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WASTELAND WARLORDS



JAMES A HUNTER
EDEN HUDSON

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EPISODE 2

JAMES A. HUNTER
EDEN HUDSON



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SUMMARY

“Out here, power is key. Getting it, using it, keeping it. Without power, you’re nothing but fertilizer.”

Two months ago, Clay Jaeger, his wife Alex, and his chainsaw-toting brother Joe came to the Infested Zone on a mission: kill a Dungeon Lord. What they found along the way was a land of opportunity. Gold-dropping monsters, magical weapons, and best of all, freedom—all there for the taking.

If they can live long enough to grab it.

Surviving in the wasteland has been a constant fight, but thriving in it, that’s going to take something more. Not just power, but the brains to use it in ways nobody’s seen before.

When a deposed Dungeon Lord sends them on a once-in-a-lifetime quest, Clay sees the chance to turn that power to his family’s advantage. But what on the surface looks like the Jaeger clan’s ultimate opportunity might actually be the meat grinder that gets them all killed. Especially if the overpowered Incant who’s been chasing them has anything to say about it.

AUTHOR AND PUBLISHER UPDATES

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CHAPTER I

GAMESTOP AND CHILL



“Will you watch your lightning lances?” Alex snapped. “That’s the second time in two rooms.”

“Two rooms and a corridor,” Joe corrected. “And it’s not my fault Chonk wanted to play with the controller. He’s a curious guy. He’s got to know what we’re doing.”

Clay glanced up from his book and checked the big front windows of the abandoned GameStop. The peeling game posters let in flashes of sunlight and glimpses of the ruined strip mall outside. There was no overt indication that Gearhead had discovered their current hideout yet, thank God. But it would only be a matter of time. The angry Incant was nothing if not persistent. Persistent and murderous.

“Then give Chonk one of the disconnected controllers to keep him busy,” Alex grouched. “Stop letting him use yours. This is the first time I’ve ever even seen a copy of *Edge of Earth and Sea*, let alone gotten to play it.”

“He would know if it wasn’t connected. Wouldn’t you, Chonk?” Joe tapped the little mechacoona on its wet nose. “Yeah, you’d know. You’re a genius.”

“You guys sound like junior high kids,” Clay said absently.

His wife and brother looked a little like it, too, sitting cross-legged on the dusty moth-eaten industrial carpet of the run-down GameStop like kids playing video games after school. An ancient Infinitab SuperPlus—powered by one of the *Fyula* runes Joe had been collecting—projected the shot of

a dank cave lit by bioluminescent mushrooms and crawling with glowing goblin-esque creatures onto the wall in front of them. A timer appeared on the split screen, counting down until Alex's tank respawned.

“Are you sure you don't want to play, babe?” She craned her neck to look back at Clay. “Abandoned game stores don't come along every day—especially not ones with thirty-year-old award-winning Game of the Year editions that don't require a stable uplink.”

Joe stopped cooing at his half-metal half-fur pet. “That's got to be a grammar violation. All those negatives? C'mon, judges, do the right thing.”

Clay shook his head. “I think there was one too many nots related to the store, but I was kind of too focused on my book to pay attention.”

That was about half true. Splitting his focus between watching out for their mech-suited enemy and trying to learn this new spell didn't leave a lot of room for playing grammar police.

“One”—Alex stuck up one finger—“I love how much of a nerd you are. Two”—she faced Joe, putting up the second—“tie goes to the speaker.”

“What? We never made an inconclusive ruling rule.”

She shrugged like there was nothing she could do. “It's about time somebody did. The doubt would've always been there.”

“Whatever. In our hearts we know the truth: Joe was robbed.” He started thumbing through a player menu, splitting the screen a third time. “Seriously, bro, they've got controllers aplenty in here. We can add you to the party. What do you want to be? Warlock? Druid? Rogue? We don't have a rogue yet.”

“Nah, I'm okay.” Clay flipped another page in the spell book. “Rogue was never my thing, anyway.”

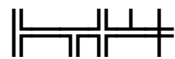
“Cleric? The way short stack here keeps dying, she needs somebody throwing health bombs her way.” He was

interrupted by a slap on the arm from Alex. “Ow! That hurts a lot worse with Katotes’s strength stats behind it.”

Although Joe was prone to hyperbole, he probably wasn’t exaggerating by that much. Since taking down Katotes back in the Bakersfield Marriot, she’d bludgeoned, smashed, and eviscerated her way up to level 9. She was leaps and bounds stronger than either Clay or Joe, could see in the dark, and had a nasty trio of abilities. Battle Instinct allowed her to use a sixth sense of sorts to anticipate enemy attacks, while Goliath Grip let her wield two-handed weapons—such as her kusarigama—with one hand. With Uncanny Reach she could preternaturally “extend” her weapon mid-swing, landing blows against targets well outside her effective range.

She was a nightmare on the battlefield and could break bones with a slap if she wasn’t careful.

For what felt like the thousandth time, Clay pulled the Monocle of True Seeing from his pocket and slipped it over his eye. It was indestructible as far as they could tell, and although it didn’t have any immediate combat applications, it was invaluable. With it, he could see anyone’s basic character sheet.



Alexandra Jaeger

Level: 9

Race: Incant

Class: Basic Brute

Alignment: Blood

Exp: 1,218; Exp to next level: 9,240

Available Characteristic Points: 0

Health: 281/281

H-Regen/5 Sec: 58.5

Magick: 280/280

Magick-Regen/5 Sec: 10.75

Stats:

- Strength: 51 (45 + 6 item bonus)
- Constitution: 26 (25 + 1 item bonus)
- Dexterity: 28 (25 + 3 item bonus)
- Intelligence: 18

Characteristics:

- Armor Rating: 115
- Melee Attack Damage: 215
- Ranged Attack Damage: 159
- Spell Damage: 167
- Movement Rate: +8.1%
- Critical Hit Chance: 7.8%
- Critical Hit Damage: +64%

Active Effects:

- Darkvision
- Rapid-Regen
- Goliath Physique: Disease, Filth, and Poison Immunity (Permanent)

Bloodborne Striker Skills:

- Battle Instinct
- Goliath Grip
- Uncanny Reach

Player Special Skills:

- Chain Weapons – Oversized (Melee Skill) Lv. 3



He breathed a deep sigh of relief as he dropped the Monocle back into his pocket. They may have been elbow

deep in a war-torn, monster-infested wasteland, and, sure, an angry superpowered Incant may have been dogging their trail, but looking at her stats gave him a measure of peace. Every time he saw the Goliath Physique Active Effect, he reminded himself that this was all worth it.

Monsters, warlords, incants—they could defeat all those things with a little prior planning and enough firepower. Cancer? Not so much. But that was one enemy Alex would never have to worry about again. Not now that she was an Incant.

Clay just needed to figure out a way to deal with all those other things.

“You guys have fun.” Clay patted his book. “I’m going to keep working on this spell.”

Seeing Clay wasn’t going to change his mind, Joe and Alex went back to clearing the cave in *Earth and Sky* without him.

Clay forced his attention back to the creased pages of the tome *Sludge Slick*.

[A thin sheen of oily sludge appears within line of sight of the caster and lasts for 1 minute before evaporating. The sludge is extremely slick and has a small chance of causing those in the Area of Effect to slip.]

Focusing wasn’t easy. His eyes kept straying back to the windows, and a couple times he had to get up and take a closer look at the sky. Just to be on the safe side. Still no sign of Gearhead. Fingers crossed, but they might actually get a decent night’s rest for once, something they sorely needed after tirelessly working their way from Camp Liberty, near the ruins of Bakersfield, all the way to Santa Clarita—over a hundred miles of treacherous territory and deadly threats.

Although, truth be told, Gearhead was the biggest threat on the radar by a country mile, and the mean ol’ SOB had been running them ragged since they left Camp Liberty.

Clay could concede that maybe they deserved some measure of it. They had robbed the Incant of his stash of stat-

boosting potions and inadvertently wrecked his workshop in the process. Not one of their better moments, Clay knew, but at the time it had seemed like their only road forward to kill Katotes and save Alex from the cancer that had wrecked their lives.

And, in their defense, they hadn't actually known it was an Incant brewing the potions at the time. Griff had conveniently forgotten to mention that when he pointed them toward the potions, for reasons he still hadn't fully explained.

They had since tried to make it up to the Gearhead—offering to pay damages, replace machinery and salvage parts, do whatever he thought was fair compensation, but apparently his wounded pride was irreparable. Nothing but their heads on a platter would appease the crazy Aussie. While every one of the local Camp Liberty Incants was an asshole, Lynes was a special class of nasty. He loved nothing more than power, and Clay, Alex, and Joe had undermined that perception of power.

There'd been a lot of ribbing directed at Gearhead around Camp Liberty afterward, and the other Incants refused to let Lynes live it down, constantly reminding him that a trio of weak-as-kittens tumbleweeds had blown into town and taken him down a peg.

They'd already been planning to leave Camp Liberty to search for Dungeon Lords Clay and Joe could take out, but having an angry, grudge-bearing Incant hopped up on stat potions and thirsty for their blood had turned that exit into grab-what-you-can-carry-in-the-middle-of-the-night-and-run. Their quick and stealthy departure hadn't been enough to keep Gearhead at bay, unfortunately. He'd been launching fresh attacks damn near every day and rousting them out of one hiding spot after another. They'd barely had a second to breathe since leaving Bakersfield, let alone been able to settle in long enough to find info on local Dungeon Lords.

Add to that the fact that they had to keep upping their game, not only so they could stay a step ahead of the Gearhead, but also just to make their new life out here work. Survival was a full-time job in the wasteland. Alex might have gained insane health regeneration and all the benefits of a

Dungeon Lord's hit point system, but Clay and Joe were still highly breakable humans. A bullet to the brain or a torn-out throat meant the end of the road for them, whether they caught it at full health or not.

That sort of looming threat never completely faded to the background, even while they were holed up in an old video game store, ostensibly safe.

The drive to mitigate that threat was what kept Clay working while Joe and Alex were playing. He had to make a way for them not just to survive out here, but to thrive. There was nothing for them back in civilization, and he and Alex wouldn't have gone back over the wall even if there was—not now that they'd tasted real freedom. And God love Joe, but he had never fit into the cookie-cutter mold of what people considered normal. Clay had never seen his brother happier than out in the IZ. In his tin chainsaw chaps over jorts and a sleeveless flannel shirt, with Bertha on his hip and Chonk on his shoulder, Joe was finally in his element.

To that end, while Joe had been collecting every magical rune he could get his grease-stained hands on over the past few weeks, Clay had been stocking up on books.

There hadn't been many physical copies in the civilized world—paper books were a hassle to manufacture, and nobody wanted to pack them around, so mainly only artisanal companies still turned them out. But since coming to the IZ, they had come across almost as many hard copies of books as Clay had seen in his whole life, barring his fifth-grade class's field trip to the Library Museum down in Rolla. So far since leaving Camp Liberty, he'd found ten books. The things turned up everywhere, from the ruins of apartment buildings to the bodies of the creatures they'd killed.

In fact, more than half of the books had come off dead mobs. Apparently, the creatures of the Merge really had a thing for reading.

Of those books, Clay had turned up three legit spell tomes—*Beguiling Call*, *Control Light*, and *Sludge Slick*. All minor cantrips, and all requiring varying levels of ridiculously high

Intelligence to read. A regular human couldn't do it; their base Intelligence stat was simply too low. When Joe or Alex looked at the thick tomes, all they saw were indecipherable squiggles and ancient sigils with no meaning. Griff—their wizened guide to the wastelands—had explained that Intelligence had nothing to do with IQ and everything to do with Magicka.

Due to the incident with the Gearhead's stat potions, Clay's Intelligence was augmented to well above the average human's base stat—where “well above average” translated to “just enough” to read the lowest-level spell tomes.

Popular opinion out in the civilized world said that only Incants could do magic. Even folks inside the containment wall believed that old saw. But last week, after tons of arduous study and poring tirelessly over the lowest-level spell text they'd looted so far, something had finally clicked in Clay's brain and he'd learned how to cast *Control Light*. Sure, a one-minute stint of being able to brighten, dim, or change the color of any existing light within a measly thirty-foot radius wasn't all that useful in the grand scheme of things. And true, casting it completely crushed his Magicka and left him feeling like a wrung-out dish towel. And yeah, without being an Incant, there was no way to regenerate Magicka outside of chugging a constant stream of potions.

But all that was beside the point.

The point was, *he could learn a spell*. Regular ol' non-Incant Clay. Stock up on enough of them and he could handle whatever came their way, even without killing a Dungeon Lord.

Sludge Slick, which they'd looted off a crusty wraithlike creature dressed as a pirate, was just inside the ballpark of what Clay's amplified Intelligence allowed him to read. Like being a human dimmer switch, the ability to throw down a layer of slippery sludge was pretty lame compared to some of the stuff he'd seen Incants do—Alex's insane new Ettin-level strength and regeneration included—but he was still dying to learn it. Every new spell was a step in the right direction.

The entrance let out an electronic chime as the door opened. Joe had slapped one of his mini Fyula runes on that ancient mechanism, too, claiming it gave the store some much-needed ambiance. Ambiance aside, Clay was all for that upgrade. It was basically a free alarm system.

“Well, I must not a’ been gone too long,” Griff said, shaking a cloud of sand and grit from his black leather duster. “You’re all still right where I left ya.”

Alex and Joe were too engrossed in their game to do more than utter a grunt and throw a wave over their shoulders.

“Find anything interesting?” Clay asked, sticking a finger in his book and flipping it closed.

The old weed shook his head. “Wind’s blowing in a storm, but that’s about it for excitement. Area’s fair dead. No sign of local Dungeons. Few koko infestations here and there in the rubble, but of course they ain’t talking.”

Clay frowned. The little kokopelli-shaped shadowmen gave him the creeps, with their faceless, light-absorbing bodies and that eerie flute music. They’d been dealing with kokos since getting into Santa Clarita, and so far, they hadn’t found anything that killed them. Physical attacks passed right through them, regardless of whether it came in the form of a magical weapon or a mundane bullet. Griff’s arcane bolts didn’t fare any better. Basically, the best they could figure was not to rile them up, and when they did, to haul ass as fast as they could manage.

“I did happen upon a bite or two to eat,” Griff said, unloading the deep pockets of his duster. He set a few dented cans of green beans, corn, and Spam on a musty bargain bin full of ancient games, then added an old box of KwikMac. “So scoutin’ wasn’t a total loss.”

The sound of the dried noodles rattling inside the cardboard got Joe’s attention.

“Hell yeah!” He tossed his controller to Chonk and snatched up the boxed macaroni and cheese. “I’ve said it

before, and I'll say it again—this stuff is worth its weight in gold.”

“But somehow it wasn't looted when everything else was.” Clay returned the Sludge Slick spell tome to his pack and dug out the pot and pan they'd brought from Camp Liberty.

“You know how hard it is to convince people to eat healthy,” Joe said.

“Healthy?” Clay raised an eyebrow. “KwikMac?”

Joe tapped the faded lettering on the front of the box. “Fifteen essential vitamins and minerals, bro. And that's probably just in the cheese sauce! There's no telling how much enrichment they put in the noodles. I lived on this stuff for a year, and look at me.” He waved a hand at himself. “I'm the picture of vitality.”

In his logger's pants, red flannel, and spiked heavy metal rocker boots, he looked more like the picture of a crackhead lumberjack.

“No comment,” Clay said.

Over in *Earth and Sky*, Chonk fired another Lightning Lance into the back of Alex's character's head, sending her for respawn again.

“Joe, are you—” She saw the mechacoona fiddling with the controls and rolled her eyes. “That's it, I'm going to single player mode.”

“Aw, come on, Chonk's just getting the hang of it!”

“He's a wild animal, Joe,” Alex said. “Video games aren't in his skill set.”

“That's what I'm saying. It's not his fault he's a total newb. He's been living in the wasteland his whole life with nobody to show him the ropes.” Joe took the mechacoona's little paw in one hand and its hedge trimmer arm in the other and awkwardly worked the controller with them. “See, he's getting it, it just takes time.”

“Are you guys ready to eat or not?” Clay asked.

“Yeah, but I’m cooking the KwikMac,” Joe said. “There’s an art to it that I don’t trust you heathens to understand. Once you’ve tasted it made the right way, you’ll see how valuable this stuff really is.”

“How much water does it take to make macaroni, like six or eight cups?” Alex asked, eyeing the scavenged water jug tied to her ruck. With her new and improved strength, it had fallen to her, the smallest member of their party, to pack the heaviest stuff. “That’s a lot to waste on one meal when nobody’s seen a water source in a couple days.”

Joe scoffed. “O short stack of little faith. I used to make this stuff all the time after the county shut off my water. Remember? Back when I was in that Cold War with them over keeping my slightly loved washing machine and mower collection sitting on my lawn, and they wanted me to hide it in a shed and wouldn’t listen to reason about how often sheds burn down?”

“That’s not a frequent occurrence for anybody but you,” Alex said, saving her game.

“I refuse to believe that. Anyway, the point is I’m not going to use up all our water. See, during the Lawnmower Cold War, I learned that the trick to cooking this stuff is to cut the amount of water you need in half by using your natural resources.” He shook the cans of green beans and corn for emphasis. “In our case, the sweet, savory, delicious juices from our vegetable friends here.”

Clay grimaced at the thought. He’d eaten a lot of subpar food over the years, but the combination of green bean juice and macaroni sounded like a new low.

“I saw that face,” Joe said. “You’ll see. I’ll dress it up just like Mom used to, with some Spam.”

Alex shot Clay a dubious look. His and Joe’s mom had been notorious at church potlucks for her insanely bad culinary creations. She’d also died of a heart attack at fifty-one, probably due to the notion that things like KwikMac were health food.

“I mean, when it’s all you got...” Clay shrugged. “Wastelanders can’t be choosers.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about,” Alex said. “You guys are the ones without health-regen.”

Joe was too caught up in his excitement to pay attention to their doubts.

“I bet Griff’s never even had Mac ’n’ Spam before, have you, Griff?”

The old weed didn’t look up from packing his pipe with tobacco, but his good eye sparkled with amusement.

“That I haven’t,” he agreed.

“And we call ourselves his friends.” Joe shook his head, digging through the bags until he came up with the game knife they’d been using as a can opener. “I’ll get things going in here.” He pointed the hooked blade at Clay and Alex. “You two—I’m going to need a roaring fire. See what you can find for fuel. Griff, you just sit back, kick your heels up, and prepare yourself for the feast of a lifetime.”

CHAPTER 2

SQUEALING SKIRMISH



Clay and Alex found a stack of broken-down cardboard boxes in the GameStop back room. Those would make excellent kindling, but they wouldn't keep a fire going long or hot enough to cook anything. Joe suggested the particleboard shelving around the store, but Clay shot that down out of the gate—they were already going to eat the Mac 'n' Spam, they didn't need to cook it over a fire full of formaldehyde and adhesive.

“There's plenty of standing dead wood outside,” Clay said, thinking of the overgrown landscaping. “If you let me borrow Bertha, I'll go cut up something that won't poison us.”

“Well...okay,” Joe said, in the heartfelt voice of a martyr sacrificing himself for their souls. He picked up Bertha, patting the saw on its bright orange casing. “Now, you be a good girl for Uncle Clay. No getting pinched or kicking back, hear me?” With a fond sigh, he handed it over. “Take care of 'er for me. Don't let her get sassy on you, because she'll do it. Yessir.”

Clay took the old Poulan Pro without comment. A lifetime with Joe as his brother had taught Clay that sometimes keeping your mouth shut was the easiest way to handle people. He headed outside, Alex following behind him.

The greenery around the strip mall had probably once been carefully curated to look like an oasis in the desert, but after twenty-plus years left to its own devices, the decorative foliage was reclaiming the area with a vengeance. Palm pups were erupting through chunks of asphalt in the parking lot, and

the grown trees hadn't been pruned in so long that masses of dried-out fronds hung down from their tops like unkempt mullets.

While Clay cut enough wood to get them through the next couple days at the GameStop, Alex hauled armloads inside and stacked them where they would make a decent barrier if they had to defend the place. The work was too noisy to talk much, but it was good to hang out together for a while, just the two of them. Traipsing through the wilderness as a group, fighting wasteland creatures, and constantly watching each other's backs didn't leave much alone time.

When the job was done, the half bean-and-corn juice, half water was just starting to steam. Clay returned Bertha and picked up his M4, then suggested he and Alex head back out until supper was ready.

"Maybe somewhere out of sight of the storefront," he suggested, once the door had shut behind them.

"Well, all right." She stretched up onto her toes for a kiss. "But only because you looked so manly felling trees and cutting logs. It's a nice combination with all your nerdy studying."

He laughed and picked her up. In spite of having the strength of a three-headed giant, she was still only five feet tall and a hundred pounds soaking wet, so carrying her wasn't any more strain than packing around a postapocalyptic Barbie doll.

They were just ducking into a denser stand of decorative grasses when a buzzing, whirring sound made the hair on the back of Clay's neck stand up. He'd heard that sound before, in Jordan during Operation Hell Gate. Except this time the drone was coming toward them, not heading away to check on the rogue Incant they'd been hunting.

"Well shit." He set Alex down and pulled his M4 into his shoulder pocket, searching the sky. "We've got drones incoming."

"Of course, right when we're about to get some alone time." She craned her neck. "Think there's any chance it hasn't

spotted us and we could ride it out?”

“Not likely.” Clay cocked his head toward the sound. “Listen—it’s circling back.”

Alex scowled. “One of these days, that dickhead’s going to pay for this.”

With that threat hanging in the air, she turned on a heel and sprinted into the GameStop to warn the others.

Clay kept his eyes on the sky, praying they would move fast enough. The whirring was growing louder. He felt naked standing out there without his Cinderscale cuirass, which offered him +2 to Strength, +1 to Constitution, and a passive +18% Fire Resistance Bonus. He’d taken it off earlier after settling in to read—it wasn’t exactly the sort of comfy clothes you lounged around in—and there just wasn’t time to go back for the armor.

On the horizon just over a quarter mile away, he saw the first glint of brass. It was one of Gearhead’s bombers, coming in from the west, using the afternoon sun as a backlight to blind him. Credit where credit was due, the Aussie sure knew how to hunt.

Clay raised his M4, tracking the drone down the sights. He’d always been a good shot, but hitting a moving target at that distance would’ve been impossible without the leg up from the Aussie’s dex potions. Kind of ironic, if you thought about it.

Adjusting for the stormy breeze and anticipating the drone’s trajectory, he squeezed off a trio of shots that echoed off the concrete and asphalt of the ruined strip mall.

A second later, two of the three shots slammed home into the bomber, knocking it out of the sky.

The GameStop door chimed.

“... can’t believe this!” Joe ranted, stirring the pot of Mac’n’ Spam savagely. Bertha was in the holster on his hip. “I hope Lynes is happy, because this is going to completely ruin the texture.”

“Will you quit worrying about dinner and move?” Alex snapped. She had all three of their rucks slung over one arm, Clay’s Cinderscale cuirass draped over her back, and her Mossberg in her free hand.

In the split second between their bickering, Clay heard more buzzing.

Griff was a step behind them, a ball of arcane energy already formed in his leathery hand.

“Which way’s it coming from?” the old weed asked, swiveling his good eye to Clay.

“West.” Clay snagged his bag and armor from Alex. He took a second to slip the armor on, then slung his ruck over his shoulders. “I shot it down, but it wasn’t alone.” He turned in a slow circle, searching for that telltale glint of metal. “We need to move out asap.”

“This way.” Griff jerked his head toward an open manhole cover out on the cracked street. “Saw it when I was scouting. We oughta be able to travel a while down in the sewers.”

They made a beeline for the manhole. Clay and Griff stood guard on either side, eyes roving, while Alex climbed down to clear out any threats that might be waiting for them below.

“We’re good,” she yelled up.

Chonk scampered down, then Joe followed, cussing up a storm at having to ditch the Mac ’n’ Spam so he could hold onto the rungs.

“Sure, let’s just leave this delicious treat for Gearhead!” he ranted as he climbed, voice echoing through the tunnels below. “And we’ll give him all the stuff we’ve looted! And our dignity! And our rights as citizens of the wasteland!”

“Just go, Joe,” Clay snapped. “Griff.”

The old weed shook his head. “Fragility before beauty, lad,” he replied, a wry grin twisting his scar-crossed face. “Go ahead. A direct hit won’t kill me unless it wipes out alla my Health at once.”

Clay let his M4 hang on its sling and started the descent. He'd barely gotten his lower body into the manhole when two more drones buzzed around opposite corners toward them.

Griff launched an arcing ball of arcane energy at the closest. The drone veered wildly, narrowly whipping out of the way of the attack.

The second dropped its payload on the GameStop. The explosion rocked the street, a fireball lighting up the night.

And the other drone was whirling around, preparing for another attack.

Clay grabbed the edge of the manhole and swung himself down and out of the way. He landed hard, water splashing as a jolt from the impact rose up into his knees. Thankfully, he managed not to twist or break anything.

