

Chapter 2.41
Goodbye, Theo

[Dread Counter]

The attack from the demon flexed ineffectively against the vampire. A grin flashed across Edward's face - this was not the first time he had seen this skill - and had been expecting it. Immediately he was twirling into a follow-up strike.

[Blood Shift]

But then, Theo wasn't there anymore. The sword struck through empty air as the vampire rose up behind him, mouth crackling with critical energy. Pain and blood, as fangs sunk into the demon's neck. Edward tried to move, but his limbs became lethargic and slack.

"Interesting," Humphrey rubbed his chin, "only a critical would have damaged the demon due to the level difference, so he bet it all on one attack."

Sally narrowed her eyes and watched the vampire continue to drink from the weakening demon. "I thought [Vampire Bite] only lasted two or three seconds?"

"He is doing it the old-fashioned way," the Death Knight grinned.

Eventually, Theo dropped Edward with a gasp. The demon collapsed to the floor with dim eyes. He looked dried up, with his skin sunken to his bones.

Humphrey knelt down beside him and gave him a prod. "This was supposed to be a duel to the death, Theo. Finish the job, otherwise, you are desecrating the sanctity of-

"Humphrey!" Sally scowled. "Theo did as he said he would."

Theo raised a finger as if to say something, then immediately threw up blood. A lot of blood. "Oh boy," he gasped between retches. "I'll stick to the skill *n-urp*-next time."

The Death Knight stood back up and shook his head. "I'm getting rather tired of watching people empty their stomachs." Archie looked up to him but then immediately avoided the empty-socket gaze.

"Alright," Theo sighed, wiping his mouth off on the back of his arm. "We'll call that even then, water under the bridge, Edward?"

"...okay..." the demon gurgled from the floor.

"You can notify your friends now to come kill us." The vampire walked back over to pick up the dropped sword.

"I... refuse."

Sally squatted down. "Why not? You'll get in trouble, right?"

"I'll be fine."

She rubbed her face. So much had happened recently; she needed to get everyone on the same page. With a hop to her feet, she turned to the gathered Outsiders. "Right, so... the System has... invited another three hundred Players to the Forest."

Their collective confusion and surprise were like bees in her ears. "Alright, settle down." She sighed deeply. "So Theo, I suppose you will be heading back there to go level up again?"

He nodded slowly and brought up his STAR interface. "I've no teleport, though... but it would be safer than hanging out here."

"I've got one for Sanctuary still," she smiled. "You can get the goblins to make you a new casket - I'll trade you some of this armor and gold too."

Humphrey walked over to them as they made the trade. "May I see your Stats, Theo?"

"Depends," the vampire looked up at him. "How good is your poker face?"

The Death Knight stared at him impassively.

"Alrighty, good enough for me." He swiped the menus across and waited for the plated figure to stand behind him.

After a handful of seconds of staring, Humphrey stood up straight again and looked away. "*Fuck.*"

"Yep." Theo stood to his feet groggily and tried to brush off some of the demon blood. "So, these new Players - what's our take? Kill, cultivate, avoid, or befriend?"

Sally sighed and walked up to throw her arms around him. "Do whatever. You're still a dingus, but you can have your hug. Just come back *alive*, okay?"

He held her in return, and they were quiet for a few moments.

"*Demon blood vomit smells horrible, by the way,*" she whispered in his ear.

"*I can smell brain vomit on you too.*"

She gently pushed him away and shuddered, slightly breathless. "That's something I'm going to mentally file away and not address. Uh," she turned to the Outsiders, "why are you all standing around watching? This isn't a *show*." With the addition of a growl, they all seemed to start having small talk amongst themselves.

"Keep me updated, okay?" She turned back to the vampire. "Wish I could see what classes or abilities you get. Oh, and we don't have a teleport stone for you to find us again?"

"Don't worry, I'll find my way back to you." He looked past her to give a brief wave to the rest of the group and then vanished in a wave of blue light.

