

Chapter 2.2 From Zero

An eerie silence washed over the clearing as most eyes turned up to question the sudden night and blood moon that washed the area in a dull reddish light.

Sally kicked her feet back and forth. "Can you believe he first used this skill a few days ago trying to woo me?"

"Yes." The Death Knight narrowed his empty sockets at the vampire. "Did it work?"

"We kissed, and it was super gross, like frenching cold fish."

Theo physically cringed. "I can hear you, you know."

"Focus on your life and death fight!" Sally stuck her tongue out at the back of the vampire before turning back to Humphrey. "It was a nice evening, though. We went and found those rampaging boars instead. Killed them all."

"I gathered." The Death Knight kept his gaze narrowed on Theo. "You told me he was taking you to hunt for Cards."

"We found two Boar Cards, so technically correct." She had even equipped them despite them being ass. Mostly because farming for Cards was way too boring for her, and she had only been lucky enough to find the Cyclops Card previously. Theo, of course, had a new full set already. It was still a mystery how he found enough time to level, hunt for items, and still be present for most of the Party's activities.

Sally cupped her hands around her mouth. "Tell her about your cool new Card set, Theo!"

Theo's eye twitched, and his mouth opened and closed before he exhaled. "You probably don't want to know - and it'd take too long to explain when we should be fighting." He bit his tongue and congratulated himself for not unloading all the information, half hoping that she would ask him to tell her anyway.

The Rogue had a grimace across her scarred face as she began to circle around the vampire. "D-do you not have a weapon? You expected me to fight you unarmed?"

Theo stood still, hands once again clasped behind his back. "Don't pretend you have any honour now, Jess. You are all Player killers."

"So are you," she spat in return, wincing at her name being spoken.

Jess lunged out at him once she got almost fully behind him, and he spun away, lashing out with his fist that she dodged. The Rogue stepped away to circle him again.

"My error last time..." Theo began, clasping his hands behind him again. "Was in trying to beat you in speed. Your meme build was just stronger than mine at the time."

The Rogue whipped around both blades again. Theo dodged one, but the smaller dagger caught him on the forearm with a hiss of acid.

“Now, of course, I know what you sacrificed to get your Evasion and Movement Speed. I don’t have to beat you in speed - I just have to strike you harder.”

Jess growled and activated [Triple Cut] - dashing straight at the vampire and crisscrossing crimson lines on his torso. Shreds of his shirt fell to the floor as she passed him.

“Woo! Take it all off!” Sally cheered from the rock before catching the glare of the Death Knight. “What? He is still objectively a stud, even if we can’t do anything more than hold hands.”

“You’ve been *holding hands*?” Humphrey somehow wrinkled up his skeletal face as the red flame from the back of his helmet increased in intensity.

Theo sighed and looked down at his ruined shirt. Why did it always have to come to this? He opened up his STAR and switched from Cosmetic to Equipped Armour. Now, he suddenly wore black leather, reinforced in places by tarnished iron.

“[Grimband] set?” The Rogue hissed from behind him. “I don’t mind taking that from your corpse.”

“You’d have to kill me first,” he turned with a smile. “Or technically, I think I am already dead.”

She began to strike out at him again, some of them he avoided, but his raised arms bore the brunt of several gashes in protecting his head. In retaliation, the Rogue was able to avoid all of his thrown punches.

Sally hummed to herself. She was not looking forward to going through the Swamp. Mostly because she would no doubt end up falling into a bog and get her clothes all dirty. Although, if they ended up covered in blood in a few minutes, it probably wouldn’t be so bad. She felt terrible for the rest of the Guild, currently unawares and about to stumble upon the *Zeroes* awaiting their travels to the second area.

She had considered contacting the Swordmaster, Dent, as he said he would repay them when they arrived in the Wastelands. By now, he must be higher than Level Fifteen, surely? Watching Theo dodge around and regenerate hits, they might not need the assistance after all. Depending on how terrible the Wastelands actually were.

Neither Archie nor Humphrey could tell her much about them. Other than they were a mix of desolate plains and sand dunes. If her previous life could tell her anything, then she would probably be facing giant scorpions and reptiles. Neither seemed like particularly good food sources for her brain-hungry stomach. Theo was slowing now, his forearms dripping with his own blood. Briefly, she considered intervening - but she was still kinda sleepy.

