

## Chapter 2.68 Shining Buffet

The march went a lot better than Sally had expected. Not that she was looking forward to an extended walk - or any manner of walking if she could help it - but being surrounded by so many undead made it feel like such a big event, she couldn't help but feel giddy.

And it wasn't just the undead. Several groups of Silver and Bronze Players had joined up alongside them - both in part to not wanting to be ground beneath the horde, but there were also some itchy to get back at the dragon and break free of the gold farming he had forced upon them.

Edward and Dent had caught up, leaving Chuck behind to deal with the injured or those not capable of fighting. For some, going against Ruben meant certain death - and Sally didn't look down upon them because of it. The ones that had the drive to fight always tasted nicer, anyway.

"We are most of the way through the Silvers now," Edward called from atop his golem. He stood tall and had his arms clasped behind his back. Lucius sat on the domed obsidian head of the monster, hand on his chin as he gazed to the horizon.

"Golds it where we'll see the most resistance," Theo added from her side. "They'll not want us reaching the mountain."

She wasn't too worried. After all, they had been able to chew through most things so far, including two groups of Golds. Instead, she yawned and waved him off. "Players are soft, most of them don't PVP, so they only have experience fighting System-created - who are rather simple."

Humphrey loomed up behind them. "That has given us the advantage in the past, but we should still be wary. They also have three Champions remaining."

"The tax-collectors and Council probably won't interfere," Edward added, "I'm the odd one out in that regard. But we still have Sidiv, the Golemancer, and whomever was the fifth."

"Anyone we can recruit onto our side?" Sally wrinkled her nose up at the demon. The intended bad guys of the first area turned out to want to live their own lives rather than follow the crazy Cleric. Perhaps there were some faces more friendly in the mountain.

Edward shrugged. "Unlikely, but you do tend to achieve the unthinkable."

She nodded. "That's why I try not to think too hard."

In truth, she was somewhat worried, if only because there was a large element of the unknown baked into this plan. Ruben was some manner of Boss, empowered by his an ability based on his wealth. Maybe if they just had some way of stealing all of his gold, it'd weaken him. Somehow she doubted they'd be able to sneak into the mountain... or anywhere, really. Especially not at the head of an undead army.

Sally hummed along to herself as they moved through the streets. If they could oust the dragon, then they'd not only be able to restore some normality in the second area for the newbies that Theo hadn't eaten, but also it would put them one step closer to getting to the third area themselves. It was a risk to come here before Level Twenty, but every day they spent out in the constant sun was an opportunity for Ruben to go after them.

They crested a hill at the end of the Silvers and stopped at the sight before them.

Where the streets and houses stopped abruptly, there was a wide plain as if it had been scoured into the land. Maybe a quarter of a mile wide, to where the Golds started, and miles long - probably straight across this sectioned off area beyond the sandstorm. The ground looked charred and melted.

"Ruben," Edward offered, as if it wasn't obvious already.

"If he could do this much damage," Norah began, before narrowing her eyes ahead. "Wait, look at that."

As more of their army filtered in to this staging area, figures began marching opposite them on the other side. Golden tabards, approaching in formation. And there were... a lot of them.

"Six-hundred at least," Theo squinted. "It's hard to make out."

"That can't be right," Sally deflated. "How can they have that many Players?"

The demon worked his jaw. "It'll be one Player per regiment, four humanoid golems, and then ten System-created."

One brain in fifteen sounded like terrible odds to Sally. There were three larger figures amongst the army marching toward them, and there were no points for guessing these were the Champions.

"They intend to head us off before the Gold area proper," Humphrey noted. "All their eggs in one basket."

Edward nodded and put his hands in his pockets. "Correct. This is essentially the remaining forces loyal to him. If we can work our way through these..."

"He'll have to come out and play personally," Sally finished.

There didn't look to be a way around the army. They could teleport to wherever the receiver was, but the assumption was that they were expected to do that - and they'd be leaving the army behind. They could send everyone into battle and then jump through to attack from the rear... but that was probably what they expected. She rubbed at the side of her head.

"Best thing is to kill as many as we can, try not to use too much power." Theo tilted his head and eyed the zombie. "We can try some tricks, but a show of pure strength will be what forces his hand."

“Do dragons even have hands?” she frowned. Theo was right, as always. Churning down Ruben’s forces meant less gold being earned and less protection. Doing anything but killing everything in front of them was detracting from their goal of gaining access to the dragon. Simple-minded, maybe, but they were undead.

She turned to the gathering, looking down at the sea of hungry mouths she intended to feed. “Theo and Lucius, Humps and Norah, split into two teams to take the Champions out. Edward, take the groups of ranged Players and put them into firing positions. Dent lead the melee Players into a flank once the first couple of rows of the enemy are engaged.” She took a deep breath.

They each nodded along or murmured their agreements.

“What are you going to do?” Theo asked her as she turned to narrow her glare at the approaching army.

“Oh me, I’m going to *eat well*,” she grinned.

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“You think they’re just going to come straight for us?” Sidiv raised an eyebrow, a thick yellow snake coiling around his arm.

“They’re undead, but they’re not stupid,” a round figure snorted, shaking out his shoulders. “That’s why there’s a trap in the portal room.”

The snake-man exhaled through tiny nostrils. “I suppose even though they look like Monsters, they are just Players at heart. Trying to find some heroic plan to pull the rug out from under us.”

The Golemancer, off to the side, tutted. “You two underestimate our opponents. If these were mere Players do you think our lord and master would have gathered such an army against them? You both saw the panic in his-“

“Blasphemy,” Sidiv hissed. “I saw no such thing. You’d do well to watch your tongue, Brakenfield.”

“And you’d so well to know your worth,” the Golemancer snapped back. “If you fall, you are worth nothing to the dragon. Best hope that you find yourself useful in this coming fight.”

They exchanged annoyed glances at each other.

As he wiped his snout, the middle Champion shook his head. “We’re standing behind hundreds of cannon-fodder, do you both need to bicker so much?” He narrowed his eyes out over the plains ahead of them. “I’m sure this will be a walk in the park.”

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It was hard for Sally not to lead the charge. Mostly because the zombies were really slow. She grumbled to herself as she speed-walked her way across the dry plains in front of the horde.

"I'll try to take out as many ranged opponents as I can on the way," Theo offered to try to lighten her mood.

She nodded. "Thanks. Fighting out in the open isn't the best for our zombie pals. They have us beat on that advantage."

"Defenders always have the advantage," Humphrey added from beside her. "Just because they have better positioning, organization, weaponry, numbers, and... uh, I forgot where I was going with that." He grinned as she shot him a tired glare.

Sally clenched her teeth together as they slowly approached. The opposing army had shuffled themselves into the start of the plains, just so that there was no benefit of the building and structures for the Outsiders to steal. They seemed content enough for the zombie army to slowly march towards them.

"I didn't mention this in the plan before," she sighed, "but it'd be nice if none of you died. At least wait for the fight against Ruben."

"Will do our best, Sally," the vampire smiled, as a sweat drop emoji appeared beside the Shade.

She smiled back at him, despite the weight of the day dragging on her mood. "I suppose this is the point of the adventure where I go through all the potions and boxes I saved up to use them for the final boss?"

"What if you need them after the final boss?" Theo frowned.

Her hand wavered over the STAR, unsure whether to bring the Inventory up or not.

Lucius nudged the vampire out of the way to stand beside her. "Don't listen to him, Sally. Definitely take every boost you can, and if there's anything you can give me - that'd be great!" A wide smile appeared beside him that only looked slightly desperate.

"Alright." She rolled her eyes with a grin. "Let's go all out."