

## Chapter 33 Endless Night

*[Novice Strike]*

The wooden sword struck the Innkeeper's arm, and a brief flash of confusion animated in her face at how the seemingly useless weapon hurt so much. Theo flickered the blunt blade into another strike - the trail of pink energy a continuation of his first skill. He could certainly feel the difference from the Speed earrings Sally had given him. His layers of bonus' and item interactions caused the second blow to twist into a third - the weapon almost moving of its own accord, willing him to make further attacks.

It had disorientated the Innkeeper. The blows had come quicker than expected and for much higher damage than a Novice with a wooden sword should be able to deal out. As she tried to retreat backwards, Theo shifted towards her, his flurry of blows unrelenting. The eighth... or maybe the tenth blow cracked the woman in the neck, and she dropped to the floor.

The crackling pink energy fizzled out as the sword returned to its normal state. Theo wiped the sweat from his brow and tried to catch his breath. He eyed the gathered Novices, who had also paused, unsure of what to do next as they saw the important figure fall.

"We don't have to do this." Theo gripped his sword tighter, holding out his open hand in a gesture to diffuse the situation. His arm still stung from his earlier wound, and he wasn't keen on adding to that.

He watched as the collective eyes of the group rose to above his head.

*Bloip!* His STAR shone red with a Bounty notification.

"Shit."

---

Bella dropped to the grass, the cool breeze rustling through her hair. Rolling to the side, she bumped into Henkk. The pale goblin looked shocked, to say the least.

She turned, fumbling for a weapon, expecting to see the surprised Healer laying in the grass after the weird teleportation.

Her mouth opened, and she frowned.

Laying on the grass on the outside of the building was an elven leg, barely covered by a scrap of nightshirt that waved in the breeze.

"Send me back in." She pulled on the cloak of Henkk. He shook his head clear and rested a hand on her.

Another wave hit her - pressure and nausea flooded her body as she then popped back into the building.

The Healer was laying up against the door in a pool of crimson. Their missing leg was now healed over but still missing. A pale sweat and tired eyes covered their face. Upon seeing the goblin appear back into existence, he was startled and raised a shaking hand to begin casting a spell.

Bella ran and leapt onto the man before he could mumble the last of the incantation, landing on top of his body. She muffled the spell as her arms wrapped around the head of the Healer. He struggled against her as a wide grin spread across her face.

"Cabbages," she hissed for the final time.

---

Jaxk jumped down from the bookshelf and snaked around the tables and chairs to approach the Librarian. As dumb and stubborn as the zombie was, they were at least a distraction.

He rounded a corner and winced as a sharp crackle of blue energy shot through the air and struck the burning corpse. A melon-sized hole cratered through Chuck, yet he still stumbled forward.

The Librarian cursed and began to head back up the stairs, beginning to prepare another [Zap]. Jaxk stopped and watched the zombie trip up the first step, face-planting the wooden stairs but avoiding the spell, which arced over his head into the wall behind. The stairs became alight with fire.

"*Doing my work for me,*" Jaxk murmured to himself, shaking his head. The Librarian cursed once more and tried to move along the walkway to the upper rooms.

With a large groan, the supports bent beneath his weight - Oleb appeared to give a brief thumbs up before continuing to weaken the building by eating it. Within seconds the whole thing shook, sending the Librarian toppling to the wooden railing, bursting through and falling back to the ground floor.

Jaxk watched the figure fall, landing atop a table which shattered dramatically. He sighed and walked over to the groaning body, quickly sticking his thin knife into the throat of the prone Leader.

"You should get out soon," Oleb called, with mouth half-full of stone, "even if the fire doesn't kill ya, this place'll collapse soon."

Jaxk wiped his blade and sheathed it. Time to rejoin the rest in the centre of the village.

---

The Blacksmith growled out in pain as the crossbow bolt struck his forearm, waylaying his attack at the stunned Death Knight. His eyes blazed as he turned to Sally, pulling the bolt out with his teeth.

"Not sure that is advised," she growled, dropping the ranged weapon and bringing out her dagger. "You can bleed out quicker doing that."

Her opponent hesitated - wanting to finish off the Death Knight but not wanting to lower his guard for the zombie to attack. He was bleeding and heavily damaged - perhaps his only option would be to wait out healing... if the Healer ever showed up.

The sound of metal boots marching across stone was enough pressure for Sally to want to act. Even if the large elf was frozen by indecision, Humphrey wasn't recovering, and she was running out of time. She tensed and then sprung forward.

