

Chapter -73

“Step aside,” I told the crowd in front of the bathroom doors. Altogether, there were sixteen people gathered here, drawn from afar either by the safety the top floor offered or Hawaiian Shirt Guy’s magnetism.

“You know, I’m thinking that Birthday Boy here has more than just simple charisma, because look how everyone here has the same expression as him.”

Bee whispered, “He’s evolved into a Birthday Brat now, maybe that’s why.”

She shared the new appraisal with me.

| Level 10 | 'Steve' | Player ^x |
|--|---------|---------------------|
| <p><i>“Please stop saying ‘Happy Birthday’ to me...”</i></p> <p>Class: <i>Birthday Brat</i></p> <p>Main Attribute(s): <i>Vitality & Wisdom</i></p> <p><i>Everyone likes the Birthday Boy, right? But remember that spoiled kid with rich parents whose birthday you went to in 4th grade? It was a swanky party. The entire venue was rented out. There were arcade games and an indoor obstacle course. It blew your 4th grade pants off, because you’d never been to a party like that before.</i></p> <p><i>But there was just one problem: the Birthday Boy was a Birthday Brat!</i></p> <p><i>He got to make the rules and come up with all the games that you played, and, somehow, that just sucked all the fun out of the party. And yet, you played along, because, well, it was his birthday...</i></p> <p><i>That’s what Steve has become.</i></p> <p><i>And yes, despite saving him from the mess of his own making, he still hates your guts.</i></p> | | |

“They’re saying you killed Samantha,” Steve announced, stepping to the front of the group that seemed on the verge of turning on us.

“We didn’t kill her, but we’re trying to find the person who did,” I told him.

“Is that why you were hunting down and killing other Players!?” yelled a woman from the back of the mob.

“They shouldn’t have run from us!” Bee yelled back.

“Guys, you’d better chill out, before this turns into a lynching,” Panda advised. “They seem extremely on edge.”

Steve seemed to be enjoying being at the front of another mob aimed at Bee and I.

“We don’t have time for this,” I told him. “Move out of my way or I’ll make you move.”

“At least tell him you just want to look at the Safe Zone Sphere,” Panda suggested.

“Did that Panda just talk?” asked one of the people in the crowd.

“It said to look at the Safe Zone Sphere?” another repeated.

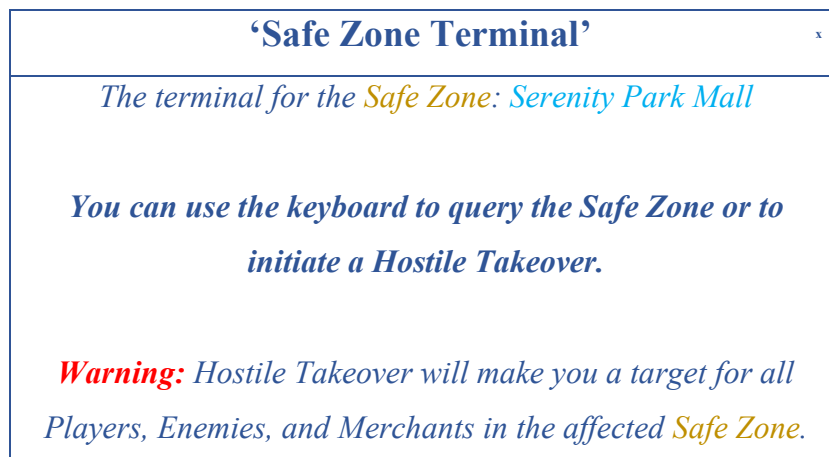
Steve turned around to look at them, “What are you talking about? What panda??”

I grabbed Bee’s wrist and pulled her with me into a leap over the heads of the crowd. Even with my full Carapace Suit on, it was now possible for me to do something like that.

Before they had a chance to figure out what had happened, we went into the women’s bathroom and shut the door. Bee twirled her fingers and half the interior flew over to block the entrance shut, as stalls, sinks, mirrors, and toilets crammed into a tightly-packed wall.

Unlike when I’d seen the Sphere before its completion, it now looked vastly different. It wasn’t hovering over a toilet for starters, and the stall it had occupied was transformed into something like a computer monitor, except super retro, with a blocky off-white keyboard below. Inside the back of the monitor was the blue glow of the Sphere.

