

## Chapter 22 Gloomy Skies

“Tough choice, Humps.” Sally scratched her chin as she looked over the three options. “My crossbow has been working out pretty well - and with you up front, I shouldn’t need to Melee and put myself in too much danger. No offence.”

“None taken, my liege.” The Death Knight performed an awkward half-bow.

“No - don’t do any of that. I’ll... cast you out of service or something.” She waved her hand at him in frustration. “It’s bad enough that your Level reduced. I guess a bodyguard has to be a Level below their Boss?”

“Ha-ha, astute as always.” Humphrey folded his plated arms across his breastplate. “But you haven’t considered Spellcasting?”

She shrugged. “I only have [Hex: Slow] at the moment, and with my random progression there’s no guarantee I will get any cool spells soon.” Sally closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead. There was the taste of a memory avoiding her attempts at retrieval. Mentally she chased it around, eventually getting a handful of it - enough to guide her decision.

[Melee Affinity Selected]

She frowned at the Death Knight who had his head tilted in interest. “Just because you are a tank it doesn’t mean I don’t need to think about my own survivability.” She sighed and relaxed her brow. “I won’t always be able to rely on you to keep me safe.”

“Preposterous! It is my sworn duty to-“

Sally hushed him with a wave of her arm to all the broken skeletons and the corpse of the Lurker. “Plus,” she added with a wry grin, “how could I *trust* you when you gave up your previous duty?”

“W-what? That’s- that’s not fair,” Humphrey spluttered.

“Just kidding. I appreciate it, skull-knight. We’re proper buds now.” She smiled and dusted off her hands on her dress. “Oh, that reminds me, where are we heading next?”

“You haven’t handed in your Quest yet.” The red flames lapped gently at the back of his helmet. Now that combat had ended they had simmered down to a gentle wave of crimson energy.

“Oh yeah, this STAR thing takes some getting used to. Especially when it doesn’t work properly half the time.”

[Quest Complete]

[50 Gold]

[Uncommon Weapon Chance Box]

“Oof, always with the random stuff.” The menus spun around atop her wrist. “Dang it, just accepted a Quest without seeing the options. ‘Clear the Goblin Cave’ - it’s near a place called Yarch. What kind of name is that?” She raised an eyebrow at the Death Knight.

“Wasn’t me that named places, *ha-ha*. Yarch is a small village close to Hillan. It’s on the way to Poppybrook.”

“And Poppybrook is where we go to eat the Guild, right? You can tell me more about it now that you are my minion?” Sally beamed, and her eyes twinkled in the flickering light of the torch still on the floor of the chamber.

“There are three parts to this that make it an ill-advised plan,” Humphrey cleared his throat, “but I will tell you as long as you never call me a minion again.” He waited for her nod of agreement before he continued. “Firstly, Adventuring Guild hubs are the central points for Parties to gather to do official boring business - so it is likely there will groups in the immediate vicinity.”

“Uh huh, got it. An all-I-can-eat buffet.”

“Secondly,” the Death Knight continued, “the building itself hosts the most powerful Party in the region. They get to influence region policy and get a few boons in return as long as they act as stewards to the Guild.”

Sally nodded.

“And lastly, this Guild Party will be protecting the Guild Core - an artefact that helps bind elements of the System together. These often have defensive layers of their own - traps, spells, and even Monsters.”

“Like a dungeon?” She tilted her head. Kill the weaklings, eat the strongest defenders, and survive the dungeon to pierce the heart.

“Yes.” A brief lick of flame curved out from the back of his helmet.

Sally tapped a finger on her hip thrice before bringing up the STAR.

[Sally: Almost died. Can’t believe you stood me up]

[Sally: New plan - meet near Yarch]

“Alright, no point waiting for the tasty snail to respond - let’s get out of here. It is starting to feel stuffy.”

[Zombie has joined the Party]

Humphrey nodded and watched the Ranger fall in line to the will of his new master. Or Mistress, he supposed - who was currently busy collecting the skulls of the fallen Warriors.

