

The Architect gripped his skeletal fists together. “You do not understand the amount of ruin the false-Architect has brought to the System. There’s a branch in the data that is labeled ‘memes’. I do not know what that is.”

Sally tapped her foot in the soft mud. “I’m not here to be your agony aunt.”

“I don’t know what that means either!”

Trying to get the big bad to see some sense had not been a worthwhile use of her time. He just wanted to complain about how it wasn’t easy to gather up the power he needed to try to smite them from existence, and her insistence that he just abdicate and allow someone more competent to lead hadn’t gone down well.

Over half of the summoned Observers had been slain at no real detriment to the *Outsiders* and pals... although several of them were either missing or she couldn’t see them from where she stood. The vampire hadn’t returned, which might mean an extra Seven had traveled further away or was hidden somehow. Or Theo had gotten lost in his mania and found something else less important to do.

Knowing the vampire, it would be the latter.

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Theo didn’t feel too good. Or rather, he didn’t feel too *Theo*, which wasn’t good.

Which made his constant smile a bit worrying.

His wrist burned and was a terrible shade of red. His STAR pulsed alongside his heartbeat - which was strange, as he didn’t usually have one to note.

Seven held down a hand toward him. “See, that wasn’t such a bother, was it?”

The vampire took the offered help and stood on shaky legs. His regeneration had come back, a new tongue back in his mouth. “What do I do now?”

“Well, I think you should start by killing the *Outsiders*, right?”

Theo ran his new tongue across his long fangs. “Kill? Is that your order, sire?”

Seven chuckled. “It certainly is.”

The crimson eyes of the vampire looked around the illuminated cathedral. There were four clones of Lana still, what remained of *Last Word*. As his glare returned to Seven, he smiled. Punch-blades of dark metal burst into his grip.

“I’d best get started then.”

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Humphrey slid across the mud, a gash of silver across his chest. Gradually, he healed up as he regained his footing. A smile went across his skeletal face as bandages came in to waylay the continued attacks of the large Observer with six arms.

“Shame my brothers are so weak.” He flourished his blade and stepped forward. It had been a concern at first that not everyone present was contributing, but after seeing what little threat the wave of Observers had presented, he didn’t blame them.

He could hear Sally arguing with the Architect, and keeping him busy was beneficial until the right time came up. The lack of the vampire was acceptable, as he had a terrible grip on his sanity right now and needed a break. There had been less support from the back, but he was pretty sure the *Outsiders* alone could break these opponents with little issue.

Something concerning in the grand scheme of things, compared to how tense the Invasions had been. The worse was yet to come, or the best.

Either way, some end was upon them.

“You felt it too?” Chuck moved up beside Lana as they approached the cathedral.

She nodded. “Well, I could feel some of my clones were here. You?”

“Some power, and something Theo had said, yeah.”

They stopped at the slightly ajar doors and readied their weapons. With a nervous push, the large wooden door swung open silently.

Lana gasped and covered her mouth.

Blood. All over the walls, floor, and pews. Body parts littered the place as if the figures had exploded. The statue that now ran with crimson rivers in the carved grooves of the tall figure had five heads placed at its feet. Seven and four that resembled Lana.

Before the statue stood a figure soaked through in blood and gore. Theo turned his burning red eyes back toward them.

“You should both leave.”

“Theo?” Chuck went to move forward before Lana stopped him.

The vampire held up his arms to show his corrupted STAR. “I don’t want anyone to see me like this. Especially not Sally.”

“Is there... can we help in any way?” Chuck’s voice stumbled as a lump caught in his throat.

“No.” Theo turned to look back at the statue. “I’m using all my willpower to not come to kill you both. I am broken. I have... fallen.”

“There’s always a way.” Lana grit her teeth. “Don’t you prepare for everything?”

The vampire chuckled to himself. "Of course. That's why I am waiting here. For the one person who has a chance to kill me. Please leave. *Please.*"

The pair exchanged glances, unsure what to say or do. Not wanting to become collateral to the vampire's bad mood, they turned to step back out of the cathedral.

Just as a figure stepped in to move past them.

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"Edward?"

"Yes, Dent?" The demon lowered his sword and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"You're bleeding. You can slow down, you know?" The swordsman leaned over to get his breath back. Between the *Outsiders*, the rest of the Observers were now tied up.

"I've had worse," Edward murmured, drawing a potion bottle from inside his jacket. "We should gather with the others. I am sure the standoff with the Architect is looming now that things are working out for us."

"Almost feels orchestrated, right?" Dent rubbed the side of his head with the back of his sword-arm. "Weird for things to be so calm."

The demon shrugged. "Either the Architect is confident we aren't a threat, or they are begging for us to win."

"Latter sure would be nice."

Sally threw up her arms in exasperation. "What are you even waiting for? Do you want us to win? Is this a pity fight so that you can feel you didn't do a terrible job?"

"I have been in charge for a day and I have achieved-"

"YAWN," Sally said, exaggerating the faux motions.

