

Chapter 2.6 Escort Quest

“No, all I’m saying is maybe you could have flown us down.” Sally crossed her arms as the vampire narrowed his eyes back up to the cliff they had just descended.

“Is this...” he frowned back at her, “...is this going to be a *thing*?”

“Probably not - the Wastes look pretty flat. But *flying*, Theo.”

“It was more a gliding thing,” he murmured to himself as the zombie walked off.

It had taken a short time to move down the rocky cliff onto the plains themselves, and not only did the heat hit them - but no sooner as they stepped away from the Swamp, all of their STARS lit up with notifications.

Sally stopped to bring it up. “Mine says... kill quest in the Underwarren.”

“Underwarren,” Humphrey confirmed a long smile across his skeletal face.

Theo wrinkled up his nose. “Mine says... take a nap?”

“Snap!” Archie beamed up at the vampire.

“Sucks to suck,” the zombie poked her tongue out at him before turning to huddles of the rest of the Guild. “Hands up if you have Underwarren for your Keystone Quest?”

One hand raised from the throng - Chuck’s.

“Huh,” Sally shrugged. “What are the chances? And if one of you says fifty-fifty, you’ll be my next meal.”

Theo opened his mouth but thought better of it.

“Alright, Guild, go do your respective things and meet back at that little town down there called...” She quickly brought up the Map as her finger pointed down at the dirty-brown buildings further along the road. “Bordertown? Really?”

Humphrey unhooked the coffin to pass it over to Theo. “Here, *ha-ha*. Good luck.”

With a healthy amount of waving and scowls, the various groups of the Guild split up to embark on their respective Quests. The Players split into two groups to help each other complete each other in turn, while the Outsiders plus Chuck did their own things.

“No bad blood from the Foxes that you’re with us?” Sally frowned as she kicked her feet through dry grass and dusty stone.

Chuck shook his head. "All of their Quests are in the opposite direction. It's nice to have a little break from them, though."

"Girls, am I right?" She punched him in the arm and almost knocked him over. "They treat you alright?"

"It's like having four sisters, so pretty terrible. *But!* It's less traumatic than whatever you guys have been up to." He furrowed his brow at the zombie. "I'm hoping we are just killing Monsters here, right?"

The warm air seemed stagnant as they moved over the near-featureless plains. Sally decided she much preferred trees - even the swamp was starting to have some charm to it in comparison. She drew up the STAR.

"I need to kill... Two-Fang."

Humphrey tilted his head to the side. "Mine says I need to kill Three-Fang."

Chuck groaned on reading his. "Save One-Fang."

If there was one thing the System was great at, it was barely anything. Sally smiled to herself. This was a little bit of fun, even if it was a little wonky. "Been a while since it was just the three of us, huh?"

"I don't think it ever was just us three," Chuck wrinkled up his face in trying to recall.

The Death Knight slowly shook his head as she raised an eyebrow at him. *Oh.* Chuck was a zombie back then. Until he managed to de-level, and his soul took over. A process she had tried not to think about, as the ramifications would surely leave her panicked at the state of her current existence.

"You're right - uh, well, I hope this isn't our last, then?" She grinned a little too widely.

The Druid nodded slowly and adjusted his thick robes.

It wouldn't be too much longer before they reached their destination - but nothing obvious was springing out of the scenery. Even narrowing her eyes, the distant hills or mountains were dozens of miles away, if not more. From the Map, she knew this area was larger, but she hadn't expected it to be even sparser in points of interest.

"Where mounts, Humps?" She considered leaping atop him - if he could carry the coffin around, then her slight frame would be no issue.

"Level Fifteen. If you're good, I'll get you a pony."

Sally pouted. She didn't want a pony. She would much rather have a fire wolf - or even a dragon. That would be more befitting a Queen such as herself. Maybe an *undead* dragon to fit the theme.

“Didn’t you have a horse, Humphrey?” Chuck rubbed his fingers idly on one of the various dark leather pouches along his belt.

“No.”

Sally waited for him to elaborate with a wide grin on her face. She knew that he knew that if he didn’t, then she would - and her version of the story was much less flattering.

With a sigh, he relented. “Petal was an Observer who merged with a horse. I did not like them. I did not want to ride them-“

“Because it was sooo cliché!” Sally hopped.

