

Chapter 53

Travel Encounters

Dried earth crumbled beneath the footsteps of the Party as they made their way through the woods.

Sally was in a good mood. Despite Jackie complaining of the heat, Humphrey giving the mobster constant evils over her smoking, Theo groaning almost as much as Lars as he looked ill, and Archie mewling to be picked up every so often.

They were going to beat people up and steal their lunch. And by lunch, she meant brains. And by steal, she meant eat. The Death Knight had reassured her that they were likely to turn up as the raid was already underway. Due to the nature of the excursion, the ten-strong group would want to get in early and spend most of the day in there - apparently, the mines had enough Monsters to sustain that.

She had wondered if there would be any Unique Monsters amongst the kobolds and whether they were the dog-type or the dragon-type. It seemed rude to ask, so she kept that as a little surprise for herself. They might be unlike anything from the pop culture of her previous world - even though a lot of the System seemed to have been vaguely made with them as a reference.

“Say, Humps? Do you know how the regiment is comprised?” She raised an eyebrow at the plated figure.

“Yes.” His skeletal features somehow relaxed. “Well, not exactly. This is rather unprecedented. However, my educated guess is that it will be twenty Level Ten guards led by a Level Ten Elite.”

Sally and Theo exchanged glances.

“Shit me, that’s a lot,” Jackie exclaimed, dropping the lit cigarette from her mouth, “what Level am I - like, twenty-something, right?”

“Close,” Sally grimaced. “Five.”

The mobster pulled a sour face and reached for her seemingly unending cigarette packet.

“It’s not as terrible as it sounds!” Sally hopped ahead of them and raised her arms as she turned. “We can probably get some experience today and Level Up! With some smart planning, we will be able to do some damage despite the power difference.”

If her speech had roused their spirits and washed away any doubt, none of them showed it. Only Archie seemed to be somewhat enthused. Lars probably wouldn’t complain either, if you excluded the moans.

“One death trap at a time,” Theo shrugged. “If we can kill ten Level Three Players, then twenty Level Ten NPCs should be... a walk in the park.” Whatever energy he had for the statement had drained by the conclusion.

Sally clicked her fingers with a wink and turned to lead the way again, the smile fading from her face. They were up against the odds - but it wouldn't be just them. The goblins in Sanctuary, including the Leaders. Hopefully some more zombies too - not only from the Mines but all three [Summon Zombie] charges. That was exciting. She could almost match their number if she was lucky - and although they wouldn't stand up to much of an assault, the corpses were always great distractions.

Slowly exhaling through her nose, she brought up her Chat with Chuck.

[Sally: yeah, we are still alive]

[Sally: off to do some evil]

[Sally: proud of you, snot]

[Chuck: doing an escort quest]

[Chuck: zero chance of combat]

[Sally: how's that feel?]

[Chuck: rain check]

[Sally: that a Druid spell?]

She waited a few seconds for the reply, briefly stumbling over a tree root as she focused on the UI.

[Chuck: we'll talk later... about something]

[Chuck: stay alive]

[Chuck: or dead, yknow wtev]

[Sally: remember to lift with ur knees]

The Chat closed, and she wondered what he could have to say later. Was he just giving her a cliffhanger? Was he *allowed* to do that?

"Everything okay?" Theo had caught up to her.

"Just Chuck, he's on that pacifist grind."

"Is it working out for him?"

She shrugged. "He isn't dead and probably isn't levelling up his trauma stat."

"Huh." Theo looked out into the woods.

Despite it being his choice to follow along, she did feel bad for the Novice. She was at least able to suppress some of the horror due to being part Monster. There must be a breaking point for him - she doubted all the Strength he stacked helped his mental fortitude.

After a short while they reached a small stream running across their path. There didn't seem to be a walkway or small bridge to cross it as far as Sally could see, neither up or downstream. The embankment sank at a sharp angle on each side, and she estimated a good eight or so feet from one flat side to the other.

"We can just jump it, yeah?" Jackie peered over the edge, her face scrunched up as she regarded the running water.

“Not all of us are so spry,” Humphrey nodded towards Lars trying not to give away that he also meant himself.

“It doesn’t look that deep.” Sally knelt down beside the muddied slope. The water was remarkably clear - perhaps two feet deep at the most, and they should have no trouble Strength-wise at wading against the flow.

