

Fifty zombies rose from the ground as Sally leaped from the mount, casting [Endless Dead]. She landed amongst the rising corpses, shielding her from the volley of skills leveled towards her. A dozen zombies fell, which did nothing but anger her further.

[Quick Death]

Her Ultimate shook the area with a wave of cold air, before all the undead burst from their positions to sprint at the now surprised Players. A [Mortis Bomb] flung from her staff already burst amongst the figures, raising further zombies.

She no longer cared to differentiate between the Players. Didn't matter what they looked like. Their Class or Level no concern to her. They had two states. Dead, or in her way. Snaking behind one of the large undead lizard Monsters, she shot out [Meat Hook] at a robed figure moving away from the melee.

They tried to bring up some manner of shield to protect themselves. Not enough. Dagger to their neck, brains now hers to consume. Sally turned, blocking a sword in between the prongs of the top-end of her staff, twisting it to disarm the weapon.

[Greater Demon]

An eruption of green flame came from further back, as Edward had grown to twice the size—now sporting an exaggerated muscled figure, his horns had extended and curled around the side of his head. While green fire continued to lap around his body, his piercing blue eyes were now ablaze with power.

As her disarmed opponent stumbled away from her and into the grasping hands of her zombie pals, she held a hand up to cast her Decay curse at the figure Greater-Edward was stomping his way toward. His thin rapier had now been replaced by a large sword that almost put Humphrey's to shame—on fire with a similar color to his eyes.

The elation in her dulled when thinking of the Death Knight. He should be here, they all should be here. An arrow struck her in the shoulder, followed by a volley of three that peppered her back. She sighed, and looked over her shoulder, her dead eyes meeting the culprit of the assault. "Fuck you," she said plainly, as the skull atop her staff burst into green fire.

Edward slashed forward, knocking an armored Player across the floor, as his strike cut into the ground—gouging a twelve-foot mark where the figure had been standing. His body moved as if he was animated and there were frames missing. Odd jolts in his appearance as he gained ground on them, flickering and pulsing around him as the power surged through his ascended form.

Their spellcasters got their act together, and bubbled shields popped up around those that remained, healing spells surging with green and radiant energy throughout.

[Domain: The Inevitable]

The demon held up a hand as the area became awash with color, as if the vibrancy and contrast of everything had been turned up a notch. The garish green of the grass and undead contrasting against his large body, which now appeared purple and blue.

“You are weaker,” his voice both boomed and sunk through the area like a constant whisper. “Thus you will perish.”

Sally bit through the brains of one Player, before using [Meat Hook] to dive into the midst of the spellcasters, her staff spinning around and spraying the ground with bright red blood that almost glowed under this strange spell.

Edward slammed his sword down into the armored Player, splitting them straight in half, twisting the blade to send the two parts slopping over to the floor. A spell of bright yellow coursed through the air, striking him in the chest and leaving a dark mark—before the zombie leaped atop the caster and the remainder of the forces were overwhelmed.

The demon flickered with power as the colors in the area returned to normal and he shrunk down to his normal size. He dusted off his suit where the spell had burned a hole through to his skin, and looked on at the battlefield. Nothing left but the sounds of undead mouths chewing through fresh flesh and bone.

Sally stumbled out from behind the wall of zombies, wiping plenty of gore away from her own mouth. There was still ferocity in her eyes, but also an uncomfortable calm to her.

“Alright, I’ll admit your Ultimate is sick as shit.” She spat some shards of bone onto the grass. “Reminds me of Theo’s spell.”

Edward deflated. “Yes, well, it’s different from that. All demons of sufficient power have a domain.”

“Would look cool if you both did them at the same time.” She licked her lips and then deflated. Instead, she turned her eyes up toward the tower.

The demon opened his mouth, as if to reassure her that they’d bring the vampire back, but at this point, he didn’t know. With the Architect hunting for bugs, they might have their own lives to worry about soon enough.

[Endless Sleep]

All but a handful of zombies went back away, and then Sally spun on the spot to glare at two figures now approaching from the treeline to the side.

“Chuck?!” She gasped and ran over, dropping her staff on the floor.

“That’s right, I-” the druid was interrupted as she flung herself around him, giving him a hug.

“Holy growth spurts, Chucky,” she looked up at him, “how are you taller than me now?”

