

Sally stood there, stunned, covered in Boss viscera. The frog-monster had vanished, and the group of them just stood there alone, covered in blood.

“Ah,” she said. “That was slightly unexpected.”

“I agree,” a familiar voice from the floor piped up.

She looked down to see Archie now sitting where the remnants of the lizardman once were. Eyepatch covering one eye, he looked rather amused to see them.

“Archie!” She crouched down. “I’d pick you up, but I’m covered in gore for a change. Why’d you have to go hide somewhere silly like this?”

“Just seemed neat.” He shrugged.

Humphrey walked around to stand behind the cat, eyeing up the corners of the rooms. “It is not entirely safe here still, little brother.”

“I know, big brother. It is time, then.”

Sally pouted. “So soon?”

Archie moved up to her and rubbed himself against her legs. “Trust that this won’t be the last you’ll see of me. Unless you all die, of course.”

She gave him a little kiss on the head, before the Death Knight reached down and picked him up. He turned away from the rest of them to absorb the last Archie.

Lucius put his hand on her shoulder, a sad-faced emoji appearing beside his head. Edward remained indifferent, but kept his eyes on the shadowed areas of the large chamber.

Sally stood and brushed the tattered parts of her outfit off. Her diner clothes were ruined now, thanks to the acid, so she changed to her Wasteland black tshirt and jeans. Not the same feel when wearing the cloak like a mage’s robes, but she’d repair her skirt when they weren’t in a such a dire position.

Humphrey turned back to them, his hands now empty. “It is done.”

She worked her jaw. “*Aaand?*”

“And we should leave.”

[Dungeon Complete]  
[No Experience Gained]  
[No Reward Gained]  
[No Gold Gained]

“Wow.” She rolled her eyes. “All that avoiding the moat and losing all my zombies for a cat that immediately died and no money.”

A portal sprung into being, leaving them the option of teleporting back to the surface. She narrowed her eyes at it before scratching at her hair. There was nothing left for them to do here. Still...

“Hey Humps, I have a question...”

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Janie held an arrow at the ready.

One that would explode and scour the area with a constant curse that stacked damage and made affected targets go crazy. Drop to the floor and claw out their own minds. She should have used it inside the dungeon, but didn't want to poison the area for the rest of them.

Then she had found Neil's body. Face down, fingers thick with gore, a pool of blood surrounding his face. It sickened her that these Monsters had killed her Party. They had been together for months, and now... they were dead.

This would be her revenge. Arrow trained on the area where the dungeon teleport would spit you out. She already had three more area damage arrows lined up. It would be simple to pin them down and drown them out.

She was smarter. The corruption made sense. Hatred for the System turned to stealing power to fight against it. Players should be in charge.

A flash of light as the first of the Outsiders stepped through.

Arrow went out, a grimace of determination on her face. But no explosion.

Her brow furrowed at the blue light, a flash as the attack curved towards the large, plated Monster.

A pink beam shot back and struck her. Panic ran her through right before the zombie did.

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Sally dropped down to the ground and watched the body of the woman slump over and roll down the slight decline. “*Ooops*, almost ate your dirty brain!” She turned and beamed at Humphrey. “So I guess the answer is yes. You could teleport with Impenetrable Defense up.”

“You live and learn,” he said with a grin. “Well, some of us do.”

She turned and wrinkled her face up at the bubble-girl. The ambush wasn't a bad idea, but still... disappointing, she *wasn't* smarter. “If you weren't corrupt, we could have fixed you.”

Edward wiped the sweat from his forehead. “I was expecting a bigger change with you Humphrey, considering you have the whole Archie now.”

The Death Knight grunted. “It's not that simple. You should know by now that important things don't happen until they are ready.”

Sally nodded. Archie did like naps, and all the different parts probably needed to get reacquainted. "It's like my legendary shield."

[Shield Repairing... 8.2%]

"Shield?" Humphrey asked, tilting his head. "The one we were questing for?"

"Yeah, pops. The System pity-provided me all the parts since area five got vanished. It's repairing now and taking foreverrrrrr."

"Curious." The Death Knight rubbed the side of his head. "Did you try assisting the repair?"

Sally clucked her tongue. "Now what makes you think I have the first clue about shield repair? It'll be done when it's most convenient, like you just said. What's our plan now that we have all the cats?"

"Assuming we are leaving the rest of the crafting gathering to Chuck's group, we should focus on personal power." Humphrey then looked back at the other two. "Although I am not sure what we can achieve when we cannot level or equip items."

She shrugged. "I could do with getting my zombies back, to start with. We can think while we eat."

They murmured their agreements and Humphrey gestured them on which way to go. As she stumbled over the dead Player bodies still hanging around, she brought up the Chat.

[Sally: Archie rescued.]

[Sally: Chuck is working on something for Theo.]

[Sally: Hope to see u soon x]

[Norah: That's good. I hope so too x]

She spun it around.

[Sally: Chucks.]

[Sally: got cats]

[Chuck: 80% on materials here.]

[Chuck: stay in touch.]

"What do you suppose we do once they have all the parts?" she asked out loud.

