

Finn groaned as he ducked down, just in time for the blow to miss his head. Barely. He felt the aftershock of the punch pulling on his hairs but ignored it, already moving forward, charging his right arm. After a Summer's worth of training, he knew perfectly where his limits lay, and how far he could push his body with Channeling. His punch was filled up perfectly to his limit and when it connected the monster shrieked, then gurgled and fell silent. Hitting it on its left flank, Finn knew he had shattered both the beast's ribs and heart, ending it.

"Finn! Watch out!" He wasn't allowed to catch his breath as Sam's voice pulled him into the next fight. Another of the monsters was charging him.

Unlike the last one, this one used an actual weapon, a crude blade that seemed to be in bad shape. The beast lunged forwards at Finn, slashing wildly at his right side. As Finn sidestepped to the left, the beast lunged its neck forwards, trying to get a bite in on his neck. Finn swore and channelled again, jumping backwards rapidly. The beast's teeth snapped shut just a hair's width away from his jugular. The beast wasted no time and followed up with another slash, aimed to the other side of Finn's neck. Still channelling, Finn added a spell in as well, almost without thinking. Low level, crude spells came to him as breathing now, after all the training and use he had put into them.

His hand shot upwards, index and middle finger extended, fast enough to intercept the blade. The spell hardened and sharpened his fingers to the point that it was just enough to best the blade. The monster roared in rage as its blade smashed into half when it hit Finn's fingers. Finn wasted no time either and while he was still channelling energy into his arm, shot it forwards, penetrating the beast's skull. It fell dead to the floor, twitching as its life ended.

Finn channelled more power into his legs, jumping great lengths back towards Sam, making sure to be close enough to protect her. As he jumped his eyes quickly scanned the area around them, counting the beasts, those still standing, and those who lay dead on the ground. With the two that he had killed just now they had already defeated fourteen. Leaving another ten of them alive. He landed with his back towards Sam, counting three beasts in front of him, he took a glance over his shoulder towards her. Sam was focussed to the ones in front of her though, of the remaining seven, four of them were charging her now, all at the same time.

"Let me help you-" Finn started to say, but he was cut short by her.

"No need, focus on the ones attacking you!" She said and then closed her eyes. Finn started to count silently in his head, and when he was in between two and three, Sam opened them again. A white fire rushing forwards from her hands. She was getting faster with casting, Finn smiled as he saw the fire consuming two of the beasts and burning a third so badly that it lost all use of one of its arms.

"Finn!" Sam warned again.

Finn groaned and turned around, the three beasts in front of him were charging as well; one of them seemed to be larger, smarter, staying a step behind the other two. *Hobgoblin probably.*

He spread out his arms, fire starting to swirl in a ball at each hand. Finn fed the balls, growing them larger and larger until they were the size of basketballs. And then hurled them towards the first two Goblins. They shrieked but didn't falter or slow down, smashing headfirst in his attacks. *Strange, they should have had enough instinct and intellect to at least evade, does the Hob have that much power over them? Or...*

Finn's thoughts were disturbed as from between the two flaming corpses the Hobgoblin jumped out, slashing at him with a sword that was easily longer than Finn was tall. Finn had to use the last bit of channelled power left in his legs to be able to sidestep fast enough to evade the overhead swing. The blade rushed past him and smashed into the ground, the metal sinking in up until half of the width of the blade.

"Damn.." Finn tried getting his hand up to fire a small ball of magic in the Hobgoblin's face, but it foresaw and was quicker. Grabbing Finn's hand by the wrist and keeping it down until the ball shot out in the ground, throwing up dust and small bits of clay and rock. The beast shrieked in victory as it started another swing, a wide one from the side this time. With no energy left in his arms or legs, Finn knew the cut would reach him before he could push enough energy in them again, the fight had left him exhausted, and his channelling was still on the slow side.

Finn groaned as he smashed his fist in the Hobgoblin's face, using an uppercut and then opening his hand and firing off an explosion spell. The blast sending him down on the ground, just barely fast enough so that the cut went over him. Finn smashed into the ground hard, air escaping his lungs in a sudden smash. He groaned and started to roll away from the Hobgoblin, channelling power in all of his limbs, so that when he got on his feet again, he was burning up against his max. He could see the faint lines of light shining through his skin already.

Damn it. I am already pushing against my limit. A small group of Goblins like this is enough to max me out.

