

Chapter -5

I slid across smooth white tiles as I flew into the Dungeon, finishing in an embarrassing tumble that culminated in me colliding with a wall. I was immediately assaulted with a series of achievements:

Congratulations! You have unlocked an achievement! ^x
<i>‘I Fought the Law’</i>
You killed an Agent of the GREAT GAME.
<i>Fun fact: Agents of the GREAT GAME are level 60 during the intro phase before the first GAME. Which begs the question: how did you manage to kill one??</i>
<i>In case you were wondering, this is the kind of act that gets you placed permanently on our Anti-Cheat Agency’s radar.</i>
<i>That’s right, we have an agency like that.</i>
<i>But I suppose that great feats merit great rewards...</i>
Reward: ‘Agent’s Punch-Glove’

Congratulations! You have unlocked an achievement! ^x
<i>‘Most Wanted’</i>
Outrun GREAT GAME Agents and live to tell the tale.
<i>To play a game properly, rules are important. That means that filthy cheaters like you ought to be purged! And not in a quick-death sort of way. No, the way we purge cheaters would make even your world’s most vile and sadistic Gods blush.</i>
<i>However, we also have the belief that accomplishments should be rewarded, so I begrudgingly give you this...</i>
Reward: ‘Wanted Poster’

Before I could wonder why no items appeared by my feet like when I defeated Dr. Juliens, someone nearby gasped loudly at my sudden appearance, and I turned my head to look in their direction, as my body rested upside-down against the wall. I swiped all the pop-ups away and took in her appearance. It was a woman with long dark hair, tired-looking eyes, clear signs of emaciation, and a missing right leg.

“You’re not gonna try and kill me, right?” I asked, as I awkwardly got to my feet.

She looked up at me from where she was slumped against the wall herself. Her leg had been cut off above the knee but had healed smoothly, though there was visible shoddy stitching around the stump.

“Do I look like I’m in any fighting condition?” she asked sarcastically.

“Looks can be deceiving,” Panda replied.

I nodded, “They definitely can be.”

The woman gave me a puzzled look.

“How’d you lose your leg?” I asked.

“Would you believe me if I told you that there is a monster in the waters here?”

I looked around. There was no entrance, even though this was where I’d entered, and there were two paths to either side of the hallway we were in, both of them leading down a few steps to waist-deep clear-blue chlorine-smelling water. Cold clinically-white light perfectly illuminated everything from the ceiling where bright tube lights sat at evenly-spaced intervals, and there was a long smeared-out trail of blood from the right, which led to where the woman sat, as though she had dragged herself out of the water and then magically staunched the bleeding from her leg. Weirdly, there was no blood in the water.

“Yes. I believe you.”

“You know, I recognize your face from somewhere.”

“Probably the news,” Panda answered.

“Is your name—?”

“It’s Gambit,” I quickly interrupted. “My name’s Gambit.”

“Wait... that means the message from earlier was because of you?”

“I defeated the Asylum Dungeon,” I explained. “That’s where it started me, which, apparently, wasn’t meant to happen. I was supposed to become a monster.”

“Sheesh, just tell her all your secrets, why don’t you?” Panda remarked cynically.

“Shut up,” I told him.

“I didn’t say anything?” the woman replied.

“I was talking to *this guy*,” I said, indicating Panda with a thumb.

“Who?” she asked. “I don’t see anyone.”

Ah shit...

“I told you, you were crazy,” Panda gloated.

“Nevermind,” I hastily said.

“If you came from the Asylum though, then you really are—”

I held up my hand and stopped her. “Let’s leave that in the past, why don’t we?”

“I guess you’re right,” she agreed. “You’re bleeding quite a lot, want me to sew you up?”

“What?”

“You know, with the healing sewing needle and thread they gave us.”

“I didn’t get any of that,” I replied. “But sure, I won’t decline your offer. Is that how you stopped yourself from bleeding to death after losing your leg?”

