

Chapter 55 Into the Bowels

Sally had to stop herself from humming a tune. Despite the imminent danger, the overwhelming joy at the anticipated full-course meal awaiting her left no room for any doubts. Her dead fingers gently caressed the cold walls of the mine tunnel as it slowly twisted and descended.

Every so often a lantern hung from the wooden bracings. *Every fourth one*, she counted. Although sometimes every three, annoyingly. Slightly less frequently were corpses of the furred kobolds.

As she entered a small room, a handful of the short Monsters were splayed across the toppled furniture. One of them, dark brown fur with mottle beige around his paws and snout, lay atop the table - his blood soaking through the maps and plans spread beneath him.

Theo knelt down by one of the bodies and ran his eyes up the wall. "At least one slashing weapon," he whispered as he ran a finger over a slightly lighter line in the rock wall. He frowned as he stood and observed the rest of the room. "Maybe multiple?"

Humphrey grunted but had nothing to add.

Sally nodded and gestured to the continuation of the tunnel. The sounds of battle were still reasonably distant - but definitely closer. She assumed their quarry was moving into the Mines further as they ground the poor pups up. If there was any loot to be had, then that would be something for the way out.

Two further rooms in a similar state were passed. Dead kobolds, the occasional partially frozen one an interesting keynote among the crimson gashes of the others. A few dozen feet further down the mine shaft, it turned to the left sharply. The sounds of the Players were very close now.

The zombie Boss paused, flush against the wall before the opening, and looked back to the group. She had picked Jackie to be her second in the surprise attack - much to the pouting of the Death Knight. He was just too noisy in his plated boots and had to keep up the rear with Lars. Jackie could at least provide covering fire and some near-instant damage while she and Theo had time to run into melee.

She closed her eyes as footsteps from the next room came briefly closer.

"Goddamn they weren't kidding when they said the spawns were crazy here."

"Almost as dense as you, Benny."

"Up yours!"

"This is only the first depth too. I think there's supposed to be three?"

"Hold still so I can heal you."

At least three different voices, maybe four. It was hard for her to tell with the pounding of her heart. Slowly, she wiped the drool from her mouth and gave a nod to the mobster.

As soon as she heard the start of the healing spell, she pounced into the opening - [Hex: Slow] cast on the nearest figure, who happened to have their back turned to her. Five Players stood in various states of brief shock in the medium-sized room. Sally leapt over dead kobolds as Jackie moved into the opening with Betty.

[*Hellfire Trigger*] blazed as four bolts were fired in short succession. The first didn't pierce the armour of the slowed Paladin, but the second, third, and fourth landed square in their back - the last striking just as Sally reached them.

[*Eat Brains*]

The unaware victim had their skull cracked like a watermelon, blood and gore spraying into the room as Sally devoured a chunk of their grey matter.

Theo ran into the room just as soon as the bolt volley stopped but slowed to a stop with a confused look on his face. "Who... who are you guys?"

[Brain Eaten] [+2% Defence]

Sally dropped the body to the floor and looked at the remaining Players. The look of abject horror and disgust was becoming familiar now. Her brow furrowed at them, her vision wavy as warmth and power flowed through her body.

They were only *Level Two*, and there were definitely only five of them. Well, four now. They were also all Fighters, except for the Paladin she had just consumed.

One of them near the back exit of the chamber, a man with short blonde hair, threw up - their sword dropping to the floor in the process. The other three didn't look confident in doing anything more useful than that, their eyes not able to get any wider as the rest of the Party entered the room.

"These are not the Players you are looking for." Humphrey intoned, waving his hand across to signify their Levels. "They are called 'The Warriors'."

"I respect a theme," Sally slurred as she wiped her mouth. "Why are you down here, though?"

The closest Player, a female fighter with red hair tied into a bun, nervously spoke up. "W-we keep getting grieved by a large group, so d-decided to Level h-here." She was on the verge of tears as her eyes kept darting between their dead member and the one who perpetrated the violent murder.

