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THE BUTCHER'S MASQUERADE

DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL BOOK FIVE

MATT DINNIMAN

MICHAEL



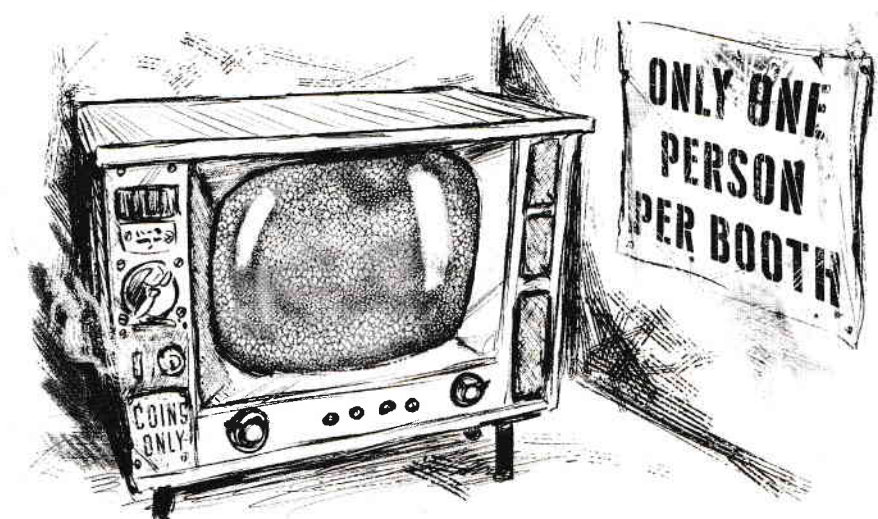
JOSEPH

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PART ONE

THE HUNT



TIME TO LEVEL COLLAPSE: 17 DAYS.

TIME UNTIL THE HUNT BEGINS: 30 HOURS.

1

Views: 512 Sextillion

Followers: 142 Quadrillion

Favorites: 23 Quadrillion

Leaderboard Rank: 1

Bounty: 3,000,000 gold

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

Welcome, Crawler, to the sixth floor. "The Hunting Grounds."

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

Remaining Crawlers: 85,223

Remaining Hunters: 360

Grace Period begins now. All hunters have been transferred to the city of Zockau. They will be released in 30 hours.

Run.

Entering the Desperado Club.

I CAME INTO EXISTENCE IN A NOW-FAMILIAR OFFICE. THE HOODED FIGURE of Orren, the grim reaper-like Syndicate liaison, sat at his cluttered desk, staring at me, hands steeped in front of him. I caught a glint of the glass under his hood. I knew there was a parasitic worm floating in there. A type of creature called a Gondii, but better known to the universe as a citizen of the Valtay.

The last time I had been in this room was after I'd killed Loita the administrator. This guy was supposedly a neutral third-party observer and fact finder, but based on recent evidence, I knew some of these liaison guys played a little fast and loose with the term "neutral."

Katia also sat in the room. It appeared she'd been here for a few

minutes already, and she appeared bored. She was in her regular form. She looked at me and grinned, though I could see the worry in her eyes.

DONUT: CARL, CARL, WHERE ARE YOU? WE DIDN'T COME IN TOGETHER! IT'S JUST ME, CHRIS, AND MONGO. WHERE ARE YOU! WHERE'S KATIA?

CARL: It's okay. She's with me. We're back in the vice principal's office.

DONUT: WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? I NEED TO PICK A NEW CLASS!

"Tell your companions you'll be joining them shortly," Orren said. "This won't take long."

CARL: Have Mordecai help you choose. I'll be there in a bit.

DONUT: I DON'T LIKE THIS, CARL. WE'RE IN A LONG LINE WITH A BUNCH OF OTHER CRAWLERS, AND MONGO IS SCARED.

CARL: Donut, everything is fine. I'm about to get a talking-to by the liaison guy with the fishbowl head. Put Mongo away, talk to Mordecai, and then make sure you get everybody near you into your chat.

"As I already told your friend, you can only see and hear me, but there are multiple entities in on this meeting," Orren said. "We have a representative from Borant, a few members of the Syndicate Crawl subcommittee, and a few additional interested parties listening in. In addition, there is a designated media representative. The media rep will not be permitted to report on anything that occurs in this meeting unless a law is broken."

"Wow," I said, turning to Katia, who suddenly had a sour look on her face. "All of this for us?"

She was about to say something, but the liaison interrupted her.

"Actually, it's all for you," Orren said. "Crawler Katia Grim is only here because she's the one who had it in her inventory. We asked her if she considered herself the owner of the item, and she claims you are the true owner. She will return to the staging area now."

