

The rest of the journey was just about what she expected. Boring. She was tired of the movement of the mount and was thankful for the brief handful of minutes that they took a break to give the creatures some of her [Mount Feed]. No other Players on the road—or really anything else of interest. At a certain point, they split from the main road to head south.

“About ten more minutes,” Theo called out.

Sally brought up her Map and stared at the little point denoting her position slowly move down the road. Almost as interesting as looking out at the same handful of trees and bushes they had passed a billion times. There had been some points of interests. Buildings further in to the jungle itself. Way back to the west, there had been a large tower that she wanted to investigate, when possible.

If they weren't in such a rush, it would have been a fun little jaunt—for sure. It was probably some kind of dungeon. Not that she was particularly fond of almost dying in dungeons, but something had to threaten her existence. She winced at putting that thought out into the world. Dangerous thoughts to be having when you had a potentially malicious demi-god stalking the world soon enough. And she didn't mean Theo.

Not that she could ever consider using the magic stake, or whatever he had given her, against him. Even if he turned and became something destructive and uncontrollable. Did that make her weak? She exhaled through her nose. He had gotten wild a handful of times and it had been easy enough to bring him back. Mostly, she thought Humphrey was just overindulging on melodrama to think the vampire could become a bad egg. She had even considered opening it up to see what she was dealing with... but he had trusted her not to.

She wasn't sure how she'd handle losing any of them, truth be told. They had gotten away pretty lightly in terms of punishment. Archie had been the closest to a loss, but that was willingly and now they had another Archie... which seemed worse to put it that way when she thought about it. This was why she tried not to think too hard. Mania had painted several thick layers over the potential panic of her human side dealing with the horrors of the world. Mostly the violence she committed.

With another yawn, she stretched out her back and then adjusted her cloak. Imagine if the System had worked and people went back to their normal world when they died here. Like an actual video game. To be fair, she only had Humphrey's word that it didn't work like that—and the supposed memories of the dead Architect through the cat. What if she was going through all this and he had been wrong? She could have been brained by the Cleric in the diner and then woke up back in her ordinary job like nothing had happened.

After over a year now, it didn't really matter. This was her new life, and she would deal with the after when it came to be. Hopefully, it would just be erasure and the void, and she wouldn't have to consider what she had done, or lost, or could have done differently. Not that she was desperate for closure... she did enjoy her life, even with the conflict and macabre nature of her broken Class.

“Are we there yet?” She whined at the vampire, tired of being alone with her thoughts for so long.

Humphrey shook his head from atop his giant steed. “You know you can just check yourself.”

Norah gave him a squeeze from where she was sitting behind him. “Sometimes a girl just wants to be heard, not necessarily have a solution.”

The Death Knight opened and closed his skeletal mouth before deflating. “I too long for the solid ground beneath my feet.”

Sally grinned at the Mummy, before turning her head back to her shadow. “You good back there, Lucius?” She had to check he was still there sometimes. Although he seemed content enough to stay shadowed indefinitely, if she couldn’t see his crimson eyes, then she would briefly panic that he had been left behind.

He popped out of his form and sat behind her, grabbing onto her cloak so he didn’t immediately fly off the back of the bounding rodent. “Never been better.” No emoji appeared beside this statement.

“Thinking of ways we can kill the Architect?” She grinned and turned back to looking ahead. Winding him up was perhaps unfair, but it should be on all their minds as a possibility. Mostly, she wondered what the Architect’s brains would taste like—if they had any. Would eating them turn her into the Architect? Part of her had wanted that at one point... but now? Responsibility didn’t sit well with her mania, and she’d only end turning things into a mix of paradise and a factory funneling Player brains straight into her maw.

“No. I’m not sure I’m capable of that, even with my...” the Shade paused. “With the secret skills I’m definitely not telling you about.”

As much as she rolled her eyes, Sally also grinned. Bunch of misfits, primed and ready to fail upwards. Or die trying. *Die again.*

“We’re here,” Theo called from the front, popping off his mount as it vanished. He hit the ground and slid across the smooth dirt, hands in his pockets, before friction won over and he came to a stop.

“Not trying that again,” Sally murmured to herself. She slowed her mouse and gave it a pet before it vanished away, Lucius and herself landing on the floor.

Humphrey’s horse whinnied and shuffled to a stop, and he helped Norah down before dismounting himself. He gave the steed a pat on the side and it vanished with a pop of dark smoke.

