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A PARADE OF HORRIBLES

DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL BOOK EIGHT

MATT DINNIMAN

MICHAEL



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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 horrors,"**https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/parade_of_horribles)*

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."

"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.

"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

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

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.

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