

Sally watched in awe as the dragon flew up into the air, the large, leathery wings causing gusts of light rain to pelt the area. With little ceremony, it turned and began flying off over the trees.

"You sure?" Theo asked, watching it gradually vanish out of their view.

She pouted, doubting her decision for a moment, before giving him a shrug. "We both know if I tried to fly on it, I'd only end up falling off. Plus, dragons are pretty large and unwieldy. I don't want more of our scenery trampled on."

Having the dragon hang around would be a powerful ally. She had spent some time pondering her options. Second best thing was to send it away to hunt down any non-Blue opponents coming this way. At best, the zombie could eat up some stragglers and thin the numbers of their enemies, and at worst, it would still slow down their approach.

Chuck stepped up to them. "Party on the road has reported incoming. Still a few hours away."

Lucius butted in. "Are they okay?"

The druid nodded. "Took a bit of damage, but they're alive. Now going to meet up with the northern team. Their safety is more important than what heads up they can give us, I feel."

Sally agreed and told him as such. "It's fair to say the Reds aren't playing nice, any we don't want any more losses." If the Architect just didn't like the *Outsiders*, then if they got killed off, then the remaining Players might be able to live on in the world. Even if the System couldn't abide by Uniques.

Theo looked around, his hands in his pockets. "So, do we just chill out for now until something comes along?"

Sally reached out and put her hand on his shoulder. "I know it's odd having to sit still for two minutes—trust me, being defensive grinds my gears too—but it's the best chance of not getting caught out."

The vampire squirmed at the thought, but eventually agreed that she was probably right.

"If you want to do something useful," she continued, "you have time to go check out the cathedral."

And he was gone, like an excited child. Lucius seemed to have tagged along as well. "You know..." she clicked her fingers. "If it's just going to be escalating threats occasionally broken up with quirky banter in the downtime, it might get old real fast."

"We could always try to be quiet for once?" Edward suggested, a wry smile at the edge of his mouth.

Lana rubbed the back of her arm against her forehead. "I was thinking of setting up a campfire and cooking. Some of us eat normal food, right?"

"Mostly the souls of the innocent." The demon rolled his eyes. "But you can't beat a good stew, either."

The rest of the *Insiders* murmured their intention to consume normal food, which left Sally feeling a little left out. While she could no longer eat or enjoy normal food, there was a part of her old self that missed it. If Chuck couldn't turn her normal after he became the Architect, then hopefully he could at least expand her dietary options. That must be the plan if he wanted no Player vs Player combat.

"You feeling okay, hun?" Norah walked over to her and started to adjust her hair again - the bandages having now come loose after all the fighting.

"Yeah. Well, I feel like there's no driving conflict for this downtime. A new Invasion will come soon, but it'll probably be rather easy. Then we'll repeat until when?"

"Worried about Observer or Seven?"

Sally sighed. "Not even that. I'm worried about after *that*. This can't go on forever, so how can we stop the event?"

Edward pulled a face. "They didn't really give us win condition."

"It's possible..." Humphrey began, "that eventually the Invasions would take up too many resources or meet a condition where if a player hasn't interacted with the event for a certain amount of time, it would cancel. This is speculation, of course."

"So just kill and eat until we get what we want." Sally sighed. "Nothing truly changes, huh?"

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There was a loud groan as Theo opened the large wooden door of the cathedral.

Lucius popped out of the vampire's shadow, a sweat drop beside his head. "That's pretty spooky, huh?"

Theo raised an eyebrow. "Aren't you ghost-adjacent?"

"It's more nuanced than that." The shade crossed his arms. "I'm sure ghosts can get scared, too."

With a nod, the vampire accepted the point. Hands back into his pockets, he stepped into the large main room of the building.

The air was slightly cooler in here, and the dim light coming in through the large stained glass windows did nothing but highlight how dusty and abandoned everything looked. Two rows of pews took up most of the floor space, aimed straight toward a tall stone statue that sat just begin a lectern.

"Odd that the graveyard is so empty," Theo thought out loud, his voice slightly echoing around the space.

"Not even a single System-created zombie or skeleton," Lucius added, but much quieter, lest they disturb something.

Theo grinned, the light slightly catching his fangs. "Oh, I'm sure Sally can fill the place with the dead relatively quickly."

The Shade cupped his misty chin. "How do you keep doing that?"

"Hmm, the fangs thing? A lot of practice in the mirror after I first turned, and then situational awareness of where light sources are coming from. You'll notice I tend to lift my chin up slightly on occasion."

"Huh, you really do think of everything, don't you?" The Shade looked down at the dusty wooden pews as they passed down the center.

