

Chapter 27 Un-Found-ed

[Map Unlocked]

“Finally,” Sally hissed as she wiped the water from her eyes. At least her tear ducts seemed to work? She was sure that would be useful for some dramatic moments in the future. Like when she finally got to eat Theo, and he tasted gorgeous.

“You okay?” Bella tugged on the side of her skirt, withdrawing her from the brief daydream.

She looked down at the small goblin, the girl’s red eyes wide and worried. Did all Monsters have exceptionally cute children? It made the prospect of Players blazing through and murdering everything that little bit more sinister and cold. Not that she would have done any different - although if faced with the ‘humanity’ of Monsters like Bella, perhaps her blade would have faltered.

“Yeah, I am. I have... stolen some of the power that adventurers have to use to help Monsters,” she smiled and gave the goblin a pat on the head. “It just takes a while to activate and is uncomfortable.”

Bella cooed, wonder filling her eyes. “So you’re a *Hero!*”

Humphrey scoffed, and Sally clucked her tongue at him, crossing her arms. “I’m what’s known as a Boss Monster.” The goblin practically vibrated with joy at this revelation.

“Do you have a fancy title?”

“I’m *Sally the Unliving!*” She unfolded her arms to strike a somewhat heroic pose.

“That’s... okay!” The smile on Bella’s face faded a little, but she still seemed enthusiastic.

Humphrey coughed and gestured towards the outdoors with a nod. “Should Sally the Unliving lead the way?”

“I have a neat little navigation... arrow thing.” She pointed to a cone hovering over her head that they couldn’t see. The transparent-white shape jostled and turned depending on which way she was facing. “After we sort this Fountain problem and get Bella somewhere safe, we will sit down and go over the map and the functions.”

The Death Knight nodded and pushed himself away from the wall. He began to move some of the furniture out of the way so that they could pass. The two zombies standing guard looked just as bored and gormless as they always did.

Sally stretched out her arms. Sleep on the hard floor hadn’t been softened that much by the furs found. Perhaps she had been spoiled by the bed in Hillan; it wasn’t too common for Monsters to have a nice bed to sleep in. Her Inventory opened up, and she took one of the Common Daggers out.

“Here,” she passed it to the little goblin, “just in case.”

Bella bit her lip and immediately tucked the blade into the leather belt around her dress. “Momma said not to play with knives.”

“Well, this one isn’t for playing.” Sally raised an eyebrow at the girl. “You may be invincible, but this is a tool for defence.”

“Okay!” Bella nodded enthusiastically.

Humphrey grunted, more to let them know he was done shifting chunks of wood than that the process was exerting. He had seemed eager to get moving, which was not entirely odd but still raised a slight suspicion in the mind of the Boss Zombie.

With just a brief glance back around the chamber, they began to head out, Chuck and Frank joining along as they passed. Chuck was now back at full health but still had his reduced Level. At least the other zombie was relatively regular - if you discount the fact that he was once a Player that Chuck had turned.

Rather than let herself get caught up in another conundrum of how this whole existence functioned, she instead let the warm light of the morning sun bathe her as she stepped out of the cave. The evening gust of the day before had all but left, and the trees stood patiently, allowing the sound of birdsong to be the prime melody of the woodlands.

“It looks like it is... that way.” She pointed further away from the road, almost behind the hills where the cave had been carved into. “It looks like we will have to circle around.”

“There will probably be an easy route close by - the System doesn’t think much of Player intelligence.” Humphrey grinned, flames dancing behind his head.

“What’s a Player?” Bella squealed up from beneath them.

“They’re, uh, basically the adventurers that come to kill you.” Sally scratched the side of her head and narrowed her eyes at the goblin. “Say, Bella, if you’re invincible, you must have survived more than one attack, right?”

“Oh yes! Everyone dies but comes back after a couple of days - but they don’t remember?”

“But you do.” The statement weighed heavily on the zombie as she tried to imagine the poor goblin having to witness her clan cut down around her every few days. Was it any relief that they came back? She shuddered.

The Death Knight caught the look on her face and tilted his head as they rounded the rough hill. “Do not forget that these Monsters are System-created. They live and die with little consequence, as the System determines.”

