

## Chapter 2.1 Early Mourning

Dim morning light barely pierced through the rolling mists, hampered by the encroaching clouds and natural gloom of the start of the Swamps. Deep within the dense tree cover, the wail of a singular zombie echoed out. A flock of birds flew from the canopy.

“Ughh,” Sally deflated, “why did we have to leave so early? I’m still tired.”

“You’re the Guild leader,” Theo shrugged, “you have to set an example.”

She glared up at him. He looked way too happy. His suit may be various shades of boring grey, but his eyes beamed with excitement behind his crimson glasses. He had been itching to go up to the Wastelands - the second Area of this game world - ever since he had hit Level Ten.

Looking back at the Death Knight, he offered no encouragement in her favour either. He had been staring off into the mists at the edge of the woodlands for most of the journey. Behind his thick plate of dark crimson armour, Theo’s coffin was strapped for transport. At his side, a satchel bag held the sleeping ball of ginger fur called Archie.

The cat was still no clearer on whether he was the Architect or not. It seemed a far reach, but with everything that had happened to them in the last couple of weeks, she couldn’t discount the idea. As for the information about the murderer of the actual Architect, both of the Observer-fueled Party members were keeping their lips sealed.

She brushed her hands off on her red dress. Despite the novelty of being able to change into different clothing, there was something about it that felt comfortable. She had swapped out the white-linen blouse for a black shirt and red jacket, however. In her line of work, wearing white was just asking for trouble. ‘Work’ being eating people.

Ever since they had defeated three of the villages and claimed them for the Unique Monsters - and then gained validation from the System in the form of the Capital accepting their presence - there had been a nervous ball rolling around her stomach. Nothing *worrying*, but there was bound to be trouble looming in their near future.

Being a Party member short was concerning, too. All of the Unique Monsters had decided to either become Leaders for the new villages or were just not built for the dangerous adventuring life they led. Jackie had filled the much-needed gap of Ranged Damage dealer, but after seeing the mobster and the dark elf happily running the Tavern, it had melted her dead heart.

And that was what it had all been about in the end. She glanced over at Theo, who looked to be counting the trees as they passed. Maybe a certain type of tree. It had started as revenge against an unfair System that had wronged her. Somewhere between making odd friends and eating brains, it had melted into just trying to make a good life for the Unique Monsters, who only had one life, to be as equal to the human Players as possible.

That is where the nerves came from. Heading through the Swamps into the Wasteland and starting the process all over again. Humphrey had warned them that the second area would have a much higher density of Players due to how late they started compared to everyone else. It sounded like more of a feast for her and Theo - but a lot more anguish, starting back at the bottom of the totem pole again.

They rounded the top of a hill as her dead legs ached. She hadn't eaten a human brain in days, and she was starting to feel run down. Monster brains just weren't the same. As they crested a peak of cut-down trees, she found herself wishing that a meal would just drop into her-

"Oh." She stopped, her Party alongside her, as they met the gaze of at least two dozen people standing in wait in the trees across a small clearing. A dirt road began at this point and eked out a weak path between the trees beyond these gatekeepers.

Her eyes narrowed as she walked closer with the Party, and was not surprised to see the slicked-back greasy hair and scarred face of Walter, the Fighter in dirtied white armour and the leader of the Player-killing Party *Zero*.

Walter gave them a friendly wave and a less-than-friendly shit-eating grin. "Seems you got here before the rest of your little friends." He scratched his chin as he leaned against a tree. "Be a shame if they arrived to see you all dead already."

Sally wrinkled her nose up. "Looks like they have sixteen-"

"Twenty," Theo corrected.

"-twenty Players in a Guild too. I don't really want to drag the others into this."

Humphrey shuffled around and brought Archie out, waking him up by placing him on soft grass. "This is certainly not ideal, *ha-ha*. But perhaps a good chance to bond or impress our Guild members."

The zombie sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose. She was too tired for this. Her voice raised to speak to the man opposite from them. "Alright. Any chance we can hang about and wait for them?" It had been a long walk - if she could sit down for a little bit before any bloodshed, that'd be really nice.

