

Chapter 2.42  
Gatekeeping

The Death Knight sighed. "There is usually a boss, and defeating it will open up an exit portal."

"That's pretty handy," she said, shrugging. "But where is the boss?"

They all looked around the empty chamber, briefly narrowing their eyes at the massive space, which didn't seem to hold anything whatsoever. The zombie turned around and put her hands on her hips. "Lucius, are you secretly the boss in hiding?"

A sweatdrop emoji appeared next to the demon's head. "What? No, I've just been a prisoner here for, well, it seems like days."

Sally rubbed her chin. "Edward did say it's been three days. It hasn't felt like it. But you know what that means?" She wiggled her eyebrows at Humphrey. "We must have been having *fun*."

Humphrey slowly shook his head while the tax collector looked in the other direction, trying to avoid eye contact and acknowledge her statement.

Sally turned her attention once again to the empty room. "It's no wonder we've been feeling a little crazy. If we haven't slept in a couple of days, too, maybe our first port of call once we escape should be to have a little rest." She wasn't yet sure where they'd go to acquire this desired rest, with everything being a desert, but that was a problem for future Sally.

"Sounds reasonable." Archie yawned. "I feel a bit tired myself."

"Weren't you just sleeping for the three days as well?" She wagged her finger at him. It was an assumption, but it seemed reasonable that they had both been in a state of rest in the nether. Otherwise, that would have been pretty boring and undoubtedly would have led to mischief.

"Maybe," he answered and started looking in a different direction before he caught the glare of the Death Knight and slowly moved his emerald gaze instead to the emptiness above them.

She looked around to see who should get a prod of her questioning next. "Perhaps there's a way for us to summon the boss. What do *you* think, Edward?"

The demon shrugged. "I'm not too sure. As I said, I haven't been here before either, so this is all relatively new to me."

Sally feigned prodding at her STAR. "How about if you tell us, then I'll give you a Demon Coin as a treat."

"I don't think trying to tempt me with the coin is going to make the answer appear. However, I will take a coin if it's on offer." Edward's eyes lit up a brighter blue as he leaned in her direction.

Sally shook her head. "We defeat the boss, then you can have one." The demon crossed his arms in retaliation, a narrowed gaze leveled at her.

Lucius cleared his throat. "Actually, I think there's some writing on the back of this dias. Would you help me have a look?" The party turned to him, the glare across their faces causing a sweat bubble to appear beside him.

"Is it in that silly language again?" Sally started walking over to where the demon had been chained up. "There was some writing on the portal device we played with before entering here, but none of us could read it." She hopped over the slack chains and squatted down at the back of the raised platform. "Yep, looks to be that way. Can you read this, Lucius?"

Another sweatdrop emoji appeared next to the demon's head as he knelt down beside her to get a better view. "No, it's not something I know, unfortunately."

Sally turned her head to him and narrowed her eyes. "What's going on underneath that hood of yours?" It wasn't that she particularly minded some secrecy, but the demon had been covered in shadow from the moment they had met. Just a heads-up if they were someone in disguise or important and on the run. Maybe they weren't even a demon - her mind started unraveling at the possibilities.

Lucius practically leaped from where he was standing. "*Nothing*, it's just my face."

Sally nodded enthusiastically with a blank expression as Archie walked over and rubbed himself against her legs.

"I can read it, Sally," he said.

"Okay," she waited for a handful of seconds, staring at the cat as he looked back at her with his emerald eyes. "So, *are* you going to do it then?" Internally she sighed. If she had a Demon Coin for every time one of the Outsiders couldn't follow through with a sentence, then she would have-

"I suppose," he nodded. Briefly, he ran his eyes along the odd deep-red runes engraved along the smooth stone. "It says there needs to be a sacrifice to summon the boss."

Sally furrowed her brow. "What does it mean by sacrifice? They can't expect groups to come down here and kill one of their own Party members to summon the boss. Nobody would do the dungeon." Well, now that they had Edward, she might entertain such an idea - although it would be unfair this early in their grouping to designate him the sacrifice.

