

Humphrey staggered backward as the enemy charged into him. A bandage broke off from the leg of the assailant and the armored barbarian smashed through the head of a zombie.

“They’re a little overtuned, huh?” Sally pouted and spun around her staff.

Norah burst a small pyramid up from the ground, pushing the attacker toward the slashing blade of the Death Knight. A wide gash coursed through thick leather and into flesh, before a shadowed version of the greatsword followed the movement and split through their organs.

“So are we, hun.” The Mummy smiled and retrieved her spent bandages like homing snakes.

Sally watched the figure slump over on the floor, guts spilling out but brain uneaten. It took all four of them to take down one of the measly human-looking barbarians. Usually they’d mow through Monsters like these. Eight levels higher and Elite, though. Humphrey had mentioned that Elite upped the effective level by a handful or something, but that was some time ago, and now that she thought about it, she might be making that up.

She turned to the side to watch the blur of the vampire streak through a handful of the enemy. They weren’t all dying in one hit, but Theo would quickly [Blood Shift] back over to any that he needed to finish off. As impressive as it was, she didn’t want to just be a passive observer while he got them all experience. She needed to do something.

Plus, the goof had said he had something special for her, and then immediately forgotten as he went off to kill things. It better be something worthy of the wait.

“Perhaps we are going about this all wrong?” She tapped a finger on the edge of her staff. They were overtuned, and shouldn’t be on the back foot just because the Monster had more health or defense.

“I apologize,” Humphrey turned his head back to look at her. “I am not feeling my best.”

“It’s not you.” Sally waved her hand and frowned at him. “But, are you okay?”

“Yes. I am sure it is just the pressure of the current situation.” The Death Knight turned back to looking out at the bandits.

More likely, it was a sign of something bad about to happen. He never really got ill or was off his game unless something terrible was afoot. It was enough to make her slightly worried. The new Architect was an unknown, and it had everyone in the know on edge.

“Lucius, you should shadow me,” she said as she rubbed at her chin. The Shade popped down into her shadow. “My dagger can pierce all defenses, near enough. If I can stab them in the soft parts, we might be able to kill them off quicker.”

“You’re not really built for taking damage,” Humphrey interjected, before she waved him off.

“I best be careful then, huh?” With a grin, she spun around her staff to hold like a spear. Her shadow did the same, pointing the sharp end forward.

[Summon Zombies]

Four undead rose up out of the ground in front of her. Her eyes narrowed in thought. With a twirl, she turned to behind them and used [Endless Dead] along with the other two charges of [Summon Zombies] to create a small army. They'd die quickly to these Monsters, but that's not why they were here.

"Stay put!" she Commanded them, leaving just the four between her and the roving humanoid targets. With a grin, she turned back to the Death Knight. "That feels like a bit more of a percentage increase?"

[Strength in Numbers] raised all of their Stats, which should make killing off the Elites a little easier. More the fool of her for not thinking of that before, but she had been distracted by the whole end of the world thing.

"Norah, if you could try to restrain their arms? I'm going to try to stab them in the face."

"Sure, hun." The Mummy stepped back a little further to get a better view of the small group.

"What would you like me to do?" Humphrey asked, resting his sword across the back of his shoulders.

"Pull my ass out of the fire when I mess this up," Sally said with a grin. "I'll only have a few jabs before they mush my zombies, and I don't intend to follow them." She spun the staff around and the skull blazed a bright green.

With a twist, she flung it out at the next bandit. Another muscled man in thick hides and coarse fur armor. It struck him, and the fire burned a dark mark across his chest. Axe glowing green, he cleaved through two of the emerging zombies and ran towards Sally to leave the last one in the dust.

Bandages shot out and wrapped around his arms, slowing his attacks but not restricting them. The axe cleaved halfway through one of the zombies protecting Sally, but couldn't make it all the way through.

She jumped forward, jabbing out with the merged [Skeleton Key]. The Monster attempted to dodge to the side, but was caught by the shadowed version of her attack, piercing him straight through the middle of the head.

"Aha!" she said and beamed as the figure dropped to the floor. "Can't dodge a shadow."

"I feel like being able to instantly kill things is something we should utilize more often," the Death Knight grumbled, his skeletal face somehow deflated.

Sally rolled her eyes. "Alright, pops. Go tank them for me and I'll stab them."

They were never much for Questing or leveling the traditional way. Grinding Monsters was a means to an end, to climb over the gate keeping them from being more powerful. Players and Uniques were usually their biggest hurdles, but even then, working together they'd been able to crumble any opposition that had stood in their way so far.

With the stat-boosting zombies, and their new plan of stabbing things with Sally's broken weapon, they started to get into the swing of things. Nowhere near as fast as the vampire, but gradually they picked up a pace that could get the extra experience at little risk to themselves. Much better than sitting around and twiddling their thumbs.

[Eat Brains]. Sally wiped her mouth off and yawned. She crouched down and looked at the loot on this fallen enemy while Humphrey readied to pull the next.

