

The glow of the fifteen-foot tall Architect illuminated the area.

[Well. This has certainly not gone the way I had expected.]

Sally bared her sharp teeth at him. “Trying to get all your problems to work themselves out because you’re too weak?”

[Hello, little corpse woman. Your time has run its course.]

The Architect tilted their skeletal head and clicked two boney fingers together.

[Corpse Explosion]

There was a sudden wash of extreme force, and a ringing in her ears.

[Strength in Numbers] [+14% Stat Bonus]

Sally blinked and wiped the gore from the back of her head with her forearm. Over to her side, Theo was making exaggerated chomping motions toward the Architect. Norah’s sarcophagi opened up, and she stepped out. Humphrey and Lucius stood with arms crossed, unharmed, just covered in a bit more fleshy stuff than usual.

The stagecoach direction was fine. The four team members up there were away from all the undead, so weren’t caught up in any damage. Fern was still sitting, but that didn’t mean much.

The graveyard surrounding them was awash with mulched rotten meat and bone fragments. All her pals were dead. More dead.

[Oh. For some reason, I thought that would work on you, too.]

It hadn’t, because she was part Player. Same for Theo. Lucius and Humphrey weren’t really corpses, and Norah had been able to hide away in time. Everything else undead around them had exploded into paste.

“Still in the habit of wasting power you do not understand.” Humphrey shook his head at the large figure.

[Betrayer. If I wanted your opinion, I would extract it from you.]

“You and what army?”

[Funny you should say that. There are some loyal Observers that take offense to you abandoning your station.]

With a grand gesture, he motioned toward the forest. The Outsiders stood in silence for a handful of seconds, before the Architect sighed.

[Apologies. My money was on Seven, so I did not think I’d need the others right now.]

“Any chance you could talk without bringing up text boxes?” Theo rubbed at his eyes, thankfully without his blades present. “It’s giving me a headache.”

The Architect narrowed his eye sockets. “Fine. I suppose I wouldn’t want to inconvenience you right before I erase you from this existence.”

“Thank youuuu,” the vampire replied, melodically, before flopping over backward into a pile of soft mud.

Sally crossed her arms, still sore that her Legendary shield had been destroyed. “Is it your turn for a monologue now? Want to tell us why we have to die and why you want to rule the System?”

She wanted to run up and punch him in the face, actually, but she was pretty exhausted. Theo was spent. Too many deaths had him running on fumes. Behind them, the others had moved in closer, Chuck crouched beside Dent’s inert body. Lana looking like she’d rather be anywhere else.

“I suppose until the Observers get here, I could fill you in on some exposition” The Architect hovered a little closer to the ground and rubbed at their skeletal chin. “But first...”

[Invasion Event Ended]
[4/5 Outsiders Survived]
[Teleportation Allowed]
[Party and Guilds unfrozen]

[Edward has left the Party]
[Theo has joined the Party]

A flash of blue, and the demon returned. He took one look at the battlefield, before turning to face the Architect. With a deep sigh, he deflated. “Shit. Shoulda stayed at home.”

“Saved you a seat, buddy.” Theo pat his hand against the wet mud, splashing it on himself.

[Teleportation Disabled]

“Ah, my mistake.” The Architect shook his head. “Don’t want anyone running away now that you’re all in the same place. Funny how eggs come to roost in the same nest over time. Only... one normal Player amongst you.”

“That’s not a real saying.” Sally sighed and looked over at Chuck.

“Oh,” the Architect continued. “But he is dead.”

Half of those present winced and tried to avoid the narrowed eyes of the druid. “What does that mean?”

“Guys,” Theo whispered loudly, “we never told Chuck.”

“System damn it, fangs.” Sally gave the vampire a light kick in the leg. “Go sleep already if you’re going to make things weird.” She watched him drop his coffin and then slither inside it like a snake. “Do we really have to do this nowwww? Humps, aren’t you going to start saving the day or something?”

The Death Knight shrugged. “Seems rude when he hasn’t had his monologue yet.”

“Sally.” Chuck said.

She grumbled and walked over to him, the eyes of everyone else on her. Stopping a few feet away from him, she put her hands on her hips and scowled. “Ready for your mind to be blown?”

He gave a shrug, still crouched down beside the dead swordmaster.

“You ever wonder why you woke up here in a pile of zombies?”

Chuck narrowed his eyes. “I was... undead at the start?”

“Where I was half zombie, half Player, you were full zombie... and then when you died protecting me, you were able to become a full Player, as intended.” She pulled a face. “I’m sorry we didn’t tell you before.”

“Hmm.” The druid furrowed his brow. “I suppose that does explain the weird dreams. And there I was, thinking I was just traumatized from my association with you.”

“I’m sure you are, in other ways.” She grinned. “I just wanted you to be normal and happy after. It was a struggle for you to accept things here.”

“It probably wouldn’t have been very good for my mental state, I agree.” He smiled at her. “Forgiven, Sally Danger.”

“Booring,” the Architect called out. “The lunatic has gone to bed, and the drama fizzled out to nothing. You’re closer to mundane Players than I originally thought.”

Humphrey worked his shoulders. “So why not let us live?”