Edward stepped up beside her as they walked and held out a teleport stone. "Dent gave me this. It goes to the main city of Upbranch, where there is a smith or crafting station. Whatever Players use." He stowed it back away. "They'll meet us there with the rest of the Blues."

"I've got to hand it to the boys. They're certainly organized." She grinned and looked up at the tree canopy. "Could certainly do with some of that in our lives, huh?"

Luckily for her, there were groups of humanoid System-created nearby. Humans who were part of some expedition or something, based on their gear. She would have complained if it had been insects or mud Monsters, so she took what she was able to get.

Lower level too, so it was almost too easy. [Meat Hook] took her into the first, her dagger finding a place in their neck before she ate their brains. She was struck by a cross-bow bolt, but she just pulled it out and growled at the offending Monster.

In an act that would probably seem cruel to an outside observer, the rest of the Party went through the packs of humanoids debilitating limbs and disarming weapons, to give the ever-growing zombies an easy task of chewing through or eating the brains of the victims. It was just pragmatic.

Sally stumbled and put her hands on her hips, projectile vomiting a warm stew of mangled brains. "Ugh. I swear my stomach is getting smaller."

"Perhaps you are just eating too fast?" Lucius had his eyes covered, a green, sickly emoji beside his head.

She groaned and rubbed at her stomach. "You guys are just lucky you don't have to eat."

"I eat," Edward said, "just not in front of everyone. Or all over the floor."

Sally hiccuped. "It was only all over the floor *after* I had eaten it. I'm not... I have standards." Placing a hand to her mouth, she was able to avoid a second burst coming up.

Humphrey stood, watching the zombies mow through the Monster packs, his arms crossed and an unimpressed look on his skeletal face.

Now out of the dungeon, it was starting to get dark, although Sally had no proper gauge on how much time they had spent doing things. It had been a long day, it was hard to believe that earlier they were all gathered around the giant lizards Theo had killed. The whole world had changed since then.

"Alright, troo-oops." She put her hand back up to her mouth. "Zombies are almost capped, what were your thoughts on what to do next?"

The Death Knight turned to her. "Let us get that shield ready for you." Hand outstretched, he gestured over to a flat tree stump.

"Like how?" She wrinkled her face up.

Inside her Inventory she looked around for the shield. As far as she knew, it had just been a notification, and she would receive it once it was complete. At some point, her Inventory had become a jumbled mess, despite being otherwise super organized. She didn't even remember looting most of it. "I just have half a sausage taking up one slot? Why couldn't it stack with the untouched ones?"

Eventually, at risk of boring the rest of the group, she found it - [Broken Shield].

"Huh, didn't notice it pop up when it came into my hoard. Thought I was yet to receive." She shrugged and brought it out into her hands. It looked simple at this stage; a round and slightly concave disk of bronze colored metal.

“How often do you look at your notifications?” Humphrey tilted his head.

She shot him a sheepish grin. “My what now?” It had actually been a while since she had checked on the brain bonuses she had received. It might be worth clearing those.

[+1.4% Strength]  
[+0.8% Agility]  
[+2.2% Wisdom]  
[+1.1% Constitution]  
[+1.6% Intelligence]  
[+18% Melee Damage]  
[+3% Melee Critical Chance]  
[+15% Physical Defense]  
[+12% Magic Damage]  
[+2% Magic Critical Chance]  
[+24% Magic Defense]

“Ah, heck,” she winced away from the boxes. “If I knew there would be so much paperwork involved, then I...” She cupped her hand to her mouth again as her stomach growled in protest. She *knew* she was more wise now, even though that percentage would only be a couple of Stat points even if she was maxed out - and she wasn’t as buffed up as Theo.

She ignored any further introspection on that side of things and stared down into the shallow dip of the shield now sitting patiently on the tree stump.

Humphrey rolled out his shoulders. “Alright, gather round, children. If you all help, then this will go a lot quicker.”

“Okay, pops!” Lucius said, a grinning face appearing beside his hood.

Edward rolled his eyes but stepped over so that the four of them were surrounding the broken shield.

The Death Knight finished glaring at the Shade before he turned back to the group. “It’s simple. Hold your hand over it.”

Sally was the first to act, her hand almost immediately hovering over her side of the object.

[Repairing...]

“I’m *repairing*,” she said with a wide grin, watching as the other three did the same.

They stood in silence for a dozen or so seconds before the excitement in her eyes dulled. “This is still going to take forever, right?”

Humphrey nodded slowly. “Yes. And when it’s not in your Inventory you cannot see the progress percentage. *Haha*.”

She deflated. Glad at least that her stomach had settled and she wasn't about to fill the dish shaped artefact with brain slurry. "Is it going to be a good shield at least? Do you know what it does?"

"It is bound to you, and the Stats and effects are determined by your Class. It is different for all who complete it."

That was slightly more exciting. Sounded like more broken System goodies.

The four of them stood there, staring at the inert shield for what felt like hours, as the sun slowly set.

"Well..." Sally deflated for the tenth time. "Who want's to share neat stories? You have a crush on anyone, Edward?"

"Ah, look, it's complete now!" The demon grimaced, trying to will the object to be done.

"Hah!" She grinned. "I'm not so easily fooled. You think I was born yes-"

[Broken Shield Repair Complete]

[Receive?]