

## Chapter 2.54 A Good Point

Sally thought of many amusing things while they strode across the desert - occasionally one of the other Party members found it worthy of a chuckle as well and didn't just roll their eyes or exhale.

Did it make the journey any less of a slog? Not particularly, but before long, what had been a blurred peak on the horizon had turned into the looming structure of the massive pyramid, almost in tasting distance. Other than the constant presence of the hot sun, there had been no sighting of any Monster, Unique, or Player along the journey.

"-and then she said, *pancakes!*" Sally beamed.

"I think you've told that one before." Humphrey worked his skeletal jaw.

"Impossible." She stopped to look behind them, putting her hand over her eyes. "My memory is impeccable."

The Death Knight winced, second guessing his desire to open that can of worms. Ultimately, he stayed silent and just exhaled slowly.

"What's going on?" Edward rubbed at his ears. "I've had my ears blocked for the last couple of hours."

"No wonder you didn't laugh at the pancake joke," Sally grumbled. "I was just thinking things have been too easy since the lizardman village - I expected some drama or menace to rear its ugly head our way."

"Do you want there to be trouble?" The demon rubbed his bright blue eyes. "I would rather we found somewhere to sleep and then we got whatever it is you're after from the pyramid with no stress."

Sally snorted. "You should know by now it doesn't work that way. Humps, what's the chance of something going wrong very soon?"

"It is..." The Death Knight tilted his head toward Edward. "...*inevitable.*"

"Sometimes I regret my life choices," the demon covered his face and groaned. "More so since I met you and the vampire."

The zombie grinned to herself, but turned back to face the large pyramid now only half a mile or so away. There was no time for regrets, only pushing forward into unknown danger. If anything, the short reprieve during their long walk only meant the coming problems were going to be even worse. They had gone past the easy win stage and now were full tilt into falling into the void.

As if hearing her thoughts on slight delay, the ground rumbled.

“*Inevitable*,” Humphrey nodded, as the demon physically cringed.

They turned to see the sands shift behind them. Around forty feet away a large circle vibrated. Anticipating danger, they withdrew their assorted weapons at the ready.

With an explosive plume of sand, a huge shape burst from the dried landscape. Looming around thirty feet into the air, loose sand ran down the solid shape like waterfalls to reveal a huge maw made of yellowed rock. Two eye sockets illuminated in golden light as the head atop a short neck looked down toward them.

“Ruben,” Edward sighed. “Or at least the apparition of him.”

“I’m not eating him if he is really made of sand,” Sally balked.

“Well, If It Isn’t The Troublesome Party.” The voice was deep but came out course and scratchy, the projection taking on the quality of the rock it had been built from.

“Hi,” Sally waved, not particularly liking the stilted tone he was talking with. “That’s us.”

“I Have Received A Report That One Of My Champions Has Been Slain.”

“Yeah, that was us.” She crossed her arms. Her expectation was that the dragon would have been more imposing. He could have at least had the decency to come and appear before them in person.

“Impressive, As Much As It Is Frustrating.”

“This is where he offers us a deal we can’t refuse or something, right?” She raised an eyebrow at the Death Knight as she murmured to the Party.

“I Am Hereby Closing Crossings A And C. Crossing B Will Be Bolstered, You Are Not Welcome In My Domain.”

With that, the light in his eyes faded away and whatever magic was holding the figure together collapsed to the ground in a cloud of dust.

“Yes,” Edward held his hand up to silence the zombie, “he is always that rude.”

Lucius tilted his head. “I only really know Crossing A. What about you, Edward?”

The tax-collection worked his jaw. “B is the middle one, generally you could say it had the least security as it is comparatively a wider entrance than A or C. But with those closed, even if Ruben only diverts those forces to the B, then it’ll be...”

“A tough nut to crack,” Sally nodded and cupped her chin. “What are we talking? Twenty Players, Ten Uniques, and maybe some groups of System created wrangled there somehow? All Level Twenty?”

“Probably triple that,” Edward grinned humorlessly. “More if he *really* doesn’t want you going in.”

“Ack. Can you teleport us in? You, Lucius?”

They both shook their heads. “Single person only.” “Same.”

