

[Aegis of the Fallen]
[Undead raised from Summon Zombies are equal to your Level]
[Nearby allied undead have Minor Regeneration]
[+10% Constitution]

Sally whistled as the shield went into her Inventory. She read over the description again. Then a third time, just to be sure.

“What’s the level over Raid boss?” She grinned.

“World Boss,” Humphrey answered. “But those were not implemented.”

She withdrew the aegis into her left hand. It looked nothing like the circular bronze shield that they had worked on. It was more oval now, a slate gray wood with a skull design on the front. Tilting her head, she got a better look at it. No, it wasn’t a skull—it was a stylized zombie head, a split line showing the brain from the top. Behind it were waves of golden... hair? “Is that me?” She puckered her lips.

“Spitting image,” Edward said with a wry grin. “Aside from the head injury.”

“About time the army of the *Outsiders* had a logo.” Humphrey grinned, a twinkle of red flame in his empty eye sockets.

“Army?” Sally whispered, still taken aback by the legendary item.

“We’re about to go to war against the System itself, Sally.” The Death Knight tilted his head. “We are at forefront of the efforts. Are you the only one who hasn’t seen that yet?”

She blinked slowly and looked at the other two.

“You’re a people magnet, we’re all behind you,” Lucius said, a thumbs-up appearing beside him.

Edward rolled his eyes, but smiled. “Theo once told me; save the diner waitress, save the world.”

Sally snorted. “Don’t put all your eggs in this basket, guys. I’m too full of brains. And myself.” Her grin turned into a soft smile. “We’ll do our best.”

Humphrey nodded and then looked up at the sky. “Might be an all-nighter. The wicked never truly rest.”

[Endless Sleep] put all her new pals back away. Her [Summon Zombies] skill now giving Level Twenty-Three zombies was *very* good. Hardier undead meant more uptime, more chance of conversions, and more Stats from [Strength in Numbers].

Sometimes she did feel like the System’s favorite.

Her STAR bloiped, taking her away from feeling good about herself.

[Chuck: We have everything.]

[Chuck: Meet at Upbranch.]

[Sally: what's upbranch]

She closed the Chat window down before he could reply. It'd only be a sensible answer, totally missing her joke. Her stomach had a weight in it, but this time it wasn't due to all that she ate. If this plan didn't work out... well, not point thinking about that just yet.

"Alright troops, Chuck has the goods. It's time to split - if you could do the honors, Edward."

He gave a low bow and then brought out the stone, a sinister grin across his face.

"That's not how you hold a pickaxe."

"Sod off, it's not really the right tool for the job. I'd like to see you do better... nob."

Norah sighed and rubbed at her forehead. This was torture.

There were now five distinct voices outside, and they had determined that this must be some kind of treasure trove and were hell-bent on getting inside.

Their ineptitude just made it more frustrating that she couldn't twist their heads off. They had tried digging at the soil around the tomb. Climbing up atop the roof to see if there was a way in. Touched every stone for the secret entrance button. Now they had finally decided to hack away with tools.

It'd be no use. It would take much greater force to unseat her from this throne and break the magical structure down.

One was coming, of course. That is why she had reinforced it with a bandage cocoon. Was it enough?

It was everything she had, so it better be.

With a flash of blue, the Outsiders arrived in Upbranch. Nothing like the sandstone and blocky buildings of the city in the Wasteland, everything here was made with a rich brown wood or light gray stone. System-created wandered around to make the place populated, and didn't give the odd group a second glance.

Waiting for them by the teleport circle, was the *Insiders*.

"Chuck!" Sally hopped over and threw her arms around him.

"Oh! *By the Earth Mother*, you smell of acid and vomit, Sally." He peeled himself away from her.

“Sure do!” She grinned. “And blood! Did you really just call upon the Earth Mother to curse me?”

He shook his head as Sally greeted the rest of them. Dent gestured for them to follow toward the Forge. Two other groups of Blue faction were present and followed on behind the two Parties.

“Ay, Boss?” Jackie sidled up to her. “I know I’m not a walking stiff, but these dweebs are cramping my style a bit.”

“I hear you.” She looked back at Fern and Lana, who were in mid conversation. “No promises, but I feel like some old gang action is overdue.”

The mobster grinned and gave her a nod.

That might make things awkward, in terms of Party dynamics. Too many friends and silly five person limit. Maybe the two groups didn’t need to be split up - but if they were able to get Theo back, then that’s the *Outsiders* sorted. It was hard being the Boss.

“Here we are,” Dent gestured to the Forge, an open furnace of heated amber light pooling from amongst dark metals where a third Blue faction group was already waiting. A System-created blacksmith stood at the side, arms crossed. “We have a high level craftsperson who can make it for you. We wouldn’t want it to fail somehow and all our efforts be wasted.”

Sally nodded as one of the Blue-tabard women stepped forward. She was surprised to realize that it was Rachel. The woman gave her a nod, and Sally returned a wave.

Chuck turned around. “Alright, I want this area contained. Maintain a perimeter and do not let anyone else close. Kill them if you need to. *We will not* be interrupted.”

With a grunt, Dent stepped away from the Forge to stomp after the groups of Blue now moving into positions. “You heard the Arch-druid, no more than a dozen feet between each of you. Eyes peeled, otherwise I’ll peel them for you. Move your ass, Russ!”

Sally whistled. “You two actually run a tight ship.”

The druid gave her a brief smile before it slipped away, his eyes looking around the area. “While I prefer to be lighthearted, the stakes are too high. We can’t afford to fail at this stage.”

She nodded and smiled back at Humphrey. “You really think Theo will be needed to save the System?”

