

Chuck-12

I slam the but of the barbell in its head and it staggers back.

“It’s team lead,” John says, as he brings one of the zombies down with a hit from the sword one of them dropped when it died.

I see the name tag on this zombie’s Walmart vest ‘Hi, I’m Rod’ under it is the title ‘team lead’. It’s got to be a joke, no one prints their name like that.

It blocks the next blow, but I put more strength in the one after that and the bar goes through the arm, and chest and it crumbles.

Finally, my father’s voice says.

I turn to assist John and Terry, ignoring the rest it has to say, but they’ve dealt with the zombies that attempted to crowd us. Three of them are broken into frozen pieces and two more cut.

We’ve been moving through the pharmacy section for fifteen minutes and this is the sixth attack, each quicker to finish. I have never been in a Walmart with a pharmacy this large.

“Terry, can dungeons be bigger than they’d be in the real world?” he gives me a confused look. “I mean, are they limited by the size of whatever they’re contained in?”

“You mean bigger on the inside?”

I nod, keeping my comments to myself. I thought I’d been clear.

“It’s just programing language, so yeah. In most games, the dungeon isn’t even in the ‘game world’. It creates an instance separate from everything. A dozen teams could enter the same dungeon, but they wouldn’t actually be in the same dungeon.”

“You saying we might not be in the real world anymore?” John asks, sounding worried.

“Is that even a thing anymore?” Terry replies and forms a column of water over his hand. “I couldn’t do that in the real world.”

“So the inside of the building doesn’t have to match the outside,” I say before John can reply. He isn’t happy.

“Could be. Depends on how close this system sticks to game rules, and which game it’s based on. We do have some extra-dimensional inventory, so that leans toward it being able to ignore how things should be.”

I nod. If this is larger, we could be here much longer than I counted on. In the list of five names on the upper right of my sight, one of them flashes yellow, Elizabeth. Her health now approaches the midpoint. The team screen, Terry calls it, lets us track the other’s status. It lets the support members know when to jump in to heal someone.

Unfortunately, I split the group. Fortunately for Elizabeth, Griff is with them, and her health goes up slightly. If Terry is worried about his mother getting hurt, he doesn’t show it. I’m still not certain he gets that this is all real.

“Grab what the zombies dropped, and let’s move on. I think we can leave this section that way.” The end of the aisle is different. Looks more like the aisles going around the departments.

The team leader zombie has two bottles of vitamins. That brings our total to eight—*If they aren’t lying to you*—and a Walmart gift card. Before I’m conscious of the question, a window pops up.

System Query: Currency
The system uses currency local to the area it is connected to, with an exchange to the system common one currently set to [error system unable to connect to the core]. Local currencies are unified and can be used at any system-established stores.

System Query: Stores
Stores are areas where goods can be exchanged for other goods or purchased using system currency. List of available goods will vary between stores, based on what is available to them, as well as the store’s rating. Higher-rated stores have higher access to the system central mercantile network.

I focus on the card.

Walmart Cash Card: Value 50\$

“Got one too?” John shows me his. The same blue card with the yellow sun-like symbol. “I guess money’s still a thing.”

“If anyone accepts them.” I hand him mine, to his surprise and the voice loud exasperation.

“You don’t think they will?”

I shrug. “How many times has your government tried to introduce dollar coins into general circulation?”

“My government?”

“I’m Canadian.” I head for the end of the pharmacy, barbell in hand, ready for whatever’s going to be waiting for us, and step into a better-lit path stretching much further than the building has any right to be. On my right is the seasonal section. On the left, another path, also longer than it should, with the grocery section far in the distance.

“Are we joining the others?” John asks.

I glance at the list of names. They’re all green. “We’re continuing here. The outdoors section is back there, we’ll find a lot of what we need... if we can get any of it.”

“Once we clear the dungeon, we’re going to get rewards,” Terry says.

“Reward’s good,” John says, “but there’s no way to know what it’ll be, so it could be

useless to us.”

“Dungeon loot’s never useless, it might not be usable by us specifically, but someone will be able to, which means we can sell it.”

“We going through every section, or heading directly for what we want?”

