

Chapter 2.8

No-Fang

Sally scratched her head and looked over at Chuck. "Do mice even have tails this long?"

"Yeah, maybe you're thinking of hamsters."

"No, not since the incident." She looked over the door and pouted.

"Uh... what-"

"Just trying out a new catchphrase. Theo doesn't think it'll catch on." Sally avoided the tired glare of the Death Knight as he tried to gesture towards the door.

Chuck frowned. "You had a catchphrase before?"

"Not since the *incident*." She beamed back at him with wide eyes.

The Druid leaned to the side to see past her. "How do you put up with this?"

"Barely," the Death Knight shrugged. Resting his greatsword across his shoulders, he began to walk up towards the large doors. Even with his large metallic form, he was minuscule in comparison, like an action figure.

Sally relented and ditched the quirky mania. Theo was much more receptive to it than these sticks-in-the-mud, although maybe he was just more polite about it. The vampire was just as weird himself these days... how far they'd come since meeting in the Forest near Hillan.

"What do you think then, papa Humps? Knock or forced entry?"

"Don't call me that," he sighed. "Let's just enter and kill everything except for whatever Chuck needs to save."

She stood beside him and looked up at the handle that was a good dozen feet above her head. Whatever lived in here, she wouldn't have thought it would have needed a handle. The giant mice they had already slain weren't exactly high on the intelligence scale. Something more interesting was afoot - probably something tasty.

"Here, allow me - this shouldn't kill anything." Chuck paused with hand outstretched. "Unless the door falls over on us or something inside. Hmm." Resigning to whatever fate had planned for his actions, he cast out a vine that shot forth and wrapped around the wooden handle above them.

After a couple of seconds of struggling, Sally rolled her eyes and came to help pull.

The doorway groaned loudly as it started to open, a musky air pooling out as the gap widened. Humphrey stood at the ready and waited for it to be open enough for all of them before stepping forward.

A large chamber loomed before them, a roughly carved rectangle of grey stone illuminated by large torches spaced apart on the walls equally. The smell of damp fur was even stronger, and Chuck held his hand to his nose. Across the room, opposite to them, were three creatures.

Two large and armoured mice flanked one that sat upon a throne. This supposed king sat with a ramshackle crown atop his orange-furred head, the random metals glinting in the light as it slid down towards his eyes. In one hand, he held a sceptre with a flowing yellow orb at the top. He also seemed to be wearing a purple smoking jacket.

“Adventurers!” the King rumbled, “Tremble and yield to the strength of my two wives, Two-Fang and Three-Fang!”

“Oh,” Chuck rolled his eyes, “King One-Fang”.

“Did you try face down?” Archie stretched out and clawed at the wood atop the coffin.

“Yeah, there’s no way I can sleep with a mouthful of pillow.” Theo sat on the edge of his vampiric bed and pouted with chin in hand.

“Shame. I’ve already completed my Quest.” The cat beamed up at him with emerald eyes.

“Perhaps I’m just worried - you saw the Wanted posters, right?”

The cat nodded. “They weren’t very flattering, yeah.”

Theo scrunched up his face. Unflattering would be putting it lightly. Humphrey’s one was just a rectangle with a skull drawn atop it, and small flames sketched just above him. Sally’s and his were a little more professionally painted, but that was a stretch of most of those words.

Whether or not it would become a problem was a matter of intent to enforce the bounties. Level Twelve or less guards? Not an issue. Bored Level Twenty Players? Big issue.

“Hey, Theo?”

The vampire looked down at the ginger cat, still looking up at him eagerly. “Yeah?”

“You can keep a secret, right? From the others?” A flicker of light rolled around his large eyes.

“One each then-“ Sally winced at the mouse opposite the Death Knight, charged forward almost instantly, knocking him into the rocky wall with a large clang. That one had three prominent fangs.

Narrowing her eyes, the one ahead of her had two fangs. Although most of the mice had prominent- she stopped that train of thought as the Monster opened its maw wide, and a beam attack started charging up.

“This is more like it!” Sally growled out loud as she put [Hex: Slow] on the attacking creature.

Chuck sighed and raised his staff. “This is my Level Nine. Try not to let me die.”

