

## Chapter -74

I threw my available Attribute point into Dexterity, while I was standing at the edge of the elevator shaft near the escalators to the second floor. More Players were entering the Mall from the nearby automatic doors, while others were running past them and taking their chances with the world outside. I paid them no mind.

“Do you have an actual plan?” Panda asked, as I stared down into the darkness that awaited me.

“I don’t need a plan,” I said, although I had a good idea of how I’d torment Liam before I allowed him to die.

This was the moment before a revenge I had long awaited, and I was savoring it as best I could. In the grand scheme of things, Liam was small-fry, and I was probably better off going after the Great Game Agencies that seemed intent on hunting me down, but, before I focused on the bigger picture, I needed the comfort of knowing that the two men who had ruined my life: the Mayor and the Chief of Police, were dead by my hand. Of course, there were many more than just those two to blame, but it was clear they had been instrumental in my downfall.

Obviously, they had colluded to bring about the social unrest that had swept me and many others up and crammed us into jails and asylums, just for being people who didn’t fit into their plans or worked against them. It was no big revelation that the poor and homeless of Castleburg were a nuisance that these two men had worked hard to eradicate. Similar stories happened all across the states, and I knew for a fact there was a bigger conspiracy at play. However, I would be happy to know that at least those two Villains would be dead soon.

“First the Chief, then the Mayor,” I muttered.

I’d tried to get to the chief in the past, but he was always well-protected, so I’d gone for the Mayor instead, which was how I’d landed in the asylum.

“You okay, Gambit?”

“I’m just enjoying the moment.”

“...Right.”

I took a deep breath, then I stepped off the ledge and let myself fall down the elevator shaft. I activated my wings immediately and began gliding down, while my Transition Lenses passive kicked in and made me able to see in the dark.

The first thing I noticed was that the shaft went much further down than expected, but also that it just sort of cut off before reaching the bottom. There was a service ladder that followed the wall of the shaft and, where it ended, it was connected to a rope ladder that fell all the way to the ground below.

As I floated down past where the elevator shaft cut off, I saw a great cavern around me, and, curiously, there was a large structure of cocoons taking up most of the space. It was an off-white color and seemed to be illuminated from within, though the rest of the cavern was dark as soot.

“It’s a Broadcasting Department hideout,” Panda said, putting to words what I’d just realized.

Suddenly it was making sense how Liam had been able to kill Samantha, because, if she appeared on their screens, then they would’ve been able to track her and learn her skills, as well as the fact that she had the Cheat Death ability, which I’d stolen. However, that also meant they’d have the bead on Bee and I.

Panda nodded, in tune with my thoughts and agreeing to them. “Quite ingenious, really,” he commented.

“Liam wouldn’t have been able to clear out the Broadcasting Spiders here by himself,” I said. “They weren’t *that* strong, when Bee and I eradicated them, but I doubt he’d be able to take out a nest this big alone.” After all, it was easily twice the size of the one that’d been built under the amphitheater for the Weaponlution Event.

“The Safe Zone Terminal did mention he had ‘goons’, so he’s probably not by himself. His Class was also ‘Local Villain’, so it seems likely that he has his own evil henchmen.”

My feet finally landed on the cavern floor and I put my gear back on. I doubted that I’d need Indestructible ability of my Swan-feather Cloak, but I wasn’t going to take any chances with a bastard as slimy as Liam.

“Either Liam or one of his men must have some kind of flashbang or smokescreen ability,” Panda guessed. “The quest from the two guards mentioned an explosion of light and smoke that obscured the murder of Samantha.”

I grunted, not really that worried about what I might go up against. If Liam and his goons were actually strong, they wouldn’t have resorted to ambush tactics.

“Ironic, isn’t it?” I said.

“What is?”

“That once given the opportunity, Liam revealed his true colors. I mean, how do you even get a Villain Class?”

“Maybe he started out with it?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so. It must be like the thing Steve got from picking ‘Party Never Ends’ and hearing ‘Happy Birthday’ 100 times, except evil.”

“Steve seemed pretty evil, ordering everyone around,” Panda argued.

“True, that *is* messed up that the System would give him an ability like that. He’ll definitely misuse it. I mean, you saw how he only surrounded himself with women... I probably should put a stop to him before he gets started.”

