

Rather than fall down into infinity, Sally's feet landed on a hard ground. In fact, it hardly felt like she had fallen for long at all. Her teeth clenched to see that Seven was still standing ahead of her. But now... they were no longer in the graveyard.

In something that reminded her of Henkk's ability, the pair of them now stood in a deep gray cube. The walls were near transparent, and she could see beyond into a limitless expanse of darkness that had the slight hint of dark green in the far distance. Surrounding her odd cube were a handful of other similar rooms, suspended in this nothingness at differing heights.

"Not bad." She spun her staff around before holding it like a spear. "Perhaps it's not time for my own monologue?"

"It would only be polite," the man smiled and gestured for her to continue.

Chuck grimaced. "Now what are they doing?" He received shrugs from Lana and Jackie, while Fern just looked impassive.

The fighters ahead of them had turned bright green. Frozen in the positions they were just in, but now looked like they had been cut out of the world. He grimaced. The assumption would either a time limit or killing the right Player would bring them back... hopefully that would happen before the next Invasion arrived.

"They can't be targeted." He turned back to the other three who had been left out. "Start setting up to be expecting their return at any notice. If the Invasion comes, perhaps we'll need to kite it around with the stagecoach."

The three nodded and started bringing things together, while the druid narrowed his eyes back into the odd fray. Dent was in there somewhere, the only Insider to get caught up.

In one of the cubes, the swordsman ran his tongue across his lips and his eyes narrowed at the Red Player ahead of him. "Forcing a two-on-two duel, huh? That's very risky for you."

Behind him, bandages snaked through the air as Norah's eyes blazed with anger at the two they had to fight.

The man with a long beard and blue sword chuckled, his eyes blazing a similar color to the weapon he held. "Oh, I've been waiting to fight you for a long time, Dent... for I am the greatest swordsman."

"Unlikely. But allow me to put to rest your doubts."

A woman behind the Red man rolled her eyes and gestured towards him. Norah nodded, but wasn't too keen on making friends with an enemy. The sword wielder had a corrupted STAR, but the woman had a regular one.

With a flash, the duelists burst towards each other, the clatter of their swords flickering light and sparks as they clashed. Briefly blinded, the woman then lowered her arm, protecting her eyes, ready to defend against the Mummy.

"Oh, hello!" A smiling faced emoji appeared in the air beside her.

Theo stretched out. “What are the chances, huh?” He grinned toward the demon.

Edward deflated. “I’d say it was *inevitable*.”

The pair were in a cube with three Red Players, one of them already injured and trying to heal up. One at the back was a nervous man who seemed to be holding a spell. At the front, a bulky woman with long black hair and two heavy looking maces.

Theo’s Ultimate form wore off, and he pouted. “That’s not fair. I wonder if I get it back when I die?”

“No, you shouldn’t,” Edward shrugged. “It goes by day rather than life.”

The vampire brought out his punch-blades and assumed a ready position. “Shame. Never thought I’d die side by side with a betrayer.”

“Well,” the demon said with a grin, his rapier illuminating green. “How about side by side with a...”

Theo looked up at him and relaxed his posture. “Can’t say it, can you, until we settled the matter of the question?”

“It is time we shed blood and make amends.” Edward’s eyes burned a brighter blue as he turned to face the vampire.

The Red Players exchanged glances and shrugged.

Humphrey glared out at the expanse, looking between the different boxes full of the Outsiders.

“Aren’t you going to fight us, you big metal bucket?”

He didn’t even turn or acknowledge the voice. Sally seemed to be knee deep in a monologue with Seven, buying them all some time. Dent was in the middle of a duel—entirely respectable—while Norah, Lucius, and a Red Player were having a polite conversation at the side of the battle. Theo and Edward were squaring off, but hadn’t started fighting each other or the Reds in the room with them.

And as for himself... he turned to the pair of Red Players. “Which one of you caused this fracture?”

“Not telling ya.” A man with a scratchy voice and large backpack grinned as he waved a knife back and forth.

“Even if we did,” the woman behind him cheered, “you can’t get him from here.”

The Death Knight took another glance around. “Well, that narrows it down to that gentleman with the demon and vampire, probably maintaining the spell.” The flame on his helmet rose higher as he looked back at them. “And you have used both of your corrupted abilities.”

“S-so what if we have?” The man shifted uneasily. “We still have our normal skills.”

Humphrey shook his head sadly. "I am afraid you are well out of your depth." He flourished his greatsword that burst into crimson flame. "Step forward and accept the ruin you have brought unto yourselves."

"...and then I said 'Pancakes!'" Sally beamed at Seven.

"Right. So that wasn't really much of a monologue. You just ran your mouth with whatever came into your head, moaned about your hair, and then attempted to tell an anecdote about pancakes that didn't even make sense." He narrowed his eyes.

She shrugged. "Perhaps you had to be there."

"When I heard about the Queen of the Undead who had brought down a dragon, I had expected more of a... femme fatale."

"I'm both those things." She frowned at him.

"I had considered trying to get you to change sides, but now I see that you are nothing but a Monster like all the others." His two swords of red light appeared beside him. "The whole scrawny zombie thing is a huge turnoff."

"*What?*" She clenched her sharp teeth together as her eyes burned bright red. "Like you could compete with Theo, anyway. I'm surprised you had enough room in that suit for the Observers with all that ego in there."

