

Chapter -63

I came to a stop in front of the main entrance to the Serenity Park that surrounded the front of the Mall. It *was* possible to enter the Mall without going through the park, but it would require us to navigate part of the main road that was utterly clogged by a massive pileup of trucks and cars.

Bee landed next to me half a minute later, and then came Samantha, severely out of breath, as it seemed that her running shoes didn't reduce her stamina consumption, but only increased her actual speed.

“You both owe me ten Coins,” I said.

“Your skateboard isn't fair,” Samantha argued.

“I was the last one to leave and the first to arrive. Pay up.”

“I think she's a sore loser,” Panda remarked.

Bee nodded. “Don't be a sore loser.”

“Fine,” she said, clearly annoyed.

Both of them handed me the coins.

While my longboard was not as fast as theirs from the get-go, it kept gaining speed with every trick and allowed me to bend the laws of reality to the point that going uphill wasn't actually tough, as well as making me able to take some turns and avoiding obstacles in ways that clearly wouldn't have been possible with a normal skateboard, let alone a longboard.

Samantha pulled her pen out from behind her ear and transformed it into a sword.

“Expecting trouble?” I asked her, then looked at the park before us. It was somehow well-maintained despite over a week of apocalypse happening around it.

“It looks too neat,” she said. “And I heard stories about a Roaming Boss in this area.”

I looked at my left hand and then at my missing right forearm. “Deal with it after you set up the Safe Zone.”

She considered her own ruined left hand for a moment, but then said, “No. People will be coming through here. Also, the Safe Zone Sphere states that any Enemies and Bosses inside its area will remain, so it's better to deal with those first.”

“That wasn't part of the deal,” I told her.

“Is it really so hard for you to help people?”

“What’ve they ever done for me? And what’s the point in helping those who’ll just stab you in the back to get ahead?”

“You don’t trust anyone, is that it? You got burned one too many times and now you’re scared of other people?”

I laughed. “That’s great coming from you. You were just as quick about running away from those Players near the Police Station, so don’t make it seem like you’re any different.”

She shook her head. “Fine. Let’s go to the mall. I’ll deal with whatever is in the park afterwards. Alone.”

“Perfect,” I replied.

Panda and Bee had just been looking between us the whole time.

“Don’t say a word,” I hissed to Panda, as we walked through the metal archway with the sign above that said ‘Serenity Park’.

I was finding it suffocating to be near someone so self-righteous like Samantha. She had gotten number one in the Weaponlution Event, so clearly she had no scruples about killing people to get her way. And she had confessed to being one of those ‘greater good’ psychos that justified their heinous acts with shaky morals, but, then again, she *had* worked for the government so it wasn’t really a surprise. She’d clearly known that the Chief and Mayor were rotten, but she’d done jack shit to change anything. It didn’t matter to her that people like myself and others suffered, so long as the majority didn’t?

It was bullshit. And it was the kind of dangerous ideology that weak people would cling to.

“Perhaps we should leave Castleburg after killing the Mayor and hunting down the Police Chief,” I said to Bee and Panda.

“Do you want to visit Madeville?”

“Logan will probably want to kill us if we go there,” I replied.

“What about Boston?” Panda suggested.

I groaned.

“When we have our own Sphere, we can make a Safe Zone out of a vehicle,” Bee said.

“And then we can go wherever we want,” I added.

Samantha who was walking ahead of us down the gravel pathway past the ponds, artificial hills, and vibrant grass, stopped and looked back at us. “What are you conspiring about?” she asked.

“None of your business,” I told her.

She muttered something and continued down the path that led to the entrance of the Mall in the distance.

Serenity Park was maybe about half a mile wide and half-again across, forming more-or-less a rectangular box that sat in front of the three-story Mall that from the outside just looked like a bunch of huge bricks stacked together and slathered in white paint, but which was at least somewhat interesting to look at on the inside. The Park itself was also just the sort of void-of-inspiration public space, which the soulless Mall corporation had pulled out of their ass to label themselves as pro-nature, even though they’d bulldozed actual bits of forest on more than one occasion to build their Malls across Massachusetts and beyond.

And what’s worse was that the malls they built tended to be abandoned by locals pretty soon after their construction, leaving behind dozens of stores with more employees than customers inside, and a massive ugly box in an area that’d previously been nice to look at. It also didn’t help that the homeless who took up temporary residence in the Mall or its adjoining Park were often ruthlessly beaten by the *esteemed* members of Castleburg’s Police Department, at the behest of the Mall’s owners.

As I looked around, my eyes scanning the carefully-trimmed hilly lawns and pruned bushes and trees, I didn’t see any signs of the homeless that would surely have lived here in the past, nor even those who’d probably come here when the whole world went to shit.

I clicked my tongue. Samantha was right that there was something going on in the Park. However, there was no incentive for me to seek it out or fight it, least of all in my current state, so I was glad when we made it to the exit of the Park and the entrance to the Mall.

“Have you been here before?” I asked Bee.

She shook her head. “No. It looks ugly.”

“It’s better on the inside,” Samantha said. “It even has an IKEA.”

