

## Chapter 18 Teeth of Stone

Sally gasped, as her finger fell from the trigger.

Skeletons?

Four shambling figures of nothing but bone and metal armour came clinking into view. Rusted swords hung from limp arms, dragging through the loose dead leaves cluttering the woodland floor. A baleful green glow emanated from their otherwise empty eye sockets as they regarded the zombie woman with blank emotion.

“Aw, they’re sad and lost!” Sally jumped and punched the air, stowing the crossbow back into her Inventory.

“You can tell?” Humphrey hovered down.

“*You can’t?*” She walked up to the first one to enter through the brush to them and gave it a pat on its metal helm. “The nasty Skullsplitter Party probably came through here and killed their friends, isn’t that right?”

The skeleton nodded stiffly.

“See!”

[Skeletal Warrior has joined the Party]

“Only Level One, but that’s okay. We don’t judge in my Party.” Sally beamed as she spun up the STAR.

[Skeletal Warrior - Undead Humanoid]  
[Level One - HP (100%)]  
[Skills: [Slash]]

The Skeleton walked over to join the rest of the group, while the three others milled around at the edge of the treeline. There may not be any room left in the Party, but she could still use [Command Dead] to do something with them. It would probably make more sense to dump Chuck and get another Skeletal Warrior... but, she had a soft spot for the zombie. As long as that didn’t get her dead. *Deader*.

“Not going to replace the-“

“I’ve already had that discussion internally,” she waved the skull away, “he stays for now.”

“We are but a few minutes away from the Cemetery if the skeletons are out this far. Are you ready, Sally the Unliving?”

“*Ready to get a new title*,” she murmured to herself, before straightening her back. “Let’s get this dumb Quest done and not get murdered by Players.”

Now that she was more focused on the surroundings, there was something comforting about it. Was it just how dead everything looked? The cooler air from the heat of the sun being obscured? It felt more home than the diner had, despite the Hillan building having that odd familiarity to it.

Sally stopped and knelt down, brow furrowed. *Bones*. She brushed leaves out of the way to reveal a whole skeleton - albeit one that seemed to have exploded apart. Dave grunted off to the right, and as she followed his gaze there was a second - and maybe a third - pile of bones about two dozen feet away.

"Looks like we found the rest of the Warriors." She shook her head. If only she could raise them back. "Oh neat, I can loot their skulls."

[Skull (1)]

"I just need to find some purple paint now, ey Humphrey?" Her nose wrinkled up as she stuck her tongue out at the Observer.

The floating skull did not respond but instead flew up into the air near the lower branches of a dead tree. He cast his eyeless gaze across the Party and the surrounding area, finally staring off towards the supposed direction of the Cemetery.

Sally followed where he was looking and tried to piece together his thoughts. It can't have been too long ago the Skullsplitters had come and... split these skulls. Well, technically the skulls were in pretty good condition, and her Inventory now sported three of them. They would definitely come in use at some point, and not just be cluttering up her space forever. Definitely.

"Everyone on good behaviour," she spun around to her cohort, index finger outstretched, "we are getting close to a dangerous zone, so be quiet and alert."

The Lurker murmured and lowered its head, while the zombies and skeletons mostly just twitched in a way that indicated they at least heard her. Chuck especially seemed enthused about the orders given and almost tripped on his own feet as he moved closer.

"A rallying cry for the ages," Humphrey hovered down closer, "apologies, that was sarcasm. *Ha-ha*. Just a little nervous."

Sally smiled and looked out the edge of the woods. There was a darkness that obscured the details beyond a certain part. As though there was a thin fog - a miasma that clouded the area and prevented seeing further than a hundred feet or so. Perhaps a potential benefit for their attempt at closing in closer to the tomb with subtlety. The last thing they would want is to be spotted from half a mile away, or even half a kilometre away.

Nevertheless, they persisted onwards.

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Gravestones. Jutting forth from the landscape like rows of grey teeth in an ogres maw. *Just the lower jaw though*. Sally looked briefly to the sky to make sure there were none above.

The gloomy clouds overhead seemed sparse of grave markers and teeth alike. Now free from the obstruction of the woods, they had emerged into what was possibly a Cemetery overcompensating for something.

As they had reached the edge of the treeline, the dead foliage had become more sparse. There was still the errant tree or two, even a desiccated garden in odd places, spread amongst the graveyard. Everything was covered in a layer of doom - steeped in it. The grass was dry and brown, the earth grey and cracked, and the stonework of the markers and scant buildings were weather worn and crumbling.

"It's beautiful," Sally gasped, eyes wide. The same dark fog obscured how long this Cemetery stretched on for, but even within its bounds, it would have to house hundreds of the buried. There were a number of mausoleums and supposed tombs dotted around the many gravestones - but perhaps more pressing were the scattered remains of more Skeleton Warriors.