The Fighter looked around the gathered Players amongst the tree line. "We can wait a few minutes, gang? Don't want the rest of their troupe to turn tail before they get here once they see their leader has been crushed, huh?" A gaggle of nods and agreements answered his question.

Theo put his hand over his eyes and squinted into the woods. "Hands up if you're a Fighter or Paladin?"

A few hands went up into the air before the glares of the leader quietened them.

"Rogues are good, too, right?" He murmured to Sally. "That's a decent amount of potential stats."

Her tired eyes just narrowed at him. If the vampire had gotten that stat gain skill, he would eat every Player he saw to min-max all of his numbers. All of their attributes were already skewed thanks to their strange classes and layers of Party Auras. Theo would become a god and consume everything in this odd world. Part of her thought that would be pretty neat.

The leader of *Zero* raised two fingers and gestured a familiar figure forward. "How about a little entertainment while we wait, then?"

Their teleportation Rogue, in her trenchcoat, stormed forward to the front - daggers in her eyes aimed at the vampire. Her face was scarred from the burns he had inflicted in the Mines.

"Duel me again," she hissed, drawing her rapier aggressively.

"I'm sorry about the face," Theo rubbed the back of his neck. "I had hoped you would have just died." He turned to Sally to see what her thoughts on this charade would be.

"Go on then." She rolled her eyes and went to sit on a convenient rock. "If you die again, then I'll be real mad at you."

Theo held up a finger to the antsy Rogue, slowly removing his jacket and handing it to the Death Knight - who begrudgingly took it. As he walked over into the open space, the vampire unbuttoned his shirt sleeves and rolled them to his elbows. Eventually, he stopped, somewhat amused at the anger built up in his opponent. He clasped his hands behind his back and raised an eyebrow in anticipation.

"Die, you time-waster!"

[Heartseeker Strike]

The woman lunged forward, dark energy swirling around the tip of her rapier as it aimed straight for the chest of the vampire.

[Dread Parry]

The tip of the blade pressed against his chest, his grey shirt indenting slightly before the sword started to bend and flex. Theo raised up his right hand, red electricity crackling as he tensed his fingers as if to claw the woman. The Rogue stumbled backwards and onto the floor away from him - but the energy dissipated from his raised hand.

"Ooh," he cooed and turned his gaze back to the Party. "I can cancel the guaranteed critical strike after the counter."

Humphrey shrugged, his arms folded. Sally gave him a tired thumbs up. Archie was watching a bug move through the grass. All in all, Theo was pretty pleased with that response. Not that cancelling the damage would be useful in many situations, but another mechanic of the System was his to now know.

"Just because you've got a nice suit and some new tricks doesn't mean anything, Novice." The Rogue spat and climbed back to her feet, withdrawing a dagger into her other hand.

*“Stat bonuses must be cumulative rather than additive,”* the vampire rubbed his chin in thought, *“otherwise Sally would get way too powerful from these bonuses.”*

The woman growled, either upset that he was ignoring her or embarrassed at making a bad show of her revenge in front of the rest of her Guild. “Fight me, asshole. Where’s your toy sword? Should we kill your little girlfriend first, as motivation?”

Theo looked back again at the zombie. Sally gave him a shrug and a twirled hand to get him to hurry up. As he turned his attention back to the Rogue, she had begun using skills to buff herself. Her trenchcoat now shimmered in the light as if vibrating. Her rapier glowed orange, and the dagger pulsed a foul green. Around her feet, an etched circle of blue runes turned slowly.

“Oh, you were actually serious?” Theo grinned widely, exposing his fangs. The Rogue opened her mouth in shock as a wave of concerned murmurs began spreading around the grouped *Zeroes*.

The vampire clicked his fingers.

[Perfect Dark]

Immediately, the drab overcast sky became pitch black, plunging the area into dim darkness. Looming behind Theo rose a large moon of crimson light, silhouetting his figure.

He pushed his glasses up his nose to cover his glowing red eyes.

“Let’s see what you are made of, then.”