Like there’s any question.

Only there is. “Terry, everything we fight will give something, right?”

“Yeah. I don’t know if it’s going to be hyper-specific to the section, but we’ll get stuff.”

Stuff we can sell.

Greed? I thought you better.

You did, asshole. Resources, survival. I have no idea what this new world’s going to be like, but if it’s providing something, I’d be an idiot to ignore it. “We clear everything.” I step into the seasonal section, barbell up, watching and listening for the zombies.

Only, it’s vines that get me. A lot of them, pulling me deeper in. By the time I get over the surprise and break them with a swing of the bar, I’m surrounded by greenery, and not the potted plants kind, where the shelve should be, it’s large flowers attached to larger stems reaching the ceiling, spreading over it, hiding that I’m inside a building.

“Chuck!” Terry calls and the voice is muffled. There’s no opening indicating where I was pulled in from. “Chuck! I think you triggered a trap. You need to disarm it, or beat it.”

A flower springs from the wall of green, baring its teeth. I swing the barbell and knock it aside, but unlike the zombies, that isn’t enough to kill it. It shakes itself, but before it attacks, something bites my shoulder, and a sliver of my health vanishes. I turn and swing, but it remained attached and keeps gnawing, as the stem breaks off from the green wall.

I swing at another flower that launches at me and another sliver of my health vanished. It’s not doing a lot of damage, but there are a lot of flowers here. If they all do a little of it, I’m still going to end up dead.

I reach over my shoulder and rip it off, throw it down, and stomp on it. It squished with a satisfying sound, but I don’t have the time to appreciate its death. More flowers come at me as if their stems were springs. I knock one out and another takes its place.

Occasionally one gets through my defense and bites, costing me more health.

There are over a dozen of them, and this isn’t gaining me anything. There’s got to be something more to this. Anytime a story hero gets stuck in a trap in a story, they get distracted by an immediate problem that only serves as a distraction from the actual solution.

I’m no hero, but if this system works as much as a game as Terry thinks it does, it might follow similar tropes, so these have to be trying to distract me from something.

And doing a damned great job at it.

Then a tab flashes and something happens. Handling the barbell feels easier and I knock more of the flowers aside or get the bar in the way so they bit on that, instead of me. Not only does it slow my drop-in health even more, but I can shift some of my attention and notice that each time one of them bites me, the lone trunk in this area, at the back, behind this wall of flowers, pulses in the same red as my health. I also see that the stems that form

the walls are connected to it as if I wasn't dealing with dozens of individual attackers, but one with dozens of attacks.

I swing wide, but that doesn't force them aside long enough for me to go through and I leave myself open for all of them to get a bite in, and my health takes a corresponding beating, dropping below half.

I should have thought about getting a vitamin ready, I could really use one—there's a pill in my hand. I don't question the system's responsiveness and swallow it. My health bounces above three-quarters and I go back to swinging, looking for an opening, and coming to the conclusion that I'm going to have to make it, or... go about this another way.

I really hope the sports section will give me weights.

I will a fifteen-kilo plate to my hand and throw it as hard as I can. The flowers ignore it and try to take advantage of my distraction, blocking one-handed isn't easy. Then the weight hits the trunk and it screeches. At the same time, the flowers go nuts, lashing at everything. Those that bite me do a lot more damage, but few get to me.

Then they calm down and go back to attacking me systematically. If any of them died from being bitten, I can't tell, but at least my attack had an effect.

Now I just need to figure out how to capitalize on it.

Come on, Dad. Not going to bestow your unstoppable wisdom on me now? No, of course not, since you're just a figment of my subconscious.

I only have four twenty-kilo plates left and I hate sacrificing another, but I need to do as much damage as I can. Like the previous one, it flies through the flowers and they would insane when it hits. Unfortunately, that isn't enough to kill this thing.

I get another plate ready and hesitate, using it to bash aside flowers lunging at me. Without some indication of the damage I'm doing, I could be wasting my time throwing them. Once I'm out, I won't have any way to cause it damage from where I am.

So I need to get closer.

