

Chapter 28

Blood and Water

Sally coughed out blood as she spun around, the shape of a man appearing behind her. The damage from that one attack was huge, like nothing experienced so far, and her STAR buzzed with low HP warnings.

Her last-minute reflex to turn was the only thing that had prevented the blade from burying straight into the back of her neck. The sweat and scowl of the assailant, half of his face obscured by a black bandanna that matched his dark leathers and cloak, gave credence to his intended plan.

She dodged a follow-up attack and hit him with [Hex: Slow] - drawing her own dagger in the process. Even with the slowing curse he was remarkably fast. His eyes burned with an unnatural green glow that wafted around his hands.

[Party: Frank has died]

She stumbled backwards out of the reach of the Rogue and glanced over at the group. Three more figures in similar garb were amongst the Party. Humphrey roared out as twin blades screeched along his armour. His [Adrenaline] activated as he reached for his sword, red flame bursting from the back of his skull.

Chuck had taken a blade to the chest and was wrestling with a Rogue with flowing blond hair for control over the stuck dagger. A battle he was likely to lose in short order. Sally cursed and switched her Hex over to this opponent and spun to face her own attacker. She had not seen Bella but didn't fear much for the invincible goblin.

The green-eyed Rogue stepped towards her, a second dagger in his off-hand, blades of silver flickering in the sunlight as they carved through the air towards her. She was stepping back towards the edge of the summit - closer and closer every attack dodged. She grabbed an item from her belt and chose the right moment.

She leapt at the man as the momentum of his attacks were at a lull. The sharp points still pierced her skin as she collided with the surprised man, putting him slightly off balance. Her own dagger found purchase in his upper arm - not an efficient place to damage but the pain caused the Rogue to drop one of the daggers, loosening the pain in her torso. Sally popped the cork from the Healing Potion and downed it as she leaned into the still-held blade.

The empty glass bottle dropped to the floor, and she grabbed the offending arm holding the dagger in her gut. As the Rogue tried to withdraw, her hungry maw opened wide. She felt strong. She felt powerful. She watched the Rogue try and recoil away, but fear painted his eyes, and panic overcame him.

Blood and warmth.

Crimson stained the soft grey of the hilltop as the gurgling Bandit slunk to the floor. One hand tried to stem the flow of blood from his neck, the other fumbling for healing of his own.

“Steve is in trouble,” a gruff voice called from the fray behind.

It was dull to her, as if half the woods away. All that she could feel was a weird beating inside her... a heartbeat? Not her own, surely - perhaps that of the fallen. Steve was in more than trouble. She scoffed and brought her blade down, straight through his leather armour into his heart. The pounding in her head stopped.

The scrape of hardened metal against stone drew her attention to the rest of the battle. She turned in time to see the greatsword of Humphrey radiate dark energy and slice a leg off of one of the Rogues in a brutal upswing. A second Rogue had taken a nasty wound across the chest, black leather armour split and darkened by blood, and had taken some steps backwards in fervent thoughts of escape. Chuck had overpowered the last of the Rogues, assisted by the Hex, and was happily making a feast of his bounty.

[Hex: Slow] hit the nervous rogue as they turned to run - stumbling in confusion as lethargy suddenly hit them. The second thing to suddenly hit them was a crossbow bolt, and they flopped heavily into the rocky floor.

The Death Knight stood over the maimed attacker, his sword resting across his shoulder as his eyes blazed bright red, jettisoning angry flame into the summits breeze. He had been injured but did not bleed - instead; he just looked more furious at the injustice.

“Wait,” Sally hissed, wiping the blood from her mouth, “they could be useful.”

She stumbled over to the figure who was almost sweating as heavily as they were bleeding. Sally felt a weird elation mixed with discomfort. Not nauseated, but the kind of jittery excitement you feel from the depths of your stomach. She knelt down on both knees, stabilising herself with hands on her knees, as she observed the Rogue.

This must have been the gruff-voiced one, although they looked anything but gruff right now. Their light blue eyes were a contrast to the rough five o'clock shadow and heavy brow that now rose high in panic. It was obvious they were in pain, and Sally was no sadist, but they needed some answers.

“Why’d you do this?” She shook, more from unease than anger.

“C-came here to kill ya,” his earnest reply came, his gruff voice now uncertain, afraid.

“Dumb.” She shook her head. “Only four of you and you didn’t even focus on me. Whiffed your one shot and now look what happened.”