"Wait," she began, but she popped away with an audible *crack*.

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CARL: Are you okay?

KATIA: Other than a headache, I'm okay. Carl, I think I accidentally got you into trouble. I didn't know what to say. They took the gate from me. I'm sorry. There was nothing I could do.

CARL: It's okay. See if you can find Donut.

KATIA: I see her. She's chasing after Mongo. Be careful.

Orren waved his hand, and three items appeared on the desk in front of him. The two watches and the winding box, the three pieces to the Gate of the Feral Gods.

"Do you remember what I said the last time you were in here?" Orren asked. He reached forward and picked up one of the watches, idly spinning it in his hand.

I sighed. I was exhausted. My brain buzzed. There was so much to do, and a part of me would welcome it if they just decided to get it over with and squish me. If not that, I needed sleep, and soon. I shrugged. "I don't really remember."

"I said if it were up to me, I'd have you removed. At the time, the kua-tin wanted to keep you, and the Syndicate Council was indifferent. After this last little stunt, nobody is indifferent anymore." He put the watch down closer to the edge of the desk. "The Dreadnoughts have up and abandoned their stake in faction wars. You wiped out the entirety of their army. The war chief's wife got stung by one of those pain-amplifier jellyfish, and the chief himself had to kill her in order to stop the pain. She's recovering now on a sedative yacht. But they've given up, and now there's an open spot, one that nobody can take because they won't be able to field an army." He just looked at me as if waiting for a reaction.

The Dreadnoughts were large, humanoid creatures with red skin. They rarely did well in faction wars because their preferred method of fighting was to just hit everything in front of them, tactics and magic be damned.

"Good," I finally said. "That was pretty much the plan. To fuck up all the armies." I looked up at the ceiling. "You guys gave me the ability to do it. I'm just playing the game."

He nodded. He jotted something on a piece of paper. "Borant didn't intervene because they thought you were going to attempt a different type of attack. And they assumed you'd lose access to the artifact afterward."

I eyed the three items on the desk. If I so much as bumped the table, the first watch would fall into my lap. “And that’s my fault?”

“It’s not. They are upset, but”—he turned in his chair to look to his left, raising his voice—“you likely made them more money than they lost.” He paused. “That said, we now have a problem. A problem with no easy solution. Actually, that’s not true. There’s a very easy and obvious solution to me. But the kua-tin don’t want to go that route. Yet. The council and the showrunners need your help.”

I felt my eyebrow rise. “My help?”

“We can’t forcibly take the gate from you. Despite what you might think, there are rules about the treatment of crawlers. At least in regard to their inventory items. Patching certain artifacts requires cooperation across all involved entities, and we do not have a consensus.”

I bit my lip.

Orren continued. “The system will not allow us to confiscate it from you.” That was interesting, considering they’d already taken it. “Borant wishes for you to remain in the game”—he again raised his voice—“despite the danger you pose to their tenuous hold on solvency. However, we simply cannot allow you to keep the Gate of the Feral Gods. We are asking for you to voluntarily give it up.”

“Is that a joke? What is this? You’ve already taken it.” I took a deep breath. My instinct was to reach out and pick up the items from the desk. I thought of the journalist. They wanted a witness. This felt like a trap. I kept my hands at my sides. I scooted my chair back an inch.

He chuckled. “When the item was first generated into the game by the system AI, do you know what happened? It set off a chain reaction of checks-and-balances subroutines so extensive, it crashed the entire system. The AI created the item in such a fashion that it circumvented its own rules.”

“Yeah, so?”

“That item has the ability to kill everyone on the floor. Borant already bent the rules the best they could to keep you from zeroing out the population on the previous floor. But this level is a little different. You can open a hundred portals and turn the dungeon into a wasteland in less than an hour.”

DONUT: I GOT THE WORLD'S GREATEST CLASS FOR THIS FLOOR.

KATIA IS BACK IN LINE WITH US.

I waved away the chat and waited for Orren to continue.

"Nobody expected you to get the item. There are rules in place we all must follow, so we can't remove it. We can, however, remove *you*. We must protect the integrity of the game. That leaves us with three options." He held up a finger. "One, I could create an order that would encase the floor in a protection spell that would remove all crawler access to portals. That would remove access to all personal spaces and clubs and break thousands of other little things. Teleport scrolls would cease to work. Certain movement spells wouldn't work. Your pet's carrier would no longer function. It would be chaos, and it would kill thousands."

He raised another finger. "Two. We accelerate you, which *will* result in your death, along with the death of anyone near you."

He let that sink in for a moment, and then he raised a third finger. "Or three, you turn the winding box in, I give you a receipt, and you get it back the moment you reach the ninth floor."