He gave her a sad smile. “It’s been a long year, Sally. Also, you smell like internal organs.”

She stepped away and grinned. “Hey again, Dent.” The swordsman stepped out to be beside them.

Chuck definitely looked older—and not just from the time having passed. Whatever war had been raging on between the factions, it had certainly added to age him. But he wasn’t just taller, but held himself with the weight of the important job he held. His robes were simple, but well made, in a mix of light brown and deep green.

Sally wiped her eyes with the back of her arm. “Things are pretty shitty now, huh?”

“You could say that,” he nodded slowly. “We came to help you in the dungeon.”

“Really?” She looked over her shoulder back up at it. There hadn’t been a doubt in her heart that she could have soloed it, or done it with Edward’s help.

The demon stepped forward. “Pleasure again, after all this time. Perhaps my energies could be better spent elsewhere?”

The zombie raised an eyebrow. “Sure?”

He nodded in return. “You know how I feel about dungeons, and I’d much rather be on the move and active.”

[Edward has left the Party]

She gave him a hug, and with a bow, he vanished in a pulse of blue light.

“Feels so apocalyptic,” she turned to give them a sad smile. “It should be illegal to keep making me this sad. Oooh, what’s in the box?” She narrowed her eyes and crouched down beside the rounded metal container Dent held in his good hand.

Chuck wrinkled up his face. “It’s... an Archie.”

“Time for the vet, huh? How’d he even lose his eye?” She tried to look closer through the air holes, but nothing other than a little blue light emanated from within.

“It’s not that one,” Dent answered, “this is area four Archie, who has fused with an Observer.”

Sally frowned and stood back up. “Like the first Archie?”

The Druid slowly shook his head. “More like... Humphrey.”

“Ah,” she responded. They didn’t need to say much more than that. Even her bloodthirsty mind could read between the lines. This Archie had turned the same as Humphrey, and they had contained it in this possibly magical container that just so happened to look like a cat carrier. “You haven’t been able to change him back?”

“Correct,” Chuck gestured toward the dungeon, and they started to walk. “Only contain him. We were hoping to help do the same with Humphrey.”

“Oh, he turned back to normal already.”

The two men exchanged glances before Dent spoke. "How'd he manage that?"

Sally shrugged. "Theo whispered something to him, his last words before he died. Which, by the way, I'm still mad at both of them for. As much as I love pops, Theo was clearly going easy on him otherwise, he would have won. I think he took the sword to the heart on purpose so that the fight didn't go on for hours, with how defensive they both are."

She sighed, deflating now that she was about to get that off her chest. As they walked across the trampled grass, marred with the results of the combat with the Players, she picked her staff back up.

Chuck raised an eyebrow at the swordsman, who just shrugged in response. "I can understand your frustration and anger, but why go off on your own?"

"Hmm? Oh, Humphrey is dealing with his guilt and Lucius followed him. Norah has Theo's body and soul in safe keeping for if we find a way where we can bring him back."

"Really?" The Druid frowned. "Where?"

Sally stopped by the entrance to the dungeon and looked at them both. "I trust you both, but I'm not telling you where. My family is already broken apart. I can't risk anything else. Not for anything."

"I understand." Chuck gave her a sad smile. "I was suspicious when Theo was asking me about resurrection magic, but that's why we started putting our plans into action."

She nodded. He seemed to have a much more level head on his taller shoulder these days. Definitely more than any of the *Outsiders* and associated goofballs. "I know that look in your eyes. Broken your pacifist run, haven't you?"

He rolled those eyes in response. "It was never that, and you know it. But yes, I've killed. To survive, to protect, to further the cause I believe in."

"See, I just do it for fun, so you still have the moral high ground." She grinned and tapped her staff against the dungeon wall. "You want to fill me in on more exposition as I eat my way through the tower?"

Chuck worked his jaw and looked up at the tall building as it reached toward the gloomy sky overhead.

"Sure," he smiled, "for old time's sake."

Dent nodded his agreement. "We'll try to keep up with you."

[Chuck has joined the Party]

[Dent has joined the Party]

The System fuzzed some information on the side of her vision. Twenty floors of challenges, it looked like only one Party had ever made it up to sixteen. None further. From her Inventory, she took out a pen and paper to write something down, before returning it.

Not that it was the right season for looking forward to the future, but she allowed herself to be a little full of hope.

That, and the brains of her enemies.