

## Chapter -69

Players were making their way into the Mall as we came to the second floor. I didn't know the Serenity Park Mall well enough to tell what had been there before the new Vendors moved in, but there were a lot of strange shops squeezed in-between otherwise normal-looking stores that were in fact Dungeons.

Bee was leaning over the side of a railing that allowed her to look down at the ground floor and she was taking the opportunity to scan the Players with her Nerdy Spectacles. Meanwhile, I was trying to figure out what the nearby Vendors were for.

Since we weren't in imminent danger at the moment, I was able to actually take in our momentary refuge. The Mall was a large rectangular box, and the second and third floors were mostly just walkways with square holes in the center that allowed you to look down at the ground floor, except for the corners, like where Samantha had set up the Safe Zone Sphere. There was a halfway point where the walkways crossed from one side to the other, and this meant that there were two square 'shafts' where we could look down. If Samantha planned on taking charge of the Mall, positioning herself at the top made a lot of sense, strategically.

Still, it was hard for me to not relate to the antagonistic messages of my recent achievements, which called me a coward for hiding in a Safe Zone. Not only did I agree that it was cowardice, but there were also no assurances that it prevented Skinwalkers and saboteurs from entering. Not to mention, Nina's warning was still at the front of my mind.

“You look pensive,” Panda said. “It's worrying.”

“I'm just thinking,” I told him, as Bee leaned back from the railing.

“There are a couple of level 3s that just entered, and several at level 1 and 2.”

“They sure got here at a very convenient time...” I remarked. Just late enough to be unable to help us, but early enough to take advantage of the place and set up their own spots. Even with a place as big as the Mall, space was sure to run out quickly, and no doubt those who were most cunning would camp out the easy Dungeons and bar others from utilizing them.

“None of them look like they were Skinstealers,” she added.

“I don't trust them,” I replied.

We walked back towards the escalators and headed down. I hadn't managed to really identify what the new Vendors on the second floor were, but I figured I'd go a round after I was healed to fully figure out what options I had for spending my roughly five-hundred Game Coins.

“Samantha got a strange reward for setting up the Safe Zone,” Bee said, as the escalator slowly moved us down to the ground floor. “It was a golden key the size of my forearm. She said it allows her to teleport to any place within our Region.”

“That sounds powerful,” I said, slightly jealous, even though I had the ‘back\_door.bat’ ability from the unCollide Plugin that Bee had helped me reinsert before we left the top floor.

“It must have some kind of drawback,” Panda remarked.

“She didn't say,” Bee replied.

We walked off the escalator, and almost immediately three people jumped in surprise when they saw me.

“Oy... your Jumpscare passive is gonna make people go insane!”

“Not my fault they're wusses.”

“Maybe it's because you're dressed like an REPD Agent,” Bee guessed.

“Let's not get too close to them,” I muttered, not replying to her guess, but fairly sure she was spot-on. Probably several Players had been brutalized by the Agents.

Suddenly, I wondered if Agents and other members of the various insect-based agencies could enter the Safe Zone... it would certainly create a lot of problems. And I *had* encountered those Ambushers, even if I couldn't exactly recall fighting and killing them.

“Wait. Where's all the bodies gone?” I asked, realizing that they weren't all over the place like they'd been when I came to earlier.

“Probably got cleaned up with the rest of the Mall when it turned into a Safe Zone,” Panda said. “Does it matter?”

“I might've missed a lot of the loot,” I said with a frown.

“There!” Bee exclaimed suddenly, startling the nearby newcomers with her voice.

I followed her finger and saw that there was a large Vendor nestled into a spot on the other side of the mall, across the open floor that the new Players were gathering in. I was fairly sure it had been a hair salon before, but I could've been wrong. It was next to an aquarium store that was probably where the strange Shark Merman spawned from. The Vendor's storefront was brownish-grey and looked to be made of some kind of paper or cardboard and two humanoid creatures stood out in front, but they weren't like Nikau the Jellyfish, rather, they looked like crustaceans.

“Are those lobster people?” I wondered.

“Let’s go check!” Bee said and bounded towards the shop.

“Wait, how do you know it’s a healer!?” I called as I walked after her.

The nearby Players were watching us with strange expressions, maybe because we weren’t acting scared and bothered by the whole concept of the apocalypse, though it might as easily have been that they knew we were a lot stronger than them.

When I caught up to Bee, who was talking to the two guards, I realized that I knew what the storefront was made of, and it wasn’t paper. Or well, not in the traditional sense. Rather, it was wood pulp that’d been formed into papery sheets. There also weren’t any doors, just a human-sized hole that seemed to lead into a tunnel.

“Is this a goddamn wasp hive?!” I asked.

“We are here to protect the Healer,” said one of the lobster men, clicking his large right claw, while his eye stalks glared at me. “Overt hostility is not tolerated.”

“You do know wasps literally get paid to make fun of humans dying on the broadcast of this ‘Great’ Game, right!?”

The other guard clacked his claws and said, “And we get paid to keep the Healer alive.”

