

Chapter 1



The pretend spell had gone awry. Not just awry, but really *really* wrong — as in, it had actually made something happen! Clearly, the world was now confuckled.

Robin whipped around looking for his cousin's kid but the tepid city street was relatively empty of people. Everything from the buildings to the clouds in the sky looked kind of flat in color and depth; like the world had once been two-dimensional but had been cheaply rendered into 3D. The bricks on the wall around the bodega window he stood in front of looked like they had been colored by the paint bucket tool in Photoshop. No shading or texture at all. Just flatly filled in with a deep beige. In fact, most everything on the street including the pedestrians, buildings and cars were all monochromatic. *Everything* was colored in shades of taupe, off-white, beige and tan. At least the sky was blue, the sun yellow and the clouds white.

He reached out to touch the wall. Despite appearances it felt very wall-like. So at least things were real and not illusions - or *delusions*. Robin groaned as he noticed his reflection in the glass. He was dressed in that shitty mall Santa costume from last year's crappy holiday job. At least it was just the hat, jacket and pants and didn't include the fat suit stuffing. Bizarrely, the outfit was blue, not red, but the coat still had dingy, white, fluffy trim safety-pinned around the wrists, zipper and the tops of the ill-fitting black boots. There was even that kid's puke stain still on the front. The stain that had never fully washed off. Robin was suddenly overcome with the smell-memory of that experience.

<DING>

Cars driving down the four lane street were distractingly quiet, only their tires making sound on the pavement. Was every vehicle electric? Salsa music played from

inside the bodega where Robin could see a handful of people through the window filling their carry baskets with groceries. Even the people looked like they'd been lifted from a color-by-numbers book. They appeared one step fleshed out from cartoons but seemed to be carrying about their lives as if everything were normal.

"Where the fuck am I?" Robin asked of no one. "Where's Dana?"

He checked his reflection again taking note that he was colored and shaded like normal. Was he trapped inside a video game somehow? They hadn't even been playing a video game. He'd been hanging with his weird little cousin, Dana from Alabama, who had insisted on getting his help in doing a "magic" ritual before she went back home at the end of the holidays. She had wanted to cast some sort of spell to open up communication with other dimensions. Robin regretted telling the kid he was a board gamer and fantasy book-lover and as such, might be open to such "out-of-the-box thinking".

Dana, a socially awkward 12-year-old, had been thoroughly convinced Robin was the perfect magical assistant since he was a "professional pretender" — Dana's words, not his. Robin was, in fact, a capital letter 'A' Actor even though he'd never taken the plunge to move to LA or New York. Eking out a living in regional theater around the Rocky Mountains for three decades had kept him fed, but not much more than that.

<DING>

There was that sound again. Like a text message notification but of a different pitch than anything he had his phone set to make. He patted the Santa jacket pockets looking for his phone only to find them empty. There was a wide, black leather messenger bag hanging from his belt on his left hip. What looked like a blue velvet dice pouch dangled on his right hip. He felt the pouch and it did indeed have the all-too-familiar chunky clatter of a full assortment of polyhedral game dice. Had he been dressed by a demented D&D player with a holiday fixation?

<DING>

He now pinpointed the sound as coming from inside the messenger bag. Robin lifted the flap noting the soft and supple feel of the fabric. *Nice material. Doesn't seem to be real leather, but it sure looks like leather. Wonder what it's made of?* Inside the bag was a single item: a small leather-bound booklet about the size of a paperback novel. It's edges worn and ragged-looking as if it had been well-used and then left to rest on a lost temple shelf for a couple hundred years. He was afraid it might tear or the pages fall out if he handled it too roughly. The cover was inscribed with blue runes that almost seemed to glow. He opened it to the first page relieved to find that the interior paper was sturdy parchment.

Printed in some sort of phonetic English was a message he read ascribing a sharp Southern drawl to the book's imagined narrative voice:

Welcum **Mistik** Hyuuman! This is yoor verree oown Instrukshun Manyul foor gaam liif.

Yoo hav ariivd in Bigbad Sitee, thu kapitul of Amérku, land of the free and home of the tasty. You're in for a real treat... or to become one. Hope you're hungry!

A little bit about you:

You are an **Initiate-Tier Player** with the archetype of **Entertainer**. Your occupation is **Mall Santa**. Your age category is **Seasoned** which includes a starting allotment of **16 skills**, **4 Basic Impediments**, and **2** permanent **Debilities**. As a bonus for being 52 years old, you gain one additional **Social Attribute** card.

Contained in your bag along with this "Lessons & Rules" tome are the following items:

- 1** Deck of **Attribute** Cards
- 1** Deck of **Skill** Cards
- 1** Basic **Dagger**
- 10 Resource** Rations (2 **Prayers**, 2 **Resolve**, 2 **Life Force**, 2 **Meat** and 2 **Fear**)

"What in the seven fucks of fake Fanta soda is all this?"

A young couple walking down the sidewalk, each holding one of their child's hands, gave Robin a harsh, narrow-eyed glare before pulling their offspring into the gutter in order to pass by without getting too close. Robin realized a moment later he should have apologized, but everything was too disorienting and made no sense. There's no way Dana's spell could have been real. Right? This place couldn't be real. Maybe all he had to do was close his eyes and convince himself to wake up.

Robin screwed his eyes tightly shut feeling the space between his eyebrows wrinkle with the effort. *Wake up. Wake Up! WAKE UP!!* He waited a few more heartbeats then opened his eyes.

A little old man stood in front of him having just emerged from the bodega. The kindly-looking fellow held a grocery bag and wore a soft-looking beige cardigan. "Are you okay, son?"

Robin blinked a few times. For once, he was at a loss for words so he just shrugged.

The old man patted him gently on the forearm. "It'll be alright. Whatever you're going through probably feels much bigger than it actually is." He started to shuffle away but stopped and looked back over his shoulder, "Just be careful around here. Things are getting kind of dicey in this neighborhood. Dressing like *that* might get you the wrong kind of attention. Just food for thought." He smiled softly while patting his groceries.

Robin watched the man mosey down the sidewalk. A few more people walked past, two went into the bodega and a couple others exited. He had not moved from the front window of the shop. Everyone glanced at him sidelong before skirting around trying not to look obvious in their attempts at avoidance.

He looked around the street once more. Clearly this was a neighborhood outside a big city as skyscrapers could be seen in the distance over the tops of the three and four-storey buildings; mostly street level shops with offices or apartments above. Very boiler plate in design even if distractingly bland given the color scheme.

A second-storey window down the block had blue curtains billowing out into the air as if from a fan inside the room. The air on the street was still and the temperature entirely comfortable. Not hot or cold - just right. "Now I'm sounding like Goldilocks. Maybe I've had a psychotic snap and this is all an elaborate manifestation in my mind."

The rippling blue curtains really did stand out being the only other thing within sight, beside himself, that was colored. Robin decided to head there and see what made it so different. Maybe he could get some answers. But if this was a delusion it would only be his own brain rationalizing the situation which likely would be of no actual help.

He closed the weird tome and put it back in the messenger bag. It disappeared as if having been sucked into a void. He looked around to see if anyone else had noticed what just happened. Glancing back in the bag revealed it to be empty with a perfectly normal bottom. "How the hell am I supposed to get that back? I'm pretty sure it was the instruction manual. Give me the Lessons and Rules back you janky Bag of Holding!"

The book reappeared inside the bag looking perfectly innocent. Robin took it out and opened it. It still only listed the contents it claimed were in the bag. He tried swiping his finger on the printing as if it were an iPad. He'd seen kids who had grown up with nothing but digital devices try that on restaurant menus and be baffled at the paper's refusal to react to their gestures.

Unsurprisingly, the text stayed where it was. He riffled through the rest of the book. "That sucks, the rest of the pages are all blank." He went back to the first page and the list of bag contents. "How about you do some freaky Harry Potter shit and show me something helpful. It better not be how to fly a broom and smack wing dings across the sky." The second page glittered briefly as new text appeared:

In order to advance you will need to improve your skills and attributes.
Start by examining your **Attribute** deck.

Robin looked back into the empty messenger bag. "There's no attribute deck in there you stupid pack of Post-It notes." However, a dark wooden card case with intricate blue mystical markings etched on its surface appeared at the bottom of the bag. Robin could feel the slight bit of added weight in the satchel. Tucking the instruction book under one arm he took the case out and pulled its top off revealing a

set of 27 tarot-looking cards made of stiff but flexible parchment. Each card listed an attribute, kind of like in Dungeons and Dragons, but there were nine different types and each had three variations labeled with a single trait and one polyhedral dice icon:

Brawn [physical] d4{imp} • d6 • d6{dbl}

Agility [physical] d6 • d8{dbl} • d10

Fortitude [physical] d4 • d6 • d8

Reasoning [mental] d6 • d8 • d8

Awareness [mental] d6 • d8 • d8

Willpower [mental] d4{imp} • d8 • d10

Presence [social] d10 • d10 • d12 • d12

Bodhi [social] d8 • d8{imp} • d12

Essence [social] d4 • d6 • d6{imp}

There were rows of little circles like fill-in bubbles on a scanTron test under each of the dice values. Robin had no idea what those were for, maybe progression or experience points? There was no way any of this actually meant anything real. It all had to be a product of his overactive imagination and too many hours spent with roleplaying games instead of studying.

He pulled out the **d6 Brawn** card and examined the words at the bottom of it:

Permanent Physical Debility: *Click Knee*

Not only does your left knee make a small snapping sound on every step going up and down stairs, but it kind of hurts a lot of the time. Actions using this attribute card will roll with **disadvantage**.

If all this turned out somehow to be real, *Click Knee* did not sound helpful at all. Perusing the other cards he found the same debility on the d8 Agility card. Four other cards were labeled with **Impediments** which seemed to be lesser variations of bad stuff and included five little fill-in bubbles under them. *Maybe those could be gotten rid of over time?*

The **d4 Brawn Impediment** was labeled as an old shoulder injury, probably reflective of having torn a ligament a few years ago in a sword fight scene during that cyberpunk stage play of *King Lear*. With no health insurance he had just tended it with heat and ice and continued painfully through three weeks of production. It rarely

bothered him these days except on the rare occasion when he tried to do pull-ups at the gym. Even if he ever got a lead role, theater still didn't pay enough for medical bills.

The **d4 Willpower Impediment** only referenced dice rolls regarding drinking alcohol. Robin loved whiskey and tequila and would rarely pass up doing shots of either one. The **d8 Bodhi Impediment** - *what the hell is Body? Bohdee? Bodhiy?* - seemed to have something to do with making emotionally-viable romantic decisions and the **d6 Essence Impediment** implied he would suck at casting spells. *No shit Sherlock! Spells are what got me into this flushing toilet swirl of a situation.*

Well, if these dice values never got bigger than twelve-sided, it would seem that Robin had been assigned moderate physical and mental capabilities and pretty good social ones. If he were being honest, they were a solid reflection of his real-life condition. In his mind he would like to think he'd have garnered bigger dice for reasoning and willpower and even brawn — though, admittedly, he was not particularly diligent in gym attendance these days. He had only ever gotten middling grades in school and was certainly not in peak condition like he was as a 30-year-old model.