“Yes. A flaming undead horse - I am a Death Knight. They were very persistent and annoying, so I gave it one try. *One.*”

Silence washed over the three as Sally held her mouth in anticipation. Chuck grimaced and took the plunge.

“What happened-“

“Petal almost died because I am... considerable in power.”

The Druid looked over the massive form of the fully plated Death Knight. He certainly was considerable. It would take quite the war-horse to support the amount of weight - even if Petal had fit the theme.

“Has Theo ever ridden in the coffin while you carry it?” A slight smile curled up at the edge of Chuck’s mouth.

“I am not a mount for the vampire,” Humphrey hissed.

Sally waved her hands at them both. “Enough, with only three of us, there is supposed to be less talking, not more.”

Chuck prodded her arm. “But we haven’t even talked about how cool Theo looks now and if you guys are dating.”

Humphrey stared daggers at the Druid, flame flickering around the back of his helmet.

“Not in front of Dad, Chucky - he gets overprotective. We aren’t *dating*, but we aren’t *not dating*, you know?”

“Not really.” Chuck looked up to the hazy sky. “Must be nice to find someone you can just be yourself with, though.”

Sally watched him for a few moments before turning to the still-glaring Death Knight. “*Can’t you adopt him too?*” She whispered way too loudly.

“We are here,” Humphrey stated, drawing his greatsword to change the conversation.

She pouted and withdrew her dagger. Before them was a hole. Barely noticeable from over twenty feet away, the wide tunnel dropped into the earth.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Chuck grimaced at the darkness. "Here." [Nature's Defence]

Small roots of hardened bark wrapped around Sally's torso to create a chest-plate of thick wood.

"Neat! Do you want to join our Party for now? Our Auras are out of this world. Figuratively."

He nodded his head back and forth before sending a message to the White Foxes.

[Chuck has joined the Party]

"Ayy, gang gang." Sally punched him in the arm again, almost knocking him into the hole. "Either I'm really strong, or you're weak."

"Yes. Allow me to take point." Humphrey moved in front of them and peered down in the abyss below. Sally withdrew a torch from her Inventory and passed it to him to hold in his offhand.

"As your Queen, I allow it." She gave his tired glare a curtsey. He was slowly regretting giving her the crown, and she was loving it.

They stepped into the darkness, now briefly lit by the amber glow of the held light source. It was a wider cavern than expected. After a steep drop down, the angle softened until it was almost flat. In some ways, it reminded her of the Kobold Mines - but here there were no supporting struts or the usual signs of a more civilized foe.

The dark sandstone looked hewn by inaccurate tools - or perhaps not tools at all. Indeed, as she squinted around the almost circular passageway, it looked more like an animal burrow. On the floor, the dusty stone fell into the grooves of long claw marks.

And then it hit her - the smell. It was something familiar but somehow worse. Wet fur, ammonia, and... death? She nudged the Druid beside her. "Got anything so I can see better?" Her voice came out whispered but carried louder through the empty tunnel.

Chuck slowly shook his head. He looked pale and slightly panicked. He had spent most of his time getting to Level Ten as a pacifist, much to the chagrin of Theo, who had tried to boost them to the Keystone as quickly as possible. It still didn't seem possible to her to actually get this far without killing anything. Certainly not as fun, anyway.

"Don't worry," she whispered again, causing him to wince as her voice carried.

Not being able to see Monster levels might be a problem. Thinking back to the Toad in the Swamps... but surely the Keystone Quest would just have them against Level Ten Monsters? In which case, between herself and the Death Knight, there wasn't much that could cause them issues.

She took a deep breath in before the plated finger of Humphrey pressed against her lips. He shook his head.

Sally rolled her eyes. Perhaps she shouldn't get too big for her boots. At least until she found bigger boots - that was how they worked, right?

As Humphrey turned back away towards the ongoing warren, a shadow flashed against the wall further in. They all paused and stood ready. Nothing.

Chuck took one step forward, and then a large shadow blocked up the entrance behind them. The stench of rodents flooded through them as two fist-sized red eyes reflected the glow of their torch.

Sounds of long claws scratching against rock came from behind them as two further sets of evil eyes clambered around a darkened corner.