“No.” The large robed figure shook his head. “You, out of all of us, should know better. Uniques are an error in the System, not designed for the purpose they now current serve.”

“Aren’t you in charge now?” Sally crossed her arms. “You get to decide what is an error and what things can stay.”

“Correct.” The Architect shrugged. “If you really need the exposition to make your little Player brains feel contented, I am here to enact the original Architect’s vision, not the upstart who ruined the System with their inadequacies.”

Sally wrinkled up her face. Not the worst idea on the surface of things. The middle Architect had their troubles and did the best they could, but perhaps if the original one had been able

to stick around then things wouldn't have been messed up. They could have even gone home. But that was beside the point at this stage.

New Architect wanted to kill off her and her friends, that was unacceptable.

"We can't come to a compromise? Accept that Uniques are part of the System now and work around it?" She gave the tall figure her best puppy eyes.

"No."

She scowled toward the Death Knight. "Daaaad, aren't you going to do something?"

Humphrey winced and gave her a scowl back. "Do you need a coffin, too? I cannot act until the Observers are taken care of."

Norah raised an eyebrow. "And why is that?"

His expression relaxed, and he looked away, sheepishly. "Protocol reasons."

Chuck looked down at Dent as the Outsiders bickered amongst themselves. It was strange seeing him dead, when he had been so full of life not so long ago. Even knowing he could bring him back, and the resources and spell just sitting ready to be used at any moment... was that a selfish action? To bring him back into this world of conflict when he was now at peace?

Fern came up beside him and sat down. Some of the hole through their body had healed up, but a large indent remained. "You are troubled. Unsure whether to allow Dent to return to the ground yet."

The druid nodded.

"Did you discuss potential resurrection, if he should fall?"

"Of course." Chuck sighed. "The reason for me holding back the ability was specifically for him, and he knew it and was fine with it."

"So, what is your issue?"

He shuffled uncomfortably. "What if he only wanted that for my sake?"

Fern tilted their head. "I think you are both idiots, then. Bring the meat sack to life when you feel it is the right time. I do not want to see your miserable face if he dies again after your spell is spent."

Lana stood behind them both. "It's kind of pleasant so far... which is worrying."

Chuck stood, and brushed off his robe. With a sigh, he raised an eyebrow at the Architect. "It's like two gods facing off against one another. They know how powerful each other is. When they fight, it'll be the end of one side for good... so they aren't rushing it. A last meal must be savored."

Sally sat down on Theo's coffin. Who knew how long he'd have to be in there to sleep off the Exhaustion stacks he had built up. Even a little sanity coming back to him would be nice. Lucius was trying to explain the history of the *Outsiders* to Jane, while Humphrey, Norah, and the Architect were having an argument over whether everyone should be fighting or not. Despite how domestic everything seemed, everyone was tense - she could feel it.

Edward stood beside her with his hands in his suit pockets. "Theo going to be alright?"

"Yeah, you big softie." She smiled up at him. "Thanks for saving my life back there, too."

"I felt that the best way to betray you was to betray the notion that I'd betray you." He grinned and gave her a shrug. "It was *inevitable*."

"It sure was." She looked back at the Architect. "If only you were undead, huh? And Parties weren't limited to five." Her head tilted to the side. "Weird how the fate of everything is going to be decided here, isn't it?"

The rest of the *Insiders* moved over to where she was sitting.

Chuck looked back at Dent's body before going through his chat messages. "Turns out Seven was cultivating the dissatisfaction within Players. Made them more irrational and angry at the System."

"They did act against better judgment," Sally said, exhaustion settling in her face. "Compare them to the two gals Lucius has helped. Most of your Blue faction were pretty sensible, too."

The druid shook his head. "Such a short-sighted plan. Hate as a motivator never works for anything other than self destruction."

"Nerd," Sally said with a grin.

The Architect held up his skeletal hands. "Okay, enough. They are here now, although there are less than I had anticipated."

Sally hopped back up to her feet. Both Players and Uniques had fought back against the Observers suddenly trying to police them. An imperfect System it may be, but it was currently home to plenty who had grown to accept it.

"I'm pretty spent on supers, guys." Sally pouted. "Anyone have much left?"

Short answer was everyone had used their Ultimates against Seven, aside from one person. Humphrey. Given how that worked, it didn't surprise her that he had kept it for this fight. She looked past Jackie who was taking a long drag of another cigarette, to see that her vehicle had been destroyed. A victim of the [Corpse Explosion] perhaps, although she thought it was far enough away. Her zombie skills were worn out, and the World Boss skills had been taken away.

Back to being a Raid level threat.

They all turned and brought up their weapons ready, as trees began to crack and collapse from the west.

"Less than a dozen, more than five," Fern notified them, their roots buried into the mud. "I must rest further now."

The Architect grinned, and turned to the Death Knight. "You will soon see the folly of your betrayal."

Humphrey shook his head. "My entire existence is to remove problems from the System. Your time is limited."

With the flash of yellow light, a figure burst up into the sky above the woods. A bird of sharp golden color in contrast to the gray skies above. With a crack of lightning, dozens of radiant bolts of energy surged down toward the gathered groups.

The fight for the future of the System had begun.