

Humphrey scratched the side of his head, adding a metallic scraping noise to their pensive silence and causing Lucius to wince.

“So,” Norah said as she tilted her head, “the two options are either these Blue tabard adventurers are going against Chuck’s will, or they are Red faction dressed up to frame the other for what they intended to do to us.”

“Precisely!” Sally raised a finger into the air. “I can’t decide which makes me more angry. Betrayal? I could never accept such a thing.”

“But what about-” Lucius began, before she pointed her finger at him in interruption.

“I had misread Chuck’s inconveniently timed messages and thought he was feeding us to the wolves,” Sally tapped the side of her head. “Not that it would have really changed the course of our venture, huh?”

She glared down at the woman, who they had gagged once more so that she would stop seething at them. Her eyes were still ablaze with hatred. It wasn’t because they had killed or eaten most of her friends either, Sally knew the difference. This was disgust and disdain for what the *Outsiders* were.

“You’re clearly Red team,” she tutted, shaking her head. “You wear your prejudice brighter than any tabard.”

“That’s rather poetic, for you.” Humphrey tilted his head at the zombie, then caught the glare of Norah.

Sally waved him off. “I ate a lot of smart brains recently. I can’t remember which, but something gave me some Intelligence. Or Wisdom. I forgot the difference.”

The Death Knight nodded slowly, his eyes narrowing.

Lucius crouched down beside the bound woman. “So, are we going to kill her? Not going to do some ‘good cop, bad cop’?”

“It doesn’t really work if you tell them that’s what you’re doing.” She rolled her eyes. “I’m not sure she’d tell us anything useful either way, and it feels so sad to murder in the cold light of day rather than in the heat of battle.” With a pout, she gave a shrug to the Shade.

He looked up at her with his crimson eyes beneath the dark hood. “I have a skill I’ve never used before. It’s uh... weird.”

Sally furrowed her brow. “I can deal with *weird*. What does it do?”

“It’s like...” ellipses followed in the air as Lucius rubbed his chin. “It’s like a truth potion, but a lot creepier.”

“I can deal with *creepy*.” Sally nodded for him to go ahead.

[Seek Answer]

Lucius pooled into mist and swirled into the nose and covered mouth of the woman. She tried to squirm away from inhaling the Shade, but after he fully vanished, she relaxed. Her eyes were now a crimson color, staring off at the horizon.

Sally withdrew the gag from her mouth. "That was creepy and weird."

The woman's mouth opened but didn't move as the words came out. "You have three questions."

She blinked in return, before looking back at the Death Knight. "You might wanna take the call, pops. I might waste it with inane quirkiness."

"I'll leave you the last one," he said with a grin. "Although, don't call me pops."

Norah placed a hand on his shoulder. "I don't know. It suits you."

Humphrey deflated and crouched down beside the possessed woman. "Are you part of the Red tabard faction?"

"Yes."

Sally clicked her fingers and scowled off at the surrounding valley. They might need to move soon if the respawns were short here. In the Forest they were slow, but it also seemed to be based on how many Players were in the area. Things had been much quicker to come back after their coma where the Wastes were quite populated.

The Death Knight tapped his finger on his plated knee in thought. "Where is your headquarters located?"

"North of here, near an area known as Thunder Cove."

He raised his eyes to the zombie and gestured for her to continue.

"Ahhh." She bit her tongue and tried not to ask something weird or about pancakes. "Who is the leader of the Red tabard faction?" She should have paid more attention to what the factions' actual names were.

"I do not know their true name. They are known as Seven."

"Seven?" Sally scrunched her face up. "What kind of name is that?"

Humphrey rubbed his chin in thought as the mist poured back out of the woman's mouth and nostrils to form the Shade back on the outside. Lucius pulled his hood back over as he blinked a few times and looked back up at the zombie with her bright green eyes.

"I'm sorry if that was traumatic or torturous," Sally said with a glum smile. "We're not barbarians, usually."

"No..." the woman furrowed her brow and looked over to the Shade. "It was actually... pleasant?"

“That was my first time,” Lucius shrugged. “I wasn’t sure what to expect, but it was fun. Did you want to be friends?”

The woman bit her lip. “Sure? Unless you are planning on killing and eat me?” She raised an eyebrow at the rest of the suddenly confused *Outsiders*.

Sally worked her jaw and let her brain catch up to the conversation. “We can let your transgression slide—but you have to join Blue team and if you try to cross us, it won’t end well for you.”

She nodded eagerly. “Charlie. I... I’m sorry for thinking you were monsters that needed destroying.”

Norah raised an eyebrow to Humphrey, who gave a shrug in return.

