

Super Necromancer System

#Chapter 29: Gang Wipeout (2) - Read Super Necromancer System Chapter 29: Gang Wipeout (2)

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"The Trident, is it?" said Aldrich as he made his way towards the Odinson boss. The Trident. A name that Aldrich would never forget.

The criminal organization that had killed his parents. One of the largest international crime syndicates on the planet whose web of influence spread from North America all the way to East Asia. Some of the most famous and feared villains worked for it.

Ending that organization was going to take time and power, but thankfully for Aldrich, he had time, and soon, he would have power that nobody could question.

"Now why would the Trident be dealing with a low-level nomad gang like you, hm?" said Aldrich.

"You aren't Trident? Then what the hell do you want with me? Why would you kill my boys like that!? For what!?" said the boss.

"For what? Let's be real here. What were you going to do otherwise? Knock me out and kill me? Do whatever you wanted with my female companion who is now gleefully ripping your mens' skulls from their spines?" said Aldrich. He manifested a coin from his palm. "I wanted to barter and trade fairly. You attacked me. I defended myself. And now, you pay."

Aldrich took a bolter pistol and shot three rounds into the Odinson boss's shield before it clicked empty. The bullets- large bolt fired rail slugs - slammed against the shield and pinged off harmlessly. Fairly impressive.

Bolters were crude in terms of design, but their miniature magnetic rail bolt shots, though notoriously inaccurate and prone to jamming, packed a massive punch.

"You can't hurt me," said the boss. He put a hand behind him, resting it against the wall of the tech room. Various wires sparked around him as electrical energy fed into him, fueling the shield. "And I got enough power here to put this shield up for hours.

Other nomads are gonna' come knockin', and when they do, you better be ready for a fucking war."

"Trust me, it won't come to that," said Aldrich. He analyzed the fact that the boss was still breathing. Oxygen still passed through that barrier. He got up real close to the boss, right in front of the barrier, and put a hand in front of it.

"[Horror Warp]" said Aldrich, chanting the spell. There was no direct need to chant the name of the spell, but he realized that it made it easier for him to focus on it, thus increasing his cast time.

A dark, wispy cloud of shadowy particles gathered around his hand, and within this black cloud were glowing red eyeballs that stared hungrily at the boss.

"Hope you have nice dreams. When you wake up, I'll make sure you're in a better mood to talk," said Aldrich as he walked away. The [Horror Warp] passed through the boss's barrier.

"W-what!?" said the boss. His eyes widened in terror as the spell enveloped his face. He started to choke for a second before he fell to his knees and planted on the floor face first, drooling. He shivered and shook every so often, blinking rapidly and growing pale and whimpering as if caught in a nightmare, and indeed, he was.

"Now, you two." Aldrich looked over to the counter where the technos hid. They were still cowering under the desk. "Get up before I put a bolt through both your skulls."

The two technos stood up with arms raised in surrender, trembling in terror. They were skinnier than the other Odinsons with visor goggles and mohawks. Notably, they had sockets in their skulls which they could use to jack into technology and interface with it directly with their brains.

"P-please, we'll give you anythin'! Anythin' you want, man, we got it!" they said.

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Valera made her way through the dark hallway like a specter of bloody carnage. She spied three men aiming their strange ranged weapon at her from several meters away. Before they could fire, she [Dashed] behind them.

"Teleportation!?" one of them exclaimed in surprise before Valera took his head and smashed it into a pulp against a wall.

"And super strength!? How many powers does she have!?"

"Just shoot! Shoot!"

Valera punched a hole straight through one man before he could fire and used his body as a shield to tank bolter shots. The corpse shuddered as bolts blew off large chunks from its back.

"Peek-a-boo," said Valera as she lowered the corpse skewered on her arm, her gleaming red and black eyes wide in excitement as they settled on the remaining gunman with hunger.

"Help! I need help! He-," began the man before his head blew apart from a powerful punch.

Valera activated her [Blood Sense], detecting the presence of warm flesh and blood bodies all around her through the walls. She shuddered in ecstasy at how much pain and terror she would inflict. She ran through the hallway and entered the living room where the Odinsons were just now beginning to get out of their drug induced stupors and get their bolter pistols ready.

Valera's eyes darted from side to side. Six more prey. She disappeared in a flash, appearing right in front of the nearest Odinson. The Odinson's eyes widened as he saw her hands dug into his guts.

"Bye bye," said Valera as she tore the man straight in half. She closed her eyes in bliss and bathed in the blood and gore, all of it fueling her [Crimson Furnace] shield.

"Shoot! Shoot! Kill her!"

Bolt after bolt fired at Valera. They pierced through her blood barrier as they were physical damage, not energy attacks, but when they reached her body, her bare, pale skin, they crumpled up and bounced off like they had hit a wall of indestructible metal.

"What kind of fucking Alter is she!? She's so goddamn strong!"

"Doesn't matter! If you want to live, you keep fucking firing! Erik, use your power! Beat her ass!"

"Oh? Someone is going to challenge me?" Valera's ear to ear, grotesque smile flashed as she looked around.

One of the men, Erik, presumably, shuddered and convulsed before his shirt ripped apart. His flesh turned red as he swelled up to a size of three meters, dwarfing everyone in the room. He had to hunch his head so as to fit in the room, and his thick muscles made it obvious how much power he had.

"Yes, that's more like it," said Valera. She threw the two halves of the man she had split open at two of the other Odinsons, killing them with the high-speed impact throws aimed expertly to cave their skulls in.

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"Yeah? You'll do anything?" Aldrich tossed the Elden World coin he had manifested over to them while pointing the bolter pistol at them. "You guys are masters at forgery and theft, right? Especially jewelry. Appraise that. I want to know what it's worth."

One of the technos shakily took the coin and stared at it, tapping his visor goggles. The goggles whirled as they focused on the coin.

"Holy sh*t...where'd you get this, man?" said the techno.

The coin shone a sheen of mystical gold and the size of a man's entire palm. The circumference of the coin was grooved and the face of the coin carved with the face of a beautiful woman's face with flowing locks of wondrously patterned hair.

"The way this face is carved and the hair, man, the hair - you see the patterning on this sh*t?" said the techno as he held it up for the other one to look. "Pure artistry. Who made this? And solid gold, too?"

Aldrich got the information he was looking for. Looked like coins were worth something in this world. He waved the technos forward. "Give me back my coin."

"Y-yeah, you got it, boss," said the techno as he flipped the coin over.

Aldrich nabbed the coin in his palm and disappeared it into his inventory.

"Now for what I really want," said Aldrich. "One of you decrypt this."

He reached into Ghost's bag that he had carried with him and slid his Eye-Phone over.

"Y-you got it! A model X, is it? We can break through this in a couple min," A techno took the phone and took it to another table where he connected it via cable to a computer screen. He jacked into the computer with the socket in his head.

"And you," Aldrich pointed to the remaining techno. "You sell CIDs, right? Show me everything you have. I need them for myself and my companion."

"You got it, man," said the techno. "You think you can spare us that coin for it? Some of our CIDs are real fuckin' expensive. It ain't easy or cheap to get around Net securities."

"How about a bolt instead?" said Aldrich as he raised the barrel of the bolter pistol right at the techno's face. "Nevermind a coin, if you want to get out of this with your lives, you do what I say. Get to fucking work."

"G-got it, man!" the techno hurried over to the back of the room and opened a locked cabinet where countless license cards sat neatly arranged in black drawers. He took a whole drawer and put it down on the counter in front of Aldrich.

"Take your pick, man," said the techno. "We got class 3, 2, and 1 CIDs. We got private investigator CIDs, police CIDs, even CIDs for the big fuckin' mega corporations. We need them when we gotta' sneak into headquarters and steal sh*t.

Just take what you need, we snap your pic, upload it to the ID, and you got a whole ass new identity. Sh*t would cost ten thousand credits minimum, but for you - on the house. Long as we stay alive."

"Impressive," said Aldrich. Citizen identifications had classes depending on what class of citizen one was. The higher class a citizen, the wealthier and more influential they were.

Class 3 comprised mostly of manual laborers and bottom rung society while class 2 consisted mostly of white-collar job workers and heroes. Class 1 was the real gold where the wealthiest corporate executives, politicians, and the top 100 heroes existed.

"I got a real good suggestion for you here," said the techno as he took out a pair of CIDs. "This was for a young couple that got rich off inherited trust funds. It's class 1, meaning you'll be able to go anywhere, and it's got the least baggage.

Your supposed money comes from a private fund, so there ain't no corporation you're supposed to be workin' for that people can trace you back to. If you want to live a real quiet, real nice life, this is the best."

"I'll take them," said Aldrich. "And these."

He took out ten CIDs for himself and Valera. Each one was linked to a large corporation and would allow them to infiltrate their headquarters when necessary under forged identities. He did not necessarily need these for now, but he had no idea if he would in the future.

And it was better to always be prepared.

"T-ten more? Please, man, we run a fuckin' business over here. Some of these were promised to some real big shot clients-," began the techno.

