

Chapter -72

“Stop running!” Bee yelled, as the two of us were chasing down a fleeing Player. “We just want to ask some questions about what you saw!”

“Leave me... the fuck... alone... you **psycho!**!”

“Well that’s not very nice,” she grumbled, before twirling her right wrist and fingers, and creating a barrier of furniture in front of the runaway witness.

With a loud *smack*, he slammed into the wall that’d been created from a lawn-chair, picnic umbrella, and a small grill pulled from a camping store that was now a small ‘open’ Dungeon, with a few monsters roaming inside between the shelves. Like the other Mini Dungeons, the monsters stayed within and didn’t go venturing out into the hallways of the Mall.

She was a lot lighter on her feet and the increased height made her strides longer, which, coupled with her intuitive use of her new wings made her able to keep up with me on foot, despite having a low Athleticism attribute.

As the witness was unsteadily getting back to his feet, we caught up to him and I stopped him from moving by placing my foot on his back.

“What did you see before Samantha died!?” I demanded.

He let out a squeal, which turned into a trembling animal roar, before his body started spasming and contorting. His arms grew bulkier, his legs became longer, and the top of his head popped off, turning him into something similar to the Police Fiends, except way bulkier. His skin also turned black and tough like leather, and his hands became metallic claws.

With a grunt, he pushed off my foot and I stumbled back a few steps.

“Moth Missile!” yelled Bee, halting her momentum. She began back-pedaling using her wings to make her float, while four orbs appeared around her right hand, orbiting her wrist. They fired off and took strangely-wobbling trajectories through the air, leaving behind trails of fluttering scales.

The newly-transformed Player had just risen to his full height of seven feet, when the first smacked into his chest and exploded in a small-but-powerful puff of scales. He was punched back a step, as the rest came in, hitting him one-after-the-other and making him tumble to the ground.

Meanwhile, I was conjuring my Giant-Slayer Lance, which appeared in the air in front of me and took advantage of Bee’s pummeling to slowly build itself.

When the Insanity Monster recovered from the last of the orb’s impacts, he caught my fully-formed lance to the chest, which tore his body in two. Since it counted as a boss kill, the cooldown immediately reset.

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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Congratulations! You have leveled up! ^x | |
| You have reached Level -16! +1 new Attribute Point available to invest! | |
| <i>Boss kills required for Level -17</i> | <i>0/2</i> |

“You’ve got to knock this off,” Panda said. “That’s the second one you’ve turned into a monster!!”

“*Brock feels like he should be used more,*” my purple gauntlet chimed in sadly.

“It’s good to know that Bee’s theory was right, and we’ve found an easy way to farm boss kills thanks to my Plugins,” I remarked.

“You’re literally farming other Players for levels! What about the investigation!?”

“He has a point,” Bee said. “These witnesses aren’t really telling us much.”

I sighed. “If we’d kept this up for a bit longer, I might’ve hit level 20.”

“At the cost of innocent people’s lives!” Panda argued. “This is literally the opposite of what Samantha wanted.”

I was only half listening to what he was saying, as I put the new point into Athleticism:

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| Level -16 | ‘Gambit’ | <i>Exit Code 3</i> ^x |
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| STATS | | | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Health: Isn’t It Great? | Stamina: いいな | Armor: Dinner Plate Armor | |
| Carry Weight: 1050 Pandas | Top Speed: Scooter | Mana: !eM H0JpR02 | |
| ATTRIBUTES | | | |
| Strength: 2415 lbs. | Dexterity: Echidna | Intelligence: ☹️ | Vitality: Brisket |
| Athleticism: 猫 | Perception: ██████ | Wisdom: ~\ (ツ) ~/ | Defense: Ceramic |
| ABILITIES | | CORE | PASSIVES |

| | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 'Punch.harder()' 'I_CAN_FLY' 'Dungeon-Break' 'Giant-Slayer Lance' 'interrupt()' 'Skater Boy' 'There's No Escape' 'Soul Blade' | 'unCollide' back_door.bat Glitch Collision 'unHero' gasm.org Anti Heroism 'unHaunt' wannaCry Jumpscare | ' <i>Glitch</i> 'Insanity' 'Inanimate Voices' 'Math.multiply(Punch)' 'BIRTHDAY_SUIT' 'Reflective Shell' 'I-Frames' 'Transition Lenses' 'Outcast' |
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“I was thinking,” Bee said. “Unless there is some kind of inheritor system in place for Safe Zones, who becomes the new Owner when the previous one dies?”

“We could check out the Safe Zone Sphere,” I said, “But it’s probably her murderer who inherited it.”

Bee gave me a strange look. Panda sighed loudly.

“What?”

“We should’ve done that from the beginning,” she replied.

“Yeah, no shit!” Panda chimed in.

“I thought that was why we were heading for the stairs,” I said. We’d chased the last guy down one of the narrower hallways of the second floor where shops lay on both sides. A sign in the ceiling pointed ahead to the stairwell.

It seemed these smaller paths through the Mall weren’t considered prime real estate, as there was only one Merchant in sight, with the rest of the stores here either shuttered or worthless Mini Dungeons. The Vendor also seemed like it was another Pawn Store, except without a guard out front. I’d spotted four of them now, and it seemed their whole business model was to buy Players’ items for a low price and sell them for a large profit. The first person we’d tried to interrogate had gone into one to hide, which had been a smart move, since the Pawn Shops only allowed one Player to enter at a time.

