

Chapter 38 Punishment

"Hello, Observer P-2T." Humphrey crossed his arms.

"We had reports that you went dark. You find yourself in interesting company."

"Hah Patootie is a funny name," Sally grinned. "What did you come here for? Telling Humphrey off?"

"Humphrey? How amusing. *Ho-ho*." The green skull nodded in the air. "I am just here to observe—"

"Heard it before," she stuck her tongue out and pulled a face. "Are you going to eventually join me too?"

"Sally, please," Humphrey shook his head. "Green has a deeper knowledge of the System; they would be able to see—"

"I can see how you are all wrong. Far too much Strength, Constitution, and sass for a zombie. [Player: Theo] has circumvented his Class selection, [Player: Chuck] is a whole bundle of issues. Observer HM-3.3 you have broken protocol and become a Monster - not to mention the destruction of the Novice village of Yarch." Patootie hovered in the air.

"So what do you intend to do about it?" Humphrey narrowed his eye sockets, and the flame behind his helmet flickered brighter.

"For now... nothing."

"Then why assault us with the unnecessary tension?" Sally growled.

"My directive is to ensure the System is believable and cohesive. Your Party and their actions are cause for concern, but I am yet to determine if you threaten the—"

"Oh, so you're just giving us a vibe check?" Chuck piped up from the back, the pair of Novices having been quietly listening in on the conversation.

"Despite being borne of error and malpractice," the green Observer glared at the Death Knight, "you are still working within the terms of the System. I anticipate that the Regiment from Poppybrook shall overtake Yarch in due course and any anomalies shall be taken care of."

"Ah, so you're not reporting us to the big boss because you think we'll be dead soon?" Sally shook her head at the indignation.

"Very smart for a zombie," the green glow buzzed, "very *astute*. The Peacekeeper Regiment is the cure to the disease that you represent - they represent the System working as intended."

"That's a bit harsh," Theo murmured, rubbing the back of his neck.

Humphrey grinned, a twinkle of red fire lighting in his eye sockets. "What if we repel the Peacekeepers?"

"I don't deal in hypotheticals. *I will* be keeping watch over you all." With that, the Observer vanished from view.

"Creepy," Chuck grimaced, "what was that?"

"Monitoring bots, Humphrey used to be one," Theo said.

The Death Knight sighed. "It's fair to assume we will be under constant observation now. It is unlikely they will show themselves, nor we be able to detect them."

"They felt it needed to come to taunt you though. Sounded personal." Sally nudged the plated undead. "Our plan doesn't change, right?"

"Yes. The plan does not change. Let us head out to the bandits."

The group turned to leave as Chuck flipped off the empty space where the skull had been with both hands before he caught them up.

"Like I'm going to follow the advice of the guy carrying a wooden sword."

Sally sighed. "Would you two stop bickering? You are worse than Humphrey and I."

Humphrey frowned and shrugged at the insinuation as she continued.

"Theo is actually rather effective, even if he has chosen a really stupid build."

The Level Nine Novice opened his mouth but then thought better of arguing. Likewise, Chuck rolled his eyes and looked off into the surrounding woods.

Travelling with people who could talk was a lot more hassle than when it was just Humps and herself, Sally thought. She liked both of the men individually, but the drudgery of walking just caused them to find ways of annoying each other. Only Humphrey didn't seem to be too perturbed, which was surprising given the now real threat of the System watching him.

She shook these thoughts away and turned to the Death Knight. "What do we know about the bandits?"

"Should be a small outpost, maybe several dozen bandits at most. Not too powerful, but we should exercise caution; the Unique bandit will be a complication."

Sally nodded despite *several* leaving a lot of smudged detail. "Before the bandit camp..."

"You want to get the newb levelled up first?"

“Perfect, glad you’re on my wavelength, Humps.” She beamed at the crimson-plated figure. Sure, it may be because he was her bodyguard, but there was a link between them - a trust and understanding that she didn’t feel with anyone else.

