

Chapter 14

Dirty Deeds

"Theo was pretty nice, wasn't he?" Sally almost skipped through the undergrowth as the light of the day began fading into dusk.

"Mmm," the floating skull replied.

"Don't be jealous, Humps." She paused and waited for the shambling corpses of her Party to catch up.

"It is just worrying, is all." The Observer had been mostly quiet since parting ways with the Novice. "First you. Now him."

"I can have more than one friend," she shook her finger at the skull that glowed purple amongst the shaded woods. "Just because he is a snack - figuratively and maybe literally - doesn't mean anything."

"What? No, I mean the glitches. You shouldn't be able to discard the Class selection once you are a Level Five Novice."

"Are you going to report it to the big boss?" She crossed her arms and began to look around to see if this would be an okay place to stop.

"...No, not right now, at least." Humphrey shook side to side.

It seemed to be a decision that was conflicting. Sally had started to get a good read of the skull, despite his lack of ability to show any change of emotion. If the Architect didn't like Theo, they might force him to change Class. Or something even worse.

She shook her head at these thoughts. Theo had given her a task, and she had agreed to fulfil it. It was the least she could do for all the equipment passed to her - even if it was basic. Sally shivered, remembering the words whispered in her ear. How surprising they were. How excited they made her. She wiped the drool from her mouth. *It was their secret*, she remembered.

"This is a slight detour from our trip to the Tomb," Humphrey announced, mostly to try and bring her out of her stupor.

A shrug was the only response offered back to him. Was it unfair to keep the Observer in the dark about the quest given? It probably wouldn't matter either way, but a promise was a promise. If there was one thing Sally was, it was a woman of her word. Probably starting after she said she would kill whoever hurt Bubbles. As much as the level-up would have been nice, another ally might save her in the future. In a handsome, if really lacklustre Novice-y way.

It was only another two minutes into their trek before she held her hand up, and they all stopped as one. Humphrey hovered down beside her, almost at head level. They both remained silent as they moved over to a bush and crouched down. The Party of zombies did

similarly to whatever cover they could find in the area. Within the darkened grey shadows of dusk, their sinister red eyes glowed.

Movement could be heard ahead of them - the telltale signs of footsteps through leaves and grass. The murmured tones of low voices carried through to the clearing where they lay in wait.

"It's getting late though, Jake." A whiny male voice was the first to be picked up.

A female voice responded to him, her tone already fed up. "Stop whining. We've already killed so many today; the drop is almost guaranteed."

"That's not how-"

"Both of you quit it. Gabs and Raleigh have already gone home. Let's just pop a couple more and then head back to camp. Tomorrow is another day." A third voice, another male - this one slightly gruffer.

"Fine," the first voice relented.

Sally licked her sharp teeth and slowly withdrew the crossbow, ensuring her dagger was ready to hand if needed.

"Oh, I see," the skull whispered before heading up to the apex of the clearing.

With a deep sigh, Sally lowered her eyes. "*Bloip!*"

"Wait," the female voice came from maybe two dozen feet away now, "did you hear one?"

"A *sick* one, maybe?" The whiny voice responded.

Sally narrowed her stare at the grass by her feet. "*Bloip!*"

"Came from over there," the gruff voice signalled, probably pointing in hopefully the direction of the party.

With bated breath, she waited as the footsteps came slowly closer. Much quieter than expected - if not for her focus on trying to track them, she doubted she would have picked them up over the breeze rustling the leaves surrounding them. And then- visuals.

Three Novices stepped into the clearing; each similarly dressed to how Theo was. They had been slightly off on tracking her voice, so they entered past the bushes nearby, and their meandering put themselves almost totally in the middle of her Party.

A crooked smile flexed across her face as she slowly levelled the crossbow at the small group stalking ahead.

"What's that?" The gruffly-voiced and mace-wielding man at the front peered out, getting a glance of Grams. "Zombies? What are they doing-"

A quick twang snapped across the clearing as the bolt struck the Novice in the side of the neck. With a panic he dropped to his knees, clutching at the blood flowing from the wound.

The zombies leapt forth with a groan, gaining some ground on the startled opponents before they resolved their combat nerves. Level Three, all of them.

Sally dropped the crossbow and snaked forth, keeping low and allowing the rest of the Party to be the distraction. The smart thing to do would be to take out the female Novice while her back was turned, *but...*

She dove atop the wounded Novice, tearing the bolt from its nestled place and biting into the warmth of his neck. This was bliss - almost immediately, the hunger pangs throughout the day were sated. All it took was a little chomp. But there was nothing stopping her from completely feasting on-

[Party: Grams Has Died]

At the last second, she rolled to the side, a sword blade cutting down her right arm. Pain. She stood and gripped it with her left hand, red eyes blazing out into the darkness.

The female Novice had struck her after felling Grams. In the background, Chuck and Suits had taken a bit of damage - her UI flickering up to show Party status - but had finally overwhelmed the man and dragged him to the floor.

"What in the *hells* are you?" The sword of the Novice was shaking, panic written across her face.

"I'm Sally," she replied, drawing her second dagger into her offhand, "and you're farming in my friends' spot."

