

## Chapter 2.26 Mist Already

Sally kicked through the saloon doors, one side snapping from the hinges and clattering to the floor.

“Alright,” she yelled, “we need information! Also, Duncan, so sorry for all the property damage; let me pay you.”

“No, no, that’s quite alright!” The heavily bearded man behind the bar practically recoiled from the notion.

She shrugged and walked up to the bar, followed by the rest of the group. “Why not? I feel bad about it - even though it wasn’t me. Apart from the door.”

“If you give us a lot of gold, it’ll draw the attention of the tax collectors.”

“Oh. I mean, Edhead the Inquisitor was just here on the roof.” She looked up at the hole in the ceiling where one of the beds was threatening to slide down into the saloon proper. Theo must have gotten his blades out and burst through as Humphrey was trying to sandwich him. She wished she could have seen that; it sounded hilarious.

“HE WAS?” The beard quivered across his face, a shimmering curtain of differing browns. “Was he after you?”

Immediately, the atmosphere of the saloon dipped as all eyes were now on them.

Humphrey turned to face them, almost hitting the zombie in the head with Theo’s wrapped noggin as he spun. “Try it if you think you can; they will be peeling your remnants from the woodwork for days after.”

The gathered oddities turned back to their own business, unable to meet his glare. As he turned, Sally ducked the spinning vampire.

“No - well, he kidnapped our friend,” she sighed and leaned on the bar. It almost reminded her of the diner - if it was vaguely Western-themed instead of vaguely fifties-themed. “We just wanted some information or help so we can go rescue them.”

She caught the side-eye of the werewolf hiding in the corner and trying to avoid the Party. “Ay, wolf-boy, come here. Here boy.” She patted the stool nearest them.

“You can ask around, but I’m not sure what most of us could do.” Duncan shrugged and went back into some default routine of cleaning out a mug. “We don’t carry much money, and most of us practically live here in fear of the goons taking us to work in the... mines.”

Humphrey narrowed his empty eye sockets. “You say *mines* as though it was something other than what immediately comes to mind at the phrase.”

“It’s gold farming, essentially.” The barkeep moved away from potential questions as the werewolf came and sat awkwardly beside them.

“How can I help you, my lady?” He grinned with perfect teeth but looked like he wanted to be anywhere else but here.

“Firstly, I’m not your lady. I’m not even his lady,” she prodded a finger into Theo’s wrapped legs.

“*Mmff.*”

“*Later.* Secondly, what is your name, and what do you do other than creep me out?” She crossed her arms and glared at him.

“My name is Barthelemy. I used to be the wealthy owner of a large estate here, but I was cursed to become a werewolf on the full moon.”

Humphrey looked out the window. “Isn’t it ninety percent daytime here?”

Barthelemy puckered his lips and avoided answering.

Sally sighed. “So, you must know the area then? We need to get to the, uhh...”

“Sands of Eternity,” Archie interjected, curled up in the sunlight atop one of the empty tables.

“That’s it. Yeah, we have no mounts and hate walking. Give me options here, furball. Not you, Archie.” She waved off the glare of the ginger cat.

The man’s mouth moved as if he had a few cheesy one-liners to spout, but part of his self-preservation kicked in and didn’t allow any sound to come to fruition. “Ah. There’s one place nearby - but it’s not guaranteed.”

“Spill it.”

“There used to be a form of chariot racing, not too far from the massive expanse of land that I owned - and still do technically. Although it is mostly sand now, and-“

The zombie growled.

“-yes, as I was saying! Chariot racing - but they are powered by magic. There’s a chance some may still be there and functional. But aside from that, there are no animals or beasts of burden left alive. Aside from yours truly, of course.”

“*Mff bff mfmfm.*”

“Yeah, and that would be fun to watch, Theo - but you’re staying there.” She tilted her head and closed her eyes. If only things could be simple. “Humphrey, get the Map location from our bud here - I need some fresh... some air that isn’t so full of itself.”

She slunk out of the Saloon and sat in the shade of the awning against one of the walls. Some days the mania just couldn’t even, and she felt tired of the constant stress and conflict. It wasn’t fair that Lucius had been taken; he wasn’t even a combatant, really.

