

Chapter 70 True Villainry

As the dark sky rumbled with thunder, the coach slid to a halt, turning sideways. Figures burst from within and joined the Cleric as he hovered in the air.

“Sally the Unliving,” he called out, slight mania in his voice, “I have come to wipe you, and Monsters like you, from this fine land.”

“It’s actually *Queen of the Dead* now!” She wrinkled her nose up and turned to Theo. “Or was it *Undead*?”

The vampire said nothing, but his tired wandering eyes had turned to sharp focus as he glared at the newcomers.

She did the same as the floating Player seethed at her response.

There was a large alligator-looking man, a woman in dark clothing, a small insect in a business suit, and an orc with a black flaming skull. Oh - this last one might be interesting. She raised an eyebrow at her two ex-Observers.

“Do you feel that too, little brother?” Humphrey muttered in a low voice. He shook his head after realising what he had said.

“Yes, he has become corrupt.”

Sally frowned. A bad Observer? She wasn’t really one to judge - technically her Party were bad guys, and two had joined her. But there was something about the Cleric and his apparent necessity to bug her that seemed even more evil. Like, at least she mostly didn’t harass people.

“Your title means nothing; I will scour every memory of you from this place! I have killed you five times already. I can do it again just as easily.”

A pang of nausea ran through her. So... *she had* been a normal zombie since the start of the System. Killed and reborn until her soul forced its way back in. There had always been a chance that was the case, but now knowing it for sure, it made her irrationally angry.

“It’s like us,” Theo’s voice wavered, “Unique Monsters following a Player.”

“He was normal before.” She shook her head. “Kind of a prick, but not some demonic angel thing. Humps?”

The Death Knight exchanged a quick look with the cat before responding. “Must be a glitch.”

That didn’t seem super believable. She turned her head to watch the mobster run over, her long legs hopping over all the corpses along the way.

“Ay, Boss.” She grinned, her hat dripping as the rain pooled around the rim.

“Why didn’t you stay up on the platform?”

“Oh. Seemed like we were doing a little gang versus gang thing here.” She pointed a long finger out to the other Party. “The rest of you schmucks are here already, and I didn’t want to miss out on getting some lumps of my own.”

Sally shrugged. Her head was already swimming with conflicting feelings, and the line across her face where she had been cut still ached. “Hey Theo,” she nudged him, ignoring whatever the Cleric had started to ramble on about. “How bad does my face look?”

He turned to her and bit his lower lip, exposing his fangs. “Honestly? That’s pretty gnarly - but I bet it’ll turn into a badass scar.”

“Did you just say *gnarly*?” She feigned puking. It did make her feel better about it though. Although you weren’t supposed to scar here, it was certainly possible for bad enough wounds. Maybe she would delay her next healing item usage...

Archie stretched out and yawned. “Are they going to talk forever or what?”

Sally cleared her throat. “Hey, Monsters? Why not join with us? We won’t force you to fight, and you can just live as you are?”

A burst of crimson flared from the false halo of the Cleric. His Uniques gave each other a quick glance, but the red hue was reflected in their eyes.

“Aw,” she leaned against Theo. Her arm felt sleepy. The break had mended, but it was still fragile. “I think he has them under control - they are fighting under duress.”

“Except for the orc.” Humphrey shook his head. “We will need to kill at least two of them.”

“I guess I have dibs on the Cleric then,” Sally rolled her eyes.

“I’ll take the gal with the nice hair,” Jackie blurted out quicker than she anticipated.

“Orc” - “Orc” Archie and Humphrey both said in tandem.

“Ah, I don’t want to fight the lizardman,” Theo rubbed the back of his neck. “What am I going to bite there?”

“Well, would you rather bite the bug?” Sally prodded him.

“I’ll take the bug, I guess,” Archie growled, shooting his emerald eyes at the Death Knight.

“Rock, Paper, Scissors for not-the-croc, Humphrey?” Theo held out a bladed hand.

Humphrey shrugged. “I don’t know what that means, but I would like to face my fallen brother.”

“*Fiiine.*” The vampire deflated.

Not being able to see Levels certainly made things less stressful. Sally rubbed her chin. You would have thought that it would be the opposite, but they had enough Luck and plot armour to win something that was on approximately even standing. Having everyone pick an opponent was a simple way to keep them focused and made things...

