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DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL BOOK ONE

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MATT DINNIMAN



PENGUIN BOOKS

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**DUNGEON
CRAWLER
CARL**



THE TRANSFORMATION OCCURRED AT APPROXIMATELY 2:23 A.M., Pacific Standard Time. As far as I could tell, anyone who was indoors when it happened died instantly. If you had any sort of roof over you, you were dead. That included people in cars, airplanes, subways. Even tents and cardboard boxes. Hell, probably umbrellas, too. Though I'm not so sure about that one.

I'm not gonna lie. You guys who were inside, probably warm and asleep and dreaming about some random bullshit? I'm jealous. You're the lucky ones. You were just gone. Splattered into dust during the transformation.

It was a Tuesday, and the calendar had just ticked over to January 3rd. A terrible winter storm had descended on North America, and half the country was buried in snow and ice. In Seattle we didn't have too much snow that night. But it was well below zero, which was unusually cold, even for January.

I'm sure in other parts of the world where it was warmer and not in the middle of the night, many more people survived. Many more.

I also bet most of them were probably wearing more clothes than I was at the time of the incident. And those assholes were smart enough not to go into the light.

Me, I didn't have a choice. Like I said, it was below freezing. I was outside. And I was wearing boxers, a leather jacket, and a pair of pink Crocs sandals that barely fit me.

I was also holding a crying, scratching, squirming, and spitting cat named Princess Donut the Queen Anne Chonk. She was a tortoise-

shell Persian cat worth more than I made in a year. My ex-girlfriend called her Princess Donut for short. I just stuck with Donut.

So let me back up about ten minutes. I won't bore you with too much backstory, but some of these details may be important.

My name is Carl. I am twenty-seven years old. After a stint in the US Coast Guard, I ended up working as a marine tech, fixing electrical systems for rich assholes and their party boats. I, up until a few days before this started, lived with my girlfriend in our apartment in Seattle.

Her name was Beatrice. Bea. She went to the Bahamas for a New Year's thing with a bunch of friends. She didn't tell me her ex-boyfriend went along with her on the trip. I figured it out pretty quick when I saw the picture of her sitting on his lap on Instagram.

I don't like drama, and I don't deal well with it. Whether she was actually cheating on me or not, it didn't matter so much. She'd lied. So I called her up, and I told her we were done. I promised I'd have all her stuff ready for her to go when she got back. No drama. No fuss. But we were done.

She'd asked her parents to come get the cat, but they lived on the other side of the Cascades, and nobody was getting through any of the passes with this weather. So I promised I'd look after her until Beatrice got back.

So, let me tell you about Donut the cat. Like I said, she's one of those fluffy, flat-faced cats that look like they need to be sitting on the lap of a Bond villain. Bea and I shared a two-bedroom apartment, and one of those rooms was dedicated to the cat if that tells you anything. More specifically, the room was devoted to Donut's Best-in-Show ribbons, her Best-in-Breed ribbons, and countless trophies and framed photographs of her sitting on a table, looking all fuzzy and pissed off while Bea and a judge stood behind her. Bea probably had fifty of the pictures. She'd won a mess of ribbons and trophies and photographs pretty much every time Beatrice took Donut to an event. And Bea took that damn cat to a show almost every weekend.

Her whole family was into raising and showing Persian cats. Me, I didn't really know much about that whole cat show world. I didn't want to get too involved. Like I said, I don't do drama.

And let me tell you something about cat people. More specifically, cat *show* people.

Actually, never mind. Fuck those guys. All that's important is Bea and Donut were a part of this whole world I didn't want anything to do with.

I never considered myself a big fan of cats. But, if we're being truthful here, I *liked* Donut. That cat did not give two shits about anybody or anything, and I could respect that. If Donut wanted to sit on my lap while I was blasting away on PlayStation, then she sat on my damn lap. If I tried to pick her up, she hissed and scratched and jumped right back up there. And then she looked at me with a squished face that said, *What're you gonna do about it?*

I'd been tempted, more than once, to throttle the thing. But I'm not an asshole. Plus, I could respect the little monster's tenacity. Some of my buddies would give me crap about it, me spending all this time with a fuzzy cat that was probably worth more than I would make in a year, but I enjoyed it. I enjoyed having that ball of fuzz sitting in my lap.

