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books

THE GATE OF THE FERAL GODS

DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL BOOK FOUR

MATT DINNIMAN

MICHAEL

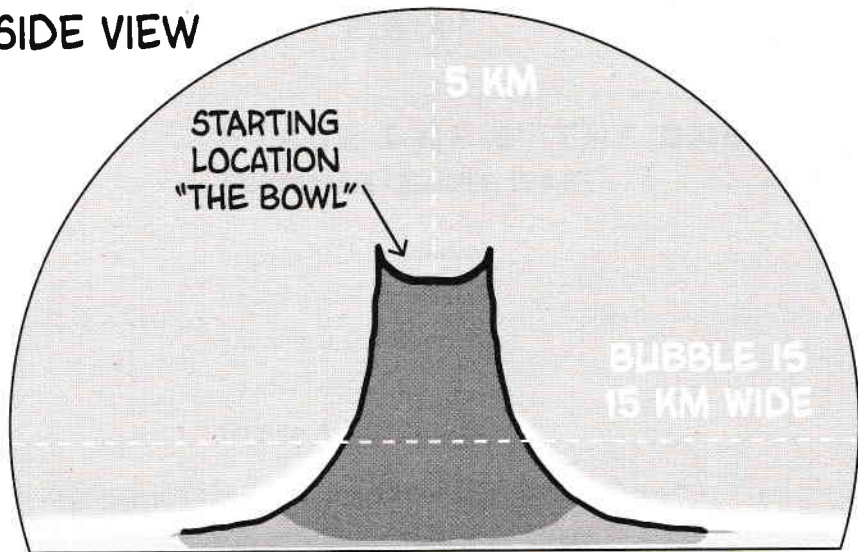


JOSEPH

BUBBLE 543 OF 1172

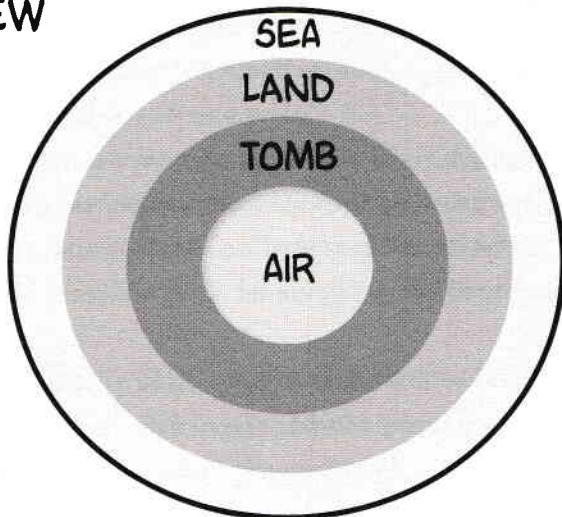
DESERT BUBBLE

SIDE VIEW



- EACH BUBBLE CONTAINS FOUR QUADRANTS: SEA, LAND, TOMB, AIR.
- EACH QUADRANT CONTAINS ONE CASTLE, WHICH CONTAINS A STAIRWELL.
- ONE MAY NOT LEAVE THEIR STARTING QUADRANT UNTIL THE CASTLE IS TAKEN.
- STAIRWELLS DO NOT OPEN UNTIL ALL FOUR CASTLES HAVE FALLEN.
- YOU MAY LEAVE THE BUBBLE ONCE IT "POPS," I.E., ALL FOUR CASTLES FALL.
- YOU MAY NOT ENTER OTHER BUBBLES UNTIL THEY ARE POPPED.

TOP VIEW





STAGE 1 OF 4. THE GNOMES.

TIME TO LEVEL COLLAPSE: 15 DAYS.

Views: 1.43 Quintillion

Followers: 7 Quadrillion

Favorites: 2.4 Quadrillion

Leaderboard rank: 3

Bounty: 800,000 gold

Welcome, Crawler, to the fifth floor. "The Bubbles."

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

Remaining Crawlers: 178,887

Entering Bubble #543 out of 1,172. Air Quadrant.

New Achievement! The Quarry Sees Another Spring.

You managed to enter a stairwell while listed in the current top ten. You're a survivor. A scrapper. And just as the buck's antlers grow another point as they mature, you, too, have grown as both a crawler and as a prize.

Reward: You have received a Gold Venison Box! Don't get too excited. It's just money. In addition, all bounties against you now and in the future will have a [$\times 2$] modifier attached.

Hey, at least the prize for surviving the floor goes up, too.

