

Chapter 42

Morals / Morsels

The mood of the group was somewhat sombre once they had finished recovering. Humphrey led the way through the woods, with Chuck falling slightly behind the other two.

Sally pulled an awkward expression at Theo, who responded in kind. It was nice that despite their differences, they were on the same wavelength. The scar from his earlier wound was just a slim line of pink now, hardly noticeable except in certain lighting. She looked away and swallowed the gathering saliva. It was even further conflicting now. Not only had she become more attached to his existence and well-being, but after tasting his blood she also wanted to eat him all the more too.

Chuck had taken a similar route but in the opposite direction. His attitude was concerning, and there was part of her brain that told her to be wary. Both Humps and Theo she trusted with her life - unlife - but the shorter Novice had already begun showing contempt for Monsters. Not that she particularly cared for them, but she and the Death Knight were Monsters - just like Bella and the rest of the goblins.

As far as she was concerned, there was no difference between the Unique Monsters and the Players who had a soul. Not until they found out how people were brought here and if they could be sent back. On reflection, this decision made her actions more villainous. Or at least as terrible as whatever the Players did...

Sally shook her head. There was no time for moral quandaries.

Humphrey held up his hand. "Movement ahead."

Sally sidled up beside him and looked into the distance. "Bandits?" She could now hear footsteps ahead but didn't have visuals yet.

The Death Knight shrugged. "I suggest we approach ready; better we get the jump than they."

She cursed under her breath and drew her dagger. Nodding at the two Novices, they similarly prepared. Although their physical Health Points had recovered, they would be too mentally drained to get into a new fight so soon before the Bandits. Hopefully, this would be some basic Monsters and not a high-level Party.

Soft voices carried out from behind a wall of dried shrubbery and trees leaning away from a mottled grey boulder. With a sharp intake of unnecessary breath, she gave the signal that they should jump out at the approaching group. Internally, she was glad that Chuck was less clumsy and more silent - leaving the Death Knight to be the clunkiest among them.

"Wait, can you hear something?"

Sally sighed; their attempts of subtlety still needed work. Instead, she led the Party into a charge, barrelling around the obstacles and sliding into a wide pathway through the trees. Ahead of them by twenty feet were four very startled-looking women.

She quickly ran her eye over them - two Level Four Novices, a Level One Cleric, and a Level One Fighter.

The Fighter was the first to speak up, taking a tentative step forward as their Party lead. "Who, or... what are you guys?" Beneath short black hair, her green eyes shifted uneasily between each of the Outsiders. The axe held in a tight fist shook visibly.

Sally licked her lips. "We are a Party, same as you..."

"Don't look it!" One of the Novices with a blonde ponytail piped up, trying to hide behind a wooden shield.

"You look like Monsters..." the Fighter continued. "Well, half of you do."

The eyes of the new group looked up at the Bounty on Theo - the clear signal that he was a Player Killer. It did little to improve their trust in the odd Party before them.

"We aren't particularly bad..." Theo shrugged sheepishly. "We are more against the System than we are against Players."

"*We aren't going to kill them, are we?*" Chuck murmured out of the side of his mouth.

"*I am sooo hungry,*" Sally hissed. "*They might want to kill us, too.*"

The Cleric moved forward to join their Fighter. "We don't want any trouble - we were just heading away from Yarch," she pushed brown hair from her tanned face, "it's been taken over by goblins."

Sally grinned and opened her mouth to speak, before the Fighter interrupted.

"Our friend, and fifth, Chloe, was attacked before we realised..." a sigh shuddered from the woman, "...she died."

The smile on the face of the zombie turned into a frown. She hoped the goblins were okay. "*Group vote?*" She raised an eyebrow to the team.

"*For.*" The Death Knight crossed his arms.

"...*Indifferent.*" Theo bit his lip and tried not to make eye contact with the nervous Party.

"Against!" Chuck threw his arms up, startling the four women. "I can't believe you are discussing this, especially you, Theo." He shook his head in frustration. "But *also*, especially you, Sally."

Sally opened her mouth to counter him, but again the Fighter interrupted.

"Do you need rescuing? You seem normal. We can fight them if need be." Her expression hardened, but her weapon didn't shake any less.

