

## Chapter 2.27 Throwing Shade

The only thing more miserable than stomping away at the dried plains of the Wastelands was doing it without all your friends. Actually - Sally could think of several more miserable things than that. Or rather, she could have if the constant sunshine wasn't melting through her skull.

"You know," she gasped, "I was never much of a hat gal, but perhaps I should carry one, just for these sorts of situations."

"Yes. Try being made out of black metal." Humphrey lowered his gaze to the zombie and sighed. "Apologies, this was perhaps an ill-thought-out plan."

"All our plans are." She shrugged in response. If they had good plans that made sense, they'd probably be too sensible and safe, and they'd be back in that luscious and cool forest. Oh, how she missed it.

She missed Theo and Archie already, too. It had seemed a bit extreme to take them both into some other... plane? Humphrey couldn't quite explain it, but she assumed it was something beyond normal space - like Henkk's ability. Theo had seemed manageable - but if they had to struggle through this overbearing heat, then it probably would have made him worse. Especially if salvation was days away.

A reflection of the previous day, it was now just her and Humphrey again. At least she knew where everyone was this time, to some degree. With a huge sigh, she at least relented to the fact that things couldn't get much worse.

With a flash of blue, Edward appeared slightly ahead of them.

"Hello, friends!"

"What do you want?" She scowled, the pair of them not even bothering to draw their weapons.

Edward gave an exaggerated bow. "I learned recently that you came into quite the sum of gold and wondered if you'd like to make a donation of-"

"No!" Sally growled at him. "Give me a good reason to! You just kidnapped our friend!"

"Ah - apologies. That is an entirely different business matter." He shrugged and looked out to the distant roving plains. "You are going in the wrong direction, though."

She glared at him as she opened up the Map. "Shit, Humps - we've been curving to the left."

"Neither of you look too well," Edward's face fell. "Is this the best option for you? Where are the other two from your Party?"

"They are currently not a large, super-heated, and furious titan of metal with a sharp weapon," Humphrey's helmet fire blazed higher. "So consider your intentions here."

"It's not my intention to..." the demon paused and furrowed his brow. "I've never met Uniques so headstrong. Even most Players give up by this point. What is it that drives you?"

“Spite.” Sally stood and stretched her back out. “What drives you to vacuum up other people’s hard-earned money for the dragon?”

For a moment, Edward paused, his tongue rolling around inside his mouth. With tiredness hitting his eyes, he shrugged. “I have my reasons - that is beyond the point.”

“Can we just buy Lucius back? Or a way to kill Ruben?” She was sweating, or at least she hoped it was sweat - usual antics hadn’t prompted her body to fulfill the necessity on account of her being undead.

“That you would suggest the latter shows how little you truly know,” the demon deflated slightly but turned to rub his chin. “As for the former - keep me company for a while, and I will see what I can do.”

“You want our company?” Humphrey twitched his plated hand in readiness to draw his blade.

Edward turned back to them with a grin. “I may be a pawn of the dragon, but the whole organization is full of bores. If it weren’t for my... employment, I wouldn’t care to spend a second in their presence.”

“Get us some shade, and you have a deal.” Sally narrowed her eyes at him. As a demon, he probably had no issue with sitting about in the constant heat, but if he could provide them some brief relief from the oppressive overhead sun - then that’d earn him a stay of her wanton violence.

He clicked his fingers and then withdrew something from his pocket. With a quick flick of his hand, it struck the dried stone and burst up into a handful of deckchairs beneath an oversized parasol.

“It only lasts fifteen minutes,” he again bowed, “but that should quench both our desires.”

Sally immediately went and collapsed into the shade, laying face down onto the deckchairs to absorb any mote of cool that was available. Humphrey tested the chairs to see if they’d take his weight, and in surprise to see it did, he sat with hands on his knees - deflated with a sigh.

Edward hopped onto a third one and laid down, sunglasses coming from nowhere and falling over his eyes. “I’ll admit it’s nice to relax once in a while.”

