

Chapter 72

Freedom

The first person Sally laid eyes on was Jackie. The mobster was bleeding heavily from a multitude of stab wounds, her hat discarded from her rain-slick purple hair. She lay still, being held up by the dark elf that had assailed her. And they were... kissing?

Marius's mouth hung open as they turned slowly to the next pairing.

The lizardman stood and began laughing, hands on his scaled hips. Theo was a blur, attacking at ludicrous speeds with his bare hands - the [Sanguine Weapon] a streak of pink wavering over his head. The vampire was also laughing, almost as much as the large beast.

They turned again to see Archie and the bug sitting and talking, the insect Monster looking glum with his face in spindly arms.

Rage was almost tangible from the Fallen Cleric. His crimson halo pulsed with energy, almost as if it was aflame. The last pairing was certainly going more to his plan.

"At least I could trust one of you," he seethed, his fist holding the zombie up twitching as his gaze bore into his other Party members.

"Humps," Sally whispered quietly as a lump sunk to her stomach.

The Death Knight was lying back, only propped up by an elbow as the orc stood above him. Across from the pair, the flaming greatsword now lay inert a few feet from their scuffle. A wide smile had crossed the jaws of the black-flamed skull as he revelled in his imminent victory.

"Let this be a lesson to all that stand against us in this corrupt System." He raised his blade high to strike down on the dull helmet of the Death Knight. For a brief moment only the sound of rain could be heard; as everyone turned to start to interject to the execution, their vision clear now the fire wall had vanished.

Then, the orc looked up. "What the-"

Something large and aflame slammed into him. As he jolted backwards a pillar of wood appeared behind him - knocking the wind from his lungs. The flaming object stood to its feet.

Jaxk flexed his muscles and withdrew a hammer from his belt, squaring up to the orc.

Sally turned as Marius twirled them to see the village.

All of the Unique Monsters had come out. She watched with watering eyes as Bella ran up to the Death Knight and started to apply healing.

"You better be good for the gold, Mister," she hissed under her breath.

Henkk walked forward ahead of the rest of the group to address the Fallen Cleric.

Marius twitched and took a step backwards. "Stay back, you weak filth! I have your previous zombie, and I will cover you with her brains if you try anything!" Panic and fury both painted his outbursts.

The white goblin smiled and raised his hands in an open gesture. "We have fifteen minutes to fuck you up; how long would you like us to take?" Even with his smooth voice, the threat was steeped in menace.

Regaining his gusto, the orc began to chuckle. "You are all low Level; you are not a—"

From a split in reality a spout of amber flame followed by the heavy body of a horse barrelled through and knocked the speaker to the floor. "I'm a *HORSE* woo!" Petal yelled as they pranced past the target. Wooden beams appeared over the black-flamed ex-Observer, pinning him to the ground.

"I swear!" Marius growled, backing further away from the throng of Uniques. "*One* more step and she gets it."

"Marius," Sally whispered, "I'll give you one last chance to repent and join us."

"Never!" Spittle shot from his mouth as he shook with rage. "I will never accept your kind."

"Then I have a secret to tell you." A small smile began to cross her weary face.

"What? Speak it so it may be your last words."

Her red eyes raised to meet his, a playful flame dancing behind them.

"I started carrying two crossbows."

Pain flared across the face of the Fallen Cleric as the thunk of a bolt buried itself into his gut. He dropped the zombie and stumbled backwards.

Sally dropped the crossbow which slunk low in her useless grip - barely able to raise her left hand she shot [Necroblast] at his right side. As he moved in reflex to block it, she lunged out and sunk her sharp teeth into his mace arm. Warmth flowed through into her mouth. It strengthened her. As he tried to stumble away, she bit down harder - until he dropped the mace.

The Fallen Cleric managed to push her off, clutching his wounded arm to his chest and hunched over at the pain of the lodged bolt. He raised his other hand in readiness to send out a radiant bolt when a shadow loomed up behind him.

