

## Chapter -64

“You really like building stuff, huh?”

“I had a bit of a LEGO phase when I was younger,” she said, suddenly embarrassed at what she’d made.

The bathroom was on a corner, but Bee had erected walls down the left-and-right hallways such that they formed a gauntlet that was impossible to navigate in a straight line, while also giving us small platforms from which we could look out above the walls and shoot the incoming monsters before they got close.

“You did a good job,” I commended her.

“Don’t worry about breaking the walls down,” she told me. “I’ll just rebuild them if you do.”

“Doesn’t your skill cost Mana?” I wondered.

She shook her head. “Weird right?”

“It must have some kind of cost though?”

“Just furniture.”

I thought about that. It seemed unbalanced somehow. “Can you use it offensively?”

“No. And once something I’ve built with furniture breaks, then I can’t use it again.”

“An environmental cost then,” I concluded.

“You’re the only one with utterly broken skills,” Panda told me. “Like your Punch Harder.”

“It has a cost,” I said.

“The cost doesn’t match the effect.”

I raised my right stub. “I beg to differ.”

“You lost part of your arm, not permanently, in exchange for killing a boss more than twice your level. That’s unbalanced as hell.”

I was about to fire back with a counterargument when a message suddenly went out, along with a blue pulse that flowed across the walls, floor, and ceiling, almost like some kind of scan.

### **WARNING TO ALL CASTLEBURG PLAYERS!**

**Player ‘Samantha’ has activated a Safe Zone Sphere inside the Serenity Park Mall!**

**For the next two hours, Enemies and Bosses in the area will be drawn to the location. If they make it to the Sphere, they will destroy it and prevent the creation of the Safe Zone.**

**Players in the area must decide if they wish to aid or prevent ‘Samantha’ in her goal of carving out a sanctuary.**

**Rewards for participating in the successful establishment of the Safe Zone:**

*100x GAME Coins & +1 Level*

**Rewards for participating in the destruction of the Safe Zone Sphere:**

*300x GAME Coins & +3 Levels*

**Time remaining:**

*1 hour 59 minutes 59 seconds*

The blue pulse came again, followed by Samantha flying out through the bathroom door, covered in blood and with a large meat mallet in her hand. It was dripping red chunky droplets onto the floor.

“What happened in there??” I asked.

She paused, looked around at the gauntlet Bee had constructed, then used her hands to wipe her face, although it didn’t help much. “There was a monster in there. It jumped out of the stall as soon as I activated the Sphere.”

“Looks like it exploded all over her when it died,” Panda remarked.

The floor began to tremble and the roar of monsters echoed down the halls that led towards us.

“So, once again, the System lied to me.”

“Why? What happened?” Bee asked her.

“It said that the duration of the ‘defend the Sphere’ event was based on the area that I attempted to turn into a Safe Zone. I know the goddamn size of this mall and what it selected doesn’t match that at all.”

“Maybe it’s a conversion error,” Panda speculated. “Like if it’s based on meters but has to convert from feet or something.”

“It turns out that it considers cubic feet, instead of square feet...”

I nodded. “That seems like something they’d do.”

“And because of that, it went from being thirty minutes max, to two hours...”

“Did you know about other Players being able to interfere with it?” Bee asked.

She shook her head. “It didn’t say anything about that.”

“Gambit and I can kill them,” Bee said confidently.

I considered the fact that my two Plugins currently optimized me for killing Players, although it would probably lead to more monsters than anything, particularly Boss-type insanity monsters... Maybe it was best if I just went for killshots if any Players tried to stop us.

“Do you think anyone will actually interfere with the creation of the Safe Zone?” Samantha asked.

“Definitely,” I answered. “The rewards are too good.”

“But what’s the point of getting Game Coins if you can’t use them anywhere?”

“Maybe someone else wants to lay claim to the Mall,” I replied. “Plus, you’ll probably get some kind of bonus for being the one who creates the Safe Zone, and maybe you get to control everything about it.”

Samantha sighed. “You’re right, that *is* tempting. Three levels is also a lot. There shouldn’t be any Players nearby though,” she said. “From what I was told, most everyone abandoned the area after realizing it was full of monsters much higher level than them.”

I frowned. “I just realized, Annabella and Hawaiian Shirt Guy will probably come here...”

“Annabella? The dark long-haired woman with a crossbow? You know her?”

“Is her last name Exposición?”

“No, it’s Encarnación.”

“It’s probably the same woman,” Panda said. “You must’ve just misheard her name.”

“Monsters are coming!” Bee suddenly yelled.

