

Super Necromancer System

Chapter 11: First Fight, First Undead

Aldrich heard another growl cut through the silent, deadly night, and he stopped thinking about the future version of himself. The version where he had all his spells and maxed out stats and an army of undead.

For now, he was still level 1. He could not get carried away. He had to be careful.

Immediately, Aldrich analyzed the situation. Judging from the pupils on these Variants along with how low their gaze was, they were the E-class threats known as Strikers. They were quadrupedal, almost wolf-like creatures known for their incredible charging speed and two large tusks jutting from their mouths.

Aldrich knew this because as a hero academy, Blackwater did have AA (Alterhuman Agency) data on all known Variants and how to deal with them.

Unfortunately, it was up to the hero academies themselves to determine how to distribute the sensitive data, and in Blackwater, training data regarding Variants, especially higher class ones, was limited as a reward to higher performing students.

However, information about lower class Variants was common enough because of how many of them there were that one could find a plethora of information online on how to deal with them.

The practical exams that Aldrich and his friends had to take involved taking down mock Variants simulated by drones and saving civilians, so he was readily prepared to deal with any lower-class Variant threat.

One of the tests even involved distracting Strikers away from civilian zones.

Aldrich took a look at the screen hovering in the corner of his vision that displayed his status. He saw that the status tab was not the only one available to him. There were also tabs labeled as , , and .

Aldrich immediately flipped to the tab where, if things were the same as it was in the game, he knew he would see the item he needed.

-1x Tome of the Dark Arts

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Aldrich mentally selected the Tome of the Dark Arts, and it manifested in his hands out of a shower of ghostly green particles. The book was no larger than a small handbook with a leathery cover made out of wrinkled, dried skin with the visage of a screaming face etched in the middle.

This was the introductory tome that Necromancers started out with that granted them three basic spells to use out of a sizable pool of fifteen.

Aldrich consumed the item by mentally willing it, and the book glowed a faint green. The list of the possible spells he could use showed up in a small screen in front of him, but he barely even looked at it, only making sure the spells he already knew he wanted were there.

He selected what he needed.

Lines of glowing bright, ghostly green energy transferred from the book and into Aldrich's body, moving up the veins of his arm and lighting them in the dark.

[Spells: Chill Blast, Raise Undead Rank 1, and Anti-Life Shell Rank 1 learned]

Thankfully, Aldrich had a good fundamental idea of how to use his newfound powers. All he had to do was mentally will his powers to work, as if they were just a part of his body, and because he knew how his game character worked, it was a breeze for him to start working quickly and efficiently.

Aldrich shuddered as he felt cold seep into his being, permeating through his veins from the tome's energy. It felt good, the cold, like he belonged to it. The book faded into dust, and at that moment, the Strikers charged out from the forest.

They looked like enormous wolves with thick, grey furred coats and snarling jowls, though their square pupil eyes and tusks made it readily apparent they were no ordinary wildlife.

They surged forwards with tusks jutting out, aiming to gore Aldrich.

Aldrich saw them moving towards him and immediately lunged to the side, rolling over a bunch of leaves as he dodged the barreling, savage bodies. A crack sounded as the Strikers slammed into trees and shook their heads, momentarily dazed by the impact.

Still, Aldrich almost shuddered at how devastating their charges were. They had almost felled the enormous trees they had hit, tilting them backwards dangerously close to a free fall. Any human hit by that would have their internal organs completely rearranged from the impact alone, not to mention the sharp tusks.

Aldrich was faster than the wolves, though. A good deal faster.

Because he had the [Unburdened] status which applied only when he did not wear any equipment, he had a sizable buff to agility. As a result, he was more than twice as fast as he was before, and even back when he was an ordinary man, he had top level athletic performance.

Aldrich pointed his pale hands at the two Strikers just like his Necromancer character would. He casted [Chill Bolt].

[Mana: 15/15] 11/15]

Two wintry spheres of foggy white and blue surrounded his hands before twin bolts of pale blue energy shot forth. The bolts zipped through the air, cold, condensed air leaving a frosty comet trail behind them.

Both bolts landed square on one of the Strikers square at the head. The impact jerked the Striker's head back like it was shot with a bullet, but it shook the blow off. Its head was cut open with jagged scars covered with frozen blood, but the damage was not enough to pierce right through the skull and into the brain.

"Hm," noted Aldrich.

These Strikers were not ordinary. Normally, E-class threats like them could be dealt pretty easily with conventional weaponry and the [Chill Bolts] would definitely have been enough to turn their brains into frozen mush considering in the game, they could make sizable dents in boulders.

But these Strikers had seemingly evolved harder skulls to accommodate their charging habits, removing one of their biggest weak points as the thick fur on their bodies formed a sort of natural armor.

In terms of game levels, the Strikers would probably be around level 4 or 5. A significant threat to Aldrich at this state.

There was no doubt that if the Strikers got a clean hit on him, he would instantly die with how low his HP pool was.

But Aldrich trusted in his reflexes and agility to kite his way through this mini boss-fight.

The other Striker roared and pawed the ground once before charging again.

Aldrich dodged pre-emptively, once more rolling to the side and narrowly evading a crushing blow to his body. He then cast [Anti-Life Shell Rank 1], or, more accurately, he activated it since it was a toggled passive.

Unlike [Chill Bolt], [Anti-Life Shell] was a passive ability that surrounded Aldrich with negative energy that healed undead while draining the life force of regular enemies.

There was no cost to maintaining the shell, especially at lower ranks, but in exchange, it did not deal much damage. It was more like 'chip' damage that accumulated over time, but every little bit counted at this point.

A ghostly green aura that looked like ethereal mist surrounded Aldrich in a hazy sphere approximately ten meters in radius. Enough range to constantly cover both Strikers in this forest clearing.

The Strikers sniffed the strange mist warily but did not register enough threat from it to run away or deal with it. Instead, they sat in the mist, circling around Aldrich from opposite ends.

Aldrich took in a breath, keeping his senses sharp for the moment they charged him. He could not use [Raise Undead] because it required corpses, but he had willingly chosen a spell that did not work because he was confident he could one shot the Strikers with well placed [Chill Bolts] to the head.

Now, though, Aldrich had to readjust his strategy and beat the Strikers with a hit and run method using the constant chip damage of [Anti-Life Shell] and [Chill Bolts] to deal frost type damage that would slow the Strikers down.

Aldrich had planned to take this fight without undead, but he had to admit that having undead would make his job a lot easier.

After all, what was a Necromancer, especially a Legion Necromancer, without his minions?

That was when Aldrich noticed with some surprise the presence of graves.

Not literal graves, but floating cross-shaped tombstones outlined in green that indicated the presence of corpses that he could raise. These corpses were only visible to Necromancers, and it was both a welcome and unwelcome sight to him.

Two graves.

Aldrich grimaced. He knew who they were. He did not like using his dead friends as undead, but for now, he had to survive. He had to survive to give them the vengeance they deserved.

Aldrich put his hand out and casted [Raise Undead Rank 1].

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[Mana: 11/15] 6/15]

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Rank 1 meant that he could only raise undead from levels 1-10, and though he did not know entirely how levels correlated with the real world, the presence of graves meant they were in the eligible level range for revival.

Two sets of pale arms burst from the forest ground, and the graves floating over them faded away.

Aldrich frowned as he saw Adam and Elaine burst from the ground, and from rotted splotches on their skin, he knew they were zombies. They looked grotesque, Elaine with the gaping hole in her stomach and Adam with a completely twisted neck. Their eyes were lifeless, and they let out guttural groans that belonged to monsters, not humans.

Necromancers were not like Priests. They did not revive the dead. They simply used corpses to create monsters.

Whatever soul was left in that corpse was long gone. At least, this was according to game lore.

Aldrich hoped that it was right. He had never been superstitious enough to believe in souls and an afterlife, but if it did exist, he did not want to keep his friends' souls trapped.

The Strikers paused their circling as they saw the two zombies, assessing their threat.

Aldrich could feel mental 'tethers' linked to Adam and Elaine, and he had an instinctive sense that he could move them around with mental commands addressed to these links. He had Adam and Elaine stand behind him, covering his blind spot, and together like this, he almost felt like they were back as a team.

Aldrich shook his head as he remembered the many fights they had gone through together in this formation. That was the past. Adam and Elaine were dead. They were zombies now, and Seth Solar and his gang had to pay for it.

Aldrich took the initiative this time, firing off twin [Chill Bolts] at the Striker in front of him.

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[Mana: 6/15] 2/15]

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He aimed not at the hardened skull this time, but at the eyes. The Striker howled in pain as the pale blue bolts slammed into its gleaming yellow eyes, bursting them apart in chunks of frozen flood and eye fluid.

While the Striker was disabled, Aldrich ran towards the other Striker, causing it to charge him. He ran so that he lured it away from Adam and Elaine while he commanded his undead friends to attack the blinded Striker.

Adam and Elaine growled as they sprinted forwards, significantly stronger than they were before. As Zombies, they had slightly enhanced physical stats, undying bodies that would not give out unless they took head injuries, and a poisonous bite and rot aura that made them better front-line fighters than Aldrich.

Overall, both were level 3, and two of them could overwhelm a single Striker easily provided Aldrich distracted the other one.

Adam and Elaine tackled the Striker and began savagely tearing into it like monsters themselves. They chomped down on the Striker, turning it over as they started to gouge their fists and legs into its skin. They broke their fingers as they tried to tear into it and then used their sharp, broken bones as knives to start stabbing, unable to feel pain or any sense of self-preservation.

