

Chapter 2.52

Crab Sticks

As the arrows and lightning arced through the air, Sally dropped to the floor. The crabs gave her some cover, and the first volley slammed into the surrounding ground - two of them cracking into the Monster right in front of her. She turned over and stabbed upward into the sinking beast. [Eat Brains].

The lightning bolt fizzled over her and Archie ate it straight from the air, leaping up to catch it as if it was a hovering toy. With a quick spin, he then spat it back out - but this time it was green and split into three.

Each crackling energy ball surged towards the standing Party members and enveloped them in the crackling energy - critical strikes. Sally pulled a skull from her belt as the zombie crab rose back to its feet, and she flung it out towards the mass of gathering enemies. It burst with the arcing green energy, paralyzing the Monsters as more undead bodies rose around them.

With a screech of metal, Humphrey stumbled back from the blow of a claw. Edward stepped in to blow the follow-up attack, and then withdrew as the Death Knight recovered.

"We are soon to be overwhelmed," the demon licked his lips as his bright blue eyes observed around them.

"Have some faith," Humphrey grinned, his sword now blazing blue with the energy that [Decimate] gave it. "We are yet to be-"

He recoiled as he was struck by the volley of arrows, two of them breaking on impact, two missing, but two embedding into his armor.

"You were saying?" Edward rolled his eyes.

Sally used [Living Dead] over by the Death Knight, healing him and a couple of zombies. A sudden blow knocked her to the floor as a large pincher slammed into her. She rolled and stuck the dagger upward to stop the follow-up from crushing her. Lucius added his strength as the claw cracked itself on her blade, numbing her arm.

Lightning began to arc around the trident head.

While they weren't losing, Sally could definitely see where this was heading. Getting chewed up by the constant melee while the Champion and archers could just pelt them from afar was just going to wear them down. Her number of zombies was slowly dwindling just as the amount of crabs was increasing.

Their group, being mostly melee again, was seriously cramping their ability to effectively fight in this battle. Other than the occasional skull, they couldn't really do much to the demon from behind a wall of giant enemy crabs. They couldn't kill them quick enough to advance. They were losing to the eventual attrition of combat.

Perhaps they should try to flee. Would it make more sense to wait until one of them was seriously injured? Or for Edward to die? She casually blocked and backtracked away from the crabs. No, there was no need for unwanted injury. She needed to find a way to...

She looked down at her shadow Lucius as the flare of Humphry's skills illuminated the surrounding puddles.

"Archie!" Sally called for the cat to run over - which, to his credit, he did.

"Yes?"

"How bright can you go? Like a sun?" She nearly tripped over him as she dodged the wide arc of a giant pincer, the ginger cat weaving between her ankles.

"I could probably go pretty bright. I would have thought you'd have had enough of"

"Do it now!" She leaped forward to jam her dagger into the surprised mouth of the attacking crab, her shadow following up with an attack to the neck, to the sound of a splitting shell.

Archie focused and began to glow - dimly at first, but he increased in intensity, soon lighting up this half of the melee. The enemies paused for a second, shocked at the sudden glow. He didn't stop there, and as she finished off her assailant, she picked up the cat.

"Don't stop!" She held him in her lap and turned away from the melee.

The cat flared pure white, blinding all foolish enough to look straight his way. Sally scrunched her eyes shut, but it still burned. She held him further away and closer to her feet.

"A little lower," Archie purred. "I see what's happening, but I can't hold this much longer."

She did as he said. A scream came from down the end of the battle, followed by cursing and growled threats.

The light pulsed away as Archie yawned. Sally blinked her eyes, but they were still blinded.

"Not bad," Humphrey said from close to where the scream came from. [Compelled Duel]

"Dammit, Humps." She spun, trying to locate everyone while her vision slowly restored. All the crabs were currently slunk low and being feasted on by zombies or beaten up by the golem. One of the archers was hunched over, his skin pulsating with a purple energy that had cracked and grown along him - Edward's power. The other archer held his bow somewhat dazed still, and confused about not being able to shoot the tax-collector who was hiding behind the Death Knight who was apparently not a target.

