

## Chapter 2.10 Dry Waterfalls

The remaining Party members sat in the room in stunned silence.

“Awwwkwaaard.” Chuck grimaced.

“He’s not usually that curt or abrasive.” Sally frowned. If he expected her to chase him outside for answers, that wasn’t happening. The bed was rather comfortable after having spent all morning in the mouse tunnels.

“He is going feral. We need to put him down.” Humphrey glared out at the open door.

Sally rolled her eyes. “Humps! Just let him cool off. Let’s find Archie and investigate the town for ourselves. You in, Chuck?” The last thing she needed was to push Theo away further if something was the matter. They needed to stick together.

The Druid looked anything but in. Although he had seen his fair share of violence, the damp covering of the demon’s blood all up his face was unpleasant. “Rain check.” He grimaced and went towards the door too.

“Still haven’t seen you cast that.” Sally piped up as Chuck’s footsteps slowly clunked down the nearby staircase.

[Chuck has left the Party]

[Sally: Archie where you cat?]

[Sally: at\*]

[Sally: cat]

She exhaled through her nose. “He’s not responding.”

The Death Knight shrugged. “Classic Humphrey and Sally adventure?”

“Yeaah, let’s go punch some doors in, or whatever.” All her muscles decided that this would be a good time to melt. Maybe just stop existing until everyone came back to pep her up.

Humphrey extended a hand to help her from the bed. “Well now, no need to seem so enthused.”

With reluctance, she took it and stood up, briefly brushing the dirt from her skirt. On second thoughts, she changed back to her black jeans - the System equivalent of dumping the dirty laundry in a pile at the end of the bed.

“We were just all so united before.” Sally huffed as they stepped over the corpse. “Now we are languishing again.”

“New area blues. Remember when we spent hours walking through the same Forest just to fight some goblins?” The Death Knight struggled to fit through the normal-sized doorway, having to turn sideways slightly as he scraped against the red wood.

“That was the spark we needed for our overarching plans, huh?” She stopped at the top of the staircase to look out of the window.

All the buildings were of similar design. Dusty, ruddy wood in basic shapes. Everything had a layer of abandonment in it, just as Hillan had. Except this was supposed to be the staging area for Players new to the area to populate. Could *Zero* have held off new Parties enough to starve the location of resources? It seemed unlikely.

“Indeed,” Humphrey continued, following her gaze. “Shake up enough trouble, and we will find a path to cling to.”

“*Trouble*,” Sally repeated before following the staircase down.

It looked as though they were in some manner of a small inn. A darkened room of few furnishings took up the majority of the downstairs. A long counter with a stool behind it. A shoe and coat rack. A dust-covered board that held keys for five rooms - four of which were present.

“No System-created at all, huh?” She ran her finger across the counter. Definitely hadn’t seen any cleaning for weeks at the least.

“Even in the Player-run towns, there would be System-created. The Wastelands are only a sandbox figuratively.” Humphrey glared around the room as if any secrets would seep out of the walls if they couldn’t meet his intensity.

“Where would we go for answers? I don’t want to spend all day opening doors to empty rooms. That’s not an engaging adventure, Humps. This one’s on you.” She crossed her arms and began to tap her foot.

The Death Knight looked briefly taken back that he was in charge but quickly gathered a thoughtful look - accompanied by a stroke of his metal chin. “If we had Wanted posters out, perhaps a sheriff’s office or jail?”

She shrugged in response. Sounded like as good a plan as any. Didn’t bring Theo back, locate the cat, or fill in the gap in their Party - but all roads led to rivers or something. With another sigh, she gestured for the large-plated ex-Observer to carry on forward.

With the sun now high in the sky, the town was warmer than she’d like. Even the earth was dry and cracked beneath their feet. The main road seemed to head straight through from one end to the other like they were on a movie set, like a pop-up fake town. Her eyes narrowed at the darkened windows, pits of shadow that could be hiding any number of opponents in wait. This could be a trap.

Eventually, Humphrey stopped and pointed to one of the abandoned buildings. Three sheets of weather-worn paper rustled in the meagre breeze. The words ‘wanted’ inscribed across the tops of each.

