

Chapter 2.63

Answers

The crimson moon vanished.

Everyone stood still in shock. All the colors of the various skills and buffs in play dimmed to almost nothing.

Theo walked forward, as if everyone else was in slow motion. Against the pitch black oblivion, his eyes blazed bright crimson, and his fangs gleamed white. He approached the Players, a female paladin in particular.

“Goodbye,” he whispered, placing his index finger on her forehead.

Like a gunshot, the dark sky vanished, flooding the area with intense sunlight once more. The paladin’s whole head now lay as a spray across fifteen feet of ground. Any blood or brain matter just pitch black goo instead of the expected crimson flesh tones.

The vampire blew the tip of his finger as the woman’s body slowly dropped to its knees and slumped over.

“*Holy fuck!*” his shadow said.

Aside from the Death Knight and Claw, everyone else stood in stunned silence.

“Who... who are you people?” One of the remaining melee classes shook as he spoke, sweat and tears running down his pale face.

Sally walked up beside Theo and crossed her arms. “Dragonslayers,” she grinned.

She held up her hand to stop the zombies, a couple of which wore dirtied Golden tabards. “You’re either with us or against us.” She hoped they would be against her. They tasted so good.

Most of them either looked at the floor or glanced toward the Champion still fighting.

“Oh, he’ll be dead soon too,” Theo yawned and stretched his arms out. “Humphrey doesn’t lose duels.”

Norah walked over to join them. “Need me to tie them up, hun?”

“They’ll be alright,” she scrunched her nose up. “Oh! Norah, this is Theo, Theo, Norah.”

“Pleasure.” Theo gave a slight bow and awkwardly tried to shake hands.

“Great to meet you too,” she smiled warmly. “Sally seems to surround herself with good men.”

The vampire tilted his head and looked between the zombie and the Death Knight, who was still locked into a mortal duel they weren't paying much attention to. Eventually, he just shrugged and wiped the blood from his face.

"I guess we will catch up when Humps is done. I'm glad you're back though, Theo."

"I'm glad to be back, too."

Losing Archie had been sad, and it was a shame that Edward left, but it was good to have Theo back. It seemed as though the System had been content to just give him even more skills as he leveled back up. She didn't even think had used [Novice Strike] in that whole fight.

She shivered, briefly reliving his use of that last skill, before turning her gaze to the Death Knight.

Nothing much had changed. They appeared to be at an impasse where Humphrey could hardly damage the bear, and anything Claw could do to him was eventually regenerated. There must be a time limit or something. They didn't have all day.

"Hurry it up, Humps! We want to press our advantage while they have bad information!"

"Okay," he replied.

Theo licked his lips as he stared down at one of the Players. "What's that about information?"

"Edward pretended to betray us so he could return to the... dragons house? The grizzly relayed the info of it and said I was out of commission, then Norah stole the stone when we attacked."

"Oh, neat," Theo nodded along. "So I can't kill the demon now?"

"He's my Bodyguard now, so no. I thought you had buried the hatchet?" She narrowed her eyes at the vampire.

Lucius popped out beside them both. "Hi, Theo," he waved as a sweat drop emoji appeared. "I'm not a demon either."

"I... knew that," Theo nodded slowly. "The shadow thing was really neat though. I'm impressed you could keep up."

"Thanks, I-"

"Lucius was going to betray us, too. He was working for one of the dragon's Champions, but we killed her and he decided we were cooler and he isn't going to do anything that silly again." Sally beamed and took a deep breath.

"Oh," Theo nodded. "Well, if Sally trusts you, then so do I."

“Seems like you weren’t exaggerating about all the conflict,” Norah tilted her head as she watched the Death Knight fight. “Certainly seems more fun than guarding the pyramid on my own.”

Humphrey slid back across the sand and deflected a downward swipe of the wide claws. “Seems we are at an impasse.”

Claw growled and circled around him.

The Death Knight turned slowly to follow the large bear. “Of course, you could always yield. We have ruined your forces. You can escape this with your life.”

“I will never surrender,” Claw seethed, his eyes reflecting the crimson flame flickering from Humphrey’s helmet.

“Then you leave me no choice.”