A trident of crackling blue energy emerged into the Architect's hand. "Fine, you want to fuckin' go, little corpse woman? Let's GO."

[Auras and Passive Abilities Disabled] [Stat Bonuses Disabled]

"Hey, that's not-" she brought her staff up at the last second, barely blocking the swing of the large trident. Sally bounced across the mud, rolling over a few mounds before coming to a stop. "Ow."

"How's that 'power of friendship' working out for you now?" he seethed as he floated closer, bringing back the trident to impale her.

A group of bandages shot out and wrapped around the extended weapon. He turned with a bright glare across his face.

"I'd say it'll work out quite well," Norah said with a wide smile. "Hit it, hun."

Jackie blazed amber as smoke hissed away from her held crossbow. With a flash of light, she fired off a salvo of bolts that shot forth and passed straight through the Architect as he turned translucent for a moment.

"Pitiful," he growled, the trident vanishing from one hand to appear in the other, dropping the wrappings. He lashed out toward the Mummy, but instead struck Humphrey as he slid in front of Norah.

"My hero," she purred.

"The day is still young." He buckled slightly from the pressure of the weapon, before the Architect finally relented.

Sally rubbed at her head as she turned over. Without her bonuses, she was pretty... she looked up to see the large blue figure flicker her way and bring the prongs back down upon her.

A large wall of thick vines burst up from the mud, the sharp ends of the weapon cracking through but not reaching her. She glanced over to see Chuck and Lana running over to her.

"Back to your feet, soldier," Lana called, looking like she needed someone to tell her that rather than the other way around.

Sally wobbled back up to her feet. "You find Theo?" She watched them exchange a glance.

"There was another Seven, and Theo killed him," Chuck began. "He said he would catch us up as soon as possible."

"Is he hurt?" Her brow furrowed. Surely not, as he could regenerate or respawn?

Chuck put his hand on her shoulder as the vines started to sink away. "Trust me on this, okay? Focus on the Architect."

She nodded, but that didn't comfort the building knot in her stomach.

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"Huh." Theo held his wrist where the corrupted STAR blinked back at his intense glare. "I had hoped that I'd have more control and be able to just give myself up." He turned his red eyes to the other figure. "But you knew that already, didn't you?"

A shrug was the only given response.

"Even you are tongue-tied at the sight of me." Theo lowered his head before shaking it. "To think I could have been so easily tricked, and become a monster, just like they all worried."

The opposing figure, half shadowed by the large pillars in the cathedral, drew their weapons.

“Very well. A fight to the death it is.” The vampire brought up his gore-soaked punch-blades. “You’d better fucking win.”

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The trident carved a wide arc through the mud as Edward and Dent dove to the side. Fern thickened the earth, causing the weapon to get stuck part of the way through to the rest of the Insiders.

“Playing with insects is certainly tiring,” the Architect growled, a glowing orb forming in his other hand.

[Mortis Bomb] struck him in the side, but he didn’t even flinch. Instead, he glared down at the handful of zombies rising from the dirt, and instead they wiggled themselves back away.

“Unfair,” Sally growled. Her curse didn’t work on him either, which left her with little to attempt. She had gone for a [Meat Hook] but he had vanished again, letting the skill miss. He wasn’t evading everything, but most of their attempts didn’t seem to even scratch him when they did hit.

“Oh, you expected this to be fair?” The Architect lobbed out the glowing orb toward her. “You are just lucky I am not at full power.”

She went to leap away, and the mud surrounding her suddenly turned into sand. Her feet dug into it and she toppled over onto her face just before the attack landed.

An uncomfortable heal ran through her, sent over by the druid. She stepped back up to her feet, most of the sand now turned to glass from the impact. The last shreds of the smoldering red cloak fell from her to land in a pile on the ground.

“Oh, now you’ve done it,” she seethed. With a motion, she swapped back to a refreshed version of her diner outfit and threw her staff on the ground to flip her knife into her right hand. It was time to go back to basics.

“Healers are such pains.” The Architect span the trident around, turning it into a double-ended glaive. With a crack like lightning, he jabbed it out toward Chuck.

Dent was there, sparks flaring from his sword-arm as he deflected the blow into the mud beside the druid. With the arm of the Architect extended, Sally hit it with [Meat Hook] and spun in toward him.

“Bug!” He yelled, bringing his free hand to swat her away - before bandages wrapped around his raised arm.

Sally jabbed [Skeleton Key] into the torso of the robed skeleton before he vanished to appear a dozen feet back. Bandages then caught her as she dropped to the ground, avoiding the spikes that had risen up to meet her.

The Architect felt themselves and raised his hand up to see a dark blue blood ran from the wound. “How is this possible?”

“With friendship, anything is possible,” Humphrey said, stepping forward.

“Betrayer, your use here is limited. Do not bother me while I crush the others.” He rose up, a pair of axes appearing in his hands.

A wide grin appeared across the skeletal face of the Death Knight.

“Limited? This isn’t even my final form.”

[Soul Knight]