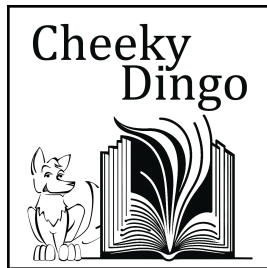


Human Flavor Book 1

HUNGRY HUNGRY HORRORS

LAYMAN KINGSFORD



This is a work of fiction. Unless otherwise indicated, all the names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents in this book are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

© 2026 Cheeky Dingo Publishing
ISBN: 978-0-9719531-3-0

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Cover Design by Skybrush Studio/Paris Ioannou

LAYMAN KINGSFORD'S
*Human
Flavor*

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DEDICATION

For my “Writing Circle” and all their
support, wisdom, feedback and editing.
Each of you feeds me unending, tasty
inspiration that never needs a side of salsa
— though I will forever contend most
everything tastes better with salsa.

Listed in order determined by dice rolls:

Jess

Lauren

Emily (BD #1)

Dani (BD #2)

Sean

Iain

and Reid

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BIGBAD CITY



Chapter 1



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

Robin whipped around looking for his young cousin but whatever tepid city street he now stood upon 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 was now cheaply rendered into 3-D. 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.

His mind was failing to track exactly where he was and what had just happened to him. The mock magical ritual Dana had insisted upon enacting had, bizarrely, manifested a truly unique physical sensation he had ever experienced. As soon as she had lit the last candle and uttered her last gibberish phrase, Robin's entire body felt like it was being sucked; sucked like when you took a vacuum hose to your forearm to see if it would give you a hickey — but over every inch of his skin all at once.

Now that the full-body suck job was over he needed to find out if his surroundings were real or hallucinatory. 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 Santa Claus costume from last month's crappy holiday mall job. At least it was just the hat, jacket and pants and didn't include the fat suit stuffing which had made him pig-sweat. Bizarrely, the outfit was blue, not red, but the coat was still trimmed in dingy white fluff safety-pinned around every hem 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? Robin was left with the sensation that the world was somehow hollow or shallow. Everything lacked a certain authenticity that he couldn't quite define.

Salsa music played from inside the bodega where Robin could see a handful of people through the window filling their hand 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 special needs pre-teen cousin on his weekly babysitting shift. Their family always told outsiders Dana was autistic as that prevented them from having to explain her whole disappearance saga and her eventual return with brain damage.

Today, Dana had wanted to cast some sort of spell to "open up communication with other dimensions". Robin sometimes regretted playing D&D with the kid which had given her the unrealistic notion he might be open to out-of-the-box thinking. As a now-home-bound 15-year-old who had been through some truly tough, life-changing shit, Dana 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 ‘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 his phone was 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 the left side of his belt. 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 hardback novel. Its edges worn and ragged-looking as if it had been well used and then put to rest on a shelf in a lost jungle temple 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. In his mind he assigned the book's narrative voice a sharp Southern drawl:

*Welcum **Mistik** Hyuuman! This is yoor veree oown **Instrukshun Manyuel** foor gaam liif.*

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

Let's take a gander at 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 **13 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 tome are the followin' items:

1 Deck of **Attribute** Cards

1 Basic **Dagger**

10 **Victual** Rations:

2 **Faith**

2 **Resolve**

2 **Vitality**,

2 **Meat**

2 **Fear**

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

A young couple walking down the sidewalk holding 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 nearby three and four-story buildings; most of which were street level shops with offices or apartments above. Very boiler plate in design even if distractingly bland given the color scheme.

A second-story 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 as being the only other things 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 it back? I’m pretty sure it was the do-or-die-guide. Give me the book 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 and the greeting proclamation. He tried swiping his finger on the printing as if it were an iPad. He'd seen small children 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 staidly where it was. He riffled through the rest of the book. "That sucks, all the other pages are 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, and 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 your **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." Suddenly, 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 book under one arm he took the case out and pulled its top off revealing a set of 28 tarot-sized cards made of stiff but flexible parchment. Each card listed an **Attribute**, kind of like in Dungeons and Dragons, but these had nine different types. Each

card had three variations labeled with a single trait and one polyhedral dice icon:

Brawn [physical] d3 • d6 • d8

Agility [physical] d7 • d9 • d15

Fortitude [physical] d7 • d8 • d14

Reasoning [mental] d6 • d10 • d11

Awareness [mental] d7 • d12 • d13

Willpower [mental] d4 • d10 • d13

Presence [social] d9 • d11 • 2d16

Bodhi [social] d5 • d12 • d14

Essence [social] d3 • d4 • d5

There were rows of little circles like fill-in bubbles on a Scantron test next to 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 the product of his overactive imagination and too many hours spent with roleplaying games instead of studying for school or his next audition.