He put the cards away and started down the street toward the window with blue curtains. A sedan passed by that was actually red. Another vehicle, a big blue panel van drove past as the time he arrived under the curtained window. The van's broad side was painted with what could only be described as arcane sigils. There was no english or other recognizable lettering on it at all.

Robin stood awkwardly under the window for a few minutes waiting to see if he could hear anyone up there or if someone would look out. No one did nor were there any discernible person-sounds from that second-storey room. There was, however a scream.

The womanly wail echoed from the narrow alleyway between the blue-curtain-building and its neighbor. *Do I want to know what that's all about? Seems like I shouldn't get involved in anything this place has to offer.*

<DING>

As soon as he had thought that thought, the bell sound came from the Instruction Book book under his arm. Time and motion slowed down freezing everything around him. Robin imagined a long bass drop sound effect like in movies when reality was coming to a halt around the main character. He opened the book. Page two's contents had changed and now read:

You are facing your first **Action**.

Since you can't decide whether to check out that blood-curdling scream or not, you will need to test one of your **Attributes** to see if you follow through with the notion of walking away or give in to impulse and see what's going on.

If you want to try to be rational about it, select one of your three **Willpower** cards to attempt ignoring the all-too-human realization that you *should* help others. Your mother will be so ashamed if you succeed and go your merry way.

If, instead, you want to feed your emotional compulsion and assist your fellow human, select one of your three **Bodhi** cards. If you fail, your Boy Scout leader will appear and give you three demerits. Just kidding, your Boy Scout leader is in jail. He's too busy getting drop-soaped in the showers to care about your moral quandaries.

Also, you have no applicable skills impacting this decision so you will be given the baseline three d4s in addition to your chosen **Attribute** card die.

"How am I supposed to know which is the best choice? Are high rolls better than low rolls or is this one of those systems where small numbers are good? Maybe the dice get added together?" The book did not deign to show an answer. The scream issued from the alley once again and this time Robin swore he could hear an animal growl accompanying it.

He reached into the bag to see if the card box was in there. It was not. The bag was empty. "Give me those fucking tarot cards, you needy sack of faux cowhide!" He held the bag's mouth wide open waiting to catch the moment the deck box appeared. Nothing showed up.

"Fine," Robin sighed resigning himself to using good manners when addressing all inanimate baggage from now on. "I summon my **Attribute** cards." The deck box appeared silently inside the bag. He pulled it out after clenching the book under one armpit so as to have both hands free. The card that had the biggest dice symbol on it without any impediments or debilities was the **d12 Bodhi** card. He held it up on display to the world around him hoping whatever esoteric intelligence was running this shindig (even if it was his own brain) would identify his selection.

Everything remained frozen. He put the deck box back in the bag and opened the book to look at it for further instruction. It said nothing new.

Feeling quite self-conscious and more than a little dumb Robin looked at the card as if it were a Pokemon ball. "I choose you, **Bodhi d12** card." The card made a sizzling sound and evaporated from his hand in a puff of blue steam. *Is it gone for ever? Do I only have these few cards for the rest of my life here?*

The blue velvet pouch at his other hip felt as if it were being tugged by a small inquisitive child. Accompanying the tug was the rattling sound of jostled dice. He put the book under his arm once more and opened the dice pouch. A bulky twelve-sided die glowed an olive green color right at the very top distinguishing itself from the other very plain taupe dice. He took it out and held it in the palm of his hand.

That sizzling sound happened again and three d4s manifested alongside the d12. They felt like they were made of heavy metal but they clattered like crystal rocks when manipulated in his palm. Not knowing what else to do with them, he tossed them onto the sidewalk watching them tumble.

Nothing earth-shattering happened when they came to a stop so he bent down to examine the results. He didn't have his reading glasses so he prepared to squint and strain. Maybe it was a trick of the light but he swore the dice swelled slightly and the size of the numbers grew bigger as if recognizing his need for magnification.

RESULTS:

BOH d12 = **6**

Basic d4 = 2

Basic d4 = 3

Basic d4 = **4**

Congratulations, you have **2 successes!** Your Boy Scout leader would be proud. You have convinced yourself to check out the screaming and see if you can be of assistance. Don't worry about your Boy Scout leader, he's getting railed and he's liking it. Let's hope your choice pays off positively too.

Normally time flow returned as did all the sounds of the suburb. Without thinking any further about this entirely ridiculous situation, Robin strode — instruction book in hand — into the alley as his rolled dice on the sidewalk sizzled into the aether. Indeed there was a woman at the far end where a drab brick wall cut off any other egress from the alley. She wore a pale tan summer dress adorned with light brown flowers. The walls of the alley were painted in streaks and splashes of bright red blood as a short, feral, half-human, half-skunk dressed in a dark purple business suit ripped its claws and long sharp teeth through the soft flesh of the woman.

She gave one last half-shriek before collapsing to the ground. Without bothering to look up, the skunk monster began jamming handfuls of lady meat into its blood-soaked and slavering maw.

Chapter 2



Robin feared he'd piss himself. The monster looked ferocious despite being about five feet tall. It was literally shredding that poor beige woman. What the fuck was he supposed to do about it? Hope the critter had rehearsed the same stage combat blocking? He had no actual fighting skills let alone any sort of weapon.

Wait! I'm supposed to have a basic dagger in my bag. Wanting to sneak back around the corner out of sight of the carnage, he found himself unable — or psychologically unwilling — to move. “Dagger,” he whispered to his messenger bag. There was immediately a feeling of something heavy materializing in the satchel.

Robin carefully slipped his hand under the flap and grabbed the cold metal hilt of a heavy blade. He pulled it out pleased to find a single-edged fighting knife with a curved sharp side and a very pointy point. It felt nicely balanced so he held it out tip-first toward the vicious skunk-man glad, at least, he wasn't shaking. Much.

The monster was too busy to take notice of anything but its meal. Should he rush toward it and stab it in the head? Would he prove faster than the monster or would he simply be charging toward his own mutilation? He took a moment to glance at the instruction book in his other hand. Time slowed to a halt once more.

Time to face your first **Fight**. Fights work like any other action but here you'll be pitting the feral wereSkunk's skill and attribute dice against your own. Here's hoping egg nog will get the stink out after this monster is through with you.

Sadly for you, your starting **Mall Santa** package leaves you with rather limited combat options. You really should have listened to your father and done something more constructive with your life.

Hey, Dad was totally supportive of my acting. Though, to be fair, he had suggested — more than a few times — that something like journalism might make a wise backup plan. I seriously doubt I'd be better equipped for a fight if I'd become a reporter. Maybe I'd interview it into submission?

Like your previous Action, you need to choose an **Attribute** card and pair it with an applicable or required **Skill** card to activate your dice pool.

Ack! I haven't even looked at my Skill deck yet. Stupid rookie mistake. Was he actually letting himself believe all this was real? Maybe he had to give in to the whims of the game in order for it to release him?

"Skill Deck, please," he said to the messenger bag. A wooden box of cards very similar to the **Attribute** card deck appeared in the satchel. The only difference was this one had white etching on its surface instead of blue. He slipped the dagger into his belt and put the instruction book under his armpit before quickly perusing the first few skill cards: **Stage Combat**, **Dancing**, **Acting**, **City Life** and **Carouse** all seemed less than helpful, though Stage Combat leaned in the right direction. However, Robin knew fight choreography was mostly just that — choreography designed to look flashy but holding little real value when throwing down against an actual opponent whose only interest was to hurt you.

The next two cards were labeled as magic skills: **ZingZap** and **Charm**. **ZingZap's** minimal description said it would discharge a small burst of electricity from his hand and had a range described only as **Short**. *Exactly how short is "short range"? Will it reach down the alley or do I have to get closer?* The card unhelpfully held no help in that regard.

The **Charm** skill said he could befriend and proffer non-destructive advice to **Some** others. *Again, how many is "some"? More than one, I'm sure, but does it affect only people or do monsters count? Maybe a wereSkunk is both a person and a monster?*

Both skills required him to choose an **Essence** Attribute card in order to utilize them. Robin feared he might not be allowed to stay in this frozen-time state indefinitely. Feeling pressured for time he brashly decided to try the **ZingZap** skill and pair it with the **d6 Essence** card; the one *without* a printed impediment.

Once again feeling utterly moronic, he held up the **Essence** card while watching for signs of un-freezing from the monster. "I choose you, Essence d6 card." The tug at the dice pouch happened again but this time a cube, a six-sided die, glowed somewhat

blue atop the other dull dice in the bag. He took it in hand and watched as a bland d10 and two d8s materialized next to it.

This is going to be hideously tedious if I have to go through life pausing time whenever I do something contested. Ironically, I hated it when video game RPGs switched from turn-based to real-time. I couldn't play them anymore unless I enlisted the help of someone 20 years younger. Actually living a turn-based life is absurd.

Robin chucked the dice into the alley. They tumbled to a halt in a puddle of what was hopefully only leftover rainwater, not bodily excretions. They were too far away for him to read but glowing numbers appeared in the air above them in a perfectly legible font size:

RESULTS:

ESN d6 = **5**

Charm d10 = **4**

Charm d10 = **1**

Charm d8 = **3**

Time remained inert so he opened up the rules book:

Will you look at that! Two dice barely rolled a four or higher giving you two low-grade **successes**. Really not very impressive, but it is your first time casting a spell so don't beat yourself up about it.

"Don't beat *myself* up?" Robin cried, incredulous. "I'm pretty sure Mr. Skunk-o-Skewer is gonna do it for me."

Suddenly the world started moving again. Robin felt puppeteer'd as his right arm rose, fingers splayed and palm aimed down the alleyway. There was a crackle of energy as every hair on his arm stood on end. He felt ecstatic with energy while simultaneously somewhat aroused as magical forces roiled through his being. This might be better than sex!

Sizzling blue electricity danced along his blue-suited arm and focused into a jagged bolt arcing the distance between him and the blood-drenched creature in its gore-spattered purple suit. The bolt made contact with an impressively loud sound akin to sizzling bacon grease on a too-hot stove. The skunk's black fur and white mohawk went stiff as the creature convulsed softly like it had an unexpected chill.

Its long and very fluffy tail stretched out to swish from side to side as its lambent eyes turned menacingly to Robin. It held a chunk of dripping shoulder meat in one claw while it slowly surveyed the situation. It looked around to see if anyone else was present. Not even a stray pedestrian had come near.

Robin was still too afraid to move. “Shitshitshit! I uh...” Would it even understand English? “I’m sorry? I didn’t mean to hurt you. I prematurely, uh... e-zap-ulated.” *Not the time to deflect with humor, Robin. You should probably run.*

The wereSkunk gave a full-body shiver and rolled its shoulders before rapidly shaking both clawed hands to splatter blood on the pavement at its feet. “Nah, mate. Yah ain’t hurt me more’n a tickle. Howevs, you interrupted me dinner. Think I owes you some pay back.”

“Sheeeiiiit,” Robin drawled. “Attribute deck!” The blue-etched card box reappeared in his satchel as time froze once more. The wereSkunk’s left leg hung in the air caught in mid-step toward the alley’s entrance.

Robin, feeling on the edge of panic, dropped the book back into the satchel and rifled through the **Attribute** cards without really reading any of them. Maybe inspiration would strike or the answer would make itself obvious.

