

## Chapter 41 Beside the Flame

“What are you doing?”

Sally slowly turned to the side, tongue still extended from her salivating mouth. Chuck and Humphrey stood at the end of the platform. The Death Knight didn't seem to be passing any judgment, but the Novice had a confused scowl across his bruised face to match the question posed.

“Goog to see ‘ou’re up, Chufk,” she said, trying to play it cool as her tongue slowly slid back into her mouth.

“Yeah.” He shook the situation out of his head. “Would have been nice to know that was a possibility.”

Humphrey jostled the limping Novice. “That Sally wanted to taste Theo or that the Elite would spawn up here?”

“The Elite, obviously.” Chuck frowned at the floor.

“It was a bit rougher than we expected,” Sally nodded, “but you got what, three Levels out of that?”

“I almost got *dead!*” He threw his arms up in the air, which caused him to wince in pain.

“But... yes, I’m very close to Level Four now.”

Sally smiled at the Death Knight. They had done a pretty good job - they certainly fought well together. Whether that was because of their Boss-Bodyguard bond or they were just naturally pretty neat, it didn't matter too much. It was a shame the zombies had gotten mulched so quickly; that skill was perhaps more useful if she got a whole horde from it with all three activations. She hoped it scaled better as she levelled up.

Theo spluttered, and his eyes opened slowly. His wounds had already healed up to some degree, and his arm had set itself back to an unbroken state. He sat forward from her lap and rubbed his temples, letting out a slow groan.

“You alright meatbag? *I didn't eat you,*” she spoke softly and mostly truthfully.

“I’m starting to wonder if the system has anything that fixes PTSD.” He grimaced and shrugged at her. “I was just broken, bleeding, with my arm twisted off. Some of that is healed, but the memory of the pain lingers.”

Sally adjusted her dress as she sat beside him. “That’s pretty deep, hun. I’ve been trying to maintain a Sunday-morning-cartoon sorta vibe. It helps that my brains got kinda scrambled on the way in.” She placed a hand softly on his leg. “I’m sorry.”

"It's... not your fault." He looked away from her as a tear ran down his cheek. "I blame the Architect. I'm not a violent person... to be forced into this... the pain, the death - it's not right."

"Maybe, I didn't need to drag you along into all this danger though."

"True - you didn't" Chuck interjected.

Sally rolled her eyes. "But - there might be a way for us all to escape this. Well, not Humphrey, I suppose?"

The Death Knight said nothing but stood with arms folded.

Theo sighed and stood to his feet, dusting himself down, before offering a hand down to Sally. "If that is possible then we must endure this, correct?"

She took his hand and stood too. "*Yarp.*"

"Enough of the sap," Chuck waved his arms despite the discomfort. "Let's just loot these bodies and head on our way."

Humphrey tilted his head to the side. Parts of his crimson armour looked cracked and tarnished. "I will try and remember if there is anything we can Level you up on as we travel to the bandits."

"I have a [Campfire]," Theo nudged Sally as he saw her check the Party UI. "It's slow healing, but we can rest together and get healed up."

"Righto - let's loot and reconvene outside of this encampment. Wouldn't want a respawn atop us - it's bound to happen eventually, right?"

"Guaranteed," he smiled before hobbling off to the nearest body.

It took them a short while to make their way around each of the corpses before they moved further into the woods away from the orc spawning area. After dividing up the spoils, Sally received her share of the bounty, along with recovering her [Dagger of Luck].

[173 Gold]  
[Red Cape]  
[Bracers of Defence]  
[Medium Medicine Kit (2)]  
[Iron Bars (4)]

Theo had enough Strength to use the [Orc Scimitar]s, but still chose not to due to his odd meme-build interaction. Chuck did not have the right stats for it but seemed content enough with the Crossbow anyway, which Sally relinquished back to the Novice. There were a couple of basic Chance Boxes that they let Chuck open. *Two Maces and a Shortsword.*

She put the bracers on. They had a little weight to them, but she already felt comfortable in wearing them. Until she found something better to stab people with, the extra defence to

block blows with was worth everything. The [Iron Bars] could be given to Jaxk back at the village, and hopefully, he could make something nice out of them. She made a mental note to check out crafting and the requirements when they were in less imminent danger.