“Did you give it a suitable edgy name?” Sally asked, raising her eyebrow and smiling.

The Death Knight deflated. “No... Norah named it.”

“I think *Peaches* is a perfectly good name,” the Mummy grinned, and gave Sally a wink.

“Very fitting, I agree,” she nodded in return. Allowing the plated figure to simmer in that, she turned to walk over to Theo, where he had stopped to peer off down in the scenery off to the left.

“Hmm.” He said, then turned to greet her. “This will be tough.”

Sally narrowed her eyes out to see a sparse woodland. The trees weren't exactly tropical and resembled part of the woodland from the starting area. Dry ground, reddish trunks, and a high canopy. In the midst of all these trees and scant foliage were people.

System-created, and possibly human. They looked similar to the barbarians from the Wastes, but more rugged. Thicker muscles, more armor, and their weapons glowed a dim green color.

“Looks... bad,” she eventually said. “Level Thirty Elites... I'm not sure I could even damage them.” Even having [Skeleton Key] at the end of her staff, it wouldn't take much to be overpowered in melee.

“You'd have to leech at first.” Theo tilted his head to the side and looked at her. “Let me do the heavy lifting again. A couple more levels and the whole Party can join in.”

Her nose wrinkled up. “Alright, tough guy. You certain you can even kill them?”

“There's nothing I can't do.”

She rolled her eyes. “The less I dig into that statement, the better for both of us.”

The vampire opened and closed his mouth, before grimacing. He turned as the rest of the Party moved over after having murmured about the horse's name enough.

Humphrey looked out at the enemies and then back to Theo. “Are you certain about this?”

“Don't feign worry on my account,” the vampire gave him a wink. “Just be ready to carry my coffin again soon... I can only do this once a week.”

The Death Knight narrowed his eyes, flame licking at the back of his helmet, but just nodded in return.

Theo stood at the edge of the area and flexed his fingers. Limbered up his shoulders and then tilted his neck from side to side. The pitch black punch-blades appeared in his hands and he hopped on the spot to get some energy built up.

Sally narrowed her eyes as she watched him burn time. Surely he didn't need to make such a show of it?

[Lord of Crimson]

His suit burst away to be replaced by a set of thick leather armor, bright red in color and buzzing with energy. The full helmet turned towards them and he nodded. Around him, the ground indented and a wave of air buffeted the area before he flexed and then burst away.

A crimson trail was left behind him as he zipped straight into the first enemy like a magnetic. [Sanguine Weapon] appeared behind him, and he stabbed out multiple times as the pink energy of [Novice Strike] blurred around the enemy.

As soon as the first Monster fell, [Blood Shift] took him over to the next one and the process repeated.

“Impressive, as always.” Humphrey relented with a shrug. “I would guess he is already Level Twenty-Five since he has the experience bonus, and that means has the number of skills a Level Thirty-Five has.”

Norah whistled. “Plus his stats...?”

“You can assume that they are maxed,” the Death Knight shook his head. “It is more convoluted than that, but it is safe to say if anyone could win a fight, it would be Theo.”

Sally wrinkled up her face. Not because she thought herself capable enough, but because of what she was reading between the lines. “Are you saying we’ll need Theo to kill the Architect?”

Humphrey tilted his head and regarded her with his impassive empty sockets. “No. It may not even come to that. But if it does, it will be a great boon to have the vampire on our side.”

She shivered. There was something she wasn’t liking about this conversation. The clouds overhead had darkened, although most of the daylight still made it through—and there was no hint of precipitation to cool her mood off. It was as if it was just a malaise that hung over the world, rather than actual clouds.

There was apprehension in her bones, and she hoped to get stuck into fighting these Monsters as soon as possible so she could push any worry out of her mind. Half-focused on the blur of red and pink darting around ahead of her, she brought up the STAR Chat.

[Sally: hey, Lana?]

[Your message could not be delivered.]

Although she was half hoping it would go to one of the living clones, that made enough sense.

“Let’s try pulling one,” she sighed and looked at the group. “I need some violence in the present to distract me from...”

“Violence from the past,” Humphrey said with a nod.

“Potential violence in the future,” the Shade added, shivering as a panicked emoji appeared.

She gave them a glum smile as the skull on her staff burst into green flame.

“Yeah.”