

Chapter 2.29

Less than the Whole

Several bolts slammed into Sally as all six figures opened fire. After the first volley, they paused.

“Ow,” she grunted, pulling one from her shoulder. “That’s not too nice.”

Not that she wasn’t hurting from the assault, but her armor had managed to absorb most of the damage and even deflect a couple of the bolts. Again, this must be the System becoming more game-like in this area. If that were to happen in the Forest area - well, six bolts would probably have killed her or at least put her in a terrible situation.

They raised their weapons again to fire once more.

“Ah-ah,” she held up a hand. “I’m giving you a chance to give up before I kill you all.” She grinned as her eyes blazed crimson. Maybe eating a few brains would cheer her up.

One of the figures in the center brought down the cover from their face to reveal a woman with tan skin and deep brown hair tied up in a bun. “Who or *what* are you?” Her tone was apprehensive but stern.

“Tired and hungry. And Sally,” she added. “The other way around. Uh. Are you... Players?” She narrowed her eyes in return - the woman didn’t look like a Unique.

“We are. You... seem like you are too? My name is Lana.” She lowered her weapon, but the other five did not.

Sally’s eye twitched. Player brains would be even nicer to consume - plus that was extra stats depending on what class they were - most likely advanced classes by now. She wiped the drool from her mouth. “I’m a bit of a mixed bag. The System broke me - half Monster, half Player. Super friendly, though, unless you want to try and fill me with more bolts.” She hoped they did.

“That sounds... unfortunate.” Lana narrowed her eyes and didn’t seem to know what to make of the zombie. “You’ve made it this far, though... alone?”

“Not alone. Odd Party and their whereabouts is a bit of a long story.” As much as she liked talking, finding at least Humphrey was top of her priority list. Right after potentially eating six brains.

One of the cloaked figures moved to whisper into Lana’s ear, and she nodded to them. “If you were traveling with a Death Knight, then he is one of the fractured tunnels.”

“Fractured tunnels?” She repeated, half anticipating the answer based on the name.

“The System is a bit... fucky,” Lana shrugged, “especially down in some of these tunnels where everything has been forced underground.” She paused and wrinkled up her nose. “Say, you’re not working for the dragon, are you?”

“Far from it,” Sally shook her head. “Wanted to eat him or turn him into a mount, hopefully.”

“Okay. That seems unlikely, yet I fully believe that is your intent.” Lana shrugged. “Some of the tunnels, the System errors when trying to place - that is my assumption - and they have been fractured into... different planes of reality if that makes sense?”

Sally looked around. Mostly she wondered why the group of six had been hiding in the wall to jump out and surprise her - that seemed like an odd thing to do since she was down here randomly. It was suspicious, in fact. But there was something else that she could almost... taste in the air.

“It does make sense,” she eventually concluded. “So why are you... all of you, down here lying in wait?”

Lana narrowed her eyes at the choice of phrasing. “I get a notion when someone is down here.”

“All of you?” Sally grinned and wagged her eyebrows.

The woman sighed in response and rubbed her face. “Smart little shit, aren’t you?” Resigning to the reveal, she gestured for the group to lower their disguises.

One after another, the dark cladding used to blend into the cavern was removed to reveal - they were all Lana.

“Neat,” Sally nodded. “So you glitched through the tunnels in certain ways, and the System duplicated you?” That seemed super odd for a Player, but who was she to talk?

“Something to that effect.” Lana hooked her crossbow to her belt and crossed her arms. “They are me, but they’re not me - I’m the one with the soul, still. If that’s what you call it.”

A couple of glares from the other Lana’s gave the hint that they might not all believe that, but the woman continued.

“It’s not all great - my effective power is actually split. As one Lana, I would be level Sixteen, but as six, I’m - well, it’s about Five or Six, I reckon.”

