

Chapter -14

I scanned the Achievement that’d just popped a couple times to comprehend it fully, then glanced down my hand still holding Bee’s, before looking to her face and asking, “Are you a kid?”

“I’m sixteen,” she replied.

I frowned. “I just got an Achievement that basically said I should contact Child Protective Services or face public crucifixion.”

“They’ve been hunting me,” she said. “They’re really scary. And they have dogs. Or well, I think they’re supposed to be dogs. They’re like aphids, but three meters tall, and their handlers are these ant-looking soldiers.”

“I wonder if there’s a theme going on,” Panda mused.

“Why?”

“I have been hunted by Agents of the Great Game. They’re *Eupatorus gracilicornis* beetles.”

“You know the Latin name for the ‘Five-Horned Rhinoceros Beetle’?”

“That’s literally the only Latin name for *anything* he knows,” Panda quickly answered.

“Are you trying to embarrass me to impress her?” I asked him, annoyed.

“Gambit... I’m not into kids, I’m just stating facts.”

“I’m not a kid,” Bee answered.

“Anyone under eighteen is a kid in my eyes.”

“Why do you have a stance on this?” I asked, suspicious of his motives.

“I don’t think I like what you’re implying, Gambit.”

“Shouldn’t we get out of here?” asked the girl. “Hawaiian Shirt Guy is waking up.”

I glanced over to the man, who was groaning loudly as he regained consciousness.

Releasing my grip on her hand, I started jogging towards a hallway that lay behind the play tubes, hot metal slide, and a swing. Bee followed closely behind me as we went down the large corridor.

No sooner had we rounded a corner than I heard Hawaiian Shirt Guy yell up a storm in the large room we’d just left.

After taking another corner of the linear hallway, we came out into a rectangular room with another hallway at the end of it, and a large metal-braced wooden door in the center of the left wall. It clearly did not fit in and it wouldn’t take a genius to know that this was the door to the Workshop that Bungo was supposed to open.

Besides the door, there were large tables with more enormous wheels of pizza, as well as five big balloon animals. No sooner had we entered than all five of them started floating towards us.

“Stay behind me,” I told Bee.

“Careful! They’ll try to wrap around you and suck the air out of your body.”

“That’s actually pretty terrifying,” Panda said, then leapt from my shoulder and down onto Bee’s head. “Good luck, Gambit!”

“*Inventory*,” I said, then pulled the screwdriver out.

Armed with a type of weapon I was familiar with, I charged forward and stabbed the flat tip into the closest balloon animal, which, if I had to guess, was supposed to be a poodle.

My weapon went straight through it, popping every inflated segment of its body and sending the airless rubbery husk to the floor. A balloon sword with a coiled blade surged right for me and slapped into my right shoulder. My body was flung right into a wall from the ridiculous strength of the seemingly-gentle impact and I heard a concerning *crack* from my left side. Fortunately, it only hurt a lot.

“Ow! Bastard!”

I jumped straight back at the balloon sword, dodging a slash from its rounded blade, before performing a slash of my own, which popped the coiled sword, but didn’t get the handle. The deflated monster started falling to the floor, while the other three moved in, and I quickly stomped on it to burst the last surviving segments.

Another balloon poodle lashed out at me, but I dealt with it in a single jab, before side-stepping a trunk-slam from an ‘elephant’ and kicking away a ‘monkey’ that tried to grab my leg. I lunged forward and popped the head of the balloon elephant, then stabbed it two more times with the screwdriver to kill it, before stomping on the head of the monkey with a satisfying *pop* and finishing it with another.

I exhaled slowly. “It’s a lot harder to stab with my left hand.”

Bee wandered over, looking at the deflated balloons. “I’ve seen those creatures suck all the air out of three different people... You made killing them look easy.”

“Well, I did break a rib I think, but it wasn’t so bad.”

“What would you’ve done if you didn’t have the screwdriver?” Panda asked.

“I’d have used my teeth.”

“That’s gnarly.”

“I don’t think I could fight one of those on my own,” Bee commented.

“To be fair, this Dungeon is Level 10.”

“Is your level higher than that then? That explains why you make it look easy.”

“...Eh, well.”

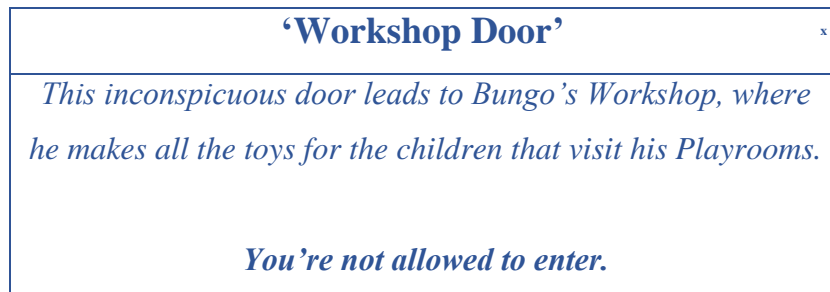
“His level is minus 4,” Panda explained.

“Did you just say ‘minus’?”

“Let’s not dwell on it and instead I’ll find you an enemy you can kill.”

“What about the door?” the plushie asked.

I pulled out my Looking Glass and stared at it, but nothing happened, so I instead walked over to it and said, “*Inspect.*”



Bee walked up next to me and repeated the phrase, “Inspect.”

She tapped the air to make the pop-up go away, then said, “I don’t see a keyhole anywhere.”