They were one Party member short, but if Theo ever managed to catch up, then that’d be fine. Zombies were starting to lag behind in Level though - especially Chuck. She narrowed

her eyes at the walking corpse who was now just leaning face-first against the wall. It probably just felt cool on his burnt skin, she decided, feeling bad for the unlucky zom again.

“Shame you cannot loot the Ranger now as he has become a Monster.” The Death Knight grinned.

“But if I killed him now, would he drop his Player gear?”

“Hmm, *inconclusive*.” Humphrey shrugged and made his way towards the stairs.

Sally grabbed the torch. After waving it about to try and douse the flame, she was amused to find she could just jam it in her Inventory lit. There were probably a few ramifications to that kind of thing, but she didn’t let it cloud her mind. With the chamber drowned in pitch darkness once more, she hopped towards the stairs where the red flame of the Death Knight briefly illuminated the doorway.

“Woah!” She tripped over the small step and scuffed her knee on the floor. “Ah, I’m injured!”

“I’m not carrying you up the stairs,” Humphrey grinned from the first couple of stairs, “I’m not the gallant type of Knight, *ha-ha*.”

“Yes, so I have observed,” she stood and brushed herself down again, “so did you lose all your cool abilities becoming Level Three?”

“Yes. I now only have [Adrenaline], [Minor Resistance], and [Grave Strike].”

“Aw, the duel one looked really useful.” She pouted and made a mental note to check the details of his skills later on.

“I hope to regain it as we grow.”

As they reached the top of the stairs and into the upper chamber of the tomb, a trail of scuffed blood led along the dusty floor towards the exit. Sally knelt down and ran her finger through it. She stared at her outstretched digit with a furrowed brow.

“I don’t know why I did that.” She looked up at the Death Knight. “It was obvious what it was.” She licked her finger.

Humphrey stared down at her with empty sockets, unflinching as she wiped and licked her finger across the trail a second time. “Perhaps you need some fresh air.”

“Uh huh,” she agreed, only briefly considering just running her tongue along the floor before she stood and started to lead the Party back outside. She winced as the dull light of the overcast sky flooded her eyes.

The air was... well, it wasn’t stale and stuffy. Sally was breathing as it felt like it was a natural reflex, rather than a mortal necessity. So although she didn’t feel the full benefit of the clear air, it was a welcome change. A few steps out from the tomb, she stopped and waited for the others to catch up.

“How long does it take for these low-level Monsters to respawn?”

The Death Knight looked around at the still-empty Cemetery. “Too long to be worth waiting around for, if that was your intention.”

“Dang.” She frowned at the gloom preventing her from seeing further. “Hey wait, did I ever respawn? Before... all this?” She waved her STAR in the air in front of him.

Humphrey regarded her with a blank expression, the flames at the back of his helmet the only movement for a long handful of seconds. “I do not know. I was not in the diner that long.”

She narrowed her eyes. Perhaps the answer didn't really matter. Even if she had been killed a few times and just respawned back in the diner, now that she had her soul... it was more real? Her tongue ran across her sharp teeth. There was something definitely strange about the whole process that was currently beyond her understanding. *Another* problem for another day.

“Which way to-“ she paused as Chuck tripped out of the tomb and landed flat on his face, “-Yarch then?”

The Death Knight put his plated hands on his hips and turned, eye sockets narrowed at the gloomy, shapeless horizon. Eventually, he pointed his finger past them, almost back the way they had come.

“Killing goblins doesn't sound like my kind of thing; perhaps there will be some way to subvert the Quest when we get there?” she sighed and began walking, with Humphrey falling into step beside her.

“Not everything has to be a subversion just because you are different. I'm sure you could just ask them to join you, and then we can all have a jolly time sacking Yarch together.”

“So you agree then?” She beamed and nudged his arm. “Oh, whilst we walk, let's see what trash I get from the Chance Box?”

“As you wish, just don't stab me if it's another dagger, *ha-ha*.”

“No promises,” she winked, drawing the box from her Inventory and running her STAR across it.

A green light flickered around the edges as the question mark adorning the top pulsed.

With a hiss, a blue mist poured from within the box, and a shape rose from within it.

Small sparkles of light fell from the object, reflecting in Sally's widening eyes.