[Kneel]

The word rang out across the area, and the bear hesitated. His posture relaxed, and he dropped to one knee, bowing before the Death Knight.

Humphrey took a step forward. “By power of the Dark Lord, I hereby knight you...” his greatsword cut a wide arc of blazing red. “...dead.” It didn’t quite decapitate the large Champion, but it made it enough of the way through to seal the deal.

“And that makes you the winner!” Sally yelled out from the side.

He deflated at the zombie stealing his line and looked over at the group waiting for him, the Mummy fanning herself with some of her bandage. Mission accomplished.

They gathered around in a semicircle in front of the Golden Players, who huddled together on the floor.

“What shall we do with you, then?” Sally drummed her fingers on her belt.

“Do you not just kill all the living?” Norah glared down at the figures. “I *hate* adventurers.”

Theo shook his head. “We used to be more... loose with our morals. Now we let them go if they don’t cause us trouble.”

“And some people love trouble, *ha-ha*,” the Death Knight added.

“Speaking of which,” Sally turned to the vampire and gave him a prod. “How many new Players did you kill and slash or eat?”

“...What would seem like an excessive amount?” He pushed his glasses up and tried to avoid her glare.

“*Theo.*”

“Thirty-two. Or Thirty-four if you count accidents.”

An emoji of numbers and mathematical symbols swirled beside Lucius. “That’s just over ten percent.”

“Some of it was self defense,” Theo shrugged awkwardly.

Sally rolled her eyes. “There’s no time to teach you about reasonable force. Let’s stop yapping and let Humps have the floor for the important stuff.”

Norah conjured up a sideways sarcophagus from the ground and sat down on the end, leaving enough room for the rest of them to sit. Humphrey stood in front of them and sighed, glancing back at the panicked Players.

“Is it okay if they hear it?”

Sally rubbed her chin. She didn’t want them to go back to the dragon and cry about what really happened here, but killing them in cold blood was rather beyond them. “Any of you remember the world you lived in before this?”

They all shook their heads, confusion mixing with the fear.

The zombie shrugged, “Go for it, big guy.”

“First thing...” Humphrey worked his skeletal jaw. “I do not believe there is a way for your souls to return to your previous world.”

Sally and Theo exchanged glances.

“That’s a rough one to lead with,” the vampire rubbed at his eyes behind his glasses.

The zombie clucked her tongue. “*Knew* that would be the case. Things would be too weird otherwise - but does that mean our old selves are dead?”

Humphrey tilted his head from side to side. “Essentially, yes.”

Sally shuffled uncomfortably on the stone casket. Although she was here, and undead already, she wasn’t about how to feel about her previous life being gone. Part of her wanted to stay here anyway, but knowing that returning wasn’t an option...

“We’ll definitely need to get to max level,” Theo rubbed his chin, staring at the floor in thought.

“Yes,” the Death Knight continued, trying to gather his thoughts. “The Architect was unwell before the world even started. My understanding was that Players were meant to opt-in and be able to return. Not...”

“Plucked unceremoniously.” Sally closed her eyes. “That’s why near the start one of the System messages said about a Log-in bonus?”

“A proper video game reality...” the vampire tapped his leg. “So originally, death would mean going back to our proper bodies again.”

Humphrey nodded. “The release was rushed by a group who I do not have the memories for - they have been scrubbed or hidden from the System intentionally. They both forced the Architect to act and then twisted some of the Observers into seeing the Architect as a threat to the System. So they got rid of them.”

“Presumably they’re now working on installing their own Architect?” Theo asked.

“A reasonable assumption. I do not know what they intend to do once that is achieved.”

Sally itched to stop that from happening. Just her luck that the Architect was working with good intention but stuffed everything up every step of the way. It sounded like something she would do - not that she would want to become that responsible.

They fell into a brief silence, as there didn’t seem to be any further flow of information. The Players and the others in the Party not entirely sure what was going on or what all of it meant.

“What if...” Sally hopped down to start pacing. “Instead of breaking the System down - we fix it? Finish what the Architect couldn’t and maybe make it so that souls can return.”

Theo shrugged, “Worth a try, if it’s possible.”

The Death Knight grinned and rolled his empty eye-sockets. “So now you want to save the System. Make up your mind.”