

The radiant light illuminating the area started to fade as Norah became covered once more. With the number of bandages reducing as they spun back around her body, she sunk down back to the ground. Sally had her hands gripped to the vampire, her unnecessary breath caught in her lungs. Theo didn't take a breath, nor did his heart start beating again.

Mostly because he didn't need to.

"Ughh," he groaned. "Who designs something with *four* charges?"

"Theo!" Sally pulled him up by the golden bandages to give him a hug. "It worked."

[Living Dead]

She let him go so that she could move the bandages to reveal his eyes. Norah settled down softly onto the throne and deflated into it.

"Are the bandages necessary?" Sally bit her lip as she looked over at the Mummy. "And thank you so much. Also, are *you* okay?"

"Can only use that when I'm on less than five percent health," Norah said with an exhausted smile. "A little while longer and I might have just died. Keep the bandages on for now. It's part of the process."

Sally nodded, confusion in her eyes before she looked down to see all the blood soaked through the broken stone of the tomb. It didn't really help her confusion, but she realized it might not have been boredom that kept the Mummy from replying.

Before she could say anything, she was lifted up as the vampire stood, carrying her in his arms.

"Thanks for bringing me back," Theo said, his smile poking through the dense bandages. "I need to stop dying, huh?"

"*Please.*" She smiled. "You might want to pop me down for now, though - things are messed up. Like really."

"Oh." He placed her down gently and then looked out at the gathered Parties about to fall out of the daze that Norah had placed upon them. "Everyone is here, just as planned."

"You're kind of an ass for doing that in secret." She nudged him. "I forgive you, though. We'll need to kill this chump before I give you the exposition."

He nodded, his sword drawing into his wrapped hand. "Ah, you didn't read the bottom part of the letter, right?"

"Not yet," she said, narrowing her eyes.

Norah cleared her throat. "I did."

The vampire physically winced and turned sheepishly back to the exhausted Mummy. Her attention soon washed away from teasing him as her yellow eyes caught the large shape of Humphrey.

“There’s still life in this old gal yet.” She smiled and stood. “Only three seconds before they recover. Not enough time for a proper reunion.”

Sally looked and nodded toward the vampire. They knew what to do.

And then the ceasefire ended, and after some brief confusion, the battle resumed.

The giant stuffed Monster slammed down onto the Death Knight, but he blocked it with the flat of his greatsword. Edward and Lana slashed through two of the pill-shaped dummies. Jackie had switched to her normal crossbow so as to not pelt everyone with bolts. Chuck supported Dent as he severed through another two of the odd Monsters.

Sally grabbed up her staff, the skull atop it bursting into green flame. Theo’s sword started to glow bright red as he crouched, ready to sprint forward. [Mortis Bomb] went out, and the vampire followed it, striking the first stuffed creature right after the projectile did. As the zombies climbed from the ground, he vanished and appeared by the next Monster to cut them though.

With a grin toward the Mummy, Sally shot off with [Meat Hook] to arrive at the next opponent. The dagger end went into their painted-on face and they started to deflate. They had no brains, which was unfortunate.

“Oh, I like that,” Theo said with a wide grin as he slid up beside her.

“Right? Now I can be both ranged *and* melee.” She gestured to him with her shield, which he took a step back to observe it fully.

He whistled. “I like our logo. Oh, can I get into the *Outsiders*?” He looked around to see who he might be putting out.

“No luck, pup. Party System is broken.” She flourished her staff and pointed it toward the teddy-bear.

Norah walked up behind them, not engaging in the battle. Her skin looked sore and cracked still, and Sally scowled at the damage she had sustained just by keeping the dumb vampire safe.

The Mummy gestured back. “The little soft Monsters are coming back.”

It was true. The first couple they had destroyed had now begun re-inflating.

“Must just have to kill the big guy.” She shrugged. “Let’s go help pops.”

Humphrey was managing to hold his own easily enough. His defenses not taking too much of a beating, yet he had been unable to damage his opponent at the same time. His sword would just bounce or slide off, unable to cut the patchwork pattern of the Monster.

“Maybe I need to find more chewable friends,” the creature chuckled to itself.

His wide smile then turned to confusion. Pain flared up his leg, and he looked down to see a small, almost-green woman in a red cloak jabbing him with the end of her staff.

“Yes, you look crunchy,” he grinned, as he reached his hand down toward her.

A flash of darkness above him and somebody landed on his head. Before he could act, the little green snack shot out a swirling pink beam up to the intruder. She then swung upwards, dragged up his side by the beam and spinning her horrible dagger around inside him along the way.

“Nooo!” he shouted, a long split running from his knee up to his rib cage before the zombie spun up to his head.

Sally grimaced as she wavered, and the golden-wrapped vampire held out an arm to keep her steady. She had expected the bear to be filled with some kind of fluff or stuffing. But it was just blood and meat. Their skin was just weirdly rubbery, which reminded her of that pigman Unique they had fought in the Wasteland. He had wanted to eat her, too.

“You look kinda goofy like that,” she raised an eyebrow at Theo. “What you got going on under there?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” he replied.

She couldn’t see his facial expression to judge how he intended that statement. Before she could prod him further, the bear shifted and raised his hands up to grab at them. Stitching worked up his side to repair the gash she had created. This was dragging on longer than she thought - they’d have to contend with another Invasion soon.

