

Flickering blue flame illuminated Chuck's impassive face.

Dent hunched over beside him and threw up blood across the thick grass.

"No need to be dramatic," the Druid admonished him, before casting a healing spell on the swordsman.

"So sorry," Dent said between gasps of air, rolling his eyes. "I'll try to not get impaled next time."

Chuck bit his tongue to avoid further bickering. Instead, he looked down at the solid metal case in front of them. Rounded at the tops and sides, the dark material had a couple thin slits along it to allow air in. "Messier than expected, casualty report?"

"Eleven dead, maybe twice that injured." The swordsman stood back up straight with a groan. "Better than expected."

The Druid looked down at his STAR, seeing that messages were coming through. He tapped it top open it up, turning away from the fire consuming their camp to focus on the screens.

"Sally says to tell all 'Blues' to avoid her at all costs."

"What, why?" Dent turned around and stepped up to him.

Chuck grimaced, and his face wrinkled up. "Shit. Theo is dead."

"Actually dead this time?"

A nod was the only response.

"Fuck." The swordsman rubbed at his face with his left hand. "It must have been Humphrey, right? And now she is going on a rampage for revenge?"

"That's why I keep you around, Dent. Smarter than you look." Chuck gave him a coy smile before returning to the messages. "She's going to the Spire dungeon right now. Alone."

Dent nodded. "Then we know what needs to be done."

Sally closed down the Chat. Chuck was updated now, and she felt a little better to have another person to vent to. She meant what she had said, though. Everyone was kill on sight now, whatever faction. She hit [Endless Sleep] on the zombies who were still standing around patiently, totally unaware of what had been going on.

The Party had kept her grounded, given her a reason to make do with her bugged existence. Strive for greater strength so they could all be safe. With Theo dead and the rest of them scattered and threatened with being erased by the new Architect, the gloves were truly off. She walked to the road as she dealt with the other notifications.

[Quest Error]
[Distributing Lost Quest Items]
[Error]
[Broken Shield 3/3 Pieces Found]

She narrowed her eyes. It wasn't like the System to error in her favor, so she was suspicious about the quest getting completed so easily. With the fifth area destroyed, it looked as though it wanted the task to succeed rather than fail, so she had lucked out.

[Shield Repairing... 0.0%]

Her crimson eyes blinked slowly as she stood and waited.

[Shield Repairing... 0.1%]

"There we go, more System bullshit." She rolled her eyes and turned around, forgetting that there was nobody else to talk to. "This is going to be weird." As she deflated, she brought up the last notification—the golden glow of her Level Up.

[Error]

She seethed and jabbed it again.

[Pick One.on.ne]
[Error] [Restricted]
[Error] [Restricted]
[Error] [Restricted]
[Overflow] [Stack Error]

"Neat." She jabbed at the 'overflow' one, as it didn't say it was restricted.

[Meat Hook] [Draws you toward struck target.]

Oh—that didn't actually look too bad, and the System didn't break because of it. Perhaps she was getting lucky. Although for a necromancer, you'd usually want to draw the target to yourself rather than the other way around... as a zombie, she could see the use.

With the click of her fingers, her large mouse appeared. "Time to bathe the world in blood," she said as she smiled sadly and gave it a pat on the side. She hopped up into the saddle, and then they were off.

Her mount scabbled back along the road, the way that they had come. Sally opened up her Map and put a little marker for where the Tomb was, so that she could find Norah if she found a way to bring Theo back. *When* she found a way, she corrected herself. It seemed pretty sappy to want to burn the world down just because her pup was dead, but he was more than just washboard abs and an affable dork.

No time for that sort of thinking, though. The small handful of hope could rest at the back of her mind as she ripped and tore her way through the System. As her ride bounded through into the treeline to head straight for the dungeon, she brought up the Party chat.

[Sally: en route to dungeon, report in.]
[Norah: No change here, hun. Good luck.]
[Lucius: What dungeon?]
[Lucius: I'm here with Humphrey... :(]

Sally wrinkled up her face. She wasn't sure how the Shade made that happen when he could only shadow Party members, but that was the least important question on her mind right now. Thoughts roving around in her mind, she bit her tongue.

[Sally: How is he?]
[Lucius: Miserable, regretful]
[Norah: Tell him I miss him.]
[Sally: tell him that_]

She narrowed her eyes and sighed, ducking beneath some branches as the mouse leaped through the foliage.

[Sally: tell him that he has a duty to uphold.]

STAR spun down as she closed the menus. If he wasn't going to help her now, then she was done with him. They didn't have the time for anything but pushing forward as quickly as possible. Not only was Theo's existence on the line, but all of them faced the same fate if the Architect continued to crack down on problems within the System. More than anything, she was worried about the goblins and Jackie too—not to mention...

A flash of blue illuminated the surrounding trees as she slid to a stop.

"Edward?"