[Theo has left the Party]

Sally stared out at the blank space where he was just standing for a few seconds before spinning around to the group with a click of her fingers. "See, that werewolf guy could take a lesson or two from Theo." She yawned and sat down on the floor.

"You know he will be back within days," Humphrey grinned. "You needn't worry about him."

"Who's worried?" She rolled her eyes. "We can just wait here till he returns, right?"

A heart emoji appeared beside Lucius, which promptly split in half. "Now that I've seen how he is when rested, I appreciate your bond a lot more."

"...*having to listen to this... is agony...*"

"Oh please," the zombie sighed. "Like you've never had a close platonic companionship that wasn't quite bound by romance or love."

"...*well... no.*"

She withdrew a Health Potion from her Inventory and threw it over to Humphrey to feed to the desiccated demon. "How about you, quiet pair? Anything to add to the current situation?"

Lucius and Archie exchanged glances, a question mark appearing beside the demon before he spoke. "No, I'm happy to be a passive observer."

"Ah! I have something for *you*, maybe? Do you want a Demon Coin?"

The emotive demon just gave her a blank stare.

With a groan, Edward righted himself into a seated position - now a bit healthier looking from the magical effect of the potion. He rubbed at his neck and winced as the bloodied wound was still raw. "Ack. The Coins will help you unlock your hidden potential. An ability that you don't have if you've space for it."

"In that case," a smiley face appeared, "yes, please, Sally! I only have two skills out of a possible... twelve?"

"They are once per day or something, too," Edward yawned and covered his eyes. "Never had one, so I'm not sure."

Sally withdrew one and flipped it through the air towards her Party demon, not failing to notice the blue eyes of the tax collector follow it through the air. Lucius caught it and immediately placed it into the shadow, where his mouth probably was.

"Ah!" A fire emoji played beside him. "I have a new ability - it's an aura for increasing Speed and Dodge."

The zombie hissed a celebration to herself. Auras were great for the group, and those were great Stats to increase. She had more than enough coins to max out Lucius and make him a proper part of the Outsiders... her eyes then narrowed at the other demon.

"What are we going to do with you, Edward?"

"A coin would be nice," he turned to her with a grin, but a lot of his usual pomp and flair had been drained from his face.

"I'm sorry that Theo drank all your blood and stuff, must have sucked..." she winced at her poor choice of words.

He tilted his head. "It was a mercy. He could have killed me, and I him. He made well on his promise to humble me - and for that, I respect him and hold no grudge."

"Yet you didn't end up summoning the other goons?"

Edward shuffled awkwardly before deflating. "I was felled by a Level One. Were they to come here and see that, I would be good as dead anyway. I might as well ally myself with you now."

Humphrey grinned. "More self-preservation than getting used to our companionship, though?"

The demon gave them a wry grin. "I wouldn't mind failing upwards for a change." He paused as he received a notification. "Are you sure?"

"You already have experience in being a manic asshole; you just have to trust us as much as we trust you." She beamed at him and stood to her feet.

Edward opened his mouth, then closed it to look at the floor. After a few seconds, he sighed and scrunched his eyes closed.

[Edward has joined the Party]

"This is just a temporary thing until Theo comes back," she wagged a finger at him. "But the least we can do is get you a couple of levels so you aren't going to die to trash."

He stood to his feet and tried to straighten his dusty and blood-soaked suit. Facing the party, he gave a low bow. "I hope to make you all proud and hope my previous transgressions can be ignored." Straightening up again, his confidence fell from his face. "Although, it is only a matter of time now before they send someone to punish us all."

"Pfft, not worried." Sally waved her hand and then looked down at the ginger cat. "Archie. You don't feel like a giant eldritch monster, do you?"

The Death Knight narrowed his eyes as the cat tilted his head.

"I don't believe so. The time in the... beyond was odd. Peaceful, but I believe it gave both myself and Theo time to think." He looked up to Humphrey. "I am more eager than ever to find the artifact we require, big brother."

Sally clicked her fingers and turned to point to the expansive cavern. "To the pyramids then!"

A few silences of silence passed before she turned back around. "Actually, how do we get out of here?"