[Heartseeker Strike]

The darkened rapier again shot towards Theo, piercing straight through his chest. The false night vanished, returning the area to the overcast day as the vampire slumped against the Rogue.

“*Shit*, why are you so heavy? Could you just...” She stumbled for a few feet as he failed to drop to the floor and just continued to weigh on her.

“Hey... Jess,” Theo whispered weakly in her ear. “Have you seen [Perfect Dark] before?”

“N-no, what are you-“ she struggled to pry his limp weight off of her rapier.

“I can only cast it at full health. Increases some of my stats and looks pretty cool too. Usually lasts ten minutes but goes away if I go beneath ninety-percent health.”

She growled. “Why are you telling me-“

Theo lifted his head, his eye burning crimson energy. “Do you want to know how much Health I regenerate a second?”

The night sky returned, sending a dark shadow across their duel and leaving only his eyes and wide smile visible as her eyes adjusted.

“Oops,” he hissed into her ear, “*spoiler alert!*”

“What... what are you?” Jess finally managed to push him away, the end of her weapon retracting from the wound with a wet pop.

Theo raised his hands, and two punch-blades of dark metal popped into existence from gloves he wasn't previously wearing. “I'm a fuckin' *nerd*.” He beamed.

“Language, Theo!” Sally yelled out from the sidelines before she turned to the Death Knight. “Honestly, did you really have to teach him how to hot-swap weapons?”

“Yes, *ha-ha*. Doesn't it look cool?”

“It does, but I'm trying not to let his ego get bigger than mine. I'm the main character still.” She wrinkled up her nose. If that were true, why was she sitting over here and not having a fight so soon in the adventure?

Her foot tapped on the floor before Archie rubbed against her leg. She looked down into his emerald eyes. “Arch, would it be bad form if I got involved?”

“Most likely. Do you not think Theo can win?”

“I just think *I* should win.” Sally tapped her fingers on her daggers sheath. Perhaps it was the nerves talking. Theo deserved a bit of time in the sun - or crimson moon as it were - and there were still nineteen other Players she could have her own time fighting with soon enough.

Theo dodged to the side and flicked his blade outwards. Other than a gash through her trenchcoat, the Rogue had avoided most of his attacks - and he had a few splits between his

armour where he was bleeding. The glow from his eyes had faded, but the crimson moon and pitch sky still loomed over their battle. He wasn't looking tired, though, just... bored.

"Did you realise you always attack in the same pattern?" He winced as he received a light slash across his arm. "I've been counting your steps. Every breath you've taken. It's a complicated pattern, but after time it becomes rote."

"Quit talkin', you bullshitter!" The woman was seething. Sweat ran down her face as the melee had gone no further despite the damage she had dealt.

"Okay." Theo moved forward and blocked her next attack, sidestepped the follow-up, blocked the next, and moved forward to block her retreating slash. He put one hand behind his back and advanced, slowly and methodically moving as if practising dance steps. As the woman was on the back foot, he blocked each quick attack with calm precision, inching closer to her.

[Vampire Bite]

Having chosen the Improved version of this base skill, the Rogue became incapacitated almost immediately. Like the paralysing bite of a snake, she became stunned as he drank her blood. Her arms dropped to the side as lethargy overtook her.

The vampire released his snack, punching a blade into her stomach and then throwing her limp body over to his party like a ragdoll. The Rogue rolled across the dirt as crimson ran from her neck.

[Eat Brains]

[+5% Melee Critical Chance]

A sickening crunch echoed through the area, and Sally rose, her face caked in the gore of what remained of the insides of the Rogue's head.

Shocked panic and anger radiated through the disgusted *Zeroes*.

"*Fucking kill them!*" Walter shouted, sending forth a signal to charge as he frothed from the mouth in rage.

Sally and Theo beamed at each other, their faces marred with red, as the Death Knight sighed and unclasped the coffin from his back.

Arrows, thrown weapons, and a variety of spells careened over the gap towards the Party as groups of melee Players charged forth.