"Oh, shame I can't eat normal food." She stood and then frowned at the rest of the Party. "Do any of eat normal food?" Her shadow shook his head.

"I probably could," Norah tilted her head, "but prefer not to. Humphrey doesn't eat at all."

Sally nodded. "Theo's diet is pretty restrictive, as is mine. Can't stand anything other than fresh brains. These chumps have a food item that increases health regeneration and some stats—would have been neat if we could use them."

Humphrey lowered his sword. "We could try?"

She smiled. "Sure thing, pops, be my guest." In her extended hand, she held what looked to be a rather packed sandwich.

He narrowed his eyes and took it from her slowly. Lucius popped out beside Sally, and all eyes except for the rampaging vampire's watched the Death Knight bring the foodstuff up to his skeletal maw.

Silence, except for the sounds of combat in the background, as he took a bite and began to chew. After a few awkward moments, the mashed sandwich vanished from his mouth and the Death Knight tilted his head to the side.

"I do not have a tongue, so am unable to taste the sandwich. The texture was uncomfortable. I also do not have a digestive system."

Sally grinned. "But did you get the other benefits from the task?"

Humphrey pulled a face and returned the rest of the meal back to her. "Yes. Although I am unsure as to whether it was worth the turmoil."

Lucius rubbed his misty chin. "I don't even have a proper body, so I can't even feign the process like pops."

The Death Knight narrowed his empty eye sockets as the red flame behind his helmet rose a little higher.

"That's fair, Lucy—I suppose there's no point filling up your boot with half-eaten sandwich, right?" Sally wagged the food toward the Mummy. "Norah?"

"I suppose it couldn't hurt," she shrugged.

There was a pulse of energy as Theo slid over to them, crackles of crimson lightning arcing around his body as blood ran down the leather armor. “Hey, what’s everyone up to?”

She beamed. “We’re taking turns biting this sandwich I found on the dead guy.”

“Okay,” the fully covered head of the vampire nodded. “Oh, I forgot to give you that gift.”

Sally moved up closer to him, as he looked through his Inventory. There was an aura around him, as though he was a furnace—but it was just power rather than heat. She had assumed his neat new form was similar to Humphrey’s but perhaps more offensive orientated. That he could only do it once a week seemed unfair, but this was a good of a reason to use it as, anyway.

“Here,” he passed her a chain with a locket of some kind on the end.

“How sweet,” she said as she held it up. It was actually a heart on the end, made from a deep red gemstone, and encircled with golden detailing. “That’s thoughtful of you, pup.”

“You probably saw the tower on the way over? It’s a dungeon, and that’s a key.” He looked over to see the odd faces the Mummy was pulling in trying to get the sandwich down.

Sally rolled her eyes. “Can’t just give a gal some jewelry, huh? You didn’t want to use it yourself?”

“I wouldn’t have the chance.” He turned back to her and shrugged. “Listen, Sally, I... I’ll get back to grinding. You should be close to the next level.”

Before she could say anything further, he was off. A blur of crimson and pink as he blazed through the respawning Elites. She looked back at the group as she put the necklace around her neck.

“It would be much better if it was made from adventurers,” Norah said as she grimaced, handing back the last of the sandwich. “I just don’t have the appetite for it, hun.”

“That’s fine.” Sally placed the remnants of the snack gently back on top of the dead body, before it shifted and stood up as a zombie, splaying the entrails of the sandwich across the ground. “Let’s just get back to what we are good at.”

Humphrey grinned. “Failing upwards and not dying?”

“You invite malady on our fair group, pops.” Sally wagged a finger at him. “Go stab something and stay out of trouble.”

The Death Knight deflated and turned to the next Monster in their area. Despite his visual exhaustion at being called pops, she knew that he secretly liked it. Mostly because Norah had told her as much. It was odd in the abstract, knowing Humphrey had been a floating skull and tool of the System, but now felt comfortable enough to be the head of the found family they had cobbled together.

If anything, it just went to show the depth and vibrancy of life that Uniques could live, just like any Player.

They murdered their way through another handful of System-created baddies, and then Theo slid over to them again.

“Alright, that should be a levels worth. We’ll need to get up on the ledge where we dismounted to claim it.”

They nodded and headed that way immediately. Theo hadn’t said how long his special form could last, but if it dropped off if he was out of combat for too long then she wanted to go accept the experience gain so he could go back out as soon as possible.

Helping each other up, they stood upon the dried mud away from the Monsters. A golden glow flooded through the STARS of the two half-Players.

“Alright, I’m heading straight back out-“ Theo began, before pausing.

A deep rumbling drew their attention, and they looked up at the darkened sky.

Sally narrowed her eyes before they widened in surprise. Above them, spanning the sky, a giant skull began to form. Deep pits where the eyes should be, miles wide. A toothed grin bigger than some of the zones. It opened gradually as a crack of lightning flashed across the clouds.

“Greetings,” a voice boomed out like thunder, vibrating through the floor. “I am your new Architect.”