Aldrich played a tense game of dodging with the other Striker, evading its lunges, charges, and snaps from its jaws with his superior agility. He did this while listening to the other Striker growling and struggling before its death throes silenced.

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[Striker defeated! + 10 EXP]

[EXP Bar: 0/10] 10/10]

[Level up!]

[Level 1] 2]

[5 stat points available to distribute]

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Aldrich nodded to himself, feeling power surge into him. The Striker leaped up and snapped at him, and Aldrich held it off with his bare hands, keeping his hands on its jaws to prevent them from closing on his face while he held it from arm's length away to evade the tusks.

The Striker's eye widened in surprise at Aldrich's burst of power.

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[Stat points distributed...]

[Strength: 6] 11]

Aldrich had expected to get around twice as physically strong from going from 6 to 11 in strength, but he felt stronger than even that, even though his class did not have an affinity for strength that granted a bonus point to every stat invested into it.

Aldrich tossed the Striker away with an expert over the shoulder throw, sending it crashing into the forest floor in a tumble of cracking leaves and branches.

His class primarily used magic, it was true, but that did not mean he could neglect his physical stats, especially in the real world where superheroes faster than the human eye could run a fist through him before he could even react and cast a spell.

"Now then," said Aldrich as he cracked his neck and knuckles, walking casually up to the Striker as it slowly got back up from the heavy throw.

The Striker looked first at Aldrich, then behind it at Adam and Elaine shambling towards it, covered in the blood, fur, and guts of its companion. The monster shuddered in fear, its tail tucking between its legs.

"It's time for you and your friend to join us," said Aldrich.

Chapter 12: The Nexus

In a reversal of roles, it was now Aldrich that charged the Striker, sprinting at the monster before it could build up speed for its own charge. He determined that the only way for the Striker to escape its situation was to charge Aldrich and force him to dodge, thereby giving it a clean getaway path.

By charging first, Aldrich removed that option, though this was far riskier for his own personal safety. Regardless, he wanted the EXP and undead from the Striker.

The Striker snapped at Aldrich when he got close, managing to close its jaws around his shoulder. Because Aldrich had not leveled his vitality, the durability of his body was still similar, and the Striker, even as a E-class monster, had bite force capable of tearing apart metal.

Aldrich felt his shoulder bones shattering and his flesh tearing like paper, but he held the Striker off with his arms while Adam and Elaine pounced on its back, tearing the Variant away and throwing it to the ground.

"Do me a favor and kill this thing," said Aldrich as he held his mangled shoulder. Adam and Elaine began to bite and claw at the Striker, wrestling it into the ground where it had no escape.

The Striker turned and managed to bite Adam's head, cracking his skull, and Aldrich reacted by throwing out a precisely aimed, powerful kick at the base of the Striker's neck, breaking the bone supporting it.

The Striker fell down, limp and dead.

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[Striker defeated! +10 EXP]

[EXP Bar: 0/30] 10/30]

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"Sorry, Adam," said Aldrich as he saw the huge tooth marks dug into his former friend's skull. "But you'll be patched up soon with my [Anti-Life Shell]. Plus, like you said, it's not like you're missing out with that face of yours."

Aldrich did not know why he talked to his friends as if they were still alive. He felt a twinge of hurt when he saw them as zombies. He thought he was immune to loss, and though he definitely was cold to it, there was still a part of him that grieved and tried to hold on to the memories of the two that had been his only friends in this unfair world.

Or maybe Aldrich was just going crazy. Perhaps a side effect of being Undead.
Speaking of -

Aldrich inspected his damaged shoulder and moved it around. There was no pain, and despite the fact that tendons and bone and muscle had been torn to shreds, he could still move it with no issues. He truly was an Undead now, and this, he was not familiar with.

In Elden World, player characters could choose from a wide variety of races, but being an Undead was not one of them. He had no idea how his character would progress or whether he could evolve from being a basic Undead to something like a Lich.

Aldrich's thoughts were broken by Adam and Elaine tearing chunks from the dead Strikers and eating the raw, bloody meat.

"I know you guys are hungry, but I need a mostly intact corpse to raise," said Aldrich. Adam and Elaine stopped chewing and stood up with grunts, swaying as they awaited further commands.

Aldrich's current mana was at 2/15, and [Raise Undead Rank 1] cost 4 mana, so he needed at the very least 8 mana to cast two of it. He needed to rest and recharge. In Elden World, mana regeneration mechanics were such that there was no in combat mana regeneration.

Mages therefore had to rest out of combat to slowly regain their mana, though this would take quite some time. A full recharge on mana took several hours at the minimum.

As a result, mages generally had to rely on using consumables to recharge their mana, specifically using an item called the [Restorative Flask].

Every single player started out with a [Restorative Flask] and it was the only basic item that stuck with the player all the way from level 1 to 100. The item had a set number of charges which could be set for either healing health or restoring mana.

Melee characters used skills that had a charge based system and not spells that consumed mana, so they could set all the charges on their flask for healing. Mages, however, had to generally set aside around half of their charges for mana.

This was the tradeoff for being a mage who was generally safer with ranged abilities.

The only issue was that right now, Aldrich did not have the [Restorative Flask] on him. Normally, it was given to the player at the beginning of the game when they entered a space known as the Nexus which was a central hub that housed the fast travel system where players could teleport to various saved locations.

As if to answer Aldrich's worries, however, a message popped up in his vision.

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New Quest: Access the Nexus

Quest Difficulty: 1

Description:

Access the Nexus using the [Sign Stone] item.

Rewards:

+10 EXP

+100 Coins

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Coins, huh.

In Elden World, coins were the main currency of the game. Even though there were no blacksmiths or artificers in the real world, the Nexus did have a shop system that Aldrich

could use coins for. The only issue was that it seemed that real life Variants did not drop coins, meaning the only way he could farm them was through completing quests.

Aldrich switched over to his tab where he saw the [Sign Stone] deposited. He selected it and manifested it. A small, crystalline black rock appeared in his hand, humming with a warmth that made it feel almost alive.

Aldrich knew what to do. [Sign Stones] could be used to imbue an area with a Gate Sign that players could access to reach the safety of the Nexus to refill their [Restorative Flask] and run from dangers.

[Sign Stones] were incredibly rare items granted by completing difficult Trial Quests accessible through the Nexus, but Aldrich could not be picky with how he used this one. He needed to get to the Nexus soon and all things considered, using the [Sign Stone] in this forest that nobody ever investigated was not that bad of an idea.

Aldrich knelt down and placed the stone onto the forest floor. It flashed with a white glow for a second before dissolving into the dirt, etching out a spiral shaped sigil. It continued to glow brightly, but when Aldrich moved away, the glow faded, and the sigil turned invisible, ensuring that it would be completely secret.

Aldrich wondered if anyone else could access the sign. In Elden World, only players who were chosen to save the world could access signs and the Nexus, so he figured that other than himself, nobody else could trigger it.

Which meant that Aldrich now had his own personal pocket dimension that he could hop into where nobody else could chase him or threaten him.

Aldrich tapped the sign and a selection message appeared in front of him.

[Access the Nexus?]

Aldrich immediately projected his consent, and the sign flashed with a blinding burst of light, enveloping him before drenching his vision in pure darkness.

The darkness quickly faded, revealing the familiar environment of the Nexus.

The Nexus was a circular, temple-like room fashioned out of muted grey stone. It was sizable, easily the size of a two-story home and just as tall. At the center of the Nexus, there was a large basin of water swirling in a gentle spiral current standing atop a pillar engraved with carvings of armored fighters wielding blades and robed mages holding staffs.

One half of the water glowed a bright gold, indicating liquid that restored health, and the other half glowed blue, indicating liquid that restored mana.

Twelve large pillars dotted the walls of the Nexus, supporting a domed ceiling dotted with large, glowing white and gold crystals that emitted light that approximated sunlight. Each of these pillars housed double stone doors at their bases, and through these pillars, a player could access Trial Quests of various difficulty.

Trial Quests were tailored for the individual player's class and clearing them were pre-requisites to maximizing and unlocking the abilities of one's class.

Aldrich heard groans behind him, and he realized that Adam and Elaine had followed him here. Made sense, considering that they were counted as his units.

"So, how's the Nexus in real life, Adam? Though you've probably seen it too many times for it to be a surprise anymore," said Aldrich. Anytime a player died, they revived at the Nexus, though Aldrich had no idea if he could actually respawn.

Until Aldrich got confirmation he could, he would assume that he only had one life to spare.

Adam and Elaine both just stared blankly ahead, their minds long gone.

Aldrich sighed before he walked over to the basin. It was elevated on a platform, so he had to climb some stairs to get to it. As he approached, he knew what would happen: light from above would descend on the basin and the player and the goddess Amara, the creator of the Nexus, would materialize and float down, granting the player their [Restorative Flask] and telling them of their purpose to save Eldenia, the setting of Elden World, from the great threat known as the Howling Dark.

But what happened was entirely out of Aldrich's expectations. No goddess appeared. Instead, when he reached the basin, strange, pixelated boxes started to cluster in front of him. He immediately stepped back, wary.

The boxes looked like graphical distortions, like glitches in the game, and when they faded away, it was not a beautiful, golden haired and golden eyed goddess that stared back at him, but a pixelated black stick figure.

"Welcome, Host," said the stick figure in a gender neutral voice underlined with a hint of static.