"You won't be running this 'business' with a bolt through your head, no?" said Aldrich. "You've seen what I've done to your friends. I won't hesitate to leave your brains smeared on these walls."

"Y-yeah, I get it." The techno begrudgingly took the CIDs to a computer. "Can you bring your lady friend here? Need her picture."

Aldrich mentally looked through Valera's eyes. She was soaked in blood and guts. She was outside the mobile home atop the corpse of a giant, red-skinned man with an

exposed skull and various fist shaped dents in his chest. All around him were the blood drained corpses of Odinsons. She had wiped out the entire gang.

Valera smiled as she sank her clawed hands deep into the red-skinned Odinson's throat, draining his blood straight through the jugular.

Valera, I need you here said Aldrich.

Valera immediately nodded. *Understood, master*.

Aldrich only had to wait three seconds before Valera appeared. She smashed through the ceiling of the tech room and landed perfectly beside Aldrich with her head bowed.

"I have eliminated all of these filthy humans," said Valera as the blood drenching her pale skin entirely red faded away, absorbed into her. She flashed a stare at the two technos, causing them to shriek. "Now, shall I dispose of them?"

"No, we need to take pictures," said Aldrich.

"Pictures?" said Valera.

"Right, you don't know what cameras are," said Aldrich. "They're like...images of us stored in recording crystals."

"Oh, to commemorate this slaughter, is it?" said Valera. "Of course, my master!"

Valera shyly leaned on Aldrich's shoulder and looked ahead, waiting for their image to be recorded.

"Uh...pictures taken separately," said one of the technos.

"You dare to ruin this moment!?" began Valera, her voice rising and killing intent radiating off of her.

"Take a picture of us together as well. Print it out," said Aldrich. "Then take the separate pics for our IDs."

"You-you got it," said one of the technos. He snapped a pic by staring at Aldrich and Valera and tapping a button on his visor goggles.

"Now, we take separate pictures," said Aldrich.

"Yes, master," said Valera as her ear-to-ear smile faded away into one more normal and regularly happy.

The techno snapped their pics individually and then took Aldrich's CIDs. He placed them on a tablet linked to a computer that he operated by jacking into it via head socket.

"How long will this take?" said Aldrich. "And don't even think about calling for help. Nevermind about time. If this takes over twenty minutes, I'm shooting both of you."

"H-holy sh*t, man, we're working as fast as we can!" said a techno.

"Up to you to work faster, then," said Aldrich simply.

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It took twenty minutes, but the technos got things done in fifteen minutes.

They handed over Ghost's unlocked phone and Aldrich's new CIDs.

Aldrich put them all in Ghost's bag and zipped it up.

"We good now, right man? We did so much sh*t for you-," said one of the technos.

Aldrich shot him through the head, dropping him to the ground.

Meanwhile, Valera hummed to herself happily through the violence as she stared at a framed photo of her and Aldrich together, blushing and holding a hand to her cheek.

"What the fuck! You said you would let us go!" said the one remaining techno.

Aldrich pointed the bolter pistol at him. "I never guaranteed your lives. And you two talk too easily."

"We didn't do nothing to you!" said the techno. "All I do here is just work on tech! I-I was just following orders, you know!"

"Orders, huh?" said Aldrich. "Real convenient that when sh*t turns sour, you pin it on orders. But you were so willing to just stand there and let us die or get enslaved.

It's so easy to follow orders when it's good for you, no?

But you know, I'm curious: how well will you take orders when they're bad for you?

So here's my order to you. Die."

Aldrich shot the last techno through the head. The bolt blew his head up completely like a bomb had been set off inside of it.

"Time to burn this place down," said Aldrich as he spied various exposed, sparking wires and crates packed with live ammunition both shrapnel and incendiary grenades. Perfect for blowing this place up and making sure no surveillance or data was left behind of them.

Chapter 30: Loot

[16 Odinson Gangsters defeated!]

[+80 EXP]

[EXP Bar: 5/500] 85/500]

"Now, shall we get to razing this base?" said Valera.

"Not yet. I'm going to loot this place as much as possible first," said Aldrich. He went over to the nightmare wrapped Odinson boss and patted him down, finding an Eye-Phone, cigars, a lighter, wallet, and, most notably, a set of car keys.

Aldrich took the keys and phone for himself before motioning to Valera. "Take a tarp from outside and wrap him in it. We're taking this guy with us for questioning."

"Ah, questioning, is it?" Valera smiled. "I do love some questioning. Especially when pain is involved."

Valera grabbed the Odinson boss by the collar and leaped up through the hole in the ceiling she had made.

Aldrich looked around and scrapped together any valuables he could. He took as many credit chips as possible from drawers in the tech room. These were sleek black chips made by Credit Union, the largest credit banker in the world, and when inserted into a credit machine or personal device along with a CID, could transfer credits directly to the owner's bank account.

He found a larger bag to carry things in, and in it, he dumped in a few bolter pistols, grenades, and a box of ammunition. He also packed a signal generator and two laptops owned by one of the technos.

"Serve," said Aldrich to the first techno he had killed, the one with his head still intact. A soul hovered over him as did souls for everyone else he and Valera had killed. Mathematically, a drop rate of souls like this was near impossible.

A drop rate for a soul was 5%. But it seemed that every single human that died so far had dropped a soul.

Gave more credence to the idea that souls did exist, and they existed in every human and, interestingly, some Variants.

This would make Aldrich's level up journey much, much faster as souls did not have to be crafted. They could just be consumed for half the experience that their original owners gave.

Aldrich watched as the mohawked, visor wearing techno stood up from the pool of blood he was slumped over. A gaping hole in his chest matched him with Aldrich.

[-5 Mana]

[Mana: 20/84] 15/84]

Aldrich made room for the techno by letting go of his one last remaining normal Striker. He would have liked to say goodbye to the undead personally, but it was not possible here.

Aldrich analyzed his power. As expected, the techno had a fairly common power that let him interface with technology with his mind via a plug on the body that linked with major nerves that further linked with the brain, though usually hardcore technos had plugs etched directly on their heads.

Although undead resurrected with a soul lost their previous identity, they did not lose their powers.

This meant that hopefully, Aldrich could use the techno for more tech-based needs as his ability to use technology was based off the usage of his power.

With this in mind, Aldrich had taken the laptops and a signal generator for Net connectivity in the Variant forest.

Everything else was not especially valuable. Drugs, more weapons, and the like.

Aldrich harvested the rest of the souls and moved on, planting multiple timed incendiary grenades around various key points in the base for a clean demolition.

[+15 Odinson Souls obtained]

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Aldrich left the Odinson base and saw Valera standing with the bagged up Odinson boss on her shoulder.

"Where to now, master?" said Valera.

"Back to the forest. I've gotten what I came here for, and I want to lay low for the rest of the day." Aldrich walked behind the Odinson base and saw the boss's personal ride: an ARMA AEP (All Environmental Purpose) armored car.

ARMA was a renowned megacorporation that focused on selling 'peacekeeping' military tech highly accessible for the common consumer, though they did have a higher end line for supplying police forces with. The consumer grade equipment was classified as green grade while the police equipment was blue grade.

The boss's armored car was blue grade, ordinarily meant for police but of course, there were no rules in the black market.

It was a solid four wheeled drive that could maneuver through the Variant forest quite well with its sturdy construction and ability to enter a sleeker 'hover mode' that, though slower, could float freely through narrow tree gaps with its smaller surface area and maneuverability.

Aldrich unlocked the car with the keys he had taken from the boss and popped open the trunk.

"Put that guy in there and close the trunk when you're done," said Aldrich.

"Understood, master," said Valera. She thumped the boss down and slammed the trunk door over him before staring at the armored car with her head tilted like a curious cat. "What is this, my master?"

"It's called a car. People use it to get around. Think of it like a mount, except it's pure machinery," said Aldrich as he got in the front seat. He had the techno open up the seat beside him, waving Valera in like a chauffeur.

Valera stepped in and sat beside Aldrich, marveling at the various screens and buttons and controls and blinking lights around her. "How quaint and wondrous. It almost reminds me of Dwarven magitek with the metal and the buttons, but even that used magic. Truly, there is no magic here? None at all?"

"If you can't sense it, it's not here," said Aldrich.

"It is still unbelievable," said Valera. "I have always hated the smoke belching and loud roaring of those dwarven metal beasts, but I suppose...there are some benefits to this technology."

Valera looked down at the framed picture of her and Aldrich. She was leaning against Aldrich and smiling widely with a few blood spatters on her face shoulders while the limp bodies of Odinsons were blurred out in the background.

She blushed as she looked at the picture.

Aldrich smiled at Valera before he jammed the keys into the car and got the engine humming. "Alright, time to move out."

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Aldrich parked as deep into the forest as he could, but at a certain point, even the armored car's hover mode could not fit through the thick growth of the forest.

"Incredible!" said Valera as she left the car. "The ride is so smooth, not at all like the galloping of a horse. And there are so many of these 'cars', too. On the road, I must have seen hundreds of them moving about, and in such orderly fashion too."

