

The short coach ride over to the graveyard was rather quiet. Partly due to the apprehension of the struggles that lie ahead and the sudden appearance of the Architect. The fact that he tried to assassinate Humphrey was concerning.

Mostly, however, it was quiet because Sally refused to speak Theo.

They didn't have the time to stand around and chat. Not wanting to get caught out in the open or traveling again, they had gone full steam ahead. She had glared at him and told him he had ten minutes to come up with a good excuse for that whole event.

Sally sighed and looked out of the stagecoach window. In truth, she wasn't that mad at him. Upset that had almost died again, perhaps. Time had become messy, and she had spent too long sinking into the pit of her feelings. Emotionally spent for the day.

The goof had done it to save Humphrey. Was it necessary? The Death Knight was full of defense and protective skills he could have used, if fast enough. But instead, Theo had offered himself up. It might have even been to show Humphrey that he was forgiven, that the vampire didn't even hesitate to give up his life for the metal chunk.

She had some idea why. Perhaps. At least, she knew that Norah probably had a decent idea. Once this was all over, she'd really need to find a way to repay the mummy. Not only had she watched over the dead vampire, but done so almost at the cost of her own life. And it had worked. With the undead not requiring most of their insides to function, turning back time had just wound his soul back inside him instead of having to go through a resurrection that made sense.

Not that it meant that he could survive a blast straight through the heart though - especially as a vampire. Staked through with Architect energy, the vampire almost seemed pleased with the outcome, rather than being a messy pile of bloodied abs in the wet mud.

*"I can see it!"* Jackie called from up top. *"Two minutes!"*

Sally wondered why the Architect was so reckless. Already pushing their powers as much as they could, was it important to get the Death Knight killed off as soon as possible? If they knew that he had the full Archie collection that might be the case. Humphrey hadn't been too clear on what the full cat may bring, but it couldn't be anything good for the new boss.

The stagecoach shifted as it turned off of the main road and onto a rougher gravel path. Leaning out of the window, she could now see the graveyard.

And it was beautiful.

Any grumpiness she still held toward her Party melted away as she was left more breathless than usual. As much as it looked like the biggest cliché going, the graveyard was picture perfect. An eerie mist hung around the dense grays and somber greens of the stone markers in the overgrown grass. Dead trees stood guard between tombs and mausoleum entrances. Shadowed in the distance was the looming cathedral-like structure.

Sally had a difficult time keeping a smile off of her face. It was a good thing the vampire was up top, so that she could regain her composure before giving him a dress down.

She practiced her scowl and just about got it down as the stagecoach pulled up just inside the gates of the graveyard.

"Everybody out," she growled, partly just because she was so excited. "Dent, organize the troops. I just want a quick word the *Outsiders* and then we'll join you."

He nodded in response, his eyes already darting around the scenery before he had exited the vehicle.

Sally gestured with her head to the undead party as they hopped out after her. They all looked rather sheepish, aside from Lucius, who was just perpetually worried.

"Not *you*, Edward." She sighed and pointed him away.

"Ah," he rolled his bright blue eyes. "You said *Outsiders*, I thought, and *technically*..."

Theo started nodding his head before catching the glare of the zombie.

"So help me I will crack your heads together like a pair of badgunk eggs if you don't stop the shenanigans." She flexed her fingers and watched the demon wander away.

With a deep sigh, she then put her hands on her hips and frowned at them all. As if daring them to speak up. They were silent, and waited for her to ask the questions, which she was more than happy to oblige.

"First up. Why are you jumping in front of bullets for a literal tank, fangs?" She tilted her head.

Humphrey cleared his throat. "I probably would have died, actually. It was a specific beam designed to be unblockable by any ability, but could disrupt what makes me... me."

"Like the Observer and Archie bullshit?" She crossed her arms, and he just nodded in return. "So the second question is, how did you survive a shot through the heart?"

Norah raised a hand. "That was my fault, hun. While watching Theo in the tomb, I may have messed with his corpse." She blinked her yellow eyes. "That sounded better before I said it."

"Messed with *how*?" Any faux anger she had been putting on was slowly eroding, as this was all too much to keep up with.

"I moved the position of his heart." The Mummy pulled an awkward face. "Since he doesn't really use it much, I just shuffled it around and put something else in there."

"I thought my chest felt a little weird." Theo nodded along with the explanation.

Sally closed her eyes and took a deep, unnecessary breath. "What did you put in him, and why?"

Norah shrugged. "Call it mother's intuition, but it seemed like a safe place to store those three vials of blood since we weren't using them at the time."

“Like I’m my own inventory space,” the vampire said with a wide grin.

The zombie clenched her teeth. “So explain then, Theo. You seemed rather happy and confident about the results.”

“It’s pretty simple.” He clicked his fingers. “Their blood didn’t mean much on its own, and I was unlikely to gain much benefit from just drinking it. However, activated with a beam of the Architect’s own power...”

“Impressive,” Humphrey concluded. “Are you sure that it has taken full effect, though? Clearly, you recovered from the wound.”

