

## Chapter 45

### Crime doesn't pay

Sally clambered to her feet and winced as a sharp numbing pain shot up her left leg. A brief glance showed a shard of splintered wood impaled straight through it.

*[Summon Zombies]*

The dirtied and poorly made floorboards of the tavern splintered upwards as three zombies burst from the ground. The door flung open, and the first bandit was silhouetted against the gap.

*[Zap]*

A crack of blue lightning shot out and burst a chunk out of the unlucky bandit's shoulder. As they stumbled backwards from the shock, the first zombie moved in front of the door and gave Sally a brief moment to compose herself. She spent most of these handfuls of stressed seconds cursing internally. With her reduced mobility, melee would be difficult. There was a second doorway down the other end of the dimly lit room - so a choke point wouldn't be her saving grace.

She hobbled from her pile of broken furniture and roofing and used [Command Dead] to send the other two zombies towards the far door. At the least, they would be able to slow down any assault long enough for Humphrey or Theo to catch on and come assist. She had hoped the first one through the door would be the Boss. As she went to bring up the STAR to call for aid, the zombie in front of her had their head caved in, dropping to the floor as a pair of Bandits surged in.

The first bandit, with more red curly beard than face, swung an axe towards her. It struck her left forearm and scraped off - her new bracers barely deflecting the blow. She stabbed into the outstretched arm, but it slid along the wrapped linens worn by the bandit, only causing a shallow line of crimson. As the bandit grasped onto her raised left arm, she lunged and bit into... a mouth full of greasy beard.

They span as her unstable footing caused her to stumble, the bandit letting her go as she tripped backwards landing unintentionally deftly atop a tavern chair that had avoided any damage so far. As he lunged, a third bandit came through the doorway.

*[Zap]*

The quick flash of blue energy struck the axe-wielding bandit in the thigh, blowing a crater of singed flesh and causing the man to drop to one knee in his approach. Sally stood and jammed the inert wand into his eye socket and hissed in anger at the two bandits waiting to engage.

The far door crashed open as five more bandits poured in, two of them taken down by the zombies before they too were dispatched. She barred her fangs and readied her dagger, her left hand twitching as she sought the opportunity to retrieve the dropped [Axe]. The three bandits joined the two, and the doorways darkened further to signal more approaching.

Just as she was about to make her move, a heavy thunk struck the wall behind her. Risking the slight glance over her shoulder, she saw the end of a blade, blazing crimson, stuck almost a foot into the ramshackle wooden wall.

All eyes were drawn to this odd sight as the sword tip carved around in a wide circle. It left a trail of bright red embers as it passed through the dark wood, the smell of burning filling the tavern. Just before it reached a full circle, it suddenly shattered forth. The figure of Theo rolled into the tavern, popping up to his feet beside the zombie, his sword ablaze in pink.

“Need assistance, m'lady?”

“Gross, don't even,” she shook her head. “You can go back outside if you're going to be cringe.”

Theo rolled his eyes. “Where's your sense of humour gone?”

“Somewhere between screwing up my leg and chewing on a gross beard.”

The Novice took a brief glance down at the dead bandit, one eye still open in shock, and then saw her injured leg. “Use your [Med Kit] then whilst I deal with these uncouth yobs.”

“Ugh, don't you start character LARPing too,” she sat back down on the chair and opened up her Inventory with a scowl.

The Novice leapt forward at the bandits, his [Novice Strike] leaving a trail of energy as his first attack flickered into the slow-acting opponents.

Sally watched him as the little progress bar on the [Med Kit] rose, pulling the shard of wood from her leg with a grunt. Theo seemed a lot more confident when it came to fighting Monsters - although in fairness she hadn't really seen him fight might in person, aside from against the Yarch guards.

He hadn't seemed so athletic in the diner, she thought, her memories perhaps not exactly picture perfect still. Here he was, shredding through these opponents like a natural. She almost swore he had his eyes closed half the time as he weaved and darted around the throng of bandits. The trail of light from his wooden blade left an afterimage in her vision, and despite the smells and noise of the melee, it was beautiful to watch.

