

Cloaked in shadows that obscured their dark metal armor, the only points of light on their new assailants were their singular eyes. Large orbs of pale white light that observed the gathered groups with impassive expressions as they drew nearer. Longswords, spiked maces, and halberds held in their plated hands, all made of black metal.

“Cousins of yours, Lucius?” Sally raised an eyebrow, but the Shade just shook his head, some slight panic in his emotionless expression.

“These are Wraith Knights,” Humphrey explained, adjusting his posture into a defensive stance.

“Oh,” she said. “Like you, but more like a ghost. They’re undead then, right?”

“Yes, but...” The Death Knight shrugged. “You can try.”

Sally strode out in front of the rest of the resistance. They were all primed and ready for the signal. There were... eight Monsters. Not terrible odds, but these Invasions were meant to get more difficult as time went on. Now, with Theo on their side, they had a little more power behind them - even if he wasn't part of the Party at present.

“Hey! Kneel down before your undead queen!” She placed her staff into the ground and crossed her arms - a difficult thing to do while still holding her shield.

The Wraith Knights paused their advanced and stood regarding her. No response came from them.

“Best choose wisely, otherwise we’ll do this the hard way.” Her grin widened, and her crimson eyes practically glowed through the light rain still pelting the area.

With the sudden pulse of gray energy, the center Wraith blew a beam of energy toward her from its central eye. The attack burned into the ground, drawing a shallow trench through the mud.

“Bad choice,” she said from mid air, [Escape Fate] taking her up at an angle toward them. Her own beam of pink energy striking one and zipping her in toward the fray. “Attack!” she yelled out.

She spun her staff around as different colored lights bloomed around in the gloom. As she collided with the first one, her dagger impaling through their armor, she spun to block the attack from another. With a sword looming up behind her, Theo slid into position and parried it away from her. Just ahead of them, the wide figure of Humphrey barreled into three of the Wraiths, right as bandages wrapped around their legs, knocking two to the floor.

“Reminds me of when we took the Bronze district in the Wastes,” Theo said as he deflected another blow before slashing out with his own attacks.

“Good memories,” Sally agreed. “Our dance of death, the screams of our enemies...” she dodged a mace before blasting the Monster with a [Mortis Bomb]. “Our family all together.”

The vampire vanished to appear above his opponent, a third punch-blade of pink energy appearing in the air as he dropped down onto the Wraith. "Now look at the little group we have gathered." He severed the head of the Monster and dropped to the floor, his eyes going over to the gang leveling off spells and attacks towards the melee.

"Yep!" She slashed the dagger end of her staff, severing off a hand at the wrist, as the pronged end tied up the weapon aimed for her. "Everyone gathered for the end times."

"Not sure who the plant person is, though." Theo stepped to the side to avoid the heavy downswing of a two-handed axe as he rubbed at his bandaged head.

"They were in the Spire dungeon." Sally's shadow slashed out, tearing a gash through her opponent's lower leg and causing them to stumble. "Guardian of one of the higher floors. You didn't know?" As the Wraith dropped, she slammed it with her shield, then twisted round the staff to impale it through the neck.

He shrugged. "All I knew was that the tower was the highest point in the area, so Henkk would be able to find it."

"You didn't even know if I could make it up there?" She kicked the Monster over and struck it again in the head.

Theo grinned, his fangs only barely showing through the golden bandages. "You're *Sally*, I knew you'd make it to the top."

"Aww." She feigned embarrassment. Perhaps he was right, though, even if he was trying to flatter her. Her head tilted to the side as she watched him combat the next Knight. If anyone was going to bash their head against something until they won, then it would be her.

As he flashed around in a blur of pink and crimson, she turned to the rest of the combat. Things had gone their way. A couple of other trenches had scored along the muddy grass, but nobody was too injured. Humphrey and Norah had taken out two, she had taken out three with Theo, Dent had taken one down. The last two were still in combat - but with the assistance of the others in the back, their time was short-lived.

Theo finished off his Wraith and tried to put his hands in his pockets. "So something like that every twenty minutes?"

She nodded. "The last ones were a little tougher, but we weren't as prepared." Her eyes narrowed. "We didn't have you either, pup."

"You want me to stick around?"

Sally puckered her lips. "I knew this question would be coming, you ass. Just brought you back from the dead and you want to run off to kill groups of Reds before they can get here, right?" She placed her staff into the ground so that she could cross her arms again.

"Ah, I'm too predictable now, huh?" He shuffled awkwardly. "I wasn't even dead for twenty-four hours."

“Yeah, and you’d still be dead if it wasn’t for all these goofballs coming together to help me bring you back.” Her eyes narrowed. “I know you like to solve things ahead of time, but I want you here with me. With us all.”

Theo tilted his head over to look at all the rest of the gathered group, now done with finishing off the last couple of enemies and regrouping. His face twitched beneath the bandaging.

“Look.” She stepped up to him and prodded a finger against his chest. “I may have the ambition to take a bite from this world, but you have the practical foresight to meta-game bullshit. Things are going to get rough here, and I need you by my side.”

