

Chapter 49

Theo-logy

Sally awoke with a start and sat forward. She had fallen asleep against Theo, and it was well into nighttime now. As she wiped the drool from her mouth, she stood and moved away from the Novice and low flame of the campfire. Theo may have trusted her enough, but she wasn't sure she could hold back if the urge came suddenly.

It was nice and cool away from the body heat of the Novice, and it helped awaken her. Humphrey sat on the other side of the fire facing the bandit campground gate. The fire from his helmet was barely visible, and he was statuesque, sword out and placed downwards in his hand like some kind of crimson-plated sentry.

Jackie was also asleep on a chair, over by one of the gate watchtowers. Slouched at an awkward angle with her repeating crossbow leaned against the side of the chair, easy to reach in an emergency. A small pile of cigarettes littered the ground around smart dress shoes slightly scuffed from the dusty dirt of the encampment.

Archie was curled up near the fire atop a barrel. She briefly wondered if the odd cat could talk through Party chat like Chuck used to be able to. What had the green Observer exactly taken away from her feline bodyguard? Something to prod the cat about in the morning - but if he couldn't see his Skills then she didn't have much confidence.

The zombie yawned and stretched her arms. It was rare to have a bit of quiet time to herself. A handful of days under her belt and it had been full tilt. Maybe she was just a bit too scared to face the voices bouncing around in her head. She exhaled. Slowly and as quietly as possible, she crept up the ladder to the other watchtower. The smooth wood of the ladder felt comforting under her hands before she clambered through the open hatch.

It was even cooler up here - the slight breeze that had become signature in this area came through unabated by the walls. Dark shadows of the trees surrounding the camp became an almost impenetrable wall of pitch black a few dozen feet past the first few layers of muted greenery. She sat down against the back wall, looking up above the woodland ahead of the camp at the tiny specks of stars covering the night sky. Were they even real?

Folding her arms, she jostled the STAR by accident. Hmm.

[Sally: hey Chuck, hope you didn't get dead yet]

[Sally: but if you did - hit me up!]

[Sally: we found a new friend, and a talking cat]

[Sally: haven't done any evil yet]

[Sally: *further* evil]

She paused and closed the chat. Morality had been buzzing around the back of her head since Chuck became human. Theo may have been swayed by her methods and intentions to defeat the System easily enough, but it had stung when Chuck had decided he couldn't be... evil.

Killing players was certainly evil to some degree, sure. When she was attacking the village to give a home to the goblins, it didn't feel so black and white. She rested her head on her folded arms, knees up to her chest as she squished herself into sitting in the corner of the watchtower. Anti-hero was the title she thought she could inherit. But she knew the real words that had become mired in the thick mud of her existence.

Selfish. Hypocritical. Impulsive.

There was no punchline there. No amount of manic quirkiness that she could use to slide across reality as if on ice. Was she still even the same Sally as in the diner? Did she even want to be? She had no anxiety, no mind goblins holding her back - she was powerful now. Her gut wanted out of the System as soon as she gained her soul, but maybe she wanted to stay here.

She shuddered at the thought. But... what about instead of breaking the System... they just bent it. Her brow furrowed as the words flowed through her head like the breeze. Priority One was seeing if there was a way to get the Players back to the real world. If that was not possible... what would the goal be? Equality for Unique Monsters so they were the same as Players? Change the System so it wasn't built on bloodshed?

Hypocritical again, she mused. Half of her still wanted to kill and consume everything. Grow stronger. Eat the System. It was like a curse - something driving her whether she wanted to or not. That was probably why she awoke with such resentment towards the System and Players.

A creak of the ladder drew her attention, and the ready-to-eat brain bowl of Theo popped up into the hatch. He turned to face her, his eyes squinting in the dark to pick her out in the shadow of the corner.

"Everything okay?" he whispered, hauling himself fully into the watchtower and sitting against the side opposite her.

"Just... Chuck got me a little shaken up." She brushed her hair from her face. "Like, I know I'm a train off the rails already - but am I at least careening in the right direction?"

There was a silence where she thought the Novice wasn't going to reply before he shifted and exhaled. "A derailed train is going against the grain no matter where it's headed. What really drives you?"

"*The System is unfair* - and there's no reason for it to be. Monsters deserve the same chance at living as Players do, and Players shouldn't be demigods in comparison just because they are human. If we are stuck in this world-"

"Othea."

"-then- *Othea*? That's what it's called?" She frowned at the shadowed shape across from her.

"That's what the Map says. We are on an island called Grace of Light. Looks like a croissant"

"*Huh*. Guess I should start paying more attention." Sally shook her head. "But anyway, if we have to stay here then I think it'll be fair to make things equal. Maybe just because I'm straddling both lanes."

"I can understand it." Theo shuffled to get more comfortable against the wooden logs of the wall. "It's like... *Hobgoblincide*, right? To a degree - doesn't matter whether you are human, elf, orc, a living skeleton - you are just as valid a character that can live and play the game."

"Unless you are a hobgoblin, of course," she added, "the only creature that is naturally evil and beyond redemption."

"So who are the 'hobgoblins' here? The system-created on both sides are without agency. Players and Unique Monsters have the choice of how to act and how to live."

Sally clucked her tongue and looked up at the peaked roof of the watchtower blocking what would be an otherwise lovely view of the night sky. "That's the thing then, there are no 'hobgoblins' as such. Or is that us? We've done our share of punching down."

"Players punch down at any Monster they can."

She grinned, her sharp teeth catching the barest of moonlight, leaving her an intimidating visage in the dark. "So it's decided then? We raise up Uniques and punch down at Players. Eventually, there should be some kind of equilibrium. Maybe end up with both sides just fighting the system-created?"

Theo scratched at his chin, the mild stubble rough. "That's... a *moderately* valid goal."

The zombie stood and looked out to the woods. "We will always be seen as evil though; we are Monsters after all. Well, you aren't."

"Maybe just a lower-case one?"

She grinned and nudged his side. Theo had done his share of the hard work, especially in the assault at Yarch. He seemed to be taking things well enough, even after she almost ate his brain. Either had an iron will or was disassociating. She would need to keep an eye on him. Not just for wondering how to cook him up.

Her eyes narrowed out to the woods - and then she ducked, grabbing the Novice and dragging him to a crouch too. Thankfully, he had the wherewithal to keep his surprise to hushed murmurs rather than a panic that she was about to eat him. She raised her eyes just over the wall.

A group of shadowed figures moved between the trees, getting close to the encampment. Theo followed suit and gulped as he squinted at the silhouettes. Sally licked her teeth and tried to pick out their details.

All Level Five. Paladin. Monk. Bard. Wizard. Rogue.

Her ability to see this information partially negated their attempt at subtlety - although had she not been awake and looking in this direction she would have never known. The group of five paused and huddled together.

"Probably talking through chat," Theo whispered. *"Should we...?"*

Sally slowly shook her head. She knew Humphrey was now awake, Archie too, and would be getting Jackie up. It had something to do with the Bodyguard condition. She didn't know exactly, but there was some kind of connection there. Like a shared mood or warning system. Her mind was wandering to avoid the current situation. A full group of Level Fives...

Humphrey still had the [Town Scroll]. At her word, they could be safe in Sanctuary. She was salivating though. *Her tongue itched.*

Quiet bloip.

She lowered down to cover her STAR as she opened the message.

[Humphrey: Hillan special?]

As the reference clicked into place, a sinister grin of sharp teeth widened across her face. Anticipation danced in her red eyes, and she turned to the Novice.

"How good are your knees, Theo?" She whispered, almost purring with malicious intent.