

Sally rolled to the floor and needle-like shards of chitin stabbed around her, embedding almost a foot deep into the ground. The Invasion had come just as she had expected it - something like a sixth sense warning her just before. Enough time for them to disembark from the stagecoach and wheel it further away.

Chuck, Edward, and Fern remained near it for protection as Jackie pelted the enemy with long bolts from the roof.

Lana seemed to be an odd mix of mid-range fighting. A small crossbow in one hand and a hooked sword in the other. With Dent, Sally, and Humphrey at the front, the clone kept between them and the defending group to ensure nothing started to get ideas.

Not that they could miss the movements of the current foe. Lucius spun a shadowed staff beneath her as she readied her own, looking up to the large figure slowing them down.

Some kind of bipedal porcupine, it was larger than even the plants had been. Singular, thankfully, but it was fast despite its size. Something like this would be a Raid Boss, she assumed, based on no prior knowledge. Despite the blood running down her left shoulder where her shield hadn't been up quick enough to block one of the long projectiles, she had a wide grin across her face.

This large Monster had a brain.

Debatable, if it was fighting both the Insiders and Outsiders together, but technically, it would have something up in their head. She just needed to get up there once it was on low enough health. This had been proving difficult so far, as it didn't seem to have an issue battling all three of them in melee. Not only was it a giant of a creature, but it had metal armor across its stomach, a spiked mace and a shield in their hands. Every so often, in between swings, it would shoot out the sharp spines into the air.

[Brain Drain] was still on cooldown, and she didn't want to lose all her zombies by summoning them around the Monster. They did much better against small groups or weak crowds, so hopefully the next Invasion was something more to their benefit rather than a giant Monster again.

Dent had taken a bit of damage, but was remarkably evasive - she had watched him parry the giant mace of the Raid Boss, where most people would have been flattened. Chuck was keeping him healed and providing the occasional shielding to one of the three in melee range. Jackie had been pelting the large creature almost continuously, but most bolts had fallen away from the armored parts - only two dozen or so actually finding purchase somewhere that drew blood.

Still, she was used to these sorts of things taking no time at all. Every minute they spent battling this creature was one minute further from Theo, and people could be tracking them down. People were tracking them down.

"Grab it, Humps!" She ran toward the Monster as it swung the large mace toward the Death Knight.

He dropped his sword and instead caught the metal head that was almost the same size as him. Blue and white light flashed over him as he slid back two feet - and as the porcupine tried to bring the weapon back up, it could not.

Sally leaped into the air and hit [Meat Hook], the spiraling pink line flinging her up onto the extended arm of the Monster. She continued the momentum but running up the arm, [Mortis Bomb] bursting over her staff before being shot off toward the growling face of the Boss.

Spines shot out in reflex. [Escape Fate] moved her away, right onto the long snout of the Monster. The rest was just procedure. Everyone debuffed the opponent, and she stabbed. She grinned. She ate brains.

Sliding down the falling body, her fall was broken by a landing pad made of soft fern and moss. She rolled back up to her feet and bowed low. A few seconds passed, and then up behind the zombie, the Boss began to stand back to its feet.

Sally righted herself. "Back in the vehicle, stop gawking!" Turning her head back to the undead porcupine, she gave it the Command to protect the road. The System wasn't likely to allow her to store something that big away, and she was full already. Slow legs meant they'd soon outpace it - so if it was able to soften up anyone following this route, that would be neat.

Running back to the stagecoach, they filtered and squeezed back in. Lucius popped out of Sally's shadow and went back up to Jackie's. With pausing to light a new cigarette, the mobster gestured for the horses to start dragging them back onto the road. They zoomed past the confused-looking Raid Boss, their arms hanging limply at their side.

Sally hung out of the window and waved bye to them. She then sunk back inside before anyone could chastise her for risking losing her head.

"Under different circumstances, this might even be fun." She tilted her head to the rest of the group, who perhaps didn't share her point of view.

"A challenge is good and all," Dent rubbed his chin. "But only if there's the option to tap out."

Chuck nodded. "There will be a point where we will be outclassed, even if you're not."

She pouted. "Eh, I'm not sure. There will be a time where the Architect will intervene if I can hold out enough, right?"

The druid shrugged. "This is all pretty big and unexpected. Whatever happens, the world is going to be drastically changed."

Sally scrunched her eyes up. There was a connection somewhere... even if the Architect was bad news for Uniques and those with bugs and errors, they hadn't done anything bad toward Players. Whether that was because Players were needed to keep the System going, or the new boss just had better ideas for how to run things... it seemed odd.

