

Sally flexed out her outstretched fingers. There was still a hum of energy to them. Slowly fading, but the skill had been more than she had expected.

“What was that?” Humphrey asked, as he stepped over.

“[Brain Drain].” She turned her head to observe him. “Damage based on how many brains I’ve eaten. It scales *pretty* well.”

“Pretty well,” the Death Knight repeated, looked back at the remains of the giant flower.

Lucius stepped up to them, trying to rub the plant gore from his arms. “You have eaten *a lot* of brains.”

“More than most,” she agreed. It had a long cooldown, but it was essentially a kill move at this point. Something to keep in her back pocket, possibly as she throttled the Architect.

“Back to the wagon!” Chuck yelled out, forcing them all into action.

Sally exhaled. Despite not needing to breathe, or have a pulse, or do anything a living person does, she had settled into doing the motions at some point. Made her feel like a human again, maybe. The System allowed it, or at least didn’t punish her either way. Now look at her.

A plated hand rested on her back to help her along. “That was the first Invasion wave. They will increase in severity for as long as the Event goes on.”

She looked up into the empty sockets of her faux-father. “How often?”

“Unknown. I estimate between twenty minutes and an hour per wave.”

That wasn’t terrible. Assuming they could keep the stagecoach functional then they’d still be making better time than anyone else in the area. She looked up to see Edward and Fern drop down from the roof, while Jackie remained leaning against the dual repeating-crossbows, a lit cigarette in her mouth.

“Humps, any knowledge on Observer threats?”

“Hmm.” He stopped by the doorway and looked back out into the Jungle. “I believe there are just under twenty remaining. Some will have moved to the other areas under the directive, but the majority might be here, somewhere.”

She nodded and gestured for him to enter the stagecoach. The sooner they could get moving, the further they could travel before getting interrupted again. She hopped in last, to be squished against the closed door once more. The faces of those inside looked more strained now.

“This plant stuff is gross,” she said with a sigh, prodding at it all over her black jeans. “At least it smells nice, though.”

“An upgrade to what you are usually covered in,” Edward agreed, pulling a face.

She wrinkled up her face as most of the others nodded their agreements. "I still feel like we are missing someone, though."

They looked around and counted themselves. All present.

"Don't worry," Dent said. "I'm keeping an eye on everyone. Just in case there's a shapeshifter or something, you know?"

Edward tilted his head. "You'd be able to tell?"

Dent didn't say anything, but nodded.

The stagecoach lurched forward again as the gangster-adjacent horses pulled them back onto the road. There was a slight breeze that rushed through the open window on Sally's side, and it calmed her. She needed to save a bit of that rage and energy for the rest of the day.

While the death of the vampire had set her off on the quest to kill and destroy everything, she had been tempered by her friends gathering. Something he had planned, knowing her well enough to keep her on the right track, apparently. If he was lost for good, then she'd rage again, but this whole Event thing was so draining. Maybe it would be better if she fell, eventually.

She was an oddity, an error that had inflicted plenty of wounds on the System. If you put the faction war down to just human nature, then the world had done fine for a year without them. If she had died in the first area...

Things would be pretty bad for Uniques still. Ruben might still be in power and doing worse things to the Wastes. She shouldn't be so hard on herself. All that was left now was to fight until either she or the System broke.

The stagecoach shuddered as if prompted by her thoughts.

"Sorry!" Jackie called from the roof. "*Think I just hit some shmuck.*"

They hadn't stopped moving, so it couldn't have been anyone dangerous. Or with any sort of situational awareness. Either a Player following the tracker blindly, or a system-created Monster wandering onto the path. Nothing exploded or stabbed through the walls, so the danger must have passed.

"How are you doing, Sally?" Humphrey asked.

"Meh," she said, taking her eyes away from the roving outdoors to turn toward the group inside. "I am *the* villain now. System has made sure of it. To all but those in this coach, I am the big bad evil gal."

"You're not... *that* evil, though." Chuck pulled a face, remembering all her achievements, good and bad.

She idly looked between each of them. "Other than Humphrey, I could kill you all."

Dent shrugged. "Hasn't that always been the case?"

"In less than five seconds," she added. Her eyes went back to the Jungle as thick silence filled the stagecoach. Not that she would kill them, of course. She was powerful before and could have taken most of them individually, maybe some of the weaker ones grouped. But now... the System had burdened her with the capacity to be something worse.

It would be a simple case of using all of her Event skills at once, then picking off the remainder. Probably key the Death Knight immediately, before he could use one of his many defensive skills. Drop fifty zombies amongst the carnage of whoever remained.

