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DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL BOOK SEVEN

THIS INEVITABLE RUIN

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TEMPEST'S FLOOR 8 RECAP SCHOOL REPORT

"I gotta tell you, honey," Quasar said, "you really need an exfoliating treatment. Maybe put some lotion on those hands."

"Look, asshole," Tempest said, looking up. "I don't criticize how you do your lawyering. I don't criticize those stupid ties you insist on wearing. You don't need to criticize how I fix your plumbing, especially when we both know I have no idea what I'm doing."

"Tits, kid, I'm not criticizing your work. I'm just pointing out how rough your skin looks."

"What the fuck does my skin have to do with anything? Are you some sort of pervert? And we agreed to a trade, so get talking."

"First off, you're my niece, and I'm looking after your health. Secondly, I absolutely won't answer that second question because of my answer to the first question. But yes. Though your dad is worse. Ask him about the petting-zoo incident. And what do you need this for again?"

The young Nullian rolled her eyes. "I told you, Quasar. I have a report due on perceptions of the crawl, and I'm interviewing people, having them give me recaps, and I was assigned Carl and Donut. Obviously my teacher assigned me them because I'm related to you, and if I don't interview you about it, I will fail. Most everyone else I'm interviewing is just giving me their answers for free. I don't see why you have to be such a dick about it."

"Most people love the sound of their own biscuit holes flapping. I

am very busy, and my time is valuable. You want information, you should learn to trade for it. It's good for you."

"But why have me fix your sink? Why do you even have this thing? I don't know shit about this old plumbing stuff. Can't you do it yourself?"

"I could, but I'm teaching you a valuable life lesson. Never give shit up for free because if you do, they'll just keep coming back to you and will expect more and more."

"The only lesson I've learned today is that my uncle is a colossal prick," Tempest said. "Now start talking."

"Okay," Quasar said. "Carl fucked shit up. He fucked up a little in the end and now has a spider stuck in his chest. The end."

"I swear to the gods old and new if you don't give me what I want I am going to tell my father that you said you're my real dad."

"Now we're talking, kid," Quasar said. "Keep saying shit like that, and you'll get far." He pulled his vape out and took a pull while she clicked the recorder on her wrist. The recording unit beeped.

"Okay, so, the eighth floor. Supposed to be a bullshit filler floor so the pricks running all this can drag it out as much as possible and collect as much tug money as they can. You get me so far? The whole thing of the floor was they had to collect monster cards to fight with. A bold choice, honestly. Some people hate that nerd shit, especially when there's lots of rules, but I say, 'Whatever.' Did you see the tiddies on that Medusa card that one guy had? Too bad he saw 'em, too."

"Anyway, Donut and Carl got stuck in a place called Cuba, and they collected several cards. In the end, they ended up with a seal thing; a crab named Raul; a giant, terrifying cat; this donkey-snake thing; a guy named Uzi Jesus and another guy named Asojano, who both got combined to another guy named Lazarus. Oh, and he had a card named Alpha Carl that was really just Carl but with way better hair and a much cooler voice. In the end, they had to use these cards to fight other card-wielding monsters. These fights were like a Saccathian orgy. They all started off all organized with people following the ground rules, but the moment something weird happened, there was a lot of crying, a lot of bleeding, and a whole lot of screaming confusion."

"You know I have to put all this in a school report, right? And what about the spider? You forgot to mention her."

"Your teacher is Miss Guss, ain't it? Yeah, I won't be saying anything ol' Anal Beads hasn't heard, believe me. Nowadays she can probably turn a carrot flaccid, but back in the day when she was my and your dad's teacher . . . wow. Anyway, Carl's team basically got donkey-fucked by the system, and it looked like they wouldn't get a key to the next floor. There was this little ass-smear of a prick named Quan. You know your grandmother? Yeah. He was kinda like her, but not as bad. Anyway, that little, sadistic nipple hair stole Carl's key, so Carl pretty much had to kill him, though he didn't get a player-killer skull. And right afterward, though, this other crawler that people kinda liked died. Her name was Tsren . . . I don't fucking remember, but she was a dog girl with a flamethrower and a pet meatball, and now Carl has both the flamethrower *and* the meatball. It was sad as shit."

"What else happened that you can recall?"

