

The gathered three stared at her blankly, although Edward didn't know what she was asking. She crossed her arms and wrinkled up her face. "What?"

"Are you... sure about that?" Lucius winced away, a sweat-drop emoji appearing behind him.

"What's the worst that could happen?" She shrugged.

Humphrey shook his head. "It's not like we really know what it does. What if it erases the memories of your old world?"

"Good. If anything, those memories are a weight on my shoulders. I can't return there. All it does is make me miss something I can't have. If Theo is gone, perhaps it will stop the ache over that too." She rubbed at her forehead. "It would be hypocritical to put other through this if I wouldn't do it to myself, right?"

"True. But I'm... still not seeing the benefit."

Edward squirmed, his brow furrowed. "Can someone fill me in?"

Humphrey turned his head. "Lucius has a skill that forces the target to answer three questions truthfully. It also seems to erase any disbelief and hate they have for the System."

The demon nodded slowly. "Isn't it your burning hatred of the System what drives you?"

"Used to be." She shrugged. "But this is my home... you are my family and friends. I need to be undivided in that. If I'm too hell bent on bringing the System down, then I'll lose sight of what truly matters."

Humphrey deflated and rubbed at his eye sockets. "I cannot stop you, but I do not know what the ramifications may be."

"I'm on board if we get to ask the questions," Edward said with a wide grin.

"One each," she wagged her finger. "I realize what I'm asking could be dangerous, especially at the final hour, but I have faith."

The Death Knight just relented with a gesture, and the Shade stepped closer to her.

"Ready?" Lucius asked calmly.

She returned a nod.

[Seek Answers]

For a moment, there was a cooling sensation. Like settling into a bed of fresh sheets. Calming and comforting. She could hear her heartbeat, like it was banging on the window, wanting to get in. Her teeth clenched, but before she needed to act, it was over.

The drab daylight filtered into her eyes and she took a deep gasp of the warm Jungle air. In front of her, the three still stood, Humphrey glaring at the demon, who looked sheepish.

“Hey,” she said, furrowing her brow.

“How do you feel?” The Shade put his hand on her shoulder. “Everything okay?”

Sally raised up her hands to view them, pouting as her brow furrowed. “I don’t... feel any different.”

A smiling emoji appeared in front of her vision. “Maybe you were perfect all along?”

“Yeah,” she said as she grinned. “Now let’s go into the dungeon and stop wasting what time we have.”

They gathered up, and she put away her undead with a wave of her hands. Being able to drop a horde right amongst people was perhaps her strongest skill, on reflection. Something about suddenly being surrounded by hungry undead spooked most Players, even discounting how much the zombies would get in the way or add their own damage to the battle.

Humphrey stomped up to the open doorway of the dungeon and paused. “You sure that you’re fine?”

Sally nodded. “I still have all my memories. There’s just no... I don’t feel angry at the System for bringing me here. You remember back at the start how I felt like the Last Word? Now I’m just... this is my home and I need to protect it. I feel reinforced. Validated.”

He nodded in response and started walking into the Dungeon.

She followed on behind him, pulling the hood over her head. Sure, it had been a risk, not knowing how it would affect her mind, but she knew she needed it. Her human side had been in a panic since day one, and as much as she had been able to drown it out with the zombie side taking the reins... things had gotten a bit much as of late.

Now? She felt calmer. More focused. She grinned, before turning a scowl towards the two lurking at the back. “So, what do you guys ask me?”

They winced at the question, but the demon and shade exchanged a quick glance.

“You didn’t hear or weren’t aware?” Edward raised an eyebrow.

“No?” She narrowed her eyes further.

“Nothing weird, then.” The Shade shook his head, a sweat-drop appearing.

Humphrey grunted and turned a glare back at them. “If we could focus on the Dungeon, please.”

The pair nodded and Sally shrugged, turning back to watch where they were going with her eyes only slowly moving away from the suspicious two. Dimly lit by lanterns, the chamber they were entering had the broken bodies of whatever Monsters were supposed to be guarding here.

“Set dressing, or Reds ahead?” She crouched down beside one of the dead. Some kind of bipedal lizard, armor made of bones, and a feathered headdress on their bloodied head.

“The latter,” Humphrey replied, flames starting to curl down his greatsword. “No experience to be gained here, so their intentions are...” he stopped and furrowed his brow over his empty eye sockets. There was an open doorway ahead of them, but his head turned slowly to the left.

Sally frowned, following his gaze to the plain brickwork wall. “What-” she began.

A beam of light shot from the wall, spiking across the room towards them. Catching through the peak of her hood, it slammed into the Death Knight’s shoulder armor, stopping about an inch into him.

“Ouch,” he growled, crimson flame dancing behind his helmet.