"Bit on the nose," Theo murmured, trying to avoid eye contact with everyone in the room.

"What do you-? Ah, sh-" The realisation hit Sally, and she paused as Jackie raised a hand. Over the panicked breathing - there it was. The sound of footsteps. "Too on the nose," she groaned, awaiting the inevitable.

The zombie Paladin rose to their feet, yellow baleful eyes briefly regarding their former teammates before they turned to face the Boss and await orders.

“*Warriors, come out and play-ay!*” A mocking voice echoed down the tunnels.

“That’s just ridiculous,” Sally sighed, to the nods of the Novice. “Listen, we’ll help you kill all these jerk-offs. I’m sorry for killing...”

“Ben,” the vomit-Fighter offered.

“*Ben*, thank you.” She renamed him on her UI. “We were here for the two grieving Parties - just a case of wrong place, wrong time.”

“If it’s any consolation, there’s a small chance they are back in the real world.” Theo rubbed the back of his neck with a shrug.

“What real world?” A leather-capped Fighter asked, brows furrowing beneath their messy black hair.

“No time for that,” Sally shrugged. She wanted to get back into battle before this energy wore out. They were at a disadvantage here though; if they fought them at the mouth of the tunnel the bad guys would have the choke-point. When what they deserved was being choked out.

“Alright,” he hissed at the remaining *Warriors*, “you’re going to help us now.” Her eyes blazed red as a sharp-toothed grin spread across her face.

The first of the gang of ten walked through into the chamber. A wiry Rogue with more teeth than morals led the pack. Shrivelled ears hung from a chain around his neck. His beady eyes scoured the room as his companions filtered in behind his step.

“Well, well... what do we have here?” He snarled at the huddle of Fighters crowded around a prone figure at the braced exit of the room.

“It’s our friend; they tried taking on too many kobolds... you have to help.” The eyes of the red-haired Fighter were puffy, and tears had marred her face.

“Oh, *I have to*, do I?” The Rogue scoffed as he pushed back his greasy hair to the murmured chuckles of the group filtering into the room behind him.

“H-he has a special sword; we need it to carry on in here.”

“They want to carry on,” a burly woman stepped in beside the Rogue. “Good thing we were here to help *push* them forward.”

“Idiot,” he snarled back, “first - let’s see that special sword - ey?” With a wicked grin, he strode towards the huddled group. The two Parties converged on the Warriors, equally interested in why the sword was special and to maybe get some gloating in over the injured person.

The Rogue loomed over the small group, his eye narrowed as they parted, revealing the body of a man lying sprawled awkwardly with a sword across his chest. A man with a bounty? Something wasn't right...

He pushed one of the Fighters away as he knelt down, shooting a scowl at them before he turned his attention to the sword across the man's chest. It seemed to be made... of wood. As he slowly reached his hand out to touch it - it burst into pink flame.

Sally grinned as she peered around the corner. Seeing the pink glow of the [Novice Strike], she gave Humphrey the signal. *Classic duo time.*

The Death Knight thundered around the corner and leapt over the prone Novice, sending the remaining *Warriors* scattering to the side. Sally had never seen him move with such dexterity or purpose as the plated figure crashed down heavily the other side of Theo and barrelled into the throng of surprised Players, with her in tow right behind.

Theo rolled to his feet and began attacking the Rogue, who was still hastily trying to withdraw his weapons while trying to get a bearing on the situation.

Jackie stood in the corridor and spun up Betty, waiting for the signal to engage [Hellfire Trigger] now that it had cooled down. Archie stood back and watched as Lars and Ben slowly walked their way into the ensuing battle.

Sally threw [Hex: Slow] on the Rogue as she passed. The sooner Theo could join them, the better. As soon as Humphrey made it into the middle of the fray, he burst into crimson flame with [Adrenaline] - bathing the stone chamber in a red glow.

[Will of the Dark Lord]

[Summon Zombies]

She glanced around to see which of the large gang failed their saves when something caught her eye.

They were all Level Five.