

Chapter 2.32

Rats to This

"I'm getting pretty tired of amber hues." Sally rubbed her eyes as they entered the first room of the dungeon. When she had thought about the Wasteland, she had expected more grey or marshy conditions, muddy greens, and pale browns. Not bright sand, constant sunlight, and everything being made out of the yellow-to-red spectrum of the color wheel.

The chamber was illuminated by flickering torches sporadically around the room. She didn't even care how long they had been there or who had lit them. Passing things off as System shenanigans had become an easy way to smooth over the bumps. If it indeed was meant to be some kind of game, then she should allow it some suspension of disbelief.

A stone doorway sat both on the right and left sides of the room, where the far wall had a big carving upon it. The text was surprisingly legible despite the dungeon looking like it had been here for centuries - even as she kicked her boots across the floor, small plumes of dust rose up.

She narrowed her eyes to read the engraving sat amongst what looked like some monster with googly edges and teeth too far set apart.

Welcome to the Eternal Sands
Rest while you can
But don't take too long
Lest you start to sink below
Choose the Right Path

"Aw, shit." Sally covered her eyes. "It's trying to reverse psychology on me."

Edward leaned against the back wall and crossed his arms. "And that physically hurts you?"

"You don't understand." She shook her head and glared at him. "I'm not meant to make the right decision - I'm a little out of control. But is the right decision the Right, or not Right because the writing writes right as Right - to mean left."

"We're going left," Humphrey sighed. "If we start listening to walls, we'll be here all day."

"The walls have no ears of mine." Sally nodded, relenting to the Death Knight's logic.

The demon just stood with a blank expression on his face, blinking slowly as he watched the pair.

If Sally's memories were correct, she had never actually played through a dungeon in the real world. Certainly, she had thought about them - even rolled some dice by herself to simulate the experience - but when you held all the cards, it was a little easier. Death could loom in every room. Hopefully, the treasure could too. She tried to remember the protocol.

"Check for traps!" She punched the Death Knight on the shoulder as he moved past to open the door.

He paused, hand an inch away from the smooth stone surface. "How?"

"I don't know, just look?" She turned to face the demon. "Hey Edward? I have darkvision."

Edward remained impassive. "Do you?"

"No. Theo does, though. He would have loved it here - maybe." She began to hum to herself. Humphrey was observing the door the best he was able, but after ten seconds, he deemed the job done.

"Safe," he shrugged and pushed the stone door open.

Immediately, the twang of air-propelled projectiles burst from inside the room - and clattered against his metallic body. The arrows fell to the floor by his feet, and he looked down. "I disarmed the trap, Sally."

"Neat! Were they poisoned? Probably, if they weren't strong enough to pierce you?" She hopped over closer and leaned down to get a better look at them. She was acting a little extra; she could feel it but wasn't sure if it was due to the pressure of the dungeon or the fact that they had someone watching them make their inevitable series of mistakes. Heh, *inevitable*.

Edward shifted himself from the wall and began to walk over, hands now in his trouser pockets. "Do you guys always fail upwards?"

"Sometimes we fail downwards too," she righted herself. "But on the whole, we mostly get lucky or violent, and that sees us through."

"*Uh-huh.*"

Humphrey stepped into the room that had assaulted him to find a small chamber with a single exit. Other than the torch on the wall, there were no other interesting facets to the room.

"Just here to poison us, huh?" Sally tutted to the dungeon. "Bit of an ego there, wasting this space for one trap."

"Don't taunt the dungeon, Sally." Humphrey scowled at her.

"Why not - you just told me it has no ears." She crossed her arms and began to tap her foot, awaiting the Death Knight to check for traps at the next door.

"That's not what..." he sighed and put his hand against the next door. "I almost wish Theo was here too, so you had someone else to annoy."

Sally pouted and looked towards the demon standing in the first doorway. "*I'm not annoying,*" she whispered.

Edward just nodded, his blank stare slowly beginning to become a furrowed brow.

The Death Knight pushed the door open, a waft of damp fur blowing back to where they were. "Giant Rats," he reported.

"Dibs!" Sally squeezed past him, jostling him to the side as she ran into the room with her dagger drawn.

There were six of the large beasts in the room - although they were smaller than the giant mice, which was disappointing. Oddly, they were all an albino white, and their red eyes turned to meet

her as she approached. The room was dirtied, with nests in each corner, scabbled claw marks across the stone, and a large ball that - wait, a ball?

She slid and turned her free hand to the sphere of almost white stone. [Necroblast]. The dark energy pulsed through the air and shattered the orb into dozens of broken parts. A wave of static passed through the room, and the rats shuddered.

Her nose wrinkled up as each of them squirmed and pulsed - before they each stood on their back legs, oddly bipedal as they mutated into muscled figures with rat heads. The crackling static energy continued to pulse around them as they flexed and stood in martial poses to greet her.

“Why’d you do that?” Humphrey sighed from the doorway as he strode in.

“I thought it was their toy,” she shrugged, glancing over their shoulder. “They might have just wanted to play.”

A rush of air signaled they had begun to attack, and she rolled to the side as a haired leg brushed past her. With a grin, she blocked a second ratman - the force sending her feet sliding back across the floor.

“At last, something with strength,” she growled - as Humphrey pulsed with his activated skills.

Edward tilted his head from the doorway as he watched them, the rats seemingly uninterested in the passive observer.

Sally blocked a punch and slashed her blade across the offending arm, drawing a slim line of crimson. The enemies were fast outgrowing the range of her [Dagger of Luck] - perhaps it was about time she opened that Legendary box...

The clang of metal signaled that Humphrey had taken a hit, but from her peripheral, she could see that he was doing fine - blocking a kick with the flat of his blade and then lashing out with his pommel.

She swerved and twisted away from the constant assault, flicking her blade and an onrushing ratman and drawing her bat as he knocked the dagger away. An overhead fist was blocked but knocked her to her knees, and she rolled away to avoid the follow-up. A third strike connected with her side, sending her stumbling over to where the Death Knight was.

“New combo time!” She beamed as the combatants surged towards them.

[Desecrate Life]

[Will of the Dark Lord]

Now weakened, they would be easier affected by the Death Knight’s area stun ability. Two of the nearest ratman to her became stunned, and she held out her hand as Humphrey drove his blade into a third dazed enemy.

[Necroblast: Barrage]

The first three projectiles struck the first immobile rat, each one blowing a layer from skin to bone to brain. The second took two of the same - then she jumped into [Eat Brains].

“Gross,” she spat, taking a blow to the arm from the ratman unaffected by the stun. It numbed her muscle but it definitely felt like it was weaker than it should have been. She blocked the follow-up punch with the bat and then swung downwards. Crackling energy surged around the weapon as it struck the knee of her assailant, the critical hit shattering the bone. As it dropped to its good knee, she grabbed the furred throat. [Necroblast]. She swung the bat to clock the rat across the head, dropping it.

She turned to see Humphrey skewer the final ratman with [Grave Strike], the dark energy mixing with the crimson flame of his blade as he slashed outwards, withdrawing the sword. The entrails of the ratman fell to the floor, the creature clutching at them, and it collapsed.

Sally sighed and tried to rub her tongue across her jacket to get the taste off.

Edward slowly clapped from the doorway. “You took a combined five or six hits, I believe. Despite immediately changing the encounter to the worst possible version. I’m not sure whether to be impressed or disgusted.”

“Be both,” Sally winked at him. “As we are only just getting warmed up.”

She turned and vomited up the rat brains across the stone floor.