

Chapter 13

Taste of Blood

“THEO?”

The slime-murder paused and stumbled backwards as he brushed the messy brown hair from his face.

“W-what the... *Sally?*” His green eyes darted wildly between the zombie woman before him and the three other undead who glared at him eagerly.

“Stand down, for now,” he hissed back at her Party before addressing the man again. “You killed my pet, you jerk.” Sally crossed her arms and kicked a lump of the former slime away.

“I... why are you a zombie? And you can talk?” His words stumbled out of his mouth as he struggled to process the situation.

“More importantly,” Humphrey hovered down and made himself visible to Theo, “how are you a Level Seven Novice?”

Sally frowned and checked above the man - the Observer was, of course, correct - a number Seven and the icon for a Novice hovered over Theo.

“Let’s have a seat,” she sighed, “and we will go over everything, okay?” She sheathed her dagger and gestured to a log lining this passageway.

Theo nodded and put his sword away nervously.

The rest of the Party went and followed a butterfly around as the pair sat down, the Observer hovering in front of them. Sally was surprised to find she was not nervous sitting next to the man dressed in basic leather armour, but why should she be? Theo, however, looked like he was sweating every last drop from his body - threatening to shrivel up.

“I’ll start,” Sally smiled diplomatically, “it’s quite the coincidence seeing you again, Theo. I see you have become a Player in this world.”

“Yeah... everyone kind of did. I woke up near the diner, but it looked overrun by the undead, so I went into the forest to do some starter quests.”

“I was in the diner. So were my friends here. I didn’t get to be a Player.” She frowned and looked down at her feet, covered in slime.

“Oh, you’re an actual *Monster* then?”

“Do I look like a Monster, Theo?”

He licked his lips to wet them. “I mean, *yeah*. For a zombie, very sassy maybe, but you are also travelling with a Party of Monsters too... I didn’t know they could do that.” He frowned and glanced nervously at the three corpses glaring up at a branch where the bug had landed.

“Monsters can’t,” the Observer interjected, “Sally is an interesting case where the System has put her between Player and Monster.”

She nodded. “I don’t have all the Player stuff. It’s... glitchy.” Turning her head back at him, she pulled a confused face. “So how are you Level Seven? Humps said Novice goes up to Five?”

“Humps?”

“That’s me,” the skull nodded, “Humphrey, Observer for the Architect.”

“Ah,” Theo gulped. “That is more concerning than the group of zombies. Well, after I hit Level Five I just got rid of the pop-up and continued killing - I’ve been farming Blue Slimes around here, so I’m sorry about your pet.”

“It was super rude,” Sally scowled, “but the blue blob was getting super annoying.”

“The little *boips* constantly, right?” Theo smiled at her. “I was farming their Cards - I just need two more.”

“Cards?” Sally questioned, giving Humphrey the side-eye.

The skull sighed. “Monsters have a rare drop of a collectable card that grants benefits to the wielder. You can have five active at a time, and there is usually a bonus for five-of-the-same or specific sets.”

“I don’t have that!” Sally wailed and slumped back. How many other parts of the System were unavailable to her?

“Even so, the System shouldn’t let you go past Level Five as a Novice. I suppose Blue Slime is the least masochistic way to do that though.” The skull tilted as if considering the possibilities.

“What does the Card do?” Sally sat back up, still deflated.

“I’ll show you,” Theo tapped his STAR.

[Blue Slime Card - Uncommon]
[Novices Gain +10% Experience]

He shrugged as the picture faded away. “It’ll be the most efficient set for levelling higher as a Novice - I think a full five of them give a bonus to attack damage or something too!”

“But... why be a Novice? Don’t you only get one attack skill?” Sally’s red eyes searched Theo’s face for an answer before it sunk in. “Oh, you complete ass - you get reborn into a world like this, and you’re going for a meme build?”

“I manage to get in contact with some of my old friends, but they’re going all tryhard with it. Full Party, complementing classes, all tactics and min-maxing. I’m all about the joy of the experience, making it memorable, you know?”

“So you don’t have a Party?” Sally stared at the Novice’s neck and wondered if he had looked that tasty in the previous life.

“No, I’m not a fan of how they seem to be a forced necessity to be able to progress.”

Her eyes lit up. “That’s great. Do you want to join mine?”

“I’m not sure I’d... fit in,” Theo glanced past her once more to check up on the zombies. “I’m not a Monster.”

“That’s okay,” Sally shrugged, “I won’t hold that against ya. I’ll even help you with your goal of... what, being the first Level Fifty Novice?”

“Correct,” he beamed, returning his gaze to her, “but what is your goal?”

“Don’t tell the Observer here,” she winked at the skull, “but I’m planning on taking down the Adventurers Guild and giving the Architect a stern talking to.”

Theo whistled and rubbed his chin. “That sounds like a worthy task. Killing some slimes one day, killing God the next - right?”