"No, but I fudge the numbers enough to where I can fake it." He stopped and looked up, taking the peaked ceiling and the gothic carvings hidden by shadow. "I don't wish for hardship on anyone, but this world... It's always been a comfortable fit for my personality. Perhaps I can say that because I came out on top, and not at the wrong end of someone's sword." He shrugged and leaned against one of the pews. "Or stomach."

Lucius looked around. "You were a normal Player when you met Sally, right? You didn't kill each other because you'd met in your previous world?"

Theo ran his tongue across his teeth. "Can you keep a secret?"

The Shade nodded eagerly.

"In the old world, I had seen Sally around our town a few times, going back and forth to the diner where she worked. I had a big crush on her." The vampire smiled as he looked up at the dimly lit stained glass windows. "Eventually, I gathered the courage to go into the diner."

Lucius crossed his arms. "Bothering a lady whilst they're working isn't romantic, you know?"

"Yeah, I know. I wasn't going to..." Theo wrinkled up his face. "I just wanted to see what she was like, base my infatuation on more than just the fact that she was cute." The vampire pushed himself back up and started toward the end of the cathedral again. "Of course, when I stepped inside, I totally lost my nerve. She was busy with another customer, so I just went and sat down. Didn't even order."

The Shade followed along, but didn't interrupt the story.

"Clocked the character sheet on the counter as I passed. Realized that not ordering anything and just sitting awkwardly was pretty creepy, so gathered myself together to leave. Paid for a meal I never asked for and brought up our shared interest."

Theo stopped as they reached the front and looked up at the statue. Rather sinister in the dim light, the head was obscured by shadows. A robed figure that held a sword in one hand, with a shield at their side.

"I couldn't tell if she was actually interested, or I had blown it with her," he continued. "Somehow I had put on an awkward confidence when talking with her, but as soon as I left the diner, I pretty much collapsed into a pile of mush." He tilted his head and smile. "Of course, then we got brought here."

Lucius ran a gloved finger through the dust on the lectern. "I can see why you'd think you were the main character. Got the girl and became the all powerful vampire."

"Ah." The vampire shrugged. "It was nice being the knight in shining armor for her for a bit. Seeing her now though... I'm just really proud. She knows how to drive actual change and cares a lot for people, whereas I just play the System to the extent of the current rules."

"You're relatively reasonable when you're not brooding or on a warpath." A smiling face appeared beside the head of Lucius.

"Knowing you're going to die puts a bit of a strain on the senses." Theo grinned. "I feel a lot calmer now. That said - I love Sally and would die a dozen times over for her, assuming the stolen blood works. Otherwise, just once, I guess?" He turned and started to stroll around the back of the statue.

"Romantic." The Shade turned back to the cracked doorway at the start of the cathedral. Almost time to go back, he reckoned. "Theo... what was it like to be... dead?"

Theo circled around the other side of the stone plinth the statue stood upon, now with a wooden case in his hands. "Honestly? It felt as though there was no time between getting stabbed through the heart and waking up in the tomb. Like a brief sleep where I didn't dream."

"Oh." Lucius cupped his misty chin in thought as they started to walk back to the others. "Did Sally tell you I used my System disbelief powers on her?"

"No?" he raised an eyebrow. "She doesn't seem drastically different, so that's a good sign. Who asked her three questions?"

"Humphrey, Edward, and... myself."

Theo's eyes glowed a bright crimson. "And what did you all ask her?"

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Sally practiced twirling around her staff. The stew smelled... okay. Normally, that kind of thing should poke at her stomach, but it hardly even registered as food to her senses. There were only so much brains she could eat, even if they were slightly different flavors. Back at the start, she had eaten more than just the special thinking parts, so perhaps she should try chomping on the next meaty morsel that turned up.

"Oh, hey Theo," she turned to see him and Lucius arriving back from their little trip. "Find anything?"

"I certainly did." The vampire gave the Shade a hearty pat on the back before he turned his glare over to the group gathered around the cooking pot. After clocking Edward, he tilted his head back to Sally. "Found a special box. No Monsters or anything, though."

"What's in the box?" she asked, with her arms extended out to receive it as the vampire walked forward. Lucius remained in place, almost statuesque.

"Hopefully nothing time consuming," Theo said with a smile. "We have a couple of minutes, right?"

She nodded and received the box. It was relatively plain in design. A light colored wood with steel framing and... the design printed on it was familiar. "Aw no," she said, and pouted. "This is a chance box. Feels like forever since I saw one in person. It reminds me of when I first started out in Hillan."

"What a callback," Theo said, putting his hands in his pockets. "Now look how far you've come."

Sally narrowed her eyes at him. "You planted this here, didn't you? You ass. You're just a big softy." She stepped forward and gave him a tight hug.

"What can I say?" he said quietly, his crimson eyes moving back over toward Edward. "I don't like leaving anything to chance."