She grimaced. “That’s right. Everyone I know got this ‘survival kit’ when the ‘Game’ started a few hours ago. As far as I can tell, you just have to sew around a wound to stop it from bleeding, but it won’t heal missing fingers or limbs back.”

“I received a Full Recovery thing for beating the Asylum Dungeon,” I told her. “Maybe if we beat this place together, you’ll get that too and have your leg healed back.”

“...That would be nice, but I’m basically just deadweight until then.”

I thought about it and then wondered, “Maybe everyone inside receives the Full Recovery. You could wait here while I clear it. Maybe that would work.”

“How are you so confident?” she asked, gesturing for me to lay down on my stomach in front of her.

I complied and she pulled my pajama shirt aside, immediately beginning to sew the skin around the wound in my shoulder, which was definitely the worst injury I’d received from the Agents’ flechettes. It was an uncomfortable feeling as the needle went in-and-out of my skin, but it was tolerable compared to the pain from the wound itself.

“I’m pretty strong,” I replied honestly. “I don’t even have a weapon but I’ve been able to punch everything to death thus far. And the Asylum was level 20, so this place shouldn’t be so tough.”

“This place is pretty big and the *thing* that took my leg came out of nowhere, so you have to be careful.”

“Ask her about what happened a week ago,” Panda encouraged me.

“I met some other people,” I started, “They said that society as a whole collapsed a week ago?”
“And you’re just now finding out?”

I shrugged, insofar as such a gesture was possible while lying on my stomach. “We didn’t have access to TVs at the Asylum. Though thinking back on it, there weren’t any visitors at all for over a week, which was odd. But yeah, I had no idea.”

“You didn’t see the blood rain or anything?”

“I saw the rain, yep, but I just thought that was normal.”

She cast me a suspicious glance, pausing her sewing for a moment.

“A week ago, all guns and military weapons completely disappeared, alongside everyone under the age of eighteen. Most electricity and water to houses also disappeared, except for public facilities, like this pool, the library, police stations, train stations, and so forth. Tools and such completely stopped working as well, but somehow the streetlamps still light up at night. As you might imagine, total anarchy broke out and people began killing each other over these public areas, forming roving gangs and whatnot. It was crazy. You must’ve at least heard all the screaming from the Asylum?”

I shrugged again. “Like gunfire at a shooting range,” I replied. “It’s impossible to know if the screaming came from my neighbors’ rooms or outside... or inside, for that matter.”

“Gambit, stop! You’re freaking her out.”

I glared at Panda who was sitting in front of where I lay, though didn’t say anything, since obviously the woman couldn’t see him.

“...Anyway. I ended up with a group who were staying in the nearby park. We were trying to make a little garden and everything, while staying out of the way of everyone fighting over the public facilities. Strangely though, no one dared to try and take over the Asylum nearby.”

“I didn’t see anyone in the park when I left,” I told her.

“Well, almost as soon as the message about this ‘Great Game’ went out, monsters started appearing from the Asylum, as well as from other areas. We ended up fighting these guys with thumbs for heads, who were really strong, before a massive bus came in and killed almost everybody.”

“A bus?”

“All public transportation apparently turned into monsters. When I ran away from the park, I met someone on a bike who said he’d seen the subway train turn into a gigantic worm that ate everyone inside it. The bus was similar, I guess. Have you seen ‘Totoro’? It kind of looked like a nightmarish version of the Catbus from that movie. It was covered in stitched human skin and it had hundreds of chubby legs under it, as well as enormous soulless eyes and a toothy grin on the front. I ended up

running in here with three other people. Two of them were eaten, the last guy got away I think, while I lost my leg. I kind of wish I’d been eaten too.”

“I’ll get you out of here,” I promised her.

“And then what?” she asked, moving on to sewing the skin around my calf wound. “What are we supposed to do then?”

“I don’t know, survive?”

She shook her head. “I get the feeling that the societal collapse starting a week prior to today was meant to cull all the weak. People like *me*. I wasn’t meant to survive...”