"Is there like a low indentation here?" The cat jumped down from the side of the raised dias to sniff around the brickwork behind it. "It's like a bowl shape, but it has no food in it."

She bit her lip and then stepped down beside him, squatting down to have a look herself. "It looks like a receptacle," she nodded. "Maybe *blood* goes in there." She grinned. "Shame that Theo didn't vomit from over here, instead."

Humphrey sighed and rubbed the side of his head. "It's a shame he had to throw up at all. I find it most concerning that neither of you seems to find that a bit problematic. I certainly have seen enough food come back up, for someone who does not eat."

Edward bared his sharp teeth as he continued to hold his arms crossed. "Seeing as it was my blood that, you know, he threw up all across the floor here. *I* could have used that. *I* was using it."

"Alright, alright," Sally waved her hand. "Enough of the back-and-forth banter. You're not paid per hot take."

The tax collector tilted his head. "We get paid?" He caught the glare of the death knight and deflated.

"What do you think, Archie?" Sally continued. "Should we try and bleed in at first, or do we have anything else that we could try and pour in? It looks like there's a little grate down the bottom." She narrowed her eyes at the slightly recessed area behind the dias - it was a slightly different color to the rest of the brickwork and smooth like a bowl. In fact, if it went for the odd positioning, she would almost assume that it was some kind of basin and had been placed into the floor. But instead of the plughole, there's just a small grate of tiny holes, almost like pinpricks, at the very bottom of the indent.

"Actually," said the ginger cat, tilting his head, "I prefer it would be filled with food. But in the event that it isn't possible, then perhaps blood might work. Do you have any volunteers?"

Sally surveyed the group of *Outsiders* as they tried to avoid her glare. Edward had already done enough bleeding for one day, she thought, and Humphrey didn't really have any blood that she could think of. Lucius had spent several days chained here, so it seemed a bit unfair to prompt him to bleed when he'd been a prisoner and only just freed, and Archie was too small. Barely had any blood in him at all. "I wish Theo were still here," she sighed. "He wouldn't mind bleeding a little bit."

She withdrew her dagger and held it by the blade, pointing the handle towards Lucius. "Lucius, *you have to cut me.*"

"I don't want to cut you, Sally," he murmured uncomfortably, trying to edge away from where she was now crouched.

"Fine, I have to do *everything* myself." She placed the tip of the blade against the back of her hand and slid it across, briefly surprised at how easily it cut through her skin. As crimson began to well and drip from the wound, she held it over the basin. Gradually, one drip after another, they plopped down to seemingly no effect. Fully engaged with the spectacle, they all stood watching her as drip after drip landed in the basin and formed a small collection. She raised her head and caught their impatient glances.

"What did you expect? I'm not going to cut my whole hand off just to do this. It would be a waste of a good Healing Potion." She was tired of the dungeon and exhausted from the days spent wandering around the halls, getting prodded by sharp things and bested by simple puzzles. It was a wonder that they couldn't tell so much time had passed, but the day/night cycle was strange in the Wasteland, so it might have something to do with that.

"I half expected Theo to have messaged me already," she sat down to be more comfortable beside the basin. "Just to brag about leveling up already. But I guess he might be socializing or something." The thought made her a little glum. Perhaps after saving the world, she could go back for a little victory tour and see the goblins and Jackie again.

Archie pawed at her non-bleeding hand. "I might be able to help this along." A ripple of energy ruffled his fur from his tail down to his head as he opened his mouth. A wriggling worm of energy pulsed forth, shimmering between yellow and green, and fell into the basin. As it touched the drips of blood, they expanded to ten times their size.

Now with the bowl almost full, the blood began to seep down into the small holes. "Huh," Sally grinned, "I guess I don't have to do everything my-"

Before she could finish that thought, she was interrupted as a crackle of energy ran around the dias, and yellow light emanated from around the cracks in the rock. The Outsiders started to scramble away from the platform as it started to rise into the air, golden light illuminating their faces as a figure came into view.

Archie's emerald eyes grew wide as the form of the Boss rose above them.