

Chapter -26

By the time the last person had introduced themselves as ‘Charley’, I’d forgotten the name of everyone else. There were three women and five guys, and one of the women hadn’t introduced herself, but instead sat on the floor hugging her legs, clearly just wanting everything to be over. The one who had screamed at me earlier was by her side, consoling her.

“*Inventory*,” I said.



I pulled the Looking Glass out, then said, “I’m just gonna check you guys to see if you’re any trouble.”

“What is that!?” one of the men yelled, lifting his gun towards me reactionarily.

“Knock it off Chris, it’s clearly just a magnifying glass. A broken one at that.”

“What’s it do?” asked a woman whose name was either Katey or Katia, I couldn’t remember which. She was one of the two with an evolved gun, but also seemed the calmest out of the bunch.

“It lets me see other people’s personalities,” I answered, half-lying.

“How do you get something like that?” asked the man named Charley. He also had an evolved gun, but was a bit twitchy, which made me think he might open fire if I made any sudden moves.

“You have to kill two bosses.”

“You already did that??”

“I’ve actually killed three,” I said.

“...Wait, you said Gambit, right?” asked K...something. “It was your name in one of the first announcements, wasn’t it?”

I shrugged. “It doesn’t really matter, does it?”

“On the contrary!” said the guy named Chris. “You’re probably really dangerous if you’re that strong!”

“Wait, haven’t I seen you somewhere?” asked another guy whose name I’d 100% forgotten.

I cringed. This was why I normally avoided groups.

“How come you’re all together like this?” I asked, praying they’d allow me to get away without answering.

They shared some glances, before Kat(?) answered, “We all more or less landed in the same area when this thing began. Charley and I took out three aggressive Players who wanted to ‘win’, but Mia took it pretty hard though. I guess she’s never seen a dead person before. We’ve just been sticking together since then, trying to avoid having to kill anyone.”

“They won’t be able to complete the Event,” Panda commented, finally piping up. “Also, scan that Mia girl, she’s not right.”

“What do you think happens when the time runs out?” I asked her, while lifting the Looking Glass to my eye and peering through the fractured lens at the people. None of the results were noteworthy, the highest level was ‘Level 2’, and the Classes were all pretty simple. Three had ‘Pacifist’, one was a ‘Nurse’, two had ‘Archer’, and the last were a ‘Big Sister’, and:

Level 0	'Mia'	Player ^x
<p><i>“I’m scared of the voices.”</i></p> <p><i>Class: Empath</i></p> <p><i>Main Attribute(s): Intelligence & Perception</i></p> <p>ERROR!</p> <p>Cannot retrieve background information.</p> <p><i>She seems scared of you.</i></p>		

“Eh... Gambit, I don’t know if your paranoia has rubbed off on me or not, but I think that girl might be a Skinstealer...”

I didn’t realize that Katey was still speaking, as Panda’s voice had cut right through hers, but she suddenly paused and then said, “You look a bit pale, Gambit, are you okay?”

“How long has Mia been like that?”

“Since we all met,” she replied. “Why?”

“Did anyone know her from before?”

She looked around for confirmation, but no one said yes. “Kristianna has been looking after her, but I don’t think they knew each other either.”

I looked to the woman, whose Class was ‘Big Sister’ and who was still gently rubbing Mia’s back, ignoring our conversation.

“*Inventory*,” I said again, putting away the Looking Glass and pulled out something else.

“What’s that for?” asked Charley, his left eye twitching.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, lifting the whistle up to my lips. I realized that my hands were shaking. Out of all my worst nightmares, Skinstealers were at the absolute top. But I had to face my fears, else the System and its goons would use them to take me down.

As I blew a note in the whistle, it felt like long fingernails scraped down the inside of my ear canals, while blood dripped from my nostrils. Everyone around me dropped to the floor, letting out screams and cries of anger.

Player ‘Gambit’ has activated a Conspiracy Whistle.

You have received +10% Insanity!

“*Now’s ya chance, smack ‘em with me willy!!*”

“We’re not doing that!” Panda yelled, covering his own plushie ears for some reason. “Right, Gambit!? You’re not gonna kill them, are you??”

I looked over to where Mia was and, as I took in her visage, it felt like a thousand bugs were crawling across my skin, while a cold sweat broke out on my back. Her body was unzipping scalp-to-sole like a onesie and large hideous teeth were emerging from the opening, as well as one big purple tongue covered in fleshy bumps.

Before I could do anything, ‘Mia’ had turned around and swallowed Kristianna.

Perhaps because of my whistle, the sight of Mia’s transformation, the revelation that a monster had been in their midst this entire time, the fact that someone was just devoured whole, or all those things combined, two other people began spasming and transforming.

“Fuck!” I yelled, readying Brock in my hand as Charley, who was only a few feet away, began to grow in size and turning into some kind of furry beast.

“Gambit, you galaxy-sized moron! Look *what* you did!”

I cut off No-Longer-Charley’s monstrous snarl with a smack to the face from my lightweight pink balloon sword, producing such a devastating *crunch* that I was sure that all bones in the top half of his body were instantaneously reduced to tiny fragments. His disfigured and hairy body was tossed across the chamber, hitting the Red door and falling to the ground lifelessly. The door itself was unscathed.

The other person undergoing an Insanity transformation was someone whose name I’d totally forgotten, and it was like his skin and flesh were melting off his bones, which had become like smoldering hot coals and turned black, while smoke billowed from the hollow eye sockets of his cranium.

As the skeleton charged for me, Definitely-Not-Mia was already trying to devour Chris, while the three survivors were slowly getting to their feet, readying their guns but unsure where to aim them.

“What did you do!” screamed the woman, who, until a moment ago, had been a paragon of serenity.

I narrowly avoided a 1000° ‘warm’ hug from the smoldering skeleton by slipping around it at the last second, before smacking it with Brock from behind and quite literally reducing it to dust.

“*Not as satisfying as being showered in blood, but we take those anyway!!*”

Out of all of us, Brock was the only one seeming to actually enjoy himself.

I spun around in horror as I saw Chris’ shoes disappearing into the Skinstealer’s maw, then a loud *bang!* went off and I stumbled back a step in surprise, belatedly looking down at the wound in my torso and the blood rapidly soaking into my suit jacket.

My body acted without consideration and I lunged forward and slammed my ridiculous-looking sword into the side of Katey’s body, sending her flying and killing her immediately. As the particles of her weapon seeped into mine, I saw that the two survivors fled down the Yellow door, with the Skinstealer immediately following them.

I looked down at my torso again, then to the body of the woman who’d shot me, while fumbling for my inventory and retrieving the Survival Kit. As it appeared in my hand, I stumbled back a step, before all the strength left my legs and I tumbled to the floor.

As the back of my head kissed the smooth stone tiles, I heard the two survivors’ pleading screams disappearing into the distance.

Then darkness overtook me.