“She’s a bleak one...” Panda remarked.

“Didn’t you get a Class with special powers?” I asked.

She sighed. “It gave me the ‘Archer’ Class, and two skills, but they require a bow... where the hell am I supposed to find a bow??”

“We’ll find you one.”

“How?”

“They give rewards through achievements and for defeating monsters. You might get a bow from that?”

“I guess.”

“Promise me something,” I said, after she finished the sewing on my calf and I stood up. “Don’t give up so easily.”

“Easy for you to say, you’ve got both your legs still.”

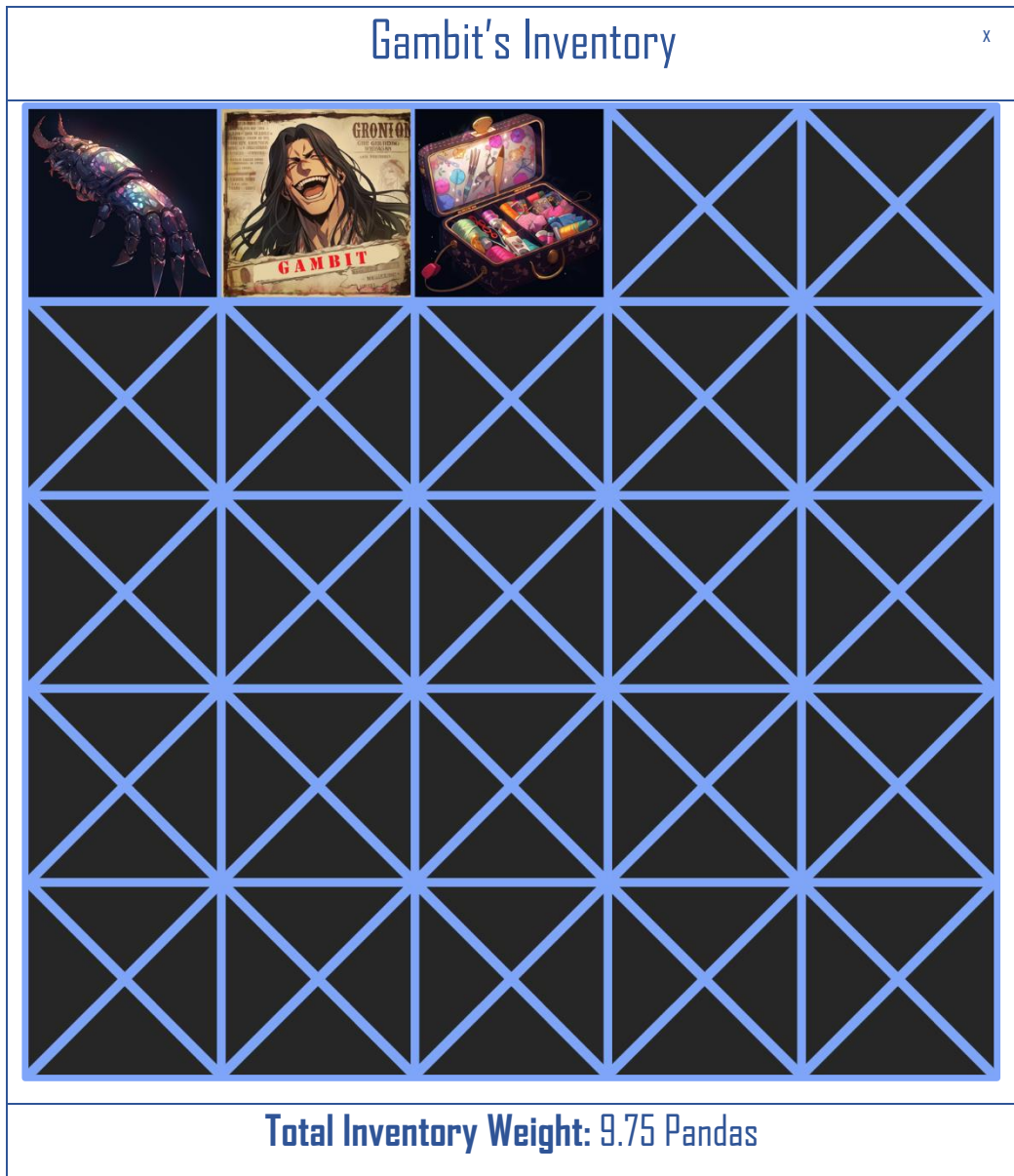
“All I know is that I just got my freedom back and I’m gonna make the most of it, apocalypse notwithstanding.”

