

Chapter 17 Gathering Moss

“What is *that?*” Sally stood with mouth agape, looking up into the bright yellow eyes of the creature that had been summoned.

[Woodland Lurker has joined the Party]

“Nice,” Humphrey interjected, “you’re starting to get more of the HUD pop-ups that Players get.”

“That’s a terrible name though; let me call you...” She squinted at the Monster and put her finger to her lips.

The Lurker was easily seven feet tall, although almost a foot of that height was its humped back. Almost built like a gorilla, the Lurker’s two long arms looked comical against its shorter legs. Moss and leaf-like fur covered their whole body as if they were a walking bush - a part of the woods come alive. It blew warm air from its nostrils as it leaned down closer to the zombie to give her a sniff.

“Friendly, huh? Let’s call you... Big Dave!” She swept through the STAR whilst absentmindedly patting the creature on the head.

[Big Dave - Level 3 - HP (100%)]
[Skill: [Thrash] [Lurk]]

“Neat. Look, Humps, a Level Three Monster with some skills. It doesn’t quite make things equal, but it’s a start.” Sally walked around the Monster to give them an inspection. “Dave’s arms are wider than I am!”

“Indeed, quite the formidable force-“

“Why can’t I name the Party?” She peeked back round from the back of the Monster, and her finger jabbed at the STAR beneath her scowl.

“It requires a full party of at least First Class Players.” Humphrey swivelled around the side to look at the woman better.

“That figures,” she sighed as her arms flopped to her side, “more anti-Monster rules from the oh-so-great System. With a capital S apparently”

Big Dave grunted and shrugged their wide shoulders.

“Exactly. Dave gets it.” Sally nodded her head sideways at the lumbering beast.

“We should have enough of a distance between us and the ‘splitters now...” The Observer avoided the potential conflict by turning to zoom over to the edge of the clearing.

“*Gotta decide who your loyalties lie with eventually, Humps.*” She shook her head as she gestured for the rest of the Party to follow on into the woods.

"I don't... my directives are very... I'm here to *Observe*, Sally."

"Yeah, yeah," she waved the stuttering skull off as they passed, "it's not me you're trying to convince."

Humphrey hovered in place as the footsteps of even the slow zombies started to fade off into the distant trees before he shook himself and followed along.

The slight decline of the ground in this part of the woods made traversing slightly easier. Only slightly, as for the most part, it just made it so the zombies stumbled into roots and tangling bushes at a marginally greater speed. Sally was tempted to hop atop the back of Big Dave - who had no issue with the jaunt through the woods - but that probably would have come off as rude.

Humphrey had been mostly quiet for the better part of the journey so far. *There had been truth to her words*, Sally thought, even if it was a bit harsh on the skull. You would have thought that the Architect would have made their System maintenance bots more... emotionless? She wondered if there was a higher-tier Observer watching over Humphrey to see what he was getting up to.

"Ah hells," she snapped her fingers and shot a frown at the canopy above, "I forgot to loot those three Novices last night."

"Yes."

"You would have told me if there was anything worth grabbing though, right Humps?" She gave the skull a sheepish grin, trying to patch up the distance she had wedged between them.

"They didn't have anything you would have been able to use to kill God."

The reply came calm, measured, but there was the slightest hint of tongue-in-cheek tone to it - enough to make Sally smile - despite his lack of both tongue and cheeks.

"They tasted alright though. Sorry if I push you too hard, I know you have a job to do." She looked to the floor as the skull floated down alongside her.

"Tell me, *Sally the Unliving*, are you happy?"

"Happy?" The question caught her off guard. She rubbed the back of her neck before running her fingers through her blonde hair. "I suppose I have accepted the lot I have been given and am doing my best to live in a manner that makes me happy."

The Observer turned to her for a few seconds, before looking back at the direction they were travelling. "I see."

"Are *you* happy?"

"Conflicted. *Ha-ha*. Previously, completing my tasks as designated was enough to content me. For three or so weeks I have been satiated by my role in the System."

“But now?” Her red eyes looked up at him with one raised eyebrow.

“I have been Observing some interesting things.” His purple eldritch colour briefly flickered red to pink, and then back to purple.

