

Chapter 2.28

Split Apart

Sally wiped the rest of the gore from her mouth. "I hope that doesn't hamper his ability to come back."

Humphrey sighed and looked out to the expansive plains beyond their brief shade. "You don't have to befriend every walking oddity we meet, you know?"

She scowled at him and knelt down by the body of the dead demon. "I most definitely do, Humps. That's like my whole shtick. Bringing the whole System together like friendly glue. Or clumps of viscera." Wiping her hands off on Edward's suit, she began to rifle through his Inventory.

"I thought it was *destroy the System* - or *eat the Architect*. Make the System fair. What exactly is your mission objective?"

"Don't..." she glared up at the Death Knight. "Don't you start having a *Theo moment*. I'm hot and bothered too - but I'm not being an ass about it."

"You just ate that man's brain."

"It was an *accident*." She rolled her eyes.

Humphrey ground his teeth together but then sighed. "What does he have on him, then?"

"Well. For some reason, I can loot his underwear - but I think he probably wanted us to take [Water] and [Summer Hat]. There's five, how thoughtful."

"I'm not wearing a-" he paused as the deckchairs and parasol vanished, and they were again blasted by the unrelenting heat. "Okay, pass one here."

Sally hummed to herself. She felt a little better than she had eroded at the evil of Edward. Generally, she had a good read on people, and as annoying as he constantly was, he was mostly unthreatening. That they had killed him in one strike each time proved this fact. He must be pretty miserable to end up coming to them for a slice of solace.

She put her hat on - a wide-brimmed straw bonnet with a red ribbon around it, and passed the Death Knight one similar that had a purple band. "Why'd he attack, though? Under observation?"

Humphrey sighed again as he popped his hat on, somehow avoiding his helmet flames burning through the item. "Yes, mostly likely. It would be odd for him to be seen fraternizing with those he is attempting to extort."

"Huh." Sally tilted her head and gestured for them to continue their journey. "People sure are complicated, aren't they?"

"Back so soon, Edward?"

The demon rolled his eyes. "Have you ever had to fight someone to the death?"

"No."

“Well, let me tell you - it’s usually a fifty-fifty thing. That new Party is one of the more powerful ones I’ve had the displeasure of dealing with.”

The shadowed figure turned to eye him lazily. “But will they help Ruben?”

“In time.” Edward shook his head. “They are quite cold but had a weakness for their Party members - with one of them kidnapped away in the dungeon, it’s only a matter-“

“It will be *inevitable*, I’m sure, Edward.” The man turned back to the ledger. “They could be what we need to push productivity up three percent for the following weeks. Do not mess this up, or the case will be reassigned. You have two days.”

The demon gave a low bow and turned for the doorway, a scowl dominating his face.

“And then she said - *pancakes!* Hah!” Sally beamed at the Death Knight.

Humphrey glared down at her from beneath the sun hat. “I’m not sure I understand the joke; perhaps there is a-“

“Never mind.” She pouted out towards the emptiness before them. The hat and water definitely helped, but the journey was still a slog.

Her STAR bloiped and she lifted her arm to see the private message.

[Dent: Wastelands pretty bad.]

[Dent: I’m... I can’t say.]

[Dent: Stay safe, stay away from the dragon.]

[Dent: Will be in touch.]

“That Swordmaster is still in the Wastes - although if Ruben is forcing everyone to stay put... it didn’t sound like he was working for the dragon though.” She idly tapped on her arm before lowering it.

“Sounds...” Humphrey paused and furrowed his brow. Slowly, he reached for his sword - and then gravity took them both.

The area of sandy rock they were walking across collapsed inwards to a hollow area shrouded in darkness. A waterfall of warm sand poured down around the rough circle of light above as the pair extracted themselves from the debris.

“Blech,” Sally spat out a mouthful of dry rock. She dusted down her clothes and looked around. “Seems we found a tunnel system.”

