

## Chapter 20 The Arisen

Sally shot a panicked look towards the door. "Close it!"

[Party: Skeleton Warrior has joined]

A whirl of curses span around inside her head. This was a very bad position - perhaps she had been too overconfident, too lackadaisical with her abilities. She shot a glance towards Humphrey who had hovered into the middle of the room near the ceiling, ready to observe.

"This is where Theo shows up just in the nick of time, right?" She clenched her jaw as the skull did not respond. Even if the super-Novice did manage to get here in time, there was nothing he would be able to do against a full-

*"Told ya we should have checked all the tombs on the way in."*

A brash voice carried faintly down the stairs towards them - sounded like the Fighter. A softer response was given but was too muffled for Sally to make out.

She hissed at the Lurker. "Hold the door. Make sure they can't get through." With a deep breath of stale air, she withdrew the crossbow from her Inventory. She had to keep a clear head. The doorway was perhaps the only advantage they had - with the staircase being only a few feet away it would create a bottleneck.

Big Dave braced himself against the door; heavy brow furrowed in determination. She ordered the two Party Skeletons to stand either side of the door, but a few feet back. The assortment of random Warriors she told to gather near the middle of the room around the table. Without being able to control or support them as well, they'd do better to draw focus away from herself in one corner - the right side of the door wall, and Chuck in the other, opposite her.

It would be nice if she could give the loaf a weapon or maybe just wrap him in a pillow. He was already half dead - but he might be some use if he didn't die too quickly.

*"Someone's opened up a passageway here."* A voice came from above - closer now.

She again glanced up at the Observer. He was focused on the door, his expression cold and hard to read. Her teeth ground together as she was unable to sweat. Footsteps could now be heard on the staircase - easily a handful, although it didn't take much to guess this was the Skullsplitters.

*"Let me check for traps first,"* the Rogue complained from the staircase.

*"There's hardly any room to move; I'm sure it will be fine."* The Fighter again, closest to the door.

The Lurker flinched as the door attempted to budge, steadying themselves with more determination.

“*Huh, it’s stuck.*” The Fighter pushed again, jostling Dave but unable to shift them.

Sally began slightly regretting being so cynical about the Architect, maybe they were a great person, and this was all a big misunderstanding? The pit in her stomach told her this wasn’t the case. But perhaps she could be free of this weird world, whatever death here truly entailed.

“*Looks more like something is blocking it,*” the Ranger now called from the spiral stairs, “*if someone opened the passage they might be here still.*”

“Hello?” The Fighter banged her fist on the door. “Anyone in there?”

There was no chance pretending to be a Player would work this time. One whiff of the door opening and it’ll be clear they were a bunch of Monsters. The loose huddle of Skeletal Warriors looked anxious, eager to get into battle even if unmatched. She glared at them and willed them to stay put with [Command Dead]. At least, she hoped she could do that with just a powerful side-eye.

“*No response.*” The shrug from the Fighter could be heard through the door, in part due to her armour shuffling about.

“Allow me.”

This voice was new - deep, gravelly, and calm. The clanking of heavy metal boots on the cold stone floor nailed shut any second guesses about this being the armoured Knight. Mumbled complaints of people squeezing out of the way of their approach were then punctuated by silence.

Sally stared at the Lurker, eyes trying to bore through the creature so that she could see what was about to happen, what their plan was so that she could try and counter it. A splintering sound and flash of pain across Big Dave’s face was the introduction to the answer she sought.

The Lurker stumbled forward from the door and attempted to clutch at their back. Behind them the longsword of the Knight had pierced through the door; crimson blood ran along the silver blade. As Dave turned back around with anger flaring in their eyes, the door was kicked open.

A torch was flung into the room, casting bright amber light throughout the chamber, shadows hauntingly dancing against the wall as the empty skulls of the Warriors were lit from underneath.

“Why is there a Woodlands- oh, *undead!*” The Fighter called from back behind the Knight.

“Nice and easy,” the Rogue called and rolled into the room beneath the grasp of the Lurker as Dave rushed forward to clog the doorway once more. The red-haired thief brought up a hand crossbow and knife levelled at the nearest skeleton before a frown spread across their face - their arms didn’t move as quickly as they expected.