“Hey, noob,” said a snarky voice from the sidewalk behind him. “Whatya got goin’ on here?”

Robin whipped around so fast he felt his left knee torque with mild pain. He hissed resisting the urge to bend over and grasp it. The joint’s sensation was too frequently familiar for him to overreact. A thirty-something, fully rendered woman in a hooded, dark blue adventurer’s tunic stood leaning casually against the wall of the blue-window building. She caustically critiqued Robin with judgmental but pitying eyes. One hand fiddled with an orange scarf draped around her neck.

“That’s quite the getup you’re wearing, mister,” she continued, crisply sucking on her teeth. “Looks like you also got something of a furry Feral problem aiming to shish-kabob ya. Need a hand?”

“Uh, sure?” Robin didn’t know what else to say. She appeared to be a real person — hopefully a real human — and not one of the beige simulacrum folk. She clearly operated outside the timeFreeze situation too. Her dark skin look hydrated and her jet-black hair was woven into two tight braids dangling out the front of her hood. She had large golden glasses set over... red eyes! *Oh fuck me in a follicle, she’s not human at all!*

She must have seen the shock upon his face. She casually waved one hand in front of her face. “It’s the eyes, right?”

“What are you?”

She sucked her teeth once before responding. “Name’s Monika, and I’m just as human a person as you. Don’t worry. I got hit with a spell ages ago that turned my eyes red. You’ll get used to all the whack stuff in this world. At least I got color, right?” She gestured to her outfit seeming quite proud of its RennFaire chíc-ness.

“Yeah, nice threads. “ *Who the fuck says ‘threads’? I’m too old for this shit. I just want to go home, or wake up or whatever. This is stupid!*

Monika crossed her arms tipping her head to one side as if expecting something. Robin stared blankly back completely contrary to how he would normally act upon meeting a stranger. Usually he was quite affable. Right now he felt totally off his game.

She started tapping one booted foot on the pavement. “You got a name or anything, or should I just call you Christmas Daddy?”

Robin was taken aback. “You think I’m a daddy?”

Monika scrunched her face in a not unattractive way. “You sure look like a daddy. Though don’t go gettin’ any ideas, I’m not lookin’ for one. I just heard a fuss out here and thought I’d come see what was going on. This neighborhood’s been safe for a long while and I don’t want it getting all infected.”

“Like, with disease?”

“With hungry predators.” She pointed nonchalantly at the frozen wereSkunk and its bloody meal at the end of the alley. “But never you mind, Daddy Noobs-alot. You clearly ain’t gonna deal with this in no reasonable manner, so I’ll take care of it. Just watch how a real **Mystic** gets the job done.”

What does she mean by ‘a real mystic’?



Time reeled back into motion as Monika strode confidently down the alley straight at the monster. The wereSkunk - its facial expressions surprisingly easy to read - was startled by the sudden appearance of the woman. Monika reached into a satchel very similar to Robin’s own and pulled out a glass test tube full of glowing red liquid in one hand and a clear crystal flask of a glitter-water in the other.

The wereSkunk dropped to all fours baring huge fangs and rushed forward at a full charge. *That business suit must be made of stretchy material for it to move so easily and freely.* Robin tugged at the thin, crisp fabric of his Santa jacket resisting the urge to scratch at his neck where the gaudy white fluff constantly made him itch.

Monika didn’t call out any verbal instructions nor did she pull cards out of her bag. Glowing polyhedral dice simply tumbled off her person like popcorn from an uncovered movie theater concession. Numbered results sprang into the air every time a die came to a halt on the ground and then evaporated. Robin saw numbers ranging from 1 to 12, sometimes they were added together and other times they danced through the air to collide with the monster’s opposing dice results.

So many visual things transpired Robin had no way to track — let alone catalog — it all. Monika hurled the red vial at the oncoming monster while pulling the cork out of

the clear flask with her teeth. She chugged its glittery contents in one big gulp like a professional keg-stander.

The red vial shattered upon impacting the skunk dousing it in searing red flames. The monster continued surging forward but was clearly smart enough to know the “STOP, DROP & ROLL” advice parents gave children should they ever catch on fire. It deftly somersaulted four times in an effort to douse the flames. It rolled to its feet like an action superhero and ripped the jacket off its tightly-muscled torso with sharp claws.

Monika finished slamming the drink down her throat and tossed the empty flask at the beast. It casually swatted it aside then patted out the last of the flames on its scorched pants. The flask rattled as it hit the ground and rolled to bump against the wall of the alley. The gnarly smell of burnt hair wafted into Robin’s nostrils. He plugged his nose and watched in amazement as Monika grew in size.

She was almost a head shorter than Robin to begin with. At six-foot-three Robin was pretty tall but she became a head bigger than him within the first second or two of magical growth. Even the skunk simply watched as the woman expanded in proportion to that of a three-story giant, tall enough to see over the tops of the buildings were she to go on tiptoes.

Another handful of dice tumbled off Monika looking like pebbles tossed over a cliff. From Robin’s angle he witnessed a few dark purple dice plop forlornly from the wereSkunk like fear-induced turds.

Monika raised one monolithic boot, her foot now as big as Robin himself. She stomped the half-naked wereSkunk with one big wet squelch and snapping of bones. When she retracted her foot there was nothing but globs of internal organs embedded in a wet mat of black fur pressed around a pair of purple slacks. The acrid aroma of skunk-stink filled the alley and wafted out into the street. It smelled like Hell had taken an acidic piss up Robin’s nostrils.

Giant Monika surveyed the scene making sure no other monsters were about. A few people out on the street along with two or three stopped cars were watching the spectacle. They held their noses or waved hands in front of faces to disperse the acrid stink. No one seemed particularly shocked at the scene. Was this sort of thing normal around here?

Monika pulled another flask out of her satchel, it was somehow sized to fit her hand and she drank its contents down in two big gulps. Momentarily she returned to normal size and began to scrape the remaining carnage from her boot onto the pavement. She turned to look at Robin, a self-satisfied gleam in her bizarre red eyes. “And *that’s* how you take care of Ferals. Nasty critters. Avoid 'em best you can.”

Chapter 3



The hooded woman bent down to pick up a handful of red and purple dollops lying on the ground next to the pulped skunk and put them in her pants pocket. Robin swore they had been dice that pooped out of the monster before it got stomped, but they hadn't disappeared like all the other dice rolls.

"Wow. Uh... thanks. Really, thank you for helping." Robin felt truly grateful for Monika's arrival. Maybe he wouldn't be alone in this bizarre gameScape after all.

"Oh, sweetie, that's cute," Monika cooed gently as she walked past patting him on his stubby cheek. "I didn't 'help'. I did *all* the work."

Robin had no reason to disagree. "Honestly, I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't come by."

"You'd have been eaten," Monika stated lightly. "And I'm pretty sure that outfit doesn't make you minty fresh." She once again judgmentally eyed his shabby, blue Santa getup. "You should do something 'bout that. Me, I'm gonna do something about this smell." She wrinkled her nose and tried scraping her boot on the pavement one more time. With the tiniest shift in breeze, the acidic, nose-stinging, skunk stink made itself redolently apparent. Robin feared the stench would get embedded in his clothing making him smell as wonky as he looked.

Robin put everything including the dagger back in his satchel where it promptly disappeared. He fell into step at the shorter woman's shoulder as she headed down the sidewalk toward the blue-curtain building's entryway. "Like what should I do? I don't even know where I am or what's going on!" Hopefully he didn't sound desperate,

but he was actually feeling pretty desperate; scared shitless, even. That's not a thought he wanted creeping in and sending him off the rails of sanity.

Monika stopped in the doorway with one hand on the handle and turned a wagging finger at him. "I moved out here to keep to myself. All that supernatural cray-cray can diddle itself elsewhere." She grunted sourly. "Looks like it's starting to creep in here after all if Ferals are sniffin' round for snacks. You best find yourself a vanilla little hidey-hole and bury your pasty ass inside it. You aint gonna last long if you wander into some colorized zone and one of the clans gets a whiff of ya."

"Clans? You mean more wereCreatures?" *How many more of those things are out there if there are 'zones' of them? This is way more than I can handle by myself.*

Monika pursed her lips and sucked her teeth, a mannerism Robin might normally find distracting if he weren't so panicky. "Boy, you need to read that tome they gave you. Do some learnin' if you wanna have any chance of surviving. Figure out your **Skills** and powers then get better at 'em."

"Like leveling up?"

Monika looked somewhat puzzled. "You mean video game leveling up? I guess you could call it that. There aint no levels or nothin' like that here. It's like the more you do stuff the more you get experience. You can do the things listed on your cards then you make dice rolls to see if ya' succeed. Eventually you get to start filling in the dots and then you earn more dice. You have to keep doing and rolling and doing and rolling just to stay breathin'."

That sounded exhausting. "Could you help me?" Robin knew he sounded desperate now. People on the street had gone back about their linen-colored lives while vehicle traffic ambled by obliviously. Clearly there was something different about the two of them, which made Monika the only obvious source of information, let alone assistance.

She took a couple steps inside the door looking ready to close it in his face. He put one hand on its taupe-tinged edge before she could shut him out. "Please. I know it's asking a lot, but if you could just give me a few minutes of your time and help me wrap my head around it all, maybe I'll actually have a prayer."

That last word caught her attention. She turned to face him. "Here's a freebie. Don't do no prayin'. I don't care what kind of Jesus you may have grown up with, but here that kind of thinkin' brings down the Celestials. They might be all glorious and beautiful and shit, but once they taste a prayer from you you'll be like a candy machine. Your Snicker-ass will definitely satisfy. Mmm-hmm."

Robin feared the door would close for sure but Monika stopped to thoughtfully examine her decorative blue nails. The internal struggle to decide between retreating to privacy versus letting a stranger in — one who had nothing to offer in return — clearly danced across her features. She self-consciously began to pull her hood further over her face but stopped with a sigh. "Fine. Come in."

She led him up a single flight of stairs at the back of the hallway. The interior of the building was carpeted with tacky geometric patterns in shades of ecru and almond. The wall paint was a tint of beige hinting at a previous life in the green family. *I'm seriously going to have to think of more words for beige. It's like everything is made out of mushroom skin. Everything except me and Monika...and the wereSkunks.*

She lead him into a fully-colored, comfortably-sized, two-bedroom apartment. Its main room combined an open kitchen with recreational space. Three large windows trimmed with blue curtains looked out over the street, the middle one open to let in fresh air, though to be fair, the outside air was just as neutrally temperate as it was inside the apartment. Stepping in from the monochromatically oatmeal hallway into a room looking like a box of crayons had melted all over was jarring to his senses - well, mostly just his eyes.

"How come your place is so colorful and the rest of the city is so bland?"

Monika pulled the dark blue tunic off over her head and tossed it onto a red couch accented with silver and white pillows. "Because, like you, I'm a **Playah**." Her inflection and tone, and the accompanying hand gesture, made it sound like she was in a gangster rap video. "Nah, just kidding with ya. But we are both **play-ERS** in this place. That's why we've got color. The stuff we gain and the places we make our own get colored in too. We even keep our names."

That last statement baffled him for a minute. "Do you mean all those plain people out there don't have names?"

