

## Chapter 35

### Endure the Dark

The Captain turned to her and held his halberd in position to guard, wincing slightly at the dagger still wedged into his side.

Even with the Hex upon him, the Captain was fast. Sally knock the first strike wide with the mace, the shock shaking down her arm, but didn't have much chance to retaliate before the armoured Leader was in the midst of a follow-up.

She ducked beneath it - a dangerous manoeuvre that risked her losing her head, but she spun out from it and struck the wedged dagger with the head of the mace, further digging it into the Leader. Off-balance, she lunged into the Captain as he recoiled from the pain. Despite her Strength, in his plate armour, he was immovable and didn't budge as she slammed into him. Sally dropped the mace and grabbed a hold of her dagger, twisting it before withdrawing it from the wound. The Captain pushed her back with a kick.

As she stumbled back a couple of feet, she grinned and licked the blood from the blade. Still plain but it felt energising. A dagger was a terrible weapon in regards to reach, but the extra Luck might help. *Maybe.*

The Captain was breathing heavily now. For all the gamification of Stats and Health Points, getting stabbed in the gut still hurt pretty bad. It was only a matter of her Strength mixed with the double damage of [Savage Strike] from the scroll that had allowed her to even pierce the plate, she assumed. Behind her, the clamour of battle had subsided.

The soft footsteps of a group of goblins joined her, as did the panting Theo. Even Humphrey managed to scrape himself up off the floor and level his blade at the now very outnumbered Captain. No guards remained standing, and save for their laboured breathing and mutters of pain; a silence filled the village square full of the dead and weary.

"Just who are you?" The Captain clenched his weapon tighter, his voice still remaining firm despite his predicament.

"I'm Sally, and I am the death of the System." She darted forward as her Party joined her.

The Captain had no chance. His attempt to attack first was blocked by the Death Knight, as the goblins all scooted in from below to stab and harry his movement. Theo knocked his offhand away with his wooden sword, leaving the Leader wide open for Sally.

She barrelled into him and bit out his undefended neck - somewhat cliché but fast becoming her signature finisher. The gurgling as the elf collapsed sweet music to her ears. She spat the tasteless blood onto the dying Captain.

"Well done, *Sally the Unliving.*" Humphrey sat back down on the floor to hold his limp shoulder. "You have defeated the five Leaders."

She groaned and dropped to her knees, the lethargy sinking into her battered body. Likewise, the goblins and Theo took an arrangement of seating and prone positions on the floor. Only Bella looked particularly cheerful, despite being soaked in blood.

Sally closed her eyes. They felt warm. "So... what now?"

"You'd need to appoint new Leaders, I suppose. This is... unprecedented." Humphrey shrugged with his good shoulder.

She licked her lips and opened her eyes again. The lantern light surrounding them felt brighter. Maybe she was just tired. "You alright, Theo?" The Novice was balled up, hiding his face away.

A couple of moments of silence passed before his response came. "Can't feel my arm or legs. Feeling pretty conflicted about the whole evening."

That was understandable. He was a Player after all, and he had not only murdered a handful of other Players - real people - but openly waged war on the System by clearing out a village.

"Do I have to do some kind of ceremony speech, or...?"

"Be a lot cooler if you did." Humphrey looked at her blankly.

"Fine." She huffed and stood up on shaky legs before clearing her throat. "As Sally the Unliving, Boss Monster and destroyer of the village of Yarch, I hereby appoint the following new Leaders."

All eyes turned to her now, the goblins all bloodied and worn, Theo looking as close to death as she felt, and even the Death Knight was enamoured by her next words.

"Bella, a small goblin with strength of heart and innate healing, you are the new Healer for Yarch."

The girl beamed and nodded eagerly.

"Jaxk. Immune to fire you shall stoke the furnaces of the forge as the new Blacksmith. Frena, with your vision to watch over others, you will make a great Innkeeper. Oleb... uh, you're the Librarian because of your insatiable appetite for... knowledge?"

Oleb shrugged.

"Lastly," Sally smiled, "Henkk - the leader who wanted to protect and keep safe the glitched and Unique, I can think of no better Captain to guard our first Outpost."

The white goblin bowed with a brief nod.

[Henkk has left the Party]

A blue light shimmered around their feet; a light circle of energy persisted beneath each goblin where they stood or sat.

"Oh, I can [Heal] people now!" Bella jumped into the air with excitement.

"Do it then," Sally's eyes widened, "*please*."