That would make her an easy target for others, though. And alone.

She smiled to herself before looking over at Chuck. "Are there many first wave Players in the Blue team?"

He shook his head. "A couple. There's more in Red team, but even then - not a lot of people made it through both areas."

Dent tried to adjust his sitting position, but had no room to move against the Death Knight. "The ones who have were either lucky, strong, or extra patient."

"All four of us are first wave," she nodded, looking over at Lana. "What about the rest of your old Party?"

Chuck gave a sad smile. "Anyone who hasn't pushed this far or fallen is just trying to live a normal life in the other areas. After Ruben fell, they went back to the Forest."

Sally could understand that, to some degree. After being forced to adventure to line to pockets of the dragon, it was no surprise some wanted to give that a break. No doubt another thing that had shaped Chuck's vision of the future.

"I've never been to that area," Lana offered. "I mean, this body hasn't."

"We'll go there once this is all over." Sally smiled and sunk into the seating, closing her eyes. "Big feast and party, all the goblins and all the pals we've made along the way."

She didn't open her eyes, but she could feel the mood in the coach lighten. Although a feast didn't really mean a good thing for the Outsiders usually, unless there were some naughty Players on the side to munch into. Once Chuck's vision came to pass... there would be no such delights for her.

Well, she was sure the druid wouldn't make her starve. Maybe he could invent fake-brains for her to eat. Stock her fridge up with them. Live a normal-adjacent life with... no, too soon for daydreams. There would be another Invasion wave coming up soon, something to sharpen her teeth on.

"Recon, Chucky?"

His eyes unfocused as he went through his Chat. “Clear so far, updates are slow from one team, however. Still alive.”

That could mean anything, though. The stagecoach vibrated as they went over a rockier part of the road.

“*Ah, you’re fuckin’ the suspension, tin can.*”

Humphrey grinned sheepishly.

Even if they lost the stagecoach now, they had saved hours of trekking through the Jungle. Especially if they were meant to be assailed every twenty or so minutes. Instead of being bogged up just outside one of the major cities, they’d be all the way close to the fourth zone. Her brow furrowed.

“Anyone know if the fourth area barrier dropped?”

They looked at each other, but with shrugs and shaking heads, they had no idea.

“Whoever the Architect is, they took someone with them who could create a barrier.” Humphrey tapped a finger on his knee. “It is likely any accomplices are still in that area, since the fifth was destroyed.”

“Then they might have kept it up.” She pouted. Eventually, all the gathering forces would push them up against the wall of the area they couldn’t move into. If it had gone and they could continue rushing passed... well, it wasn’t as though they could outrun the Architect, unfortunately.

Chuck nudged the Death Knight. “Any closer to knowing what Archie is planning?”

“I’m afraid not.” He tilted his head from side to side. “It’s not that simple. You know how cats are.”

“I... guess?” The druid grimaced.

Sally fidgeted. “I can feel the next Invasion coming. Why are they against me? Shouldn’t Monsters be on my side, against Players?”

“Such a betrayal,” Edward said idly, as he stared out the other side of the coach.

“Also,” she continued, “can we just outrun them?”

Humphrey shrugged, pushing the two men sitting next to him against the walls more. “It is possible, but we would be delaying the...” his eyes narrowed at the demon. “We would have to fight them eventually, and it would be better to do so when it is under our control.”

“True,” Dent agreed, while trying to push the Death Knight back away. “Last thing we want is to be fighting Players or worse and have a train of System-created arriving late to the party.”

“*Or worse,*” she repeated to herself, looking back out of the window but holding onto her staff tighter.

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Norah was out of breath. The toes of her bare feet gripping at the armrests of her throne as she stood upon it, her arms extended out and fingers twitching.

Unraveled to the point of being covered by little more than a bikini's worth of bandaging, her deep gray hair covered her face as her head hung low in concentration.

The tomb vibrated again; the wrappings squirming around as if in as much pain as she was.

Small trails of dark blood ran down her arms to gather and patter against the stone floor below her.

"Aww," a deep voice boomed from outside. "*Why won't you come out to play?*"

Another deep vibration shook the air inside the cocoon of bandages, and the Mummy hissed from the pain.

"Just a little while... longer," she seethed, her yellow eyes aglow, beaming through her hair as she looked up toward the golden-wrapped vampire. "True Monsters never die, they only fade from the memories of the foolish."

She clenched her teeth together as something started to pound on the outside walls.