Monika shrugged. "I think *they* think they have names, but they can't tell us. It doesn't really matter cuz I don't think they're even really real. I mean, we have to dine on them, so I *hope* they aint really real. Know what I mean?"

Out of all the things Robin had seen and done today, that statement was the most shocking. Having it so off-handedly delivered way made it no more palatable. "You don't mean *eat* people, like that skunk monster was doing?"

Monika shrugged again as she reached up to open a cabinet in the kitchen. "I mean, you can if you wanna. But it's not my kink, if ya know what I mean?" She pulled out a metal tin and pried the top off without breaking any of her long blue fingernails. Pulling the red and purple things she had picked up in the alley out of her pocket — they looked like ice cream bons bons or large gumdrops — she deposited them in the tin, put the lid back on with a snap and returned the container to its shelf in the cabinet.

"What was that? Did the wereSkunk drop them?" Robin hoped the answer wasn't monster poop, though maybe that would be in total alignment with the rest of the weirdness this place offered.

Monika waved at the comfy furniture. "Okay, okay. Hold your horses, Cerulean Santa Man. Take a seat and tell me your name and I'll give you a few tidbits about life here in Bigbad City."

Robin realized she had introduced herself out on the street but he must not have returned the courtesy. “Oh gawd, I’m so sorry. My name is Robin. Robin Bennett. I’m from Albuquerque, but I guess that detail doesn’t really matter.”

“Tits for truth it don’t matter, cuz this is your home now,” she declared while throwing herself onto a soft green lazy chair that swiveled and reclined. She yanked her boots off and dropped them to the side of the chair before pulling a vial of green liquid from her satchel. She poured its contents over the boot used for skunk-stomping. The smell of a freshly-mowed lawn filled the room completely eliminating the stink.

She tossed the vial back in the bag and made herself comfortable. The only thing missing from this tranquil moment were cocktails and a plate of hors d’oeuvres. Strangely, Robin didn’t feel hungry or even thirsty. Shouldn’t he be at least one of those things after all this craziness? Weird. He was tired and even a little shaky but he had absolutely no craving for anything edible. He took a seat on the red couch but stayed at the edge to show he was ready to pay close attention to everything Monika had to say.

“First off, you’re gonna want to get as many useful **Skills** and powers and items as you can. The ones you start with are super crappy. What is your archetype anyway?”

Robin took a deep breath and looked ashamedly at his outfit. “I think it said I’m a Mall Santa.”

“That’s your job, your **Occupation**, Robin Claus,” she chided. “I mean, what’s your *type* of character? It’s called ‘archetype’ here but video games might call it a class or some shit. For instance, my archetype is **Scholar** and my chosen occupation is **Alchemist**.”

“You mean like turning lead into gold, alchemy?”

Monika actually laughed out loud. “I suppose, maybe. But gold isn’t of much use here. Nah, I craft potions and liquid magic stuff. Let me guess, you had a job once as a mall Santa?” Robin nodded. “I bet you’re a musician or actor or somethin’.”

It was Robin’s turn to chortle. He affected a French accent, “Dingdingding! You, madame, are quite correct.” He switched back to his normal voice upon seeing Monika’s eyes narrow, hopefully not in irritation. “Yeah, I’m an actor and I’ve worked more than a couple seasons as Santa, especially now that I’m older.”

“That tracks,” Monika agreed. “I was a chemist back in the real world. Went to grad school an’ all that. Had me a real good job, too, testing foods and flavors for a big pastry company. Now that I’ve been here for, like, ten years or some bullshit, I’ve almost forgotten what real food tastes like.”

Robin was flabbergasted. “But there’s food here.” He pointed out the window toward the bodega down the street. “I saw people buying groceries. Are you saying you haven’t *eaten* in ten years?”

“Nah, that’s for the plainFolk,” she replied, sucking teeth and waving the back of her hand toward the same window. “*They* need to eat food, or at least they think they do. You and me and other **Players** don’t need *that* kind of food no more.”

“Well that sucks,” Robin whistled, leaning back to fully slouch on the couch. A cinnamon bun sure sounded good. Or any donut, really.

“Nah, it’s not so bad. Saves time not having to shop and cook and dine and all that. The downside is we *do* have to consume **Resources**. That’s what all the bland folk are for. *They* feed *us*.”

Not sure he truly wanted to hear the answer, but figuring he had to ask if he had any hope of understanding, Robin half whispered, “So you weren’t joking. We have to eat people?” He felt sick anticipating the response.

“Well, I think I said *dine* on people. Their **Flesh**, the meat of people is only one **Resource** we can make use of. If you want to get your spent dice and **Attribute** cards back you’ll have to ingest **Resources**. Luckily, **Resources** get converted into physical pieces. We don’t actually have to eat people-nuggies or suck the life force out of old miss Crack-in-the-Box down the block. I mean, you *can* if you wanna, but its messy and unnecessary. You saw that Feral ripping a lady apart. It’s a choice.”

So *that* was how he could regain his expended game bits. They only disappeared from his satchel of holding until he refreshed them. “What if I don’t do that, what happens?”

Monika slowly shook her head from side to side, braids scraping across her shoulders. “Mmmm-mmmh. Honey, ya don’t wanna run your **Components** down too far. If you do, you won’t be able to take actions beyond basic walking and talking.”

That didn’t sound good. “What are the other options if **Flesh** isn’t to my liking?”

“Luckily, as a human, you and me do have options. We can consume any of the five: **Flesh**, **Faith**, **Fear**, **Resolve** and **Life**. It doesn’t matter too much to us, any of ‘em will keep us alive, but you’ll find certain types of **Resources** will provide better fuel for certain abilities than others.”





“How will I know which ones are best?”

“It’s kinda irritating the instruction book doesn’t tell us that stuff,” Monika admitted. “You’ll have to use regular scientific method, you know — trial and error to figure it out. I bet ya that sad little zappy-zap spell you tried casting refreshes best with **Faith** drops. You’d best get to munchin’ down prayer biscuits to recharge it.”

“Oh, okay. How do I know how many resources I have?” Maybe Monika wasn’t going to be the best guide, but at least he knew more than an hour ago.

Monika wordlessly opened the bedazzled satchel hanging from her belt and pulled out a small book identical to the one Robin had but he could see this one was covered with more icons and numbers. She opened it to an early page and turned it so he could

see it fully. “Right here on your Player Sheet is a list of all your stats like **Skills**, **Attributes**, **Money**, **Reputations** and **Equipment**. It also shows your current **Resources**.” Hers had a list of the five types mentioned a moment ago with a number next to it:

Faith		13
Fear		16
Flesh		4
Life		5
Resolve		0

Robin nodded as if completely understanding everything he was looking at. He’d check his own list later so as not to look dumb right now. He knew he should ask more questions but he didn’t want to strain her patience. In auditions, he always feared looking like a hack nepo-hire if he got too inquisitive about the part he was going for. It was usually best to pretend he understood more than he actually did.

He took a moment to examine the rest of the apartment. He could see a bathroom along with a bedroom and one other closed door, presumably a second bedroom. *If I don’t have to eat and drink anymore, then I guess the only thing I need in the shitter is the shower. That’ll be a nice simplification of my morning routine.*

He had no desire to head back into the wider city to fend for himself. If this were the real world, he’d put his acting chops to use and see if he couldn’t wine and dine Monika into letting him stay the night. She had all the wrong pieces and parts for him to be comfortable taking things past casual flirtation, but that methodology had saved his bacon more than a few times in his life. Flirtation might come across as too obvious. Monika did *not* seem like the sort to suffer a fool. She might even turn him into a toad or something.

He remembered his **Skill** deck had a card called **Carouse**. That meant partying and drinking and socializing and stuff. Maybe he and Monika could go out on the town and have some fun while he whittled away at her reluctance to keep him around. Maybe he could even find a way to prove himself useful or desirable. However, if they ran into another monster, all he’d end up proving was how *little* help he actually was in this fuckStain of a place. Perhaps it was worth a shot as no other ideas sprang to mind.

Robin cleared his throat and affected his most casual tone of voice. “Hey, maybe we should go out for a drink or something? You could show me where the safe places are, what’s fun to do around here and fill me in a bit more on how to go about getting **Resources**.”

Monika guffawed sounding like a put-upon granny. “Child, there is no fun to be had out there. First off, drinks and food all taste like tofu. Sure you can get krunked an’ all, but there’s no culinary joy in it. Second off, it’s safest to keep your head low and not attract too much attention. This suburb has been quiet enough for a long time and I don’t want to go makin’ more noise than I need to. Today’s little scuffle was bad enough.”

Robin delivered a cheeky grin. “You sure? My treat.”

She sucked her teeth loudly this time. “Listen, Broke Saint Nick, I’m pretty sure the game didn’t give you much in the way of money, let alone **Reputation**. I’d bet all you can afford is a couple cups of the swill served at *Smeggy Meg’s*. No way am I risking my neck for that.”

“Who’s Smeggy Meg?”

“She and her brother are the only other **Players** in this burb. The dumb devil-bitch had the flaps to open a public bar a few blocks over.” Monika shook her head like she was chastising a child. “She’s a succubus so she’d be more’n happy to help you out if you show her your nutsack and candy cane. Now I think it’s time you get gone, I need a nap.”

By the tone of her voice he could tell his time being welcome in her home was over. Best not push things too far as he was in no position to alienate the one person who had been of help. Smartly, he chose to get going and leave the door metaphorically open, or at least not locked, for when he needed assistance in the future.

Chapter 4



Despite the increased activity on the street outside Monika's building — probably due to the approach of rush hour given the lowering sun — Robin felt even more alone than before. Spending even a brief time with another person simply highlighted how disconnected he was from all the beige simulacrum going about their taupe little lives in this weird cityscape. On a whim, he tried striking up conversation with one of the plain strangers.

"Hi, uh, excuse me," he said, offering open hands to show he was no threat. The kaftan-wearing woman turned her head to glance at a pigeon flapping over head and kept on walking. While the street was far from teeming with folk like New York City, he did have to keep stepping out of the way of pedestrians to avoid being an obstacle.

"Hello. Could you..." A trench-coated man avoided eye contact while scuttling past never bothering to look up from his phone screen.

"Howdy hey, howdy ho. Could you spare a..." The teenager looked at him like he was a clown selling beaded dildo bouquets. The kid scrunched their face in disapproval and sauntered away. Robin had forgotten to take into account what he was wearing. No wonder no one would talk to him. Santa Claus was clearly out of season, if this place even celebrated Christmas.

Robin gave up trying to chat with strangers and leaned against a lamp post to just observe. He channeled techniques drilled into him from acting classes back in college. The advice had always been along the lines of *'Watch the world around you. Take note of how people walk, how they hold themselves, how they speak to others'*. This must

have triggered a response from the game overlords because the world irritatingly ground to a halt.

“Son of a ball sack,” he swore out loud.

<DING>

Realizing he had forgotten to ask Monika how it was she did stuff without verbally requesting cards and dice, he reached into his bag and pulled out the instruction manual, seemingly the only item in his possession with the ability to appear on its own:

Action time! You have initiated an **Observation Skill Test**.

Let’s hope your powers of inspection, examination and investigation are at least somewhat inspired by reruns of *Columbo*. If you’re interested in learning something helpful, now is the time to do good dicing.