The [Wooden Sword] did damage beyond what its simple form belied, even though Level Nine didn't give the tasty meatbag any bonus aside from his Strength going up. Watching the bursts of blood from his strikes was mesmerising.

Her health bar ran back up to around 85% as the Kit completed, a warm burst of comfort flowing through her body - and most importantly her leg was now usable, if still stiff. She stood, grabbing the discarded [Axe] up off the floor and ran, barreling into a figure coming into the doorway.

They tumbled out down a couple of rickety wooden steps onto the hard floor of the campground. Light temporarily blinded her as she got used to the sunlight once more, but in finding herself on the top of the two-person pile, she hacked downwards with both weapons.

Humphrey slid across the dusty floor beside her, levelling an approaching bandit with a hefty upward slash. The Death Knight was spattered with blood, his whole armour a brighter crimson than usual - and he hadn't seemed to of taken much damage in the process.

Theo stumbled from the second door of the tavern, also covered in mostly-not-his blood. He was sweating heavily and looked queasy but otherwise unaffected. He furrowed his brow as his eyes focused, moving to stand alongside them whilst keeping eyes ahead.

Sally stood as she too looked in front of them. Most of the bandits had been culled. The only few that remained were the Boss, three melee, and four ranged bandits. The Death Knight had been way out on his estimation of how many enemies there were here. She licked her lips, eyes darting between the larger bandit leader and the ones holding ranged weapons. Why hadn't they attacked yet?

"Not as eager to join your fellows?" Humphrey taunted, flicking the blood from his greatsword across the floor.

Hank spat on the floor and grunted. "Don't hav' to be 'Unique' to hav' some brains."

The Death Knight tilted his head.

"Huh," Sally frowned. "You're pretty self-aware."

"And you're not," the bandit grinned, a foul twinkle in his eye.

A snap came from above, where the mountain cavern began to overhang the encampment, and something weighty fell down towards the group.

With a flash of crimson and pink energy, both Theo and Humphrey cut through the air above them, slashing the heavy rope net in half and it fell apart around them ineffectively.

"Now what?" Sally grinned and cracked her knuckles.

Hank scowled and dug through his tunic, retrieving a small piece of crinkled paper. He silently mouthed some words as he read through it before turning his gaze back to the trio - stuffing the paper back into a pocket abruptly.

"That was just a distraction," he growled, "for this!"

The Party tensed briefly... and then relaxed as nothing came to pass. The bandit leader looked frustrated, and his eyes darted amongst his lackeys. Sally sucked her teeth.

"Well, you boys have fun with this, I'm going to..." She narrowed her eyes around the camp - they lit up as she hopped over to a nearby corpse.

[Crossbow Gained]

"*F to the yes*," she murmured to herself as she wound it back to load a new bolt. She glanced back up to see all the ranged bandits trained on her. She still fancied her chances.

“Perhaps we can parley?” Theo suggested, if for nothing more than to keep the large bandit busy.

“We ain’t Pirates, ya bastard.” Hank shook his head, much to the smarmy grins of the remaining group behind him.

“Yeah, Theo.” Sally strolled back over to the Novice. She was perhaps enjoying the growing confusion on his face a little too much.

“I’m pretty sure that it isn’t a Pirate-specific term,” he said, wrinkling up his nose.

“Do you see any ships here?” She continued, much to the amusement of the bandits. “How about you Humps, any boats?”

“Not in the traditional sense,” the Death Knight shrugged.

Theo raised an eyebrow. “What does that even mean?”

“It means...” Sally tilted her head at him with eyes wide, “*that it’s time to kill the bandits.*” She flicked the Crossbow towards Hank and her finger tensed against the trigger.

“Hey!” A voice called out from the deeper cave encampment, putting a pause on their anticipated brawl.

“*Hows about you assholes stop killing my goons, and we talk?*”