

They stood in awkward silence for a few moments as it sunk in. There would be no mistaking that what Humphrey said was true or not, out of any of them, he would know.

“What does this mean?” Sally eventually asked, her zombies now standing still and looking around aimlessly while she processed.

Humphrey rubbed the side of his metal head. “It shouldn’t be an immediate process. We have potentially a couple of days before they are empowered and can make changes to the world.” He stopped rubbing and deflated. “But this is all new ground, so I can’t say for sure.”

The metal coffin on his back popped open, and Theo stumbled out. He adjusted his suit and put his glasses back on his face as he gathered himself. “What happened? I felt something dire occur.”

“New Architect has been chosen.” Sally filled him in and helped him fix his collar. “Short time before potential doom.”

“Good thing I’m not dying today then,” he gave a slight grin back. “Do we have a plan yet?”

They shook their heads.

Theo held his hand up to his eyes and sighed. “Alright, I have the location of some Level Thirty Elite humanoids we can go power level on.”

Humphrey furrowed his brow. “Even for us, Level Thirty Elite Monsters are...”

“Trust me,” the vampire grinned. “We don’t exactly have the time to do anything but go all out.”

The Death Knight nodded.

“How’d you get that information,” Sally prodded him in the arm. “And how far away is it?”

He shared over the Map details. Near the Southeast point of the map, quite close to the fourth area. “I asked Chuck.”

She pouted back at him. “Oh, he’s talking with you now?”

“Well, you hardly ever check your messages, so...” Theo put his hands in his pockets and turned away from her glare. “We have mounts, but just two, so-”

“Actually, I have my own transport,” Humphrey said with a wide grin, “I can take Norah.” He stepped to the side and held out an arm.

[Nightmare Steed]

A large skeletal horse, covered in heavy metal garb, burst into being on the ground in front of him. Crimson flame flickered from the eye sockets of the undead creature—much taller and wider than any usual horse. But then, it’d need to be, considering the rider.

Sally whistled. "I hope that lasts longer than the last one." She turned to avoid the Death Knight's glare. "Lucy, you can pick me or Theo to ride with, either shadow or normal way."

"With you would be great!" Sparkling eyes appeared beside his head. "I've never ridden a mount before."

With a click of their fingers, the giant zombie mice appeared beside the two undead-Players. Sally hopped atop hers and gave it a pet, before holding a hand down to lift the Shade up.

"Straight there," Theo said. "No stopping?"

"Stop only for Red team." Sally pushed her hood back so she could see them all better. "I know that it's a distraction, but it will be worth it."

Theo and Humphrey both nodded, and then they were away as soon as Sally cast [Endless Sleep] to put away her zombies. Her mount jumped and dodged through the dense trees and overgrown foliage, avoiding all the packs of the Monsters living in the Jungle.

"There's a path to the north, about five minutes," Theo called out to her. "We can follow that halfway there."

Sally checked her Map and gave him a nod. It would be much quicker along the road rather than trying to make it through the vegetation. She saw that she had messages pending from Chuck.

[Chuck: Sorry for everything.]

[Chuck: I have a bad feeling about this.]

[Chuck: Hopefully Theo knows what he is doing.]

[Chuck: We don't have a tele there as it is... rough]

Silly goose had been running an army, practically. Now he was apologizing for things he didn't need to. She missed him, and the small glimmer of hope within her considered the new Architect might be decent and then they'd all live happily ever after. Actually, now that she thought it in her head, it sounded less likely to be the case.

[Sally: no worries bud.]

[Sally: hold the fort, we'll meet soon, okay?]

[Sally: if it's bad, we stand together.]

[Chuck: If it's bad, we fall together.]

She smiled and closed it down. Poetic, although he might have been full of pessimism when saying it, rather than it being the motivational line she had read it as. They were all oddities in the System. It was a wonder they had made it this far. Still, that didn't mean she would go quietly into the infinite void.

"This is actually quite nauseating," Lucius groaned from behind her.

"Just hold tight, bud." She grinned as the warm air whipped through her tied-up hair. "And try not to vomit on the new cloak." Being covered in dried blood was one thing, but vomit would be beyond the pale. Not that the Shade ever ate anything...

The three mounts burst out from the greenery and landed on the illuminated road. Shuffling to the right, they began to bound down the clear path.

Lucius leaned against the zombie's back. "This is better, slightly."

