

The background of the cover is a dramatic illustration. A massive, dark dragon with glowing red eyes and horns looms over a city at night. The city lights are visible through the dragon's body. The sky is dark with some light clouds. The overall color palette is dominated by blues, oranges, and reds.

LAYMAN KINGSFORD

HUNGRY
HUNGRY
HORRORS

HUMAN FLAVOR BOOK 1

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 was standing 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 red hat, jacket and pants and didn't include the fat suit stuffing. 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 memory of that smell.

<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. She had wanted to cast some sort of spell to open up communication with other dimensions. Robin was beginning to regret telling the kid he was a board gamer and fantasy book-lover and 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 at 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 is?* Inside the bag was a single item. A thick piece of parchment about the size of a standard sheet of paper. Its edges were worn and ragged-looking as if it had been well-used and then left to rest on a lost temple's shelf for a couple hundred years. He was afraid it might tear but the material proved stiff enough not to bend to gravity but still be foldable.

Printed in some sort of phonetic English was a message:

Welcum **Mistik** Hyuuman!

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:

Your archetype is **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" document are the following items:

- 1** Deck of **Attribute** Cards
- 1** Deck of **Skill** Cards
- 1** Basic **Dagger**
- 10 Resource** Rations (2 Prayers, 2 Willpower, 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 inside 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 folded the weird parchment into quarters 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!"

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The folded parchment appeared in the bag looking perfectly innocent. Robin took it out and unfolded it. It still only listed the contents it claimed where 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 do that to paper restaurant menus and be baffled at the images' refusal to react to their gestures.

Surprisingly, the text scrolled up just like one would expect from an iPad. "This is some freaky Harry Potter shit. I better not be expected to fly a broom and smack wing dings across the sky." The continuation of instructions read:

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 piece of paper." 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. He took the case out and pulled its top off revealing a set of 27 tarot-looking cards made of the same stiff-but-flexible parchment as the instruction sheet. 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 a 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 lines 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 school hours playing roleplaying games with friends 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's die 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 or something in his shoulder a few years ago in a sword fight scene in 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.

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 attributes. 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 rank bigger dice for reasoning and willpower and even brawn (though he was not so diligent in his 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 when he got 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 his messenger bag again. Time and motion slowed down freezing everything around him. Robin imagined, or at least thought there should be, a long bass drop sound effect like in movies when reality was depicted as coming to a halt around the main character. He reached in the bag and pulled out the Lessons & Rules parchment which had reappeared inside. It 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 parchment 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 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 putting the parchment between his teeth 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 took the parchment from his mouth 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. *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 accompanied by the rattling sound of jostled dice. He put the parchment back in his teeth 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**

d4 = 2

d4 = 3

d4 = **4**

Congratulations, you have **2 successes!** Your Boy Scout leader would be proud. You have convinced yourself to check into 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.

Without thinking any further about this entirely ridiculous situation, Robin strode — parchment in hand — into the alley as his rolled dice sizzled into the ether off the sidewalk. 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.

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She gave one last half-shriek before collapsing to the ground. Without bothering to look up, the wereSkunk started 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 not being much taller than five feet. It was literally shredding that poor beige woman. What the fuck was he supposed to do about that? Hope the critter had rehearsed the same stage combat blocking Robin had? 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 wereSkunk glad, at least, that 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 into his own mutilation? He took a moment to glance at the instruction sheet 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 for a wise backup plan. I seriously doubt I'd be better equipped for a fight right now if I'd become a reporter. Maybe I'd interview it into submission? He read on:

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 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 sheet in his teeth 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 in hurting you.

The next two cards were labeled as magic skills: **Zap** and **Charm**. Zap’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”? Would it reach down the alley or would 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, so feeling pressured for time he brashly decided to try the Zap 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. I hated it when video game RPGs started switching from turn-based to real-time. I couldn’t play them anymore unless I enlisted the help of someone 20 years younger. Actually having to live a turn-based life is absurd and I now see the impracticality of it.

