

The weight of the phrase sunk into Sally slowly. Sure, it had been the plan from the beginning, right? Eat the Architect, get revenge on the System... but now that it was an actual thing that they might be expected to do...

Well, she hadn't brought her best cutlery set, for one.

"How could we kill a god?" She was surprised to hear this questioning voice was her own. The rest of the gang shared a similar amount of apprehension about what was expected of them.

"Just fail upwards," Dent said with a wry grin. "Same way you chewed through an army and killed a dragon."

"That was different." She deflated. Now they'd set a precedent that they might be competent there was no avoiding all these side-quests.

Humphrey looked perturbed but tried to keep their moods up. "The Architect, while technically the creator of this world, any upstart wouldn't be exactly god-like in power should they take the mantle."

"So they could be killed?" Norah asked.

"Yes. Should they allow us the chance, *ha-ha*." The laugh had a little less heart in it than usual.

While the vague description of their power didn't give Sally much confidence, it also didn't surprise her. The original Architect was killed after all, and didn't have a way of fixing things themselves. Maybe part of the world was just as it was, unable to be changed to such a degree she imagined a god would be able to. She clucked her tongue.

"What makes you sure they will be a villain, and not try to fix the System?"

Dent and Archie exchanged glances before the cat sighed and turned his one good eye to her. "We don't know for certain how they'd act. If it is the group that killed the Architect, then there's a chance they want to change the world to suit their own vision."

"Which means there's a chance it's nothing good," Dent added, "and we're preparing for the worst."

Pragmatic. Sally scratched at her hair. All it meant was that the worst was bound to happen. The narrative wouldn't allow it any other way. "You guys are Level Thirty though, right? What do you expect us to do?"

"We are... but..." the swordsman scratched at his chin idly with the end of his blade. "Chuck has a lot of faith in you. That's not to say that I don't, but..."

Archie yawned. "You not being a group of Players makes you somewhat of an anomaly. There are very few actual Uniques that care to run the same gauntlet as Players, if you can believe it."

Sally could. In their adventures so far, all the Uniques they had met had sooner gone to live a normal life rather than put their lives in danger. Present company excepted, of course. That was the crux of it, though, wasn't it? A normal life. Beyond being a Monster, or having to grind out levels or Quests to stay relevant. She screwed up her face in resignation.

"Unless anyone has any objections, I would like us to formally join the Blue team." She paused and crossed her arms. "On one condition."

The rest of them stopped. Dent frowned. "We're not actually called-" he said before stopping, the cat resting a paw on his shoulder.

"I stand by your decision," Humphrey said, with a brief bow.

Norah tutted, but gave a nod. "As much as I despise adventurers, having a clear enemy would be appreciated."

"I'd like to make new friends," the Shade added with a thumbs-up appearing beside his head.

Dent smiled and raised his eyebrows. "Alright, Sally. What's your condition?"

"We refuse to wear the tabards!" She huffed and tried to stand taller to make her point.

Archie nodded. "That is reasonable. We accept."

The six of them stood in silence for a few moments before the zombie deflated.

"It's just a verbal agreement then. There's no actual 'thing' to it?"

"Correct," Dent said with a grin, before gesturing them forward once more. "Just kill the... Red team, and assist us when you see us. Your group is too much of a wildcard, so I won't bring you into the gears of the machine proper. You can still act as free agents until we have need of you." He tilted his head. "Until *the System* has need of you."

"Great." Sally sighed. Responsibilities. So not much had changed since the start of the day, except she trusted Chuck a little more and she could eat brains quicker. The fact that the System might need their help was a bit of a wet blanket over their plans. Still, without the System what did they really have?

They'd just have to keep getting more powerful until the new Architect was crowned and then see what happened. Either way, they'd need to be strong as possible. Especially as Chuck had already hit Level Thirty before them—unacceptable. As contemplative silence filled out the group, she narrowed her eyes at the swordsman.

"So, Dent, tell us about Chuck?" She grinned.

He raised an eyebrow in return, but had an otherwise impassive expression. "What did you want to know?"

“Well... we haven't seen him since the big battle in the Wastes... so anything you can tell us?”

Dent tilted his head. “Hmm. Well, after you all rolled through to the Golds to fight Ruben, Chuck and the surviving Players moved up to the battlefield. He healed me up pretty good. Save a lot of lives that day, in fact.”

Sally nodded. Enough to turn someone against Uniques after seeing what Ruben had wrought in the area. “Then what?”

“He tried to heal you all, too. There's a remarkable amount of care in his heart for you, despite his disagreements with your... methods. Between him, Edward, and Archie, they devised the tomb to keep you safe while your souls wormed back into your bodies.”

