

Chapter 2.4 Swamp Thing

"I probably shouldn't ask, huh?" Chuck tried to cover his eyes from the bloodied destruction marring the landscape.

"Well. You can see this as our final test before going into the Wastelands." Sally now felt remarkably upbeat and wavered back and forth on her feet.

"But..." the Druid peeked through his fingers at the equally blood-soaked zombie, "the four of you killed them all already."

Theo sighed as he lay atop his closed coffin. "Not all, some escaped." Gradually his UI was repairing his Cosmetic Outfit.

"Not that I'm ungrateful for you sparing us the bloodshed. I'm just shocked at your... *efficiency*." Chuck sat on the rock the zombie had previously claimed.

Humphrey stepped heavily over to them, slightly jostling the vampire from his resting. "Both Theo and Sally have exceedingly high Strength and Constitution for their Level. We also have more Auras than a normal Party."

"Auras are really effective, though," Theo frowned up at the Death Knight, "they don't get chosen that often?"

"Normal Classes get fewer chances to take one. The three of us have Monster Classes which are often more geared towards supporting our fellow villains."

Chuck looked more concerned after the explanation. "What about Archie?"

Humphrey turned his head out to the clearing, where the ginger cat was prancing around and investigating the corpses strewn about. "He doesn't seem to have any Class, and some of his skills are too high Level for me to know what they are."

Sally wrinkled her nose up. Archie would be a force to reckon with if he could concentrate on fighting properly for more than ten seconds. It was nice to have an ace up their sleeve - but something more consistently reliable would be less stressful.

She went over and kicked the wooden coffin. "Any good loot?"

"Nothing much for me." He put his hand over his eyes to block more of the sunlight. "There was a Gem, though. Where is your rare sword?"

"I didn't lose it."

The vampire didn't respond.

Sally crossed her arms and scowled over at the rest of the Party looking at her. "Okay, so I lost it. But! Maybe some newbie will find it, and it'll really make their day. I was paying it forward, in a way."

After a brief moment of silence, Theo moved his hands away from his face. "I'll keep the Gem for now, then."

With a huff, the zombie sat down on his legs and pouted. "They really had no Skill Books?"

"No, if they had, I would have... well, I would have used it immediately." He grinned up at her with a flash of his fangs.

"Ass. So would I."

The rest of the Guild mulled around. Searching the bodies if they had stronger stomachs or just waiting in the wings if they'd prefer only to see Monster guts. It was a small point of shame that Sally didn't remember most of their names - they were Players, after all.

She put her chin in her palms. "I'm surprised the Zeroes got enough people to create a Guild."

Humphrey exhaled and turned to look out back over the dense tree valley behind them. "Player numbers in this first area are very few now. It became a thing of being with them or against them. Most Players do not want to die, even at the moral expense of killing others."

"Yeah, who would want to kill Players?" Sally rolled her eyes and brushed off some dried blood from her skirt.

"You shouldn't want to kill anything," Chuck wagged his finger before deflating. "When did I become such a square?"

"When were you born again?" She stuck her tongue out. "Anyway, we are burning daylight here. What's the plan, Humps?"

The Death Knight shrugged and grinned. "The Swamps are a few hours of walking. There may be Monsters in there that will attack us, but as an almost full Guild, we shouldn't have issues. You'll know when we are in the Wasteland by the way that is."

"And we should get our Keystone Quests," Theo added.

"Alright." Sally stood up on the coffin, almost tripping as she stumbled around the vampire's legs. She took a deep breath in. "Guild! Ten minutes to wrap things up, and then we are heading out."

She frowned and looked back down at Theo. "There was really no other gear on alllll those dead Level Tens?"

He blinked through his crimson glasses as he was now wearing his once-again immaculate casual clothes. "Thirteen shortswords, seven maces, five shields, six bows, eighteen daggers, ten iron helmets-"

"Just all the rare stuff, you reprobate." She gently kicked his leg and courted toppling off again.

“Stop jumping around on my bed, and I’ll tell you.”

Chuck rubbed his temples with both hands. “Are they always like this?”

“Yes.” Humphrey narrowed his eyes at the pair. “Although they have become more cordial since Theo became a vampire.”