I closed the pop-up as well, then walked forward and put my left shoulder against one of the segments of the double door, before pushing with all my strength. Although there came a *creak* from the wood, it didn’t budge an inch.

“Guess I’ll have to punch it down.”

“That’s a terrible idea,” Panda said. “If it doesn’t work, you’re back to being Mister No-Arms, but this time for good.”

“Is that how you lost your right arm?” the girl asked.

“Yep. But I killed the Clown at least, so it wasn’t a bad trade.”

“Don’t forget that killing the Clown soft-locked the Dungeon.”

“...Zip it, Panda.”

“I am without zippers,” he replied.

“Then ‘stitch’ it.”

I looked around the room, but there were no other killer toys, so I began making my way towards the hallway in the back, hopping up to grab a huge piece of pepperoni, which was stuck to an enormous slice of pizza that drooped off one of the large tables.

“Come on,” I said, and was about to put my Looking Glass away, when I stopped and swung it around to peer at my companion. Just in case.

Before it locked on her, however, it targeted one of the deflated balloon animals:

Level 5	'Balloon Creation'	Enemy ^x
<p>“*Unsettling breathing noises*”</p> <p><i>Bungo is a very talented balloon artist and he can make anything that children ask of him. Given that these balloons are filled with oxygen harvested from 'Rats', they have peculiar tastes.</i></p> <p><i>These tastes include shoving their bodies down your throat and sucking all the air from your body. Yes, that means even your organs and bloodstream, as well as your lungs. It's not a fun way to go.</i></p> <p><i>This Enemy is dead.</i></p>		

Level 0	'Bee'	Player? ^x
<p>“Hey I'm Bee.”</p> <p><i>Class: N/A</i></p> <p><i>Main Attribute(s): Intelligence & Wisdom</i></p> <p><i>This Player is looking at you right now and thinking, “Why is he staring at me through a magnifying glass?”</i></p> <p><i>She seems cautiously-friendly towards you.</i></p> <p><i>This is a Wayward Minor, please locate your nearest Child Protective Services member and alert them!</i></p>		

“Why are you staring at me through a magnifying glass?”

“It's an item I was rewarded after clearing two Dungeons.”

“What does it do?” she asked.

I handed it to her. “Look at me through it.”

She lifted it up to her right eye, which, from my perspective, enlarged its dark-green iris as well as some small dark freckles around her nose. With her pale skin, green eyes, and freckles, I almost thought she could be a ginger, if not for the black hair. Then I realized that her hair was dyed black, because the roots were a lighter color.

I was about to ask her about it, when she said, “Why does it say ‘*Look at me, I’m on the News!*’ as your phrase?”

“It’s... it’s probably better you don’t know.”

“It also calls you a Cheater and an Amoral Pervert?” she said, becoming visibly confused.

“Alright, I think that’s enough of that,” I said, but before I could take it out of her hands, she looked at Panda who was back on my shoulder and froze. I saw how the color drained from her already-pale face as she read whatever had appeared, then suddenly the Looking Glass exploded in her hands and she began screaming.

Bee collapsed to the ground and started writhing, while I was frozen in decision paralysis, not knowing whether to hold her still or back away.

“Panda! What do I do!?”

“I don’t know, you big stupid idiot! Help her!!”

“Oh god, oh god,” I muttered as I knelt down and tried to stop her from twisting and spasming.

Something like a shockwave punched me off my feet and sent me halfway down the hallway we’d been heading towards, where I landed painfully on my tailbone and skidded for a few feet, fraying the ass of my neat dress pants.

I immediately got back up and ran over to Bee, who was letting off a ton of steam and glowing faintly.

With a groan, she pushed herself to her knees, while something like ashy particles were floating off of her body.

“...Are you okay?” I asked.

As the smokescreen cleared away, I saw how her body had changed and transformed into something not-quite-human. Two-foot-long light-green beetle antennae were sprouting from her forehead and folded back, almost looking like horns. Her skin-color was likewise green, and the area below her neck, where the clavicle bones should be visible, was covered in chitinous plate-like armour, which also covered her forearms and hands. Her black-dyed hair was the same as before, and, despite the new skin-color, her freckles were still visible, but her eyes were now a mix of two colors: red &

green. The most prominent addition to her body however, was a large set of carapace plates on her back, which were green as well, and seemed to hide a pair of wings.

I picked up the Looking Glass, with its fragmented lens, and looked at her through it:

Level 0	'Bee'	Enemy? <small>x</small>
<p data-bbox="683 528 911 562">“?????????????”</p> <p data-bbox="520 611 1074 689"><i>Class: Beetle Girl</i> <i>Main Attribute(s): Intelligence & Wisdom</i></p> <p data-bbox="301 739 1292 772"><i>This Player has succumbed to Insanity and been transformed into an Enemy.</i></p> <p data-bbox="312 822 1281 943"><i>...Actually, that's not supposed to be possible. The System isn't meant to be able to transform Wayward Minors! They're not even supposed to have an Insanity Gauge!</i></p> <p data-bbox="544 992 1050 1025"><i>She seems ?????????????? towards you.</i></p> <p data-bbox="279 1075 1315 1153"><i>This is a Wayward Minor, please locate your nearest Child Protective Services member and alert them!</i></p>		

Bee pushed herself to her feet and stumbled towards me. I took a step back. Surprised by my reaction, she looked down at herself and her hands.

“I’ve become a monster,” she said.