

## Chapter -19

The sound of cannon-fire filled the air, each concussive blast making the ground quake. I’d put Bee on my shoulders and was sprinting down the road, while what looked like black drop pods were falling down from the enormous vessel in the sky. It was large enough that its shadow cast the area beneath it in a dusk-time gloom.

Bee’s hands were clasped onto my forehead, while Panda was nestled between her arms. The carapace covering her body and fingers was somewhat painful as it pressed against my skin, but my mind right then was on getting as far away as possible.

The buzzing of the Agents’ flying vehicle was totally deafened by the continuous *boom* from the enormous Child Protective Services cruiser in the sky, but a glance back over my shoulder showed that they were still flying after us with their beetle wings.

Then something like an incoming mortar screeched through the air, before it hit the street behind us with enough power to release a shockwave that momentarily sent me airborne, though I landed on the heels of my shoes a second later and continued running, with Bee still holding on firmly.

“Bee, close your eyes!” I yelled.

“Why?”

“Just do it!” Panda yelled, understanding what I was about to do.

“Okay, they’re closed, what now?”

I took a deep breath, then yelled, “*Unequip All!*”

All the clothes left my body as it was pulled into my inventory, before the full effect of my passive was unleashed:

**SKILL TRIGGER!**

**BIRTHDAY\_SUIT** is now in full effect!

**I\_CAN\_FLY** is now available!

Energy surged through my body and I leapt high into the air, yelling, as I reached the apex of the sixteen-foot jump, “*I\_CAN\_FLY!*”

A sound like tearing fabric emerged from the skin of my back and I heard Panda gasp at what he saw.

“Gambit! You have wings!”

Although I couldn’t articulate or flap these wings, they ensured that our descent towards the ground was slowed significantly, while forward momentum was maintained. Within just a few seconds, we’d outpaced the pursuing Agents. Granted, it didn’t matter how far I ran, given that I still had a freaking beacon showing my location at all times.

“What kind of wings are they?” I asked as we were nearing the ground again. I could feel that my stamina was pretty drained from the skill, but figured I still had enough left for another jump-and-glide.

“Erm, they’re pretty gross, to be honest with you.”

“They’re not angel wings?”

“...Seriously?”

“What?”

I felt as Bee shifted around to look at them as well. “Oh god! They’re made of human skin!”

“Bee! Close your eyes!”

“Gambit, you need to shave your back. You’re really hairy.”

“*Inventory*,” I shouted and quickly threw my clothes on, the wings disappearing as only two feet separated us from the ground.

No sooner had I started running down the asphalt road than another set of screeching drop pods fell from the sky. They impacted an intersection near a gas station in front of us and sent forth two shockwaves that punched me to my ass and knocked Bee off my shoulders.

Before I could get to my feet, I heard movement from behind us as well, as the beetle Agents alighted only a few yards away.

“*Lay down on the ground and prepare to be probed, Cheaters!*”

“What do we do, Gambit!?” Bee asked, panicked. “I’ve never been probed before.”

“Trust me, we’re not getting probed,” I said, trying to sound reassuring.

“Isn’t it a crime if they probe a Minor?” Panda commented.

As the sound of the beetles’ boots on the asphalt became louder, the approach of six other boots came from the direction of the drop pods, as they spat out three ant-like humanoids each.

“*Show us the Wayward Minor and you won’t be publicly crucified, you Amoral Pervert!*”

Sensing a challenge to their authority, the beetles yelled to the ants, “*Back off Queen-lickers! This is our jurisdiction! These two are rule-breaking Cheaters subverting the GREAT GAME!*”

“Screw that, you dung-eaters! You know the Child Protective Services take precedence when it comes to *Wayward Minors!*”

Although it hadn’t panned out exactly as planned, since Bee and I were now trapped between the two opposing agencies, we were fortunately not killed on sight which was a definite victory, albeit a small one.

“How long until the first Game Event?” asked Panda.

“Why would I know? You think I’ve got an internal timepiece or something??”

“*Silence Cheater!*” yelled one of the beetles, his buzzing voice filling my ears like a swarm of flies.