Chapter 13: Hunting

"...Who are you?" said Aldrich as he narrowed his eyes and scrutinized the pixelated black stick figure. It was a little eerie staring into the plain circle that was its face as it was impossible to discern any emotion from the being.

"I am known as the System," said the stick figure.

"Where is the goddess Amara?" said Aldrich.

The stick figure ignored Aldrich as if it was a NPC that could only answer certain pre-programmed prompts and questions.

"Here in the Nexus, you will find a safe haven where great warriors like yourselves may find rest. The Nexus is connected to all parts of Eldenia where its Sign has been carved, and so through the Nexus, you may help all parts of the realm," said the stick figure.

Aldrich realized that the stick figure, or rather, the System as it called itself, was speaking the exact same dialogue prompt as the goddess Amara would have. In essence, it was the goddess Amara, just...different.

Aldrich wondered whether it was some placeholder for Amara before she had been completed by the game developers. If so, then did that mean that Aldrich was playing the 'game' on an earlier version?

"Skip dialogue," said Aldrich, and the command prompt worked.

The System paused for a second before moving on. It clasped the black pixelated boxes that functioned as its 'hands' together, and between them, a shining golden orb manifested. The light died down, and a beautifully ornate crystal flask floated down to Aldrich's eager hands.

[Item: Restorative Flask obtained]

"That is the Restorative Flask," said the System. "You may now fill it with the waters of life, granting you the ability to heal even the most grievous of injuries or restore your tired mind."

Aldrich came up to the basin and stared at the flask in his hand. When his attention came to it, details about the item appeared in a screen pasted on his vision.

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Restorative Flask Rank 1

Rank: Divine

Description:

Use to consume the waters of life, healing 30% of one's total maximum health or mana or 10 health/mana, depending on which value is greater. Attune charges and refill this

item at the Nexus. May be upgraded upon completion of Trial Quests to hold more charges.

-UNIQUE

-UNDROPPABLE

-UNSELLABLE

Available Charges: 3

Healing Charges: 3

Mana Charges: 0

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Aldrich noted that the flask had three tick marks on it that indicated how many charges there were. He poured out the golden liquid into the basin down to the last tick, draining the flask two thirds of the way down.

He then filled the flask back up with blue water.

Like this, he switched up his charges from three healing to one healing and two mana.

"Excellent," said the System as it hovered to the side of Aldrich. "With this, the waters of life may now give you protection on your harsh journey. Now, I will explain to you these twelve great pillars of creation and the Trials that lie behind their doors."

Aldrich listened to the dialogue just in case something had changed and the System would say anything different from the goddess Amara, but nothing changed. The System described how each of the pillars granted access to Trial Quests that unlocked further abilities of one's class.

Each pillar had recommended levels that went up by 10 per pillar, so by the tenth pillar, one had to be level 100. The final two pillars were challenge quests that required highly optimized builds to clear but granted incredible rewards.

Aldrich knew exactly what each trial quest held in store for him as he had completed all of them before. Through them, he could start to find strong undead monsters to raise, equipment, coin, and useful spell tomes.

The first pillar required a level of 10 to access, and so Aldrich would have to grind some Variant monsters out to reach that level first.

After the System spoke about the Trials, it then started to speak extra dialogue that the goddess Amara did not have.

"Heh, lad, you may also come to me for any craftin' or repairin' you need!" said the System.

Aldrich recognized that the System had taken up the tone and mannerisms of Sindri, the blacksmith god that worked at the Nexus who players could turn to for crafting. He introduced the Soul Forging system where rarely, monsters or enemies dropped Souls that could be used to forge weapons or gear that took up their attributes.

Regular drops like monster claws or teeth or whatnot had to be collected in large quantities for craft anything out of them, but a single Soul alone could craft an entire piece of gear or weapon.

In general, it seemed that the System took up the role of all the NPCs that were normally in the Nexus.

Aldrich listened, careful to note whether the System had any extra unprompted dialogue, but it did not.

It just cycled through the same things Aldrich had heard from Sindri, and afterwards, it just remained silent, having exhausted completely through the dialogue from the goddess Amara and the blacksmith god Sindri, the two NPCs of the Nexus.

Aldrich walked down the stairs once there was just silence. At the base of the stair, there was another Sign that he could access to reach Signs he had placed. He knelt down, beckoned Adam and Elaine to come close, and touched the Sign.

As the bright white light engulfed Aldrich and his group, he heard one line of unprompted dialogue from the System.

"May the hunt feed you well, Host..."

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Aldrich returned to the real world, right above the Sign he had placed in the Variant infested forest. He wondered what that last line from the System had meant, but it did not seem important enough at the moment to waste time focusing on.

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[Quest: Access the Nexus] completed!

+10 EXP

+100 Coins

EXP: 10/30] 20/30

Coins: 0] 100

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The two Striker corpses were still beside him, and when he looked down to check his wristwatch (a watch that had no Net capabilities, hence, unlike his Eye-phone, it had not been taken from him) he noted that about five minutes had passed.

In the Nexus, however, Aldrich had thought he had spent at least ten or so minutes, indicating that time passed around half as fast as it did in the Nexus compared to the real world.

Aldrich checked his mana.

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Mana: 15/15

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Good, thought Aldrich. Going to the Nexus restored his health and mana to full as it usually did. His mangled shoulder had completely healed up to normalcy, but notably, the gaping fist sized hole in his stomach did not.

He figured that because he had sustained that injury before his undeath, it counted as part of his body now.

He did not mind it. It gave him a striking reminder that he still had to make Seth Solar pay for what he had done.

Aldrich looked down at the Striker corpses and hovered his hand over them as he cast [Raise Undead].

"Serve," he said, though he did not know why. The word just slipped out of him, as if it belonged as a chant to the spell. The word felt fitting, though, he had to admit.

Aldrich's hand glowed green, and ghostly green energy flickered around the two Striker corpses. The corpses shuddered and then started to move. Their flesh rotted a little, tufts of hair falling out as they became zombified. They stood up on all fours, coming forwards to Aldrich and nuzzling their tawny, rotting heads at his hand like pet dogs.

A hazy dark green aura of rot emanated from them - the same aura emanating from Adam and Elaine.

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Mana: 15/15] 5/15

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Aldrich checked his tab.

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Chosen Undead (0/1)

-NONE

Undead:

-Zombie Human Level 3

-Zombie Human Level 3

-Zombie Striker Level 5

-Zombie Striker level 5

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Aldrich nodded to himself before drinking his Restorative Flask, restoring his mana.

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Restorative Flask Charges: 2/3

Healing Charges: 1/1

Mana Charges: ½

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Mana: 5/15] 15/15

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Now, he had a sizable army to work with. Every 10 levels, the base number of units he could control increased by 5 and the number of spells he could attune increased by 3, though leveling the Attunement stat could add even more units or spells to that.

As for the Chosen Undead mechanic -

Legion Necromancers differed from other Necromancers in that they could bind a powerful Undead to their very souls. Normal Undead did not gain levels but Chosen Undead were lifetime companions that continually grew with their Necromancer and could be outfitted with equipment as well.

A level 100 Legion Necromancer could have up to 3 Chosen Undead, though the more Chosen Undead one had, the lower their max level cap was. At 3 Chosen Undead, their max level cap was at 60.

At 1 Chosen Undead, it was a whopping level 100.

Aldrich preferred to work with one strong Chosen Undead that covered his weaknesses perfectly.

A Chosen Undead was so important that without one, Aldrich would go so far as to say that a Legion Necromancer was half as strong as an ordinary Warrior or Mage of the same level that relied on their personal strength alone.

To get one, Aldrich had to reach level 5, at which point he would obtain an item to reach out to a wide selection of Chosen Undead.

In summary, Aldrich had two goals.

First, to reach level 5 for his Chosen Undead.

Then, to reach level 10 for his first Trial Quest.

After reaching level 10 and clearing the first Trial Quest, he was confident he would be strong enough to beat every single one of Seth Solar's gang. The only issue was Seth Solar himself who had an incredible set of powers that no army of ordinary zombies could ever hope to beat.

Aldrich would devise a way to kill Seth Solar as well, he had no doubts about it. But for now, there was the grind.

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Aldrich roamed the Variant forest, scouting out where he was while he hunted for more Variants to kill. He figured out that he was ditched approximately one mile out from the single road that led into Blackwater.

That road, along with Blackwater itself, was lined with Anti-Variant Emitters that generated a specific energy frequency that prevented Variants from entering it.

However, as these frequencies were coded only to specific Variant species, there was always the chance that Variants could evolve or some unknown new species could migrate in, hence why Blackwater had walls and why the roads had auto-turrets installed in them.

Aldrich had no idea whether the auto-turrets would track him and shoot, but he did not want to take the chances. He would not return to Blackwater until he was strong.

About twenty minutes into his scouting, he encountered another Variant. It was a huge clump of animated moss, thick, tentacle-like vines, spines, bark, and bulbous yellow eyeballs. It shuffled along the forest floor, leaving a trail of gooey, slime-like sap behind it.

This was a Moss Beast known for its powerful lashing tentacles and its hidden maw full of rotating buzzsaw like teeth that ground up anything that went into it into mush. However, what it was most feared for was its ability to release a cloud of paralyzing gas from various tubes in its body.

If one evaded the gas, Moss Beasts were not difficult to deal with as they were slow and uncoordinated.

Aldrich smiled as he spied the Moss Beast from behind a tree trunk, mentally commanding his four Undead to split up and circle the plant monstrosity.

