

Chapter 28

Small Blessings

The barrel clattered to the rocky floor and its contents launched out towards them. Sally pulled her dagger out but paused in surprise at the dark shape that rolled across the floor - as it stopped just before them.

"Hello!" A small, green face beamed up at them, eyes slightly askew from her dizzying arrival.

Sally scrunched up her nose at the small goblin girl laying upside down to them. Her dagger wavered in her hand before she relented with a sigh. "Who are you?"

The goblin girl righted herself and dusted off her plain brown dress. Both the dress and the beige undershirt she wore were stained and grubby - perhaps from what was inside the barrel. Once again she beamed up at the Party before speaking. "My name is Bella. What's yours?"

"I'm Sally, and this is my friend Humphrey." She knelt as she jerked a thumb back towards the Death Knight, who was looking more perplexed than the zombie. "The other two are Chuck and Frank, but they don't talk much."

"Momma said I talk too much," Bella looked shyly at the floor, "or at least, she used to."

Sally sucked in some air and glanced around the room. "Are... any one of these your Momma?" A finger jabbed in the air towards some of the dead goblins.

"Oh no, Momma just moved away." The bright smile returned to the young goblin's face. "Bad adventurers came here and killed everyone, but not me!"

"Is that because you hid, little one?" Humphrey stood a little closer but still loomed over the little girl.

"No Mister, I hid because I was scared of the dark." She gave a quick glare to part of the chamber not currently lit by the torch. "I didn't die because I *can't* die."

The Death Knight raised his lack of eyebrows towards Sally.

"Well," the zombie tilted her head, "what do you mean by that?"

"I'm Bella the Invincible! You can try it out if you like. I trust you."

Sally brought her dagger and placed it to the neck of the goblin girl, who did not flinch.

"*Woah, woah!*" Humphrey interrupted, waving his hands and kneeling down with them. "Why would you go straight for the throat? Just try and cut the back of her hand if you must."

She opened and closed her mouth a couple of times waiting for words to come out - but none did. With a shrug, she removed the blade from Bella's neck and put it against the back of her offered hand. "If I get overcome by bloodlust and start eating you, I apologise."

“Okay!” Bella beamed and started wide-eyed at the blade against her skin.

Sally paused, gradually seeing the girl as less of a loot pinata and more of an adorable pinata. She drew the blade of her dagger across the goblin’s hand. At first, nothing happened - and then a long crimson rivulet formed across the wound.

“Owwy! Why’d you do that?”

“Oh I’m sorry- I thought-“

“Hah! Just kidding,” Bella stuck her tongue out and waved her hand in the zombie’s face. The blood began to disappear, and the evidence of the act vanished within a few brief seconds.

“*Ha-ha!* How curious!” Humphrey narrowed his empty sockets and regarded the small girl with curiosity.

“What do you think?” Sally turned to him, eyebrow raised. “Really over-the-top regeneration?”

“Most likely.”

Bella yawned and rubbed her red eyes, pushing her dusty black hair away from her face. “So what are you doing here? You don’t look like adventurers?”

“We are here to... uh,” Sally scrunched her face up thinking of a different reason than wholesale slaughter. “We are looking for strong Monsters to join our Party.” Her almost-grimace of a smile was probably not as convincing as she had hoped.

“A Party does sound fun... but maybe you could help me instead? Do you know the way to where Momma lives?” Her eyes widened, the torchlight dancing alongside her excitement.

“I don’t know where anything is... Humphrey?”

The Death Knight shrugged. Somehow, his face had softened. “This is the only goblin cave I know of - do you know where your Mother went, little one?”

Bella twiddled with a loose strap of her dress and kicked some dust slowly from the cave floor. “No, not really? She said there is a place with special water nearby? Some of the clan were sick, as they are not as invincible as me!”

Sally sat on the floor and crossed her tired legs - a yawn escaping from her mouth as well. With a gentle toss, she threw the torch to the floor so that she could rest her chin on both palms as the little goblin sat down opposite.

“Special water? There’s a Rejuvenation Fountain not too far from here - that would be my best guess.” Humphrey sat down too, his metal armour scraping against the rock floor as it shifted into a comfortable position.

“Sure?” Bella nodded, seemingly able to inflect the majority of her sentences into questions.

“But sleep here first, right?” Sally frowned at the Death Knight. “Or should we be travelling more at night, given our dispositions? I think we burnt ourselves out too much walking in the day.”

“Yes. To the sleeping at least. Respawn won’t be for a while, so we’re as safe as it can get.”

“Amazing, so Bella - if you join with us for a bit we can help you out and protect you?” Sally grinned at the goblin.

“Okay!”

