

Laying on the slick mud of the graveyard, Sally looked up at the demon standing above her. After two seconds that seemed to drag on forever, his lifeless body dropped to the floor - a fist-sized hole through his chest.

[Party Member Edward has died.]

“Stupid ass,” she growled and shook her head. Sure, he would come back, but now he was back in the Wastelands and unable to help them. The fact that he had possibly saved her life was beside the point.

“Edwaaaaaard!” Theo yelled out, bursting into red flame and flickering over to the woman who had fired the shot.

Dent wiped his brow as a heal came in from the distant Chuck. His opponent also received a heal from one of the distant Reds. As much as he enjoyed proving to be the best swordsman in the System, he was tiring, and this wasn’t the ideal battleground for proving his worth. Still, he needed to persist.

Sparks flared out as Humphrey slashed across his armored opponent, before he stepped forward and slammed the pommel of his sword into them, wounding the man. The Death Knight then kicked out their leg and twisted his sword around to slice through the Player’s neck as he dropped.

“We need to prepare,” he growled. “Invasion is imminent.”

Lucius stabbed a fallen Red with the end of his shadow staff to ensure they were dead. “Theo told me he had one last favor to call in for when Seven was here.”

“Oh?” Humphrey cast [Kneel] on an approaching Player and then easily cracked their skull with the downswing of his sword. “Must he always be full of surprises?”

“He made it sound like a gift for Sally that we’d all benefit from.” A question mark appeared beside his head. “But that doesn’t narrow it down.”

Norah smiled. “I think I have a good guess, though.” She turned her gaze over to the vampire, who was finishing carving through the one who had shot the demon.

Jackie banged her foot on the top of the stagecoach, annoyed that she couldn’t spray into the crowd. Any pot shot at Seven was just blocked, so she had taken to tapping out the occasional bolt at the Players on the outside.

“Come on, you goons, it’s time to crack some skulls.” She pulled a face and lit up a cigarette.

The stagecoach door opened up and a group of eight bandits clambered out, dressed in dark gray suits and armed with melee weapons. At her command, they power-walked through the midsection of the graveyard toward the fight, looking threatening.

“Seems your pals are dying just as quickly as before,” Sally grinned. “Even with a do-over the best in the System aren’t able to take down the Outsiders. And assorted allies.”

“True.” Seven shrugged. “Despite the stories, I still underestimated you.”

“Heck yeah you did.” She could feel the Invasion imminent now. A complication. “Now get in mah belly!”

“I remember the old world.”

She stopped, foot sliding in the mud. “You do?”

“I was a nobody there. Aimless. Downtrodden. This new world gave me a fresh start, and a means to take control.” He smiled coldly at her.

Sally raised an eyebrow. “If it’s acceptance you’re after, we’re all about that.”

“No. I think it’s time your little game ends now.” Seven held out his hands, a wave of energy vibrating along his arms.

[Multi-Form]

“Oh.” The zombie rubbed the side of her staff against her head. “Now there’s seven of you, that was... unexpected and kinda sad, actually.”

Indeed, in a rough circle, the Red leader had shifted into six more versions of himself. Each was as overconfident and annoying as the last. As much as she would like to have eaten his brain, knowing how weird and corrupt he was - she’d probably get a stomachache.

Through the floor, the vibration of the Invasion turned all unoccupied eyes toward the start of the graveyard. From behind the gates and emerging from shadows came... lots of town guards. They looked like the ones from the Gold area of the Wastes city. Dozens soon became close to a hundred, and yet they still didn’t stop spawning.

Theo slid across the wet mud and slammed into the side of Humphrey. “Wah, happy birthday. *Oh*, you’re not Sally.” He narrowed his bright red eyes between the Death Knight and Lucius. “I got her a little surprise.”

Humphrey looked between the onrushing horde and the twitching vampire. “What did you do?”

“Simple really, Sally.” He scratched the side of his head, cutting himself with a punch-blade. “I tapped in the Living Bug guy we met in the Forest. Had him tweak a little variable. You see, an Invasion has a set power level, and it cobbles together Monsters to make up to it before releasing. So I...” he stopped talking.

Lucius looked at Jane, who just shrugged.

The Death Knight sighed. “So he forced it to pick a lower power Monster, causing it to generate... possibly hundreds. And all so that... ah, I see.”

Theo looked back up at him. “You’re not Sally.”

Sally licked her lips. This couldn't be by chance - the System wasn't this nice. She could already feel the hum of power inside her. Narrowing her eyes, she scoured the battleground for the pup. Ah, Norah was currently trying to stop him licking the blood from Humphrey.

She smiled and shook her head. "Hey, Seven?"

Three of them raised their eyebrows, while the other four were looking at the Invasion force and the remaining combatants.

"Hope the stories didn't downplay this part."