"Theo? Oh, is that the vampire over there, who looks like he is about to french kiss the demon?"

Sally raised an eyebrow toward the pair, currently in each other's faces talking, while the Reds with them stood awkwardly waiting. "System damn it, fangs." She sighed and glared back at Seven.

Dent stumbled forward, the man passing him and stopping too. Both men paused, their breath held, before a spurt of blood erupted from the Red Player and they dropped to the ground. The swordsman stood up straight and relaxed his sword arm. "A worthy attempt."

Lucius and Norah gave him some polite applause, while the woman grinned sheepishly.

"You used your skill on her?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Sure did," a thumbs-up appeared by the Shade. "I'm not allowed to touch the corrupted ones, but Jane here is normal. *More* normal, now."

"I've been trying to get through these walls," Norah interjected, "but they aren't made of any material I've come across before."

"Oh, you'll want to kill Vinny," Jane offered. "Or at least interrupt him." Her finger pressed against the side wall, pointing down at the man holding a spell in the room with Edward and Theo.

“Just *stab* me then,” the vampire seethed.

Edward glared at him, face-to-face. “I’ll not give you the satisfaction.”

One of the Red Players went to step forward before the other stopped them. “Don’t interrupt the enemy when they’re making a mistake.”

“Why else would you ask Sally what my greatest weakness is?” Theo bared his fangs. “You seek some petty vengeance just because I killed you three and a half times.”

“You are not acting yourself. This is neither the time nor place.” The demon stood taller. “Plus, this is what she answered.” He leaned forward to whisper in the vampire’s ear.

Theo blinked. “Oh. I mean, she’s not wrong.” He stood back away from the demon and scratched the side of his head with the edge of his punch-blade. “That might be a little more awkward than fighting to the death, huh?”

“Especially in present company.”

The vampire turned his glare back to the confused-looking Red Players, before looking to where Sally was. “Alright. If killing these three doesn’t fix the weird box thing, can I trust you to kill me so I can help Sally out?”

Edward smiled. “See, now we’re on the same page, blood brother.”

Theo grinned, as crimson light started to flicker around him. “Blood brother,” he agreed, with a brief nod. Together, they launched towards the Reds.

Blood flicked from Humphrey’s sword as he flourished it around the head of the second Player bouncing across the odd floor.

“You died as you lived,” he announced to nobody. “Weak and inconsequential.”

He sighed. Now alone and trapped in this odd box, the two corpses offering no solution to get out or move around, he turned his attention to the other cubes in this space. Norah and her lot seemed safe. Theo’s one had become a swirling flash of light as their battle had finally gained progress. The fact that the Players had been content enough to sit back and watch the pair bicker proved they were too weak to succeed.

Sally and Seven were squaring up and about to duel, which he wished he could get closer to assist. There were also two other cubes, one with some Reds in but no Outsiders. A larger one still was actually way above them and seemed to contain all of Sally’s zombies. More the fool them, as each one boosted the Outsider’s Stats.

The Invasion was now but a few minutes away, he could feel it.

“We might need your help soon, little brother,” he murmured to himself.

Sally spun away, a gash through her upper arm dripping warm blood down through her top. Why was her blood even warm? Why did it run when she had no pulse? Sometimes she had a pulse, or rather her heart moved, just like any other muscle.

“You know he’ll be coming for you next?” Bright green illuminated her face as the skull on her staff burst into flame.

“Oh? What makes you think I won’t be able to stop the Architect?” Seven took a step toward her and his floating swords carved through the air.

“First,” she said, leaping backward as she shot out [Mortis Bomb], “I’m clearly the main character, while you’re just a terribly overcooked villain.”

“Are you sure?” He blurred to the side to avoid the projectile, the skull just bursting ineffectively against the far wall. “I’m not a monster who eats people but gets a pass because I’m overly cheerful about it.”

“You just kill for different reasons. So what, you can rule the System the way you think is best?”

He rolled his eyes. “I already covered this in my monologue. Were you really not paying attention?”

Sally shrugged. “Those kinds of things usually aren’t important when I’m close to eating your brains, anyway. Plus, I was watching to see when the caster of this skill would die.” She gestured to where Theo was now fighting with her eyebrow.

Seven turned to glance that way, and Sally pounced.

“Nice try,” he smiled, lashing out with both swords. She was no longer there, however. A sharp pain sparked in his lower back as he spun to find her there.

Three zombies started to crawl from the perfectly flat floor where she had used [Escape Fate] and jabbed him with her dagger. Sally twirled and deflected the floating swords, backtracking to avoid being impaled.

“Curse immune, but you’re pretty stabbable,” she said, sticking her tongue out at him.

“I’ve wasted enough time here,” he growled. “Die, roach.”

The sword swords spun together, forming a spear of bright light that immediately darted towards her.

With a pop of energy, Theo suddenly appeared in front of her, taking the brunt of the attack and slumping down to the floor.

A second pop and he landed beside the zombie again.

“Four stacks, fangs? Why you gotta come here and steal my thunder?” She scowled at him as Seven ground his teeth together.

“Just came to deliver a message,” the vampire shuddered as he righted himself. With a finger outstretched, he pointed to where Edward stood alone amongst the corpses of the Reds.

“*Death approaches,*” he whispered.