The meat mallet in Samantha’s hand transformed into a crossbow and she climbed up on one of the little stands Bee had made. As she looked out over the incoming monsters in the distance, she lifted her crossbow and fired off a bolt. Then her weapon forcefully transformed into a crank-operated crossbow. She fired again and it transformed into a handheld crossbow.

Every time she fired, her weapon changed shape, though it seemed she could control it somehow, but, given the limit of one kill per transformation, it was clear she would quickly run out of variants of ranged weapons that fit into the apparent pre-modern theme of her transformations. As if to point this out, her crossbow became a recurve bow, which then became a longbow, and so on.

I got up onto a platform as well and looked out over the incoming monsters. They were having trouble navigating the corridors made by Bee’s furniture walls, and some of the smaller and more agile creatures were scaling them instead. They were like little hairy wingless imps that had a gaunt sunken-cheeked appearance, with light-blue fur and yellow eyes.

“The Imps are level 6,” Bee said, scanning the monsters, then firing off a Bolt that embedded itself in the forehead of one, sending it backwards off the wall.

“More coming down the left hallway,” Panda commented, and I hopped down from my platform and went over to one that looked out over that side instead.

On the right side were the imps, plus the skeletons we’d seen earlier, and weird noodle-like spaghetti men, all of which were covered with various toppings, like meatballs or seafood, as well as accompanying sauces.

“The Skeletons are between level 8 and 10, and the Spaghetti Men are all level 12!”

On my side were three of the enormous Guinea pigs, as well as some half-fish half-human creatures that were probably the things Bee had called mermaids earlier.

In the absence of ranged attacks or weapons, I pulled off tiny bits of the furniture walls and finger-flicked them with the index of my left hand, which hurt, given that both my thumb and index were broken. Fortunately, Brock was covering the hand and providing structural support, but Panda was grimacing every time I did it.

Each finger-flicked bit of trash turned into a dangerous projectile that, although they were hard to aim, instantly killed anything they hit, creating impact and exit wounds reminiscent of a rifle.

Brock made a happy sound every time I landed a hit and each resulted in the strange purple color spreading onto the monsters. I couldn’t tell if it did anything as they died with the same impact that caused it.

When the last of the monsters on my side lay dead and about thirty holes perforated the walls, I looked to the right side, where monsters were still coming and the midway point of Bee’s gauntlet was already clogged with dead.

I hopped down from the platform and went over to help them, but was stopped halfway there by Brock.

*“I am level 2!! Touch me in your special way!!”*

“Maybe it’s a good thing that Samantha can’t hear us,” Panda remarked dryly.

I opened the inspection menu for Brock and clicked the button to level him up, getting a pop-up as a result:

<b>Brock — Level 2</b>		
Pick one of the following level-up skills:		
<b>Inflation</b>	<b>Air Blast</b>	<b>Pitcher</b>

All impact damage is turned into internal inflation within whatever is hit.	Punching the air creates a powerful blast of condensed air that has a max range of 12 yards.	All objects thrown or otherwise sent flying with Brock gain 2x speed and are more accurate.
---	--	---

Since it seemed the most fitting for the current situation, I picked ‘Pitcher’ without much forethought. After selecting it, the inspect screen popped back up.

<b>‘Brock’</b> <span style="float: right;">x</span>
<i>A purple balloon gauntlet that makes a noise when it hits something.</i>
<i>Any punch with this glove has quadruple the impact damage and impacts twice.</i>
<i>Doubled throwing speed and more accurate throws.</i>
<i>While this weapon is equipped, <b>Purple<sup>2</sup></b> is enabled.</i>
<i>Level: 2</i>
<i>Kills remaining until next Evolution: 22</i>
<b>Weight: 2.592 Pandas</b>

The balloon gauntlet on my hand morphed along with the change, the fingers becoming slightly longer and the palm slimming down on the sides, matching the actual shape of my real hand more.

*“I hope that felt as good for you as it did for me,”* Brock muttered in a satisfied voice.

*“Please stop.”*

*“Why is your balloon thing squeaking so much?”* Samantha asked, turning away from the incoming monsters to look at me.

*“Fak yuu, ya cow!?”*

*“It just does that sometimes,”* I replied, not bothering to actually explain that he could talk. Somehow, it seemed more annoying to only be hearing the squeaking of balloons, rather than his voice.

I got up onto the platform to look down across the walls, just in time to see something break through the crowd of monsters to try and get through the narrow corridors formed by the furniture.

Bee looked excited. “It’s a m—!”

“Merman...?” Samantha interrupted her, holding a Looking Glass to her right eye.

“Is that half a shark fused with the bottom half of a person?” I asked out loud.