

Chapter 2.31 Dungeon Fun

Sally walked along with her arms folded. A scowl leveled at the wall.

Humphrey slowly regenerated, his armor gradually repairing himself as his health rose.

Lana and her clones awkwardly followed along behind them, not wanting to be part of the argument.

The pathway ahead of them hadn't changed much. It was still just a dim tunnel, roughly circular but with a flat floor. It was dusty, dry, and drab. The zombie sighed.

"I just don't know why you can't tell me if it was Archie or not."

"I've already told you it wasn't."

"But you're *lying*," she growled. Her eyes flared crimson, and she glared at him. "I can read you like a book, Humphrey."

"Then you should know that I do not want to tell you for your own good." He looked down at her, his face impassive.

"Pah." Sally deflated. She could definitely see he was being stubborn. It wasn't like him to be so tight-lipped about something like that though. The claw marks were huge, and although she was sure there were other monsters in the world with ginger fur... it was all too convenient - and his silence told her more than his stupid skeletal face did.

"There should be an exit coming up soon," Lana offered from the back, hoping to change the conversation.

"I disagree," Humphrey leveled a finger forward.

They stopped and stared ahead. Just beyond the gloom, only just coming into their view - was a dead end.

Lana ran forward to get a better look, before slowing to a stop. "That's not right..." She turned back around, her confusion melting straight into worry.

Sally and Humphrey both turned around to look behind them - to see it was a dead end too.

"Huh." The zombie shrugged. "Hope you brought a shovel, Humps."

"I have no Inventory to store garbage." He grinned as she glared at him.

"No, no, no, no, this shouldn't be happening." Lana walked back toward them, hands over her eyes. "We went the correct route..."

"At least we can just go back to Sanctuary," Sally shrugged. "We aren't going to die here." She pressed at her STAR in preparation, and it just returned a flicker of light - nothing further happened. "Ah."

“The floor isn’t supposed to be this soft, I imagine.” Humphrey made a show of moving his plated boots up and down as the rock beneath him bent and squished like it was made of cake.

“Shit.” Sally frowned over to Lana for advice - to which the woman just responded with a panicked shrug.

[Out of Bounds Warning]

“Oh hey, System messages - neat.” Sally’s eyes widened at the message blared into her pupils.

[Players Stuck - Reconfiguring]
[Locating Appropriate Landmark]
[Searching...]

“What’s this Humps?” She grimaced at the thought of the System trying to fix something large and wholesale like her position within it. It might look too closely and realize she wasn’t normal.

“One of the few fail-safes. Honestly, I’m almost surprised the Architect thought about the situation.” He crossed his arms and grinned at her as he slowly sunk into the floor.

Certainly, the Architect had cut some corners when it came to... creating this world. The alternative was unthinkable, though. Either they would have been stuck down here and have had to try and dig out - if that was even possible should they have been split from the main plane - or they would have fallen into some unimaginable void that would have put Henkk’s area to shame.

[Teleporting. Please Standby]

Blue enveloped them, and vertigo rushed through Sally. Something about it felt different than the other teleportation she had previously used. It wasn’t stronger or quicker, but... deeper? That didn’t make much sense to her brain rattling around her skull as she stumbled into the heat of the overworld again.

Humphrey appeared next to her, stumbling across the loose sandy rocks. Lana didn’t appear.

“Where is she?” Sally jabbed at her STAR, and with a flicker, it then resumed normal functionality.

[Sally: you okay?]

[Lana: Yeah, back to... my home down here, I guess.]

[Lana: What about you?]

Sally looked up. Empty plains of overheated rock. Hell. Humphrey coughed from behind her, and she turned around. A large structure loomed behind them. Ruddy brickwork and carved details show off detailed suns and barren landscapes. A waterfall of sand ran from the domed peak of the building, covering a wide entrance with a constant warm curtain.

[Sally: right where I needed to be]

[Sally: be safe, stay in touch]

[Lana: You too, Sally.]

She closed the STAR and tilted her head. “It put us right in front of the dungeon? The Eternal Sands?”

He nodded. "There aren't many landmarks in the Wastes now; our quest was here, so it pushed us forward rather than back."

