

To say the inside of the stagecoach was cramped would be putting it lightly. Whilst Jackie once again took to the roof to man the mounted dual-repeater crossbows, the rest of them didn't fancy their chances atop the thundering coach at the speed they were traveling at. Well, aside from the Shade, who was shadowing the mobster up top. Jackie was extremely elated to find out that Lucius could somehow wield his own mounted weapons.

Sally rubbed at the edges of her cloak. She was somewhat nervous, and it wasn't just because she was now in the limelight. They had put a lot of effort into getting this artefact that only might bring Theo back. But then, it wasn't even on if he might stay dead - as sad as that may be. They were all together, which was great, but all heading to the same stationary place. Putting all their eggs into the same basket to the extremes.

If the Architect, Seven, or anyone with an axe to grind got wind of the location, that's where the end times would occur. While Humphrey might be sure the new god was shooting themselves in the foot by forcing the event, it wouldn't matter if they won out in the end. It wasn't like her desperate and half-brained ideas hadn't even worked out.

She eyed up those in the coach. The Death Knight took up the majority of the other side, with Chuck and Dent wedged in uncomfortably beside him. Sally was next to the window on her side with Lana, Fern, and Edward after her.

"Tell us a story, pops," she asked as she pouted toward him. More to break her train of thought rather than to fill the silence.

The Death Knight sighed, but his skeletal face relaxed. "This is the third Architect."

A silence, somehow thicker than the previous one, settled into the wagon.

"*What?*" Sally grimaced, confused.

"Mmm." He shuffled awkwardly in the seat, while everybody but Fern glared at him. "That wasn't really much of a story, was it?"

"Spill it already, otherwise you're walking."

"Very well. The Architect that died just over a year ago was put into place accidentally. There was one before him who was the true creator of this world, this System. Something went wrong when testing how to bring Players here. Instead, they swapped position with someone from your world."

Chuck clucked his tongue. "That explains all the ham-fisted pop culture references."

"And to think we are one of a handful that really gets them?" Sally shook her head. "So they got here and just tried to make the best of a bad situation."

Humphrey nodded slowly. "Unfortunately, they didn't have the vision of the true creator, which gave rise to the number of... oddities and problems the System has."

The stagecoach shook and jolted.

*“Run straight, ya goons!”*

“So it was probably just some dork like us then?” Sally grimaced and looked out of the room. A cobbled together reality. Thankfully, it had been stable enough to get this far. “You know of this because of Archie?”

The Death Knight nodded.

“So... is the cat actually the Architect?” Dent asked.

“The Architect had a soul, like a Player. When he died, it left this world the same. Every Archie is a split of his memories, a recording he was able to take from himself and apply to a Monster.”

“Almost like me, then.” Lana rubbed at her forehead and sighed.

The stagecoach fell into silence once more. Sally didn't like that story too much.

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Noah hummed to herself and smiled. It was nice and quiet outside now.

It had taken a lot of concentrated effort to do it—especially while maintaining her bandages—but she had managed to summon her Ultimate outside. Their screams had been quite delectable. The tearing of their flesh and shattering of their armor as the giant zombie broke them into pieces.

The bloodlust had been sated for a while, but it hadn't stopped what was approaching.

Seeing the pop-up messages telling her that she was being hunted didn't even dampen her mood - that just meant more adventurers to add to the pile.

Sally was on the way as fast as she could.

Good. Now they'd have time to prepare for the storm.

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Chuck wrinkled up his face as his eyes were unfocused, reading some Chat messages.

“Northern team have eyes of two Parties of Red en route on foot. Other two teams are clear.”

“If they were smart,” Edward began, “they'd all congregate somewhere and attack us as the biggest group they could.”

Lana nodded. “Probably when we're distracted by another threat.”

“After we've used the key,” Dent said, “I have a shortlist of locations that might be beneficial to try to hold.”

Sally just looked miserable as she watched the Jungle go by out of the window. The first time Players were going to make an effort to actually kill her, and she didn't even feel up to the

challenge. And for what, immortality? That was probably a lie. Not like she would trust the Architect to uphold that end of the bargain, even if they could make that a reality.

For the most part, the Outsiders had always been the aggressors. Now having to be on the defensive to stay safe... it felt wrong. But what was the alternative? They could keep moving with the stagecoach, but the Architect would just get stronger and the Event wasn't likely to end just because everyone got bored and couldn't keep up with them. The Players had tracking now, the Outsiders couldn't hide away.

Finding all the Players and eating them could work in the short term, but there would surely be some other way the Architect could put pressure on them. They were the big bad in all of this. Aside from the corrupted, other Players could be converted to being more peaceful here.

"Holding up, Sally?" Chuck asked her, while trying to get more comfortable pressed up between the Death Knight and the coach wall.

"Meh." She shrugged her shoulders. "I'll be fine once I have something to sink my teeth into."

