

Humphrey grimaced. "I'm not sure that's how..."

He was interrupted as Sally struck her two weapons together before binding them with all the twine and string she could find. It wasn't exactly stable. Perhaps the Death Knight was right. She scratched the top of her head and waved her bound ponytail about.

"Hey Lucy, come shadow my dagger for a second?"

The Shade walked over to the rock she had both her weapons laying on. He rubbed at his misty chin and the shrugged, a similar emoji appearing beside him. With an outstretched finger, he cast his shadow ability on the dagger.

Sally positioned her staff, her tongue sticking out as she tried to judge the distance and positioning. "Alright, end it."

The dagger popped back into existence and tried to escape from the blocked position where the staff now sat. Immediately she was upon them both, holding them in place with her full strength. At first, they resisted and squirmed beneath her hands, but after a handful of angry seconds, they gave up and merged.

She lifted up the staff, which now had her dagger sticking from the bottom. With a flourish, she spun it around, gripping it like a spear before twirling it around and jamming it into the ground. The Skeleton Key slid into the rock easily and the staff remained standing as she crossed her arms in pride to beam at the others.

"That's not supposed to do that," Humphrey said with a sigh, rubbing the side of his head.

"Story of my unlife," she continued to grin. "Watch this, too." She took a dozen steps away from the staff and pointed her finger at the inert skull sitting at the head. It burst into green flame, and then with a flick of her wrist she sent the [Mortis Bomb] off to splash against a rock ineffectively.

"I'm almost jealous," Norah smiled as she leaned against a rock. "Players seem to get all the fun when it comes to loot."

"Maybe that's something else we can fix with the System." She went and plucked her new item from the ground. "It also increases the damage and healing of any spell I cast with it, and it makes any undead near me extra happy."

"I'm pretty sure I can feel that," Lucius nodded, a smiley face next to his head.

Humphrey rolled his empty eye sockets. "What about your Level Up?"

In all the excitement, she had totally forgotten about that. Not that she cared for looting at the best of times, but it wasn't everyday you found a Legendary item that was perfect for your Class. It was almost suspicious... unless that was the way it worked. It would be disappointing to get an item you couldn't use. She sighed, relenting to see what the System wanted her to choose from this time.

[Pick One]

[Hunger for Flesh] [Undead allies have +10% Lifesteal]

[Persistent Curse] [Channelling a Curse for five seconds turns it into a debuff on the target]

[Construct Golem] [Create an undead golem (requires body parts).]

She clucked her tongue. “What did everyone else get?” Perhaps she could waste some time while she decided and not feel like the whole show was about her.

“We all agreed not to tell you.” Humphrey grinned widely and crossed his plated arms.

Sally gasped. “Norah, even you too?”

“Sorry, hun.” She shrugged apologetically. “If it’s any consolation, it is something we shouldn’t need. I hope.”

She groaned in response. That made her more interested in what it could be if it was a last ditch ability. Something dangerous or desperate. Part of her knew that mean they would have to use it at some point. That’s how the System liked to play these games.

“Nothing from you either, Lucy?”

The Shade shook his head, and a mute symbol appeared beside him. “It’s tough because it makes me really excited and I want to share, but I promised Humphrey and I wouldn’t want to break a promise. I’m sure you understand, and it probably won’t be long before I get to use it, as it’s a...” He held up his hands over his misty face as the Death Knight glared at him.

“Well, that’s fine.” She narrowed her eyes back at her options. Interesting ones once more. The golem one would have been nice if she had picked up that body-part skill back in the Wasteland, but as it stood she only really had skulls. Enough to cast [Mortis Bomb] forever, but she didn’t want to split the stack and burn through those reserves.

The Curse one would have been perfect if she had more than one Curse to cast. That was a totally different playstyle than she was aiming for. Focusing for five seconds sounded terrible enough, there would be plenty of times she’d get interrupted before that and she’d get frustrated trying to apply the debuff instead of moving onto other things.

Keeping her zombies up for longer, though... she was growing into the horde-leader role, and it did say *allies*, too. That meant everyone. Aura stacking won out in the end. Keeping her pals up and alive meant she’d be able to grow bigger hordes with less effort.

[Hunger for Flesh]

“Alright, I picked, and I’m not telling you all either.” She stuck her tongue out.

“Back to fighting, then?” Humphrey looked out to the Monsters that had respawned behind them. It was getting into evening now. They wouldn’t be able to get through a whole run through to the Boss again before dark.

“Yeah.” She followed his gaze and wrinkled her nose up. “Let’s kill our way out of this area and find a place to camp for the night?”

“As you wish.”

She gave her staff a twirl around. It would take some getting used to, but both ends were pretty pointy now—so she shouldn’t have any issue fighting with it. She just had to remember not to put the dagger-end into anything she didn’t mean to.

“Oh, first things first.” The Death Knight stopped as Norah began taking his crimson cloak off.

Sally watched them with a raised eyebrow, as the Mummy then moved over to her and wrapped the bright red cloth around her. “Are you sure, Humps?” A hood folded back as the rest circled around her like robes.

“I feel rather exposed without it. The color clash was nice.” He shuffled and cleared his throat. “But I think it suits you well now.” Norah stood beside him and wrapped her arm around his.

She took her belt off and put it around the outside of the robe so she could access her skulls—even though the staff could summon them from her Inventory—it just suited the look. A wide smile crossed her face as she gave them a little spin. “Thanks, mummy and big pops. You’re the best.”

