Chapter -78

I was airborne, tumbling through the air from the force of my final punch against Liam's head. My arm was still in one piece, though the fingers of my right hand were broken and my wrist was fucked.

After unequipping my gear through my inventory, I said, "*I_CAN_FLY*."

Achievements, announcements and pop-ups were rolling in, as I slowly drifted back down to the floor of the mall, where a vast pile of dead hand-spiders rose up to meet me. Liam Johnson, the Chief of Police turned Local Villain, was dead by my hand at last. But I had not been quick enough to stop the Lord of Sinners from entering the Mall Safe Zone.

Roaming the hallways were dozens of Players who'd been transformed into Insanity Monsters, although none of them were the boss-variants that I caused, since all had been created by the Lord and not through any actions of mine.

"No, this is definitely your fault," Panda argued in response to my thoughts.

Around the Vendor shops with guards lay heaps of dead hands and transformed Players, but those that'd been without protection were not as fortunate. The Safe Zone would never recover from the fallout, and my image would be forever tarnished by the mass loss of life that'd happened here. But, it was hard to feel bad about it, even though Panda was probably right.

Samantha had been an idealist and Greater Good advocate, and look where that'd gotten her: dead at the hands of another person with the same point of view. If I could do things all over, I would have told her to focus on herself rather than all of those who just wanted to leech off of her power and backstab her first chance they got.

I saw Bee emerge from the Healer's shop, after she'd no doubt seen the Region-wide announcement:

WARNING TO ALL CASTLEBURG PLAYERS!

Player 'Gambit' has defeated the 'Lord of Sinners', but in its death it has left a sickness behind. Take care to avoid the area near 'Serenity Park Mall', lest you become corrupted by the lingering taint of Immorality and Insanity.

Bee looked around, eyes scanning across the dead hand-spiders and the brown sand their torn-open bodies left behind. She quickly went over and looted a glowing wisp near the largest heap of

the hands, before noticing me drifting down towards her. Then, with a simple jump, she leapt into the air and took flight, her large moth wings flapping lazily to bring her up next to me.

"Did you get him?"

"I did," I told her. "I'm the new Owner of the Safe Zone now."

I brought up the personal announcement I'd gotten and shared it with her:

SAFE ZONE ALERT!

You are the new Owner of the Safe Zone: Serenity Park Mall

Method of Ownership Transferal: Murder

Previous Owner: Liam

"Is it okay for us to stay here though?" she asked, probably wondering about the 'taint' mentioned in the announcement.

"We won't be affected by the Lord of Sinners' curse."

"So it'll be like our private hideout then!?" she asked, excitedly.

"More like your private toxic waste pit," Panda remarked scathingly.

"He's just mad that I caused a lot of people to die," I said.

"It was just *so* unnecessary. You could have killed him without dooming countless people as a result!"

"Since when has *that* stopped me?"

The plushie sighed.

"I need to visit the Healer again," I told her. "My hand is broken."

"The quest the guards gave us should make it cheaper," she replied.

"After I'm healed, we should go back down the elevator shaft together. There should still be a lot of Leftovers to grab, since I haven't looted them all. Also, there's a Broadcast Department nest down there."

"Really?" she asked.

"Yeah, it was even bigger than the one we found during the Event."

We landed in front of the Healer's shop and my wings folded down onto my back, though I didn't re-equip my armor, as I expected to take another dip into the honey tub.

"We have found Samantha's killer!" Bee announced to the guards.

I nodded. "It was a woman named Isabella who did it. She was working on behalf of Liam Johnson."

"Thanks…" said one of the crustacean men dejectedly, his voice making it obvious that he thought the quest had led to the devastation of the Safe Zone.

The other guard handed us a large Game Coin worth fifty and a small paper slip that looked like a child had made it with crayons, and which read: "*Healer Shop Discount Voucher. Come get the good goop!*"

I took the large coin and handed it to Bee, since she said she wanted the rewards, but kept the voucher for myself, before saying, "I'd like to see the Healer!"

The dejected guard fixed me with a glare of his stalk eyes, then said, "It's 100 Coins to get healed."

"That's quite a lot," I muttered. "But, I have this voucher!"

His gaze landed on the paper slip as though it was the first time he'd seen it and not exactly three seconds since I'd been handed it by his companion.

"That'll be 95 coins then."

I paused.

"Hah!" Panda laughed at my despair.

