

# **Super Necromancer System**

## **#Chapter 19: Valera - Read Super Necromancer System**

### **Chapter 19: Valera**

#### *Chapter 19: Valera*

After what felt like an eternity, Valera finally put Aldrich down. She took off her bucket-like black great helm, finally exposing her face, and knelt into the grass before Aldrich. Her face was deathly pale just like Aldrich's, showcasing that she was an Undead just like him.

More specifically, a hybrid between Dullahan and Vampire. Her features reflected this. Her sharp, ferocious eyes possessed black sclera and the pupils centered within them were a bloody, glowing crimson red.

Her hair was dark black and styled in a rough, messy bob cut that went down ever so slightly to her neck. Her bangs concentrated on one side of her face, forming a sort of veil of hair that obscured her left eye.

Her lips were notably black, as would her claws be if Aldrich remembered her correctly.

"You look as good as ever," said Aldrich. In proper fantasy game manner, Valera was modeled to be stunningly beautiful, and real life did even more justice to her looks than what rendered graphics, no matter how advanced, could ever do.

Aldrich's Undead mind and body stopped him from getting distracted any by her looks, and he suspected that as long as he had a purpose he was driven to, he would not suffer those kind of distractions.

This was the quality of risen Undead like Aldrich - many were arisen for a single purpose like vengeance or haunting, and they tuned out any unnecessary emotions or needs for it.

In contrast, natural Undead like Vampires or Dullahan that were born as Undead could experience the full spectra of emotions without much issue, though of course, their moral and instinctive sensibilities would be quite different from that of humans.

"Th-thank you, my master," said Valera as she closed her eyes and took in the compliment with a deep, almost shuddering breath. She opened her visible eye and looked up at Aldrich. "You too, look marvelous, my master. Though I must wonder - why have you changed your appearance so? And you have become an Undead? Also, where has your wondrous equipment gone?"

"I could say the same to you."

"I-I look different? Does my new appearance displease you?" said Valera, worried.

"About your equipment, I mean," said Aldrich. "Your equipment's gone. Your level's been reset, too, despite the fact that you remember our past adventures."

"Yes, I do wonder about that," said Valera.

"What happened, Valera?" said Aldrich. "After I left?"

"When we slew the Howling Darkness together, we parted ways. I to the Nether for some rest while you, my master, were to address the United Council of our victory," said Valera.

Aldrich nodded. He knew this part. After the Howling Darkness, the final boss, was defeated, the player made a grand speech to the United Council - a coalition of all races that had banded to fight against the world ending threat of the Howling Darkness - and told them that the battle was over.

Any summoned units one had did not make it to this final cutscene, so Valera must have returned to her home in the Nether.

"Then?" said Aldrich.

"Then...I do not know. I returned to my Keep in the Nether, and then...darkness, I suppose?" said Valera. "There is only darkness in the Nether, yes, but this was a kind of darkness that settled over my mind. I fell into a great trance. A sleep from which I felt was to never awake.

In that trance, I felt time pass. Years upon years upon years. All that time, I awaited your return. When you did not return, I believed that you had also fallen into this dark sleep just like me, and so, I awaited your awakening, for I knew you would never betray me, my dear master.

I knew one day, you would awaken and call out to me.

In the meanwhile, I dreamed of our adventures. Our past struggles. And then I dreamed of our reunion."

Valera's voice cracked as single tears welled up in the corners of her eyes. However, she did not let them fall, for she had her pride as a warrior.

"For years and years, I dreamed. Of us. Being together."

"I'm sorry, Valera," said Aldrich as he knelt down and put a hand on her shoulder. "I was away, too. But we're together now."

"Yes," said Valera as she nodded. She smiled at Aldrich. "Yes, we are. I do not know why we have returned to this level of weakness, but I do not care how weak we start - that only means we have even more chances to grow stronger together."

And I know this: I will never, EVER let you go again." Her smile grew wider, almost impossibly wide, her large, vampiric fangs showing. "And anyone that dares to drive us apart, I will rip and tear their flesh from their bones, then I will scatter their bones to dust, and the lament of their women and cries of their children shall be music to my ears."

Well, at the very least, Valera seemed absolutely loyal to Aldrich.

"Nice to see that you still have your fighting spirit," said Aldrich. He stood up, and Valera did so as well, standing by him in stiff posture and attention as a knight would. She towered a full head over him, and it was not as if he was short. He was slightly above average height at 5'11 (~180 cm). She was just particularly tall, standing at 6'3 (~190 cm) without her armor.

That would make her a little harder to conceal, but her generally human appearance would mean she could visit cities alongside Aldrich without the need for much of a disguise. She just looked like a tall goth girl - not entirely out of place in the often diverse and colorful crowds of cities, especially larger, more festive ones.

If her starting inventory was like it was in the game, then she also had a casual equipment set in the shape of a black dress to blend in even more.

"But you have to be careful, Valera," said Aldrich. "This...is a new world. It isn't like the one you knew before. Everything is different. I know how this world works, so whatever we do, you have to listen to me."

"I am always ready to follow your commands, my master," said Valera with a half bow.

"That means no [Blood Rage], not unless you absolutely have to," said Aldrich. As a half vampire, Valera could access a [Blood Rage] racial ability that changed her from a shield bearing protector into a fist-fighting berserker.

Her personality in game was described as fiery spirited with rage that burned as hot and steady as her loyalty for the one she deemed her worthy master. Aldrich simply hoped that fiery spirit would not cloud her judgement for after entering [Blood Rage], Valera became a non-controllable unit that damaged anyone hostile with 0 strategy.

In real life, he imagined that Valera simply became akin to a monster that attacked anything that moved aside from Aldrich and his units.

"Of course, my master," said Valera. "I will suppress my urges. Though that means if I cannot quell my thirst in battle, I must quench it outside."

She looked around to the Strikers and Adam and Elaine. She grimaced. "I do not like the taste of lesser Undead blood, but it must do." Her eyes landed on Elaine, and she raised a black brow. She pointed her gauntleted finger at Elaine accusingly. "And who is that my master? Someone you fancy, perhaps, now that you are an Undead? May I tell you now as your most faithful knight and most loyal confidant that she is not right for you?"

"I know," said Aldrich. He looked at Elaine, then at Adam. "She wasn't right for me. She was right for him. I wasn't ready to make anyone happy, and I doubt I am now. But I saw the spark of happiness between them, and I wanted it to grow. I wanted to see them happy. But now, this is all they're reduced to." Aldrich sighed before shaking his head. "She is - or was - a close friend, Valera. So was he. I hope you can treat them with respect."

"Of course, my master," said Valera with a deep nod. "If they are your friends, then they are mine also. And my master, your words from before, about not being ready to make anyone happy, that is simply not true.

You have made me happy beyond measure. Back then and now. No, even more so now."

"And I want to keep that happiness strong," said Aldrich, knowing that as Valera was now a sentient being, he had to take care to keep her in good graces to maintain her loyalty.

Valera simply blushed and remained quiet, taking in Aldrich's words in bliss.

Aldrich manifested the [Tome of the Dark Arts Rank 2] from his inventory.

Another flesh-knitted tome appeared in his hand.

"Ah, learning more spells?" said Valera. She looked Aldrich up and down, and since they were linked together, she could see his status. "Let's see, you are currently level six and can attune three more spells. Considering that is the Rank 2 Dark Arts Tome, will you be taking [Negative Burst], [Summon Undead (1st Ring)] and [Negative Surge]?"

"Close, but not quite," said Aldrich. Valera remembered what he had taken when they were adventuring together. The spells she listed were the most optimal set for fighting.

[Negative Burst] released an area of effect wave that healed undead and damaged the living, [Create Undead (1st Ring)] allowed for the creation of Undead from scratch

whereas [Raise Undead] required a corpse, and [Negative Surge] buffed an ally unit with enhanced physical stats for a brief period of time.

"I'll be taking [Negative Surge], [Summon Undead], but I won't be taking [Negative Burst]. Instead, I'll be taking, hm, let's see..."

Aldrich's green eyes glowed as he saw a list of fifteen spells he could choose three from. He saw what he wanted. "Ah, I'll take [Horror Warp]."

[Horror Warp] was a projectile spell that took the shape of a slow-moving cloud of darkness. Once the darkness contacted an enemy, it would wrap around their heads, stunning them as they inflicted a nightmare of pain and horror that would drain their life energy and cause psychic damage.

Those afflicted by the spell needed to constantly struggle to escape, with greater psychic resistance and vitality helping break the spell easier.

In combat, [Horror Warp] was not that useful. It was a good single target stun when it landed, to be sure, but it was so slow moving it could get parried or spell broken or dodged or blocked quite easily.

"[Horror Warp]?" said Valera, slightly confused. "Are you sure, my master? It is not as effective in the battlefield as [Negative Burst] which can heal all your Undead and drive back the foul living from harming you."

"Like I said, Valera, this world is different. The battlefield isn't all there is to it. There's much more I'll have to do. Like interrogation. And there's nothing like horror and pain to break a man to speak."

"Ah, that is true," said Valera casually. "I was no torturer, but I do know how to strike to hurt, not to kill. I can help with the torture, too!" she continued enthusiastically.

"When the time comes for it, I'll consult your expertise," said Aldrich with a smile, her enthusiasm leeching onto him.

## *Chapter 20: Getting Ready*

"We have to leave this place soon," said Aldrich. He gave a lingering look at the Sign he had inscribed. He could not stay here even if it meant abandoning the Sign and the safety of the Nexus.

There would be investigations about Ghost's death soon enough, and this part of the Variant forest was shallow enough that search parties would roam here.

For the next several days at least, Aldrich needed to vacate this place.

That meant no easy access to the Nexus.

No quick refills on his [Restoration Flask] and access to crafting.

Not until he got another Sign which he would get upon completing the first Trial Quest.

"You three," Aldrich clapped his hands and commanded the Strikers. "Scatter some of Ghost's remains here and there. Litter this place with your tracks and claw marks."

Like this, Aldrich could ensure that anybody that found this place and Ghost's remains would just think he had died to Variants. There would be no additional line of investigation past that.

Beyond that, Aldrich had to think about where he wanted to go now. There was no way he was going back to Blackwater, what with being supposed to be dead and all.

The answer was Haven city. There, he would find more information about Seth Solar and his gang.

And at least in Haven, a city of 300,000, he could find anonymity.

There, he could wait and gather information while hunting and leveling in the Variant forest outside its walls.

Wait until Seth Solar and the rest of his dwindling crew came by on their weekend party nights where he could pick them out in the city, away from the security of Blackwater.

The issue was getting to Haven.

Aldrich picked up Ghost's bag and tore it open, trying to find anything useful. He found packs of pills and used syringes, and these, he tossed away.

What was useful was Ghost's Eye-Phone.

The only problem was that it was locked to Ghost's fingerprints, and Aldrich had not raised the man as an undead, nor would he have deemed that scum to be fit by his side.

But he had an idea.

He snapped his finger.

"Here, boy." He waved the Strikers over, and the massive, tusked wolf creatures came to his side.

"I have never seen monsters like these," said Valera in wonder. "They look to be dire wolves, and yet, they possess tusks like great boars. And their eyes seem to belong to squids. We truly are in a different world."

"You'll see things a lot stranger than this, trust me," said Aldrich. He knelt down and pointed at the ground. "Vomit out Ghost's fingers if you can."