“Alright then,” Sally scratched at her hair. “Lucy, come help me loot for a sec. You two can unwrap our new pal here.”

Resigned grunts from all of them, but they did as they were told. She walked up towards the dead Players with the Shade in tow.

“What did you do in there, Lucius?” She narrowed her eyes at him.

“Me?” A sweat-drop appeared beside his head. “Nothing criminal. Player brains are interesting places, though. There’s like a...” He rubbed his chin in thought.

“Sickness?” Sally asked.

“Yeah!” He clicked his gloved fingers. “Like a System-sickness. Part of their brain that has trouble accepting this reality.”

“So when you were in there, you cured that?” She kneeled down by one of the bodies and started looking through their gear.

“Not really cured,” he said with a brief pause, a question mark beside his head. “It was more like unclogging a blockage. Or pushing something under the rug.”

Sally nodded and looked back up at him. He allowed the woman to suspend her belief and allow herself to be content with what life she now had here. Nearly all Players had zero active memory of their previous lives, but there must be parts lurking in the back of their minds, making them want to reject the status quo here. Marius had been a prime example of that. Other than herself, Theo and Chuck were the only others she knew had past memories they could access.

It probably would have broken them if they weren’t bugged, or didn’t have each other. She felt bad for the Druid being left without them for a year. It was time to reply to his messages.

[Sally: we missed u too]

[Sally: I understand if we can’t meet yet]

[Sally: Reds disguised in blue tabards ambushed us.]

[Sally: We have a turncoat. where can we drop them safely?]

Charlie might be thankful for the Shade unlocking the part of her brain, allowing her to be satisfied with the System, but she didn't want to drag the woman around. Lucius could have pen-friends on his own time. They had a world to save. Or something.

She looked back up to the Shade again. The System was supposed to pump you full of something when you joined that made you forget the past and accept the new. It obviously wasn't working as well as intended. It was a difficult thing to shunt a mind to accepting a whole new reality without some consequence. Which made the power that Lucius had more powerful than a lot of things the rest of them had.

"Hey, Lucy." She stood and brushed her hands off on her clothes. "Don't you go dying anytime soon, okay?"

He nodded, but a confused face appeared beside him. "I'll do my best, Sally."

He'd have to. That sort of ability would help smooth over the world once she was queen of it—or whatever the plan shook out to be. While filling the populace with the Shade was hardly a step up from the System drugging people itself, there would be a way to do it that wasn't as predatory as they had just exhibited. She looked over to the woman, who was now unwrapped and looking rather sheepish between the two undead.

Her STAR bloiped, and she checked the messages.

[Chuck: Bastards!]

[Chuck: Sorry, that's Dent rubbing off on me.]

Sally narrowed her eyes.

[Chuck: Glad you're okay. There's a camp South of where you should be.]

[Chuck: Stay safe, keep in touch?]

[Sally: will do x]

She spun the menus around and then brought up the Chat with Theo.

[Sally: Humps just killed ten Players solo.]

[Sally: Hope you're being just as impressive x]

With a smile, she walked back over to the others with Lucius in tow. "Alright, listen up. We have permission from head office to drop Charlie off at a nearby camp. She'll join up proper and spread the word of how great we are." She hoped anyway, although the Blue faction might have a dim view of the turncoat, they seemed the more reasonable side.

"Charlie," she continued, "we will be killing anything in our path, so best to stay back. My zombies won't target you, unless you annoy me."

The woman nodded. "Thank you, Sally. I'll be on my best behavior." She smiled, something earnest that was in contrast to how much fury her face had previously held. True magic. "I have some buff skills I could cast, though?"

"Be my guest," the zombie grinned in return. She could see that Humphrey was rather neutral on the Player, but Norah was full of her own disdain for the adventurer.

It made sense. Out of all of them, she was the more classic Monster. Defending her home from invading forces, that was the extent of her interaction with Players. Other than Chuck, she hadn't really met any 'good' Players. Sally knew there was more nuance to it. She was part Player herself, of course.

She wondered what the Shade's ability would do to her. Perhaps a thought for a better, or worse, day.

"Onwards, to the south!" She pointed more to the east, before correcting herself slowly, finger moving through the air.

---

"Sally is safe. I'm still worried, though." Chuck deflated in his chair as a ginger cat leaped up onto his lap.

"You think she won't like the plan? Won't accept it?"

The Druid worked his jaw. "There's a lot of moving pieces. I just want things to work out okay for everyone."

He stroked the ginger fur of the cat slowly, running his hand down their back to avoid the flaming skull it had for a head.

"Oh, things will," the cat started to purr. "Things will."