“Where’s the IKEA at? Samantha mentioned this Mall had one.”

“The entrance is on the bottom floor, on the northern side,” Panda answered. “We already passed by it when you were hunting down the previous witness.”

“She was pretty fast, wasn’t she?” Bee commented.

“I think a lot of people are putting points into Athleticism so they can outrun things,” I replied in disgust.

“Can’t believe that my Furniture Fortification stopped both of them in their tracks. It’s like they don’t assume we’ll try to stop them with magic.”

“That’s a pretty normal assumption,” Panda replied dryly, then looked at me. “Why do you want to visit IKEA?”

I shrugged. “Just figured it might be a big Dungeon. Everything else here is small stuff with no meaningful rewards at all.”

“I’ll hit level 12 if we clear it,” Bee said.

“How about we find the murderer first...?”

“Fine,” I replied.

“I’m kind of bored of playing Detective,” Bee said. “It’s too much work.”

“I’m finding you two’s lack of empathy for Samantha to be quite concerning,” the plushie said in a scolding tone.

“If you make yourself a big target, you can’t be surprised when someone takes a swipe at you,” I replied.

“It *was* unfair how she died,” Bee argued.

“Nothing about this Game is fair,” I shot back.

While we walked to the stairwell to reach the top floor and find the bathroom where the Sphere was installed, I stowed Brock away momentarily and pulled out a packet of the colorful gum. I unfolded the wax paper and sniffed the flat gum stick.

“It smells like a Thanksgiving Dinner,” I said.

“You sure you want to use that?”

“Yes, I’ve decided on what to combine.”

I threw the gum into my mouth and bit down. A cascade of flavors hit me all at once, reminding me of the time, after a severe beating from the local police, when I’d had to blend all my food in order to be able to eat. In this case, it was like honey-glazed ham, stuffed turkey, hashbrowns, salads with too much mayonnaise, a pint of beer, and a cheesecake were all blended into a smoothie. It was, unsurprisingly, very delicious.

“Yuck,” Panda remarked, making a sound like a cat trying to cough up a hairball.

“You can taste it?”

“Of course. It’s foul as hell. Why do you like this??”

“I wanna try it!” Bee insisted.

“Get your own gum,” I told her, which made her frown. The expression looked strange on her humanoid moth face.

ACTIVATING SKILL FUSION!

Choose two Abilities or Passives to combine:

“Combine ‘*Giant-Slayer Lance*’ with ‘*Soul Blade*’.”

“So you’re going for *that*, after all,” Panda said approvingly.

“I think the result is going to be a lot more flexible. Besides, Giant Lance is a bit too rigid and requires the target to stay still, probably making it useless against faster enemies unless I can incapacitate them.”

“Wow, you actually put a lot of thought into this,” the plushie commented, surprised.

COMBINING SKILLS!

One moment...

...

...

...

New fusion skill created!

Congratulations!

You have unlocked the new Ability:

‘Giant-Slayer Soul Blade’

“For a moment there I was worried you might trigger an Adjudicator response,” Panda said.

“Might happen if I’d tried using my ‘Glitch’ passive, but at least for now this should be a good ability.”

“Let’s have a look first before you start celebrating.”

I inspected the new ability and shared it with Bee before she could even ask.

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|-----------------------------------------|
| <i>‘Giant-Slayer Soul Blade’</i> |
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x

Unique Ability

Why is your Soul shaped like a banana?

Draw a blade formed of your own soul, the shape of which is unique to you, and which disappears after a single attack. It deals damage equal to all your Attributes combined and multiplied by the level difference between you and your target.

By holding the Blade above your head, you can charge it to deal up to 3x its normal damage based on how long it is charged.

If the blade takes damage, you suffer 3x the amount of damage as a result.

Cooldown: 20 minutes

If used to kill a Boss, the cooldown resets.

This ability appears on your Appraisal!

“Higher risk, but also much more potential,” I said, nodding to myself in satisfaction.

“That’s so cool!” Bee said. “I want a unique ability too.”

“If we keep clearing Dungeons, you should be able to get one eventually.”

We came out of the stairwell and followed the hallway in the direction of the bathroom, where Samantha had set up the Sphere. Before we even came out into one of the main paths around the central holes that allowed us to view the floors below, I could hear loud talking.

When we came around the corner at the far end of the corridor that’d previously been littered with furniture walls, a large crab shuffled past us, carrying heavy trunks and chests on its back.

“Howdy,” it said in a cowboy-like accent, before continuing in the other direction.

I saw a large group of people standing in front of the bathrooms, and was unsurprised to recognize Steve amongst them.

“Coward didn’t even leave the third floor...” I muttered disapprovingly.

Some of the Players noticed us immediately and began pointing, saying things like: “Those are the ones!” and “They did it!”

“Why do I feel like we’re about to have another mob on our hands?” I wondered out loud.

“Think about it from their perspective,” Panda said. “The owner of the Safe Zone was killed, then you two started chasing after Players, turning them into monsters for level-up experience.”

“They shouldn’t have run from us,” Bee said. “We’re the good guys, obviously.”

“I... actually, I’m not even gonna try to unpack that,” Panda said exasperatedly.

“Good job, Gambit,” he then mock-praised me, pointing to Bee. “Look what you did to the girl.”

I gritted my teeth, ignoring his jab, as we drew closer to the crowd. “Don’t turn your back on anyone here, Samantha’s murderer has to be amongst them.”