on that. It seemed the aliens, or whatever, knew a whole lot about Earth mythology and lore.

Far behind him, the murder dozer had finally backed up properly and had straightened out. It rumbled down the hallway toward us.

"Yeah, you gotta complete the tutorial."

The pineapple goblin swung at me again. I waited until the club passed the apex of its arc and stepped in. I hit the goblin square in the nose with a jab and then a left hook to its right temple. It crumpled to the ground in a heap. A bar appeared over the creature's head the moment I hit it. A health bar, I realized. It hadn't appeared until it took damage. The bar went down more than halfway, turning from green to red. The goblin had more than half of its life drained.

I'd clocked it pretty good, but not that good. It was like I'd just punched a ten-year-old.

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The second goblin looked at his friend, open-mouthed, then turned and ran back toward the dozer.

My fists ached. I hadn't been in an actual physical fight in years. Most of my time as a coastguardsman was aboard a cutter as an MK—a technician. I was never involved face-to-face with any sort of real law enforcement. That said, most people I encountered who'd never been in the service didn't realize that we trained as much as we did. People thought of us as glorified lifeguards. They had no idea how much we trained in hand-to-hand combat.

"How the hell do I do that if you don't open the door!" I yelled as I kicked the downed goblin in the ribs. I felt a satisfying *crunch.* "Can't you just let me have access now?"

"It doesn't work that way, kid," Mordecai said. "We can't just have untrained crawlers wandering around the dungeon, you know. Besides, you can't open boxes unless you're in a safe zone. And unless you're a complete idiot, you can probably guess you're not in a safe zone right now."

The goblin's health bar had moved deeper into the red, but he wasn't dead yet. A distant part of me seemed horrified that I was planning on killing this thing. Despite his weapon, he was incredibly easy to hurt. But one glance up at the bulldozer, which had stopped to pick up the second goblin, relieved me of any potential regret. I put my hands on either side of the unconscious goblin's head and I smashed down on the stones. I smashed down again and again until the health bar completely drained away.

"Hey, hey!" Mordecai yelled. "Hey, stop!"

"Whose side are you on anyway?" I asked, whirling on the creature.

But then I realized the rat wasn't talking to me. "You can't come in here!" he was saying, his back now turned.

Donut. He was talking to the goddamned cat. She had decided she'd had enough of this hallway and wandered into the guild through the cracked door.

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A whole wall of **New Achievement** notifications appeared along with a couple other, new notifications, but instead of auto-playing like they did before, they appeared as little messages in the upper

left of my screen. I sensed I could mentally click on them, but not now. The AI or whatever the hell was running this circus seemed to know that right now was not an opportune time to cover up half my line of sight with game bullshit. Not with the real danger barreling down on me.

"Open the fucking door!" I cried.

"Kid, get your creature!" Mordecai said, turning toward me, a strange hint of panic in the rat's voice. "I'll get in trouble if they find out I let a crawler sneak in against the rules."

"Open the door," I repeated. "Look. It's clear, but it won't be in about five seconds. Let me in!"

The door slammed, the last chain rustled, and then it opened all the way. I rushed inside just as the murder dozer barreled by, rolling directly over the bloody corpse of their friend. The brakes screamed, but the dozer continued its forward momentum, sliding on the body as it smeared down the hallway. The two goblins turned and met my eyes as I flipped them both off. They squealed in rage as I slammed the door.

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# 3

THE MOMENT THE DOOR CLOSED, A NOTIFICATION APPEARED.

**Tutorial Guildhall**

**This is a Safe Zone.**

**Warning: level timers are still active.**

"I shouldn't have let you in," Mordecai said, wringing his furry hands. I examined the rat creature. He wore a black vest and blue pants. He had a pair of well-worn sandals on his feet. An info box popped up.

