

Sally rolled across the rain-slick grass, her shoulder clicking out of place as she landed in a crumbled mess of limbs.

[Living Dead]

“Ow,” she said through clenched teeth. Just one more Invasion, they had said. They were right, but naturally it could have been that easy.

She stood to her feet and clicked her back out. Five enemies had popped out of the ground before the stagecoach, and it was only by miracle that Jackie had managed to bring it to a safe stop without ramming into some of the nearby trees. Why she hadn't gotten the feeling the Invasion was about to happen like last time, she wasn't sure, but it sure made the start of combat rather awkward.

Both Dent and Edward had almost been crushed to death as soon as the coach emptied. Humphrey became rooted and couldn't get into melee to draw aggro. Jackie had to hold off on firing so that she didn't draw the Monsters to herself.

And as for herself. Well, the creatures summoned to best her looked like bipedal rhinos, but their horns and heads were made of metal. Slightly taller than Humphrey, they were quick strong. Apparently she couldn't eat their brains, either - something she had just learned the painful way.

Two of them were now dead, and with the Death Knight drawing them in, she raised her staff up and cast [Ruin].

A red circle illuminated around Humphrey, and cracks began to form around the enemies. She had tried not to look at the skill descriptions of the new abilities too much, as they made her feel ill. [Ruin] didn't affect allies, she knew that much, which made it great for dropping on the big metal man.

Humphrey flashed as he activated his parrying skills, blocking the attacks of the sword strikes and leveraging near-instant critical strikes right back at them. Chuck had cast a spell that slowed their reaction times, so even if they were powerful, they couldn't react quick enough to prevent the retaliation. She stood back and used [Curse: Drain], occasionally shooting off [Mortis Bomb] when she could.

The extra zombies didn't do too well, but for the time they were alive they boosted all her undead pals Stats. There was no point getting in the way of the Death Knight in full force, and once Jackie and the others joined in, they made short work of the last three.

Even as the last Monster was still collapsing, she was running back to the stagecoach, followed by everyone else.

“Apologies for using my cooldowns so soon,” Humphrey said.

“Stuff it, pops.” She cast [Living Dead] on him. “We got through it a lot quicker.”

Doors closed as they were all sardined back inside. The horses struggled for a moment to get the stagecoach out of the ditch they had fallen into, but soon enough, they were back on the road.

After the rocky road, there was the thudding of wooden planks as they crossed a bridge. Rain continued to fall and thunder rolled around the sky. Sally looked at the faces in the coach. They looked tired already. Apprehensive, wet, and weary. Fern looked fine, though. The dryad hadn't really provided much support during the combat, remaining in the stagecoach defense team - which was fine. She did kinda drag them into this whole ordeal.

"Ah," Chuck pulled a face as he stared at his map. "After the bridge... I should have guessed where the tomb would be, if I had thought about it."

"You did know where we were going, right?" She gave him a soft smile. "But thanks for keeping it out of your brain for me. Never know who might be prying."

"Haven't had another dungeon try to snatch you up?" Edward asked, raising a tired eyebrow.

"Nah." She tilted her head against the side of the coach and felt the vibrations through her skull. "I reckon it was that chap you killed in the eyeball. We didn't see what his corrupted skill was, and it'd explain part of why they knew we were about to enter."

Humphrey grunted and nodded.

"Twelve to fifteen minutes," Chuck said, closing down his Map. "The invasion will come soon after we get there, but there should be enough time to prepare the area, at least."

Sally gave a brief nod, but didn't say anything further. Now the knot in her stomach was weighing her thoughts down. She felt silly for the worry, but it would be a big change for the gang if they couldn't bring the goofball back. Exhaling from her nose, she brought up Party Chat. Norah hadn't sent a message in a while. Hopefully she hadn't fallen asleep from boredom.

[Sally: on our way.]

[Sally: ten minutes or so x]

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Norah couldn't reply.

Through golden eyes that ran crimson with blood, she saw the messages pop up from the zombie. Perhaps a bit of relief would have sunk through her body, if she could move. Instead, a brief, pained tear dropped from her face to land in the large pool of blood covering the base floor of the tomb.

*"I can smell you in there. Can't wait to grind you beneath my teeth."*

The top of the cocoon flexed slightly as the brickwork shifted under the next pounding assault. Although the tomb wasn't meant to hold up to being under constant siege, she had put her all into keeping it together. Her literal life.

Norah grinned through clenched teeth. How soon the tables would turn. She just had to hold out a little longer.

Bloodied cracks along her skin revealed glowing, radiant light.

Just a little longer.

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Sally wrinkled up her face. “So I literally just stab him with it and turn it like I’m unlocking something?”

“It sounds a bit barbaric, huh?” Chuck shrugged. “But it’s like... temporal or something, so it won’t damage him.”

“Just a jump-start then. The whole turning back time thing seems a bit reductive.” She looked at the object in her Inventory, but daredn’t withdraw it yet in case something happened to it. Something *would* happen to it, she was sure of it.