"Jump down," he yelled up to Griff. "You're clear!"

The old weed threw another arcane attack to keep the drone from taking a potshot, then hurried down the ladder. He fumbled and his boots slipped on a rung, and Clay had a second of wondering whether trying to catch the old man would injure them both or save Griff a broken hip before Griff caught himself and scrambled the rest of the way down.

"Thataway," the old weed said breathlessly, pointing down the south side of the junction.

They took off at a sprint, sloshing up rooster tails of stagnant sewer water as they ran. Another explosion rocked the tunnels, and a plume of heat and light billowed after them.

The manhole and most of the street caved in, but the drones didn't relent. As they ran, Clay could hear them raining down ordnance on the street above. The two mechs couldn't follow the sewers in every direction at once, so instead they were carpet bombing everything they could in a slowly widening radius.

Alex was at the front, leading the way with the dark vision she'd inherited from Katotes, but she was about to turn down a tunnel in the drones' direct path.

“No, go left,” Clay yelled. “They won’t swing back around that way for another few seconds.”

She pivoted, and the others followed. A heartbeat later, the bombs dropped, collapsing the tunnel they’d almost taken.

As they ran, Clay strained his ears to make sure the drones were still following their widening path and called out directions for them.

Before long the explosions and cave-ins faded behind them, and they were able to slow to a walk. Griff and Alex seemed to see fine in the darkness, but Clay clipped a light to the barrel of his M4 so he and Joe wouldn’t be helpless.

“Be on your guard,” Griff warned them, taking a swig from a stamina potion. “We’re not out of danger yet. Like as not, all that ruckus stirred up everything living down here.”

Alex pointed her Mossberg down a short dead end on their right.

“What sort of stuff lives in these sewers?” she asked. The alcove was clear, so she continued ahead.

“Massive fifty-foot alligators for one,” Joe said. “The great-great-great-great mutant grandbabies of those pet alligators people flushed down the toilets back in the 2070s.”

“That was just an urban legend,” Clay said, taking a swig from a stamina potion of his own.

“Oh yeah?” Joe shot a condescending look at Clay over his shoulder. “If sewer gators don’t exist, explain to me how people go missing without a trace in all major cities with sewer systems.”

Clay snorted. “Every major city in the US has a sewer system.”

“And people disappear all the time,” Alex said. “Kidnappings, mob hits, the homeless who get lost in fires and other disasters. Some people even intentionally disappear so they don’t have to pay their taxes or, like, drop their old identity and create a new life somewhere else.”

“That’s what *they* want you to think,” Joe said.

“They who?” Clay knew he shouldn’t get sucked in, but he was actually kind of interested.

“Big tech,” Joe said with supreme confidence. Chonk scampered across the ledge and hopped into Joe’s arms. “That’s why I never had a cell phone and always had to borrow your guys’.”

“Well, I don’t know much about tech,” Griff drawled, clearing a tunnel to their left, “but I do know you don’t hang around down in these kinds of places if you can avoid it. We’ll want to get outta here before nightfall.”

“What happens then?” Clay asked.

“The heavier hitters start coming out. Night-aligned folks like common crocturnals and dark slimes and such as don’t like the light. Few of ’em even get burned by bein’ in the sun. Strong as hell after dark, though.”

That cut down on the chatter in a hurry. They kept moving, checking every shadowy junction they had to pass through. As they moved, Clay idly wondered whether he could Control Lights to change his flashlight to give off UV rays just in case something nasty attacked.

Now and then, light shined down from above through cracks or potholes run rampant in the city streets. Clay kept an eye up, but didn’t spot any signs that Gearhead’s drones had figured out which way they’d gone. Looked like they were in the clear, at least for now.

It was getting dark, however. Through a sinkhole ahead, Clay could see the Evening Star hanging in a darkening orange sky.

“As much as I hate to say it, we should probably go back topside.” He glanced at the sky again and tried to gauge how long it had been since the drone attack. At least a couple hours. “We should also keep moving overnight then find somewhere to hole up before morning.”

Wearily, the four of them scaled the sunken asphalt back up onto the street. They ate a cold dinner of some jerky on the move. By then they were too tired for much banter, not to

mention, Clay suspected, too frustrated and tense from the constant threat of another Gearhead attack.

When an ungodly squealing tore through the otherwise quiet evening, all of them went immediately on high alert, hunkering down behind a crushed and burnt-out car. What the hell was going on now?

“You’re making a mistake!” someone screamed. “You will regret this, you fools!”

Clay shut off the flashlight on his M4 and searched for the person screaming. Alex racked her Mossberg, and Joe pulled Bertha from the hip holster. Griff pulled his sword and buckler, most likely not wanting to call attention to their hiding place with the light from his arcane energy attack.

A horde of monsters rounded the corner on the street ahead: annoying little kokopelli-shaped shadowmen, bopping along like tiny jazz musicians listening to the world’s creepiest music. Gangly valbats taller than Clay, with veiny half-wings hanging from the underside of their arms. A pack of desert grims—huge black-scaled, red-eyed gila monster-dog hybrids—that roamed the wasteland.

Instead of attacking each other, the disparate creatures seemed to be after something.

“Get back, you savages!” that voice shrieked again. “I tell you, I am not what I seem! You should be bowing to me!”

Through a break in the horde, Clay caught a glimpse of a tiny black-and-pink lump.

“Was that—” He leaned forward to get a better look. He was pretty sure he hadn’t seen that right. Must’ve been a trick of the light.

“Ohmigosh!” Alex gasped and grabbed his arm.

He winced. “Easy, Katotes.”

“Clay!” Her voice jumped up two octaves, the way it did when she saw a cute kitten or puppy. “It’s a teacup pig!”

Clay shook his head. So his eyes hadn’t been playing tricks on him after all. As he watched, the little oinker juked a valbat

and sprinted between the squat scaly legs of a grim, the whole time squealing about being more than it seemed.

“What’s a delicious little pig doing running around the wasteland?” Joe wondered.

“We’ve got to save it,” Alex said.

Clay laughed. Except Alex wasn’t laughing, too. Her face was dead serious. He squinted at his wife.

“You want to fight a dozen rabid monsters for livestock?” He glanced out at the scampering piglet. “We’ve still got plenty of jerky if you’re hungry. We don’t need to risk calling Gearhead to our location just to go after the runt of the litter.”

“It’s not just meat, Clay. It talks.”

“This is the IZ,” he shot back. “Half the stuff out here talks!”

“No, Clay, short stack is onto something,” Joe said, starting toward the street. “You never turn down free bacon. That’s a sin against nature.”

“No.” Alex stabbed a finger at Joe. “Teacup pigs are not food. They’re malnourished little designer pets, and this one needs our help. And let’s not forget I talked Clay into letting you keep Chonk. You owe me this. We’re going to rescue it, end of discussion.”

With that, she spun around and broke into a run toward the melee.

“And *then* we’ll eat it,” Joe said, hefting Bertha onto his shoulder and heading after Alex.

Chonk scampered off behind him, chittering out an animal war cry and revving his little hedge-trimmer arm.

“Welp?” Griff fixed his gaze on Clay.

Clay grimaced and shrugged. “I guess we’re saving a pig.”

“That’s about how I figured it,” Griff replied, stowing the sword and buckler.

With barely any transition time, the old weed lobbed a handful of blue fire at the throng like a grenade. It landed with a boom, taking out a desert grim with its fangs about to snap shut on the pig's round little gut.

Alex hit the outer ring of monsters like a wrecking ball. A simultaneous elbow strike and back kick sent a grim crashing into its buddies and folded a gangly valbat in half at its newly stove-in ribs. The weird bat-creature raised a long-fingered hand to hurl a spell in retaliation. Luckily, Joe was coming in right behind Alex, batting cleanup. He gunned Bertha and brought it swinging around in a wide arc. Green valbat blood flew as he took the spell-slinger's head off.

Chonk's hedge trimmer whined in answer. The little mechacoon bobbed and weaved through the crowd, slicing ankles and hamstringing anything that got in his way.

The *rat-tat-tat* of Clay's assault rifle joined the cacophony of sound. Regular bullets would do all of jack shit against the kokos, but they worked just fine against the rest of the flesh and blood mobs swarming the pig. The muzzle belched flame and vomited out hot lead as Clay deliberately picked his shots and carefully squeezed the trigger. Brass casings rained down in rapid succession, *clinking* on the pavement. Even as a kid, he'd always been a helluva marksman, and the Marine Corps had turned him into a sharpshooter with unparalleled aim and accuracy.

But that was nothing compared to what he could do now.

After raiding Gearhead's stash of attribute-enhancing potions, Clay had managed to permanently bump his Dexterity up to twenty-three—technically twenty-five when he had on the stat-augmenting Cinderscale. From everything they'd been able to gather during their time in the IZ, a base stat of ten seemed to be standard for a normal adult human, while a score of twenty was gold-medal, Olympic-athlete caliber. Anything above that was edging into the realm of humanly impossible. With a Dexterity score of twenty-five, Clay was fast and agile, with the reflexes of a cat and the aim of an online bot in a first-person shooter.

And never mind that he wasn't an Incant.

He could do things he never would've dreamed of just a couple months before. He could put a round center mass and in the black at a thousand meters without blinking an eye or breaking a sweat. Hell, he could key-hole every single shot without even trying. Nowadays, the precision and accuracy of his weapons were the biggest limitation. At this range, though, he couldn't miss. Every time he pulled the trigger, a round found its target. Grims fell, half their face suddenly turned to pink mist, even as Clay effortlessly picked swooping valbats from the sky.

He ran dry and popped his first mag out, securing it in a drop pouch at his hip, before sliding a fresh mag into place and racking the bolt back. He'd only had two mags on him, and even though he never missed, sixty rounds didn't go as far as most people would think. Especially not when most of these mobs took two or three well-placed rounds apiece to put down for keeps. That was probably the worst part of fighting something that survived based on health points instead of its internal organs—getting used to taking off half their head and still having to shoot them two more times. Clay couldn't wait until he had a little magical firepower at his disposal—that would go a long way toward leveling the playing field.

From the opposite side of the horde, another handful of Griff's magical blue fire flew. It smashed into a thick knot of the slaving creatures, sending chunks of asphalt and flesh flying.

Closer to Clay, the teacup pig screamed as a koko's shadow arms elongated and grabbed for its hind legs. Its tiny hooves scuttled on the asphalt, scrambling to change direction, but it wasn't going to make it.

Since his bullets were basically useless against the shadowmen, Clay let his rifle drop and pulled his Lesser Wand of Inferno.

“Shut your eyes,” he hollered to Alex, Joe, and Griff, then he fired off the first of his eight shots for the day.

The blazing Inferno Lance streaked across the parking lot, lighting the street up like the whole city had been dropped onto the surface of the sun. Through squinted eyes, Clay watched the lance slice harmlessly through the koko before blasting apart the grim galloping in behind it. He cursed under his breath. That shot hadn't done any damage to the koko, either. At least it had distracted the little freak from its prey. The pig put on a fresh burst of speed as it escaped, still squealing at the top of its tiny lungs.

The koko turned its empty face to Clay, the pig forgotten.

The bobbing, dancing shadowman pulled out a flute darker than a black hole and blew a reedy tune that set Clay's teeth on edge and made the hair on the back of his neck stand at attention. Flashing orbs appeared in a variety of desert landscape colors—red sand, burnt sienna, midnight teal. Each one wove through the fight and attached itself to Clay, Alex, Joe, and Griff. A smaller, piercing yellow one even found Chonk and followed the mechacoona's ground-level rampage.

The air seemed to buzz as the sky filled with a cloud of locusts. Each of the nightmare bugs was as large as Clay's fist, with jaws like bolt cutters and legs spurred with wickedly curved razors.

The locusts descended, following the dancing orbs.

Alex, Griff, Joe, and Chonk had been doing a decent job of taking out the valbats and desert grims—those might be bigger than the kokos, but when you dealt damage to them, they felt it—but when the locusts hit them, things went south fast.

They flew too close for the Wand of Inferno or Clay's rifle to do any good. They swarmed inside Bertha's reach, attacking Joe. The bugs' chomping mandibles tore through skin, and the spurs on their legs opened gashes wherever the overgrown grasshoppers landed. Down below, Chonk spun around like a furry tornado, chittering and swinging his hedge trimmer in a wild flurry. Clay ripped the locusts off, smashed them, bug-stomped them, but for each one he killed, fifty more took its place.

Griff blazed, surrounding himself with a halo of blue fire, maybe figuring he could burn them off, but that only served to draw the locusts to him like june bugs to a porch light. With nothing else to do, the old weed had to extinguish his flames and switch to a notched-up old shortsword and buckler.

Alex was faring slightly better than the rest of them, but only because she healed a hundred times faster than they did. She whipped the spiked ball and kama of her kusarigama until the chain was wrapped tight around her arms and the weapons were in her fists, then she went to town, throwing a series of lightning-fast punches and chops. With the Ettin strength, every locust she hit exploded on impact, but there were too many of them.

While the locust minions tore them apart—slow death by a thousand bug bites—the kokos surrounded the teacup pig and snatched it screaming from the ground. The shadowmen didn't have any facial features to make expressions with, but Clay swore he could feel smugness radiating off the little creeps.

The flashing burnt sienna orb that was following him around flashed as it darted past his face. With renewed fury, the locusts attacked him.

The orbs. Griff's fire. The locusts weren't obeying the koko's music, they were following the bright lights, attacking whatever living creature was closest.

Clay froze. Focusing while a swarm of flesh-eating grasshoppers was chowing down on you wasn't easy, but he forced himself to home in on the one cantrip he knew so far—*Control Light*. Concentrating for all he was worth, he made the cast.

In the corner of his eye, a purple Magicka indicator appeared, fancied up at the edges with ornamental scrollwork and filigree. Every drop of his Magicka disappeared.

But the flashing balls of light strobed out new colors—camo green, bluegill blue, Old Crow orange, and the rich red brown of a redbone coonhound. It was like some kind of redneck rave. With a thought, Clay sent the lights dancing and pulsing toward the kokos.

The swarm of locusts ceased their relentless assault and fell still, entranced. Joe, Alex, and Griff immediately went on the offensive, smashing the little critters with furious abandon, but the bugs seemed to have forgotten about them completely. Instead, a million tiny eyes turned to follow Clay's stolen lights.

CHAPTER 3

A PIG'S TALE



As the strobing orbs descended on the shadowmen, the full swarm of locusts took to the air, their wings buzzing like a ten-thousand-watt bulb, and turned on the shadowmen. Every other attack they'd tried on these little creeps had failed. But not this one. The locusts' massive jaws tore into the flute-playing creatures, chewing through inky flesh like ancient Egypt's wheat fields. Splashes of dark purple blood fell across the pavement for the first time.

The kokos panicked. They scattered, hightailing it in every direction.

"Oh no you don't." Alex whipped the kama end of her kusarigama at the one holding the pig, wrapping the chain around the little oinker and jerking it out of the koko's hand.

The shadowman was too busy flailing at locusts and running to go back for its lost snack. Alex scooped the struggling little pig up into her arms and hugged it.

"Unhand me, you vile, puny creature!" the pig screamed. "Do you have any idea how powerful I am?"

"It's okay, you're safe now," she said, before gently shushing the pig. She sounded like Joe talking to Bertha.

The last of the kokos, already half-eaten by locusts, disappeared down the street.

Clay let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"Way to go, bro." Joe slapped him on the shoulder. "You really saved our bacon. Our literal bacon."

A paw patted the back of Clay's calf, and Chonk made some encouraging racoon noises.

"And pork chops," Joe said. "Oh, and ribs! Man, if we had some Kansas City sauce right now..."

Clay glanced at his wife, cuddling the tiny black-and-pink pig.

"Yeah, I kinda doubt she's going to let you cook that thing up after all that."

"I could burn the lot of you to a crisp with a single breath!" the little oinker squealed, squirming and kicking. It couldn't break free of Alex's grasp. "I am all-powerful! I will destroy you!"

"Funny, crispy is exactly what I was thinking." Joe eyed the pig. "Looks like there'll be just enough for all of us to have two or three slices—unless Griff is kosher. In which case, we'll graciously accept your religious views and your strips of bacon."

The old weed smirked. "Mighty thoughtful of ya, but I believe you're missing the point of the little runt's argument." He fixed his eye on the teacup pig. "You say you're quite the big deal, eh?"

"I was the most powerful Dungeon Lord in this territory until a rival of mine found a way to curse me." She let out an indignant grunt. "I am a Great Blue Wurm, mighty and powerful beyond anything you have ever experienced. Tremble before me!"

Joe scoffed. "I recognize a bacon seed when I see one, lady. How stupid do you think we are?"

She eyed his cutoff flannel shirt and tin pants. "Quite."

Alex let out a laugh, and Joe shot a glare her way.

"Whose side are you on, short stack?"

"Like you didn't deserve that." Alex shrugged. "Besides, it's not every day you run into a wisecracking animal sidekick."

“I am not a sidekick!” the pig huffed. “I am mighty! I am death incarnate!”

The little runt was definitely showing a dragon-level of rage and arrogance. Then again, Clay had been on feral hog hunts before. Those beasts were just as mean as any magical wasteland monster he’d ever tangled with.

“If you’re so powerful,” he interrupted her rant, “how did your rival manage to pull something like this over on you?”

The teacup pig stopped squirming and glared at Clay. Tough to do as an adorable porker, but the pig pulled it off.

“He... crept up while I slumbered. Yes, it was up upon my vast hoard of treasure that I slept, and this cowardly cockatrice snuck into my magnificent throne room and cast a Polymorph spell to bind me in the form of this puny creature.” A piggy scowl wrinkled her snout. “Along with my gorgeous scales and long, flowing beard, my great and powerful dungeon lord magicks were locked away. From there, it was a simple matter for the weakling to cage me. Deposed and humiliated, I was kept in the throne room as an amusement. Until a day ago, when through use of my superior cunning and no small amount of luck, I finally managed to make good my escape.”

“Pfft. Sounds like a load of pig crap to me,” Joe said, rolling his eyes. He stuck up his hand. “I vote we eat it. All in favor?”

On his shoulder, Chonk stuck up his hedge-trimmer arm and chattered in agreement.

“Try it,” Alex snapped, hugging the tiny pig close while she glared daggers at Joe and Chonk in turn.

“Everybody just hang on a second.” There was a way to verify all of this, and it didn’t require them to take the word of a random talking pig. Clay pulled out the *Monocle of True Seeing*.



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Level: 1 (Cursed!)

Race: Miniature Swine (Cursed!)

Class: Court Jester (Cursed!)

Alignment: Earth

Exp: 0 Exp; to next level: 440

Available Characteristic Points: 0

Health: 22

H-Regen/5 Sec: 2

Magick: 0

Magick-Regen/5 Sec: 0

Attributes:

- Armor Rating: 14
- Melee Attack Damage: 14
- Ranged Attack Damage: 9
- Spell Damage: 0
- Movement Rate: +10%
- Critical Hit Chance: 5%
- Critical Hit Damage: +50%

Active Effects:

- Item-Based Curse!

Miniature Swine Skills:

- Wallow
- Swine Rush
- Charm Person



The pig's stats were a total dumpster fire, about what he would expect of a creature small enough to fit through a cat door, but she did have a weird Active Effect going on—Item-Based Curse. Its level, race, and class also had the Cursed

debuff listed beside them, which was exceedingly strange. Also, what the hell kind of unpronounceable gibberish name was that? Something wasn't adding up here.

“What’s an Item-Based Curse?” Clay asked her.

“The spell was cast using a claw stolen from my front paw pinned to a frightful artifact known as a Voodoo Doll.” She stuck out her left foreleg to show a chipped hoof. “When I destroy the artifact and regain that critical piece of myself, I can break this curse and depose my rival.” She eyed them dubiously, then snuffled in a way that was both sickeningly cute and resigned. “You three don’t look like much, but you did manage to defeat that vile crowd of savages. If you successfully help me regain my true form and retake my dungeon, I would be willing to grant each of you a boon.”

“A Dungeon Lord’s Boon?” Griff asked, peering down his scarred nose at the little piglet.

The pig blinked. “Of course, yes, a Dungeon Lord’s Boon. I also have the aforementioned vast treasure hoard. Help me kill my rival, and anything in it is yours for the taking. Up to a reasonable amount, of course.”

“Define reasonable,” Joe said, rubbing thoughtfully at his chin.

Alex locked eyes with Clay, and he knew instantly what she was thinking: this could be the break they’d been looking for. They hadn’t had a second to search for local dungeons in their crazy endless run from the Aussie Incant, but now one might have just stumbled across their path, and with a potential treasure reward to boot.

She turned the pig around to face her.

“Before we agree to anything, we need some information,” she said, the lovey-dovey excitement gone from her voice. Now she was all business. “What level is this rival Dungeon Lord, and what class is he?”

“The worst sort of tasteless, low-class scum,” the pig sneered. “A puffed-up, painted and pierced Lizardman Voodoo Shaman, who expends all his energy on looking fearsome but

shoots his darts and throws curses from afar like a toothless coward.” She turned her tiny head and spat on the ground. “And for all that, he is barely a level 20. If I were not so secure in my own greatness, I would die of embarrassment.”

“What Tier is your dungeon?” Alex asked.

“Tier 4.” The pig snuffled angrily and adorably. “Imagine, someone so weak and pathetic and *tacky* running something so far above him.”

Clay chewed it over. A Tier 4 might be just this side of possible—after all, they’d taken out Katotes without an Incant in their party, and the Ettin’s dungeon had been a Tier 3. Now, with Alex’s Incant powers, a Tier 4 should be within their reach. A ranged class would even be a decent fit for a dex and weapons build like his. He was already pretty proficient with the Lesser Wand of Inferno, and something with “Voodoo” in the title was bound to have major Magicka-regen.

If they played this right, he could be slinging spells within the week.

The piglet seemed to take Clay’s thoughtfulness as a hesitation.

“As one who spawned in and recently escaped from said dungeon, I know all the secret ways in and out,” she assured them. “I can lead you to the throne room without ever having to face the creatures in the earlier floors.”

Griff nodded. “Seems to me I heard a song and dance like that once. Tell me if this sounds familiar, Miss Dragon—you get our party into the throne room, then skedaddle so’s the big bad takes us out one by one.”

She snorted an indignant *hmph*. “I would not pull a ‘Griever’ for all the gold in my hoard. A Greater Wurm would never run from a fight!”

“Except in pig form,” the old weed pointed out.

“I was not running!” she squealed. “That was a tactical retreat! I planned all along to return and defeat him with the appropriately painful and embarrassing measures!”

“Guess that makes us the embarrassing measures,” Clay said flatly.

She turned up her snout. “There is nothing more humiliating for a Dungeon Lord than to be slain by puny humans.”

“How do we know you’re telling the truth about any of this?” Alex asked, searching the pig’s face for answers.

“Hey, Joe’s got a great idea, everybody pay attention to Joe,” Joe said. “How about Clay kills this pork rind and becomes an Incant right now? Her life is literally in the palm of our hands. It’s never going to get any easier than this.” He shrugged. “And if Clay gets awesome dragon powers, we’ll know she was telling the truth about being a Dungeon Lord.”

Looking at her stats again, Clay wasn’t so sure. “Or maybe if I kill her in pig form, I’ll get lame pig powers. I’m sure a high-demand skill like Wallow will come in handy somewhere down the road.”

“So it’s a coin toss,” Joe replied with a shrug. “I still say it’s worth a shot.”

“Will you two stop?” Alex hugged the struggling pig to her like a fussy baby and scratched between the thing’s ears. The little runt went limp in her arms, making a weird purring-grunting sound. “There’s not going to be any pig murder! I don’t care if she’s a great Dungeon Lord or a total liar, she’s adorable. We are not killing *anything* this cute. Ever.”

“What if it’s—” Joe started, but Alex cut him off.

“*Ever.*”

“We can’t stand around arguing about this all night,” Clay said, scanning the quickly darkening night sky. “All that flash and noise is bound to have got the Gearhead’s attention. His drones could be on the way as we speak.”

“Now who is running from a fight?” the teacup pig grunted, regaining some semblance of her dignity and haughtiness now that the head-scratches were finished.

“It was a tactical retreat,” Joe sneered.

“Perhaps a gesture of good will is in order,” the little pig said. “As a great and powerful Dungeon Lord of this territory, I can tell you that a nomadic dungeon called the Sooq is on its migratory path through Santa Clarita. They buy and sell every magical item, spell, and potion you can imagine and many you cannot.

“They do not deal with feral mobs off the street, but with my clout and perhaps a minor fetch quest from you, it may be possible for you to buy a cloaking spell or object that will hide you from your enemy. That would be useful to hide you from this Gearhead, would it not? The Sooq is the reason I’m here in the first place. I hoped to gain a place with them to recuperate before searching out and hiring someone to help me destroy my rival. However, as I have found you, perhaps the search is unnecessary.”

