

## Chapter 71

### Death of the Party

Crimson sparks blazed from Sally's sword as she blocked the swing of the eldritch-looking mace. The Cleric had definitely not been this strong previously, and her numb arm was a testament to that fact. In fairness, she had done her fair share of levelling - it was only the inability to see Levels that caused her concern.

She darted forward to lunge at him. With a pulse of his dark wings, he leapt backwards, the resulting gust causing her eyes to narrow.

"What happened to you?" She growled and readied the blade. There was no chance that whatever he had become was part of the normal Cleric Class progression. Certainly, there wouldn't be anything this demonic-looking.

His eyes were sunken and manic. "I ascended! The so-called Architect was letting the System fall to chaos, and I intend to put it back into order."

"Did you become... part Monster... *Marius*?"

He rushed towards her, their weapons clashing in another spray of red light.

"Do not use my name, you wretched abomination!" The Fallen Cleric feigned a swing of the mace before blasting a radiant bolt at the zombie with his other hand.

A burning pain radiated up Sally's side as she narrowly avoided the bolt. As she rolled across the floor she withdrew a crossbow and raised it - before the crimson mace immediately came down upon it, shattering the ranged weapon and knocking the zombie back.

"*Asshole*, do you know how many times I've replaced that, *Marius*?"

"Stop calling me that!" Fury sparked behind his eyes, his angered voice echoing across the road.

Sally grinned, despite the lethargy and pain. Part of him must know why she started calling him by his given name. Players - she just referred to them by their Classes. But Monsters had real names to show her kinship. His hypocrisy was expected but brazen. Knowing that he was one of the things he sought to destroy must eat him up inside.

"You should join us," she ducked a wide arc of the mace, "we need a moderately evil healer."

"I'm. Not. EVIL."

Jackie swung Betty around like a mace, always slightly too slow to catch the hooded woman. Her suit was soaked in blood from several stab wounds, and her face was pale and clammy. "Stay still you miserable freak," she growled, spinning up [Pin Down].

“Sorry dear, I’ve *never* been touched,” a flash of a smile appeared beneath the darkness of the hood as the woman dodged to the side.

As Betty rang out, the bolt hissed through the air - piercing through the side of the loose hood and knocking it backwards. The silver hair of the dark elf fell forward, and a crimson line slowly appeared across her cheek.

“Well,” the mobster winked, “first time for everything, ay?”

Theo spat blood on the floor. His own, unfortunately. Whatever was left of the top half of his outfit was now shredded pieces on the floor, and his bare torso bore several gashes which were slowly regenerating. It felt as though his arms would fall out of their sockets with how fast he had been punching - and yet the large lizardman was barely hurt.

“It’ss like sswatting a mossssquito,” the large maw of the beast twisted into a grin as he flourished the three scimitars.

“You have *incredible* damage reduction,” the vampire panted as he shook feeling back into his fists. “My whole 'thing' is doing lots of small amounts of damage.”

“To take advantage of how realistic normal combat is in thesse low Levelsss?”

“*Exactly*. Until it gets... unrealistic,” Theo winced, aware that he was currently a vampire trying to fist-fight a crocodile to save a goblin village.

“Unfortunately for you, gnat,” the lizardman hunched down, ready to power forward, “my Level is doubled when it comes to defence.” Green light flickered across his trio of blades as he leapt at the vampire.

Archie sat down and tilted his head. “Just what are you, anyway?”

The insectoid stopped casting whatever spell it was preparing and wrinkled up its face. A series of clicks and chirps came from beneath the mandibles - accompanied by a shrug.

“Obviously you’re a *bug*, but I don’t remember a creature like you.”

A brief pause before higher-pitched chirps.

“I see. That is unfortunate.” The ginger cat looked around at the ensuing battles before returning the emerald gaze to the agitated insect. “And this is what you want to do with your brief life?”

The bug clicked slowly, and a sharp knife of ice began to form in their hand.

Humphrey stepped back as the clang of the sword colliding weakened him. Despite his defences, the previous battle with the Champion had taken a lot out of him, and there was something else going on that he was unable to put his finger on. Mostly on account of having lost a couple of them.