"Yeah, traffic lights and laws will tend to do that," said Aldrich. The quaint thing was that although Settlements were pretty lawless zones, the roads leading in and out of walled cities were maintained directly by the Alterhuman Agency and Panopticon, so they were fairly heavily policed.

This deterred nomads from blocking roads and stealing from drivers and supply convoys, though the key word here was deterrence. It was no guarantee of safety, and especially in more remote road stretches, the threat of nomad attacks was quite high.

Aldrich's undead came out of trees and bushes, surrounding his car, and he waved at them, finding comfort in being with his small but growing army again.

"I'm back," said Aldrich, nodding especially to Adam and Elaine. "And one step closer to getting back at Seth Solar."

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Later that night, with the moon rising high above and shining its silvery pale light down on the forest, Aldrich sat in a small, watching as the techno he reanimated worked with a laptop. The laptop was plugged into the signal generator - a rectangular black box with blinking green lights - and also plugged into the techno via cables.

Aldrich smiled. The experiment on whether the techno could use his power even as an undead had been a success.

Technos could still use their power to operate tech. This gave even more weight to what was known as the Cassandra Principle.

It was a well known phenomena that techno Alters, especially the much higher end ones who could create technology that seemed to belong centuries ahead, could not actually articulate how they made this technology or share the principles or construction behind it.

When they worked on their tech, they did so almost in a trance, and often, this trance was highly addictive, like being in an euphoric dream.

As a result, the strongest technos were often known for extreme passion and protectiveness over their technology on top of an inability to share their ideas.

The extent to which a techno was affected by the Cassandra Principle varied greatly.

Some could actually share their technology and explain how it was made, but it was a known rule that the more advanced tech was, the less accessible it became.

One thing Aldrich noted was that he could not see through the techno's eyes or mind when he neurally linked with the laptop.

He was blocked out while the techno worked, and that meant Aldrich had to give the techno individuality to function on his own.

"Alrighty, that's done," said the techno as he handed Aldrich his forged CIDs. All the credits he had stolen had been transferred to his new fake identity as a Mr. Bruce Vane, netting him with a total of around 10,000 credits to his balance.

That was not a lot, especially considering he was supposed to have inherited a multi-million credit fortune, but then again, Aldrich did not really need that many credits. He just needed enough to get into and out of places he needed to in cities.

"Onto the phones." The techno plugged Ghost's Eye-Phone and the Odinson boss's eye phones into ports in the laptop. The technos visor glowed a tint of blue as lines of text, images, and code sprawled across the laptop screen in near unintelligible fashion to someone not as tech savvy as Aldrich.

The techno scanned the content of the phones for any information relevant to Aldrich.

Meanwhile, Aldrich nodded at the success of the second experiment: one regarding individuality of undead and how it affected their performance.

Even with individuality, the techno was utterly subservient to Aldrich.

He had wanted to experiment how much individuality an undead could exhibit and whether it would inhibit Aldrich's command over them.

Thus, he had also formed a hunting party consisting of the Geist, Dynamite Girl, and Valera to roam around the forest, hunting down natural Variants to farm EXP. In this party, he gave Dynamite Girl and the Geist individuality with the key order to follow Valera's orders.

The Geist and Dynamite Girl had an instinctive dislike for each other, but they put that aside for Aldrich's orders and worked surprisingly efficiently.

By consuming all the Odinson souls for EXP (with each of them offering 3 EXP) and the hunting party taking down several more Variants, Aldrich had gotten to level 9 simply by doing nothing himself.

He began to realize that once he hit a critical mass of undead, he could farm experience from anywhere across multiple locations because his undead had no range limiter nor time limit. His growth was exponential, and this was the start of the curve up.

He dumped his 5 extra stat points into Attunement, netting him two extra unit slots.

[+5 Attunement, +10 with affinity bonuses]

[Attunement: 31] 41]

[Unit Limit: 10] 12]

Aldrich commanded Valera to save the corpses of a Alloy Wing Eagle and Big-arm Grizzly to add to his undead army. The eagle, especially, was of interest to Aldrich as it was large enough for him to use as aerial transport.

"Alright, I've finished scanning through these phones, unlocking locked files and folders, you name it," said the techno. "So, what do you need, boss?"

"Hm," Aldrich thought about what info he needed for a second before he was interrupted by a groan.

The crinkling of a tarp sounded in his ear as he turned to see the wrapped up boss rolling around as he moaned and groaned in pain and fear as he awoke from his nightmare.

"You know what, he'll know what to look for better than me," said Aldrich as he walked over and put a foot on the boss's chest, holding him still.

"It's time for some questioning."

The techno put a thumbs up for Aldrich and said, "Good luck, boss. I'll be here when you need me."

Chapter 31: Investigation

Aldrich kicked over the Odinson boss so that he faced upwards. He could not move on account of how tightly wrapped up he was in the brown tarp Valera had rolled him in, but his mouth was already moving.

"Anything you want, I'll tell you! You need something? I'll get it to you!" said the Odinson boss, his one biological eye so wide that it looked like it was damn near ready to pop out of his skull. "Just don't put me back to sleep! Not there, not back there, not the nightmares, god, no!"

"Well, that was easy," said Aldrich. He jotted down a mental note that [Horror Warp] was no longer just a simple ten second stun if it landed. Against those with no mental resistance, it locked them in a prison of nightmares for almost eight entire hours.

Regardless of how willing the boss was to talk, Aldrich still put his staff right on the man's throat, pressing into it with just enough pressure to let him know that at any given moment, the staff could pierce right through and end his miserable existence.

"The Trident. Everything you know about them. Tell me," said Aldrich. He spoke to the techno as well. "And you, listen to what he says and bring up any relevant info on his phone."

"You got it, boss," said the techno.

"Fisk, is that you?" said the boss, perplexed and betrayed. "You're working for him now?"

Aldrich allowed the techno, Fisk, his name was, to respond, curious as to whether there would be any recognition of his former boss.

"Uh, don't know who you are, but yeah, I'm workin' for him. But y'know, if you ask me, I think you ought to get talkin' instead of chattin' with me," said Fisk.

"You heard him," said Aldrich as he dug his staff deeper into the boss's throat, making him wheeze.

"O-okay," coughed the boss. "We started working with the Trident a year ago."

"In Haven?" Aldrich narrowed his eyes. "I've done my fair share of research on the Trident, and I was fairly certain they had no presence in Haven."

"Y-yeah, you're right," said the boss. "It wasn't in Haven. They got in touch with us for a heist. We had to snatch something from an Imugi convoy further down south. Around the S48 Highway.

After the Monstering, the United States highway and road system had been completely overhauled due to the threat of monsters and vast swathes of land rendered uninhabitable. Two sets of roads were developed.

'Secure' roads numbered from S1 to S50 that were reserved for transfer of crucial supplies and 'Commercial' roads numbered from C1 to C100 that mapped a web of traffic around the states.

The U.S. government managed the commercial roads, but the Panopticon - a multinational peacekeeping and technological development organization that worked with almost every world government and the Alterhuman Agency to fend against Variants - managed the secure roads.

Thus, S roads had a ton more security, surveillance, and hero presence.

"A ragtag, twenty or so member gang like the Odinsons managed to hijack an Imugi convoy? On a S road? Fucking ridiculous," said Aldrich as he began to press the staff into the boss's throat again, suffocating him.

Imugi was a mega-corporation based in Korea that stood at the absolute top of any military tech and development. ARMA was more commercial and widespread where Imugi was absolute razor cutting edge, creating top notch technology tailor made for select elite clients.

Any Imugi convoy would have been guarded heavily. No, heavily guarded was an understatement. There would have been absolute top of the line autonomous defense systems, battle drones, force fields, and probably high-end mercenaries guarding it.

This was on top of auto-turrets, cannons, and maybe even a hero or two that would have guarded a S-road.

"He's right," said Fisk as his red tinted visor flashed and glowed. "Got some comms and credit transfers that prove it."

"Hm," said Aldrich as he eased the pressure on his staff.

"You-you have to believe me," said the boss. "We didn't do it by ourselves. The Trident helped us. They sent out a guy to help us. Villain called the Vanisher. He helped us. He just sorta flew over the convoy and then anything that could shoot at us just disappeared.

It was real easy to just bust in and take what they needed after."

"And what did they need?"

"I don't know."

Aldrich glared at the boss.

"I really, really don't know!" said the boss, panicked. "They-they wouldn't tell us, and why would they? We're just nomad thugs. B-but I do know that it was a case of some kind. Real secure and fancy lookin', that case was. They made us transfer it, too."

"Where to?" said Aldrich.

"To Haven. We got a real strong presence in Haven, and we're reliable unlike them crazy ass Boltheads or Fiends, so I think that's why the Trident chose us to carry that package. We got it over to that nightclub, the one with real classy cocktail party theme, uh, the Red Circle!"

Aldrich thought about this for a moment.

It was true that the Trident had no real presence here in Haven. Their north American branch operated largely in Neo-York, the largest tier 1 walled city in the states, not in a tier 3 city like Haven.

