

Chapter -4

While I looked around for a way off the roof of the asylum, making sure to avoid the front of the building near the literal rift in reality, a loud buzzing sound echoed across the city, as something large slowly descended from the sky in the distance. I couldn't really see what it was, as the enormous many-winged shape quickly disappeared behind one of the towering edifices to Capitalism.

The part of Castleburg near Calm Springs was a bunch of smaller two- and three-story buildings, since it lay on the fringes of the city, but in the distance were the tall office buildings of the finance monkeys and other societal parasites.

“Perhaps the apocalypse was a good thing after all,” I mused darkly.

Panda saw where I was looking and said, “You’ve gotta knock it off with this one-sided vendetta...”

I narrowed my eyes. “Never.”

If not for *them* and *their* ways, I wouldn't have been forced out of my lousy apartment and onto the street, after already having been forced to sell my vintage collection of fridge magnets to pay back part of my debt.

Buzzing came from almost directly above me all of a sudden, and I looked up to see a large potato-like vessel with six enormous botfly wings, which was steadily circling the beacon of light above my head, while descending towards the ground.

WARNING!

GREAT GAME Agents are coming to investigate cheating and rule-breaking!

All Players in the area, get on the ground and prepare for invasive probing!

Non-compliance will be punished!

“I’m not having stuff shoved up my butt by an authority figure again!” I yelled and leapt off the side of the roof, surprising myself by easily landing in a tuck-and-roll without any injuries.

“Seems your Athleticism has made you great at jumping and stuff,” Panda said, then continued, “I wonder if you can outrun these Agents though.”

No sooner had he said it, than four figures in insect-like carapace armour had dropped from the circling potato botfly in the sky, falling to the ground like cruise missiles. Before they splattered on

the roof of the asylum, two large wings unfurled from each of their backs as carapace plates shifted away to reveal them. With their armour and wings combined, they looked like futuristic beetle-humans, specifically of the species ‘*Eupatorus gracilicornis*’ due to their one large horn and four small ones on their eyeless helmets, as well as the glossy reddish dark-brown of their carapace plates.

I didn’t need any special abilities to understand that these ‘agents’ were bad news, especially for someone like me whose existence clearly violated the designs of their game. So, I ran towards the nearest building. A bowling alley.

“Who puts a bowling alley next to an asylum?” Panda wondered aloud, as I glanced back over my shoulder and saw the four beetle men spread out in the air, while clearly heading directly for me.

The area near Calm Springs featured a few residential blocks, the aforementioned bowling alley, a park overgrown with weeds and dead plants, a small corner-store grocer, and some local stores with shuttered windows. There were no people in sight, but plenty of evidence of a mass evacuation, as well as signs of something *enormous* having plowed through the street and park.

Cars and motorcycles had been abandoned in the middle of the street, forcing me to jump and climb over them to reach the other side where the bowling alley was. The sign out in front of the place had a wacky font and read ‘Time to Spare’, but clearly hadn’t been maintained for a long time, as a few of the letters seemed on the verge of falling off.

I slid across the hood of a polished Subaru, before diving head-first through the swing doors of the bowling alley, landing on a crusty colorful carpet, like the kind used in arcades from the eighties, and getting a mouthful of lint.

No sooner had I gotten to my feet than a group of terrified young adults were pointing at me with sharpened sticks, bowling pins, broomsticks, and other improvised weaponry.

“He’s human!” one of them exclaimed.

“Duh,” I replied, before two of the beetle Agents glided through the open doors behind me. Their wings folded in under themselves and disappeared under the plates on their back, just as they held out their three-fingered hands in claw grips.

“*Lay down on the ground and prepare to be probed!*” they said in unison. Their voices carried an unsettling buzzing, kind of like microphone interference.

Before they could grab me, I spun around and swung my right fist into the helmet of the nearest Agent, shouting “*Punch.harder(!)*”

ACTIVATING SCRIPT: *Punch.harder(!)*

```
if(Punch != Kill){  
Punch.harder();  
}
```

As my knuckles slammed into his horned beetle helmet, a tiny crack formed, but since it hadn't killed him...

