

Chapter 2.23 Against the Grain

“What do you mean?” Sally pouted. She had found the armor fair and square. If you ignore the skill that Archie used so that she got all of the loot. And that she didn’t *share*.

“Did you even read the effects of it?” Humphrey crossed his arms as they stepped out into the road to stop awkwardly crowding the doorway.

Theo had shuffled along about another foot in the time they had spent watching, so keeping an eye on him was easy enough while they had time for discourse.

“Big brother is right, Sally.” Archie stretched out in the morning sun.

“Right about what?”

“It’s nothing terrible, but the armor is meant for someone else.” Humphrey tilted his head but looked no less perturbed.

“But...” she pinched the bridge of her nose. “The armor is bound to me; nobody else could have it.”

“Hmm.” The Death Knight exhaled and looked down at the cat. “What do you think, little brother?”

“If what she says is true, then that makes sense, surely?”

Sally felt like her head might pop. She was still groggy from having just woken up, and then they were going to berate her about her armor because they didn’t understand how bound items worked? Even as ex-Observers?

“Let me get this straight,” she waved her hands in the air to get their attention. “There are lots of items in the System that belong to someone - but you are unable to tell me the specific person or persons. You just know that the items *belong*?”

“Yes,” the Death Knight nodded in tandem with Archie.

She deflated and turned to catch up to Theo. She had always known they were fallible, but to have such a gross misunderstanding of a core concept of these types of things was... wow, she really wished she had the normal vampire to gripe about this thing with.

“Hey, pudding.” She gave his legs a little kick, and whatever tune he had been humming along to ceased. “You got somewhere to be?”

“No.” He rolled onto his back and looked up at her.

If she didn’t know any better, she would have assumed that he had died in the night. Of course, he was already undead - but now he looked rougher than some of her summoned zombies. She managed to give him a polite smile. “Then where are you going?”

“*Away from you.*” He tried to shuffle backward slightly.

“Away from me specifically? Or from the whole group?” She crossed her arms.

“Yes.”

She spun around and wagged a finger at the Death Knight. “You’re a bad influence! Also, we must have some rope and something to gag him with, right?”

Humphrey shrugged. “Depends on what we are planning.” On catching the intense glare of the zombie, he grinned and continued. “But we could probably wrap him in my cloak if you have no rope in your Inventory.”

Sally didn’t even bother looking through it to check. “Yeah, wrap him up.”

As the Death Knight approached, the vampire tried to squirm away. He was unable to get far before the red cloak encircled him like a swaddled baby. Unceremoniously he was then slung over his shoulder, just his glaring eyes the only thing peeking out.

Sally sighed. “That’s one thing taken care of; now let’s check the list.”

“Oh, morning everyone - sorry I overslept.” Lucius stepped out of the hall, rubbing his neck.

“It’s fine,” Sally waved him off. “We have just been bickering about semantics and grabbing our little lunatic here.”

The demon nodded, but the just stared impassively.

Next on the agenda was getting to the pyramids to get the Observer magic object and hopefully somewhere for Theo to have a nap. Even if they could just reset his mania temporarily, that’d be great - at least then they should have a couple of days of normal Theo to help them fight or farm items for her.

“You said it was Level Fifteen for Mounts, Humps? How are we going to get to the pyramids without turning to dust under this sun?”

On the map, it looked like a couple of days of walking. Why the System made everything so far apart - she cursed it once again.

Archie rolled over on the ground, rubbing his back against the warming cobbled road. “I could do something, but it could go wrong.”

She wasn’t too keen on trying out whatever random skill the cat could conjure up. It could be something as banal as summoning a horse-drawn cart - or he could turn into a hot air balloon that popped over the dessert and dropped them to their doom. If there was some method to his madness, it might have made it a more palatable option.

As she shook her head, she looked around at the rest of the buildings on the street. Nothing untoward, but the empty town still put her on edge. It should be bustling with Players and System-created, just like Sanctuary or any of the other villages. It became a pinprick of anger within her - a hatred for the dragon that had scoured the System of the rightful life in this area.