**Mordecai—Rat Hooligan. Level 50.**

**Guildmaster of this guildhall.**

**This is a Non-Combatant NPC.**

**Hooligans are the smartest, fastest, and ugliest of the Rat-Kin race. While not as roided-out as a Rat Brute, or as *Imma fireball yo ass* as a Rat Shaman, Rat Hooligans offer the best of both worlds. They are physically strong, and they have a decent grasp of magic.**

I closed out the box. Through the door, I could still hear the screech of goblin machinery just outside.

I mentally clicked on the list of several information boxes cluttering my vision.

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**Error. You may not access this until you have completed the tutorial.**

All the boxes disappeared, swooping away into a single folder item that started to blink.

I stood in a wide room about the size of a classroom. A fireplace and bed dominated one side of the room. Several shelves dotted the walls on the left half of the room, filled with random objects and a few framed photographs of birdlike creatures. The other half of the room was nothing but a well-worn and oval-shaped gray carpet and an empty desk. A half dozen classroom-style chairs lay scattered about. I turned back to the door.

"Is this the only way out of here?" I asked.

"What?" Mordecai asked. The rat wasn't paying attention to me. He was focused on the cat.

"Yo," I said. "Morty. Is this the only exit?"

"It's Mordecai, kid. And yes, yes. Of course."

"Are those green assholes going to still be waiting for me when I get out of here?"

Donut jumped up on a high shelf and knocked a vase over. Ash spilled out.

"Mom!" Mordecai cried, running to the shelf, shooing the cat away. He reached up for the shelf, but he couldn't reach. "Damn this body." He turned back to me. "Can you just grab that thing for me? Get him out of here?" Mordecai sneezed. "I think I might be allergic."

I didn't think he was sneezing because of the cat but because of the gray cloud of dust that had formed around the spilled ash.

"Holy shit, man," I said. *Be careful,* I warned myself. *He doesn't seem too tough, but he's level 50. That's gotta mean he's a powerful bastard.* "Can you help me? Are they going to wait for me or not?"

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"Yes. No. Probably. Well, it's complicated. One might wait. But one will definitely go back to their clan and call the others. You

smashed that poor goblin's head right in. Give them an hour and the whole family will be out there."

Across the room, Donut discovered the fireplace, which crackled merrily. The cat sat in front of it, lifted her leg, and started licking herself.

Shit. "Okay," I said. "Don't you dare lock this door."

I grasped the handle and went back outside.

I barely had time to hear the rat say, "You're tracking my mother's ashes all over . . ." before I slammed the door.

The goblin tractor had overshot the doorway by about ten meters and was in the middle of a wide turn, trying to come back the way it had come. The engineer had driven the tractor right into the wall. The spinning wheel sparked as the spikes shredded against the stone. The dead goblin remained smeared over the tiles. The corpse looked more like a party-sized sausage and green pepper pizza that had been run over a few times.

Both of the remaining goblins had their backs turned to me. I sprinted toward the vehicle.

The murder dozer had a small ladder near the back. It looked as if it was made of bones tied with rope. One of the goblins would turn at any moment. I had to get them now. If one of them got away and warned the other members of its "clan" or whatever, I'd be screwed. I *needed* this tutorial guild, so I only had one choice.

The jagged bones of the ladder ripped into my bare feet as I pulled myself up. I stifled a cry. I jumped onto the top of the metallic, whirring contraption.

The murder dozer screamed so loudly that neither had noticed me. The whole top of the machine was nothing but a fur-lined recessed hole with benches running the length. Despite the fur, the ground was hot on my feet, almost burning. It smelled of scorched tar and animal musk. The machine could probably carry about fifteen or so goblins, not including the driver, who had a seat up front. A dozen levers and spigots and vibrating handles extended from the

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floor in the cockpit area. The controls all vibrated and bounced up and down. The pot-wearing goblin sat in the seat, screaming and grunting something as he twisted and turned and pulled on levers. Smoke billowed and steam hissed from multiple pipes. The whole machine vibrated like a boiler about to blow.

