

Chapter 2.5 Humble Mud Pie

A gigantic monster burst out from the fetid swamp, casting streams of slick mud and foul water splashing around the area. The Guild stood in shocked awe as the creature rose impossibly tall, almost striking the tree tops. Grey-brown rubbery skin and a wide maw that sat beneath two bulbous eyes that glowed yellow.

“That’s a big frog,” Sally nodded, frowning up at the beast.

Theo popped out his blades. “*Toad.*”

The Death Knight withdrew his sword and cast a glare at the ginger cat, now awake, who returned a nod. “Unique Monster, be wary.”

“Already sent him a Party invite.” Sally’s eyes burned bright crimson and ignored the grimaces of frustration from the rest of the Outsiders. The empty space wasn’t going to fill itself, after all.

Arrows, Ice bolts, and beams of fire shot out from the collected Guild members. Most were either absorbed or deflected from the gigantic beast. His baleful eyes cast around the gathered ants along the path.

“His Level must be...” Theo scratched his head, almost cutting a chunk of hair off with his blades. “To take *no damage* from all of those attacks...”

“Yes,” Humphrey nodded, his face a stoic grimace, “we are in danger.”

Sally wrinkled up her nose and looked between them both. Danger was fast becoming their middle name. Like a collective family name - oh, did they even still have surnames? Briefly, she tried to consider what it might be. Outsider? *Sally Danger Outsider?* That idea went straight into the trash can.

The Toad opened their mouth, and from within, a large tongue shot out, striking further down the group into one of the other Parties. It retracted, and several Players were stuck to it, a gross mucus covering the dull pink appendage. Straight back into the mouth of the creature, the Players were swallowed whole.

[Guild member Harriet has Died]
[Guild member Jones has Died]
[Guild member Stephen has Died]

“Fight, or run?” Theo’s right eye twitched as his crimson glasses slid down his nose.

Sally clenched her jaw. As angry as she was, she was the leader here, and she had to keep the little snacks alive. “Do not engage! Run!”

The White Foxes were ahead of them and turned to sprint further along the trail with no hesitation. Chuck cast a spell to allow them to pull ahead unhindered. The Warriors were

behind them and pulsed with their respective defensive skills. Both Parties in the rear became the unlucky recipients of the Toad's ire, and a second tongue-lash struck out and caught one Cleric.

[Guild member Edgar has Died]

A hideous sucking sound reverberated throughout the area, and Sally's eyes widened as she turned back to see the creature leap into the air. The dark shape rose above the tree top and briefly obscured whatever dim light the day could offer. After the short and sickening silence, the Toad collided down onto the path, the sounds of snapping branches and bones echoing against the large thud that vibrated through the ground.

[Guild member Katie has Died]

[Guild member Ryan has Died]

[Party *Strength of Many* has left the Guild]

[Necroblast: Barrage]

Several bolts of eldritch energy flew out and struck the looming creature but seemed to have little effect. Whatever it was made of, it had incredible Damage Reduction.

"Any thoughts?" She yelled out to her Party.

"Try not to antagonise it our way, please!" Chuck was pale and doing his best to be as far ahead of the rest of them as he could be.

The yellow eyes of the Monster turned to look towards the zombie. As his mouth opened, the tongue shot forth.

[Dread Counter]

Theo slid out in front of them and was struck by the four-foot wide tip of the long tongue. With the crackle of red lightning, he punched back at the gross appendage. Blood spurted from a three-inch-long gash. "Oh," he said.

Humphrey joined up beside him a split second later and tried to pin the fleshly blob into the ground with his greatsword, but it just slid off, and the tongue retracted. They both turned and ran back to the Party.

"I can't believe you picked *that* over being able to fly," Sally scowled at the vampire as he caught back up.

"Sure, I mean it has a long cool down and everything - but, with my Strength, an empowered critical hit is very devastating to anything that may-"

"Later, Theo!" Sally turned back and raised her hand out.

