

Sally held the key in her hand and furrowed her brow. One of her best friends in this strange world, Neil, stood close with his hand outstretched, ready to receive it.

Although she had no problem giving it to him - she trusted him, of course - it was just as safe in her own hands. They were all traveling together, after all. Her eyes drifted away from him and toward the rest of the Outsiders surrounding her. Humphrey. Lucius. Edward.

The Death Knight and Shade looked calm enough, just waiting for to make the transaction. Edward seemed... off? Maybe still a little perturbed about almost digging his own eyes out.

"Why did you want to hold it again?" She raised an eyebrow at the man. Why did he smell so... edible?

Neil smiled warmly. "You always have your hands busy in combat. If they've set up an ambush, maybe I can open the door while you keep them busy."

The zombie nodded. That tracked, for the most part. She *did* usually have hands and stomach full when fighting. Their goal was to rescue Archie, rather than kill all Players.

Edward grinned widely and leaned forward. "I can believe that, Neil. You *are* known for being sneaky." He stood back up straight. "In this instance, I believe the key is safer with Sally, though."

The Player's eye twitched, but he didn't change his expression. "Well, I disagree, but I relent to the group, as always."

"Heck yeah you do," Sally said with a nod. "Classic Neil. But now you have piqued my interest towards the second door." She tapped the end of the key in thought before putting it back in her Inventory.

Humphrey sighed. "Well, we are pretty short on time. I'd rather not hang around when there are lots of things to do."

"You three are the strongest," Edward said, a wry grin still across his face. "You take the route of danger, and our good pal Neil and I will quickly investigate the cleared side passage."

"As much as I dislike splitting the Party, you're probably the least of us I'd worry about, and Neil is practically invincible for having survived this long with us!" Sally beamed.

Neil did not look as enthused, and shot a glare at the smiling demon. "I suppose that is pragmatic."

She clicked her fingers and dragged the other two towards the door, as Edward gestured towards the side entrance. The pair walked over and Neil led them through the stone door, shutting out the rest of the Outsiders preparing to go through to the boss area.

A dozen steps in, the man turned suddenly and threw out a sharp spear that radiated green energy. It slammed harmlessly against the doorframe, as the demon was no longer there.

“Who are you?” Neil growled, eyes now searching throughout the otherwise featureless room.

“*You can’t betray the betrayer.*” Edwards voice hissed around the room.

“You could see my ability, how?” The man was sweating now, another spear in his right hand as a flowing white orb began forming around his left.

“*I am the king of deceit. The lie that weighs heavily in the hearts of the strongest. A mountain of ruined trust gripped tightly by the pained chains of regret.*”

Neil turned, flourishing his weapon and trying to gauge where the voice was coming from.

“*Perhaps, worst of all... I am inevitable.*” Edward flashed out and caught the Player in the side with his rapier, before being knocked back away.

“That’s all you had?” Neil grinned, his mouth contorting in odd angles. “Barely a scratch after all that bravado.” He held up his glowing hand toward the demon.

Edward shrugged and slid his sword back into its sheath. “Nobody betrays the *Outsiders*, except me.”

Neil twitched as if pained, his prepared attack faltering slightly. “...no, what have you done?” He looked back up in fear, his eyes glowing purple.

Edward crossed his arms and grinned, his sharp teeth illuminated amongst shadow as the Player dropped his weapon.

Sally pushed the Shade out of the way. “You really need to use your other skills more.”

“Do not,” Lucius huffed, but relented to her going in front. “My shadowing ability is the most powerful thing I have to offer.”

Humphrey grinned. “So that you are under no threat of taking damage?”

“Unfair!” Next to Lucius’ head, a bobbing angry face appeared.

Sally waved her hands at both of them. “Alright, settled down, you reprobates.” Although she had started it, they should know better than to continue. She turned her head to see the demon walk through the wider doors to join up with them.

“Well, you didn’t get very far.” He tilted his head, a smile still on his face.

“Neither did you.” She frowned. “Where’s uh... where’s... things go okay over that way?”

He nodded and his grin widened further. “You could say it was an *eye-opening* experience.”

“Okay, cool. Come help us breach this next door.”

Edward deflated before walking over to take his position and assist them.

Sally raised her hand, kneeling down behind the Death Knight to shoot ahead once the door opened. She felt that something was wrong, and it wasn't just the rumbling of a potential meal missed. By her approximation, there should only be two corrupted Player's left. Or one? She wasn't sure why she thought that, though.

But there was a danger, like a vibration through the floor. A second Party.