He pulled out the **d9 Agility** card and examined the words at the bottom of it:

Permanent Physical Debility: *Click
Knee*

Not only does your left knee make a small snappin' 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. In fact, his left knee had been problematic since childhood. Perusing the other cards he found an identical **Debility** on the **d3 Brawn** card. Four other cards were labeled with **Impediments**, which seemed to be lesser variations of **Debilities** and included five little fill-in bubbles under them. *Maybe those could be gotten rid of over time?*

The **d6 Brawn Impediment** was labeled as an old shoulder injury, probably reflective of having torn a ligament a few years ago in a sword fight 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 got a lead role someday, theater would never pay enough for medical bills, so he was stuck with that shoulder issue for life.

The **d4 Willpower Impediment** only referenced dice rolls when drinking alcohol. Robin loved whiskey and tequila and would rarely pass up doing shots of either one. The **d5 Bodhi Impediment** — *what the hell is Body? Bohdee? Bodhiy?* — seemed to have something to do with impinging emotionally-viable romantic decisions. The **d3 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 sixteen-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 had been as a 30-year-old model. Maybe these stats were pretty truthful after all, if a touch humbling.

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 he arrived under the curtained window. The van's broad side was painted with a logo for Midtowne Pet Kitchen, complete with a happy-looking kitten and puppy pair.

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-story 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 **Instrukshun Manyuel** under his arm. Time and motion ground down freezing everything around him. Robin imagined a long, groaning bass drop sound effect, like when action slowed down around the main character in

a movie. He opened the book. New contents filled the second page:

You have triggered one of six allowed **Time Outs** to prepare for your very first **Action**.

Since you can't decide whether to check out that blood-curdlin' scream or not, you will need to test one of your **Attributes** against one of your *other Attributes*. The results will see if you follow through with the notion of ignoring a potential crisis via **Willpower** or give in to foolish impulse and see what's goin' on via **Bodhi**.

If you prove to be rational about it, your three **Willpower** cards will allow you to ignore the all-too-human realization that you *should* help others. Your old Boy Scout leader will appear and give you three demerits. Just kidding, your Boy Scout leader is in jail. He's too busy gettin' drop-soaped in the showers to care about *your* moral quandaries.

If, instead, **Bodhi** wins out, you will feel the emotional compulsion to assist your fellow human — thereby makin' your momma so proud she might weep.

“Well, I gotta assume high rolls are better than low ones 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 but time unfroze. A new 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 always using good manners when addressing all inanimate baggage from now on. Using his best Shakespearian voice, like when he played Glendower in *King Henry IV*, he grandly pronounced: "I can call spirits ... I mean, **Attribute** cards ... from the vasty deep!"

The deck box appeared silently inside the bag just as time froze once more. He pulled it out after clenching the book under one armpit so as to have both hands free. The three **Willpower** cards and three **Bodhi** cards all glowed ever so slightly about their edges.

He held them up on display to the world around him for identification by whatever esoteric intelligence was running this shindig (even if it was his own brain).

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

Feeling quite self-conscious and more than a little dumb that nothing immediate was happening, Robin looked resignedly at the cards as if they were Pokemon balls and declared, "I choose you."

The cards shimmered more brightly and 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, clasped the six glowing cards in one hand, and awkwardly opened the dice bag with the other.

Six dice, some with slightly wonky unfamiliar shapes, popped out of the sack and hurled themselves onto the pavement. They rolled to a stop organized in two side-by-side columns.

Robin 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.

SIZE	SOURCE	RESULT	RESULT	SOURCE	SIZE
d14	BOH	✓ 11 ⇒ 10	○	WLP	d13
d12	BOH	✓ 8 ⇒ 3	○	WLP	d10
d5	BOH	○ 1 ⇒ 2	✓	WLP	d4
WINNER: BOHDI					

Congratulations, you have rolled a double **Bodhi success!** The highest dice results are compared against each other, then the next highest, and then the lowest. Two successes on your **Bodhi** dice beat out the one success on a **Willpower** die.

This means you have convinced yourself to check out the screaming and see if you can be of assistance. Your Boy Scout leader would be very proud. But don't

worry about him, he's getting railed and he's likin' it. Let's hope your choice pays off positively too.

As an additional bonus, you have earned your first point of **Karma** and one **Dot** of **Experience**.