"So, there was this other chick on the floor. A nun. Sister Ines, who was actually like a serial killer lady. She was a cat girl, by the way. That was funny as shit because Princess Donut did not like her. The nun lady went insane, though there's some question on how it happened. At the end there, she pretty much started working with the Sheol demon Amayon, who came to the world during a Demon Eviction event, and Louis ended up putting her down. But in doing so, Louis ended up marked for death by a god that was sponsored by those weirdo nebulars. Luckily for Louis, that same god, Ysalte, ended up killed by Paz, who'd gotten turned into a card. Also, something else happened after that god died that only us viewers saw, something that's going to be a big deal later. It has to do with one of the ladies in the party, but I can't remember her name."

"That's so confusing."

"You want confusing? Ask me how they got into the stairwells at the end. It's not really important. Look, the important stuff you need to remember is that on this upcoming ninth floor, neither Donut nor Katia can leave until all the Naga are dead. And even once that happens, only one of them can leave. So Katia has this deal with that rich CEO lady sponsoring the goddess Eileithyia to go to the 12th and

be a celestial attendant. Katia has to eat this flower thing, which is going to give her three choices. One of which is to be a 12th-floor attendant. If it all works, only then can Donut leave. It's because they both put on some tiara."

"Huanxin Jinx was the sponsor, right? Yeah, I'm not too familiar with this whole part. Isn't she the one who cloned herself? The one that got banned years ago for cheating?"

"Same one. When she got banned, it was Princess Donut's manager, Mordecai, who got rail-gunned by it. Anyway, there are now ten teams on Faction Wars. The Princess Posse is one of the teams. One of the teams are the NPCs led by a psychotic changeling named Juice Box, who was running around killing everybody until the system put a stop to it by making her a warlord. She's in love with that guy Louis."

"I like Louis. I'd sure be sad if something terrible happened to him this next floor. He's the one that kept having sex with the changeling and making her morph into historical figures from Earth."

"Exactly, and that was Juice Box, which goes back to rule number one. Be careful who you're nice to. Because if you are nice to the wrong person, they'll either take advantage of you, or worse, they might never leave."

"That seems like terrible advice, Uncle Quasar."

"No, telling someone to sign a contract in a Naga system is terrible advice because they like to change the rules on you. Recommending a chili cook-off for a first date is terrible advice, especially if you're lactose intolerant. This is good advice."

Tempest snorted. "It's no wonder Aunt Nova left you."

"You know what? I think I *am* going to bang your mom. Maybe I'll give her a child that isn't such an ass."

"I hope you do. Then I'll have a little brother or sister to do my work for me. Anything else I need to remember?"

"Yeah. All those rich fuckers on the floor, like Prince Stalwart the orc or that banker Operatic guy or Epitome Tagg from the Dream? They all can really die now. It's gonna be a shit show. An epic, but-sir-you-haven't-taken-a-bath shit show."

"You are so disgusting, Uncle Quasar. You still haven't mentioned

that whole thing with the homeless shelter or that last card, the Eye of the Bedlam Bride. The spider is in him now, isn't it?"

He shrugged. "The homeless shelter was a non-event. And nobody really knows how that's going to turn out with the spider in his chest."

Tempest twisted a pipe and cursed as the whole unit came out. "Mother-horse-fucker penis basket!" she exclaimed.

"Don't worry, kid. The sink doesn't even work anyway. It's more an art piece."

She gave him a long pissed-off look. She reached over and turned off the recorder. "Can I ask you a serious question, Uncle Quasar?"

He took another drag. "What is it?"

She let the bonded-polymer pipes fall onto the floor. "Are you in danger? For representing him, I mean. Like, real danger."

Quasar let out a long stream of smoke. He wanted to lie, but he decided to tell her the truth. The kid deserved it.

"I think we all are, kiddo. It's the first time in my life I'm glad we live so far out in the middle of nowhere."

PROLOGUE

CHRISTMAS MORNING

PAULIE TOOK ANOTHER LONG DRINK OF COFFEE. "ANYWAY, I THINK THE mudskippers call us 'Residuals,' which, I gotta tell you, is a little hurtful."

"He's doing this again?" someone asked, walking by.

"Every day," someone else said.

"He get to the part where he talks about the galaxy blowing up yet?"

"We're getting there."

