

Seven shook his head. "We still have a few minutes before the spell collapses. Plenty of time for me to kill you."

"Writing is on the wall," Sally said and tutted. "Your faction is all but dead, and you think you have a chance against all of us?"

Theo didn't add to the conversation, but stood wide a wide grin, saliva running from his mouth and dripping to the floor as his eyes burned bright red.

"They were a means to an end. When I am Architect, all will become corrupt and break the shackles of the STAR System."

Sally furrowed her brow.

"I covered all of this already," he sighed. "How do people put up with you?"

"Hey, Theo." She tilted her head toward the tense vampire. "Would you still love me if I was a worm?"

He twisted his head toward her, hardly able to take his gaze away from the corrupt Player. "I would carve a hole through the System until I found a way to also become a worm."

"Sweet." She grimaced. "You wouldn't find a way to turn me back into a woman instead, though?"

"I have no preference," Theo growled, his head turning back to Seven. "As long as we can be together."

Seven narrowed his eyes. "I'm not sure what that was supposed to prove... other than you're both kind of weird." The spear split back into two swords, and each of these then split again - four swords now hanging in the air beside the man.

"Ah." Sally shrugged. "Just wasting some time, really. You seem fine with talking more than necessary." It was also to try to gauge how far along the vampire was with his sanity taking a hit every time he died. He looked about ready to burst into violence, but his answer was relatively on the level.

Time to put the *Sword of the Undead* into action. That was a working title.

She clicked her fingers, and that was enough of a cue.

Warmth buffeted her as the vampire burst forward, crimson energy pulsing behind him as [Sanguine Weapon] brought out a floating weapon of his own. He lashed out forward before vanishing to appear behind Seven. Both attacks were blocked with little effort, and Theo slid back across the smooth floor.

"Ah, ah ah!" He hopped from one foot to the other. "No tricky parrying skills, right? Better tell me the number of charges."

Seven didn't turn to face him, but instead raised an eyebrow at the zombie. "Is he always like this?"

"No." She was willing to let Theo tie up the odd man filled with Observers. He wouldn't stand a chance against the whole of them, and Humphrey might be able to recycle some of the skulls within him or something.

"Do you let him fight all your battles?"

"Sometimes." She yawned. "You're overthinking this, *Five*. I'm not a monolith with underlings, I'm just the shepherd of oddballs. As long as *somebody* saves the world, I'll be happy."

Seven rolled his eyes right before Theo launched back at him. The whirr of swords clashed against the punch-blades, matching the vampire's speed.

Chuck rubbed at his eyes. "This is stressful. Should I have prepared a speech for this?"

With a raised eyebrow, Lana just gave him a shrug.

"Like, in an ideal world," he continued, "Sally would have just killed him and then that makes things easier for me, right? Never seeing or meeting the leader of the opposing faction made things a lot easier to compartmentalize."

Jackie yawned from atop the stagecoach. "So we just whack him and bounce. You don't have to put on a show."

"Regardless..." the druid tapped the end of his staff into the mud. "I feel like a show is coming our way whether we want it to or not."

Fern looked around impassively. "Does this sort of thing happen regularly?"

The murmured chorus of indecisive acknowledgements from the group was not too reassuring.

[Curse: Drain] did not work on Seven, and Sally wasn't too keen on getting in the way of Theo as he sped up and lashed out constantly with [Novice Strike]. She looked up at the cube filled with her zombies, but something was preventing her from putting them away with [Endless Rest]. All in all, it was a very annoying start to the fight with the Red faction leader.

She had expected it to be more dramatic - or even underwhelming, perhaps. A quick brain eaten and then onto their bigger problem of the Architect. He was probably just toying with them, which was pretty boring. If he intended on becoming the big boss, then the supposed immortality reward for killing the Outsiders wouldn't appeal to him. He was just here to check out who might threaten his attempt at ascension.

If there was one thing she was sure of, it was that he could not become the Architect under any circumstance.

She looked to the side to see cracks forming along the glass-like walls of their current cube.

"Looks like we have had our fun here," Seven smiled. "Are you all ready for round two?"

Before she could answer, the darkness shattered away. A burst of light flooded into her eyes before the dull gloom of the outside, followed by the mucky smell of damp earth reached her senses. Blinking away the shock, she realized they had all returned to the same positions as before - and the Players that had been killed in the cubes were alive again.

Her shield went up as Seven's swords struck out at her, knocking her back through the slick dirt.

Dent furrowed his brow, recovering a second too late to see the impending attack of the duelist he had just won against coming for him once more.

With a flash of darkness, Theo appeared in front of him, absorbing the majority of the blow. He staggered back into the swordsman, who caught him.

