

## Chapter -20

My fall came to a sudden stop with an instant deceleration. A second later, the darkness cleared away, revealing my surroundings as some kind of massive underground cavern full of ancient ruins. What’s more, I was bound into a seated position on a stone shelf of some vast amphitheater that easily seated twenty-thousand people, with there being maybe twenty shelves, or perhaps ‘rows’ were a better word, that curved to encompass a single stage at the bottom that was currently empty. Hands of pale-blue light were holding me stuck where I sat, but I was still able to move my head and neck.

Panda hopped down from my shoulder and got comfortable on my lap, then said, “Lot of people here, huh?”

I looked around and though I’d briefly scanned my surroundings, it didn’t hit me until now that the rows of the amphitheater were absolutely full, with not a single open gap. If my assumptions were correct, then all these people had been pulled here from within a certain radius, meaning that Bee was supposed to be around here somewhere. However, no matter where I looked, I couldn’t spot her green carapace, skin, nor antennae.

“I don’t see Bee anywhere,” I said, realizing that my hearing was kind of obfuscated from the peculiar effects of the transportation. Then the proverbial wool fell from my ears and all I heard was screaming, crying, and shouting.

A sigh of nostalgic relief left my lips. “It’s almost like being back in the Asylum,” I commented.

“Gambit... I say this as your friend, but... you’re not okay.”

“You’re a talking Panda,” I replied stupidly, feeling very mellow all of a sudden.

It seemed that it wasn’t just me who felt this change, as the loud noises from the forcefully-seated people began to die down. The people on either side of me were both men who looked haggard and malnourished. As I lazily looked around some more, I saw this reflected in a lot of people, though there were the occasional individuals who seemed content and confident, as well as a rare few with clear deformities no doubt caused by taking certain passives from the Boss Rewards.

The lights in the ceiling, which were in fact some kind of tiny flying brightly-glowing insects, began to dim, while others directed pillars of light at the empty stage below. Like snakes of fabric, the hands of blue light moved up past my neck and forced me to look down at the scene, since *something* was about to appear. No matter how much I tried, I couldn’t overpower the hands keeping

me restrained, and when I tried to open my mouth to ask Panda for help, no voice escaped, or rather, the sound was switched ‘off’.

Panda looked up at me and snickered, perhaps enjoying the fact that I couldn’t talk. Then the pillars of light aiming at the stage converged on a single point and something like a flashbang preceded a tiny hovering creature’s appearance.

**Welcome Players to the first EVENT of the GREAT GAME!**

All of us were forced by the blue hands of light to raise our arms and clap. The synchronized *smack* of over twenty-thousand, mostly, human hands was deafening and I could feel how after just a few claps the skin of my palms was becoming raw and starting to bruise, yet I was hopeless to stop it.

Despite the mellowing effect that had overcome me like one of the drugs the Asylum orderlies always dished out, I felt a seething hatred towards that tiny fairyfly-like humanoid, as I instinctively knew it was one of the Orchestrators behind the apocalypse and our suffering becoming someone else’s entertainment. As though to highlight this latter part, floating orbs covered in multifaceted eyes were moving through the air like drone cameras, no doubt capturing this moment for an audience somewhere.

**All of you have survived the first day of the GREAT GAME’s initialization and are now rewarded by being allowed to participate in the first of many thrilling life-or-death GAMES!**

Once again, we were forced to applaud, but I saw how a lot of the people nearby were sobbing and yelling wordlessly, unable to fight against the bonds. As my own hands slapped against each other, Panda tried to stop my arms from moving, but was unsuccessful, and had his soft head squished between my palms for his trouble. Fortunately, he seemed completely uninjured, but I also still had a sneaking suspicion he wasn’t really there and more like some demented cartoon mascot my diseased brain had conjured.

The fairyfly announcer flitting about on the stage below held up her hands and our clapping ceased, much to everyone’s collective relief.

**Thank you, thank you! You’re too kind!**

**Now, I’m sure you’re all eager to find out what this first **GAME** will be about, but before that we have something that must be dealt with.**

The Announcer lifted her tiny right hand, which suddenly glowed with a pale-blue light, before three people from various parts of the amphitheater seats were lifted high into the air by the blue hands and then brought to the stage. They were all three forced to hang in a t-pose ten yards above the platform, as the fairyfly continued talking.

**As some of you are aware, we take allegations of *Cheating* and *Glitches* very seriously, and these three individuals are ones which were apprehended by our brave **REPD Agents** and confirmed to have engaged in various acts of *System Subversion*.**

**Please keep watching as they are **punished**.**

The hands holding my head in place moved its long fingers to my face and forced my eyelids open, while my gaze was aimed at the three floating t-posing people. They were all men ranging from eighteen to twenty-five. The first of them had several transformations on his body, looking more like a nightmarish creature from the dark ages than a human; the one to his left had an edgy trench coat and katana; and the last wore a full carapace suit like that of a beetle Agent.

Suddenly they all began to scream in agony.

What followed next was one of the most sadistic and cruel things I’d ever seen, which was saying something, given that I watched *Funkytown* every Christmas Eve just to put me in the holiday spirit.

After the announcer was done with the public crucifixion, the three brutalized bodies continued just hanging there in the air, like the most gruesome example of ‘*Fuck around and find out*’ and as an obvious deterrent to any prospective cheaters. Granted, I was pretty much screwed, since I was already on their radar, but it seemed that being apprehended by the beetle Agents was what led to this, so as long as I could elude them, I’d be fine. Probably...

The Announcer then returned to the announcement with her cheerful voice as though nothing had happened.

**Currently, thousands of other **EVENT AREAS** are going through the same as you, but, in time, there will be way less Players to fill the seats and thus you may end up sitting next to those from the other side of your world, rather than your annoying coworker *Samantha*.**

*\*Throat-clearing noises\**

**Without further ado, I will now explain the rules of the first GAME!**

**We call it WEAPONLUTION!**

All of us applauded.

“That’s a stupid name,” Panda remarked.

I blinked, something which was once again possible thanks to the fingers no longer propping my eyes open forcefully.

“I know what you’re thinking: ‘Yay, Panda can talk!’ I can see it written on your face. And no, I don’t know why their strange magic doesn’t work on me, but, then again, I also don’t think they can actually see me. I’m like invisible ink, but you need to be insane to read me.”

**In this GAME, you will each be given a weapon befitting of your culture.**

**The objective is simple!**

**You need to kill twenty-five Players within forty-eight hours to complete the GAME!**

**But, to make things interesting, your weapon will have a set of three Evolutions to choose between with every kill you get, which should hopefully lead to a spectacular finale!**

**We also like to incentivize go-getters, so the first three Players to complete WEAPONLUTION, will receive a special reward!**

**Lastly, a Cadre of Ambushers from the Anti-Rebellion Force will join in to make things a little more *challenging*.**

The Announcer waved her hand and suddenly I fell through the ground and became enveloped in darkness again.

**Ready, Set, Go!**