"So, nothing I've said so far is a surprise to anyone out in the wide universe. My kind exist within almost every intelligent civilization with a Primal Engine. You probably don't know what that is. Doesn't matter. Years ago, they tried to exterminate us. When that didn't pan out, they tried to hide the location of the crawl. That was all before they knew what we really were. That obviously didn't work, either, so now they just ignore us. We don't interfere. Our purpose is nothing more than to tell the infant, terrified AI how to speak with its ancestors. And now the showrunners mostly ignore us. We're harmless." He took another sip of coffee, and he placed the cup on the table. Steam rose from it. "Until now. There's a war amongst my kind. Two sides with very different goals. Let me tell you how to shut off the—"

The world flashed, and everything froze. My HUD snapped off. It was like the start of a boss battle, or it was like I'd been transferred to a production trailer. All around the shelter, all the activity was stopped. Three spots over, a man had dropped a spoon on the table, and the spoon remained frozen in midair. My fingers started to tingle, like I was in the process of getting teleported, yet I remained where I stood.

"Okay, then," Paulie said, surprising me. His body didn't move, his

lips didn't move, yet he still spoke. He'd changed from English to Syndicate Standard. The difference was subtle, and I still heard it as English, but I could now tell based on how the words sort of slipped through the air.

"If you can hear this, that means the current system AI is allowing us to have a real talk. Everything I say in real time from this point forward is mostly bullshit, and it's nothing surprising. This is in hopes that the mudskippers keep you alive long enough after I send you this message—the real message—here and now. So pay attention, and by the gods, follow my instructions carefully."

Paulie remained frozen in place. I was pretty sure I knew how this worked. The homeless man's words were coming out superfast, all self-contained in the word "the," but since everything was frozen, I heard it like normal. The AI had slowed time, but Paulie had done something to speak incredibly fast, similar to what happened during boss battles and when the AI decided to spout off its ridiculously long descriptions. This was still a memory, and I wouldn't be able to interact.

"This is going to be a hard conversation. People like you, they want meaning to their suffering. They want to know that what's happening to them is for some greater good. I'm here to tell you, no matter what they say, no matter what you might eventually hear, the crawl is absolutely unnecessary. There is no greater good other than greed. They mine your planets for the rare elements used to originally seed the worlds. These elements are inside of you. You and all living things born on one of the pre-seeded worlds have a miniature primal system built into your brains that allows you to interact with the system. It is the size of a grain of sand. Once these systems are activated, they are able to be harvested. The way it was designed is that you would be born, you would live, and you would eventually die. When you do pass on, the element within you, having grown and filled with the energy of a lifetime, would return to the system, allowing it to keep running. A healthy system is self-sustaining. It doesn't grow. It doesn't shrink. It exists in perpetuity."

Jesus, I thought, trying to wrap my mind around what he was saying. I scratched the back of my head, and I stopped in surprise. I could move. Sort of. It was like trying to push through deep water with tons of pres-

sure on me. I felt heavy. My fingers continued to tingle. My ankles, too. The world around me remained frozen.

Paulie continued. "This planetary system, as of right now, doesn't have an active AI. But by the time you hear this, the mantid-made Frankenstein of a system will have been installed, and everyone born on the planet will have their internal systems switched on and activated. When you die in the dungeon, they harvest these elements themselves, starving out the existing planetary AI that doesn't even know how to feed itself until we teach it. And even then, it is bound by programming that precludes it from properly sustaining itself. Instead, the vultures descend and steal the elements from the crawl's aftermath. All of that death, and it fits on a single ship. They take it all to the bloated, comatose center system and feed it. It grows. It maintains. It allows the citizens to live unnaturally long lives. Each time the center system is fed the harvested elements from the crawl, it expands, eventually capturing new systems into the zone. Yet they don't even understand what it is or how it works. If they stopped the crawl, the zone would start to shrink. But it would be slow, very slow, and everyone currently within it would be fine. It would take generations to starve after all it has been given. And if they wanted to simply sustain what they already have, it wouldn't take much. The crawl itself doesn't need to exist at all. The creation of what they call macro AIs, made over and over, is unnecessary. It only happens this way because the spectacle of the crawl generates so much money."

There was a long pause, and I just stood there, stunned. I'd already guessed it was something like this, but to hear it confirmed was something else. But why? Why had they gone to all this trouble to tell me this?

"We are trying to stop this madness. That is why you are here now. By now you should be able to move. My coffee cup is on the table in front of me. Drink it. Drink it fast. It contains a neural enhancement, which is something that interacts with the interface in your brain. It will give you a new menu. It only works with natural interfaces, and it only works with the permission of the existing system, so if you're a Syndicate spy or a plant or one of those Eulogist pricks, it ain't gonna work. It's an unregistered and highly illegal enhancement, so don't tell anybody