With tired eyes, she spun the STAR around to bring up private messages.

[Sally: We made it to the Wastelands.]

[Sally: It's garbage - did you see it before the sandstorm?]

[Sally: Would be nice to call in that favor, but I don't know what to ask for.]

She paused and briefly wondered if the Swordsman was working for the dragon. They had made it sound like Players were forced to gather gold, so him being able to jump around the areas didn't seem plausible unless he had gotten those teleports before the area was washed away by constant sunshine.

After a few minutes, she closed the STAR. He wasn't dead yet; she was pretty sure that the System would decline to deliver the messages if he no longer existed. Perhaps he was knee-deep in his own peril. There was plenty to go around.

Humphrey pushed through the single door and out into the open, turned to notice her sitting there. "I got the details, and then I had a little fun pointing Theo at the werewolf, like a weapon."

"Thanks, Humps. That makes me feel a little better." She gave him a glum smile and tried to imagine the panic in the jerk's face.

"For a brief moment, you had us all back together." The Death Knight looked out to the barren wasteland as he spoke calmly. "Whatever you decide, we are with you."

"Mrrf."

Humphrey shook the bound vampire. "We are *not* doing that."

Archie came strolling out and stretched his back, clawing at the dark wood. "Everyone okay?" He tilted his head, eyeing the party up with his emerald eyes.

"Just struggling a little," Sally deflated. "We need to get to Lucius. We need to get Theo some sleep. We need to get your magical thing."

The cat sighed. "There is one thing I can try, but it will mean both Theo and I will be unavailable for an unknown amount of time."

Humphrey knelt down beside Archie. "How unknown are we talking - there's a difference between hours and months."

The response wasn't immediate, but eventually, the ginger cat relented. "Days. Could be one day, could be a week."

"It'll fix Theo, though?" Sally raised an eyebrow as she looked at the vampire.

"Yes and no. It could be as good as a long sleep. It could irreparably change him in unknown ways."

"This seems risky, Sally." The Death Knight exhaled. "Can he not survive a few more days as he is?"

"Mgfg mfmfmmm."

Sally gasped as tears welled behind her eyes. "That's... it's up to Theo. I know you're not in the right mind, but you have to accept what Archie is offering."

"*Mfbmm.*"

"You too, pup." She wiped her eyes with the back of her forearm. "Go ahead, Archie. How does this work?"

"No idea," the cat smiled. "Please put him down, big brother."

The Death Knight laid the vampire on the wooden floor and stepped back.

"Well, good luck." Archie looked up at them, a glimmer reflecting in his emerald eyes. "All things going to plan; we will probably see you again."

He opened his mouth, facing Theo. With a burst of energy, the cat evaporated into a radiant beam of light that briefly blinded the zombie. Archie spun around the prone form of the vampire, creating a casket made of magical light.

Just as the illusion had completed and Theo was fully entombed, they both vanished. A puff of ginger hair and magical energy fizzed through the air in the space left.

"What?" Sally was lost for words. Except for the word what. "What?" She repeated.

Humphrey rubbed his chin, the scraping of metal echoing over the dull sounds of chatter from inside the saloon. "He has become a coffin in some manner and taken Theo to someplace in the System where they can be in stasis in this form."

"Really?" Sally stood to her feet shakily, now the proud owner of two words.

"Yes. That is my best approximation. It may not be the sleep that he requires, and they may not exist in that space without issue - but without other options, it is a good chance."

"Ass." Sally scratched her head. In some ways, it was a weight off her shoulders - now just her and Humphrey again, it was easier to focus on their tasks at hand and push forward. It was also double as worrying not to know where the pair were or what would happen to them. Plus, with Lucius being kidnapped, their Party was just down to two again.

"Classic Sally and Humphrey adventure?" The Death Knight grinned.

"I don't think our classic adventures were this messed up," she sighed and leaned against the plated figure.

"I know. But you want to have an undead dragon mount, right?"

"Even better than that," she closed her eyes, "I want to fix this area to be fair for everyone."

"*Classic adventure,*" Humphrey nodded, his helmet flames flickering.