

Sally shivered. "A big skull is kind of spooky."

Humphrey looked at her with a blank expression on his face. "This is just a projection, not the actual size of the Architect."

"Skull means an ex-Observer?" Theo clucked his tongue, right before his Ultimate wore off and he returned to his normal clothing. "Ah, shit."

The Death Knight nodded. "It is likely."

They looked back up again. Another rumble vibrated through the air as the Architect opened the giant skeletal mouth to speak once more. "I am eager to meet all of you, however, my powers are still limited. Just as a warm-up, however... it seems nobody is using the fifth area. Such a waste of resources... well, no more."

Beneath their feet, the ground shook.

"Open your map," Humphrey demanded of the zombie.

With a spin, she brought it up and zoomed out. The Death Knight came and stood behind her. They both held their breath, as there was undeniably a large gap missing where the fifth area had just been.

"Surely not." Sally furrowed her brow. "He just said he was low on power, and he deletes a huge chunk of the world? Or at least the continent we are on." She tried to zoom out further, but it stopped when the who of their large island was fully in view.

"It means that he was truthful when he said there was nobody there. The System has a failsafe. If there are no Players the whole of Othea can be... removed." Humphrey stepped back away from her.

Theo rubbed at his forehead. "So it would just be an empty sea, or the whole reality would collapse?"

Humphrey shrugged. "It is not something I have intimate knowledge of."

Lucius looked practically petrified, his crimson eyes glued to the large, looming skull. Norah just looked annoyed. Her jaw was clenched. They could feel the power, maybe even more than Sally and Theo could. Probably fear it more, being constructs of the System now under control of this unknown entity.

"Pragmatic," Sally eventually said with a sigh, "but doesn't exactly paint him in the best of lights. Especially with the whole skull-face thing."

The Death Knight deflated.

"Until I have a proper grip on things," the voice continued to shake the air around them, "I am disabling experience gain. So sit tight and enjoy the life you currently have."

"Ass!" Sally kicked dirt. "Also, very ominous."

Theo groaned. “Just when we were getting caught up, too. But at least Chuck can change his terms?”

“Of course, I’ll message him now.” Sally nodded. Perhaps it made sense to put a stop to some of the System, especially if you were looking to fix it or find out where things were going wrong. Still, it didn’t settle very well with her and she wasn’t too hopeful that this new Architect had only good things in mind for anyone—especially her oddball friends.

[Sally: Chuck]

[Sally: you seeing this??]

[Sally: pls advise]

He didn’t reply immediately, so she closed it down. The Level Up was still pending, but she couldn’t focus on it when being watched so intensely from above.

“So now what?” she asked, to a chorus of shrugs and murmurs. They did look to her for the way forward, usually. Without being able to level, what choice did they have now? A vacation? The Architect wouldn’t allow something that easy for them, she was sure of it.

As if to answer her, the voice boomed out once more.

“While I am resting, I will put my errant workers back to use. There are many things wrong with this System, and their assistance is required.”

With that, the skull started to fade away to be replaced by the gloomy, overcast sky. Light rain began to fall, as if to signal their absence.

“Rude,” Sally huffed. “Didn’t even tell us his name.” She turned to the gathered Outsiders. “Well, we’d best take a seat and think about what to do. Maybe head out back toward wherever Chuck is? Consolidate our allies.”

Theo pinched the bridge of his nose. “I suppose that makes sense. As soon as we can level again though...”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it.” She waved him off. “What do you think Humps?...Humps?”

The Death Knight was holding his face, but moved his hand away at her verbal prodding. From behind his helmet, the crimson flame petered out and was replaced by a blaze of light blue energy. He stood tall and glared at the gathered Party.

“I am not *Humps*, I am Observer unit HM-3.3.” His empty eyes went between each of them. “You are all out of sorts. Submit for correction, or suffer the consequences.” Bright blue flame ran down the length of his greatsword.

“This is no time for jokes,” Sally said, narrowing her eyes at him. He wasn’t usually this good of an actor, though.

Norah shook her head. “He’s been reclaimed by the Architect, that’s really not him anymore.”

“We will not stand and be corrected,” Theo stepped forward in front of the rest of them. “Leave us be until you return to your senses.”

“Oh?” The flame at the back of Humphrey’s helmet burned higher. “Are you so eager to jump onto the blade of judgement and perish?”

The vampire grinned, exposing his fangs. “Nah, I’d win.”

“We shouldn’t be fighting,” Sally interrupted. “If you can’t shrug off the control, then we will leave and you can go your own thing.” She crossed her arms and stared the Death Knight down.

“Your presence is untenable under the new order of things. Any bug or error must be corrected.” He raised his sword in a ready position.

Theo shook his head. “Can you even see yourself? You’re just a big of an oddball as the rest of us.”

“Yes. My time of penance will come eventually, but for now I must deal with things, as is my directive.”

Lucius had just been quiet, sweat drops and panicked faces appearing beside him all the while. There was a lot of tension in the Party, as the now Observer-again Death Knight didn’t seem to be able to buck off the controlling influence of the Architect.

Sally seethed through clenched teeth. “Then I guess we’ll have to take you down a notch and knock some sense into you.”

“No,” Humphrey said with a cold grin.

[Compelled Duel]

The vampire tutted. “You know my Stats are too high to...” his brow furrowed. “*Oh*, it did work.”

“Ass, Humphrey!” The zombie threw her hands up in the air. Her plan was to wail on him until Norah could tie him up, using Theo’s speed to block his attacks and tire him out.

