

Chapter 2.39

Raising the Stakes

The chamber shook as energy began to flood around them. From the center of the runes, an orb of electricity began to form - deep purple in color and crackling out wildly. Where the reaching tendrils struck the stone, blackened marks remained.

"We've just fought a bunch of demons," Sally groaned as she slowly stepped backward away from the maelstrom. "Can't we have something different?"

"Be careful what you wish for." Humphrey stood in a defensive stance, crimson fire flickering down his blade and buffeted by the energy whipping around the room.

"You know, normally I would have gone by now, but something is restricting my teleportation ability." Edward looked even more worn out and fed up now and had just allowed himself to be slowly pushed back across the ground by the barrage of wind and foul energy.

Sally briefly considered if she had made a mistake. Surely not, however. It wasn't really something she made a habit of. If the silly magic machine didn't want to be powered by the Demon Coins then it would have rejected it or become inert. Maybe if she could put a second one in, the effects would be reversed? Her eyes narrowed - probably not the best plan she had come up with. Maybe all twelve of the coins would have been better.

With a flash of bright white light, the storm around them ceased, and everything came to a standstill. As their eyes adjusted, the runes had now become inert - and a figure now stood in the midst of them. Enveloped in a dark robe that appeared to wave and flickered as if it were made of mist, bright yellow eyes peered out from the shadow of a hood. Two horns of ivory twisted out from the top of their head - through convenient holes in the hood. In one hand, they held a book of bright purple, the cover of which shifted hues slightly. The other hand held a long staff made of silver, the top of which was a pulsating orb of amber light.

Why hath thou summoned me?

Sally snorted. Someone needed to tell the Architect that people didn't really talk like that. Well, they should have gotten the memo before they had died - that'd be more useful than knowing currently.

"Who are you?" She yelled, although her voice came out muted as if the energy in the room was dampening sound.

I am Natus, the Eternal Horizon.

"Okay. We don't really want to fight right now; want to make a deal or something?" Not that she didn't think they could take whatever this being was, but she was feeling pretty sleepy, and their brains probably tasted bad. She considered asking if that was the case, but that may be impolite.

The figure wavered for a moment as if in consideration, their misty robes buffeted by an unseen wind in the chamber.

What doth thou have to offer a being such as I?

She furrowed her brow and looked at the Death Knight. The spectacle of their arrival and archaic language was just fanciful dressing over the fact they were still a part of the System. Some being created a short time ago, following a set path - unless they were Unique. Shame she had no more room in the Party. Knowing what she did, it kind of took the magic out of the whole encounter.

“What do you seek? Power? Souls?” She checked her Inventory quickly. “Mount feed?”

I am the collector of abilities. For every two I consume, I can grant you a boon in return.

“Oh.” Well, now that they had put it in game terms, the wet blanket had fully smothered her. Couldn’t she just meet all powerful entities without it being part of the on-rails experience? She tapped her ability sheet to review what she had. “Give me a minute then, sounds good.”

Edward sidled up to her, his movements slowed by the power in the room. “Are you sure you are willing to do that so easily? Everything has a cost-“

“Yeah, duh. Cost is two abilities. I get one back.” She turned back to Natus with a wrinkled-up nose. “The boon is an ability I can *use*, right - something good and not a curse?”

If your gift pleases me, then-

Right, right. Sally ignored the rest of the sentence. It was just a yes with more words than required. She had missed out on being able to replace a skill when Dent had stolen the shrine out from under her nose. She wasn’t about to lose the chance to reroll something else.

But what? Most of her skills had some use; after the System had finally set her on the right path for a Zombie Boss or Necromancer, most of her choices had been in the right vein. There was no telling what Natus would give her... and what they would even want. Just based on appearance, they were some kind of spellcaster - with the book and staff.