"So much for the cavalry option," the Observer mused as the zombie woman knelt down to retrieve the skulls from the fallen.

The Lurker whined and hunkered down; their yellow eyes darted around.

"Aw, Big Dave, I know there isn't much tree cover here," Sally stood back up and cradled the moss-covered fur head of the beast. "We will stick to what obstacles we can as check which tomb we are meant to be investigating - and then we are out of here as soon as possible."

The creature seemed to be somewhat comforted by this plan and raised back up to their full height. Chuck was caught on the ruined metal fencing that they had been able to stroll through unhindered.

"Wow, looks like we have a natural [Find Traps] user," the floating skull rolled his empty sockets.

"He can't help it." Sally scowled at the Observer as she strode back over to pull the zombie from the metal pole his shirt was caught on.

With a brief rip, the dirty white shirt tore, and Chuck stumbled forward - tripped, and landed face-first in the dry dirt with a deep thud that belied his short frame. He lay there and didn't move for a few seconds, as if stunned or moderately embarrassed.

Sally sighed. "Up you get, poppet." She brushed some of the dirt from his front as he wobbled to his feet, for whatever good that would do. Her red eyes searched his face, trying to get a hold of the familiarity she held for the clumsy fool. His previously damaged eye had recovered back to normal - some magic of the System, she assumed - but the gaze he returned was vacant and devoid of any personality that was slipping from her memory.

She frowned and gave his shoulder a squeeze, before turning around to face the more pressing situation. Her concerns over the zombie would have to wait till they were in a safer position. The STAR on her wrist boiped as she received a chat notification.

[Theo: Got the last card ;P ]

[Theo: Will make my way to the Cemetery]

[Sally: Be quick - running out of space in the Party]

“The Quest didn’t specify which tomb it was, right?” She closed the menu system and narrowed her eyes at the nearest building.

“I’m afraid not - exploration quest is exploration-y.” Humphrey floated around in an arc, trying to shake the constant stare of Big Dave.

“Bit of a rough second Quest.”

“Much like your skill choices,” the Observer rose higher up, “you are not following traditional advancement. There are three buildings nearby that are explorable.”

With a nod, they started to head towards the closest one. The building was a roughly square structure made of thick stone slabs. Dark vines engulfed the back corner and the black metal bars of the gate covering the entrance were rusted and worn. A pitch recess led somewhere underground from behind the barred doorway.

“It’s locked,” Sally pointed at the almost comically large padlock on the side of the gate.

*“Is it?”*

She frowned at the Observer, just catching the tail end of a flicker of red in his otherwise purple glow. With a huff, she turned back to the lock - which was now unlocked.

“It was obstructing my duties...” The skull looked away, off into the distance.

“Best have the same outlook when I have a blade to my throat,” Sally grinned and shook her head.

The gate squealed gently as she opened it. She bit her lip and resisted the urge to squeak it back and forth. Putting a signal out to any adventurer in the area that they were here would be one of the sillier things to attempt. Maybe later.

Humphrey came down beside her to offer his glow as lighting. A short staircase of less than a dozen stone steps covered in muddy leaves led down into a short passageway. The walls were cool to her touch. Relaxing even. Her fingers brushed across small indents in the brickwork - and a brief panic about traps quickly became a realisation. Under narrowed eyes and the scant light from the floating skull, she was able to pick out carvings of names and dates. Those that were buried here?

Big Dave and the others stood at the entrance on guard. Not only would the large beast not be able to comfortably fit down into this small tomb, but Sally had no doubts that Chuck would fall down the stairs and break himself.

The short passageway led to another small set of three steps as the room opened up to a chamber. Humphrey’s light barely illuminated the featureless wall on the opposite side. In the middle of this room, a raised stone plinth stood - atop it was a wooden box...

No - this was a *treasure chest*.

“Odd place to keep treasure,” Sally mused, her voice dampened but echoed in the underground chamber. “It is probably a... disguised monster?” She could feel a name sitting in the back of her muddled mind, something from the before-times, but it couldn’t reach her tongue.

“Suspend your belief a little; perhaps the owner wanted to take their possessions with them to the afterlife.” Humphrey looked particularly menacing in the otherwise pitch-black room, his purple eldritch glow illuminating the recesses of his empty sockets.

“Pfft.” She brought out her dagger and jabbed it into the wood - tense and expecting something to burst out. The sharp sound briefly reverberated up throughout the stone.

No Monster surged forth.

“Best open it then,” she shrugged.

With the weapon stored, she grasped the lid and lifted, eyes widening as a familiar hiss of clear mist was expelled by the chest.

She looked within to see her bounty earned.