“It seemed pertinent to remove the higher threat first,” the response came.

Theo grinned. “I knew it would come down to this eventually, old man. Unstoppable attack power against the unmovable defensive abilities.”

Humphrey didn’t reply. Instead he launched himself forward to swing out with the greatsword—a blazing trail of light blue following it. Only, Theo was no longer there.

He had shifted out behind the Death Knight and slashed out with his sword, sparks flying from the struck metal armor but doing no damage.

“Pitiful,” Humphrey growled as he spun on his heel to swipe backward.

Theo blocked the strike and slid across the ground by a dozen feet, leaving small trails through the dirt. “Well, I don’t want to kill you. I have to use kid gloves.”

“I hold no such reservation.” The plated figure launched forward, his sword blazing with [Grave Strike].

Norah nudged Sally, as both pairs of their eyes couldn’t move from the battle. “If you kick Humphrey from the Party, he won’t get all our Aura benefits.”

“You’re right...” she chewed on her tongue. “Seems unfair when it’s a duel, but we have a clear favorite to win, unfortunately.”

[Humphrey has been kicked from the Party]

The greatsword struck the empty ground, blowing a cloud of mud into the nearby vicinity. Skeletons rose up around him as he used [Lord of the Damned], before [Adrenaline] and [Dead King’s Court] illuminated his dark armor with magical energy.

Theo hopped backwards a few steps before holding his empty hand out. A ball of crimson energy grew within his palm, then he cast it out toward the Death Knight. The skeletons took the brunt of the attack, which burst into an explosion of bright white electricity that arced between them. Even as they fell, Humphrey jumped through the resulting cloud of energy and swung down at the vampire.

Stepping to the side to avoid the greatsword, Theo received the plated boot follow-up to the thigh, knocking him back.

[Kneel]

The vampire stopped and dropped down, head hung low.

“Be at peace, miserable bug,” Humphrey seethed as he swung his sword around.

[Dread Counter]

Theo stopped the attack and leaped forward with his sword crackling with critical energy.

[Impenetrable Defense]

Sally sighed and rubbed her eyes. “We might be here for a while. It would be less stressful if we knew what their abilities they had chosen. Theo must have at least a handful I haven’t seen.”

Lucius shuffled awkwardly. “And presumably only one of them is trying to kill the other.”

She nodded slowly in response. “Theo is testing the waters to see what he can get away with. Enough to debilitate but not destroy.”

The vampire had become a blur as he slashed out at the Death Knight, the latter’s defensive shield now gone. They went back into trading blows. The sky turned pitch black and a

crimson moon rose up behind Theo as he switched to his punch-blades. [Sanguine Weapon] went up to add a third striking weapon to his attacks.

[Expert Duelist]

Theo slid backwards as his strike was blocked and the greatsword swung out at him, cutting through his suit jacket but not his skin.

“Evasive worm, you have not damaged me yet,” the Death Knight growled.

The vampire grinned, the red moonlight reflecting on his fangs. “I am also unharmed. You talk too much for how little you can do. Now you can parry every block until I damage you, correct?”

“Correct.” Humphrey flourished his blade around into a defensive stance.

Theo rolled out his shoulders. “Interesting.” A pulse of energy washed over him and he now had a blurred after image as he moved.

Flashes of light bloomed from where the Death Knight illuminated in light blue blocked the attacks and swung out immediately with his sword against the blur of red that was the vampire. They clashed another handful of times before the vampire slid away from the battle, rubbing the blood from the side of his mouth.

His suit was even more shredded now, some blood soaking through his shirt. The crimson moon remained, however, which meant he wasn't particularly damaged.

“Not bad, old man. I'm starting to learn the pattern of your attacks, though.”

The Death Knight shook his head. “You will need far too many attacks to dent me. I only need one good strike.”

Theo darted forward, crimson globules hanging in the air behind him.

[Hard Parry]

As soon as the Death Knight blocked the shot, his greatsword swung out with far greater speed and strength than usual. The vampire spun and rolled across the ground, up to his feet and now sporting a long gash running up his side.

“Something new,” he grinned, wincing slightly. “An automatic counter... for *three* strikes?”

“Too smart for your own good, for all that will help you.”

With a click of his fingers, the blood spheres Theo had left around congregated in one place, swirling up to form a figure made of the sloshing liquid. The crimson homunculi dove towards the Death Knight with a faux blade, attempting to attack him from behind.

As Humphrey spun around to block the attack, Theo used [Blood Shift] to close the distance and try to land his own attacks. With the clang of metal and bright flash of blue, the Observer

slashed through the blood-person and then spun to block and leveled the sword through the vampire.

Stumbling again, the crimson mood faded and dull light once again washed over the area. Theo had a second gash up his chest, but a bright smile across his face. "Worth it. Now that's out of the way..."

His punch-blades burned bright red, hot like the sun before he shot forward in a split second, shifting at the last moment to attack from an unexpected angle.

Only, it was expected.

"I lied." Humphrey grinned, as his skill activated one more time. With a near instantaneous flash, his greatsword deflected the intense attack and jabbed out at the vampire. There was a crunch of bones as it pierced straight through his chest and heart. "It was four attacks."

"*Theo!*" Sally yelled.

Humphrey leaned forward to stare into his pale face. "One less error in the System."

The vampire slumped forward, sliding further down the blade, closer to the Death Knight. Theo whispered something as close to the skeletal face of the Observer as he could manage, before dropping back down the sword and collapsing onto the floor.

[Party member Theo has died]