Like last time I’d seen them, they were all identical and wore dark-brown glossy carapaces. I saw how one of them kept glancing towards Bee, probably because she resembled them more than a human now. Granted, her appearance wasn’t due to a suit of armour, but then, when I thought about it and looked closer at the beetles who were busy arguing with the ants, I realized that I had been wrong about them. Their carapace *was* their body. After all, it was an exoskeleton, which meant...

“Oh god, I just realized that the Punch-Glove was literally just some dude’s severed limb that I shoved my own arm into...”

“*Not a word more out of you, Pervert!*” the ants shouted in unison, three of them pointing at me with spears of some kind.

“They’re very abusive,” whispered Bee.

“Yea, they really don’t like Gambit,” Panda agreed.

The black ants were not as bulky as the beetles, but shared many similarities, such as the fact that their bodies were covered in carapaces and antennae poked out from the tops of their heads. Instead of plates on their back hiding wings, the ants had large gasters poking out from where their butts would normally have been, and these were carrying some kind of neon-orange fluid that partially shined through the black lining.

“We’re lucky they didn’t bring their ‘dogs’,” Bee added quietly.

“How bad can they be?” I wondered.

“Really bad. They’re so much bigger than you think.”

As the two agencies continued discussing our fate and the apparently-convoluted minutia of how each of their agencies and their jurisdiction worked, I carefully opened my inventory with a subvocalized command and pulled out my Looking Glass. I aimed it at one of the ants first, since they were new to me. Fortunately, none of them seemed to notice, since it wasn’t a hostile move.

<b>Level 45</b>	<b>'#0003890221'</b>	<b>Collector</b> <sup>x</sup>
<p><i>“Keep <b>Wayward Minors</b> safe.”</i></p> <p><b>Job:</b> <i>Minor Collector</i> <b>Affiliation:</b> <i>Child Protective Services</i></p> <p><i>This is a Minor Collector of the CPS. As you may guess, their job is to collect <b>Wayward Minors</b> who were not automatically collected when the <b>GREAT GAME</b> was initialized on your world.</i></p> <p><i>The Ants of the CPS are hive creatures who take solace in numbers. It'd be a bad idea to get on their bad side, because, even if you kill a hundred of them, there are millions more ready to take their place.</i></p> <p><i>They seem openly hostile towards you for your repeated displays of <b>Amoral</b> behavior in front of a <b>Wayward Minor</b>.</i></p>		

I swiveled around to appraise one of the beetle agents, specifically the one who was arguing with the ants.

<b>Level 60</b>	<b>'K-klhh-glrq'</b>	<b>Agent</b> <sup>x</sup>
<p><i>“Glory to the System and its Rules! Death to all <b>Glitches!</b>”</i></p> <p><b>Job:</b> <i>GREAT GAME Agent</i> <b>Affiliation:</b> <i>Rule-Enforcement and Probing Department</i></p> <p><i>This is an Agent of the REPD. Agents such as this investigate rule-breaking and aberrant behavior that violates the System's carefully-laid design. They are in charge of discovering the cause of <b>Glitches</b> as well as preventing subversion of the <b>GREAT GAME</b>.</i></p> <p><i>The Agents of the REPD take rule-enforcement very seriously, as the System is their literal God. To them, <b>Glitches</b> are like the Devil and must be eradicated once discovered. Usually, this takes the form of vivisection and then ritualistic crucifixion.</i></p>		

*They seem openly hostile towards you for your repeated displays of **Glitched** behavior and flaunting of the System’s rules.*

“I wonder if the beetles are Welsh,” I muttered below my breath, quiet enough to not be noticed.

“Who gives a shit, Gambit! We need to get out of here!”

“Easy enough for you to say!” I hissed.

“Maybe they’ll begin fighting each other?” Bee guessed, scooting closer to where I sat and tried to look inconspicuous.

“If they do, the beetles will win,” I said. “They’re Level 60, while the ants are Level 45.”

“There’s only four of the beetles, but the ants brought a goddamn spaceship!” Panda argued.

“Oh right, I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Do you have any other tricks up your sleeve?” Bee wondered.

