

"Oh, no." Sally's hand went up to her chin. "You were right, *it is* writing. It's just not something I understand. We'd better check the stoves."

A question mark popped up beside the prone Shade.

"Never mind, only Humps would get it." She held out her hand to help him up.

The Death Knight stepped over and looked up. "Hmm." After tilting his head and rubbing his chin, he abruptly turned around and strode straight for the burning pyre in the middle of the room.

Sally raised her eyebrows, but knew better than to panic over such a thing. A couple of seconds after the large plated figure vanished into the flames, he returned with something in his hand.

"Nothing like a bit of heat to clean off the muck," he said with a grin, skeletal face shadowed against the blaze.

"Yeah, yeah," she gave the righted Shade a pat on the back. "What did you grab?"

"A key hidden in the flames by Archie."

Sally nodded. Pretty smart of the cat really. She wouldn't have expected to find anything of use in the constantly burning pyre—a Player wouldn't either. Knowing that Humphrey was near fire-immune, and placing the message that only he could read meant that they were expected. Of course, with Humphrey knowing what most of Archie thought, that all seemed to track.

"Where does it go to?" she asked. "A door? A special place in your heart to get the rest of the other Archie souls inside you out? Some treasure for a change?"

"Yes," he replied.

Sally narrowed her eyes and shrugged. "I'm starting to wonder if Theo got the better deal here."

The Death Knight looked a bit sheepish at that statement, some guilt still inside him over the fateful fight he had engaged in with the vampire. "It is for a door, further in. This is the only way of opening it."

She held out her hand. "Well, let me put it in my Inventory. If you walk about holding it in your hand, that bubble girl will come steal it. Or something worse, and we're not playing that sort of game today." She flexed her fingers as he slowly placed it in her grip. "Ah! It's pretty hot still." It vanished into her intangible storage.

"Yes. Let us continue. The doorway awaits us."

The Shade rubbed at the side of his head. "Couldn't we just shadow the doorway, anyway? And they have someone who can go through walls?"

Sally shook her head. "You're overthinking this, bud. Let's just go eat puzzles and solve brains."

With no further disagreements, they all gathered to continue on to the next room. The zombie practically hopped over to the closed door in readiness to go through their prepared breaching protocol once more. This time hopefully to something more than a closet. Together, they repeated the planned actions, the demon only grumbling in the background a little as the stone door vanished.

A large room where some monstrous lizard creature had been killed already. Their body lay sprawled across the floor with dozens upon dozens of puncture wounds across their scaled form.

Humphrey went up to it and narrowed his eye sockets. "How strange. These wounds did not bleed."

"Didn't bleed... or the blood went elsewhere?" Sally clicked her fingers and looked around the room for any clues. She was thinking of something like vampirism, or a weapon that could draw blood, but she also didn't discount any weirder explanation.

The Death Knight prodded at the corpse. "I actually can't tell." With a shrug, he started to push the corpse to the side of the room so that they could pass through to the other side easier.

"Handy of them to clear the way," Lucius put his hands behind his back as he strolled about.

"Hmm." Sally wasn't so convinced. Not only for her selfish stomach reasons, but there was still something else that didn't sit well with her.

There was nothing immediately untoward about the room, however. Similar stonework as the rest of the dungeon, and the usual torches illuminating the walls. Maybe it would feel less weird if she needed to actually put effort into killing things. Any traps should have been disabled by the Player group too—so all they were left with was chasing shadows in hopes of running into the room where Archie was hiding.

"They have not killed the Boss yet, if that is what you are thinking about." Humphrey returned to her side once the opposite doorway was clear. "Otherwise, the dungeon would make a fuss about it. Whether that is a conscious choice by them or not remains to be seen."

"I'll be seeing their remains soon enough," she grumbled to herself. An alive boss meant that they'd be able to take any loot for themselves once they killed it. If she didn't know any better, she would put money on the cat hiding behind that eventuality.

"Ready breach protocol," Humphrey ordered, turning to her and attempting to wink with his empty eye sockets.

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"Hmm," Norah tilted her head to the side and wiped her bloodied hands off on her thighs. "That's much better."

She stepped away from the body of the vampire, Theo now completely wrapped in golden bandage.

Humming to herself, she went around and sat atop the small rock throne to regard him.

"That is the best I can do," she sadly smiled. "The rest is up to them."

Another vibration shook the tomb, and more dust fell from the ceiling.

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Edward stumbled forward, almost bumping into the back of the Death Knight who was preparing to breach the door. "Shit," he seethed, spinning back around.

"What are you-" Sally began, turning her head to see him looking the other way - an arrow protruding from his back. "Are you even watching our backs, you goofball?"

