

Chapter 57 Unchewable

Sally paled. As intimidating as the Swordmaster Dent had been, this group were on a whole different level. In part this was due to the red Player Killer notifications next to their Classes, showing high bounties - but it was also how they stood, the manner in which they held themselves. They were *killers*.

A Fighter at the forefront turned his head to the side, observing the Outsiders and gathered zombies. His pale face had two deep scars across it, cutting blank spaces from his right cheek, over his eye and into his short dark hair. His studded armour had been dyed white but was dirtied and unwashed.

“Well, this is certainly interesting.” His words came out slowly as if he was savouring each word.

Behind him, a Knight in full plate mail dyed a bright yellow stood with their hands on their hips. Two Wizards - one in pale grey robes and another in light blue scowled at the undead Party, poised in anticipation. The last of the group was a female Rogue in a dark leather trench coat and black goggles.

Sally’s hands shook, a mixture of the brain-high wearing off and the pressure of the powerful foes now in this small chamber with them.

The white-armoured Fighter turned their gaze slowly away from the Outsiders down to the injured Cleric against the wall.

“Disappointing,” he sighed, “we had information that there were a couple of Parties about to head through the Swamps today - and you brought us here for this?”

“I-I’m sorry, Walter - they had something-“

“No excuses. The whole ten of you were here, and yet this Party of... odd low Levels were able to almost wipe you?” Venom dripped from his words, yet his eyes remained calm.

The Cleric said nothing in return and just lowered their head, cowering away.

“You will be dealt with later,” the Fighter continued as he turned his dead-eyed stare back to Sally. “Naturally, we respect that you seem to be killing Players too - your bounties are decent for... *Players* your Level.”

Humphrey narrowed his sockets. “How is it you were able to get yours so high without the System intervening?”

“It tries.” A humourless grin spread across his slim face. He raised a hand and clicked his fingers.

The Rogue opened up her trench coat, revealing two belts and a bandoleer of scrolls and small magical stones that Sally hadn’t seen before.

Walter widened his slim smile. "Teleport Scrolls and Stones. Jess there has all points in Dexterity, Evasion Chance, and Movement Speed. No faster hands in this area. Anything untoward comes up - we can jump between places in almost an instant."

The Death Knight said nothing but slowly nodded.

Sally huffed and crossed her arms - partly to hide them shaking. "So what's the good of killing people in the Swamps and never getting your Second Class?"

"It's for a purpose," his dark eyes focused on the zombie. "If we were Second Class then there would be fewer rewards for killing the First Classes. We get some nice items from the idiots trying to Level and progress. Potions, Magical Items, Skill Books-"

"You have Skill Books?" Theo blurted out.

"Sure do. Level Nine Novice? You might be the biggest newb yet!" This time the smile met his eyes, and his Party chuckled among themselves. "I bet you'd like one, huh?"

The Novice paused, briefly licking his lips as his eyes darted between Sally and Walter. "What would I have to do?"

"Easy. You're the only one closest in Level." He withdrew a sledgehammer from his back. It was a simple and brutish weapon, the end of it a dull, flakey red. Not rust - dried blood. "Why not duel one of us for a chance?"

Sally scowled at Theo. This was no time for heroics - a Skill Book wasn't worth him dying and denying her a tasty brain. These Player-killers were kitted out and experienced in getting rid of fools like the Novice. Yellow Knight was clearly the decoy, most likely full Defence and CON to weather the attacks. The two Wizards would be Crowd Control and Status Effects. Walter would be the one picking off the easy targets as the Rogue gave them an easy exit.

If it was that clear to her, she assumed Theo would know too. He was smart; his brain was not just a pretty face. She doubted they would play fair in any kind of duel. And yet it came as no surprise that the Novice nodded in agreement.

"Okay, but I get to pick who?"

His answer was met with laughs. Walter shrugged. "Sure, why not? If you think you have a chance."

Theo levelled his finger outstretched at the Rogue.

"Interesting choice, Jess does need to pad her kill count, I suppose."

Theo brought up his STAR.

"Ay, no funny business?" The Rogue stepped forward, drawing a thin rapier from beneath her trench coat.

“Just sending a last love letter, in case I die.” He replied flatly, closing the menu and not meeting the gaze of Sally.

The zombie narrowed her eyes and opened her STAR - but there were no notifications (except for the Daily Reward). As she looked up, she was surprised to see him in front of her.