The Hobgoblin roared, arching its head back and holding its arms wide apart, enraged that its prey got away. Finn didn't waste the opening and dashed forward, using the majority of the channelled power in his legs, leaving just enough to be able to quickly hop out again if needed. The Hobgoblin started to react, but it was too slow, Finn put both of his hands on the beast's ribs, just under its chest. He fired a spell, and two narrow explosions tunnelled their way through the flesh of the beast, shredding its lungs, heart and spine.

Finn was panting as he slowly stood up straight, the Hobgoblin falling to the ground. He looked over at Sam. She was surrounded by corpses, slowly burning in that white fire. Two of the Goblins remained, and Sam was keeping them at bay with a whip made of lightning. Each time it clapped, shreds of flesh separated from one of them. But they were circling and flanking her, causing her attacks to come in slower and slower as she had to cover more ground.

As Sam clapped the whip at one, she had to turn her back to the other one. The Goblin used the opportunity and lunged at her, wielding a small spear with a knapped point. Sam screamed as she brought the whip around, realising she would be too slow. Her eyes turned big as the Goblin came towards her in the air, the spearpoint aimed at her head.

Finn roared in rage, swinging the large blade of the Hobgoblin and cleaving the smaller one in two in mid-air. The blade was too heavy and his arms too tired, so he had to let go of it. When he landed, he felt his legs give in as well, exhausted he fell to the ground on his hands and knees. Sam let go of her spell and the lightning whip dissipated.

"Finn!" She yelled as she quickly ran over.

Finn groaned and rolled over on his back, laying down and panting.

"It's okay. I am just... hmm.. tired." He groaned but managed a smile. "That was quite a lot."

Sam smiled at Finn as she put her hands over him, a soft green light emitting from them. Finn groaned as he felt the comfort of her healing magic wash over his body, each wave grinding away his wounds and exhaustion.

"It was, closer by again as well. I think we are only 3 kilometres away from a town now."

"I know, we need to be quick and get back home Sam. Starting at Master's place, the woods were entirely overrun with monsters and beasts. Heading back, we find more and more of them, closer and closer to civilisation."

"Yes, and the bodies we found... there were so many. They can't have been only from Players. Which means..." Finn nodded.

"The zones are failing, or normal people are walking into them. Which shouldn't be possible."

"No, Jennifer explained it differently. It is not that it shouldn't be possible. It is more that the system should be smart enough to filter what can and can't enter. She did say something about filter failures though, that it happened before. But they left before I got any real explanations for that."

"Hmmm," Finn sat up and rubbed his arms, the shimmering was still there, he would have to spend time to get rid of the rot again properly. "We have looked the wiki over five times as well, and I think we can be sure there is nothing about this in there. Nor in the books they gave us to study."

Sam sighed. "Mhm, but Finn, you know that if normal people can enter, and there are still this many zones being spawned, closer and closer to civilisation..."

"Yes," Finn said with a stern glare. "It is only a matter of time before one of these zones spawns in the middle of a town. And if it also has a filter failure.... a lot of people will die." Finn imagined what such a thing would look like to normal people. A street would look like a normal street, and then suddenly, as you were walking, it would be filled with beasts and monsters, like these Goblins.

"We have to get home as fast as we can, Sam. Our families, our friends.... none of them are safe as long as this keeps happening." Sam nodded but didn't say anything. "Did you manage to reach any of them with the Scrying?"

Sam shook her head. "No, the water remains still, so either they are not responding, or theirs is broken. I can't reach Jennifer either by using her spell Whisper wood. It might be that there is too much distance between us but..."

"But?"

"It's weird, different from before. It is as if you are trying to hear something with pillows pushed up against your ears; there is always some noise around. But it is random, lifeless noise. The noise now.. it is... different, just different. It feels no longer random."

"What do you mean?"

"It feels as if there is a lot more noise there than normal. But that shouldn't be possible, since Jennifer told me few Players could use the medium her Whisper wood spell is using."

"Hmm, everything is weird and off, we should have been able to reach them by now. We really need to rush back home."

"I agree, we can go on for a few more hours, but then we need to make camp too. Today was exhausting too, and we need to make sure we have enough time to rest up as well."

"I know, tomorrow won't be any different from today probably, if not harder." Finn stood up with a groan and then helped Sam up as well. He held her by her side for a moment and kissed her. Then he started walking. "Let's go then, the sun is low, but we should be able to get a few hours of daylight out of it."

Sam smiled, cherishing the kiss and the moment for a moment. Looking at the setting sun, she sighed. Her life was becoming stranger and more difficult each passing day. And her resolve was being chipped away.