"You say *quest* as if it was something official and not just us bumbling about trying to save our friends while we beat up Monsters and steal their lunch money."

Humphrey smiled and gestured towards the doorway pelted by flowing sand. "The best kind of quest, then."

Sally sighed. Sure, it was mostly convenient that the System had decided to put them right in front of where they had wanted to be - but now that the dungeon lay before them... she had a little anxiety about the whole process. She wanted Theo and Archie back - but they couldn't exactly when Lucius was apparently right in front of them.

Plus, dungeons often required a sharp mind and consideration to avoid traps and puzzles. Not many things she could just stick in her maw and chew through to win the day. However, given the company that she kept - Intelligence wasn't exactly in abundance.

Two steps closer to the dungeon, and another flash of blue lit up beside them. The slim figure of purple with bright blue eyes gave them a bow.

"Welcome to the dungeon," Edward grinned.

"I guess it was *inevitable* you'd show up again," Sally glared at him.

"You know, it's a lot less fun when other people say it." The demon stood up straight, and his eyes dimmed.

Humphrey shrugged. "I suppose if you say it all the time, tiring of it becomes inev--"

"*Point made.*" Edward held up his hand. "Nice hats, by the way." He gave them a wink, and then a bit of stoicism returned to his face. "I recently heard you dispatched Damon; that is quite a... shame."

"Not a big fan?" Sally raised an eyebrow.

The demon looked around the area as if expecting someone crouched amongst the wide open plains with their ear wide open to spy on his thoughts. "We had our disagreements, sure. It was more of a shock - I knew you all were competent, but..."

Sally smiled, but her gaze fell back towards the dungeon where her friend was being kept. "This a business or pleasure visit, Edward?"

"Hmm. It is a warning if you will. Apparently, they grow tired of my inability to extract funds from you, so they will soon assign someone else to the task." He adjusted his suit jacket.

She bit the inside of her mouth. "Are they as edible as you were?"

"No. Also, that was unpleasant - next time, just stab me in the heart or decapitate me, please." His face pulled up into a grimace.

Humphrey stretched out his sword arm. "How do you keep coming back, though? You can respawn?"

Edward raised an eyebrow and paused as if he was unsure whether that was information he wanted to give out willingly. "There are stipulations, but yes."

"Neat." Sally began to walk toward the dungeon. "What I would do with that sort of power."

The demon shrugged and looked away towards the sandstorm. "Indeed."

"Got any plans for the day?" Humphrey slapped him on the back as he walked past. "We could use a bit more mania while we die in the dungeon."

Edward clucked his tongue and frowned at the Death Knight before looking over at the zombie who was eagerly nodding. He deflated. "Fine - but I'm not helping or getting involved."

"You're pretty weak anyway," Sally winked. "How do you keep dying in one hit - you're not under-leveled, are you?"

"That's my business. I..." Edward wrinkled his nose up. "How about you just go ahead. You can have my life story later."

"Deal!" She jumped and punched into the air. "Can you give us clues, though? Who has Lucius now? Is there a boss monster? Should I prepare any specific resistances for the dungeon? What kind of puzzles are there? We're kind of dumb, so can we just bypass those? Or can we just start breaking through any of the walls? I don't want to ruin the experience, but we are kinda in a hurry, so..." She paused as she reached the curtain of falling sand.

"Is she always like this?" Edward murmured to the Death Knight.

"Yes, *ha-ha*. Although she has been filling the silence more now that the Party is split." Humphrey held out his sword so that the flat side would block some of the falling sand - creating a small gap of empty space so they could see beyond.

"Ha! There's already a trap right there!" Sally pointed excitedly at a slightly raised platform just beyond the waterfall of sand. "Sneaky, huh? I kind of want to see what kind it is, though..."

"*Sally*." Humphrey shook his head as the zombie slowly moved her foot toward the pressure plate.

She pouted and instead hopped over it wildly - causing the demon to wince.

"You know, I almost want to help you now. You look like you'd need it."

Humphrey grinned and gestured for the tax collector to go next.

As he stepped over too, they took one last breath of the outside air before they started to delve into the dungeon.