“There’s a short detour we can take.” He turned his head to Theo. “There’s an orc encampment slightly to the west - not as far as you encountered, but in that direction.”

The Novice nodded. “Seemed a bit weird at the time, like a hunting party? That was the first time I’d seen them that side of the woods though.”

“Interesting.” The helmet flames flickered wildly briefly.

Sally knew what that meant - more bugs or glitches to contend with. Hopefully just something like the Cyclops, and not anything to distract them from their task.

“Am I going to be able to get to Level Five and change Class?” Chuck nudged up between the zombie and Humphrey.

“Killing some orcs? Probably not, although-“ The Death Knight stopped dead in his tracks.

Chuck tripped over the now stationary plated feet and landed face down on the road. As Sally and Theo exchanged a look, they helped the young Novice up.

“Hmm.” Humphrey knelt down and observed the road before looking into the woods on the right.

Sally joined him and narrowed her eyes. The grass just off of the road had been flattened, and patches of trampled mud showed through. A handful of bushes between the trees had been shredded and equally thrashed to pieces as if something, or many things, had blazed through the area.

“What does it look like?” She crossed her arms.

“Looks like... boars?” Theo offered with a shrug. “There’s the occasional group spaced around parts of the woods.”

“Theo is correct,” the Death Knight stood back up, “although they are not normally so destructive. They graze or run from Players, but return to their area. This looks like a stampede that tore through across the road into...” He turned and pointed to the left side of the woods - where they could now see some similar damage.

“Must of been a lot of lil piggies to churn up that mud,” Chuck idly gestured to the turned earth. “How many boars are usually in a pack?”

Humphrey shrugged. “Between five and ten, at a guess. This looks like two dozen or so, at my estimation.”

Sally rubbed her forehead. Just once it would be nice to go half a day without some part of the System doing something untoward. “You seeing this greenie?” She looked up into the clear sky. “Much more pressing matters to attend to than our group of weirdos.”

If the Observer was there, it gave no sign of acknowledgement.

"I'm not sure if 'weirdos'-" Theo began.

"Hush, puppy." Sally wagged her finger. "There's been too many words and not enough sustenance. You'll want to be on the good side of these gnashers." She pointed to her sharp, pointed teeth for emphasis.

"Wait," Chuck interjected, "so if Players are humans, and you only eat them - you're murdering actual people?"

An awkward silence fell amongst the group as they stood still on the road. Theo especially looked down at his feet as the zombie tried to come up with a concise excuse.

"Short answer... yes?" She shrugged sheepishly.

"In fairness," Theo added, "Players are hunting Sally down, so it's mostly self-defence."

"Mostly." She agreed with a nod. "It's not like Theo, who didn't even eat the ones he killed. Oh - maybe we should have swapped Leaders for that?"

"You're not helping your case." Chuck swept his messy hair from his forehead, scowling up at the bright sunny day. "It's not that I judge the morality of it - this must be some kind of weird dream or virtual reality thing, right? We might just go back to our normal lives when we die."

They all cautiously eyed up Humphrey, who returned a blank expression. "I know nothing of your previous lives or how you come to be here. I apologise."

"It's okay, Humps." Sally nudged him. "We'll just assume we aren't committing wholesale slaughter on innocents until proven otherwise."

"I plan on repressing and avoiding any thought of it," Theo rubbed the sweat from his hands across his Novice armour, "and hopefully just die before becoming accountable."

"That's the spirit," Sally nodded, shooting him finger-guns. "Now let's go kill some orcs, so Chuck can be more useful than you."

Chuck rolled his eyes.

They set back off up the road in the hopes of not coming across the rampaging boar horde. Sally ran up her STAR menus, checking for any notifications. Naturally, the daily reward sat unclaimed - as was now tradition. With no better way to build a little suspense, she decided now was as good a time as any to retrieve it.

[Day Eight Reward]

Her right eye twitched; it was definitely not Day Eight.