"I only need my hand healed," I insisted.

"Price's the same, no matter how much healing you need."

"That's a horrible business model," Bee commented.

I grumbled, but handed over the coins nonetheless. The guard took the payment and then stepped aside from the hole into the Wasp Healer's hive.

Bee followed me in and the guards didn't even challenge her, which I thought was very unfair, though I didn't have it in me to complain about it. As we walked through the tunnel, I pulled out the Rubik's Cube reward I'd gotten and handed it to her.

"Can you solve this for me?"

"Ooooh!" she exclaimed, as she took it into her hands. "So many patterns!"

I tried to pull out the '????' item as well, but it wasn't possible, nor could I even share the description with her, which was odd. I also had no idea what its cryptic message was about, or how I was supposed to 'Seek the Truth'.

"You're back again," remarked the old Wasp lady.

"Your services are very expensive," I told her.

"You seen any other Healers 'round here?" she asked me.

"Fair enough. I only need my hand fixed, but I'll take the full-body treatment, since I paid for it." She shrugged, then indicated a tub with her cane.

"Can I keep my head above the honey this time?" I asked her. I wanted to still be able to talk to Bee and Panda, while I got healed up.

"Suit yourself."

I plopped myself down into the viscous healing honey tub, with nothing but my head poking out, while Bee sat down on the papery floor in front of me and began muttering to herself as she played with the cube. The healing power of the honey was quickly repairing the bones in my hand, as well as mending dozens of scratches and bruises I'd had no idea I'd sustained.

"I got these from Liam's Leftovers," she told me, not looking away from the cube, while handing me a golden key and a large Game Coin.

I accepted them and they immediately vanished into my inventory somehow. It was a pitiful 46 Coins and:

'Key to the City (Castleburg)'	x
Rewarded to 'Samantha' for establishing the first Safe Zone in her Region.	
By squeezing the key tightly, the wielder can teleport to any place within their Region.	
Uses remaining: 2/3	
Weight: 1 Panda	

"I've got an idea of how I'll use this," I told her. "But we need to go to the Broadcast Center below the Mall for that."

"Wait, what are you planning?" Panda asked, for once not clued in to my thoughts.

"You'll see," I replied with a grin.

I'd have more than just a simple revenge against Liam. The Key would unlock the way to accomplish that, but first I'd need to make sure of something.

Speaking of revenge, I began to look through my achievements:

Congratulations! You have unlocked an achievement! ˣ
'*Best Served Cold*'   **You got your revenge.**
So, you got your revenge at last. I'm sure it felt great and that all your problems are now gone. Because that's what getting revenge is like, right? A permanent solution to your problems.   *The children and families of all those Agency workers you mercilessly killed know that revenge is a fleeting reward, but they don't care. They want their justice, and only when they are parading through the offices holding your cold entrails aloft will they feel satisfied.*
Reward: A temporary sense of justice

Congratulations! You have unlocked an achievement! ˣ
'*Oh Lordy*'   **Killed the Lord of Sinners.**
Boss Monstrosities are designed to be handled by a veritable army of Players working in unison to halt their destructive conquest across their Regions.   *But you slayed it alone by just punching it a lot…*   *It's honestly quite irritating to repeatedly witnessing you making a mockery of our GREAT GAME and its brilliant creations. I am sure the **Flesh Sculptor** will seek to punish you for destroying his beautiful child.*   *Nevertheless, spectacular results deserve spectacular rewards, yada yada…*

> **Rewards:** '*unVirtuous Plugin*' & '*Lord's Hand*'

> **Congratulations! You have unlocked an achievement!** ˟
>
> **'*I'm in charge now!*'**
> **Became the Owner of a Safe Zone.**
>
> *You're the boss now, but try to not let this newfound authority go to your head. Or do, we actually prefer when Players become despotic psychopaths.*
>
> *Safe Zones are a frustrating feature that the 'Humane Extinction of Sentient Species Act' requires us to implement into the GREAT GAME, but all they do is protract the show and give us a lot of horrible B-roll drama of Players arguing with each other without murder being involved. Only Envy Demons enjoy watching that…*
>
> *Anyway, here's a meaningless reward for your meaningless new title.*
>
> **Reward:** 3x '*Safe Zone Tokens*'

"Do you know what the Tokens are good for?" I asked Bee.

