

Warm morning light flooded through the window of the tavern, illuminating the plain room. Sally groaned and rolled away from the beam scouring her tired eyes, but just ended up slipping onto the floor. She rubbed at her sockets and tried to organize her mass of blonde hair.

“Too early to be morning already,” she murmured as she sighed to herself and stood to stretch out her back. From the glowing STAR hovering above her wrist, she changed her clothes to black jeans and a shirt, with a red leather jacket atop.

Just because she was part zombie, it didn't mean she liked feeling half-dead in the mornings. She blamed Theo for that - and speaking of...

She walked around the room to the large metal coffin laying on the floor beside her bed. With a dark boot, she kicked at it a couple of times.

The sound of metal grinding came as the lid shuffled off to the side, and the figure within loomed to a sitting position. His dark brown hair was a mess atop his pale face, and his crimson eyes were bleary.

“Morning, Theo!”

“Is it?” He groaned and held his head.

“Serves you right for staying up late grinding.” She put her boot on the edge of his metal bed and leaned forward. “I'm off to have a coffee with Norah, so we can gossip about you and Humphrey.” She grinned.

“Isn't that against the rules?” He plucked out glasses from the side of his silk-lined coffin and put them on. “Want me to get the Questing route sorted for later?”

“Please. Gather the others and we'll meet you by the Temple, pup?”

“Sure, it's a date then,” he said with a grin.

Sally rolled her eyes and moved toward the door. “The only thing I'm hungry for is power. Oh, and human brains.” She waved him off as she closed the door.

The Wastelands sure had changed in the time they had been in a quasi-coma. Even more so in the week since they had woken back up. At first, they drew plenty of glares and drawn swords from the Players who had never heard or seen from them. Once they had been told of how they defeated the dragon, Ruben, to save the Wastes, they had been more accepted. Only took killing a handful of Players, too.

She still received glances as she walked through the city - she was technically part Monster, after all. With the Party all together, they looked like a Boss event made manifest. Theo was the only one also part-Player, the rest were Monsters in all but name. They had become found family. Throughout all the trials and tribulations they had been through so far, they always had her back.

With a quick hop, she leaped into the walled garden of the cafe. Several round tables with chairs were dotted around the patio area, about half of them occupied by now slightly nervous patrons. Some of them were System-created, just fulfilling their routine, acting a role. Narrowing her eyes, she spotted Norah on the other side.

“Morning, Norah,” she grinned as she approached. The Mummy looked radiant, despite being mostly covered by wrappings. She smiled and her bright yellow eyes lit up at seeing the zombie.

“Morning. How are you doing?” She gestured to the table where two coffees had already been ordered.

“Tired. I’ve been impatient to get to the next area.” She cupped the warm mug. Pretending to like drinking coffee was one of her newest favorite hobbies.

“Understandable, hun. Theo too, I bet?” Norah blew the steam from the top of her held cup.

“He was out most of the night farming for items. Relentless, that man.” Sally pouted and looked out over the wall at all the people milling about. So many brains going to waste.

The Mummy had a grin across her face. “Regretting having his coffin in the same room?”

She snorted in response. “It’s amusing. It’s like being an old married couple. He can be annoying, but it’s comforting having him in proximity. Even if there’s nothing there, you know?”

Norah nodded. “Same for me and Humphrey, really. Undeath certainly changes how you think about relationships.”

“Don’t tell Humphrey...” Sally leaned across the table to whisper. “But I let Theo try to *bite* me.”

The Mummy gasped. “Do tell?”

“It was terrible, worse than kissing,” she stuck her tongue out to pretend to retch. “The media makes it look so romantic, but it was like having a medical procedure. I suppose it’s the same as me not wanting to eat dead brains.” Sally rolled her finger around the rim of her cup and sighed.

Norah watched her for a moment, a smile still on her bandaged face. “Enough of that, hun. What’s really bothering you?”

Sally exhaled and sunk in her chair. “Falling behind the curve, and knowing there are a lot of things going on in the third area. Nobody is answering my messages, but I know they’re not dead.” Her eyes narrowed. “Also, Lucius is hiding the other side of the wall.”