That seemed unfair. Ruben must be really tight with his security. Could they really take on hundreds just to get into the rest of the Wastes? She started imagining some convoluted plan where they’d go back to the Forest and get Henkk - or whoever had dropped the care package - to air drop them over enemy lines. It probably didn’t work that way.

She turned to see the rest of the Party patiently waiting for her and shook her head. “We’ll demolish that bridge when we get to it. It is a bridge, right? For now, let’s focus on the doom right before us.”

“Yeah, it’s a bridge,” the tax-collector sighed and deflated.

Sally clicked her fingers. As good as done then, if she got that much of it correct. All that was left was finding a way to murder scores of people unharmed, and then just a quick waltz up to the palace, or castle - wherever the dragon lived. One quick brain meal later and they’d be on to area three.

Humphrey knelt down beside the cat. “Are you going to relent the truth to me yet, little brother?”

Archie opened his mouth, but seemed to melt slightly at the Death Knight, referring to him as such. He glanced at the captive Party and sighed. “When I was away with Theo, I may have gotten a little bored... and...”

“And?” Humphrey loomed his skeletal face closer.

“I may have coughed up a hairball into the void.” He looked at the floor.

Edward raised an eyebrow. “You do that when you’re bored?”

“Read the subtext, Ed,” Sally jostled him out of the way. “He was just preening himself or something.”

Humphrey exhaled and stood up. “So that explains the big monster version of you that almost killed me.”

“I knew it!” The zombie punched him on the arm.

Archie looked up at them with his wide, emerald eyes. “It helped me learn something, though. There are other Archie’s out there. One in each zone.”

“Good thing I absorbed that one, then. I hope the others are less *like that*.” The Death Knight shrugged.

Silence fell over the Party, as half didn’t quite understand any of it, and half understood too much. Sally stared between them, her tired brain beneath the straw bonnet, trying to make

some sense of it all. “There’s five Archies... is that because the Architect split something of themselves into five parts? If we have to turn this in a Quest to rescue all five...”

“We don’t know for certain,” Archie tilted his head. “That’s why we are here.”

Sally flipped her dagger around a few times as she looked up at the looming pyramid. She hoped the thing they wanted wasn’t right at the top. The dragon might die of old age before they got all the way up and then out again. That’s only if it wasn’t full of terrible things, which it probably was. She flicked her STAR open.

[Sally: going into the pyramid now]

[Sally: hope to find answers]

[Sally:\_]

She pouted at the flickering text boxes, unsure what to add. He didn’t reply right away, which she assumed meant he was now grinding twice as hard, knowing how eager they were to dive into trouble.

“Alright, troops.” She cleared her throat. “Rules for the pyramid. Do not split up. That’s mostly it... uh, don’t die? Edward can if he wants.”

“I do not want to.”

Humphrey grinned. “We *will* totally split up.”

She sighed. “We will find a safe room to take a break. It has been sunny for infinite hours, but I bet it should be time to sleep soon.” Hopefully, the darkened interior of the structure could allow their internal rhythm to accept sleep. “Dibs on any daggers, too.”

“You’re the only one with an Inventory, so...” Edward put his sword away, his blazing blue eyes eager for the shade and rest of the pyramid.

Without further need for distraction or ceremony, she stomped off ahead of them to lead to the pyramid. Even without their constant grumbles, she was getting tired of the day. If anything, the exhaustion just helped with making the trek feel like it took less time.

Then, they were there. The stonework of the pyramid was smooth, rather than the large, jutting steps that she had expected. There were no windows or ways out higher up, so using it as a large slide was out of the question. Plus, hitting the ground at that speed would do nothing but break her legs, anyway. Design flaw.

A small entrance, barely a spec against the otherwise gigantic pyramid, sat before them. An open doorway with a stone awning over it, both covered in some ancient text she had not seen before. “Anyone read this?”

“I can,” Archie offered, after the rest shook their heads. “It says, Tomb of the Great King. Except the *King* is crossed out and *Queen* has been written over it. And then King over that, and then Queen again.”

“Must change ownership quicker than a... than a...” Sally clicked her fingers and let the jab sink away. It was difficult to make pop culture references when most of your brain was zombie mush and you couldn’t remember the real world.

“I’ll check for traps.” Humphrey offered, walking towards the opening.

Edward moved a couple of steps backward.