It wasn’t an energy attack though, and Sally looked up at it as it retracted. It looked like a sword, flat and silver—but weaved through the air, stretched out as it had come from the wall, wiggling as if it was a snake.

Lucius struck a pose and held his hands out to form a triangle. With the hiss of air being released, the whole side of that wall vanished to appear as a soft shadow. In another room just past it, a man and a woman stood, both wearing red tabards. Surprise illuminated their faces in being found, the wavy sword snaking back to the man.

[Compelled Duel]

Humphrey immediately strode towards the man, the duel intending to stop the odd attacker from getting to any of the squishier Party members.

“I have to hold this one,” Lucius groaned, his hands still extended. It was larger than what he could usually shadow away, so that made sense to Sally.

As she gestured for the demon to follow her, the woman in the room pulsed with purple energy. “You’re on your own Lambert,” she said, before sinking away through the floor, bubbles pooling around her.

“Damn it!” the man growled and thrust his sword toward the looming Death Knight. It shimmered and flowed through the air like a ribbon, almost circling the plated figure before darting down—striking Humphrey on the side of the head.

He stopped and glared at the man. “You corrupted your STAR for something so pitiful?”

Sally slid towards the side of them to see—and the Death Knight was right; on the man’s wrist was a glow of unmistakable red. At a guess, it had allowed him to use his sword like a wiggly worm that could go through walls. She nodded to herself at this astute observation.

Humphrey swung his greatsword around, the snake-like weapon of the Player wrapping around it but doing little to absorb the force.

“We do what we need to. The world needs rid of filth like yourselves.” He was sweating, and his eyes were full of anger.

“Incorrect,” Humphrey interrupted, fire blazing along his weapon. With a jolt forward, it tore through the ribbon sword and cleaved straight through the chest and neck of the man. “Giving into desperate power makes you weaker, not stronger.”

He looked over at the nearby staircase as the Player slumped over onto the floor. “That makes me the winner.” With a shrug, he gestured for the others to come through the shadowed wall. “This might be a good shortcut.”

Sally nodded and led the others through, allowing the Shade to let go of his spell once they were all through. The Players must have known that they would be on the way—otherwise they wouldn’t be waiting to stick the sword through the wall. A couple of inches lower, and it would have been quite the assassination attempt.

“The other Player probably went to warn the others,” she said as they went to the stairwell leading downward. “My assumption is a full Party of corrupted STARS.”

Edward rubbed the back of his head and looked back at the wall now blocking their escape. “What’s all this about? If you explained it previously, I probably wasn’t listening.”

She narrowed her eyes at him and stopped at the top of the stairs. “We’re all bugged as Uniques, right? Which often comes with an ability. Something the System has given you that it probably shouldn’t have, but knows how to work with it.”

Humphrey nodded. “Corrupted STARS are from Players stealing some ability from the System without its consent. There are usually unintended consequences from the usage.”

“We fought against one in the first area,” the zombie continued, “who turned into a fallen angel or something really edgy. Some of the evil Lana’s have a potentially incurable poison. This dude had a wiggly worm.”

They looked down at the corpse. His STAR was now colorless, just a shadow of whatever it was before, and his sword looked regular.

Lucius kneeled down to pick it up and check, and swung it side to side to confirm. “The lady sunk through the floor. Some sort of teleportation?” A question mark appeared beside his head.

Sally shrugged. “Just some way of delaying the...” she glanced over at the demon. “...one-way trip into my stomach.”

Humphrey started off down the stairs, and they followed suit. With potentially unknown powers expecting them, they were slightly more on guard than they usually cared to be. The Death Knight led the way down into a long hallway, torches illuminating the walls, with the demon in the back to keep an eye to make sure the bubble-woman didn’t try to surprise them.

“You think I could fix them?” Lucius asked, whispering from behind her.

She shook her head. "Don't want you touching the corrupt stuff, Lucy. We don't know if it could spread or anything." She wrinkled up her nose. "If you're going to be fixing people, we'll want you top form, right?"

The Shade agreed. A thumbs-up emoticon appeared beside his head.

Humphrey stopped and raised his hand up, and the rest of them halted. It looked as though there was a doorway ahead of them leading to a wider room.

Sally strained her ears in an attempt to pick out any noise. At first—nothing—but then there was a grumbling voice.

*"Told you we should just kill the animal."*

*"You can't even catch the blasted thing,"* a deeper voice boomed out.

*"Well now the undead are here,"* this one, the woman from before. *"What do you plan now? Lambert is dead, they might already be upon us?"*

*"Then Mus here can kill them off, right? Your arrows loaded up, big guy?"*

*"Yeah,"* the deeper voice sounded out.

Sally leaned forward, as close to the Death Knight's head as she could manage.

"Humps! Humps!" she whispered.

He turned his head slowly and narrowed his eye sockets at her.

"We have to save the cat."