

Chapter 43 Fewer Still

Sally slumped against a large rock as they stopped for a breather. The temperature had been consistently mild all day, but the amount of walking in their armour was slowly draining their stamina. Theo withdrew a water flask and wiped the sweat from his brow.

Humphrey was the only one of the three who didn't seem to be too bothered. "Theo, have you used a [Skill Book] yet - I assume not?"

The Novice gasped as he gulped down some of the fresh water and nodded. "Never found one and I was not in the villages often to purchase."

"What's [Skill Book]," Sally frowned, "and why is this the first I'm hearing of it?"

Humphrey shrugged. "There's a lot of things you don't know - I can't stand around talking about everything. It is more efficient to just bring it up when it is most important."

Sally said nothing but narrowed her eyes at the Death Knight.

"It's basically an item that lets you unlock a new skill. My understanding was that it works on First Classes and above - since you know, Novices only get the one skill." Theo rubbed the back of his neck, reminded of his inadequacies.

"Do you have one Humphrey? Is that why you're bringing it up?" She stood back up and ogled the plated bodyguard - maybe he got one from the village?

"No, ha-ha. I would have given it over already or used it myself. They are worth their weight in-"

"We'd all need one," Theo diplomatically interjected having seen the twitch in Sally's eye start-up, "if we can all use one, anyway."

"Hence my question. I do wonder if an over-levelled Novice could use it to gain a new skill. Or could a Monster?"

"Or half-Monster half-Player," Sally added, not wanting to be left out of the decision. "It would be a big boost in power to any of us."

They all nodded in silence, perhaps secretly plotting to be the first to attempt to use something that they didn't have or know how to find. Sally slyly glanced between the other two. Humphrey had pretty decent skills already that suited him, and he had a clear progression for what may come next. Theo only had one skill, so a second one would be swell if he could even get anything considering Novices don't have any to achieve after [Novice Strike].

She, however, had the whole breadth of the System to draw potential skills from. What if she could suddenly [Summon Dragon], [Remove Soul], or [Eat Theo]? The skill could also be as useless as [Novice Strike], she supposed. With great randomness comes risk. Maybe she

could eat loads of these books and become overpowered? There was probably some limit to them - she would wait till they had at least one before getting disappointed by the reality.

“Did you know Henkk had a whole Matrix thing going on?” Sally shuffled her feet on the loose stone as she glanced at Theo.

“How so?”

“It was like... a video game.” Those words burst forth into her brain with a warm but uncomfortable energy. “*Video game*,” she repeated to herself.

“Huh? Hmm.” The Novice looked into the air and sucked at his teeth, although he was having the same word-gasm. “Like... he could see past the code? It wasn’t just a teleport power then.”

Humphrey was silent, his arms folded as he regarded the pair discussing. They really should get moving again if they wanted to reach the Bandits before dusk... but Observing was a habit hard lost. He glanced out towards the woods behind him to watch for movement.

“There was a little room he’d made, sort of outside the System - although I’m not sure how true that was. It was like if you clip through the terrain in a game and there’s just emptiness.” She placed her chin in her palms as she sat on a warm rock.

The Novice contemplated this for a while, staring now at the ground with a furrowed brow as if he expected to see through the illusion. “It definitely makes some manner of sense. That we are in a game, I mean.” He looked up at the zombie, but his frown remained. “The stats, items, skills, everything kind of reminds me of something like...”

“*Hobgoblincide?*”

Theo clicked his fingers. “Yes! Like a tabletop roleplaying game... just kind of real. And painful.”

The Death Knight tilted his head and finally spoke. “Players are usually not aware of the past life. Certainly not details of... whatever it is you’re talking about.”

“An RPG is like the System except you play it by proxy with your imagination,” Sally rolled her eyes, “instead of the opposite, here. They usually have progression and classes - Monsters to slay and loot.”

Humphrey returned a blank stare. For a moment, the only sound was the lapping of the red flames from his helmet. “Well,” he finally announced, “that makes my existence seem less... *I don’t know*. I suppose I was always a meaningless pawn of something greater.”