"Clearly not well enough," he hissed, trying to find the culprit. Over near a darkened corner, a couple of purple bubbles popped and vanished into nothing.

"Hit and run tactics don't work too well on us," Humphrey said to the empty room, although he looked back at the demon with something akin to concern on his face. "Well, on us undead, at least."

Sally clucked her tongue. "Yeah, I can't heal you, demon-man. Shoulda chosen the dead side."

Edward turned to scowl at her, before seeing that she had a healing potion extended in her hand. "Thank you," he nodded. As he downed the liquid, the arrow worked its way out of his back and fell to the stone floor. "That Player is going to be a problem."

She shrugged. "You got a cooldown on your duel still, pops?"

"It will be a little time yet, yes. Perhaps we should change marching order?"

After a suitable amount of squabbling amongst themselves, they arranged into a group so that the Death Knight was at the back, Edward and Lucius were in the middle, and Sally took lead at the front. It would be much harder for someone lurking in the background to drop an arrow that could do high damage to the two undead, rather than the softer pair in the middle. Not that Sally was keen to test if she could survive an arrow to the head, but there was always one of her skills to bail her out.

Into the next room, which had a had a handful more dead lizard-people and two exits. A wider doorway to the east, and a small one to the north. It looked as though the wider doors were locked at some point, and the Players had been through and gotten it open through the method that the Dungeon required - or perhaps the bubble-woman had just gone through and unlocked it from the other side. That seemed unfair, even if Lucius could do even better than that.

"Which way, Humps?" She crossed her arms and pouted at the inert corpses on the floor.

"Boss is through the wider doors," he replied, tilting his head. "I do not believe the other direction is important while this way is already open."

Edward scratched at his eyes. "Why does everything here look so itchy?"

The group exchanged glances.

"Poison or a curse?" Sally furrowed brow and put her hand on his arms. As he withdrew his hands from his face, his eyes were no longer bright blue, but a strange shade of deep purple.

"Not sure," he grimaced. "How do I look?"

"Not... great?" Her grip withdrew so that she could open up her Inventory. She must have more Antidotes or something? "How do you feel?"

The demon stood up straight and furrowed his brow. "Very strange. I'm not even sure what I am afflicted with. I want to claw my own eyes out and probably continue digging through into my brain. After that I might be okay."

"Ick," she replied, well aware she did a lot worse. At least her skill turned it into a flash of violence rather than a drawn out and painful process. "You can resist it, though?"

A sharp-toothed smile spread across his face. "Oh, no. I'm only a few seconds away from a second and most likely more fruitful attempt." He held up his rapier into the air. "However..."

They all tensed, expecting him to impale himself—either at the whim of the curse, or to die and respawn back in the Wastelands. Instead, the light drained from his eyes; the purple shifting back to the bright blue gradually, as a sheen of similar light started to appear on his weapon.

"[Exchange Malady]," he explained. "Any negative status effect I am afflicted by, I can transfer over to my weapon to use as an enchantment. Infrequently."

Sally rolled her eyes. "Had me worried for nothing. Just be careful where you point that thing. You're the only one who can come back from death, remember?"

"Don't worry, it will be—"

"Inevitable?" Lucius tried to finish, helpfully.

"...safe in my hands." Edward glared at the Shade.

The zombie clapped her hands together. "Okay, now that we have those oddball antics out of the way, shall we go over to these big doors and head on through toward the Boss?"

They all nodded their agreements, and she sighed, allowing a smile across her face. Nearly there.

The wider doors meant that their plan wasn't as effective—and she wondered whether that meant an ambush would be more or less likely without such a good chokepoint. Then again, the five of them could get through anything more or less.

She turned her head to the man with the strange grin. “I can tell there's something on your mind, Neil.”

“Caught me,” he grinned. “We've known each other too long.”

The Outsiders collectively rolled their eyes.

“Always interrupting my plans at the last minute with your own ideas, huh?” She smiled and crossed her arms. For a Player, he had fit in with them surprisingly well, all the way back when... some time ago? An average-looking guy on the surface, with short brown hair and sharp features, only the shark-like mouth gave him away as being different.

“I was just thinking...” he rubbed the back of his neck. “They'll be expecting us to go straight for the Boss. We should head the other way?”

“Ah, I don't know.” She grimaced and the Death Knight gave her a shrug. “Sounds like it could be dangerous.”

Neil grinned widely. “Nonsense. We're the *Outsiders*. If you're that worried, just let me hold on to the key to free Archie?” He held out a hand toward her.

That made sense to her.

She opened up her STAR Inventory to track it down.