Robin chucked the dice into the alley. They tumbled to a halt in a puddle of what was hopefully 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

d10 = 4

d10 = 1

d8 = 3

Time remained inert so he glanced at the instruction sheet.

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 alive with energy while simultaneously suffused with ecstasy as magical forces roiled through his being. This was better than sex!

Sizzling blue electricity danced along his red-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 and the creature convulsed softly like it had an unexpected chill.

Its long and very fluffy tail stretched out and swished from side to side as its lambent eyes menacingly turned to notice Robin. It held a chunk of dripping shoulder meat in one claw as 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... 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 splattering 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, rifled through the Attribute cards without really reading any of them. Maybe he hoped inspiration would strike or the answer would make itself appear.

"Hey, noob," said a snarky voice from the sidewalk behind him. "Whahya 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 sensation was all too familiar and frequent 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 appeared to be caustically critiquing Robin with judgmental but pitying eyes. One hand fiddled with a yellow scarf-sash 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. 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. "My name's Monika, and I'm just as human a person as you are. 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 this world has. At least I got my color, right?" She gestured to her outfit seeming quite proud of her outfit.

"Yeah, nice threads. *Who the fuck says 'threads' anymore. 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 normally would act meeting a stranger. Usually he was quite affable. Right now he was 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 glittering water in the other.

The wereSkunk dropped to all fours baring its huge fangs and began to rush 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 and resisted 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 to start drinking its glittery contents.

The red vial shattered upon impacting the skunk dousing it in searing red flames. The monster continued to surge 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 over and over in an effort to douse the flames. It rolled to its feet like an action superhero ripping 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 just watched as the woman expanded in proportion to that of a three-story giant, nearly 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 out of the wereSkunk like fear-induced turds.

Monika raised one monolithic boot, her foot now as big as Robin himself. She stomped down and smashed the half-naked wereSkunk with a result of wet squelches and snapping bones. When she retracted her foot there was nothing but globs of

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internal organs embedded in a wet mat of black fur all glued together around purple slacks.

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, though no one seemed particularly shocked at the scene. Was this sort of thing normal around here?

She pulled another flask out of her satchel, it was 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 as 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 couldn't tell what they were but he swore they hadn't been there before the creature had gotten stomped.

"Wow. Uh... thanks. Really, thank you for helping." Robin felt truly grateful for Monika's arrival.

"Oh, sweetie," Monika cooed gently 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 acerbically. "And I'm pretty sure that outfit doesn't make you minty fresh." She once again judgmentally eyed his shabby Santa getup. "You should do something 'bout that."

Robin put everything except 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-widow building's entryway. "Like what? I don't even know where I am or what's going on!" Hopefully he didn't sound desperate, but he was actually pretty desperate. Probably even scared shitless if he allowed that sort of thinking to creep in.

Monika stopped in the doorway with one hand on the handle and turned to jab a wagging finger at him. "I moved out here to keep to myself and let all the cray-cray play out elsewheres. 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 a colorized zone and one of the clans gets a whiff of ya."

"Clans? You mean more were-creatures?" *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 wasn't so panicky. "Boy, you need to read that pamphlet 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. It's like the more you do your stuff the more you get experience. You gotta do the stuff listed on your cards and then make dice rolls to see if ya' succeed. Eventually you get to start filling in the dots and

then you get better and get 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. Other people on the street had gone back about their linen-colored lives and vehicle traffic ambled by obliviously. Clearly there was something different about the two of them so Monika made for the only obvious source of information, let alone potential assistance.

Monika 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. "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 angels. They might be glorious and beautiful and all that shit, but once they taste a prayer from you you'll be like a candy machine and your Snicker ass will definitely satisfy. Mmm-hmm."

Robin feared the door would close for sure but Monika stopped for a moment thoughtfully examining her decorative blue nails. The internal struggle deciding whether to retreat to her own peace 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 down 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 in a tacky geometric patten in shades of ecru and almond and 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 in this place. It's like everything is made out of mushroom skin. Everything expect me and her.*

Monika lead him into a fully colored, comfortably-sized, two-bedroom apartment with a main room combining an open kitchen and recreational space. Three large windows trimmed with blue curtains looked out over the street, the middle one open to let in fresh air. 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 the red couch accented with silver and white pillows. "Because, like you, I'm a playa." 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 what they are. 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 in no way made it more palatable. “You don’t mean *eat* people, like that skunk monster was doing out there?”

