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THE DUNGEON ANARCHIST'S COOKBOOK

DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL BOOK THREE

MATT DINNIMAN

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TIME TO LEVEL COLLAPSE: 10 DAYS.

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RED LINE.

Welcome, Crawler, to the fourth floor. "The Iron Tangle."

Your title has reverted to Royal Bodyguard.

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

The world rumbled. The ground shook. I stumbled backward the moment we appeared, but I was held upright by a metal wall. Lights flashed in a quick staccato, pulsing on either side of the long, thin room. I felt the *thump, thump, thump* under my feet. We were in a long plastic-and-metal tube that vibrated and thundered. The lights in the room blinked out, then turned back on.

Mongo screeched in anger and fear. Donut jumped to my shoulder, trembling. Katia clutched on to a metal pole rising from the floor to the ceiling.

New achievement! I'm on a train!

Choo Choo, Motherfucker.

**Reward: You've received a Train Conductor's Souvenir Hat!
Wear it with pride!**

"It's a subway car," I said. We hurtled through a tunnel, racing toward some unknown destination.

A double aisle of seats, facing inward, filled the train car. The seats were made of beige molded plastic with brown cushions that were ripped and tagged with marker and spray paint. The words were in nonsensical letters in the Cyrillic alphabet. The floor was dingy and pocked. Scorch marks dotted the plastic walls. Poles rose to the ceiling at regular intervals and also ran the length of the car. The whole place smelled like a pile of dead rats.

The train car was empty except for our party.

"It's a Metro car from Moscow," Katia said. "But the ones I rode were in much better condition than this. And cleaner." Her face had returned to the mostly human, blond-haired form she'd held earlier. Her nose had been knocked halfway around her face the last time I'd seen her in her doppelganger form, but she'd willed it back into place.

At the end of the subway car was a closed door with no window. Above the door hung a small electric sign with red words scrolling across the top.

Red Line, Car 20. Next stop: Sirin Station [81] in 12 minutes and 32 seconds.

"Everybody get dressed," I said. I sat down in the chair and quickly began the process of putting my gear back on. I briefly examined the stupid train hat we'd received, and it was junk. It wasn't magical. It was a simple blue-and-white hat one would see on a toddler. It had the words "I rode the Iron Tangle" embroidered on it.

"Carl, it says I have to pick a new class because of my Character Actor skill. I only have six minutes to choose, or I will get a 'random'

one,” Donut said. “The list is full of new stuff. Not the same as before.”

CARL: Mordecai. Help Donut pick a class. She’s going to read off some choices. We’re in a moving train car. I think it’s a subway-system-themed floor.

MORDECAI: Welcome back. Donut, hit me with the suggested list.

DONUT: I DON’T LIKE THESE CHOICES, MORDECAI.

As Donut rattled off a list of options in the chat, including things like Alley Cat Brawler and Nec-Cat-Mancer, I moved to the window and peered outside.

We moved swiftly. The exterior wall of the tunnel was right there, barely inches from the window. It appeared to be made of dirt or rock. Lights flashed by occasionally as if electrical lights were built into the tunnel walls at random intervals.

“Why does she always type in all caps?” Katia whispered as I peered out the window. “Is it because she’s four-legged?”

“No. It’s because she’s Donut.”

“She’s quite the handful, isn’t she?”

I remembered what Odette had said about Hekla wanting to steal Donut away.

“More than you know,” I said.

We had 10 days to complete this floor. Our first priority would be to find a stairwell. If we were constantly moving, that was going to provide a unique challenge. There were only 9,375 stairwells this time. If the level truly was subway- or train-themed, and this wasn’t just taking us to some random location where the floor was really going to begin, we needed a map. Even if there was a stairwell at each and every stop, that suggested this system was beyond huge. Finding a stairwell wouldn’t be enough if we didn’t know how to circle back.

My Escape Plan skill couldn't find any directions or maps, at least not in this car. The skill worked great, but you had to know where the hidden maps were before you could utilize it.

"Wow," Katia said. "My constitution is double what it normally is. I'm at 102. I have an active momentum bonus even though I'm not moving."

"Good," I said. *That means you're our meat shield*, I didn't add. "I hope that's by design. Otherwise, I wouldn't get used to it. If the showrunners didn't mean for that to happen, you can bet it'll be patched out tonight."

If we were going to be doing a lot of close-quarters fighting this level, that meant I needed to work on my hand-to-hand. Last floor had been all about explosions. I suspected that was going to take a back seat here.

DONUT: SO, SHOULD I DO THE FOOTBALL HOOLIGAN OR THE FIRECRACKER CLASS? QUICK, I'M ALMOST OUT OF TIME.

MORDECAI: Hooligan. If you're going to be stuck in a series of tubes, it's the best choice. It comes with a momentum bonus and several team buffs. Plus the Mascot skill, which gives a bonus to Mongo.

Donut glowed for a moment.

DONUT: I DID IT. I GOT THE MASCOT SKILL! BUT I DIDN'T GET GROUP CHANT OR MOVING RIOT. I GOT THE 10 POINTS TO MY CONSTITUTION, THOUGH.