*"Woah! Contact!"*

The stagecoach shuddered and everyone shuffled to one side as it turned at an angle, the horses whinnying out loud. As they slid to a stop, the sound of the crossbows on the roof vibrated through the whole carriage.

Sally popped the door open and fell out, pushed by the rest of them. Landing awkwardly, she rolled up to her feet, withdrawing her staff and shield at the ready. A rush of air pushed against her as a thick vine swiped through the air, aiming for the mobster firing off continuous bolts.

A flash of blue illuminated the area as a bubble-shield went up around the stagecoach. Chuck stood just outside the doorway, his staff held up high and maintaining the barrier.

"Protect the coach!" He yelled, as everyone else poured from the vehicle.

Sally turned to see their assailants. Three giant flowers, their vibrant petals closed to form a faux mouth. They moved around on tentacle-like roots, each with four arm-like vines that were barbed with thorns as long as daggers.

"I've got one," Humphrey growled, hitting it with a successful [Compelled Duel].

A little hasty, perhaps, without seeing what they could do - but it did lower the threat against the coach by a third. She ran, avoiding the whip of one of the protruding appendages. No brains in these bulbs. Both because they had tried to attack possibly the most powerful group of Players in the System, but also literally, as they were flowers.

The green flame of [Mortis Bomb] was flung from her staff toward the nearest giant plant. A pleasant soft violet color, and over twenty feet tall. As the bomb struck it, it turned its large mouth toward her. With one action, it scooped forward and ate up the rising zombies, into whatever lurked within. That was the opposite of how these things were supposed to go.

Sally held the end of the staff out as she got closer, almost upon her target. A barrage of crossbow bolts peppered the plant before the spray moved across to the other two. From the prongs of her weapon, red light circled.

[Ruin]

Beneath the roots of the Monsters, a circle of red light emerged - twenty feet in diameter, it immediately began to tear away at the underside of the flower. It writhed in pain, as cracks and flakes of its roots started to fall off.

Sally jumped into the air and shadowed bandages came up beneath her feet, pushing her higher into the air. She shot a quick glance down at the Shade below her and grinned. A thumbs up emoji appeared beside his head as she went up higher, right before the plant launched itself forward.

The bandages tore away from her as Lucius was eaten by the bulb. She dropped, crimson energy burning in her eyes as she spun the staff around ready to puncture the petals below her. Vines whipped through the air toward her as she fell. The first missed, swiping over her head, but the second she had to block with her shield. A thorn caught her briefly across the forehead, drawing blood, but most of the damage had been prevented.

She landed on the soft flower, jabbing the [Skeleton Key] side of her weapon into it as drops of her blood flecked onto the Monster. It was so large that the depth of the dagger didn't do much to it. Sally growled and pushed it across, cutting a line across it.

Another vine swung across and she rolled out of the way, the plant striking itself. In pain and frustration, it moved its mouth up higher, trying to turn vertical. Perhaps to digest the shade. Sally ran, up the increasing slope of the large petal and leaped, staff out to pin herself to the creature before she fell. Shifting her weight, she swung up to the pouting entrance to the plant, faux-lips closed.

Staff jammed in, she created a small gap. "Are you okay, Lucy?" He hadn't died, that was for sure, but it was a terrible position to be in.

"I'm stuck, I can't move!"

Couldn't see her to shadow either, she assumed. Her brow furrowed as she watched a vine sway around, ready to slash out at her again. Either this would work, or it would end poorly. She liked those odds. The long, green appendage whipped out at her.

[Escape Fate]

By using the barest of gaps the dagger had allowed, the System let her vanish downwards inside the plant. It was dark, and the walls were sticky, as if covered in thousands of fibrous hairs.

"Is that you, Sally?"

"Sure is, bud," her staff burst into green flame, illuminating the inside of the flower. "You ready to get out of here?"

He nodded and then vanished, shadowing her.

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“You are not assisting?” Fern turned their head toward Edward.

“Big monsters aren’t really my thing.” He raised an eyebrow in return. “I am watching the stagecoach in case this is a decoy, or we are betrayed.”

Fern nodded and looked back down at the combat. Dent, Lana, and Chuck had taken down the one on the left. Humphrey was finishing off the middle one. The last had eaten both Lucius and Sally, but nobody seemed to be panicking about it.

The rotating barrels of the roof-mounted dual repeating crossbows spun down, and Jackie sighed.

“Could do that all fuckin’ day.” She pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

There was a brief silence, as if all the sound in the area was sucked into a vacuum, and then the third plant exploded.

Parts of the flower rained down in the area in thick, sodden chunks, as the roots and vines collapsed to the floor and shriveled up.

Sally stepped out of the ruins of the Monster, covered in pink gore and radiating with energy.

“I think they made a mistake.” She licked her lips. “This amount of power is... hard to swallow.”