It made some sense that if they wanted something delivered to Haven, they would hire local help.

It was not uncommon for larger criminal syndicates to hire nomads like the Odinsons or, as the boss mentioned other gangs like the Fiends or Boltheads, for dirtier work, especially where their influence was limited.

After all, nomads had no real citizenships, were largely untraceable, and could easily be abandoned when anything went wrong.

But why at Haven? Something as sensitive and important as a case from Imugi, too.

And to the Red Circle? A random nightclub?

"Any info on this?" Aldrich asked Fisk.

"Sorry, boss," said Fisk. "I got correspondence with a guy called 'Mr. X' that set this whole heist up, but after the heist was done, there's nothin' more."

"So that's it, hm?" Aldrich shook his head. "You Odinsons are just too low level to know anything useful. I've reached a dead end about the Trident with you."

It's time to find some answers at the Red Circle."

Aldrich raised his staff up, ready to pierce the boss's throat, but then he shouted. "Wait! Wait!"

"What?" said Aldrich, the staff still raised and ready to kill.

"Th-the guy, Mr. X, the guy that connected us to the Trident, he also told me to bring my boys to Haven as often as I could."

"Why is that?" said Aldrich.

"He-he wanted me to sell our drugs, especially the good and expensive sh*t like X, to a list of dealers he approved," said the boss. "Dealers that aren't nomads like us, y'know, classier guys that deal sh*t in the city, inside clubs or bars and stuff."

"And did you?" asked Aldrich.

"Y-yeah, it was a no-brainer. He paid us way more than it cost to get the X. I have no fuckin' idea why, but that's why we keep comin' back and back to the Settlements around Haven," said the boss.

Very, very interesting.

"Bring up that list of approved dealers if you can, Fisk," said Aldrich.

"Here." Fisk turned his laptop screen to Aldrich. He scrutinized a list of twenty names and did not recognize any of them except one.

Davis Shane.

The Blackwater technician and engineer that Aldrich had blackmailed for selling drugs to students. Aldrich knew that Davis sold drugs inside Haven when the A and B class students went out, but now he knew where this all happened: the Red Circle.

Aldrich began to realize there were threads tying together the Trident with not only the nomads, but Blackwater and its students.

The Trident was peddling drugs to Blackwater students indirectly through a supply chain comprising of the Odinsons and then select dealers in the city.

But why? He started to formulate thoughts and suspicions.

"Bring up info from Ghost's phone," said Aldrich. "Find any mentions for the nightclub called the 'Red Circle'."

"There's a sh*t ton of em', boss," said Fisk with a whistle. "Text messages, group chats, location tagged pictures, don't know where to start with this-"

"Any correspondence with a 'Davis Shane?', " said Aldrich.

"Yeah. Good amount. Looks like this 'Ghost' kid was a junkie. Real deep in it, too. Bought from Davis at the Red Circle every week," said Fisk.

"You know anything about this?" Aldrich asked the boss.

"No! N-nothing at all!" said the boss. "I just peddle the drugs; I don't actually deal em! Don't know who they go to and never needed to!"

"I see." Aldrich looked down at the fearful boss's face and came to realize that the man would have no more useful information. He was just too low level for this. All he had been for the Trident was a mule to carry drugs and that one stolen case from Imugi.

"Well, looks like your usefulness has come to an end. Take a break down in Hell."

"W-wait-," began the boss before he choked on his words as Aldrich's staff tore through his throat, killing him.

[+8 EXP]

[1x Odinson Soul (boss) obtained]

[1x Odinson Soul (boss) consumed]

[+4 EXP]

[EXP Bar: 88/650] 100/650]

[Current Level: 9]

Aldrich kicked the boss's corpse over for Adam, Elaine, and the Alpha Striker to start tearing away at to sate their hunger for brains and flesh. Meanwhile, he sat behind Fisk.

"Show me all the correspondence you have from Ghost related to the Red Circle," said Aldrich.

"You sure, boss? That's a lotta stuff," said Ghost.

"I have time," said Aldrich as he made sure Valera's hunting party was doing well. They were doing excellently, ready to track down more natural Variants. Soon enough, he would hit level 10 and then access the first Tutorial Quest at which point he would gain a massive boost in power.

Chapter 32: Investigation (2)

Aldrich spent the next several hours just poring through all of Ghost's communications about the Red Circle. His focus was unbroken, his mental stamina just as infinite as his physical stamina from being undead.

Ghost and the Odinson boss all talked on private chatrooms located in what was known as the Darknet.

The regular Net was formed by the Panopticon after the Monsterring and was considered an evolution of the world wide web. It accommodated techno Alters who could now literally dive through virtual space with their minds, providing a universal, unified space that the Panopticon and various Net cyber security companies could regulate and secure.

However, there were many that did not like the feeling of having the Panopticon's ever-present eye watching over them, and so the Darknet was formed. An evolution of the dark web just as the Net was an evolution of the internet.

The Darknet required specific software, configurations, and authorizations to access, and any data on it was encrypted so heavily that many technos generally considered it nigh impossible to forcibly crack into it from the outside.

However, with a Darknet surfer's fully cracked phone or personal device, this became a different story. With access to their personal device and information like passwords and personal account information, it was relatively easy to access user data on the Darknet.

Ghost's Darknet conversations were largely held between himself and Davis Shane, the Blackwater technician and drug dealer. There were many conversations lasting through a range of a year - almost the entire time that Ghost had been in Blackwater.

Most of these conversations were about Ghost buying drugs.

Drugs not only for himself, but for others, and, more repulsively, to slip in the drinks of unsuspecting women. Aldrich remembered the way that Ghost had looked at and touched Elaine, and once more, he was grateful that he had ended Ghost with the pain and suffering he deserved.

What Aldrich noted was that in these communications, Davis Shane talked to Ghost with a subservient tone, always asking him what he needed, telling him what the best things to buy were, giving him discounts, and so on.

The technician even tried to stop Ghost from taking more X personally, warning him of addiction, but of course, Ghost had ignored him.

Davis Shane was not trying to push drugs onto Ghost. He was trying to keep Ghost and the Blackwater students he dealt with happy, even at the cost of profit.

Aldrich found an especially interesting conversation dated back to around the same time when the Odinsons had made their heist and carried the Imugi case to the Red Circle. It was a request by Ghost asking when the 'special package' was getting here, that Seth Solar personally needed this, and that it was urgent.

This was no coincidence. Seth Solar needed whatever was in that case.

To which Davis replied that he knew it was on the way, but he had no idea exactly when it would arrive as he could not directly ask the Trident. Davis further stated it was better to ask Casimir for details.

A search on the word 'Casimir' through Ghost's phone indicated that he was the owner of the Red Circle nightclub. Ghost did not have any virtual communications with Casimir, but he and Seth Solar's crew routinely talked about the club owner in good light, appreciating the owner's hospitality and willingness to always set up a private room for them.

And, perhaps most interestingly, Casimir gave Seth Solar's crew access to Connectors.

Connectors were individuals that, as the title suggested, 'connected' another to a criminal organization. They were largely responsible for managing job listing for mercenaries and villains that needed work, but for the largest criminal syndicates like the Trident, they gained even more responsibilities.

Connectors for these larger organizations were also responsible for contacting and keeping in the good graces of the strongest villains, pampering them with gifts, parties, and luxuries in exchange for a few 'favors' here and there. They also reached out to potentially recruit independent villains and mercenaries into working full time for the organization, listing out comprehensive job benefits and securities to working for them.

In essence, they were job recruiters. The HR department of criminal organizations, so to say.

Seth Solar and his crew, no, not just them, messages in group chats implicated almost the entirety of Blackwater's A-class, went to the Red Circle for not only VIP service, but also to get in touch with Connectors for the largest criminal organizations.

The only A-class student that Aldrich could not find a mention of was the current rank 1 Mel Morales.

In the Red Circle, the Connectors would promise the top performing Blackwater students permanent high-end positions in their organizations, recognizing the talent and potential that the A-class students had.

Aldrich came to the realization that Blackwater was not truly a functional hero academy. It trained either corrupt heroes who would use their position in the AA (Alterhuman Agency) to function as moles, or if they were in the A-class, funnel into the highest ranks of criminal syndicates as villains.

It all made sense now. Why Blackwater was so isolated and so hidden. Why there was so little information about it. Hell, when Aldrich had tried to research the academy, he could not even find a list of past alumni, no doubt because they all now worked as villains or mercenaries.

It explained why the academy had such good equipment and facilities despite being so obscure and ranking so low.

It explained why they did not give a damn about psych evaluations.

It explained the brutality of the academy where only the strong survived.

It also implicated the Solar family as the academy's current head was Selina Solar and, of course, Seth Solar attended it.

The fact that this had not become a PR nightmare for the Solar family indicated only one thing: the Solar family was working with criminal organizations to keep any information about their involvement highly hidden.

Aldrich had done some research on the Solar family in trying to create his contingency plans against Seth Solar and knew that he and his mother were not part of the main branch of the Solar dynasty.