“I could start just punching wildly and hope for the best, it hasn’t failed me yet.”

“You were definitely the type of child who tried to force the square peg down the triangular hole in kindergarten, weren’t you Gambit?”

I was about to fire back a very witty and clever retort, when suddenly a new message appeared in front of my eyes. I looked over to where the leaders of the two agencies stood and saw that both of them were holding strange cylindrical devices made of stone in their hands.

**WARNING!**

**A GREAT GAME ADJUDICATOR HAS BEEN SUMMONED!**

**CEASE HOSTILITIES OR BE VAPORISED!**

**VACATE THE LANDING ZONE IMMEDIATELY!**

“Ah, shit... this is only escalating,” I muttered as I saw some kind of trippy constantly-shifting geometric shape appear in the sky. A hole opened at the bottom of the mercury-like vessel and sent a pillar of light down to the ground, directly between the two arguing groups. They all took several steps away from the circle the light formed on the asphalt.

Then *something* manifested on the ground where the pillar touched, as though beamed down with some kind of ripoff Star Trek transporter.

I immediately lifted my Looking Glass to my eye, peering through the fractured lens at the *thing* that appeared from the pillar of light.

Level ??	'Adjudicator'	Manager <sup>x</sup>
<p data-bbox="552 309 1043 344"><i>“I do not appreciate being looked at.”</i></p> <p data-bbox="584 394 1011 430"><b>Job:</b> <i>GREAT GAME Adjudicator</i></p> <p data-bbox="593 439 1002 474"><b>Affiliation:</b> <i>Dispute-Resolution</i></p> <p data-bbox="296 524 1299 680"><i>There are a lot of Agencies handling the multifaceted nature of the GREAT GAME. As with anything where big egos collide, there is an inherent need for mediators and judges that determine: who is in the right and who deserves a crucifixion.</i></p> <p data-bbox="280 730 1315 887"><i>If your worthless existence has brought the attention of an Adjudicator, you have made all the wrong moves in your life leading up to now. Unlike Agents who make up the vast majority of the Agencies, Adjudicators are like demi-gods who answer only to the MASTERS of the GREAT GAME.</i></p> <p data-bbox="564 940 1031 976"><i>It seems to not like you staring at it.</i></p>		

The light from the nonsensical spaceship in the sky died away and left behind the most awful thing I'd ever laid eyes on. It was a floating upside-down pyramid made of quivering purple flesh, which sported tentacles from random parts of its 'body' and was utterly covered in eyes. Above the pyramid was a floating sphere with a mouth, within which was an eye that physically hurt to look at, its iris like a shroom-induced kaleidoscope.

“Don't look at it!” I quickly told Bee, covering her eyes.

### WHY HAVE I BEEN SUMMONED!?

The assembled ants and beetles all dropped to their knees, seeming to almost regret having invoked the Adjudicator. The voice of the incomprehensible being was like having worms poke against my cranium from within, giving me an instant migraine and making blood drip out my nostrils.

I clenched my teeth and held on to Bee, as though I could somehow shield her from the effects of its voice, but it was clear from the way she was quivering that she felt it too.

One of the beetles started to explain the situation, though dared not look directly at the eldritch monstrosity in front of him.

Before I could hear anything, however, an announcement appeared and the world slowed to a crawl. I had the uncomfortable realization that, while everything was moving at one-twentieth its normal speed, the Adjudicator was not affected by this time dilation, and seemed to be watching Bee and I as we read/listened to the announcement.

**At long last it is time for the first GAME EVENT of the GREAT GAME!**

*\*Applause and choir-like harmonizing blood-curdling screams\**

**Everyone still alive and hearing this announcement will now be transported to the nearest  
EVENT AREA!**

I looked up and my eyes met with the one large eyeball in the floating spherical mouth, its gaze feeling like an open flame, and, though the Adjudicator didn't say anything, I knew this wouldn't be the last time we met.

Then, suddenly, the ground vanished under me and I fell into darkness. The air was sucked out of my lungs while wind whooshed by my ears. I tried to yell, but my voice never manifested.