"WHAT THE SHIT?" I SAID, SEEING THE NOTIFICATION. NOBODY HAD warned me our bounties would double. Mordecai hadn't mentioned it, nor had I seen it listed in the cookbook. I wondered if that was a new thing. *Those fuckers.*

I coughed, regretting I'd said anything out loud. I spit the sand from my mouth.

Tens of thousands of crawlers hadn't made it past the last few hours of the fourth floor. I felt my fist clench and unclench as we trudged forward, leaning into the wind.

Donut mewed with irritation from my shoulder. Hot wind blasted against us, and every time I breathed, my mouth and nose started to fill with sand. We needed masks. We could only talk using chat.

We'd stepped from the warehouse onto the fifth floor just a few minutes after the fourth level collapsed. I felt the standard rumble in the ground while we were still in the warehouse, but it was much more distant than usual.

**DONUT: I NEED TO PICK A NEW CLASS! I REALLY WISH THEY
GAVE ME MORE TIME. THE CHOICES ARE ALL DIFFERENT.**

CARL: Mordecai. Help Donut choose. We're in an air zone.

**MORDECAI: There you are. By the gods, did Odette make you
clean her house first before she let you go? I'm already
here and have been gathering intel. Come to the town
that's hunched up against the northwest curve. The walls
block the sandstorms. Locals say the storms only last an
hour or two each day. Apparently there's only two towns in
the area. Donut, read me your choices.**

Donut quickly read off some of the class choices. None of them had a flying ability. Many sounded more interesting and exotic than usual, like Nine Tails and Demigod Attendant, though there were a few in there that had to be a joke. Like Vape Shop Counter Jockey. Mordecai asked rapid-fire questions. He zoomed in on two choices.

**MORDECAI: The class choices keep getting better. We still need
to keep your constitution up. You just lost ten points from
losing your Football Hooligan. There's one that'll replace it**

and more. Glass Cannon normally forbids you from adding to your constitution upon level up, but it comes with a plus-fifteen constitution base, and it'll also greatly increase your training speed on all spells. It does not increase your intelligence, but it lowers the cost of all spells, which is almost the same thing. Your *Magic Missile* will be much stronger, and it's already pretty strong. You can't train constitution anyway, so it's a good choice, especially if we grind on your magic. But if you don't actually obtain some of those benefits, it could be a waste of a class.

Donut's Character Actor benefit went up in power each time she descended a floor, but it still came with a risk. She didn't always obtain all of the chosen class's benefits, and once she picked, it was set for the floor.

DONUT: I CHOSE IT!

MORDECAI: Well? What did you get?

DONUT: I . . . WELL, I GOT EVERYTHING. EXCEPT THE PLUS 15 TO CONSTITUTION.

"*Goddamn it,*" I muttered, and immediately regretted it. I had to spit out more sand.

MORDECAI: Okay. We need to really focus on keeping Donut out of harm's way until we get her better armor. No more riding Mongo into battle.

Class choice out of the way, we started to move. Dust and sand swirled around us. The ground felt solid, though my feet sank to the ankles with each step. With the dust storm, I could barely see more than twenty feet in each direction. I looked up, and I saw nothing

but brown. I turned, and the door we'd just left was gone, replaced by a curved, rocky but uniform wall. It seemed to rise high and away, like we were standing inside of a crudely sculpted bowl.

KATIA: Okay. I see the edge of town. It's close, about three hundred meters ahead and to the left. My Pathfinder skill is acting a little odd. I can't see anything behind us except the mountain wall.

DONUT: THERE ARE NO TUNNELS AT LEAST. I HATE TUNNELS.

I wasn't so sure about that. My chat was filled with people checking in with their surroundings. I minimized it until we were someplace safe, but I saw a few people mentioning tight, claustrophobic tunnels. Bautista was in one such passageway. Elle and Imani said they were on a round, floating island that was really a bunch of boats lashed together. They were being pelted with a hailstorm and had taken shelter in the hold of a cargo ship that was filled with level 29 fish monsters.

CARL: I can't see shit. Watch out for mobs.

DONUT: THIS IS RUINING MY FUR. AND IT'S HOT. I DON'T LIKE THIS, CARL. MONGO IS MISERABLE.

CARL: Mongo is still in his container. You don't know if he's miserable or not.

It *was* hot. It felt like a hair dryer blasting on us. I remembered how cold it was when we'd first entered the dungeon. My eyes caught a countdown timer in my upper-left vision. It was my potion sickness indicator from when I'd taken Mordecai's Special Brew. I still had over four hours until I'd be able to take another potion. At least the timer had kept ticking while we were on Odette's show.