They were an illegitimate branch with Selina Solar being the product of a one-time fling from the previous head of the Solar family. Quite likely, Selina Solar was the daughter of the previous Solar head and a villainess, hence why Selina had such strong connections to the criminal underworld.

That made Seth Solar also illegitimate. He could never step into the fold of the main Solar family and don their golden costumes to bask in their glory and public game. He could share their last name, but his existence would forever be a tightly controlled secret kept within the confines of Blackwater and its criminal web.

This was a significant amount of information to organize and mentally order, but one thing was clear to Aldrich: he was not just going to take down Seth Solar and his friends, but also Blackwater - the academy that had thrown nothing but abuses to him and his friends.

And by take down, he meant destroy. It was not enough for him to just leak this information to the public. Very likely, any leaks would just get taken down or smeared as

fake news by the wealth of both the Solar family and various crime syndicates with vested interests to keep their villain and fake hero factory up and running.

No, Aldrich had to destroy Blackwater. Break it down so that it could never, ever produce villains. The very same kind of villains that had killed his own parents.

Aldrich had the information he needed. He just needed to act.

He knew Seth Solar and his crew made a visit to the Red Circle every Saturday. That was the perfect time to take them all down at once.

Taking them out one by one would leave far too much time for suspicion to grow.

But the problem was, yet again, power.

Storming the Red Circle was no joke. If there were Connectors there, there were likely bodyguards. Mercenaries and decently rankings villains. And also the majority of Blackwater's A-class.

Aldrich would have to take down all of them.

It was conceivably possible for Aldrich to do this after reaching level 10 and clearing the Trial Quest.

After clearing the Trial Quest, he would gain a full set of new equipment, Elden World monsters to raise as undead, a powerful passive skill, and even more spells.

The issue was Seth fucking Solar yet again. He was just too strong. Far, far stronger than the rest of the A-rank.

It was almost a miracle that Mel Morales could even consistently beat him to take the rank 1 spot, and even then, she did that through unique applications of her portal based power, not through sheer brute force.

Seth Solar might have been an arrogant asshole, but his power was the real deal. Even now, he could just fly through Aldrich's undead army and burn everything down in a few minutes.

He was just that strong.

Ghost and the rest of the A-class were like ants compared to Seth Solar. And it was not because the A-class was necessarily weak, it was just because they were young and had undeveloped powers.

Alter powers needed time and training to develop, and it was said that an Alter's power fully maximized and matured as late as the age of 30, with some even taking longer.

However, Seth Solar was a genetic anomaly known as a Starter Child. His power was high from the beginning. That meant he had less growth potential over time, but that mattered little when he had overwhelming power to start off with.

Super strength, super speed, flight, near invulnerability, and high temperature solar beams for fire damage: the man was a living, walking, flying counter to Aldrich and his army.

And if Aldrich wanted to strike on Saturday, he only had about five days to prepare against Seth Solar.

During that time, he needed to get as strong possible -

[Vine Beast x 1 defeated!]

[+25 EXP]

[Moss Beast x 3 defeated!]

[+45 EXP]

[Big-arm Grizzly defeated!]

[+40 EXP]

[Tunnel Centipede x 12 defeated!]

[+360 EXP]

[Red Carapace Great Centipede x 1 defeated!]

[+80 EXP]

[+550 total EXP]

[EXP Bar: 100/650] 650/650]

[Level up!]

[Level 9] 10]

[EXP Bar: 0/1200]

[+5 stat points available to distribute]

[TRIAL QUEST 1 available]

All the experience from the Variants that Valera's hunting party killed throughout the hours of Aldrich's investigation poured into his head. He had tuned them out to focus on the investigation and because he trusted Valera, but he did not know that they had hunted so efficiently that he had already leveled up.

Evidently, the hunting party had encountered a nest of giant centipedes and had dealt with them quite well.

With Dynamite Girl there, any bug type natural Variants would have been no challenge at all, especially since they were all immune to poison and because bug type natural Variants tended to clump up, making them perfect targets for high heat explosions.

Aldrich stood up.

"That gonna be it, boss?" said Fisk.

"For now. Good job," said Aldrich. "Get some rest."

"Thanks a bunch, boss, but I don't need it. I'll be playin' some games if you don't mind," said the techno as he booted up a rhythm game plastered with images of anime girls.

Aldrich thought about taking away the techno's individuality, but he could not see how playing this game would be of much risk, especially since it seemed to be offline.

"Sure, go ahead," said Aldrich. "If you see or hear anything suspicious, you reach out to me."

"Understood, boss," said Fisk as he started to rapidly tap at his keyboard, playing the game with expert skill honed from years and years of practice. It stood to reason that if martial arts training stuck with an undead raised with a soul, then so would...these skills.

Aldrich made his way towards the deeper end of the forest where Valera was. He mentally commanded her to stop hunting and meet him.

It was now time to clear the first Trial Quest.

Chapter 33: Ghastly Preparation

Aldrich distributed his 5 new stat points as he sped his way through the forest, weaving through trees and thin gaps with expert agility. He was not as fast as any Alter with powers that boosted their physicals, let alone ones that specialized them for speed, but he was fast enough that he could run circles around Alters with no such powers provided their AC count was not extremely high.

As Aldrich reconvened with Valera, he distributed his 5 new stat points.

[+2 Attunement, doubled to +4 from stat affinities]

[+3 Magic, doubled to +6 from stat affinities]

[Attunement: 41] 45]

[+1 Attunement point available]

[Magic: 21 (28)] 27 (34)]

[Mana: 20/66 (84)] 32/72 (90)]

After this, Aldrich commanded one of his Evil Eyes to scout out the area around the Sign. He wanted to see to what extent the investigation for Ghost's death had progressed. It was currently early in the dark hours of dawn on Tuesday, and Blackwater would have started searching around Monday afternoon after giving Ghost the benefit of the doubt that he was just partying in Haven until Sunday.

Only a day had passed. It was likely that any search for Ghost had not yet gone beyond the boundaries of Blackwater campus. The search outside campus would probably start at first light today, meaning Aldrich did not have too much time.

Aldrich reached Valera's hunting spot and found a large pile of blasted tunnel centipede corpses blackened and smoking beside a series of holes dug into the dirt. Valera sat on top of it, humming to herself while swinging her legs to her tune.

The Geist and Dynamite Girl stood down below, eyeing each other warily.

"Y'know, I don't know what it is, but I don't like you. Don't like how ugly you are or why you disgust me so damn much," said Dynamite Girl.

"Geh." The Geist shrugged and turned around.

"Huh!? You wanna repeat what you said in front of my face!?" Dynamite Girl started fuming, evidently very easily prone to anger.

Interesting, noted Aldrich. From Dynamite Girl and Fisk, the techno, he realized that giving individuality to undead with souls retained personality traits from their past lives, though they had no memories of them.

Each tunnel centipede was sizable, almost as large as a bear. Easily big enough to wrestle a man, wrap around him, and devour him.

"Quiet, you two, master is back," said Valera. She jumped off the pile of centipedes and landed on a knee, elegantly bowing as a knight would to her lord.

"Geheh." The Geist waved a hello to Aldrich.

"Welcome back, captain," said Dynamite Girl with arms crossed.

Aldrich nodded at them. For now, he did not turn off their individuality. Leaving them with some had been incredibly useful as they could make their own decisions and fight far more efficiently, especially since Dynamite Girl had training in working with groups.

Plus, Aldrich somewhat appreciated the extra noise and conversation.

Valera gestured to the side with her gauntlet, pointing at a much, much larger centipede.

From the crimson red carapace on it, Aldrich recognized this as a Red Carapace Great Centipede. Likely the leader of this swarm of centipede Variants. It was six meters long and wide enough that it could plow through an ordinary man and snap him in half in two with its golden, bladed mandibles.

A massive dent in its head and several patches of raw, broken off and burnt carapace indicated that it had died to a mixture of severe blunt force trauma and explosions like the rest of its kin.

"That was one real tough bastard," said Dynamite Girl. She spat at the corpse before raising her arm up, showing a huge cut in her side that exposed her internal organs and shattered off ribs. "Fucker got me real good, too. Blew it off the face of this goddamn earth in payback, though."

"Gehgeh," said the Geist.

Dynamite Girl sighed. "I know I didn't literally blow it off this planet. Christ, do you not understand what a figure of speech is?"

"Geh?" the Geist shrugged again.

Aldrich stepped over to the Great Centipede and put a hand over its shattered head. "Serve."

[-5 Mana]

[Mana: 32/90] 27/90]

The Great Centipede reanimated, its many sharp, blade-like legs skittering before it flopped around back on its feet.

"Gross," said Dynamite Girl.

[+1 Zombie (Red Carapace Great Centipede) Lvl 11 reanimated]

[Units controlled: 10/13] 11/13]

"And the eagle and bear I asked you to save?" said Aldrich.

"You, present the master with the prey he requested," said Valera as she pointed at the Geist.