Maeve was clutching at a bleeding stab wound in her stomach. She looked pained and annoyed. Now very furious at Humphrey especially.

That had worked better than Sally had anticipated. Lucius was acting like a shadow, so the best way he could reach them was to use the light to have him stretch across the battle. The

fact that the Death Knight had not been affected by the harsh illumination, and had managed to drag Edward along with him, was a stroke of luck.

“You are fools,” she sputtered, blood running from her mouth. “Even if you defeat me, there’s no-“

“Even if I defeat you?” Humphrey beamed crimson fire from the back of his helmet. “Let me tell you about my dueling record.”

It was slightly better than Theo’s, kinda. Sally stretched out and started to hopscotch across the dead crab shells to get closer. She sent a skull at the confused archer trying to pick out a target - the blast knocking them from their pillar and into the rising zombies below.

Lucius melted away from her and back into his normal form. “Very ingenious, Sally.”

“You did all the hard work, bud.” She looked back at the pouting cat. “You and Archie.”

“How did you know that would work?” A slightly panicked-face emoji appeared beside him.

Sally raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t. If you want to fail upwards with us, you have to make all the one in a million shots.” For all she knew, the bright light could have rendered his shadow form useless, or he might not have reached or been strong enough to attack.

They paused and looked up at the dark clouds. A portal of black edged with green opened up and a wooden crate fell down from the sky. It quickly dropped to the ground, crushing one of the zombies.

As Humphrey dragged out the intro to his next duel, Sally went to inspect it. It had her name atop it.

The Death Knight flourished his sword. “Are you ready, demon?”

Maeve spat a glob of blood which landed in one of the puddles. “I’m no melee fighter. If it weren’t for your skill, I would have teleported away by now.”

He chuckled. “One little scratch and ready to turn tail home?”

“I kinda use my intestines for digesting, so the wound is pretty inconvenient.” Lightning arced around the trident, held loosely in her hand. “Why don’t we make a deal?”

Humphrey leaped forward, [Grave Strike] glowing dark energy along his greatsword as he swung it around. The attack was blocked and sparks flew out of the impact. He grinned and leaned into the blow.

“I don’t make deals with losers,” he hissed as five skeletal warriors erupted from the surrounding earth.

“It’s from Theo,” Sally tilted her head as Lucius helped her pop the lid off. Edward had come over to join them, but had his eyes on the duel.

She peered inside and lifted a note from the top.

“Sally, sorry I couldn’t be there in person. Things are swell here down in the Forest. I have committed unspeakable horrors. In my absence please find the enclosed, and I hope that you don’t die so I can be there soon. Theo.”

As much as she rolled her eyes, she couldn’t help but smile at the note. The dumb pup couldn’t message her on the System thing but had the time to write something out by hand. She folded the paper and tucked it away in a pocket. *Keepsake get*. Too precious for the error-prone Inventory.

She withdrew the tarp covering the crate contents and gasped. A screaming emoji appeared next to Lucius. Even Edward raised his eyebrows.

Maeve stepped back as the skeletons gathered around the Death Knight. Her hands pulsed with deep blue, and a slick shell of energy started to form around her.

“*Defensive* is my thing,” Humphrey grinned. “That won’t win you a duel.”

The demon growled. “I just need to wait out the timer and survive your weak attacks, then I’ll teleport away.”

“Dear me, Champion. I had thought you wouldn’t have been so soft.” The Death Knight held his sword up, and his five skeletal warriors turned to him - stabbing him with their swords.

“What are you-“ the demon began - before the bone protectors did it a second time.

The bright blue flame of [Decimate] flickered along the long greatsword.

Humphrey tutted as waves of power pulsed around his feet.

“The System sure is silly, huh?”