Because Undead were immune to poison, this was going to be a breeze.

He turned on his [Anti-Life Shell] and stepped out of his cover, firing off a [Chill Bolt].

]]

Mana: 15/15] 11/15

]]

Twin bolts of pale blue slammed into two of the Moss Beast's large, exposed eyeballs, splattering them before permeating frost deep into the Variant's leafy body. The Moss Beast gurgled as it started to slowly slither its way towards Aldrich.

Aldrich commanded his Undead to attack. He got the Strikers to unleash their signature charges while having Adam and Elaine hold back, not wanting their bodies to suffer too much abuse.

The Strikers struck from behind, slamming into the Moss Beast's back and goring into it with their tusks. The Moss Beast shook as leaves, moss, and green liquid poured out of its body.

In reaction, the Moss Beast emitted its paralyzing gas. Various tube-like plants in its body opened up, and from them, yellow gas whooshed out, filling the area in a hazy tint of noxious yellow.

Aldrich waded through the gas with zero issue. He breathed it in before making a face. Smelled like rotten eggs, maybe even worse.

[Poison Immunity triggered]

The Moss Beast grumbled as it sent out thorny tentacles towards Aldrich and the Strikers. The Strikers moved backwards, dodging the slow and clumsy tentacles, before running backwards to make distance for another charge.

Aldrich, who was even faster than the Strikers, had zero issue dancing around the Moss Beast. He commanded the Strikers to charge again.

The Strikers slammed into the Moss Beast again, and this time, the dual charges were fatal. The Moss Beast's eyes lost their yellow glow as it slumped down and started to break apart. Vines and leaves and branches split apart and scattered across the dirt as the slime-like green liquid holding its body together oozed out of its damaged form.

]]

Moss Beast defeated!

EXP: +15

EXP Bar: 20/30] 35/30

Level Up!

Level 2] 3

EXP Bar: 5/60

Five stat points available to distribute

]]

"Hm." Aldrich noted with interest that there was not only a grave floating over the Moss Beast's corpse, but also a small white, flickering orb. That was a Soul.

Now, there was a dilemma. If things worked like they did in Elden World, if he took a Soul, the Moss Beast's corpse would crumble into dust, making raising an undead impossible.

As a result, Necromancers could raise soulless old corpses, but if they took the souls themselves, the corpses would fade away, leaving nothing to raise.

Aldrich decided to take the Soul instead of raising an Undead.

The Moss Beast was far too slow and too large to use reliably, in any case. He reached out and grabbed the white orb, and it faded into his palm.

It was far better for him to craft a cheap weapon out of it so he could make use of the Moss Beast's paralytic agent better.

]]

1 x Moss Beast Soul obtained

]]

Chapter 14: A Crucial Hint

Aldrich then distributed his stat points. He reviewed to himself how exactly the stats worked.

Strength was a measure of physical power.

Agility was a measure of physical speed and coordination.

Vitality measured the total health pool and the durability bonuses a character got from wearing armor. Every point in vitality raised total health by 3.

Magic raised the mana pool and was the scaling stat for most spells. Every point in magic raised total the total mana pool by 3.

Attunement was a stat that indicated how many skills, spells, or units a player could have at any given moment of time. Every five points in attunement allowed a player to attune an additional spell, skill, or unit.

High levels of attunement were also required to even begin to access summoning stronger units.

For fighter type classes, attunement increased the refresh rate of the skill charges they could use per day, but this was not really relevant for Aldrich who used spells that costed mana.

Perception increased accuracy, critical chance, and critical damage. It also gave bonuses to skills and spells that checked another's status. This, for all intents and purposes, was the worst stat for Aldrich to level as he generally did not rely on his own spells or melee strikes to deal damage.

Now that Aldrich's strength was up to a decent level, he dumped 3 points into magic and 2 points into vitality.

]]

Strength: 11

Agility: 8 (13)

Vitality: 6] 10

Magic: 5] 11

Attunement: 5

Perception: 8

==

HP: 21/21] 33/33

Mana: 11/15] 33/33

]]

Because Aldrich's Legion Necromancer had stat affinities for Vitality, Magic, and Attunement, he got double stat bonuses from investing into them. This meant that the 2 points he put into Vitality became 4 and the 3 into Magic became 6.

Where other classes only got 1.2x or 1.5x boosts to affinity stats, Legion Necromancers got a whopping 2x modifier.

This might have seemed incredibly good, but it was balanced out heavily by the fact that stronger undead required health offerings to raise, making it a balancing act to decide whether to use a massive health pool to create summons or tank hits.

High level spells also had notoriously high mana costs, and where other caster type classes had passives that offset the cost of stronger spells to large degree, Legion Necromancers had no such perks.

The only spell cost reductions they had were in raising and maintaining undead.

As a result, they burned through their high mana pools deceptively quickly when they were pressured to defend themselves without their minions with offensive spells, exacerbating their weakness when alone even more.

And, most notably, Legion necromancers needed to rely on a massive number of units. Hence why Attunement, the stat that increased how many units one could control, had to be at a high number for the class to be usable to begin with.

Attunement was pretty awful as a stat considering it was mostly non-combat related, but this was because it was assumed that the Legion Necromancer would optimize their combat potential with summons. As one leveled, the quality of diversity of summons increased, and so Legion Necromancers scaled incredibly well with levels.

All in all, this made the Legion Necromancer quite bad at early levels but one of, if not the strongest class late game due to their sheer versatility with proper minion setup and control.

Aldrich's strategy was therefore simple.

Level the basic physical stats of strength and agility to a functional level where he could begin to keep up with Alter superhumans but then invest everything else into magic, vitality, and attunement so he could be an efficient Necromancer.

Already, just with a few points in Magic, Aldrich nearly doubled his ability to use [Chill Bolts].

Defeating Variants in this weak forest was going to be quite easy now, and he proceeded to do just that, actively looking for prey.

Hunting, as the System had said. Always hunting, always reaching experience, for those levels that would make him strong, strong enough so that nothing in this world could deny him the vengeance and justice he was owed.

==

Aldrich roamed the Variant forest and killed ten more Strikers over the next hour. They were the most common Variant in this area and among the most common in general though he knew that deeper in, there were reports of larger, stronger Variants.

These, though, he had no data on, so he stuck in what was essentially a 'low level area' to kill as many Strikers as possible.

Over time, Aldrich had amassed three zombie Strikers to cap out his unit count to 5/5. Using them like a pack of hunting dogs, he easily tracked down more Strikers, surrounded them, and efficiently killed them with [Chill Bolts] and zombie maulings.

Aldrich returned back to his Sign and first checked his status after his hunt.

]]

Striker (x10) defeated! +100 EXP

EXP Bar: 5/60] 105/60

Level Up!

Level 3] 4

EXP Bar: 45/120

Five stat points available to distribute

]]

Aldrich distributed all of his stats to magic. Attunement was definitely important, but it was not a direct combat stat. All it did was allow him to attune more spells and minions. If he was too weak to obtain spells and minions in the first place, it was a dead stat.

In the early game, like with most mage type classes, magic was the primary stat to level for Legion Necromancers.

]]

Strength: 11

Agility: 8 (13)

Vitality: 10

Magic: 11] 21

Attunement: 5

Perception: 8

==

Mana: 3/33] 3/63

]]

Now, at 66 total mana, Aldrich finally had a mana pool that he could work with as a mage. With that settled, he checked his wristwatch. It was 10 P.M. and the date was now October 31, 2117.

A day had passed since he and his friends had died under Seth Solar's fists. He sat on a large rock beside the Sign while Adam and Elaine sat beside him.

His three Strikers curled down by his feet like sleeping dogs, though they were always vigilant for threats.

"Almost feels like we're camping," said Aldrich as he looked up. As an Undead, he had perfect night vision, and when he looked up, he saw stars speckling the sky, painting up the bright and vast milky way. "You know, that was one thing I wanted to do together. When we all became heroes.

My parents took me out once and seeing the stars like this without city smog and pollution to cover it up was amazing.

Glad you guys can enjoy it too."

Aldrich looked to his side to see Adam and Elaine staring up but with dull eyes and open mouths. Their skin was pale, cracked, and rotted in patches. There was no sign of recognition there, just adherence to Aldrich's mental command to look up.

"Though I guess it's not the same," sighed Aldrich. He balled a fist and looked down. "I swear to both of you, with this new undeath I have, I am going to make sure Seth Solar, Ghost, and all those useless wastes of oxygen that make up that group will suffer."

That was when Aldrich noticed something. The white glow of the Sign illuminated a faint glint of glass under the leaves.

Aldrich cocked his head and immediately investigated it. He uncovered a pile of leaves to see a pile of empty syringes. He inspected a syringe and narrowed his eyes.

Its contents were nearly empty, but there were unmistakable traces of light blue liquid.

This was X, a heavily addictive narcotic popular among younger, wealthier folk. He remembered the technician at Blackwater he had tried to blackmail for information about which students he sold drugs to.

Looks like some of them involved Seth Solar's gang.

However, it did not seem like Seth Solar was the type to do this drug. X had pretty serious side effects including weight loss, causing skin to pale, and constant jitteriness when off of it.

Seth Solar had not exhibited any of those symptoms. Nor did the rest of his crew.

No, wait.

Then, Aldrich remembered. A thin, gaunt face. Pale skin. Lean, bony hands.

Ghost.

Ghost was the one that did these drugs, and it seemed like he dumped his needles here so he would not get caught.

