

## Chapter -54

Bee, Panda, and I emerged into the middle of a floor that seemed to belong to a vastly different building. I spun around to take in our surroundings, and...

“Where the fuck are we?”

It was a sea of cubicles that surrounded us. I couldn’t even see the ends of the room, because the cubicles just stretched outward in all directions with seemingly no end. Then, as though spurred on by our arrival, all the cubicle walls grew ten-feet tall.

“It’s another maze,” Panda remarked. “They must be the cheapest dungeon types to make.”

I groaned. “I’m done with mazes. This one looks even more boring than those underground ruins.”

Instead of going anywhere, I sat down on the dark-grey carpet.

“*Dungeon-Break*,” I said.

**Warning!**

Your ability is now on cooldown!

**Time remaining:**

1.21004566E-5 century

“That’s a bit under 11 hours,” Panda translated.

“I thought it’d been longer than that,” I complained.

I pulled one of the Victory Champagnes out of my inventory, but it immediately evaporated.

Then I pulled out the Fusion Gum.

“Gambit... what are you doing?”

“I’m going to fuse *Dungeon-Break* with *Giant-Slayer Lance*.”

“Are you braindead or something!? Why would you do that!?”

“Because I’m bored of this shitty dungeon layout and I want to break it down!”

“Now, don’t do anything irrational! Gah, what am I saying... all you do is irrational!”

“You have gum!?” Bee asked excitedly, snatching it from my hands.

“Hey, give that back!” I yelled, getting to my feet.

“Inspect,” she said. She made a few surprised sounds as she read through it. “This seems pretty powerful.”

“That’s because it is,” Panda remarked. “Don’t let him waste it on something stupid!”

I took the packet of gum from Bee’s hand and threw it back into my inventory. “Fine! Let’s just beat this dumb maze then.”

“*What about me!! I’m on the verge of bursting!!*”

“Huh? Why?”

“*I can’t level up on my own! You have to do it for me!!*”

“Oh, right. *Inspect.*”

<b>‘Brock’</b> <span style="float: right;">x</span>
<i>A purple balloon gauntlet that makes a noise when it hits something.</i>
<i>Any punch with this glove has quadruple the impact damage and impacts twice.</i>
<i>While this weapon is equipped, everything tastes <b>Purple</b>.</i>
<i>1 unused level-up point</i>
<b>Level Up?</b>
<b>Level: 1</b>
<b>Kills remaining until next Evolution: 13</b>
<b>Weight: 2.592 Pandas</b>

I clicked the ‘level up?’ part of the inspection window and a new screen appeared over top of it.

<b>Brock — Level 1</b>		
Pick one of the following level-up skills:		
<b>Bouncer</b>	<b><u>Purple+</u></b>	<b>Inflation</b>
<i>Anything hit with this weapon bounces upon</i>	<i>Now 2x more <b>PURPLE</b> than ever before!!</i>	All impact damage is turned into internal

<i>impact with the environment.</i>		inflation within whatever is hit.
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“They really truly want you to pick Purple again, huh?”

“At this point, I’m inclined to choose it just so it goes away.”

“I wanna see,” said Bee and I showed her the options.

After a moment, she answered, “You’ve got to go purple.”

I clicked the option and Brock made a hiccup sound.

“You okay?” I asked him.

“*Fak...*” was all he replied.

A pressure grew in my stomach suddenly and I involuntarily spat out a purple clump of goo. The clump began wriggling, sprouted eyes like those on a snail, then let out a screech, before disappearing in a puff of purple smoke.

“Purple+ was a mistake...”

I retched again and though nothing more came out, I realized another thing about my body that had changed: my saliva and bile was all purple, not to mention let off a definitely-radioactive glow.

“I’m pretty sure my blood has changed color too,” I said with a grimace. “Why did I let you talk me into picking it?”

“I was convinced it had to be good,” Panda said, with Bee nodding in agreement.

“It would be too weird if they just gave you a bad option that didn’t get better later on.”

I groaned as a dribble of purple spit fell from my lower lip. I desperately wanted some water to wash down the new taste in my mouth, but I knew that there was no escaping the purple taste...

“Wait,” I said, bringing up the inspection for Brock again.

<b>‘Brock’</b> <span style="float: right;">x</span>
<i>A purple balloon gauntlet that makes a noise when it hits something.</i>
<i>Any punch with this glove has quadruple the impact damage and impacts twice.</i>
<i>While this weapon is equipped, <b>Purple+</b> is enabled.</i>

<i>Level: 1</i>
<i>Kills remaining until next Evolution: 13</i>
<b>Weight: 2.592 Pandas</b>

“Aha! I can just take off the glove and I’ll be fine!”

I immediately pulled Brock off my hand, the suddenness of which made him yelp.

“*Oy! Warn me in advance, you nong!*”

I spat onto the floor and was elated to see it had turned back to its normal translucent color.

“Gross, Gambit...” Panda scolded me.

“Bee, do you have water or anything like that?”

She nodded. “I stole some from Riii’s production trailer,” she said and handed me a water bottle from her inventory.

I screwed off the lid and downed the whole thing in seconds. It was the most delicious thing I’d had in ages, even though it was just lukewarm plasticky water. With a satisfied sigh, I wiped my mouth on the back of my hand and threw the empty bottle away.

“Thanks!” I said, then looked at the balloon gauntlet I’d taken off my hand. “You ready, Brock?”

“*Slowly, got it? No ramming your hand in all at once! Fakkin hurts y’know?*”

“Can you two stop talking like that!?” Panda complained. “It’s really off-putting.”