Samantha led the way as we went through the revolving door which turned on as we approached, revealing that the place had power...

WARNING!

Now entering level 12 Dungeon Hub ‘Serenity Park Mall’!

As we came out onto the smooth and reflective tiles past the door, I breathed a sigh of relief that we hadn’t wound up in a new Dungeon, though it was immediately clear that there were several

Dungeons in here, as the hall that stretched out in front of us and to the right-and-left had groups of monsters fighting each other.

“It’s a Dungeon *Hub*?” Bee said out loud, confused.

“I think it means there are a lot of Dungeons here, when normally they wouldn’t be clustered together so tightly.”

“That seems dangerous.”

“Unless you know how to exploit it,” I shot back. No doubt levelling here would be easy if groups of people worked together. It was obviously the reason Samantha had picked the place.

“I’m going to get the Safe Zone Sphere up. Come with me!” Samantha called, before running for the set of escalators immediately in front of us. These were operating as well, which made sense, given that this area was a ‘Hub’. But, the implications were not great, as wherever there was electricity still running, there’d be people trying to hoard that power for themselves... Though, saying that, the average level of the Dungeon Hub was going to filter out most people at the moment. In the near future, when the average Player level in the city was higher, it would definitely lead to infighting.

Bee and I followed after her. “Where are you going?” I yelled.

“To the third floor!”

“Why there?”

“You’ll see!”

I took three steps at a time as I followed behind her, and when we came to the second floor, there was a skeletal knight trying to beat up a dog-sized Guinea pig about fifteen yards down to the left. Nearby was a costume store and a pet store that they seemed to have spawned from.

Around us was the aftermath of dozens of similar fights, though there ominously weren’t any dead bodies, as if something was stealing those away.

“That’s weird,” Bee commented, stopping to look at the elevator shaft.

“What?” I asked, keeping an eye on Samantha so I wouldn’t lose sight of her.

“The elevator itself seems to be gone. It’s just a vertical tunnel. You don’t think it’s like the Taxi and the Metro, do you?”

“I don’t think the System considers elevators to be public transport, but if it did, then the escalators would’ve turned into snakes or something, don’t you think?”

Samantha had already gotten to the third floor and was running to the right before I lost sight of her.

“I think I have a clue about why the elevator is gone,” I said, “I’ll tell you later though, come on!”

“Right behind you!” she yelled, just as the Guinea pig chomped down on the skeletal knight’s head with its enormous teeth, crushing it.

“Seems like a free-for-all in here between the monsters,” I remarked as we bounded up to the top floor.

“It’s like survival of the fittest,” Bee said. “Everyone is trying to establish a hierarchy or something.”

“I don’t like the sound of that. It would imply there’ll be a King.”

“Or a Queen.”

“Let’s settle on ‘Ruler’,” Panda said, mediating before we could get into an argument about semantics.

“If they keep fighting each other though,” I said, getting to the escalator landing and spinning on my heel to go right, “Then they’ll grow really strong, won’t they?”

“I scanned that Guinea pig from earlier,” Bee said. “It was level 8. There was also a weird half-Betta-Fish-half-human mermaid that was level 13.”

“We can deal with those,” I said, slowing down a little so she could keep up with me on foot.

As we ran down the hallway, we passed many shuttered stores, several pillaged ones, and a few that were unnervingly-pristine. The last ones were clearly Dungeons, though whatever they spawned was nowhere in sight, which worried me, as amongst them was a toy store. For whatever reason, things associated with children were incredibly powerful by design, such as the enemies I’d encountered in Bungo’s Playroom.

We eventually found Samantha waiting outside the bathrooms near a burger restaurant that was utterly decimated from some kind of explosion in its kitchen.

“The bathrooms? That’s where you were heading?” Bee asked.

“Look, I know it’s improper, but it’s the apocalypse, you can go wherever you like,” I told her.

“Stop talking, dumbass, I’m not here because I need to pee! The Safe Zone Sphere has to be put in a secure area when it’s triggered.”

“And you picked the bathrooms why?”

“It’s a defensible position,” she argued back.

“I don’t think... actually, hmm, no that’s a good idea.”

“Will we have to defend the Sphere??” Bee asked, sounding excited.

“Yes. It will lure all nearby enemies within its area to its source.”

“I get to use my Furniture skill!” she exclaimed and immediately got to work pulling ‘furniture’ out of the nearby ruined stores. This, inexplicably, included the product shelves from a hardware store and the burger restaurant’s grills and ovens, as well as the bolted-down sofa-benches and chairs.

I looked at my arms and sighed, then shifted Brock to my left fist.

“Let’s punch a lot of monsters, huh Brock?”

“Fak yes!! I love tower defense!!”

“You ready?” Samantha asked.

I looked to Bee who was hastily erecting walls and creating a lot of obstacles for monsters to have to go through, while also making a sort of funnel that’d lead them in a single file directly to the bathroom doors.

“I guess so,” I told her.

She hurried into the female bathroom, while I remained put, watching Bee get to work with uncharacteristic enthusiasm.