Aldrich snapped his fingers. "Here boy," he said, beckoning a Striker to come to him. He held out the syringe to the zombie wolf-beast, and it curiously sniffed the object.

"Find me as many of these as you can," said Aldrich.

Within minutes, the Strikers uncovered a massive pile of syringes buried in a shallow pit. Not to mention other drugs and the shattered remnants of his, Elaine, and Adam's Eye-Phones. Judging by how many syringes there were, he figured that Ghost came here basically every single weekend after partying out in Haven.

Aldrich shook his head. Seemed like this was the routine dumping spot for any illegal things for Seth Solar's gang. That included Aldrich and his friends' corpses too. That was all they were reduced to.

Illegal trash to be buried with used up syringes.

What a sick fucking joke.

But this was a massive hint. This meant that at the very least, Ghost came here routinely to dump his needles.

In fact, considering it was only 9 P.M. on a Sunday night, it was highly likely that Ghost might even be coming back tonight.

Alone, too.

Seth Solar might have been a sociopathic monster, but he had his own pride to consider. He and the others in his gang went out to party on Fridays and Saturdays, but not Sundays as they had training awaiting them on Monday.

All of them except Ghost who was likely too addicted to X to back out of a Sunday trip for a free hit.

Aldrich immediately went back to the Nexus using the Sign. He had little time to waste. He had to get everything ready before Ghost got here between midnight and 2 A.M.

As the glowing light of the Sign enveloped him, he took in a deep breath, feeling the weight of the moment settle on his shoulders.

For seventeen long, long years, Aldrich had faced nothing but abuse. He had been beaten, spat on, called worthless, and told to die for the sake of humanity's evolution.

The world had torn his parents away from him without a second thought, torturing them and breaking them apart when they were some of the only precious lights of good left in this dark world.

The world had torn his friends from him under a merciless, uncaring fist.

All because Aldrich was powerless.

But now, he had power.

He remembered his last words to Seth Solar and his gang before he died.

He swore he would be their judgement.

This would be the first trial. His first judgement.

Chapter 15: Catching a Ghost

Aldrich entered the Nexus with his small undead entourage behind him. Gold and blue sparkles of energy danced around him, completely restoring his health and mana to full.

[HP: 33/33]

[Mana: 66/66]

What he first did was go to the Wellspring - the platform and basin of ornately carved white marble where the waters of life spiraled - and refilled his restorative flask. When he saw that the clear, crystalline flask was filled with gleaming gold and blue liquid, he capped it with a diadem shaped golden stopper.

]]

Restorative Flask charges: 0/3] 3/3

]]

After this, Aldrich spotted the stick figure entity standing behind a large work table of ashen stone where various smithing tools such as a hammer, anvil, and the orange light

of a lit forge surrounded it. It had an ornately carved bronze hammer in its hand and it whacked away repeatedly at nothing, mimicking the idle motion of Sindri the smithing god.

Aldrich leaped several meters down and landed right in front of the stick figure.

"Oh, good Host, what can I do for ye today, eh?" said the stick figure, mimicking Sindri's light and hearty tone, though its voice still had a neutral, emotionless timber to it that made it eerie. Like it was speaking in awkward text to speech.

"What you said to me before I left, about the hunt, what did you mean?" asked Aldrich.

"Hm? That ain't a request I can fulfill," said the stick figure, repeating Sindri's dialogue for when he was given a task he could not perform.

"Alright then," sighed Aldrich. He had no idea what this stick figure was, and though it did bother him, he could not be picky about it. It seemed to be some sort of unfinished asset that was a placeholder for both the goddess Arama and the god Sindri, and as long as it fulfilled their roles properly, he did not have complaints. "I want something crafted."

"Craftin', is it? Heh, ya ain't gonna' find anyone as good at that as me!" said the stick figure. "Now, what can I do for ye?"

Aldrich found a menu of options appear in front of him. Specifically, this was for crafting. By offering up dropped materials, coins, and Souls, a player could have Sindri create items for them.

Aldrich found the [1x Moss Beast Soul] in his inventory and offered it up. The glowing white orb that represented the soul appeared in his hand and then floated over to the stick figure.

"I want a weapon," said Aldrich. "Specifically, a two-handed staff that acts as a catalyst."

In Elden World, a player could ask Sindri for what type of equipment they wanted from a Soul, whether it was a piece of armor or weapon.

In Aldrich's case, he wanted a staff that worked as a catalyst, with a catalyst being a weapon that channeled magic and was thus appropriate for mage type classes.

The actual stats and effects of the weapon, though, were randomized.

Sindri would bring up a menu of three to six options, depending on the player's level, and these options would have varying effects and stats.

For example, giving Sindri the Soul of, say, a Fire Drake, would make him pull up three staff options, one that enhanced fire, one that had a fire breath type spell imbued in it, or one that simply just had high stats.

Sometimes, in rare cases, a weapon would have all of these effects. In bad cases, it would have nothing.

Basically, it was a dice roll system to get what you wanted out of a Soul, and by spending gold, one could reroll these options.

The stick figure swiped at the soul with its glitchy black block of a hand, and the soul disappeared.

"Ya got somethin' good here! A soul, is it? Well, here's what I can do for ya!"

Aldrich saw three options flash in front of him.

]]

1. Staff of Grasping Vines

Rank: Common

Type: Staff (Catalyst)

Stats:

+2 Vitality

+2 Magic

Effects:

This staff can cast the spell [Grasping Vines] that shoots forth six binding, thorned vines.

2. Staff of Iron Bark

Rank: Common

Type: Staff (Catalyst)

Stats:

+5 Vitality

Effects:

No special effects

3. Staff of Stilling Pollen

Rank: Common

Stats:

+2 Magic

+2 Perception

Effects:

This staff is able to cast the spell [Pollen Cloud] that paralyzes all units in its area of effect. Operates off a charge system with three charges. Each charge requires twenty-four hours to restore.

==

Forging Cost: 80 Coins

Reroll Cost: 30 Coins

]]

Aldrich assessed the options. They were about what he expected. The item tiers were all at Common rank which was standard for an item crafted from a monster that ranged from levels 1-10. He recounted the item tiers in his head -

Basic: These were items that had zero stats or special effects.

Common: These items had a level threshold of 1-10.

Uncommon: These items had a level threshold of 10-30.

Rare: These items had a level threshold of 30-50.

Epic: These items had a level threshold of 50-70

Mythic: These items had a level threshold of 70-90. This was generally 'endgame' equipment.

Divine: These were top tier end game items that held a level threshold from 90-100. Gear of this tier was rare enough that it was extremely difficult to be decked out in full Divine equipment as the materials needed to craft them were too finite in number.

As for the options themselves, there was only one good choice.

Aldrich reached a finger out and pressed the [Staff of Stilling Pollen] option. This would allow him to neutralize Ghost with the most efficiency. The Alter could just phase out of [Grasping Vines] and the +5 vitality from the [Staff of Iron Bark] would do nothing considering the fact that Ghost was strong enough to shatter a human rib with a casual finger press.

As it stood now, Ghost could probably kill Aldrich in one good beatdown of physical blows, and without the stats and minions to back him up, +5 vitality meant precious little. It was just more health for Ghost to whittle down.

On top of this, Aldrich needed to neutralize Ghost quickly. He could not afford Ghost just escaping with his invisibility and phasing.

"A wise choice, good Host!" said the stick figure. It began to hammer rapidly down, the sound of clinking resonating through the empty temple.

In a few seconds, it was done. A glowing golden orb with the icon of the item embedded within floated towards Aldrich.

[-80 Coins]

[Coins Remaining: 20]

Aldrich grimaced at how few coins he had. Since Variants did not drop coins, there was no easy way to farm them. He needed to find a way to get more if he wanted to use crafting and equipment system properly, and the only way was to obtain the ring known as the [Ring of Avarice] located within the First Trial.

So, until he got to level 10, he needed to be conservative with his coin usage.

"Thanks, System," said Aldrich as he felt the [Staff of Stilling Pollen] fall into his inventory. "Just curious, but can I take a look at your wares?"

Aldrich knew that Sindri had a list of items he could buy. Basic gear, mostly. Stuff that got outscaled later very easily. The higher the player's level, the higher the rank of the gear, but as far as gear went, they were the worst of their tier.

"Of course, lad!" said the System.

A screen flashed in front of Aldrich. It was completely empty.

"Hm," said Aldrich. "That'll be it, then."

"Good luck on ye journey, Host. If ya ever need me again, I'll be hammerin' away here!" said System as it turned its attention away from Aldrich and went back to hammering aimlessly at nothing.

Aldrich walked away back to the exit Sign. It seemed that the System had no items available to sell. Not entirely a big hassle, considering the fact that Aldrich had no coin to buy anything with anyway, but it was noteworthy that that was another difference between now and how it was in the game.

Aldrich stood atop the exit Sign, his small group of Undead gathering around him. He looked to Elaine and Adam and nodded at them. "Tonight, I'm taking the first step to making things right."

Chapter 16: Catching a Ghost II

Adam and Elaine grunted at Aldrich because that was all their zombified vocal chords were capable of.

Light enveloped the group, blinding away the Nexus and teleporting Aldrich back to the forest. He checked his wristwatch.

10:10 P.M.

Barely any time had passed.

Good. Aldrich needed some time to get ready.

He materialized the [Staff of Stilling Pollen] in his hands. It looked like a two-meter-long bamboo shoot that split off into three branches at the crown. A yellow, seed-like bulb the size of a baseball drooped from each branch, and the surface of each seed was scattered with tiny hairs and bright yellow pollen.

