

Chapter 36

Fresh Light

Despite her excitement at now being able to summon undead, Sally managed to drift off to sleep in the tavern with relative ease. Theo hadn't been too pleased with seeing the bloody handiwork he had made outside of the bedrooms - but having two locked doors between him and the jaws of the zombie woman eased his mood.

She awoke to a knock at her door - the pillow she was chewing falling out of her mouth as her bleary eyes adjusted to the daylight. "Uurf?"

"It's Theo - you should come see this."

She rolled from the bed and tried to stretch out. There wasn't as much ache through her limbs as she had expected - a good night of rest seemed like powerful enough healing magic even without the help of the Healer goblin. Stumbling lazily over to the door, she opened it to see the Novice standing there. He looked as refreshed as she felt.

"Let's get some breakfast, ey? If you can eat normal food?" He shrugged and nodded his head towards the stairs.

Sally nodded back and gave the room a quick once over before leaving. It was partially odd that she slept in her armour and that all her possessions were kept in some intangible space, but it also seemed perfectly natural. It was something easier to just not think about.

Even as they reached the top of the stairs, the light streaming in from the windows at the top of the stairwell, there was something immediately odd - *noises*. Specifically, the murmur of voices. Sally hopped down the stairs, turning at the bottom to see the table-laden tavern to the left.

It was bustling.

Nearly two dozen goblins sat at the tables. Drinking, eating, and generally having a good time.

"I spoke to Humphrey earlier. Apparently, as the five Leaders are goblins the System has populated the village with goblins," Theo said from behind.

"Neeeeeat," Sally hissed, turning and pushing past the Novice to exit the kitchen door.

The village itself took a few seconds for her to process. Not only were there now scores of goblins going about their daily System-assigned lives, but the structures had also changed. The structures were now of a darker grey stone, with accents of red. Wooden spikes adorned the edges of the roofs, and fiery braziers had replaced the lantern posts. The garrison at the top of the village now sported two banners of crimson, each with a painted skull upon them.

"Pretty impressive, huh?" Theo nudged her with his elbow. "The first Monster-controlled Player-town. All because of you."

Sally nudged him back. "I had some help, you tasty sack of sappiness. I have an itchy feeling though - where's Humphrey at?"

"He said to bring you to the forge."

She groaned and rolled her eyes. "If this is some kind of crafting or refining tutorial, I will be super justified in eating you."

"That's not - oh we just skipped breakfast there, huh? You go on ahead. Let me pick you up some... meat, I suppose?"

"I guess - I haven't even eaten a brain yet. I'm not sure if that's a thing here in this world." She shrugged and waved him off as she set off towards where the Death Knight should be.

Eating a brain just sounded inconvenient - Players kept them locked away in their stupid skulls, which were a pain to get into even with her current Strength. Oh, she didn't even try to loot all those dead guards and Leaders. She cursed herself. Hopefully, the bodies would still be in the pile wherever Humphrey dragged them out to.

A pair of passing goblins greeted her as she passed. Everyone seemed so happy and accepting of her. A village full of Monsters happened to be anything but that - they were no different than the elves that lived here previously. Just a little smaller and greener. Something seemed odd though.

Stopping, she tilted her head to observe the goblins moving around. They all seemed normal enough... oh - that was it. There were no children. While she was no expert on the subject, there was definitely none that were as small or spritely as Bella was. With a shrug, she made a mental note of this oddity and carried on her way.

She arrived at the forge to find Jaxk hammering away at something. The fire-immune goblin had already grown in size and bulked up, his slender frame now bulky and bare to the elements. He placed down his smithing instruments as he saw her approach and levelled a wide grin at the zombie.

"Ay, good morning, Sally. Looking for Lord Humphrey?"

"*Lord?* Yeah, Theo said he'd be over here. You seem to have settled in here pretty well."

"It was certainly a surprise this morning," the goblin scratched at his soot-covered head, "but I feel like I have some kinda purpose now, a place to live and people to protect. Even if the gobs walking around aren't Unique - they're still my people."

Sally smiled and looked back out at the village. It was certainly something worth protecting. Even if nothing was real, it was something they had earned. Something taken back from the unfair System. Roping them into her crusade had been a little heavy-handed, perhaps, but they had stepped up more than she had expected.

The back room door swung open, and the plated figure of Humphrey strode out. He looked slightly different, and the curiosity must have been evident in Sally's eyes as the Death Knight grinned and stood tall and proud.

"I had Jaxk give me a little upgrade, *ha-ha!*" His armour looked sturdier, maybe thicker in places and better defined. "Getting your arm nearly hewn off is not fun."