I already know how successful it is to try it while they're focused on me, but I also know how to force that to stop.

I throw the plate, and as the flowers go nuts from the damage, I run through them. The few that bite me bring my health below half, and some regain their senses before I reach the trunk and take slivers out of it, but then I'm in striking distance, and I let loose.

With each hit, I scream. I scream at it, and this system, at my father, the world, those people outside waiting for me to return and lead them to safety. I keep hitting and screaming even once the trunk loses the glow that had been part of it and cracks open.

It's only been two days of this new world and I'm already fed up with it and the people in it.

When I stop, it's because my stamina bar bottoms out and I drop to my knees, using the barbell to keep from falling face-first on the ground. The bar's bent, I notice, and the weights I threw are on the floor, so at least I haven't lost these. I'm down to a quarter of my health, no stamina to speak off, but that's rebuilding, and my willpower's full.

Yay for unrestrained violence.

Once my stamina is at a quarter, I'm able to get to my feet, but that slows its rise

significantly. Can't be helped. Now that I'm no longer fighting, I can hear Terry calling my name through the foliage. He sounds worried.

"I'm okay!" I yell. I don't see a way out, but I do see items inside the broken trunk.

Two bottles of vitamins, what might be a trowel, except for how sharp the edges look. Three sort of apples-looking fruits, and a pack of seeds.

I take the pack of seeds.

Item: Seeds, Mother of Flowers
You are holding a pack of seeds, Mother of Flowers. (content 12) The Mother of Flower is a plant that, when properly cared for, can serve as a defense for a residence as well as provide low levels of food. For each month of growth, A Mother of Flower can grow one flower that can inflict 4 points of damage. The Mother of Flower can regrow a flower per day. The Mother of Flower will recognize anyone caring for it as friendly. Anyone in the company of someone it recognizes as friendly will be ignored. Once per year, the Mother of Flower produces a Pearl of the Tree.

I take an apple looking fruit

Item: Pearl of the Mother of Flower
You hold Pearl of the Mother of Flower tree. Consumption of it gives 250 hit points, 250 stamina points, and triples the rate at which hit point and stamina is regained for 24 hours.
Warning: this is a perishable item. Improper storage will cause it to degrade

I whistle. That's some powerful healing. And the package holds twelve seeds. One of the fruits probably has more, but there's no telling what needs to be done to make those grow. I only hesitate a second before sending the package of seed to my inventory. It's not useful to anyone in the immediate future, and I suspect that once I'm home, I'm going to want a solid defense around my house.

I take the trowel.

Item: Trowel of Stabbing
A trowel is a tool used to help get the ground ready for planting. This trowel has been enhanced with especially sharp edges which, on top of allowing it to break hard ground, will cause extra damage if used as a stabbing weapon.
Any ground prepared with this item will increase the growth rate of plants planted in it by 10%. This bonus will last for one month and can be prolonged by renewed use of the trowel on the ground around the plants.

So a weapon and a gardening tool. Appropriate for the section of the store and this new world. I consider putting it in my inventory, but this is something someone can make use of now. I take the bottles of vitamins and set about looking for a way out, but as I turn away from the trunk, the vines covering the shelves wither away, revealing the way out, with Terry rushing in to hug me.

I freeze and I'm thankful for the full bar of willpower as it starts dropping. As gently as I can I move Terry away from me. "Please don't do that again."

"I'm so glad you're okay."

"Okay's subjective," John says, cautiously looking around. "You look like they put up a fight."

"They did, but I got us some stuff out of it." I hand them everything except the seeds.

"You didn't eat one of them?" John asks after reading a fruit's description.

"Unless Chuck's health is way higher than anyone's, this would just be a waste," Terry replied, holding one. "I wonder if we can cut it and spread the effects." He looks at the trowel. "Can I keep this? Since I'm a wizard, I'm kind of limited on the weapons I can use."

"Says who?" John asks, and that give Terry pause.

"You can keep it," I say. "When you find something better, you can pass it to someone else who'll have a need for it." I pick up my weight lifting plates and send them to my inventory. "How about we continue? I've never been one to spend all day shopping."

John groans and Terry grins.