

Sally groaned and stretched out, hissing as the morning light burned into her waking eyes. She rolled to her side in the bed to move away from the glare and frowned at the figure standing on the other side of the room.

"It's *how* early, and you're already leaving me?" She pouted.

Theo grinned, exposing his fangs, as he buttoned up his dress shirt. "Big dungeon day today, wanted to get a bit more practice in."

She exhaled and sunk into the bed further. "Which one was it again?"

"Dark Cathedral." His smile widened.

She whistled. "The Level Forty one? You get all the fun."

"You know I live for it. They're trying hard mode too, but just the east wing. Three bosses, and pops is up first."

"Humphrey *hates* going first in the dungeons. After that one time with the all Paladin-raid." She brought the duvet up over her mouth to hide the grin.

"*Don't.*" The vampire shook his head. "He complained about it for two weeks. I'm going to work with him to do all this dramatic goading stuff—I'll stand in the background and make fun of the Players while he fights. Try and put them off or at least make my fight a bigger payoff."

"You're up last then?"

"As usual." He nodded. "We have Curtis as the middle Boss."

"The skull-golem? He's a doll, such a gentle giant. When he bursts out into a dozen flaming skeletons it gives me goosebumps. Wish I could be there to watch you fight, pup."

He pulled on his suit jacket and worked the sleeves to be comfortable. "You're on day five of the Zombie Event later, yeah?"

"Yeah. Still low level, but it's fun getting to play about with my pals for a bit. Oh!" She scooted up into a sitting position. "There's this player—Kenny, first three nights he died to my hands, ate his brains each time. Fourth night, he's got something fierce in his eyes. I could see he'd got new equipment and leveled—and he managed to bash my head in, caught me right off-guard!"

"Hey, good on him." He walked around the bed to where she was sitting. "Drop me a message later and let me know how it goes?"

She held his face as he leaned in, and they shared a slow kiss before he moved back away.

"You too, pup." She grinned and looked into his eyes. "But if you don't wash off, and soak the bed with Player blood *again*, I won't be as amused as the first two times it happened."

"I'll wash off and brush my teeth, promise." He gave her another quick peck before moving away. "Naturally, I'm hoping for a wipe, but perhaps tonight I'll take the loss."

“First time for everything,” she said and rolled her eyes. “I’m surprised Chuck hasn’t given you something low level to humble you.”

“Ahh, I have a reputation to uphold.” He gave her a bow and flourished his hand. “Until we meet again, my queen.”

She stuck her tongue out at him as he vanished in a flash of blue that caught the edges of the simple wooden furniture around the edges of the room.

With the place to herself, she deflated and smiled. The Event wasn’t until the night, so she had the day to burn away. It wasn’t like she needed to practice anything either. She had the whole shambling and eating brains thing down pretty well—even if she had to hold herself back a little. Well, a lot.

Relenting to greeting the day proper, she slid out from the bed onto the cool floor and switched into a red t-shirt and black jeans. The nice thing about the Event was that it was in the Forest area, so she got to spend time around the places in the world that brought her the most comfort. Not so far from home, which made stumbling back full of Player brains easier.

It did make the visit to Jackie and Fran’s place a little awkward when Kenny had turned up, but he was a good kid. Thankfully, the System took the trauma of dying away now, so his anger against her had been just a healthy determination. She even gave him some more tips for fighting the undead. Secretly she hoped to foster him into being a vampire hunter to take Theo down a few pegs.

She hummed to herself and tied her long hair back. Chuck had clued her in that the odd growth was due to a bug linking it to her natural progression. It hadn’t moved an inch since they had won. For their part in saving the world, Chuck moved their Stats and abilities about when needed for whatever job they were doing. Which was fine – it was nice to no longer have to struggle for levels or grasp at power to survive.

Humphrey, with his Observer insight, had taken up a Head of Security role in charge of a new batch of Observers. He still liked to do a dungeon or event on occasion, however, just to keep himself sharp. Lucius had become something of a therapist for Uniques and Players alike. It suited him; he loved to help people and was happy to be outside of a combat role. Norah had little interest in fighting, but had taken up a place on the Wasteland Council alongside Edward.

As the Architect, Chuck had taken the power of the Lucius’ skill to allow all Players to have the comfort of being happy within the System. Then, with a mix of Lana’s and Edward’s powers, he made everyone able to respawn. Apparently, it was the simple matter of making a recording of someone’s ‘soul’ to come back when the originator died. It worked for both Uniques and Players. Everyone had the chance to live, fight, and die if they wanted, or just hang about and enjoy their time here.