“Makes sense. Removes all tension then, I suppose. With the brain-eating thing, I mean.”

The Death Knight tilted his head. “I am glad to see them happy. As if I didn’t have enough cats to herd.”

Chuck raised an eyebrow. “Going for the big stoic daddy thing, huh?”

“...I can kill you in three hits, plant-boy.”

With a smile, the Druid looked up to the sky. “Cool. A simple yes would have sufficed.”

“I changed my mind,” Sally growled. “Let’s just stay and be rulers of the tree place.”

They all stopped to watch as the zombie struggled to clamber out of a knee-deep pit of wet mud and stagnant water.

“If you quit jumping around, you wouldn’t-“ Theo began before catching her glare.

Humphrey lent a hand and pulled her from the thick mud with a loud slurp, putting her on the more stable path.

Perhaps she should have repaired her normal clothes too. Between the dried gore and the wet swamp, it was decent camouflage, she tried to convince herself. So far, the Swamp had been a miserable affair. It was cold and clammy in some parts and humid in others. The only thing that had attacked them was some kind of Mud Bear that died before she had a chance to withdraw her dagger.

Travelling with almost twenty other Players made combat short when everyone wanted to throw out an ability from the outset. It would be no surprise if any Monster ran in the opposite direction once getting a whiff of them. It made her feel like less of the Main Character.

“You need any help?” Theo stood and waited for her to catch up.

“Not from you, item hoarder.”

The vampire rubbed the back of his neck. “I was going to share.”

She waved him off. Despite her grumpy disposition, she wasn’t really annoyed at him. He had made sure they had almost the best gear possible in the short time between Sanctuary and now. There were few pieces of gear that would have been much of an actual upgrade for them amongst the dead Players.

There was just an urge to be a bit more alone. Not away from Theo or Humps - but the Guild felt weird to be around. Chuck was okay, but most of the rest of them still looked like walking meals. Sure, they were allied with her - but for some of them, it was no different than the Players joining Zero to stay alive. It was become a Player-killer or avoid her widening maw with the thin wall of the System holding them on the same side.

Her view of Players had somewhat dimmed. Now that they had beaten back the forces of the System to lay claim to villages for Monsters to live in unassailed... it had taken a bit of wind out of her sails. Sure, she claimed it as a Win with a capital w - but then was the question of *now what?* Head to the Wastelands and try to do the same there. And then to the third area?

She was the dog that had finally caught the back end of the car and now was a bit shocked at how metallic and unyielding it was. There was always the draw of getting more powerful... and that seemed to be the easiest part. They were already overpowered. But what was the point of gaining all that power? To be the new Architect - or to break free of the System entirely?

Twisted trees of muted greys and browns hung low across the Swamps. The dense and moist canopy blocked most of the daylight, adding to the malaise of the group. There were no sounds of frogs or crickets or whatever animals were supposed to live in a Swamp. Sally couldn't quite remember. Silence had started as a nice way for her to organise some thoughts away into the lidless boxes of her brain, but now it had become oppressive.

"I hope the wastes aren't this dire," she eventually sighed and rolled her head to the side to give Theo an exaggerated pout.

"Well. I hope they're not as muddy, at least," he shrugged and gave her a glum smile.

Mud was indeed terrible. She was glad they could agree on that. Even Humphrey had been quietly simmering over how he kept sinking into the softer mud - not only was he a large chunk of plate metal, but with both his sword and Theo's coffin on his back, he was a bull in a china shop as he clattered through outstretched boughs of almost slimy trees.

Chuck and Archie seemed to be doing alright. The cat hat curled up atop the Druid's backpack and fallen asleep - and the young man himself seemed professionally interested in the difference in background.

Once they arrived in the Wastelands, Sally hoped they'd all split up to do their Keystone Quests, and the Guild would be more of a loose collection than a social club of people she couldn't eat. It would be super awkward if the System sent them on to do the same thing, and they had to bunch together for longer.

It would be nice just to be the Outsiders again and find a fifth member too. Some one-on-one time with Theo would be neat - some with Humphrey too. Some *classic* adventuring time. That was only if they ever got out of this depressing mulch.

Sally huffed and looked out into the wet swamp.

The wet swamp opened a large yellow eye and looked back.