

## Chapter 47 To Consume

“Are you okay?” Theo crouched down beside her, his warm hand resting on her shoulder.

She shuddered as her eyes focused.

[Zombie Path Unlocked]  
[New Skill: Eat Brains]  
[Stats Increased]  
[Brains Consumed: 0] [Bonus: 0]

The words spun around in her head, her vision shifting as the hunger roiled around in her stomach. And then, there it was.

Heartbeat. The dull thud of someone nearby. Slightly elevated - maybe nervous or concerned. Briefly, it blinded her, consumed her, a beating drum encouraging her to act. To silence it.

Her shaking vision twisted round to the figure beside her. The warmth radiated from him, his features blurred and his voice distant and muffled. It wasn't just his throat now. His head brimmed with potential.

Sally leapt up from the floor, knocking Theo back and landing atop him. Her red eyes blazed fire as she bared her fangs.

As went to bite him, a wave of lethargy washed over her body. Several strong blinks didn't seem to shrug the feeling, and as she slowly lowered sleepily onto the Novice, her tired eyes met with Jackie. Embers of a disintegrating scroll fell from the hand of the mobster.

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The Cleric rubbed his left forearm over his robes. A burning pain shot down the bone every time the coach jostled as it was pulled down the stone road. His jaw was stiff from clenching it.

“You alright, Bossss?” The hissed voice came from the seat opposite.

He looked up to regard the large reptilian warrior sitting across from him with tired eyes. The sickly green scales almost looked luminescent in the dim lighting of the coach interior. A wide jaw full of sharp teeth arranged in a humourless grin was no less disconcerting than when they had met.

“Marius is fine; he will just be happy once we are back in Yarch.” A female voice came from beside the lizardman, the woman shrouded equally by shadow and the pitch-black cloak she wore. Snow-white hair ran out from beneath the hood.

“A necessary, but unfortunate, distraction.” The Cleric looked out of the window. If the operation was successful, then it would prove paramount to his cause. For the fight ahead.

“You really think th’ zombie girl issss there ssstill?”

Marius winced at the repeated extended s’s. *So cliché*. “I have my information. The bug needs to be squished, and she has a Party now.”

A growl emanated from the other side of the lizardman. A small figure no more than two feet tall sat behind a newspaper. A series of clicks and chirps followed.

The Cleric frowned and watched the trees pass by them. “It’s simple, we use the System to defeat the Party.”

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Blurred, grey shapes started to filter into the zombie’s vision.

“*Hey, you, you’re finally awake.*”

The voice was familiar. Theo’s? Colour started to brighten the shapes as they sharpened every time she blinked. Yes - the Novice was crouching nearby where she was sitting.

“Sorry, hun. [Sleep Spell]. Good thing you didn’t resist it, ey?” Jackie leaned down into her vision.

“Blurf,” Sally replied. Her tongue still felt sluggish. The wall behind her was cold, even through her armour. Dusty floorboards felt rough beneath her fingers. “What happen?”

The shuffling of armour replaced the mobster as the Death Knight squatted down next to the Novice. “You interacted with some kind of magical item that unlocked the zombie skills that you didn’t have before.”

“You look with your eyes, not your hands,” the mobster chastised from out of view.

“Then you tried to eat me, for real,” Theo added helpfully.

Sally shook her head, trying to shift the fog clouding her thoughts. Clumsily, she got to her feet. The group eyed her warily. With a sigh, she relaxed into a normal posture and frowned at them. Seeing their faces, the weight in her skull felt lighter, and she grabbed hold of her faculties.

“I now have the desire and ability to eat brains,” she stated plainly.

“Yes.” Humphrey nodded and folded his arms. “It would have been nice to know what you used to do that. It is now an inert ball of glass - no System-related information.”

Her eyes glazed over as she looked at Theo. “Sorry about almost eating your brains.” It would have been nice if he had been her first though. There was an itch - what sort of bonus’ would she get from eating brains?

“Wouldn’t have been much of a meal,” he shrugged sheepishly, “I am Partied up with you guys, after all.”

“This is kinda weird, huh?” The mobster wrinkled up her nose with a sour expression across her face. “Your lad here found you some items from my store - let me go get my things before we head out.”

The Novice stepped over with his STAR up as the mobster ascended the stairs to the main floor.

“Jacks is pretty nice,” Sally smiled weakly at Theo. “We need more morally questionable jerks in our Party.”

“I can’t tell if you mean that genuinely or not.”