Each of these bulbs had a cast of [Pollen Cloud] embedded within them, making them noxious gas grenades that could be remotely detonated.

A near perfect tool for what Aldrich wanted to do -

==

"Stop me here," said Ghost from the comfortably cushioned backseat of a commercial hovercar. He was the only passenger in a car that had enough seating space to fit in

six, and he abused the space as much as possible, putting his feet on the seat and sprawling out like he was in his own bed.

He had ordered an black tier express ride from Carrier, the best and most reliable taxi and rideshare service on the market, and he was damn well going to make the most of his purchase, especially now that he was getting jitters from coming off the high of X.

"Are you sure, sir? This is still quite a ways from the compound, and there may be Variants out and about," said the driver from the front seat. An opaque black plexiglass sheet separated passengers from the driver, but Ghost could still see the silhouette of the driver's head cocked in confusion.

"Did you not fucking hear me?" said Ghost, annoyed. "I want out here."

"As you wish, sir," said the driver. He halted the sleek black, expensive hovercar to a smooth stop. Ghost's passenger side door slid open, and he hobbled out, backpack slung over his shoulder.

"Next time, if there is one," said Ghost to the driver. "You don't question me, got it? Two hundred credits a ride and you lecture me, a top tier Blackwater recruit, on safety? Fuck off."

"Have a nice day, sir," said the driver, obviously used to this kind of treatment.

"Yeah, whatever," said Ghost as he stumbled away on the paved road. He heard the hovercar door click shut behind him and the car zoom away. He waited until the car was completely gone before he went off the road and into the dirt of the forest.

Ghost grimaced. In class ranking, he was 20th - the very last of the A-class, and he was in dire danger of slipping into B-class. No, in the first place, he was B-class material. The only reason he was in the A-class was because Seth Solar was his friend and could pull string for him.

But even that had limits.

By training hard, Ghost could barely hold his own in the A-class, but these drugs, these fucking drugs - they screwed him up. They made him slow when he needed to be fast. They made his head go blank when he needed it to be sharp.

Ghost dug his fingers into his forearm and grit his teeth. But he could not quit. Fuck that Blackwater technician for introducing him to X. It was all his fault that he was in this downward spiral.

Regardless, Ghost needed to get rid of the syringes he had used. X was illegal enough that getting rid of them in Haven city was a risk because of cops finding them and

tracing them with chemical dating. Granted, it was not a high risk, but any risk was too much for Ghost to handle.

Blackwater's zero drug tolerance policy meant that if Ghost was caught with, no, even just associated with drugs, especially one like X, he was truly fucked. The best way he thought of getting rid of contraband was dumping them in the forest because nobody ever went there due to the danger of Variants.

Now, as a pretty strong Alter himself, Ghost could easily deal with low rank Variants like Strikers. But there was always the off chance that some stronger Variant was there. Even in that case, though, he could just use his ability and run away.

Ghost took the ten minute or so trek to his usual dumping spot. Meanwhile, he checked his Eye-Phone's photo gallery, a smile forming at the ends of his lips as he went through his normal de-stressing routine.

He looked through pictures of bare-naked women he had snapped while they were passed out senseless from drugs he slipped them at a private room in the After-Dark, the biggest night club in Haven.

One of them was a complete smoke show, too. A solid nine out of ten who had just graduated from Haven High school, and her, he had gotten passed out and used all the way. He licked his lips, watching snippets of the videos he had taken of her.

Ghost reached the clearing where his dumping spot was and put down his bag. He unzipped it, taking out a small bundle of syringes and a few small empty plastic boxes that once had pills in them. He laid the contraband by his side and withdrew a hand shovel.

Shovel in hand, he started to dig away at the little pit that held his secrets. Until he hit something that cracked.

"What the fuck?" he whispered as he uncovered some dirt. He had hit a small, golden...seed? Its outer shell was lined with cracks from his shovel. No, not just one seed, there were two others too laying beside it.

Ghost registered confusion for a split seconds before he started to grow wary, and this single split second costed him.

All three seeds burst apart, releasing a concentrated gas of yellow dotted with glowing speckles of pollen. Ghost coughed violently before covering his mouth, his eyes watering, and he immediately activated Phase on his upper body, making his lungs and mouth intangible.

Too late, though.

One breath of that concentrated gas had buckled Ghost to his knees, his entire body growing numb and still, and he fell face first into the pile of seeds. He felt stabs of pain as used up needles in the dirt pile pierced his face.

Ghost made his lungs, mouth, throat, and nose intangible as long as he could, but he still needed to breathe. The gas stayed there for longer than he could hold his breath, and he was forced to gulp in another breath of it.

Ghost blinked and grimaced, his body frozen like a statue. His head, though, was not paralyzed, keeping him conscious.

Paralysis from the head down was a common trait of Moss Beast pollen poisoning. This, he knew from his training.

As he grimaced, staring down at the dirt, struggling not to have needles puncture too deeply into his cheeks, his mind raced.

How?

Why?

Moss Beasts released their gas through tubes, not through seeds like this. And why had a Moss Beast planted these seeds in this specific hole of all things?

Nothing made sense.

Ghost felt his body kicked over, flipping him over face up. His pale red eyes widened near impossibly as he stared up at a pair of glowing green eyes looking down at him. Then, he recognized the face.

It was a face he thought he would never see again.

"W-what the fuck? You-you're that Dud!?" whispered Ghost, finding it incredibly hard for his numbed lungs to draw breath.

"Aldrich. That's my name. A name you never bothered to learn."

Chapter 17: Vengeance

Aldrich felt a strange feeling looking down at Ghost like this. The whole concept of looking down: this was entirely new to him.

But he could not deny that it felt right. No, it was right.

It was just.

Yes, this was justice.

Justice with consequences that this world lacked. Justice backed by actions, not idealism. Justice that Aldrich would make real.

Justice he would rain down on all those deserving with vengeance.

This was the first drop of that rain. That storm of vengeance and righteous purpose that Aldrich could now make real with his powers.

As he looked down at Ghost, a screen flashed in front of him.

A quest.

[New quest: VENGEANCE obtained]

The tab of his interface flashed with an indicator, and he mentally tabbed over to it. He raised a brow slightly, noting that the way the quest looked was...different. The words detailing it were colored in bright, bloody red, and their font looked like disheveled scratches. Distinctively sinister in appearance.

]

VENGEANCE [ACTIVE]

Difficulty: 5

Details:

Hunt down Seth Solar and his crew. Enact vengeance. Enact judgement.

Rewards:

-Death of Ghost: 200 EXP, 200 Coin

-Death of Evan Harker: 50 EXP, 50 Coin

-Death of Simon Wells: 100 EXP, 100 Coin

-Death of Zayn Soldata: 250 EXP, 200 Coin

-Death of Seth Solar: 1000 EXP, 800 Coin

-Bonus EXP gained from absorbing Negative Energy from each individual

]]

Aldrich cracked his neck. He did not exactly know how or why this quest appeared, but he did not complain. He was going to make sure Seth Solar and his gang were all going to die anyway. If he was going to get rewarded while doing so, then all the better.

The bonus EXP from absorbing negative energy was something Aldrich had not seen before, but it made sense.

Undead creatures lived off of absorbing negative energy. It healed and nourished them. And recalling game lore, Aldrich knew that where positive, healing energy was associated with emotions like love, happiness, and hope, negative energy emanated from emotions like hate, fear, and despair.

It was obvious how Aldrich would get negative energy Ghost.

"You still have a hole in your chest. I can see right through you. How in the hell are you alive!?" said Ghost.

"That doesn't matter, does it? What matters to a selfish piece of trash like you is whether you'll be alive, no?" said Aldrich. He took his staff and shoved the butt end of it into Ghost's chest.

As expected, Ghost used Phase, making the staff go right through him.

Ghost's head was still not paralyzed, so he could will his power to work.

"You stupid, stupid fuck," said Ghost. He smiled, his lip and cheeks twitching and bleeding from a mixture of paralyzing agent and needle punctures. "You must have gone through a Blooming and awakened some kind of power that lets you live like this.

How you processed Moss Beast pollen - I don't know.

But what I do know is that you were a dumbass for using Moss Beast poison. It paralyzes from the head down, and as long as I can think, I can use my power.

You will never, ever get to touch me, and when I can start moving again, you better be ready, because I'll finish off what Seth started. I'll fucking rip your head off your neck and use it to decorate my dorm."

"A Blooming, is it? I guess that's what everyone will think is what happened to me," said Aldrich. A Blooming was the term to describe when an individual awakened their powers. It also applied to those who awakened their powers unexpectedly after puberty.

Of course, even in those cases, it was Alters with dormant Alter Organs that Bloomed past puberty.

Duds like Aldrich who had no such organ had no hope for even that.

Still, this was interesting information.

If people found out about Aldrich's powers, they would think he had developed an Alter power, and those were limited to a select category of powers.

For example, Augmenters usually had powerful bodies while Blasters had ranged capability. Very rarely was there a Blaster that was also physically tough and an Augmenter that had ranged powers.

People would try to cram Aldrich into specific power categories and underestimate him.

Good.

Let them underestimate. He would surprise and crush any opposition against him.

"You're lucky you Bloomed to a power like that to save your ass, but you know what? You're still a useless fucking Dud at heart. Eventually, someone will find me, and when they do, I'll make sure you're hunted down to the ends of the goddamn earth," said Ghost.