“Didn’t know you were such a chivalrous knight,” he antagonized me.

I ignored him.

“I wonder if he could force people to do things like leave the Safe Zone or give him items.”

“Good thing Bee can withstand his powers,” Panda replied.

“Maybe if I cut out his tongue, his power will stop working?”

“That’s... not the solution I had in mind, personally.”

We reached the entrance tunnel to the large spider nest that was nearest to the elevator shaft in the ceiling. It was kind of shaped like a funnel, and I couldn’t help but imagine an enormous spider racing out to greet us as soon as I touched the web-made floor.

After a careful prod with my boot toe, nothing happened. I let out a small sigh of relief, then marched into the building, while my swan cloak fluttered behind me dramatically. There were similar funnel entrances across the vast structure that took up most of the cavern space, but since there were no people outside, I guessed they were hiding somewhere within.

“You know, they might already be aware that you’re coming and have laid a trap for you.”

“It’s all under control,” I told him. “Worst case scenario, I’ve got my teleport-to-safety button.”

“Back Door is still on cooldown,” he told me flatly.

“Oh... well, then I’ll punch my way out.”

Panda shook his head in disbelief.

“What are you gonna do if he’s not here?”

“They I’ll use my Wanted Poster,” I replied.

“Oh, I forgot about that thing.”

The floor bounced gently as I walked through the reception of the Broadcast nest. There weren’t any bodies anywhere, which was an uncomfortable trend I’d been noticing lately. Sure, the bodies in the Mall disappeared thanks to the transformation into a Safe Zone, but I’d never found out exactly what’d happened to the other bodies.

I entered the waiting room, which had a hole in the ceiling, just like the nest under the amphitheater.

“Hey, what do you think—?” I was about to ask Panda, when a guy walked around a corner. He paused, blinked a few times, then squinted as if he wasn’t sure he was seeing correctly. I didn’t waste a moment, before loping forward and smashing my right fist into his chest. “*Get it!!*” Brock yelled.

Instead of sending the guy flying, his torso where I’d hit literally just disintegrated into a red mist, before the top and bottom of his body just fell to the ground, slowly turning purple.

“Eh... what the fuck was that?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Panda muttered. “I think his health pool must’ve been *so* small that your attack turned him into fine particulates before he could even get knocked back.”

“Feels a bit like some unintended physics due to my impact damage,” I said.

The Drain Air evolution I’d grabbed for Brock had, somehow, managed to steal some of the dead guy’s air and the fingers on my gauntlet were slightly bloated now.

I pulled out my Looking Glass and inspected him:

Level 2	'Paul'	Player <sup>x</sup>
<p><i>“Sure thing, Boss!”</i></p> <p><b>Class:</b> <i>Henchman</i></p> <p><b>Main Attribute(s):</b> <i>Strength</i></p> <p><i>Paul was one of those people who appreciate others telling them what opinions they should have. As a result, he was primed to be a Henchman, Devotee, Waterboy, what-have-you.</i></p> <p><i>The nature of a tag-along’s Spontaneous Class Evolution revolves entirely around who they decide to tag along with. In this case, Paul picked a Villain to follow, and thus he became a Henchman.</i></p> <p><i>He was always destined to die without fanfare, as the mob-character he was, but here’s a fun fact about him: he enjoyed licking stamps before putting them on letters.</i></p> <p><b><i>This Player is Dead.</i></b></p>		

“Somehow I feel kind of bad,” Panda said.

“Hey Paul, have you seen—?” asked another man as he came around the corner.

I reacted immediately and punched the guy in the head, exploding it like a watermelon and venting the air I’d sucked out of Paul, causing all of the gore to shoot away from me.

“Holy fuck, Gambit!”

“*Wheeeew!!*” squealed Brock contently, as gore and brain matter showered the web wall in front of me.

I was still holding the magnifying glass so I appraised the second guy and got pretty much the same result, except his name was John, and his ‘fun fact’ was that he once got a parasite infection from licking a slug.

“Do all of Liam’s Henchman enjoy licking stuff?” Panda wondered.