MORDECAI: Damn. Chant would've been good. Okay, you three. I just peeked my head out of my room, and I am in what appears to be a train station settlement. It looks as if the stores and inns are placed at these stations. This is a bigger one where you can switch between three different train routes. One of the trains is a subway like you described, but another is much larger. Like a regular

transcontinental railway train. Get off at the next station, and see if you can find a safe room or inn.

CARL: 10-4. By the way, thanks for telling us about the bounty.

MORDECAI: So you made the top 10, huh? Find a safe room, and we'll talk.

I looked at Donut. I tried to remember what she'd lost by switching away from Artist Alley Mogul. The only noteworthy benefits were the +5 to dexterity and the 15% bonus to item sales. Also, she'd received a few extra coins when we went down the stairs, but it wasn't much. The loss of the dexterity bonus would probably be the worst part. "So what do your new skills do?"

The ground rattled as we went around a bend. The lights flickered.

"I only got a couple of new ones. It came with a skill that would've raised my damage if we were moving, but I didn't get it. The best one is Mascot. If Mongo deals damage to an enemy, everybody in the party receives a bonus to dexterity and constitution. If he kills a mob, the bonus lasts for a couple hours."

"That is a good one," I said.

"Also, my constitution went up by 10 points. Oh, and I got a skill called Guinness that doubles my strength if I'm drunk."

"Are you serious?"

"Quite," she said. "So if we're going to be doing any fighting, we'll need to stop at the club first so I can get another Dirty Shirley."

CARL: Mordecai, is it me or are these classes better than what we were offered before?

MORDECAI: It's an unintended benefit. A lot of these rarer classes weren't available because she didn't meet the minimum requirements. But as her stats increase, the classes she's offered on each level will be better. There's another benefit I hadn't anticipated, too. She'd received a level 5 Negotiation skill with that Artist Alley class. Before

you guys left the third floor, she'd raised the skill to level 7 thanks to all that selling you did. When she lost that class, the five levels went away, but she retained the two she'd received, including the skill experience, so it actually bumped itself up to four on its own.

CARL: Wait, I don't understand. So if she gets a temporary skill, she keeps it the next floor down? What about the stat point increases?

MORDECAI: She won't keep the stat points. But as long as she uses a skill enough to level it at least once, it looks like she'll keep it, minus the levels she received as being a part of that class. Skill experience is a complicated, under-the-hood metric crawlers can't see. It takes a lot to break the cherry, so to say, and obtain level 1. But once you're in, you're in. So in other words, use Mongo as much as you can, and you'll keep that Mascot benefit. Also, from now on, we should keep an eye out for classes with rare spells. If she levels the spell at least once, then I think she'll keep it.

CARL: That seems like a bug.

MORDECAI: I think it might be. So don't talk about it out loud or bring attention to it. They probably won't notice until she manages to keep a spell from one floor to the next. Now get to work. I'll look for a map, but you should, too.

"Katia," I said. "You have the Pathfinder skill. Do you see anything?"

"The skill is only level three. It was level one when I got it, and it's hard to upgrade. I have to keep my map open all the way to train it. My old game guide said I needed to find a training guild to really boost it. I can zoom my map out really big, but when I do, I don't see much. There are tubes everywhere, like a mess of noodles. Though a minute ago, I saw another train rush by on another track on the other side of this wall, shooting off at an angle from us. As for this train, there are 20 cars, and we're on the last one."

"Can you see any mobs?"

"No. It usually doesn't show monsters. But if we're close to a stairwell or a safe room, I'll get a notification. But I can see car number 15 is shaped differently than this one. I can't see what it is. It's not a passenger car like this one."

I looked on my own map, and it showed the first half of car 15. I knew normally my map zoomed out a little bigger than that, but it shrank while we were moving. If Katia could see all 20 cars, then that skill really did make the map a lot bigger. The map also helpfully labeled the cars for me, something I hadn't seen before. We were in **Cabin #20—Passenger Car**.

"What does the label say for that 15th car?" I asked Katia.

"It just has a question mark."

I examined the back wall of the train. Normally there'd be some sort of emergency exit. Instead, it was just a solid metallic wall. I wondered what would happen if I attached an explosive to it, breached the wall, and jumped out onto the track. Considering how tight the tunnel was, we'd probably get squished by the next train in a matter of minutes.

"Okay, guys," I said. "Let's go check it out."

I moved down the center aisle. Donut jumped to my shoulder. Mongo pushed his way to my side. He had to struggle past the vertical poles. If he got much bigger or the aisles any tighter, it was going to become a problem. We came to the door, which seemed out of place here. There was no glass window. I sensed this door was something added by the dungeon, and normally there'd be a short, open gangway where one could walk the length of the train unimpeded. Above, the timer to the next stop was at five minutes.

"I'm going to pull the door open. Katia, your constitution is four times mine, so you go in first. You okay with that?"

She swallowed but then nodded. I could see she was trembling. "I guess that's my job, isn't it?"

"Don't worry, sweetie. We have your back," Donut said.

The door slid to the side, revealing a small, enclosed space be-