[Rare Sword (Empty Socket: 1)]

[Belt of Constitution]

[Health Potion]

[Medium Medicine Kit (2)]

“A sword??” Sally cooed and brought it out of her Inventory. She gasped. “Is this a *katana*?”

“No,” Theo shook his head firmly. “We aren’t doing that. It’s just a nicely made blade. It’s not enchanted, but it has an empty socket - if we find any Gems.”

“There’s *Gems*?”

“Yes,” Humphrey nodded. “You probably won’t find any in this area. Whoever died with this sword would be kicking themselves. If they weren’t dead.”

The zombie slowly slid the blade into the scabbard now on her left hip. Looks like her dagger days were over. She gave herself a few bonus points for not swinging it around the rather cramped basement. With a nod towards the stairs, she gestured for the group to leave. “You get anything nice, Theo?”

“Boots with Movement Speed and Gloves with Evasion Chance. There were a few other things, but I can’t use them as a Novice.”

“Perhaps the greatest boon is the inclusion of a new member to our group.” The statement from the Death Knight was flat, but Sally chose to gloss over it.

“Only one space left now, I’m sure we can fill it super soon.” They reached the top of the stairs back into the main room of the headquarters to see the mobster slam down a large wooden case onto the desk - paperwork fluttering off onto the floor.

Two catches popped open on the front, and Jackie lifted the heavy lid. Inside a contraption of wood and steel was revealed. “This’s my pride and joy. Call her Betty.” With slight strain, she lifted the large object out.

It was a crossbow, although larger and more complex than Sally had ever seen. Beneath the polished wooden frame, a cylinder of metal framework sat. The dark steel atop the weapon was engraved with a golden pattern of symmetrical swirls.

“A repeating crossbow?” Theo asked mouth hung open.

“[Hell Trigger], [Rapid Reload], [Pin Down], and [Explosive Shot].” The mobster grinned as she wielded this behemoth of a crossbow, perhaps the first genuine smile the group had seen.

“You’re Level Five though, right? What’s the other skill?” Sally squinted at the UI pop-up, her vision perhaps not one-hundred percent yet.

Jackie deflated a little, the smile draining from her face as she glanced over to the Novice. “[Extort].”

“Well, that could be useful,” Theo rubbed his neck, trying to be diplomatic, “like if we come across some ornery traders, or-“

“Don’t forget I saved your life, wise-ass. You owe me.” Jackie frowned and stowed her crossbow.

“Way to get indebted to everyone.” Sally nudged the Novice in the side, only slightly relishing how his soft body moved beneath that useless armour. “Shall we get moving then team?”

“I’d say goodbye to the fellas, but they’d forget soon enough,” Jackie shrugged, looking away idly.

Sally nodded and headed towards the door. She felt sad for the mobster. Having to watch your brainless friends go off and die to the Players but come back and remember nothing about their previous lives. Them not having a purpose except to follow the path the System had set out for them.

As they walked from the headquarters and out along the pathway to the middle camp, thoughts ruminated in her muddled mind. Before she had awoken, if she had been like Chuck, a zombie that was killed and reborn until her... soul had somehow made it into almost the correct place... is that where a lot of her resentment for the System came from? Seeing herself and her friends killed over and over by Players?

“What are we doing next, Sally?” Theo roused her from the thoughts as they entered the second bandit camp.

“Is there anything that we can find to help us out, Humps?”

The Death Knight rubbed his chin in thought as they passed the remaining bandits.

“At least you didn’t die, Hank.” Jackie nodded before looking around the rest of the camp. “Shit job of defending though. You’re in charge while I run some errands.”

“Yes, *Boss*.”

Humphrey eventually shrugged. “Depends on whether you want to Level up, find more loot, or fill the last place in our Party.”

“Why is it always three choices?” the zombie grumbled back.

“Generally a fifth member will be a better power increase than whatever we may be able to find nearby, probably more than levelling too.” Theo drummed his fingers on the hilt of his wooden sword.

Sally stopped before the opening of the door they had smashed open. “Any leads on further Unique Monsters? Sympathetic Players?”

They all produced a gathering of shrugs and heads shaking in the negative.

She sighed and stepped through the opening into the more open and airy first part of the camp. “It’s not like our problems are going to be solved by- *oh!* Look, a cat.”

About a dozen feet in front of them, sitting expectantly was a small ginger cat. His eyes widened as the odd group moved towards him.

Just as Sally went to pet him, he shirked away and opened his little mouth.

“Greetings,” the cat announced, “I am the Architect.”