One of Beatrice's ironclad, this-is-not-negotiable rules was no smoking in the apartment. So after our fight and breakup, I'd made a point of smoking as much as I could. I know, immature. But it was freezing outside. Donut didn't seem to like the smoke too much, and the smell clung to her hair. So, as a compromise, I would crack the window when I smoked.

So when I woke up at about 2 a.m., having been startled awake by a dream, I decided I needed a smoke. I pulled out my pack, cracked the window, and I lit a cigarette.

Donut, who had been sleeping right next to me on the bed, decided at that very moment that she wanted to—for the first time in her feline life—go outside and explore. She jumped up on my shoulder, and she leaped out the second-story window onto the tree

outside my apartment. Just like that, I'd had that window open dozens of times over the past year, and she'd never even given the window a second glance. But tonight, on the coldest night of the year, the furry asshole decided to Lewis and Clark her way out of the apartment.

She scampered down the tree, sniffed at the sidewalk a few times, and then promptly realized it was cold as fuck. Her adventure over as quickly as it began, she rushed back up the tree and stared at me over the five feet from the window to the branch. The adventure all drained out of her, Donut decided not to risk jumping back inside. So instead, she decided to start howling at the top of her lungs.

I spent the next several minutes cursing at the cat, trying to coax her back inside. I opened the window all the way, sending gales of ice-cold air in the previously toasty apartment. The fuzzy black-and-beige-and-white cat just sat there, bitching and howling so much I feared one of my neighbors might wake up and shoot her.

I'd left my boots in the dryer all the way in the building's basement. I didn't know where the hell my running shoes were. So, in a momentary decision I would quickly come to regret, I squeezed my feet into a pair of my ex-girlfriend's Crocs, pulled a heavy leather jacket on, and I rushed outside to grab the cat. A part of me kept saying, *Screw it. It's not your cat. Let the fucker freeze.*

But, like I said, I'm not that much of an asshole. As much as Beatrice deserved it, she loved that damn cat. And poor, stupid Donut wouldn't stand a chance out here in the cold. Not for long.

Plus, again, the cat was right there, howling like someone was eating her children in front of her.

I rushed down the stairs, and I jumped outside, rushing to the tree that sat between the sidewalk and the building. I immediately regretted not taking the time to put proper clothes on. The cold, windy air sank its claws into my legs and feet.

Donut was right there, sitting on a tree just out of reach, looking between me and the open window into the apartment. She continued to howl. A light popped on in an apartment on the first floor. I

groaned. Mrs. Parsons. Grumpy, I-like-to-file-complaints Mrs. Parsons.

"Donut!" I said. "Come on, you little shit!" I held out my arms.

The cat could jump into my arms. It was something I'd trained her to do. I could shake a bag of cat treats, and she'd jump right up there. I could make a *pspspsps* sound, and she'd sometimes jump up on my shoulder. I cursed myself for not bringing cat treats out with me.

The window on the first-floor apartment slid open. "What in god's name is going on out here?" Mrs. Parsons called, sticking her head out the window. The old woman had her head wrapped in some sort of towel, making her look like a swami. Her beady eyes focused on me. "Carl, is that you?"

"Yes, Mrs. Parsons," I said. "Sorry. My cat got out, and I'm trying to get her in before she freezes to death."

"It looks like you're the one who's going to freeze to . . ."

Mrs. Parsons never finished the sentence.

Slam.

It happened so fast.

The building smashed down to the ground. I watched it happen. The seven-story apartment building was there one moment, and then it was gone. But it hadn't disappeared. I was looking right at Mrs. Parsons when it went down. It was like the building was a massive tin can that had been crushed by a giant cosmic boot. I saw it, and I heard it. Wind rushed at me, and it was instantly dark outside. The streetlamp just to my left was gone. The buildings all around me were gone. The cars on the street were gone, too.

Everything was gone except the trees and the bicycles in the bike racks, and Marjory Williams's moped, which was still booted by parking enforcement.