Clay turned to Griff. “Know anything about this Sooq dungeon?”

“Been a while since I last came through here,” the old weed said, adjusting his wide-brimmed hat. “A while my time, not young folks’ time. A couple a decades is more than enough for a new dungeon to pop up. ’Course, Little Miss Great Blue Wyrms here might be takin’ advantage of the fact we’re new in town and don’t know our way around.”

Alex’s eyes lost focus as she checked something in her Incant interface.

“No, the Sooq definitely exists. It’s on the list of local dungeons, but it’s weird. There’s no Tier level. Where it should be, it just says ‘Responsive.’”

“We’re not spoiled for options here,” Clay said. “We’ve got to get clear of Lynes at least long enough to learn more about her rival’s power level and what we’ll need to take him out. Worst-case scenario, it’s a setup. If it looks like that’s the case, we kill our way back out—starting with a certain pig.” He shot a glare at the runt.

“I am the Great Blue Wyrms,” the oinker grumbled.

“I say we do it,” Alex voted. “Even if taking back her dungeon doesn’t pan out, we can’t keep running like this. Being invisible to the drones would give us a chance to rest, and if it works on Gearhead, too, we’ve got a major leg up on him.”

Griff looked down at the pig one more time, sawing his jaw a little. After a second, he directed a short nod at Clay.

Joe sighed.

“Fine,” he said, resigned. “We find this Sooq thing, then help Bacon Bits get her dungeon back.” He wagged a finger at the pig. “But if there’s even a hint of sketchiness from you, it’s sizzle-sizzle-crunch. Got it?”

The pig blinked. “Are you addressing *me* as Bacon Bits? I am a mighty Dungeon Lord of great renown—”

“It was that or Chris P. Bacon,” Joe said. “And no offense, but you’re not really big enough to justify that fourth syllable.”

“I will not be belittled with such foolery!”

“Hey, if you’ve already got a cool name, let’s hear it.”

The pig scowled. “My name cannot even be pronounced by the unforked tongues your race is cursed with.”

“Bacon Bits it is!”

Clay rolled his eyes. “Don’t antagonize the dragon pig. Let’s get moving—I doubt this roving dungeon is going to show up on our doorstep.”

CHAPTER 4

SEARCH FOR THE SOOQ



Their eclectic party headed deeper into the urban sprawl, following Bacon Bits's directions. Instead of being overshadowed by taller and denser buildings the farther in they got, they found themselves surrounded by higher and higher piles of rubble. Huge swathes of the city looked as though they had been carpet bombed. Burned-out vehicles littered the street—where there still was street to walk on.

In places, the potholes had turned into sinkholes that swallowed entire blocks. From the dank, shadowy sewers below, glowing reptilian eyes blinked up at them, watching as they carefully edged their way around the crumbling asphalt. Clay kept his M4 tucked up in his shoulder pocket, at the ready. They seemed to be waiting for full dark to fall, but he didn't want to be surprised if some of them decided to come out early.

They kept on the move through the night, constantly checking back over their shoulders and listening for the telltale buzz of drones.

As the sun rose the next morning, heat waves followed it up from the cracked asphalt. The sea breeze didn't offer much relief, just blew in the tantalizing, salty smell of cool water beyond their reach.

A little before noon, Clay spotted signs for a school zone. Under an ancient overpass, he caught sight of an overgrown football field, a dilapidated baseball diamond, and a circular track that had seen its best days decades ago. A pair of horse-

like creatures galloped around the lanes, chatting in low voices as they ran. One let out a whinnying laugh.

Clay let the rest of the party know they were there, but didn't suggest going after them. They weren't threatening, and, at least for the time being, they didn't seem any more dangerous than the yuppies around St. Louis who loved to start their mornings with a jog. Sure, it was annoying to be reminded that you could use more cardio while you were trying to enjoy your morning donut and coffee, but that wasn't a reason to kill someone, even if they were monsters.

"There," Bacon Bits said, pointing her chipped hoof toward an open field to the east. "We have arrived just in time to get the drop on them."

Clay followed her line of sight, but didn't see anything that resembled a dungeon. The place looked like it had been an old solar field back before the Merge. Shattered panes of dark glass littered the field, and thick gray electrical cords had been pulled up from the hardpacked desert dirt. Here and there, the metal posts the solar panels had been mounted on still stood. A few had numbers on them in runny spray paint. Weird choice of graffiti, but not exactly scary.

No monsters. No dungeon.

Clay glanced over his shoulder at the pig, still safely cuddled in Alex's arms.

"Where's this thing supposed to..." His question trailed off as a deep rumbling shook the ground beneath his boots.

From beneath the overpass rolled an enormous vehicle that fell somewhere between a battleship and a space shuttle transport. The little round RV satellite dish planted on the pinnacle of the metal monstrosity narrowly passed below the concrete flyover. Black solar panel glass crunched beneath its CAT 797F Haul Truck tires as it nosed its way onto the open field. Clay couldn't imagine steering a hulk like that, but whoever was at the helm guided it nimbly between the numbered metal poles.

With a creak and hiss of air brakes, the massive battlewagon lurched to a stop at the center of the field next to the spray-painted number 1.

Clay's first instinct was to attribute this monstrosity to a new attack from Lynes, but the grunginess of the beast didn't fit with the Gearhead's M.O. All the Incant's non-animal creations were sleek and shining.

More evidence rolled onto the field behind the battlewagon.

"It's not alone," he finished the thought out loud as he twisted back toward the overpass.

"That's an understatement," Alex said softly.

Joe whistled under his breath, squinting at the armada of inbound battle vehicles.

There were so damned many of them, and all of them were as unique and varied as the creatures who piloted them.

Finally, the significance of the poles and numbers clicked in Clay's head. It was a campground. Each pole denoted a site.

Massive diesel-pusher RVs rolled in after the battlewagon, then shining retro Airstreams reflecting the last rays of sun. Behind them came tiny teardrop campers pulled by old but well cared for trucks and jeeps, and bulky camper vans strapped with rattling pots and pans and grills. An old Indian rumbled in towing a tiny one-person pop up, which would be more than enough room for the pair of pint-sized gobbos riding double on its leather seat.

Every single vehicle in that strange caravan was being driven by wasteland creatures. Gray-bearded goat demons in Hawaiian shirts watched their mirrors as they backed their rigs into the designated camping spots. Owlbears in short sleeve button-ups and khaki shorts hopped out of their jeeps, chocked their wheels, and began cranking out slides and rolling down awnings. Clay even spotted a stooped bipedal tortoise in denim overalls guiding in an old converted school bus.

"Behold, the Sooq!" Bacon Bits squeaked, wriggling in Alex's grasp. "We must move to a position of power before

they have time to put down stakes!”

“Those are leveling jacks, not stakes,” Joe said. “And since they’re electric, doesn’t look like we’re going to beat them to it.” He gave an appreciative grunt. “Damn, automatic leveling and dual AC. Imagine the price tag on that puppy. We shoulda been a dungeon, then we could afford to mosey around this wasteland in style.”

Clay eyed Bacon Bits. “You’re sure this place can be reasoned with? They’re sure as hell dressed for war, and they could have anything hidden in those campers. Rifles, mortars, rocket launchers—hell, bigger monsters.” They’d have to have some bigger monsters somewhere in there, because what he was seeing right now amounted to the equivalent of a bunch of retirees tooling around setting up barbecues and lawn chairs.

“Without one such as me to lend you credence?” Bacon Bits said, puffing up her tiny body. “You would not stand a chance. But with a powerful Dungeon Lord such as the Great Blue Wurm on your side, they will not dare attack without giving us an audience.”

Out in the solar field turned campground, a minotaur in a floppy-brimmed sunhat started setting up a horseshoe pitch.

“Maybe it’s just an illusion,” Joe said, shifting his weight uncertainly, “but these people don’t exactly look all that dangerous.”

Clay had to admit his brother had a point. Sure, they looked like monsters, but if the wasteland had taught Clay anything, it was that looks could be deceiving. The room service cart that ended up trying to eat him in the Bakersfield Marriott had been lesson enough. Besides, some of the worst monsters he’d encountered so far were of the human variety. Griff had insisted that not all the things that had come from Hearthworld were evil or bad—he himself was a prime example. Altogether, the most defense the Sooq was mounting was a pair of sentries roaming the perimeter of the solar field—and even those guys looked like they were a few decades past their prime.

“Nope, no illusions down there.” Griff, who’d been silently casting his good eye back and forth between the rumbling caravan and the little pig, finally spoke up. “Well, unless you count one or two a’ them gals makin’ themselves look a little younger’n their years.” He fixed his keen blue gaze on Clay. “Way I figure it, there’s two kinda dungeons out here in the wasteland. One that’s just itchin’ to chew up and spit out raiders, and one that don’t bother you if you don’t bother it. Some of us done the fussin’ and fightin’ thing already, and now we just want to live the rest of our lives out peaceable.”

“Like retirees,” Alex said.

The old weed chuckled. “Aye, lass, just like that.”

“Tiki hut!” Joe stabbed a finger at the colorful thatched bar folding out of the battlewagon’s massive armor-plated side. “Nobody who runs a tiki hut can be evil.” He turned his head to the mechacoon hitching a ride on his shoulder. “Remember that, Chonk. That’s one of my five life rules that have never led me astray.”

“All right,” Clay said, pushing down the images of what might happen if they were wrong and everything in this place opened fire when they walked in. “Let’s see if we can’t find somebody down there willing to talk to us.”

Even though they were heading into the caravan just to talk, Clay kept his M4 ready to rock, just in case everything went sideways. In their short time in the IZ, they had learned a clear display that they weren’t pushovers was the safest way to do business. Joe followed suit, keeping Bertha in hand, but didn’t fire up the chainsaw yet, and Chonk kept his hedge trimmer off for the time being. Alex was still carrying the pig, but Clay knew if things turned sour, she and Griff could take care of themselves.

A team of sentries from the western edge of the solar field moved to intercept them. Clay kept an eye on their trigger fingers—or trigger hooves and trigger feathers, in this case—as they approached. An aging goat demon and owl-bear, both of whom looked like heavyweight fighters past their prime,

each packed a rifle, while the final sentry, a stumpy little balding imp, had a wand and an attitude twice the size of his buddies.

“Y’all can stop right there, er you can die right there,” the imp drawled, taking a defensive stance and aiming the wand at them. “Yer choice.”

“We’re not here to make trouble.” Clay put up his hands, without taking them too far from his rifle. “We were hoping to talk to your leader about an artifact we’re looking for.”

“And just whoooo,” the owl-bear demanded, “may we say is calling?”

Bacon Bits raised her chin in a dignified stare. “The Great Blue Wurm of Santa Clarita.”

“Never heard of it,” said the imp.

“You must be joking!” the little pig spluttered, squirming awkwardly in Alex’s arms. “Why, I am known from the mountains of the wasteland to the sea! My supreme reign struck terror into all who passed my way.” She shot an embarrassed glare at Alex. “These fools are mistaken, that is all.”

“Ever heard of Lumberjack Joe and his faithful sidekick Chonk?” Joe said, tipping an imaginary cap. “We’re kind of famous.”

The sentries stared, completely unimpressed.

Griff slipped to the front of their party.

“We’re just some folks interested in buyin’, if you’re interested in sellin’,” the old weed explained. “Might be, I did a fair bit of business with the Troll Nation, back in yesteryear.”

The imp’s ears perked up at that. He frowned, forehead furrowed in consideration. He spat a brown stream of chew into the dirt, then jerked his head at the goat demon. With a bleat, the bruiser hoofed it through the campground toward the battlegon.

Joe grinned at the rifle-toting owl-bear. “So. Hot enough out here for ya?”

Alex shot Clay a look—the usual *he's your brother*—and Clay braced himself for this to erupt in fire and chaos and bloodshed. Joe was a friendly guy, the kind of guy who never really made the connection between the appropriate time for small talk and a good time to shut up.

But the owl-bear replied, “Ninety-eight yesterday in the shade. We had to stop off in Oxnard so the older RVs wouldn’t overheat.”

Joe’s eyes lit up. “You guys are driving campers with that old-timey coolant system? What make do you have?”

“A feeeew different transmissions across the board,” the owl-bear said, gesturing to the sprawl of vehicles littering the field, “but the worst are the Dolphins.”

“No way!” Joe slapped the owl-bear’s bugling arm muscles. “I lived in a Dolphin for years! It didn’t go anywhere—I bought it for parts and swapped out its engine for my truck’s—they both had that old 460 V8, you know?—but its beauty was on the inside. That shower-toilet combo was slick as hell.” He sighed. “Those were the days.”

In Alex’s arms, Bacon Bits looked on, aghast. “Why are we discussing dwelling inside water mammals and the area’s climate? These things have nothing to do with our objective.”

“Because old men love to talk about the weather,” Joe told her, rolling his eyes. “Everybody knows that.”

“So... you are attempting to make an ally?” Bacon Bits asked, sounding supremely unconvinced.

“No, I’m attempting to make a buddy. They’re more valuable than allies, ’cuz you can drink with ’em.”

Before the teacup pig could respond, the goat demon returned, huffing and puffing from the exertion. They must not see much action for him to be out of breath after a little jaunt like that. Maybe the battlewagon was enough to scare potential attackers off.

“Tajira said she’ll see you kids,” he announced. “But you have to leave your weapons out here with us.”

CHAPTER 5

TAJIRA'S TOTALLY REASONABLE REQUEST



The idea of wading into a potentially hostile dungeon—even one composed of RVs and motorbikes—without their weapons made Clay’s skin crawl. Every survival instinct he had said this was a terrible idea, no matter how friendly the creatures in the Sooq seemed to be. But after a quick nod from Griff, he reluctantly slipped the M4 sling over his head and motioned for the others to do the same. It was a dangerous gambit, but even unarmed they weren’t completely powerless, he reminded himself.

Griff could sling some deadly magic, Alex had the power set of an Incant—even if a relatively new one—and Clay had a few spells tucked up his sleeve. Joe... Well, Joe had his mouth, which was really his most potent weapon, and Chonk if things got really bad.

“I can’t believe I had to leave Bertha,” Joe muttered as they followed the goat demon through the camp. “A Poulan Pro’s not a weapon, she’s a way of life.”

“You think I like walking around unarmed?” Clay hissed under his breath. His hands itched for a gun or the Lesser Wand of Inferno. If this meeting went down the tubes, all he had to protect his wife and brother was changing the color and brightness of lights. Stupid spell sure as hell didn’t seem so cool now.

Inhuman creatures stopped flipping burgers and hanging strings of flamingo lights from their awnings to stare with gaping maws as Clay, Alex, Joe, and Griff passed. Bacon Bits

looked out at them from Alex's hip with an adorable superiority only a dragon in a pig's body could muster.

At one point, Chonk tried to go after a plate of brats fresh off the grill, but Griff, moving with the speed of a man half his age, caught the little half-mech bandit by the ringed tail before he made it onto the picnic table and ended their peaceful parlay before it even began. After that, Chonk stayed tucked firmly under Joe's arm, chittering and scolding every time they passed a campsite in the middle of making lunch.

Finally, they passed into the shadow of the massive battlegon. The goat demon led them around the corner into the meager shadow cast by the slightly pitched sides, where the tiki hut had been set up.

A tall, slender cat woman stood behind the bar, pouring a fruity-looking drink into a mock coconut. She had a long, sinuous tail, sandy fur peppered with gray like a gracefully aging cougar, and the tufted ears of a lynx. Those ears swiveled toward them as they approached, but she popped open a bright pink umbrella and dropped it into the drink before looking up. Her golden-brown eyes were lined with dark fur.

"Be welcome, y'all," she purred, shooting them a feline smile that revealed a pair of deadly looking fangs. Her accent was straight out of one of those period romances about the genteel South that Alex liked to watch. "I am Tajira, Dungeon Lord of the Sooq, merchant, trader, and haggler of great renown, and not a bad hand with a drink shaker, if I do say so myself."

Bacon Bits snorted. "I am the Great Blue Wurm of Santa Clarita. Coming from so far away, you may not have heard rumors and tales of my glory, but I assure you—"

"Oh, we mustn't discuss business before we settle the dust in our throats," Tajira interrupted the pig. "Sit, y'all, make yourselves at home! How's about I mix you up something cool and refreshing? I make a mean Blue Lagoon."

"Hell yeah. You had me at sit!" Joe said, dropping onto one of the fold-out stools. He plopped the mechacoona on the

bar in front of him and whispered at the top of his lungs, “Mind your manners, Chonk. This is a classy establishment.”

“Thank you for your hospitality, Dungeon Lord.” Griff swiped off his hat, making a gallant bow.

The cat woman chuckled as she dragged brightly colored bottles and a margarita machine out from under the bar.

“Please, we’re friends,” she purred. “Call me Tajira.”

“It’d be my honor, Miss Tajira,” Griff said, his blue eye twinkling. “I’m Griff. This here’s Clay, Alex, Bacon Bits, Chonk, and the lad on the end there is Joe.”

“It’s pronounced Lumberjack Joe.”

While Griff made the introductions, Clay pulled a stool out for Alex so she didn’t have to juggle it and the teacup pig, then sat on the one beside her. He wasn’t a big fan of fruity frou-frou drinks, but Tajira didn’t seem like the type to keep beer on tap. Besides, turning down a Dungeon Lord’s hospitality at their first meeting was probably a bad idea. He did slip his Monocle on, anyway, so he could tell if she mixed in anything deadly.

Already Chonk was chowing down on a coconut bowl full of peanuts.

Joe popped one of the salty snacks in his mouth and eyed the décor. “Nice place you got here, by the by. Very tasteful.”

“Well, bless your heart for saying so!” She started scooping ice into the blender. “I do like to think I’ve added a little color to this dusty, drab ol’ world. No offense, but this Earth of yours is certainly no Otherwhere—that was the part of Hearthworld where I spawned. The delophinia were just rampant there—the prettiest flowers you ever did see.”

“Been through there once or twice back in the old days,” Griff said. “I might be looking outta half the number of eyes I was back then, but even I can see that the delophinia’re only the second prettiest flower to come out of Otherwhere.” The old weed blinked at Tajira.

It took Clay a second to realize the old-timer was winking at the cat lady.

“Oh, you!” The old cougar was a lot quicker on the uptake, letting out that purring chuckle again.

Alex turned her face away from the flirting old folks and raised her brows at Clay. *Are you seeing this?*

Clay gave her the smallest of facial shrugs. If Griff wanted to fraternize with the Dungeon Lord, he must know what he was doing.

The scream of the margarita machine made conversation impossible for the next minute. When it was done, Tajira fussed over pouring the drinks and sticking colorful paper umbrellas into them.

One at a time, she pushed the finished drinks across the bar. For a split second, she looked like she was going to shove Clay’s glass off the edge of the table like any douchebag housecat, but she only grinned and flourished her claw-tipped fingers at the icy concoction.

“The Blue Lagoon a la Tajira. See what you think of that.”

“Thanks.” Clay’s monocle wasn’t showing any dangerous effects from the brilliant blue slush. On the contrary, the drink supposedly gave a temporary boost to Stamina with a side effect he’d never seen before that read *Refreshing – 1 hour*.

He took a polite sip. Blue-raspberry-flavored slush ran down his throat. It sent out the customary burn of liquor, then immediately on the heels of that, a cooling wave washed through his body, spreading out from his stomach. He felt like he’d just stepped into air conditioning after a long, hot day trenching lines by shovel.

Next to him, Alex *mmed*. “That. Is. Amazing. You are the queen of drink-making.”

“It’s been said that I do know my way around a cocktail,” the cat woman purred. She propped her elbows on the bar top. “To tell y’all the truth, I wasn’t expecting to make any for outsiders today. The Sooq’s not normally open for trade on the

day we pull into town. We like to take at least twenty-four hours' rest after our journeys.

“Driving takes it out of you. But I told the sentries we just had to make a concession for such a strange litter. This is the first time the Sooq has seen humans enter peacefully in... ever.” Tajira glanced sidelong at Bacon Bits, who was rooting around in a blue drink almost as big as she was. “And I’ve never seen them working with mobs and NPCs.” Her golden eyes twinkled at Griff. “Even handsome silver foxes such as yourself.”

Griff cleared his throat and got real interested in something across the way.

Clay covered his smile with his drink; it was the first time he’d seen the old weed embarrassed. Apparently, Griff could dish out the flirtatious remarks, but he couldn’t take them.

“So tell me, y’all, what is it you seek here?” Tajira purred.

Bacon Bits took the cat woman’s remarks with a lot less grace. The little oinker was full of booze and thoroughly offended.

“I am no mere mob off the street,” the teacup pig said, squirming out of Alex’s hands and trotting across the bar toward the cat woman. Her gait weaved a little as she went, and her tiny snout was stained blue from whatever food coloring went into the drink. “I am the Great Blue Wyrml! Terror of Santa Clarita!”

Tajira smiled lazily. “A Great Blue Wyrml Dungeon Lord? You’ll have a name, then.”

“I? Of course I have a name! Even the lowliest of Dungeon Lords”—Bacon Bits hiccupped—“has a name! At present, however...” She sat down hard on the bar, floppy ears drooping, pig shoulders slumping in an exaggerated pout. “I cannot pronounce it. It is this accursed form—*hic*. My mighty Dungeon Lord name is beyond this puny, unforked tongue’s capabilities.”

“That’s why we call her Bacon Bits,” Joe volunteered helpfully. “We’re too dumb to say her real name, too.”

“I am not dumb!” Bacon Bits squealed. Without warning, she charged at her flannel-clad naysayer in a drunken fury.

Even using Swine Rush, the little oinker wasn’t going to do any damage—she was weaving crazily and could barely keep her hooves from tripping over themselves—but Alex scooped her up before she could get to him.

“*Joe.*” She shot a warning glare at him over Bacon Bits’s head.

“I was mighty!” Bacon Bits’s rage had flipped with the lightning speed of the wasted into an obnoxious wailing. “Great Blue Wyrms! But now I’m just a pig! A pig-wyrms! A pirms!”

“It is so very sad when the mighty fall,” Tajira said, her eyes sparkling with laughter.

“There’s no reason to rub it in,” Alex snapped, scratching Bacon Bits’s head consolingly.

“Y’all have to forgive me,” the cat woman said. “I just find it so funny when those who claim a spot above their place in life realize just how low they sit on the totem pole.”

Recognizing the protective flash in his wife’s eyes, Clay decided he’d better step in before she attacked a Dungeon Lord on behalf of a pig’s hurt feelings. If Alex considered someone part of the family, she would kick ass and take names for them—and apparently in the bare day or so they’d known Bacon Bits, Alex had decided the piglet was part of the family.

“We didn’t come here to talk about Bacon Bits’s dungeon,” Clay interjected. “We’ve got a bigger problem on our hands right now. You’ve heard about Incants, right? Humans who kill Dungeon Lords and get their powers?”

Tajira shot him a condescending smirk. “Honey, I just handed a drink to one.” Her tail twitched toward Alex. “Don’t tell me about Incants. I knew about Incants before you silly Earth creatures thought up a name for them.”

“Just wanted to make sure we were on the same page.” Clay cleared his throat. “Anyway, we’ve got a pissed-off Gearhead Incant on our tail. We want to help Bacon Bits take

back her dungeon.” *And get Joe and me powers*, Clay added mentally, deciding that it was probably smarter not to mention their eventual plans to assassinate a Dungeon Lord *to a* Dungeon Lord. “But we can’t get clear of this Incant long enough to think, let alone fight the rival who deposed her.”

“If you’re about to ask for some help killing him, I’ll have to stop you there,” Tajira said, drawing a claw across the bar. “The Sooq doesn’t interfere in petty human squabbles. That just wouldn’t be befitting of a dungeon.”

“I used to be in a dungeon,” Bacon Bits snuffled morosely.

“We’re not asking for help killing Gearhead,” Clay said. “We’ll take care of him ourselves as soon as we can. But Bacon Bits mentioned that you might be willing to sell us a cloaking spell or magical item that could keep us hidden from his drones. That’s all we’re asking.”

“Drones?” Tajira tapped her furry chin. “You mean a type of mechanical underling that spies and attacks at great range for this Incant? I may have just the thing. Y’all ever hear of a Camera Obscura?”

“Isn’t that the trick where you use sunlight and a hole in a darkroom to project an image from outside?” Clay asked.

“You’re suspiciously smart for a jarhead.” Joe squinted at him. “Who’d you steal those brains from?”

“Not now, Joe,” Alex warned. “We’re trying to talk like grown-ups. Read the room for once.”

“Or a coloring book,” Clay suggested.

Joe snorted and bumped Clay’s fist over Alex’s head.

“See, short stack? There’s always time for a jarhead joke.”

Alex sighed. “I apologize for the children I brought with me, Dungeon Lord Tajira.”

“Don’t even worry about it, honey,” Tajira purred. “You’re right on an Earth level, tomcat,” she said, looking at Clay, “but the sort of Camera Obscura I’m talking about is a magical item, not a trick of the light. We Hearthworld throwbacks

define it a little differently.” She slid feline eyes to Griff. “I imagine you’ve heard of them.”