He leaned in close and whispered to her. “*Master, forgive me, but I’ll have to go all out... just this once...*”

“*Asshole, I hate you.*” She hissed back as he turned away.

Pink flame enveloped his wooden sword as he stepped forward. Both Parties stepped back to give more room to the pair.

With a brief nod, they began.

The lizardman wiped the blood from his curved blade on the long grass, painting a dark crimson streak through the verdant greens.

With a short growl, the Cleric spat on the corpse of an Orc. “Useless Monster.”

Avoiding his glares, the lizardman and the pale, cloaked woman looked away. They had no interest in invoking his ire as he shook with anger.

“This is why Uniques are infernal and must be cleansed. They have one life to live, and they waste it. *Waste it.*” He kicked at the limp body to further his point.

A series of clicks and chirps came from behind him.

The Cleric spun around and glared at the short figure, his fist shaking as his face reddened. “Don’t you start again. It’s only because you are useful that you haven’t met the same fate. We need our fifth Party member before tomorrow, and this heretic just wanted to be a *trader?*”

A single chirp sounded out from the small insectoid, who then also avoided the gaze of the looming Cleric.

Marius sighed and looked towards the sky with eyes closed. He let the rage lower, but his left fist remained clenched. Pain had been flaring down his arm, pulsing along with his heartbeat. He had taken to wearing a glove to hide the discolouration of his skin. *Perhaps the four of them would be enough.* They were running low on time.

“Maybe I can be of service?” A low, scratchy voice came from the trees behind them.

They turned to watch the source of the voice appear in mid-air, a black-red flame flickering all around a floating skull.

[Novice Strike] missed for the third time.

Sally clasped at her face, a nervous energy making her want to join the fray. The Rogue was clearly playing with the Novice as they hadn't made a single attack yet. Instead, she had dodged away, the flicker of pink energy arcing through the air and then disappearing as the attack failed.

"Pretty quick for a Novice," Walter admitted. "Looks like it is mostly gear-dependent though. Stats make a bigger difference."

Sharp teeth were harder to grind together, Sally found, especially when they slotted together like some kind of cartoon character. "*What are we doing? Shouldn't we...?*" she hissed towards the Death Knight.

Humphrey slowly shook his head, his hands clasped and folded across his chest. Instead, he turned around away from the fight to murmur something to the panicked *Warriors* huddled in the corner.

She looked between Jackie and Archie for some help. The cat was just sitting, watching intently, seemingly more interested in the flailing colours of the sword strike. A puff of smoke came from the mobster, but she seemed pretty serene given their danger.

Sally turned back to the fight just in time to see the Rogue make her first attack. The rapier was almost a blur in the air as it darted out - striking the Novice in the shoulder of his off-arm.

Theo grunted in pain and redoubled his efforts. Again and again, the flare of his skill lighted the small chamber before it was extinguished - unable to land a blow.

"You're trying to hit me with a [Wooden Sword]?" Jess scoffed. "You must be a brainless zombie too."

A second rapier attack snaked out and struck Theo's off arm again - a few inches below the first puncturing attack. She was still toying with him.

"Play fair, Jessica," Walter rolled his eyes with a smirk on his face.

She blew out some air in exasperation. "Alright. Go on then, Novice. You can strike me once - just not the face."

Theo wasted no time - his attack blazed through the air and struck the arm of the trenchcoat in a similar place to where he had been stabbed.

Her smirk quickly changed into confusion at the amount of pain from the impact. "Ow, that actually-"

The wooden sword flickered around in a bright arc to strike her again before she had finished the sentence. A third one was already on the way as she gathered her senses - only just having enough time to parry it. Theo spun immediately out, the Rogue dodging it, but he continued the rotation like a whirlwind, catching her on the backswing.

Sally allowed herself a smile as she watched the concerned expressions grow on the Player-killing Party. The Rogue was probably in no danger still, and they would intervene if she were - of that she had no doubt, but for now, their discomfort was her pleasure.

Clangs of wood against metal resonated through the small space as light from the attacks blazed through the air. With the increased blocks and parries it seemed as though the Rogue had gotten used to the attack speed of the Novice.

"Stuff this," the woman hissed.

[Heartseeker Strike]

Her rapier was enveloped in shadow as it shot forward, piercing straight through the torso of Theo and out of his back.

The pink light of his attack faded as Sally's mouth dropped open.