I looked around, the freezing weather momentarily forgotten. In the dark, overcast night, I could barely see anything. In the distance—a distance I could now see thanks to the lack of buildings—a fire burned.

There was utter, complete silence.

"What the hell?" I said, spinning in circles.

A couple random things remained. Like the bike rack. The stop sign was there, but the street sign next to it was gone. It didn't make sense. Where the cars were parked on the road, car-shaped indentations of dirt appeared, as if they'd been pulled down toward the center of the Earth, being ripped directly through the asphalt.

Donut jumped into my still-outstretched arms. I looked at the cat, not knowing what to do or say.

"What the hell?" I said again.

All that remained of my building was a rectangle of churned dirt and rocks.

And then I saw it, right near my feet.

It was Mrs. Parson's head. In the dark, it was hard to discern. But I immediately knew what it was.

It hit me, at that moment. The sudden shock of the buildings was one thing. But there were people in those buildings. It was almost everybody in the damn city. Hell, even most of the homeless people were in shelters. There'd been a whole thing on the news about them rounding everybody up because of the extreme cold. It was two in the damn morning on a Monday night. Everyone would be in bed. And that meant everyone was dead!

I kept spinning in circles like an idiot, not knowing what to do. I felt sick to my stomach. Donut started to squirm, having decided I was useless. She clawed at me, but I wouldn't let the cat go.

Then came the voice. A male, robotic voice.

It spoke in my mind. The voice was like a physical thing. A spike in my brain scratching me. It wasn't speaking English. But I understood the words. As the person spoke, the text also appeared floating in front of me.

Surviving humans, take note.

"What?" I said out loud. "What's that? Who's there?" I kicked at the floating words with my foot, and the too-small Croc went flying.

I hopped over and quickly shoved my foot back in. The words moved with me, floating just a few feet in front of my face.

Even the letters weren't in English. They crawled down, not across the screen. But I knew them, understood them like I'd been reading the language my entire life.

Per Syndicate rules, subsection 543 of the Precious Elemental Reserves Code, having failed to file a proper appeal for mineral and elemental rights within 50 solars of first contact, your planet has been successfully seized and is currently being mined of all requested elemental deposits by the assigned planetary regent.

Every interior of your world has been crushed and all raw materials—organic and inanimate—are in the process of being mined for the requested elements.

Per the Mined Material Reclamation Act along with subsection 35 of the Indigenous Planetary Species Protection Act, any surviving humans will be given the opportunity to reclaim their lost matter. The Borant Corporation, having been assigned regency over this solar system, is allowed to choose the manner of this reclamation, and they have chosen option 3, also known as the 18-Level World Dungeon. The Borant Corporation retains all rights to broadcast, exploit, and otherwise control all aspects of the World Dungeon and will remain in control as long as they adhere to Syndicate regulations regarding world resource reclamation.

Upon successful completion of level 18 of the World Dungeon, regency of this planet will revert to the successor.

A Syndicate neutral observer AI—myself—has been created and dispatched to this planet to supervise the creation of the World Dungeon and to ensure all the rules and regulations are properly followed.

Please pay careful attention to the following information as it will not be repeated.

Per the Indigenous Planetary Species Protection Act, all remaining materials—estimated to be 99.999999% of the sifted matter—is currently being repurposed for the subterranean World Dungeon. The first level of this dungeon will open approximately 18 seconds after the end of this announcement. The first-level entrances will be open for exactly one human hour and one hour *only*. Once the entrances are closed, you may no longer enter. If you enter, you may not leave until you have either completed all 18 levels of the World Dungeon or if you meet certain other requirements.

If you choose not to enter the World Dungeon, you will have to sustain yourself upon the surface of your planet, and this may be the last communication you receive during your lifetime. All previously processed matter and elements are forfeit. However, you are free to mine and utilize any remaining and naturally occurring resources for your own benefit. The Borant Corporation wishes you luck and thanks you for the opportunity.

For those who wish to exercise their right of resource reclamation, please take note.