The Strikers all heaved their chests. Two of the Strikers dry heaved out a pile of bloody and mulchy human meat mess, but one of them managed to throw up a few intact fingers.

"Perfect," said Aldrich as he patted the Striker on the head. He took an index finger and wiped it on his bodysuit and then, after tapping Ghost's Eye-Phone active and making sure it had enough battery, pressed the finger on the screen.

The Eye-Phone registered Ghost's biometrics but then locked, requiring additional facial recognition identification to access.

"Hm," said Aldrich as he stared at the locked phone. He had wanted to access the phone for any potential information regarding Seth Solar and the rest of his crew, maybe even use Ghost's credits to access a high-end taxi service that could pass through security checks, but it looked like those options were not up for grabs yet.

The key word was yet.

In this era of Variants, walled cities were a necessity, and Haven was one of them. However, among walled cities, there were tiers. Haven ranked at tier 3 - the lowest of them all. Still, a walled city was infinitely better than the nomadic settlements in the Wastelands that constantly had to run away from Variant attacks.

That was where the poor went. Or villains on the run. Where Adam and Elaine had been dumped as children.

Not a good place to live, to say the very least.

Compared to that, Haven was, well, a haven.

But because it was tier 3, it might have had walls and enough hero presence to ward off Variant attacks, but it did not have enough authority to get rid of a developed criminal underbelly.

Hence why Ghost could so easily pick up highly illegal designer drugs like X.

Inside Haven, Aldrich no doubt figured that there were black market technos capable of bypassing Ghost's phone locks.

These same technos could also forge CIDs (Citizen Identifications) for Aldrich and Valera because Aldrich was technically dead and needed a new identity while Valera had no identity to begin with.

As for the rest of the Undead, Aldrich had to admit he had an issue at hand.

There was no way he was bringing them into any remotely civilized area.

Normally in the game, any non-chosen undead were just despawned after combat or upon entering friendly areas. One had to resummon them afterwards.

But in the real world, Aldrich had his summons indefinitely. Granted, this was much better than it was in the game, but it presented the problem of where to keep the undead.

For now, all he could think of was hiding them in the forest, but he figured he would find a better solution later.

In particular, he theorized about becoming a Lich.

Liches could store undead within an orb inside of their being and thus continuously carry units with them. When picturing a Necromancer, a Lich was what first popped into many people's heads. They were the premiere Necromancers, and it was no less true in Elden World where their racial abilities seemed almost tailor made for Necromancy purposes.

However in the game, player characters could not be undead, so there was no official way to become a Lich or any of their higher evolutions.

Lore stated that some mages or lesser undead turned into Liches through sacrificial rituals, but the exact details of such rituals were not described in much detail.

Regardless, this was something to think about later. What was more important was getting to Haven.

Without easy transportation, Aldrich would have to go to the city by foot. That meant traveling through the forest as taking the main road was far too conspicuous. And deeper in the forest, there were stronger threats.

Most Variants were at the E to D rank in the forest, but there were some reports of C rank Variants moving about.

The difference between E and D was not much, but the gap between D and C was highly noticeable.

In a one on one battle, Aldrich would lose against a C rank Variant nine times out of ten, even if said Variant had a disadvantage against Aldrich such as, say, a reliance on poison he was immune to.

The sheer physical stats of a C rank Variant were just too overwhelming. A C rank Variant could go toe to toe with heavy battle tanks with sheer physical stats alone. One punch from them would pulp Aldrich into paste, especially with his poor health pool.

But Aldrich now had Valera whose class and stats were entirely specialized towards taking hits and dishing them back out.

He could challenge a C rank Variant if he played his cards right.

"What is that?" said Valera as she peered down at the Eye-Phone.

"This?" said Aldrich. "Right, you're unused to this world. In this world, technology has progressed quite far. One such product of this advanced technology is this. If I had to explain it to you, it's essentially a communication spell, information scroll, and recording crystal all combined into one.

"Impressive," said Valera as she held her hand out. Aldrich gave her the phone, and she squinted as she looked at it, turning it sideways and upside down like she was a 100-year-old grandma who had no idea how to operate tech. "How do you use this...this artifact?"

"It's called an Eye-Phone," said Aldrich. "And we can't use it. It was locked to someone I killed. You could say it was Bound to them."

In Elden World, Bound items were usable only by a specific individual as they were imprinted to their souls. The [Restorative Flask] was one example of such an item.

"This little thing can cast communications, contain information, record events, and even bind to souls? Marvelous," said Valera. "And I cannot even sense even a bit of magic from it. There must be a concealment spell upon it as well."

"No concealment. It just doesn't use magic. Nobody does in this world," said Aldrich.

"Truly?" Valera looked shocked. Coming from a world where magic dictated basically every facet of life, this was not surprising. "Nobody?"

"Yes," said Aldrich. "We are the only ones that can use magic."

"Then conquering this new world shall be no challenge at all!" said Valera.

"Don't get too hasty. The only race that exists in this world are humans, but they have evolved. They each have unique powers that are highly unpredictable.

Some of them may fly, some of them may shoot flame from their hands, some may have powerful punches, and so on. You cannot underestimate them," said Aldrich, noting that he referred to humans as 'them' so very naturally. "And there are monsters, too.

Monsters called Variants that may not use magic but will have powers that can match it.

These dog like monsters are Variants, but the term 'Variant' is broad. The power level of a Variant can range broadly.

Deeper in the forest, there will be much, much stronger threats."

"I will always be on guard, my master," said Valera. She raised her enormous cross shield of bone and black metal in the air. "With this great shield of mine, I swear you will face no harm."

"Please, you don't have to coddle me like that. I can take a hit when I have to," said Aldrich. He nodded to Valera. "But I'll count on you to cover me when I don't want to take them.

Just like old times."

"Like old times," said Valera with a wide smile.

"Alright, then, it's about time to move out. First things first, I have to make as much use of this Sign as possible while I still have access to it," said Aldrich.

"[Create Undead]" chanted Aldrich as he thrust his pale palm out. Green threads of energy started to swirl around him.

[Create Undead (1st Ring)] allowed Aldrich to create Undead creatures from several 'rings' that were basically tiers. The higher the ring was, the stronger the undead were. 1st Ring Undead matched the caster's level up until level 10, at which point they hit a cap.

So, for Aldrich now, any undead he created using this spell would be level 6.

A list of undead options showed up in his vision.

==

Skeleton Rogue

Skeleton Archer

Zombie Brute

Evileye

Ghast

==

Aldrich created a Skeleton Archer. He saw as a shower of green particulates gathered in front of him, forming the silhouette of a skeleton. The bright green energy dimmed, showing off a fully formed animated skeleton standing at around his own height. It was dressed in a cloak and loincloth of tattered brown leathers that gave it a ragged, deteriorated look.

The skeleton wielded a longbow in its bony hands while a quiver of black wood hung at its back, containing rot-poisoned arrows buzzing with flies.

Skeleton Archers could use the Skill known as [Dead-Eye] that allowed them to make a shot with heavily enhanced accuracy and critical strike chance after a small channel.

Useful for dealing critical damage in vital areas.

[1 Unit slot used]

[Unit Capacity: 5/8 ] 6/8]

[-10 Mana]

[-10 Health]

[HP: 45/45 ] 35/45]

[Mana: 66/66 ] 56/66]

Aldrich winced at the sizable cost of creating undead.

Created undead were generally far more reliable than raising them since the caster always knew what their created undead were capable of.

But because they were created out of nothing instead of an existing grave, they cost much more than raising existing corpses.

Aldrich intended on using the Sign one more time to just get a free full heal after spending his health and mana creating undead.

"[Create Undead]," repeated Aldrich. He chose the Skeleton Rogue this time for it had the highest burst damage out of all the summons and functioned particularly well when there were a lot of distractions to cover it.

A skeleton with a hunched back and low center of gravity formed. It held twin curved daggers in its hands. It was dressed in black robes, had a long black bandana wrapped around its skull, and a cloak that seemed to meld with the darkness around it, showcasing that it possessed [Shade Walk], a stealth Skill that made it temporarily invisible until its first strike.

[1 Unit slot used]

[Unit Capacity: 6/8 ] 7/8]

[-10 Mana]

[-10 Health]

[HP: 35/45 ] 25/45]

[Mana: 56/66 ] 45/66]

Aldrich chose these two units because combined with the Strikers and Valera, he had enough frontline distractions and protection. He needed some more burst and ranged damage.

As for the last undead -

"[Create Undead]," said Aldrich for the last time.

This time, bones did not form from green particles, but instead a large floating eyeball the size of a basketball. The eyeball possessed a glowing yellow sclera with wide black pupils that darted about curiously. A large pink, fleshy optical nerve trailed behind it like a tail.

An aura of smoky darkness flitted around the eyeball, constantly making it see-through.

[1 Unit slot used]

[Unit Capacity: 7/8 ] 8/8]

[-10 Mana]

[-10 Health]

[HP: 25/45 ] 15/45]

[Mana: 45/66 ] 35/66]

This was the [Evileye]. It was not a zombie or skeleton, but a spirit, for Necromancers could also call upon restless souls. It had no combat ability but it did have incredible eyesight and permanent stealth. As far as Aldrich knew, nothing in this world could counter magical stealth, but he still needed to experiment to be certain of this.

Regardless of that, having the [Evileye] as a forward scout would be highly useful going deeper into the Variant forest where unknown threats lay.

"All done," said Aldrich.

Valera walked over to each new Undead he had summoned and inspected them up and down. She tapped the skeleton archer and rogue on their skulls. The skeletons did not really think or have any will, so they just got bonked and stood there.

"Good bones on you two," said Valera. She walked to the Evileye and pretended to punch it, pulling her strike back just an inch away from the eyeball. It did not blink and just looked at her blankly. "And good, you will keep your eye open for the master.

Valera nodded to herself. "Hm, alright, you all pass to serve my master."

"I'm glad they passed your screening," said Aldrich. He stepped over to the Sign and started to access the Nexus. "I just have one final stop left before we can get a move on."

"Ah, do you need something forged?" said Valera.

"You're right about that. How did you know?" asked Aldrich.

"Our souls are connected, master. I can sense your intentions and see that Soul in your inventory. If we are to leave the Sign for some time, then you need to get the most out of this final visit.

You must be going not only to heal yourself, but also to use that Soul so it is not just sitting in your inventory," said Valera. "I must ask, though, how will you use that Soul? Will you forge a new staff? Some armor, perhaps? No, what am I saying, I can protect you enough already-"

### *Chapter 21: Phantasmal Mask*

Aldrich stepped onto the Sign and the white teleporting light enveloped him and everyone else. In the next instant, they were transported to the gloomy innards of the Nexus temple with its dull grey stone and towering, gothic style pillars.

The only thing remotely colorful inside of it was the Wellspring of Life which, made of shining white alabaster and marble, positively sparkled with the blue and gold light projected from the glowing crystals hanging from the domed ceiling above.

"The Nexus. To think I would return here once more with you, my master," said Valera. She seemed happy at first, but then she narrowed her eyes. "But this place does not seem right."

"What do you mean?" said Aldrich.

"The Nexus is a safe space forged by the twin gods Amara, goddess of light and life, and Sindri, god of flame and forge. There is a warmth to the Nexus that is reflected in their powers. The warmth of positive energy that is uncomfortable to Undead like us, but I sense no such thing now," said Valera. "It is as if...as if this place seems dead."