“Here,” she waved her hand in the air, “I give you [Necroblast] and [Necroblast: Barrage].” Partially a risk to give away her two ranged attacks, but she wasn’t really much of a spellcaster herself. She wasn’t sure if her lack of Intelligence, *stats-wise not actual*, would cause it to drop off once enemies with Magic Resist became more common.

This is an... acceptable gift.

“What do I get?” She crossed her arms, ready to be disappointed.

The path thou walk is littered with the dead. Error.

Sally exchanged glances with Humphrey. “Did you just say error?”

It seems I am unable to provide Error. Fortune must favor you; as such, I will have to provide you a stronger boon with Error.

Natus paused again and rubbed the side of their head with the glowing tip of the staff, illuminating their shadowed head and revealing no features - just further shadowed mist.

“Maybe it’s just playing up,” Sally shrugged. “Just try out the highest tier next and see if that works?” She shot Humphrey a not-very-sly wink.

"I'm not sure that will work," he grumbled back, knowing full well he had doomed it to become reality.

I do not usually have such issues. I doubt I'd even be able to give you [Zombie Apocalypse]. Ah, curses.

Sally watched the skill filter onto her list.

Edward stepped forward. "Could I have the same deal, please?"

No.

The pressure in the room dropped, and any residual movement of air halted, as the large figure looming above them froze and turned to ash. Slowly, parts of them broke off and dissipated, as if they were a burning piece of paper now made two-dimensional.

"Damn it," Edward growled, "put another Demon Coin in?" He turned to the zombie.

Sally stood staring at her new ability with lips pouted. Reading over the vague System description over and over again.

"Everything okay, Sally?" Humphrey walked over to her, positioning behind so that he could read her windows. After a few moments, he stood up straight. "Oh."

"That's like... an Ultimate, right?" She blinked slowly, unsure how to think.

Humphrey scratched at his chin, causing her to wince. "It isn't something a Player would get, or even high-level Bosses, really."

Edward fidgeted, unable to see the messages in front of the zombie's face. "What does it do? Why are you both so pensive about it? Was it worth the cost? Give me a Demon Coin."

Sally exhaled and closed the STAR down. Her eyes closed, and she rubbed them with her fingers. "Man, no wonder Theo gets so grouchy - being tired sucks." She lifted her head, a wide grin across her face as her eyes sparkled.

"It has limitations," Humphrey put his hand on her shoulder. "So do not go wasting it."

She rolled her eyes but couldn't wipe the smile from her face. "The conditionals aren't even active, so don't worry. I'll actually keep the horses in the barn for this one."

"I'm not sure what that means."

"Me neither," she beamed.

The demon worked his jaw. "Can we please summon the spooky god thing again? I'd like to trade some of my skills?"

"No." Sally shook her head. "You are not taking part in this dungeon, remember. No pain, no spoils. Did you want a turn, Humps?"

“I am content with what I have available, but thank you.” The Death Knight walked around, back to the altar, and gave her a brief nod.

“Alright, let’s pop the proper thing in and play by the rules for a change!” She shot Humphrey some finger guns. “Like that ever worked out for us.”

Edward trembled with anger, tensing as if he were considering drawing his blade. After a few seconds, he sighed and relaxed. His hands found his pockets, and he strode off to them as they peered at the coin slot once more.

“Don’t look so glum, Edward,” she said with a smile, noticing his face, “I’m sure you have great things in your very near future.”

It looked more like he had an upset stomach, but it wouldn’t hurt trying to pep him up a little. The sun coin slid into the slot, and a warm energy started to fill the room.

“You didn’t even explain your new ability,” he sighed.

“Nope! I want to keep it secret. Trust me, it’ll be worth the wait.”

The demon rolled his light blue eyes as a pulse of amber rose up from the runes, a swirling vortex appearing and shimmering. After a few volatile seconds, it became flat and inert.

“Neat. A portal.” Sally hopped around to stand before it.

With one last chance to take a deep breath, she stepped into it, followed by the two others.