[Ancient Grove]

Vines and plant growth surrounded the King, enshrouding him in a wide orb of druidic power. The verdant greens and sprouting flowers of pink and amber were a stark contrast to the dim and muted colours of the supposed throne room.

With a quick nod to him, Sally then sprinted off towards Two-Fang. What she wouldn't give for Dread Counter right now - although she wouldn't ever admit that to the vampire. *He could have been able to fly!*

Blue energy flashed and blinded her as she dove to the side, the attack of the beast finally released. Pain flared up her legs as she rolled into the trusty Crossbow-withdrawal, with a bolt piercing into the side of the rodent's face. This one had a dirty-grey colour to its fur, with streaks of pale brown near its eyes. The Monster turned, and the beam curved through the air, scoring a dark mark across the doors and entrance wall.

Chuck unravelled from his recoiled position, thankful that the beam had struck a good few feet taller than he was. He was still unsure of how he was supposed to save One-Fang, but protecting him from the carnage about to be wrought seemed like a good starting point.

[Lord of the Damned]

Skeletal Warriors burst out from around the Death Knight as he parried and deflected a quick slash of large claws. Three-Fang was extremely fast for its size. A blaze of crimson circled in the air as he stepped forward with a flourish to distract the oversized mouse. It returned the action by running around the wall, an impressive feat, circling the corner of the chamber to drop back down behind him. Black energy enveloped the Monster's paws.

[Necroblast: Barrage]

The pulsing blasts of energy radiated as they struck the Monster, charring fur and splitting skin. Two-Fang screeched out in rage, and Sally leapt atop the side of the beast, dagger in the mouth so that she could grab handfuls of the fur. Against the writhing and warm creature, she began to clamber up, unable to be shaken as the mouse tried to snap back at her.

“I huv a mnnt!” She growled out with the blade between her teeth. From atop Two-Fang's back, she giggled in mad joy at her impromptu bronco ride.

Chuck deflated at the sight and over to the Death Knight to see if he was taking things a little more seriously. Immediately, he regretted the decision.

Humphrey was standing inside the maw of Three-Fang, the Monster's mouth pried open with the greatsword like a toothpick in a cartoon, and the plated Party member was trying to pull the tongue of the beast out.

They were goofy and irritating, each in their own different ways, but when it came to violence, they were always a step above whatever was asked of them. He had seen the aftermath of the fight at Sanctuary and stayed well clear of the other two villages they had taken. It was one thing to be allied with the Outsiders, but carnage just wasn't who he wanted to be.

A Druid was the best thing he could have become, really. Despite the Class choice not having a tangible change to his personality, it had served as a guiding track so that he didn't go off the rails. He had also seen the dead Cleric, Marius. The things that hate and denial could lead you to. Sally and her Party bloodied their hands with the best of them, but they hadn't flown off the handle.

Even as his stomach turned as the Death Knight was successful in tearing his coveted prize from the panicked Monster, there wasn't the grim trauma that real people doing these real things would face. They enjoyed it and accepted it. Just as easily as they'd throw around banter or annoy each other, they would eat and kill anyone who opposed them. It was as scary as it was impressive. Even now, the zombie had sighed as her mouth withdrew from the broken skull and exposed brains of her fallen enemy. He was stunned.

Sally dropped to the floor with a smile. "Woop! That's my Quest completed. Are you ready to hear all the amazing Keystone skills I get to choose from?"

"I am done also," Humphrey wiped his gore-soaked plated gloves on his red cloak. The low gurgles of the mouse behind him did little to bother him.

"Oh," Chuck downturned his mouth and released the spell protecting the King. "I guess you are saved, One-Fang?"

"Thank you little ones!" The King boomed down towards them. "I was hoping for an amicable divorce from both my wives, but I guess this way works out anyway. For me."

"Huh," Sally briefly frowned up at him as she prodded at her STAR. "You must be a Unique Monster? Want to come join-"

"*Sally, no!*" Humphrey shook his head.

She rolled her eyes just before they were illuminated by the long-awaited skill choice.

[Keystone Quest Completed]

[Pick One]

[Crypt Warden] [Undead allies receive a boost to STR/CON/DEF]

[Soul Witch] [Your kill temporally empowers your Necroblast skills]

[Resourceful] [Luck and Item Find increases]