

Chapter 37

Reborn

“...Chuck?”

The figure paused their attempt at escape, confusion mixing with their panic. They licked their lips in an attempt to whet reality to make some sense. “...S-sally?” His tentative reply came.

“Oh buddy, why are you hiding under all this death?” She frowned as sadness crossed her face.

“Well, why do you *look* like death? Where are we?”

She sat on the grass and gave the floor a pat. “Come on out, and we will talk, I won’t hurt you, despite my appearance.”

“Okay...” He did not sound convinced but worked his way out of the pile and nervously came to sit nearby - but not too close. He looked like a normal human - his dark hair was matted slightly from the various corpse juices, and his hooded top was similarly dirtied.

“How long have you been in there?” Concern painted over Sally’s face as she looked him over.

“Since dawn.”

Sally wrinkled up her nose. “Gross, no wonder you’re so spooked.”

“Plus, *you* look like a zombie,” he added, his eyes still darting all over her to try and make sense of her current look.

“Yeah, I am a zombie.” She watched his nerves turn into a frown. “Or, only partly one at least. See, there are Players, and there are Monsters-“

“Oh, I’ve always been a player,” he interjected.

“*There you are!* See, you’re late to the party here because everyone except you and I started in this world almost four weeks ago.” She smiled at his wavering acceptance.

“So it’s like a real-life video game, huh?” Chuck wiped the sweat from his forehead.

“Apparently I’m just called Chuck here now, too?”

“It was close enough,” she shrugged. “How good is your memory?”

He closed his eyes and sighed, trying to bring forth what he could last remember. “I... work in a diner? I remember you there and then the kitchen. Someone was nagging me-“

“Doris.”

“-Doris - yes. Then I felt sleepy. There was a period of... I don't know - nothingness?” He shook his head and opened his eyes. “It's hard to explain, but then I just woke up here under a pile of dead bodies.”

“My tragic backstory is similar - except I woke up partly as a Monster.”

“That does explain the bad complexion.”

“Ass,” she flicked a clod of dried dirt at him. “So now you're a Level One Novice. Want to join up with my Party and destroy the System?”

Chuck rolled his tongue around in his mouth. “I feel like I am missing several days of context for all this.”

“I'll fill you in on the boring stuff when we travel. We have another Player in the Party, so you're not the only normie.”

“Ugh,” he rolled his eyes, “I'll join I suppose, just don't call me that.”

[Chuck joined the Party]

Almost immediately, both of their STARS lit up with chat notifications.

[Theo: Huh, how?]

[Humphrey: Interesting]

[Theo: But also - what?]

[Chuck: new reality, who dis]

“No memeing in chat,” Sally scowled at the young man half-heartedly.

“So, you have a cute guy and some kind of Gundam in your Party?” Chuck raised an eyebrow. “*Theo* seems familiar though?”

“Maybe you saw him as he left the diner. You came in after him. You think he is cute?”

“Not my type, but good on you.” He tilted his head. “Unless that sort of thing is illegal here, right?”

Sally rolled her eyes. This was definitely the Chuck she used to know. “I don't have that kind of attraction anymore. I do really, really want to eat him though. In a zombie way.”

“Should I be worried?” He narrowed his eyes to see if she was eying up his brain already.

“Strangely, no.” She shrugged and stood up, brushing off her skirt. “It's like... you're family or something.” There would be no point telling him about his recent undeath - it could only confuse him more.

“Lucky me,” he smiled despite the sarcastic tone and rose from the floor himself.

She gave him a light punch on the shoulder. “Yes, lucky you. I'm kind of a big deal around here.”

Sally gave the bodies a quick loot, while Chuck averted his gaze. "Theo is probably the most experienced Novice in this world, so you've got a great mentor before you choose a Class."

[Skull (6)]

[Gold 46]

[Cheese (1)]

[Common Basic Spear (2)]

"Rest of this stuff is pretty broken or terrible quality, plus I can't reach some of the corpses because of the loot box clipping." She turned around and opened up her Inventory. "Here are some items for you."

She transferred over a Spear, eighty gold, and the Cheese.

