

With a yawn, Sally rolled out of her bedroll and slid down the rock she had been on, her face squishing against the dry stone of the ground. "Blurf," she muttered.

"Good morning," Humphrey said with a grin as she stood up.

She adjusted her hood and looked around. Norah was sitting up against a rock reading a book, and Lucius was perched atop the tallest jutting peak of their little campground. As she stretched out, she turned to see what the Shade was looking at. A blaze of pink energy darted between several of the large lizard Monsters.

"Did that punk not sleep last night?" She scowled at the movement and crossed her arms.

"No." The Death Knight stepped over to stand beside her. "Just killing all night, I assume. I tried waving, but he didn't heed my call."

Sally looked at her STAR, which looked normal. "Either he has been slacking, or we will need to move from the area to get all the experience."

"Yes." Humphrey nodded. "The latter seems most likely."

"Easy enough then." She waved out at the blur of vampire. "Theo!"

He stopped in place, the beast he was standing on slowly slumping over. Hands in pockets, he hopped down and began to stroll over.

Sally tapped her foot on the ground. "Why did you not sleep, fangs?"

Theo shrugged as he got closer. "I can nap while you travel, if that's okay with Humphrey? The leveling seemed more important."

The Death Knight narrowed his eye sockets. "Isn't your coffin now made out of metal?"

With a smile, the vampire withdrew a small cube from his pocket and threw it into an empty space. It immediately expanded out to a metallic rectangle, which caught the morning light. "If you're not strong enough, it's fine."

Crimson flame flickered higher behind the Death Knight's helmet. "I'm sure I will manage."

Theo gave them all a bow. "Until we next meet, then." As the lid popped to the side, he hopped in, falling asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. The metal cover slid back over him.

With a sigh, Humphrey stepped over and lifted the coffin onto his back, with some assistance from Norah to get it secured in place.

Sally narrowed her eyes out to the horizon. "You'd think the System would consider us out of combat since pup is asleep, but he at least left us a clear path out back into the Jungle."

"Best hop to it!" Lucius jumped down from the rock and almost tripped over as he landed. "Can't wait to see what we get next and don't tell each other."

She rolled her eyes. Not that she could complain about some easy levels. The System obviously wasn't expecting one person to solo these Elites all through the night—plus they were under-leveled, so it probably counted for more. The four of them began walking over the rocky terrain through the gap in the Monster packs.

As tempting as it was to beat up and eat some more of the lizards on the way out, she was tired of them already. Better to get their bearings and see where to head to next after their anticipated Level Up. It looked as though Theo had killed the boss at least once, and she wondered if he got any good loot from it. Words for later.

Eventually, the group made it to the edge of the rocky area and back under the canopy of dense tropical foliage. Sally's STAR illuminated a golden hue, and she sucked at her teeth. "Two levels! Theo really treating us, huh?"

[Pick One]

[Improved Escape Fate] [Increased distance by 5ft]

[Improved Eager Stomach] [Eat Brains threshold is reduced further]

[Improved Share Burden] [Damage absorbed is reduced by 20%]

Some actual numbers for some of that too. The System really tried a little harder for this one. Although the damage absorption was quite a high amount, if the zombies were taking the hit anyway, then she didn't care too much if they popped in the process. A little cold-hearted maybe, but she was dead so...

Escape Fate didn't really need to go much further. That did enough already. Eating brains a little more soon—that seemed almost unfair. Then again, she was probably the highest level zombie in the world, and the System had no idea what to do with her and the skill progression. Having an instant-kill mechanic seemed unfair when she was so prolific and didn't have a lot of the downsides a zombie was supposed to have.

[Improved Eager Stomach]

[Pick One]

[Ignore Pain] [Temporary shield equal to 20% Max HP.]

[Strength In Numbers] [Aura. Undead allies gain +1% Stats per nearby undead ally.]

[Rave Review] [When an undead minion kills a target, nearby undead allies gain STR and Speed boost.]

The STAR faded to a normal silver color—no third Level, but Theo had really excelled. Come to think of it, if they were Level Twenty-two now, then he would be at least the same and have his Level Thirty Ultimate already. She narrowed her eyes at the metal case containing the vampire, wondering what it could be. Something edgy and overpowered, no doubt.

"Hey, Lucy," she turned her head back, avoiding looking at more skill choices. "I can have another Bodyguard if you ever felt up to it. No pressure."

The Shade rubbed his misty chin, crimson eyes narrowed. "Let me think on it, and I'll let you know." Ellipses appeared beside him as he did so.

It would be unfair to expect him to join just because they were in a Party and everyone else had. But there were certainly a lot of benefits to becoming one. Perhaps there was even a way to opt out of being a Bodyguard, but the others—even Edward—had never done so. Whatever his decision, it was fine. She might be able to find a different Unique... or even eye-patch Archie! She deflated and returned to the skill choice.