[Endless Dead]

From the dirt and muck, the remaining zombies from the morning fight emerged amongst the last Party of Players. Some of them were the Level Ten opponents she had eaten - although it was only assumed that they were all that level. With no way to see that detail anymore, they could have just rolled a weaker force. Although judging by the Stats that she had received-

The Toad stomped down with a webbed foot, crushing a pair of zombies. As much as she hated to see them go to waste - it was better that they died serving as a distraction. Rather than she and her friends die. There were always more zombies to raise, after all.

It was several minutes later before they all slowed to a stop, each one of them panting for air and dripping with sweat. Sally closed her eyes and rested her hands on muddied knees. One of her Guild Parties had been erased from this world, and the Mighty Swords had lost a member. They were currently in a state of mourning, and barely contained tears could be heard from their haggard breathing.

That was the other problem with travelling with so many Players. Other than being a tasty morsel of temptation, they still had a tenuous acceptance of their own mortality. For whatever violence the System threw at you that you had been able to overcome - when your friend died or you yourself were in mortal peril - there was something very human about that fear, even in this world.

She had seen the cracks starting to show in both Theo and Chuck before their classes and worldviews changed. The former slowly eroded away from the trauma she had been dragging him through, and the latter quickly broke from the change-in-reality whiplash and found solace in trying to be a pacifist. She pitied the Players. At least, the nice ones that didn't want to kill her.

"You think we lost it?" Theo's cheeks were a slight pink rather than the usual pale white.

"Ass." Sally punched him on the arm. "Don't tempt fate when you're standing so close to me."

They waited and looked back down the path, eyes straining against the gloomy darkness. The fog seemed to be working against them, hinting at a dramatic reveal when they least expected it. Archie dropped down from the Druid and put his ear to the ground.

"I don't think we are being followed."

Sally grimaced at this further luring of the Toad to find them. Maybe she had rubbed off on them, and they shared her reckless death wish. Killing the large Monster might have been nice. They had just used up all of their fancy abilities to show how powerful they were in fighting the Zeroes, so perhaps this was the humbling they deserved. Although she looked back at the morose humans, it wasn't her Party that paid for the hubris.

"Take two minutes, everyone." She raised her voice so that all could hear. "We want to move as soon as possible."

Murmured acknowledgements came from the remaining groups. Not like they had much choice, they must be at least halfway through the Swamps now. In a rare display of maturity,

Sally opened up her Map. It flickered as though weak. The Architect may have ensured most of the System was not tied to them before dying, but it still had issues.

“What do you think, Humps? Forty-five minutes to an hour?”

The Death Knight stood behind her and gazed at her open windows. “Yes. Also, you have unopened Daily Rewards from almost two weeks ago.”

“Do I get them all at once if I open them now?” Her index finger wiggled in front of the button to claim.

“Possibly, sometimes it’s hard to remember.”

Sally closed the STAR menus and gave Humphrey a concerned scowl. “Are you feeling okay? You’re not suffering memory loss or have a short life span, right?”

“Hmm.” He folded his arms across his chest and looked out amongst the recovering Players. “I have been gaining new thoughts, feelings, and memories from our travels together. Sometimes it feels like that overrides or pushes out prior information.”

“Ohhh,” she punched him on his plated arm with a metallic clang. “You’re becoming *normal*. Come on, let’s get out of this place.”

Forty-seven minutes and twenty-eight seconds later, as Theo was keen to point out, the Swamp began to dry out. The peat bogs and stagnant pools became damp mud and tough patches of grass. Trees became taller and a slightly richer shade of brown. This too started to fade into cracked and reddish earth beneath their feet. Sparse trees of dry, amber leaves and sparse branches.

As the canopy rescinded and the glow of mid-afternoon light illuminated the Guild, they emerged onto a plateau.

Beneath them, a large expanse of dried grass and sparse vegetation rolled out ahead until the amber sands of a desert met the horizon. Herds of various creatures could be seen moving across the plains, and in the distance, there were grey shapes of distant buildings and structures. The area seemed impossibly large. At the foot of this small cliff was a small town of dark wood and little movement.

As a breeze of warm air washed over them, Humphrey turned to the Outsiders with a wide grin across his skeletal face.

“Welcome to the Wastelands.”