

Chapter 24 Wound Up

"I'm getting pretty tired of walking," Sally whined, "when do we get horses?"

"When you've earned one." The Death Knight sighed. "Walking is so much worse than floating was."

If she didn't know any better, Sally would have assumed they were stuck in some kind of loop. It had been perhaps a couple of hours of following this road, and the scenery hadn't changed by much. If not for the sun waning towards the late afternoon there would have been almost no indication that any progress had been made on their journey. On reflection, the walk from Hillan down to the Cemetery had taken a little while. If Yarch was further away, it made sense - it was just so *boring*.

"I know we said no side-quests, but we have to break up this monotony. Also, find someone to eat. *Something*."

Humphrey scratched his chin in contemplation. Then he looked around the woods either side as if he could gain any sort of clue as to whether something was nearby.

"No," he shrugged, "it will not be long before we are at the goblin caves - you should save your energy for that."

Sally looked up at the Death Knight with a scowl. In that weird armour, he stood almost a full head taller than her - and certainly had a more appropriate figure for fighting. "Alright then Humps, my Manager *slash* Assistant, tell me how you even got to take over that suit thing - how does that work?"

"In lore terms, this was the ancient Warrior Ark'han the Lost. He fell in the Bleak War where it is said he fought on for an hour even after being decapitated."

"That... I guess they can just make up anything, huh?"

Humphrey grinned widely. "Pretty handy as I was the missing piece of the puzzle - I just had to reroute some of my energy into merging with the potential Monster. A simple task for someone as powerful as-

"So Ark'han would have been some kind of Quest Boss for higher Levels? Since you were Level Ten before."

"Yes." The Death Knight flexed his fingers and looked up to the sky as they walked. "I'm not sure why that is something I could do as an Observer - but we have both seen how fallible the System can be."

Sally nodded. That all seemed to make some manner of sense. As much as anything in this world did, at least. Although she had secretly hoped he would join her cause, it was still a surprise for how much he had sacrificed to willingly help her. Having someone she could trust was a relief. She puckered her lips and frowned.

“Do you think we can trust Theo?”

Despite his lack of face-flesh, Humphrey managed to look taken aback. “You have doubts?”

“It’s not that. He just seemed to be on board with the plan almost immediately. He is certainly an odd cookie-“

“And a *Player*.”

“-and a Player, yes. I just hope he can join the Party in proper terms rather than...” She looked back towards the two zombies shambling along behind them as she drew a finger across her throat.

“As a Novice he will pose no threat to us, no matter how high his Level gets. Perhaps still more useful than Chuck, though.” Humphrey cocked an eye towards the barely living corpse.

“Hey! Leave him outta this. He is unusual, just as you and I are. He just hasn’t had the opportunity to... flourish yet.”

The Death Knight grinned and looked back towards the road ahead. “You’re just interested in what will happen if he gets to Level Zero.”

“No!” She threw her arms in the air. “But what will happen, do you know?”

“Ye-no, I do not.”

Sally opened her mouth to respond but then paused. Her brow lowered, and her eyes darted towards the woods on their right. “Noise,” she hissed - unnecessarily as the rumbling sound grew quickly in volume.

The cracking of trees and crushed bushes reverberated around the space around them as they drew their weapons in anticipation. Soon a large silhouette bounded forth, shattering the tree at the edge of the embankment and sending the shorn parts over their heads like nothing.

A ten-foot-tall humanoid snarled down at them, his singular blue eye glowing blue. In his hand, he held a giant club, almost as wide as one of the trees crushed in his path - the tip of which had sharp, bladed barbs embedded into a wooden head. Weird sigils and markings were painted on his bare skin, a leather loincloth adorned with bones the only item of clothing apparently worn.

“Oh hi,” Sally beamed nervously, “would you like to join my-“

The club slammed down in the place she had been standing, the zombie barely able to dodge out of the way in time as shards of broken stone road peppered her. She rolled and stumbled back to her feet, clutching at her arm as the pain took hold - one of the barbs had just caught her.

Humphrey leapt forward, a pulse of red energy flowing over his armour as he activated [Adrenaline] causing his movements to speed up. As he parried the follow-up swing of the cyclops, he stumbled backwards from the force.