I stooped to pick up their Leftovers. They had twelve Game Coins combined, as well as a caramel apple pop and two tootsie pops. I only took the money, leaving their fetish-adjacent candy behind for someone else to grab.

Instead of heading through the tunnel both of the men had come through, I hopped up into the hole in the ceiling and found myself in a sort of ‘ventilation’ shaft, except it was tall and wide enough for one of those spider humanoids to move through freely, meaning there was plenty of space for me.

As I moved through the area, I occasionally caught glimpses of the rooms below through slits in their ceilings. More of the Henchmen were milling about aimlessly as I progressed through the tunnel, and, from their appraisals, they were all either level 1 or 2. As with the first two, they had identical info and mob-character names, alongside a weird licking-centered ‘fun’ fact.

After about ten-or-so rooms, one of them must’ve found Paul and John’s bodies, since shouting and panic went through the Henchmen like wildfire. I couldn’t help but feel like the antagonist in a slasher horror as I observed them from above, totally unnoticed.

“Oy, Gambit, the way you’re smiling is creeping me out.”

Within half a minute of the commotion kicking off, two higher-leveled Henchmen appeared, heading towards the entrance, and I recognized one of them immediately. From their appraisals, it said they were both level 6 and former traffic cops in the Castleburg Police Department.

I almost busted through the ceiling to kill them from above, but Panda stopped me.

“Eyes on the prize.”

With determination flowing through me, I heeded his words and continued moving through the ventilation tunnels above the rooms. I began trailing a runner, who was seemingly delivering the news

of the two Henchmen’s deaths to their boss, moving through the tunnels above the rooms he entered. After what felt like ages, the runner came out into a large room full of monitors and speakers, where high-leveled Henchmen were watching other Players through the screens intently. From the headphones they were wearing, it seemed they could even listen in, which wasn’t something I’d noticed from the Broadcast nest in the Weaponlution Event.

In the back of this monitor room sat a man on a leather couch, several half-naked women surrounding him and desperate for his attention. A tall imposing woman with a long black ponytail dressed in riot gear stood nearby, and was the only of the Henchmen who had a different role. She held a short tube-thing in her left hand and leaned against a massive greatsword that her right arm was draped around.

Level 13	'Isabella'	Player <sup>x</sup>
<p><i>“I’m yours only so long as the money keeps flowing my way.”</i></p> <p><b>Class:</b> <i>Bodyguard</i> <b>Main Attribute(s):</b> <i>Vitality &amp; Perception</i></p> <p><i>The small Prison on the outskirts of Castleburg used to be this woman’s former workplace. When the GREAT GAME started, she had to kill her way out of the Prison, which had transformed into a hybrid Dungeon, where only the inmates were transformed, while the guards and other workers remained human.</i></p> <p><i>In clearing a way out for her fellow coworkers, she killed so many transformed inmates that she was the highest-level Player in your region prior to the WEAPONLUTION Event.</i></p> <p><i>During the Event, she met Liam Johnson and he convinced her to work for him as his protector, and most of the GAME Coins he now earns go directly into her pocket. But she is worth every bit of it, and through her formidable power, he’s been able to build his little empire.</i></p> <p><i>She is hostile towards you.</i></p>		

My eyes narrowed as I took in her boss.

His large mane of dark-brown hair was full of grey streaks, and his five-o’clock stubble suited his pudgy face and double-chin poorly. He wore a full dark-grey suit that was a size too small and he

kept fidgeting with a large golden key, the same one Bee had told me about. A grin was smeared across his face as he watched a screen where a Player was fighting a losing battle against a Dungeon Boss, while his right hand was firmly squeezing one of the fawning women’s ass. On the table in front of them were drugs, alcohol, and snacks.

I gritted my teeth.

It was unmistakably the Chief of Police, now styled as a wannabe kingpin and several pounds heavier than when last I’d seen him.

Before I had the chance to get the jump on him, Isabella looked directly up at me through the slit in the ceiling and raised the stubby weapon in her left hand. Just as she fired and sent a shower of molten shards into the ventilation tunnel, I shoved myself through the ceiling, landing atop one of the Henchmen’s work-stations with a loud *thud*.

I pointed a finger of my purple gauntlet at Liam Johnson and said:

**“There’s No Escape.”**