[Party: Bella has joined]

She sent Chuck and Frank back closer to the entrance by a bit - the least they could do is be an early warning system for anything approaching. If the goblins respawned around them in the cave, then that would be an interesting morning alarm, but she trusted that Humphrey had a reasonable guess on when that might actually occur.

Having an invincible Party member sounded good on paper, but a child with no ability or weapon proficiency wouldn’t be of much use. She doubted that they could roll the girl into battle to absorb blows... unless they strapped her to a shield. No. That was crazy thoughts from a tired brain. A self-healing shield was a poor use of such power.

They briefly arranged some of the unbroken furniture with the largest shards of those that did not survive the carnage into a makeshift barricade. It split them from the two zombies near the front, but the more time they had to react to danger, the better. A handful of bedrolls and furs not matted with blood were fashioned into beds for the three of them - more comfortable than the bare rocky floor.

“Sally?” Bella rolled over and furrowed her brow.

“Ya-huh?” She was staring at the ceiling. The flickering of the torch was keeping her awake, but they had kept it out for the goblin girl.

“You are a weird-looking goblin.”

“Mmm? Oh - my green skin? I’m actually a zombie.” She turned her head to the girl to see her reaction.

“Oh? Okay!” Bella beamed and closed her eyes. The rattling sound of the Death Knight snoring did not seem to bother her.

Sally looked back at the ceiling as a new message popped up in the air next to her.

[Quest Updated - Goblin Cave: Find Momma]

She gave the retreating text a half-smile. While this had certainly been a less physically taxing adventure than planned... it was still odd. Stale air slowly exhaled from her lungs as her eyes closed. Everything seemed to be a series of odd events - but could it really be

anything else? If she was a normal Monster or a normal Player, then her life would probably be more normal. Instead, not only was she a mess, but also a mess magnet.

She drifted off to sleep with thoughts of her previous life playing on her mind, trying to smudge the memories so the different shards could join and be more cohesive.

A finger prodded her awake. She growled and had to hold herself back from gnashing at the imposing digit. As her red eyes blinked back open, the goblin girl was squatted down next to her with a wide smile across her face.

“Wakey-wakey! You sleep like you’re dead? *Heeee!*” She squealed and ran off, happy enough to be an annoyance.

Sally groaned and sat up. Soft sunlight filtered in from the cavern entrance, barely making it far enough to properly light their chamber but giving enough ambience where the torch was not needed. She gingerly flung it into her Inventory fully lit again, being careful not to burn herself.

Humphrey was leaning against the wall, arms folded. “Careful running about in here,” he scolded Bella gently before turning to the zombie. “Oh, morning Sally. I hope you rested well.”

“A full sleep that has restored all our Health Points - hard to imagine that ever being bad. But, I hope you did too.” She smiled and dusted herself down.

“It was exemplary! *Ha-ha!*” He beamed back at her and then his expression dropped. “First time I have ever slept, it was frightening - how do you reconcile the gap in consciousness?”

“I guess... we don’t? It’s a nice break from existing, at least on a functional level. Did you dream?”

“I did!” Bella hopped over beside them, “I did! I dreamt of adventures coming to kill me but they couldn’t no matter what they tried!”

Sally pursed her lips. Perhaps better to just move on from that. The girl seemed happy enough. Her eyes caught the empty sockets of the Death Knight, and it seemed he had the same thought.

“I did not,” he shrugged, turning his gaze away and back towards the cave entrance. Chuck was in view and staring up at the rocky ceiling with great intensity. “We should move soon. We need to get to the Rejuvenation Fountain and start to make plans for Yarch.”

She nodded and brought up her STAR - there was a notification in the chat.

[Theo: Almost died to a bunch of orcs. Didn’t think they came out this way]

[Theo: Camping for the night to recover - will meet near Yarch, give co-ords if you can]

“Tall stack of BBQ goodness almost died,” she repeated for the Death Knight, “said there were orcs. He is totally going to be a liability for us, huh?”

“Probably, *ha-ha*,” Humphrey grinned before rubbing his chin, “*orcs* though, interesting.”

“What’s this?” Bella pointed to the menu hovering over the STAR. “There’s a weird bit here that doesn’t match?”

Sally frowned and brought her wrist closer to her red eyes. It was like a part of the menu had wrapped around and gotten lost behind whatever UI box it had been assigned to - only the barest of white, blurred text lingered at the edge of the holographic display.

“I never saw that before, Bella - good eyes!” She beamed down at the little girl who seemed overjoyed by the praise. Sally tried to jab at the near-hidden text.

On the third attempt, she struck the mystery, and a buzzing static filled her head, causing her to clench her hands against her temples - a vertigo sensation lulling her forward.

Humphrey reached out to steady her as something in her skull popped, and then the tension was relieved as a notification popped up in front of her blurred, watery eyes.