

Chapter 16 Loss Prevention

"There's nothing in these woods that are really that dangerous," the Fighter shrugged, brushing her long black hair away.

"*Nothing that dangerous*," the short Ranger spat as he kicked through a vine tangled around his boot, "not during the day, at least."

The group Cleric, a petite woman with large blue eyes, tutted and shook her head causing the hood of her light grey robes to fall back and reveal flowing blonde hair. "Don't go getting all conspiratorial, Bren. The Hillan Woods and surrounding areas have always been safe for night camping."

The Ranger pulled a face. "You heard the two Novices wailing back in town, though - no contact with the rest of the group. Something killed them *real* quick."

"Serves them right for being Novices still," a red-headed Rogue pushed past to the front of the group, shrugging unapologetically. "Even *we* are still pretty behind the curve."

"Better slow than dead," the Cleric chastised, pulling her hood back up.

The fifth member of the Party said nothing. Their full plate armour glinted in the sunlight as they stopped in place, full helmet turning to the side.

The Ranger caught their gaze and walked over in that direction. "Oh, there's a small pool over here - good eyes."

"Gods forbid we have a Ranger that chose any kind of Tracking abilities," the Fighter rolled her eyes and stepped into the clearing.

"Go get cleaned up; it won't be too long before we get to the Cemetery." The Cleric hustled them out of the woods.

"Ah, you won't be complaining when we get into a fight." The Ranger shrugged and took out his water skein to be refilled. The water looked clean enough to drink.

"Weird," the Rogue knelt down on the side of the pool, "there's a pair of [Basic Boots] just sitting here."

Sally cursed through clenched teeth as she peered out from the dense bushes that only barely hid their location. She could at least be thankful the two zombies were well-practised in playing dead, but her eyes blazed red with anger.

A full Party of Level Threes, except for the Knight at the back - they were Level Four.

Attacking them now would be folly. Even on a skill-to-skill basis, it would be their sixteen

versus her three. The element of surprise wouldn't get them far either, and she doubted that the zombies could chew through metal armour. Instead, she settled for gnashing her teeth and trying to pick up what they were talking about.

Humphrey had remained over the pool, his ability to cloak to those he did not wish to see him a handy ability for recon. She would have to poke him for clarification - if they didn't find her.

The mud was cold through her outfit as she lay prone amongst the shrubbery. Despite wearing the armour Theo provided, it still felt like her linen shirt was the only thing between her bare flesh and the earth beneath her. Typical that she would need to get cleaned up again so soon.

Her fingers dug into the soul as she seethed. What was this feeling that burned within her? Fear? No, it was closer to anger - disdain. Her tongue ran across her sharp teeth. Maybe some envy or jealousy as well, she may admit. Time seemed to stretch on as she watched the figures mill around, murmuring about her boot, the cemetery, and other meaningless banter. *Sally hated banter.*

Eventually, they began to leave. The Knight seemed to be pensive, thoughtful even, and lingered briefly in the clearing before joining the rest of their Party. Their voices got slowly further away until they became inaudible. The Observer came down to the impromptu hiding position.

"Coast is clear," he nodded.

Sally let out a long, stale breath, before pushing herself out of the mud. Indeed, her white shirt now had a generous few streaks of brown down the front. "At least I'm not dead. *Deader*," she grumbled to herself. The softer soul did feel kind of nice on her bare feet, however, and she took a second to squash it between her toes.

"Seems they are heading to the Cemetery too," Humphrey offered as he looked back to the direction travelled.

"Figures. I would have thought someplace like that would have been cleared out by now." She hopped out of her hiding place and tried to avoid getting caught in the rougher bushes as she went back into the clearing.

"Perhaps I was too vague about respawns," the skull rotated slowly, "I just didn't want to give you false hope about your own mortality."

"System-created Monsters can respawn, but anything with a soul can't?" She stuck her toes back into the water to wash the mud off.

"There are also some Monsters with the Unique tag that do not respawn."

"Gotcha - ah *dammit*," Sally narrowed her eyes around the edge of the pool, "they ran off with my boots."

“It was the Rogue, *ha-ha*.”

She shook her head as she brought up the menu to clean off her clothes. As it progressed, she tapped the STAR to bring up chat.