Your **Observation** skill gives you a d8 and two d10s. You must choose one of your **Awareness** Attribute cards to complete the dice pool.

He asked the satchel to give him his **Attribute** deck box and it obliged with another <DING>. He had two **Awareness** cards with d8s and one with a d6 so he chose one with the higher value d8. The card sizzled into nothingness and three tan skill dice and one glimmering olive attribute die appeared in his hand. He tossed the dice onto the sidewalk:

RESULTS:

AWR d8 = **5**

Observation d10 = 3

Observation d10 = **9**

Observation d8 = 3

He had rolled one low success - the 5 - and one high success - the 9. The dice vanished as he looked back to his instruction book:

Well look at you being a good Looky-Lou looking around and being tolerably looker-ific. Simple **Actions** like this only require a single dice result of 4 or higher to be considered a success. More complex actions require two or more dice to roll 4 or higher. However, some actions will benefit from the *QUALITY* of your success.

What this means is the higher the combined SUM of all your successes, the more you stand to gain from the action. In this case, the *quality* of your Observation action is 5+ 9 which equals 14. Not bad for a noob.

Is there some cosmic intelligence behind the instructions? Does it write to all the players with this level of snark or is it just being that way with me? Maybe I'm just being puppeteered by a puerile deity. Or, most probably, I've had a psychotic snap and this is my new self-manufactured reality helping me cope with the padded room my family has thrown me into.

The book gave no further details. Robin did wonder if anyone back home had noticed he was missing. Eventually someone would have to. His mom expected a call every Saturday morning and his best friends had standing plans to meet up for drinks most Tuesday nights. Maybe time didn't work the same here or maybe his little cousin would undo the spell that landed him here. Either way, he had no ability to do anything about it.

Having succeeded at the **Observation** action time began timing again and Robin glanced about the street to find certain elements had gained a faint white glow pulling his attention toward them: a red-trimmed poster in a storefront advertising a pleasure bar called *The Stick & Mitten*; an old lady walking slowly down the opposite sidewalk fingering a necklace of beads and mumbling what likely was a prayer upon noticing a copy of that same poster; a blue paper flyer lying partially crumpled in the gutter advertising a different bar, *Smeggy Meg's*; deep scratches, claw marks in fact, up the side of the lamp post Robin was leaning against. Had wereCreatures been climbing it sometime recently? And for what purpose? Surveillance, perhaps?

Maybe this neighborhood is in more danger than Monika realizes. I think what I need is more information. One of these bars ought to be a good place to start. Robin knew he still had much to learn about this world. Irrational as it might be, getting indoors seemed safer than loitering about the streets as the sun set. *Smeggy Meg's* was certainly not an appealing name for a bar. Besides, Monika had said a succubus owned it and if this reality's succubi were anything like in *Dungeons and Dragons*, Robin's gay ass had no interest in going down *that* road.

Resisting the urge to dramatically dust off his hands at having reached a decision, he pushed off the lamp post and tugged the cheap Santa coat to get it to lay a bit more evenly on his narrow frame. *The Stick and Mitten it is! Let's hope I don't get mugged or kidnapped or eaten on the way.* He patted his pockets searching for his phone to pull up a map. *For fuck's sake!* He didn't have it with him. The game had not deigned to provide him with one even though other people obviously had smart phones.

It was worth a try. "Hey, Lessons and Rules book, show me a map of this neighborhood." Shockingly, or perhaps with less shock than would have been garnered a couple hours ago, the book buzzed so Robin turned the page in time to see the blank parchment surface swirl like wet ink going down a drain. The ink resolved into a map of the neighborhood. It even had 3-D dimensionality to it with little isometric versions of all the buildings. *Well willya lookit that! It worked!*

The page even had a little blinking arrow indicating which way he was facing. Robin oriented himself accordingly and headed off for a five-block walk.

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Even from down the street *The Stick & Mitten* stuck out. Red lighting throbbed over a red brick facade in stark contrast to the unvarnished beige architecture everywhere else. All three stories of the club palpitated with colorful vibrancy while sensuous jazz exuded from outdoor speakers. It felt like the first place Robin had encountered that actually thrived with life. Everything else he had seen was austere in comparison or hollowly decorated with performative verve like Monika's apartment.

Only a half dozen other people could be seen on the long street and no one was close by. The street lamps, just now flickering to life as sunlight departed, gave off Irish-cream-colored illumination. Not knowing if it was a good sign or bad that no other people were entering or exiting the club, Robin inhaled deeply, squared his shoulders and walked through the front door.

The main room, while actually spacious enough for sixty people or so, felt inviting, comfortable and intimate despite its three-story high atrium construction. Red and teal velvet lined the furniture and walls somehow managing to look elegant, not gaudy. Dark wood sconces provided low lighting that was sufficient to see clearly but not so much as to feel revealing should one desire privacy. Round wooden cabaret tables and cushioned chairs filled the center while luxuriously pillowed and curtained curved booths lined two walls.

Along the third wall was a lengthy dark wood bar, polished to shine warmly in the subtle lighting. A number of beige patrons sat alone or in pairs at the bar and at various tables and booths. The place was about half full. A susurrus of whispered conversation lingered as undertones beneath sultry jazz played by an instrumental trio on a small stage. Next to the stage an elaborate, curving staircase wound its way upward to the darker, balconied floors above.

Behind the bar stood a menacing light blue demon with a cloud of spiky blue hair and a wicked grin streaked across its face. Why patrons weren't stampeding in fear out the front door was inexplicable. Robin would have run if it weren't for the underlying sense of welcome permeating the rest of the place. The music soothingly accompanied an enticing smell, vanilla maybe? Cinnamon? He wanted to feel hungry but no such sensation was discoverable on his tongue or in his stomach.

Robin simply stood in the open doorway and watched as couples canoodled, an old lady drank somberly alone and the disturbing blue demon poured elaborate cocktails with a frosty touch magically chilling them without the need to add ice.

A hand came from behind to rest on his shoulder "Welcome to *The Stick & Mitten*, handsome," said a warm, chocolaty, baritone voice. The hand continued to seductively stroke down Robin's arm as its owner slowly came into view.

A six-foot, pale pink devil with a shock of fire engine-red hair, oversized pointed ears and huge horns protruding from its forehead came to a stop in front of him without

the slightest regard for personal space. He had red bat-like wings tucked behind him. Clearly visible as the only thing adorning his bare chest - with slightly unnatural bone structure - was an elaborate series of black leather straps. Fully familiar with gay bar attire, Robin noted the devil's intricate harness should have been glued to the skin to stay in place but appeared to retain its placement quite organically. The harness shifted seductively with the creature's every mannerism.

"My name is Zebryl, my sister and I own this fine establishment and are here to serve your every... pleasure." That last word landed with breathy weight as one of the demon's clawed fingertips found the waistband of Robin's Santa pants and slipped behind it and the underwear beneath.

Robin could not control the gasp that escaped his lips. The devil's red eyes trapped his gaze inviting him to follow its line of sight down to waist level. The demon expertly pulled the material away from Robin's body as they both took a gander at the contents of his crotch.

The demon looked pleased with the view. "I see you are a human of the stick variety," it said. "Whatever sort of carnal pleasure you seek, either Yaritzya's mitten or mine own stick will be more than adequate to sate, I promise. Or perhaps you're interested in a two-for-one deal?"

For the second time this day Robin found himself speechless. His body was reacting to the insanely attractive devil's insinuation and he had no idea what the proper or expected response was or who Yaritzya might be. Its sister, presumably? Had he gotten confused and ended up in the succubus lair after all or had Monika misled him?

The demon cooed coyly having yet to release its hold on Robin's waistband. "Oooh my, I see we have some growth potential here. Please, let me find you a more suitable spot to discuss our offerings. The doorway is no place to dawdle when so much comfort awaits further in."

Leading him by the waistband, the demon ushered Robin into the main room and sat him down in one of the plush booths. "Please, allow me to get you a drink. What is your favorite flavor?"

Robin wondered if he had been ensorcelled, but realized he had seen no dice rolls appear from the devil nor had he been required to excavate his own cards and dice. "Uh, anything whiskey would be fine. Thank you."

"Of course," the devil smiled showing fangs that he swore glinted in the low light like they were in a chewing gum commercial. "I'll be right back." It turned to saunter to the bar knowing full well Robin's eyes were glued to its perfectly perky ass clad in perfectly tight black leather pants.

Am I having a natural reaction to this... incubus? It has to be an incubus. Nothing else from hell would be so absolutely alluring and frightening at the same time. Surely I'm being dick-witched.

The old lady sitting alone at one of the center tables caught his eye and gave him a knowing ‘*you get some*’ wink. Why on earth would someone who appeared so sweet and innocent be in a place like this? Robin had heard that retirement communities were filled with randy old folks and rife with STDs. Nah, she must be here for the music.

Nope! The naughty spinster was doing the classic index finger penetrating a hole shape with her hands. She awarded his wide-eyed reaction with a quirked smile and a salute of her cocktail. Could this get any more other-worldly?

Zebryl slithered into the booth to deposit a clinking rose-quartz tumbler in front of Robin. The devil’s thigh slipped across his leg to park dangerously close to his groin. Robin tried to shift a few inches away but found himself indelibly trapped beneath the warm demon appendage. He gulped and took a sip of the whiskey.

Robin’s palette expected the usual bourbon bite but all he felt was the cool sensation of flavorless, chilled water. There wasn’t even one of those big blocky cubes of ice making it cold. The blue demon bartender must have curated the drink. He took another sip not knowing what else to do. Maybe his brain added a hint of oak and spice this time, but overall there was still no flavor. He did start to feel a hint of familiar whiskey warmth make its way down his throat. Monika had said they could still get drunk in this world, it just wouldn’t taste good.

The incubus leaned in and stroked a couple clawed fingertips through Robin’s hair expertly removing the Santa hat from his head. “What’s your name, friend? I would very much like to learn a bit about you and what brings you to our little club.”

Robin cleared his throat and took one more sip. He wanted to pull his head away from the hand that now pleasantly toyed with his messy hair but he was afraid he might offend the creature. “Um, well, I’m new here and I guess I’m just, uh, looking for answers or a way to get home.”

The devil threw its head back and laughed heartily. It wasn’t a mocking laugh but a truly jovial one. “Why in all the worlds would you want to do that?”

What could possibly be a good answer? Why would anyone want to stay here? “Um, because I have friends and family and a whole life back there. Why would I want to be here where I can get torn apart by B-grade movie monsters?” Robin’s stomach clenched at that last remark. He’d meant the insult as a description of the wereSkunk from earlier but realized everyone here was not human, beige or otherwise. He’d just insulted the host. Robin braced for engulfing flames or claws ripping his throat out.

Instead, Zebryl used its other hand to beguilingly take Robin’s drink out of his grasp making sure to achieve plenty of unnecessary flesh-on-flesh contact. The incubus took a sip and sighed as if satisfied by the empty taste of it. Maybe it was another trick of the light, but Robin swore he saw a puff of red smoke or steam emanate from the glass.

“I can taste your fear, my nameless friend,” the devil breathed. “Did your own words scare you? Do you think me akin to those feral animaloids licking their lips at the sight of your succulent flesh?”

