

Chapter 25

Dead End

The glow of purple reflected off of the Death Knight's armour, casting deep shadows within his empty eye sockets. "There we go, that is the unexpected amount of luck I had anticipated, *ha-ha!*"

Sally plucked the item from the air with a furrowed brow. A rectangle, not much larger than her hand, and flat except for some slightly raised details on one side. The artwork on the card stared back at her with its single eye. Her grip tightened as a buzzing filled her head - a familiar pressure that eventually released with a *pop*.

[Card Feature Unlocked]

"Alright, alright. What does this... Cyclops card even do?"

[Cyclops Card - Rare]
[For every 4 Strength you gain 1 Constitution]

"Wowzers, that seems... excessive? How high do Stats go?"

"Yes. The soft cap is one-hundred. Given that you seem to have something odd going on with your Stats already, this is perhaps problematic." Humphrey brought his hand up to his chin in contemplation.

Sally shrugged. Without seeing her Stats, there wasn't much she could do about it. Even if there was a problem, it sounded more like something that would work to her benefit. You could never have too much Strength or Constitution, right? It would only make her more able to survive in this strange world.

"More to the point," she retrieved her dagger from the cyclops' leg, "is what was this meanie doing out here at his Level? Also, why not join my Party?" She shook her head.

"They are usually mountain creatures; it is unusual for a Monster to wander so far from their spawning habitat."

"Unless they are like me." She beamed and sheathed her blade.

"I don't think anybody is like you," the Death Knight shrugged, "perhaps the System is just fraying at the seams more than we first thought."

That stood to reason - if anything, they had almost encountered more unusual activity and errors than normal things. Chuck with his lowering Level and not being able to die, Theo with avoiding choosing a Class and being super tasty looking, Humphrey disobeying his directive to help her out - now Monsters in odd places.

She took a look through the rest of the belongings of the felled foe. Surprisingly, despite his lack of pockets, the cyclops had managed to hold onto a great deal of coins and miscellaneous boring stuff.

[Gold 134]
[Skull (3)]
[Healing Potion]

"I'll leave everything else. No point getting my Inventory filled up with gross junk. Can't stand clutter. Are you listening, Humps? *I can't stand it!*"

"Yes. I did hear you - I am just ruminating."

"*Can't stand it,*" she whispered to herself, shaking her head. Skulls were different though. Skulls were neat and stacked into one square - and one day she could make a throne with them, or one of those archways for a garden - maybe even a weapon. Like a skull-trebuchet!

Her arm was at least back to almost normal. There was a weird darker green discolouration to most of it, which she assumed would be bruising if her blood still worked that way. She wasn't sure if the System knew how living corpses were supposed to react. The Healing Potion - a small glass filled with a bright red liquid - was stowed on her belt. As much as she could use it to get back to top form, you never knew when it could come in use.

"We'd best head off," Humphrey eventually concluded, apparently having dropped whatever thought process he was lost in, "I'd rather we get to the caves before dark."

"There's no Monsters that are dangerous that come out at night though, right?"

"Yes. No *Monsters.*"

Humphrey had been correct in that they shouldn't dally around for too much longer, for as their destination drew closer the waning amber of the setting sun soon flooded the sky, bringing with it long shadows of the looming trees.

"How have we been walking nearly all day and gotten no further," Sally complained, her body slack and hunched over as her legs ached.

"There's a science to it." The Death Knight tapped on the side of his helmet. "Roads are usually free of most danger; the wilderness has all the bad stuff. As this is the newbie area, it is quite... bland."

"Aside from our big ol' friend back there." She jerked a lazy thumb backwards. "Plus, the feeling like I am being watched."

"No doubt we are."

Sally straightened back up and raised an eyebrow at him. "You think so?"

"Yes. Not by Monsters. That isn't too likely. But Players, Observers, and maybe others? We are an interesting Party."

“If the Architect wanted to, could they just... Smite us out of existence?” She fiddled with part of her hair.

“That’s a strong... maybe.”

They walked on in silence for a while. Chuck and the dead Ranger - Sally decided to call them Frank - stumbled on behind them at a slight distance. The former had somehow managed to regenerate the flesh and clothing that had been burned away in the tomb fight. His health was still deep red on the UI, but otherwise, he looked as he had the previous day.

The road was mostly shadowed now as the sun had sunk closer to the horizon, with beams of orange occasionally making their way through the gaps in the trees. It was cooler now and the light breeze that had flourished throughout the day had increased its efforts a little. Eventually, some rolling hills could be seen through the dense woodland, a few peaks rising up in the distance.

