

Chapter 54

Arrogance

Sally almost slid on the carved stone base of the shrine as she stopped and swivelled around.

A figure stood on the other side of the clearing. Dark leather armour contrasting with the occasional silver armour plates that caught the light. One on the knee, one on each shoulder, and the left arm bracer. Small pouches lined across their chest as well as along their belt. As they stepped into the light further, their black beard and tanned but scarred face aged the man beyond his years.

"I have come here for that shrine, madam." His gravelly voice was harsh but calm, almost apathetic.

"But I'm closest," she whined in return, narrowing her eyes. She gulped. Level Fifteen Swordmaster. That must be a Third Class Fighter.

"I have travelled from the middle of the Wastelands just to use this and change my Keystone ability," he slowly walked towards her, "every shrine I have seen along the way was on cooldown or camped by a Party."

She shot a glance over to the Outsiders. They all looked tense. Could a Level Fifteen solo their whole group? Somehow she managed to prevent herself from blurting out the question to the Death Knight. Instead, she tried to keep the man engaged.

"You don't have a Party?" For all she knew, they could be nearby in hiding - or on their way.

"No." He stopped around fifteen feet away from her and regarded her Party with cold eyes. "You seem to have a very *interesting* one."

"We're a bunch of misfits, those glitched or shunned by the System." She attempted a pleasant smile, which was difficult with how sharp her teeth were.

The man scratched at his beard as his gaze slid between each member before back to Sally. He seemed totally relaxed as if they were no threat. "System's been real weird for the past couple of weeks."

"We are looking to fix it, in a manner of speaking."

"Interesting." He looked passed her at the shrine. "If I could just reset my skill, I'll be on my way."

"The name's Sally," she seethed through a clenched jaw, "and I'd really like to change a skill as I don't have a proper Class."

His eyes flickered back to her. They were pale blue and pierced through her. He licked his lips before he spoke, which she read as a small sign his patience was being tested.

“Miss, I don’t care to bloody my sword on those who aren’t a challenge. I’d hate to end your little crusade so early.” There was a slight inflexion to his words now.

She glanced over at the Outsiders. Humphrey remained impassive. Jackie looked like she was itching to let loose with her tensely held crossbow. Theo was trying to give a signal; his face said panic, run away, but the actions of his hands looked more like he was encouraging a fight. The cat was just asleep. She clucked her tongue at how cohesive everyone was.

Intrusive thoughts told her that a Level Fifteen brain would be very tasty - and maybe worth the risk. She quickly did the maths. The numbers did not look good. They did not have enough crowd control to tie him down - he would probably likely pass Humphrey’s Stun check and would blaze through her zombies even if she summoned all of them.

Her eye twitched as she stepped to the side.

As the man walked towards the shrine, he stopped beside her. “Name’s Dent. You have a STAR, right? If you make it to the Wastelands, come meet me, and I’ll repay you.”

She held her wrist out to match with his, a brief glow as his contact information was added.

“What, nothing you can give a gal now for her trouble?” She wrinkled her nose up as he continued up to the shrine.

“Nothing for your Level or Class.” He shook his head as he placed his STAR into the alcove. “I can only use swords, so don’t keep much else.”

A yellow sheen flashed over the shrine, circling around the outside of the alcove and increasing in intensity before it flickered out - and the shrine was now inert. Instead of the off-white of the marble-like material, it was now a dull grey.

“I’m surprised you didn’t want to kill us because of what we are, even if it wouldn’t be worth your time.”

He turned back to her, his eyes looking at System messages that she couldn’t see as he chose a new skill to replace another. “Some Players are more monsters than some of the Monsters are. After my Party...” he trailed off as his eyes focused back on her. “Let’s just say only the numbers matter to me now. Being the best Swordmaster in the System. Anything else is inconsequential.”

Sally nodded but wasn’t sure what to say.

“As it is then, goodbye and good luck, Miss.” He held out a scroll which burnt up in his hand. A quick blue light flooded over his body and then dissipated as he teleported away.

After a few moments of silence, she kicked a loose stone away. “Dent is a silly name.” She turned to the Party. “Cat got your tongues? Just because I’m the main character doesn’t mean I have to do all the talking.”

Archie meowed.

