

Norah sunk down on the throne and exhaled.

“Sorry, this is so boring, Theo,” she said to the inert body of the vampire. “If only my priests were still alive.” It never took this long—although, she was usually the one dead—so her view of that time might be distorted.

Knowing the System, the ability to summon the priests to complete the ritual would come at her next level up—or maybe at twenty-five. Some guilt about not leveling up quicker gnawed at her stomach, but what was done was done.

The Mummy extended out a bandage, unfurling through the air, before curling it back and into her hand. She repeated this process another handful of times, then her brow furrowed.

As the next bandage went out, it caught the light in an odd way. Instead of being a dull gray fabric, it now appeared to be covered in gold leaf. It returned to her hand and she raised it to see that it was normal once more.

“Curious,” she said.

Her eyes went over to the side as Chat messages popped up, the notifications of the Party members switching around. A warm smile emerged beneath her bandages.

“Not long now,” she whispered, as vibrations through the ground caused dust to fall from the ceiling of the stone chamber. “Not long at all.”

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The skeletal horse and zombie mouse thundered through the undergrowth.

For all that the day had brought them, Sally was energized. The anger and panic had worn away to leave her with the determination to fix this third area. Fix the whole world. Which appeared to be this singular continent, oddly.

She had given herself enough time to be morose about Theo, but seeing all her pals together again... she had to do her best for the System, no matter who fell along the way. It wasn't her job to do it, she was meant to be a lowly zombie stuck in a diner for the rest of her existence. But the System had let her get away with more and more—it'd be rude to not continue to run with it. Plus, dying and being reset was Theo's kinda thing and he could keep it.

Edward was a decent enough stand-in for now, if he would stop pulling on her cloak. She glared back at him, to which he returned a sheepish grin. The skeletal horse had much more room on it, but he hadn't been eager to get back on it for some reason. Probably wasn't comfortable being sandwiched between the metal Death Knight and the fleshless horse. Lucius was shadowing Humphrey instead.

They were riding back deeper into the jungle, where Chuck and Dent were sure that the eyepatch Archie would be hiding. With him being one of the cats, she had thought he might be able to sense that they were coming... and with how he could predict the vampire's

demise they might know the safest place to be picked up from and that the Outsiders would be looking for him.

She had the feeling that there were some other things going on in the background that she hadn't been clued in on yet. Theo had to die for something else to happen, perhaps. That's why it had been kept a secret, so as to not interfere with the progression of the... end times. A bit melodramatic to call it that, but with the overcast sky and looming threat, it fit well enough.

Before setting off, she had asked Humphrey what joining all the five Archies together would do—especially if they were absorbed by him. He had just shrugged, which seemed like bullshit. There was no way either he hadn't spoken to the cat about it, or knew through their memories. Another bad surprise to be mindful of, no doubt.

She looked at the Map again as they bounded over fallen trees and grassy patches. There was a dungeon in the nearby vicinity. It seemed like a good bet. With the world going crazy, people weren't likely to want to stand around and plan out a dungeon run. The only people who would be trying would be those trying to hunt down something specific...

Her jaw clenched. There were two Parties of Reds outside the Spire dungeon. Were they waiting for her specifically? What did they know that she didn't? Other than how to work most parts of the System she had been intentionally avoiding. She had a feeling that the identity of Seven, their leader, might play some part of it.

Nobody seemed to have seen them, or could describe them. Given that their doctrine was especially hostile, those sorts of leaders were usually at the forefront. The big bullies hoping to crush things to rule over the dust. Acting from the shadows... just meant that there was something else at play. Another reason for the formation of the faction and mess in this third area.

It couldn't be any of the Outsiders, as they were all in a coma. Edward spent all his time doing his part in leading the Wasteland. What about the Insiders? Jackie was safe. She was too low a level around here and had made her peace with living a quiet life up until being called upon. Fern was suspicious, but also completely overwhelmed with life outside of their dungeon.

Part of her believed that Chuck could have masterminded leading both factions. Either to ensure he remained on top of the food-chain in this area, or... no, there was no real benefit for him. His plans seemed to click against how he felt about the System way back in the Forest area. The fact that he had killed now proved how far he was willing to go for the Blue teams worldview. Dent had only wanted to be the best swordsman in the world. Would he have chosen Red if not for the connection to Chuck?