“Sure, that’ll be [5 Gold], Miss.” The goblin girl beamed up at the zombie with her hand outstretched.

“F-fine.” Sally frowned but handed over the money. She watched as the goblin put her hands together and a green glow flowed between them like a tether. She began to feel pretty good... she brought up her UI to see her Health bar rise to the top. “Wow, that’s super nice. Shame we can’t take you along with us now.”

Humphrey coughed from the side.

“Okay, okay,” Sally rolled her eyes, “how much to heal everyone here?”

“Uh!” Bella wrinkled her nose as she counted each of the presently injured. “Ummm... [60 Gold]?”

“Don’t all rush to pitch in.” Sally shook her head and withdrew her gold. Not that she had been paying attention to how much she had accumulated - but she was certain she had enough.

The small goblin went around in turn and healed them in a similar manner. She crouched down by the charred and crumpled form of Chuck and prodded at the zombie. “Not much I can do for him, Sally.” She turned back to the Boss and gave an exaggerated pout.

Sally sighed. “It was inevitable. He was the last of the diner zombies and had only made it this far by glitched miracle.” She was still pretty sad about it, though. As goofy as Chuck had been, he had also been pretty effective at turning the tide of their fights.

“So, what are you going to name your first village?” Humphrey stood up and stretched his sore arm out.

“Henkk is the Captain now, so it’s his choice.”

“Oh!” The white goblin narrowed his pitch-black eyes and glanced around the dimly lit village. “How about... *Sanctuary*?”

“It’s cliché,” Sally shrugged, “but sure. The first foothold of the Outsiders - the glitched and the anti-System-ites.”

“The new Leaders will need to bind to their buildings overnight.” Humphrey folded his plated arms. “I will assist in clearing some of the bodies to the outskirts.”

“Thanks, Humps.” Sally watched the goblins scarper off to their various new homes, and she jerked her thumb over to a bench with a nod to Theo.

They sat down on the smooth wooden surface, the glow of a lantern above them slightly rocking in the light breeze of the night. The Novice leaned back and closed his eyes, facing towards the clear sky.

Sally bunched her hands together and tried not to stare at his exposed throat. “You doing okay, Theo?”

"Maybe." His single-word reply not doing much to encourage that fact.

"It's the emotional toll, right? Something the healing doesn't fix."

They sat in silence for half a minute before the Novice sighed and turned his head towards her. "I must have made a good impression on you at the diner, huh?"

"Perhaps. It's different here," she smiled sadly. "In this world, you're only as attractive to me as a fully loaded burrito would be."

He blinked slowly in response before looking back towards the night sky. "Burritos *are* pretty damn awesome."

"Right?" She kicked the side of his leg. "You're an anchor for me, a reminder that this isn't my real life. It's taking a lot of self-restraint not to turn you into my next meal."

"Well, I do appreciate it." He smiled and sighed. "I was trying to avoid thinking about that, by keeping to myself whilst in the System. When you showed up... I had to face the reality of the situation-

"Or lack of reality."

"-yeah, and I think although the path you intend to travel is going to be futile... it's the right thing to do. I don't want to be part of this game... or alternate world... or whatever we have been forced into."

"Even if it kills you?" Sally raised her eyebrows.

"Even if it kills me."

"Even if I eat you?" Her eyebrows raised further.

"Even if... well, let's have a rain check on that?" He smiled and sat back up straight. "I've got a bounty on my head now. I may be worth more than a quick bite to eat."

Sally resisted telling him she wouldn't make it quick. "Big outlaw now, are ya?"

"Probably kill-on-sight for most Parties now. The System doesn't take too kindly to Player-killers." He shrugged and idly ran his finger down his wooden shortsword.

[Restrictions Lifted]

She looked down at her STAR, which now buzzed with information - most notably a golden light shone from it, duplicating the glow that also radiated from Theo's.

"Looks like that little stunt levelled us all up," he grinned, going through his menus.

Sally *boiped* away the Party notification to show that Humphrey and Theo had levelled up and pressed onto her own.

[Level Up]  
[Boss Monster Keystone]  
[Undeath Affinity - Increased CON and Resistances]

[Pick One]

[Summon Zombies - Summoning (1/Day) 2-5 Zombies are summoned under your control]

[Dark Healing - Party Healing Spell 60 Mana, 2m Cooldown - Undead within your control  
restore 20% HP]

[Call of the Grave - Single Target Curse - Target takes increased damage from all sources]