REACTIVATING SCRIPT: *Punch.harder()*!

```
if(Punch != Kill){  
Punch.harder();  
}
```

The second punch followed instantly behind the first, expanding the spiderweb of cracks on the helmet. However, as soon as it reactivated a second time, something strange happened. My entire fist began glowing red-hot, as though instantly heated to a thousand degrees, and a different 'script' triggered:

ACTIVATING SCRIPT: *Math.multiply(Punch)*!

```
Math.multiply(Punch)
```

The third punch launched forward with such speed that it didn't so much hit the helmet of the agent, as it simply just deleted the top-half of his body from existence, alongside the entire wall and doorframe behind him. A millisecond beat passed, before the sudden flash-heated air formed from the incredible velocity of my punch released its energy in an explosion of wind, which sent me and all the young adults behind me tumbling backwards, while flinging the other Agent out the doorway.

While I tumbled across the colorful and crusty carpet, I just barely managed to grab Panda as he flew off my shoulder, and together we rolled through the entire lobby and into the area where they kept the world's most uncomfortable shoes, as well as all the bowling lanes.

I coughed out a lungful of dust and carpet lint, then picked a few hairs off my tongue, before spitting onto the floor. “Have they never heard of vacuum cleaners in this establishment??”

The people around me slowly started getting up from the sticky floor, quickly giving me a wide berth.

“What just happened?” asked one of them, a young man.

“He just punched that weird alien guy so hard he disappeared!” exclaimed a woman.

“Who were those guys?” questioned a third person.

I stood up and wiped dust and lint off my bloodied and torn pajamas, then said to the eight people who had nearly stabbed me to death with their improvised tools seconds prior, “Those guys were bad news! They want to probe us all, and you know what that means!”

“We’ve been hiding here for days and they didn’t show up until you did!” replied one of the men angrily.

“Yeah, you brought them here!”

“I don’t want to be probed...” said a terrified young woman.

“Days?” I asked. “This whole thing just started today, didn’t it?”

“Have you been living under a rock or something??” asked one of the men. “The whole world went to shit a week ago. This thing with all the weird messages, and monsters, and stuff, it’s just another part of an ongoing meltdown of society!”

“It’s totally unfair,” complained one. “It gave me a useless Class!”

“Who cares about your dumbass Class, Joe,” yelled a woman who had probably heard him whine about it too much already.

I lifted my arms into the air, “Everyone calm down!”

A second later the three surviving beetle Agents burst through the ceiling, scattering dust and ceiling lights, before landing on the floor between us with three consecutive *thuds*.

I reconsidered my words, “Scratch that. Run!”

Only two of the eight people heeded my words, with the other six charging the Agents, who lifted their three-fingered carapace gauntlets at them. Like a sudden swarm of angry wasps fired from their palms, a buzzing barrage of flechettes tore the six people apart in seconds.

I was already hightailing it down one of the bowling lanes by the time the Agents had finished off the six and split to pursue us who had fled. It seemed that they weren’t entirely certain that I was the sole troublemaker here, which was working in my favor.

One of the people who had run, the woman who had scolded Joe, screamed in fear before an echoing *crunch* cut off her cry.

“*Stop running!*” demanded the beetle who was chasing me with leisurely strides down the slippery bowling lane. I’d just gotten to the end of it and reach down to grab two of the pins, which I hurled at him as hard as I could, before diving down through the hole past the pins, to reach the area behind the lanes.

Panda who had been looking back over my shoulder said, “You only pissed him off with that. But nice throws nonetheless.”

“Thanks,” I said, as I squeezed out through the narrow gap of the machinery behind where the pins were stacked. All the machinery was powered but switched off, indicating that, despite what they had told me earlier about society’s collapse a week ago, electricity still functioned in this place.

“I’m surprised ‘Time to Spare’ wasn’t turned into a Dungeon,” Panda remarked as I ran down the back area, heading for any emergency exit I could find.

“They probably don’t want to stack them all next to each other,” I replied. “But didn’t the announcement also say that it was all public facilities?”

“Was Calm Springs a public facility?”

“I think the city was funding it.”

“Hmm, they’re wasting a lot of good Dungeon potential by just limiting themselves to that,” Panda mused.

“Are you planning on giving them pointers or something!?” I asked, annoyed, just as I finally found an emergency exit.