"I got that impression too," said Aldrich. "And what I theorize is that this place is not the real, original Nexus. It's just a replica. There's no true 'life' to it, but it still retains the powers it should have."

"Is that so?" said Valera. She darted her crimson and black eyes around warily, as if expecting a threat at any moment. "Hm. As long as you trust this place, I will too."

"So far, it hasn't done me any wrong," said Aldrich. He leaped over the Wellspring of Life to the Forge where he found the System hammering away at seemingly nothing.

Valera followed closely behind Aldrich and immediately raised her shield against the glitchy stick figure, standing in front of Aldrich to protect him. The System, however, did not respond to her and continued hammering away, the sound of metal clinking on metal ringing through the air despite the fact that the System held no hammer in its blocky hand.

"There's no point, Valera. The Nexus is a no combat, no kill zone," said Aldrich.

"Forgive me, my master." Valera put down her shield but still eyed the System suspiciously. "I was simply cautious of the unknown. You seem to know what that thing is."

"Sort of," said Aldrich. "From what I can tell, it seems to be a fusion of the goddess Amara and the god Sindri. This thing performs both their functions in the Nexus. Can you sense anything off about it?"

Valera cocked her head and stared at the System for a good ten seconds. Then, she shook her head. "I sense no hostility. No emotion at all. I can perceive that there is divine essence within it, the same kind that built up Amara and Sindri, but...how do I put this...it seems unfinished.

Gods are Divinus - raw divine energy - shaped into vessels by belief. This thing is pure energy. Chaotic and unshaped. And yet, still stable enough to maintain the Nexus."

"I see," said Aldrich. His theory that this stick figure was an unfinished game asset for both Amara and Sindri started to find more weight with Valera's words. "In any case, questioning this thing has no purpose. Like you said, it's unfinished. It only responds to certain key words and requests. And as far as I can tell, it's basically just a machine that fulfills the functions of the gods. Until we find more cause to suspect it, we have to rely on it."

"Understood, master," said Valera. "I trust your wise judgement. Especially over my hot-blooded impulsiveness."

Aldrich nodded and walked up to the System. "Here for a forging request."

"Ah, a forgin', is it?" said the System. "I can do that any time! Now then, what'll it be, lad?"

"Soul forging," said Aldrich. The crafting/forging menu opened up in front of Aldrich and he selected the [Soul of Ghost] from his inventory. Ghost's soul manifested in his hand as a shimmering white orb that ever so often flickered transparent.

Aldrich tossed the orb to the System and the stick figure caught the orb and inspected it.

"Mighty fine material yer bringin' in!" said the System.

"Yes, fine indeed," said Aldrich, remembering the satisfaction of crushing Ghost. "Now then, I want head gear."

"Gotcha. Here's what I can do!"

Aldrich found a list of three options projected in front of him.

==

1. Ghostly Helm

Rank: Uncommon +

Type: Head Gear (Heavy)

Stats:

+15 Vitality

+5 Agility

+5 Perception

Effects:

Refraction (Passive) - This item grants the wearer a permanent passive that reduces all incoming damage by 10%.

## 2. Hood of Melding

Rank: Uncommon +

Type: Head Gear (Light)

Stats:

+10 Agility

+10 Magic

+5 Perception

Effects:

Ghost Walk (Active) - By activating this item, the wearer may enter a Phase state where they are rendered invisible and pass-through solid objects with 50% boosted movement speed. [Ghost Walk] lasts for 3 seconds.

Cost: 30 Mana

Cooldown: 15 Seconds

## 3. Phantasmal Mask

Rank: Uncommon +

Type: Head Gear (Light)

Stats:

+5 Magic

Effects:

Phantasmal Shroud (Passive) - The wearer obtains a permanent passive that grants them a 10% chance to dodge an incoming attack by phasing through it.

Ghost Walk (Active) - By activating this item, the wearer may enter a Phase state where they are rendered invisible and pass-through solid objects with 50% boosted movement speed. [Ghost Walk] lasts for 3 seconds. While this ability is on cooldown, Phantasmal Shroud is disabled.

Cost: 30 Mana

Cooldown: 15 Seconds

=

Cost: 200 Coin

Reroll Cost: 50 Coin

==

Aldrich put a hand to his chin, wondering what to take. He had rolled well, obtaining three choices of Uncommon (+) tier gear.

The plus sign indicated that the gear was at the highest end of its tier, and since the Uncommon level range of gear went from 10-30, the difference was quite massive between a basic Uncommon piece of equipment like Aldrich's current staff and any of these three head pieces.

Thankfully, the gear had not been at the Rare tier, as though players could equip gear one tier above their level threshold, anything above that made equipment unusable until they met the level requirements.

"The helmet would be quite useful for protecting you, my dear master," said Valera as she peered at the options. "B-but I will protect you anyway, so maybe it isn't useful after all!"

It seemed that Valera wanted Aldrich to choose equipment that protected him the most while also struggling with her pride to be the one to always protect Aldrich.

"I trust you to protect me, Valera, don't worry about that," said Aldrich. "And my class has no affinity for heavy gear. I'll suffer stat penalties for wearing a heavy helmet. That leaves me with either the hood or the mask, and it's a no-brainer to pick up the mask here."

Though the [Hood of Melding] granted much better stats than the [Phantasmal Mask], it only had one unique ability. Aldrich knew from playing the game that stats might have seemed attractive, especially in earlier levels, but additional unique abilities or passives were worth far more.

As far as rolls went, the mask was quite lucky. He had gotten a horrible roll with the heavy helmet, especially because mage type classes had a higher chance to roll lighter equipment, but the other two options made up for it.

"Craft me the [Phantasmal Mask]" said Aldrich.

"You got it!" The System hammered down at Ghost's soul, shattering it and then reforming it into another glowing white orb, this time with the icon of the item imbued within it.

The orb floated to Aldrich and he absorbed it into his inventory with a touch.

[1x Phantasmal Mask obtained]

[200 Coin spent]

[Coin: 220 ] 20]

Aldrich immediately withdrew the mask and equipped it. A pale white ivory mask formed over his face. It was oval and seemingly latched onto his face with no need for a strap. It was completely featureless, like a ceramic plate, aside from a single horizontal line running across it to indicate Aldrich's eye line.

"This will do," said Aldrich. He could see perfectly through the mask as if it was not there despite the fact that it basically completely obscured his face. The perks of magic.

"Marvelous!" said Valera as she clapped her gauntleted hands together. "Piece by piece, you adorn yourself for battle." She whispered under her breath. "A shame I can't see your face, though."

"Hm? What was that last part?" said Aldrich, not quite catching it.

"N-nothing!" said Valera as she briskly walked back to the Sign. "We are ready, yes? For adventure?"

"With you, anytime," said Aldrich, wanting to convey that she was a valuable protector he could always rely on.

Evidently, Valera took those words differently. Her pale skin got a shade redder, and she immediately put on her helmet. "Then we must make haste. Onwards!"

---

## *Chapter 22: A Pack Problem*

Aldrich and his ever-growing entourage of undead traveled through the Variant forest. He knew generally how to get to Haven, but since he had no Eye-Phone, he had no access to a reliable map.

To compensate for this, he had the Evil Eye float in the air, above the tree line, to track their way through.

Every so often, Valera would detect danger with her [Defender's Vigil] passive, and whenever this happened, Aldrich would stand behind her shield and let the Evileye scout ahead with its permanent invisibility.

It did not phase through solid objects, but it could squeeze through most tight gaps, and it's omni-directional vision meant that it scoped out any threat quite easily.

For the most part, Aldrich just found more Strikers for they were the most common Variant in the forest. These were easily dispatched - Aldrich himself could handily beat one with just his physical stats alone.

In total, Aldrich had netted himself 5 kills and 50 EXP.

[EXP Bar: 25/250 ] 75/250]

Eventually, after about an hour of traveling, they happened upon a full pack of them.

A pack numbering up to ten Strikers with a significantly larger Alpha with them. The Alpha was marked by an angry red line of fur running down its forehead and up to its snout.

The Evileye spotted them while they were sleeping in a clearing by a small stream, though a few of them remained awake to keep watch.

\*What shall we do, master?\* said Valera, speaking with Aldrich telepathically through their spiritually linked bond. \*We could simply pass by them.\*

\*I know\* Aldrich looked behind him. His skeleton archer, rogue, three Strikers, and Adam and Elaine stood ready for battle. \*I want to scale my army up a little. Get rid of a Striker and replace it with an Alpha.\*

\*Might I ask why we do not replace the zombies?\* said Valera. \*Objectively, they are the weakest among your army. I know you said they were your close friends, my master, but for your safety-\*

\*They stay with me. End of question about that\* said Aldrich firmly. He wanted Adam and Elaine to stay with him until he got vengeance on Seth Solar and all of his crew.

Until they sunk their teeth into all of them and carved out a piece of vengeance they deserved, he would keep them by his side.

\*Understood, master\* said Valera. \*I'm sorry-\*

\*Don't be sorry. You haven't done anything wrong - I was just making my position clear.\* Aldrich took in a breath. \*Alright, I've decided: let's fight them.\*

Valera shuddered in anticipation for violence under her armor. \*I am ever ready, my master.\*

\*Here's the strategy: the Skeleton Rogue cripples the alpha and then you charge in with the Strikers. I will stay at the edges of the clearing with Adam, Elaine, and the Skeleton Archer to provide cover\* said Aldrich.

\*Are you sure, my master? From what I can sense, I can defeat all of these creatures by myself. After all, I am quite suited to mowing down masses of weaklings\* said Valera. \*That big one might take me a few more seconds than the rest, but they are no challenge. Unworthy to face you.\*

\*I'm sure of it. I need to test out whether the Rogue's invisibility is undetectable as well.\*

\*Understood\* said Valera.

—

Aldrich watched from the Skeleton Rogue's 'eyes' as it snuck past the ring of sleeping Strikers with ease. Its black robes and cloak were covered in shadows that obscured it, completely rendering it invisible.

The skeleton's high agility was apparent in the way it could flip over the wolves and weave past them with such quick and coordinated movements, and in no time, it was right in front of the Alpha.

The Rogue took its curved daggers and sunk them right into the Alpha's eyes. The blades sunk in halfway, destroying the eyes but not reaching the brain before the Alpha remarkably reacted on pure autopilot.

Its brown fur raised up in prickles as an omni-directional force shockwave blasted outwards, knocking the Skeleton Rogue far back, crashing it into a tree.

All the Strikers woke up in an instant of alert, growling and ready to fight.

Aldrich's experiment on invisibility was somewhat of a success.

These were his observations:

Magical invisibility was troublesome to deal with, but not invincible. The Strikers could not pick up anything with their sharp sense of smell nor could they perceive the Rogue even when staring right at it.

Basically, it seemed that magical invisibility functioned by placing a 'shell' of obscurity around the user, enclosing any physical signs like scent, sound, and appearance from others. Thus, the sounds of their breathing, their heartbeat, or the clicking of bones was all hidden.

What did worry Aldrich was that movements made in invisibility still gave off hints when the user interacted with physical surfaces. Footsteps, for example, were still audible. And Aldrich noted that the Skeleton Rogue did make imprints in the dirt wherever it stepped.

