

Chapter 73

New Normal

Sally sat down by the bar on one of the wooden stools. The place was pretty packed, even for it being mid-afternoon. It had been a tiring week, and she was just glad for the chance to rest her feet. Now that she was able to change her clothes, the red shirt and black jeans combo made a nice change.

"Here ya go, hun - this one's on the house." The barkeep pushed an ale tankard across the wooden surface of the bar with a nod and wink.

"Thanks, Jacks," Sally beamed at the mobster. "How's Fran doing?"

"She's a doll as always. Out back cookin' up some meat Players dropped around for a Quest. Things go well at Yewbridge I take it?"

"A lot less bloodshed than here - but the gang all being Level Ten helps out a lot." Sally idly tapped at the counter and looked around the tavern.

Jackie followed her gaze around the room as she cleaned out some empty mugs. "Waiting for fangs?"

Sally raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, but don't start. We actually have a messenger from the Poppybrook coming to meet us."

"Sure, sure. If he stands you up, just let us know, and Fran will dig out the stakes." The mobster winked again and went off to greet some other patrons.

Images of the battle for Sanctuary filtered through Sally's mind. Theo had held her. At least until she told him to put a shirt on. Terrible way to get some kind of blood-borne disease, that was. Part of her wished they were both living so there could be something more between them. But... things were good. They had killed for each other and bled for each other. In some ways that seemed more important than any romance.

Her mind wandered over to the doorway as the vampire walked in on cue. Having finally been talked out of wearing the cliché clothing, he now wore a smart suit with a crimson tie. Glasses with red lenses sat atop his nose - to help him see better in the daylight. In the time spent being a vampire, he had become a little thinner and paler - but it suited him.

"Hey, Theo, good hunting today?"

He beamed in return, his fangs showing, as he came and sat at the bar beside her. "Two of the Cards I need, still one missing. It's a shame we are hard capped at Level Ten."

Sally rolled her eyes. "It does suck that our Keystone Quests have to be done in the Wastelands - but, you level up fast enough, we don't need you zooming ahead of us."

"Can't help if I'm just a better player." He winked and looked back to the door. "The other two meeting us here?"

“No. We are meeting the delegate just outside the village. They said they’d be there in a bit.”

Theo rubbed his fingertips on the bar. Sally could see he was eager to get moving to the second area. They were a Party member short after helping populate both this village and Yewbridge with Leaders. Humphrey had told the vampire about some of the items he could find before Level Twenty, and now it was all he would think about.

“What are you thinking about, Theo?”

“Oh?” He turned his attention back to her. “I was just counting the clean mugs stacked back there.” A gesture of his head to the wall behind the bar set her eyes rolling.

“Let’s get out of here. It’s a little walk.”

They both waved to the mobster as they walked out into the warm afternoon weather. Sally looped her arm around the vampire’s as she brought up the STAR menu to select Guild Chat.

[^Sally: Alright gang, everyone has hit Level Ten now.]

[^Sally: We are heading to Area Two at 8:00 sharp tomorrow.]

[Chuck: White Foxes are ready.]

[Jerri: Warriors are ready.]

[Xuan: Five Swords are ready.]

[Bran: Strength of Many are ready.]

She closed her chat back up. As a parting gift, Jackie had fleeced enough people for them to found a Guild. Twenty-two Players in total. Between the vampire and her own hunger, a few Players had found their way into their mouths - but the ones smart enough to yield saw the crimson writing on the wall and had allied themselves. Plus the world was a lot more vibrant now with neutral and friendly Monsters towards the Players that were still in the area.

After some strong words and bared fangs of encouragement, Theo had guided them all to get to Level Ten in time. A small army of Players was certainly not what she had expected to be taking with her into the second area - certainly not living ones. But now if they needed to take a town as a home base, they could do that. Possibly even the non-violent way.

“Everyone is ready for tomorrow.” She nudged the vampire and looked out into the town. It was a strange mix of different System-created, but it felt... normal to her. Another place where she could belong. She couldn’t help but smile as they passed through the streets of shops and residential buildings, back out into the wilds.

They followed the road in silence for about half an hour. Sometimes the quiet was nice, without having to be making quips or stabbing someone. Not that those weren’t some of her favourite things to do, but it was nice to be stress-free for a brief time. Eventually, they reached the intended meeting space.

Theo walked around and wrinkled his nose up. It was a clearing amongst some trees with a small circular rock floor, long overgrown by grass. Two stone benches sat on either side of the centre.

“Low chance of ambush, it’s close enough to the road that we’d see anything coming, and the bushes are too thick through the trees to approach quietly.”