Another scream echoed through the building, followed by the sound of a barrage of projectiles destroying a bunch of stuff. They’d already found and killed the other two who’d run, leaving just me, meaning that I’d have all three of the Agents on my ass in moments. As though to perfectly point this out, sounds of walls being broken down came from the backroom behind the lanes, just as I kicked open the emergency exit and ran outside.

“I’m just saying, it seems half-baked at best,” Panda continued.

“Shut up for a second,” I told him.

A back-alley ran behind the ‘Time to Spare’ building and I quickly followed it out into a large street with yet more abandoned vehicles.

“Another thing,” Panda started, ignoring my request, “Why would public transport still be operating if society at large has shut down?”

I halted in my tracks and turned my head to look at him. “What?”

“Remember, the announcement talked about public transport. If society collapsed a week ago, why would they be operating all the way up until today?”

“I don’t fucking know. It’s all nonsense! And who cares, I won’t live long enough to find out if those Agents catch me.”

“Perhaps you can hide your beacon if you go inside a Dungeon again.”

“That’s so dumb it might actually work... though there’s also the possibility that I’ll be locked in until the remaining Agents can hunt me down inside...”

“Isn’t there a public indoor pool around here?”

I thought about it, then realized he was right. If my memory served me correctly, it was only two blocks away.

The buzzing wings of the flying potato grew louder as it began hovering towards me, obviously tracking my beacon, while sounds of destruction came from the back-alley I’d just escaped from. I picked up speed as I leapt nearly three meters into the air, sailing across an overturned truck and the two cars that’d crashed into it from behind.

“If things have gone tits-up a week ago,” Panda continued, “Then where are all the bodies? Shouldn’t the dead be rotting in the streets?”

“Stop talking!” I demanded, fed up with his nonstop barrage of questions that were just confusing and terrifying me more than I already was.

“Sheesh, Gambit, you’re a real sourpuss today.”

The buzzing grew louder-and-louder as I went down a street between residential blocks, and a glance back over my shoulder showed me that the six-winged potato had picked up the three Agents following me. Fortunately, it wasn’t a speedy vehicle, but it made up for that in persistence. And even if I had obliterated one of the Agents, I had no idea if I could pull it off three more times nor did I really understand how I had pulled it off in the first place.

“There!” said Pandamonium, pointing straight ahead with his fingerless arm. I didn’t need him to point out the very obvious public indoor pool, as it stood nearly three stories tall and had a unique smoothly-curved roof.

“I wonder if my ban is still in effect,” I said as I pushed my legs to the limit, going at least as fast as a horse-drawn carriage.

“You know, *that* life-guard needed reconstructive surgery after *you know what*.”

“How’d you know that?”

“Don’t you watch the news ever?”

A staccato sound like a full-auto potato cannon came from behind me, in the same direction as the buzzing wings of the pursuing vessel, and I instinctively started zigzagging, which proved a good idea as a shower of flechettes began raining down all around me.

I grunted in pain as projectiles settled into my back and my legs, but I kept going towards the relative safety ahead of me.

“They’re firing tiny wine-cork screws at you!” Panda yelled.

“Can you pull out the one in my shoulder? God that stings!”

“I can’t! I have no opposable thumbs!”

Another spiraling screw flechette pierced deeply into my calf and nearly caused me to fall.

I let out a frustrated yell and quickly jumped behind a bus stop for cover, while the buzzing came ever closer.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” I cursed as I tore out the screws from my back and my legs. I didn’t have time to be gentle with pulling them out.

Nearby was a weather-worn and rusty metal bench bolted into the ground, but I ripped it free with a determined tug, then hopped out from my cover and hurled it towards the flying potato, scoring a direct hit to two of its wings, causing it to start losing altitude.

While it slowly went to ground on a collision course with one of the residential blocks, I put on a burst of speed and reached the end of the street, where a flickering set of traffic lights chaotically blinked through red, yellow, and green at the T-junction. There was a particularly nasty multi-car crash in the middle of the road, which I leapt over, before running up the flat stone steps that led to the public swimming pool.

I glanced over my shoulder once and saw the three beetle Agents zipping through the air a hundred meters back, their outstretched arms firing flechettes in my direction, which fell short a few meters behind me.

With a nose-dive into the doorway, I was quickly pulled into the Dungeon to relative safety.

WARNING!

Now entering level 8 Dungeon ‘The Pool Rooms’!