"This is the one," she murmured, licking her lips. "Get ready gang."

Although... if the bubble-girl had been spying on them, she might have seen their door breaching plan and would have told any potential second Party about what to expect. In which case...

"Wait a sec. I think we need to switch things up."

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The tall man stretched out and lowered his bow. "I thought they'd be in more of a hurry than this."

A woman dressed in purple, swirling orbs of light around in a circle, shrugged. "Maybe Neil got them."

"Wishful thinking," a third Player in full plate armor grunted as he leaned against the wall.

The other two in the room said nothing. One, a lightly armored man with a blonde beard, kept prodding his glowing red STAR. The last, a figure shadowed by a large blue hood, stared directly at the door. None of them stood in line of sight of the entrance once opened.

"I hear something," the first man said, bringing his weapon back up.

The woman cast the light orbs out onto the floor, and four featureless figures made of pure white light rose up to draw swords from out of the air.

"Remember," the knight said, "as soon as the door opens we need to-"

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"Hit it!" Sally yelled with a wide grin.

The shadow bandage they had stretched back across the hallway held her back tight, like elastic. Humphrey held her in place as the Shade tried to tighten it. Lucius stood by the wall, a dozen feet to the left of the actual door, with his hand ready to shadow it. Edward mostly looked like he didn't agree to this plan, but was ready to jump in after her.

As the wall vanished, she shot forth, air flapping at her cloak for the brief change of speed. The merged weapon held like a spear, she almost immediately collided with a Player, the dagger slamming into their side and piercing their lungs.

She dropped to the floor on top of the tall man.

“Ah, *shit!* Cast it!” someone in the back shouted.

A cool feeling washed over her even as the blood from her victim soaked through her clothes and warmed her. As much as he was struggling, her attention went up to the others in the room.

Around her, a cage of white light had formed. Just about the exact size of the room. Looking quickly behind her, it had covered the shadowed wall and Edward was currently struggling to push through it.

Most curious, however, was that she was unable to use any of her skills.

With a quick hop to her feet, she spun the staff and blocked the sword swing of the knight.

“Oh?” She grinned widely. “You think I’m trapped in here with you?” She slowly pushed back against his sword, the man shaking as he gradually relented to her strength.

Her eyes blazed bright red. “You’re trapped in here with me.”

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“Now what?” Lucius hopped up and down in a panic.

“I’m not sure what this does, other than keep us out.” Humphrey strode over to the door, flame burning behind his helmet. “This is a corrupted ability. Usually Sally would just use [Endless Dead] and that would be a quick end for them.”

He swung the door wide open to see the glowing bars of the cage blocking the way.

Edward and Lucius squeezed in beside him to watch what was going on.

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Sally wasn’t really a melee expert. Sure, she had been using daggers for most of her zombie career, but that was usually a short-term deal to opening up skulls to get the juicy bits inside. Still, she was a Raid Boss now. Above an Elite or Champion, and the other designations they had long forgotten about.

Something this knight was learning the hard way. Their silly cage prevented their skill use, too. While the ranger lay bleeding out on the floor, struggling for breath, the rest were somewhat hesitant to engage in melee.

The mage, Sally would leave for last. The light around her hands meant the purple-clad Player was the one holding the cage up. She could already see they were at an impasse.

Keep the shield up and try to whittle her down in melee, which wasn’t exactly going their way. Or drop the shield to allow all their skills, but get immediately swarmed by her stored up zombies.

She blocked another swipe and twirled around the staff, the dagger end slicing across his shin, cutting through the metal armor like butter and drawing blood. The thief now moved in

to assist. Two daggers, slick with some manner of poison, perhaps. Rather rude, in her opinion, and she ground her teeth as it reminded her of Theo's poisoning.

The bearded man swung in as the knight regained his footing, but Sally had already stepped back away and used the pronged end of the staff to divert the attack. She twisted her weapon and his arm tangled in between the jutting parts. With a pull, he lurched toward her. Letting go of the staff briefly, she wound up a quick right hand to punch him straight in the face.

And the result was... surprising, even for her. The man flung back, dropping his daggers to clutch at a face beyond broken. Without their skills keeping them together, her strength was able to shatter bone.

The Players paused briefly, in shock and unease. A mistake on their part. Her plan changed, knowing how this would eventually end anyway.

Rolling beneath the slow swing of the pensive knight, Sally launched the staff like a thrown spear.

The [Skeleton Key] found its target in the forehead of the mage, and the cage started to crack and fade away.

"Inventive," she said with a grin. "But ultimately, nowhere near enough."

[Endless Dead]