“Heard of ’em, but never seen one in person.” The old weed held out leathery hands, framing a box the size of an old smartphone. “’Bout yea big, supposed to obscure you from tracking spells, enemy underlings, and scrying devices for a set amount of time.”

Clay nodded. “That would do the job. We’d like to buy one from you, if you’re willing to sell.”

Tajira’s eyes lit up. “You want to become a trading partner with the Sooq? It’s quite unheard of, I have to admit, such an illustrious dungeon as mine dealing with humans—even if one of them is an Incant. But perhaps an exception could be made if those particular humans showed that the partnership would be worth our while.”

“We scratch your back, you scratch ours,” Alex said.

“Well, bless your heart.” Tajira showed her fangs in a feline grin. “I guess humans aren’t as stupid as the wasteland wildlife guides say after all! As Dungeon Lord, it falls to me to see to our collective welfare. We require safety and security, of course, but as you’ve seen, we can easily provide those for ourselves,” she said, waving a paw at the battlewagon and its smaller cousins. “But what good is security without happiness and satisfaction? Just about worthless, I say. And how can merchants of such high caliber as ourselves find satisfaction without the constant in and outflow of rare and valuable artifacts? Why, without that, how could we even call ourselves merchants?”

Clay was pretty sure he saw where this was going.

“But you’re not interested in risking your neck for those rare and valuable artifacts,” he guessed.

“Tell me, tomcat, who’s gonna turn a profit if the merchants are all dead?” Tajira’s dark-lined eyes narrowed. “Respawns don’t come along for us mobs like they used to, and it’s not good business to get killed off seeking that which you wish to sell. Better to make brave, bold, adventuring

friends who'll assume the risk for you—for an appropriately high reward, of course.”

“I'm starting to see a pattern here with you Dungeon Lords,” Joe said, casting a baleful eye from Bacon Bits to Tajira. “Do we have ‘rubes’ written on our forehead or something?”

“I think it's the jorts under tin pants that give it away,” Alex said.

“Hey, breathability is a major factor in desert tactical gear. I'm just the only person here smart enough to implement it.”

The cat woman chuckled. “I'd never take advantage of y'all. I'm as fair as a summer day—you want something, we want something. We're helping one another out, as all good friends ought to. And to prove it to you, I'll not only give y'all the Camera Obscura in exchange for a certain artifact, I'll make you official trading partners of the Sooq. The first humans to wield this title, you'll be welcome to buy, sell, and trade with us and any affiliated marketplace. We have seven convenient stationary locations around the wasteland, and we're working on opening an eighth in Palmdale by next month.”

Right then, she sounded more like a used car salesman than a Dungeon Lord, and she still hadn't given them any info about the artifact she was looking for.

Obviously, Griff was thinking along the same lines as Clay.

“If you don't mind my askin', Miss Tajira, what exactly is this quest item you're so all-fired to get your paws on?” The old weed rested an arm on the bar. “Where it's at might be a useful bit a' intel, too, seein' as you're plannin' on sending us to fetch it for you.”

Tajira leaned closer to Griff, her tail snaking sinuously over her shoulder to tap him on the nose. He straightened up, a bit of red coloring his scar-crossed face.

“The item I seek is the Greater Saltshaker of the Troll Gourmet,” she drawled. “A magical spice shaker which

perfectly complements any dish on which it's used, bringing out the essence of its flavor without ever over-seasoning. Rumors and gossip have come to me of its location. All tales point toward a dungeon located east of Santa Clarita, out in Soledad Canyon. The Fun House.

“It was the sort of thing y'all humans called a ‘carnival’”—Tajira did the air-quotes thing, which was especially strange coming from a creature Clay wouldn't have guessed had a context for the gesture—“before the joining of our two worlds. After the Merge, Smilerfax the Enigmatic seized control of this smattering of entertaining rides and fried foods and turned it into his own labyrinth of traps, riddles, and puzzles—while retaining the fried foods.” She leaned forward and whispered softly as though imparting some great secret. “He was a big fan of funnel cakes and deep-fried Oreos.”

“Who's not?” Joe shrugged.

“Smilerfax had quite the legendary sweet tooth. Word is, he recently passed. Clogged valves of the heart.” Tajira shook her head as if that were a damn shame. “In going, he left behind the Fun House throne and one Greater Saltshaker, along with the rest of his treasures and forgotten relics.”

“If he's dead, why not just walk in and get it yourself?” Alex asked.

Tajira smiled sweetly at her. “All those aforementioned traps and puzzles remain. Smilerfax was renowned for his love of creating deadly consequences for failure. I can't ask any of my underlings to risk their lives to retrieve the Saltshaker. And it'd be just plain irresponsible for a Dungeon Lord to put her throne at risk to do something so menial herself.”

Bacon Bits pulled her blue-stained snout out of Alex's drink long enough to slur, “That is why Dungeon Lords have minions.”

“To send them on suicide missions,” Clay said flatly.

“Yes,” both Dungeon Lords answered together.

“Riddles? Puzzles?” Joe shook his head. “Huh-uh. Nobody said there was going to be a test. I left all that baloney behind

when I graduated high school, and I'm not going back willingly, no matter how classy this mobile bar of yours is."

"Not even for a thousand gold?" Tajira purred enticingly. "Y'all could make that much easy, selling loot to our merchants. The prices we give for goods from official trading partners are fifteen percent above what we offer strangers, and fifteen percent lower for every item you purchase from us. At those rates, you can't afford to refuse. Of course, there's also the Camera Obscura. I won't relinquish that for anything less than the Shaker, but I think y'all will agree that dropping off the enemy's radar is cheap at any price."

Clay's eyes widened as a prompt flashed in front of his eyes. Non-Incants couldn't level, gain experience, or access their Character Sheets—unless they had an item like the Monocle of True Seeing, anyway—but they could see things like item descriptions. In all the time he'd been in the wasteland, however, this was the first time he'd ever seen a magically generated quest prompt.



Trading Rights!

Tajira, Dungeon Master of the Traveling Sooq, has agreed to give you the Camera Obscura in exchange for finding and returning the Greater Saltshaker of the Troll Gourmet. The

Saltshaker is currently located in the Fun House, former dungeon of the recently deceased Smilerfax the Enigmatic. To sweeten the pot, Tajira has also offered your party the right to trade with the Sooq.

Objective: Retrieve the Greater Saltshaker of the Troll Gourmet from the Fun House and return it to Tajira.

Reward: Camera Obscura; option to trade for goods and services at the Sooq; buying and selling prices within the Sooq are improved by 15%

Failure: Reject the quest or fail to retrieve the Greater Saltshaker of the Troll Gourmet

Penalty: Rejecting Tajira's generous offer of friendship could prove to be hazardous to your health...

Restrictions: None

Accept quest? Yes/No



Clay's eyes flickered over the penalty clause. *Rejecting Tajira's generous offer of friendship could prove to be hazardous to your health...* Although none of the mobs they'd met so far in the Sooq were overtly hostile, there were a lot of them, plus they had them completely surrounded. It was the kind of offer that was hard to refuse. When he saw the vacant gazes of the rest of his party, he knew they had also received the notice.

"Why do you hesitate?" Bacon Bits squalled suddenly, huge tears dripping off her tiny snout. "Your assistance is the only way to regain my—*hic*—former glory, and her assistance is the only way you can gimme assistance! *Hic*—" The little pig's whole body jumped with the hiccup. "It all falls apart unless you accept, and yet you sit here, getting no saltshaker or camera! Please—*hic*—oh please, Alex, make them gimme my dignity—I mean my dungeon—back!"

Alex picked up the drunk little pig and put it over her shoulder, shushing and patting its back like a fussy baby. She looked at Clay over Bacon Bits's head.

"We said we'd help her," Alex insisted. "What's one more dungeon, anyway?"

To an Incant with near-instant health-regen, inhuman stamina, and monster-sized strength, one more dungeon was nothing. To a couple of regular humans, like Clay and Joe, it was basically life and death—but then so was everything else out in the wasteland. The Fun House might kill them, but on the other hand, if they didn't take the quest, there was a distinct possibility they wouldn't leave the Sooq alive. And Alex was right, they'd given Bacon Bits their word. If they wanted to take out the little oinker's rival Dungeon Lord, it was looking like they couldn't avoid a side trip to a murder carnival.

“You worked at the county fair three summers running,” Clay said to Joe. “Three years’ worth of running those rusty death traps full of screaming, sticky brats, helicopter parents asking you if this ride’s safe and how often you disinfect the lap bars, and annoying high school kids throwing cheese fries at you—and you’re scared to raid a dinky little carnival?”

Joe straightened up in his seat.

“Looky here, Lumberjack Joe’s not scared of anything.” He tapped his chest. Chonk stopped shoveling peanuts into his mouth long enough to see what his human was getting riled up about. “I rode the Hammer that summer the counterweight snapped off and almost took out the 4-H barn. When the Tilt-a-Whirl engine freaked out, who climbed on and rescued Elise Rae Taylor? You’re looking at him, buddy—and she even went out with me once after that. Nobody knows carnivals like me.”

“This quest was tailor made for you,” Clay agreed.

Joe let out a world-weary sigh. “Guess it’s true what they say—you don’t choose the carnie life, the carnie life chooses you.” He locked eyes with Clay. “I’ll do it under one condition. I’m leading this Fun House tour. You guys do what I say, when I say, and if anybody wins a jumbo prize, I get to keep it.”

“That’s two conditions, but deal,” Clay said, shaking his brother’s hand before Alex could protest. She shot him one of those *you’d better know what you’re doing* looks.

Clay was pretty sure he did. About seventy-five percent sure. Well... maybe sixty. Either way, it was better to let Joe think he was running the show than try to drag him along against his will. Plus, he really did have a ton of experience with carnivals. Some of that had to eventually come in handy, right?

“That settles it.” Joe hopped off his stool, chugged the last of his cocktail, and slammed the empty upside down on the bar, startling Bacon Bits out of her drunken snooze with a porcine squeak. “As we used to say back at the county fair, remember to keep your hands and arms inside the ride at all

times, kiddies, because we are not liable for injury, not insured for your death, and we sure as heck ain't turning around for lost body parts."

"Then y'all are accepting my quest?" Tajira purred.

Clay nodded and hit "Yes."

"We'll do it," he said as the prompt vanished.

"Now, don't take this the wrong way," she said, "but I know how heroes and adventurers work. We're still friends, but I've got to make sure y'all are gonna bring the Greater Saltshaker back to me if you get it, not run off and sell it someplace else."

The cat woman reached across the bar and patted Griff's arm. Metal clinked, and a heavy-duty iron shackle snapped closed around his leathery wrist. The old weed jerked away instinctively, but it was too late.

He was chained to the tiki bar.

Tajira gave them one of those feline grins. "A little insurance policy. I'm keeping the silver fox 'til y'all hand the Saltshaker over." She patted his forearm. "And don't y'all worry none, I'll take good care of him in the meantime." She paused and leaned forward, feline fangs glinting in the tiki torch light. "Just don't take too long..."

CHAPTER 6

REDNECK ENGINEERING



“Can’t believe Griff got to be the one chained to a tiki bar,” Joe muttered for the thousandth time that night around the campfire. “I was right there!” He stopped sharpening Bertha’s chain to throw up one hand in disgust. “That could’ve been me forced to drink booze and eat peanuts until you guys got back.”

“Something tells me wasteland lumberjack isn’t Tajira’s style,” Alex said. “Griff, though...”

“What? No way is Griff sexier than me!”

Clay grabbed a chunk of Joshua tree from the pile of wood they’d gathered and tossed it onto the fire.

“I don’t hear anybody calling you a silver fox,” he said.

“Ageism! If I wasn’t cursed with all this youthful charm, women would be lining up around the block to chain me to their tiki bars.”

“Stop with all the yelling.” Alex put one protective hand over the little ears of the black-and-pink teacup pig sleeping off a tiki hangover on their bedroll. “You’ll wake up Bacon Bits.”

“Not as loud as she’s sawing logs.” Joe cranked Bertha’s chain around to a new section and went back to sharpening. “Even Bertha’s embarrassed. That there is one little oinker who cannot hold her liquor.”

Alex rolled her eyes. “As opposed to all the other day-drinking pigs that can.”

“O ye of much condescension. I got wasted with a pig or two in my day.” Joe grinned at Clay. “Remember when me, you, Bubba, and Jon-Jon fed a bunch of Busch Lite to Jon-Jon’s Berkshire during the Barnyard Zoo your senior year?” A wistful grin spread across his face. “Now that hog could put ’em down. Three Busch-els and a fifth of Ol Pappy, and that sonuvagun still could’ve beat a breathalyzer!”

“It got loose and smashed up a bunch of cars in the school parking lot,” Clay said, recalling the events of that evening very differently than his brother. “Not sure that counts as holding your liquor.”

“Hey, nobody ever proved the booze was what sent Wilbur into that rampage,” Joe said. “For all we know, he’d just got into a fight with his girlfriend-sow and was dealing with some major issues.”

Clay shrugged. “Just sayin’, it was probably pretty drunk if it did all that.”

“What is a broken heart, anyway, but the drunken rampage of the soul?” Joe mused, mostly to himself.

Alex sighed and shook her head. “I leave you dorks alone together for one weekend...” She was smiling, though.

“I seem to remember you laughing pretty hard when you heard Mrs. Henning’s car was one of the casualties,” Clay said, nudging her knee with his. “Didn’t you say she deserved it for telling you martial arts wasn’t a real sport?”

Joe obviously hadn’t done enough shit-stirring for the day, because he added, “Course, you can’t argue with her logic—basketball *is* a real sport. There’s teams and everything.”

“Martial arts isn’t a sport,” Alex snapped, “it’s a way of life.”

“Yeah,” Joe said. “One where nobody dunks. Boring.”

Clay’s laugh broke off in his throat. He heard a buzzing, whirring sound that made the hair on the back of his neck prickle.

Beside Joe, Chonk looked up into the night sky, ears twitching manically.

Clay stood up and snatched his M4 from where it was leaning against his chunk of concrete.

“What’s going on?” Alex picked up her Mossberg. She’d barely finished asking before the sound cut off.

Joe jumped to his feet.

“It’s a horsefly! Is it on me?” He tried to twist around to look at his back. “Get it off!”

“Shut up,” Clay said, turning in a slow circle, scanning the area for any sign of it. “There’s nothing on you. It’s a drone.”

Alex spotted it first, helped along by the night vision she’d inherited from Katotes.

“Across the street, on that ledge.” She pointed with the barrel of her shotgun.

Clay spun around, eyes focusing on the half-hidden target.

The drone didn’t look anything like the unmanned surveillance vehicles the military had been using during his deployment. This one was about the size of a softball, made out of glinting brass gears in the shape of a huge fly. A pair of shiny wings poked up from its back, and two geodesic eyes stared out the front, glittering in the light from their fire.

Whoever was operating the thing must’ve seen Clay taking aim. The mechanical bug shot into the air, gears whining and wings buzzing. It zoomed upward, trying to get lost in the night.

Clay led it by a hair. Just before it disappeared in darkness, he squeezed the trigger as he exhaled, slow and steady.

It was a shot he never could’ve made a month ago. With his enhanced dexterity, though, it felt as easy as shooting down a hot-air balloon at point-blank range. The M4’s muzzle flashed, and a split second later came the metallic burst of the bullet tearing through gears.

Bits of brass and hair-thin glass rained down, tinkling on the concrete.

Keeping an eye and ear out for more insectile drones, the three of them sidled over to check out the biggest pieces of the wreckage. Bits of broken glass gritted under their boots. Clay kept it covered, just in case, but the thing was definitely out of commission.

“It’s Gearhead’s,” Joe growled, shaking his head. “That mad Aussie bastard finally did it. He made a pact with the Satan of insects—the horsefly. I expected better.”

“Okay, so maybe we don’t stop for the night,” Clay said, lowering his rifle.

“Why not?” Joe stomped on the eye parts of the mechanical bug, grinding the lenses into the street under the thick sole of his bone-studded Skeletal Warboots. “You already killed his evil spy bug—we should be fine.”

“That thing would’ve been sending surveillance back the whole time. Coordinates, too.” Clay looked toward the sleeping bags and fire, where Bacon Bits was still snoring, blissfully unaware. “Sure, it’s possible he’s all the way back at Camp Liberty, but odds are good he’s a hell of a lot closer than that.”

“Think he’s still mad about his workshop?” Joe wondered, nudging the broken bits of the drone with the toe of his boot.

Alex’s mouth popped open. Even for someone as quick on the draw as she usually was, that took a second to recover from.

“You mean is he still mad about how we stole his stat potions, gave his mech golem a nuclear meltdown, and blew up every bit of advanced technology he’d built?” She shook her head. “Why would someone be mad about that?”

“Yeesh, I was just thinking out loud,” Joe said. “It takes all kinds of people to make this world go round, you know. Sure, he was calling us bloody buggers and shrimp on the barbie and other Australian stuff, but I think underneath all that rage, he seemed like a pretty reasonable guy.”

“Agree to disagree.” Clay headed back toward the fire. “We need to get out of here, ASAP.”

“Seconded.” Alex shuddered and hugged her Mossberg closer. “I’m not staying the night where some dickhead Incant was just spying on us.”

“Well, give me a second.” Joe set Bertha down and grabbed his ruck, then started scooping bits of broken drone into a side pocket. Chonk scampered over to help him. “Waste not, want not, right little buddy?”



THEY DIDN'T HEAR any more drones, but Clay kept them moving through the night anyway. Most likely Gearhead's spy machines were equipped with thermal imaging, but just in case they weren't, he figured they should make use of the natural cover of darkness. Besides, the more distance they put between them and the last place Gearhead knew they'd been, the better.

At least they didn't have to worry about getting lost. Alex had been given a quest marker when they accepted Tajira's task, and she fed them directions from her Incant interface. That helped them maintain a steady pace rather than having to constantly stop and check their position by the stars.

They only had to engage with hostile creatures twice, once near the caved-in ruins of an old city park where a band of crocturnals had been staked out, and later when they got jumped by a Skeletal Corpse Viper at a burnt-out In-N-Out Burger.

Because they were all on heightened alert, the ambushes weren't the easy pickings the wasteland monsters had been hoping for. Clay chased off the crocturnals by using Control Lights to change their crank flashlights to UV lights. Like Griff had mentioned, the light burnt their scales and sent them running. The Skeletal Corpse Viper was a different, gorier story. It had lunged out of the shadows at Alex, probably assuming it was picking the weakest out of the herd. What it

hadn't been expecting was for this pint-sized wrecking ball to launch a fist like a railroad hammer through its skull. It didn't even have a chance to realize its mistake; its head exploded like an overripe watermelon with a cherry bomb inside.

Both skirmishes were over almost as fast as they'd begun, and while the crocturnals got away without dropping any loot, the Viper left behind a long brown leather duster with a decent armor rating and +2 Magicka boost.

"Guys, who am I?" Joe swung the duster onto his shoulders and squinted one eye. "Well now there, lads, I reckon mayhap yonder."

"I don't even need a ruling on that," Alex said. "None of it made any sense."

"What? That's how he talks. Clay, tell her."

"Let's keep moving." Clay took the jacket and stuck it in his pack for Griff. He hadn't seen the stats on the old weed's current duster, but it was looking pretty beat to shit. Anyway, if the new one wasn't what Griff was looking for, they could sell it to the Sooq.

Gray seeped into the sky as they left Santa Clarita behind and took the ancient Soledad Canyon Road up into the mountains. On one of the abandoned ranches outside town, they found a weather-beaten machine shed, surprisingly uninhabited. By unanimous vote, they decided to catch a few hours' sleep inside, where Gearhead's drones wouldn't be able to spot them.

The place was packed with rusting off-roading frames, crumbling knobby sand tires, and moth-eaten five-point harnesses. Alex wrapped the snoring Bacon Bits in an old pair of pjs and laid her in a chewed-up bucket seat, while Clay unrolled their double sleeping bag on the dusty floor.

In spite of having just pulled an all-nighter on the march, Joe wasn't interested in setting up camp. He wandered around the shed, touching parts, picking them up, wiping dust off their number plates with an odd reverence that only a redneck tinkerer could have for rusted-out mechanical garbage.

“Man, this stuff was the cream of the crop when the Merge hit. They probably got a hundred thousand bucks in parts just sitting here, filling up with sand.” Joe let out a low whistle. On his shoulder, Chonk made a cooing trill, probably because racoons didn’t have the lip structure to whistle. “Boy howdy, if I had a week and an air compressor...”

“You don’t. You’ve got a couple hours and a death-trap carnival.” Clay kicked off his boots and climbed into the double sleeping bag with Alex. “Get some rest so you’re ready for it.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, definitely,” Joe said hastily enough that Clay knew he wasn’t listening. God love his brother, but Joe probably couldn’t hear anything over the sound of the engines revving in his head.

Clay turned over and curled around Alex’s tiny form. Best to leave the grease monkey be and get some shut-eye so he could pull his and Joe’s weight if he had to.

He dozed off to the metallic sounds of old parts being sifted through—

—And bolted up out of a dead sleep to the scream of a pneumatic impact wrench.

“Mmwhatssit!” A sleep-panicked elbow from Alex sliced toward Clay’s face. He pulled his head to the side and threw out both arms to stop it before her new Ettin strength caved his skull in like that Skeletal Corpse Viper’s.

From her bucket seat nest, Bacon Bits was squealing bloody murder. “Who dares disturb the Great Blue Wyrn! I’ll have your blood for a drink mixer, your bones for toothpicks, your scalp for... for...”

“A hat?” Joe offered.

“At the very least!” the teacup pig cried.

Clay scrubbed his gritty eyes. “What the hell, Joe?”

“Sorry, guys, that’s my bad.” Joe popped up on the opposite side of a half-built dune buggy, the impact gun in his grease-covered hands. “You all were sleeping so hard, and this

gun says ‘quiet performance’ right on the side”—he tapped the words on the label—“so I didn’t figure a little tinkering would wake you up. See, I found an old air compressor and got it running with a Fyula rune, and there’s about ninety percent of the parts we’d need for—”

“Clay,” Alex groaned, pulling the sleeping bag up over her face. As in, *I can’t deal with your brother right now. Please do something, for the love of all that is good.*

He kissed the back of her neck by way of an *I’m on it* and slid out of the sleeping bag. There was no way they were going to get Joe to put down the tools and leave the dune buggy alone, so Clay went for the next best option.

“Come on and help me roll this thing outside.”

Once they got the buggy, the air compressor, and the engine block outside under the lean-to, Joe dove back in, headfirst. Clay considered grabbing a little more sleep, but the brilliant desert morning light and his redneck git-outta-bed-and-git-doin’ upbringing outweighed the exhaustion from the night before. Besides, Bacon Bits and Chonk had snuggled up on his side of the sleeping bag—the coon sprawled out like roadkill and the little pig nestled in Alex’s hair like a cat.

So he stayed up and helped Joe rebuild the rest of the buggy. Two eyes watching for drones was better than one, anyway.

Once Clay got into the project, he had to admit it was going to be good to have some kind of transportation again—especially one that could off-road. They hadn’t had the luxury of riding in a vehicle since they crossed the containment wall into the IZ. Alex’s car had been sold way back when they were still trying to stay ahead of the medical bills, and though they’d held onto his truck for as long as they could, it had finally gone along with the house for the money and gear to strike out west. They’d been on foot since they stepped off the train in Fresno, and buddy was he looking forward to sitting back and riding a while.

People who didn’t know Joe very well might’ve written off his messing with the rust-bucket buggy as a waste of time, but

Clay had seen the miracles his brother could do with machinery that should've been well beyond the point of salvage. Old lawn mowers, busted four wheelers, locked-up tractors, crushed derby cars—give him an engine and four wheels, and no matter how badly degraded the parts were, Joe would turn out something that ran. The cobweb-encrusted, dust-clogged dune buggy was no exception.

By noon, the pneumatic wrench had sung its last song. Joe slapped a Fyula rune onto the engine, then touched the stripped ends of the brittle, mouse-chewed ignition wires together.

The engine rumbled to life.

“Hot damn!” Joe crowed over the noise, slapping a hand against the dash. “She’s a beaut, ain’t she?”

“She runs.” To Clay, *operational* wasn’t a synonym for *beautiful*, but he knew to Joe they were basically the same word. “Still thinking no on the muffler?”

“And silence that sweet melody?” Joe lovingly patted the coolant reservoir on the exposed engine. “That would be sacrilege, Clay, and I didn’t come all this way to commit sacrilege. I came to whoop ass and solve carnie puzzles.”

Clay grinned. “Then let’s get everybody up and on the road.”

CHAPTER 7

WELCOME TO THE CARNIVAL



In the dune buggy, the last ten miles to Soledad Canyon flew by. They weren't going to win any stealth achievements the way that beast was growling, but they were covering a lot of ground. Not walking for once was great, but Clay hadn't realized how much he'd missed cruising along at highway speed with the wind whipping through his hair. Even with the bouncing suspension and dust blowing in his face, there was nothing like it. Everybody was in high spirits, hoopin' and hollerin' as Joe did donuts and ramped dunes. Even Bacon Bits was enjoying the ride.