She nodded and sat on one of the benches. It would be a shame to mar such a peaceful slice of nature with violence. Plus, she really didn’t want to have to march on the Capital. Sally watched the vampire stand off to the side in part of the shaded area, rubbing his chin as he stared off into nothingness. Undoubtedly thinking about levelling or items.

“Hey nerd, why not come sit with me? It’s shaded.” She pat the cold stone next to her.

He tilted his head to her but almost immediately relented. “Sorry, I’m just a bit anxious is all. Humphrey said that sending a delegate was unheard of - in that sinister voice he does.” The vampire sat on the bench and immediately slouched.

“Sometimes Humps covers for things he doesn’t know with vague but ominous statements.” She copied his slouch, and they both looked up to the clear blue sky.

“I think he is just grumpy that he has to haul my coffin around.”

“Are you kidding? He secretly loves the visuals of it. Plus, we don’t want you going without sleep for days again, huh?” She elbowed him in the side.

“I’m still sorry about that.”

“Sorry doesn’t bring the orphans back, Theo.”

“And why were they orphans in the first place, Sally?”

An almost polite cough roused them from their glowing-red-eyed death stares. They turned to see the looming figure of the Death Knight, the ginger cat Archie upon his shoulder.

“Terrible defence, as usual. I could have been someone of ill intent.” Humphrey grinned but folded his arms across his chest.

“Pah,” Theo rolled his eyes but didn’t want to encourage him.

Archie dropped down from the plated armour of the Knight and ran up to the zombie to hop onto her lap. He began to purr as she ruffled his fluffy cheeks.

“Any breakthrough yet?” Sally raised her eyebrows but expected the negative again.

“Almost!” Archie beamed up at her with his bright emerald eyes. “Big brother says there’s an item in the second area that will help us unlock the potential of the meowmeries hidden away in our skulls.”

The vampire leaned forward with a frown. “Did you just say meow-meries?”

“No,” Archie shook his head.

Sally beamed at them all. They had fought off three of the village-taking regiments in a row, and each had become easier as they levelled and grew as a team. Certainly, without insane

Players trying to interfere, they had quite an easy go of it. The three of them were Elites in their own regard and combined with their two brain cells shared between them, outsmarting the System-created turned things in their favour.

Of course... all that could change at any time.

The sound of a horse approaching came from down the road, and they all craned their necks to see who it was. Three horses in fact - a woman in simple regalia and two male armoured guards behind her. Humphrey moved to stand behind their bench as the figures dismounted and walked towards the small clearing.

"The Outsiders," she gave a small bow. "I am Steward Iona - I bring message from the Capital."

Sally stood to give a curtsy, briefly saddened not to be wearing a skirt. "Well met, Steward Iona - please join us in sitting."

Theo shot the zombie a furrowed brow as she sat back down, as if surprised that she had the capacity for manners.

She *was* nervous. Not for any kind of threat of violence - but the village captures were part of the big plan of *Making Things Equal* - and this could be a big turning point in how things progressed.

Iona sat on the bench as the two guards stood behind. "The Council and our patron Party have been watching your efforts since the capture of what is now Sanctuary. At first, we were shocked and appalled."

Sally nodded enthusiastically in hopes the woman would get to the final conclusion quicker.

"We were in the process of sending an order for a larger army to combat the increasing problem you were causing - however, the patron Party called for an emergency vote."

She wondered who this mysterious Party could be, and the urge to blurt out a question only barely held back.

"As such, we have decided to accept the validity of Monsters having a fair share of township under the Crown. In addition to the three villages you have taken remaining under Monster control, we would like to invite five so-called Unique Monsters to sit at the council as representatives. This is under the condition that you don't attempt to capture further villages or incite violence in Poppybrook."

The zombie's mouth hung wide open, and tears began to well in her eyes. "You're... treating Unique Monsters as regular citizens - as equals?"

"To a degree, yes. There will be no more contracts or Quests that target Uniques, and they will no longer be attacked by the Crown guards - further than that is beyond our control."

Theo adjusted his glasses and cupped his hand to his mouth in thought. "*Crown, Council, Adventuring Guild, and a patron Party,*" he murmured under his breath.

"Well that's great news," Sally leapt to her feet, unable to control herself any longer. "What's the catch?"

"No catch - just that this only applies to this area, naturally. Beyond the Swamps is out of our jurisdiction."

"You hear that gang?" The zombie turned and placed her foot on the bench. "*We won*, and the Wasteland is ours to conquer!"

Out in the Swamps, the sound of a knife sharpening against a whetstone pierced through the gloom.

The leader of *Zero* slicked back his greasy hair and idly glared over at the gathering of twenty Players.

"They're coming tomorrow," he snarled, a twisted grin forming at the side of his thin mouth.

With a raucous cheer, dozens of weapons were held up in the air, echoing out into the mists.