[Hex: Slow]

Sally shot her crossbow at the slowed Rogue, striking the figure in the side, piercing the ribcage. A pained expression flared in their face along with a sudden panic as the Skeleton Warriors they thought easy to dispatch now closed in on them.

“Han needs help,” the Ranged growled from the hallway, an arrow barely skimming past the Lurker and striking a Skeleton in the shoulder, causing it to stumble backwards.

“I can’t see them; you’re in the way!” The panicked voice of the Cleric came from the stairwell, the bottleneck working as hoped.

Sally shook as she loaded another bolt into the crossbow, trying to shrink further into the corner. A second bolt might put the Rogue closer to death - but if the skeletons could finish them off then she should save-

A bright flash of blue light filled the chamber for a split second, and then Dave roared in pain. The Lurker's arm was hewn from his body, radiant blue light still dancing across the edges of the wound as blood began to spray to the floor - the hum of the Knight's sword almost like static in the air. An arrow from behind followed up, striking Big Dave directly in the face.

[Party: Big Dave has died]

[Party: Skeletal Warrior has joined]

She flicked through the STAR and licked her teeth. It was a distraction, but giving a skeleton a boost from [Mighty Aura] might make a difference. The Rogue had grabbed hold of one of the Skeleton Warrior's arms to prevent them from landing a blow, but a second one carved a slice in their flank, pain and sweat covering their face. They looked dizzy, woozy... *ripe*.

Before she could take advantage, the Knight stepped into the room and the two Skeletal Warriors on guard stepped forward to engage. Against the heavy plate, the rusty sword of the first just bounced off, and the second was parried - a counterattack easily splitting the skull from the neck.

[Party: Skeletal Warrior has died]

Sally froze at the sight of, surely, her imminent doom. The torchlight flickered off the bright armour, giving the Knight an almost demonic visage. The crossbow would do nothing against them; neither would the swords or teeth they had. As the Knight turned to smite the second Warrior, the Cleric ran into the room, hands glowing a bright yellow light.

The bolt left the crossbow. Sally watched as the light from the healing spell faded, and the eyes of the Cleric widen in slow motion. One of the eyes anyway, as the other had a bolt through it. The healer started to collapse, and the Knight turned to catch her. The Knight then looked up and saw Sally.

“Bren, Healing Potion - NOW!” the Knight boomed, passing the dying form of the petite blonde over to the Ranger entering the room.

A second roar came from the stairs as the Fighter rushed in using a skill - and the Skeletal Warriors surrounding the Rogue turned to immediately face the new threat, almost entirely forgetting the near-death person existed.

Sally backed against the wall, trying to think of a way to escape the enclosing Knight as their blade started to glow blue. Ideas were short.

“What in the blazes is that-“ the Ranger began, fumbling for a Healing Potion to give to the held Cleric. “I can see the bounty, but- *oh Gods!*“

The Knight turned back to his Party, as did all eyes in the room briefly, as a figure in flames grabbed hold of the Ranger from behind and bit into his neck. Blood spurted from the wound as his own clothing started to set alight; the Ranger dropped the Cleric to grasp at his wound as the burning zombie also fell over and laid still.

The Fighter growled as their weapon cleaved another Skeleton into fragments. Having finished off the last of the Warriors, she rushed over to help put out the fire on the Ranger and heal the injured pair.

“I don’t know who you are,” the Knight growled, as he turned back to face the shrinking Sally, “but you will pay for this with your life.” He levelled his blade back at the zombie woman as she slumped into the corner. He was now just a couple of steps away from striking her down.

Her hand gripped the handle of her dagger and trembled as her mouth ran dry. *Was this it?* A single tear rolled down her cheek, knowing that she would never get to gobble up Theo.

As she felt the shadow loom over her, the static energy of the magic crackling through the Knight’s blade made her skin prickle. As the sword drew back, her muscles tensed, prepared to try and run. Try to escape.

A red flash of light burst through the chamber, briefly blinding everyone.

The smell of burnt dust was accompanied by the sound of creaking metal and plate grinding against smooth stone.

“*Ha-ha,*” a booming laugh echoed deeply around the chamber, “*ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!*”