*[Hex: Slow]*

The arc of anti-undead enchantments on the Blacksmith's weapons slowed just enough for her to avoid the blows. Sparks rang from the floor as the axe blade carved the air just beside her. Sally kept trying to flank the sweating elf, hoping to draw his attention away from Humphrey. She tried to bring up her Party UI as she leapt back from another dual-weapon attack.

[ERROR: Restricted]

*Typical.* Was this the System choosing an opportune time to glitch up, or was there something the Captain could do?

The Blacksmith's hammer grazed her arm, and the tingle of the magic energy repulsed her. It felt dangerous. Despite being slowed, the elf levied an almost constant barrage of blows - and with the extra reach he had over Sally's dagger she found it hard to approach. With a feint, she threw the dagger.

At this range, it cut the Blacksmith but fell to the floor - it hadn't the momentum to do much more. In the brief flinch of the elf, she slid in and launched a heavy punch straight into his gut.

It barely moved him.

"Hah! Got you now!" The wide grin of the bearded elf shone out through his shadowed face as he readied his weapons at the zombie.

A flesh of red carved his head clean from his neck as the sinister glow of Humphrey's greatsword arced through the air.

"You mean '*Ha-ha*'!" he grinned, the flames from his helmet flickering but weak.

"Here." She threw a [Healing Potion] at the Death Knight, who caught and ingested it immediately. "We need to get to the town square now and hope that everyone else was successful."

"Yes." Humphrey nodded and fell into step with the Boss Monster.

As Sally stepped into the open air, a weight sunk in her stomach at the sight of the group marching towards them. The imposing figure of the Captain in polished silver armour, holding a halberd, strode out in front of perhaps fifteen other Yarch guards. If it was any consolation to her panicked nerves - there didn't seem to be any Players amongst them.

The pair stopped at the midway point of the Southern end of the village. The Library to their East was alight now, flames licking up the sides as part of the roof collapsed. Two small figures, silhouetted against the fire came out to join them - Jaxk and Oleb. Chuck was nowhere to be seen.

From an alleyway, Bella and Henkk came to join them. The girl's dress was smeared with blood, but she otherwise looked in good spirits. The white goblin however appeared to of had his fill of the adventure but was here and holding a dagger tightly.

From behind them, the tavern door slammed open, and Theo stumbled out, immediately throwing up across the cobbled flagstones. He was covered in blood, his armour was worn and scuffed, and his pallor was offputting - even for Sally. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve and with a shallow smile stumbled over to the group.

"You all look like garbage," Sally beamed, "but I am glad you're all okay."

"Mfff." Theo shrugged, convulsing as he tried to keep more of his [Dinner] from escaping. "So, who set off the guards?"

Sally raised her hands up and shrugged. "Who knows." She held his gaze silently as his eyes narrowed.

"I hate to spoil a reunion," Humphrey cleared his throat, "but someone is waiting for our attention."

She turned to see the Captain and his retinue standing around thirty feet away. They had stopped but stood at the ready awaiting order to charge.

"Foul undead and assorted Monsters," the Captain called out, his voice deep, carrying throughout the village. "...and Murderous Player."

Theo waved sheepishly.

"You have assailed this fine, pleasant village. You have slain four of its Leaders. Sent the rest of the populace into hiding within their homes. *There is only one punishment for this, and as I stand here before you today-*"

Sally nudged Theo. "Isn't it weird how they always monologue?"

He nodded, keeping his eyes on the Captain. "If the endgame is death then why not just go straight to the fighting?"

*"-on behalf of the Crown, he who sits atop the marbled throne of-*"

"Yeah, right? We should be kill-on-sight."

*"-and with the power granted to me, I hereby-*"

"Hey!" Sally interrupted the Captain, "Can we skip this cutscene?" She wrinkled her nose at her Party and lowered her voice. "We don't have much healing, right?"

[Party UI - Error: Restricted]

Theo shook his head slowly as the armoured elf stood literally shaking with rage at the group. "I used the [Healing Potion] you gave me, I have two [Small Medical Kit]s, but those take a little time."

"They are unlikely to wait for us to recover, *ha-ha*."

Sally scowled. An all-out battle was not the best use of their skills, not against superior numbers. She tried to read the Level of the guards and Captain, but her eyes just burned. Something was not right, adding to the unease that she had-

Chuck stumbled out from the crackling ruins of the Library. No longer aflame, he was burnt beyond recognition. Almost skeletal - blacked, dark flesh clung to a low percentage of him. He brought a sickening meaty smell to the already smokey night air.

She turned back to the gathered group ahead of them, the Captain levelling the pointed end of their halberd right at her.

"*Guards - attack!*"