"Dent," she asked, "what defensive options do we have near the area four border?"

“There’s either a fort inhabited by neutral stone constructs, or a shallow amphitheater type space out in the open.”

While a fort might be a traditionally good place to try to defend against unknown Monsters and Players, being trapped in rooms or corridors would be a detriment to them as much as it would for their assailants. The outside area would give them plenty of space for all their skills and to engage threats as they saw fit... but they’d also be sitting ducks for certain types of skills.

“Ah, let me think on it,” she eventually decided. “I much prefer being on the offensive.”

“That could be an option,” Dent tilted his head to the side. “Until we lose the stagecoach.”

Walking it wouldn’t work out too well when Players had tracking on them, otherwise it would be ambush time. “Invasions happen at night, Humps?”

He nodded slowly. “There is no rest until the Event is complete.”

Given that ‘complete’ meant the Outsiders dying, she wasn’t too keen on that. There went the plan of waiting until night and finding where the Players slept, too. If only the dead could be resurrected, they could just die and then be brought back to complete the Event themselves. Her brow furrowed.

“How does the whole soul thing work, Humphrey?”

The Death Knight shuffled awkwardly. “How do you mean?”

“Pretty much the whole process, right? Souls get here, in these bodies, then when people die - where do they go? Is it even a soul thing?”

His mouth opened and closed. “I’m unsure what I can tell.”

At least four pairs of eyes glared at him, willing for more information. “You know, then?” Sally narrowed her eyes.

“Not... exactly. Even the fully formed Archie does not have the full Architects memories, and some part of what you are requesting is part of what the original creator had set up.”

Her hand clutched at her staff tighter as her teeth clenched. “So, what *do* you know?”

He sighed and took a few seconds to gather his thoughts. “A soul, as you imagine it, does not exist. There is no ghostly spirit inside you that leaves, or was even brought into this world. It is more of a sequence of data.”

“Our thoughts, the way our brains work and the like?” Her eyes grew tired, but she still glared at him. “So we’re all clones, in a way?”

“The you from the other world is dead, so it is more a transfer of consciousness.” Humphrey had a sheepish look across his skeletal face.

Lana leaned back and closed her eyes. "So, for all intents and purposes, I am the *original* me. As much as any other Player is."

"Then Norah isn't stopping a soul from floating away, but the data stream that is 'Theo' from what... being erased?" Sally tapped her foot on the floor.

"That is... I'm sorry," Humphrey lowered his head. "I do not know what happens after a Player dies."

She wasn't satisfied with that answer. "Chuck, resurrection magic works here, right?"

He nodded. "There are limitations, but yes."

"Then there must be some... temporary storage of Player data, at the least?" She pulled a face. On the surface, it still sounded like it was a soul and they were just arguing semantics. Knowing for sure might guide them into finding a way to... do something useful?

"At least for a week," the druid unfocused as he brought up his STAR windows. "Under seven days, most of the body present, some material components. Very long cooldown."

She nodded, but didn't really know what to ask next.

"I don't usually tell people I have it." Chuck looked out of the window. "There's always more death than chances to use the skill. Lately I've been selfish. Saving it for if one of us fell."

It didn't take much to guess he was talking about Dent. The rest of them were undead or Unique. She couldn't blame him for it. If she had a special bring-someone-back-to-life skill, she'd only use it for the *Outsiders*. They'd probably be a lot more reckless if they did, though, not that they currently needed it.

She yawned, the conversation exhausting her emotionally. They still had a little while to go before the next Invasion.

"*Makin' good time, boss!*" Jackie called from above. "*Might only be one more Invasion before we get to bats!*"

With a touch of her STAR, she brought the Map up. The mobster was right. While they could have spent all day getting this far on foot, the stagecoach was making the distance a non-issue, the occasional speed bump of an Invasion notwithstanding. Walking and getting into fights every twenty minutes would have been draining.

She allowed herself a little bit of excitement. Even though she was trying to temper her expectations and know that realistically Theo might not come back with the key, it would be great to see Norah again. She bet the Mummy had been pretty bored just sitting there and watching the dead vampire.

Plus, even if the key didn't work, Theo's data might be in the System for a little longer. They could find another way to bring him back, she was almost sure of it.

And if he was dead for good, then she would remember him fondly as she brought the world to its knees.

A crack of thunder sounded out over increasingly darkening skies.

Assuming they all lived that long, of course.