Theo shrugged. “Want to try killing me and find out?”

“Enough!” Sally stepped over and prodded the vampire. “So what was the ‘I’m dying again, please hug me’ thing about?”

“Oh.” He rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “I was just setting my respawn point.”

“I’m your respawn point?” While there was a hint of indignation in her tone, that didn’t actually sound so bad. Assuming he could actually come back from death using Edward’s bug, anyway. It would be nice not to have to test that, but in a way, it was comforting to know he had chosen her to come back to. Not that there was any better choice, but she chose to take it as a good thing.

“That way I can-“

“Yeah, yeah. Save the mush for after the apocalypse, please. We’ll even ignore the parts of your story that don’t make any sense. Like you didn’t know you had the vials in you, or that the Architect would strike you there, and what was even with the fancy bandages, Norah?” She stomped her foot with impatience, knowing the next Invasion was soon.

Norah shrugged. “I don’t actually know. It made Theo’s dead body look nice, though.”

“Thanks, Norah,” he gave her a brief bow. “I appreciate that.”

“I also couldn’t look you in the face, dead or not, after reading the end of that letter.”

Theo pulled a face and turned away from the Mummy, placing a hand over his eyes in shame.

Humphrey narrowed his eye sockets. “Should I be reading this letter?”

Sally, Norah, and Theo all turned to say “No!” at him in unison.

The zombie sighed once more, but felt content. While they were a constant pain in her backside, these were the *Outsiders* she knew and loved. What they were all fighting for. She turned her head to see Lucius looking rather out of it. He had been rather quiet since they had left the site of the last Invasion.

“Alright,” she said. “Go see Dent and get your orders sorted out. We are short on time. Lucy, walk with me a second.”

They nodded and turned to go and see the swordsman as she gestured for the Shade to follow her through a line of worn gravestones.

“Talk with me. You seem a little lost, Lucius. Is it just too many cooks here?” She gave him a soft smile.

“Not exactly.” The Shade looked out into the dense mist of the graveyard. “I am just not sure what my purpose is.”

“Hmm?” Sally stopped and leaned against a large gray plinth. “I think you’ve always been a helper, right? Either through combat, your advice, or with your brain skill.”

He tilted his head and put his gloved hands in his pockets. “I suppose you’re right.”

“You helped get pops back too, yeah?” She grinned wider. “If anything, Lucy, I’d say you have the biggest heart of us all.” And certainly in the right place, unlike Theo’s.

Lucius nodded and a thinking emoji appeared beside him. “I think... the adventuring life is not for me in the long term. I have a lot of fun with the *Outsiders*, we are like family...” he looked over at a couple of them in the distance, arguing on where to stand. “But helping people in a non-combat situation sounds less stressful.”

She stepped forward and gave him a hug. “That’s what we’re fighting for. I want us to win so that you can have that.”

“Oh!” A shy emoticon beside his head. “I wasn’t sure how you’d feel if I left... especially after not becoming your Bodyguard.”

“Don’t sweat it.” She stepped back from him with a wide grin. “What I want most for you... for any of you, is to have a happy and safe life. Acceptance within the world. What you choose to do with that, I support you all the way.”

He nodded. “Let’s go save the world, Sally.”

“Heck yeah!” She gave him a playful shoulder-push.

The pair walked back over to see Dent and Chuck looking worn out already. She gave them a grin to hopefully energize them. “What’s the plan?”

Dent stretched out. “We’re viewing it as three separate zones. We’ll fight in the first and fall back to the one behind as necessary. This first area which is mostly open to start with. Jackie will pack the coach at the start of the second area, which is more built up with tombs and crypts. Then if things get real dicey, we’ll fall back to the cathedral at the back.”

Chuck nodded. “And if things get bad there, we’ll see you in the afterlife. Not that there probably is one.”

“Not like I’d go anywhere good if there was,” Sally agreed. “Solid plan though. We’re going for the *Outsiders* up front, *Insiders* at the back again?”

“Pretty much.” Dent nodded. “Edward, Lana, and myself will be more in the middle to protect the three at the back.”

“And I’ll switch as required,” Lucius added.

Sally turned to look at the entrance. Would be nice if the Monsters came that way and filtered in through the graveyard and didn’t just spawn in behind them.

In saying that, it was odd that there were no System-created Monsters here. There should be hordes already prepped for her to take control and grow an army. Now that she thought about it - the place where Norah had her tomb didn’t fill back up with those Elite Barbarians either.

“Has anyone seen any System-created?” she asked, raising her voice.

Murmurs and shaken heads - they had not.

How odd. She furrowed her brow in thought. A screeching sound disrupted her thoughts as she turned toward the entrance gates to see them buckle and twist. The shadow of something with more claws than healthy rose up from the ground, dulling the scenery.

Two large orbs of fiery red opened up and stared down at the gathered resistance. The red dragon opened its long mouth as the two Parties readied up their skills.

[Become Ashes]