[Sally: Tomb might be trouble, if I die I just want you to know...]

[Sally: I wish I killed and ate you x]

If the walking steak dinner had actually chosen a Class, then he would at least be able to contribute better to the Party - but even then they were sorely outpowered. It was also not very likely she could find more Players compassionate to her cause... and willing to murder other Players in the way. Her STAR *boiped*.

[Theo: Stay safe]

[Theo: Just think, a Level Fifty Novice would be a meal all the more sweeter ;P]

Bloody tease, she huffed with a smile, closing the UI. There was no use complaining about it; there would be no further pals to be found in the reflection of the pool. The Cemetery may have enemies, but it would also have undead to control - a possibility to gain an upper hand.

“I think you were about five feet away from your bounty being visible,” the skull idly announced, as he hovered over the calm water once more.

“Arrgh, why tell me that?” She scowled and searched her inventory to see if her sneakers were in there. Thankfully, they were.

“Your Luck knows no bounds, *ha-ha*.” The Observer laughed awkwardly as he turned to watch the two zombies stumble out of the undergrowth.

With her sneakers back on, Sally brushed down her newly cleaned clothing. She didn't feel too lucky, the [Rabbit's Foot] notwithstanding. There was the option of staying back near Hillan, perhaps just farming out some more Novices... but even that had danger. Word had already gotten out about her. If more Novices started disappearing in the area, then it would only draw more higher-levelled Parties out.

She gazed out to the woodlands surrounding them. The way to the Cemetery - the direction the enemy Party went - was at a slight decline. With a glance, she looked over at the Observer, who was staring in the same direction.

“Penny for your thoughts, Humps?”

“Did you see their Party name?” He slowly turned to meet her look.

“Parties can have names?”

“Yes. Their name was The Skullsplitters. Very gauche.” The Observer shuddered in the air.

“You’re not a real skull, though?” Sally crossed her arms and tilted her head slightly. “Like, you’re just a construct made in the image of one?”

Humphrey did not respond but turned back to gaze in the direction of the Cemetery.

The zombie villainess tapped her foot on the ground. Parties having names would make it easier to discuss specific ones without getting confused. The Skullsplitters were the first full Party she had come across, and they were pretty intimidating too, all things considered. No doubt on their way to go split-skulls down near the Tomb - beating up her undead friends would be their last mistake.

“We’ll give them a slight head start, and then follow them in. Avoid them if possible, but hope to find more allies down at the Cemetery if we need to engage.” She nodded both at the Observer and her two companions who had joined them at the cusp of the clearing.

“As good a plan as any,” Humphrey smiled with his teeth.

“Glad to have you on board.” Sally rolled her eyes and then perked up - “Oh! I never redeemed my daily prize thing, eh?”

“Yes.”

She spun around the STAR in search of the right menu. Despite there being few options it took her three goes-around before finding where it was hidden.

[Login Bonus: Day 2 - Receive Gift?]

“Yes please, System.”

[20 Gold]
[ERROR]
[P:]
[ERROR]

“*Really?* How do I send a complaint, Humphrey?” She scowled at the fading text before turning towards the skull. Her finger wagged in accusation.

“I will forward this to my Manager.”

Sally bared her teeth at the Observer, narrowing her red eyes. She flipped through her Inventory - nothing new added. The Errors must really be-

“Oh, what’s this?”

Humphrey moved closer to see the hovering screen showing her stored items. “Looks like whatever ‘P’ was supposed to be. That isn’t usually something given to through the reward program...”

She withdrew it, her eyes sparkling with wonder.

[Monster Summon (M)]

Sally whistled. "The Error taketh and the Error giveth, huh? I should use this now, right?"
Right now? *Right?*"

"You can, but if it is something untoward, then it will set you at a disadvantage."

Untoward? Like something really noisy, perhaps. Or something on fire - that would be pretty bad for their current situation. She stared at the item in her hand; the glass was smooth and almost felt warm in her dead hand. Waiting would be the sensible thing to do. There could be no telling where such an item could come in clutch at a last-ditch moment.

However, only a fool would rely on chance when things were dire.

She threw the glass ball to the floor, shattering it. Sparks of yellow lightning arced around a light blue mist that spewed forth from the broken summoning item.

A darkened figure loomed out from the cloud.