The smooth, rocky ceiling of this tunnel was much lower than the long main hallway leading off the stairs. When I stood to my full height, I could reach up and touch it. Barely. It still amazed me, the idea of an entire world made up of these hallways and paths.

I rushed forward and grasped onto the regular goblin, who still clutched his pineapple-less stick in his hand. The creature barely weighed anything, surprising me. I picked him up as he grunted in surprise. He unsuccessfully attempted to hit me with his stick. With all of my strength, I threw the goblin forward. He rocketed out of the passenger area of the dozer.

The screaming monster sailed directly over the head of the engineer, who was only now starting to react. The flying goblin crashed onto the tunnel wall, then bounced back, landing directly on the spinning front blades. A spray of red showered over the both of us.

The final goblin snarled, and quick as a whip pulled a small, curved blade from a sheath on his side. He jumped from his chair and rushed at me.

*Oh fuck.*

The monster moved much more quickly than I anticipated, surprising me. I had to remember this was a different class than the last two, and he was a level higher. Two levels higher than myself.

This was a dumb idea. What was it that Bea always said? *"You just jump headlong into things without thinking it through"*?

I kicked at the goblin with my bare foot. With nobody at the controls, the tractor continued to whine and shred at the dungeon wall. The vibrations got worse by the moment. Soon the whole thing was bucking like a washing machine with a rock inside it.

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The goblin was yelling something at me in its guttural language.

"You're in my world now!" I yelled back at him. "You need to speak *my* language, you weird green piece of shit."

To my surprise, the goblin grinned. I could tell he understood me. The little monster switched the knife back and forth between hands. "*You're* not speaking your language," he said. "You're speaking Syndicate Standard, you idiot slave. They programmed it into your brain. Do you really think you'll survive past . . ."

The goblin never finished the sentence. As he was distracted with his own soliloquy, I leaped forward, snatched the pot off his head, and clobbered him with it. Sharp little teeth went flying. The goblin stumbled. I smacked him again. He careened off the side of the tractor. His health bar appeared after I'd smacked him the first time, but it was still well in the green. He splatted to the ground, groaning. His knife went flying.

I peered over the edge. The goblin lay on his back. The tractor continued to spin and buck, but it was edging in the opposite direction. The goblin's health was still three-quarters full, but he'd had the wind knocked out of him.

The goblin started to sit up and I threw the pot at him. To my utter astonishment, I clobbered him right in the forehead. He cried out, his hands reaching to grasp the new wound.

I gauged the distance. It wasn't very far. Like maybe seven, eight feet. I'd done that plenty of times as a kid.

*What the hell?* I jumped off the murder dozer, aiming both feet toward the chest and stomach of the still-recovering goblin.

I'm not sure if I mentioned this earlier, but this is important information right here. I stand six foot, three inches tall. I weigh about 230 pounds, and while I wasn't in nearly as good shape as I was while I was on active duty, I'd been hitting the gym three times a week for years, building my muscle mass. I'd always been blessed with one of those bodies that naturally held muscle well. My dad was a linebacker. Hell, even my mom was five foot ten. And *her* dad had played center for Oregon State before becoming a prison guard.

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So, what I'm getting at is that I'm a large dude. I have a lot of

bulk. The goblin was small, and he had hardly any mass at all. The effect of me jumping onto him from high above was like someone smashing a fat jelly donut with a sledgehammer. The little dude didn't have a chance. Goo spurted out of the goblin from every orifice.

The murder dozer started to whine even louder. I looked down at what I'd done, and I suddenly felt sick to my stomach. More notifications appeared on my screen. A tooltip popped up, appearing in my peripheral vision. I turned to look.

**Goblin Murder Dozer—Boiler Breach Imminent.**

A countdown timer appeared below the text. It was at 12 seconds and counting down.

*Son of a bitch. It's gonna blow.*

I turned back toward the room, a mere thirty meters down the hall. Was that too close? I didn't have time to think about it. I ran, slipping and sliding on the tiles as I booked it back to the room. I ripped open the door and jumped inside. I slammed the door and braced for impact.