“I will advise against such action,” Humphrey attempted to scowl at the pair.

The Novice rubbed the back of his neck. “I feel like I will be a hindrance more than anything, though. As you said - I only have one attack skill. The equipment I will have available is also restricted. As will my options for-“

“Yeah yeah, Sally doesn’t care. *As you said*, it’s about the memorable experience, right? We are using the Party to kill the Party.”

Theo smiled and nodded. “You know, you certainly seem much more confident in this world.”

Sally leaned forward, the shadow of her hair obscuring her eyes. “I have one question then for you, Mr Novice.”

“Er- yes?” Theo leaned backwards in response; brow furrowed in brief panic.

“Do you want a piece of this bounty?” She pointed upwards at the icon she knew that he would be able to see.

He swallowed. “Nope. No offence intended, but that amount of Gold isn’t worth the risk of fighting you and your friends over there.”

Sally slumped back and exhaled. “Sucks. I really could do with killing and eating you. I’m so close to levelling up.”

“Sorry to disappoint?”

“You joining or not, then?” If she couldn’t eat him yet, the least he could do was stay around to act as an emergency meal for when they were on the road.

“I will have to decline... for now.” He held his hands up in apology before continuing. “I need to get the rest of these Cards, and it might take a little time - I’ve been at it for two weeks and only have three.”

“But after then?” Sally pouted.

“After then, sure. Just send me a message if you leave the area - or I can message you when I’m done?” He wiggled his STAR towards her blank expression.

“Message?”

“Oh wowzers,” he shrugged, “you didn’t even get the proper Novice tutorial stuff, huh? Let me try this anyway.” Theo held his wrist out and gestured for the zombie woman to do the same.

Sally held her STAR over his, and there was another droning whine in her head. She held her hands to her eyes as the pain threatened to make her eyes burst from their sockets - before a pop! Relief washed over her as a new menu rotated around her wrist.

“I’m okay,” she assured the Novice, seeing his worried expression, “the System does not give its gifts freely. Now, how do?”

“Like this,” Theo smiled.

[Theo: Hi Sally]

[Sally: Oh, neat]

Humphrey bobbed above them, taking an inert interest in the development. “You can only send messages to people you have scanned with. Or with Party members if you ever needed to talk privately.”

“Really?”

[Sally: Hi Chuck!]

[Chuck: aaaaaaaaaaaaaaa]

“So, where are you heading next?” Theo rubbed at the stitching on his leather bracers.

Sally closed the chat window and tilted her head. “Do you know where the tomb is around here?”

“Sure, pretty much straight South from where we are now. Can’t miss it as after the woods is the Bloom Plains, and there’s a big Cemetery right there.”

She idly rubbed some of the dried flakes of blood from her dress as she tried to imagine it. Why did she want to go there? “Dead friends are nice,” she shrugged, “but thank you for being understanding, Theo.”

The Novice reddened slightly and tried to wave her off. "Please, it's nice to talk to someone who isn't gargling the Adventuring Guilds... poleaxe. Speaking of, did you need any equipment? Novices can only trade Common gear I'm afr-

"I have *shoes*."

Theo blew air out of his nose. "Here then, I can trade you a full set I have spare. Blue Slimes drop those Chance Boxes pretty regularly. Shame I mostly seem to get-

"Daggers?"

"Yes! Right?"

Sally gestured to the Observer, arms flailing to emphasise the point.

[Basic Common Cap]
[Basic Common Armour]
[Basic Common Bracers]
[Basic Common Leggings]
[Basic Common Gloves]

"What kind of weapon do you want? Again, just the basic stuff." Theo brought his Inventory back up and cycled to the Weapons tab.

"Um. Do you have anything ranged? A Crossbow or Magic Staff?" Sally had no idea if those were actually things in this world.

"Depends on if your DEX is high enough, but I have-

"I can't see my stats."

Humphrey idly wandered off to try and curtail the walking dead trying to climb into part of a tree.

Theo scrunched his nose. "Wow, really handicapping our Party, aren't we? I'm assuming you'll replace the zombies with other misfits along the way?"

"I don't suppose any of your friends were a Cleric?" She avoided his question, not wanting to think - or dare even hope, that he might be correct in his assumption.

"No," he shook his head, "they decided to split healing between Paladin and Druid, I think. Here just take these."

[Common Shortsword]
[Common Crossbow]
[Common Staff]
[Common Buckler]
[Common Mace]

"Thanks, Theo," she grinned, excited to try out some of the new loot he had given her.

“No problem, but perhaps now you can do something for me, Sally?”

He leaned forward. His warm, meaty face to the side of her cold, dead one. In her ears, the sound of blood pumping through his veins almost drowned out his soft voice. The hairs on the back of her neck rose, tingling with anticipation.

Her eyes widened as he whispered his request, and a long, sharp-toothed grin spread across her face.