“Don’t call me that,” he deflated. “But, you’re welcome.”

It had been quite the day, Sally beamed as she turned to the roving Monsters. The only thing that could make it better now would be-

The flash of blue light near them revealed the suited vampire, and he hopped down from the rocks he appeared on with his hands in his pockets. “Hey, all.”

“Theo!” Sally waved him over, despite being right there.

“Wow, I must have been gone longer than I thought. You look great.” He grinned and exposed his fangs.

“Productive outing?” Humphrey asked, narrowing his eye sockets.

Theo tilted his head back to look at the Death Knight. “I sure hope so.” His eyes back to their surroundings, he clucked his tongue. “We fighting these lizard things?”

“Just killed the Boss.” Sally nodded. “Killing our way back to somewhere safe to camp.”

“Somewhere safe...” Theo clucked his tongue and turned around. “Where does the Boss spawn, in that convenient circular area?”

She followed his gaze and nodded along.

“Does anything spawn right here? There’s like a small prep area for Parties to get ready to fight them, yeah?” The vampire licked his lips and looked at the grouping of rocks they were standing amongst.

“That is correct,” Humphrey said.

“Camp right here then.” Theo shrugged and gave the zombie a smile. “I need a bit of exercise. It’ll be like the hell portal, except less stressful for you guys.”

Sally raised an eyebrow and looked at the others. It didn’t seem fair to let Theo have all the fun, but then again, this was his type of thing. If they could get to sleep while he was doing his thing, then that would be experience and potential Levels.

They seemed conflicted, but ultimately gave her the nod. “Alright, sounds good, pup. But any sign of trouble, or if you make it too noisy, then we’ll go camp elsewhere.”

“Very fair,” he gave her a bow. “I’ll leave you to set up while I begin.”

[Endless Sleep]

She put her zombies away as the vampire darted away. Wouldn’t be good if the wandering dead caught aggro from the Boss or any of the Elites. As she watched Theo appear above a Monster and blaze crimson lines through it, she tapped her fingers on her staff. It slowly sunk into the ground. “I suppose this is probably one of the safest places we could be, comparatively.”

Norah nodded. “Theo will watch over us, and the Monsters would stop people from approaching us directly.”

Sally chose to ignore the fact that the vampire had simply stated he would solo a bunch of the Monsters through the darkness of night. It wasn’t that they had really struggled, but they had acted as a team. With the light of the day waning, she put down a Campfire and rolled out her bedroll.

Lucius was asleep immediately as soon as his head hit the floor. Humphrey and Norah were a little way off and murmured to each other for a while before they were quiet. Sally pulled her cloak around herself and deflated.

“Hey.”

She looked over her shoulder to see the vampire sitting on one of the rocks. With a smile, she got up and hopped up beside him. Looking out at the open ground illuminated by moonlight, she rested her head on his shoulder.

“Tell me something new, Theo.”

“You first.”

“We made a Player friend today. Lucius cured her of her anger against Uniques and the System.” She kicked her feet back and forth.

“Huh? Really? That’s pretty interesting.” Theo tilted his head to rest against hers.

“Yeah. Actually made me consider Chuck’s vision of the future more. Oh, I asked her about babies, too.”

“Hmm?”

“I told her we either didn’t have genitals or they didn’t work, so I asked her if Players can make babies.”

Theo was silent for a moment. “Oh.”

“Short answer, no.”

“State-mandated infertility?”

Sally grimaced. “Sounds a lot more dystopian when put that way, huh? Your turn.”

He moved his head away to look down at her. “I met one of your old friends, actually.”

“Really?” She looked up at his crimson eyes and raised an eyebrow. “Which one? Werewolf boy?”

“Lana.”

“No way? How is she doing?” She smiled.

Theo shuffled awkwardly and looked out toward the horizon. “Well. You want the full truth or just the sugar-coated bit?”

“All of it.”

“The original Lana was killed after Ruben’s influence over the Wastes was ended, made a real mess of the tunnels she was in. Most of her clones survived and would eventually come to blame us for that... you especially.” He paused to gauge her reaction before continuing.

“Some started to delude themselves into thinking they were the original, but the dissonance caused them to hate the System.”

“*They were Last Word?!*” She hissed, so as to not wake the others.

“Yeah. Got themselves corrupted because they didn’t care for their humanity. I met one who didn’t turn, and she gave me the antidote for the poison.”

“Wow. That’s a lot to take in. So... you’re not going to die tomorrow?” She grinned up at him.

He nodded slowly. “I no longer have the poison.”

“Vague answer, but I’ll accept it.” She wrapped an arm around him and gave him a squeeze.

“You coming to sleep soon?” A yawn escaped her mouth just thinking about it.

“Not quite yet.” He worked his jaw and then pressed his STAR for something. “Sally...”

“Yeah?”

“I know you and Humphrey are worried that one day I’ll be too powerful or lose control... so I want you to have this.” From his Inventory, he withdrew a rectangular box of polished wood. A metal clasp kept it closed, but there were no other markings or details on it.

“What’s this... a special stake or something?” She grimaced and pulled a face at him.

“Just... you’ll know when you need it. No opening it before then, okay?” He smiled, revealing his fangs.

“Melodramatic ass,” she said and sighed. “Fine. If there comes a day where I have to kill you off, then we’ve already lost.”

He stood up and gave her a kiss atop her head. “Sleep well, my Queen.”

“Dweeb,” she muttered under her breath, a smile across her face as she hopped down to go back to her bedroll.

Not a bad day, overall.