

## Chapter 21 Ascension

As the blow from the Knight stayed, Sally risked glancing at the sound of the familiar - if now a lot creepier laugh.

In front of the throne, the ancient armour now stood. Dark silvers and burgundy decorated the ornate plate, and a constant burst of red flame emanated from the back of the helm. In his plated hands, the Death Knight held a greatsword that glowed with the same red energy as the helmet.

The face of the helmet twisted into a devilish grin. "Ha-ha," it reiterated, "I think you'll find, the woman does not die *today*."

[Party: Humphrey has joined]

"These three are barely holding on." The panicked Fighter's eyes darted between the new figure and the Knight. "We need to get out of here."

The Knight hissed and looked down at Sally, disgusted by her. After a brief moment, he relented and turned towards their Party - ready to help them escape.

"*Ha-ha!* Not so fast, Mr Virtuous... [Compelling Duel]." Humphrey lowered his gaze as he levelled a finger at the retreating Knight.

The Knight stood frozen in place, halfway in motion to stepping towards the fallen Cleric as the Fighter had the Ranger over her shoulder, the Rogue supported by her arms. "What are you doing," she hissed.

"Uh oh, looks like you failed your save - ha-ha!" The Death Knight flexed his head side to side and raised the greatsword. "I've always wanted to do this."

Sally sat speechless in the corner, eyes darting between the frozen Knight and the apparent Death Knight Observer - if he was even still that. Slowly, so as not to draw attention to herself, she brought up his details on the UI.

[Humphrey - Level 10 Death Knight]  
[Undead Humanoid] - [Skills Unknown]

The Ranger threw up across both the floor and the Fighter.

"*Uh!* Seriously? - c'mon we need to-" the Fighter yelled and stooped to one knee, dropping the Ranger and sending the Rogue stumbling towards the spiral stairs.

The Knight turned like a statue towards Humphrey and readied his own sword. "Who are you? What are you doing here?" The words came through clenched teeth.

“Well,” Sally smiled, rising back to her feet at the gesture of the Death Knight, “we aren’t huge fans of the System, or the Architect - or even the adventures that come around and kill everyone.”

“That’s right,” Humphrey growled. “So we are going to destroy everything - bit by bit. *Ha-ha!*”

“But... you’re *Monsters?*” The Knight held his sword in a ready position and tensed up.

“That seems to be a matter of... perspective.” Humphrey grinned widely and launched himself towards the opponent, his greatsword flickering through the air with a hiss.

Sally tore her eyes away from the clash and ran over to the doorway. The stairwell was empty save for the Ranger laying sprawled across the floor. She ground her teeth together and weighed up chasing down the escapees - they were heavily injured, but that was a sure way to get herself overwhelmed by accident. The Ranger looked... unwell to say the least, and rather unappetising, unfortunately. She hadn’t gotten to eat from any of them.

The sound of sharp blade against metal came from behind her, and she turned to witness the duel. Humphrey was remarkably quick with the large blade - and seemingly enjoying every second of the battle. As proficient and well-armoured as the Knight was, it was clear the Level difference was against them. Every blocked blow put them on the back foot; already their strength was waning. Their reactions slowed as lethargy set in.

Still, the adventurer was giving it their all - causing the Death Knight to block and dodge around to avoid the flashing blade, neither of them seemingly able to land any decisive blows.

A clang reverberated throughout the chamber as the Knight’s armour was split and dented. The greatsword burned with intensity as if it hungered for the carnage. Humphrey had pushed the foe back to the far wall.

“Nothing personal,” the Death Knight grinned, arms wide in feigned apology.

The Knight roared and darted forward unexpectedly, his longsword blazing a bright blue glow. Static buzzed through the air as the tip struck the burgundy breastplate undefended and Humphrey opened his mouth in shock.

“*Ha-ha!*” His expression turned to an evil scowl as the blue blade just slid off his armour, the attack having no effect. “You had no chance from the beginning.”

The Knight stepped back; now pressed against the wall. He almost dropped the sword as he fumbled around his belt for something.

Humphrey raised his free hand; palm outstretched towards the panicked man.

*[Drain Life]*

A foul mist of green-purple swirling energy pulsed out of the Knight in a stream that made its way into the outstretched plated hand of the Death Knight. The adventurer shuddered, arms limp and no longer searching around their possessions as his sword clattered to the floor.

