

Chapter 2.9 Blood x Money

Sally hissed at the choices. This was like the Affinity choice all over again. If only there were a way to select all three at once. Her hand hovered over the selections - no. She lowered it again. Trying that would be a recipe for just unlocking the one she least wanted.

[Crypt Warden]

No actions were without consequences, but this at least seemed like the best option for the Party. It was the boring Melee Affinity once more - but the longer her zeds could stay alive, the better. Plus, it stacked with Humphrey and Theo. The closer they got to invincible, the less likely the System would be able to sweep them under the carpet.

“-no, I’m just happy where I am, thank you. I’m a *King*.”

She turned to see the Death Knight and Mouse-King in a heated discussion. As much as she had wanted him to join as a Party member or neat mount, the giant rodent seemed unable to solve his own marital problems. How could he assist with their world-conquering goals? The Party were paragons of self-assured normalcy and competency.

“Hey, Humps, what did you choose?” She shouted across the chamber, her voice echoing down the tunnels.

The Death Knight turned away from his conversation with One-Fang, and his expression softened. “Can I not keep it a secret until it becomes a key pivotal moment in future turmoil?”

She shook her head. “It’s my turn with the Chekhov’s Gun,” she patted at one of her side pockets. “What about you, Chuck?”

The Druid scratched at his head. He looked tired. “Just some heal.”

“Really?” Sally crossed her arms. “I bet it’s cool, though, like with a neat name. Are you going to hold out on me too?”

Chuck furrowed his brow and turned back to look at the entrance to the throne room. “Footsteps,” he murmured.

“Oh!” The mouse king grinned, his ramshackle crown sliding back atop his head. “More ungrateful interlopers to kill off my-“

“Hush already,” Sally scowled, “you’re just scene-dressing now. Let the adults talk.”

One-Fang opened his mouth but closed it promptly. Under the glaring presence of the zombie, he slouched on the throne and resigned to being brow-beaten once again.

She could hear the footsteps, too - a clip-clop of feet against the rough stone floor. Possibly only one person running. Perhaps someone who had a quest to do down here was horrified

to find that all the Monsters had already been defeated. Maybe even someone with a Quest to kill One-Fang.

“You guys ready to head back to *Count-von-Count-a-lot?*” She shrugged. They weren’t getting stuck down here listening to someone whine or getting murdered by an eager Level Twenty. Even though she thought she could take one on... well, maybe with Theo here.

Humphrey and Chuck nodded their acknowledgements and started to walk nearer to her so they could all teleport at once.

Just as she raised the stone that would take them to the vampire, the sprinting figure slid into the doorway and raised his hands.

“Aha! I thought I smelled a new Party!”

Sally paused. She thought in all likelihood that this new character was probably a Unique Monster - on account of him being almost seven feet tall and a dull shade of blue. Dark horns rose from a tangled mop of white hair, and his luminous baby-blue eyes matched the striped suit he wore.

“Hey,” she began, “you want to join our-“

“*Sally, no!*” Humphrey huffed at her, narrowing his eyes at the newcomer.

She rolled her eyes. They were never going to fill the empty space if they kept stopping her from inviting every Unique Monster they came across. You had to shotgun blast those invites out in the hopes that some foolish sucker would bite.

“My name,” the slim demonic-looking fellow announced with a a bow, “is Edward the Inevitable. I am an appointed toll taker for-“

“Not interested.” Sally gave a thumbs down.

“...It’s not voluntary - you are required to provide a gold stipend of-“

“Theo has all our gold,” she shrugged. “He likes to count it, even though the System already does that.” Turning to the Death Knight, the zombie frowned. “We should probably talk to him about that. It’s not healthy.”

“Do not ignore me! You will incur the wrath of-“

“Yeah... bye!” Sally activated the Teleport, and with a brief flash of blue, they vanished, leaving the odd demon and mouse-king unpartied.

A brief flood of vertigo flooded over them before it abated, and they found themselves in a darkened room of deep red wood. Curtains drawn to obscure any sunlight. From a casket on the floor, a shadowed figure loomed up - crimson flickering in the back of his eyes.