The vampire deflated and gave a reluctant nod. “You’re right, I know.”

“Otherwise,” she continued, “I’m going to ask Norah for your letter and I’ll read the bottom part out to everyone.”

He physically recoiled from her words. “Come on, blackmail isn’t necessary.”

Sally clicked her fingers before grabbing her staff. “My dear Theo, you forget that I am a *villain*.” With a wide grin, she turned to stride off toward the rest of the *Insiders* and *Outsiders*.

Dent rolled out his shoulders and nodded to her as she approached. “Not as bad as the metal rhino Monsters. Perhaps we got lucky.”

“Or now we are cursed by something,” Edward added, idly scowling up at the constant rain.

Chuck rolled his eyes. “More likely, we were better positioned and prepared. Theo’s resurgence is a huge boost to our front line power, and aside from a few beams, the Wraiths were melee focused.”

“Right.” Dent wiped the rain from his forehead. “Now we need to make the decision of where to go before we bogged down in even more combat.”

“What are the options?” Theo brought up his map, his eyes frowning beneath the bandages.

“Jublia Keep, or the Circle of the Sparse.” Dent shrugged. “I didn’t name them.”

The vampire slowly nodded. “I’ve got an even better idea...” he sent the coordinates over to the other Players.

Sally brought it up and tilted her head. “Looks like the middle of nowhere?”

Humphrey had already circled behind her to look at the Map over her shoulder. “Hmm. Intriguing. I could not think of a more apt place for us to either fall or rise.” He grinned at Theo.

“There’s no marker.” Chuck frowned. “I’m not familiar with the area. What is it?”

Theo's grin was wide, his fangs catching what little light the morning offered. "It's a graveyard. A big one with lots of mausoleums, crypts, tombs, and the like. Large cathedral at the back."

"A bit of all sorts of terrain, then." Dent rubbed his chin. "Not to mention thematically appropriate."

Sally nodded. "That's the most important bit." She leaned over to ensure the stagecoach was still in one piece - which it was. "Get saddled up, Jackie. Got about a ten-minute ride to our next place of final rest." The mobster shot back a nod and ran over to the vehicle.

Chuck turned his head away, eyes unfocused. "*Shit*. One of the teams just died."

"Southern one," Dent added, before shaking his head.

Sally clenched her jaw and hoped it wasn't the one with either Rachel or Charlotte in. Seemed silly to be playing favorites now, but perhaps if they came out on top there would be a chance to bring back to life everyone who died today - or even the week, if that was possible.

"By foot, that's still a good eight hours away from the graveyard," Chuck bit his bottom lip. "We can't assume they don't have another way of travel, though."

She pulled a face. All these unknowns weren't too fun. Once again, she preferred being on the offensive rather than defensive. "No point dawdling now. We need to get set up at the 'yard before the next Invasion."

The gathered force nodded and grumbled their acknowledgements.

Just before they turned toward the stagecoach, there was a flash of blue light from the side, and they turned.

A robed figure with a high collar, spectral and glowing a bright blue. A skeletal face with a sinister scowl and odd hat atop their head.

[I really need to stop using so much energy, don't I?]

"Architect!" Sally growled and her staff burst into bright green. Although they were speaking out-loud, the messages also reflected inside her vision like notifications.

[Now, now. I am currently incorporeal, so don't waste your energy, bug. I am just here to deliver a short message.]

The figure hovered around, until their eyes focused on Humphrey.

[My most traitorous little pet. Full of things that need to be erased.]

Shaking his head, some sadness in his empty sockets, the Architect then lifted his hand up toward the Death Knight.

[Goodbye.]

A beam, a couple inches wide and a foot long, burst from the skeletal hand. Made of pure light blue energy, the very air around it crackled as it shot forth.

Sally turned, the after-image of the beam still in her eyes as she saw that it hadn't hit Humphrey. Theo stood in front of the plated figure, a burning hole through the golden bandages, right where his heart was. Now there was just a hole straight through his body. The Architect sighed.

[What a waste. Until next time, bugs.]

The illuminating glow of the figure faded away, washed away by the breeze. Sally growled and spun around to the vampire.

"*Seriously?* You're impossible!"

"Sally," he said, as blood soaked through the wrappings down his torso. "Hold me close now."

She dropped her weapons and threw herself around him, squeezing him tight against her. "Asshole. Why you gotta do this to a gal?"

"Just a few seconds longer," he whispered, deflating into her with a long sigh. "Things will be okay."

Sally leaned her head back to look at him, a confused scowl over freshly wet eyeballs. "You've got a secret again, haven't you?"

He smiled, despite how tired his eyes looked. "And... *done*." He cupped her ears with his hands and gave her a brief kiss on the forehead before stepping away from her.

She continued to be confused as she saw that the previously golden bandages were now soaked through with crimson, from head to toe. Fragments of glass dropped down from his torso onto the grass as the wrappings started to decay and turn to ash, revealing his pristine suit with no sign of the previous wound on him.

"Sometimes," he said, taking his crimson glasses from inside his jacket to put back on. "My genius scares even myself."