

## Chapter 40 Seeing Red

Sally dropped to the floor as one winding bolt of fell energy surged off into a tree someway off behind the melee. A second one struck Humphrey in the shoulder, letting off a blaze of green that crackled as it petered out, the smell of burnt ozone filling the air overpowering the scent of gore and sweat. If only she still had her [Crossbow].

As if the System could read her thoughts, the Crossbow clattered to the floor just behind her. Shortly followed by a hard thud of Chuck's bloodied body.

She cursed and rolled over to his prone form, grabbing the Crossbow along the way. Definitely broken bones and plenty of sources of bleeding.

"Ow," Chuck hissed towards the hard ground. "...*Elite*."

Sally popped a Healing Potion from his belt and helped him imbibe it. "Hump, guard Chuck," she growled, her eyes scanning the top of the platform. She couldn't see Theo or the Elite.

With a twang, she shot the bolt out at the shaman, striking the orc in the hand holding the staff - pinning it to the wooden focus and interrupting their next spell. "Throw me!" She ran at the Death Knight.

Humphrey dropped his greatsword briefly to crouch ready, boosting her into the air as she ran onto his braced forearms. She leapt into the air, her fingers just reaching the rough lip of the platform.

Thank the Architect for my high Strength. She pulled herself up, pausing halfway as she saw Theo. A brief shiver of cold ran through her core, followed by a burst of red-hot rage. Her fingers clenched into the wooden floor as she lifted the rest of her body up, eyes blazing at the Elite orc.

Theo's wooden sword glowed pink as his [Novice Strike] tried to strike out at his opponent. His arm was held back at an odd, unnatural angle so the blow couldn't land. Gashes of crimson ran up the side of his torso and across his face. He was in a test of Strength against the massive orc and was slowly losing. The orc had its fair share of damage too, and the arm not currently twisting away the Novice's attack held a scimitar sluggishly.

"Leave him alone!" She withdrew her dagger and balled up a fist in her free hand.

The Elite looked over at her, his bright yellow eyes furrowing in confusion at seeing a Monster - or at least something that looked like a Monster. With a grunt, he headbutted Theo and dropped him to the floor. The pink glow of the wooden sword faded as the Novice sunk to the floor, unconscious.

"Nobody bleeds my boy but me," she hissed through clenched teeth. She watched as the large figure picked up their second scimitar and rolled their shoulders out. The orc was much larger and better armed, with more reach. If this was the time to unlock some hidden potential, then it'd better happen soon.

“What are you?” the deep voice of the Elite boomed out.

Sally grinned and checked the UI. *Krudd the Bloodthirsty*. He wasn't Unique and was only a Level Three Elite. If she took down the Cyclops, then this chump should be easy enough. The fact that both men had been taken down by this one guy would have to be a stern conversation for later on - Chuck had a bit of an excuse, but with Theo being Level Nine, he shouldn't be this paper-thin. She was ignoring the group of dead orcs already littering the floor that the pair had managed to dispatch.

“Answer me!” Krudd bellowed again, hesitating.

“I am *Sally the Unliving*, eater of the System, slayer of Monster and Player alike, and those are my friends you just bullied!”

The orc huffed and hunched down, ready to sprint. “Too many words.” He launched forward, closing the gap between them in a couple of brief seconds. The first scimitar tore through the air, the power of his large arms blurring the glowing blade as it careened toward her.

Sally took a deep breath to cool her temper and sidestepped the first attack. As fast and strong as it may be, it was heavily orchestrated. The second blade was slower - dark blood ran down this arm in streams, and she was able to block it with the edge of her rare dagger. Trying to block was not a great idea, just due to the surface area of each weapon, but the act knocked on the confidence of Krudd.

His glare faltered as the amount of strength this slim zombie seemed to possess was much higher than expected. As his blades twisted through the air, she seemed to be one step ahead, just outside his reach or able to deflect his assault. He didn't feel helpless, though - in fact it just enraged him further. With a burst of amber flames, he activated [Endless Fury].

Humphrey slid his blade through the last of the orc defenders, foul intestines dropping to the floor as he stood in front of the injured Novice. No orc had made it past - even the shaman had been unable to send magic that way, even if the Death Knight had to take a couple of those eldritch blows himself.

The shaman, now the only orc left in the lower campground, licked their yellowed fangs nervously. Most System-created, especially low-Level Monsters, were not built for self-preservation. They would not run, or give chase over great distance, or even beg or plead for mercy. Thus, all they could do was send further bolts of green magic out at the slowly approaching plated figure.

Humphrey grinned, crimson flames like a furnace from the back of his helmet. Dark energy swirled around his greatsword as he readied a final [Unholy Strike].

Sally caught the sharp edge of a scimitar across her forehead as she leapt backwards. Blood ran down her face, threatening to blind her as she cursed at the orc. Whatever his skill did, he had renewed speed and focus and had become a whirling dervish of continuous attacks. Splinters of wood had shot up from the platform along with blood and shredded leather as Krudd struck everything in his path.

Foolishly, she hadn't bought her own Healing Potions or saw it fit to get a portion of the supplies that Theo had gotten from Sanctuary. There would be time after the fight, she had thought. It would be a quick in-and-out, twenty-minute battle against some weak orcs. A fresh cut against her thigh reassured her that she was correct on being completely wrong.

Could she hold out until Humphrey finished down the bottom and was able to circle around? *Doubtful*. Plus, Theo was bleeding out, and she didn't have the space to properly check the Party UI and see how everyone was faring. Why the System couldn't be accessed mentally was something she would add to her long list of questions for the Architect.

She ducked and dived towards the Elite, sliding along the wooden platform. A scimitar struck next to her head, cutting off a chunk of hair as the blade stuck into the wood. With a quick strike, she stabbed the offending hand, heavily slicing through two fingers. In the brief respite, she clambered up and sliced across his stomach as she moved away from him. The streak of crimson was her reward, but the orc was too tough-skinned to be so easily disembowelled by a small weapon.

Krudd growled and let go of the scimitar embedded into the wood, his skill was draining him of stamina, and the small injuries were adding up. He raised his blade up for the attack, expecting the duel to continue - but the zombie ran away - leaving him briefly perplexed.

Sally jumped over a dead orc and bashed away at her STAR, the menus spinning erratically as her shaky hand tried to find her Inventory. With a brief yelp of jubilation, she withdrew the Crossbow and turned towards the Elite.

The orc roared as his weapon flashed through the air, knocking the projectile out of the air with a clang. As he lowered the scimitar with a grin, a sharp warm feeling clouded his vision in one eye. It was... *uncomfortable*.

She watched as Krudd raised a hand up to feel for the bolt protruding from his eye socket before the Elite slumped to the floor and collapsed. "Ass," she spat, "now I'll have to find where my dagger went." She stowed the Crossbow and ran over to Theo.

Thankfully, he also stored a Healing Potion on his belt. Why he didn't think of using it himself was another cause for her to shake her head. She lifted him onto her lap so she could feed the potion to him. He looked pretty bad - not only was his sword arm limp and clearly broken, but the gash on his face was pretty deep, and his breathing was haggard from his side injury.

For a brief moment, this was as human as she had felt since awakening here. She felt sorry for him; there was a pit inside her that wanted to care for him and was alarmed to see him in such a state. Despite the lives she had taken and the differences in their existence here, he was just as fragile and Unique as she or Humphrey were.

She slowly licked a line of blood from his face.