“You could at least knock, guys.” Theo sighed. “I almost had it.”

“Skill issue,” Sally hopped atop the actual bed in the room, which creaked at the surprise assault. “Humphrey and I got our Keystones - so did Chuck.”

“Hey, Theo. Sorry for intruding.” Chuck awkwardly shuffled his feet. “I should perhaps go find the Foxes.”

“No need to be shy,” Humphrey grinned as his helmet flames illuminated the room in a further red hue.

“It’s more that... you’re all pretty dead and covered in viscera - it’s quite emotionally oppressive.”

Sally didn’t prod him further. As fun as it was to wind Chuck up, she understood the difference between them. “Thanks for your help today, Chucky. We’ll arrange that gossip sesh for a less gore-covered occasion?”

“Sure,” he gave a smile despite his discomfort. “I felt like I was being carried, but I’m glad I was on your side of the pointy stuff.”

“What was it you killed?” Theo piped up. “Any good loot?”

“Mice and assorted mice parts.” Sally kicked the side of his coffin. “We settled a domestic dispute, too, *I think*.”

Chuck nodded and gave them all a brief bow. “More mania for me to unpack at a later date. Keep in touch.”

They waved him off as he turned and opened the door - the Druid gasping as a figure loomed on the other side.

“Did I not mention I was *Inevitable*?” Edward grinned as he stepped into the room - Chuck yielding to his advancement.

“Who’s this asshole?” Theo stood from his coffin with clenched fists.

Sally looked between the two. It was unlike the vampire to lose his temper or evoke naughty words - especially in her presence. The inability to sleep must be eroding away at his human side again, even though it was still the day.

“Ah, you must be the Party coin purse?” Edward stopped to observe them all. “You’re actually all rather *strange*.”

“I suggest you leave.” The vampire stepped out of his bed and started walking towards the man.

“Let me assure you, I do not care for idle threats. I am here to do my job and-“

Theo flashed forward, his fist-knives popping into existence as he slashed out at the intruder in an arc of crimson energy. Blood sprayed through the air, and then his arm hung limp.

Edward dropped to the floor, his neck cut wide open.

“Sorry guys, uh- especially you, Chuck. Not sure what came over me.” Theo turned with a sheepish smile to the Druid, who took the brunt of the arterial spray.

“Could have just given him some gold,” Sally swung her legs back and forth on the bed. “That was a little out of character.”

“Firstly,” Theo put away his blades and stood tall, “you never give scammers anything.” He stopped as he started the process of cleaning his outfit through the STAR.

“Secondly?” Humphrey sighed.

“Huh? Oh, and yeah - there’s something odd going on, right?”

The three watched him expectantly.

“Sorry.” Theo shook his head. “I’m feeling a little off. I shouldn’t be this tired...”

Sally sighed and lay back on the bed. “Perhaps you’re just sore that we are going to Level faster than you.”

“No, no. Not going to happen.” The vampire shook his head, but his eyes told a different story. “Just need to sleep. But there’s something - uh, there were Wanted posters of us three.”

“Yet we are not assailed?” Humphrey looked down at the corpse of the demon.

“That’s the thing - there’s like nobody in the town. It’s a ghost town in all but the literal sense.” He raised a finger as the zombie sat up. “And yes, I’ve checked.”

Humphrey scratched at the side of his skull, the metallic sound causing the Druid to wince. “There are abandoned settlements in the Wastelands, but this is not meant to be one of them.”

Sally pouted. They had made it half a day into the second area, and already the glitches of the System were rearing their ugly heads. Not to mention she met two Unique Monsters, and Theo had just murdered one in blind rage. That was against their new moral code - probably.

“Theo, why’d you kill the nice man? He may have been able to give us answers.”

The vampire tilted his head to the side as if he were trying to listen to a whisper in the breeze. Eventually, his eyes focused on hers.

“I just have to kill all demons.”

“Uh - I’m not accepting that kind of cliché. Fess up, fangs.”

Theo stood for a moment, the cogs rotating in his head.

“No,” he replied, as he turned and left the room.