

Chapter -6

The stench of chlorine flooded my nose and filled me with nostalgia of the time that I body-slammed a life-guard for denying me access to the tube slide. It had technically been inside this place, but unlike the Asylum, the Dungeon transformation of the public indoor pool had completely changed it into something else. I also couldn't help but wonder if the name of the place was a reference to something.

“Do you remember what this place was called? I think there was a message that popped up right as I nose-dived through the doors.”

“Yeah. It was called ‘the Pool Rooms’, with a level 8 difficulty.”

I was wading through the waist-high water, which filled the hallway entirely. The water sloshed loudly with each of my labored strides and the sound echoed off the white-tiled walls. I got a strange sense that I'd been here before, though I knew for a fact that I definitely hadn't.

“It has kind of a weird dream-like quality to it, this place.”

“Nightmare, more like,” I replied.

“I wonder what kind of monster attacked Annabella,” Panda mused. He was sitting atop my head, since he *really* didn't want to get wet.

“I should've asked...”

I'd already made it pretty far, so I decided to just press on. Although, the place was like a maze, with a lot of branching hallways just appearing randomly, most of them seeming to be dead-ends. The current hallway I was wading through led to stairs and up into a larger room, which would hopefully be where the boss was hiding.

“It's somehow creepier with no monsters around, don't you think?”

“I guess.” I reached up and patted Panda where he sat on my head and said, “I didn't think you'd be this scared of water though.”

“I'm not! I just don't want to get my fur wet. It'll take forever to dry and I'll stink of chemicals.”

I passed by two branching hallways on either side of me and quickly glanced down each in turn, but it was just more of the same. The uniformity of the walls and ceiling lights was making it impossible to tell if I'd been down these paths already or if I was seeing them for the first time.

No sooner had I moved past them than a pleading scream came from the left-branching hallway. It belonged to a man from the sounds of it.

“Didn’t she say that one guy survived?” I asked.

“She did.”

“Guess we’re going that way instead then,” I decided and quickly began running down the branching path, the water sloshing and splashing loudly as I did my best to push my body through it.

The scream came again from down the end of the hallway, where a wall stood and two new paths opened up to the left and right. As I reached the wall here, I looked in either direction, until I heard the sound again and followed the left way, which led to a wall and a hallway going right, at the end of which were stairs and what looked like a locker room.

I was panting heavily as I forced my way to the stairs, then quickly got out of the water and found myself faced with a dead-end, which, as I’d seen from a distance, had lockers lining the wall. On the floor up against the back sat a man. He was seemingly uninjured, and he was alone.

“You okay??” I asked, breathing heavily from the exertion of getting here.

“What the hell are you yelling for if you’re okay!?” Panda demanded to know.

The man slowly stood up. He was wearing a dry white shirt, blue tie, thick-framed black glasses, and black neatly-pressed pants, with trimmed black hair and a clean-shaven face. Basically, he looked like he had just left work at the office, which I thought was weird, if the world had been a total mess for a full week.

Then he let out the same scream again, except, his mouth wasn’t moving.

“What the fuck?”

“Gambit, I don’t think this guy is human...”

“What makes you say—?” I started to ask but didn’t get to finish, as the middle of the man’s body slowly unzipped, opening up to reveal a massive vertical-slit of a mouth with thousands of needle teeth.

I stood there dumbfounded for a second, then immediately spun around and leapt from the top of the stairs and several yards out into the waist-deep water, before quickly running back the way I’d come.

“What are you doing!?” Panda yelled, holding onto my long hair as he started to slowly slide off my head. “Why didn’t you fight it!?”

“I am NOT messing with no goddamn Skinstealers!” I yelled.

I had to stop and catch my breath, after running for what felt like half an hour, just to get away from the human-impersonating monster. Also, I was completely lost.

“You’re such an idiot, Gambit!” Panda scolded me. “This place is way lower level than the Asylum, so why the hell are you running!?”

“You know I don’t like Skinstealers!” I reminded him. “They already took over the city council and police, I ain’t letting them get me too!”

Panda sighed, then crawled down to sit on my shoulder, despite his obvious fear of the water that reached up past my hips.

“Well, regardless, we’re totally lost.”

“We’ll find our way to the boss,” I assured him. “Just pick a direction.”

I was standing in the middle of where four hallways intersected and I’d already forgotten which one brought me here.

“*That one*,” Panda said without much thought, pointing his fingerless arm down the one to my right. “When in doubt, always go right.”

“Don’t you think they assume that’s what we would do, hence why we should go left?”

“That’s what they think you’ll think, which is why we should go right!”

I nodded, totally convinced. “Makes sense to me.”

As I followed the right hallway, I quickly started hearing sounds of running water and picked up speed, shoving my legs forward despite my thighs and calves already being sore and tired. At the end of the hallway were left-and-right-branching paths, but I followed the sound to the right, then rounded a corner and came to a set of steps that led up out of the water, placing me in a square box of a room, where four colorful holes in the far wall indicated water slides. They were Green, Yellow, Blue, and Red.

“Pick a color,” I told Panda.

“Why do *I* have to pick again??”

“Because you’re clearly good at it. So, pick one.”

“Fine. Red.”

“Why Red?”

“Same logic as before. They want you to believe Red is the ‘instant death’ slide, but it’s in fact Green, while Red is the one that takes you where you want to go.”

“What about Yellow and Blue?”

Panda shrugged.

“Well, I won’t argue with the results of your last pick, so Red it is.”

The *slap* of my wet socks on the white tiles of the square room echoed loudly, as I made my way to the slide. The sound of running water was coming from the slides themselves, which had holes in the top that fed steady streams of it down the tubes, to limit the friction-burns. Although, if it was constructed correctly, there’d always be friction burns no matter what.

“Now the question is: head-first or legs-first?”

“Head-first,” Panda said with utter certainty. “If it is actually the death slide, you don’t want to be blended from the feet up. Or crushed, or whatever else might be waiting at the end. Me, I’d use a blender. So, yeah, head-first.”

“You’ve eh... you’ve thought about this a lot?”

“We all have dreams, Gambit.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I just crawled head-first into the Red tube.

“If this kills me,” I said, my voice bouncing off the smelly plastic walls, “Then I’m blaming you.”

“You can’t blame me when you foisted the choice of picking on me! That’s unfair!”

“Too late,” I said and pushed my body forward.

Immediately my chest started sliding on the thin layer of water. Panda was sitting on my neck, holding onto my long hair as we hurtled down the dark tube towards either a terrible landing or death.

Congratulations! You have unlocked an achievement! ^x
<i>‘Blind Faith’</i>
You picked a colored path based on nothing but intuition.
<i>In the GREAT GAME, colored paths are always fraught with danger and rewards. You chose a path based on intuition and time will tell if you made the right decision or not.</i>
<i>While you are potentially hurtling towards certain death, here is a list of what the colored paths always lead to, though the color is always randomized:</i>
<i>Death — Treasure — Setback — Boss</i>
Reward: Whatever lies at the end of your path