I didn't answer for several moments. My mind raced. *Goddamnit*. I needed that gate. How could I keep my promise to Juice Box without it?

I needed time to think. "Why was there a liaison helping Maggie cheat?" I asked. I looked up at the ceiling. I had no idea if he was telling the truth about the reporter, but if he was, they were the most important person here right now. "Maggie and Chris kept getting censored. They said it was a caprid. The creature was obviously working with the Skull Empire."

Orren's chair creaked. The watch wobbled. In the momentary silence, I could hear the distant boom of the dance floor. "Everyone here is aware of which you speak. There's an answer to that question. You're not allowed to hear it. But I'm glad you asked, because it's an important lesson. Exploits can work both ways. The forces working against you have had a lot more time to learn how to manipulate the system. Rest assured that particular issue has been dealt with in the same manner and swiftness as the one before us now. What's your choice? Will you hand the artifact over?"

"I want a lawyer," I said. "I'm not touching those things until I talk to one."

He grunted with amusement. I could tell, despite his mostly serious demeanor, he was enjoying this exchange. He looked back over his own shoulder to peer at the blank wall. "I told you. What did I say?" He returned his fishbowl head in my direction. "You just said the magic words, crawler."

ENTERING THE STAGING AREA.

I was hoping we'd teleport to our personal space and Mordecai would be the one who walked us through specialization. That's not what happened. This was like a football stadium, with a high ceiling and distant walls. It appeared every crawler entered into this room here or a place like this, waited in line, and then was forced to undergo specialization class selection. From what I gathered, everybody had to go through the line, even those whose classes didn't have the option to specialize.

By the time I arrived, the room was almost empty. Maybe three or four hundred crawlers remained, all on the far side of the room. I started walking toward them. I'd been in Orren's office for about an hour and a half, so not too long, but it appeared whatever this was, it was going by quickly.

CARL: I'm in the giant arena place. Where are you guys?

KATIA: Are you okay? What happened?

CARL: I'm okay. We lost the gate, but not permanently. It's a long story.

DONUT: WE'RE ALREADY DONE. YOU HAVE TO GO THROUGH THE SMELLY LITTLE ROOM, AND THEN YOU COME BACK OUT. EVERYONE IS GETTING SCATTERED, BUT ALL THE PARTY MEMBERS ARE COMING OUT IN THE SAME PLACE. ALSO, WAIT UNTIL YOU SEE WHAT MORDECAI LOOKS LIKE.

KATIA: This world is similar to the third floor but with a lot more trees. You should come out just outside a medium dryad settlement. Find a pub called Die Kirschbomben.

CARL: Did you guys get class upgrades?

KATIA: I got something. It didn't change my Monster Truck Driver class name, but I could pick one of three "endorsements." They only give you ten minutes to pick, and you can't use chat while you're in the little room. I got the HAZMAT endorsement.

DONUT: THEY SAID I COULD PERMANENTLY PICK ANY CLASS I ALREADY HAD, BUT MORDECAI SAID THAT MIGHT HAPPEN AND TOLD ME NOT TO DO IT. SO I DIDN'T. BUT IT'S OKAY BECAUSE I ALREADY GOT A NEW CLASS JUST FOR THIS FLOOR, AND IT IS GREAT.

CARL: What did you get?

DONUT: I'LL TELL YOU BUT ONLY IF YOU PROMISE NOT TO GET MAD. KATIA SAYS YOU'RE GOING TO BE MAD.

CARL: Donut. What did you pick?

DONUT: I'M A BARD! ISN'T IT GREAT! IT'S NOT A NECROBARD LIKE THEY OFFERED ME BEFORE, BUT IT'S BETTER. I'M A LEGENDARY DIVA. THAT'S WHAT THE CLASS IS CALLED. LEGENDARY DIVA. I SING!

CARL: You sing.

DONUT: I SING SONGS AND THEY CAST SPELLS. I GOT A BUNCH OF THEM. I'M PRACTICING ALREADY. MONGO LOVES THEM AND THE TREE GUY AT THE PUB SAID I CAN HAVE A GIG FOR THE LUNCH SHIFT TOMORROW.

KATIA: He said you could sing *after* the lunch shift.

DONUT: DON'T RUIN IT, KATIA.

I took a long, deep breath.

CARL: Okay, I'll see you in a bit.

Velvet crowd-control ropes snaked back and forth, attached to little brass poles, like in a line to buy tickets at a movie theater. Hundreds of single-door exits dotted the far wall, and as I watched, the remaining crawlers all walked one by one into individual rooms and disappeared.

I picked up one of the barrier things and tried to add it to my inventory.