“What even are you?” she growled, stabbing the encroaching hand with the [Skeleton Key].

“I’ve come to eat you all for master!”

She rolled her eyes. “Let me guess, that is Seven?”

“Not telling!” The other hand grabbed Theo for a second, but almost immediately, the vampire burst out in a flurry of slashes from his black punch-blades. The patchwork fingers of the Monster fell apart, spraying blood and odd chunks of bone down across their head.

Sally was tired of this fight already. “Everything keeps regenerating.”

With a shrug, Theo glanced through his STAR menus. “Looks like dying reset all my abilities.” The blood around them started to swirl into a spiral before gathering into a dark ball at the tip of his finger.

A grin across his face, the air cooled as he placed his finger at the top of the patchwork leather by his feet. There was a shockwave that cleared the gathered darkness, just as the blast blew a deep hole through the bear’s head, burying straight down to his neck, almost. While the Monster staggered slightly, he didn’t fall.

“Gosh.” Sally rolled her eyes, before jumping down into the large wound.

A few seconds passed as the vampire watched the head sew itself back up, now with Sally trapped inside.

The Monster grumbled. “Something feels odd.”

“*Now we’ll see who likes being chewed!*” the muffled voice of the zombie came from within.

Theo hopped down onto the damp grass as the Monster started to thrash around and claw at its own face. Hands in pockets, he walked over to Humphrey.

“Theo,” the Death Knight said.

“Humphrey,” the vampire replied.

For a handful of seconds, the pair stared at each other impassively. Then they both moved in and hugged.

“You watched over her,” Theo said.

“I faltered, but together we survived.”

They moved away from each other, and both grinned. “You look rather odd bandaged like that,” the Death Knight tilted his head.

Norah jostled him from the side. “What does that say about me?”

“Nothing, *ha-ha*. It suits you, but I was not expecting a similar look for Theo.” He shuffled awkwardly.

Everyone had stopped fighting for the most part. The strange pill-shaped Monsters didn’t really attack back, just regenerated - although now that Sally was doing something to the giant patchwork bear, all the surrounding opponents seemed to be deflating to a degree.

“Must be pooled health regeneration or something,” Chuck surmised. “Good to have you back, Theo.”

The vampire nodded. “You’ve grown. I’m glad that you, Dent, and Jackie are here. Lana and the plant person are a surprise, though.”

“It’s been quite the day or two of surprises,” the druid grinned and rubbed the back of his head. “I suppose Sally didn’t have the time to get you up to speed?”

Theo shook his head. “Dying took a lot out of me. How long was I out for?”

Humphrey looked between the others and furrowed his brow. “Technically, less than a day?”

“Oh. I thought it would have taken longer.” He looked back at the writhing and slightly deflated Monster. “She did say the Party couldn’t be changed. Looks like there wasn’t enough time to win the final battle without me.”

“Unfortunately.” Chuck nodded. “Architect has started a World Event to kill the *Outsiders*, Players have tracking to their location at all times. Teleportation and Mounts are disabled.”

Theo tilted his head and then turned back to the druid. “Oh. Perhaps I can go and lie back in the crypt instead?” He grinned, pushing through the wrappings to expose his fangs.

“Not only that,” Humphrey added, “but there are Invasions of high level Monsters every twenty minutes. We are expecting one imminently.”

“*Out of the frying pan...*” the vampire murmured to himself.

Sally cut her way out of the stomach of the near-empty sack that once was the bear and gasped for air. Stumbling out onto the rain-slick grass, she then stopped and threw up.

“That’s my gal,” Theo said, smiling, as he walked over to her.

“Gross.” Sally shook her head before standing up to greet him. “If I had known our reunion was going to work, I probably wouldn’t have arrived covered in vomit and gore.”

He said nothing, but brought her in for a hug.

“*It looks as though I left parts of him still inside,*” she whispered, her eyes going over to the lumpy patchwork bear, “*but that’s all vomit, too.*”

“*Why was he filled with meat and bones?*” he whispered back.

“*Right? I can bear-ly believe it.*”

Theo sighed and pulled himself away, a smile still on his face. “Thank you for finding a way to bring me back. I wish I could have told you that-“

He was silenced as the zombie put a slimy finger on his lips. “Let’s survive the Event, and then you can give me all the mush, okay?” As he started to nod, she narrowed her eyes. “And the other stuff.”

Humphrey cleared his throat. “We’d best either move to a new area, or get set up here for the next wave.”

Sally nodded and prodded the vampire away from her. “Chucky, organize the troops. We’ll take the next Invasion here and then go to the next location.”

The druid nodded and immediately delegated the job to Dent, who then turned and started barking orders to everyone. Under the guidance of the swordsman, they started to get into a defensive formation.

“*Theo?*”

The vampire turned around to see the demon approaching him. “*Edward.*”

He gave a brief bow before holding his hand out. "Such a shame you darken our doorstep once more." Edward grinned widely. "I only wish you could take my place and be more useful."

Theo grinned back and took up the handshake. "You've been keeping them safe, so you've earned the stay of my blade."

"Quit *flirting* and get *ready*." Sally stormed in and pushed them apart. "You can be best buds after the world has stopped ending."

As if on cue, a flash of lightning lit up the glum sky. The rolling thunder soon after signaled the rise of darkened shapes coming from the nearby treeline.

Another Invasion to quell, their weapons and spells were drawn at the ready.