

## Chapter 15 End of the Line

[Hex: Slow]

“What, you’re not going for [/.Puppy]?” Humphrey asked, the slightest of smiles peaking at the edge of his jaw.

“Like I need any more errors in my life,” Sally shook her head, “it was clearly bait.”

If her friends were going to be slow coaches, then the Hex curse may level the field somewhat. Even if she switched them out for towering stacks of hamburger meat, like Theo - being able to slow down an enemy would be an advantage. [Upheaval] sounded alright, but didn’t really appeal.

“Level Three now,” she told herself, “any more surprises from the System? Anything I can now unlock?”

She let the silence of the woods around her answer. It was another pleasant day, by all accounts, as the sun gradually rose. The light breeze rustled through the part of her hair that wasn’t matted with dried blood. She yawned, despite the good rest. Another day travelling and avoiding the sun wasn’t the worst thing - but no doubt it wouldn’t be that easy. Sally flicked open her chat.

[Sally: Already have more skills than you, hamburger]

She closed the chat. “Alright, let’s get going to the tomb...” She peered out at the dense woods, turning almost a half-circle in trying to determine which direction to stroll.

“It’s this way,” the skull rolled his lack of eyes, before heading off in a direction she wasn’t looking.

“C’mon boys,” she waved at Suits and Chuck. The pair shambled along after her.

“There’s a small body of water nearby,” the skull offered as he floated along, “*so you could* get cleaned up.”

“Giving me lots of help now, Humps - you sure the big guy will like that?” She smiled at the Observer, with a quick flash of a wink.

“Making sure you are presentable does not go against my directive,” he responded, not looking back down at her.

“Are you going to join my Party now that I have openings? *Very* lucrative position.”

“I... am unable to - even if I so wished it. Observers are not capable of joining Parties.” This time he did look back to her, a hint of emotion on his skull-face. Was it sadness? Disgust?

Sally hopped over a fallen log, and stopped for a moment to watch her two zombies clamber over awkwardly. “Are Stats a choice too, like... where to assign them?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm, does that mean mine are still unassigned? Or because I am a Monster, they are automatically allocated? Wait, don’t answer if that’s just going to be a Yes.”

The Observer glanced between the woman and the two zombies picking themselves off of the grass floor.

“Can you see Stats? What did Theo have?” She leaned towards the skull with eyebrows raised, her hands pressed together in exaggerated interest.

“*All Strength*, pure damage only.”

Sally giggled - that sounded just like the dolt. She could picture him now, building for full damage with [Novice Strike] and trying to kill things in one hit - before they could turn around and paste him. She licked her lips thinking about him in paste form.

“I can tell your distribution, but not the exact numbers. They are oddly as cloudy to me as they are to you.”

She frowned up at the floating skull, drawn from her daydreams of Theo sandwich spread. If she wasn’t currently able to select her Stats, did it matter that much how they were distributed? “Pass. Let me know when I have some agency.”

They slid down a short, muddy embankment and her disguised boots splashed in a shallow stream. It flowed weakly, perpendicular to their direction of travel.

Chuck landed face first into the water, having tripped on the way down the decline of terrain. Suits stumbled through awkwardly but maintained footing.

“Could you *be* any more accident-prone, Chuck?” She brought up the Party information screen with a shake of her head. “You took more damage from that than you did fighting the Novices last night.”

With a flicker of her hand, the menus of the STAR spun around, pending notifications ignored as the holographic text disappeared. Sally began to walk downstream, watching the flickers of sunlight roll along the slight current of the water.

“What were we going to the tomb for again?” Humphrey flew up beside her. The question seemed more levelled at digging into her thought process, rather than an admission of absent-mindedness.

“The Quest said just to ‘investigate’ which I guess for a Player, it means go stab some undead. For me, that means go find some friends.” She kicked a loose rock into the stream.

“Seems like more a hub for danger,” the skull responded, flatly.