"How is it you don't get motion sick as a shadow, but a little ride atop a giant zombie mouse has you all greener than... uh, the Jungle?"

"Oh, I should try that." He vanished and his crimson eyes appeared from her shadow.

She raised an eyebrow behind her, and her shadow gave a thumbs-up. Riding time was a nice break to really process things. While the Forest was mostly them pushing against the System, and the Wastes was ousting a problem figure ruining the area, the Architect coming back into being was something different.

They were potentially at a disadvantage, and had no control over the when, where, or what. All they could do was get stronger and hope that if there were any problems with the new policies of the Architect, then they could just overpower them like usual. Of course, they could just as easily be erased from existence for being outside the norm. Then all of this would be pointless... but they had to try, at least.

Humphrey was vague on what actual powers a new Architect would have. A few days for them to settle into the role, but after that, what could they do? Some of the System was set in place, she was sure he had said at some point, so there were limits... but that's as far as his Observer knowledge could take the conversation. The parts of Archie within him surely knew more, but without all five, there were gaps.

If the Death Knight absorbed all five of the cats, would that make him the Architect? Probably not if there was already one assigned... but then that added the question of would the new god accept that there were little shards of the previous owner walking around? Probably not if it was the group that killed the first Architect. How could they keep Archie safe from an entity so powerful?

She missed the days where eating a bully's brain was the toughest challenge they had to face. Even taking Sanctuary from the System-created would be preferable to having to deal with the handover between the murdered god and potential assailant.

"You alright?" Theo rode his mouse beside hers and raised an eyebrow.

"Long distance travelling let's my brain do too much thinking." She pouted at him. "That usually makes me sad."

"When we get to our destination, I might have something that'll cheer you up." He grinned, revealing his fangs.

Sally considered it was probably unlikely he had even more abs than currently. The second option of Player brains seemed like wishful thinking, too. Third choice was potentially new items dropped during his kill spree last night.

“I look forward to it,” she said with a grin. As soon as he rode ahead a little, her smile faded, and she deflated. Not even a cool new legendary item could rouse her spirits. She’d still accept it, though.

“Contact!” The vampire took her from her thoughts and she looked up ahead in the road.

Three figures stood just to the side, possibly arguing about something, before the approaching undead Party caught their attention.

Red tabards.

They went to run, but the Outsiders were too fast. A twelve-foot tall pyramid burst up in front of them as they tried to escape into the jungle, pushing them back to the road. One of them, an archer, recovered and had an arrow burning with power just as Theo appeared behind them, sinking his fangs in. Sally sent a flaming skull out from her staff toward them, as bandages wrapped around the third.

Theo turned from his victim to stab the one struck by the [Mortis Bomb], grabbing the body and throwing it up into the air as the Party thundered past. Sally leaped up from her seat. [Eat Brains].

Norah threw her captive into the air toward them, as the vampire appeared in the air, striking them through the back before they fell to Sally, who ate their brains as well. Theo vanished again and appeared back in the saddle of his mount.

The last figure stood shocked and bleeding profusely from the neck as the raised zombies overpowered them.

“Two out of three isn’t bad,” Sally said as she wiped her mouth. It would just take three days for those zombies to catch her up, if they didn’t die before that. Nothing quite like a bit of cavalry to come save the day at the last minute, although they’d probably be stealing Theo’s thunder at that point.

Perhaps she should ask him what his second Ultimate was. Would he even tell her? Probably not. She glared at his back as he rode in front of her. She could understand the spectacle of leaving these things to mystery until they could come in and save the day, but it was also too convenient. They could have anything until the time came up where they exactly needed something. She knew Norah had something like that, and she was just counting the days until they found out what that was.

She yawned. The rest of the trip might be somewhat boring unless they occasionally ran across groups of the enemy faction. Then again, most were unprepared for the Party at full force. Little could be. It brought her brief comfort that together they were stronger than most things. Like a roving natural disaster, they had surpassed the best Players. Not only that, but had been working to make the System a better place—few could stake a similar claim.

In fact, she had lived a good unlife. Carved her own place out amongst the ruins of a bugged System and gathered a tight-knit group of found family. A weird sense of love and companionship that went against her nature, but felt right. Worries washed away, as she felt rather content with what she had achieved. Optimistic about the future.

She looked up at the sky, which was darkening further. The rumble of thunder shook the distance. Getting closer.

It was just a shame the System didn't share her positive viewpoint.