Robin proffered a half-hearted shrug; half apology and half question. “I’m Robin. Robin Bennett.” He hoped his name was enough in the way of peace offering.

In a very business-like manner, Zebryl offered his clawed hand for shaking. Robin accepted and gave as strong a pump as he could muster hoping his hand didn’t quiver or sweat too much. He noticed a curved spike emanated from the back of the devil’s hand. He wanted to touch it, to stroke it it, maybe even lick it.

Dice tumbled across the tabletop. Some had come from Robin and quite a few more had rolled off of Zebryl. Robin snapped his gaze from the view of one of his own evaporating **Willpower** cards to the devil’s face. The incubus gazed alluringly with ruby eyes straight into Robin’s heart. All he wanted to do was take the demon by those huge horns and pull it down into his lap and let it go to town on his suddenly raging erection. He *was* worried about how those fangs might feel down there if the demon decided to bite, but the idea was simultaneously invigorating and frightening. Red steam poured out of his pores and the incubus inhaled the mist with deep, intimate satisfaction.

“Ah, thank you Robin,” Zebryl moaned, hinting at ecstasy. “Your fear tastes so clean and fresh. I presume you are not accustomed to this sensation?”

Robin sank back into the pillows of the booth and let the demon’s caress return lingeringly on his chest. “I guess maybe not. I haven’t had real stage fright since I was a kid and I’m not a thrill seeker that goes ski racing or sky diving or anything like that.” One clawed finger tip traced a curling path across his plain white t-shirt before worming its way around his waist coming to rest with a warm palm upon the small of his back.

“Well, I am honored to be the one to elicit such flavorful feelings from you,” Zebryl said. “I hope you are beginning to find comfort here?”

Strangely, Robin *did* feel more relaxed. How was that even possible? He should be more frightened than ever at literally being in the hands of hellspawn. “What did you just do to me?” He gestured toward the tabletop and the now-evaporated dice. “You did something that caused a dice roll but time didn’t freeze and I didn’t purposely select an **Attribute** card or anything.”

“Oh my, you really are new here.” Zebryl handed the drink back to him while using the hand on his back to pull him ever so slightly closer. “You don’t need to pause time to make **Action** rolls. You just activate cards and dice with your mind. It’ll become second nature soon enough, like any other repetitive behavior. Eventually you may not even notice it happening at all. Besides, each **Player** only has a half-dozen **Pauses** allotted to them, so you probably want to be sparing in their use.”

Oh gawd! How many have I used? I haven’t even been tracking that. Maybe the Instruction Manual catalogues that sort of stuff for me. I’ll have to look later... if I ever get a safe minute to chill.

One thing did pop to mind regarding **Pauses**. “Can other **Players** ignore **Pauses**?” He thought back to Monika’s appearance in the alley with the wereSkunk. She had walked in on him right in the middle of picking cards and reading instructions.

Zebryl’s red eyebrows crinkled. “No, I don’t think so. At least I don’t know how to and I can’t say I’ve ever seen it done. I suppose there could be some species out there with that ability.”

Robin filed all that info away to think about later and chose to pose another question while the devil was in an informative mood. “Were you feeding upon my **Fear** just now?”

Zebryl grinned. “I most certainly was, friend Robin. And might I say you taste delicious.”

“Uh... thank you?” Robin tried again to squirm out of the incubus’s grasp but found the attempt lacked commitment. His throbbing groin betrayed the conflicting desire to remain right where he was and escaping. “Can you tell me how to do that? I’ve been told I will need to **Feed** on something other than actual food and water.”

“Well that is very true,” Zebryl admitted. His ruby gaze dropped to the tented fabric of Robin’s pants. Its free hand pointed, “*That* is also a type of meal we ought to explore, and soon if I am any judge.” A wicked smacking of lips followed the gesture. “I would very much like to lick your stick and take a bite.”

Robin sucked in a quick gasp of air. Maybe incubi *did* feed upon flesh and Zebryl had lied. Was dick meat on the menu after all? The weirdest sensation happened just then. It felt like his dick burped. There was definitely a mortifying new occupant in his boxer briefs.

Zebryl, with practiced ease and no sense of judgement, slipped its free hand into Robin’s underwear and pulled out a glinting red dollop of spongy material, not unlike what Monika had collected off the wereSkunk. Zebryl pulled its other arm out from under Robin and placed the bon bon in its open palm for examination. “This is a dollop of **Fear**. I simply made you scared and your body expelled a serving of it for me, or any **Player**, to consume.”

“Can I touch it?”

“Sure.” Zebryl tipped it into Robin’s hand. “I suppose you could eat it, but it won’t do anything for you. Your cards and dice receive no nourishment from your own ingredients.”

Robin pinched it lightly. The red dollop felt like a gumbdrop. Was this really fear made manifest or was this just another serving of outrageous weirdness this world insisted on providing? He gingerly handed it back to the devil who casually popped it into its fanged mouth swallowing it whole.

Zebryl lightly pushed the table away and moved to fully straddle Robin putting their faces mere inches apart. “What do you say I take you upstairs and we feed that throbbing pole of yours a *hole* meal?”

Despite the outlandish circumstances and the absurd notion of banging a devil, Robin was on the verge of saying ‘yes’ when the front doors slammed open followed by a deafeningly animalistic howl shattering the serenity of the parlor. Five anthropomorphic monsters swaggered into the room — four were Canines of various types and a massive wereBear.

The bear, dressed in a fancy smoking jacket, took a few additional steps in to take advantage of better lighting. “Meat’s back on the menu, babes!” With the preternatural ease and familiarity of a lifelong pack, the four canines surged into the club brandishing fangs and claws. Patrons screamed. Robin lost his boner.

Chapter 5



Robin sat frozen in disbelief watching the scene unfold almost as if in slow motion. The wereBear struck a wide stance casually crossing its massive fur-laden arms as the four canine, denim-clad monsters surged into the lounge.

Two dogs in the werePack were red-furred — one definitely a fox, the other more dingo-like — sprang directly into the middle of the room knocking over tables and chairs with a clattering crash of breaking dishes and drinkware. Both wore simple, if ragged, t-shirts and denim pants. The smallest dog, perhaps a coyote, leaped onto the end of the bar, braced itself on all fours, threw its shaggy head back and released a loud, almost cheerful series of yips encouraging its mates to enact maximum carnage.

The little blue bartender demon hurled a cocktail shaker at the coyote only for the metal cup to bounce harmlessly off the creature's shoulder. The coyote snapped its head around to glare at the demon before pouncing with startling speed. Dice exploded off both beings as the demon unleashed a torrent of flying icicles. The coyote's sharp-clawed hands batted the missiles aside with little effort. The two tumbled out of sight behind the bar with a screech and a yowl. Robin could not tell which sound came from which monster.

The biggest canine, most certainly a wereWolf, had begun dismembering a romantic couple dining privately in the first booth. Zebryl cried out, whether in despair or anger Robin could not tell, but the devil launched into the air with strong beats of its surprisingly huge red wings. A matching ululating yell came from an upstairs balcony and yanked Robin's gaze as well as the wereBear's upwards.

Descending like hell's fury personified came a nearly naked woman-devil of similar coloring to Zebryl. Sheer, gauzy fabric and long locks of red hair flared about the succubus - for surely this was Zebryl's sister - as flames licked from her eyes, hands and nipples. She landed with grace on a tabletop between the wereFox and wereDingo to unleash a bursting ring of hot flames. The canines yowled as their clothing and fur caught fire. The succubus kicked one powerful leg into the snout of the wereFox its head snapping back with a clack of teeth. The fox dropped to the ground with a whimper seeking to put out its fur-fire by rolling around.

Despite being alight, the wereDingo latched overly large teeth onto the succubus's exposed ankle, the crunching of bone audible across the room over the din of death and disarray.

Zebryl, with two flaps of his wings, swiftly landed next to his sister retaliating on her behalf with a flaming backhanded slap to the wereDingo's face making good use of his hand's spike. The dog yelped, backed away finally taking efforts to madly pat out the flames about its body. Zebryl put one arm around his sister's back to help keep her upright.

The wereWolf, the closest canine to the entrance, stopped its assault on the romantic couple. The humans' severed limbs and ripped-out entrails commingled on the table with a half-eaten plate of nachos and the remains of a fried bloomin' onion. The wolf professionally surveyed the situation. A handful of purple dice tumbled off its body as it unleashed an ear-shattering howl squalling the very air in the room as if a fairytale pig's hut was its target. The burning fur of the two red wereDogs was snuffed out and the devil siblings were blasted a dozen feet back. They tumbled onto the stage among cowering beige musicians and a cacophony of damaged instruments.

Robin realized he was so far out of his league he was sure to be killed before formulating any sort of plan. Clearly, hiding under the table was pointless as these monsters likely had preternatural senses of smell. Zebryl was too concerned about protecting its sister and the dozen or so remaining plain humans obviously had little or no ability to protect themselves, let alone help him.

Not knowing what else to do, Robin triggered a **Pause**. Everything froze in place. Absurdly catching Robin's attention was a fork and plate caught in midair tumble as the wereWolf shoved a table out of its way. Feeling like an utter coward and a total failure, the only thing he could think to do was get the hell out of there.

He started to slide out of the booth but seemed to run into a soft invisible barrier. No matter which direction he tried to go, the game prevented him from leaving the booth. Thinking back on the alley fight, he had been busy perusing the Instruction Manual and hadn't tried to go anywhere when Monika had appeared. She had confidently taken charge of the situation before Robin had done anything effective. Now, testing the limits of what a **Pause** allowed, it clearly did not permit him to roam the world freely.

"Oh gawd, ohgawd ohgawd!" he cursed out loud. "What the fuck am I supposed to do? All I've got is my tiny little **ZingZap** spell!"

He reached into his satchel and yanked out the Instruction Manual before realizing he had done it without verbally asking. *Guess I'm getting the hang of doing things mentally. Amazing what a dose of panicked desperation will do for ya'.* He flipped open the book to the page after the neighborhood map hoping some sort of guidance would be proffered. No such luck. The page was placidly blank.

"How do I survive a battle?" he demanded of the book.

Ink swirled and words appeared.

By not dyin', you silly Saint Nick.

"Well *you* can go lick a cheese grater." Robin was tempted to hurl the tome across the room but thought better of it. "I'm feeding you to the first paper shredder I find!" He jammed it back into his satchel hoping the book's feelings were hurt.

Looking resignedly around the lounge, Robin despaired at his options. A twenty-something man had been halted mid-dash toward the front door. The massive wereBear had begun to casually reach out one long clawed arm to grab the poor human. The wereCoyote had reappeared squatting atop the bar while chomping meat off the severed bartender's thigh, meat that had turned purple instead of its natural icy blue. *Guess that means it's getting its daily allowance of **Flesh**.*

Not wanting to think about how he would have to, at some point — if he survived this shit show — start doing the same thing in order to keep going. Robin vowed to himself and every imaginary cosmic being that he would *never* take flesh off of another person. Or even off a monster. The very thought made him gag and not in the fun dick-sucking way.

What caught his attention next was the old woman, the one who had naughtily winked at him earlier. She was directly in the big wereWolf's path, likely its next target. Even if the game world would let him escape, there was no way he could abandon that poor senior citizen to be devoured like an hors d'oeuvres. If he wanted to live with himself in good conscience, he would have to try to save her, even if it put him in danger of getting eaten like a Santa-kabob.