"I miss being Level Ten already," he growled, empty eye sockets blazing with fury.

Sally pointed her Dagger of Luck at the cyclops and cast [Hex: Slow]. Almost immediately, the large Monster seemed to become lethargic - allowing the Death Knight to circle around past the next swing. She commanded the two zombies to stay back on the road.

With a deep breath, she ran in closer, dagger at the ready. Humphrey had circled around the Monster, causing it to rotate and face almost back into the woods. With a flash of red light, the greatsword carved a crimson line across the stomach of the lumbering cyclops.

As the beast roared in anger, Sally slipped up behind him and jammed her blade into the back of the Monster's knee. Her mouth salivated as the warm blood ran out from the piercing wound, his thick skin not enough to resist the attack.

And then, pain and pressure - a weight sense of weightlessness before she crashed down on the hard ground and rolled. Her brain caught up as she wheezed and tried to stand. One of her arms no longer worked. Distracted by the damage she had inflicted, she hadn't seen the backhand of the club's handle swing back. She spat blood on the floor. *Wasn't it interesting that she could do that whilst still undead?*

"Sally!" Humphrey yelled out, breaking her from her stupor.

She had just enough time to flatten to the floor, the club whizzing past in slow arc inches above her as her right arm flared up in agony. Her dagger... it must still be in the cyclops, or on the floor somewhere? She rolled onto her back and brought up her STAR, pressing it with her nose as her right hand hung limp.

The Death Knight slashed at the Monster, causing another large gash in the left arm and then the left flank of the cyclops. Droplets of red spattered out across the worn grey stonework of the road. The greatsword pulsed with dark arcane energy and his helmet's flames increased in intensity as he clashed against the large club. Splinters of wood dropped to the grass as the long blade cut into the wooden weapon.

Humphrey strained against the strength of the overbearing cyclops, having to relent against the show of power as a meaty left fist came in to strike at him unguarded. The blow rattled out as his metal armour shook and he was knocked backwards.

Sally swore under her breath, trying to fiddle with the UI without the use of her hand was stressful and frustrating - who would design such a hindrance in their System? Finally, she retrieve the item she was after - just as a shadow loomed over her.

She looked up to see the large eye of the cyclops blazing down at her, his mouth agape and grinning with fist-sized teeth arranged awkwardly like they had been too indecisive when growing in. As the club raised into the air, she struggled to level the crossbow in her offhand - thankful that she had stored it away loaded - the weapon shaking as it moved to a more vertical position.

The thick arm of the cyclops tensed as he brought the club down, and Sally clenched the trigger of the crossbow.

With eyes closed she waited for the inevitable end. It did not come as quickly as expected.

“Could... you please... move!”

She opened her eyes to see the Death Knight standing by the cyclops, holding the large Monster up so that he didn't fall atop her. A crossbow bolt sat lodged dead centre of the single eye. Sally rolled across the road, wincing every time her injured arm struck the path - before finally Humphrey could sidestep and allow the weighty giant to collapse to the floor, dead.

“Thank, Humps. You're my Knight in flaming armour again.” She stood to her feet, wobbly, and gave him a weak smile.

“That's... not a normal place for a Cyclops to be.” He wiped his sword off on the Monster. “Level Five Elite.”

“So, that's meant to be a challenge for a full group of Level Fives? I feel like we took it on pretty well considering then?”

“Hmm. There is something more to it than that - but I think we will cross that bridge when we get to it.” He stowed away his greatsword on his back as his flames gently died down.

“The only thing I feel like crossing is this Med Kit off of my Inventory list.” Sally again struggled to navigate the STAR without the use of her right arm.

“Once you are done with that, come loot.”

She murmured under her breath as she brought out the supposed healing kit - a small progress bar appeared over it. At least she didn't have to do any field medicine, she sighed. Once complete a warm rush of green energy filled her before quickly dissipating. Her arm felt... better - still stiff, but at least movable.

With a stumble over to the corpse, she leaned against the large flank of the cyclops. Was damage meant to feel this painful? A headache began to throb. The prospect of more walking threatened to turn it into a handful of mental nails for sure.

She tapped against the dead body, again wishing she had some kind of zombification spell, and her eyes fell over the loot dropped.

“Humphrey! *What in the-*“