

Sally yawned. Not that this was *boring*, but it was low effort. Her zombie forced had increased, and while scores of them died between each grouping of Monster packs, she was maintaining numbers through her other skills. She could really do with another ability that increased their base level again.

They hadn't come across any other Quests yet, which slowed down their experience gain, but the amount of damage they were doing to the local wildlife population was at least moving the needle—according to Humphrey, anyway. At least, until they respawned.

“Once we drop the Player off, there is a good area to the north again,” the Death Knight assured her.

“How do you know?” She narrowed her eyes.

He grinned in response. “Archie reasons.”

That didn't exactly fill her with much confidence. Aside from the fact that they were probably stuck here for good, he hadn't labored upon them many more details about what was going on with the world. It stood to reason he might know all if there were five total cats that had been split from the Architect—but with two of them already, she thought he might be able to... well, she didn't really know.

She wanted to bite into the System and take a bigger piece of it. Making peace with what she was had long passed, and she didn't expect a miracle cure that would turn her into a normal Player... and she wasn't even sure she'd even want that. Not that being undead didn't have downsides, but after eating her way through scores of real people, a fully normal Sally might not be able to handle that weight.

Plus, all her friends were undead. They were kind of a package deal.

“I'm not saying you're too heavy, Humphrey—it just might not work as expected.” Norah pat the Death Knight on the arm as he deflated, disappointed he wouldn't get to be flung into combat by her bandages.

Lucius was retelling the fight against Ruben to Charlie, who looked both enraptured and partly in disbelief. He was probably embellishing some of the facts. The big dumb lizard hadn't been able to shift or escape from a handful of lunatic corpses, served him right for getting what he deserved. Greed had been his undoing.

She brought up her Map. Monsters were thinning out now, and they were getting close to the camp where they could drop the Player off. Despite her definitely tasty brains being held in her skull, Sally didn't feel much like eating them. Maybe it was because she had accepted them. It was easier to eat a meal that was angry or fearful, perhaps something her Monster side adored.

“We're almost at the camp,” she announced, mostly because she wanted a bit of attention. There hadn't been any sightings of Red Team or the Last Word, so the trek through the wilderness had been pretty uneventful after the gnolls.

Not that she wished for hardship, and she was sure losing twenty Players would put a bit of a dent in the Red's offensive capabilities. Humphrey had gotten the location of their base out of the woman, so it was possible they could go ruin their day for good. That said, they hadn't officially joined the Blue Team yet, even if it was a given. She just didn't fancy wearing the tabard that much—it would totally clash with the rest of her style.

"I just wanted to say thank you, again," the Player moved over to her. "I feel much better about everything, like a weight has been lifted from my mind."

Sally waved her hand. "It was nothing. Just try to get along with Blue team—I'm sure they'll be accommodating once they realize that you aren't going to double cross anyone."

"Yeah." The woman grimaced. "I realize that I might be hard to trust, but I can't... I can't go back to the others. Not just because the ambush failed—but ideology-wise it doesn't make sense."

Sally nodded. If things were pretty bad, then there would be a lot the woman would need to prove to be considered a proper Blue faction member after absconding from the other. There was something more than just wanting to save her own skin though. She had been angry enough to die right before Lucius had possessed her. It was... strange.

"What can you tell us about the Red faction?" She raised an eyebrow at Charlie. "Some insider information might be useful if they try anything else."

"Oh! Well..." Charlie scrunched up her face in thought. "They know about you five, at least the leader did—and he wanted to make sure you either joined us or died. Knowing how powerful you were to defeat the dragon... you'd either be a boon or great threat to their progress."

"True and true," the zombie replied with a nod. "Their problem was not accepting me and the gang for what we are. They didn't even pretend to make up a plan for what to do with Uniques."

Charlie nodded slowly. "It's a bit shortsighted, now that I really think about it. Unique Monsters are... different, but in a way they aren't so different from a Player."

"We're people too." Sally smiled. "Live and die the same, have thoughts and dreams." Mostly involving carving out people's brains and eating them off Theo's abs, but still.

The woman didn't respond, but looked off through the treeline sheepishly.

Sally nudged her on the arm. "Best thing you can do is convince people of what we really are, stand on our side of the line when the final battle happens. The Blue faction seems pretty on board—the leader is one of my longest friends."

"I'll do my best, Sally." She gave her a warm smile.

"Looks like the camp ahead," Humphrey announced, narrowing his eye sockets.

Three figures moved from where tents had been partially obscured by the foliage. A man and two women in long robes, blue tabards atop their spellcaster clothing.

“Hail,” the man called out, raising his hand. “We were told to be expecting you.”

Sally grinned. “We have someone Chuck said you’d help look after.” She crossed her arms. “In a nice way, not in a faux mobster way.”