Normal flow of time returned as did all the sounds of the suburb. Without thinking any further about this entirely ridiculous situation, Robin strode — **Instrukshun Manyuel** in hand — into the alley as his rolled dice on the sidewalk and the **d14 Bodhi** card all sizzled into the aether with a wisp of blue steam.

Around the corner there was, indeed, 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 khaki flowers. The walls of the alley were painted in streaks and splashes of bright red blood as a short, rabid, 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 only 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 combat choreography? He had no actual fighting talent, 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 out the side of his mouth

at his messenger bag. There was immediately the 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-dude-in-a-suit glad he wasn't shaking. Much.

The monster was too busy to take notice of anything but its meal. Should he rush forward 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 **Instrukshun Manyuel** 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 eggnog will get the stink out after this monster is through with ya'.

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.

He returned his attention to the book:

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

*Ack! I haven't even looked at my **Skills** 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? "Show me my **Skills**, please," he said to the guide book. The next available blank page magically filled in with details:*

Acting [craft] d10 • d16 • d20

Dancing [physical] d13 • d15 • d18

Carousing [community] d6 • d9 • d10

Shopping [mundane] d8 • d12 • d13

Interior Design [academic] d6 • d9 • d10

Sewing [craft] d8 • d12 • d13

Sailing [lake] d4 • d5 • d8

Outdoorsing [mountain] d5 • d9 • d11

Spanish [academic] d8 • d12 • d13

Stage Combat [physical] d8 • d12 • d17

ZingZap [magic] d6 • d6 • d7

Charm [magic] d10 • d11 • d12

He slipped the dagger into his belt and put the guide book under his armpit before quickly perusing the **Skill** list. **Sailing, Dancing, Acting,**

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 intention was to hurt you. The whole point of stage combat was to *not* make contact; this wereSkunk would surely not hold to the same agenda.

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

The **Charm Skill** said he could befriend and proffer non-destructive advice to a **Few** others. *Again, how many is "few"? 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?*

Robin feared he might not be allowed to stay in this timeless state indefinitely. Feeling pressured, he brashly decided to try the **ZingZap Skill** and combine it with his biggest **Essence** card — the **d5**, which luckily did not have 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 d5** card." The tug at the dice pouch happened again, but this time four dice popped out to hover in the air appearing to jiggle with

anticipation at being used instead of immediately tumbling to the ground. One was the **d5** from the **Essence** card, and the other three matched the dice sizes listed next to the **ZingZap** spell — **2d6** and a **d7**.

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 games 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 feels absurd.

Robin pointed down the alley half-expecting the dice to hurl themselves that way. They simply continued to hang there. Time remained inert, so he opened up the **Instrukshun Manyuel**:

Will you look at that! It appears you need to actually cast the spell, you silly sorcerer.

“How the actual fuck am I supposed to do that? Wave my hands around and shout ‘abracadabra’?” Robin cried, incredulous. “I’m pretty sure Mr. Skunk-o-Skewer is about to come for me any second!”

Suddenly the world started moving again. Robin dropped the book as his right arm rose as if he were a puppet, fingers splayed and palm aimed down the alley. There was a crackle of energy as every hair on his arm stood on end. He felt ecstatic while simultaneously somewhat aroused as magical forces roiled through his being in an enthrallingly alien sensation. *This might be better than sex!*

Robin's four dice tumbled to the pavement with a clatter, while four dice shot out of the wereSkunk's pants pocket to line up alongside them:

SIZE	SOURCE	RESULT	RESULT	SOURCE	SIZE
d6	ZingZap	○	3 ⇒ 18 ✓	FOR	d18
d6	ZingZap	○	3 ⇒ 9 ✓	Resist	d13
d5	ESN	○	2 ⇒ 8 ✓	Resist	d12
d7	ZingZap	○	1 ⇒ 5 ✓	Resist	d8

WINNER: WERE**S**KUNK

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

The **ZingZap** spell seemed to have been too weak to cause any damage. The skunk's long and very fluffy tail stretched out to swish from side to side as 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, spattering 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, picked up the guide book and dropped it into the satchel. He rifled through the **Attribute** cards without really reading any of them. Maybe inspiration would strike or the answer would make itself obvious.

“Yo, 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 anymore. A thirty-something, fully rendered woman in a blue crop-top jacket and some kind of adventurer’s skirt 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 array of colorful potion vials set in her belt.