"It is almost as pleasant as flying!" the teacup pig oinked, ears flapping in the breeze. "Of course, as a Great Blue Wurm, I serpentine through the air, but you humans have certainly created an adequate substitute if one does not mind linear motion!"

"The map shows an old fire road up ahead," Alex yelled at Joe over the engine. "It'll take us right into the canyon."

Joe shot her a thumbs-up, then floored it over a scrub-covered dune. They got a solid second's air on that one. Clay laughed and Joe whooped. In the tiny child's harness next to Joe, Chonk raised his paw and hedge trimmer and trilled like a kid on a roller coaster. All in all, the machine-shed layover was working out better for morale than the GameStop had.

At least until they drove into the canyon.

Then the brilliant midday sunlight dimmed to an eerie twilight half a day ahead of schedule, and the walls seemed to

close in behind them. No clouds had appeared overhead, just an unnatural murk that darkened the world around them, like a movie scene that had been shot during the day and artificially filtered to look like night.

Clay got a prickly feeling down the back of his neck, like they were being watched from every angle. He released his harness and stood up in the shallow bed of the buggy, back against the roll cage to steady himself. He adjusted his grip on the M4 and watched for threats. Up front, Alex stopped calling out the directions and silently pointed the way. Joe hunkered down behind the wheel, brows furrowed and eyes constantly on the move. Chonk scooted as close to Joe as his little five-point harness would allow.

Only Bacon Bits seemed immune to the sudden weird gloom. The little pig was still laughing into the wind, ears flapping and tail wiggling.

“Feel that cool canyon air!” she squealed. “When I’ve been returned to power, perhaps I will set up a summer dungeon for myself here! You cannot deny it’s an excellent location. A little out of the way, but perfect for funneling unsuspecting prey into your trap.”

That was what Clay was afraid of.

They followed the canyon down, and in minutes the fairgrounds sprawled out in front of them.

Sun-bleached lights blinked and chased each other around rust-bleeding signs. Even from a distance, they could hear warped carnival music crawling out of some hidden sound system, none of the notes quite right, but none of them completely out of tune, either. A midway lined with garish tents flapped and fluttered in the breeze, the jumbo prizes swinging and swaying like hanged men dangling from gallows. Food trucks advertised greasy snacks and sugary drinks in sinister colors.

The Twisternado creaked and banged as it whirled along with an empty barrel. At the kiddie coaster’s biggest drop, a pair of trains had already been derailed, and a third was flying by at breakneck speed, wheels striking sparks on the tracks.

High overhead, the Zipper's cages rocked and tipped, a few hanging on by nothing more than a single bolt.

At the center of the sprawl loomed a massive metal structure folded out of a semi-trailer, which connected to a green-and-orange-striped big-top tent. Warped circus scenes had been airbrushed onto the black sides in screaming Day-Glo colors—stretched-out simulacrums of almost-familiar animals that seemed to move and shift when Clay wasn't staring right at them; a magician shoving swords through a box containing his beautiful assistant in one light, blood leaking from the holes and her face twisted in agony in another; a big top full of excited spectators one second who were suddenly all burning in hellfire while their flesh melted from their bones in the next.

The entrance to this creepfest was in the center of the trailer, a door painted into the razor-toothed mouth of a laughing, demonic clown. Overhead, a cockeyed sign flashed SMILERFAX'S FUN HOUSE.

Except every now and then, when Clay's eyes weren't directly focused on the letters, he could've sworn they said SMILERFAX'S FUNeral HOUSE.

Solemnly, Joe drove them through the gravel parking lot, swerving around the few dust-shrouded cars that had been left there to rust. He stopped the dune buggy outside the empty ticket booth and shut it off.

In the silence left behind, screams—a weird combination of ecstatic and terrified—made uneasy goosebumps race along Clay's arms and crawl down his spine. He strained his eyes in the half-light, but couldn't find any carnival-goers who could be making the sounds.

"This place is spookier than my memaw's doll room," Alex said in a small voice.

"Nothing is creepier than her doll room," Clay replied. He and Alex had been forced to sleep in her granny's creepy shrine to porcelain dolls one Christmas Eve when all her family was staying over. He hadn't slept a wink with all those glass eyes staring at him. But standing there looking out at the

nightmare carnival, he wasn't too sure the doll room was even in the same ballpark as this place.

“You guys just haven't seen a carnival after closing time.” Joe white-knuckled the steering wheel as if they were drifting a sharp turn rather than sitting still. “This right here, this is why it takes a special kind of person to be a carnie. Any dingbat off the street can smoke a cigarette while pulling a lever all day. But when those midway lights go out...” He took a deep breath and let it out. “That's where we separate the men from the boys.”

“I think it's quite pleasant,” Bacon Bits said, little head swiveling this way and that as she admired their surroundings. “A bit small, but this Smilerfax has done an excellent job using the natural ambiance. And, as you can see, everything is still functioning in his absence.” She waved a hoof at the crazily tilting rides. “That's the mark of a true Dungeon Lord: delegation and seeding. I myself had a floor boss for every level of my dungeon and contingencies set up to continue spawning mobs no matter what.”

Alex frowned out at the carnival. “So you're saying there are probably some free-roaming monsters in there even though Smilerfax is dead?”

“Oh, most certainly!”

“Great.”

“We're going in hot either way.” Clay hopped out of the buggy and did a quick check that his extra magazines, combat knife, and the Wand of Inferno were still in place, along with the handful of Magicka and health potions in his drop pouches. Alex and Joe piled out and followed suit while the animal half of their party looked on.

Weapons out and reloads ready, they headed for the ticket booth. On the side of the little shack, a faded sign demanded they *Check out our midway! Must-play games! Delicious treats! Eat your heart out!*

The ticket booth's windows had been smashed out, and the shadows inside were so deep that the shards of plexiglass

clinging to the frames looked like the last couple decaying teeth in the jaws of some ancient beast.

“If there’s going to be a jump scare anywhere, it’ll be there,” Alex muttered.

Clay had to agree. It looked as if there should be a cobweb-covered skeleton manning the till. He kept the windows covered as they approached.

Nothing jumped out at them, which only served to make them more uneasy.

Just past the ticket booth, a turnstile had been set up beneath a heart-shaped metal archway. In bloody-red, buzzing neon across the top, where the gates of hell would have said, *Abandon all hope ye who enter here*, were the somehow more ominous words, *The heart hungers... .*

Instead of the standard three periods for the ellipsis, the words were followed by four multicolored lights: a blue one, a green one, a pink one, and a black one with a white stripe across the middle.

Alex shot Clay a grin. “How bad is that fourth period bothering you, grammar Nazi?”

“Technically that could function as a complete sentence, so using a period followed by an ellipsis is fine,” he said. A corner of his mouth turned up. “But, yeah, a lot.”

“That there is a puzzle clue if I’ve ever seen one,” Joe said. “Someone write that down—blue, green, pink, black-and-white combo.”

“It’s four lights, Joe, I think we’ll remember it,” Clay said. Besides, with a name like Smilerfax the Enigmatic, he figured there was going to be a helluva lot more to the puzzles than a simple color pattern.

“You think that now,” Joe said, scratching *B, G, P, B&W* into the grease and dust on Bertha’s engine case with his thumbnail, “but when you’re caught up in the swirl and sugar rush of the carnival, buddy, all bets are off.”

A dark shadow flashed in Clay's peripheral. He looked up just in time to see the lights had gone off. They went back on before he had a chance to say anything. No one else seemed to have noticed.

He shook his head. There was nothing weird about that. Lights went off and on all the time out here in the IZ; electricity was hard to come by in the wasteland. No reason to start jumping at shadows.

Still, he watched the buzzing neon for another few seconds. It didn't flicker again.

"Clay, you coming?" Alex and Joe were headed for the turnstile, Bacon Bits and Chonk in tow.

"Yeah." He shook his head like that would clear away the doubts and caught up to them.

The turnstile shrieked in protest as they forced their way through its rotating arms.

The cool night breeze picked up as they stepped into the abandoned midway, the wind whining eerily. The game tents flapped, prizes swayed in the yellow light of the bare bulbs, and the desert grass waved. Coils of thick black extension cord snaked haphazardly across the ground beneath their feet, crisscrossing and tangled in the dead grass. Sugar-scented air blew in from the food trucks.

Bacon Bits took a deep snuffle. "What is that intoxicating aroma?"

"Diabetes." Clay eyed the prices on a stand for deep-fried Double-Stuf Oreos.

The Single Stint – 5.00

The Triple Bypass – 9.00

The Widowmaker – 19.00

Finally finding the heart's desire – priceless...

"I like cookies as much as the next person, but deep-frying them is where I draw the line," Alex said. She almost tripped on an overloaded surge protector wound up with duct tape.

“Geez. This place must’ve been a lawsuit waiting to happen back in the day.”

“Aw, look at him!” Joe cooed at Chonk. The mechacoon was across the way, chittering up at a tentful of moth-eaten jumbo stuffed pandas. “The little trash panda recognizes his giant trash cousin! Want one of these big guys, Chonkie-chonk?”

“Don’t you dare,” Alex snapped.

Joe stopped with his hand halfway to a blue-and-white panda leg.

“I had one condition going into this job, short stack. You all knew what you were getting into when you agreed to it,” he said. “Besides, I know how carnies think. They didn’t put these prizes out here so nobody would ever take one.” He gestured to a stack of metal milk bottles set up in a pyramid three bottles high. “You just have to step right up, win the game, and the stuffed teddy’s yours, fair and square.” He picked up the trio of waiting baseballs.

“How about you try to get us killed *after* we find the saltshaker,” Clay suggested. “For now, let’s focus on getting what we came here for.” He jerked his chin at the looming FUN HOUSE. “Tajira said the saltshaker was probably in Smilerfax’s hoard.”

“Fine, if you’re going to believe someone who’s never run a carnival before.” Joe tossed the balls back onto the stand.

Together, they started for the demonic clown mouth at the end of the midway.

A slithering hiss cut through the carnival music like a sharpened cleaver.

The thick cords crisscrossing the grass reared up like pissed-off cobras and shot toward them in a blaze, bodies sawing through the grass with impossible speed. Looked like Bacon Bits was right after all—even with Smilerfax gone, there were some nasty surprises waiting for them.

CHAPTER 8

FUN AND GAMES



Clay took aim and led the tangled knot of cords that seemed to be the lead cobra. With his new level of dex, he probably could've made the shot, but it was hauling ass toward Alex. He let the M4 hang on its sling and ran for his wife, pulling his K-Bar.

A thick coil whipped around Clay's legs, tangling him up and ripping his feet out from under him. He hit the dirt, slamming all the air out of his lungs. Through the pain and desperate struggle to breathe again, he hacked at the cord.

Alex easily dodged the oncoming cord and swung her Mossberg like a solo escrima stick. The wallop sent the cord cobra reeling sideways, but another one looped over her shoulders from behind, cinching her arms tight before jerking her off her feet, too.

The Doppler effect sound of a shout shot past Clay and Alex as Joe was dragged between them. A split second later, Clay's cord jerked. The grass and dirt tore at his hands and whipped his face as he was yanked backward. He stabbed the K-Bar into the ground, trying to grab some purchase, but it scraped across the hardpacked desert dirt without penetrating. He was barely able to keep the knife from being ripped out of his hand.

Then suddenly he stopped moving. The cord went slack around his ankles, and before he could jump up, a pair of cords snaked under Clay, shoved him to his feet, and spun him around.

He was back at the milk can tent.

Joe stood next to him, looking bewildered. A second later, Alex was shoved to her feet by the cords on Joe's opposite side.

"What the hell?" She sank into a wide, defensive stance, pulling free her kusarigama.

The cord cobras hissed at the weapon and slithered around, crissing and crossing over one another, but for some reason, they didn't attack.

"Guys," Joe said, his voice hushed with fear and awe, "I think they want us to play this game."

"Oh sure," Alex said. "And then they want us to get a slushy and a funnel cake and ride some rides."

"Think about it. Why else would they have dragged us back here?"

"He does make an excellent point," Bacon Bits said. Sometime during the snake-fight, the teacup pig had climbed up onto the wooden table in front of the Milk Bottle Toss with Chonk. She pointed down at the painted sandwich board sitting outside the tent. "'Must play,'" she read. "In my line of work, such things are often meant to be taken literally."

Clay looked around the midway again, this time really taking things in. There were two other MUST PLAY signs sitting out, one in front of a shooting gallery lined with glittering green superhero capes, and the last in front of the Ring the Bell game surrounded by winnable pink inflatable hammers.

Blue pandas, green capes, pink hammers. Blue, pink, green, like the first three dots in the incorrect ellipsis. So where was the black-and-white prize? The closest thing he could find was the picture of an Oreo on the side of the deep-fried confections truck.

"Let me try something." Clay slowly stuck his knife back in its sheath and raised his hands, showing the hissing cords that they were empty.

The hissing and agitated slithering calmed. They silently swayed and bobbed—all except the electrical cord snakes closest to Alex.

“Stow the kusarigama,” Clay said softly.

“Over my dead body.”

“Just try it, babe.”

“Yeah, babe,” Joe said, “have a little faith.”

Alex pointed the flail end of the chain at him. “You don’t ever call me that.”

“I double pinkie promise I won’t if you just put your ninja chopper away. Come on, short stack, ol’ Smilerfax would’ve wanted us to win a prize! Do it for him.”

“What he would’ve wanted was for us to die playing his rigged games,” she said.

“He never expected the Monster of the Midway, a.k.a one Joseph Jaeger, to step right up and win them all.” Joe swirled his finger to indicate the row of tents. “I know the trick to every one of these puppies.”

“Come on, Alex,” Clay coaxed, “you know if anybody really does know the tricks to these, it’s Joe.”

Alex sighed.

“Fine.” She stood up and shoved the chain sickle back in her belt. “But if we die, I’m going to kill you both.”

The second she took her hand off the weapon, the cords sank into neat coils with only their heads raised. It was almost like they wanted to see Joe back up his claims.

Joe picked up one of the baseballs and started tossing it to himself.

“Now, I’ve run a milk bottle throw or two in my life. It may look harmless, but the bottles are all insanely heavy. Not to mention, see how that bottom one is set up a little in front of the rest? As the CIC or ‘carnie in charge’ of the game, you’re supposed to arrange it that way so it absorbs most of the impact from balls thrown directly at the center.” He eyed the

stack. “Three bottles on bottom, two in the middle, one on top. Three throws to knock ’em all down. You’d be tempted to start hucking at the center of the stack or take out the top half, then work on the bottom, but you’ll never get all six that way. What you need to do—”

He reared back and let the first ball fly. It slammed into the bottom right milk bottle.

The whole stack of cans collapsed. A giant blue panda dropped off the tent. Immediately, Chonk leapt onto its head, wrasslin’ the stuffed bear around like a coked-up pro wrestler.

Clay whistled. “Nice shot.”

“Okay, I’m impressed,” Alex admitted.

Joe stood there, dumbfounded.

“That wasn’t supposed to happen,” he said, a frown creasing his brow. “You’re supposed to take out the bottom cans one at a time. That’s the trick.” He glanced down at his arm in a mixture of wonder and speculation.

Clay wasn’t entirely surprised. Although Joe wasn’t an Incant by any stretch yet, he was also something a little more than human thanks to the permanent stat potions they’d lifted off Gearhead. At sixteen, Joe’s Dexterity wasn’t anything to write home about, but his Strength stat was sitting at twenty, including the bonuses from his gear. Joe was probably putting a fair amount of extra heat on that ball, whether he knew it or not.

“It must be more about figuring out the pattern,” Clay said, nodding at the other must-play games so they could see what he’d noticed. “Blue prize first, green prize second, pink third. Every game takes us a little closer to the fun house.”

Joe shook his head. “But that’s not very hard.”

“Maybe the next game is.” Clay clapped his brother on the shoulder.

“Maybe.” Joe picked up the panda with Chonk still clinging to its head. “Let’s go, Chonk.”

Clay got why his brother was disappointed. He was feeling kind of let down himself. When they'd played video games as a kid, Clay had been the one who could never quite believe a puzzle or riddle was as simple as it looked. He'd always been sure there was something beyond the obvious solution, something more convoluted, more cunning. That was what Joe had expected, and not finding it had thrown him off.

Clay had been wrong a lot of times with those puzzle games, too. More often than not, the solution was as easy as "match the colored wire to the same-colored plug" or "light up all the circuits in order." There hadn't been a trick, and that kind of sucked. But every now and then there had been an outlier of a game where all the pieces came together to form a more elaborate solution, something nobody could ever have seen coming and yet still made perfect sense if you took the time to think about it.

Alex put a hand on her hip and cocked her body at their serpentine captors. "Are we even allowed to go to the next game?"

But the herd of electrical snakes made no effort to stop them as they moved toward the shooting gallery. Instead, they slithered alongside, pacing them like overzealous referees.

The superhero capes fluttered in the breeze, the tent's bare yellow bulb sending sickly green sparks glinting off the sequins. Beat-up pellet guns had been secured to the tabletop with steel cable. The targets were already in motion—weird misshapen little animals whirring across the gallery with a mechanical grinding noise.

"Go ahead, Clay," Alex said, nudging him forward. "You're the marksman of the family. This game was made for you."

Clay looked at Joe. "What's the catch? If there is one."

"Oh, there's always a catch. Carnies don't play fair. Ain't no money to be made in fairness. Either the barrels are slightly bent or the sights are off," Joe said. "They amount to the same thing—you can't trust your gun."

Clay nodded, then picked up the closest pellet gun and peered down the side of the barrel. It appeared to be straight, but the front sight was almost unnoticeably off-center. He pulled the butt to his shoulder and eyed the weird unknown creature targets. Blue on the middle rung, green on top, and pink on bottom.

Once again, no black with a white stripe. Either he was expecting too much from a random wasteland Dungeon Lord or they were in for a nasty surprise later on. He sincerely hoped it was the former.

Clay took a deep breath, eased it out, then repeated, this time stopping at a comfortable point in his exhale. *Plink, plink, plink*, he shot them down, blue, green, then pink.

He let the last of that breath out in a whoosh as a superhero cape fluttered to the ground. All around them, the cord cobras seemed to be bobbing in approval.

“This is suspiciously easy,” Joe said, snatching up the cape. “I don’t like it.”

He set the panda down long enough to fasten the glittering cape around Chonk’s neck.

“But you’ll keep the prize?” Alex said, cocking an eyebrow at him.

Joe glared at her. “It perfectly complements his hedge trimmer. What am I supposed to do, leave it?”

“Come on,” Clay said, looking down the midway to the last must-play game before the FUN HOUSE. “Let’s go ring the bell and get this over with.”

When they got to the strength game, Alex picked up the sledgehammer and looked at their resident carnival game expert. Even though she was the smallest of the three by a significant margin, strength was her strong suit. This game was made for her, just as much as the shooting arcade had been designed for Clay.

Joe heaved a sigh. “Hit it exactly in the middle.”

“Hard as I can?” she asked.

“I don’t even have the heart to say ‘that’s what he said.’” Joe waved a despondent hand at the game. “Looks are deceptive, short stack. They make you think it’s about strength, but really this is a game of precision. Just hit it on that dot at the center and the bell rings, whoop-ti-shit.”

She took a couple practice swings at the dot, then pulled back the oversized sledge and slammed it down. It struck a little off-center.

“Crap,” she muttered.

But the ringer shot up through the blue section of the high striker, through the green, and dinged the bell at the top of the pink section.

With a squeak, one of the inflatable pink hammers dropped at her feet.

“Okay, so we won all the must-plays,” she said, trading the huge sledge for the inflatable hammer and looking to Clay. “Now what?”

Clay turned to the looming demonic clown in front of Smilerfax’s FUN HOUSE. The sign didn’t suddenly reveal any hidden funereal messages, and for the moment, the metal facades of the massive structure showed only the happy circus scenes. No melting faces or magician’s assistants bleeding to death.

There were, however, three cutouts shaped like a giant panda, a superhero cape, and an inflatable hammer next to the entrance. The answer to this riddle seemed obvious enough.

Hefting their prizes, they headed for the clown mouth.

A cord cobra slithered like greased lightning in front of them and wrapped itself across the opening just before they could walk through. One of its buddies hissed, then jabbed its plug-head at an outstretched clown hand coming off the side of the demonic mouth.

Must be THIS tall to ride!

The “THIS” was marked with a reddish-brown line that had run in long dribbles down the sign.

Clay raised an eyebrow. The height requirement was barely five feet.

“They probably think Alex is too short,” Joe said.

She glared at him.

Joe shrugged. “Prove you’re not.”

She shoved the inflatable hammer at Clay, then stomped over to the clown’s hand. With her back against the metal, the top of her head was right on the line.

She threw up her arms. “Well?”

Joe cupped his chin and hemmed. “I’m going to need a second opinion on this one.”

“Seriously?”

“You’re just tall enough,” Clay said.

“Barely,” Joe said. “And yet my time-honed carnie instincts make me think you cheated somehow.”

She slapped his arm.

The electrical snakes didn’t let them through. The pointer jabbed its head at Clay and Joe, then at the height requirements.

“You’re kidding me,” Clay said.

“Look here, danger noodles.” Joe butted up to the clown hand to show them he was well over the requirement, and pointed at the line over his shoulder. “I’m at least a foot taller than—”

A *click* sounded, followed by a groan like a rusty door. A spring-loaded axe blade swung around the side of the giant hand.

Clay dove, tackling Joe to the ground. They landed in a heap of arms and legs as the axe blade thudded into the reddish-brown line where Joe’s neck had been a split second before.

“I get it!” Bacon Bits squealed with glee. “Must be this tall to ride—and no taller! It is a joke!” Her whole tiny body

wiggled from snout to tail. “Oh, I do like this Smilerfax!”

“Yeah, he’s a riot.” Clay helped Joe to his feet.

Now that Smilerfax’s axe-joke had been triggered, the cord cobras slithered aside.

Warily, Clay, Joe, and Alex crept through the demonic clown’s mouth. At the entrance, they stopped and stuffed their carnival prizes one at a time through the appropriately shaped cutouts.

The FUN HOUSE door sprung open, and a maniacal laugh rolled out of the blackness inside.

In a heartbeat, Clay had the M4 in his hands. Beside him, Alex swung her Mossberg toward the door. Bacon Bits ducked behind Alex, and Chonk bolted up Joe’s leg, chittering wildly.

“Easy, guys.” Joe swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “It’s an automatic thing, like those electronic chimes over store entrances.” In spite of his reassurances, he didn’t sound convinced himself. He scratched behind Chonk’s ears, not taking his gaze from the depths of shadow inside. “Most fun houses have them. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Powered by a Fyula rune,” Clay guessed.

“Sure.” Joe hefted Bertha. “That or evil scary ghost magic from the souls of the damned who dared to enter.” He shrugged. “That’s what I always figured was powering the one at the county fair.”

With a jerk on the starter cord, he brought Bertha to life, then stepped through the FUN HOUSE entrance. The darkness swallowed him whole.

“Once we’re done with this place, we need to have a serious talk about you guys letting me go first into potential combat situations,” Clay told Alex. “Rifles and Wands of Inferno are useless when you’ve got family right in your line of fire.”

“You dorks should both let me go first,” Alex said. “I’m the one with rapid health-regen and a Dungeon Lord-sized

pool of hit points. I could soak up damage while you two attacked from the sides.”

Clay hadn't seen it at first—he'd been too distracted by the jump scare—but there was a little heart-shaped cutout on the door right about his chest height. He frowned at it.

“I'm not sure I can deal with letting you take a beating for me,” he said.

“Aw, babe.” Alex relaxed her aim long enough to stretch up on her toes and peck him on the cheek.

“Is this what is referred to as a public display of affection?” Bacon Bits asked. “Because I want it to stop immediately. It makes me wish to heave my stomach contents onto the fun house platform.”

Alex chuckled and picked up the teacup pig, stuffing her into the biggest pouch on her vest.

“All right, knight in dingy scale armor,” she said, waving her Mossberg at the door. “You go first, and I'll come in at the last second and save your life.”

Clay smirked. “Last I checked, the score stood at two saves to one, with you losing.”

Before she could reply, he stepped into the black void of the fun house.

CHAPTER 9

CARNIE TRICKS



And immediately found himself standing outside the carnival's heart-shaped archway. Joe stood at the turnstile with Chonk on his shoulder, looking confused and a little annoyed.

“Smilerfax didn't have much of a grasp on what ‘fun’ meant,” he said when he saw Clay. “I'd even go so far as to say that starting this whole place over again is lame.”

“What,” Alex said, appearing behind Clay, “the hell?”

“It's like those games where you keep getting sent back to the beginning of a level until you play through the right way,” Clay said. “The way the game wants you to play.”