However, the Skeleton Rogue had training as an assassin to mask the sound and noticeability of its movements, gracefully darting about only in firm patches of dirt on the tips of its bony toes so as to absolutely minimize any traces of itself.

The problem was that if Aldrich who had no such training tried to use invisibility, others could still track him with either the sound of his footsteps or any impressions he made on surfaces.

This was not an issue for the Evil Eye which was a spirit that made no sound in the first place, so for now, it seemed that the Evil Eye was completely undetectable. Functionally invincible unless it was caught up in some wide area of effect attack.

Whether Alter powers that could see through conventional invisibility or sense others worked against this invisibility remained to be seen, but Aldrich heavily suspected that they would not.

Most detection based Alter powers worked by sensing the unique energy signatures Alters gave off.

That would not work at all on magical invisibility.

"TO BATTLE!" shouted Valera as she charged in with her enormous shield. Her rousing cry generated all attention on her.

A Striker leaped up to bite her, and Valera took her shield and used it like a giant battering ram to swat the Striker away like a fly. The Striker flew like it was launched by a cannon into a tree and slammed against it with a crack, its spine shattered.

Another Striker bit her leg but could not penetrate her armor. She drove her shield down into the Striker's neck and decapitated the creature in one swift blow.

"Dirty mutts! You think you can challenge me with this! Let alone my master!?" said Valera as she pounded her breastplate in challenge.

The Alpha Striker was blinded, but it tracked her through her obviously loud voice and charged towards her, snarling. It seemed to possess some level of muscle augmentation as its body swelled in size, its muscles rippling and engorging with blood until it was the size of a hovercar.

Valera put her shield ahead of her and blocked the Striker's charge. The loud clang of half a ton of solid muscle slamming against a brick wall of metal shield rang through the night. Valera moved backwards in the dirt about several inches as she dug in her greaves, resisting the Striker's powerful attack.

"Hahaha! Now that's more like it!" said Valera.

In the next instant, the remaining Strikers had all piled around her, snarling and clawing and biting at her armor. They did damage, to be sure, making impressions in the armor with their teeth, but nothing appreciable.

"Swarming me like the weaklings you are - just what I wanted!" said Valera. Her eyes glowed bloody red through the slits of her helmet. She let go of her shield and then loosed a heavy punch into the ground. A shockwave of crimson red blasted outwards from her, scattering the Strikers on her body every which way.

That was the skill [Bloody Strike] that infused her next attack with a shockwave of explosive blood.

The shockwave was strong enough that all the normal Strikers lay limp on the ground, their internal organs ruptured or bones shattered.

Only the Alpha striker managed to stand, driven back several meters before it regained balance.

Blood from the Strikers Valera had killed flowed from their bodies and around her, swirling in a thin barrier that formed a spherical shell around her.

"Yes, yes, YES!" she exclaimed as the blood not only flowed around her, but into her, seeping through the gaps in her armor as they healed her and fueled her [Blood Rage].

"Valera-," began Aldrich, not wanting to have her fall into madness.

"Oraa!" Valera heaved her shield back and then tossed it. The cross-shield spun like an enormously oversized shuriken towards the Alpha Striker. Because the Striker was blind, it was too late to dodge, and the giant shield slammed into it, driving it backwards and impaling it on a large tree.

Valera turned around to Aldrich and removed her helmet. She gave him a thumbs up and the warmest, brightest, happiest smile he had seen. At the very least, she was still sane, just high on the thrill of fighting.

### *Chapter 23: Raising the Alpha*

You did well. Very well," said Aldrich to Valera. He paused and gave her a nod, hoping that this was enough to make her happy. He was unused to giving out praise because of how alone he had been.

The only praise he had received was from his parents, and that praise had come from a place of warmth in their hearts.

It had been many years since that same warmth had been snuffed out in Aldrich's own heart.

"Thank you, master!" said Valera with a proper bow. "Mhm. Mhm." She nodded to herself, smiling and taking in Aldrich's praise no matter how awkward or little it was.

As Valera took in Aldrich's praise, Aldrich was occupied by the experience flowing into him.

[Alpha Striker slain!]

[+70 EXP]

[Striker x10 slain!]

[+100 EXP]

[EXP Bar: 75/250 ] 245/250]

Aldrich sighed. Just five points off from level 7. He hated the feeling of going through a fight and being just short of leveling up. But he could not let his mind dwell on that.

"Now to raise this Alpha," said Aldrich. He stepped over to the corpse of the Alpha Striker impaled against a tree trunk with Verla's shield. He tugged at it and found it ridiculously heavy.

Beyond even his current already superhuman strength to move easily. "Valera - can I get some help with this shield?"

"Oh, of course!" said Valera. She rushed to the shield and dislodged it with ease, showcasing the stark difference between a warrior type character that invested most of their stat points into the physical ones and a mage type character like Aldrich.

The Alpha Striker corpse slid down and thumped limply on the ground.

Aldrich was still wary, and he had his skeletons take aim and stand guard over the corpse.

Variants could have any number of Alter powers within them, but generally the number capped out at five. The stronger the Variant, the stronger these powers were.

This Alpha Striker might still have some kind of regenerative power on top of the muscle boosting and shockwave generation it had showcased.

Aldrich's worries were dispelled when he saw a floating, green-outlined grave over the wolf monster's body.

To raise the Alpha, Aldrich needed to make room. His unit control was maxed out at 8/8 already.

"Perfect," said Aldrich. He snapped his fingers, and one of his three Strikers came to his side. "Your service is over. Rest."

Aldrich patted the Striker's head one last time, and the Striker licked Aldrich's hand and nodded before crumbling away into nothingness.

[Units controlled: 8/8 ] 7/8]

"Now then," said Aldrich as he knelt by the Alpha Striker's corpse. He took out the two curved daggers lodged into its eyes and tossed them behind him. "Catch, Rogue. You're probably missing these."

The Skeleton Rogue flipped in the air and gracefully caught the two daggers before landing on its knee, bowing a cracked skull at Aldrich. It had taken considerable damage from getting tossed into a tree from the Alpha Striker's shockwave ability.

Aldrich turned on his [Anti-Life Shell Rank 1]. A misty green, fog-like aura appeared around him, covering his undead and healing them. Notably, the plant life around him started to wilt and die, withering as their life force was drained ever so steadily.

"Ahhh," said Valera as she breathed in deeply. She raised her head up in closed eyed bliss. "The scent of my master-I-I mean, the scent of negative energy!"

"Its rank is low right now, but I'm on my way to fixing that," said Aldrich. "I'm particularly curious as to how Alters and Variants will deal with the highest ranks of it when even being in my presence requires stat and level checks to pass instant death."

"At the very least, you will soon not have to personally deal with weaklings like these," said Valera as she stared at the Striker corpses in disdain.

"Hm." Aldrich thought about it for a moment. His [Anti-Life Shell] was liable to kill countless innocents as well with his mere presence.

But if he absolutely needed to, he would.

Deep down, even though he had never done it before, he knew that he was willing to sacrifice lives for the greater good. If he had to sacrifice a hundred innocents to survive another day and save countless more over time, then he would take that deal with zero hesitation.

This, on top of a willingness to kill villains without a second thought, was one of the major reasons he had always failed the psych evaluations for higher ranked hero academies.

He was willing to see and use lives as game pieces.

He was not a villain, but he was not a hero, a real hero like his parents, either, that was for sure.

He had lost a fundamental reverence for each and every life as sacred and worthy after watching his parents die, for their lives were sacred and worthy and ended while the lives of villains continued on.

And now, as an undead, this mindset was even more prominent.

But these were thoughts relevant for another time. Aldrich put a green energy wreathed hand on the Alpha Striker's head.

"Serve," he said.

[-5 Mana]

[Mana: 93/93] 88/93]

Tendrils of bright green flowed into the Alpha Striker, causing its corpse to shudder before it slowly stood back on his four legs. The gaping chest wound from Valera's shield was still visible on its stomach, splitting it open down the middle and exposing its organs. It had no eyes, either, but all of these wounds would regenerate over time in Aldrich's presence.

[Alpha Striker Lvl 7 reanimated]

[Units controlled: 7/8 ] 8/8]

Aldrich obtained information about the Striker. He noted that he did not know the precise stats of reanimated Variants. No specific status screen detailed their abilities in numbers and words. He just had a feel of how strong they were and what powers they could use.

Based on this general feel, reanimated Variants were given a 'level' approximating their combat ability, but Aldrich knew that this level was not entirely accurate. It overly favored physical stats and combat powers and did not consider the utility of non-combat abilities.

Aldrich theorized that Variants had no status related information aside from their level because they did not fit neatly into the game mechanics of Elden World. He imagined this would be similar with reanimated Alters, too.

"I see. So, you had a power that enhanced your muscles, shockwave generation, and Alter detection smell," said Aldrich. He noted that Variants above the E-rank were notable for having multiple powers. He figured this Alpha Striker was solidly D-rank. "Good, then that confirms that most Alters with detection abilities can't see through stealth."

Alters, or any living being that possessed Alter Cells and Organs possessed a unique energy signature, and the higher their cell count, the stronger this signature was. By sequencing this energy signature by wavelength and unique flow patterns, the Alterhuman Agency could maintain a database of existing Alters and their powers.

Alters that used powers that concealed themselves concealed not only their physical appearance, but the emanation of this energy signature. This made them undetectable by any conventional form of Alter detecting technology.

The only way to see past concealment sourced via Alter powers was to use detection sourced through Alter powers. However, detection-based powers were far rarer than concealment-based ones, making this Alpha Striker and its smell quite the useful ability.

Aldrich stood up, and the Alpha Striker nuzzled its large head into his hand for a head pat.

"Valera," said Aldrich. He turned to see Valera staring at the Alpha Striker with envy. "You can drain the rest of these corpses."

"Yes, master," said Valera as she gave the Alpha Striker a powerful leer that made the monster, even without eyes, shudder and feel danger, breaking off from Aldrich.

Valera raised her hand into the air and closed a gauntleted fist together with a metallic click. The ten Striker corpses around her shook before blood flowed out from them, gathering around her and strengthening the sphere of crimson around her.

This was [Crimson Furnace], a signature ability of Valera's. Any unit she killed had their blood drained and formed into a barrier around her. Any damage she took also transferred blood to this barrier, making her tankier and tankier over time and especially durable the lower her health was.

In addition, the barrier was specialized to defend against magic and energy based attacks where her own body was specialized for taking physical blows, making her defense well balanced.

Offensively, the barrier could be ignited and turned into a massive omni-directional explosion around her based off how much damage it had soaked and absorbed. In the case that Valera was at 10% HP, the damage was doubled, making it a one-time super attack.

Or utility wise, it could be drained to heal her, though at a less efficient rate than consuming blood for healing directly.

"Alright," said Aldrich as he saw Valera's barrier solidify, turning into a shell of deep crimson red. "We should move on-,"

Aldrich paused, getting a danger signal from the Evil Eye.

He immediately linked his sight with the Evil Eye and saw something that made him hold his breath.

#### *Chapter 24: The Geist*

The Evil Eye stared down at a Variant heading right towards Aldrich, likely drawn by the scent of blood and death.

It was a three-meter-tall humanoid figure with smooth, plain white skin. Its body was highly muscular, and it shambled forwards with a heavily hunched back, dragging its knuckles across the dirt. It was nearly completely featureless, its skin having no blemishes and its fingers and toes holding no nails.

