

Chapter 2.45
Three Days Grimace

The heat was unbearable.

After stepping through the portal, the Party found themselves right outside the dungeon, back amongst the sun-bleached stone and sandy desert of the Wasteland. Despite how stuffy the boss room had gotten after the battle, the fresh air did little to relieve the group as it was heated beneath the constant sun.

“We can just go into the starting room again to sleep?” Sally held her arm over her eyes. “I can’t move through this without rest.”

“Not the most ideal place to have a nap,” Edward shrugged, “but the next potential place is a good walk away.”

Humphrey held his sword in the midst of the falling sand so that they could step over the door trap again. With a collective sigh, they walked down into the shaded chamber and slunk against the walls. Sally shot a glare at the poem on the faux side again, before she too sat down.

[Dungeon Completed: Reset in Eight Hours]

“Time enough for a sleep,” she sighed. “Edward, tell us some bedtime stories about the other half of the Wastes. I think our main goal is to get through the storm, right?”

Humphrey nodded. Killing the dragon was a lofty goal for their current position, and just getting through to the more inhabited areas of the second zone would be something to aspire to after they had visited the pyramids.

“Okay.” Edward tilted his head in thought as he sat against one of the stone walls. “Player-wise, there are three groups. Gold, Silver, and Copper. Each wears a tabard showing the colors of the rank they belong to. Copper and Silver both farm all the Monster spawns in the second area to gain money for Ruben. Silver rank has more allowances and freedom...”

“But they still have to make money for the dragon?” Sally yawned and rubbed her eyes.

“Correct. The Gold ranks are more of enforcers working for the Dragon’s Council. They make sure the other ranks are playing nicely and are usually Players who have earned out from the previous ranks to earn favor.”

Humphrey scratched his chin. “What about Uniques?”

“Five tax-collectors. Five Champions. Five Council members. Then there’s Ruben above all.” Edward sighed, his face sinking with exhaustion as the last few days started to take hold of his normal disposition. “Anyone else is farming alongside the Players... or killed.”

Humphrey grimaced at the tired demon and shook his head. “Lucius and I will take the first watch.”

Silence drifted throughout the chamber as the rest of the *Outsiders* fell into an easy sleep.

Sally rolled to her side and spat out a mouthful of dust. She felt like someone had been using her skull as an anvil, and they were a really shitty smith. With aching limbs, she got to her feet and stretched out. Everyone else seemed to be asleep still, aside from Archie. The cat was staring up at the corner of the room.

“Everything okay, Arch?” She whispered to get his attention.

He turned and nodded, his focus on whatever invisible thing loomed in that part of the chamber now eradicated. *“Yes, they all fell asleep after a while, so I have been watching.”*

She glanced to the empty corner, then back to the cat. Well, they were all alive, and nothing untoward had happened, so there wasn't much to complain about. Her STAR had pending chat notifications, which she opened up.

[Theo: level 2]

[Theo: level 3]

[Theo: level 8]

[Theo: just kidding, level 5 now tho.]

Judging by the timestamps, it looked like he had been grinding most of the night. The most annoying thing was he hadn't mentioned anything about new skills or his class. Was he a Vampire Lord still? Would he get a second pick at an overpowered monster class and have two classes? The greedy ass.

[Sally: Skills? Class? You have a bed, right?]

A reply didn't come straight away. He might be sleeping still. Chuck hadn't been in touch for a few days... that shouldn't be worrying, but with how weird things were, it certainly ground at her empty stomach. Oh - but there was a new mail message. She always forgot to check those.

[From Chuck]

[Sally, I know you don't check these - but it seems that nobody does, so this might be the best way to warn you. They have taken us to the other side. We are being put to work as a 'Copper,' which sounds like enforced adventuring. I don't know what you can do, but be safe - we at least won't die, I don't think. Have to go. Take care.]

Sally kicked up some dust and balled her fists. They dared kidnap Chuck? She had half a mind to barge straight through the sandstorm and free or eat all the players.

“Everything okay?” Humphrey rose from his seated position.