A figure sunk his fangs into the man's neck. Marius raised his hand to dislodge Theo, but [Vampire Bite] quickly hit his Stamina and his arm flopped downwards ineffectively. After a few seconds, the Cleric dropped to his knees, and the vampire relented, spitting a mouthful of blood to the floor.

Sally stood over him, her shadow covering his weary eyes as they looked up to her. Once more, the only sound around them was the falling rain from the gloomy sky.

“Eat my brains, *go on*, Monster. That is what you want.” His voice came out in short pants.

The conditionals had been met. She swayed on tired legs as she idly looked at the skill pop-up.

“Hi Sally,” Bella tugged at her shredded skirt. “Did you want healing?”

“I... don’t think I have the gold for it.” She frowned and opened up her Inventory.

Marius ground his teeth together, blood and cold sweat running down his body. Theo stood behind him with arms folded across his bare chest.

“For some reason, I only have three gold left.” The zombie tried to shrug, but her arms just painfully wiggled.

“I could at least fix your arm?” The small goblin wrinkled her nose up at the break. “Oh! I also found your dagger! Isn’t that lucky?”

“Hah. *It is*.” Sally smiled as the warmth from the healing pulsed up her arm. It was amazing what a difference that made - not the fixing of the shattered bone - but warmth in her cold, dead flesh. The goblin placed the [Dagger of Luck] into her hand.

Humphrey’s sword burst into red energy as he cleaved into the wooden beams and the orc beneath them. Kicking the remnants of the broken timber to the side, he lifted the wounded ex-Observer from the ground and threw him back atop the debris. The Death Knight stabbed his weapon down into the thigh of the enemy, pinning him to the floor.

He knelt down by the orc and placed a plated finger against the bloodied chest of his opponent. “Merge or perish.”

“Hah, *sure*.” The orc’s skull managed to spit up blood. “A red Observer? I’ll just take you over in no time and carry on in that nice shiny body.”

“No, I am a purple Observer, and you are weak.”

Archie walked over and sat beside them. “You are a purple, big brother? I thought red, too.”

The Death Knight turned to the cat with a scowl. “You knew my name; how did you not know what kind of Observer I was?”

“What makes you think I’ll want to become part of you?” The orc hissed and struggled against the sword keeping him in place. “Our ideals are opposite.”

“All Observers live to serve the System. You can continue your duty and make amends for the wrong path you have travelled.” Humphrey nudged the sword.

Archie climbed atop the body and gazed into the empty sockets of the black-flamed skull. “I will forgive you too.”

The orc took a moment of pause as he maintained the glare of the ginger cat. Eventually, he looked back up at the Death Knight. “Alright, I accept. I am ready.”

Humphrey held out a plated hand, which the orc took with a weak grip. Swirls of black smoke began pouring from the skull as it slowly evaporated and swirled up and around the Death Knight's arm. It sunk into his body, and finally, as the inert corpse of the orc slumped to the floor, the plated bodyguard stood back to his feet and sighed.

"That will take some getting used to." He looked back down at Archie. "I will try and process his thoughts to find out about the Architect's murder and who else is responsible."

"If I am mortally wounded, will you absorb me too?" The cat stretched out and wagged his tail.

"If you allow it."

"What about ME? I'm a HOOORSE." Petal yelled from just behind them.

"Hurry up!" Marius bit at the air, trying to shift from the weight of the vampire now holding his wings down. He hung his head low in resignation.

Sally tutted and shook her head. "Normally, I'd be all for eating some brains - especially with whatever Class you are now. I'm literally drooling. But that would be unfair to you. To become my zombie thrall when I can see that this existence is so troubling for you. Look at me, Marius."

The Fallen Cleric slowly raised his head, the anger in his eyes now replaced by anguish and sorrow.

"The biggest mercy I can give you is freedom from this System. I hope this sets you free."

With a quick flick of her arm, Sally buried the dagger deep into his eye socket.

Marius's mouth opened before he slunk to the floor, dead. The crimson halo melted away, and the wings of black feathers became limp and started to fall apart.

Sally stood and watched the dead body in silence. The rainfall continued to fall, and she closed her eyes.