Sally shook her head. “Naw. Humps, you are part of the Outsiders now - remember? The Party that will be the [Death of the Party]. Wait, why did that box up?”

“Hmm,” Theo tapped at his STAR, “seems that links to an archived text document - like a lore file or something. It’s locked though, can’t access.”

“Tease,” Sally clucked her tongue, eyeing the Novice over for double measure.

“We’d best head out.” Humphrey rolled his shoulders out and flexed his plated legs. “Let’s get the Bandit Unique on our side before dinner, huh?”

She threw up her hands in resignation.

By the time the outskirts of the Bandit encampment were visible, the sun was indeed waning towards the horizon. Why had the System decided that everything had to be so bloodydamn far apart? It was one of the things that irked her most about this world. It made finding people to eat difficult - especially if they just let some of them go. She glanced over to Theo.

“You know much about the layout, Humphrey?” The Novice said, narrowing his eyes at the wooden log walls ahead of them.

The Death Knight rubbed his metal chin. “You know, it is harder to recall certain details since severing my connection.” He tilted his head at Theo and grinned. “There are three sections of the camp - an outside within the walls, a secondary camp built around the entrance to a cavern, with the third being structures inside the mountain.”

“Each tougher to blast through, I assume?”

“Yes, *ha-ha*.”

Sally bit her lip and forced her gaze away from the Novice and towards the walls ahead of them. As much as her confidence wanted her to blaze ahead, the prospect of trying to take down such an entrenched encampment with just the three of them was a slight concern in the back of her mind.

“What Level are they?” She asked, idly tapping a finger against her sheathed dagger.

“Mostly Two. The first area has a Level Three leader - the second has a Level Four.”

“The third area?”

Humphrey grinned at her and shrugged. “That will be the Unique Monster, I presume.”

Sally slowly exhaled through her nose. “Well, let’s get started before it gets dark. Game plan?”

“I think our orc-plan worked out pretty well, *ha-ha*.”

“Right? So you take aggro, I’ll bring out some zombie friends while you stun, then Theo can take on those outside the stun range while we mop up?” She beamed at them both as they nodded their agreement.

Humphrey lumbered out in front as Theo opened up his STAR menus.

“Here,” he withdrew something from his Inventory and passed it to her, “I forgot I had this because it requires First Class to wear - but you might be able to wear it?”

He placed a small metal ring in her dead hand. A plain band in a dirty silver colour with etchings in light green across it.

“A ring, Theo? I feel that is just too easy to make a joke about. So I’m not going to.” She bit her tongue to stop something coming out and slipped the ring on.

“Looks like it works then,” he smiled sheepishly, “it has Resistance against Slashing damage. So unless all the Bandits have hammers, it should help.”

“The orcs dealt Slashing damage too...”

“Like I said, I only just remembered!” He edged away from her as they walked towards the outpost.

“Well better late than never. I do appreciate it,” she moved some hair from her face, “you just earned a few more days of remaining uneaten.”

“Hey, I’m a hardened outlaw now, those sorts of threats don’t-“

“If you two could please stop.” Humphrey stopped to look over his shoulder. His cape fluttered dramatically as the flames from his helmet rose higher. “Some manner of surprise would be beneficial to our assault.”

Sally waited for the Death Knight to turn back around before sticking her tongue out at him. Theo smiled but turned his attention to the fight ahead.

“Hmm, in saying that,” Humphrey tilted his head as he pointed a plated hand forward, “the gate is already open.”

The logged walls, which stood a good twenty feet high at pointed tips, broke at one section where a large gate would presumably be closed. Two watchtowers over each side of the opening were vacant, and the entrance was indeed wide open as the Death Knight had noted.

They sidled up to the wall and moved slowly towards the gate opening, drawing their weapons. Sally could hear no sound coming from within. She wasn’t too sure what noises she expected, but a group of people would make some kind of noise.

She pushed to the front of the three of them as they reached the thick post that the gate would hitch to when closed. Slowly she peered around the edge to observe the camp.

Her eyes narrowed over empty wooden shacks, topped chairs and crates, a dying campfire, and two scores of bloodied bodies strewn across the area.