“The Dragon has Chuck and his Party!” She shuddered as the anger found solace in venting out to the Death Knight. *“Even more reason we need to murder our way through the second area.”*

Humphrey gave a gentle kick to Edward, who woke up rubbing his shin. *“Huh? Danger?”*

“There will be. We will have to fight our way through one of the checkpoints, correct?”

The tall demon stood and brushed down his suit, *“Correct. There will be a tax collector, champion, and Party of Gold Players at the least. If we are to be expected, then...”*

“We *will* be expected.” Sally stomped around as she paced, fuming. “They will come check on Edward, and we’ll kill them, and they’ll track us and get in the way at the pyramids, and we’ll kill them again. They’ll know we want to come through, and they’ll send an army.”

“That’s not...” Edward rubbed his forehead. “Okay, some of that that is possible. But Ruben doesn’t exactly like his resources being wasted or diverted away from gaining gold.”

Lucius had now awoken and rubbed at his supposed face beneath the shadowed hood.

The Death Knight walked over to the bubbling zombie and put a plated hand on her shoulder to keep her still. “It is best we focus on what is directly in front of us. If the Druid is in no current danger, then there is no need to fret. The artifact in the pyramids will give us some boons for the coming conflict.”

Sally allowed her frustrations to melt away and deflated. Perhaps it was just too long since she had been able to eat some proper Player brains. If all the Parties were now on the other side, then that meant another age still before she could satisfy her empty stomach. It was no wonder she was skin and bones.

“As nice as your sun hats were, Edward,” she slunk against the wall and sighed. “I don’t think I could walk all the way to the pyramids under this heat.”

He smiled and crossed his arms. “I can’t promise an easy route, but I can get us both closer - and to a place that has brains you can... eat.” The sentence seemed to lose its luster once he realized what he was saying.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I knew there was a good reason we were destined to be friends. Spill the details.”

The demon rolled his eyes. “There are a few locations I can teleport in order to aid my previous duties. The pyramid is unfortunately not one of these - but there is a village of hostile lizard-people nearby that I can. They have persisted through the heat.”

“Neat.” She clicked her fingers. “So, we drop in, get a quick bite to eat, and then it’ll be a short stroll over to our main objective?”

“*Shorter*, yes.”

Humphrey stretched out his shoulders. “The dungeon brought you close to leveling. Hopefully, a bit of combat will push you over the edge.”

“Hopefully, there will be some edges to push the lizardkin over and into my mouth.” She grinned and looked at the gathered Party.

Sure, they were less effective without the powerhouse of Theo with them, but she knew he would turn up just when things were dire once again. While she was no damsel in distress, she was willing to let him be the knight in shining armor if it made her life more convenient and less traumatic. She glanced at Humphrey with a little guilt in her eyes over the literal Knight in... crimson and black armor who had saved her life plenty of times.

“Alright,” she shook the thoughts from her head. “Any objections to getting started on our bloody path towards... answers or something?”

Edward cleared his throat. "Ah, how about one of those *Demon Coins*?"

"Of course." She gave him a bow in apology. "How inconsiderate of me to forget. Don't spend them all at once!" She withdrew two coins and flung one to each demon.

Sally watched as Edward shoved the coin into his mouth, eating it down like it was a tasty meal. "Wow, you really do just - when I saw Lucius do it, I thought maybe it was... never mind."

An emoji of fireworks appeared next to Lucius. "I now have [Soothe Spirits], which doubles passive regeneration outside of combat."

"Neat," she smiled. Some in-combat healing would have been the golden ticket, or even some ranged damage could have rounded the team out better. Still, you couldn't argue with more buffs. She felt better about it already. "What about you, Edward?"

"Oh, mine is called..." a smirk curled up at the corner of his mouth "...[Betray Trust]."

"Alright, well, we aren't ending on that suspicious tone." She shook her head.

Humphrey looked around the room. "Ending what?"

"The conversation before we teleport out, of course." She tilted her head with a frown. Maybe the Death Knight had taken more hits in the Boss battle than she thought. "Instead, I just remembered with my smart brain that I was given two skill reset points!"

"So what are you going to reset?" He responded, deflating slightly.

Her eyes shone with bright crimson.

"See, now *that* is a good question."