“*Inspect*,” I said out loud.



“Huh, you have to actually type the stuff you want to know into the terminal,” Panda surmised.

That seemed simple enough, so I bent down and typed ‘Safe Zone Owner?’.

There followed a loud series of beeps, while the screen scrolled with random text that seemed to excite Bee for some reason.

“I see a pattern!” she announced.

Then the query returned with its answer.

Safe Zone Owner: ‘Liam’

“Liam... not as in Liam Johnson, the Chief of Police... right?”

I typed in the question and a moment later, the query returned an answer:

Player ‘Liam’

Class: Local Villain

Level: 12

Description: Former Chief of the Castleburg Police Department, he has now styled himself as a Local Villain, who preys on weak Players and sows discord in Safe Zones, while he and his goons profit.

I ground my teeth so intensely that the sound echoed between the bathroom walls.

“That motherfucker is here!”

“Gambit, slow down,” Panda urged. “Let’s just take this one step at a time and figure out where he’s hiding.”

“I know where!” I said, then stomped over to the furniture wall and tore it down, before kicking the bathroom door off its hinges, shooting it out into the hallway and startling several of the people in the nearby crowd.

“Ah crap,” Panda muttered.

Screams and horrifying sounds of tearing flesh and breaking bones emanated from those players who’d been close to the edge of insanity, as my jumpscare had sent them over and my Plugin ensured they became Insanity Boss Monsters, just like the two players Bee and I had hunted down earlier.

Before pandemonium could kick off, Steve’s voice rang out above the turmoil of Players transforming and fleeing down the two hallways, “Steve Says: **Everybody freeze!**”

Everyone, even the monsters, stopped dead in their tracks, myself included. It was as if my body just stopped responding to my own commands.

“What the fuck, Steve!?”

“Look what you did!” he yelled at me from where he stood near the center of the unfolding mess.

“I know who killed Samantha! It was Liam Johnson!”

“The Chief of Police?” he asked, momentarily wrongfooted.

“He’s here! I’m going to find him and kill him! Stop this dumb power of yours so I can go!”

The monsters were starting to move, as were the Players. My own body began to slowly unthaw from his ability as well. But before I was freed, Hawaiian Shirt used the same thing again.

He pointed to a Player that was half-transformed into a bulky brute-like monstrosity, who had a bone exoskeleton that had a skull face with horns over the skinned remains of his real body, then he shouted, “Steve Says: **Everybody kill that one!**”

I grumbled in annoyance, but felt incapable of ignoring his demand.

“Not good,” Panda said. “His ability is using his Wisdom to overpower everyone, including you. It turns out that your Shrug Emoji Wisdom score is technically lower than whatever he’s got.”

“I’m unaffected!” Bee yelled from the doorway, looking around.

Meanwhile, I had put my right hand to my chest and invoked my Giant-Slaying Soul Blade. Since Brock was now equipped on that hand, the resultant weapon appeared in the color purple. However, it wasn’t the same shape as before. No, instead of a banana, I was now holding a—

“Did you just pull a purple corn-on-the-cob out of your chest?” Steve asked, before Bee body-slammed him to the ground and stuffed a wad of toilet paper into his mouth, making him unable to utter another ‘Steve Says’ command.

I lifted the corn-on-the-cob into the air, and the leaves unfurled, revealing the corn with its many kernels, which then began to grow in length and take on the shape of a large blade, like that of a Nodachi, except covered in kernels.

While two other players were pulverized by the monster with the exoskeleton, and three other Insanity Monstrosities were heading towards it to obey Steve’s command, I managed to fully charge my Soul Blade, and swung it down in a diagonal slash, catching all four of them with it.

The slashing blade travelled through all of their bodies without any immediate effect, and then it disappeared from my hands, the purple light it was made of returning to my body.

“*Fakkin sick as!?*” Brock said, taking credit since his purple curse had been part of the strike.

That same purple curse appeared as a thin line on each of the four monsters, starting with the exoskeleton one, then the two which were like overly-long Police Fiends, and finishing with the last one, which was a blob of flesh with tiny arms and legs that had a massive extended mouth that fused head and upper torso into one piece.