“Panda, consent is important,” Bee replied.

I slowly slid the gauntlet back over my hand, producing an uncomfortable balloon screeching.

As soon as it was back on, my stomach let out an unsettling gurgle, before I retched and spat out a purple goopy clump. Like before, it sprouted eyes and a mouth, screamed, then disappeared in a poof of purple smoke.

“I will never get used to that...” I said.

“I’d be more worried if you *could* get used to something like that,” Panda remarked.

“Alright, let’s figure out where the Police Chief is, so I can tear him a new one.”

Without waiting for Bee or Panda to agree, I picked one of the four directions in the intersection of cubicles we were in, then set off down the path.

While walking past the walls formed by flimsy cubicle walls, it was occasionally possible to see into some of them, where the same sight greeted us every time: a simple L-shaped desk with an old off-white monitor and PC on top, a keyboard, mouse, notepad with two pencils, an empty picture frame

next to the monitor, a ‘motivational’ poster to the left of the PC, and a simple grey office chair with wheels. Sometimes the motivational posters changed, but everything else was always the same.

Randomly, after being forced to turn down a new path after hitting a T-section in the maze, Bee picked an open cubicle and sat down on the chair. She tried to turn on the PC, but nothing happened. She then tried to draw something on the notepad, but there was no ink in either of the pencils. Frustrated, she ripped down the motivational poster, which featured a man with a noose in his hand and the text ‘*Hang in there!*’, which seemed like it could be interpreted very poorly...

As she walked out of the cubicle, the poster disappeared from her hands and reappeared inside, intact. She next tried to steal the pens, mouse, keyboard, and notepad, but the same thing happened. Lastly, she tried the chair, but it physically couldn’t be pushed out of the cubicle’s opening.

“Just give it up already,” Panda said. “It’s clearly not working.”

“I know one of these cubicles has to be the way out!” she insisted.

I sighed in response. She was probably right, but I was just so tired of the monotonous dungeon design already that I couldn’t get my spirit up.

There was hardly any sound in the endless sea of cubicles, aside from our footsteps on the carpet and the low drone of the air-conditioning embedded in the ceiling. I’d already tried to punch my way through the cubicles, but they recovered from damage so quickly that it was impossible to make any headway, let alone create shortcuts between the various paths crisscrossing the space.

We continued through the maze for what felt like hours, with Bee checking every open cubicle we walked past. In total, we must’ve stopped by at least forty, but aside from a lot of different disturbing ‘motivational’ posters, there wasn’t any obvious difference. Despite that, Bee continued to test their pens and PCs.

It wasn’t until we rounded another corner in our chosen path that we came to a cubicle with a clear difference: it had two numbers on its notepad written in blue ink.

“86,” Bee said, sounding both confused and elated to have found a ‘clue’. Though neither of us understood what the ‘clue’ was for.

“Do you think they want us to check all the cubicles?” Panda wondered. “That seems pretty absurd, right?”

“Maybe it has to do with the number of cubicles,” Bee guessed. “We’ve checked exactly 42 already, so maybe if we go past 44 more we’ll find our next clue.”

I groaned. “You know, my backdoor ability is ready, we could always just leave.”

“And give up on the Safe Zone Sphere!?” Bee replied as though I was out of my mind.

“Fine! You lead the way then, and do the counting and whatnot!”

She smiled, which I thought was an unusual response, but probably she just liked the puzzle aspect of it all.

When we came to cubicle number 86 in our journey, there was a new number on the screen: -17.

Bee quickly realized this meant that we had to retrace our steps back to number 69. We’d already passed by it before, but this time it was different, as though visiting number 86 had changed it. Most surprisingly, there was a man seated in the office chair.

As we entered his cubicle, the chair spun around to look at us and we saw that he had no face, though the rest of his body was completely normal, with a white shirt, a light-blue tie, and dark-blue dress pants.

“Hi, my name is Paul—” was all he managed to blurt out before I pulverized his head with my fist.

“*Git sum!!*” Brock squealed elatedly as he was covered in blood.

“Gambit! Why did you do that!?” Bee yelled in outrage. “He could’ve given us the next clue!”

“I’m not trusting any no-face bastards!”

“But look! He didn’t even leave any Leftovers! Clearly he was friendly!”

As the faceless creature’s blood splattered all around the cubicle and spilled onto the floor, it failed to fully stain everything, which, as I looked closely, was actually a clue in itself.

“Look,” I said, pointing to the splattered wall next to a motivational poster, which depicted shadowy figures looming over a cubicle wall to look at a sleeping worker, with the text below saying ‘*Don’t fall asleep in the office!*’

“Is that the number 7?” Panda wondered, squinting, somehow.

“Well-spotted, Gambit!” Bee praised me patronizingly.

We left behind the dead headless human imposter and went to cubicle 76, though it was completely normal.

Bee nodded as though realizing something and I followed after her as we began retracing our steps. Eventually we were almost all the way back to where we had started.

“Cubicle number 7!” she said excitedly and gestured with open arms at the cubicle that awaited us. Inside was a door just existing impossibly in the middle of the floor, with a woman trying to break open its codelock with a crowbar.

The woman turned to look at us and I realized I recognized her face from somewhere.

“Tell me you know the code,” she demanded exasperatedly.

“Look, Gambit, it’s Samantha!”

Bee seemed to appraise her for a moment, before she shared the information with me.

I furrowed my brow as I read through it.

“We should probably turn around and leave,” I said. “I don’t want to get involved with her.”