Combat was only allowed against Monsters, unless in a set Event or Dungeon. It was just what the little snot said he was going to do. She knew he could be trusted, and was doubly glad she hadn’t put the crown on herself. Half the reason she had thrown it at him was to avoid the temptation. Queen of a whole world would just go to her head.

She checked her watch and cursed at herself.

[Sally: running late, sorry!] [Norah: as always, I knew and planned to arrive late myself]
[Norah: ;)]

Without the pressure of conflict, she had become even closer to the Mummy. The struggle had brought the found family together, but this era of peace had allowed them to settle and grow stronger emotionally. Without the need to grind or over-plan, the time spent with Theo had been a joy, too. Any worries that they were just together out of convenience for the bad times had washed away within the first week.

Now it was what, two months? Things were getting better by the week.

She left the bedroom and hopped down the stairs of their house, down into the living room, to see a familiar ball of ginger fluff sitting on the couch.

“Oh, Archie! I didn’t know you were sleeping here.”

He stretched out and narrowed his emerald eyes. “No, I don’t usually stay, because of the noise. I came over this morning. Shall we walk and talk?”

“Of course. I’m off to meet Norah and the gals for coffee.”

“Acceptable. The weather is nice, at least.”

They left the building and stepped out into what was indeed a pleasant day. Despite having the whole world at their fingertips, she wanted their house to be in the goblin village. If they wanted to go down to see Jackie and Fran, there was always a room available - and the rest of the world was just a teleport away.

“Tell me, Sally, are you happy?”

She looked down at the cat. “That’s an easy question. I’ve never been happier in all my unlife.”

“Okay then.” Archie tilted his head. “Are you satiated?”

“Hmm? I get to fight and eat brains still and the stakes are low.”

“Do you like low stakes?”

She stopped and put a hand up over her eyes to block out the sun as she glared down at the ginger interrogator. “What’s this all leading to, Arch?”

He sat down on the warm cobblestones. “Nothing. Go enjoy your lunch, Sally. I just wanted to make sure you were fine with the status quo.”

“Well, thanks? Lucy already does that.” She narrowed her eyes at him before turning away. “Adios, Archie. You should go along to the next guy’s night, maybe try to keep Theo and Eddy in line. They need more babysitting than I can provide.”

Archie didn't respond, but continued to watch her leave, a slight smile on his fluffy face.

The door to the round chamber slid open with a hiss, and the blue light that illuminated the edges of furniture faded under the presence of the daylight coming through the opening.

A figure stepped in and sighed.

"We were going to go out for lunch, Chuck." Dent entered the room and the door hissed shut behind him.

The Architect looked up from the screens glowing blue and grimaced toward the approaching man. "Ah, crap. Sorry, Dent - lost track of time again."

"Of course." The swordsman smiled. "That's why I brought it here." Held by his mechanical hand, he gently placed a tray down on the desk.

A waft of the warm meat and pastry hit Chuck's senses, and he melted. He rubbed at his eyes and yawned, trying to separate himself from staring at screens all morning.

Dent sat on the edge of the smooth desk. "*Outsiders* been behaving?"

Chuck nodded. "Pretty happy. I think Sally and Theo might be getting bored soon enough, though."

"Oh? Not content with paradise?"

He grimaced. "They came to me the other week to request I make their Constitution the max possible."

Dent tilted his head. "Why's that?"

"Same reason that you did."

"Ah." The swordsman pulled a face and looked away. "That aside. They've always been the type to rise up to a challenge and defeat the odds. They are having fun now... but I suppose I could imagine they'd eventually want something more."

"Exactly." Chuck picked one of the pastries up and gestured towards the screens. "Look at this, though. It's something... big."

Dent grimaced. "Big? How big are we talking?"

"Well, you know how it's super odd that the world is just this one continent, nothing further? Like we are in a bubble?" He brought up a screen showing the continent in blue lines, zoomed out to sit inside a sphere. The fifth area restored, it resembled a croissant shape once more.

"Yeah. It is odd." He furrowed his brow at the shape. It didn't even make sense in terms of physics, as far as he understood them.

"I've been trying to..." Chuck clucked his tongue. "Zoom out?"

He gestured with his fingers, and the small globe that showed their world shrank down. While keeping the size set, he then tried to make it smaller still.

"Oh," Dent tilted his head. "What are those?"

His mechanical hand raised and his index finger pointed towards what looked to be the boundaries of other spheres, just on the edges of the perimeter of the screen.

Chuck smiled. "I think we should find out."