"W-wha-"

Sally burst forward, getting in close to the Novice as she raised her sword back. She collided with her opponent before the [Novice Strike] skill could be used. Her sharp teeth gnashed into the leather armour as her arms wrapped around the Novice trying to wrench her off.

A wild kick to Sally's shin caught her off-guard, and she flinched backwards, letting go of the woman briefly. Thoughts of fleeing washed over the pale and clammy face of the Novice, her resolve broken. Before they had a chance to react, Sally lunged forth recklessly again. The panic in the woman's eyes turned to shock as a dagger found a place just under the leather armour into her stomach.

The Novice collapsed from the sudden pain, dropping her half-raised sword as the zombie bit down on her neck.

Crimson waves of odd euphoria passed through the limbs of Sally. Each bite into the exposed flesh of her victim became more feral, and a growing desire welled up from her gut. *Consume*, it said. *Gorge on the weak*. She hesitated at first, her past humanity baulking at the scene playing out before she eventually gave in.

Sally feasted.

After a few minutes, Humphrey floated back down from his perch.

"Before you say anything," Sally pouted as she rolled away from the corpse, "I don't feel proud of myself. *No*, that's a lie. That was pretty rad - other than losing Grams."

"Yes."

"But also," she waved her wrist in the air, "I got that Level Up!"

"Just barely. Level Three Novices are scraping the barrel a little." The skull took a moment to visually absorb the corpses across the woodland floor.

"If they want me to be a *Monster*, I will be," she shrugged, laying back into the cool grass, "wow, why do I feel drunk?"

"Maybe you ate too much."

"Well, perhaps if they didn't want me to eat them, they shouldn't have made Players so tasty." Sally yawned. Okay, perhaps she had overeaten.

She pressed the chat menu on the star, shrugging off the Level Up for just a few minutes - just to build the suspense up a little.

[Sally: Hey Theooo]

[Theo: Hi Sally, all good?]

[Sally: Our little secret has been taken care of xoxox]

[Theo: Amazing... and scary - thank you!]

[Sally: Find ur dman Cards so we can kill God alrdy]

She closed the chat without waiting for a response. This feeling in her stomach was not great - or rather, it had been too great. She had supped from the fountain of vitality and was now too healthy to live. If she was about to pass from this System, her one regret was that... she didn't eat more people.

As darkness fell across the world, Sally closed her eyes and joined it.

"Sally. *Sally?*"

The zombie rolled over and spat out a mouthful of grass she had apparently been chewing in her sleep. Had she slept?

"Mrff," she growled and sat upright, head lolling on her shoulders as her body tried to function. It was light out again - but only barely.

“Good thing nobody came looking for your bounty whilst you were unable to be roused. It has increased, by the way.”

Sally squinted up at the skull, the glimmers of early morning sunlight falling through the shifting canopy into her red eyes like a hail of broken glass. Why had she even fallen asleep? One glance at her even redder white shirt brought the memories back.

“Only by 15 Gold,” Humphrey continued, giving her a stern glare from empty sockets, “Novice lives aren’t worth too much, apparently.”

“Ouch. The System doesn’t pull any punches, huh?” She stood and brushed the dew from her rather dirty-looking dress. As she looked over at her first meal, she nodded her head. “What’s the point of all this Class business if I can pop a guy in the neck with a bolt and kill him?”

“The starting Levels are very... *realistic*? Although, take my word with a pinch of salt, as I only have the System as a base measure. After a few Level Ups, you start getting more resilient to basic damage.”

“Brütal.” Sally shook her head and turned to her two remaining zombies. They were sitting patiently on the grass, having both feasted and rested themselves too. It was a shame that she couldn’t make new undead, or find a way to bring some back from the diner - or even reanimate the ones that died again.

She turned to the floating skull, who seemed to be waiting patiently for something.

“Monsters are usually created by the System, right? They don’t have *people* in them?”

The Observer was silent for a few moments. “Yes.”

“Are there NPCs that aren’t *people* too - sentients that aren’t from the previous world?”

“Maybe I should be observing the Ultra-Novice instead; he asks less questions. *Ha-ha*.” He waited for the awkward pause to pass - which it didn’t. “Yes,” the skull eventually sighed.

“Okay, neat. I was worried,” she crossed her arms, “you know, whether it was morally okay to ingest innocents. But if they are just constructs of the System, then I don’t feel so bad.”

Humphrey hovered in silence.

“Oh, I never chose my level-up skill!” Her wrist rose with a gleaming golden star attached. “There’s a message from Theo too.”

[Theo: You must be good luck. Found the fourth card this morning!]

“Wow, my messages from last night were pretty cringe - do I get drunk off eating people? Best leave him on read for a bit.” She flipped through the menu to receive her levelling rewards.

[Pick One]

- > **[Upheaval]** [Area 20ft Radius - Turns Target Area into Rough Terrain and does Minor Earth Damage]
- > **[Hex: Slow]** [Curse - One Target becomes Slow and has less Energy]
- > **[./Puppy]** [Passive//Error - #Mar A to Parse-Sector Override... Compiling, Compiling... Retry Parse?]