“Ah! A *Stamina Drain* enchantment?” His eyes blazed red as he stared at the orc.

“Is that what you’ve been worrying about?” The black-flamed skull shook his head and flourished the blade. “It’s no wonder you’re so soft.”

The Death Knight surged forward and slashed out at his opponent, drawing blood from the orc’s thigh. The follow-up attack was parried, and Humphrey then dropped to one knee as exhaustion dulled his flames.

The pitch Observer chuckled. “After killing you and any other upstart Uniques, I’m going to become the next Architect.”

“Over... my dead body,” Humphrey hissed, trying to struggle back to his feet.

“That’s my intention!” The looming pitch-black flame around the skull of the murderer blazed with greater intensity as he stood over the struggling Death Knight.

Sally rolled across the wet cobblestone, agony flaring up her side. Broken ribs for sure. Her grip on the sword shook as she got back to her feet, stumbling as her body convulsed with pain.

Marius grinned wickedly. “See? You put too much stock in being helped by your *Party* - they are nothing but tools, and you are nothing without them.”

“Not true,” she growled back, readying her off-hand to cast [Necroblast].

“Watch and see!” With a flick of his mace, crimson fire blasted forth from behind his wings and ran along the floor. A ring of fifteen-foot tall raging flame encircled them both - cutting them both off from their respective Parties. With the way the duos had been fighting in opposite directions with her in the middle, neither pairing would be able to see any of the others.

A blur of red obscured Sally’s vision as the mace whirled past her face. She already had a sore scar across there - a heavy hit from the bludgeoning weapon might just send the top half of her head bouncing across the road.

For all his posturing, Marius had not used many skills. If he had become a part-Monster recently, then that stood to reason. He was powerful though, more than Theo - and that guy powerlevelled better than anyone. [Necroblast] blew a darkened scar across the shoulder of the evil bastard but didn’t seem to do as much damage as she was used to.

One of his skills must be a defensive shell - possibly against the same damage type that she was using. She whirled in with the sword, flickering attacks one after the other. The Fallen Cleric was evasive, dodging three attacks before blocking the last with a swipe of his wing. Black feathers were shorn away before he used them to push her back.

He growled, and the crimson of the mace grew brighter. “My turn now.” Marius used the wings as a boost to leap into the air, starting with a wild overhead swing before landing where the zombie rolled away from - immediately starting up with a flurry of angered swings.

The attacks came just as furious as her own, but she was tired and numb from the extended battle. Dodged, blocked, barely blocked - and then a jump to the side to avoid a radiant bolt.

This put her right in the way of a heavy swing of the mace, unable to guard against it at this angle.

With a horrible snap, Sally yelled out in pain as the sword clattered to the floor. Her right arm was broken and hung limply at her side. Quickly she scoured her brain to weigh up her options as she tried to shake the rain from her eyes. Perhaps she would just have to try and bite him-

His fist loomed out from in front of her blind eyes and grabbed a hold of her shirt. Marius lifted her into the air and regarded the zombie with his cold eyes.

“Even if you were the strongest of them, you are still a cockroach. You will be crushed beneath my boot, and your little movement will lose all steam.” His face contorted with barely contained seething hatred for all that she was.

“The System will continue to err,” she spat back, “and you will be seen as the worst of us.”

“I am NOTHING like you.” His fist was tightly clenched around the crimson mace, the whites of his knuckles a stark contrast to the roving colours of the weapon. “Tell me, what can you hear, abomination?”

She tried to struggle against his grip, but she was all but spent. No healing and neither of her arms were very responsive. Over the sound of the pattering rain and the pulsing flames of the encircled wall... there were no sounds of fighting. No clashes or yells, just the tired gasps of her own undead lungs against broken ribs.

“The last thing you see before I snuff you from this world will be the corpses of those heathens you mistook for being your friends.”

With tired eyes, Sally watched as the flickering heat of the fire wall slowly rescinded.

As her eyes adjusted to the gloom and she laid eyes on what remained of her Party, her jaw clenched tightly shut.

A single tear ran down her cheek as she shook.