The demon stumbled across the floor, clutching at his blood-soaked suit. "Ah! Sally, I was hoping you were okay." He stretched out straight, pain causing him to wince as his blazing blue eyes focused on her.

"Hop on, we don't have the time." She gestured, and he did so without further delay. The mouse set off again, and the zombie tilted her head back. "You're injured, Observers?"

"Correct. We didn't even know of them, but they just showed up in the city and started hunting down Uniques."

Sally growled and clenched her teeth together.

"I escaped, but... what's going on here?"

"Humphrey turned. Killed Theo. Ran off, now I'm alone."

The demon opened and closed his mouth a few times, before looking off toward the horizon past the treeline. "...*dead?*" There was an unexpected layer of disbelief, or sadness, in his voice.

“He is being kept in stasis, but we don’t know of a way to put his soul back. I’m heading to the Spire dungeon to see if it has answers.”

[Edward has joined the Party]

“The others?”

“Lucius followed Humphrey, who is sulking even though he is back to normal now. Norah is guarding Theo’s body.”

Edward was silent for a while as they thundered through the jungle. There wasn’t a lot that could be said, and the weight of the situation kept them both quiet.

They burst out of a hedge way to land beside a group of surprised Players wearing red tabards.

[Meat Hook]

Sally leaped from the mount and zipped straight toward the first, a knight, via a beam of swirling green energy. Her staff spun in her hand as she collided with the plated figure—the dagger end going straight through their metal armor and into their heart. [Eat Brains].

She then turned as the skull atop of her necromancer weapon burst into green fire, launched off into the next Player who looked like a healer. As a shield flickered over them she clicked her fingers and used [Endless Dead], flooding the area with zombies, including several of the large lizard Monsters.

A red beam of energy burst from one of the opponents, coring two normal zombies, the leg of a lizard, and slicing through the side of Sally’s torso. She gnashed her teeth and cast [Living Dead] on herself. Using the other dead as cover, she slunk up into melee with the assailant and jammed her staff down, the [Skeleton Key] at the end piercing their foot and pinning them to the ground.

As another Player came in to assist, she ducked away and withdrew one of her other daggers, blocking the blow and sliding back behind another zombie. With her left hand she commanded the skull atop the staff to turn into a [Mortis Bomb] and she fired it point blank into the struggling fighter.

[Eat Brains] on a target crushed by the Elite zombie lizards. [Eat Brains] on the overwhelmed Player she had pinned and surrounded by zombies. [Eat Brains] on the last one, lost and without hope.

[Endless Sleep]

She turned and stomped back toward the mouse; her face caked in gore and eyes burning a bright red. Edward was still sat on the mount, looking rather sheepish.

“Sorry, I’m still injured, and it looked like you had a hold on things.”

“I need more Players to eat,” she licked her lips. “No mercy until I get what I want.” She climbed up in front of him into the saddle. After a brief pause, she turned her head back to him. “You’re level twenty-three now, better start acting like it. Here’s a Health Potion.” She extended her hand back to him.

“Rough day, huh?” he murmured, taking the potion with a nod of thanks.

“You’ll soon see why I prefer to keep people around me and not be alone.” The mouse jerked forward as they set back off, causing the demon to spill some of the healing liquid down himself.

He bit his tongue before making a snappy response. There was something about the zombie that was different, an anger in her that he didn’t particularly want to invoke towards himself more than necessary.

Sally seethed as she glared at their destination. At this distance, she could now see the tower looming ahead of them again. Killing the Players hadn’t made her feel any better about how things were progressing. If anything, it made her feel angrier. Clearly, she just needed to kill more Players.

Maybe if the dungeon was a wash, she could turn her focus on wherever the Red team had their base. Listen to the soft tune of their death screams before the Architect could find and put a stop to her. Maybe a defeatist attitude, but it was time to temper the positivity into something sharper that she could jam between the ribs of the System and hope to find some heart.

“If you have any bright ideas for bringing Theo back, I’m all ears,” she called back to the demon. “When I tear this world in half, I want the dumb ass to bear witness.”

Edward grimaced. It was bad enough when she had wild aspirations of defeating the dragon, but the fact that she had made her threats of destroying the world have some weight to them. “Nothing at the top of my mind, I will think about it.”

She grunted a reply before looking at the notifications pop up on her STAR.

[Chuck: Red team holding dungeon entrance.]

[Chuck: two Parties, estimated.]

Closed that down without responding. Opened up Party Chat.

There were no new messages.

She was going to say something, but bouncing around on her mount was making it awkward. After they reached the dungeon, she would.

The building loomed into their view quickly, the mouse making short work of the cluttered jungle. Easily twenty floors tall, she estimated. Almost circular, but flat edges pickup the light of the day—so maybe a hexagon or similar.

As they burst from the treeline, ten figures standing in a clearing before the structure turned to face her. Their red tabards were much dimmer in color than the blazing fury in her own crimson eyes.

Her sharp teeth formed a wild grin as the Players began to ready their spells and attacks.

Too slow. Too weak.