“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 — an

actual human — and not one of the beige simulacrum folk. She clearly operated outside the timeFreeze situation too. Her dark skin looked hydrated and her jet-black hair was woven into two tight braids dangling out the front of her hood. She had large golden goggles set atop her forehead 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 visage. “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 chic-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 '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 pulled a glass test tube full of glowing red liquid from her bandolier in one hand and a clear crystal flask of glitter-water in the other.

The wereSkunk dropped to all fours, snarling to reveal huge fangs, and rushed forward at 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. 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 twenty-something, as they danced through the air

to collide with the monster's opposing dice results.

So many visual things were transpiring that Robin had no way to track — let alone catalog — all of it. Monika hurled the red vial at the oncoming monster while pulling the cork out of the clear flask with her teeth. Like a frat bro, she chugged its glittery contents in one big gulp.

The red vial shattered upon impacting the skunk, carpeting 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, gracefully dousing the flames. It rolled to its feet like an action superhero, then ripped the charred jacket off its tightly-muscled torso.

Monika finished slamming the drink down her throat and tossed the empty flask at the beast. It casually swatted it aside, then patted one last flame 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 had been almost a head shorter than Robin a moment before. At six-foot-one, Robin was pretty tall, but she became 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 had she gone on tiptoes.

Another handful of dice tumbled off Monika, looking like pebbles tossed over a cliff. From Robin's angle, he witnessed a few soft-looking

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 accompanied by the 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 was taking an acid piss up Robin's nostrils.

Giant Monika surveyed the scene, making sure no other monsters were about. There were now a few people out on the street, along with two or three stopped cars watching the spectacle. The beigeFolk held their noses and 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. Ciao, babe."

Chapter 3



The be-goggled 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 polyhedrals.

"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 off-handedly as she walked past and patted him on

his stubbly 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 the kind of thought one wanted creeping in lest, one got sent 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 elsewheres.” 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 ain't gonna last long if you wander into some controlled 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's "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 ain't 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 in your **Manual** then you make dice rolls to see if ya' succeed. Eventually you start filling in the **Dots**, and then you earn bigger 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 pathetic.

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 goggles over her eyes, 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 led 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 everything else is so bland?”

Monika pulled her dark blue jacket off 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 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 become colored too. We even keep our names.”

That last statement baffled him for a moment. “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 ain’t 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 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 purple and red things from her pocket that she had collected in the alley — they looked like 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 were those? 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 rocker 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 bandolier. She poured its contents over the boot she’d used for skunk-stomping. The smell of a freshly-mowed lawn filled the room, completely eliminating the stink.

She tossed the vial into her pants pocket 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 **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 occupation is **Alchemist**.”

“You mean like turning lead into gold, that sort of 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 with a slight shake of her head. “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. Suddenly, cinnamon bun sure sounded good. Or any donut, really. Or was he just trying to convince himself he was hungry?

"Nah, it's not so bad. Saves time not having to shop and cook and dine and do dishes. The downside is we *do* have to consume **Victuals**. 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** is only one **Victual** we can make use of. If you want to get your spent **Attribute** cards back and heal from **Injuries**, you'll have to ingest **Victuals**. Luckily, **Victuals** 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. Not to mention the slow drain of **Karma**."

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 **Vitality**. It doesn't matter too much to us, any of 'em will keep us alive."

"Oh, okay. How do I know how many **Victuals** I have?" Maybe Monika wasn't going to be the best guide, but at least he knew more than he did an hour ago.

Monika wordlessly reached over to a full bookshelf behind her and pulled off a small tome identical to the one Robin had, but he could see this one was covered with slightly different icons. 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, Karma** and **Equipment**. It also shows your current **Victuals**." Hers had a list

of the five types mentioned a moment ago, with a number next to each type.

Robin nodded as if completely understanding everything he was looking at. He felt a little moronic because he now remembered his book listing at least some of that information, but he had been so overwhelmed it had left his mind. He'd check his own list later so as not to look even dumber right now. He knew he should ask more questions, but he didn't want to strain her patience. In auditions, he always feared coming off like a meddling know-it-all 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. However, in this case, 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** list had **Carouse** on it. 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 fuck stain 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 **Victuals**."

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 decently quiet 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 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, hopefully leaving 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 making himself an obstacle.

“Hello. Could you...,” The trench-coated man he addressed 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 knew what Christmas was.

Robin gave up trying to chat with strangers and leaned against a lamp post just to 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 **Instrukshun Manyuel**, seemingly the only item in his possession with the ability to appear on its own:

Action time! You have initiated an *Unskilled Observation Action*. 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.