He surveyed the place, searching for differences. At first glance, everything in the midnight creepfest seemed the same except for the bloody neon sign over the archway. Now it said, *The heart's deadliest desire is the sweetest food... .* except now all the periods in the incorrect ellipsis were black with that white stripe through the center.

“We missed something,” Clay said. “It has to be the black and white part of the pattern—we never found out what that last dot corresponded to.”

“But there wasn't another spot on the fun house for us to put a fourth prize in,” Alex pointed out.

“What if it's a shadow level?” Joe gestured at the Milk Bottle Toss on the opposite side of the heart-shaped arch. “Like when you smash all the mystery boxes on a level, then

they send you back and all the boxes are replaced with outlines of boxes. Look.”

The pandas hanging from the tent were now the standard black and white, and the milk bottles, which had all been painted a faded blue, had been replaced with a row of black on the bottom, white in the middle, and black again on top. In the darkness, the top and bottom rows were just barely visible, and the white center almost looked like it was floating on nothing.

Clay craned his neck to look farther down the midway. The green superhero capes had been replaced with capes decorated black, white, and black again in three thick bands. The shooting gallery had been updated to match the new color scheme. Same for the Ring the Bell game and its prizes. The inflatable hammers looked even more ridiculous in black and white, like massively overstuffed Oreos on a stick.

“Could be a shadow level, I guess,” Clay agreed. But it would’ve been a lot more interesting if Smilerfax had set it up to keep sending them back until they figured out the puzzle.

Alex nudged him playfully. “Don’t sound so excited.”

“You’re right. We probably won’t ever get a job this easy again. I should enjoy it while it lasts.”

Joe cracked his knuckles. “Let’s smash some shadow boxes.”

The second they stepped through the heart and out into the midway, the multitude of garish yellow stage bulbs blinked off and the thin gauze of clouds pulled back. In the moonlight, the milk bottle tent looked mournful, the pandas misshapen and rabid. That warped carnival music sped up a few beats, snarling and shrieking and loping along, while the carnival rides swung along at an insane wobble.

Joe set up at the Milk Bottle Toss just like he had before, picking up one of the now black-and-white balls and winding up for the throw.

Chonk squalled.

He wasn’t by Joe’s side anymore; the little mechacoona had disappeared from the grass.

A plank of wood popped out of the ground in front of the milk bottles, with Chonk tied to its head.

Joe did a double take. “What in the great name of Poulan Pro are you doing, Chonkie?”

Chonk scolded him back in racoon, kicking and biting at the electrical cords holding him in place. Like the world’s largest metronome, the wood plank started ticking and tocking back and forth in front of the milk bottle pyramid. A bear trap descended from overhead, its jaws snapping open and shut closer and closer to Chonk’s head.

“Give Chonk back, you coon-kidnapping jerks!” Joe started over the table, but with a hiss and snap of cord, the electrical cobras snatched him by the ankles and pulled him back. “Let me go or face the wrath of Bertha!” He pulled the chainsaw from its sheath and fired her up, swinging wildly. “Eat saw!”

Clay and Alex jumped in, her going for the caterwauling coon and him trying to free his caterwauling brother without taking a chainsaw to the face. But they hardly made it a step before the cord cobras had bound them up again, even tighter than the first trip through the midway.

A set of ghostly pale numbers appeared beside the bear trap, counting down the seconds from 19. With every turn of the clock, the bear trap’s jaws snapped a little closer to Chonk’s head.

“Joe, settle down!” Clay struggled within the cord’s pythonlike constriction. “I think you’ve got to win this before it hits zero to get him back.”

“But carnie clocks never play fair,” Joe wailed, still wheeling Bertha wildly at the electrical snakes. Every time he hit, the cords threw up a shower of blue sparks. “Everybody knows there’s no way to win it before the time’s up!”

The numbers did seem to be ticking down a lot faster than a full second. For every Chonk-pendulum swing, three seconds disappeared.

But maybe Clay could fix that.

He cast Control Lights, concentrating with all his might on the flashing numbers. With an effort of will, he slowed them down, first to regular speed 8...7...6..., then grinding them to a stop at 5.

“Do it, Joe,” Clay yelled, straining to keep his concentration as he felt a little more energy trickle out with every breath he took. “Knock down the bottles!” he growled.

“All right, Smilerfax, you sick clown,” Joe said, grabbing a ball and winding up. “Let’s play a game.”

He chucked the first ball too far toward the center. It pinged off the purposely out-of-line bottle, shaking the pyramid, but not knocking the insanely overweight bottles down.

“You missed!” Alex kicked and fought the cords attacking her. “You’ve got to focus, Joe!”

“I didn’t miss,” Joe said. He reared back for a second shot.

It hit the same bottle, veering off again without knocking down a single milk can.

Clay’s stomach sank. The clock started up again. He renewed his concentration, but this time he couldn’t do more than slow them down.

4...

“Yes you did! You said you had to take the bottom ones out one at a time to knock over the whole tower.”

3...

Chonk squealed as the bear trap snapped right next to his ear. He sucked his head down into his furry shoulders.

“I did not miss,” Joe repeated, his voice deadly calm. “I hit that one on purpose.”

2...

He winged the last ball at the very center of the pyramid, giving it everything he had. The ball smacked that same center milk can at top speed. It shot out from under the stack, taking the top two rows of bottles with it in a chaotic clatter of metal

on metal. The bottom right can wobbled, then got smacked off the bench by one of the falling top cans.

The bottom left milk can spun in place, teetering almost horizontal, then righted itself.

It wasn't going to fall.

1...

Alex gasped. "Clay, do something!"

Desperate, he cast Sludge Slick on Chonk. Oil exploded from behind the mechacoon's back, covering the pendulum and splattering the rest of them.

0...

The buzzer sounded and the bear trap's jaws shot toward Chonk's head.

With a wet *sloop*, the mechacoon slipped out of the cord cobra's grasp and hit the ground—and he didn't stop there. He slid a full thirty feet, finally coming to a stop when he slammed into the side of the fried Oreo stand.

The cord cobras dropped to the ground, lifeless once more.

Free of their hold, Clay slumped with relief. Chonk looked a little dazed, but at least he still had his head attached.

"What on earth were you doing, Joe?" Alex demanded, kicking a leg free of limp electrical cord. "You knew the trick—why didn't you just knock them down like you said to?"

Joe rounded the table and went into the tent. "Because that's what Smilerfax wanted me to do. This was the other way to win." His voice became muffled as he ducked under the milk can bench. "The way to show this carnival who's boss. Knock that cheater can back into line, then take them all out at once."

Alex helped Clay to his feet. "Thank God you thought of that greasy spot spell."

"Sludge Slick. And you mean thank God I had just enough Magicka to cast it," he said wearily. He felt like an overcooked noodle.

“I knew it!” Joe came up from under the bench holding a magnet the size of a grapefruit. “That cheating sumbitch. So that’s the way we’re going to play this shadow level, huh? Fine. The gloves’re coming off! No more Mr. Nice Monster of the Midway. Come on, guys.” He chucked the magnet at the last milk bottle, knocking it over with a clang. “Let’s tear this carnival a new one.”

The wind picked up, making the shooting gallery’s black-and-white capes flap ominously as they came to a stop in front of it. With a start, Clay realized not only the color scheme had changed. Now instead of harmless little pellet guns, three ancient AK-47s were tethered to the table with log chains.

“Clay!” Alex shrieked. Her nails scraped down the calf of his pants.

He spun around just in time to see her hand disappear into a trapdoor in the dirt. The door screeched as it slid shut.

“Shit, Alex!” He dropped to one knee and jammed the butt of his M4 in the hole.

“Too late, bro.” Joe tapped him on the shoulder, then pointed at the shooting gallery.

Alex’s wrists were tied to each side of the gallery frame. She struggled and jerked, but she couldn’t break free.

A huge round sawblade big enough to hew redwoods into deck planks popped out of the side of the gallery, inching toward her. It was going to cut her in half at the waist.

“Nope,” Clay said, shaking his head. “Absolutely not. I’ve read all about AKs. They have shitty aim even when they’re not rigged, they jam like motherfuckers, and—”

The ghostly number 19 appeared over Alex’s head. With a click, it ticked down to 18.

“Take it easy, bro,” Joe said. “You already know the trick, and you beat this once—”

“Not with Alex right in front of the targets!”

“Clay, babe, I know you can make these shots,” she called. “You’ve got better dex than any of us. And if you miss, I’ve

got plenty of hit points, right? Just... you know... hurry.”

13...12...11...

Bacon Bits tugged on his pants leg. “I am not powerful enough to help you in this form, but please save Alex. I like her. She carries me about.”

“I’m trying.” The saw was screaming closer, and he was out of Magicka to slow the clock. “Shit.”

Clay scooped up a rifle and checked the barrel for defects. It looked clean, so the sights were probably the rigged part. God help him, his hands were shaking like crazy. He swallowed hard and pulled it to his shoulder. “Don’t move, okay?”

“Hey, thanks for the advice!” she said in insultingly grateful tones. “I was about to start practicing my kata.”

“Hey, good time for sarcasm.” Weirdly, that she could make jokes did make him feel infinitesimally better, though. He started the controlled breathing, trying to will the oncoming sawblade out of his field of vision.

8...

He sighted the best he could down the probably messed-up sights. He could just barely make out the black targets in the moonlight, and if the pattern had to do with anything, he probably had to shoot one black, one white, then one more black, just like the dots.

7...

He followed a target across the gallery.

But he couldn’t pull the trigger with Alex there.

6...

“Dammit!” He raised his head.

Maybe he didn’t have to play by the carnival’s rules. That had been the key in the last game—forget the way you were supposed to play it and come at the whole thing sideways.

4...

Clay jerked his chin at Joe. “Hit the deck just in case.”

“You got it.” Joe dropped, pulling Chonk and Bacon Bits down beside him.

3...

Clay took aim at the sawblade. As his breathing slowed, he felt himself relax and the whole world come into focus. He watched the individual saw teeth slicing toward Alex, saw the oscillation of the blade—there was a good inch’s give on either side. His gut told him that was the real key to the game, though if he screwed this up his wife was going to end up with an oversized saw lodged in her rib cage. So no pressure.

He sent up a silent prayer as he squeezed the trigger. Staccato bursts of automatic fire blasted out of the muzzle.

2...

The first shot hit the blade on edge, warping it. It wobbled and whined, thrown off-balance. The next two shots in that burst missed, but he adjusted on the fly for the new trajectory of the blade and squeezed the trigger again. The concept of “spray and pray” had never been quite so real to him.

1...

The second burst tore into the blade, this time ripping the disc halfway to the center. Jagged metal whipped toward Alex, but Clay sent the final blast downrange, nailing the swing arm the saw was attached to.

The mechanism shattered. At the same time, the cords tying Alex to the shooting gallery dropped loose. She ducked and covered. Clay followed suit as deadly bits of shrapnel flew off at all angles.

The timer hit zero and the buzzer sounded.

Clay leapt back to his feet and vaulted over the AK-47 table. He pulled Alex off the ground and hugged her tight.

“You did it, Clay-san,” she joked. “You became one with the bullet and showed that saw who’s boss.” When he didn’t let go, she patted him on the back. “It’s okay. You saved me. Everything’s fine.”

“Yeah, I know, I’m definitely fine with all this,” he said, squeezing her tighter. “Don’t I look fine?”

She laughed. “More like *foin*.”

“This is more affection,” Bacon Bits grunted darkly. “I too am glad Alex’s halves are still attached, but I retain my dignity and do not show it in public for all the other Dungeon Lords or their ghosts to see.”

“Aw, you little soft serve.” Joe rolled onto his side and scooped the teacup pig and Chonk into his arms. “I think some little oinker wants a group hug!”

“I do not! Unhand me immediately!”

When all the undignified displays of relief were concluded, the party made their way down the midway toward the Ring the Bell game.

The darkness felt electric with tension. Everybody was keeping an eye out for whatever insane new attempt on their lives the strength tester would make.

A light winked in Clay’s peripheral.

The fried confection stand’s inside light had come back on for a split second, illuminating what could only be the Widowmaker—a huge helping of deep-fried Double-Stuf Oreos sprinkled with powdered sugar. Clay had just enough time to think you were getting your money’s worth and more with that puppy.

Then the light blinked off.

The distraction had caused Clay to fall a couple steps behind the rest. He double-timed it to catch up.

In the darkness, the toe of his boot caught on something. He pitched forward. With the lightning-fast reflexes he’d gained from the dex potion, he chopped his steps and saved himself a face-plant. The graceful save was all for nothing, however. The ground dropped out from underneath him. Blackness replaced the moonlit carnival, and he felt himself falling impossibly upward.

Somewhere in the void, he heard Joe yell.

CHAPTER 10

SWEET TOOTH



Then Clay was on his knees with his cheek flat on the strike plate of the strength tester game. Joe was positioned the same way opposite him on the plate. This time instead of being tied down by cord cobras, they were locked headfirst through a pair of guillotines. The blades glinted in the moonlight.

Alex stood over them with the sledgehammer in hand.

“I must say,” Bacon Bits snuffled from somewhere nearby, “I am somewhat offended I was not the one chosen to give Alex pause. However, I appreciate not having my life endangered.”

“Aw, short stack, I didn’t know you cared about me so much,” Joe said.

“This is bullshit.” She looked at the head of the sledge. “There’s not even enough room between you guys for this thing to land. You’re dead either way.”

Straining his eyes, Clay found the timer already ticking down, the numbers plummeting like someone taking a swan dive off a twenty-story building.

“It’s all right,” Clay said, trying to reassure her like she had him. “Joe and I’ll pull our heads back—”

“Naw, that ain’t gonna do it. You gotta think outside the box, short stack,” Joe interrupted. “Think like a cheater, like the opposite of the honorable karate man.”

The timer kept up its headlong plunge.

“C’mon, crazy,” Clay said, “I know you can do this.”

Alex pressed her eyes shut and took a deep, calming breath. “Screw it. Sorry if this kills you guys,” she said softly, steadying her hands on the hammer handle.

She stepped back, then sprinted toward Clay. Leaping, she sprung off the guillotine blade over his neck. Her opposite foot landed higher on Joe’s guillotine, and she kicked off again. She ran up the last couple feet of black-and-white tower and directly walloped the bell with the sledgehammer.

It rang a heartbeat before the countdown struck zero.

She hit the ground in a three-point superhero pose, head snapping up to make sure they were still in one piece.

The guillotines dismantled themselves with a mechanical whirring, releasing Clay and Joe, and disappeared into the sides of the Ring the Bell game.

“Easy peasy,” Alex said weakly, her shoulders heaving as she huffed and puffed.

Clay gave her a hand back to her feet.

“I guess that was kind of impressive,” he said. “An MMA fighter probably would’ve done it better, but if that’s the best a martial artist can do...”

She elbowed him in the ribs. “That was so impressive it counts as two saves. We’re tied now.”

“My ass we are.”

Joe hefted Bertha onto his shoulder and looked toward the FUN HOUSE. The facades had flipped over to their demonic visions of melting faces, unknowable animals, and blood.

“Check it out,” Joe said. “The price of admission changed.”

Just past the demonic clown mouth, the cutouts for the panda, cape, and inflatable hammer had been replaced with cartoonishly perfect cutouts of a chainsaw-wielding man with a racoon perched on his shoulder, a petite little pixie of a woman, and a lanky guy packing an M4.

On the FUN HOUSE door, the little heart-shaped hole seemed to wait expectantly. Clay glanced at the overflowing trashcan behind the door. Had that been there on their first pass?

“It is no matter that I have been once again left out.” Bacon Bits turned away from the cutouts and lifted her snout to the sky.

“You weren’t left out,” Alex said, picking up the pig and sticking it in the front pocket of her vest. “You’re just hard to see in cutout form.”

Bacon Bits perked up. “Of course! I should have known one as infamous as the Great Blue Wurm would not be required to stoop to walking through on these silly hooves.”

Together, they stepped up to their corresponding cutout.

“This is it,” Clay said, steeling himself. “We ready?”

“Ain’t never been more ready,” Joe said, wrapping his fingers around Bertha’s starter cord. “Time to show this carnival who the real carnie is.”

Clay nodded, and the three of them stepped through...



...AND WERE RIGHT BACK at the beginning of the carnival. Overhead, the heart-shaped metal archway said *Feed the heart or taste its deadly bite...* in bloody neon. The lighting looked almost angry, as though enraged at their audacity to miss what was right in front of them. And still the dots were four black lights slashed across with white stripes.

“What the crackerjacks!” Joe kicked the dirt in frustration. “I hate puzzle games! This is like high school all over again! It can’t get any worse than this.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Alex pointed down the midway. “Those’re going to be way worse.”

Clay followed her gesture. Once again, the MUST PLAY games had changed, this time morphing into roided-out

versions of their formerly deadly selves. As if potentially dying wasn't enough of a threat, they had turned into what amounted to sentient meat grinders for the game player and whoever's neck was going to be on the line. At the milk can throw, a series of snapping bear traps dangled from the ceiling while a pair of industrial-strength pitching machines flanked the milk cans, pointing toward where the player would be standing. And instead of baseballs, spiked metal balls sat inside the automatic feeder basket.

The other games were no better.

At the target shoot, there were now 240 Medium Machine Guns instead of AKs, and the Test of Strength had sprouted eight electrical cord tentacles, which all wielded oversized metal mallets taking turns slapping down on where the player would be standing. The carnival wasn't trying to subtly rig the game anymore—it was now a kill or be killed situation, and Clay didn't think they could survive another round. Alex may have been an Incant, but she was still pitifully low-leveled in the grand scheme of things, and Clay and Joe didn't have the weapons or the skills to take out the army of sentient cobra cords.

“Nobody can survive that. Not even you,” he finally said to Alex. There was something off about this. Obviously, the carnival could've killed them several times over but hadn't. Why? “We're going about this all wrong. There's some key piece we haven't figured out yet, something Smilerfax wanted to get across.”

“What he wants to get across is a sharp knife across our necks,” Alex said. “And that's something I don't mind missing.”

Joe's mouth popped open. “Can she use ‘across’ twice in a sentence?”

“If they're used correctly, I'm in the clear.”

“Judges?”

“Not right now.” Clay shut his eyes and squeezed the bridge of his nose. There was something here, he knew it, but

he couldn't quite put his finger on it. What in the hell had they missed?

What had changed on their playthroughs?

Obviously, the games had gotten deadlier every time. That stupid messed-up ellipsis had changed color after that first time, and the games' color schemes had changed with them. The sign over the archway kept changing, too.

The heart hungers.

The heart's darkest desire is the sweetest food.

Feed the heart or taste its deadly bite.

Feed the heart. The heart-shaped archway didn't make any sense. They'd gone through it twice now—basically feeding it—and they kept landing back at the beginning. Not to mention its bite had gotten deadlier each time, so that couldn't be the answer.

What about that little heart on the FUN HOUSE door? It'd been there both times, but they hadn't found anything to put in it.

The heart's desire...

"The sweetest food is the heart's darkest desire," Clay said, snapping his eyes open. "How could we have missed it? It's literal. The must-plays were just a distraction. We walked right past the real key to this place both times."

"What are you talking about?" Alex asked, brow creasing as she looked at him.

Clay spun around to face his brother. "Joe, what makes the most money at a carnival?"

"Obviously the concession stands," he replied with a shrug. "Some people get motion sick on rides, and some people think they're too good to waste their money on rigged games, but I don't care who you are, everybody likes a snack. Especially carnie food. One smell of that funnel cake and people are lining up around the block."

“Exactly.” Clay shoved through the turnstile and headed for the food stand. “Tajira said Smilerfax took this place over because he had a deep-fried sweet tooth. Think about it. What’s darker or sweeter than a deep-fried Oreo?”

“Sugar with more sugar on top,” Joe volunteered, catching up to him.

“That’s sweet but not dark.” Alex ran to keep up with their long legs. “Black on white on black—that’s the part of the pattern you were talking about, Clay, the part we couldn’t find.”

“Because we were too focused on the prizes.” Clay stopped at the concession stand window. That spotlight had flared back to life, illuminating the powdered-sugar-sprinkled Oreo concoction. Now that he’d worked out the answer, the whole carnival seemed to be pointing the way, from the 19-second clocks at all the games, denoting the exact cost of the Widowmaker, to the *Finally finding the heart’s desire – priceless...* at the bottom of the price list. Hell, it even had the correct form of an ellipsis. “Smilerfax didn’t care about the prizes, he wanted us to find the overpriced, artery-clogging snack that he loved so much it killed him.”

Joe gasped. “Just like Mom.” He put a hand on his heart and bowed his head. “They’re eating deep-fried Oreos with Jesus now.”

“We just have to feed the heart.” Clay reached into the food stand, watching out for any traps that might spring at the last second, and lifted the Widowmaker out on its grease-stained paper plate. “Literally.”

The thick black snakes of electrical cord lined the midway. Alex and Joe fanned out to protect Clay’s sides, but this time the cord cobras didn’t attack. As the deep-fried cookie concoction passed between them, the electrical beasts lowered their heads in peaceful reverence. The warped, eerie carnival music took on a strangely uplifting note—something between a worshipful dirge and a heavenly choir.

The demonic clown mouth even seemed to be smiling as Clay passed under it.

At the FUN HOUSE door, Clay stopped and started feeding deep-fried Oreos through one at a time. When the plate was empty, he rolled its edges together and tipped in the remains of the powdered sugar, then tossed the plate into the trashcan by the door.

The door sprung open again, and the maniacal laughter sounded, bright and clear as a starburst.

Clay raised his M4. “Moment of truth.”

“We know you’re dying to lecture us about rifles going first,” Alex said, “so this time we’ll let you take the lead. Don’t worry, I’ll swoop in afterward and save your life.”

“Says the lady who’s still behind by one.” Before she could answer, he stepped into the shadows.

And stepped out into a light so brilliant he had to shield his eyes. Instead of being redirected back to the start, he found himself beneath the striped canvas of a circus big top. Garish spotlights shone down on a raised circular platform in the center on the unnatural tent. There was no sign of Smilerfax, which was a relief—it seemed Tajira had been telling the truth and he really was dead—but they did spot his throne. A gaudy thing constructed from a carousel bench seat, it was flanked by a pair of formidable-looking carousel animals—two striped Cheshire cats with overly large smiles.

Grease-stained and powdered-sugar-encrusted plates were stacked high around it. Smilerfax really had loved him some sweet fried goodness. A little too much.

There was also loot. Stacks of gold and silver coins piled into heaps. Magical weapons and armor, strewn carelessly about, as though they were a second thought.

Joe let out a whistle.

There was enough treasure to set them up for three lifetimes. With a haul like this, they could go back to Camp Liberty and live like kings. Hell, they could probably sell the haul to any of the mercenary groups that operated out here and head back to civilization with enough to buy back everything Alex’s cancer had stolen from them. House, truck, business,

dojo. All of it, and none of them would ever need to work another day unless they wanted to.

It was tempting. Normalcy. The easy life.

Thing was, Clay didn't want that anymore. And now that Alex was an Incant, it probably wasn't even possible. If they went back over the wall, the government would eventually come snooping around and find out about Alex's powers. Hell, even Clay's meager magical abilities would set off some red flags. Once that happened, life would change. The government wasn't in the business of letting unregulated Incants run around without supervision.

No, he, Alex, and Joe would bag what they could of Smilerfax's treasure hoard, but the real prize they were after wasn't money, it was power. And to get power, they needed to kill a couple of Dungeon Lords. For that, they needed to complete Tajira's quest.

Clay found what they'd come for resting on the armrest of Smilerfax's throne. A plain-looking saltshaker that could've come out of any cafeteria or diner on the planet.

He picked it up and inspected it with the Monocle of True Seeing.



Greater Saltshaker of the Troll Gourmet

Effect 1: Perfectly seasons any food item.

Effect 2: Perfectly protects against oversalting.

Salt is the true key to Flavortown, but it is a double-edged weapon. The right amount brings out bursts of brilliant flavor, but too much can spoil even the tastiest of dishes...



“Whoa,” Alex said as she stepped into the treasure hoard.

“We're gonna need a bigger backpack,” Joe said, staring in slack-jawed amazement at the piles of glittering gold.

Clay held up the saltshaker. “Got what we came for.”

“But you bloody buggers ain’t leavin’ here with it.” The Aussie Gearhead stormed into the FUN HOUSE and violently slammed the door behind him. “Maybe if you lot die real nice for me, I’ll bury you with your precious little saltshaker.”

CHAPTER II

AUSSIE FIGHT



In his whirring mech suit, Flynn “Gearhead” Lynes stood seven foot tall and looked like a half-human tank.

Clay could vouch for the accuracy of that appearance, almost having been crushed to death by the angry Aussie in their last meeting.

“It doesn’t need to go this way,” Clay said, putting up his hands. “I know we got off to a rough start, but no one needs to die. Blowing up your lab wasn’t intentional, and we’re happy to make restitution.” He waved a hand at Smilerfax’s hoard. “Hell, take this place. It’s yours. There’s more than enough to make up for whatever you lost back in the junkyard.”