Not wanting to give that stupid manual the dignity of being useful, Robin tried picturing his **Attribute** cards and list of **Skills** in his mind. Miraculously, it worked like an iPad display appearing in the back of his vision or maybe inside his brain. The only **Skills** with any potential usefulness to the situation were still the **Stage Combat** physical skill and the magical **ZingZap** and **Charm** spells.

He still doubted the **Stage Combat** would be of real value and ought to be utilized only as a last resort. Having tried the **ZingZap** spell against the wereSkunk to no effect, he suspected these seemingly stronger creatures would be even less bothered by it. That left his choice whittled down to the **Charm** spell.

If I were on a reality TV show and was seen jumping into a fight magically sweet talking a wereWolf into not eating an old lady, I'd be the laughing stock of social media. Obviously, I should try the actual combat spell but I really don't think I'm equipped to make effective use of it.

He read the description of the **Charm** spell, still in the ridiculous Southern accent he had assigned to the Instruction Manual's imaginary voice:

Charm: a magical skill, probably plagiarized from a Petal Pixie's spell book, provides its caster with enhanced allurements and potentially enchanting powers of suggestion. Intended for benefiting from social situations, feel free to attempt its use in the bedroom or even just out on the street!

Range: medium *Amount of Effect:* some

Attribute Pairing: **Presence**

Skill Dice: **d8 • d8 • d10**

Experience Gained: O O O O O (none)

The five dots at the bottom of the description would presumably be checked off if and when he successfully used the **Skill** enough times or maybe with great success or some other esoteric metric. He could probably ask the manual to describe the **Experience** system of the game world, but he wasn't going to let that fucking stack of parchments Post-It-Notes think it had the upper hand in this relationship.

Besides, if things were being defined with abstract terminology like 'medium' and 'some', he was unlikely to get much more clarity even if he were willing to ask.

"Fuck it! Guess I'll be charming the pants off this wereWolf. I hope nobody thinks I'm suddenly into furies, cuz I don't need *that* kink clogging up my DMs."

Mentally selecting one of his two **d12 Presence Attribute** cards to pair with the spell, Robin let the world **unPause** and he half dashed to interpose himself between the onrushing wereWolf and the old woman's table. The four dice used in casting the spell appeared in his hand and he let them drop to the floor as he struck a pose, one arm extended with wrist flexed back and palm toward the monster.

"Stop in the name of love, Mister Ruff n'Gruff!" At least he hadn't tried to sing that first part even though the Supreme's song played in his head.

Five purple dice tumbled off the wolf. Blessedly three of them were only four-siders.

ROBIN'S RESULTS: QUALITY = 24

PRE d12 = 7

Charm d10 = 8

Charm d8 = **5**

Charm d8 = **4**

WEREWOLF's RESULTS: QUALITY = 10

WLP d10 = **5**

Bravado d6 = **5**

Bravado d4 = **2**

Bravado d4 = **2**

Bravado d4 = **2**

The action's calculations appeared in Robin's mind now that he was giving attention to the ability to do so. Not having to check the manual for every minute detail was proving extremely convenient. All four of his dice had rolled successes against only two of the wolf's.

The monster skidded to a halt on huge padded feet. Apparently lycanthropes in this world didn't wear shoes and preferred to go bare-pawed. The wolf grabbed both lapels of its black leather jacket and gave Robin the most over-the-top, clichéd, examination. Its lambent yellow eyes started at his black Santa boots then moved all the way up to the dangly white poof at the tip of his red hat.

"And what, *prey* tell, are you supposed to be?" it growled in a sultry growl, licking its lips and baring wicked fangs stained with the romantic couple's blood.

Robin noticed at least six nipples lining the hairy, brown chest beneath the open jacket. The clash, clatter and screams of everything and everyone else in the room continued unabated. "Well, funny you should ask. I had just been going over the master list of who's been naughty and who's been nice when you all came barging in here."

The wereWolf took time to casually examine its long, sharp claws on one hand. "And where did my name fall on that list? I'm thinking 'nice', but maybe you could buy a girl a drink and help me make it onto the 'naughty' column."

Maybe this spell should be called **Seduce**, not **Charm**. Surely that was a separate spell all together. Maybe this wereWolf was just all horned up at getting to wantonly slaughter innocent humans. Behind the wolf in the entryway, he witnessed the wereBear plucking the escaping twink clean off his feet and literally tearing him in half. Blood showered in all directions. Rhinestones tinkled off the youth's custom t-shirt as the fabric shredded. The bear jammed its snout into the poor guy's guts and went to town as if at a state fair rib-eating contest.

Robin refocused on the wereWolf. Despite feeling like his voice would start warbling, the spell must have reinforced the delivery of his words for he sounded totally relaxed and confident. He'd experienced that sensation only a handful of times onstage when he was truly in the zone of emotional commitment to a scene. "What's your

name, darling, and I'll take a gander at the list and see. First, how's about I get us a shot of tequila and we can check the list together."

With a wet clatter, a twink rib slid across the floor having been casually tossed by the wereBear as it gobbled down more of its victim. Behind Robin, the old woman had remained sitting at her table in a horrified stupor. She frozenly held a half-eaten dumpling in one hand.

The wereWolf sauntered closer to tap one huge claw upon Robin's chest. "Or, how about you sit tight while we finish up here and I take you back to our place and we see if we can get you all ferocified. Maybe even turn your outfit a nice shade of **Feral** purple?"

Not really sure what that meant, it was most definitely not a suggestion Robin was willing to agree to. "That sounds, *interesting*," he hedged. "Just let me pull out that list..." He made sure to draw the wolf's eyes toward his satchel as he reached into it with one hand while making a motion with his other for the old lady to get ready to run. Hopefully the desperate flapping of that hand delivered a clear enough message to the terrified woman.

While the wolf watched his satchel hand, he mentally selected the **d6 Essence Attribute** card and prepared to surprise cast the **ZingZap** spell right in the monster's face. Even though the attribute card had an **Impairment** listed on it, it provided a bigger die than the third and final **Essence** card which was only a **d4**. He didn't take the time to read the details of the impairment but unleashed the electrical discharge directly into the werewolf's eyes.

Impairment: *your dice succeed only on 5's or higher due to your inherent disbelief in actual magic.*

RESULTS:

ESN d6 = 3

ZingZap d10 = **10**

ZingZap d8 = **8**

ZingZap d8 = 2

The wolf yowled in shock and pain as the spell delivered a sizzling bolt of electricity down its snout and directly into its brain. The smell of burning hair engulfed Robin's nostrils. He had been lucky that the two biggest dice had rolled their maximum result. Maybe that made the spell more damaging? He had no idea.

Robin whirled around, grabbed the old woman by the arm and yanked her, rather violently, toward the front door. Firmly fixed on the exit, they half stumbled half ran past the gigantic wereBear still making a meal of the young man. The monster noticed them and their mad rush. It hurled an entire leg at their retreating backs and sprang in their direction with speed belying its size.

The leg thumped into the wall ahead of them next to the exit leaving blood spackle and smears on the polished wood. Robin shoved the old woman through the double doors just as massive claws ripped down his back. Weirdly, there was no pain at first. He turned his head to see the gargantuan 8-foot wereBear towering over him preparing to rend him with both claws this time.

Desperate, Robin cast **ZingZap** again using his last **Essence** card:

RESULTS:

ESN d4 = 3

ZingZap d10 = 7

ZingZap d8 = **5**

ZingZap d8 = **5**

The bolt of actinic, jagged light hit the wereBear directly in the chest scorching fur. He hadn't even bothered to take note of the dice results but they clearly had been good enough to deal damage. That's when the pain of the rending to his back kicked in.

He tripped out the door landing on his knees ripping the pant's cheap fabric. He could feel a distressing amount of wetness soaking into the back of his shredded Santa jacket. The wereBear was about to lunge out the doors when it was hit from behind by a blast of bright red flame. It whipped around and surged back into the lounge leaving Robin and the old woman to flee clumsily down the dark street.

Chapter 6



Robin awoke to the sensation of sizzling acid trickling down his spine. He screamed.

“I’m so sorry, honey,” a forlorn, but kind voice cooed softly.

Robin thrashed and rolled not knowing where he was or what was happening. He thumped bodily onto a wooden floor as he fell from bed. Sheets tangled his feet but the searing sensation on his back did not stop. In fact, it got worse. He rolled to his stomach in an attempt to clamber upright but the same searing pain flared in his knees leaving him prone on the cool wood.

A kindly, if elderly, face appeared over the top of the rumpled bed. “I’m just trying to treat your cuts, my dear. I know it hurts, but we really don’t want infection setting in, now do we?”

The old lady from the club. She had a khaki kerchief bound about her head, and judging by her dark taupe features, Robin would guess she was Black, if people had that sort of distinction in this world. He wondered what color he looked like to her. Did all the non-player residents of this world see things the same way as players? They certainly seemed perfectly fine with demons working in nightclubs and wereSkunks assaulting pedestrians, but was their vision as color undifferentiated as their appearance?

“Please, sweetie. If you could get back onto the the bed, it’ll make things a lot easier,” she stated, not making it a demand, but the implication of a demand was, well...implied.

"Where are we?" Robin groaned as he gingerly scaled the side of the soft bed as if in a rock-climbing gym.

"My house," she said. "It's nearly morning. We ran until I almost fainted. Then you insisted on carrying me the rest of the way here, almost a mile, I should think. You passed out as soon as we were safe."

Noticing long streaks of red on the sheets as he surmounted the bed he opted for a prone position on his stomach. There was nothing he could do about his badly scraped knees continuing to leak into the fabric, but by the feel of it, he needed to stay on his front so his lacerated back didn't make the mess worse. He realized he was half naked. Had the old lady managed to disrobe him or had he lost his shirt and Santa jacket along the way?

"Try to get comfortable, dearie" she said softly. She continued wiping the deep claw wounds on his back with a warm, damp cloth. That must have been the source of the pain upon awaking as it now redoubled. Robin hissed as contact with the fabric continued unabated.

"What's your name, son? I figure I should at least know what to call my savior."

Knowing it was best to keep breathing steadily through the pain, he said, "Robin. Robin Bennett. What's yours?"

<wah-wah-ghah> A garbled mumble was her response. The pain of his wounds must be affecting his hearing despite her gentle touch. "Sorry, what was that?"

The same <wah-wah-ghah> noise happened again, somewhat of a combo between the adult voices from Charlie Brown cartoons and an activating gag reflex. Had his hearing been damaged in the fight? Or the during the flight? He felt particularly weak, like he had spent three days at a music festival doing nothing but drugs and dancing like a seizing scarecrow.

Deciding he didn't want to look stupid, he mumbled something noncommittal and pretended to have caught her name. "Well, it's really nice to meet you. I'm glad you weren't hurt in the attack. You *weren't* hurt, were you?"

"No, no, Mister Robin. You made sure to keep me all safe. Your long legs kept us ahead of those nasty wereWolves. You even hurled lightning at them and made them stop following us."

Robin had no recollection of anything after running around the block from the club and following the woman's pointing finger as to what direction to flee. There had been light street traffic and he remembered considering hailing a cab but with no phone or money they had just kept running.