“I’m not a fan of water.” Theo rubbed the back of his neck, giving his own scan up and down to see if he could see a bridge.

Sally rolled her eyes. “We aren’t being bested by a bit of wet. Humphrey, I am delegating the problem to you - I am going full send.”

“I am not aware what that means-“

They watched as the Boss zombie took a dozen or so steps back and sprinted towards the edge. She leapt into the air, sailing over the river. Her foot slipped on the edge of the opposite embankment turning her landing into an impromptu roll. She quickly spun up onto her feet, raised her hands in the air, and turned back to the watching group.

Theo mimed holding up a scorecard. “Eight.”

“*RIGGED!*” She stomped her foot and crossed her arms. “Now hurry up and get across.”

Jackie held out Betty to the Novice. “Here, put this in your big pocket.” She paused as he went to take it. “Don’t make any mistakes. We are at a handy junction where I can drown ya.”

He nodded and stowed the weapon away in his Inventory.

The mobster took a few steps back and performed the same sprint-jump as Sally had. Jackie’s longer legs made an easy go of it, and she landed with a slide beside the zombie.

“Ay, what score’d I get?” She brimmed with confidence, brushing a chunk of purple hair from her face.

“Uh - a Nine?” Theo shrugged.

She crossed her arms and looked proud of herself as Sally pouted.

“Hurry up, Humps, so I can lecture Theo about my insecurities.”

The Death Knight scratched his metal chin and looked at the remaining group. The Novice, the cat, and the walking corpse. With a brief shrug, he withdrew his greatsword from his back, a pulse of unholy energy flickering along the long blade. He turned, after briefly drinking in the slight worry in Theo’s eyes, and moved to the nearest tree.

With a quick flash of crimson, the large sword carved straight through the trunk - a straight line of bright red glow across the width of the dark log. As the glow faded, the tree shifted

across this slice, and with the cracking of breaking branches, it fell - crashing across the small gorge.

"I got my skirt all dusty for no reason," Sally murmured to herself.

Jackie just looked down at the zombie's outfit. The dried blood, brain matter, mud, and who knows what else made the dust seem like the least of the issues.

The pair watched as one by one the rest of the Party made it across the log to their side of the water. Theo took even longer than Lars to slowly shuffle along the fallen tree.

"Never imagined you a hydrophobe," she tilted her head as the sweaty man hopped down from the thickening branches. "Y'know after all the gore and murder didn't ruin you."

"We all have our Achilles heel," he tried to get his breath back. "I'm not usually that bothered by it; it's strange."

"Well, at least I know what to do if I never need to chase you down." She gave him a pat on the back and allowed Archie to hop onto her shoulder.

Jackie came and stood the Novice as the Boss walked away. "*Betty*." She held out her hands as Theo removed it and returned the repeating crossbow to the mobster.

They continued along their path for another hour or so. The weather remained mild as it seemed to always do. Sally squinted at the almost clear sky. It was probably saving all the rain and stormy weather for when the stakes were the highest. She knew the System understood how to set a good scene.

After a while, the Death Knight stopped and turned towards the right. "As much as I don't want to tip the scales with my meta knowledge." He craned his head back to Sally who had now paused. "We should take a brief detour this way."

Seeing no reason to doubt him, the Outsiders changed course briefly.

A few hundred feet later, as they worked their way through denser trees, there was an opening - a circular clearing with some kind of stone structure in the middle.

Twenty feet tall, made of a grey marble that was similar to the Fountain they had previously seen. It was a rounded cone shape, with two sets of carved wings jutting from near the peak. As they rounded to the front of the shrine, a rounded indent was visible on the lower bulge of the main body. Carvings of a language that Sally didn't know spread out in spiral patterns around the small alcove and across the floor in a wide circle.

"Shrine of Regret," Humphrey grinned, "and it looks like it isn't on cooldown."

Sally raised her eyebrows to the Novice in question, but he shrugged and shook his head.

Seeing their confusion, the Death Knight revelled in the reveal. Crimson flame flickered higher from his helmet, and he narrowed his empty eye sockets.

“It lets you unlearn one of your skills and replace it, *ha-ha*.”

“Dibs!” Sally immediately shouted and ran towards the shrine, hand outstretched to try and activate it.

“*Stop there!*” A gruff voice shouted out from behind them.