“Aw,” Sally pouted. She had hoped that absorbing all those attacks was because of how useful her new armor was, not because her opponent was weak. Still, crossbow bolts had proved pretty fatal regardless of Level, so maybe she shouldn’t be so sad. “Oh,” her train of thought switched tracks. “Does that mean my friend might duplicate?”

“Based on his current travel route,” she closed her eyes. “No.”

“Are you in a Party of all your clones? Oh, but there’s six of you.”

“We figured that it would be fair to not exclude one of us, so no.”

Sally licked her lips. “I could help with that.”

“You have a free space in your Party?” Lana tilted her head.

Free space in her stomach, Sally grinned to herself. Although it might not be polite to ask to eat your new friend’s clone. Even if it was a spare one. Or at least the one not currently in charge.

She briefly considered if the talking Lana was a decoy and the real one sat to the side to observe with less personal danger. That would be smart.

“No,” she eventually relented. “Part of my long story is me and Big Boots were heading to the Eternal Sands dungeon to rescue a friend that the tax collectors kidnapped.”

Lana nodded. “Sounds like a Player thing to do. You didn’t seem like much of a Hero on account of being... what I assume is a zombie? Do you eat brains?”

Sally narrowed her eyes. Not that she had the moral high ground or anything, but if the woman turned on her because of her penchant for consuming smart jello then - well, Lana was pretty weak. It would make for a short meal, but perhaps then she would be lost and unable to find Humphrey.

“Some, usually just Monsters. Some Players take offense with my existence, and I’ve had to defend myself.” She shrugged. That was mostly the truth.

“Defend yourself by eating their brains?”

“Waste not, want not. Look, at the start, my desire was for wanton destruction of the System - eat everything that opposed me. But in finding my friends and how the System truly was, I became a bit more nuanced in what I chose to consume. It’s still pretty evil to eat Player brains, but I give them a chance to be friends or run away.” *Usually*, she added inside her head.

“Like you are with me?” Lana tapped her foot and smiled.

“You shot me first, I’d be well within my rights.” Sally grinned to show off her sharp teeth.

“Fair.” The woman turned and looked further down in the tunnel. “Been a while since I’ve had someone to talk to, to be honest. You said there was just you and your one friend?”

“Yeah, why?” Sally furrowed her brow.

“Something else is approaching the Death Knight.”

Humphrey exhaled through his nose. Or, at least, the holes where his nose would be if he didn’t have a skeletal face. The pang of danger sense had faded, so whatever had threatened Sally was no longer an issue. Whether that meant she had killed it or befriended it - no, it was much more likely that she had made friends with whatever it was.

Briefly, he considered how she had that effect on people. He supposed that since she was a half-human Player and half-zombie Monster, she could see both sides of the coin. Either something was a threat, or if not - then why not get along? Plated fingers ground across his chin. He didn’t quite see it that way, but it had worked out well for them so far.

If they could ally up with Edward, or at least find a way to stop him from annoying them constantly, then...

The Death Knight paused and turned slowly.

Shadows and rock. His grip tensed on the handle of the greatsword. Humphrey knew when something was afoot. But this wasn't just a demon to bug him for loose change. The air had cooled in anticipation of the reveal.

"Show yourself," he growled out, his deep voice carrying down into the pitch black of the cavern.

Three eyes of burning green energy popped up amongst the shadows, a good dozen feet in the air.

<Why? What will you do once you see me?>

The voice carried like the wind yet coursed through the Death Knight's hearing like sandpaper. He winced and leveled his blade in preparation.

"Depends. Are you friend or foe?" He was not as good as Sally at the small talk and could feel the imminent fight looming his way already.

<Oh-ho-ho>

The eyes came closer, as the radiant crimson pulsing from the Death Knight began to illuminate the massive shape of a creature that shouldn't exist. A horror beyond comprehension that even sent a chill down Humphrey's spine. As a wide maw filled with hundreds of reflective teeth caught the bloodied light filling the area, he spoke again.

<I am much worse than both, Humphrey>