"This makes me the winner," Humphrey grinned, somehow affixing his large sword to his back.

Sally ran over to the collapsing Knight and threw the helmet off. His eyes were rolled back in his head, and he looked dried out, but food was food. She bit through his throat and savoured the sweet taste of his remaining life force.

"You coulda done that sooner." She scowled at the Death Knight as she wiped the gore from her mouth, along her arm. "Saved the rest of the Party?"

Humphrey folded his arms and looked away. "It was no easy decision to become this. I have severed my connection with the Architect, abandoned my duties to the System, and gone against the very nature of my creation."

"Aw, just because you couldn't bare to see me die?" She teased and walked over to the smouldering body of Chuck.

She hadn't received the notification of his death... bringing up the UI she could see that was on no Health Points again. She knelt down and brushed some of the ashes from what remained of his lower trousers. "It's not shorts season, you goof."

Chuck rolled over, half his face blistered and sloughed off from the burn damage, and slowly started to get to his feet despite his apparent lack of being dead.

"Huh." Sally shook her head before her STAR bleeped.

[Level Up]

Humphrey sat on the edge of the obsidian table, oddly interested in having the ability to do so now.

"Chuck - you levelled up too, but you're down to Level zero-point-one-five. How does that even work? If you get even clumsier from this, I swear I will leave you behind." With a sigh, she tapped her own level-up notification.

Nothing happened.

She jabbed at it again, and again - but the message just stayed put. Maybe she just had to give it a minute. Perhaps the System had performance anxiety.

"Strange, the Ranger seems to have turned." Humphrey idly drummed his fingers on the table. "I'm not sure it's supposed to work like that."

She turned to look at the figure laying by the door, who now had started to shuffle to their feet. His complexion was certainly more on the green side - and he didn't have glowing eyes before. "Perhaps Chuck is the alpha zombie?"

They turned to watch said zombie staring up into the corner of the room away from everyone else.

“Doubtful, *ha-ha*.”

“So you’re just a Level Ten Death Knight now? No fancy background knowledge?” She walked back over to the Knight, being careful to move the flickering torch further away from Chuck.

“Yes. I no longer observe. To put it in a metaphorical sense, while I do not have library access, I have still retained the pages previously read.”

Sally mulled this over as she crouched down by her last meal. Having a powerful Monster in her Party was certainly a big boost - she shot a sad glance over to the body of Big Dave - but a System-linked untouchable knowledge bank had advantages too. It was done now, at least. No sense in aching about it.

She smiled at him as she started to loot the Knight. “At least now we can be proper friends, right?”

“I can assure you that had no weight in my decision.” The Death Knight looked away at the wall.

[240 Gold]  
[Healing Potion]  
[Dried Meat (5)]  
[Sturdy Necklace]  
[Sturdy Ring]  
[Secret Note]

“I’m leaving his armour there because there’s no way I’m wearing plate.” She stuck her tongue out in disgust. It looked like the Knight liked to stack Damage Reduction, which made sense. For all the good it did him. She put them on and felt slightly more resistant to pain... maybe? She brought up the Secret Note.

[Secret Note: Within Walls, Lands Afar, Broken Ground, Crimson Mar]

“Some kind of poem,” she murmured. A problem for another day. Time to try and level up again.

The menu buzzed, but her repeated presses did nothing.

“Humphrey! I am broken - it won’t let me Level Up.” She held out her wrist and pouted towards the Death Knight.

“Hmm.” He stood and came over, kneeling slightly to be level with the held-out STAR. “There is something I may be able to try if you’re willing?”

“Please.” She nodded and then tilted her head as he drew the greatsword. “Unless it involves cutting off my arm.”

“*Ha-ha*,” Humphrey grinned and placed the sword to the stone floor and knelt before her.  
“*Sally the Unliving*, I hereby pledge to be your champion, to protect your life and obey your commands. I will travel with you in every venture you will.”

“That’s very sweet - and slightly creepy, Humps, but-“

The Level Up text fuzzed and vanished, before being replaced by a notification popup.

[Bodyguard: Humphrey, Death Knight - Level 3]

[You are now a Tier One Boss Monster: Elite]

**[Choose your Affinity]**

[Melee Affinity - Increased: Health, Melee Damage, Defence]

[Ranged Affinity - Increased: Speed, Ranged Damage, Critical Chance]

[Spellcaster Affinity - Increased: Mana, Spell Damage, Spell Critical Chance]