Overall, it almost looked like an eerie, overly muscled mannequin.

Something out of a horror movie.

Its spherical head lacked any real facial features as well. Just a massive, large-lipped mouth curled up into a constant half-open smile, showcasing a set of oversized human teeth that chattered constantly.

This was a Geist.

Among Variants, Aldrich recalled from what limited research he was able to do in Blackwater, there were three classifications.

Natural Variants - these were Variants that had seemingly adapted to nature. They became parts of ecosystems and adopted the traits of the flora and fauna within them. The Strikers with their wolf-like appearances were examples of such Variants.

They needed food and water to live, could reproduce on their own, and acted generally like wild beasts, and so could be scared off or even tamed.

Geist Variants - these were inexplicable monstrosities that were spontaneously spawned and very often humanoid in appearance.

They were functionally immortal, requiring no food, sleep, or rest. They also did not seem to reproduce unless they possessed a power that allowed them to self replicate. They did not have any particular set of behaviors that were consistent, with each Geist having their own unique behavior patterns that made them highly unpredictable.

Some were like pre-programmed robots, and some were surprisingly intelligent - it was impossible to tell.

In addition, Geists had an immense thirst for human and Alter blood and flesh, making them much higher threats to civilization than natural Variants. Not only that, but Geists were generally much stronger than most natural Variants, with even the weaker ones usually starting out as a C-ranked threat.

The third category of Variants were Titans. These were monstrosously powerful Variants that were often the size of battleships or even larger. These were Variants of near legend, formed immediately after Zahak's death and the beginning of the Monsterring.

There were twenty Titans to begin, but after eight of them were killed by a united humanity, the remaining twelve returned to enormous nests across the world in remote areas, occasionally appearing every few years for an attack before being driven off again.

"We're leaving," said Aldrich immediately. He did not want to risk a fight with a C-rank monster now. He knew he could challenge one, but only if he had a few advantages on his side.

For example, if the Geist had abilities Aldrich and his units were immune to.

But if the Geist had multiple powers geared for just raw power and sustained combat, then Aldrich doubted he could fight one, even with Valera.

Valera could go toe to toe with it in sheer stats most likely, but she would lack the damage to finish it off.

Strong enemies with built in sustain. Even in Elden World, this was the type of enemy that gave Legion Necromancers trouble in lower levels where they had too few minions for large scale swarming tactic.

If the Geist also had powerful area of effect abilities on top of that, then Aldrich had no chance of winning.

"What is that beast?" said Valera, seeing through Aldrich's eyes. "It disgusts me. It is a sin against nature. A sin against life. Even more so than we are as undead."

"Yeah, that's a good way to describe it," said Aldrich. He had to agree the thing was not pleasant to look at. "It's called a Geist and all you need to know is that it's above our paygrade for now. We could fight it, but there's no guarantee we would win."

Valera put her helmet on. "Indeed, I can sense potent strength from it. Oh, how I would want to cave its ugly skull in. But I will heed your commands, master."

"Geists hunt living humans, so most likely as undead, it won't even register us. We just need to take a route around it-," began Aldrich before he paused, seeing something both haunting and interesting.

Through the Evil Eye, Aldrich saw the Geist open its huge mouth. Its stomach expanded grotesquely and convulsed before it regurgitated out a spit covered woman. Its barbed tongue lay hooked in her back, holding her like a caught fish.

She was a hero, there was no doubt about it from the remnants of her tattered orange and red costume. He could not tell whether she was alive as her head was down with her long, dirty blonde hair covering her face like a veil. She hung limply on the Geist's lengthy, prehensile tongue like a rack of meat hung at a butcher's shop.

The Geist carefully wiped away its spit on her body and giggled to itself as it patted her head gently and moved her arms and legs around, arranging her into heroic poses like it was playing with an action figure.

The Geist giggled to itself, its entire body shuddering, but because it lacked any facial expressions, it was hard to tell whether it was actually amused or whether this was some strange natural reaction.

With this, Aldrich knew what this Geist was. He had seen it on the news before when it attacked Haven six months ago.

And he knew then that he could fight it.

Aldrich's mind raced as he thought of a strategy based on the information he had.

Media coverage of the Geist attack had been quite thorough because Haven mostly did not get many Variant attacks. The forests surrounding it only had E to D rank natural Variants that generally stayed away from civilization, so the spawning of the Geist was a surprise that took the city off guard,

The Geist had attacked Haven in the dead of night, charging through a half-repaired hole in one of its walls. Within the city, it released a potent neurotoxin from various pores in its body while it rabidly hunted down any human it could see.

With its massive size and strength, the Geist ripped apart and devoured humans while its toxic gas killed many more. In just half an hour, it had wracked up a body count of one hundred, including the hero Iron Soldier.

The Geist used its tongue to dig into Iron Soldier and pilot his body, puppeteering the hero against the very civilians he once protected.

A response team was formed to counter the Geist after half an hour.

This team beat back the Geist, but not before the Geist managed to seemingly kill and kidnap Dynamite Girl, another hero. With its super regeneration, it barely escaped back into the forest, and since then, Haven was on increased alert for its potential return.

From the news reports, Aldrich knew the powers the Geist had.

First was its constant stream of neurotoxic gas. It was highly lethal to humans, causing brain failure within twenty seconds unless their bodies were enhanced. This was the largest reason why it had taken over half an hour for the AA (Alterhuman Agency) branch in Haven to form a response team.

They needed equipment to filter out the gas.

As undead, however, Aldrich and his minions were all immune to the gas. Hell, the skeletons did not even have brains for neurotoxins to work on.

Next was the Geist's ability to control another creature with its tongue. This was troublesome, especially because it now controlled Dynamite Girl, a solid C-class hero known for her ability to generate explosions from her hands.

Her ability was highly effective against Aldrich's undead because it dealt fire type damage and had a wide area of effect. Judging from her body condition, she was still more than combat capable. Aldrich could see through her torn costume that her body was still muscular and toned.

Very likely, the Geist's tongue kept her supplied with nutrients, possibly even still keeping her alive.

On top of this, the Geist had an ability to make short-range high-speed dashes and a potent healing factor that allowed it to regenerate a lost limb within seconds.

The regeneration was not much of an issue. Most of Aldrich's minions dealt Necrotic damage and that rotted out flesh and directly nullified regeneration.

But the high-speed dashes combined with naturally formidable strength that could tear apart humans like paper meant the Geist was a highly mobile, deadly threat even without its toxins and regeneration.

With Dynamite Girl as well, the odds were considerably stacked against Aldrich.

Even Alters without powers that strengthened their body were superhuman by virtue of having Alter cells. A C-class hero like Dynamite Girl could probably shatter concrete with a solid punch. That was more than enough to one destroy skeletons in two or three hits, especially with the weakness of skeletal undead to crushing blows.

But strategy could compensate for this gap in power.

"What is it, master?" said Valera. "Are we not to escape now? Or perhaps..."

Valera stiffened a little under her armor before a shudder ran across her from helmet to greaves. She held her shield tight to her. "I know that glint in your eyes, my master. That thinking, focused stare that I adore so much for: you want to fight, do you not?"

"Yes," said Aldrich. He nodded and started to mentally command his units to move out of the clearing and get into position. The Geist was spotted a hundred fifty meters away and would be in this clearing within the minute.

He did not have much time to prepare. "We will."

### *Chapter 25: Geist Hunt*

The Geist made its way into the clearing, walking Dynamite Girl in front of it to minimize risk to itself.

Dynamite Girl stumbled forwards, her head still limp and down, moving with stilted, awkward movements like she was a puppet being jerked along by strings.

The Geist cocked its head as it sat by the flowing stream where the Strikers had slept. In front of it, it stared down at a Striker corpse. It picked up the corpse in its large hand, raising the decently heavy wolf creature with ease to its face.

With a gurgle, the Geist tossed the Striker away once it identified that it was not a human.

"Gehgeh," said the Geist in a strange, garbled, almost alien voice, though the pitch was high and curious, almost questioning.

It looked ahead at a trail of Striker corpses leading into the forest.

The Geist stared at the line of corpses for a second and then made Dynamite Girl walk ahead to investigate, obviously realizing something was suspicious. It sat there and stretched out its thick, muscular, barbed tongue as Dynamite Girl continued along the line of Striker corpses.

As Dynamite Girl walked further and further ahead, the tongue tethering her to the Geist grew thinner and thinner.

Dynamite Girl stepped out of the clearing, a full twenty meters away from the Geist, and stopped in front of the very last Striker corpse.

There was nobody around it. No surprise attack.

It was just a lone corpse.

"Gehhhh?" the Geist garbled. It started to bring back Dynamite Girl, and that was when something severed its tongue.

The Skeleton Rogue materialized, its twin daggers down from having slashed straight through the middle of the Geist's tongue where it had been stretched thinnest and easiest to cut.

Dynamite Girl fell face first into the dirt, her connection to the Geist severed.

Aldrich had seen that the Geist used Dynamite Girl to investigate and thus baited the Geist to draw her out using Striker corpses.

Since the Geist could not detect the Evil Eye, it could not detect the Skeleton Rogue either.

Aldrich had the rogue use its [Shadow Walk] and stay still in the center of the clearing so as to minimize any movement it had to make.

The Geist let loose a garbled, warped scream of pain before it used a high-speed dash to appear right in front of the rogue. The Variant cocked back its huge, musclebound arm to destroy the rogue, but a series of arrows flew from the treetops, lodging into its arm and chest.

"Geh!?" the Geist stepped back and tore the arrows out of its body. In this moment, the Skeleton Rogue ran for its life, or rather unlife, disappearing into the cover of the forest.

"Geh...geh?" The Geist stared at the puncture wounds made by the arrow. The flesh around them rotted, the white skin turning black and festering with pus. It cocked its head, wondering why its regeneration did not kick in.

The Geist then tried to pick up its tongue and re-attach it with regeneration.

"ORAAA!"

That was when Valera stormed out, using her own [Dash] skill. She became a black blur as she slammed into the Geist at full force, bashing its body with her shield.

The Geist was strong and fast too, though, and it reacted by holding up its arms in a guard, using them as a shield of its own to resist Valera.

The sound of concussive impact rang through the forest as the Geist drove back several meters under Valera's momentum and power.

"Gehhh!" The Geist roared and pushed back, its enormous back muscles rippling, and this time, Valera started to give ground.

"Oh? A little strong, are we? How about THIS!" Valera used the [Shield Slam] skill and drove her shoulder into her shield. Her shield glowed with crackling red energy that exploded outwards in a shockwave as it slammed against the Variant.

The Geist tumbled backwards several meters before righting itself, its large fingers digging into the dirt. The creature shook its head from the impact and then started to release its neurotoxin.

Various pores in its body opened up, and purple gas steamed outwards, quickly covering the clearing in a mist of toxins.

Valera breathed in deeply, mocking the Geist. "Is that it!? Poison!? Utter foolishness!"

"Geh?" the Geist cocked its head as it saw that its toxin had zero effect on Valera.

She banged her breastplate before she charged again, using this time a basic attack where she swung at the Geist horizontally with her cross shield, aiming to cut its head open.