Then the bone exoskeleton monster exploded in a shower of gore that shot out in front of me and sprayed down the right hallway, hitting two fleeing Players from behind. The other three followed in quick succession, each exploding like popcorns of meat.

“Nicely done!” Panda praised me. “Four boss kills in a single stroke!”

“Mmmhmbbmmhmmhmbbmmmm!” Steve exclaimed from where he lay flat on the floor, with Bee sitting on top of him.

“Hush now,” she told him, stroking his bald head.

“Hbmbmb!” he complained.

| | |
|---|------------|
| Congratulations! You have leveled up! ^x | |
| You have reached Level -17! +1 new Attribute Point available to invest! | |
| <i>Boss kills required for Level -18</i> | <i>2/3</i> |

“*Brock is level 6 now!*”

With the four Insanity Monsters dead and every other Players having fled, I took the moment to pick Brock’s next upgrade, while Steve struggled against Bee’s weight and strength. It was clear he hadn’t figured out how to use his skills without saying them out loud.

| Brock — Level 6 | | |
|---|--|--|
| Pick one of the following level-up skills: | | |
| Sonic Attack | Static+ | Drain Air |
| Impacts produce a loud plastic shriek that inflicts temporary discombobulation on | Moving around while Brock is equipped rapidly builds up static that is released as | Drains the air from any target hit with Brock, which in turn inflates him equal to |

| | | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| all creatures in a 20 yard radius. | electricity damage on the next punch. | the air inside the target. |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|

The third option seemed to be feeding into the same mechanism as the ‘Pump It!’ evolution that’d added a valve to the wrist of the balloon gauntlet. I picked it and then reviewed the updated info about him.

| ‘Brock’ x |
|--|
| <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>Creates powerful blasts of wind when punching the air.</i> |
| <i>Builds up static over time that is released upon the next attack.</i> |
| <i>Can be inflated using attacks to drain air from targets, or by blowing into the valve in the wrist, in order to increase damage up to quadruple its normal value for the next attack.</i> |
| <i>While this weapon is equipped, Purple² is enabled.</i> |
| <i>Level: 6</i> |
| <i>Boss Kills remaining until next Evolution: 3</i> |
| Weight: 2.592 Pandas |

“Check me out!” Brock squealed.

“Alright, time to go beat the Chief of Police to death.”

“You know where he is?” Bee asked, while Steve continued to make helpless noises beneath her.

“Of course. Nina told us so: *‘The birdcage has a hole in the floor and the crows of death sing at midnight!’*”

“The Crows of Death are obviously the Police, or well, former police, since, y’know, they swarm dead bodies.”

“That’s kind of part of being a policeman,” Panda replied.

“Is the hole in the floor the elevator shaft without the elevator in it?” Bee asked.

I grinned. “Bingo.”

“Bee should probably stay here,” Panda said. “What you’re planning on doing isn’t very child-friendly.”

“Hey!” she complained.

“Nah, he’s right. Go wait in the Healer’s Shop, I’ll come find you when I’m done.”

She sighed. “Fine. But I’m taking the reward for the investigation!”

“Sure.”

I rolled my shoulders, then jogged down the hallway until I reached a section where only railing separated me from the floors below. I vaulted the railing, while unequipping my gear, then yelled, “I_CAN_FLY!”

Wings made of my own skin unfurled from my back and I floated down to the first floor at a leisurely pace.

Bee appeared next to me in the air, before overtaking me, as she floated a lot faster, and more gracefully, thanks to her moth wings.

Back on the third floor, Steve had managed to dislodge the wad of toilet paper from his mouth and was yelling self-censored obscenities after us.

A deep rumble was emanating from my heart, as the excitement of the horrors I was about to unleash on the Chief of Police began to fill me.

“You look really sinister, grinning like that,” Panda commented.

“Liam has no idea what’s in store for him. I bet he’s down below the Mall, in whatever hidey hole he’s found, thinking he can just wait out the duration of the Safe Zone hotfix and then emerge as the new Owner.”

My grin widened.

“I’ll turn his final moments into a nightmare.”