"Geh." The Geist opened its large mouth wide and its stomach expanded before caving in with strong flexion. It made a vomiting sound as it spat out the corpses of the Big-arm Grizzly and Alloy-wing Eagle. They were drenched in spit that preserved them well - likely the same way that Dynamite Girl had been preserved alive inside of the Geist's stomach.

"Even more gross," said Dynamite Girl as she shook her head at the Geist.

"Good," said Aldrich. He went over to the bear and eagle and chanted again, "Serve."

The grizzly reanimated, and then after the cooldown for [Raise Undead] passed, he casted it again, raising the eagle.

[-10 Mana]

[Mana: 27/90] 17/90]

[Zombie (Big-arm Grizzly) Lvl 8 Reanimated]

[Zombie (Alloy-wing Eagle) Lvl 7 Reanimated]

[Units Controlled: 11/13] 13/13]

Aldrich looked up as the zombie Big-arm Grizzly stared down at him. It was massive, as large as the Geist was, though of course, considerably weaker. Its main power lied in its overly sized arms that dragged on the ground. These blows could store kinetic energy and unload them in explosive bursts that could even out-damage the Geist in short bursts.

The Alloy-wing Eagle was an oversized eagle sizable enough for Aldrich to comfortably ride on. Its wings were metallic in texture and color, possessing a shining grey sheen and yet still being pliable enough flap and maneuver the creature through the air.

Aldrich had the eagle fly up in a test run, and it managed to lift him off the air quite easily. It could even seat Valera, too, he guessed, but anymore than that would make flight for it uncomfortable.

"Superb!" Valera clapped her hands together. "My master takes to the skies once more. It is no Frost Dragon, but it will do for now. I hope there are dragons in this world - seeing you ride upon that majestic mount did awe me so."

Aldrich remembered his old mount from Elden World. His level 100 character rode a Frost Dragon, the strongest undead mount there was.

"There doesn't have to be," said Aldrich. "Remember our Trial Quests? There are dragons in the later ones. Which is actually why I needed to meet back up with you.

It's time to clear our first Trial Quest."

Valera squealed in delight before she regained her composure, putting down the visor of her helmet and grasping her bone shield firmly. "Then onwards to battle we shall go!"

=

Aldrich took all of his undead, including Fisk, with him to his Sign. The Evileye had scouted the area and a significant perimeter around it and had no found anything noteworthy. The Sign was free to use for now. He commanded the Evileye to move out to Blackwater and scout the campus directly.

Around the Sign, Aldrich looked around at his ever-growing and incredibly varied undead army. He pulled up a list of them.

Chosen Undead: Valera of the Immortal Legion Lvl 15

Zombie (Adam) Lvl 3

Zombie (Elaine) Lvl 3

Zombie (Alpha Striker) Lvl 7

Zombie (Big-arm Grizzly) Lvl 9

Zombie (Alloy-wing Eagle) Lvl 8

Zombie (Red Carapace Great Centipede) Lvl 11

Evil Eye Lvl 7

Evil Eye Lvl 8

Skeleton Rogue Lvl 7

Skeleton Archer Lvl 7

Undead Geist Lvl 17

Undead Dynamite Girl Lvl 12

Undead Fisk Lvl 3

]]]

Aldrich waved his hand forwards, bringing the skeleton archer kneeling before him.

"You've done well for me. But now, it's time to rest." Aldrich released control over the archer, dismantling it into piles of bones that then crumbled away into dust.

"[Create Undead]" said Aldrich. Before accessing the Trial Quest, he wanted to be as strong as possible. He intended on resummoning undead that matched his current level at 10.

It was not possible to cast spells in the Nexus, so he needed to create them now.

However, he only had 17 mana, and Create Undead cost 10 mana. He did not intend on wasting mana creating undead once he got into the Trial Quest if he could.

Aldrich knew exactly everything that happened in the Trial Quests because he had played through them all. He knew every single secret pathway and hidden piece of loot there was. As a result, he knew what units he needed to use as well.

Because of this, Aldrich summoned a Ghast for it had incredible utility in the First Trial.

A cloud of smoky darkness sputtered in front of Aldrich, swirling around a single, stony grey orb. The orb cracked and chipped, sloughing off chunks of rock until it sculpted itself into a floating skull of rock. Dark smoke flickered around it as it hovered in the air, emanating an aura of strangely cold smoke.

[1x Ghast Lvl 10 created]

The Ghast could not attack. What it was actually useful for was its ability to generate an aura of smoke around it that obscured undead within it. Obscuration was different from invisibility in that anyone that came close enough to the smoke could see the undead within it, but outside a certain range, the obscuration functioned like invisibility.

It also had an active spell known as the [Spirit Boundary]. It would root itself in place and its smoke would form into a forcefield that significantly enhanced resistances to

elemental attacks from the outside while inside, undead gained both a [Stone Flesh] passive that made them extra resistant to physical force.

"Huh?" Fisk tapped his visor as its red glow sputtered and turned off, leaving the it just a dull piece of red tinted glass. He looked down at his eye-phone where he had been playing a game and saw it start to drop its framerate horribly. "What's going on!? I was close to breakin' my damn record!"

"You dare to amuse yourself like this in the presence of the master!?" Valera clenched her fist but Aldrich raised a hand, preventing her from dashing over to Fisk and bashing his head in.

"Wait," said Aldrich. He looked up at the Ghast floating above him and sent it closer to Fisk. The closer the Ghast went, the more Fisk's phone malfunctioned until it eventually just turned off.

"I see," said Aldrich. In the lore, Ghasts were known to be restless spirits that appeared when tombstones and grave markers were destroyed or stolen. They became like spiritual tombstones that provided a boundary of solace for undead that had their graves desecrated.

Thus, it obscured undead within its boundary from the outside, granting the undead the privacy they deserved in their afterlives.

Evidently, this also meant disrupting any technology that had camera capabilities or likely any form of recording whether auditory or visual.

Aldrich had not used the Ghast beforehand because it was so squishy. Only at level 10 did it gain decent durability in the form of a passive known as [Sturdy] that allowed it to survive a single fatal blow. But this new, unforeseen ability, an ability that was only known in the lore and had zero gameplay implications, was useful beyond measure here.

In the modern world where almost every corner of civilization had some form of surveillance.

Aldrich noted this down for later. Anytime he would make an attack in a city, he would always bring a Ghast with him.

For now, there was the Trial Quest to worry about. He put a hand over the Sign and the light from it burst outwards, enveloping Aldrich and his undead.

Chapter 34: Trial Quest 1

Aldrich found the environment around him changed from forest to the dull grey stone and gothic architecture of the Nexus. He felt his HP and Mana restore to max, and the first thing he did was go up to the Wellspring of Life and restore the charges on his flask.

"Huh, where's this, boss?" said Fisk as he looked around in pure wonder, staring first at the imposing gargoyle crowned pillars surrounding the Nexus and then at the ceiling full of golden and blue crystals. "Looks like a place straight out of a game. All this cool glowing crystal ceiling stuff and dark fantasy temple aesthetic - I totally dig it. Reminds me of that game, y'know the one with rollin' and dodgin' and dyin'? Dark Sins?"

"I know it," said Aldrich.

"Yeah, I agree," said Dynamite Girl as she looked around with crossed arms.

"Huh, you play games?" said Fisk. "Never thought you the type."

"J-just a little. Make no mistake, though: I ain't a complete nerd like you," said Dynamite Girl.

"You two remember playing games?" said Aldrich. He did not know exactly to what extent an undead risen with their souls knew of their past lives. He knew that according to game lore, they lost all memories, but that did not seem entirely to be the case.

"Yeah, don't remember which games, exactly, but some," said Dynamite Girl. "I was stressed and angry a lot. Helped cool down sometimes."

"Geh," said the Geist.

"What? I'm still stressed and angry all the time!? Huh!?" Dynamite Girl balled her hands into fists and leered at the Geist. "Keep that up and I'll show you stressed for real!"

"Alright, calm down," said Aldrich. "I just have a question: how much of your past life do you remember?"

"Nothing much at all, really," said Dynamite Girl. "My name, mostly. Stella. Though I remember being called Dynamite Girl as well. Everything else is kind of a haze, almost like a fever dream."

"Haven city. Does this name ring any bells to you?" said Aldrich.

Dynamite Girl nodded. "Yeah. Think I used to live there or something. Nice and tidy city center, ugly-ass streets everywhere else. Don't know much of anything else. Though I

kinda get the sense if you like, uh, told me or prompted me, I might remember a thing or two."

"Hm." Aldrich realized that fully arisen undead had not wiped their memories. They retained them but they were deeply 'locked' so to speak and would not emerge unless specifically prompted.

This made some practical sense. If the arisen undead had zero memories at all, then they would just be like helpless, clueless infants that had zero idea how to function.

This gave Aldrich worries about whether triggering memory returns would cause a risen undead to rebel, but at the same time, Aldrich could at any given moment just turn their individuality off.

For now, he let everyone have their individuality. If anything, retaining memories might be especially useful, especially in the case of people like Dynamite Girl who had the potential to hold valuable information by being a hero.