*Bam!* The world shook. The door bucked, throwing me forward onto the floor of the guildhall. My ears rang. But the door held, and I didn't seem to be otherwise injured. Donut was in the corner of the room, poofed out and hissing.

"What the bloody hell did you do, kid?" Mordecai asked, looking over me at the door. "That gate is capable of holding back a kinetic strike from a star destroyer. I'd never seen anything shake it that much."

"Huh," I said, sitting up. My ears continued to ring. "That goblin bulldozer thing got stuck against the wall, and then it blew up."

Mordecai nodded slowly. "A boiler breach, then. The local shaman probably enchanted it in case it ever exploded. It would have focused the energy from the blast at the closest non-goblin. You're lucky you were behind that door. A focused explosion, even a small one, has a lot more energy than you might think."

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Having decided the commotion was over, Donut left the corner and returned to her spot in front of the fire. Her normally poofy exterior remained extra puffed out, and her tail swished up and down. I could tell the cat was pissed off.

"Your creature crapped in my mother's ashes," Mordecai said, shaking his head. "This is so not worth it. Not worth it at all."

"So, Mr. Training Guild," I said, leaning against the wall. My feet ached. My heart continued to thrash in my chest. I was covered in goblin blood. It felt as if I had raw hamburger meat stuck between my toes. I shuddered. *I need to get shoes. Shoes and pants.* "What the hell is going on? What's with the dungeon? Is everyone really dead? How do I work this shit?"

A million other questions popped into my head. I knew he could probably snap and break me in half, but I had an overwhelming urge to grab the rat man by his stupid vest and shake him until all the answers tumbled out of him. "Also, who the hell are you? Why are you here? What's really . . ."

Mordecai held up his hands. "Okay, okay, slow down, kid. I know you're confused. I've been in your position. All will be explained. That's why I'm here. But before I start, I need to explain something to you two." The rat looked over at the cat, who glared back at him. "My name is Mordecai, and I am what's called a Non-combatant NPC. I am like you. I'm a person whose world was displaced. This was many, many solars ago. I was a dungeon crawler just like you. I made it all the way down to floor 11, and I knew I would never make it any farther than that. Once you descend to floor 10, you're given several options to exit the dungeon. The deeper you go, the better those options are." He walked over to the shelf with the upset vase, and he picked up a framed photo of one of the bird creatures. He handed it to me. It looked remarkably like a normal framed photo. But the material was peculiar, and the photo was cut oddly, oval-shaped with the corners lopped off.

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"That's what I really look like. This is a photo of my brother. I was born a skyfowl, but I became a Changeling when I reached floor

three of the dungeon. I switch form every time my guildhall is moved."

Mordecai continued. "When a dungeon first opens, I work in a guild such as this. Later on, after the third floor collapses, my room here is transported to a much deeper level, and my form is changed again. I spend most of my time working a magic guild, which is a place one can go to pick spells and train if they've chosen a magic-based path. Though over the years I've only had a handful of people actually make it that far. Most crawlers don't make it past the tenth floor."

"So, a Changeling is a shapeshifter?" I examined the picture. I couldn't tell if it was a photograph or a painting or something else. The eyes of the image seemed to bore into me. It was a golden eagle–like creature. Wings, angel-like, were folded on its back.

"Yes," Mordecai said. He sighed. "They re-created my home for me, including all my possessions, when I decided to become a guildmaster. I had but a few moments to grab anything I wanted before they evaporated it all. Now, every time I move to a new world, they change my shape. It's something different every time, but it's always a type of mob from the current floor of the dungeon. I don't know why."

"I don't believe any of this," I said. "So you're aliens? You're all from a different world? Then how does the game or whatever know how we talk? Some of those last notifications mentioned Jean-Claude Van Damme and incels and steroids!"