"No!" Chuck held his face. "*No fighting.*" With a deep sigh, his face rose to face the zombie, his eyes looking even more tired than before. "I'm sorry, Sally, I can't do this."

[Chuck has left the Party]

“B-but, Chuck?” Sally stammered as she watched the Novice walk across to the other group.

“You girls have a free spot, yeah?”

The Fighter nodded and added him to their Party while still trying to keep her eyes on the three remaining. She whispered something to Chuck, and he shook his head.

“Probably asking if he wanted to attack us now,” Humphrey said with a small shrug.

“We are going to leave now. We will not attack you if you do not attack us?” The voice of the Fighter wavered but seemed earnest enough.

Sally clenched her jaw. The pit in her stomach wasn't just from the escaping meal. Her mind felt cloudy, and her mouth refused to move to form words. Instead, she just nodded.

With brief nods of their own, the group of women plus Chuck exited from the clearing - still keeping weary eyes on the Outsiders until they were out of sight.

The zombie boss slumped to the floor and exhaled. “Fffffffuuuuuuuuuuuuuu-“

Bloip

[Chuck: I still have you on here - keep in touch]

[Chuck: I don't hate you, I just can't be a monster]

Sally smiled and wiped her eyes. If only the little jerk knew.

[Sally: Just don't die]

[Sally: ass]

[Chuck: The group name is White Fox]

[Chuck: don't ask]

[Chuck: I want to fight the same fight as you]

[Chuck: just from the other side of the fence]

“Everything okay?” Theo knelt down beside her and put his hand on her shoulder.

“You know how they say ‘if you love something, set it free?’” She looked up at him, her red eyes softened.

“Yeah-“

“Well, do you love that hand?” Sally ran her tongue across her teeth as her eyes bore into the tasty warm handburger upon her.

Theo slowly removed himself from the situation and stood back up straight. “We need to find you some food. Any way we can ethically source it?”

Humphrey rubbed the side of his helmet, the scratching sound of metal upon metal making the Novice wince. "That seems unlikely. If we only killed bad people, then that would be closer to ethical."

"Depends how we define 'bad'." Theo shrugged. "Am I not bad?"

Sally stood back up and brushed her skirt off - mostly by habit. It was still dusty and covered in dried blood or worse. *Typical zombie aesthetic*, she supposed. "Morality is relative, right? Especially if we are talking about who I can kill and eat. The best we can do is run into Players who will fight us outright for the honour of being in my belly."

"Like that Cleric." Humphrey nodded sagely to the agreeing nods of the zombie.

"Wait, which Cleric was this - haven't you seen a few?" Theo raised an eyebrow.

Sally shrugged animatedly. "It was the one LARPing like there was an achievement for being aggressively in-character. I wonder why he didn't get a Bounty for clocking that Ranger?"

"I suppose he only did some damage; he didn't outright kill the Ranger himself."

They stood in silence for a few moments, the lack of action and subsequent questions leaving them awkwardly unfocused.

"I wonder where they're going then." Sally raised her eyebrows innocently.

"There's another Novice village about half a day's travel from here." Theo looked out in the direction the White Foxes had been travelling.

"Belberry," Humphrey added, "slightly more popular than Yarch, but probably just as deserted these days."

"Probably not full of goblins either." Sally narrowed her eyes. They would have to find five more potential leaders if they wanted to steal another village from the System. She caught Theo's eyes, the Novice was able to see what she was plotting in her head.

"Let's save what we have first; best not stretch ourselves too thin."

She rolled her eyes in response, despite him being correct. "Any chance of snacks on the way to the Bandits, Humps?"

"Possibly, it would be a popular place to gain experience. There is a chance some Parties may be camping in the area."

"I suppose we should go find out, huh? At least we don't have the liability of getting Chuck levelled up and keeping him from dying." Sally got her bearings and started to head back in their original direction.

"Think he will turn back into a zombie if he dies?" Theo caught her up, and Humphrey lagged behind.

"Don't put that out into the world, Mister." She wagged a finger at him.

The Death Knight turned his head to watch the smallest shadow of movement flicker between distant trees behind them.

His eye sockets narrowed before he turned back to the Party with a grin.