

Chapter -8

I landed like a wet rug on the stone-covered ground right in front of the public indoor pool’s entrance, releasing a gasp as I sucked in the delicious air, before immediately hacking out a lungful of water. After rolling onto my back, I stared up at the sky above, where the sun’s light was almost totally gone.

Though they felt like they were full of static, I raised my arms up above me, seeing that they were back, not to mention that the Agent’s Punch Glove still surrounded my right hand and half the forearm.

“Gambit!” Panda yelled, as though I’d been ignoring him for a while. “The Agents might still be out here!”

With a suddenness I wasn’t physically ready for, I shot to my feet, the motion causing stars and wormy bright lights to swim through my vision. I looked around on the wide steps leading up to the entrance of the building, as well as the sky, but there were, blissfully, no sign of them.

“Seems they’re leaving me alone for now,” I replied.

“If those ominous messages are anything to go by, we won’t have seen the last of them...”

I looked at my gauntlet, remembering how the achievement had told me the agent’s children would all be trying to kill me...

“I wonder why I got to keep *this*?” I mused, moving my hand around so that the glossy carapace segments shone and changed color slightly in the sparse sunlight.

“There’s probably some rule that prevents equipped items from being devoured completely.”

“That makes no sense... you’re saying that it was recovered along with my swallowed arm?”

“How else would you explain it?”

“...Fair enough.”

As I thought about the Full Recovery that’d literally saved my life, I remembered the woman I’d met: Annabella. I looked around and saw her standing not too far away, her right leg returned to her body. I was glad to see that my theory had been correct. Then I noticed that she wasn’t alone, since she was talking to some guy who seemed slightly familiar.

He looked kind of like an office worker, his hair was neatly-cut, he was clean-shaven, he had thick glasses, a white shirt, blue tie, and black pants.

“Panda... didn’t the announcement say there were only two survivors?”

Pandamonium followed my gaze and noticed the guy as well. “That’s right...”

He was just standing there, staring straight into the air, while Annabella was talking to him, asking him questions.

I knew what was coming, and I knew what I had to do.

As I began striding towards him, Annabella turned to look at me and sounded like she was about to say “Thank you.”

Her words were cut off when I pulled my right gauntleted fist back and slammed it right into the guy’s torso. Thanks to my already-incredible strength and the tripling impact damage of my Punch Glove, the result sounded less like a *thud* and more like ten ritz crackers being stepped on.

The Skinstealer immediately fell forward, forehead slapping against the stones. Just like *that*, it was dead.

Congratulations! You have unlocked an achievement! ^x
<i>‘The Boy who cried “Wolf!”’</i> Killed a Skinstealer in front of another person, before it could reveal its true nature.
<i>Whether this was a random coincidence or intentional, you pulled off quite an incredible thing, and your actions may have saved countless lives from this infiltrating monster’s predations...</i>
<i>However, it seems you are the only one who knows the truth, so, yeah... have fun explaining this one to your friends...</i>
Reward: <i>‘Conspiracy Whistle’</i>

Immediately a black whistle with red lines on it manifested in the air above my hand, and as soon as I touched it, it disappeared, no doubt going straight into my Inventory.

“What did you do!! Oh my god, you killed Sam! What the fuck is wrong with you, you *psycho!*”

“You don’t understand,” I started to say, stepping closer to her, but she immediately took a step back, then pulled a crossbow out of thin air, perhaps a reward she had gotten from the Dungeon. She lifted it up and aimed it right at my head, with an arrow appearing on the string from one moment to the next.

“Don’t come near me! I’ll shoot!”

“Annabella, please—”

“I knew I shouldn’t have trusted someone *like you!*”

I gritted my teeth.

“I just saved your life you, you idiot! He was a Skinstealer! He was gonna kill you!”

“Just like the Mayor, right!?” she yelled. Seeing my surprised expression, she went on, “Yeah, I heard all about it on the news! Everyone did! You’re a fucking *monster!*!”

“Gambit, let’s just go,” Panda advised.

I released an angry and frustrated wordless yell, then turned around and ran off.

I was heading in the direction of Normann’s tailor shop, hoping to find myself some slick new threads there. I’d swapped my wet pajamas for the sleeveless shirt I’d gotten. It was literally just a normal white crisp dress shirt with the sleeves missing. It had no unique benefits or effects, but it was a nice quality. It was fortunate that I hadn’t seen any other survivors, since, when I’d put my pajamas into my inventory, the pants had gone in as well.

“You know, you’re not really giving off ‘I’m-not-crazy’ vibes with this getup.”

“That’s why I’m heading to Normann’s!” I replied, annoyed.

I was still thinking about what Annabella had said and the memories of the past were coming to the front of my mind.

It had all started a few years back, when I’d been fired from my job, following my dad going into the hospital and me having to care for him and pay for his treatment, despite the fact that it made no difference to him, as he croaked not long after. I’d been without income, saddled with medical debt from a healthcare system that’d failed me and my family, and then I lost my apartment.

All of it had been too much to bear, and the stress, anxiety, and anger... all of it had coagulated into a mental breakdown. Much of my memories from *that time* were hazy at best, but I had been living in the parks for weeks, while making posts to the local Castleburg message boards, as well as posting videos about my beliefs to all the social medias.

“Conspiracy theories,” Panda corrected me.

“*I’m* doing the inner monologuing here, not you!”