Gearhead advanced a clanking step that rattled the FUN HOUSE and sent coins sliding off their piles.

“I intend to take the gold, all right. But I’m gonna do it the right way, ya bloody drongo. Keep what you kill, that’s the rule.” He stabbed a metal-clad fist at Clay. A mini cannon popped out of the wrist, its insides glowing red as a burning coal. “I’m gonna gut ya so’s I can spread your insides all over this fair like bloomin’ Anzac Day streamers. Then I’m gonna go the same to your budgie-smugglin’ brotha and that little bird you call a wife. Then, and only then, will I take all the bloody gold for myself. Keep what you kill, them’s the rules.”

Anger burned through Clay like a firestorm. No one threatened his family. No one. Joe and Alex were the only two people in the world he gave a shit about. Incant or not, Gearhead was going to regret coming at them.

“Last chance,” Clay said, barely restraining the growl in his voice. “Take the gold, we part ways, our business done, and I’ll generously forget what you just said. But I promise if you try to hurt my family, I’ll rip off your gearbox and shove it down your throat.”

“Big words, fucker. Let’s see ya back ’em up.”

“Now,” Clay barked.

While he’d been talking with Gearhead—distracting him—Alex had crept around to his flank. She swept forward like a tidal wave, slamming her shoulder into the Aussie’s side, then twisting into a brutal elbow strike, which knocked the cannon away from Clay. Gearhead staggered drunkenly, knocked off-balance by her rush. Staying with him, Alex blasted the Aussie in the jaw with a vicious follow-up hook.

Gearhead tumbled to the ground from the sheer force of the blow, but a second later he rolled back onto his boots with the grace of a giant robotic cat. The move should’ve been impossible given his bulky armor.

Joe whistled. “The gyros on that beast!”

“More like the dex potions,” Clay grumbled. He grabbed a Magicka potion from the foot of the throne and downed it.

“Six of one, baker’s dozen of the other,” Joe replied, shrugging. He jerked Bertha’s starter cord and the saw roared to life, preparing to charge.

Clay grabbed his brother’s arm.

“Wait!” he yelled loud enough to get the Gearhead’s attention. He focused on the indicator light at the center of the Gearhead’s chest plate and cast Control Lights. “Haul ass, guys!” he hollered, doing his best to sound panicked. “His suit’s about to melt down!”

Gearhead’s thick brows furrowed, and his face twisted with fury. But he looked down at the light, which was now burning with the same insanely bright light the iron golem’s had shined with just before it blew his workshop sky high.

The distraction worked. Alex darted in again, snagging him by the throat then hooking her foot behind Gearhead's heel. With a deft lift and pull motion, she swept the leg, slamming him flat on his back. The second he hit the ground, she threw a series of quick body shots to a squealing servo on the side of his suit. The tiny motor sparked. Lynes floundered for a second like a turtle on its back.

“Seriously,” Clay said, jerking his head at her and Joe, “time to go.”

They came running, Alex in the lead with Bacon Bits in her pocket.

“Mayhem!” the teacup pig squealed gleefully. “Violence! Havoc!”

Clay and Joe followed along behind, with Chonk hard on their heels. The five of them crashed through the FUN HOUSE door.

An army of electrical snakes had converged on the exit, hissing and spitting and slithering over one another angrily. Strangely, none of the cord cobras moved to attack as their little group raced out into the dim gloom of the carnival. They stayed staring expectantly at the FUN HOUSE door.

Clay, Alex, and Joe barely made it ten yards down the midway when a roar like a tornado shook the air. Something boomed, metal shrieked, and heavy-duty canvas ripped.

The Aussie exploded out the top of the FUN HOUSE, blasting into the air like a space shuttle. Boosters had been attached to the bottoms of his boots and at strategic points along his suit to stabilize his flight. He raised his cannon arm again and pointed it at their group.

Clay had told Gearhead that if he picked a fight, he wasn't going to walk away, and he intended to see that promise paid in full. But they were completely outmatched and outgunned. Alex was tough, fast, and hit like a sledgehammer, but Gearhead had to have twenty levels or more on her—not to mention superior gear and buckets of extra stats, thanks to his potion manufacturing hustle. Clay and Joe weren't bringing

much to the table at this point. Tinkering with the lights on Gearhead's suit was Clay's magical ace in the hole, and it wasn't going to work twice.

If they were going to survive this, they would have to fight smart... and pray they got lucky as hell every step of the way.

"Scatter," Clay bellowed, a plan already forming in his mind.

They all bolted in different directions. Clay and Alex tucked and rolled under the Tilt-a-Whirl, while Joe and Chonk dove into a wagon shaped like a giant lemon that purported to sell frozen lemonade.

Red light flashed. Thunder boomed, and dirt and scorched grass rained from the sky. The spot on the midway where they'd been a second before had turned into a charred crater.

"How's yeh like that, ya wankers?" Lynes crowed. "Decided I needed a ranged banger after our last little tango so's I could cook me some chookshit tumbleweeds."

"I'm gonna kick his ass into next Thursday," Alex said, starting for the dented ride skirting.

Clay grabbed her shoulder. "Not by yourself, you're not."

"I love you and Joe dearly," she said, "but I'm the one with the Incant powers. If we're going to walk away from this thing, it's on me."

"Just because you're an Incant doesn't mean you can go ten rounds with him," Clay said, trying to make her see reason. "The psycho's probably been shotgunning stat potions from the time he learned how to craft them until now."

As if to confirm Clay's theory, the wreckage of the kiddie coaster soared past and landed in a twisted heap on top of the Tilt-a-Whirl.

"Hiding in there, are yas?" Lynes flew out of Clay's field of vision. "Come out, ya buggers, or I'll smash you out."

"What exactly are you proposing?" Alex asked, looking through a rust hole in the Tilt-a-Whirl floor at the smoldering, sparking wreckage of the coaster.

“We turn the dungeon on him. He’s powerful, but did you see those cord cobras? They were pissed. He didn’t play the games. Didn’t pay the price of admission into the fun house. We did.” Clay peeked through the awning. The Target Shoot still had 240s sitting out, and the Test of Strength was going wild, corded arms flailing about with heavy, spiked mallets. “I think we can turn the games on him. That’s our edge. I’ll get Joe on board. You just get to the Test of Strength and be ready. We’re going to drive him to you.”

“How?” she asked.

Clay winked. “Do you trust me?”

She scowled. “You know I hate those movies.”

“Yeah, but you love me. I promise this’ll work—I’ll make it.”

Another screech made Clay flinch as Gearhead ripped out the basketball toss and hurled it through the air. Like the kiddy coaster, it landed on the Tilt-a-Whirl with a crunch, rattling the scant protection covering Clay and Alex. The stink of hot metal singed his nostrils.

Clay ignored the noise, the heat, and the chaos and focused instead on the small pool of *Magicka* churning inside his body. Last he knew Joe was in the lemonade stand, and so far he hadn’t seen his brother abandon it. He spoke—just a whisper—and cast the very first cantrip he’d ever learned, *Beguiling Call*. It was a basic glamor spell that allowed him to throw his voice to another location within line of sight.

Joe had laughed when Clay told him about it and immediately asked if he could throw farts with it too. Despite the mockery, Clay had known it had some handy combat applications. And yes, it turned out he *could* throw farts with it. Fart sounds, anyway.

His voice vanished and power drained from his body as the words resurfaced a hundred feet away. “Draw him out, Joe. Distract him long enough for Alex to make a break for it, then use the automatic pitching machines at the Milk Bottle Toss to drive Gearhead toward the Test of Strength.” Just speaking the

few sentences exhausted Clay to his core and left him feeling hollow and empty. Draining Magicka without having the ability to regenerate it was no fun. Thankfully, he still had a potion in reserve.

He chugged the brew while he silently hoped and prayed. Beguiling Call wasn't telepathy, so there was no way to know if Joe had actually gotten the message.

Just when Clay was about to give up hope and go it alone, he heard his brother's twang.

"Yo, Waltzing Matilda, why don't you come pick on somebody your own size?" Joe yelled, gunning Bertha's engine. Chonk's little hedge trimmer echoed the war cry. "You scared of Lumberjack Joe Jaeger?" He sauntered into the center of the midway, back straight, head held high. "'Cause buddy you should be."

"Now's our chance," Clay said.

"Fine, but if this works it's going on my save counter," Alex grumbled.

"You have a problem, woman." He gave Alex a quick kiss—before she could protest further about how dumb and reckless this was—and pushed her into motion.

She turned and bolted across an open stretch of midway, angling toward the ring toss booth.

Clay ran his thumb over the silver band on his ring finger, the Hatchling Naga's Band of Quickstrike. It was his replacement wedding ring and a reminder of what was on the line here, what he was fighting for. It also happened to give him a dex boost and a small bonus to movement speed, which he would need to pull this off.

He took one more glance at his brother. Joe was still running his mouth while slowly circling toward the Milk Bottle Toss. Good. Now it was Clay's turn to buy Joe a little time.

Clay pulled up the Tilt-a-Whirl skirting and took off at a dead sprint toward the Target Shoot, arms and legs pumping like mad. He slid to a stop and pulled a 240 Medium Machine

from the counter. The electrical cord cobras swayed, heads bobbing, but they didn't seem particularly interested in stopping him. Clay and the others had already played Smilerfax's game and won. The cobras were now more or less indifferent to him.

To Gearhead? Not so much.

Snaking cables slithered toward the pitched battle between Joe, Chonk, and the enraged Incant.

Joe leapt over the Milk Bottle counter and co-opted one of the automatic fastball pitchers, which were now filled with spiked metal balls.

"What would win in a fight?" Joe taunted. "Gearhead McAussie's fancy-shmancy beer can suit or Joe Jaeger's infamous deadly fastball?" He slammed a fist against the ignition button. "Batter up!"

The pitcher whirled to life and metal balls exploded from the basket feeder with a *whomp*. They whistled through the air like missiles and crashed into Gearhead's mech suit, leaving huge dents. The hits slowed his approach, but didn't knock him back. Too much power in the suit and strength in his stats.

"Reckon I've had about alla ya fuckery I can stand," the Incant spat.

Gearhead batted the next spiked ball aside with his armored fist, then leveled the barrel of his cannon arm at Joe and the pitching machine. So much for Joe's distraction buying time. Clay had to act before the Incant blew his brother's head off.

Utilizing the full speed of the naga ring, Clay broke left and circled around so that Gearhead was sandwiched between him and Alex at the Test of Strength.

The Incant's cannon glowed red, a heartbeat from firing.

Clay planted his feet, jammed the buttstock of the stolen carnival machine gun into his shoulder, and let it rip. He'd used 240s back during his days in the Corps, and they weren't meant to be fired from the shoulder. Thanks to his enhanced strength, he managed to keep the barrel more or less on target,

but it was still a fight. Screaming rounds chewed into Gearhead, sparking madly and pinging off into the night.

The Incant's shot at Joe jerked wild. With a snarl, Gearhead snapped a metal helmet down over his face, protecting his head from the incoming 240 rounds.

“Done hidin’ then are ya, ya bloody bunga?” Lynes took aim at Clay, his cannon flaring red. “Welcome to the piss-up!”

“Croikey, mate, I wasn’t done with yeh yet!” Joe drawled in an offensively bad Australian accent. He grabbed the pitching machine and awkwardly straddled the counter, somehow managing to shoot off another volley of spiked fastballs as he went. “Have anotha shrimp fah the bahhhbie!”

A spiked ball clanged off the back of Gearhead's helmet. His head whipped toward Joe.

Clay moved closer, sending more rounds pinging off the Incant's suit. Bombarded from both sides, Gearhead started to move back, trying to get them both in his field of vision.

“Hold still, ya wankers!” Lynes picked up speed, backpedaling unknowingly toward Alex.

While Joe kept blasting fastballs at him, Clay stayed on the move, keeping the pressure on and himself just out of Gearhead's line of sight.

It was working! They made it halfway across the midway, heading toward the Test of Strength, before Gearhead finally launched his counterassault.

“Enough of this shite!” Gearhead yelled, slamming his forearms together with a thunderous *clang*.

A bright light flared, and his arms seemed to fuse together. A huge steel tower shield emerged from the forearm plates, covering him head to toe. With a roar, Gearhead lumbered into motion, charging Joe. The steel fastballs continued to hit with rhythmic thuds, but the conjured shield was just too damned thick.

“Get out of the way!” Clay yelled, but it was impossible to be heard over the din of the battle. “Joe, move!”

Joe wasn't fast enough by half. Gearhead slammed into him like a rampaging rhino. The pitching machine absorbed the brunt of the blow, but Joe still went sailing, tumbling ass over teakettle. He smashed bonelessly into the side of the lemonade stand and dropped to the ground, down for the count.

Clay's blood ran cold. It seemed like an eternity, but finally, he caught the steady rise and fall of Joe's chest start up again. His brother was alive, though for how long now depended entirely on Clay and Alex.

Or maybe not entirely on them.

Chonk raced forward, dragging one of the bear traps from the Milk Bottle Toss behind him. The mechacoona leapt as Gearhead closed on Joe and swung the bear trap by its chain. The trap smacked into Gearhead's shoulder and snapped closed on impact, the heavy teeth punching cleanly through the metal in a way Clay's bullets had failed to do. God rest his monstrous soul, but Smilerfax sure knew how to build a quality trap.

With the bear trap lodged firmly in place, Chonk launched a fresh assault, scrambling up one of Gearhead's legs.

"You bleedin' ungrateful traitor!" Lynes roared. "I created you!"

The mechacoona gnawed and clawed at his armor, trying to rip the suit open at the knee like the non-mecha version of his species cracking open a crawdad on a riverbank. The furious Incant kicked and batted at the little trash panda.

A lucky punt sent Chonk flying after his unconscious owner.

The scuffle with the trash panda had pushed Gearhead even closer to the Test of Strength, but now it was all on Clay.

"You want to face off man to man?" Clay pulled the Wand of Inferno. "Fine. Let's see who's got the bigger fireballs."

Gearhead grinned, the mechacoona already forgotten. "A'right, then, catch!"

He pointed his cannon at Clay and fired.

Clay dodged, thankful for all that extra dex, and fired off the first of his eight shots for the day.

Gearhead blurred out of the way, and the crackling bolt of Inferno blasted the Pick the Duck pool sky high. Rubber duckies were still raining down as the Incant took aim at Clay again. That answered the question of whether Lynes had min-maxed his stats. Obviously, he was keeping them all equally topped off. The Incant's speed and dex made Clay look like Alex's memaw during her double broken-hip period.

Red light flared behind Clay. He tucked and rolled, using his own dex to come out of the dive. He leveled the wand with his off hand and unleashed a second fireball that streaked across the midway, leading Gearhead by a fraction of an inch. The Incant tried to correct course when he realized Clay had anticipated him, but he was a hair too slow. The fireball caught the meched-out Incant full in the chest and knocked him back a good ten feet. A plume of smoke drifted up, and an angry scorch mark adorned Gearhead's chest plate. Otherwise, he looked unharmed.

"Barely even stung," Gearhead gloated. "Here you were talking a big game about killing me, and ya can hardly even scratch my paint job." He thumped his chest. "Have a go, I'll give ya a free shot, just so you can see how right fucked you are."

Clay wouldn't pass up an opportunity like that. Without hesitation, he released not one but three more fireballs in rapid-fire succession—*thoom, thoom, thoom*.

Fire enveloped Gearhead and a cloud of debris billowed up, making it impossible to see. Clay held his breath, hoping that Gearhead's hubris was more powerful than his armor.

But no. As the smoke and dust cleared, Gearhead was still standing, his armor charred but serviceable.

"Ya bloody Yanks never stood a chance," Gearhead mocked.

“I wasn’t trying to kill you,” Clay replied. “I was just moving you into position.”

A second later a spike-studded mallet, wielded by the sentient Test of Strength machine, sideswiped Gearhead. He folded like a cheap lawn chair. Another mallet whistled toward the Incant from overhead. He saw it at the last second and rolled, narrowly avoiding the blow.

What he didn’t avoid was Alex’s kusarigama. The chained weapon flashed out and the heavy spiked ball on its end clanged into Gearhead’s jaw, knocking his helmet loose. It went spinning into the night, clattering on the dusty asphalt.

The Incant hastily scrambled back to his feet and wiped blood from his bottom lip, glaring at Alex. She was standing on top of one of the swaying, hammer-wielding cobra arms, outside the swing of the mallets.

“The rumors are true, then, are they?” Lynes asked, eyeing Alex. “You bleedin’ tumbleweeds actually managed to kill Katotes. And the sheila’s got his power, eh?” He aimed the cannon at Alex. “I could always use a little more strength. Throw in with me, leave these fucksticks behind, and I won’t hurt ya. Unless ya like it rough. Whaddaya say, little bird?”

“Eat shit,” Alex said, launching a fresh attack with her kusarigama.

The chain shot out, but Gearhead sidestepped the ball.

He raised his arm and tried to take aim, but Alex was too fast. She darted in between the swaying hammer arms, drawing Gearhead in after her. The Test of Strength hammer arms rained down, pummeling him from every side and exacting vengeance for his refusal to play the game. From the protection of the swinging arms, Alex threw attacks with her kusarigama. Lynes tried to retreat, but the snaking cobra cords picked that moment to spring their insidious trap. Thick cables wrapped around the Incant’s ankles and slithered up over his arms, miring him in place.

“Bugger off and get stuffed, ya fuckin’ extendy cords!” he yelled, struggling to free himself. A panel on his forearm plate

flipped open and a huge buzz saw emerged, slicing mercilessly at the cords, but more were slithering in from all over the carnival.

Despite the hammer blows from the machine and Alex's weapon strikes, Gearhead remained standing. Reluctantly, Clay abandoned the 240 in exchange for the M4 dangling from its sling and raced toward the action. Incant or not, a .556 round to the face was going to eat the hell out of his health pool—Clay just needed to get close enough to take the shot. Even with his elevated dex, there was too much chaos going on to shoot from a distance. Plus, the chances of hitting Alex were just too high for comfort.

Know your target and what lies beyond it, he reminded himself.

Clay ducked around the Mount Everest rope climb and got into position behind the Test of Strength machine. He needed to be close, but not too close; he had no doubt that those hammers would target him if he got in range. Alex was only alive because of her uncanny ability to dodge the wildly flailing machine.

“Enough muckin’ around!” Gearhead thundered. The overlap plates covering the Incant's chest had pulled back, revealing a pulsing orb of brilliant white energy. “Suck the snag, ya bungas!”

Clay raised the rifle and squeezed the trigger in a single fluid motion. Too late. In the same instant, a column of light erupted from Gearhead's chest, shooting toward Alex.

She threw herself to one side, but the lance of energy clipped her and sent her flying. In its wake, the Test of Strength exploded.

Eyes wide, Clay backpedaled, but the expanding beam caught him like a freight train. The world spun and he landed in a sprawl, stars winking on and off in his vision. He smelled something burning. Skin. Probably his own, though the pain hadn't set in yet.

He tried to sit up but couldn't.

Alex was squirming on the scorched grass twenty feet away, but she seemed to be in only slightly better shape than Clay felt.

Gearhead was bent over and looked winded from their mallet-kusarigama-M4 attack, but otherwise he was doing dandy. The Test of Strength game was gone, nothing left but a smoking ditch in the earth, and the cords that had been wrapped around him had melted to his suit. Their days of defending Smilerfax's carnival were over and done with.

“Last chance, girly,” Gearhead growled, stalking toward Alex. “I’ll treat you nice, so long as you learn your proper place—”

“Havooooooc!”

Gearhead stopped in his tracks as the howl of a gas engine cut through the night and a mechacoon chittered out a bloodthirsty war cry. The dune buggy smashed through the carnival fence with Joe in the driver's seat and Chonk strapped in next to him, cradling the havoc-crying Bacon Bits. Still winded, Gearhead turned, and his eyes flared wide.

Clay could barely get his body to move, but he had enough juice left in the tank for one last cantrip. He mustered the Magicka trickling through his body and shaped it according to his will. A thin sheen of slick oil appeared beneath Gearhead's feet, spreading out in a ten-foot radius. Gearhead lurched into motion, but his steel boots found no purchase.

“What the bloody—”

The rusty off-road vehicle plowed into the Incant. His laser blast went off, streaking harmlessly into the night sky.

With a thud and clank of metal, Gearhead and the dune buggy careened into what remained of the FUN HOUSE trailer. The buggy pinned the Incant in place, just long enough for Joe to leap from the driver's seat and onto the hood with his chainsaw in hand.

“Ain't nobody messes with Lumberjack Joe's family!”

“Fuck me dead,” Gearhead said in disbelief.

“If you insist.” The chainsaw growled as Joe gunned the gas and drove the blade down, straight into the Incant’s unprotected neck. Blood sprayed, painting the side of the FUN HOUSE red.

With a clatter of metal, Lynes dropped over the front of the dune buggy, dead. Turned out, some things were lethal no matter what kind of power you had at your disposal—a chainsaw to the neck seemed to be one of them.

The booming sound of tribal drums drowned out the warped carnival music, and an invisible force lifted Joe into the air. He was covered in gore, whooping like a happy hound, and had Bertha lifted above his head like the NASCAR cup.

It was like when Alex had become an Incant, but that didn’t make any sense. Weren’t people only supposed to gain Incant powers if they killed a Dungeon Lord?

Clay didn’t dwell on the thought long. That final spell had taken everything else out of him. Black invaded from the sides and the last thing Clay saw as the curtains came down on his vision was his brother glowing with brilliant golden light as the blood and bruises burned away.

CHAPTER 12

INCANT JOE



“Is he dead?” a small voice oinked.
“No, he’s just unconscious.”

“I never know what will end you puny humans. At times you seem so fragile, and at others, you are harder to stomp out than an infestation of kokopellis.”

Alex’s soft hands pulled Clay’s head into her lap. “Come on, babe, wake up.”

“You have to do it like this.” Joe slapped his cheek. “Clay, wake up! The trailer’s on fire!”

Clay groaned and rolled away from his brother.

“Stop that!” Alex snapped. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I see no fire,” Bacon Bits snuffled. “Nor any trailer.”

“It’s a joke from when we were kids.” Joe poked Clay in the side and stage-whispered, “Get up, bro. I’ve got big news you’re not gonna want to miss.”

“And you can’t wait five minutes to tell me?” Clay rasped. It felt like somebody had taken a belt sander to his throat and the claw end of a hammer to his skull. He squinted up at his family. Even the sliver of moonlight from behind the gauzy clouds stabbed savagely into his pupils.

Joe grinned down at him. “Five minutes? I don’t want to wait five seconds.”

Alex pressed a cool glass bottle into Clay's hand. "Here, drink this, babe."

"Yeah, babe," Joe said. "Drink this, and then guess who's got two thumbs, a chainsaw, and Incant powers."

Still on his back, Clay downed the Ultimate Healing Potion. A little trickled into his beard, but that was better than moving right then. He wiped it away with the back of his hand. As the wave of relief washed away the world's worst migraine-sore-throat combo, he relaxed back onto Alex's folded legs, his arms falling limp on the scorched grass and sand.

Bits and pieces of the carnival riddle and the fight with the Gearhead slowly fit together.

Clay squinted at Joe. His brother was wearing what looked like the Gearhead's mech armor, except it was remarkably clean and undamaged for something that had just recently been impaled by a chainsaw.

"I think that fight must've knocked something loose in my head. Did you just say you're an Incant?"

"Hells yeah, I did. Pretty sweet, amiright?"

"But there isn't even a Dungeon Lord here," Clay said. "How did you end up with powers?"

Alex brushed sweaty hair off Clay's forehead. "Well, if you think about it, we *are* Dungeon Lords," she said softly. "Incants, I mean. Remember what happened after we killed Katotes? I got that prompt saying that, as a Freehold Incant, I could claim his Dungeon Stronghold. What if Freehold Incant is just a fancy term for Dungeon Lord without a dungeon? What if all the Incants are actually just human Dungeon Lords? Maybe that's why they're all so secretive."

"I think short stack's onto something here," Joe said. "Because right after I chain-sawed ol' Gearhead, this killer drum track started playing like"—he mimed playing a massive trap set, making the sounds with his mouth—"and then I was floating, and my stove-up ribs healed, and everything was bright and awesome, and I got a notification that I had all these

cool powers with mech and bonuses to runes and small engines and stuff. And, even more to the point, I got a message saying I could lay claim to any fallow dungeon location or challenge another Dungeon Lord to a duel for the right to their stronghold.”

Bacon Bits snorted and rolled her eyes. “Foolish humans, this is a thing we Dungeon Lords have long known for ages. I will admit, however, it is fascinating to see your kind finally piecing together the information.”

“In our defense,” Alex said, “there aren’t exactly textbooks out there on how to become an Incant, just the rumors about killing a Dungeon Lord. And I’ve never even heard a whisper about getting power by killing Incants. Not once, and we scoured every corner of the internet before coming out west. The Incants have to be keeping it under wraps because they know if word got out, it would be open season on any Incant not smart enough to... well, hole up in a dungeon.”