Both of them were slightly taller than me, and though they were humanoid in shape, there was nothing human about them, just like how the Beetle Agents were just beetles shaped to look humanoid. But they definitely seemed like they’d take quite a beating before they went down, although I guessed that part of the Safe Zone’s unique status was that it didn’t allow for hostilities to take place inside. It did make me wonder about why some of the Vendors had a need for guards.

“How much does Healing cost?” Bee asked, before I could get us banned from entering.

“The first one is free,” said the guard on the right.

“Great...” I groaned. “The first one is free and will get us hooked, then the next will cost all our gear and money right?”

“This one is very hostile, isn’t he, brother?” said the second guard.

“He is indeed.”

“We might as well try, if it’s free,” Bee told me.

“Fine! But if I see a stinger, I’m fighting back!”

Before either of the lobster men could bar us from entering, Bee pushed me through the aperture. We moved through a C-shaped tunnel before coming out into a surprisingly-cozy interior that was decorated with warm-glowing lamps fixed into the ceiling, and a few potted plants in hanging pots.

Strangely though, there were very large hexagonal pits in the floor that were full of what I guessed to be honey.

Sitting on a wooden stool was a tiny and old-looking Wasp woman with two long antennae sprouting from her forehead, and coal-black hair and eyes. Her skin was grey and instead of a lower body she had a large abdomen with a tapered point, and it had a yellow-orange pattern starting from the middle and down, while the rest of it was grey like her skin.

The Wasp was sucking on the stem of a white flower, releasing smoke rings into the air somehow.

“Here fer healin’?” she asked in a thick accent that might’ve been Scottish.

I reeled for a moment, utterly discombobulated by the incongruence between her voice and appearance.

“The guards outside said it was free,” Bee quickly replied.

“Only fer today. Dinnae tell the whole village.”

“What?” I asked.

Bee translated. “Just today, but don’t tell everyone.”

“Fekkin’ expensive,” the Wasp explained.

“So, what do we do?” I asked. “I’m not agreeing to anything involving a stinger!”

“Get in tub,” she replied, gesturing with her flower at one of the hexagons with honey in it.

“Do I keep my armor on?” I asked.

The woman looked to Bee. “Bit slow ain’t he?”

Panda laughed. “She says you’re a moron.”

I gritted my teeth, doing my best not to rise to the provocation, and said, “*Unequip All.*”

Then I walked, barefooted, across the papery floor to one of the ‘tubs’ and slowly lowered myself down. Panda hopped off my shoulder just before he could get trapped in the sticky sap.

Surprisingly, the hexagon was deep enough that I couldn’t feel the bottom, and I ended up submerged to just below my chin. Immediately, I could feel a warmth flow across my body.

The Wasp got up from her chair and limped over to my tub with a gnarled wooden cane in her hand, then used the tip to push against the top of my head until I was all the way under.

I gasped, thinking I’d fallen for an obvious trap and would now die a slow, but sweet, death as honey clogged every orifice of my body. But then I realized that I could breathe just fine.

Whether due to the healing effects or something laced into the honey that surrounded me, I felt myself starting to fall into some kind of deep meditative state that bordered on sleep, while my right

arm was meticulously reconstructed, along with my many broken bones here-and-there, and the countless bruises and scratches.

An achievement suddenly appeared in front of my eyes:

<b>Congratulations! You have unlocked an achievement!</b> <sup>x</sup>
<i>‘A Healing Hand’</i> <b>Met a Healer in a Safe Zone.</b>
<i>Healers come in all shapes and sizes, but you managed to encounter a rare one: a former <b>Announcer</b> of the <b>GREAT GAME</b> who switched to the side that actively supports <b>Players</b>.</i>
<i>If you manage to get friendly with Healers, they will often offer you discounts. Note that ‘getting friendly’ means: do <b>Quests</b> for them.</i>
<b>Reward:</b> ‘Safe Zone Token’

There was a new type of currency given as a reward for the achievement, and I immediately inspected it through my Inventory.

<b>‘Safe Zone Token’</b> <sup>x</sup>
<i>A token for use in <b>Safe Zones</b>, which allows you to utilize certain machines and services.</i>
<i>It is possible to exchange <b>GAME Coins</b> for <b>Tokens</b>, but the best way to earn them is through <b>Safe Zone Quests</b> for the various <b>Vendors</b>.</i>
<b>Weight:</b> 0.1 Pandas x Amount

*Another incentive to look around the Safe Zone a little longer, I contemplated.*

Perhaps it was because of the honey and its healing properties, but I was feeling significantly less inclined to get out of here right away.

A sigh escaped from my entire body as I began to fully relax and let go of all the tension that I’d unwittingly been holding on to.

As I was just about to enter a perfect Zen-like state, Panda’s voice cut through to me, “Eh, Gambit, I think this Safe Zone isn’t actually ‘safe’.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, although, because of the honey that surrounded me, my voice came out muffled and weird-sounding.

The Plushie, who was standing up above, managed to hear me just fine. “Well, someone was just killed outside the shop we’re in. There’s a lot of screaming going on.”