"Don't worry, Ghost," said Aldrich. "Nobody will find you. Nobody but them."

Aldrich withdrew his staff from Ghost's chest and snapped his fingers.

Load groaning rattled through the air while low, bestial growls hummed like the whirl of deep engines.

"Wh-what the fuck is that!?" said Ghost. He tried to look around, but he could not move his head properly as his neck was paralyzed. All he could do was look up at Aldrich looking down at him.

"You'll see," said Aldrich.

Adam, Elaine, and the three Strikers emerged from the edge of the clearing. Aldrich had hidden Adam and Elaine and had the Strikers rove around the area in a tight perimeter, tracking down Ghost as soon as he got within two hundred meters of this dumping site with their incredible scent-based tracking.

As a result, Aldrich was alerted of Ghost's presence and also knew exactly when to detonate the pollen seeds.

Adam and Elaine came by Aldrich's side and stared down hungrily at ghost, spittle foaming at their bloody mouths as they shuddered, ready to feast on flesh.

"Look who it is. Our old friend Ghost," said Aldrich.

Adam and Elaine snarled, with Elaine even reaching down to swipe at Ghost's face. Ghost made himself intangible, letting the swipe pass through him.

The Strikers circled around Ghost like hungry sharks, occasionally snapping close to his face, their putrid, toxic breath and spit spattering against his face.

"Z-zombies!?" said Ghost. "Is-is that also your power? Making zombies?"

Aldrich put his staff over Ghost's mouth. "Shh. That isn't important. What is important is that you make a fine meal for my friends. Then at least you'll have done one good thing for them."

Aldrich stepped back and let Adam, Elaine, and the three Strikers start mauling at Ghost. Ghost, predictably, turned intangible, and they kept swiping and biting and clawing through him.

"I'm fucking invincible, you idiot!" said Ghost, though he was visibly panicked, unable to move. "This is pointless! Let me go!"

"Let's not be impatient," said Aldrich. He raised a hand, making his undead stop their attack so that Ghost could hear him. "It's quite rude to leave so soon after such a touching reunion, no? Plus, with how much paralyzing pollen you've breathed in, you won't be moving for hm, let's see, three hours?"

Aldrich smiled and sat on a rock, watching as Ghost could only helplessly lie there and look up at the undead, rotting faces that drooled for his flesh. Finally, there was fear in his face. Abject, utter fear as he came to increasingly realize that his power was not invincible.

[Negative energy harvested: +10 EXP]

[EXP Bar: 45] 55/120]

"I've analyzed your power. All of its weaknesses. I've been analyzing them and all the powers of your group ever since I got to Blackwater because one day, I figured I could make a contingency plan against you scum," continued Aldrich. "But let's be real. Back then, that was just a dream. I had no power to abuse your weaknesses even if I knew them.

But now? Different story.

Your phasing has some safeties in it. For example, theoretically speaking, if you were wholly intangible matter, you would just fall through the ground and pop out the end of the Earth. But you don't.

But then you have limitations.

You can phase through inorganic matter and destroy it, but you can't do it to organic matter.

And the biggest limit you have: you can make yourself intangible, but it stops your bodily functions.

If you make your chest intangible, for example, you can't breathe. I assume if you make your head intangible, you're also blind.

You can't speak while they attack you, can you? Because you're holding your breath. Because you know that if you spend the time to draw even a single breath, your face will be torn apart into a hundred different pieces.

So, let's see it. Let's see how long you can hold your breath, A-class student. Let's see how long you want to suffer."

Aldrich clapped his hands together, and all five of his Undead swarmed on Ghost, constantly tearing and biting and clawing at his body while he made himself intangible.

Aldrich set a timer on his wristwatch, seeing how long Ghost could hold his breath.

30 seconds...

60 seconds...

1 minute...

2 minutes...

3 minutes...

4 minutes...

5 minutes...

Ghost sucked in a breath, and the moment he did, Adam and Elaine bit into his shoulders while the Strikers gored into his sides with their tusks.

Aldrich raised a hand, making the Undead stop and letting Ghost catch his breath.

Aldrich walked over to Ghost and stood over him. Ghost's face was bloody. His chest heaved up and down as he took in desperate breaths. His eyes were wide with fear.

Blood pooled from his sides where holes indicated where the Strikers had jabbed him.

Deep teeth marks on either of his shoulders showed where Adam and Elaine had bit him.

The flesh around those open wounds started to blacken and rot, and Ghost yelled in pain as his nerves strained to the maximum extent of agony before rotting away from suffering Necrotic damage he had no resistances to.

"Wow. Five whole minutes," said Aldrich as he tapped at his wristwatch, causing the timer to stop. "The average unenhanced, untrained person can hold their breath for 30 to 90 seconds. You, by virtue of having Alter Cells that enhance your body can hold your breath for five entire minutes without even training for it."

"F-Fuck you," said Ghost, still defiant despite fear obvious in his face.

[Negative energy harvested]

[+20 EXP]

[EXP Bar: 55/120] 75/120]

"But you know what? Five minutes is nothing. I can hold my breath for ten minutes from all my training. I heard back before Alters were a thing, the record was twenty-four minutes.

Can you imagine? A person with no powers, a person you would look down on as a Dud, doing that?" Aldrich scoffed at Ghost. "I'm sure you could do even better if you actually trained, too.

If you ever felt the need to work hard to even be fucking recognized as being allowed to live. If you weren't addicted to X and causing suffering instead of working on yourself."

Aldrich stepped away and waved the Undead on again. They swarmed over Ghost, savagely tearing at him while he held his breath and made himself intangible. The ground beneath him was utterly torn up at this point, all the grass ripped off and the dirt gouged out with deep claw marks.

Aldrich sat on his rock and waited, setting his timer again.

This time, Ghost only lasted 3 minutes.

Again, he yelled as he suffered a new round of cuts and bites.

Again, Aldrich raised his hand up and stopped the Undead. He strolled over to Ghost.

Ghost breathed deeply sucking in as much breath as he could. One of his eyes had been clawed out, blood streaming from the empty socket while the flesh around it rotted.

"Ah," said Aldrich as he saw Ghost's red pupiled eyeball lying on the dirt. He picked it up and tossed it to Elaine. "There you go, Elaine. Hope vengeance tastes good. You'll get a lot more of it soon."

Elaine swallowed down the eyeball whole and licked her bloody lips.

"A-Aldrich-listen to me!" said Ghost.

"Oh, now you remember my name?" said Aldrich. "What happened to 'Dud'?"

"I can help you," stammered Ghost. "You want Seth, right? You want his friends, right? I-I can lead them out here!"

Aldrich looked down at Ghost begging for his life and felt absolutely nothing. It was not just that Aldrich was numb to suffering, especially suffering from those that deserved it. It was something else, too. Becoming an Undead had made his mind...colder.

He felt less.

When he saw Ghost begging, it did not feel like a human being was pleading with him. It felt like a cockroach was twitching its legs, begging to be stomped and ended.

It was disgusting.

Ghost saw the complete disgust in Aldrich's eyes and started to beg harder.

"I can tell you Seth Solar's weakness! The weakness of his whole family!" said Ghost.

"Oh? What is it?" said Aldrich.

"It's-it's Kryptic!" said Ghost. "Kryptic drains the Solar family's powers!"

Aldrich recalled what Kryptic was. It was a highly radioactive ore found in the Midnight Trench, a massive nest of Variants located over the Pacific Ocean so called because a vantablack dome covered it, leaving it a black spot of complete darkness.

Kryptic was a dark, crystalline material that was extremely rare on account of how dangerous it was to obtain. It was mostly used for poisonings, with even a gram of it powdered and put into liquid or sublimated into gas form capable of killing basically anyone without incredible durability.

As it was also untraceable, breaking down completely in the body, it was a favored tool by the highest end assassins of the world.

"Interesting," said Aldrich. He had no means of obtaining Kryptic for now, but it was still useful information to have.

"N-now let me go, Aldrich!" said Ghost. "I-I've told you so much already! If Seth Solar finds out, he'll kill me, I'm sure of it. No, the entire Solar family will be out to kill me. Please, man, just let me go - I'll run far from here, you'll never seem me again, I'll hide out somewhere and live quietly and you won't ever even hear from me!"

"You don't have to worry about Seth Solar or anyone else finding you," said Aldrich.

For a moment, Ghost's face lightened, finding some hope.

"Because you die here," said Aldrich. He turned away and waved the Undead forwards.

This time, Aldrich did not set a timer. He let his zombies tear at Ghost without pause. Ghost screamed again after a few minutes, then held his breath again. A minute later, he screamed again and sucked in another quick breath.

On and on like this, Ghost lost pieces of himself slowly, bit by bit, breath by breath, and Aldrich watched as he continued to farm Negative energy from him.

Until finally - it was over.

And the rewards flowed in.

[Negative energy harvested. Total energy harvested: +70 EXP]

[Quest: VENGEANCE objective completed]

[-Death of Ghost completed]

[+200 EXP, +200 Coin]

=

[EXP Bar: 75/120] 345/120]

[Level up!]

[Level: 4] 5]

[EXP Bar: 225/200]

=

[Level up!]

[EXP Bar: 25/250]

[Level 5] 6]

=

[10 Stat points available to distribute]

[x1 Tome of the Dark Arts Rank 2 obtained]

[x1 Nether Binding Amulet obtained]

Chapter 18: Chosen Undead

Aldrich closed his eyes and sighed as he looked up to the pale moon above. Glowing waves of green energy flowed around him as he leveled up, wrapping him in an aura of power born from Ghost's suffering.