She had thought the System oppressive in the Forrest, where Uniques had no place amongst the Players - but here it was just as bad, but in a different way. Nothing was allowed to flourish. No doubt countless Players and Uniques had died in rebellion against the harsh rules imposed by

the greedy Monster. Even the System-created couldn't function, and were forced into living underground. Everything was ruined, and she was too tired to abide by that.

"I know of some ways - we can get about a third of the way there through some tunnels," Lucius slowly moved into her eyeline as she stared intently into the distance. "But then it'd be mostly above ground."

Sally sighed and shook the frustration from her head. All things came to be eaten by her wanting maw eventually; the dragon was no exception. The important thing was getting her Party fixed up.

"Alright, Lucius - can I call you Lucy?"

"I don't... sure, I could live with that." The demon shrugged and was accompanied by an emoji of a yellow face doing a similar motion.

"Lucy, Humps, Arch - let's go into tunnels again and... stuff." She deflated as her rallying cry lost its luster.

"Mmf bffts."

"I'm not calling you that, Theo, don't be reductive." She shook her head and started to follow the demon.

Two hours had passed since the troupe had left Bordertown, and things were drab.

Sally sighed for possibly the three-hundredth time. Theo could probably tell her the exact amount of times - if he wasn't constantly glaring at the floor in some kind of catatonic state. The tunnels were a miserable expanse of boring rock and little else. None of the alleged hidden-away Monsters or Player groups to break up the monotony of just walking.

It was tiring, and even the group had become quiet and morose. The slight benefit of not being under the constant glare of sunlight was nice, but they still had to make the distance to the pyramids. And then they had to hope that Theo could sleep in a sarcophagus. If not... that was a couple of days away, and who knows what he'd be like.

"You still got a percentage thing, Theo?" She hung back to be closer to him.

"Urf."

"He doesn't at the moment." Archie translated. "He doesn't have the curse, so he isn't on a downward spiral - but the exhaustion and not sleeping has his level of... trouble-making up."

Sally wouldn't exactly call it trouble-making. Corpse-making, maybe. The last time he had gotten this bad, they were luckily in the midst of the System-created, and the carnage he wrought - although terrible - had been to their brief benefit. Theo-100 was something else, unrelenting carnage, unstoppable and chaotic. His normal exhaustion still had some sensibilities to it; he was just bloodthirsty. Literally and figuratively.

"You could tell him to be less heavy," Humphrey grumbled.

“Aw, you could carry a truck, Humps. You’re strong.” He might not know what a truck was, but he perked up a little at the compliment. She turned to the demon. “How did all these tunnels get made?”

Lucius tilted his head back and forth in thought. “It’s like... all the areas that had a System presence were shunted down beneath the surface. That is the best way I could describe it.”

“Ohh.” Sally wrinkled her face and looked back and forward along their route. So it was either somewhere where Monsters spawned or a Quest location or route, possibly. “That explains how the barbarians had a tunnel - it would take far too long to actually dig something like that out.”

“Especially without the direction of a Unique,” Humphrey added. “I assume a lot System-created would have been too stubborn to move and perished completely under whatever ability the dragon has.”

“Right on the money, Humprey,” Lucius had a thumbs-up emoji appear, “if you excuse the expression, of course.”

“I will allow it.”

If anything, this reveal just ruined Sally’s mood further. She was already annoyed at the dragon for messing up so much of the Wastelands and her progression. Would this be what it would be like if someone evil became the new Architect if that was possible? In the weeks since their apparent death, there had been nothing to show that the mantle had been picked up, and some of the System was still broken or full of errors.

It gave the slight possibility that she could still put that crown on her head - although, at this rate, it would be months before they even got to Level Fifty. By that time, anything could have happened. Part of her still wanted to return to the real world, if that was even possible. Part of her liked it here. But then, part of her was a Monster, so that checked out.

Lucius stopped at the front and waved his torch around a bit. “Hmm.” A question mark bubble appeared. “That is new.”

Sally squinted her eyes to see a ladder scaling the cavern wall. Across the rock, someone had painted a phrase - no, a sign - with an upwards arrow, which read;

Last Chance Saloon.