Pulling another face, she looked out the opposite window to see the Spire dungeon in the distance past the Jungle. Fern was already looking that way.

“Did you want to go home, Fern?” She leaned forward to get a proper look at the dryad.

“No. I am currently happy.” They continued to stare at the dungeon as it slowly left their view.

That was a hard sell, but she took it at face value. Fern wasn’t in the *Outsiders* and didn’t have any reason to join them on their death-wish journey. They could opt out at any time, well, any of them could really. If Theo hadn’t died, she probably wouldn’t carry these guys along with her, just send them somewhere safe and let the five undead fight until things were done. For better or worse.

But that was the crux of it, really. They wanted to rescue the System from whatever this Architect wanted, run things the way Chuck and the Blue team wanted. In that way, they and hopefully most Uniques were on their side. Players were a harder sell, especially that they now had a homing pointer to come kill the *Outsiders* - to become immortal.

She tilted her head. “The reward of immortality is pretty transparently ridiculous. Cartoon-villain kinda stuff. How likely is it that I am wrong?”

Humphrey tilted his head back to stare at the ceiling and exhaled. “The original intention was that death wasn’t the end. Even in this world, you were supposed to be able to leave. Of course, we know how that has gone.”

“So there was supposed to be something like Edward’s bug, but without the level loss?”

They turned their gazes toward the demon, who just shrugged.

“It’s possible,” the Death Knight nodded. “Again, not something I have the current details of.”

Sally rolled her eyes and looked back out at the miserable weather. They were getting closer now. She could feel it. The pressure of the inevitable point where she'd be sitting there in the rain beside his body, just waiting for it to activate. The not knowing was driving her insane. And then having to deal with an Invasion at the same time, unending waves of... she sighed, and the stagecoach lurched onto a muddier path.

"Visual!" Jackie yelled from up top, soaked from the rain. "*There's contact.*"

Growling, with eyes burning bright crimson, Sally leaned out of the open window. There it was - the tomb. Currently being assailed by a large figure and surrounded by at least two dozen smaller ones.

"Fuck them up, Jackie!" She shouted up at the mobster.

Returning to the inside of the coach, she seethed with anger. "Norah is in trouble. Humps I need you on the big guy. Everyone else kill your way through the smaller shits and then help pops. I'm going straight for Theo."

The flames behind Humphrey's head burst with greater intensity and he clenched his fists tight. Stoicism passed through the rest of them, nods and grunts of approval. The stagecoach rocked as the mobster took it down the embankment, heading straight for the large figure.

[Maximum Firepower]

Jackie revved up the dual repeater-crossbows, beaming out bolts that burned a bright red. The figure turned as the projectiles burst up chunks of damp mud from the ground as they worked their way towards him.

"Jump!" Sally shouted, and they began to leap out from the coach as it rocketed through the gathered enemies, pulping two of them as it zoomed in a wide arc to start circling the tomb.

She rolled across the wet grass and brought her shield and staff up. The smaller Monsters were pill-shaped. Dark gray with weird faces drawn on them. Humphrey was already aflame and bursting toward the main antagonist, which she frowned at.

A large patchwork teddy-bear, twenty-feet tall, with a wide mouth filled with very real-looking teeth. With mismatched eyes, it looked almost gleeful to be interrupted by the gathered Parties. From her peripheral, she saw the two pulped dolls re-inflated up to being their normal five-foot size.

The combined *Outsider* and *Insider* teams worked through the enemy. Hardy and regenerative, but not very offensive at this stage. She didn't have the brainpower to work through this. Despite being undead, her heart was pounding in her chest.

"Norah!" she yelled out into the bad weather. "We're here, open up!"

Cracks of golden light started to appear around the brickwork of the tomb as she ran toward it. Even now, she didn't draw the key, just in case. Nothing left to chance.

[Icon of Eternity]

The tomb exploded in a flash of radiant light, blinding and stunning everyone but one. Sally. From the ruined building, a female figure made of solid gold rose up into the air as bandages swirled around her. Drawing up from inside the tomb, they started to wrap around the golden figure slowly, covering up the shining radiance.

Sally had no time to stop in awe, even if everyone else was dumbstruck. She leaped over some of the ruined brickwork, almost slipping across the wet stone.

There he was. Wrapped in golden bandage, which was odd, but no other thoughts were in her head. Staff sunk into the ground beside her as she hopped up atop him.

Key from her Inventory and into her hand. It was cold, translucent, powerful.

No hesitation, she brought it down into his stomach. It stopped halfway, as though it had fit into something tangible, and she twisted it with a heavy click.

From her hand, the key vanished. Consumed. The attempt made.

As swirls of bandaging slowly dimmed the area around her, she waited.

The rain continued to fall, the sound of it pattering against the stone the only thing audible as the fighters continued to remain stunned. But she waited.

Red eyes wide, she gripped at his shoulders, wanting to shake him and wake him up.

She waited.