He heard the sounds of ravenous chewing, flesh tearing, and bones crunching as Adam and Elaine finally had their fill of Ghost. Their fill of vengeance. He let them eat up Ghost's corpse to nothingness as a well deserved reward for their suffering, and also because Ghost had dropped a Soul.

Aldrich would use the Soul and craft something out of it. If it retained Ghost's powers, then an item, perhaps a cloak that could activate Phase, was going to be far, far more useful than a dumb zombie that could not reliably use the reflex and thinking intensive Phase power.

In the meanwhile, Aldrich stabilized his newfound power by distributing his stat points. He started to invest more heavily into Attunement now as he had obtained the [Tome of Dark Arts Rank 2].

The [Tome of the Dark Arts] were basic items that Necromancers received at levels 1, 5, 15, 25, and 35 and 50 that granted them a catalogue of spells to learn from, of which they could learn three.

Past level 50, one had to craft or find better spell tomes to obtain spells that scaled into higher levels.

Many of those higher-level tomes, though, Aldrich could find in the Trial Quests, so he did not worry about learning spells. He just might not have access to the absolute rarest spell tomes that required traveling about in Elden World itself.

Aldrich dumped in 8 points in Attunement and 2 points in Vitality.

Optimally he would have spent his Vitality points into Magic, but this was not the game where he knew what threats he would face and how much health he needed to tank pre-coded attacks.

In the real world, he needed higher health and durability as a safety net to make sure he did not just instantly die from a strong surprise attack.

[+ 2 to Vitality, doubled to +4 due to affinity bonuses]

[Vitality: 10] 14]

[HP: 33/33] 45/45]

[+8 to Attunement, doubled to +16 due to affinity bonuses]

[Attunement: 5] 21]

Good, thought Aldrich. With this, he could increase how many spells and units he could attune at any given moment in time. For a Legion Necromancer like him who relied on minions, this was the absolute most important stat.

For every 5 attunement points, he could attune one extra spell OR minion. With a total of 21 attunement, he could add in up to four extra spells or minions or a mixture of both.

The base number of spells he could attune was 5, and the base number of minions he could attune was also at 5.

Every 10 levels, Aldrich would obtain a passive skill called the [Legion's Calling] that increased his base unit controlling capacity by 5, thus maxing out at a total of 55 total units controlled at level 100.

However, since he was not a more ordinary Mage type class, he did not get bonuses to increasing spell capacity with levels, so he needed to use Attunement for that. Yet another reason why Attunement was such an important stat.

Aldrich used 3 of his Attunement Points on expanding his units and 1 on adding spell capacity. He currently knew 3 spells, having 2 empty slots, so with 1 bonus, he could learn 6 spells total which was all he needed for now.

[Unit control limit increased from 5 to 8]

[Equipped spell limit increased from 5 to 6]

With that said and done, Aldrich walked over to Ghost's corpse. Or rather, what was left of it. Just a few bloody smears, bone shards, and tidbits of pink viscera scattered across the dirt. As he approached, his Undead parted way for him.

"You talked so much sh*t, but in the end, this is all you amount to, huh," said Aldrich as he looked down at the remnants of the man who once had tormented him and his friends so. He shook his head and reached out to grab Ghost's Soul.

[1x Soul of Ghost obtained]

"Good work, everyone," said Aldrich as he gave a thumbs up to Adam and Elaine while petting the Strikers as they curled around him like giant dogs. "Now then, it's about time we added more friends to this party."

Aldrich's Undead heart no longer beat, but if it did, it would have beat at top speed in anticipation. He withdrew the [Nether Binding Amulet] from his inventory.

He held out his pale palm and dark purple curls of murky energy coalesced around it, swirling and forming into an orb that then shattered, leaving behind an amethyst diadem framed in ashen white bone.

The [Nether Binding Amulet] was given to Legion Necromancers at level 5 and allowed them to tap into the Nether, the underworld of Elden World where demons and higher level Undead with actual names resided.

There, Aldrich could choose from a wide selection of power named Undead to form a pact with, making them his Chosen Undead that could level up and even wear equipment. A lifetime companion that essentially served as his 'other half', compensating for all his weaknesses if chosen well.

Aldrich activated the [Nether Binding Amulet] by crushing it in his grip. It shattered like brittle glass, and the purple gem shards floated in front of him. They started to form a circular orbit and within this orbit, swirls of spiraling darkness formed, creating a portal.

The trees around Aldrich swayed and groaned. The grass and flora around the portal started to wither and die and crumble to dust.

Aldrich eagerly awaited his summoning options to appear in a list in front of him. He already knew who he favored. He had the most inclination to choose Valera of the Immortal Legion. This was the choice he played with in the game and the one that best complimented him as a powerful melee fighter and tank, but he wanted to see if he got more options now compared to the game.

It was also worth considering other options as they might not have been useful in the game, but they had more utility in the real world.

Hadar of the Golden Bone was a skeleton with, as his title suggested, golden bones dressed in trench coat and top hat who was, for all intents and purposes, a meme option in the game. He had little combat or utility ability but could generate Coins rapidly and increase Coin rewards.

He even had a nifty coin toss attack where he would literally shoot coins at people and deal damage in exchange for making the player lose money.

In the game, Hadar was useless because Coin eventually became highly plentiful, making him a useless option for mid to late game. His coin toss attack generally also sucked.

But now, with Coin so scarce, maybe he was useful.

Justeaze the Eye was a Wraith that possessed incredible clairvoyance spells that could scope out areas and battlefields before exploring them. In the game, this was not that useful as Aldrich already personally explored every area, rendering her ability to scout redundant.

But now, it was an incredibly ability to have for utility.

Gorgoth the Many was a floating ball of corpses and skeletons that could spam the battlefield with countless Undead, basically functioning like a second Legion Necromancer to really swarm enemies with units.

In the game, Gorgoth got outscaled because his Undead were all generally low leveled, but perhaps summoning him for the potential to form a massive army to clear out Variants en masse was useful in the real world.

Options. Options. So many options. And yet -

"Huh?" Aldrich cocked his head as he stared at the portal. By now, he should have received a list of potential Chosen Undead to summon from the Nether, but he did not.

Instead, the portal began to crackle with bolts of lavender energy - a signal that a Chosen Undead had been chosen already.

Aldrich stepped back, wary at this sudden change.

After all, this was not the game anymore. Chosen Undead were not mindless in the game lore. They had their own names and personalities. Who was to tell whether they would be hostile or not?

Whether the one that emerged from that portal was something terrible that Aldrich had to fight, not ally with?

Aldrich had his undead gather in front of him, growling as they readied to defend him.

From the portal, an enormous suit of black and white armor stepped out. The figure wearing this armor was easily two meters tall, its each and every step letting out heavy, clicking thuds as the sizable armor moved up and down.

There was power and weight behind all of those steps. Pure, raw, physical power that promised that anyone that ran afoul of this knight was guaranteed to find themselves smashed into quite the crater in the ground.

The knight did not wield a weapon, but instead an enormous cross-shaped shield of black and grey metal that was noticeably larger than its already sizable frame.

The knight stood still as the portal closed behind it. It stared directly at Aldrich. Tension rose in the air.

Aldrich immediately knew who this was.

"Are you...are you Valera of the Immortal Legion?" said Aldrich hesitantly. It looks like his Chosen Undead had been chosen for him, and it was the same as he had used in the game.

A good choice, to be sure, so he could not complain.

What he was wary of was whether Valera was hostile. If she was, Aldrich had little guarantee he could beat her. She was a Dullahan Death Knight warrior specialized in defending and melee brawling, and she started out at level 10 - noticeably higher than Aldrich now.

"Master...master...is-is that you?" came Valera's surprisingly feminine voice through her full-face helmet.

Aldrich did not hear any hostility in her voice, but he kept his guard up. "Yes. It's me. Do you potentially...remember me?"

"Of course!" said Valera. She dropped her giant cross-shield, and it thumped heavily with a metallic clang on the ground. She put a gauntleted, spiked hand to her breastplate. "We went through so many adventures together! So many trials! So many lives and deaths!"

Valera looked down, and her voice was pained. "But then, after we defeated the Howling Darkness together, you disappeared. I-I had no idea what had happened to you. For three hundred years, the longest three centuries of my immortal life, I had thought you were gone. Lost forever."

"Hm," said Aldrich. It seemed that Valera retained memories from the game to a degree. The main objective of Elden World was to beat back the evil entity known as the Howling Dark, and once that was done, players according to game lore 'retired' and lived a peaceful life with the world returned to peace.

Of course, in-game, the player could do as he liked and continue exploring areas or re-challenge bosses and events, but other than this, the 'story' of the game was done. Anything past it was 'non-canon' content.

Aldrich had finished the main story about three years ago. Before he even came to Blackwater. This was likely when Valera had lost memories of him, and it seemed that every single year that had passed was a hundred years in Elden World time.

"But now I see you are here, starting a new life in a new body. Oh, my master, how my heart races to see you again!" Valera rushed forward using the warrior skill [Dash], turning into a blur as she slammed into Aldrich and hugged him. "My dear, dear master whom I had devoted my entire soul to!"

"G-good to see you too, Valera," said Aldrich with a wheeze as he suffered crushing damage.

Okay then. Valera was most definitely not hostile unless she planned on hugging him to death. Which at the rate she was going, was definitely a possibility.