“Yes.” Humphrey righted himself, picking his summer hat from the floor and placing it back upon his helmet. “*Joy.*”

“At least it is cooler - and as long as it is heading in the right direction, it’ll make traveling easier.”

“What about when it changes direction? We can’t exactly dig upwards.” The Death Knight glared into the darkness surrounding them. He turned to see the zombie had already started off down one of the passageways. With a sigh, he followed.

“You worry too much, Humps.” She turned with a grin that quickly vanished, as the Death Knight was no longer behind her.

Humphrey scratched his chin; he was sure he had seen the zombie just ahead of him a moment ago.

A giggling noise off to the left caught his attention.

[Humphrey: What are you doing?]

[Sally: walking, where r u?]

[Humphrey: I was right behind you.]

She looked up from the STAR. The amber light pooling down from where the roof had collapsed was still very visible - yet no sign of the Death Knight.

[Sally: something foul is a feet]

[Sally: afoot*]

[Humphrey: Continue with caution?]

[Sally: ye]

With a sigh, she drew her bat. Just what she needed - to be alone. Even at the start of the adventure, it hadn't been this way. Humphrey was there from the moment she awoke. The thought brought back memories of the diner - and that of her life from before. Archie has said they came here through magic but was unable to elaborate further, even when pestered after he got his voice back.

A great wizard that made a video-game-esque world and populated it with young people from her world, wiping their memories... for what? It seemed egotistical and short-sighted. Although, she did imagine a great wizard would be those things. Did her previous life still exist, or was the old her dead? If she could return to that life, she wouldn't be half-zombie, surely. So what would happen?

The odd caverns had dulled her mood. She almost wished she was back up, trudging through the bland hot sand and constant sunlight. At least she still had Humphrey back in those days. How long had it been? Days? Years? Bringing up the STAR, she checked the timestamps on the chat logs. Oh, just two minutes.

There was still an odd feeling to it. Like the Death Knight was still around her somewhere, she just couldn't see him. Eyes narrowed, she took the bat and spun around in a quick circle with it extended. She completed the movement without any interruption, the crackling of critical energy along the edge of the bat the only sound. It dissipated, and she wondered where crits had been before this.

Perhaps it was part of how the Forest area was supposed to have more realism, and now more game effects were in the Wasteland. Maybe they would appear randomly, outside of skills or magical items. She found it hard to grasp onto some reason to care about them.

With an exhaled sigh, she deflated and continued on.

A slight corner bore nothing but further tunnels - although something didn't feel quite right. She knelt down and checked the ground. The dust had been disturbed at some point, and there were

multiple sets of footprints. That's about where her detective skills ended, but one of the tracks did look suspiciously like the large plated boots of the Death Knight.

She took another dozen steps and then froze as something caused the hair to prickle along the back of her neck. With her off-hand, she slowly withdrew her [Dagger of Luck].

One further step forward, and then the walls collapsed in front of her. No - it wasn't the walls; there were figures camouflaged in dark brown and grey to blend into the cavern. Six of them rolled out into her path and raised repeating crossbows.

Sally went to open her mouth as their fingers clicked the triggers.

Humphrey furrowed his brow further as he ground his metallic teeth together. As Sally's bodyguard - as far as the System was concerned - he could tell she was in danger. Being her close friend, he believed he had such a sense of trouble when it came to her naturally, even without the process of her being his boss.

But he just couldn't see her. Even if he concentrated, there wasn't even the barest shuffle of sound anywhere else down this tunnel. It was infuriating - yet he did not believe this was the work of magic or any monstrous group.

The part of him that still held a grasp on being an Observer could feel the pains of the System. Whatever strain the dragon had put on the workings of this area had effects that he couldn't quite explain. Things had been strange - but still made sense in some twisted way. This current situation did not, and if his experience told him anything...

This would just be the start.

Growling to himself, he continued onwards, the flames from his helmet illuminating his path.