“You know,” Sally began, “turning slowly to glare at the demon, “it’s hard for us to be friends when you have taken Lucius away.”

“I never considered the possibility of us being friends,” Edward idly tapped on his long leg. “So much bloodshed.”

She shrugged in response. “We can let that slide - we very much live in the present rather than hold grudges.”

“Really? Your vampire friend doesn’t seem so keen on me.”

That was true, and partially it had something to do with his sleepless mania. There was another thing there too, that she wasn’t too sure about. Theo could sense Edward, and his desire to kill all demons had sprung from that - but why didn’t he like this particular demon?

“He isn’t normally like that; it’s a curse thing.” She frowned and swung her legs around so she could sit and glare at Edward properly. “But there is something odd about you, more than just being a jerk.”

He raised his eyebrows and tried to read her face. It was hard to see what he was doing behind the sunglasses, but any retort did not come immediately. Eventually, he sighed and sunk into the deckchair to look upwards.

“Do you always attempt to disarm your opponents by being so affable?”

“I hardly ever aff people, and you’re the one that wanted our company. You can see it though, can’t you, Edward?” She grinned wildly.

“I see nothing, zombie girl.”

“Fine, whenever you’re ready, let us know. But until you give Lucius back, you’re in the top five of our bad guy list.”

He was deflecting, but she could see it clear as day. The demon was in some kind of bind and wanted out of whatever job he had with the dragon. There was no way he would admit it to her, but he saw them as the key to unlocking those chains. If nothing else, The *Outsiders* were a wrecking ball for the System - and if he had gotten a whiff of what they had achieved in the Forest, then perhaps it had sparked the hope that they could do the same in the Wastes.

“Flattered,” he said, the hint of a wry smile across his face. “Even if I had the desire to give you the demon back, I cannot. He is not my prisoner; I was just the messenger.”

Humphrey grunted. “A terrible one. You told us neither the conditions of his release nor exactly where he was being held.”

“In fairness,” Edward held a finger in the air, “I was avoiding getting cored by the vampire for a third time. Dying isn’t pleasant, even if I can come back from it.”

Sally desperately wanted to ask how he managed that - but perhaps his Unique glitch was maintaining the ability to respawn that the System-created had. More importantly, was the information on Lucius. “Spill it now, Edward.”

He opened his mouth as if to protest, but the use of his proper name softened his response. “Sands of Eternity has a dungeon; he is being held there. The intention is either you’ll die in the attempt or survive by a thread and have no option but to join alongside Ruben.”

She bit her tongue in how much information he was willing to divulge. It was briefly surprising. “What does Ruben want?”

“Gold.” Edward sat up and removed his sunglasses, turning his burning blue eyes towards her. “Dragons get more powerful the more gold they have; he wants to ascend past the Wasteland. Rule the world and all that boring stuff.”

She nodded. It made some degree of sense - motivations aside, Players wanted to gather strength and move on, so it wasn’t a stretch to imagine a powerful dragon would feel that they could do the same thing.

“Although,” Edward stood and brushed his lavender suit down. “Now that I have told you this, I *will* need to kill you.”

Sally stood too, but she didn’t believe him. Well, he was slowly drawing his sword - but there was no anger of malicious intent in his eyes. She frowned as she tried to read him.

“Better not loot my corpse after this, either.” He gave a grim smile. “*Now perish.*”

He swung out with his sword, but Humphrey was already there - having leaped over the deckchairs to block the attack aimed at the zombie.

With a flash of crimson, he scored a deep gash across the demon’s chest - blood spraying over the unarmed Sally.

[Eat Brains]

Edward's emptied body dropped to the floor, spilling more demonic blood amongst the small area of shade.

“Oh no!” She looked at her marred hands. “I did that by reflex; I feel kinda bad.”

“Don’t worry,” Humphrey grinned, “I’m sure he felt worse.”