

The wooden doorway burst open and a shadowed figure silhouetted the opening briefly, before being engulfed in a blazing torrent of fire.

Fabric burned and crisped away as the man stepped into the room. The flames abated, and his bare torso smoldered as it healed over.

“So sorry,” Theo said with a grin, “I’m supposed to ask before entering, aren’t I?”

The woman clambered backward, knocking into shelves as she drew up a crossbow. “This arrow is imbued with holy power, if I strike you in the heart—” Although most of her face was shrouded in some manner of face mask, her eyes were wide with panic.

“You won’t.” He stopped and looked around. “You’d think your hideout would be harder to find. Planning this for what? A year? Undone within a day.”

“What kind of Monster are you?” Her finger tensed on the trigger.

“I could ask the same question. In fact, I did to the last three of you I killed.” Theo took a step forward and grinned, his fangs catching the light. “No answer satisfied me, however.”

“You’ll get no answer from me either, *Outsider*.”

The vampire tutted and shook his head. “See. That’s where you’re wrong.”

He took another step forward as her finger pulled the trigger.

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In all their excitement, Sally almost forgot to hand the gnomish Quest in and receive the experience. After a quick jog back to the hand-in sign, her STAR blazed in the familiar golden shine to tell her the deed was done and she was ready to level up.

“Nineteen,” she clucked. “Feels like it’ll be forever until we hit Thirty here.”

Lucius shrugged. “Well, we are behind by a year. If anything, I’m surprised Chuck and the others are still in this area and not the fourth one.”

Sally narrowed her eyes at the horizon, or at least in the direction of it through the terrain and trees. Maybe there was something up with that area too—it wouldn’t shock her. It was surprising enough that the Jungle area was mostly working, if you ignored the pitched battles between Players.

She resigned to bringing up her skill choices.

[Pick One]

[Eager Stomach] [HP threshold for Eat Brains is lower.]

[Hard to Chew] [Increased protection against Beasts.]

[Unyielding Flesh] [Maximum Absorption is increased by 2%.]

If there was one thing she wanted to fix with the System, it would be that she could go back and choose all the skills she didn't get to pick earlier. Some manner of skill reset or picking system would be grand. Still, it was what it was.

It would even help if it wasn't so vague. The Eat Brains threshold could be huge if it was a good increase. Useless if it was only marginal. Still... the thought of getting food into her stomach sooner easily beat out the other options, and she prodded it before she couldn't second guess her appetite-led decision.

"What did everyone else pick?" She grinned. "I can eat brains sooner, apparently."

Lucius rubbed the back of his hood. "I can do this." He walked behind a tree to their left, and a second later, walked out from behind one on their right.

"Mine goes like this," Norah said with a smile. She placed her hands together to form a gap that looked like a triangle. Out amidst the horde chewing through bandits, a miniature pyramid about a dozen feet to the peak burst out of the floor, sending bodies all over the place.

"Both very neat," Sally said diplomatically. "And you, Humphrey?"

"Nothing so interesting." He looked away, a wide grin across his skeletal face.

"Metal-ass, you just want to keep it secret." She huffed and looked back at the Player following them along.

Charlie smiled and cast a defensive buff on the group of zombies munching on some jungle bandits. "Tell the joke about the pancakes again. I love that one."

Sally grinned. "I would, but these guys might have heard it before."

Humphrey slowed down to scowl at the Shade, putting a wide plated hand on his shoulder. "Whatever you did to the Player, please undo it."

It was a remarkable change. Even Sally could admit that. The woman had seemed a little put off by the newly raised dead, but otherwise was accepting of the group and their antics. Saw them as equals—which made her happy. That's all she ever wanted from the System. They just needed to line every Player up and have Lucius hop inside them for a moment and then all would be right with the world.

If only things could be that simple. It was hard enough to organize the *Outsiders* into a straight line without calamity or mischief making a mess of the process.

The Death Knight then walked over beside her. "I am concerned about Theo."

She raised an eyebrow in response. "Softie. What, his poison?"

"Not exactly, although that is concerning. Archie hid some memories before transferring to me, but I know they were about Theo." He tilted his head as he watched the zombie bandits rise up to join the horde.

“Why do you think he’d do that? What could he of known?” Sally frowned and cast [Living Dead] on her pals.

Humphrey shrugged. “Nothing good, I’m sure. There is a lot wrong with that man.”

