

Chapter 2.74 The Incident

Sally blinked her eyes.

They were dry and struggled to focus as her brain tried to wake up. She was breathing, despite not needing to, and her breaths were slow and shallow. Numbness faded away from her hands and she found she could wiggle her fingers.

Questions cracked like eggs onto her sluggish mind, slipping right past the important parts such as words, and dripping to the floor. Floor. A sandstone color, smooth but not polished. The flickering light of torches drew her eyes upward.

In her peripheral, familiar shapes. She couldn't quite place their names at this stage. But it was... family? No, her Party. That was it. The cracks allowed more dissociated memories to trickle from the dam. She was a zombie in an undead adventuring party.

The surrounding chamber was mostly plain, a rectangle of similarly colored stone as the floor. There was perhaps detailing or engravings on the walls, but she couldn't see it from here, and was currently distracted by something else.

"Hey you, you're finally awake." The voice was familiar and spent some time echoing around in her skull before she could place it.

The visual was only helping slightly. Sally furrowed her brow at the ginger cat with an eye-patch sitting in front of the group, waving his tail with impatience. His other eye wasn't emerald, but there was something about the confident animal that struck a familiar tone.

The taste of a name clicked across her desert mouth. "...Archie?"

"Indeed." He tilted his head. "I am the Archie from the third area."

"Oh!" She smiled, but couldn't really connect the dots yet.

"Care to take a brief walk while your companions recover?"

She nodded and with stiff and aching legs, she stepped after the cat, giving one last look at the rest of her friends sleeping while standing up. The Death Knight, Mummy, Shade, and Vampire.

"I'm sure your memories are a little bit of a jumble," Archie continued as they walked through a corridor away from the room. "Maybe this will jog things a little?"

They stepped out through an open doorway onto a balcony. Before them, a city of sandstone, decorated with bronze, silver, and gold, shone beneath the moonlit sky. It was calm. She frowned out into the distance.

"The Wastelands? Did we fix it? *The dragon!*" The flood began, everything pooling back at once and threatening to overwhelm her. The violence and the struggle. Victory, but also defeat?

Archie hopped up to the stone wall of the balcony and sat, wrapping his tail around his legs. "Archie Two's last action was to send me a message to come and look after you."

"That's some foresight, huh?" Sally leaned forward on the wall, the cool stone calming the adrenaline trying to get her worked up.

"We are rather clever." He tilted his head. "Although we were worried you couldn't come back."

"Come back?" Things were starting to make her head hurt now.

"Ruben's Ultimate, [Game Over], is meant to erase you from the... world."

"Okay." She blinked. Just a big killing move then. There was no need to add the mysterious vagueness to it. "But it didn't?"

There was a flash of blue, and a figure appeared beside them. A slim man in a purple suit with bright blue eyes and horns on his head.

"Edward!" She leaped forward and gave him a hug. "I remember you."

"I didn't get a hug," Archie sighed, his wide eye looking out to the city.

"Glad to see you're back amongst the living... unliving... after all this time, Sally." He grinned. "I suppose it was—"

"*All this time?*" She raised an eyebrow between the two of them.

Edward crossed his arms. "You hadn't told her yet?"

"I was leading up to it before you interrupted," the cat flicked his tail in annoyance. "While we were able to prevent you from dying, you've essentially been in a coma."

"For how long, Archie?" She loomed over him. "*How long?*"

"...a little over a year."

"Oh, I thought you were going to say twenty years or something." She yawned and leaned her back against the wall and looked up at the night sky.

Edward grinned. "The sandstorm was removed, and normality returned to the Wastes. The System-created returned, and Players flocked here after the Forest and were able to level properly."

"A happy ending," she grinned.

"There's been four other Player waves since you were out of action." Archie stretched out and yawned.

"Really? So you're telling me that the world is a lot more populated now. We aren't in the top percentage of Players?"

Edward nodded. "Most are still between first and here, but the third area is quite populated now - especially after you cleared the blockage of Ruben."

She sucked at her teeth. As much as she didn't like to be behind the curve, more Players meant more conflict - which equaled more brains. That made her stronger, which made it easier to... she raised her eyebrow at the demon. "Have you just been hanging around here for the year, since you're my bodyguard?"

"Yes and no," he deflated. "I cannot level higher than you, so I was kind of stuck, anyway. It's been *miserable*, but I am on the democratic council that runs the Wastes now... so yay for me?"

"Politics doesn't really seem like your sort of thing," she smiled. "Not like you to be a backstabber."

He tilted his head in return. "I used the remainder of Ruben's gold to rebuild what I could, including this little fortress to keep my favorite group of rocks-brained undead safe."

"Knew I could trust you." She exhaled from her nose and turned back to look out at the city. It seemed so quiet now to when they had fought here. "So, what's the deal with the third area?"

"That's why I'm here." Archie moved closer and rubbed up against her arm. "There are two factions of Players that have organized against each other. One believes the System should be destroyed, and the other wants it to be fixed or saved."

"Huh," she tapped her fingers on the wall. "So I need to decide what side I'm on and then eat my way through the other?"

The cat exchanged a glance with the demon. "It may not be that simple, but sure."

"Neat! I just have to wake the rest of the gang up, have this conversation all over again with them present, and we'll need to level up to Twenty to get stuck into that mess."

Archie rubbed the side of his face on her. "Well, your STAR is already glowing."

Her eyes wide, she smiled down at the golden System interface.

"Found a scout trying to sabotage the supply lines, boss." The gruff figure dragged a man into the wide tent of dark fabric and threw them on the floor.

The detainee looked to have already been roughed up, with a black eye and grazing across the side of their shaved head. A green cloth gagged their mouth, while their arms and legs were bound tight with rope. Dark leathers and a muddied black cloak. They certainly looked like a sabateur.

From a wooden writing desk, a figure stood and stepped closer. "And you couldn't deal with them in the field? You know how much I hate to bloody my own hands, Shin."

“Sorry, boss. This one said he had information.”

With a sigh, the figure dressed in long robes of green kneeled down and pushed the prone figure onto the side with the tip of his staff. “He could also just as easily want to speak a spell or ability and assassinate me.”

The gruff man said nothing now, but lingered awkwardly near the tent entrance, unsure whether to remove the prisoner or not.

What patience the caster had left slowly eroded, and he gestured to the hovering man. “I will deal with him. You may leave.”

“Yes, boss.” With a couple of half-bows half-nods, he left out into the night.

“Now then.” The man reached down and removed the gag. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

“There’s a new Architect coming. It has been prophesied.”

“I put little faith in such things.” He stood and rubbed at his pale face. “What purpose do you have in telling me so? To gloat, that your faction was correct? Do you wish to switch sides knowing you were wrong?”

“I come to warn-“

“No, no. You do not *warn*.” The figure held out his staff over the body. A green energy began to glow around the end and filled the tent with dull light. “If this comes to pass, and it turns out you were correct, well, I have a few friends that could bring you back so I can apologize.”

Vines encircled the man, wrapping him tightly and covering his mouth. They continued to constrict the writhing prisoner until bones started to crack and blood ran from his mouth. All the while the caster watched with an empty look in his eyes.

Eventually, the struggling ceased, and the vines rescinded. The spellcaster relaxed and exhaled deeply.

A shadowed figure crossed the front of the tent, stopping to step inside. His arm, a slim bar of sharpened metal, glimmering in the lantern light. “Thought I could smell death in the air.”

“I don’t suppose you could dispose of him, please, Dent?”

The man nodded. “Of course, Chuck.”