She ignored my question, totally absorbed in the cube as she was, but the old Wasp replied, "You can exchange those for services in the Safe Zone, or use it on the lottery machines in the hopes of getting special items."

"Could I have used one for a free healing?"

"No. I run a proper establishment here, so no tokens. But you can use one to get a backrub by the Sea Urchin Masseuse on the third floor, or have a story told to you by the Wandering Crab."

"Guess I'll just try my luck with the machines then," I said, since none of the 'services' sounded that great.

"Just don't come crying to me when you get nothing in return."

"Can I exchange them for Coins instead?" I asked.

"No. But I'll happily take your Coins if you want more tokens," she replied with a sinister grin.

"I'll pass on that…"

"Better not get back into gambling," Panda advised. "You know what happened when you got really into collecting cards."

"It's not the same!" I retorted. "The stores in the city were all clearly only selling the bad card packs, while keeping all the rares for themselves!"

"It was a dumb card game, just let it go already…" he remarked.

"Yu-Gi-Oh is serious business!"

The Wasp gave me a strange look and I realized she couldn't see nor hear Panda. Before I could try to explain to her that I wasn't crazy, she just shook her head and made a big show of looking at the label on a bottle of maple syrup she was drinking from.

I sighed and tried to push aside how Panda's goading made me feel by inspecting my new items, starting with the strange robes I'd received from manifesting the Lord of Sinners.

<div style="border:1px solid">

'Hooded Stitched-Skin Robe' ^x

*A hood robe of stitched-together pieces of skin. The worshippers of the **Flesh Sculptor** all wear robes like this in honor of his legacy, undertaking its creation themselves and sourcing the material from those they sacrifice in his name.*

Wearing this armor imbues you with the following effects:

- 75% Elemental Damage Taken

+ 15% Physical Damage Taken

+ 100% Insanity Damage Taken

- Insanity Monsters created by your deliberate actions do not attack you

+ An Absolute begins to take notice of you

Weight: 18 Pandas

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"Definitely don't put that on," Panda said, his voice sounding panicked. "Avoid anything to do with the Flesh Sculptor!"

"Why? What's so bad about him?" I asked.

"He makes monstrosities like the Lord of Sinners for fun! That's what's wrong with him!"

"Maybe he'll consider sponsoring me instead of Miranda. She's a bit too blood-fetish-oriented for my tastes."

"Sure, sure… and then he'd turn you into a true monster as payment for your services!"

"Fine, I won't put it on. Right now."

"Oy!" he protested, but I ignored him and looked at the plugin next.

'unVirtuous Plugin'   x

—PLUGIN—

Harvested from the festering corpse mound of the Lord of Sinners.

Virtue is a sickness. Embrace Vice.

Plugin Ability: *Under.mine(Virtue)*
Plugin Passive: *Immortality's Curse*

Weight: 22.91820215 Pandas

I inspected the skills, wondering if they did exactly what I thought they would:

'Under.*mine*(Virtue)'   x

Plugin Ability

Virtue is a castle of sand, and all it takes is a strong enough wave to undermine it from below.

Ram your index finger into another Player's body to increase their Insanity Gauge by 30%, while you gain 15% in return.

> *If the Player reaches 100% as a result, they immediately explode and heal you by 30% of your max Health. All nearby Players, upon witnessing this, incur a 15% increase to their Insanity Gauges as well.*
>
> *Cooldown: 10 hours*

> ### 'Immortality's Curse'   x
>
> *Plugin Passive*
>
> *With a sufficiently-strong force of personality, you can make anyone agree with you over time, even if they are initially opposed to your point of view.*
>
> *Players with less Wisdom and Perception combined than your Strength value are slowly turned towards being Morally Evil for every minute they spend in your company.*

"Goddamn," I muttered. "I should swap unCollide out for this."

"…Yeah, just really embrace your new villain persona," Panda said. "Soon there'll be hordes of insane villains roaming Castleburg, all thanks to you."

"Alright, time's up," the Wasp Healer announced, before hooking her cane under my arm and lifting me up and out of the tub.

"Hey, I wasn't finished!"

"Your healing's done, so git."

I frowned, but allowed myself to be rudely ushered towards the door, while globs of honey rolled off my body and plopped down onto the floor. Bee got up and followed after me, though her eyes didn't leave the cube for a moment.

"Guess I'll figure out what the Lord's Hand is for as we head down below," I remarked.