Sally hopped over to take a closer look. “Ha! Look at yours, Humps.” With a wide grin, she jabbed a dead finger at the square with a little skull atop it.

"It's mostly accurate," he turned to gaze off into the distance.

"Meh," she scowled at the other two. "They made me look like a wretch, and Theo looks like a generic vampire cliché."

"I know, right."

Sally kicked him in the shin. "Forget that - there's not even a bounty reward? It just says 'wanted dead or alive', and we're already kinda both."

Humphrey hummed to himself and walked around her to further down the wall. She watched as he plucked another page from the dried wood of the building.

"Another poster, for Archie or Jackie?"

The Death Knight shook his head and read it aloud. "Final warning. Should the levy not be paid by the end of the week, this town and the surrounding area shall be rendered barren and inert. May charity save you."

"Hmm. That's enough context clues for what happened here, then, yeah? Handy to have them all on a piece of paper. Is it signed?"

"Yes."

"...I swear, Humps."

"Signed by Edward the Inevitable, on behalf of... and the rest is torn off."

Sally narrowed her eyes. The System might like to swirl around something macabre in her cornflakes, but this bit of narrative peek-a-boo wasn't settling well on her grumbly mood. The mouse brains had tasted gross, and she didn't want to play detective today.

The Death Knight tucked the notice into his belt. "Shame Theo struck down the chap that may have some answers."

"Psh." Now she just felt tired. Why couldn't her Quest have been to nap - and Theo could have gone and slain the oversized rodents?

A *bloip* from her STAR indicated a notification.

"Oh, a private message from Theo. *Private!*" She turned and moved away from the Death Knight since he was able to see her UI.

[Theo: Sorry, Sally.]

[Theo: a lot on my mind recently.]

[Theo: I'm just going to go blow off some steam.]

[Theo: talk later?]

[Sally: of course]

[Sally: find me some good items, punk]

She closed the messages, still not really any less concerned about the vampire. “False alarm, nothing *salacious*, Humphrey.” She waved her hands in the air. “Oh, that’s an idea - do you think we could do like, a pin-up calendar for merch?”

“Merch?”

“When we’re a famous Party, of course. Assuming we don’t die before Level Fifty - we’ll be well known by then, I’d think.”

The Death Knight tilted his skull in thought. “I’m not sure how marketable I-“

“You’re hot shit, Humps. Naturally, Theo would be centrefold, though - no offence.” Sally rubbed her chin.

“That is understandable.”

“Like, you’ve seen his abs, right? How does that even work when he is dead? Like the muscle growth - I can understand the low body fat percentage when all he drinks is blood. But I don’t really have abs, and I’m just as slim - if not more!”

“Sally.”

“Everything I eat just seems to go to my hair. Which I’m not complaining about - I’d much rather have long, thick hair than end up with the thin and sparse stuff like an undead would usually have. I should just count my blessings, huh?”

“Sally.”

“Plus, I’m remarkably strong and healthy for a corpse. That’s obviously something that the System decides - but other than eating brains, it makes everything kind of arbitrary, right? Like just a veneer of undead gloss over basically a living demigod at this point.”

“Sally.”

“You’re right. Perhaps that is a bit too egotistical - we are small fish in the grand scheme of things, even if we are stacked tighter than... sorry, I seem to be talking an awful lot. I think it’s just anxiety over the Party falling apart - I have no idea what I’m doing, and I didn’t think we’d ever get this far, with everything we’ve been able to change.”

She paused for breath, eyes wide as the wind-up key slowly ran out of steam.

“Sally.”

“Yeah?”

The Death Knight raised a plated hand and pointed his index finger over her shoulder.

She turned to see a bloodied figure silhouetted against the shadow of a dusty awning. Having politely waited for her waterfall of words to finish, the man stepped out and into the light.

Crimson had now soaked through his purple suit, but a fanged smile radiated across the demon's face.

"I told you that I was *Inevitable*," Edward beamed with eyes a bright light blue.