You don't have the **Observation Skill**, but your training as an actor does give you *some* benefit. So instead of three **Basic Dice** a **d3**, **d4** and **d5**, your **Skill** dice will be **UPsized** to **d6**, **d8** and **d10**.

You will need to choose one of your **Awareness Attribute** cards to complete the dice pool. Now, your opposing dice will be determined by what yer lookin' fer, so you better have a clear intention if you wanna get good results.

He asked the satchel to give him his **Attribute** deck box, and it obliged with another <DING>. He had **Awareness** cards with **d7**, **d12** and **d13**. He choose the **d13** and watched as it sizzled into nothingness, and three tan skill dice and one glimmering **Attribute** die appeared in his hand. He concentrated on wanting to learn valuable details about the world before tossing the dice onto the sidewalk:

SIZE	SOURCE	RESULT	RESULT	SOURCE	SIZE
d8	Observe	○ 7 ⇒ 13	✓	Info	d14
d6	Observe	○ 6 ⇒ 9	✓	Info	d17
d13	AWR	○ 5 ⇒ 7	✓	Info	d7
d10	Observe	✓ 5 ⇒ 2	○	Info	d6
RESULT: NOT MUCH					

The dice vanished as he looked back to his **Instrukshun Manyuel**:

Well, look at you being a lazy Looky-Lou lookin' around lackin' looker-osity. You only managed a single success.

What this means is you'll garner a couple basic details, but nothing of real import.

Better luck next time.

*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 barely 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*;

Robin sighed. *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 he'd seen other people using smart phones.

It was worth a try. "Hey, **Instrukshun Manyuel**, show me a map of this neighborhood." Shockingly, or perhaps with less shock than would have been garnered a couple hours ago, the book vibrated 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.



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 crimson vibrancy, while sensuous jazz exuded from outdoor speakers. It felt like the first place 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 open-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, though the cheers, loud grousing, and the clatter of dice hinted at the presence of a vivacious gambling room down a dim hallway. A stanchioned sign labeled “Bastard Dice Tournament” confirmed the suspicion.

In the main parlor, 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. The only thing missing was the presence of cigar smoke.

Behind the bar stood a short, 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

place. The music soothingly accompanied an enticing smell, vanilla maybe? Cinnamon? He wanted to feel hungry, but no such sensation was discoverable upon his tongue or 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 for 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 gradually came into view.

A six-foot, pale pink devil with a shock of fire-engine-red hair, oversized pointed ears and huge horns — one red, one blue — 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 for immovability, 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 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 that 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 Robin 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 ‘you get some’ wink. *Why would someone who looks 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 round hole with her hands. She rewarded 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 onto the table. The drink came from his left hand, which had a red spike protruding from it, unlike the blue one on his other hand. The devil’s thigh slipped across Robin’s 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 is 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 not everyone here was 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 meek shrug — half apology, half question. He sputtered a quick reply, "I'm Robin. Robin Bennett." He hoped finally giving 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, blue, crystalline spike emanated from the back of the devil's hand. He wanted to touch it, to stroke it, maybe even lick it.

Dice tumbled across the tabletop. Four had come from Robin, and four 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.

SIZE	SOURCE	RESULT	RESULT	SOURCE	SIZE
d13	WLP	○ 8 ⇒ 10	☑	PRE	d16
d9	Carouse	○ 8 ⇒ 9	☑	Seduce	d19
d10	Carouse	○ 7 ⇒ 7	○	Seduce	d22
d6	Carouse	☑ 3 ⇒ 2	○	Seduce	d15
WINNER: ZEBRYL					

The incubus gazed alluringly with ruby eyes straight into Robin's heart. All he wanted to do was take the demon by those huge, mismatched 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.

"Ahhh, 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 to 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 eliciting 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 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. In fact, you only have access to a few **Time Outs** when you’re new. All you really have to do is activate cards and dice with your mind. It will become second nature soon enough, like any other repetitive behavior. Eventually you may not even notice it happening at all.”

*Oh gawd! How many have I used? I haven’t even been tracking that. Hopefully the **Instrukshun Manyuuel** catalogs 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 **Time Outs**. “Can other **Players** ignore **Time Outs**?” 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, 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 desires of escaping and remaining right where he was. “Can you tell me

how to do that? I've been told I will need to **Feed** on something other than actual food."

"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 judgment, 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 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 receive no replenishment from your body's own ingredients."

Robin pinched it lightly. The red dollop felt like an actual gummydrop. 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 wereCanines of various types and a massive wereBear.

The bear, dressed in a fancy purple smoking jacket, took a few additional steps inside 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.