“Like yourself?”

Humphrey opened his skeletal mouth but promptly closed it.

Sally didn't think that the System should make that sort of determination. Sure, the Monsters may not have souls - or the freedom to choose a life outside of their designated role - but that didn't mean that they shouldn't be allowed control. The talking skull had managed to escape his constraints, and she hoped that he could see where she was going with this.

Bella skipped along ahead of them by a few feet. The little goblin seemed perfectly capable of avoiding her fate. Maybe due to an error in the System? With a flick of her STAR, she brought up her Party Member's screen.

[Bella - Unique Goblin]

"Huh, says she is Unique," she murmured to the Death Knight flanking her.

"Momma always said that too!" The girl with apparently exceptional hearing giggled.

"Odd." The flames from the back of his helmet flickered in contemplation.

As they clambered over a group of small boulders, they hopped down onto a path. Again, only a slightly more apt name than the worn passageway to the cave, but this one at least seemed to conveniently pass up a clear route into this part of the large hill. A baby mountain, even.

She shrugged and helped the goblin jump down from the rocks. As obvious as it was, the route would take them to their destination, which was the minimum you could expect from a path. As Chuck fell from the rock onto his front, taking some damage, she opened up Chat.

[Sally: Going to Rejuv Fountain south of Yarch]

Sally bit her lip and frowned as she went to close the UI.

[Sally: Bring seasonings x]

She hissed a cursed at herself and went to catch up with the others.

Slowly, as their walk ascended up the hill, they rose above the level of the tree cover. A carpet of gentle waving greens covered almost as far as the eye could see, the morning sun illuminating everything and making the gaps in cover all the more obvious. A rough circle where a town sprung from the green - like a tree stump of darkened wood and red tile. Smaller clearings left pockmarks in the green fabric of the region, a sliver of different shade signifying the road they had travelled not too far off.

Sally narrowed her eyes - trying to see any Monster or Players in the nearby area. She wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or concerned. Something still didn't sit right in her head, an awkward lump that refused to let her sit at ease.

"If you are wondering why it is so quiet," Humphrey joined her gaze, "in the three or so weeks, most Players have moved on from this area." He briefly shifted his focus to the goblin squatting down observing a bug intently. "*Most*, but not all. After the first week when a lot of Players died in the second area, people started to slow down a bit - no use in rushing."

“So the ones still remaining here are either incompetent or extra cautious.”

“Both equally dangerous in their own ways, *ha-ha*.” The Death Knight gave her a pat on the back, his plated hands not jostling her slim frame as much as she had expected.

With a few more twists and turns, they eventually made it to some kind of plateau. The rock was a worn grey, almost smoothed intentionally - perhaps just buffeted over time from the elements... although that would have to of been artificially so. In the middle of this rough thirty feet circle sat a fountain made of white marble. Smooth folds had been carved into the main body of the object, with an ornate swan-like creature rising from the middle.

A soft trickle of water ran from the beak of the bird statue as it looked to be caught mid-escaping the fountain proper. Just at a cursory glance, it would make more sense for there to be a spout rather than a trickle. Sally held her hand out to stop her troop as she narrowed her eyes.

On her own, she gently trod towards it. It was beautiful in design and showed no signs of wear from the elements. The interior of the Fountain became visible as she neared it - a low pool of clear water. Totally devoid of any sort of algae or moss or little bugs that you would perhaps expect from running water left to nature. The bottom of the Fountain was clearly visible, a plain circle of white marble slightly lower than the ground she stood upon.

Circling around the white marble, she couldn't help but lose her gaze on the horizon. Now even higher than the trees she could see out to where the woodlands finally ended, and new regions of different shade and texture teased their existence. She licked her sharp teeth as the unhindered breeze rolled through them. She looked down at the far side of the Fountain and saw a satchel flattened against the ridged wall. With a gesture for the group to come over, she knelt down and retrieved it.

Setting it on the edge of the Fountain, another breeze rolled through, rustling her hair. Something felt odd though, different to the first gust.

Her skin prickled, and words were caught in her throat as she turned around.

The sharp pain of a dagger plunged into her back.