"I can imagine," Sally nodded, "so increased defence?"

"Yes. Increase in my Armour Class and mundane resistances." The Death Knight paused and crossed his arms. "You never asked what I received from levelling up."

Sally rolled her red eyes. "Out with it then, Lord Humps."

He opened and closed his mouth before relenting the information. "[*Will of the Dark Lord*]." He opened his arms wide to exaggerate the reveal.

"Uh-huh. What's it do?"

The Death Knight deflated slightly. "It's an Area of Effect Stun if you must put it in base terms. Long cooldown. Save check against Willpower."

"Well, that's much cooler than what Theo got at least. Which was nothing." She grinned and leaned against one of the non-heated counters. "Although the item interaction he has going on seems to be working well."

"It is inefficient, but professionally I am very interested in how far he can push it." Humphrey rubbed his chin with his plated hand. "He needs more Speed and Base Weapon Damage."

"So Strength items? We really need more loot."

"That's why I asked you over here," the Death Knight grinned, his flaming helmet flickering, "we need to get stronger, and probably quite quickly."

Sally clucked her tongue. "It's the village, right? Either Players or the System is going to come fight it?"

"Yes. Astute as always. In two days a regiment from Poppybrook will arrive to reclaim the town. Between now and then, Players may attempt the same."

"Thankfully it should mostly be low Levels around here?"

"Yes." Humphrey tilted his head, his eye sockets narrowing. "But stronger Parties may travel over for the challenge."

"Arse." Sally rubbed the bridge of her nose. "But you have ideas, right?"

"Always, *ha-ha!* Now that we have a base of operations this makes things a lot easier for our progression. It depends whether you want more loot, more experience... or more allies."

"This isn't like a three-choice thing where I have to pick after some suspenseful deliberation?"

"No, I... don't believe so?"

“Allies it is! Our Party is looking a bit thinner now, two spaces to fill.”

“I thought that may be the case,” Humphrey nodded, “there is a bandit encampment not too far away. I have reports that it is being led by a Unique Monster.”

“Reports from whom?” Sally frowned before Theo's arrival from the side caught her eye.

“The Village Notice Board. We have access to some of the things Players had here.”

Theo entered the forge and winced as the wave of heated air enveloped him. “Oof, how can you both stand it in here?” He passed a small basket over to the zombie.

“Real Classes get resistances, pup.” Sally peered inside the wicker container, a variety of cooked meats meeting her gaze as the cover lifted.

“I’m the first Level Nine Novice though,” he shrugged, almost immediately regretting it.

“Correct,” the Death Knight nodded. “I do not believe there would be anyone else as... dedicated to such...” he frowned and rubbed the back of his neck. “...*folly?*”

Jaxk had been silent during the continuing conversation, seemingly patient enough to wait for the group to leave so that he could continue his new role.

“Leave Theo alone, Mr Edgy Dark Lord,” Sally waved her hand, “shall we agree to set off against the bandits this morning then? Sounds like a classic adventure that we’ll have no issue with.”

“... Yes.”

“Sounds alright to me,” Theo shrugged.

“Oh, before we do - are the corpses still around? My skull collection hungers.”

Humphrey nodded and pointed out to the back of the village. “About three dozen feet out that way. They shouldn’t have despawned yet.”

“Despawned,” Sally repeated, letting the word roll out of her mouth. “Alright, Theo go get supplies. And I’ll meet you both in the square.” She moved to leave but paused to hand the basket back to the Novice. “Sorry, not enough blood.”

She strolled her way out of the village. It was another pleasant day, which she was moderately content about. Part of her did miss the gloom of the Cemetery. There was something about the sunlight that brought the feeling of hope, of safety, which she was surprised to realise was something that felt good right now. Her unlife had been fraught with uncertainty and danger so far, so a break was a warm welcome.

The pile of corpses had been unceremoniously stacked in a pile a reasonable distance away from the village, behind a small group of trees. As she approached, her STAR *bloiped*.

[Theo: Let me know if you run into any problems]

[Sally: I've been gone two minutes!]

[Theo: Sorry - trouble just seems to follow you]

She tutted and closed the window, also ignoring the Daily Gift notification. It would take ages to sift through and loot all these bodies when they were so stacked without opening up some of them repeatedly by accident. They'd better have something decent on them.

As she crouched down to begin sifting through - a figure amongst them moved, backing away from her.

"K-keep away!"

Sally tensed and peered through the stacked bodies. A pale and familiar figure sat panicked, trying to escape her gaze.

Her mouth hung open as she silently mouthed a curse.