"No, no, no." The vampire tilted his head back at Dent. "Be careful, corrupted!" A wide gash spread across his chest and bled heavily through his ruined shirt. Theo shuffled back up to his feet and tilted his head from side to side, his crimson eyes searching the battlefield. "This isn't perfect, is it? No, no."

[Perfect Dark]

A crimson moon rose up as the sky darkened to near pitch black.

With the flash of blue, the demon stepped in beside him, deflecting the follow-up of the Red Player before Dent gathered himself to renew their fight.

"You're bleeding," Edward said, raising an eyebrow.

"Corrupted skill. A wound that cannot regenerate." Wisps of red flame snaked away from Theo's eyes as he licked around his lips. "It is *very* rude."

"Allow me." The demon placed his hand on the vampire's shoulder, furrowing his brow in surprise at how warm he felt. A deep red glow filtered down his rapier as the injury healed up at remarkable speed.

Theo looked down and then back at the demon, his eyes wide. "Thank you, brother. Best friend. Buuuuddy"

"Alright." Edward rolled his eyes. "Save the mania for later. How about we show them what we're made of?"

"Guts and bones!" Theo grinned widely, his fangs reflecting the red like of the faux moon.

"Well... okay, I was thinking more..."

[Domain: The Inevitable]

The reds illuminating the area grew more garishly vibrant, contrasting with the shadows which became darker. The pair darted forward towards the renewed Players, their weapons aglow in bright light.

Yellow light bloomed over Norah as a large eye looked down upon her target. Dozens of bandages wrapped around them, and with a pulse of power, that Player was turned to sand.

“Shit me!” Jane stepped away from the battle. “Now I’m not sure either side is the right one.”

“Then move or fall like the rest.” Humphrey growled and stepped forward, as multiple shots of a magical attack struck him.

“What pops means,” Lucius began, ignoring the rise in flame behind the Death Knights helmet, “Is that this place isn’t safe if you don’t want to fight.” Into his hand, he conjured up a shadowed version of Sally’s staff. “All I can do is show you the right path. It’s up to you to take it.”

Sally spun her staff around, deflecting one of the swords and blocking another with her shield. She was at least glad that the one thing she actually got around to crafting in this world turned out to be super useful. Not that it was helping to gain her any advantage at present.

Seven still stood with hands behind his back and a smug look on his face. Perhaps intending for her to feel foolish and weak given that she couldn’t get close enough to stab him while still avoiding his four sword technique. She had commanded her zombies to ignore him and focus on the other Players, as he would just calmly cut down any that approached.

“I assume you have more skills than just looking like a giant ass,” she seethed at him.

“Naturally. I have to save some energy for the Architect, however.” He tilted his head. “If you manage to land another strike on me, then I might consider using something more than my basic attack.”

If he was being powered by seven Observers, then her assumption was that he could delegate tasks to them. Have all of them focus on the attacks and blocking while his Player side could just stand there and gloat over her ineffectiveness. She wasn’t used to having a fight being so drawn out. Usually zombies or a well-placed skull would seal her the brain-eating victory.

As three of the swords lashed out toward her, she used [Escape Fate] to dodge to the side, having to use her shield again as the fourth sword waited until she reappeared to attempt to strike. Some of his confidence was warranted, she relented. Seven was proving near unassailable at present.

Not that it would stop her. If anything, she was growing more determined.

Theo turned, sensing the rising attack power of someone nearby. The man with the scratchy voice that sent off the large bomb. He had now turned and was aiming the corrupted attack off to... off to the stagecoach and ranged allies. Unacceptable.

With a burst of dark energy, the vampire dropped down in front of the Player and grabbed him in close like a hug.

“What are you doing? The shot is primed! Let go!”

“Hush, little one,” Theo whispered. “It’ll all be over soon.”

The explosion rocked the area, killing three Players and a handful of zombies as the blast vaporized the attacker. Dust and fragments of bodies washed through the area, giving brief pause to the heated combat.

Theo stood there, stunned. Not dead, somehow, but the darkened sky and red moon washed away to be replaced by the dull gray clouds overhead once more. He looked down at his body, or what remained of it. He couldn’t usually see his ribcage or leg bones as far as he could remember. And although he wasn’t able to move or really process anything, his body clearly knew what it was doing. New muscle and tendons began to grow, blood slowly swirling around him as he stared blankly at the damage wrought.

As she paused to scowl at the reckless behavior of the vampire, Sally caught the glow of a weapon off to the side. It was the rail-gun type shot that pierced through the whole graveyard, now charged up once more and aimed right at her. [Escape Fate] was on cooldown, so she went to move - but her foot slipped on the mud, causing her to waver in place.

Hands grasped her shoulders from behind, and the demon loomed over her.

“At last,” he whispered, as the rail-shot finished powering up. “I have my opportunity.”

The blast rang out through the graveyard.

[Outsiders Remaining 4/5]