

Chapter 56

Rumbled

Her mind spun as the battle went into slow motion. The *Voice of Gaia* Party didn't actually say what Level the two grieving Parties were. Humphrey had said it was a Level Three area, so she had made the false connection. You know what they say about assumptions though - they get you killed, *you ass*.

Three fresh temporary zombies burst from the hard rocky floor as she made a quick slash-then-stab with her two blades into a Ranger that was currently stunned. Despite the unprotected damage, it was still not enough to kill the equal-level Player - so she gave them a headbutt for good measure.

Her panic about higher-level opponents was quickly washed away by the excitement of Level Five brains. Instead of turning to her next opponent, she again stabbed at the falling Ranger, jumping on top of them and plunging her dagger through leather armour into their chest.

A flurry of bolts flew overhead, striking at the few members of the gang who were about to try and stop her.

[Eat Brains]

[Brain Eaten] [+5% Ranged Damage]

She sat up from her victim, blood soaking into her already filthy white shirt. *This was exhilarating*. Turning to the Novice, she watched as Theo battered the Rogue - despite their attempts to block his whirling blade, it was just too unrelenting. Sally stood warm and calm, barely even registering the clash of weapons and shouts of pain and anger mixed with the groans of the undead.

She could sense the Rogue was on low health.

As she blissfully walked towards him, the Rogue suddenly went invisible, one hand fumbling for a red potion as he quickly faded from view. The [Novice Strike] wore off as the wooden sword clattered against the stone wall. She watched Theo growl and search the flickering shadows for signs of the Rogue.

But Sally could smell the blood.

She ran full pelt towards a plain wall, colliding with a soft, dense Rogue-shaped figure. With a crack against the stone and a further burst of the potion bottle breaking on the floor, the injured opponent shifted back into view. His beady eyes were wide with panic, and he opened his mouth to speak.

[Eat Brains]

[Brain Eaten] [+2.5% Melee Critical Chance]

A hand shot down towards her, and she opened her gore-caked maw as if to bite it before realising it was the hand of Theo. She instead took it with hers and stood with his assistance. He looked different. There was a cold indifference mixed with an anger - *no, not anger*. Some kind of primal determination to stay alive.

“Get back into the fight,” he growled.

Her head lolled back around to the swirling battle. The mass of their opponents had become their detriment at the start. As Humphrey had pushed them back and engaged, they had tripped over each other or been pushed out of their effective ranges. Even now, the shocked head of some manner of spellcaster lay detached from their body in the middle of the melee - the first casualty of their bad positioning.

The Death Knight had killed two. She had killed two, Jackie had killed one - and between the mobster and the zombies another handful of Players were injured. The tide had stabilised now, as the support characters were able to buff and heal the remaining fighters, and the Death Knight had come to be very outnumbered.

“*Retreat!*” a voice called from the back - a Bard with a bolt in their upper arm.

As she leapt towards the fray, three of the remaining members vanished in a shimmer of blue light. *Teleport Scroll*.

Two of the gang remained - a Fighter and a Cleric. She watched as the Cleric readied a healing spell in one hand towards the armoured Fighter squaring off against Humphrey, with their other hand grabbing at a Teleport scroll.

Sally growled and threw her dagger as she ran the short distance with her sword raised. A bolt struck the outstretched hand, halting the spell. Her dagger struck the forearm of the grabby-hand, the Teleport Scroll instead falling to the dusty and crimson-stained floor.

Unholy light flickered along the Death Knight’s blade as he feigned a swing to instead slam the hilt into the face of the Fighter, breaking their nose. He followed up with a swift kick with his plated boot into their unguarded stomach - knocking the wind from them. As they dropped to their knees, Humphrey grabbed them by the hair, his own crimson helmet flames dancing wildly.

Sally barrelled past the Cleric, only briefly slashing out with her sword, dismembering the outstretched hand. She slid around to the held Fighter.

[Brain Eaten] [+5% Health Points]

She stood and laughed. Her clothing was drenched and stuck to her cold skin. As her jubilation echoed around the now quiet chamber, her blood-red eyes turned back towards the Cleric, burning with evil intent.

Theo handed Humphrey a Health Potion, which he downed into his skeletal maw with a thankful nod.

"I'm... not s-sure I can talk," Sally turned her head to the pair abruptly, shuddering all over. "Feels like h-had quest and done c-cocaine about it."