“We are just about here now.” Humphrey pointed with an outstretched digit. “The dirt pathway here will lead to the Goblin Caves.”

She squinted her eyes. There was indeed a dirt pathway coming up. “Do we need to worry about the Goblins? They aren’t like... Level Eight and more sharp edges than necessary?”

“I’m not sure how many edges are necessary-“

“One, maybe two - *max*.”

“-but, they are low Level. Their danger mostly comes in numbers, but between the four of us we have almost a whole brain, I reckon...”

“So just funnel them into a chokepoint, fair enough.” She nodded and started to think of potential scenarios as they left the road to follow the dirt path.

Perhaps ‘dirt path’ was a little generous. There was a slightly worn path in the ground that wound and meandered around the slightly sparser trees. It was a breadcrumb trail to guide those with little navigational skills - or no Map, as the case may be.

“So you go in first, alright.” Sally had decided that was the best plan in almost any scenario that didn’t involve eating Theo. Humphrey *was* the designated minion.

“As you wish.” He turned and nodded to her, an unnecessary formality to make her uncomfortable.

“Chuck and Frank are best used behind me to protect against flanking or anything sneaking up on us. I will support you in taking out weakened ones or if you get overwhelmed.” She rubbed her chin and tilted her head.

“Sounds like a reasonable plan, *ha-ha*.”

“You aren’t convinced?” The laugh didn’t have the usual ridiculous pomp to it.

“Being away from my connection to the System has left me feeling a little lost without access to the knowledge I am used to accessing on a whim. I would not say that I am scared, but the unknown has brought fear into me even when it is unwarranted.”

Sally frowned at the Death Knight. “These are valid thoughts, Hump. You did a brave thing, and I’m here to support you with it.” It was unlike the skullhead to be anything but annoying, and he hadn’t shown any amount of trepidation when fighting the cyclops - or maybe she was too focused to notice.

“Thank you, *Sally the Unliving*. I hope to fill the hole of not-knowing with other, more joyful things.” The flames at the back of his helmet lit slightly brighter.

“I hope to fill my tum with some gobbo meat,” she grinned, giving him a light punch on the arm. “At least, if they are edible and don’t taste like regret.”

It was then that the cave came into view. Less than a handful of trees ahead a dark toothless maw spanned across dark grey stone - a hill of rock rising above the treeline. The entrance was perhaps just over a dozen feet in width and height, a rough circle almost. Just outside the cave, a bucket, two stools, and what remained of a campfire lay strewn across the scuffed clearing.

Sally approached cautiously as Humphrey drew his greatsword. The chairs looked like they were for guards to sit at, maybe? She knelt down by the campfire, licked her finger and touched the wood within. *Still warm*. “Still warm,” she repeated with a hushed tone as the Death Knight could not read her mind.

“Lots of boot marks through the muck and dust too,” Humphrey added. “Not goblin-sized either.”

Sally sighed and gazed off into the darkness of the cave. It would be just her luck to arrive just after some Party had already come through and cleared it out. What did that mean for her Quest though - did she just have to wait for them all to respawn? Could she just wander in and receive the Quest Completion even though she did none of the work?

Actually, that second one sounded quite preferable. “Let’s check it out,” she signalled to the Death Knight with a nod. “See what actually happened?”

“I will lead the way - perhaps you can make use of that torch now rather than relying on my radiant personality, *ha-ha!*”

That was more like the Humphrey she knew. She winced and stumbled back a couple of steps as she withdrew her Torch - forgetting that it would come out fully lit. She took one last look back to the woods and road behind them, shooing Chuck out of her line of vision, but nothing untoward caught her eye. With a shrug, she followed the Death Knight into the cave.

If the entrance had been any indication, the inside of the caves confirmed the fact that something was amiss. Or at least, the dead goblin bodies did. *Imagine raising a zombie goblin army*, she sulked internally once more - one day raising the dead would be a power in her grasp. She demanded it. There were at least half a dozen in just this starting area of their once home.

Silently they gingerly walked over slain goblins, broken furniture, and shards of split rock. They stopped in a wide chamber to observe the destruction. In a way it was haunting - the flickering light of the torch casting dancing shadows from the lifeless bodies of the short Monsters. In another way, it was plain annoying that they missed out on all this experience and loot.

Humphrey put away his sword and shrugged before folding his arms. "Sucks for us, I suppose."

Sally groaned and rubbed her face with her free hand.

She was about to complain some more when her voice caught in her throat - a sound from the other side of the chamber stopping her dead in her tracks.

The Party slowly turned their heads as a barrel at the side of the room slowly started to tip over with an ominous creak.