The Geist showcased its surprising agility and ducked beneath the swipe before punching Valera straight in the chest. Its fist popped through her [Crimson Furnace] blood barrier and smashed straight into her armor.

Valera skidded backwards several meters as the echo of dented metal rang through the air. She suffered damage, but nothing considerable. The blood barrier had reduced some of the damage and she did not have any weakness to crushing damage that skeletal or lesser undead like Aldrich had.

She looked down to see a crack in the armor around her torso, and she laughed. "That's it! That's more like it! Hit me! Come on, HIT ME!"

Valera charged again with her shield, and the Geist roared as they engaged in another clash of blows.

Aldrich acted quickly. He had waited outside of the clearing, beyond the Geist's potential detection range, and now sprinted towards Dynamite Girl's corpse. He had planned all this from the start, and everything had gone according to what he had envisioned.

Bait the Geist into drawing Dynamite Girl out.

Use the Skeleton Rogue to cut off its tongue.

Place the Skeleton Archer in the trees to provide suppressive fire.

Have Valera charge in and distract the Geist so that it could not re-attach its tongue or reach Dynamite Girl.

Now, the most important phase of the plan -

Aldrich knelt by Dynamite Girl's limp body, ready to raise her as an undead.

Two Strikers, the Alpha Striker, and Adam and Elaine stood around Aldrich, acting as his bodyguards in the case that the Geist tried to dash past Valera.

However, Valera kept the Geist's attention quite well.

Aldrich inspected Dynamite Girl and did not see a grave marker floating above her. That was when he realized she was alive. Still breathing, though very shallowly.

Six entire months in the Geist's stomach and used as its puppet, and this whole time, she had been alive.

"Thank you for your service to Haven. Now, I will end your suffering," said Aldrich, saying her last rites. He took his staff and stabbed it straight through her neck, killing her.

He felt a small twinge of pity for her, but it was like a human seeing roadkill. A passing, cursory sense of pity that was not given a second thought.

He truly was not human anymore, and he did not mind. This mindset made him stronger, and as long as it did, he welcomed it.

Maybe, just maybe, someone could have saved her and healed her back in Haven.

But then what? Where was the guarantee her mind was still intact? And who was going to bring her back to the city?

Aldrich definitely was not going to - there was far too much risk involved bringing her into the city as he was now as a literal walking corpse with no fake identity.

He would have to deal with questioning and investigation from the AA, and that was the last thing he wanted.

At least like this, Dynamite Girl was guaranteed to be useful. Before he reanimated Dynamite Girl, Aldrich noted that a Soul floated above her body. He shook his head - taking the soul was not the right choice here.

He needed her powers now.

"Serve," said Aldrich as he put her hand gently on Dynamite Girl's forehead, infusing her corpse with green strands of energy.

[-5 Mana]

[Mana: 79/84 ] 73/84]

Aldrich felt as another one of his Strikers rubbed its head into his hand. He patted the wolf's head gently.

"You did well. It's time for you to rest, too," said Aldrich.

With that, the Striker faded into dust, giving Aldrich space to add Dynamite Girl.

Dynamite Girl's corpse shook before standing up not as a zombie, but an undead.

[Undead (Dynamite Girl) Level 12 reanimated]

A Necromancer could not take a soul and also reanimate a corpse. Once a soul was taken, the corpse lost its capacity to be reanimated and crumbled away.

But if a corpse was reanimated with its soul intact, it became possible to resurrect higher tier undead.

Zombies might have been marginally stronger than their live counterparts, but they were slower, dumber, and lost all training that the original corpse might have had.

An undead, however, could develop individuality and retained any martial arts training they had when they were living. However, they lost all their active memories, turning them into amnesiacs that unfailingly served their new master.

If needed, a Necromancer could also just prevent any individuality from forming at all, essentially turning the raised undead into basically high functioning robots that retained combat training skills but no real free will.

Aldrich limited Dynamite Girl's individuality for now, wanting her to be as efficient a fighter as possible.

Dynamite Girl shakily stood up, her skin turning from tanned olive to pale white while her golden blonde hair turned platinum, almost silvery white. Her eyes were blank, though, with no real sense of thought in them.

The only thing she followed was Aldrich's killing intent, and her face turned into a scowl as she faced the Geist.

==

"No fair!" Valera grimaced as she saw the Geist regenerate a gaping slash in its stomach from her shield. They were half a dozen meters apart now, having blown each other mutually backwards from simultaneously hitting each other.

But where Valera nursed a few broken ribs, the Geist was as good as new, standing back up with almost no issue. Several necrotic arrows jutted out of its body, but there were not enough arrows to adequately neutralize the monster's healing.

"Valera, hold it down! Go all out!" Aldrich's voice rung out from outside the clearing.

"Yes, master!" Valera smiled widely under her helm, and if her face was visible, it would have shown her cheeks splitting apart as her smile grew impossibly, grotesquely wide - a trait of the Dullahan. Finally, she could let loose.

Valera heaved her cross shield back and then tossed it again.

The Geist dashed to the side, dodging the shield projectile. The shield smashed through the trunks of three trees, felling them.

Valera closed her fists as a bloody aura surged around her.

Because she had a warrior type class, she had both weapon specialties and combat specialties that granted her relevant skills in those areas. Her weapon specialty was in

using a shield and her combat specialty was as a Shielder, allowing her to use defensive skills geared towards guarding allies.

But when she tossed away her shield, her combat specialty turned from Shielder into Berserker and her weapon specialty changed from shield to bare-handed.

This significantly increased her offensive capabilities, and truthfully, aside from defending her master, there was nothing she loved better than brutalizing flesh with her own two fists.

"ORAA!" Valera used [Dash] to appear in front of the Geist and unleashed a heavy right hook straight into its face.

"Gehhhh!" the Geist gurgled as its face caved in, its large human teeth shattering and flying as it surged backwards, slamming heavily into a tree trunk behind it.

The Geist fell to the ground and rubbed its face, a fist sized impression punched deep into it. The impression buffed out and began to heal, but not before Valera was upon it again, this time sending a kick into the side of its head.

The Geist dashed behind Valera, turning into a white blur.

Valera predicted this move and spun around with an elbow, smashing into the Geist's skull again.

"Gah!" the Geist's head whipped backwards from the blow.

Valera rushed forwards and then bear hugged the Geist, pinning its bulky white arms to its sides while she exerted crushing force.

The Alpha Striker and the one remaining normal Striker circled the Geist, growling and waiting to pounce if it broke free. Arrows rained from above from the skeleton archer, lodging into the Geist's head. The skeleton rogue appeared from stealth, slashing rapidly at the Geist's back.

Aldrich stood at the edge of the clearing, away from direct danger, with Adam and Elaine by his side. Dynamite Girl stood in front of him, growling, her eyes bright orange with energy as they had been back when she was alive.

She wanted to go. She wanted to tear that monster apart. Aldrich knew that when she was alive, Dynamite Girl was known for her loud mouth and ferocity. Maybe that had stayed with her even past death.

"Go. Give that monster what it deserves." Aldrich waved Dynamite Girl ahead.

She sprinted forwards and leaped in the air, slapping her arms onto the sides of the Geist's muscular neck.

Dynamite Girl roared as her hands started to crackle. Sparks and pops rippled from them like fireworks before two enormous, bright orange explosions erupted outwards. The explosion was so fierce that it not only blew back Dynamite Girl, but also Valera and very nearly killed the skeleton rogue, shattering many of its ribs and skull.

A cloud of smoke rose from the center of the clearing as did the smell of roasted flesh.

Aldrich linked his smell with the Alpha Striker's, and from this, he knew that the Geist was sitting completely still in the center of the smoke, the upper half of its body completely vaporized.

Its regeneration worked quickly, though.

Already, its upper spine started to reform, as did flesh and muscle mass.

Aldrich stopped this. He stuck his staff out and spammed [Chill Bolt].

Because it was a Cantrip, it had no real cooldown. Bolt after bolt of pale white energy slammed into the Geist, permeating frost energy deep into the Variant's half-destroyed body.

Like Necrotic energy, Frost type damage also negated regeneration, though only when the [Frozen] status was fully applied. [Chill Bolt] did not inflict too much frost buildup, but spammed like this on a stationary target, it was all too easy to turn the Geist into a dead block of frozen, destroyed cells, not a single one left whole to regenerate properly.

[-60 Mana]

[Mana: 73/84 ] 13/84]

Aldrich waved his staff from side to side, batting away smoke as he stepped forwards, revealing the Geist's deeply frozen ice block of a lower half body.

Aldrich smiled at what he saw: a grave floated over the Geist, as did a Soul.

[Geist defeated!]

[+350 EXP]

[EXP Bar: 245/250 ] 595/250]

[Level Up!]

[Level 6 ] 7]

[EXP Bar: 345/340]

[Level Up!

[Level 7 ] 8]

### *Chapter 26: The Settlements*

Aldrich took in a breath as a green aura swirled around him, the experience from the Geist boosting his power by two entire levels.

[+10 stat points available to distribute]

"Mmmm, yes!" Valera positively moaned in ecstasy as power flowed into her, but where Aldrich's aura was green, hers was a deep, bloody red.

As a Chosen Undead, Valera leveled at the exact same rate as Aldrich, so she too had gained two levels, raising her from level 10 to level 12.

"How do you want me to spend my power?" said Valera, talking about how to distribute her own 10 new stat points.

"In strength, vitality, and agility where your affinities are. A three-five-two spread in those stats should work well," said Aldrich. He wanted Valera to be as physically powerful as possible to make up for his lack of melee combat prowess.

"Understood, master." Valera closed her eyes and clenched her fists, taking in a deep breath as she used her stats.

Aldrich saw her stats go up. Her class was as a Death Knight, and that class, like Necromancers, could choose a 'path' that specialized them. In her case, she had taken the Oath of Blood and Bone, specializing her in blood magic and body reinforcement.

Blood magic ordinarily cost both mana and health, but since Valera was a vampire, she could choose to increase the health costs in exchange for removing mana costs.

Because of this, just like Aldrich, vitality was the most important stat for Valera.

Her stat affinities were 1.5x in strength, 1.5x in vitality, and 1.2x in agility, gearing her towards being a tanky brawler.

[Chosen Undead: Valera stats]

>>

HP: 120/186

Mana: 21/21

=

Stats-

Strength: 37 ] 42

Agility: 22 ] 24

Vitality: 54 ] 62

Magic: 7

Attunement: 10

Perception: 10

>>

Aldrich saw Valera tuning her stats and he did the same.

[+5 Attunement, +10 with affinity bonuses]

[+2 Agility]

[+3 Vitality, +6 vitality with affinity bonuses]

[Vitality: 14 ] 20]

[Agility: 8 ] 10]

[Attunement: 21 ] 30]

[HP: 45/45 ] 60/60]

[Units controlled: 8/8 ] 8/10]

Aldrich cracked his neck as he spent his 2 new attunement points into units controlled. Soon, when he got to 50 Attunement, he could upgrade his [Raise Undead] spell to [Mass Raise Undead] and resurrect corpses en masse, not to mention a significant cooldown reduction.

"Ah, master, seeing you getting ever closer to your original strength makes me feel so very warm inside," said Valera as she put her hands to her face.

"Yeah. Soon, I'll be unstoppable. We'll be unstoppable," said Aldrich. He pointed his staff at the frozen Geist corpse. "Serve."