The woman tried on a smile. “I wish I had your mindset.”

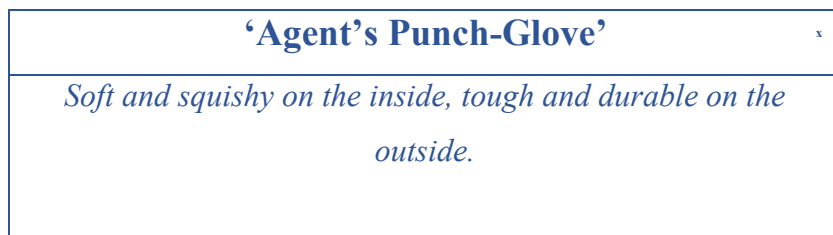
“It’s all a matter of perspective,” I replied. “Thanks for sewing up my wounds.”

She packed the needle and thread back into the small box that she’d pulled them from, then handed it to me. “You should take this with you. There’s about three yards of thread left. Also, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Annabella Exposición.”

“Thanks.” I took the box from her, then said, “*Inventory*.” It disappeared from my hand as the screen popped up.



I clicked on the ‘Agent’s Punch-Glove’ to bring up the item.



<p><i>In case you're wondering, this glove belonged to the Agent you brutally murdered. He was just doing his job, you know? His twenty-seven children have sworn blood oaths to revenge him, so you'll be seeing them soon enough.</i></p> <p><i>Any punch with this glove has triple the impact damage.</i></p> <p><i>Wait... why did we add that feature to it!?</i></p>
<p>Weight: 8.1 Pandas</p>

“Triple damage,” I mused to myself as I brought it out of my inventory. It appeared in the air in front of me and fell to the ground with a *clunk*. I immediately stooped to pick it up.

The outside was a glossy reddish dark-brown carapace with overlapping segments and errant spikes jutting out here-and-there, while the inside was kind of like a raw shrimp. The sensation as I forced my fist into the elastic and squishy meat was quite uncomfortable, but I was certain that this was the perfect weapon for me right now.

“Maybe this will stop you from destroying your fist every time you punch things really hard,” Panda remarked.

“How’d you do *that*? Making an object appear out of thin air, I mean,” Annabella asked.

“You just say the word ‘inventory’ out loud. Same as with your ‘status’ screen.”

“I didn’t know that,” she replied, before saying, “*Inventory*.”

I couldn’t see what she was seeing, which I assumed meant she couldn’t see my screens either, but I noticed that her eyes lit up with a blueish light, as though a monitor was reflected off them. I turned back to my inventory screen and clicked on the ‘Wanted Poster’ as well.

<p>‘Wanted Poster’ x</p>
<p><i>A wanted poster with no face or name on it... yet.</i></p> <p><i>Allows you to mark another Player or GREAT GAME Entity anywhere on the world of “Dirt” for a full day, making them visible to anyone from afar thanks to a beacon of light above their heads.</i></p>
<p>Weight: 0.1 Pandas</p>

“Might come in handy perhaps,” I considered, then swiped the window away. “Alright, I’m gonna go find the boss,” I told Annabella.

“Good luck,” she called after me as I followed her blood trail down the tile-covered steps and into the waist-deep water.