Sally smiled and hopped over a fallen log. She stopped to watch Big Dave pick up each zombie and place them on the other side before clambering over. Even with the heat of the day starting to feel a little uncomfortable, it was a brief moment of bliss. The Woodland Lurker snorted as she gave them a pat on the arm.

“How close am I to levelling up, Humps?”

“Still quite far - you did only just level up.” The Observer shook his head.

“True. I haven’t even used my new skill yet - my other two are passives so it will be fun to do something more than *run up and bite people*.” The START menus popped up so that the skill could be read again.

“A proper Party fight will be a lot different from the easy pickings you’ve had so far,” Humphrey floated backwards as he moved in front of her, “not to put a damper on your achievements so far-“

“I’ve killed seven people.”

“-but the skills and abilities of five people working together, and the fact that they won’t fold after a single surprise attack... it will be a learning experience for you.”

She pouted at the Observer partially obscuring her view. “Do you think heading to the Tomb is a mistake?”

“I think everything since you opened your eyes in the diner has been a mistake. *Ha-ha* just a joke,” the skull tried to walk back the comment on seeing her expression sour. “Truly, I believe you are capable.”

“You need to choose a lane, Humphrey. I’m the one that is supposed to be an emotional mess given that I am recently now a person that eats people. In some weird world. Where I also want to eat the only living person I recognise from my previous life. I wonder how the porkchop is doing - how long between messages should I assume he has been killed by the Slimes? Or worse, what if there is another half-Monster out there like me killing Novices? Maybe I should-“

“Sally.”

“Huh?” She looked up from her hands where she had been staring.

“Everything is okay.”

She walked quietly, looking at the purple skull as he rotated beside her once more. Her sneakers crunched against fallen leaves and errant sticks. A frown crossed her brow as she

looked down, wondering why the sudden amount of noise. Even the lighting was dimmer now despite no increase in canopy cover.

The group paused, and she took in her surrounding for the first time in minutes. It was as if they had suddenly changed season into Autumn. The previously green trees were now a mix of oranges and browns - the ground was now littered with dried and desiccated leaves. An overcast sky filled in the gaps between the shedding branches with a muted grey.

Humphrey nodded towards her. "We are getting close."

[Sally: Almost at the Tomb]

There was no immediate response. After ten seconds she closed the chat with a shrug. If the fool had gotten himself killed and she wasn't around to eat him, then she would be super annoyed. Her fingers drummed on her arm as she sighed.

"Is there resurrection magic in this... System?" The question felt awkward like it had the taste of the world from before. A language forgotten but familiar.

"Yes."

"More information, bone-head." She shook a fist at the Observer. "Please."

"It's a skill only some Third Class jobs get, so not anytime soon. There are items too - but very rare."

"I bet there are special limitations or conditions on its use too, huh?"

"Yes."

"*Architectdammit*, Humphrey." Sally shook her head. The Observer couldn't be any more annoying if he tried. If resurrection was a difficult thing then maybe she wouldn't waste it on her meal ticket. Although, she didn't have any better candidates yet. It was unlikely it would work on her...

Big Dave grunted and hunkered down, causing the rest of them to stop. Humphrey rose up higher - a sure sign that something was afoot. Sally pressed up against the Lurker and peered at the tree cover. Chuck and Suits just lingered in the background quietly.

Far ahead, maybe eighty to a hundred feet through the darkened and dead trees, there were dark shapes moving.

Sally gulped. Did they catch up to the Skullsplitters without realising? If the enemy Party had taken a rest, then that was certainly possible. Had they noticed- oh the shapes were getting closer. She slipped out her crossbow and loaded a bolt, eyes trying to dart to the surroundings for an opportune place to hide or escape.

The Lurker narrowed its eyes as its fur rose in anticipation.

Sally cursed her inability to have a rising heartbeat - or to sweat. It made the brief panic uncomfortable and awkward as she levelled the crossbow and squinted with one eye down the sight.

Sixty feet away, a group of shapes moved closer. Was it five? It was hard to tell between all the twisted dead trees.

Fifty feet, details started to form on the silhouetted figures. Metal armour glinted in the dull overcast light.

Forty feet, her finger clasped around the trigger. She held a lifeless breath.

Thirty feet...