“Is that a veiled warning? I had considered that we wouldn’t be the only ones Questing there.” Sally pushed her blonde hair from her face and smiled up at the Observer. “More

chance for us to eat some newbies right? I need those Level Ups. [Mighty Aura] is nice, but something with regeneration or speed would fit better - especially now with [Hex: Slow].”

“I just don’t want to go back to my normal job so soon, *ha-ha*.”

The trek along the small ebbing stream was perhaps the more serene leg of their journey yet. Grass became richer shades of green, the breeze seemed to lull, and with less undead causing a ruckus in their wake the creatures of the woods were heard - even if not seen. Within a dozen minutes, the small group arrived at an open area where a small pond have developed at the end of the water flow.

A pool of reflective, and surprisingly clear, water glimmered under the gaze of the morning sunshine. Small flowers and other greenery sprung up from around its edges - almost looking like mini-woods of their own, with blooms of white and yellow amongst deep verdant grasses. A butterfly of mottled reds and black fluttered from a grouping of flowers and out into the woods beyond.

Sally whistled at the view, as she knelt down by the edge of the water and looked at her reflection.

“Huh. I do look quite the state, and my complexion has seen better days.” She touched the surface of the pool, sending the barest of ripples out.

“For a corpse... I’ve certainly seen worse. There will be an option on your STAR to clean yourself up.”

She wasn’t too sure whether to take the first part of that as a compliment or not, and gave the skull a narrowed side-eye, but relented to checking out her wrist UI.

[Clean/Wash?]

After a quick tap, she watched a progress bar fill over the course of five seconds. With little fanfare, once it was completed - her clothes were as good as new. She peered back into the pool - and the previous smears of dark, dried blood were gone from her face and hair.

“Not sure how I feel about that,” Sally held her arms out to check their cleanliness, “seems a bit arbitrary.”

“*Ha-ha*. I suppose it does seem out of place considering you have had to do most things manually.” Humphrey floated out over the pool and looked down at his own reflection.

“Pfft.” She took her boots off, the visual of her sneakers also vanishing, and sat with her feet barely in the water. “Feels odd... not as relaxing as expected, but still a relief for my weary soles. Let me check my notifications.”

[Theo: Level 8 (: ]

“Show off,” she smiled, closing the chat. It had been nice seeing Theo. Despite their brief meeting in the before-time, he was something of an anchor to reassure her that she wasn’t going mad.

Asking her to get rid of the Novices farming in his area was surprisingly callous... and it excited her.

Her toes tapped in the shallows of the pond. She hadn't been this bloodthirsty in her previous life, right? It had been easy to become the role of a Monster - or perhaps that was by design. Surely if she had been reborn as a Player, she would have just as eagerly been slaying monsters - so it shouldn't be *that* different. Eating people still felt a little weird.

Chuck also reminded her of her past. A familiar figure that she couldn't quite place yet. Even that didn't make much sense though. Where was his soul? If he had become a Player then why was he a zombie here - but if he hadn't become a Player, then where was his soul? Surely not still in the zombie, Humphrey had said Monsters were System created. Herself the exception of course. Still, it did make her worry about the clumsy zombie.

She turned her gaze back to the Observer who was still looking at himself in the pool. "Humphrey, am I evil?"

The skull turned to regard the zombie, his purple energy illuminating a circle of the pool beneath him. "Morality is relative."

"Weak answer," she shook her head, "does the System regard me as evil?"

The Observer floated across the pool close to her, as ripples expanded and slowly faded from his movement. "As a Monster, your goal is to be a hindrance and obstacle to Players, which you have been doing. As a Player, your goal is to grow in power and defeat obstacles. I'd say you are doing well in the eyes of the System."

"Doing *well*, but not doing *good*." She sighed and ran her finger through the soft dirt at the water's edge.

"That is a conundrum. You will have to reconcile with yourself; I am not here to judge." Humphrey turned away slowly and tilted to the side.

Sally paused and frowned in the direction he was looking, holding a breath of air. The gentle breeze roamed through the leaves of the trees around them, the slight sound of birds chirping from behind, and a few lazy insects buzzed around the edge of the water.

Even the two zombies took the unspoken hint to remain silent briefly.

And then she heard it.