There will be 150,000 level one entrances added to the world. These entrances will be marked and easy to spot. If you so choose to enter the first level of the dungeon, you will have five rotations of your planet to find the next level down. There will be 75,000 entrances to level 2. There will be 37,500 entrances to level 3. 18,750 to level 4. 9,375 entrances to level 5 and 4,688 entrances to level 6. The number of available entrances to the next lower level will continue to decrease by half, rounding up until the 18th level, which will only have two entrances and a single exit.

Crawlers who choose to enter the World Dungeon must find a staircase and descend to the next level down before the allotted time is up for that level. Once the time has passed, the level will be reclaimed and all remaining matter in the level, organic

and inanimate, will be forfeit. Generated loot and other matter that is not gathered and claimed may be placed in the Syndicate market.

Each lower level will have a longer period of reclamation. Additional rules come into play once any crawlers descend to the tenth floor. These rules will be explained when and if any crawlers reach this level.

If you so choose to enter the World Dungeon, it is highly recommended you immediately find and utilize a tutorial guild. Multiple tutorial guilds will be seeded throughout the dungeon on levels 1 through 3.

If you have any additional questions, or you wish to file an appeal, such requests must be submitted in writing directly to the closest Syndicate office.

Thank you for being a part of the Syndicate. Have a great day.

My brain could barely parse any of what the voice had said, so bewildered was I at everything that had just happened. I could no longer feel my legs. I had been outside much too long, and I was in serious danger of freezing to death, of losing toes to the cold. I had to get inside, and I had to do it now.

But there was no inside anymore. There weren't even any cars. I eyed the fire that continued to rage a few blocks over. I needed to get over there, and fast. I turned, and I started to shuffle-run.

The wind, which had been a light breeze before the buildings all disappeared, was now a constant, freezing gale that stank of the ocean. Donut twisted in my arms, scratching at me, trying to get free. She chomped onto my shoulder, but my jacket protected me. I clutched the cat tighter.

Was this a dream? Had I accidentally been dosed with some sort of hallucinogen?

World Dungeon? What the actual hell? What did that even mean? My mind continued to race. I immediately thought of *Pathfinder* and *Dungeons and Dragons* and other games I hadn't played

since I was on active duty. I couldn't see a single damn person. I was surrounded by only the sound of the wind.

A horn, like a trumpet, sounded, blasting through the night air. I stopped dead, looking around. What now? *It's the dungeon appearing*, I thought. *This is happening. Holy shit, this is really happening.*

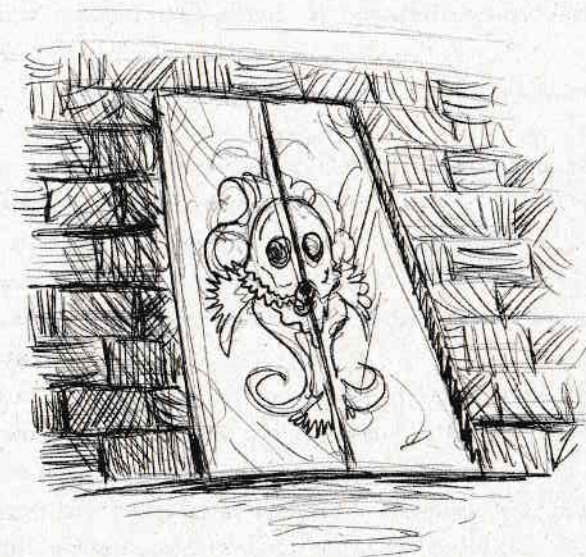
Less than a hundred feet to my left, right in the middle of what had once been a thrift store, a spotlight burst into the air. I saw an additional spotlight appear about a mile away. I turned, and I saw a few more littered throughout the city.

Even from this distance, I could feel the warmth radiating from the brightly lit hole in the ground.

I didn't think about it. My head still swam with all the information that had been thrown at me. The pink Crocs barely fit on my feet. The distant fire was farther away than I thought. I had seen firsthand what hypothermia did to people.

So I turned toward the light, and I ran.