"Hey guys, what if we don't split five-on-five? Could we all just focus on the Cleric and pop him quicker?" She raised her eyebrow and raised her tired arms in an exaggerated shrug.

"I'm not sure how fair that'd be," Theo mumbled.

She watched his exhausted expression with concern. "Do you need a *coffin* to sleep in?"

His mouth hung agape, and he turned back to her, his eyes wide. "Yes! That sounds so nice!"

"*Quit talking amongst yourselves!*" The Cleric yelled out. A bolt of radiant energy formed in his hand. "You. Will. Listen." He threw the bolt down towards the zombie.

Humphrey stepped in the way to block it - the fizz as it struck his armour didn't cease and he dropped to one knee in front of her.

Sally gasped and circled around him; the bolt remained embedded in his collarbone area, melting away at his armour.

"Don't touch," the Death Knight growled, grabbing it himself and wrenching it from the wound. His plated fingers smouldered just from contact. "I advise not getting hit by those."

The Cleric spread his arms wide, and five of the bolts appeared in an arc above his head. "Time to salt the earth," he spat, willing his Party onwards.

"Alright *Outsiders*, let's uh, keep up our trend of not dying. I want at least four of you to survive." She gave them a wink and flashed her sword forward, ignoring the nervous glances between the rest of them.

Jackie immediately let off an [Explosive Shot] at the female Monster, the silver-haired woman vanishing from the impact and shimmering into view a dozen feet to the side.

Archie hopped forward and turned completely blue, activating some unknown skill.

Humphrey exhaled and activated [Dead King's Court] again, empowering his undead allies as he strode towards the orc.

Theo very unenthusiastically jogged towards the large lizardman.

Sally sprinted forward as the radiant bolts shot down towards her. She zig-zagged and dodged, sparks flying from the cobblestone road as the attacks missed her. Two of the recent zombies were struck and exploded with golden sparks. Once each shot was spent, she waved a fist into the air. "You going to come down here and fight?"

Wild light danced behind the dark eyes of the Cleric. He dropped to the floor, his black wings relaxing and blowing a wave of dust dramatically towards her. In his hand, a mace of red energy appeared. "I've been waiting for this moment for a long time."

"Funny," Sally slid to a stop to size him up, "I hadn't thought of you at all."

[Hell Trigger] shot bolts from Betty in quick succession, each one hitting the blur of the moving woman. Jackie cursed as her opponent darted and then appeared right before her, sinking a blade into her side. The hood raised to reveal a beautiful dark elf, a slight sadness in her large opal eyes.

Theo cast [Sanguine Weapon] as the lizardman drew twin scimitars. His first punch was blocked, and he had to roll away from the second. Something struck him from behind, lacerating his thigh - the tail of the large Monster also held a scimitar. "Three against three," he grimaced from the pain as he watched the long mouth of the lizardman curl into a smile in return.

Archie stopped and blew a gust of ice spray at the insect-person; a cone of super-cooled air and snowflakes blasted the air and iced over the rain-slick road. The Monster was no longer there as the hue rescinded. Dropping from the sky, the bug rolled towards the cat and lashed out with twin whips. The cat hissed as one struck his flank, flaying a patch of fur from his skin.

"I am the Architect!" He growled as energy began to pulse around his tiny feet.

The Monster clicked and chirped in response, an antennae raised in challenge.

[Adrenaline] pulsed through the Death Knight as he levelled his sword towards the orc with the flaming skull for a head. "It is a shame to meet under such circumstances, brother."

"Hah!" Black flame pulsed from the Monster. "We are nothing like brothers." He pulled a sword made of black metal from his back.

"You forget your station, the Architect-"

"The Architect is dead! And yet you cling to his teet still." The empty sockets of the orc narrowed as a crooked grin crossed along his teeth.

Humphrey growled and stood still in a defensive stance. "So soon you would fall in with those who would destroy the System?"

"Look who is talking, 'brother'." The orc flourished his blade and stood still opposed to the Death Knight.

"There is a new normal coming to the System, and we are trying to allow it to flourish. We are the protectors, and we must find out how the Architect came to pass."

The Orc laughed, cackling out against the sound of battle and rainfall. A flash of lightning cast hideous shadows amongst them.

“Well let me make this easy for you before I kill you.” He crouched, ready to spring forth.

“I am one of those who killed the Architect.”

The two once-Observers leapt towards each other, anger burning within both of them.