"I thought I was the main character," Theo frowned as he murmured to himself.

"You seem to have a level enough head for it, and you is the boss, Boss." Jackie shrugged and lit a cigarette, looking disappointed that there would be no fighting.

The Death Knight stood impassively, his gaze still on the shrine. Slowly, he turned back to face her, the light breeze gently caressing his helmet flames. "No comment."

Sally closed her eyes and exhaled. She wasn't even really that annoyed at the group. As comically oddball and reliant on her as they were - that was part of their charm. What she was most frustrated by was being insignificant compared to the sole Swordmaster.

Knowing that they could have done almost nothing if he had attacked them burned her up. And that was just Level Fifteen! While the fights in this starting area had been rough at times, she had always felt that they had the upper hand - whether through plot armour or just convenient luck. But they were still small fry in the World.

Why was the World just an island? She let the question distract her mind from the simmering anger. Opening her eyes, she looked up briefly at the location marker pointing them to the Mines still.

"I guess this is a long cooldown? We should just head out." She curled her fingers around the hilt of her sword and then relaxed them. Trying to trick herself into thinking something had been accomplished here.

Humphrey nodded. "Yes. Several days to a week usually. It is not a set time, but usually not worth waiting around for."

With one last forlorn glance at the tall grey-marble structure, Sally slouched in resignation and resigned herself to leaving the area. It probably would have just glitched for her anyway, she told herself. The last thing she needed was to lose all her skills or to be given something useless like [Novice Strike].

The Outsiders fell into step behind her, Archie now settling on the wide plate shoulder armour of the Death Knight.

"As far as random encounters go, that one was pretty dull." She raised her eyebrows higher in an exaggerated effort towards Humphrey as if he was the sole reason it ended as a flop.

"Perhaps a wake-up call." He replied bluntly.

Theo groaned and rubbed his face. "Of course. The higher our notoriety gets, the more likely we are to attract the attention of someone who could easily wipe us from the System."

"Imagine a Level Twenty Party that hears about our uprising, and they want to be the heroes to stop it." Humphrey turned his empty-socket gaze towards her. "*Ha-ha.*"

Sally exhaled. *Mood killer.* "So what do you suggest? Is there a way to go 'off-grid' or hide ourselves better? By nature, we are going to make noise if we are killing and toppling civilisation?"

“Yes.” The Death Knight grinned at her frustration. “Let me consider some options.” He looked into the air and frowned.

“Meow,” Archie stated from beside his head.

She waited for either of them to elaborate before giving up on that as well. Her earlier mood had been completely run over by the series of miserable events. Still, she tried to shirk them off, looking into the distant woods with determination. There was a big fight to be had and potentially brains to be eaten.

Another half an hour of bland scenery passed with little fanfare. Other than Humphrey occasionally looking into the air, the Party seemed to be content enough to walk in silence and contemplate the trial ahead.

Eventually, they reached thinning trees, and with a quick check of her Map, Sally gestured for everyone to slow and quieten. As they stepped with as much stealth as they were capable of, they reached the edge of a clearing.

Ahead of them, as they crouched behind the sparse amount of trunks, was an unmistakable Mine entrance built into the side of a rocky hill. A square of wooden beams bordered the entrance and continued inwards into dim light - bracing the sides of the tunnel. From within, a rusted minecart track spat forth like a snake's tongue before it ended at the side, a couple of overturned carts having spilt their contents.

Alongside the dirty footsteps in the grey dust, discarded mining tools, and roughshod wooden furniture the exterior of the mine was also splattered with crimson. Half a dozen kobold bodies lay dead in various states of injury. They were the dog-like kind. Sally hid her pleased grin.

The Players must be inside.

Gingerly they began to make their way across the clearing to the entrance. Weapons were drawn. The corpses looked to have various stabbing and slashing wounds, along with some burns - one was even partially frozen. Sally licked her lips as she reached the open maw of the mines.

A faint echo of battle came from within.

“They are not far inside,” Humphrey narrowed his lack of eyes to the dim wall torches further in, “they must not have started that long ago.”

With a nod and wry smile, Sally met the eyes of each of the Outsiders.

Sword in one hand, Dagger of Luck in the other, she exhaled and led the group down into the unknown below.