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 red ice cream bonbons or large gumdrops — she dropped 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 stuff? Did the wereSkunk drop it?” 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, Santa Man. Take a seat and tell me your name and I’ll give the rundown about life here in Bigbad City.”

Robin realized she had introduced herself out on the street but he must never 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 maybe doesn’t really matter right now.”

“Tits for truth it don’t matter, cuz this is your home now,” she declared while throwing herself into a soft green lazy chair that swiveled and reclined. She spared no time making herself comfortable. The only thing missing was a couple 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 cravings for anything edible. He took a seat on the couch but stayed on 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 Clause,” 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 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 plain folk,” 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 understand anything, 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 Ms. 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-mmmmh. 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?”

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“Luckily, as a human, you and me have options. We can consume any of the five: **Flesh, Faith, Fear, Will** 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 sheets don’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 to cast refreshes with **Faith**. You’ll need to munch down some 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 puled out a parchment sheet identical to the one Robin had but he could see this one was covered with icons and numbers. She turned the sheet 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 **Items**. It also show 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
Will		0

Robin nodded as if completely understood everything he was looking at. He’d check his own list later. Examining 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 then I guess the only thing I need from the shitter is the shower.*

He had no desire to head back out into the wider game world and try 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 her into asking him to stay. She had all the wrong pieces and parts for him to be comfortable taking things past casual flirtation, but the process had saved his bacon more than a few times in his adult life. Since neither wining nor dining seemed a viable way to spend time in this fuck stain of a place, any flirtation would be too obvious and 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

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some fun and he could whittle away at her reluctance to keep him around. Maybe he could even find some way to prove himself useful or desirable. The risk would be they might run into another monster and all he'd end up doing would be proving how *little* help he actually was.

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 and 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 could 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 Demon bitch has the flaps to open up 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 dick. Now I think it's time you get gone."

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 any help so far. He'd be smart to get going and leave the door metaphorically open, or at least not locked, for when he needed assistance in the future.

Robin Bennett

Human • 52
SPECIES AGE

Mall Santa (Entertainer)
OCCUPATION (ARCHETYPE)

Universalism
MOTIVATION



Attributes (Deck)

PRIMARY SKILLS

STAGE COMBAT d12 • d12 • d10
PHYSICAL

DANCE d12 • d10 • d8
PHYSICAL

ACTING d8 • d8 • d6
MUNDANE









CITY LIFE d10 • d10 • d8
ENVIRONMENT

CAROUSE d10 • d8 • d6
COMMUNITY

CHARM d10 • d8 • d8
[MAGIC] RANGE: MEDIUM • AMOUNT: SOME

ZAP d10 • d8 • d8
[MAGIC] RANGE: SHORT • AMOUNT: SOME

ATTRIBUTES

PHYSICAL	 BRN d4 {IMP} d6 d6 {DBL}	 AGL d6 d8 {DBL} d10	 END d4 d6 d8	
	MENTAL	 REA d6 d8 d8	 AWR d6 d8 d8	 WLP d4 {IMP} d8 d10
		SOCIAL	 PRE d10 d10 d12	 BOH d8 d8 {IMP} d12

Fatigue (Discard)

MONEY



- DESTITUTE
- POOR
- COMMON
- AFFLUENT
- WEALTHY
- OPULENT

REPUTATION



- INFAMOUS
- DISGRACED
- SCANDALIZED
- ORDINARY
- NOTABLE
- EXALTED
- FAMOUS

LOCATION: _____
REP: _____

LOCATION: _____
REP: _____

LOCATION: _____
REP: _____



PHYSICAL IMPAIRMENT

Injury



MENTAL IMPAIRMENT

Stress



SOCIAL IMPAIRMENT

Stigma