[-8 Mana]

[13/84 ] 5/84]

Because the Geist was strong enough, [Raise Undead] did not cost just 5 mana, but 10% of Aldrich's maximum mana pool. Thankfully, because his mana pool was still relatively low, the cost was not that significant.

The Geist corpse shook and then thawed, ice crystals shattering all around it. It then started to rapidly regenerate, growing its spine, ribs, skull, then the flesh and skin. Once again, it stood tall and musclebound, its eerie, permanently open, chattering smile now directed at Aldrich.

[Undead Geist Level 17 reanimated]

[Units controlled: 8/10 ] 9/10]

Aldrich saw as the Geist's soul faded away, flowing back into the Variant. It was odd to think that this creature had a soul. Did that prove the existence of the soul? Or were souls just a simple game concept limited only to the game itself?

It was impossible to tell and a philosophical discussion for later.

"Good, good," said Aldrich. "You were just within my limit to raise."

Any corpse that was more than ten levels over Aldrich was a corpse he could not raise. But after leveling up to level 7 from killing the Geist, he was just in the edge of the threshold to reanimate it. He did not take the Geist's soul to forge an item because he only had 20 coins so far and did not want to risk bad rolls.

In Elden World, monsters that had multiple powers were the worst to try and craft from because more often than not, an item would only have just one of their powers.

As a result, it was better to just reanimate these kinds of monsters so that they could use all their powers effectively versus wielding a weapon that only managed to channel one of their powers.

"Geh...geh (I serve you?)" said the Geist. Aldrich could now understand it through the mental link between summoner and summoned.

"I'm turning off your individuality for now," said Aldrich as he waved his hand. The Geist quietened, becoming a fully controlled unit the same as Dynamite Girl.

Seeing undead that could speak like this, Aldrich felt a pang of pain. If only he had reanimated faster, then he could have resurrected Adam and Elaine with their souls intact. Then, he could have saved them, been with them - he shook his head.

What was past was past. And besides, even in the lore, it was explicitly mentioned that resurrected undead had their souls twisted such that they were different from how they were in life. Thus, they lost their memories and though they could keep some core personality traits, they were entirely different beings.

Aldrich looked ahead, beyond the forest, towards Haven. All he could do was look ahead. To move forward.

Ever forward.

Towards vengeance.

==

Aldrich did not encounter any more powerful Variants throughout the remainder of the hour long trek to Haven. The Evileye spotted a few Strikers here and there, a Spined Boar and even a Big-arm Grizzly, but these natural Variants avoided Aldrich, running from him.

Or rather, they avoided the reanimated Gest, for the Geist was likely the apex predator of this forest.

To fill up his one remaining slot for units controlled, Aldrich summoned another Evileye. The more Aldrich used his current one, the more he began to appreciate how incredibly broken it was. It was essentially 'game breaking' considering basically nothing could detect it.

It gave Aldrich a complete view of anything he went into and made it so that he never went into a situation unprepared. That alone was worth way more than an individual strong unit.

"This disgusting creature will serve us well," said Valera as she walked by Aldrich while eyeing the Geist up and down. She then turned a glare to Dynamite Girl.

As she was not a zombie, her features were not rotted, retaining the rough prettiness she was known for in the hero community. "But her, well, I will keep an eye on her."

"No need," said Aldrich. "For the foreseeable future, I plan on keeping both of them without free will."

Aldrich's Evil Eyes saw the end of the forest two hundred meters ahead. The tall line of trees ended, sloping down into a meadow that funneled into dry, cracked earth lined with roads that hovercars zipped by on.

"We're here," said Aldrich. He stopped and turned around, staring at his growing army. An Alpha Striker, one ordinary Striker, Dynamite Girl, the Geist, Adam, Elaine, the Skeleton Rogue, and the Skeleton Archer. "All of you, stay here. Get back deeper in the forest."

Aldrich pointed at Dynamite Girl and the Geist and gave them limited free will through a command. "You two, protect everyone. Especially Adam and Elaine. Keep them in the forest and do not let anyone discover you.

If anyone discovers you, you kill them, no questions asked.

Nobody can know you are here."

Dynamite Girl and the Geist nodded and then walked away deeper into the forest, leading the rest of the undead behind them.

"Now, that leaves just us," said Aldrich to Valera.

"Yes, just us," said Valera. She shyly rubbed her gauntlets together like a typical maiden in love.

Aldrich looked Valera up and down, inspecting her armor.

"O-oh? Master, why are you looking at me like that?"

"You need to take that armor off," said Aldrich.

"S-so forward, master-," Valera blushed deeply.

"It stands out too much. You still have you [Ballroom Night Dress], right? Equip that. We need to look as human as possible."

"Understood, master," said Valera with a bow, understanding that Aldrich was being serious here. "And what of that hole in your chest, master?"

Aldrich wrapped himself in a large torn chunk of Dynamite Girl's bright orange cape. "This will have to do for now. I'll find something else to wear down there."

==

Aldrich wandered through winding streets of hastily constructed metal shacks, tents, and mobile trailers. Some of these shacks sold food, some clothing, some hardware - cheap porn holodiscs, stolen data chips, and the like.

People moved about with dirt and grim in their fingers and faces. Their expressions were serious and hardened, and many of them had goggles above their heads and wore hooded jackets with tears and patches littering them.

More notably, many of these individuals had cybernetic parts. Mechanical hands, clicking artificial eyes, chrome plates on their skulls, and the like.

These were Nomads. People that survived in the Wastelands because they were not privileged enough to live in a walled city or were just flat out criminals. Because they did not have to abide by any city laws, they often boosted themselves with cybernetics.

In cities, cybernetics were heavily regulated because they tended to cause something known as Technomania, a rabid insanity caused from too much cybernetic enhancement, particularly within the brain.

Out here, though, outside city walls, there were precious few laws that were enforced, so cybernetics flowed freely. After all, nomads had to take any and every advantage they could get to run from and fight Variants as they traveled through the Wastelands, hopping from walled city to city.

Nomads moved their mobile homes, motorcycles and shacks right outside the walls, creating temporary residences known as Settlements when they were not moving through the Wastelands.

Of course, if a Variant attacked, they were the first casualties, hence why most of these homes were built so shoddy and makeshift - they were easily built and easily destroyed by design. If the time came for the Nomads to run, then they could run at a moment's notice.

It was a known fact that though crime was relatively well policed within the walls of cities, there was little to no regulation in Settlements. In the distance, Aldrich saw Haven's thirty-meter-tall walls looming, large autocannons sweeping from side to side at the top of the walls, searching for Variants to gun down.

People from Haven who wanted to buy drugs, gamble, or buy illegal tech would come here, and this time, Aldrich was one of them. He was sure he could get two forged CIDs (citizen identification) here.

Nomads were known for being experts in black market dealings, especially with under-the-table tech. They might have looked rough and rugged, but they had a relatively strong techno presence.

Their cybernetics fell short of licensed cyber-doctors in walled cities, but it still got the job done. Not to mention that there were more than a handful of cases where highly skilled for-hire Nomad techno hackers that had managed to get valuable data even from established Megacorporations.

It was how they made a living in this new age of alter power boosted tech and data.

Aldrich walked side by side with Valera through the Settlements, smelling smoke, burning metal, and roasted food in the air.

Without her heavy armor to weigh her down, her figure stood out in full view. Her night dress was elegant, sleek and black and hugging her hips and straining at her sizable chest. Yet, where her skin was visible - her bare shoulders and arms in particular - it was obvious to see the outline of toned muscle from a lifetime of physical activity.

In Valera's case, a full lifetime and undeath of beating people to death.

Occasionally, a man would whistle at her or eye her for far too long, and she would respond with a deathly glare, immediately instilling both the fear of god and death into them and making them scam.

With his mask on and Dynamite Girl's cape as a makeshift cloak, he was largely unidentifiable, and in the first place, Nomads rarely bothered each other.

Aldrich had his two Evil Eyes scan ahead in the sky, searching for an appropriate shop. In a few minutes, he found one.

A large trailer fitted with vent pipes and a neon sign labeled with bright blue letters that read out TECH. Simple and to the point. The door of the trailer had the symbol of a bearded man with an eyepatch over it.

The symbol of the Odinsons, a fairly well known Nomad gang specialized in forgeries and robberies.

Aldrich cracked his neck and knuckles. The Odinsons were known for oftentimes getting violent in their dealings. "Valera, I know where we're going. And we might have to fight."

Valera smiled widely as she clenched her fists. A small portion of her powerful aura emanated, making nomads around them tense up in fear before scattering away like cockroaches exposed under light. "Then all the better, right, master?"

"Yeah," said Aldrich. Ideally, he would get his two forged CIDs with no issue, but if a problem ever arose, well, he was ready to get his hands bloody for he had no sympathy for criminals.

## *Chapter 27: The Odinsons*

Aldrich and Valera made their way to the Odinsons shop. It was a good walk away from the main 'streets' of the Settlement, taking up its own isolated territory. As he walked, he had the Evileye scout everything it could.

Their shop was a large, mobile trailer home that looked somewhat like a subway car or railcar. It was long and rectangular in shape, though sizable enough that it could reliably fit in twenty people to live rather comfortably.

Among mobile homes in the Settlements, this was one of the larger ones for sure, indicating that the Odinsons ranked quite highly among nomads in terms of wealth and power.

The home was decked out with modifications to survive traveling through the harsh environment of the Wastelands where sand storms, torrential storms, magnetic storms, and basically any storm one could think of blasted the land.

There were blinking green generators at the top of the home that likely projected force fields while auto-turrets rotated around, pointing directly at Aldrich and Valera as they approached. Two large cannon barrels were fitted into the front of the home, and bright, glowing white lines streaked on the cannons indicated they were energy weapons.

Twelve large power bikes were parked to the sides of the trailer home, attached by cables to sockets on the home to charge their electric engines. Once, gas and petroleum were used pretty often in the world, but that had phased out completely since the Monstering when rising climate temperatures and mass, sudden environmental instability forced cleaner energies to the forefront.

The home was armored in retractable layer of shingled black Durasteel like the scales on an armadillo, though since the home was anchored and open for business, the armor was fully retracted.

Aldrich counted eight Odinson members outside, though likely, there were just as many if not more inside the mobile home. Not bad, all things considered. He could get a general sense of power from the Odinsons, reading their levels.

They ranged from levels 1 to 5. Pathetically low, but expected. Nomads generally did not have amazing powers. If they did, then they would not be living like this out here. Hence the reliance on cybernetics and conventional firearms.

The only exception was wanted villains, but as far as Aldrich could tell, these guys were just low-level gangsters.

Then again, level ratings seemed to favor physical strength and destructive capability. Some of them might have had confusing or unique powers that made them more difficult to deal with.

Aldrich was still careful. He still took the time to formulate what to do. But he did know one thing, if things went bad, terribly bad, he would leave no survivors.

==

Aldrich and Valera walked up to the Odinsons base. Odinson members stood up from tables and tarps where they enjoyed the shade to talk or play cards or inspect tech and put their hands to their hips, thumbing Bolter pistols.

All of the Odinsons notably had an artificial blue left eye - a signature marking for their gang. Among this were tattoos that evoked the image of old Norse runes.