"Quite talkative to the master, aren't we?" said Valera as she stepped past Dynamite Girl and shoved her aside. She put a hand to her breastplate and raised her shield up. "I am ready for battle, my master. I will prove to you through this Trial Quest that I alone am truly worthy to be by your side."

"Yeah? Who was it that torched those bugs, huh?" said Dynamite Girl.

Valera turned around to glare at her.

"Let's stop with the arguments. Any more and I'm turning off your free will," said Aldrich.

"Got it, captain," said Dynamite Girl. She sighed. "I can be a little rough around the edges. Speak my mind out a lot. But trust me, when it comes down to the fightin', you can always count on me to have your back."

"Hmph. You will have to prove yourself to me beyond words," said Valera.

"Didn't we already fight together? Well, whatever, looks like we're gonna be fightin' soon, ain't we?" Dynamite Girl looked to Aldrich.

"Yes." Aldrich stepped over to the first pillar of twelve that supported the walls of the Nexus.

The first Trial Quest.

The pillar was shrouded with green light, indicating that it was active. The gargoyle above it had its empty eye sockets filled with green as it gazed down at Aldrich, inviting him forwards. The massive twin double doors of stone carved into the pillar were open,

showing a swirling portal of azure blue, almost like a whirlpool on the surface of water, leading into the quest.

Aldrich looked at his tab.

Trial Quest 1: The Search

Difficulty: 4

Description:

By reaching level 10, you have shown great strides into mastering the dark art of necromancy. But now, it is time to truly test yourself, to truly prove that the power over the dead that you wield is worthy.

This trial will be a test of how well you are capable of controlling the dead that you have bound to yourself. You will prove that these souls whose undeath you bind to yourself serve a truly capable master.

In the accursed Rotted Greatwoods where precious few living souls dare to tread, you must find the lost Eye of Azoth. None know exactly where it has fallen in these cold and foul woods.

It may be within the twisted woods itself. It may be lost in the depths of the murky swamp that festers within. Or perhaps it is within the belly of some mighty beast.

It is up to you, O Necromancer, to wade through the dark and the cold and the rot - elements you are well accustomed to - and find the long lost eye.

Time Limit: 1 Hour

Objectives:

- Find the Eye of Azoth

Rewards:

- 1x Eye of Azoth

- 3x Restorative Flask charges

- 1x Sign Stone

- Passive: [Corpse Barrier]

- Passive: [Death Sense]

-Spell: [Grave Consumption]

-Tome of Dark Arts Rank 3

-500 Coins

-500 EXP

]]]

Aldrich analyzed the quest. It read the exact same as it had in Elden World. If everything was the exact same, then this Trial Quest would be an easy breeze to deal with.

"Once we go in, we don't waste any time. You do as I say and you work efficiently. Understand?" said Aldrich.

"Yes, master," said Valera.

"Roger, captain," said Dynamite Girl.

"Sure thing, boss," said Fisk.

"Geh." The Geist nodded.

"Good. The place we are teleporting to will very much be like a game. A game set in a high fantasy setting, if that gives you any hints about what types of challenges and enemies you'll face. But just listen to me, and you shouldn't face any real difficulties." Aldrich nodded and then stepped through the portal

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Aldrich found himself now in the Rotted Greatwoods. He stood at the edge of a great forest full of rotted, leafless trees. Despite lacking leaves, the trees had curled their bare branches around each other in twisted contortions and knots forming a massive canopy of tied up branches that made trying to look down through the trees from above impossible.

Behind Aldrich were massive, towering mountains that functioned as impassable terrain in the game. In front of the mountains was a moat of foggy, pale water that, just as they did in the game, generated a 'forcefield' that made them impassable.

The skies above were dark and cloudy with a pale, full moon shining down whenever it could through its veil of clouds.

[To aid in your Trial, your control over your Legion has improved]

[Call of the Legion Rank 1 obtained]

[+5 to units controlled]

[Units Controlled: 13/13] 13/18]

Aldrich nodded.

At the start of every successive Trial Quest, the [Call of the Legion] passive skill would rank up to a total of rank 10, with each rank granting +5 units. By the 10th Trial Quest, that was 50 bonus units to work with.

"Totally cool," said Fisk as he adjusted his visor and looked around. "So, there's like monsters and sh*t here? Dragons and stuff?"

"A dragon would incinerate you with a mere look," said Valera dismissively.

"Oh, but there ARE dragons? Damn, that's awesome," said Fisk. He rolled his shoulders. "VR games never did it for me, but for this, I'm willin' to get off my computer for once and kick some monster ass.

What're we beatin' up, boss?

Orcs? Goblins?"

"In your case, nothing. You, Adam, Elaine, and the Ghast will stay here," said Aldrich.

"Huh?" said Fisk. He looked at Adam and Elaine. "I mean, I appreciate the company, boss, but-

"None of you are strong enough to keep up with us," said Aldrich. "In the case of the Ghast, it will be here to protect you. Don't step outside of its [Spirit Boundary]."

"Damn, I can't even use my damn phone in this," said Fisk as he stared down sadly at his turned off phone.

The Ghast looked at the phone and shook its head, chattering its teeth and disapproving of the recording device.

"We're going to separate," said Aldrich. "The gist of what we have to do is simple. We have one hour to find an object called the 'Eye of Azoth.' If things are how I think they are, I know exactly where this eye is and what type of enemies you should expect to face.

However, I get bonuses for clearing some hidden objectives, and that requires me to split this group up."

Aldrich began to strategize. The Eye of Azoth was located at the very end of the forest, and it was not that hard to get to. You just needed to take a straight path ahead through the forest which would lead out to a cave, and there, you had to fight a Giant Slime holding the Eye of Azoth.

Upon death, the Giant Slime would also drop the head piece of the [Grave Reaper] item set.

Overall, a very simple quest that took at most 30 minutes.

But then why was the time limit an hour long?

That was due to hidden objectives and loot that one could search for.

However, Aldrich knew exactly where everything was.

First, there was a sizable camp of trolls on the western side of the forest. They guarded two treasure chests containing the body and waist pieces of the [Grave Reaper] item set. Then, to the east was a swamp filled with dormant giant mud crabs. They guarded chests containing the arm and leg pieces of the [Grave Reaper] set.

"Valera and Dynamite Girl, you two pair up and go straight. Just straight ahead. You'll find a cave at the end of this forest. There-,"

"We will face the great slime!" said Valera. "But master, without your frost magic to make the slime's body brittle, I have no means of destroying it."

"Slimes are even weaker to flame than they are to frost. Dynamite Girl can handle it," said Aldrich.

"Like I said, when it comes down to fightin', I got your back," said Dynamite Girl.

"I suppose this is an apt way to prove your resolve." Valera started off into the forest. "Come on then. Now will also be an excellent time to have a conversation about exactly where you stand in your relationship with master.

Just because he trusts your abilities does not mean he feels anything for you..."

Valera continued on her warning rant with Dynamite Girl sighing as the two of them disappeared into the forest.

"Now all of you will assault the troll encampment," Aldrich waved his hand over and mentally commanded the appropriate units to gather in front of him.

This group was comprised of all the zombies made from Natural Variants plus the Skeleton Rogue. Now that the rogue was level 10, it obtained a bonus active skill called

[Rotting Stab] that infused a blow with a concentration of necrotic energy that negated regeneration.

Particularly useful for countering troll regeneration.

"There are five trolls and one troll chieftain. Once you get there, surround the encampment but do not engage. I will direct combat after I am done with my own things. Go."

The veritable zoo of zombie Variants and the skeleton rogue moved northeastwards, disappearing quickly into the thick of the forest.

Aldrich left the Alloy-wing Eagle behind and got on its back and made it hover in the air.

"Now, that leaves you with me," said Aldrich as he looked over at the Geist.

"Geh? (Just us?)"

"I'm taking you for dirty work at the swamp. Now get on." Aldrich got the eagle to hold out its talons, and the Geist reached out and grabbed them.

The eagle squawked as it flew in the air with heavy flaps of its wings, obviously straining a bit with the Geist's muscular weight, but the eagle adjusted, and soon, they were soaring high through the air.

Soon enough, Aldrich flew over the surface of the murky, muddy green and brown swamp. He could see large brown circles - patches that looked strikingly like small islands of dirt to rest on - but he knew that these were in reality dormant giant mud crabs.

At the center of the swamp where a particularly thick ring of six crabs gathered was a patch of glowing water. This was where the treasure chest was. But anyone that tried to get that chest was bound to get viciously assaulted by six giant crabs.

"I'm dropping you down there," said Aldrich.

"Gehgeh...(Do you have to? I'll be all alone, too)" said the Geist.

"You have super regeneration to survive an initial mauling, and the crabs are weak to poison. Your neurotoxic gas will disable them quickly. I chose you to do this for a reason: you were the best suited for it," said Aldrich.

"Gehh...(Okay...)"

"Alright then, off you go." Aldrich tapped the eagle's back and it squawked before dropping the Geist.