She punched him on the shoulder lightly. “Like falling for the wrong type of gal?”

He smiled and shook his head, before looking over to Norah. The Mummy was entangling the living bandits to give the zombies an easier deal of overwhelming them. “Part of me feels I should be wary of how... human I have become. From unerring servant of the Observer, to patriarchal Knight of a group of oddballs.”

“You erred plenty before,” she shook her head. “Remember back before the Graveyard, I asked you if you were happy?”

Humphrey nodded slowly, looking back down at her.

“And are you now?”

“Yes.”

She grinned. “Then you’re on the right path. Whatever the problem with Theo is, we’ll get past it together. As a group.”

“Remarkably level-headed for you.”

“Hey, *skull-head!* If there’s one thing I am, I’m always-” she tripped on a tree root and landed on the thick vegetative ground. “...level-headed.”

A bandage wrapped around her arm to help her up, and she brushed down her clothes. Wasn’t much point at this stage. Covered in all manner of grime and gore. Par for the course as a zombie. While thinking of these goofballs as her new family was first born of a joke, it was closer to reality than she’d like to admit. Her real family might as well not exist for as far from them as she now was. There wasn’t blood between the *Outsiders*—not their own, anyway—but they cared for each other.

She looked back at Charlie, as the woman was smiling and talking with Lucius animatedly. They were Monsters, but that’s all she wanted for the gang—acceptance. Maybe to eat some brains on occasion.

“Any other Quests this way?” She looked up at the Death Knight.

He shrugged. “Killing our way through mobs isn’t the most effective way of leveling, but it’s relatively easy.”

She would be inclined to agree. Between their buffs and the snowball effect of her horde, they were chewing through Monster packs with little need to intervene themselves. Norah seemed to like assisting, but that was more because she was trying to look after the flock rather than act out of necessity. Sally would put [Living Dead] up whenever it was off

cooldown and that kept some up too. With enough time and weak enough enemies, she could start growing her own zombie apocalypse without needing to use the skill.

“Soooo, your Ultimate? Give me the details.” She pestered the Death Knight as she threw out a green-flame skull into the next pack of enemies.

“It’s meant to be a Stat and Defence buff... but it also draws on the ‘souls’ that I have absorbed.”

“So two Archies and the Observers? Thinking of that, we didn’t see any in the Wastes.” She tilted her head and cupped her chin.

“Edward said that Ruben had them killed off. Saw them as a threat to his eventual rise to power.”

Sally snorted. How well did that work out for him? She was still salty that she never got to raise him as a zombie, due to stupid System rules. With a furrowed brow, she brought up her Skill window and then switched to the Passives. If it was possible, it’d be one of the screens that would have cobwebs on it for how irregularly she looked at it. Second only to the boxes with random things in.

[Dragonslayer]

“No way, I received a passive for eating the dragon! It must have popped up while we died.” She wrinkled up her face. “But it won’t tell me what it does?”

Humphrey stood behind her to look. “Interesting. Probably nothing dire. You’ve lived this long without anything bad happening.”

“So far. Don’t jinx it.” She sighed and closed the windows down. “I’d best go loot all these mobs before someone yells at me.” The zombie hopped over to find some corpses to sift through.

Norah walked over to the Death Knight and put an arm around him. “Everything okay, my dear?”

“Yes.” He furrowed his brow and looked out at the dense canopy of tropical trees. “Currently.”

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Theo hopped down from the small house hidden away in the treetops next to a large hill, hands in his pockets. He hummed to himself, his suit fully repaired and a glimmer in his eyes.

When he landed on the ground, he stretched his back out and yawned. Brought up his STAR windows and narrowed his eyes at some information. Gave it a pout and then closed it down, looking instead at his wristwatch.

The hideout above exploded, shaking the canopy and sending flaming debris clattering down to the floor around him. He paid it no attention as burning wood and shattered furniture dropped from above. Instead, he withdrew a sheet of paper and unfolded it.

*Edward-? Now unlikely.*

*Humphrey. Likely.*

*Lucius. Very doubtful.*

*Norah. No?*

*Sally... untenable*

His right eye twitched, and he folded the paper back up with a sigh. Put it back in the inside pocket of his jacket.

Hands back in his pockets, he wandered off, humming to himself again as dark smoke from the wreckage filled the area.