

## Chapter 34

### Gathered before Dawn

Humphrey stepped in front of the Boss Monster as she loaded her crossbow. His sword blazed with fell energy, illuminating their position in a dim crimson glow. Theo prepared his [Novice Strike], the stress on his face visible even through the sweat and grime. The goblins looked panicked for the most part - aside from Bella, and Chuck just stayed lying on the floor.

Sally peered out from the side of the armoured Death Knight and shot a bolt off into the quickly approaching crowd. The Captain had seemed content enough to let the mass of generic guards flood ahead of him - one of which was struck by her ranged attack. Just the upper chest. Not a killing blow. She quickly wound the crossbow back.

She could almost smell them now. Boots thundering across the stone, their angered expressions yelling and grimacing as they prepared for the clash. If Sally had a clearer mind, she might question the amount of sentience these System-created had - how deep did their feelings, their sense of self go? The second bolt flew out and struck a different guard in the thigh.

This first guard stumbled straight into a wide upswing from the Death Knight, his large blade cleaving a deep gash through their torso. Blood flicked through the air, dappling the throng as the first guard fell defeated.

And then the battle was truly upon them.

Sally drew her rare dagger and went to move to engage the front line of the guard - but Theo stepped in the way. The Novice swung forward with his wooden sword, a blaze of pinkish energy arcing through the air. He struck a guard and immediately twisted into a follow-up attack - blocked - but a third twisted its way into the bracer of his opponent, disarming the guard. He moved as if in a dance led by the unconventional weapon.

Humphrey burst into red energy as he activated [Adrenaline], his greatsword having no issue in carving through whatever passed as armour. Sally fell in behind the Death Knight, lashing out at a wounded guard that stumbled past - her dagger finding the exposed neck. Soon they started carving a bloody path through the regiment. She found no joy in it. The System-created were not interesting to her, nothing but obstacles in the way. Humphrey had taken some damage, but most attacks were not strong enough to pierce his full-body plate.

The goblins were being just as opportunistic as she was. They helped finish off some of Theo's opponents. They were being avoidant, drawing out lone fighters and then piling on. Oleb had chewed small lines in the path, tripping and causing uneven footing for the guards approaching. Then, when they had an advantage, all four would pile on with a flurry of merciless dagger strikes.

*[Rallying Cry]*

A wave of blue light flashed through the crowd, briefly illuminating the village square. Humphrey's greatsword struck out at an opponent but was blocked; his attack was rebuffed as the remaining guards retained a light blue colour to them.

Likewise, Theo met with more resistance. He had managed to fell two guards and damage a handful more all with the same use of his skill - but his next strike against the buffed guard fell short, and he was knocked back. He stumbled, lethargy taking its toll as sweat dripped from his face, and took a blade to the side of his stomach.

"Theo!" Sally growled, casting [Hex: Slow] on the guard attempting a overhead swing to follow up at the reeling Novice.

It gave Theo enough time to just bring his sword up for a block - bracing with both hands. Bella slid into the scene from between his legs and stabbed the guard in the lower leg.

*[Novice Strike]*

The face of the Novice was nothing like what Sally had seen yet before. A tired, focused scowl set on his face, his eyes cold and teeth clenched and grimacing. He stood stooped slightly as blood ran down his side. Where his hand shook, there was still the determination to keep on fighting.

She turned from him before he could start his next skill - a guard swung at her, a shortsword aimed at her arm. The metal rang against her dagger as she managed to divert the path of it away, her arm numb from the vibration. Sally grabbed the guard with her offhand and headbutted them, stabbing them in the shoulder and then neck as they recoiled from the blow.

Humphrey barrelled into her, and she tumbled to the floor into a painful roll. As she righted herself to scowl at the Death Knight, she saw him with the halberd blade partway through his left shoulder - the large Captain holding onto the blunt end of the weapon. She quickly switched [Hex: Slow] onto the armoured figure while she had the chance.

Things had been going... okay for the group. She risked another quick glance around - Theo looked terrible but again was flickering around a pair of guards - taking a few cuts himself but layering up damage even on the Rallied opponents. Jaxk had taken a nasty-looking cut to the head and was being helped by Henkk. She watched as a guard jabbed their sword towards Oleb and the goblin ate the incoming pointy end - Frena then rushed the confused opponent, having now joined the group with a sharpened spear.

She turned back to the Captain clashing with the Death Knight. Humphrey's left arm sagged, hanging limply as he stepped backwards parrying the assault from the last Leader of Yarch. Sally brought out the [Scroll: Savage Strike] and activated it as she stalked towards them. The paper burnt and disintegrated from her grip as a red glow started to swirl around her held dagger. She dodged and spun away from an interloping guard, not wanting to waste the double damage on such a lowly foe. Theo flickered in to strike at the attacker, a blur of pain and pink light.

Sally cursed as she ran forward, hopping over the bodies of the fallen. If only she had better skills. Despite things still being in their favour - all it would take would be losing a goblin or, dare she think it, Humphrey and the tide could easily turn against them. Even as she closed the short distance, she could see the fire from the back of the Death Knight's helmet had dimmed.

She timed her arrival for just after the Captain had swung at Humphrey, the clang of blades clashing also signalling her arrival. Dagger outstretched, she barrelled into the large armoured form of the Leader, ramming the blade through into the side of their stomach. A guard clocked her on the head immediately after, and she dropped to the floor. Her vision started to fade.

At first, a numb sensation flooded her. Then, the cold cobblestone of the village square sank through her prone body. The sound of muffled fighting grew clearer, and she blinked. A familiar pressure filled her head - but instead of a pop, there was just a slow, steady release. She felt calm, almost like she just nap. Even with the surrounding chaos. The fighting, the heat from the fire, the wet feeling at the back of her head.

She shook - or rather, someone was shaking her.

"Sally," the voice of Theo came from above her. "*Get up.*"

She did. Not because of the concern or the urgency of the request. Not because she felt like she could gorge on his tasty flesh. Not even because he was fast becoming a trusted friend.

She rose from the floor because she was angry. His hand was warm against hers as he helped her up to unstable footing. Her eyes turned to him, blazing bright red, but she saw past him to one of the few remaining guards levelling a blow towards the unaware Novice.

As the blow came down, the burnt figure of Chuck lumbered into the way - his skull splitting in twain from the blow, spraying what remained of his brain matter across them.

[Party: Chuck has died]

Something burst inside Sally. She pushed Theo to the side and grabbed the guard by the throat, crushing their windpipe even as the body of her former Party member still fell to the floor. Where was her dagger? It probably didn't matter. She twisted the mace from the now dying guard. Humphrey was still on the back foot and lagging even further - the Captain was still slowed and now injured from her attack, but two guards had positioned in between them all as the melee had progressed.

She stepped forward with confidence, despite feeling light-headed. The first guard swung, but she was quicker, the mace striking the opponent's wrist, shattering the bone and sending their weapon clattering to the floor. Sally lurched forward and bit into the arm that came up to support the broken one. The blood was... different. Plain. Average. A world of difference compared to the joy of consuming a Player. Yet still, it felt sustaining in some way.

[Restricted]

The START hummed as Theo flashed beside her.

“Get the Captain,” he growled, sounding groggy and pained.

She nodded and slipped past as he engaged the other guard, arriving at the duel just as the Death Knight was struck and knocked to the floor.

*“Hey! I’m your opponent now!”* Her voice rang throughout the village.

The Captain paused over the prone body of Humphrey and turned to the approaching zombie. *“Oh, you’re approaching me?”*

Sally spat as her eyes flared bright crimson.

“I can’t eat the shit out of you unless I get closer.”