Lana was the oddest one out, which was saying a lot. Not really a Player or Monster. A clone of the real one, but seemingly as pleasant as the originator. Currently, anyway. She had helped Theo, where the other clones were part of Last Word and wanted an end to the System.

It was all very convenient that all these friendly faces were together at the right time, to the point that it was hard for her to trust it all. And trusting people was one of her key facets. That and being fine with murder and eating brains.

“Contact ahead,” Humphrey called out. “Reds.”

She narrowed her eyes and gathered her focus on what lay ahead. They had reached the dungeon already, her internal monologue making the time pass by quicker than expected. A half-semi circle of stone sat amongst bushes, a gated doorway on the flat side closed.

Two Parties of Red—these ones not just standing around awaiting their demise, however. They had dug in, used logs and rocks to create low fortifications for their casters and ranged attackers to fire from while the melee Classes stood ready at the front with shields up. Either they were camping every dungeon and landmark in this area, or there really was something up.

No matter, perhaps a little eating would help calm her mind.

It was times like these that she missed the Mummy and the ability to be flung into the middle of bad guys. Badder guys? The skull on her staff burst into green flame as she hopped up into a standing position on the mount’s saddle.

[Quick Reversal]

Edward cast a buff on her as the [Mortis Bomb] flew off towards the crowd.

The lights of the Player’s attacks blazed through the area like a terrible disco. [Impenetrable Defense] flared up as Humphrey dropped from the horse as it vanished, his arms wide to attract and leveled attacks.

Lucius popped out from the Death Knight and immediately hopped over and into Sally’s shadow as she jumped from the vanished mouse and shot out [Meat Hook] over the heads of the waiting melee and into a ranger near the back.

The beam of pink energy drew her over their heads and she stuck her tongue out at them. [Endless Dead]. Dozens of stored zombies began to crawl up around the Red’s as she bounced off some kind of spherical shield that was protecting the ranged attackers. Sally fell to her back and rolled away to avoid an attack bursting up earth from where she had been. She slunk behind a normal zombie that burst from a follow-up attack, a wide grin on her face.

[Desecrate Life]

She flourished the staff around, jabbing out on occasion to put holes into random enemies—whether they were heavily armored or not. All the while moving away and putting undead between her and whoever tried to attack.

At the last moment, she felt the presence of a rogue Class appear behind her, the slight vertigo of their abilities wearing on her before it faded off and the demon’s enchantment activated. She spun near instantly and the intended attack against her was rebuffed. Instead,

she hit them with the skull-end of her staff, twirling it around to slice them with [Skeleton Key] at the base. First slash caught their arm, disarming them, second twirl caught them across the collarbone and dug in deep.

“Why are you here?” she growled at them, pulling the dagger free from the wound, a shadowed version stabbing the opponent in their legs.

Humphrey radiated with energy as his buff pulsed over him. With slow, methodical steps, he had worked his way in amongst the crowd, blocking and riposting. Every strike perfectly calculated and deliberate. From his side, Edward would dart in to take advantage of every time he would put an enemy on the back foot, making up for the Death Knight’s slower speed by weaving in high spikes of damage as he struck out at vital points.

The Red didn’t answer her question, and was even less talkative once she had eaten the brains from their skull. Anger in their eyes, though, which reminded her of Charlotte. A brief wave of guilt rode through her, and she wondered whether she should try to save some of these misguided souls.

“Lucy!” she began, turning toward her shadow. Something weighty struck the side of her head, and the world tipped to the side. Briefly she panicked that something was about to eat her brains—either the pent up guilt and horror she repressed from her own actions, or something was really knocked loose in her head.

System messages flared up in her eyes as she struggled to get the strength to right herself, and without thinking about it, she selected Yes to get it out of the way.

The sounds of battle vanished and a cold feeling washed over her. Raising her head, she blinked away the brief pain in her skull and observed the inky darkness around her. The STAR, illuminating plain stone beneath her, bloiped as a message came in.

[Ruben: Hey Sally?]

[Ruben: Do you want to go bowling?]