Something to keep herself alive, a big boost for when she had a large horde, or a temporary boost that was reliant on her pals killing things. She noted that the last one said ‘minions’ and not just Undead allies... otherwise Theo would pout if she didn’t pick it. [Ignore Pain] sounded like a lot of personal protection, but when was the last time she almost died? Died again?

[Rave Review] would be better if her zombies scaled better, but would pair well with her Ultimate, [Quick Death]. Nothing quite like a domino effect. Still... [Strength in Numbers] was another aura that was constant. Even with just the *Outsiders* that was a +5% buff to all stats, and summoning any zombies would increase that. With [Endless Dead] at full capacity, that would make them +55% boosted. She salivated thinking about a bigger horde—or even [Zombie Apocalypse] if the System allowed it.

[Strength in Numbers]

Something to make her more of a caster would have been nice, now that she had the whole staff and cloak/robes thing going on. Still, that just made appearing amongst the melee and eating people’s brains all the more fun when they didn’t expect it.

“I’m all done picking, and you’re welcome.” She gave them a bow.

“A new Aura?” Humphrey asked, raising an eyebrow to Norah.

Sally wagged her finger. “I’m not telling.”

“Oh,” the Death Knight nodded in return. “I just felt several percentage points stronger, is all.”

She deflated. They needed to decide what they were going to do for the rest of the day. It was hard to think of anything that was more efficient than the Elites... unless there was another area with higher Level Elites, of course. Sally rubbed her hair in thought.

“Unfortunately, I do not know the area very well,” Humphrey said as he watched her think. “But generally, if we start killing toward the Area Four border, we will run into tougher mobs.”

“Seems inefficient,” she said and shrugged. “But we’re ahead of the expected curve and things usually pick up as we go.”

Lucius gave a thumbs-up, accompanied by a similar emoji beside his head. “Worst case, we can always call on one of our friends.”

“Good point,” Sally said with a nod. She spun up her STAR to open her chats.

[Sally: hey Rachel]

[Sally: just in case you didn’t hear, we joined Blue]

[Sally: Dent is pretty persuasive]

[Rachel: Glad to hear it!]

[Rachel: I hope to fight alongside you in the future.]

Some brains could avoid her stomach, after all. Well, just because she was greedy enough to want to eat everyone, doesn't mean she should. Eventually she would run out of Players, so that was a long-term problem. She pulled her hood over her head to shadow her face. How dire would that be? To be without any proper brains at all?

[Endless Dead] brought back all her zombies from the previous day, the large lizard zombies crashing through the vegetation and trees, unused to the busy terrain and uncaring at how they got through it. They got the whiff of the pack of Monsters ahead and tramped through the area, destroying plant matter and the surprised creatures alike.

"Perhaps the System should have more limits on what you can zombify," Humphrey said with a wince.

"Don't give me that," Sally wagged a finger at him as she snarled. "Remember, I never got my zombie dragon—so allow me everything else I want forever."

A sweat-drop appeared beside Lucius.

She pouted back at the terrain being mulched. If she had a dragon, she could fly about and do stuff like... probably fall off of it mid-flight doing something goofy and breaking her head on the ground when she met it. There must be other dragons in the world... she would just need to pry the information out of someone and then it would be good as done.

"If I ate Edward's brains until he died for real, would he come back as a zombie that could respawn, too?" She tilted her head in thinking out in the open, rather than expecting an actual answer.

Humphrey shrugged. "Remember original Chuck?"

She shuddered. "I almost forgot. Do you think we should tell him, eventually?"

"What's this about Chuck?" Norah leaned in, keen to hear the unspoken knowledge.

Sally sucked her teeth. "Aaaah. I'm not sure I should say—but okay, you have to promise to keep the information to your graves, though. Figuratively, uhh..." She glanced between each of the undead.

Norah and Lucius both nodded.

"His... Player soul got stuck in limbo when he was brought to this world. It was partly tied to an actual zombie, and then when that zombie died... his soul found a place and he was reborn as actual Chuck." She grimaced.

A question-mark appeared beside the Shade's head. "None of that means much to me, but that explains why he was a good friend if he used to be a zombie, too."

“He was a friend in my life before here too,” Sally said and sighed. “It all feels so long ago now.”

“Things have certainly changed.” Norah gave her a soft smile. “For all of us, hun.”

Lucius crossed his arms. “Well, if you ask me, we’re on the up! I have a super good feeling about today.” Stars sparkled either side of his head.

A crack of thunder rolled across the sky, and Humphrey growled as he held his face.

“Everything okay?” Norah put her hand on his shoulder.

With a deep sigh, he lowered his hand. “The new Architect has been chosen.”

They each turned to glare at the Shade, as sweat-drops continued to appear beside his head.