

MADMAN APOCALYPSE

Chapter 0

Through the bars that covered the thick tempered glass window, the world was stained crimson, while fat droplets slowly rolled down the outside, leaving oily streaks in their wake.

I regarded the blood rain with an ambivalent and disinterested look, although at least the sun’s light through the oily streaks dyed my white walls in a fascinating pink hue.

“Thursday already?” I wondered out loud to the only audience in my cell.

The Panda doll regarded me with its beady eyes. No matter how many times the orderlies threw it out, for fear of it being utilised for nefarious means, it always found its way back to me. It was quite possible that the Panda wasn’t really there, but it was hard to tell.

“I’ve been here for too long,” I grumbled. They gave me no clocks or calendars or even pens with which to track the time here, so it was only by looking at the outside world through the tempered glass window and protective bars that I got a proper sense for its passing.

Thursday was always blood rain. It was the only real constant I could track the time by.

A *thump* from outside my soundproofed cell pulled my focus from the window to the door. Without warning klaxon or an orderly’s voice through the intercom buried in the ceiling where I couldn’t reach it, the door simply slid open. It was a heavy metallic thing that might as well’ve been used to secure a bull or a raging tiger. I smirked to myself at the thought that I was worthy of such security measures.

I shared a brief glance with the Panda doll, “I suppose you ought to come along.”

The knitted doll didn’t protest as I took it by the arm and went out through the door that had opened for some reason.

“Perhaps it is another illusion, just like the blood rain?” I considered out loud.

When I looked down the clean white hall with the linoleum floor and bulbous security cameras dotting the ceiling at even intervals, I saw that this entire section had been opened, as my neighbours’ and their neighbours’ heavy metal doors were likewise opened wide.

There was not a single orderly in sight and the red glow that normally revealed the life within the cameras was absent as well.

“Is it Halloween already?” I wondered. “Or perhaps they are testing us.”

“You ought to run,” said a voice nearby.

I chuckled. “It’s been a while since I heard voices.”

I felt something tug on my right hand where I held the doll, then it began to pull on my long grey sleeve as it crawled up my arm. With a surprised look, I saw that the Panda had come to life.

“Well, *this* is new.”

The doll made its way onto my shoulder then poked me in the forehead with its knitted fingerless arm. “Snap out of it, Gambit. You have to get out of here before they get you!”

“Gambit? Is that my name?”

“Of course it is,” the doll replied, shaking its head in disbelief. “I’m Pandamonium, remember?”

“Not really.”

“They must have hit you hard in the head last time they restrained you, those orderlies.”

“They are pretty strong,” I agreed.

A fat hand suddenly reached out of my neighbour’s cell, it was covered in blisters and sores, with bruised hues of blues, blacks, and purples. A second later the head emerged.

“Mike looks different,” I commented, surprised at my neighbour’s glow-up. No sooner had the words left my mouth than the head turned to glare at me.

“...*that*’s not Mike.”

The head was elongated to twice its normal length, the eyes had sunken in so deep that nothing but darkness stared back, and the mouth was opened wide enough for the corners to reach the bottom of his shrunken ears. Then Not-Mike let out a garbled scream and launched out of the doorway, slamming into the hallway wall. He was about to reorient himself and jump me, when suddenly—

***Tap* *Tap* ... Is this thing on? Oh, it is?**

Throat clearing noises

Welcome one and all to the GREAT GAME (trademark pending)!

You may have noticed already that things have changed around you significantly.

Those of you who were using public transport at the time of the transformation may already

be dead or are about to be, once time resumes. Especially those of you on the metro.

**And my condolences to those of you who were within public facilities when it happened, as
you have now become mindless monsters.**

The rest of you, however, are *mostly* all unscathed!

For now.

**You will all be pleased to know that your world, “*Dirt*”, has been chosen to participate in the
GREAT GAME!**

“What does this mean?” you may wonder. Well, let me tell you!

**Once every odd-numbered millennium, a world with a sentient population is picked to take
part in the GREAT GAME, with the winners gaining cosmic influence and popularity. Pretty
exciting, huh!?**

**I can tell a lot of you are thinking, “I don’t have time for this, I have work to do at the office!”
Well, *Samantha*, your office has become a den of monsters and your janitor is now an eight-
eyed Calamity Demon, who craves human flesh.**

**But don’t you worry! Your old job and life may be gone forever to the predations of cosmic
horrors and their filthy spawn, but the GREAT GAME comes with a fantastic System that
makes everything A-OK by assigning you a cool new ‘Class’!**

**Your starter Class may or may not determine how long you survive, but for those of you who
do manage to hold on to your *pathetic and meaningless* lives, you can potentially gain a new
Class or evolve your current one!**

**On top of your swanky System-granted Class is the ability to level up your rank and improve
your new attributes, like Strength, Charisma, Wisdom, Void Lore, and more!**

“How do I level up?” you ask. Well, it’s simple!

Kill your fellow humans or the many new *fun* monsters that roam your world!

**For the next twenty-four hours, have as much *fun* as you want with your new powers and
attributes. Don’t forget to familiarise yourself with the *wacky* neighbours who just moved into
your area, and make sure to get comfortable with this new reality, because once the timer
ends, the first of the many challengingly-brutal GAMES begin!**

Now a brief word from our Sponsors!

THE GREAT GAME IS BROUGHT TO YOU BY *incoherent blood-curdling screams*!

Time resumed as though I hadn’t just heard a crazy message in my head that proclaimed the apocalypse had come in the form of some game of life-and-death. Then a screen popped up in front of my vision, before Not-Mike flew at me and slammed me back into my cell that I’d just emerged from.

I swiped at the air, trying to get the screen to disappear, while my neighbour tried to slam his fat hands against my chest. With a violent shove, I pushed myself out from under Not-Mike and his distended and bloated body. I kicked him in the side of his elongated face for good measure, then hopped over him and out the cell, before grabbing the heavy door and slamming it shut.

“That door weighs 800 pounds...” Pandamonium remarked.

I looked down at my hands, “Maybe all the exercise finally paid off?”

While Not-Mike pounded on the door from the other side, I finally regarded the screen that refused to leave my vision:

Congratulations! You have unlocked an achievement! ✦
<i>‘Huh, that’s not meant to happen...’</i> Start the GREAT GAME inside a Monster Den.
<i>I swear this is not meant to be possible... but you somehow survived being inside a Monster Den during the transformation. Unlike the other patients and orderlies within ‘Calm Springs Asylum’, you have retained your humanity.</i> <i>Please remain where you are while we send an agent to investigate this mystery.</i>
REWARD: <i>‘System Glitch’ Class</i>

“What am I supposed to say? ‘Gotcha’? ‘Accept’?”

“Maybe there’s a small X in the corner that’s really hard to see?” the doll suggested.

I squinted as I looked at the screen floating inches from my face, then I spotted the small symbol and tapped my finger against it, making it disappear.

“Huh... seems you were right.”

“Now can we get the hell out of here?” Panda asked. “It doesn’t sound promising that they’re sending an ‘agent’ to investigate why you are still human.”

As though to further emphasise the need for me to get a move on, garbled screams emerged from all the other cells nearby. Already, from the one furthest down the hall, a pencil-thin woman with clawed hands and a scrunched-up long face was beginning to crawl out onto the ceiling, while her long deep-purple tongue lolled around beneath her.

“I suppose waiting around is unlikely to be a good idea,” I replied, then started running down the opposite way from where the thin woman had emerged. Screams and shouts came from the security station up ahead and I felt fairly confident that getting out of here would be quite a challenge.