An emoji bubble appeared over the edge with a sweat drop within. The figure of the Shade jumped up and waved his hands. Beneath the shadow of his black hood, his crimson eyes were wide with panic.

“No! Sorry, I came to find you and then it looked like you were in the middle of something and I didn’t want to interrupt, but then I was already here so it would look weird if I tried to walk away-“

“It’s fine, Lucius,” Sally rolled her eyes. “Your new outfit looks good on you.”

“Thanks!” He stepped back so they could see his leather armor and cloak, now all in deep browns and black. A love heart emoji appeared beside his head.

It had taken them a while to get the emotive and shadowy figure to open up and get use out of more of his skills. He still held a little guilt over originally intending to betray them, but had proved his loyalty ten times over since. If it weren’t for the emoji bubbles, he would be the only one of them not overtly extra.

“Want to go find the other two? My hands are warm enough.” She grinned and put the untouched coffee back on the table.

Norah shook her head with a smile. “So hard to keep you pinned down.”

Sally jumped atop the chair and then onto the edge of the wall. “That’s why they- *woah!*” She wobbled, almost losing balance, before a bandage shot from Norah’s arm and held her up. “Thanks!” The zombie held a hand out to help the Mummy over the wall.

They dropped down beside the Shade, who had his arms crossed. “You both paid, right?”

“What’s that mean?” Sally beamed, pushing her hair back from her face. “Norah are you any good with hair? It seems to just grow based on my level rather than any conventional means.”

“It does look like it would get in the way, if it weren’t usually matted back with blood, hun.” The Mummy rubbed at her wrapped chin. “I’ll see what I can do when we get back later.”

“Neat.” Sally led them toward the Temple with a wide smile. Despite hoping they could get to Level Twenty in no time at all, apparently the System actively made it more difficult the higher you got. After the war against the dragon and the week of adventuring since, they had managed to get to Seventeen.

Their friend and now council member, Edward, had assured them that they would be able to travel to area three at Level Eighteen. If they were willing to take the risk of being under-leveled, of course. She had no doubts they’d be able to handle it, given that they took down the dragon at Fourteen.

Two areas in the world saved and fixed, or at least as far as she considered. Unique Monsters that only had one life the same as Players, living in some kind of harmony amongst the System-created. The newer groups that had been dragged into this world knew no differently. There was still violence, sure - but at least things were more balanced between everyone who only had one life here.

Now the third had a conflict between two factions of Players over whether they should destroy or fix the System. Frankly the destruction option seemed rather short-sighted,

ignoring the fact that was her original plan. If there was no way of ending the System and sending people back to where they had come from, then fixing it to be more fair and a genuine world they could live in was a close second best.

“There they are,” Norah prompted her from her runaway monologue.

The large plated figure of the Death Knight raised his hand in greeting, his skull-face grinning as crimson flame rose from the back of his crown-like helmet. Theo stood in his black suit with a red waist-jacket, leaning against the wall of the tall temple.

“Hope you didn’t miss us too much.” The Mummy wrapped her arms around the right arm of Humphrey.

“Yes,” he grinned back. “Although it has hardly been an hour.”

Theo tilted his head to look at the zombie through his crimson glasses. “How was pretending to drink coffee?”

“Hush, fangs.” Sally kicked dusty sand at his slacks. “I know what you get up to with that mouth.”

“Well.” He stood up straight and brushed down his clothes. “Perhaps you’ll be happy to hear we’ll be splitting up for the leveling today.”

She wrinkled up her face. “Not especially. Have you already picked teams?”

He shook his head and looked around the rest of the Party. “No, I figured we could just spend half an hour arguing amongst ourselves about it.”

Sally leaned out to the side to catch the empty sockets of the Death Knight. “Classic Sally and Humphrey adventure?”

Theo smiled. “I knew that’s be your choice. The rest of us will group up too then. You have elementals, we have giants.”

“I can’t eat elementals,” she whined.

The vampire shrugged and went through his STAR to send them the coordinates. “You want to get to about eighty percent experience and then we’ll meet up at the next point. There’s some level Twenty elites near the coast. We’ll grind them out for the level up.”

Excitement burned in Sally’s eyes. “Alright, let’s get this started then.”