CARL: Donut. Minefield.

Donut unleashed Mongo, who squawked with dismay at the driving sandstorm. She cast *Clockwork Triplicate* on the pet, and she ordered the two automatons to range ahead of us. With our limited vision, they'd provide an early warning for both mobs and sand dunes.

The town was close, but getting there was a chore. We didn't see any mobs. We passed a cave-like entrance in the ground that offered shelter, but the clockwork Mongos were unable to enter despite it being wide-open. It was a short, sloped descent filled with swirling eddies of sand. In the hole I could see a tunnel fading away into darkness. I took a few steps down the slope, and I saw the shimmering wall. It was not a portal, but a force field of some sort, similar to the wall of my *Protective Shell* spell, protecting the entrance to the cave. The sand passed right through. A clockwork Mongo walked up and swiped at it, claw bouncing off it like it was a physical wall. The creature didn't explode or blow back. I formed my gauntlet and hesitantly reached out to tap it.

Warning: You may not enter this quadrant until your current quadrant's castle is liberated.

I tried to shout what I'd learned at Donut and Katia, but the wind was just too loud. We had to stick with chat.

CARL: This is a cave entrance to the subterranean zone. It sounds like we can't leave the air zone until we deal with the gnomes.

KATIA: The map won't let me see anything inside there. But look at the walls. I thought this was a mountain, but it all looks carved. I think there's a building under our feet.

I took a Banger Sphere and rolled it down the slope. It bounced a few times down the uneven ramp, entered the area as if the wall wasn't there, and just kept going. It disappeared into the darkness.

A moment later, the ground rumbled with a distant explosion. I didn't hear it, but I felt it in my feet.

You have set off a trap. Maybe next time you'll be more careful.

CARL: Shit, it sounds like the subterranean tunnels have traps in them. We need to be extra vigilant.

KATIA: I believe it's an underground tomb. Like Indiana Jones stuff.

She pulled a regular torch from her inventory, lit it, and tossed it through the force field. It lit up a long, sloping hallway made of carved bricks.

CARL: I think you're right.

Relief patterns of what looked like a flaming, screaming pterodactyl adorned the walls. *Well, that's ominous.*

DONUT: CAN WE DISCUSS THIS AFTER WE GET OUT OF THIS SAND? I MEAN, REALLY. WE CAN'T EVEN GO IN THERE. THAT'S NOT OUR AREA. THIS IS JUST AWFUL. SOME PEOPLE ON THE CHAT SAY THEY'RE IN A TROPICAL PARADISE AND SOME SAY THEY'RE IN A SNOWING ZONE. ANY OF THOSE WOULD BE BETTER THAN THIS, AND I DON'T EVEN LIKE SNOW.

We abandoned the cave entrance and continued on toward the town. The fact we hadn't seen any mobs was concerning. Fewer mobs usually meant *stronger* mobs.

We did see one oddity as we trekked to the town. There was a twisted, burned-out shell of metal on the ground. It appeared it'd been there for some time. I couldn't determine what it used to be, but it might've once been a vehicle. The system didn't label it at all.

I touched the metal to see if I could take it into my inventory. It felt solid and light, but rusted. It was half buried in the sand. We left it and continued on our way.

We soon came to a tall, curved wall made of sheets of metal riveted together. The walls rose high, maybe twenty feet, and a fabric awning covered it above that. The thick blue-and-white-striped material whipped violently in the storm, threatening to rip away at any moment. The fabric curved up and away into the darkness. Every few dozen feet, large, dark boxes stood atop the walls. They appeared to be lookout towers. They were closed up against the storm.

KATIA: The town is built against the wall. There's an entrance that way.

She pointed right, and we followed along the patchwork metal until we reached an arched doorway built into an alcove that was mostly protected from the wind. Donut started hacking up sand onto my shoulder. There was a crude sign over the large double doorway. It read "Hump Town. Bang twice to enter."

The knocker was a mallet, like for a giant drum. It hung from a chain by the entrance. I grabbed it and smacked it against the door twice. The whole doorway echoed loud and deep.

"That was louder than I expected," I said. We could finally talk here, though we still had to raise our voices.

Donut continued to hack in my ear.

"Hey, don't puke on my shoulder."

"Where else am I going to do it, Carl?" she said between breaths. She proceeded to puke on my shoulder.

"Goddamnit, Donut," I said.

"In ancient Egypt, it was considered an honor for a cat to vomit upon you. You should thank me."

"Hump Town," Katia said drily. "I can't wait to find what that's all about."

Several minutes passed, and nothing happened. The clockwork