Mordecai nodded. "You're getting ahead of yourself. Each dungeon is specially built for the world it inhabits. And they spend a lot of time . . . *a lot* . . . of time making sure the locals understand the game and the notifications. They go for authenticity. I'm not really supposed to tell you any of this stuff, but I figure if you're going to be stumbling around out there, you need to know what's happening."

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"I still don't know what's happening," I said, frustration rising further.

Mordecai shook his head. "You humans are all the same. This is

the seventh or eighth human-seeded world, and it's always the same. You always want to know why. Why can't you just accept your circumstances and move on? My people, the skyfowls, we generally last much longer than you humans. You know why? Because we roll with it."

I didn't say anything for several moments. There was a lot to parse there. "Human-seeded world?" Did that mean that conspiracy-spouting asshole on TV with the crazy hair was correct? That humans weren't unique, but a crop, left to grow unattended until, until . . . *this*?

Mordecai saw my look of bewilderment and sighed. "Okay, okay. I'll give you the quick version," he said. He pulled a seat and sat down. He gestured to another chair situated in the center of the round carpet. "You might as well get comfortable."

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# 4



"THERE ARE SIX BASIC STARTER SPECIES THE SYNDICATE USES TO seed worlds. Humans are one of them. They find a compatible world, sprinkle the humans on there, wait a couple thousand years, and then reveal themselves to the largest settlement. They usually do this as soon as civilization starts to take hold, but long before any sort of industrial revolution. As long as there's a working government, this counts as 'First Contact.' In a legal sense, I mean, which gives them leave to wait a couple thousand additional years, come back, and strip the planet dry."

"How?" I asked. "It all happened in a second!"

Mordecai shrugged. "Technology beyond your understanding seems like magic. So as far as you're concerned, in this place, it *is* magic. It's like that *Wizard of Oz* movie, but you'll never get to peek behind the curtain."

"You've seen *The Wizard of Oz*?"

"Guildmasters prepare for years for each new dungeon world. Kid, I have been preparing for this longer than you have been alive. The advance team arrived in your 1930s, I believe. Whenever that book came out, *The Hobbit*. I left the last system and entered the prep phase in your year 1964. I know this world and your customs just as well as you do. I even once got to shapeshift into a human and go out into the world. I went to a Blockbuster Video and stole a bunch of James Bond tapes. I was so happy once you guys started digitizing everything."

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"How long have you been a guildmaster?"

Mordecai shook his head. "You don't even want to know. So anyway, your planet defaulted on claiming Earth as a sovereign entity. You had 50 local years since first contact, and first contact was several thousand years ago. Whenever those pyramid things were built. The Borant Corporation has a huge backlog of worlds to mine, and your time is now."

My head swam. "So, they're taking all of our minerals?"

Mordecai nodded. "Sort of. Borant deals in rare *elements* and the like. What they end up mining will fit on a single transport. I don't know too much about that part of the process. The elements involved are unimportant. It's a big universe out there, and there are plenty of places to mine. That's not why they're really here. While Borant does make a profit on the mining, the real money is in the game. The dungeon."

"How?"

"Are you kidding? The Syndicate consists of over three billion independent star systems. Every season, a new *Dungeon Crawler World* debuts across the net. Quintillions of citizens of the Syndicate become obsessed with the Crawl."

"Wait, so this is like a TV show? Like *Survivor*?"

"Oh, I loved that show. And as far as you're concerned, yes, it's a show like *Survivor.* But it's more a *Running Man* situation than a *Survivor* one."

I leaned back in the chair. *I'm on an alien television show. Holy shit.*

Bea had always wanted to be on television. She'd tried out for countless reality shows. Me? I'd rather have a hot poker stuck through my eye. I briefly wondered where she was, and if she was alive. *Probably not,* I decided. It'd been just past 5 a.m. in the Bahamas when it had happened, which meant she'd probably been asleep in her hotel. Probably in bed with that asshole. And if by some miracle she had survived, there's no way she'd have gone into one of those tunnels.

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"So are there people watching right now?" I asked, looking around.

Mordecai put his hands together. "I will get to that in a moment.