The wiping of blood from his back stopped. "Oh my, these really do look worse than I thought. You probably need stitches, and a lot of them. I could call one of my children to come take us to the hospital." When Robin took too long providing an answer, she said, "Or I could do it myself. I'm pretty handy with all kinds of needles."

“Were you a nurse or something?” He assumed she was retired and figured she would have proclaimed herself a doctor if she had been one.

She laughed quietly. “No, no. Nothing of the sort. I was a teacher. I do a fair piece of knitting these days, though.”

The difference between chopstick-like knitting needles and one fine enough to use for stitching wounds seemed significant. Did he have a better idea? Calling more people to the house and getting them involved, and hence, put in danger, was not something he wanted on his conscience. Besides, as an actor, he had no medical insurance in the real world and certainly had none here. Unless this version of Amérku had universal health care, he was going to have to rely on the old woman’s ability to seamstress his flesh like a holiday sweater.

“Okay, you can do it. I trust you.” Robin didn’t *really* trust her but didn’t know what else to do. He was in no condition to get himself out of the bed, let alone all the way to a hospital. Besides, with how angry and wet his back felt, even a bad stitch job was preferable to nothing.

The old woman shuffled out of the bedroom and was gone for a bit, or maybe Robin passed out for a minute or three. She eventually returned with a sewing kit. He didn’t examine it too closely as he preferred not to know what tools she was about to impale him with. She sterilized a blessedly small needle with alcohol and got to work. Robin gritted his teeth but soon passed out for sure, hopefully more from exhaustion than from any butchery on the old woman’s part.

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The next time Robin awoke, it was to the sensation of wetness under his cheek. His face rested on a soft pillow. He had clearly been drooling. Like a lot. He moved to dry off when the crackling sensation of acidic pain — as if a slab of salmon grilled on the open flames of his back — made him gasp aloud.

“Oh good, you’re awake,” the old woman’s voice declared. He was facing the wrong way to see her. He carefully turned his head while slowly propping himself up on both elbows, the sweat-damp sheets peeling from his chest as he rose. The old woman sat in a soft chair in one corner of the cozy bedroom knitting with khaki yarn. The bedroom was decorated in beige floral prints and what likely was tacky wallpaper had it been rendered in color. In shades of beige, it didn’t seem so bad, maybe visually too busy lending an air of over-decoration to the space, but not offensive. “How does your back feel? You passed out so I haven’t taken a look at your knees, but I did a pretty good job on those gashes, if I do say so myself.”

She sounded pleased and Robin couldn’t help but smile a little. “It feels okay, I guess. Maybe some aspirin or something would be nice to help with the pain.”

“Of course, dear. Right there on the bedside table, along with fresh, cold, sweet tea.”

Robin hated sweet tea, but didn’t want to come off as ungrateful so he took the pills with a healthy gulp simultaneously rediscovering that nothing had taste here. Hopefully

the tea still had caffeine. He judged the light coming in the curtained window defined time as late afternoon. Had he been asleep all day? “What time is it?”

“Oh, about four-thirty,” she replied. “I’ve been asleep most of the day too, once I got you all sewed up. I reckon you must be gettin’ hungry. I know I am. The arthritis in my knees is telling me it’s time for food. A good meal always softens any discomfort, I always say. Do you like fried chicken? I got one o’ them fancy new air fryers so I can even make it all healthy.”

Healthy fried chicken? That’ll be the day. I hate fried food, but since everything tastes like tofu, what harm could there be? Maybe her fried chicken will be cholesterol free as well as flavor free. “Sounds delicious, Betty” Robin said. He was thinking she reminded him of Betty White, his favorite actress from the Golden Girls; wholesome in appearance but naughty enough to throw dirty gestures. She probably had a wild and kinky side too which might explain her presence in the club last night.

She either accepted the name he gave her or she heard what she wanted to hear. Or maybe this game world kept plain people from giving their names to **Players** on purpose. If NPCs heard their own proper name no matter what a **Player** called them, **Players** might more easily reduce them to mere chattel in their minds, making it easier to kill them. Or maybe NPCs weren’t real at all and were some sort of construct put here solely to be fed upon. It *did* matter to Robin. Betty was kind and caring so whatever she was, he didn’t want anything bad to happen to her.

Getting out of bed was harder than Robin expected. He felt terribly weak and his legs seemed ready to give out at any moment. As Betty toddled out of the room, he looked around for something to wear. It didn’t seem appropriate to wander around the house with no top on.

His red Santa jacket and plain white tee lay crumpled on top of the dresser. He picked up the shirt but it was brown and crusty with dried blood and was so torn it likely would never be wearable again. The jacket, while also blood-stained, was somewhat more intact. The back panel was, of course, all torn up but the rest seemed in decent shape. If Betty didn’t have something for him to wear, he could probably salvage it after giving it a good wash. He might even borrow her sewing gear to remove the arms and use the sleeve fabric to patch up the back.

Grateful to still have pants, he *did* note they were in bad shape from the knees down. If he was going to bother fixing the jacket, he might as well turn the pants into shorts while he was at it. He shuffled down the hall into the kitchen where Betty had started prepping food. “Do you have anything different I could wear? And maybe I could use your washing machine?”

Without pulling her kerchiefed head out of the refrigerator she absently waved one hand in his direction. “You go ahead and make yourself at home, sweetie. You will hardly be the first down-on-their-luck stray I’ve picked up over the years. In fact, that’s how my husband and I acquired all four of our children, praise be to angels.”

Not feeling up to small talk, he simply thanked her. He retrieved his jacket from the bedroom and made his way into the utility room just off the kitchen. He found the washer and dryer and a basket of clean, folded towels. Stripping off the red pants and his underwear and tossing all three items into the washer, he took the largest, fluffiest towel and wrapped it around his waist. Contemplating draping another towel over his shoulders to cover up a little more decently, he swiftly discarded the notion. Every move he made that required bending over or lifting his arms reminded him of the state of his back. It would probably be far more *uncomfortable* having a towel scraping across his back than it would be parading around the house mostly naked.

Hell, I've gotten totally nude in half a dozen stage productions. Betty's just one more audience member, right? This is no big deal. I'm just happy to be safe.

Betty was busy humming a soft tune while cooking so Robin returned to the spare bedroom. He took out the Instruction Manual from his satchel which lay under the mangled tee shirt on the dresser. The page after the neighborhood map was glowing so he read the stark black writing:

Congratulations! You're currently in shitty shape. Hope you're feeling all saintly about saving a poor, nameless, old woman. You used up most all of your **Attribute** cards! All you have left are **REA** d8, **AWR** d6 & d8, **PRE** d10 & d12 and two **BOH** d8s. Betcha feel all accomplished at being an over-achiever, or maybe we should say over-user.

The good news is **resting** will slowly return your **fatigued Attributes** to your **ready** deck at the rate of two cards per full day of rest.

Your wounds, on the other hand, are gonna take a lot more time. Not only do you have a **WLP** d4 card out of circulation due to **Stress**, but your two **BRN** d6s, **AGL** d8 & d10 as well as **FOR** d6 & d8 cards are all lounging in your **Injury** cache. They are out of circulation until you get better medical treatment than granny stitches.

Robin groaned. He nearly let himself flop backward onto the bed but jerkily stopped realizing he would land directly on his hamburger-ed back. "This fucking sucks. Those wereDogs might be tracking us down and getting ready to rip through this house at any moment. I won't be able to do anything in *this* condition."

He glared at the book before asking the inevitable next question. "So how do I refresh and heal faster?" He suspected he already knew the answer but he needed confirmation before deciding how to proceed.

Well, you're gonna need to **Feed**, you silly goose. And not on Gram Gram's fried chicken but on Gram Gram herself.

You still have your starting allotment of 10 **Resources**, two each of **Flesh**, **Fear**, **Faith**, **Resolve** and **Life**. As an **Initiate**, every 4 **Resources** you consume will either return 1 card from your **Fatigue** cache to your **Ready** deck or you'll **Heal** 1 card. As a human, you have the privilege of using any flavor of **Resource**, so be glad your palette is broad.

Be aware, **Healing** moves cards from your **Stress**, **Injury** and **Stigma** caches to your **Fatigue** cache, not directly back to your **Ready** deck.

Time to find your appetite and chow down if you hope to stay alive in this world for very long.

There was no way Robin would dare **Feeding** on Betty. Even though Zebryl had demonstrated how to extract **Fear**, the last thing that sweet old woman needed was Robin scaring her more than she already had been. He certainly didn't want to risk giving her a heart attack or anything.

He mentally commanded the satchel to bring forth the chonky **Resource** gumdrops. There were two each in red, yellow, purple, green and grey. They all were somewhat squishy and kind of therapeutic to play with. No matter how hard he squeezed one between thumb and middle finger they would not rupture or come apart. They actually *did* look tasty; candy-like even.

He knew the red ones were made from **Fear**, but had no idea which color was which for the other four types. Robin could ask the book but didn't care enough to bother. Without thinking any more deeply about it, he popped one of the red ones into his mouth and started chewing.

The texture was very much like a gumdrop and even though his fingers hadn't hurt the dollop it chewed easily enough. The flavor was delicious! **Fear** turned out to taste like a fresh waffle cone - a hint of sugar with forward vanilla notes. The only thing missing was the crunch of a waffle cone, but he didn't care. The taste was nearly orgasmic as relief started to flood his body.

Robin quickly gobbled the second **Fear** drop and the waffley flavor only heightened. After swallowing, hoping the flavors wouldn't contrast too sharply, he jammed the two yellow ones (his favorite color) in his mouth. Chewing these washed his taste buds in cool, refreshing margarita flavor. The bite of tequila combined with the citrus-ness of lime proved quite refreshing.

As he swallowed, a shimmering waver appeared atop his satchel creating a glimmer in the reflection on the dresser's mirror. A tarot-sized card depicting d10 in **Agility** resolved into reality but remained somewhat out of focus. He felt a warm, smoothing sensation so he carefully turned his back to the mirror while peering over his own shoulder. As he watched, the angry redness of the four long gashes visibly reduced and maybe even shrank in length a tad, though perhaps that was wishful thinking.

Robin summoned the rest of his **Attribute** cards from the satchel. Most of them appeared in an out-of-focus pile as if his vision had deteriorated and he needed to bump up his reading glass prescription. *Those must be all my **Fatigued** cards.*

A very slim pile of seven cards had also appeared, but these were easily readable. Presumably they were all that remained in his **Ready** deck.

*I only have six more **Resources** left which means I can heal only one more card from the Injury cache which will still leave five out of circulation. And that didn't even shift a single card of the — he quickly counted the thicker pile of fatigued ones — 15 cards, back into my **Ready** deck. Betty seems accommodating enough and has already offered, I think, to let me stay and rest here. I don't really have any other options, so I might as well call this Home for now and settle in.*

As soon as that thought finished, he feared he was having a stroke. The walls and every item in the room wavered as if behind a screen of heat rising off hot summertime pavement. Color spread across every surface as if he had stepped out of a silent, black and white movie from the 1920s into a Hawaii-based one in the 1980s. Turned out the wallpaper was, indeed, tropically tacky. The entire room looked like Magnum P.I.'s wardrobe had been used as spackle, paint, varnish and upholstery.