A crazy thought hit Clay, and he sat up, bracing himself with his arms. “They’re not the only ones keeping it under wraps. The Marine who struck the killing blow on that Jordanian Incant disappeared the same night. Word was they’d been ambushed on the way back to base and wiped out, but nobody ever found any remains.”

Joe gasped. “You think the military took him!” He slapped a hand to his chest. “*Our* military! To create the perfect melding of man and magic, a superweapon the likes of which the world has never—”

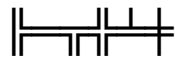
“No. No way.” Alex made a slashing motion in the air. “We are not doing redneck conspiracy hour right now. We have more than enough problems to handle as it is without worrying about what the government is or isn’t up to.”

Except that’s exactly what we should be worried about, Clay thought.

Alex was right, now wasn’t the time or place for this conversation, but if the government did know about how Incants were made, then Alex and Joe probably already had targets on their backs. They would need to be extra careful

around the DoD mercenary contractors, like Triple S, who regularly ventured out into the wasteland looking to scavenge loot and sell it back to the government at a steep profit. If the government was in the business of making super soldiers, how much would they pay for a live Incant, hog-tied and delivered into their hands?

“Still, best if I see what the damage is,” Clay said. He dug the monocle out of his pocket and slipped it over his eye inspecting his newly transformed brother.



“Lumberjack” Joe Jaeger

Level: 4

Race: Incant

Class: Arcane Tinkerer

Alignment: Earth/Fire

Exp: 387 Exp; to next level: 3,840

Available Characteristic Points: 0

Health: 365

H-Regen/5 Sec: 43

Magick: 240

Magick-Regen/5 Sec: 8.75

Stats:

- Strength: 30 (22 + 8 item bonus)
- Constitution: 51 (40 + 11 item bonus)
- Dexterity: 20
- Intelligence: 19

Attributes:

- Armor Rating: 344
- Melee Attack Damage: 117
- Ranged Attack Damage: 87

- Spell Damage: 85
- Movement Rate: +5%
- Critical Hit Chance: 10% (7% + 3% item bonus)
- Critical Hit Damage: +60%

Active Effects:

- Redneck Wisdom

Arcane Tinkerer Skills:

- Pact of Armor
- The Everyman Tool
- Material Mending
- Arcane Engineering

Player Special Skills:

- Bonded Companion – Lv. 2
- Chainsaw– (Melee Skill) Lv. 2
- Mechanical Craftsman – Lv. 3



“Hot damn,” Clay whispered, eyes wide.

Joe grinned. “Fits just right, don’t she? It’s like three lawn mowers welded together on monster truck tires—tailor-made just for me. Pact of Armor turns this beautiful hunk of iron and steel and rivets”—he thumped a hand against the mech suit—“into an arcane focus. It’s bound to my body, so nobody can pry it off unless I’m dead, and I can take it on and off in a jiffy.” He snapped his fingers and a swirl of black fog enveloped him. When it cleared, Joe was wearing his tin pants, jean jorts, and flannel shirt once again. Another snap and the armor was back in place.

“Badass, amiright or what? Plus I have a super beefed up Constitution, I passively regenerate health and Magicka now, and I have enough health points to take the mother of all

beatings—assuming their hits can even make it through my fancy armor. I’m a freakin’ tank. And that’s not even the coolest part. Material Mending lets me channel Magick to restore the durability of items and repair any damaged material that I can cover with my palm. Took a little doing, but I managed to fix this suit of armor up with hoodoo. Can you believe it?”

“I’m starting to,” Clay mumbled, eyeing the pristine looking suit of steel. “And what about the other two things? The Everyman Tool and Arcane Engineering?”

“I saved the best two for last, broham! The Everyman Tool? Literally any tool.” He reached into a compartment at his side and pulled out what looked like a heavily used Phillips-head screwdriver. He grinned as the screwdriver shimmered and elongated, turning into a hammer. Then it distorted again, transforming into a Sawzall with a *Fyula Rune* etched into the side. He panted, breathing hard as the Sawzall shifted, finally returning to the screwdriver. “I can channel energy into it and temporarily transform it into any handheld tool.

“It’s like a portable shop, right there in my pocket. Which is great, because I need all kinds of weird tools for Arcane Engineering, which, to my mind, is the perfect blend of magic and engineering. I can break things down shotgun style, figure out how they work, then use my magic to fix ’em up and get ’em working. It’s basically like what I’ve always done, but now I can use magic instead of YouTube videos to create whatever asinine inventions strike my fancy. Pretty sure that’s how Gearhead managed to create this little guy.” He reached down and ruffled Chonk’s furry head.

There was some small part of Clay that hated that he was now the weakest member of his family, but at the same time, the Arcane Tinkerer class really was perfect for Joe. Plus, they were that much closer to achieving their long-term goals. Now instead of locating and taking out two Dungeon Lords, they only needed to find one.

“There’s something else,” Alex said. “Gearhead must’ve been a lot more powerful than Katotes, because I got a ton of

experience when he died. It pushed me up to level eleven, and I unlocked a new evolution.”

“Yes, that is correct,” Bacon Bits said, ears flopping as she bobbed her head in agreement. “Level ten is usually when the first evolution happens for midrange dungeon monsters. As we grow, we evolve and change, unlocking new forms and abilities at key junctures. I myself started out as a lowly Draconic Grub if you can believe it.”

“So what’s your new class?” Clay asked Alex.

“Bloodborne Striker,” she said.

Clay grunted noncommittally and turned his monocle on his wife.



Alexandra Jaeger

Level: 11

Race: Incant

Class: Bloodborne Striker

Alignment: Blood

Exp: 103; Exp to next level: 9,240

Available Characteristic Points: 5

Health: 281/281

H-Regen/5 Sec: 58.5

Magick: 280/280

Magick-Regen/5 Sec: 10.75

Stats:

- Strength: 56 (50 + 6 item bonus)
- Constitution: 26 (25 + 1 item bonus)
- Dexterity: 33 (30 + 3 item bonus)
- Intelligence: 18

Characteristics:

- Armor Rating: 119
- Melee Attack Damage: 229
- Ranged Attack Damage: 173
- Spell Damage: 176
- Movement Rate: +9.1%
- Critical Hit Chance: 8.3%
- Critical Hit Damage: +66.5%

Active Effects:

- Rapid-Regen
- Goliath Physique: Disease, Filth, and Poison Immunity (Permanent)

Basic Brute Skills:

- Battle Instinct
- Goliath Grip
- Uncanny Reach
- Bloodborne Frenzy
- Bloodborne Armor

Player Special Skills:

- Chain Weapons – Oversized (Melee Skill) Lv. 4



Clay was shocked at the changes. She was light-years stronger than him or Joe—even the newly modified Joe, who legitimately had Incant powers of his own—and she’d unlocked two new abilities with this evolution: Bloodborne Frenzy and Bloodborne Armor. He wondered what these new skills would bring to the table.

“Bloodborne Frenzy is basically Barbarian Rage,” Alex said, as though reading his thoughts. “Well, sort of. I can’t trigger it at will, but if anyone causes me or any of my party members to bleed, it allows me to activate the effect, which gives me a fifty-five percent boost to my speed, evasiveness,

and damage output for two minutes—although I’m pretty sure the duration will increase the stronger I get. Right now, I can use it three times per day.”

Clay whistled through his teeth. Her total damage output was already 229 points of damage, per hit. If she landed a clean blow, she could one shot him without breaking a sweat. A fifty percent damage increase for two minutes was insane.

“And what about Bloodborne Armor?” he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“It’s a passive ability that activates while I’m in Frenzy. I haven’t actually seen it in action, but it lasts for the duration of the Frenzy, gives me a fifty percent resistance against normal weapons, and temporarily swaps my Strength stat for my Constitution stat when calculating my overall health and regen rate.”

“So you can become the Hulk three times a day,” Clay said flatly.

She shrugged. “Really, it’s only for six minutes a day, which isn’t much in the grand scheme of things. But yeah...” A thin smile tugged at the corner of her lips. “Hope you’re not too intimidated.”

Clay rolled his eyes. “Nope. Now you’re as tough outside as I always knew you were inside. Just make sure you don’t accidentally shatter all my ribs when you hug me.”

“That’s what health potions are for,” she replied with a wink.

Clay snorted and gained his feet, brushing his dusty palms off against the front of his pants. “We’re burning daylight. We’d better get back.”

“Sure y’all don’t want to hang around?” Joe asked. “My stomach feels like a black hole eating me from the inside out. Turns out becoming an Incant is hungry work. I bet I could scrounge up a couple of those deep-fried Oreos from the concession stand.” He spun his screwdriver. “Even if the fryer’s busted, I bet dollars to donuts I can get the ol’ girl working again.”

“Oh no,” Alex said, vehemently shaking her head. “I’m done with this fun house. We’re taking that stupid saltshaker back to the Sooq so Tajira will free Griff and we can get on with Bacon Bits’s quest to regain her dungeon.”

“Thank you, Alex.” Bacon Bits climbed into her vest pocket and snuggled in. “If I have not yet mentioned it, you are by far my favorite human.”

Joe’s face darkened. “I still can’t believe Griff got to stay chained to a tiki bar while we were out here fighting Smilerfax’s Double-Stuf Carn-Evil and Gearhead. Old fart has all the luck.”

“I doubt Griff’s just been sitting around drinking this whole time,” Clay said drily.

“Then Tajira taking him captive was an even bigger waste than I thought,” Joe said.

CHAPTER 13

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED



In spite of its collision with the Gearhead, the dune buggy was still in working order. Mostly. Joe fixed everything that was wrong with a little elbow grease, a bucketful of Magicka, and his handy-dandy, all-purpose screwdriver.

In next to no time, their little party covered the distance between Smilerfax's dungeon and the Sooq, though they had to skirt around the outside edges of cities to avoid streets clogged with abandoned cars and caving in with neglected potholes. It was just coming on true night when they pulled into the traveling market's campground.

Most of the dungeon retirees were busy unrolling tarps and putting security curses over their stalls and tables for the night. The place looked like a city-wide garage sale from a fairy-tale village. Clay just wished he'd been in time to find the grumpy old man with the magical equivalent of the dog-eared paperback collection.

The sentries weren't happy at the late hour they'd come calling. Begrudgingly, they directed Clay, Alex, and Joe to wait at the tiki bar lit with strings of pineapple-shaped lights while they notified the Great Lady Tajira.

"Where do you think they're holding Griff?" Joe wondered out loud, casting an eye down the rows of RVs and campers. He bent over and scratched absently at one leg. He'd swapped out his fancy new armor for his jorts, tin pants, and flannel. He loved his new armor to pieces, but Clay suspected that armor was hotter than hell in the California heat. "I admit I was a

little jealous about the whole drinking thing, but I didn't actually want the old guy to be suffering while we were gone."

"Ten to one all the old lady monsters were fighting over who got to keep him," Clay said.

"Looks like Tajira's been holding him personally," Alex said, nodding over Clay's shoulder. "And like he enjoyed himself just fine."

The elderly cat woman and the old weed had come around the corner of the massive battlewagon. Griff was slightly disheveled, but definitely not in a tortured-prisoner way. His wiry white hair was sticking up on one side, his eye patch was off-center, and he'd missed one shirt button. It was as if somebody had woken him from a sound sleep in a luxurious bed and he'd thrown on his clothes as fast as he could.

Tajira, on the other hand, was as cool and composed as if she were headed to a lady's luncheon. Not a whisker was out of place, and she didn't have a wrinkle in her cotton capris or pastel shirt.

"Oh, I get it—*holding* holding." Joe grinned and elbowed Alex. "Doing the walk of shame, Griff ol' buddy?"

"You want to keep a hold on that tongue, boy." Griff fixed his piercing blue eye on Joe. "It's a mite late to shoot a fool down for impugnin' a lady's honor."

"See," Joe said, "I told you guys that was how he talked."

"Glad to see y'all came back in one piece." Tajira took her place behind the bar, propping her elbows languidly on the top. "Am I to assume this means you brought me a shiny new quest item?"

Clay dug the saltshaker out of his ruck.

"One Greater Saltshaker of the Troll Gourmet." He unrolled it from the shirt he'd wound it in for safekeeping and held it up, but didn't hand it over. "It's yours—as soon as we get the Camera Obscura." They might not need the Camera Obscura for the Gearhead anymore, but it would definitely come in handy as extra security when they snuck into Bacon Bits's dungeon. There was only one rule in the wasteland—

You keep what you kill—but if there was a second rule, it was never look a gift horse in the mouth. They'd earned that damned trinket, and Clay intended to make sure they got what was theirs.

“This is not your first handover.” Tajira’s face stretched into a feline smile. “All righty.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out an old-fashioned lens and box-style camera the size of a wallet, steampunked out with brass gears and shining cherry wood. “One magical spy-jammer, the promised partnership of the Sooq, and the return of one handsome silver fox”—she winked at Griff—“in as good or better shape than you left him.”



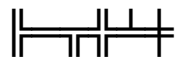
Congratulations! You have completed the quest Trading Rights!

By hook or by crook, you have successfully managed to secure the Greater Saltshaker of the Troll Gourmet. As a reward, your party has received the Camera Obscura and the ability to trade for goods and services at the Sooq. Additionally, buying and selling prices within the Sooq are improved by 15%. Your travelling companion Griff has also been returned to your care, seemingly no worse for the wear...



Griff colored slightly. He plopped his hat on his head and cleared his throat, studying the bar top.

Clay took pity on the old weed and initiated the swap. The Camera was lighter than he'd expected given the construction materials and seemed to pulse with a mystical energy.



Camera Obscura

Durability: 27/49

Properties: Grants a 30-ft circle of invisibility, hiding user and all allies from enemy spy engines, scrying technology, and underlings for up to 20 minutes per charge.

To activate Camera Obscura, press the shutter button.

Charges: 5/6

To charge Camera Obscura, user must kill an elemental chimera of at least level 1, attach a rune of power, or plug into a 110-volt electrical outlet.

“What you see isn’t always what you get.”



“PLEASURE DOING BUSINESS WITH YOU,” Clay said, nodding at the cat lady and tucking the Camera Obscura into a pouch on his jacket.

Bacon Bits clapped her tiny hooves. “Finally, we can return to my dungeon and show that fool he had no idea who he was cursing!”

“Y’all aren’t going to run off and leave a lady to test her new acquisition all by her lonesome, now are you?” Tajira dragged out a bottle of tequila and her blender from under the bar. “At least stay long enough for a salty margarita.”

Joe slapped his hand on the bar. “Sold.”

“But I want to show Alex the treasure hoard and all of my favorite dungeon passages,” Bacon Bits said.

“We just completed a quest,” Joe said. “This is the prime time to rehydrate. If we don’t take a second to wet our whistles, we could all die.” His eyes widened to convey the seriousness of the threat. “We’ve got to refill our electrolytes.”

Alex snorted. “Not sure margaritas are the best way to do that.”

“Are you kidding me?” Joe said. “All that salt and lime? They’re a wasteland miracle drink.”

Clay glanced over his shoulder at the campers.

“It wouldn’t hurt to rest up a little while and hit it hard tomorrow,” he said. This would be the first time in weeks they wouldn’t have the possibility of an attack from Gearhead hanging over their heads like an executioner’s ax. A full night’s rest sounded like paradise. “We’ve been going so hard

lately, a break is probably in order. Besides, if Tajira wouldn't mind, I'd like a chance to look around tomorrow when the Sooq opens back up."

"I don't mind at all." She dumped a load of ice into her blender, then dropped in a whole lime. "It's never too early to use your Official Trading Partner discount."

"Oh, and maybe I can find some good deals on lawn mower parts," Joe said.

Bacon Bits's tiny pig shoulders slumped with defeat.

"Hey, I am really looking forward to seeing your dungeon," Alex said, rubbing the teacup pig's back. "But Clay's right, we'll be a lot stronger and ready to kick major rival Dungeon Lord ass if we take some downtime now. Besides, if you liked the Blue Lagoon, you're going to love a margarita."

The pig grunted. "Though I despise the delay, it would be quite rude to leave without tasting the revelry of Dungeon Lord Tajira's salty margaritas."

"Thank you for the concession"—Tarija graced her with a catlike grin that seemed strangely amused—"Dungeon Lord Bacon Bits."

"Hot dog!" Joe whooped. "Mix 'em up, bartender, and I'll regale you guys with the latest exploits of the wasteland-renowned Jaeger Squad. We begin our story with a chapter I like to call 'How to Kill an Incant in Seventeen Simple Steps.'"

Clay shook his head. So much for keeping a lid on that particular route to becoming an Incant.

After a few rounds of the best margaritas any of them had ever had—no doubt thanks to the Saltshaker's powers of perfect seasoning—and several of Joe's increasingly elaborate versions of their triumph over Lynes, Tajira allowed them to set up camp in the shadow of the battlewagon. As exhausted and eager to get a full night's sleep as they all were, however, the Jaeger Squad didn't immediately disperse and hit the sack.

Instead, they stayed up a while after the cat woman retired, hanging around the little fire at the center of their tents. Clay and Alex leaned against one another, not talking, but staring companionably into the flames. Griff drew a whetstone along the notched blade of a battle-worn short sword. Now and then, Chonk used his hedge trimmer to cut pieces from a dead creosote bush and handed them to Joe to toss into the fire.

Bacon Bits sat half-asleep on Alex's lap, slurring boozily about her dungeon.

“And the yard and street surrounding it are overgrown with stinging vines that bite and paralyze low-level mobs. So many pretty flowers that give off the most delightful scent of charred flesh...” The little pig's blinks slowly became longer and longer. “And the roof has what I believe your people call a widow's walk, where I was sometimes allowed to fly up and look at the stars.” She stretched out her chipped hoof and nestled her head on it like a pillow. A trickle of drool formed at the corner of her mouth. Dreamily she grunted, “I shall be such a mighty Dungeon Lord someday.”

Clay felt like somebody had thrown a bucket of ice water on him.

“Shall?” he said. Alex and Joe both looked at him like he was crazy. “She said she *shall* become a mighty Dungeon Lord someday. As in she's not now.”

Bacon Bits squeaked and sat bolt upright. “What? No! I would never have said—”

Joe gasped. “Dude, you totally did!” Chonk stopped cutting another branch midway to chitter in agreement. “Clay never mishears that grammar police stuff.”

“And what was that about ‘*allowed* to fly up and look at the stars’?” Clay asked.

“I—what I said was—that is—” Bacon Bits jumped to the ground, whirling back and forth so she could look at each of them. “Now see here, puny humans, what you must understand about Dungeon Lords is—”

“May as well come clean, lass,” Griff drawled, his single blue eye sparkling with the dying firelight. “Miss Tajira and me already figured it out. Earth folks take a little longer, but it’s only a matter of time ’fore they catch on, too.”

Bacon Bits hung her head, and a big tear dripped off her snout. “Yes, I can see that it is time. Please, Alex, do not be disappointed in me,” she snuffled. “I am still very powerful. You will see when I am returned to my form as a Great Blue Wym.”

Alex frowned down at the teacup pig. “I think you’d better start talking.”

“You must understand—in the world of dungeons, power and strength are everything; I thought it must be so with your people as well,” Bacon Bits said in a wavering voice. “I know now that I was mistaken. You are not only strong, but kind and discerning. Alex is my Great Blue Wym hatchling sister from another egg. Clay, you are so clever and yet so strangely altruistic that I cannot at all understand you. Even you, Joe, you gigantic dolt! You, too, have wormed your way into my cardiovascular tissue.”

The little pig took a shuddering breath. “You see, I am not the great and powerful Dungeon Lord you perceived me to be when first we met.”

“I didn’t perceive you like that.”

“Shut up, Joe.” Clay looked at Bacon Bits. “So you’re just a regular talking teacup pig?” Damn. Put that on the list of things he never thought he’d say before coming to the IZ.

“Hardly!” she snorted, puffing back up with draconic offense. “I am the Great Blue Wym. It is only that I have never run my own dungeon. I was the Floor Boss of the Haunt Topic, second only in the pecking order to the Voodoo Dungeon Lord himself.”

“So, if a rival didn’t depose you, what happened?”

“Creative differences,” she said with a sniff. “My vision for the dungeon was far better than that fool of a Lizardman’s, but rather than kill me when I challenged him, as is befitting

and honorable, he cursed me into this humiliating body. All my powers, all my strengths and abilities, forced to waste away, locked inside this disgrace for the rest of my existence!”

“If you call that existing,” Joe said. “I don’t know how I’d live without my Incant powers.”

“Probably exactly like you did for the last thirty-odd years,” Alex said. She turned to Bacon Bits. “We have a rule in the Jaeger Squad—”

Joe crossed his arms. “If this is the inconclusive grammar rule, I want it on record that I still protest.”

“Not now, Joe!” she and Clay both said at the same time.

“Our main rule is that we’re completely transparent with each other.” Alex looked from Clay to Joe, then back at Bacon Bits. “What happened to you sounds like it sucks, and your Dungeon Lord seems like somebody we might be able to take down a notch or two. I think I speak for all of us when I say that we want to help for lots of reasons. But going forward, if you can’t be one hundred percent honest with us, you can’t be part of the team.”

Bacon Bits’s curly tail wagged and her ears perked up.

“Oh, Alex, I do so want to be part of the team!” She trotted over and hopped into Alex’s arms. “I have never been a part of a squad before! I vow I will not lie to any of you again!” She looked from Clay to Alex. “To tell the truth, it feels much better without the weight of this elaborate tale to keep track of. And as long as we are confessing things, it is important that I tell you all, my former Dungeon Lord is much more deadly than I at first let on.”

Clay frowned. “You lied about his level, too?”

“No, he was indeed a level 20 when I escaped,” Bacon Bits said. “However, as a Voodoo Shaman, his most fearsome ability allows him to capture the souls of his enemies and enslave them as his unwilling servants using odd little dolls he calls ZombiePops.” She snuffled contentedly as she snuggled deeper into Alex’s arms. “Well, good night and pleasant dreams, squadmates!”

For several seconds, there was nothing but stunned silence in their camp, broken only by the crackle of a branch Chonk hefted into the fire.

“Well, that settles it. We’re going to need a new plan of attack,” Clay said.

Griff nodded. “Always a good idea.”

Alex dragged her hand down her face. “And some sleep. All this honesty wore me out.”

“Don’t worry, guys,” Joe said as they broke up and headed for their tents. “No Voodoo Daddy is too big or bad for the Jaeger Squad.”

“If that was a twenty-first-century classical music reference, you’re fired,” Clay muttered.

“Whatever, you know I’m hilarious. All I meant was whatever comes at us, we can handle it. We’ve got this.” With this, Joe ducked into his tent, humming an off-kilter version of “Go Daddy-o.”

As Clay climbed into the sleeping bag next to his wife, he hoped like hell his brother was right. Tomorrow they would lay their immortal souls on the line against the most dangerous creature the IZ had thrown at them yet. With any luck, Clay would get them all through it alive and come out an Incant himself... Without it, the Jaeger Squad would become more fertilizer for the wasteland.

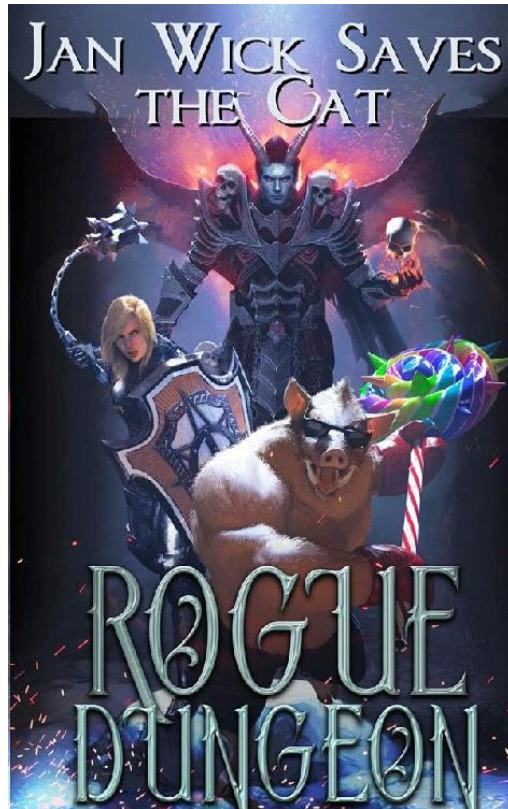


THE END

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eden Hudson



I am invincible. I am a mutant. I have 3 hearts and was born with no eyes. I had eyes implanted later. I didn't have hands, either, just stumps. When my eyes were implanted they asked if I would like hands as well and I said, "Yes, I'll take those,"

and pointed with my stump. But sometimes I'm a hellbender peeking out from under a rock. When it rains, I live in a music box.

But I'm also a tattoo addict, sumo junkie, and the world's okayest drummer. Jesus actually is my homeboy.

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