“Of course,” the man smiled, a slim black mustache raising in tandem. “We have been told what will happen if we upset you in any manner.”

This caused her grin to extend even further. Chuck knew them well enough to know that crossing them was an easy route straight to her stomach, and it didn’t matter how powerful the opposition was. In a way, she wondered if the Druid had been swayed on his stance with them in mind.

“Off you go then, Charlie. Here.” She held out her arm to get her contact information. “Stay in touch, okay?”

The woman nodded and smiled back at them. “Thank you all again. I won’t forget this.”

With that she turned and went over to the three robed figures, the man and one of the woman escorting her gently back to the camp while the third continued to watch the Party.

“Everything okay?” Sally asked.

“Of course. Are you not planning to join the camp for a short spell?”

“Mmm...” She looked between the *Outsiders* and saw their apprehensive expressions. “Nah, we have lots of leveling to do. Maybe next time?”

“Oh, that is fine.” The robed figure gave a brief bow. “I will have to send them out to meet you, then.” She turned away and walked back into camp without elaborating further.

Sally shrugged and pulled a face at the rest of the group. “You said to see Charlie go, Lucius?”

He rubbed his misty chin. “Not really. It was nice to make a new friend, but I am excited to meet even more.”

She nodded with a smile. It was nice to make friends. No doubt they could find more amongst the Blue faction—certainly more than anywhere else in the area. Just as she was wondering who their surprise guest could be, a figure walked out from the camp toward them.

“Dent!” Sally beamed.

The man stepped over closer to them. His right arm replaced by a long blade from the elbow down, he now sported a rough beard that aged him by a handful of years. Chainmail

overlayed with dark gray clothing made him look like a lost wanderer more than a great swordsman.

From atop his shoulder, Archie appeared, wearing an eyepatch.

“And Archie!” She hopped across the muddy floor closer to them.

“It’s been a while,” Dent said with a grin as he nodded to the rest of them. “Chuck sent me as a bit of an olive branch for being so distant.”

Sally nodded. “He must have a reason, I’m sure.”

“He does.” The swordsman rubbed the back of his head. “All in good time, though. You all close to twenty-five yet?”

She leaned back and pulled a face at Humphrey, who slowly shook his head. “Nineteen,” the Death Knight added.

Dent blinked twice. “Ah.”

Archie stretched out and leaned forward so that Sally would take him. “Typical that you would be so behind the curve and yet thriving.”

The zombie cuddled the cat up close and turned to walk him over to the Death Knight. “I wouldn’t say thriving, Arch. But we aren’t dead yet. Dead, dead.”

“Big brother,” the cat nodded, before jumping from Sally’s grasp and onto Humphrey’s wide shoulder pad. “Just like old times, huh?”

“Almost,” the Death Knight grinned. “I assume this is something more than just a casual visit to ply us onto your side?”

Dent coughed and pulled a face. “Let’s walk and talk. You all need experience and standing still too long makes me itchy.”

With murmured agreement, they turned toward the north as per Humphrey’s earlier suggestion, and the zombie horde moved ahead of them to clear the path from any Monster in their way. Sally looked out at her group of walking corpses with a sigh. It was nice having Charlie’s buffs. Perhaps the System could give her something similar if she was meant to be partially a support necromancer or whatever.

Dent sidled along in the middle between her and the Death Knight. “It’s actually a matter of grave importance—I believe Rachel mentioned it to you, but wouldn’t say too much.”

The cogs in her brain ticked over a few notches. “Ah—she said something about someone becoming the new Architect?”

He nodded. “As far as we know, that is true.”

Archie took over after yawning first. "There is a barrier stopping everyone from going to the fourth area and beyond. But it's not natural, and there are at least a handful that did cross before it was put in place."

Humphrey rubbed the side of his head. "To do that, it would either have to be a Unique or-

"Or an ex-Observer with some remaining power." The cat's tail swished through the air.

Sally narrowed her eyes at the ground ahead to try to focus. So that's why there was such a struggle in this area. They couldn't progress and had blamed it on the broken System. So naturally, the only thing to do was war it out until they could come up with a solution. In all this meantime, some bad eggs had crossed through and leveled, and somehow gotten their way to wherever the Architect resided to claim his crown.

Or throne. Or however it worked. It wouldn't surprise her if it was the same group that had intended to kill off the Architect in the first place. Any Observers that had inside knowledge of how the System worked would be in prime position to enact these plots, that it had taken them this long was curious, but nothing to worry about now.

"What worries me," Dent continued, "is that we don't know when. It could be today, it could be in a week or two."

"But it is close?" Humphrey questioned, flame licking around the back of his helmet.

The swordsman exhaled through his nose. "Yeah."

"That's why we wanted you to level up," Archie said. "In case we need you to kill a god."