"I can interrogate then," Theo shrugged, nervously patting the shaking zombie Boss on the shoulder. "Unless, Jackie...?"

"What? Just because I'm a mobster you think-"

"Okay, okay, I'll do it." The Novice rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"You wanna look out for this cat though. He ain't normal."

All eyes, including the panicked Cleric and *Warriors* trying to sink into the background, turned towards the small ginger cat as he waltzed quietly out of the exit tunnel.

"H-how so?" Sally twitched. *It was hot down here, right? Was it just her?*

"I did feel... something." The Death Knight put away his greatsword, slightly scraping it across the ceiling. "Level Fives would normally put up more resistance than that, even with their disadvantages."

Theo scratched his chin. Whatever grim determination had powered him through the fight had faded, and he looked tired now. "Felt like fighting Level Threes, right?"

No response was given, but they continued to watch the cat preen himself, oblivious to their conversation.

"Well, uh... take a seat," the Novice nodded towards the Cleric, who collapsed against the wall, pale and clutching at their stump. "My name is Theo, and I'll be your good cop." He turned back to the Party behind him before regarding the injured man with a shrug. "You have your pick of bad cops."

"W-who are you people?" The spittle of the panicked man ran down his chin as he shook with fear and rage.

"We're assholes like you guys were." Theo sat down on the floor. "Emphasis on the were." He paused for dramatic effect as the bodies that Sally had killed rose to their feet as zombies. "In fact, with your resume, we'd love for you to *join us*."

The Cleric gulped. His green eyes darted between the gathering of odd figures in the room. A small spark of determination pushed away the brief fear. "You're all idiots," he smirked, between wincing from the pain he was in. "Can I at least heal my hand?"

"No." Theo shook his head. "Not after you just insulted us."

A growl emanated from the pained figure. "Shoulda just killed me then; they'll come here for you."

"Who w-will?" Sally stuttered as she came to loom behind the Novice. Being this close to his head... her attention was drawn to his hair, the rounded shape of his head - imagine what a

tasty brain he must have! *Level Nine too!* But... the bonus from killing a Novice must be pretty weak...

"Zero," the smirk remained as sweat ran down from the Cleric's dusty blonde hair. "The leaders of-

"Oh, that makes sense." Theo turned to give the zombie a scowl as her drool pattered on his head. "You guys are just goons for a higher Level party, right? They must bully you, huh? Do you run their errands in the low-Level area for them? Or you just too weak to-

"*Shut up, shut up!*" The Cleric seethed. "Just have your pet zombie eat my brains already. They'll kill me if they teleport here, or worse..."

"I'm n-not his pet!" Sally pouted, turning away from them both.

"It's more of the other way around," Theo sighed, "but I perhaps am interested in increasing my bounty - maybe I'll-

"You don't get it. Sure we grief and have caused player deaths. But we don't PvP. Zero does." The man closed his eyes. "They are Level Ten, and they gatekeep the progression through the Swamp to the Wasteland."

Humphrey grunted. "Level Ten First Classes, or Second?"

"First."

"Not too bad then." The flame flickered at the back of the Death Knight's helmet. "Although our ace card may have already been spent." He looked down at the cat, who was now halfway to having a nap.

"What's your call, Sally?" Theo stood up and stretched as Jackie stormed over.

"You didn't even do any interrogating, useless *ass-having-ass*." She squatted down by the Cleric and shoved Betty against his temple. "Who ya working for?"

"I-I just said - it's Zero-" the man winced away from the cold metal of the weapon.

"Oh yeah. Well, I guess we didn't need much information anyway. We just came here to murder ya after we got a tipoff."

"W-who told you we were here?"

"Huh?" Jackie cupped an ear as her finger tightened on the trigger. "I think we are doin' the talkin' here, punk."

"*She's good*," Sally whispered into Theo's ear - he was startled, not realising she was that close - but he nodded in agreement.

The Cleric squinted his eyes down towards his STAR, his arm hanging limp with the dagger still embedded in it, which made it a hard angle to read.

“It’s too late,” he grinned widely, “they are on the way.”

The Party tensed as a wave of static filled the chamber. Sally looked at the *Warriors*, who had still been too scared to move, and then at Humphrey, who had started reaching for his sword.

With a pop and flash of blue light, five new figures now stood in the chamber, the digitised ‘10’ of their Level searing into the widening eyes of Sally.