

## Chapter 2.36 Safety in Numbers

Sally stood there in shock, her mouth opening and closing as she tried to process the statement. "Are you... sure?"

"It's as clear as the System can be." Humphrey rubbed the side of his head as he stood.

"But how? Without the Architect..."

The Death Knight shrugged and shook his head.

A large lump had settled in Sally's throat. More people from the real world had just been pulled into whatever this place was, somehow. Even without the Architect being alive to do the necessary deed. They had considered waves of new Players, but it had slipped from her mind, like so many other things.

"I can't... she covered her face with her hands." She took a deep breath. "We need to fix the Wastes before they try to come through - the Toad! Shit. With the System not even working properly, how are they... how are we..."

Humphrey opened his skeletal maw, about to say something, but then closed it.

"I know what you're thinking. You were about to say that it wasn't our problem, right? Well, who else, Humps? Who else is going to do it?" She started pacing. Time was against them - it might only take newbies two weeks - maybe even one before they tried venturing through the Swamps. Assuming *Zeroes* or some other group weren't gatekeeping then the nigh immune Toad would kill anyone.

She stopped and deflated. Here she was, trying to play the hero - when she was supposed to be a self-styled villain. Instead of being overjoyed at there now being a banquet of fresh brains to consume, she was worried for their survival. Perhaps just because they were new, behind the curve. It was conflicting.

"I seem to be out of the loop here," Edward leaned towards them with his brow furrowed. "What are you talking about?"

"Long story short," Sally waved her hands in exasperation. "Players come from somewhere else, like another world. There's just been a new group brought into the Forest like there was about... two months ago?"

Humphrey nodded.

"Ah." Edward tilted his head and looked off, unfocused while he thought.

"That's quite a big thing to drop out of the blue." She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "We'll need to kill the dragon as soon as possible - then the Toad?"

The demon snorted but then retracted the humor he had found in her statement. "Normally, I'd think you mad - and certainly you're not powerful enough to do what you dream of... but watching you in this dungeon. With training, then you might be the best ones to stand a chance."

“Flattery,” Sally smiled. “Hopefully, once we are all back together, we can get some more levels, right Humphrey?”

“Of course. Let’s focus on the task at hand for now, and hope Archie returns soon... without breaking anything.”

Sally narrowed her eyes at him, trying to scrape the truth from him with her glare. Despite being in the room for a generous handful of minutes, she hadn’t really given it a proper look. Social issues took precedence when the room itself hadn’t tried to kill her.

The room was a similar square shape to the rest - in fact, she was fast becoming tired of the dungeon. Where was the multi-level, varied terrain, true exploration experience? These were just boring rooms with danger in them, connected in a way that eventually led to the boss, or Lucius, hopefully.

In the middle of this bland cube of space was an altar with some shapes upon it. She almost didn’t want to get any closer in case it was a puzzle - in fact, she was pretty sure that it was. She didn’t have the stomach for it currently.

“Humphrey, go look at the puzzle thing, please. I am too exhausted now. This place has terrible food.”

The Death Knight would have rolled his eyes if he had them but relented to go do what was requested.

“How serious is this new Player thing?” Edward sidled up to her.

“Depends on what you mean by serious.” Sally sighed and rubbed her forehead. “It’s kind of a lot to process right now. You ever think... about how you got here?”

The demon shrugged. “I suppose not. There are memories there, but no physical evidence any of it happened. I’m here *now*, though.”

“You are,” she gave him a smile. “You’re a lot cooler when you’re not being an annoying henchman.”

Edward closed his eyes and looked up to the ceiling. He exhaled and shook his head. “I bet you’ve met plenty of assholes that you eventually charm onto your side?”

“No,” she said, “some of them I kill and eat.” A grin spread across her face as she began to walk over to the Death Knight. “I have more patience for Uniques, but if Players don’t want to bend the knee, then I always have dinner reservations open.”

The demon was left to quietly consider this with his eyebrows raised.

“What’s the damage, Humps?”

“None, yet.” He scratched at the side of his head. There were three exits to this room, and the altar had a series of Stars engraved into stones arranged in a jumbled order.

“It is like... a constellation thing? Do you have those here?” Her eyes burned as she stared intently at the mixture of tiles.

Humphrey shrugged.

“Edwaaaaard. Can we not just pay you to help us?” Sally whined and leaned across the altar. It was nice and cool, and she was feeling overheated from doing too much thinking.

“Any gold you give me, I’d have to take back to Ruben.”

“What about...” Her STAR lit up her wrinkled face as she opened her Inventory. “You want a [Demonic Coin]? Or is that reductive to ask? I don’t mean to be offensive.”

“You have a *coin*?” The demon narrowed his bright blue eyes and rubbed his chin.

“Good sir, I have more than one.” There was a look on Edward’s face that told Sally she should be a little coy about the total amount - if one had pulled such a reaction from him.

“More than one? Those are very useful for demons... but even for a handful, Ruben would not look kindly on my betrayal. I should probably remain impartial.”

“What could we get for twelve?” Sally raised her eyebrows, putting her figurative cards on the table.

Edward licked his lips. “Twelve? Uh... you should know there is a cost to making a deal with a demon.”

She looked back to the Death Knight, who shrugged again. Making a deal with a demon sounded a lot different than her intent to just trade some of her items for some help. Although her mind was lagging, she tried to imagine what kind of cost he might be expecting. “Surely you dictate the cost if I’m making the deal; why not just *not be an ass* about it?”

He smiled and shook his head. “It’s not always a direct deal - we aren’t making a contract. Call it fate, if you will. An ill omen for your troubles.”

Humphrey shuffled on the stone floor. “Perhaps not a good idea to invite further malady on ourselves.”

“True.” She sighed. It didn’t sound like it would be a problem, but they shouldn’t add to their problems while they were already on the back foot. “I suppose you’ll have to share with Lucius; he might like some.”

Edward nodded and crossed his arms, not intending to interrupt them further.

“I have an idea,” Sally stretched out and went towards the door to the East. “Does the door count as an enemy?”

“Only to your progress, *ha-ha*.”

“I mean like an entity. That has defense.” She rolled her eyes, then withdrew her dagger. With a stiff jab, she struck the carved stone - the blade sinking into the stone as if butter.

“Normally no, but in a dungeon...”

“Yeah, alright, Humps. I’ve already stabbed it and worked the answer out. There’s no need for the extra exposition.” She waved her free hand at him. “Sorry.”

With a few additional stabs, she managed to strike whatever counted as a lock mechanism within the door, and with a groan, it started to open up.

“Puzzles can suck it,” she turned to stick her tongue out at the altar.

“Sally! Behind-“ The Death Knight began.

Something shot out from the room, striking her in the back. Pain and warmth flared up her back as she looked down to see the tip of a metal spike protruding from beneath her ribs.

With a metallic screech, the chain attached to the pole yanked her backward into the room as the door shut itself - plunging her into darkness.

Humphrey slid up to the wall and slammed his sword into the door, the only effect being a white line of dust upon the unmoving stone. He spun back to the demon with the fire behind his helmet blazing wildly.

“Fix the puzzle, *now*.”

“I... cannot.”

Crimson flame flickered in the eye sockets of the Death Knight.

“You do not want to know what I will do to you if you do not.”

Edward gulped.