Archie yawned and stretched out atop the Death Knight. “Chuck is a lot calmer these days. More at home in this new world.”

“Does he know we can't go back?” Sally furrowed her brow. “Dent, do you remember the old world?”

He shook his head.

“Chuck does, yes.” Archie nodded. “At first it weighed heavily on him, but in time it became motivation to get where he is now.”

Humphrey tilted his head to look at the cat. “It is rather impressive what he has accomplished. He always had more... tact for these things.”

Sally grinned. “Not hard when our default is eating or murdering our problems. You're right though, Humps. I'm proud of Chuck.”

“You can tell him that when you see him,” Dent said as he grinned, “I'm sure that will get him flustered. He has been melodramatic lately.”

Unsurprising. The return of the dragon slayers mixed with the unknown new Architect, alongside the war between the two factions. That was a lot for the little pacifist dweeb. “Tell us how to level quicker then. It'll take forever to get to Twenty-Five.” She gestured out to her zombie horde, who were chewing through packs of what looked like giant insects.

“Northeast of here, there are a bunch of large elites and an area boss. You could probably farm that for a few levels before it starts to slow.” Dent raised an eyebrow to Archie.

“Agreed. You should be tough enough to survive them. If not, then big brother needs to keep the other Archie fragments safe.” He pawed at the side of the Death Knight's helmet.

Humphrey sighed. “I'll need to absorb all of you at some point?”

“We'll see,” the cat said with a small smile.

“Alright then,” Dent stopped and held his good hand out to be shaken. “We just wanted to fill you out on a bit more exposition before you got too far ahead of yourselves. Now you know the stakes... I’m glad to be on your side once more.”

Sally beamed as she shook it. “Always a pleasure, Dent. You give our regards to Chucky, okay?”

The swordsman gave a brief bow and smile before both he and Archie disappeared in a blur of blue teleportation.

“Wow,” she said with a sigh. “Things just don’t stop don’t stopping, huh?”

“Yes...?” Humphrey shrugged.

Norah moved up and put her arm around the Death Knight’s. “What would a new Architect mean for Uniques like us?”

He slowly shook his head as he looked at the worried Mummy. “Anything from acceptance to immediate death.”

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“They remind me of the giant frog.” Sally wrinkled up her face.

“Toad,” Humphrey replied.

The creatures were definitely large—at least twenty-five feet tall and patterned in green and orange scales. Not quite dinosaurs, although they were similar. Four stout legs and a large mouth filled with sharp teeth. Bulbous in nature, their yellow eyes lazily watched around the area and they stomped about in a pattern.

“The Boss is deeper in.” Humphrey scratched at the side of his head. “We’ll need to be careful if these are all Elites.”

Sally rolled her eyes. Like they were ever careful. The dark brown rocky ground was scoured of most vegetation, as if it was either volcanic underneath and too hot, or the Monsters had eaten it all. Given the length of their sharp teeth, she doubted the latter. “Let’s pull one and find out. I’m not keen on feeding them all my zombies or getting collateral problems heading our way.”

Skull in hand, she threw [Mortis Bomb] out over the space into the first Monster. A blaze of green left a small mark on the creature as it immediately stomped out the four zombies with the thrashing of its wide front feet.

“Mean,” she huffed. “Alright, battle positions gang! The afternoon draws late. Let’s level before it gets dark!”

They nodded their agreements as the Monster growled and ran towards them. Lucius shadowed into Humphrey and the Death Knight pulsed with his buffs. Norah shot out two

bandages to tie around the legs of the creature. The first snapped off underneath its power, but the second wrapped tight and the Monster stumbled.

Humphrey ran forward to meet them, his greatsword flourishing.

“Heard from Theo, hun?” Norah asked as she strained against the weight of the enemy trying to pull against her binding.

“Nah.” She shook her head and held [Curse: Decay] on the target. “Knowing him, he’s probably been killing things non-stop to level higher than us. He’ll drop in at an opportune moment to steal some thunder.”

“He’s not a bodyguard, though?”

“No, just has a knack for knowing when I need him.” She smiled to herself. “Oh, Humps did say I’d get another Bodyguard slot at... Twenty? It’s about every five levels.”

Norah smiled and summoned a sarcophagus to fling out at the Monster. “You thinking of asking Lucius?”

“You think Lucy would accept? He’s settled in well with us, but sometimes it feels like he’d rather be off doing something instead of adventuring.”

“Won’t hurt to ask, hun.” The Mummy shrugged. “Let’s get to Level Twenty first.”

Sally grinned and flipped her dagger around as her curse could no longer take hold. The Monster growled out as Humphrey blocked a stomp and his shadow sliced out at the extended leg.

“C’mon pals,” she yelled back to her waiting horde. “Let’s go feast!”