A cold light bloomed in her eyes as wind whipped around the graveyard. A fresh layer of gloomy fog enclosed on all within, darkening the area. Sally held her hand out and the temperature of the area dropped sharply.

[Zombie Apocalypse]

She cackled as she slowly rose into the air atop a small pyramid. This was pure joy. Not only would her zombies easily overpower the Invasion force over time, adding or replacing their numbers lost, but [Strength in Numbers] was now working overtime to give them a Stat boost that was beyond the pale.

[Strength in Numbers] [+174% Stat Bonus]

The rest of the Reds were soon overpowered as more than one hundred zombies crawled up around them. A spray of crossbow bolts began peppering the Invasion, weakening them ready for the hungry mouths of the undead. The Outsiders turned their attention to the copies of Seven.

"You really think you stand a chance?" He gnashed his teeth as all copies spoke at once. "Come at me then, useless sacks of ill-gotten power."

Sally grinned and slid down the side of the pyramid, her staff bursting into green flame. It always came down to this. "Shoulda done your homework, *Four*. Hubris always gets our enemies killed."

"Hubris?" He yelled back, raising his hand. "I'll show you hubris." The familiar energy of the rail-shot started blooming down his arm.

Chuck smiled as he quickly flicked through his Guild messages. The rest of the Blues had just confirmed they had destroyed the Red team base and taken anything important. That made them the winners, in his mind, even if they fell-

He was shoved to the ground, to land amongst the loose gravel covering a nearby grave. Fern stumbled, a fist-sized hole through their chest.

"Oh." The dryad looked down at the druid. "I have come to the conclusion that I do not enjoy adventuring and combat."

Chuck raised up his hand and a brief heal pulsed through Fern, as they sat down on the ground softly. "Are you okay? Thank you for..."

"I have the option of dying or going into a hibernation for my existence to persist. For several reasons, I am choosing the latter."

The druid got up and put his hand on the bark shoulder of the plant-person. "Do what you need to. We will keep you safe."

"Couldn't even... keep yourself..." The end of the sentence didn't come as Fern fell asleep.

Seven pulled a face. "How strange that keeps happening. If I want to kill someone, do I have to aim at whoever is near them instead?"

"The inability of the Reds to jump on the swords for their brethren is what makes us strong and you weak," Sally said with a wide grin. "We have the power of friendship."

"Gross." Seven spat.

Humphrey used [Compelled Duel] on one of the Sevens, while Norah and Lucius tried to pin one down. Theo had become a human pinball, zipping back and forth between each copy in a blur of red and pink. Each of his strikes blocked, but as he continually sped up, he was starting to keep them busier and more distracted.

The zombies nearest the Sevens were quickly ran through, but were soon replenished by the addition of killed Guards at the graveyard entrance.

A Seven burst toward Sally, quickly followed by another. He dodged to the side to avoid the [Mortis Momb] but as the second one bore down on her; she used [Escape Fate] to appear just behind the second, jamming her staff backwards. The dagger connected with the back of his neck, severing his spine and killing this copy outright.

As they both dropped to the ground, she flourished her staff and turned to the first one, four zombies raising around the dead body as she grinned widely. "Fell for that twice now. Were your brain cells shared around too?"

The Death Knight slid backwards across the mud, glowing lines across his dark metal.

"Four swords seem to be better than one," the Seven said with a grin. "I feel you are holding out on me, however."

"I would not waste my true capabilities on a miserable excuse for a Player," Humphrey replied, raising his sword back up to continue the duel.

"He's just cutting through my bandages," Norah seethed, her eyes bright yellow with fury. "I don't even know where my summon went."

"I can help," Jane said sheepishly, touched the Mummy on the shoulder. A blue light enriched her, leaving a gray-blue sheen across her whole body.

Norah narrowed her eyes at the adventurer, but turned and shot out a bandage. The wrapping carried the same energy with it, and as a glowing red sword swung to cut it - instead, sparks flew out and the bandage span around the weapon to cover it.

“Thank you,” the Mummy said. “I will now protect you as one of my own.”

Theo spun out and slid across the mud, building a small hill of it against his foot before he stopped. His left arm hung limp by his side, lacerated in multiple places to the bone. As he caught a few breaths, it regenerated back to full health in a matter of seconds. “Ohhh! Regeneration makes me tired tooooo.”

Two of the Sevens were approaching him. He clicked his fingers, trying to start up a tune he couldn't even hum along to, despite his attempts. “How does it go, again?” His tired eyes went up to the globules of blood hovering in the air, most of them obscured by the horde of zombies thick in the area.

Seven lunged for him, a further two swords in his hands, alongside the four floating ones.

“Oh, I remember now.” Theo smiled, right before the six swords pierced him through. “It was... like this.”

A blood-soaked hand went up as time slowed, and a dark orb burned at the tip of this index finger.

“Pop!” he said, a pitch-black blast exploding Seven's head, as the vampire himself succumbed to the wounds and fell down dead.