The Rogue’s eyes darted over to Chuck chewing at the guts of the blonde-haired Rogue and then back to Sally. “N-not four of us.” A wry, panicked smile curled up the side of his face as rivulets of sweat coursed down his round face.

“Not...” Sally frowned as her eyes scoured the area. “They stayed hidden and kidnapped the goblin?”

A coughed laugh erupted from the injured Rogue, seemingly finding some bittersweet ending to their plan. “We’ll take her and do what we do to all M-monsters...”

“One last question,” Sally stood and dusted off the grey rock dust from her dress. “It was the annoying Cleric that sent you, right?”

He said nothing, but there was the faintest hint of recognition that gave it away. The Rogue licked his lips and jabbered his mouth, perhaps about to try and negotiate or throw more hurtful comments.

“Humps,” she gestured to the Death Knight. She was at her limit for compassion for those decried Monsters but were one themselves.

The greatsword burned with dark energy and carved through the air in a clean arc as the head of the Rogue sailed off into the treeline below.

Sally held her head in her hands for a moment, trying to exhale the vertigo and the unease from her system. She couldn't wait to eat that miserable Cleric. Theo was a delicacy, but whatever the Cleric was called - he she just wanted to gnaw and gnash and mulch that scrawny frame until nothing but bone and gristle remained.

“You alright?”

The heavy hand of the Death Knight rested on her shoulder. It was oddly comforting. She bit back the sobs welling in her throat and raised her head from her hands. She smiled up at the demonic skull of her friend, but her eyes gave away what emotion lay inside.

“Being a Monster is not easy,” he said softly, “Players can kill us with abandon as they see us as below them - not real. When it comes to morality, the ethics of taking a life... we are not different to them, and they to us.”

“Nobody hunts Players down just for trying to exist, though.” Her lip wobbled as she tried to throw out an exaggerated pout to mask her feelings.

“Nobody yet.” He grinned, his lack of eyebrows raising.

“You big jerk,” Sally gave him a light punch to the chest and a smile. “I can be an ethical villain still, can't I?”

The Death Knight shrugged and stood away from the zombie, then turned his head to the path. “Should we try and find the little one?”

Sally looked around at the carnage atop the summit. Chuck was contently sitting atop the remains of his meal. Gore caked down his front. Three further Rogues lay in pools of blood, the red marring the plain grey of the smooth rocky hill. Spatters of crimson - some of them her own - dotted the plain white marble of the Fountain.

“You think I have time to loot?” She bit her lip.

The Death Knight shrugged once more. “You are the villain here, *ha-ha*.”

She cursed under her breath and jogged uneasily over to each of the bodies in turn - scolding Chuck for being lazy and letting Frank die in the process. The blonde-haired Rogue

surely would have died from embarrassment from losing to such a low Level zombie. Had they not already died from being killed.

[Gold 348]
[Uncommon Leather Hood]
[Uncommon Leather Chest]
[Uncommon Leather Gloves]
[Uncommon Leather Boots]
[Rare Leather Leggings]
[Poison Supplies (5)]
[Speed Earring (2)]
[Healing Potion (2)]

"I'd say that was worth the trauma," she brushed down her new armour set - which still appeared as her waitress outfit. "Not as light as the Basic gear, but it should offer me more protection, right? And these Speed earrings are pretty cute - I'd wear them even if they weren't useful." They dangled from her ears, golden kite shapes with some kind of shiny gemstone that swirled between a verdant green and mustard yellow.

"Yes."

Sally felt a little bad that Humphrey couldn't enjoy the looting experience - perhaps there would be some other way to improve him? With one last glance, they began heading away from the Fountain - satchel stuck in her Inventory for the time being. Whatever the Fountain was actually used for, she no longer cared.

About twenty feet down the winding path she stopped and knelt down. Humphrey stopped behind her, and Chuck stumbled straight into the back of the Death Knight.

There was a little blood on the path. She ran her finger through it and licked the crimson off. "This blood is *blood*," she twisted her head around to confirm to the pair giving each other evils.

She stood and moved ahead - another drip of blood. Her feet increased their speed, her new boots comfortable, and the frequency of blood increased.

They rounded a corner, almost running now, and stopped.

In a large smear of crimson, the prone figure of the small goblin lay, tiny hands clutched to her stomach holding bloodied shapes of reds and pinks.