Humphrey was given the [Red Cape]. Despite him not having a proper Inventory or way to equip items, he made do with the old-fashioned way. The cape was large and even though it was slightly worn and rough around the edges, it suited his look perfectly. He posed dramatically, and it shimmered in the breeze. "*Ha-ha!*" Crimson flame blazed from his helmet.

The two men brought out some food to eat as the [Campfire] was set up - the warming flame comforting and relaxing. Sally was a little jealous she was not interested in partaking of the meal - the memory of the way Theo's blood made her tongue tingle was too fresh in her memory to find purpose in anything else. Why couldn't she have been a Vampire instead? At least then she could turn him or at least turn him into a thrall.

She glanced over at Chuck. Perhaps a mindless follower wasn't the best idea. The thought of how he had come to be - how his soul had lingered in some other space before joining to his body... some of that was scary to think about. The other people in the diner... were they in a similar position? Her thoughts busied her mind enough that she didn't notice Chuck staring at her at first.

He looked... tired and stressed. Perhaps the ordeal was working him over harder than it had with Theo. Chuck had almost died too, if he had landed slightly different from the drop off the platform - or even if he hadn't been pushed and got trapped in melee. Something told her he didn't still have the ability to come back from zero Hit Points at some Level loss... although...

"Have you thought about what Class you'll pick?" Theo was the one to end the awkward silence.

"Probably Rogue," Chuck shrugged, still looking over at Sally. "Evasion chance, ranged damage with the Crossbow - try not to die."

"Ranged support would be useful," the zombie nodded. Part of her wondered if she had gone for Ranged or Spellcasting Affinity with how the Party was now stacked - but the extra HP and defence had certainly saved her so far. "Do you know what the Unique bandit Boss is like, Humps?"

"I do not. Generally, bandits are a mix of ranged and melee. Spellcasting is rare. They aren't very skilled - but it depends on how the Unique has been glitched if that's what they are."

She nodded. It was a reasonable assumption that the Death Knight would know if the Unique was System-created or not. Having named one-life Monsters seemed like a short-lived endeavour. Any Party worth their salt would have hunted them out at this stage in the... game? That word felt awkward but sat in her mind like a slowly melting ice cube.

Chuck's hand shook as he tapped on his leg, something clearly playing on his mind. "So the plan is to recruit this... other Monster, then travel back to Sanctuary and beat off the approaching city guards?"

Sally stifled a snicker as she nodded.

“We won’t be walking back, though,” Humphrey held up a hand. In this hand was a rolled-up scroll. “[Scroll of Town Teleport]. I had to twist Oleb’s arm for this. Not literally, *ha-ha*.”

“Neat!” Sally’s eyes gleamed. “So we can probably do the bandit thing, get Chuck levelled, do some adventuring - and just pop back in time to help defend the village?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes.”

Theo rubbed his chin. His facial wound had closed up, and a fresh scar ran down the right side of his head. “I haven’t been around this side of the woods. It would be great to find out if there was anything else that could be useful for my build.”

Humphrey tilted his head and put the scroll back away on his belt. “Let me consider what I know and furnish you with any pertinent details.”

“I await your response eagerly,” the Novice nodded slowly in return. However, anything that made him attack faster might break his arm or kill him quicker than any opponent.

Chuck just looked ill. His eyes had a sunken look to them, glazed over as he stared into the lapping flames of the [Campfire].

Sally ran her tongue across her sharp teeth. The woods around here were oddly quiet - there was no ambient noise of animals or insects, only the brief rustle of pine needles as the gentle breeze meandered its way through the area. Maybe it would be a good idea to get Chuck back to the Village for some proper rest soon; there was obviously some coming-to-terms-with-the-situation that he needed to get on board with.

“Hey Chuck, what do you want to do after you get your Class?” A verbal branch of peace she offered across the flames.

He looked up, the fire dancing in his darkened eyes.

“I want to kill more Monsters.”