Chuck raised an eyebrow, and his smile returned. “That’s not why I am bringing him back.”

“Sap.” Sally shook her head. “And that’s not a tree pun. Well, it is, but... thank you, Chucky.”

He gave her a nod and then went over to oversee the crafting.

She leaned over and rested up against the Death Knight. It was heading into night now, and the day had tired her. Too much emotional and physical exhaustion when she just wanted to eat people and make silly quips. The dream. Her eyes turned to the side, and he saw Lucius talking with another familiar face - Charlotte.

Maybe this is how Players felt all the time. The community, things being peaceful and everyone helping each other. The unfair lot she had been given no longer angered her. It just made her sad. How things could have been different. But this is what they had now... and looking at the Shade and the Player animatedly talking, there was a future there where everyone could get along.

"Everything fine, Sally?" Humphrey looked down at her and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Far from it, pops. But has it ever been?"

He grunted. "Have faith. Some things are written by destiny."

Sally pulled a face. "Was it destiny for all the Players I've killed? Things can't just be for my benefit."

"I can say no more."

She moved away from him and scowled. "You know something, don't you?"

"No."

"Big metal ass having ass. I'm going to go talk to a different goofball if you're going to be all cryptic." She walked off before he could respond and found Edward leaning against the side wall of the Forge on his own.

"Doing alright, Mr. Sinister?" She grinned.

"Eh." His glowing blue eyes looked up toward the sky. "I am... filled with regrets."

"Remarkably open for you. Please share more." She placed her staff into the ground and leaned against it.

"Do you think Theo can forgive me, and we can turn a new page?"

She snorted. "What? Are you serious? You two are like best buds already."

The demon furrowed his brow. "Really? But...?"

"You're as big of a sap as any of us, huh?" She shook her head and sighed.

They fell into a brief silence as the sounds of the Forge went on in the background. The murmurs of conversations that she didn't care to hear.

"I loved, once."

She raised her eyebrow and look back up at him, unsure how to respond to that.

“She was... she changed me. The first person I never betrayed. A Unique demon. Light rosy skin, eyes like the galaxy, and the softest blue wings. Taken from me by a group of Players before Ruben took over the Wastes.”

His blue eyes searched the clear night's sky.

“Oh, Ed.” She pulled him in for a hug. “I’m so sorry.”

Hesitant at first, he reciprocated the hug and sighed. “The vomit doesn’t really do it for me either, I’m afraid.”

“Sorry, hah.” She pulled away and wiped her eyes with the back of her forearm. “I probably shouldn’t do that either, don’t want to get acid or vomit in my eyes.”

“Thanks for including me in your oddball family,” he grinned at her and then stood up straight. “But that’s my emotional allotment for the year, so now I will be off to maintain my reputation.”

She beamed at him as he walked away, and she sighed. Just what she needed when she was running thin - everyone coming and giving her their...

Her head turned to see Lana standing nearby, looking rather sheepish.

Sally smiled softly and gestured her over. “I’ve been vomiting a lot and am rather dehydrated, so if you’re going to make me cry, then I might literally die.”

“Ah.” The woman grimaced and brushed the dark curls away from her face. “That makes me feel pretty awkward about what I was going to say then.”

“That you appreciate being included and accepted? Thankful and sorry for something.” Sally stuck out her bottom lip.

“Yeah, you got me. Been one of those kinda days, huh?” Lana smiled and looked over at the Forge.

Sally sighed and wrinkled up her nose. “Just my whole existence, really. Aside from the odd week or two between areas, I’ve always been at one end of the blade or the other. I’m a force of chaos.”

The clone shook her head. “You’re a force of change. Most of us here have been dragged along by your strong ambition for it. I know you probably think you got the short end of the stick, by in my view you’re sitting atop the tree.”

Perhaps. Sally rubbed at her hair. It was itchy being bundled up, and she needed to wash it before she let it be free. She was the Queen of the Dead, sure, but the leader of an army? Over by the Forge, Humphrey was talking with Chuck. In catching her glance, they beckoned her over.

“Duty calls.” She shrugged apologetically. “But for what it’s worth, you’re just Lana to me. No further qualifiers on that.”

The woman nodded and smiled, moving away to allow Sally to go.

Chuck wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Almost done, Sally."

"Actually," Rachel's voice came from further in. "It is complete. Successfully."

Bubbles of excitement rose up in her stomach as the woman brought it out, a soft smile across her sweaty face. A key of bright blue, a pulse of white light illuminating it from within.

With a shaking hand, she reached out and took it. It was warm, and heavier than it looked. Straight into the Inventory so nothing terrible could happen to it. She then threw herself at Charlotte and gave her a tight hug.

"Thank you so much. And sorry about how I smell. And also how it might look for a zombie to throw themselves at you suddenly."

"You're welcome," Rachel smiled despite the overpowering undead woman. "I only hope that it works."

"Let's get moving," Chuck ordered, his voice stern but soft. "Perhaps we'll sleep tonight after all."

Sally beamed as she released the Player and hopped over towards the druid.

A pain suddenly pulsed through her head, and she grasped at it in surprise. Everyone around her suffered the same malady, confusion and discomfort radiating around the gathered groups.

Then, the notification pop-ups appeared.

[New Event!]

[Defeat the World Bosses]

[Target: The Outsiders]

[Proximity Tracking Active]

[Teleportation is Disabled]

[Mounts are Disabled]

[Party and Guild System Frozen]

[Reward: Immortality]

Sally rubbed her eyes and looked up to see every nearby System-created turn to her group and glare menacingly.