"What do you want, Mr. Mask?" An Odinson, a big guy, probably easily six foot two (~188cm), came up to Aldrich and Valera. He scratched his rough blonde beard with a mechanical hand and smiled at Valera. "Or are you here to sell her? Cause' if you are, I'd buy in a damn heartbeat. Promise I won't rough her up too much, either. Gotta make sure you can keep her fresh to put food on your table, right?"

A nerve became visible on Valera's forehead, and Aldrich immediately raised a hand in front of her as he sensed a lethal punch coming.

"No, I'm no pimp," said Aldrich. "I'm here to buy tech."

"Yeah?" said the Odinson. He looked disappointed before he waved others of his gang onward. "Boys, get them checked up."

Two Odinsons came by waving metal detecting sticks in front of Aldrich and Valera.

"Nothing on em but the clothes on their back," said one of them.

"Check AC count."

The inspecting Odinsons took out two scanners that fit over their eye like a shade. The scanners were red in color and projected a small web of holographic red light that washed over Aldrich and Valera.

"AC count...zero?" said the Odinsons in confusion.

"Zero? The fuck? Scan them again."

Another round of scanning commenced.

"Yeah, it's zero. No doubt about it."

"You two are Duds? While I'll be damned," said the bearded Odinson with the mechanical hand. "Haven't seen one in a long time. Thought your kind was extinct or some sh\*t, heh. But guess you all won't pose any threat."

The Odinson turned around and talked into a radio transmitter in his hand. "Two clients, boss. Lookin' for tech. No weapons. Both Duds. Pretty sure they ain't cops or undercover heroes. You can see em' through the cameras, too."

He put his hand to his ear and heard commands from the other side. He smiled as he looked at Valera again. "Got it."

The Odinson nodded to Aldrich and Valera and waved them forward, suspiciously friendly now. "Go ahead. Look around and buy what you want if you got the creds for it."

The door to the mobile home slid open with a heavy click, and Aldrich and Valera stepped in while two Odinsons walked behind them, almost corralling them into the home. The insides were dimly lit with neon purples and dark blues like a night club. The walls were just bare, solid metal with zero concern for home decoration.

There were tables and chairs and furniture scattered around hap hazardly with Odinsons smoking up a drug-fueled storm, some passed out, some fondling half-dressed prostitutes in their laps, and others watching telescreen broadcasts.

The dank smell of Green, the newest and most concentrated strain of marijuana, wafted through the air as did the acrid smell of regular smoke.

The heavy sliding doors clicked closed behind Aldrich and Valera, and as they did, a silence descended on in the room.

All of them stared at Valera. A few whistles came out.

"Look what we have here," said one of the Odinsons as he eyed Valera up and down while sprawled out on a couch.

Valera just stared straight ahead, not meeting eyes with any of the Odinsons.

\*Master, when can we bash their skulls in?\* said Valera telepathically.

\*Patience, Valera. Let's see how this plays out.\*

Aldrich immediately mentally commanded his two Evil Eyes to scout this room and the others, getting a full read of the home's layout.

"Yeah, we got customers, Bjorn. Keep it in your pants for now," said the Odinson with the mechanical hand. "Brant here will lead you to the tech room. Have fun." He motioned to an Odinson that was heavily decked out with cybernetics.

His skull was completely chrome capped and both his arms were entirely mechanical.

Brant smiled at them and ushered them forwards with a head movement. Aldrich and Valera followed, but by now, Aldrich knew everything that was going to happen.

The mobile home was roughly split into two. Right now, they were in the living quarters. Deeper in, the other half of the home comprised of a tech room where a duo of goggle wearing technos moved about in rolling chairs, maintaining weapons, detached cybernetic parts, and, most importantly, creating forgeries.

They forged works of art and identification cards. They also checked the authenticity of various things the Odinsons had stolen from supply convoys or heists in walled cities using fake IDs.

Jewelry, mostly, for in today's society where consumerism still ran high to keep human morale high, useless and petty things like jewelry still had high value, especially in walled cities where there was enough wealth and stability for people to find something, anything, to prove they were richer and better than others.

But this was not all.

Behind the tech room, Aldrich saw five Odinsons with shock batons armed and ready. They had expectant, hungry smiles on their faces. It was obvious what they wanted to do.

They wanted to knock out Aldrich and Valera, especially Valera, and then do what they wanted. Probably kill Aldrich and force Valera into sexual servitude. They did this because they thought that Aldrich and Valera were Duds.

Completely and utterly powerless.

This was why they did not even care to ask Aldrich to remove his mask. They did not think he was any threat at all.

It made sense for these pieces of trash to do this. They had lived by the motto of stealing from the weak their entire lives.

Why would they change now?

When they saw two seemingly helpless prey stand right in front of them?

\*Master, do you see what I am seeing?\* said Valera.

\*Well, yeah, you're seeing what I'm seeing\* said Aldrich.

\*Oh, right, I forgot, teehee. Sometimes I feel we are so close that your eyes are mine, and mine yours. Anyways, master, do I have permission to fight? To kill? To rip and tear?\*

\*Yeah\* said Aldrich. \*Just remember: no survivors.\*

\*My master, you do not have to tell me that. I know\*

### *Chapter 28: Gang Wipeout*

"Just a lil' more, and you'll get what you want, hehe," said Brant as he kept ushering Aldrich and Valera forward. They were now at the end of a dimly lit hallway, just a few steps away from the brightly lit tech room.

The two technos notably had been ordered to stop working and hid under their counter and worktables until whatever it was that happened blew over.

"There, just across that door," said Brant as he pointed to the open entrance into the tech room. The boss is there, too. He's a real nice guy. You can deal with him. Bet he'll treat you real nice, too."

"Come on in. We don't bite. We got a bad rep cause' of our robberies and all, but we got noble hearts, you know. We only steal from rich pricks in walled cities.

To fellow nomads like you two, we only got generosity," said the boss, marked as the head of this gang because he wielded a mechanical spear-energy gun that was supposed to be the stand in for Gungnir, the mythological spear that the Norse god Odin wielded.

He stood several meters behind the door with a surprisingly welcoming smile, positioned like bait so that he was visible but none of the five baton wielding goons at the sides of the door were.

One Evil Eye was positioned in the tech room, watching everything that happened. Another was positioned outside, keeping tabs on the rest of the goons.

"Yeah, go on in." Brant smiled hungrily, waving Aldrich and Valera in.

"How about you lead us in?" said Aldrich. "We can all go in together."

"Huh? No can do. Boss likes to keep his meetings private and real personal, heh. He likes to get first dibs on clients, y'know."

"I wasn't asking." Aldrich casted [Negative Surge] on himself. Green strands of energy infused into his body, covering it with a thin, visible aura. For ten seconds, Aldrich now received 20% of his magic stat into strength, agility, and perception. In his case, this was a six stat bonus.

[-15 Mana]

[Mana: 55/84 ] 40/84]

\*\*[Author's Note: Aldrich drank 2 charges of his mana flask prior to this]\*\*

[Strength: 11 ] 17]

[Agility: 10 ] 16]

[Perception: (10) ] 16]

Aldrich reached out and grabbed Brant's chrome plated skull. His fingers dug into the metal, warping it with moaning cracks.

"Th-the fuck, man!?" shouted Brant.

"I go left, you go right," said Aldrich.

"Understood, master," said Valera as her eyes lit up red and her fists closed.

Aldrich leaped in and held Brant up to the left as a human shield. Two Odinsons with shock batons yelled as they slammed their batons down but only hit their fellow Odinson. Brant convulsed and foamed at the mouth as the electricity savaged him.

Aldrich threw Brant towards the baton wielding Odinsons, turning him into a human-chrome bowling ball that knocked his fellow gangsters down like bowling pins.

Aldrich glanced to Valera's side.

Valera had just taken the baton hits right to her shoulders. The blue electricity cracked through her body, but all she did was just smile. Three Odinsons just kept beating and whacking at her with the batons with shock ridden impacts.

"Is that it!? Is that it!? You can't even make me feel pain!"

"What the fuck!? How's she still standing!?" said an Odinson as he swung his baton again, this time in fear.

Valera grabbed the Odinson's wrist and snapped it like a twig.

"FUUUUCK!" the Odinson went down on a knee as he let go of his baton.

"Get off of him!" said the other two Odinsons as they let go of their batons and tried to pry Valera's hand off of their brethren's wrist. None of them could make Valera even budge.

"Pathetic," said Valera with an utterly bored expression on her face. "You want me to let go of him? Fine."

Another scream of pain rang through the air as Valera tore the Odinson's arm straight off. Blood arced and trickled from the dismembered limb, and Valera patted it in her palm before using it to smash the other two Odinsons in the head, completely crushing their skulls and instantly killing them.

Their blood circled around Valera, fueling her [Crimson Furnace] shield.

Aldrich in the meanwhile disabled the Odinsons on his end.

Where Valera overwhelmed with enormous stats, Aldrich used his comparatively lesser stats to their maximal extent, using his extensive martial arts training.

He weaved expertly between baton strikes and then struck their throats, collapsing their windpipes, or gouged out their remaining eye with finger pokes before dropping them with precise, quick liver punches.

This left three Odinsons including Brant disabled and groaning on the ground, though Brant was dead, the chrome capping on his skull caved in from Aldrich's grip. Aldrich killed the remaining disabled Odinsons by stomping on their necks, breaking them to make sure there was no way they could regenerate or suddenly blindside him with a power.

All this in a sequence of just one and a half seconds, before the Odinsons could even draw their Bolter pistols or use their powers.

"Experiment success," said Aldrich. "With [Negative Surge] and my martial arts, I can beat armed Alters even as a caster. Though I guess this trash doesn't count for much of a challenge."

"Indeed," said Valera as she stomped her heels down on a downed Odinson's skull, shattering it and splattering her pale legs with blood. The blood quickly drained away, absorbed into Valera's body. She made a disgusted face. "Even their blood is utterly foul. I was so excited to taste fresh human blood, but theirs is tainted. It tastes like rust. Like metal."

"Too many cybernetics," noted Aldrich.

"H-how!? Alters!? How did you avoid the scanners!?" said the boss as he aimed his spear gun at Valera and fired off a bolt of plasma.

The plasma scattered against Valera's energy resistant blood shield, turning into nothing but smoke and crackling electricity.

Valera turned to the boss and glared at him, her black and red eyes monstrous, inhuman, and utterly lacking anything resembling human mercy.

"W-what!?" the boss stepped backwards while his knees trembled. He clenched his fists, and his one remaining eye glowed white. A barrier of translucent white energy formed around him. His Alter power. "What-who are you two!? Heroes!?"

He looked down at the bloody and brutalized bodies of his men. No heroes would ever do this. "No, not heroes, then...villains!? Do you work for another gang!? God...it isn't about the money, is it!? We'll pay it back, I swear. The Trident will get what I promised them!"

Aldrich immediately stiffened. "The Trident?"

He heard shouting and footsteps echo behind him as Odinsons were alerted to the scuffle.

"Valera, take care of everyone outside this room. Remember: no survivors," said Aldrich. "I'll take care of things here."

Valera's Dullahan smile showed. Her cheeks split apart as her smile grew from ear to ear, baring rows of sharp, bestial teeth and large, bloodsucking fangs.

"As you wish, my master," said Valera. Her voice had a throaty, inhuman reverb underlining it now. She sprinted off as a black and white blur, and as her quick footsteps echoed down the hallway, screams rang through the air as she tore her way through the gang.