"A spear, fantastic. I feel just like a medieval peasant now." He withdrew it and gave the nearest tree a few test pokes. "This is a fantasy world I take it?"

"So far," she nodded, "like a type of RPG."

"Sad. I'm more of a shooter guy, myself." He awkwardly managed to work out how to stow the weapon into his Inventory.

"Jeez, alright - here." She transferred him over her Crossbow. "There are Ranger and Mage classes at the least, for when you get to Level Five. I'm not a Beginners Guide though, you know?" Sally scrunched up her face at the echoed sentiment.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm sure I'll pick things up quickly enough. Do we need to go meet your boy-toy and the robot?"

"Yes. He is not a robot though; he is a Death Knight, and-"

"Same difference."

Chuck was a lot less annoying when he was a zombie, Sally thought to herself as her eyes narrowed. Not that she wished death upon him. Not when she couldn't even stomach eating him after.

She gestured towards the Village and then headed back. Chuck was attentive enough to silently take in some of the information dumps she was able to vocalise on the short trip over. Classes, Players, Monsters, Parties, and Skills. The overview was brief - but enough to give the poor lad some grounding in the new world.

"Welcome to Sanctuary," she gestured widely with her arms as they entered the town. Goblins turned to eye Chuck with suspicion, but they carried on as normal.

"Cliche, and the locals are not what I was expecting."

"Remember, there are no System-created humans. Also, do not leave the Party as the goblins may kill you." She turned to the new-Novice who was looking a little overwhelmed. "Sorry, Novices usually have their hand held at the start - not that I'd know, of course."

Chuck nodded but said little. It was somewhat unlike him but perhaps understandable given the circumstances.

As they reached the village square, the imposing figure of Humphrey alongside the delicious stack of Theo stood out amongst the shorter goblins. Both of them looked at the approaching pair with a heavy amount of curiosity and confusion. Chuck extended his hand for shaking.

“Humphrey,” the Death Knight nodded as he clasped the smaller hand in his plated fist.

“Not a very edgy name for a Death Knight,” Chuck beamed and then shook Theo’s in turn. “And you looked taller in your chat picture, Theo.”

“A pleasure to... meet you, Chuck,” the Novice narrowed his eyes as Sally tried to communicate something to him, silently mouthing - don’t mention the dead stuff? “That’s the first time I’ve been negged in this world.”

“Sorry,” Chuck shrugged, “I spent all morning covered in dead bodies. I’m only half this salty, usually.”

“It’s slightly better than having someone threaten to eat you all the time,” Theo smiled, avoiding the gaze of the zombie. “Let me sort you out with some Novice gear.”

“Hey! I’ve had plenty of chances but haven’t done it yet!” Sally scowled and looked out around the village as the two men dallied with their equipment. All this around her was now under threat. Whether they were System-created or not, this little community stood for their hope and as the first important step in their journey to ending this charade of a world.

Humphrey stood beside her. “We should leave. Defending this village will not be easy, but the most important thing is you survive. If it falls, it can be retaken, but they need you. *We* need you.”

She looked up at the metal Monster, the warm flames of his helmet making the air wavy behind him. “You’re remarkably soft and considerate for someone designed for impassively monitoring the world.”

“They will come for me,” he ignored her comments, “and I want you to be safe even without me. Without these inept Players.”

“What’s got into you?” Her eyes searched the stoic face of the Death Knight. “Do you know something that you aren’t letting on?”

“Yes.”

She frowned and looked back out at the village. Her five Leaders were now running the place. They should be able to hold out against random Players that may come investigating. If it took Poppybrook two days to reach here, then it must be quite far away. Even walking from the Cemetery to Yarch - now Sanctuary - the distance had surprised her. She would have to give the Map a proper look once they got walking.

“How soon?” She looked back up at Humphrey with a raised eyebrow.

“Hmm.” His eye sockets narrowed, and he raised a finger to the air just above them. “About now.”

Out of the air, a skull bathed in eldritch green energy appeared and lowered to meet them.

“Hello, rogue unit HM-3.3” the Observer hissed in a dry tone.