PART ONE



**DUNGEON FLOOR 1.****TIME TO LEVEL COLLAPSE: 5 DAYS.**

AN ORNATE STAIRCASE LED DOWN INTO THE LIGHT. EACH STEP APPEARED to be made of wrought iron, and the whole thing was wide enough to accommodate twenty people walking side by side. Glowing warmth radiated from the hole. I took a step, falling down a little farther than I anticipated. My footfalls echoed into the brightness.

This was a city of almost a million people, and I was the only one here.

Donut, who had stopped fighting, clutched onto my shoulder and started growling as we descended toward the bright light. Welcome, glorious warmth beckoned me deeper. My legs and feet, which I hadn't been able to feel, were now starting to burn. I hadn't been out in the cold long enough to sustain any real damage, but I was frost-bitten to hell.

The stairs seemed to go on forever. The iron steps were carved in an odd pattern depicting what could've been fish. Or maybe demons. The almost Asian-looking carvings gave me an uneasy feeling. These stairs weren't here just a few minutes ago. *This whole thing is made of the buildings and cars and people of the world.* Who did this? How did they do it?

By the time I reached the bottom of the stairs, the temperature had risen to a humid, balmy 80 degrees Fahrenheit or so. The metal stairs ended at a marble floor and a hulking door that stood about

thirty feet tall and was just as wide. The wooden arched door was carved in the shape of a massive fish demon, like the stairs.

I looked up at the double doors.

"What the hell is this thing?" I muttered.

As I stared at the door, an information box popped up over the door. The box appeared so suddenly and unexpectedly that I stepped back. It was like I was in a game, or maybe wearing special contact lenses that popped up informational tooltips. It even had a little X in the corner to close it out.

This is a rendition of a kua-tin, the dominant species of the Borant system and principal owners of the Borant Corporation. Make sure you recognize these guys. There'll be a test later.

Was that last part supposed to be a joke? I focused on the X in the corner and mentally closed the box.

Hub, I thought. I looked up at the carving again and I felt something, almost like a slight haptic tingling in my brain. The information box popped up again. I closed it.

Weird. I could control the information with my mind. I could open information boxes on certain items by focusing on them. I could close the boxes by mentally clicking the X with my mind.

That means they're in your head. Maybe this isn't really happening. Maybe you're asleep, and this is all some sort of high-tech simulation. Like in the Matrix movies.

The pain in my warming-up legs and feet reminded me that simulation or not, it didn't matter. Not when I could hurt.

With my one free hand, I pushed at the door. It opened easily inward, revealing a long hallway lit by multiple torches. The hallway was just as wide and tall as the door, more like a tunnel for a double-lane roadway than for someone to walk through. In the distance I could see several branches leading off the main hall. A blinking light appeared near the first branch. It seemed to be a sign of some sort, but I couldn't read it from here.

"Oww," I cried as Donut chomped down on my hand. I dropped the cat, and she bounded forward into the hallway. She stopped about ten paces in, looking around with a confused, startled look on her face.

I stepped toward the cat, and the doors slammed behind me. The light from the entrance room cut off and was replaced with a dusk-like dimness.

Welcome, Crawler. Welcome to the First Floor.

This was a new voice. It was male, sounding overly enthusiastic, almost like a game show host. It wasn't the same person or speaker from the original announcement. The words appeared floating before me and were simultaneously spoken in my mind. Unlike the tooltip-like box, I wasn't able to close it out. This was more like subtitles.

A timer appeared in the upper right of my vision. It was at **4 days, 23 hours, and 48 minutes** and counting down. I, again, swiped at the characters. They didn't go away. I closed my eyes, and the information disappeared. It was unsettling and it gave me a slightly queasy feeling to my stomach.

Donut remained in her spot several paces in front of me, but the chunky cat was swiping at the air in front of herself. *She sees it, too*, I thought. *Holy crap*. Whatever this was, it was happening to the cat just like it was to me.

"Donut," I said, calling to the cat. "Stay with me."

The cat, being a cat, ignored me. But as I looked at her, I felt that same almost imperceptible tingle I felt when I'd looked at the door. I focused more tightly, and an information box popped up over the cat.

Crawler #4,119. "Princess Donut."

Level 1.

Race: Cat.

Class: Not yet assigned.