A few of my posts had gone viral and, as it always goes, the story was picked up by local and then national news stations, where I was openly mocked for my beliefs. Rather than extend a helping hand, I was made the black sheep of Castleburg, and I think that was the thing that really sent me over the edge.

The following years I went in-and-out of mental institutions, after petty thefts, public acts of indecency, arson, violent assault on a lifeguard who had an attitude, and, lastly, the attempted murder of the Mayor.

I wish I could remember my justifications at the time, but all I know is that I went to his private residence with a screwdriver and a hammer, and it ended up in a city-wide manhunt. I was chased down by the police while utterly naked for many hours, with the hunt culminating in me somehow ending up on the roof of the Calm Springs Asylum where I’d been admitted once prior.

When the sentencing went down after I was finally captured, it was for life, with no chance of parole, but my defense lawyer, a guy by the name of Thomas Smile, was able to successfully argue for an insanity verdict, just like all my previous convictions, which is how I ended up in Calm Springs Asylum permanently.

Or well, until the whole world went under.

“You know, the attempted murder on the Mayor I get, but why did you have to kill his dog?” Panda asked.

“I didn’t! They framed me!”

Panda scoffed.

“I’m telling the truth! What point would there be in me lying now??”

“Fine, whatever. But why would someone frame you for that?”

“Because killing a dog is an unforgivable act. Any shred of sympathy people might’ve had for me and my cause was destroyed with *that act* pinned on me.”

“Maybe I’m losing my mind too, but that does make sense in a way.”

“You’re a figment of my imagination, so if I’m crazy, then we’re both crazy.”

“I don’t know. I watched you lose both your arms and headbutt a monster to death. That’s a level of insanity I can’t compete with.”

“Really? I thought you were something like my subconscious mind.”

“...That’s pretty rude, Gambit. I’m your friend! Not your repressed thoughts!”

“Then why can’t anyone see you?”

Panda shrugged. “Maybe only the insane can perceive me?”

I thought about it. It seemed probable, but who knew how any of this stuff really worked? And besides, Panda had been by my side for ages, though I definitely remembered the orderlies at Calm Springs confiscating him repeatedly...

“*Inventory*,” I said, bringing up the menu. It was too much to figure out right now, especially when I was cold and starving.



“Think we can eat the ‘*Lil’ Newt*’?” Panda wondered.

“Stop, I’m having flashbacks to the meat flower...”

“It’s surprising you’re hungry despite eating *that*.”

I gagged at the memory. “It was foul, also I think it disappeared from my stomach after I took the skill it offered.”

While the screen remained open in front of me, I hopped over some cars that were crashed into each other on the road I was walking down to reach Normann’s shop. I tapped the image of the salamander and it popped up with a new screen:

‘Lil’ Newt’ x
<p><i>Obtained by defeating the Pool Rooms Dweller. Some amphibians on your planet are known to regrow limbs and organs, well, Lil’ Newt here is technically immortal. Given enough time, he will eventually return to his original size as he was when you fought him in the Pool Rooms. However, the reason he is only ‘technically’ immortal, is that he can be slain with a kiss on his eyeless head.</i></p> <p><i>Guess what you have to do to gain access to his rewards.</i></p>
Weight: 2.3 Pandas

“I have to... kiss it?”

“Not the worst thing in the world.”

I sighed, pulling the salamander out of my inventory. It appeared on my palm and sat there, looking at me with its rubbery eyeless smiling head. Despite the fact that it was roughly the size of a normal salamander in this state, its teeth were way too big, like they belonged to a six-year-old kid, which really offset its cuteness factor.

As I braced myself for the most terrible texture in the world, I leaned down and planted a lil’ peck on Lil’ Newt’s head.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Panda commented as I straightened back up.

Then the Newt began screaming, as it was slowly turned into dust like a vampire caught in the sun.

Choose your reward! x
<p><i>I can’t believe you did that... that was truly the most horrific thing I’ve seen in the last two-and-a-half minutes. Before that,</i></p>

it was a guy picking a fight with a metro train, which went about as well as you might imagine.

Anyway...

Pick one of the options:

‘BIRTHDAY_SUIT’ | ‘Newt’s Boon’ | ‘Echolocation’

‘BIRTHDAY_SUIT’

x

Passive

We’re not meant to encourage this behavior, but, eh, well... this Passive makes you jump further and run faster in inverse relation to how much clothes you’re wearing. So, get in your speedos and tear up the race track!

‘Newt’s Boon’

x

Passive

Harness the power of Lil’ Newt who you killed with a kiss, by becoming able to VERY SLOWLY regenerate lost body-parts and internal organs.

However, it’s very painful and the shock of regenerating lost limbs might give you a heart-attack.

‘Echolocation’

x

Passive

Your hearing improves to the point that any sound you make can help you distinguish what your surroundings look like in a twenty-yard radius.

*But you also permanently lose your vision if you pick this ...
but hey, you can live out your dreams of being a Manbat!*

“Truly some terrible options,” I remarked. “One cripples me, another might kill me, and the last one rewards me for running around naked...”

“You’re already going pantsless, so what’s the harm?”

“Fine,” I said with a frown and chose BIRTHDAY_SUIT as my reward.

I felt a sudden flood of energy fill me and when I next jumped over an obstacle on the road, I flew almost twice as high as before, landing in a tucked roll with the grace of a felid several yards further than where I’d aimed.

“This is not so bad,” I remarked, before taking off in a sprint. As I zoomed down the sidewalk past the many shuttered shopfronts, I knew that I was definitely much faster than a carriage now.