"Geh!" the Geist sped downwards and curled up into a cannonball as it crashed into the muddy swamp, right in the throng of mud crabs.

Chapter 35: Clearing the Trial Quest

Aldrich stood atop the back of his giant eagle and watched with a hand to his chin as he observed the Geist.

The Geist ploughed up a geyser of muddy swamp water when it landed in the swamp, and almost immediately, the six giant mud crabs became active. They were easily the size of a large hovercar with pincers large enough to slap a fully gown adult man into pulp wholesale.

A flurry of angry pincer jabs and smacks assaulted the Geist. All things considered , the Geist did not take that much damage.

After all, among the units Aldrich had, the Geist was at the top considering raw physical stats, even beating out Valera overall when considering agility.

Pincer jabs tore out chunks of flesh while clubbing blows smacked against the Geist's pale flesh with impact that broke the skin, but any damage it took, it smoothed over with its super regeneration.

In the meanwhile, the crabs started to attack the Geist slower and slower as the neurotoxin infiltrated their bodies, stiffening them up and paralyzing their muscles.

It was then that the Geist followed its instincts to kill. It used its high-speed mini dash to escape from the ring of crabs, positioning itself behind one.

"Geh!" The Geist hammer fisted down on a mud crab's head, completely caving it in with a cracking, shattering impact. It then leaped on top of the crab's body and used it as a stepping stone to get to another crab.

For this one, the Geist grabbed the crab's eye stalks and ripped them out before eating them. One by one, the Geist hopped around the paralyzed and poisoned crabs, smashing their heads or ripping out their eyes until it was done slaughtering all six of them.

[6x Giant Mudcrab defeated]

[+240 EXP]

[EXP Bar: 240/1200]

"Gehgeheh." The Geist stared up at Aldrich with its constant, eyeless smile.

"Good job," said Aldrich. He snapped his fingers, and the eagle brought him down to where it was now safe. "Now go dive in there where you see light shining. You should find a treasure chest. Bring it up for me and your job here is done."

The Geist nodded and dove right into the single clear patch of water in the swamp. A few moments later, and it emerged with a wooden chest slung over its broad shoulder. Aldrich used his staff to tap the chest, and it opened up, revealing two orbs with the arms and leg pieces of the [Grave Reaper] item set.

Aldrich absorbed them into his being.

[Grave Reaper Bracers obtained]

[Grave Reaper Base obtained]

Aldrich then looked over to the dead crabs and chanted, "Serve."

He waved his green energy wrapped hand, and one of the crabs reanimated. He waited the cooldown for [Raise Undead] and casted the spell again, raising another crab.

[-10 Mana]

[Mana: 90/90] 80/90]

[2x Zombie (Giant Mudcrab) Lvl 8 reanimated]

[Units Controlled: 13/18] 15/18]

Aldrich commanded the crabs to hold their position here because if they tried to swim out, they would just get swarmed by the other crabs lying dormant throughout the swamp. When he left the Trial Quest, any summons he had would just come back with him anyway.

He raised the crabs because they had the ability to easily travel through water, and he did not raise more of them as he wanted to raise other monsters from this area.

"Alright, get back on," said Aldrich as he waved the Geist forward. The Geist shuddered and shook, flinging mud off of itself like a dog shaking to clean itself. It latched onto the Aldrich's eagle mount's talons and with that, they were off in the air again, the eagle once more squawking in protest at the Geist's heavy weight.

"Geh...(Am I that fat?)" mumbled the Geist as they flew off.

==

Aldrich soared over to the western edges of the forest where the troll encampment stood within a large clearing in the forest. It was marked out by smoke trails from various fires as well as roughly made tents anchored into place with stakes of large bones adorned with skulls.

Around the fires sat seven trolls. They were large humanoid creatures with pot bellies but thickly muscled arms, legs, and shoulders, looking like strongmen whose bodies were built for power, padded equally in insulating fat and powerful muscle. Each of them stood at around seven feet tall (2.1 meters) and wielded either large wooden clubs or just their bare claws and jutting tusks.

Their skin was grey and riddled with warts, scars, and the occasional tumorous mass, and these imperfections liberally dotted their face, making them horrendously ugly in a conventional human sense.

These were Grey Trolls.

Trolls were a highly adaptable species on account of their regenerative ability, and so they could over quick periods of time and generations attain attributes suited for their environments such as fur for the cold and fire resistant skin for volcanic areas.

However, these adaptations came at the cost of heavily reducing their regeneration, and so Fire Trolls and Ice Trolls did not have a strong healing factor.

Grey Trolls, however, were the 'baseline' troll whose regenerative abilities were top notch to the point where to try and kill them without some form of negating their healing was a waste of time.

Hence why there were large fires around.

By game design, the player was meant to use them against the trolls, lighting their weapons on flame or driving the trolls into them.

These trolls would not be much of an issue.

Aldrich had more than enough undead to just dunk the trolls forcibly into their fires. The only issue was the presence of a troll chieftain.

It was level 14 and located within a large tent at the edge of the camp. It was sleeping by default but fighting too close beside its tent would draw its aggro. It was significantly stronger than the other trolls and had multiple troublesome skills to deal with.

The point of this encampment was not to storm it and kill everyone. It was a test of stealth. The sleeping troll chieftain's tent held the treasure chest holding the [Grave Reaper] set pieces, and the player was supposed to use a skeleton rogue to carry it out without drawing much attention.

But Aldrich and his undead army were strong enough to defeat everyone here for experience.

Normally, the player's undead army did not generally exceed level 12 and they did not have access to minions with fire at this point in the game.

However, with the Geist and Dynamite Girl, Aldrich was over leveled for this.

The only real challenge was the chieftain.

Aldrich put a hand to his head and focused, sensing that all of his Variant and skeleton undead were hidden in the edges of this clearing, awaiting his order to pounce in and strike.

Aldrich mentally communicated his plan.

*There are seven trolls there, each of them level 8. There is one level 14 troll chieftain lying asleep in the largest tent. Take out the chieftain first, and the rest of the trolls should be easy pickings. Here's how this will get done -

The Great Centipede will bury underground and ambush the troll chieftain along with the Skeleton Rogue. Poison does not negate troll regeneration, but it does slow it down some.

The Great Centipede has a power to harden and strengthen its muscles and carapace when it wraps around prey, and with that, the troll chieftain should be immobilized.

The rogue will then assassinate it with a stab to its brain.

Once the chieftain is dead, everyone else can swarm in and overpower the rest of the trolls with force. I will drop the Geist at this moment, and its poison will again slow the trolls' regeneration, but I advise you all to try and shove the trolls into fire.

Take care, though, as zombies, you are also vulnerable to fire."

Aldrich felt a wave of understanding coming from all of his units. He nodded to himself. He knew that most natural variants were surprisingly intelligent.

Experiments with tamed natural variants like Strikers showed that they were capable of registering emotions, self-awareness, long term memory, and understanding orders with layers of complexity.

This was one of the reasons why there were multiple variant awareness groups that sought to end the practice of indiscriminately hunting down variants, but that was a long shot considering how much damage variants had done, their often unpredictable wild

instinct to murder humans, and how lucrative a business it was to hunt them for their parts.

Aldrich watched through the Skeleton Rogue's eyes as it evaded the trolls lounging around their campfires with [Shadow Walk] and headed down to the chieftain's tent. Under it, the Great Centipede tunneled underground, synchronizing their ambush together.

The Skeleton Rogue used its thin, skeletal body to slide underneath a tiny gap in the tent's entrance flap so as not to draw more attention. Inside the round tent, it spied the troll chieftain snoring and unconsciously scratching its belly.

A large axe of roughly hewn cursed rock lay beside it, though if things went right, the chieftain would never even have the chance to use it.

The rogue tiptoed behind the chieftain; its curved daggers upraised.

Kill him Aldrich set his plan in motion.

The Great Centipede emerged from the ground in a burst of cracked earth and dirt. It immediately wrapped its armored, serpentine body around the troll chieftain with frightening efficiency. All of its many golden legs sank into the troll's body like hooks, going into its skin and tightening the hold to near inescapable status.

"Guuh!" the Troll Chieftain loosed a battle roar of pain as the great centipede sunk its mandibles into its throat, injecting its potent flesh melting toxin.

The roar reverberated around the camp, alerting every single troll.

Before the troll could say any more, the skeleton rogue stabbed its two curved daggers into the troll's eyes. The daggers were coated in purple necrotic energy, and when they sank through the soft eyes and into the beast's brain.

The necrotic energy rotted the brain out entirely, incapacitating the troll and soon killing it.

In Elden World, the combat system did factor in vital strikes.

An attack struck directly through the head or critical weak points such as cores were instant kills or in the case of regenerating monsters, a completely incapacitating blow until it was healed.

Of course, if a blow that negated regeneration was struck into a vital area, then it was an instant kill regardless of how powerful the target's healing was.

Everyone else, attack Aldrich clapped his hands, and from the clearing, his zoo of undead variants emerged to attack the trolls before they could help their chieftain.

Chapter 36: Clearing the Trial Quest 2

The Big-arm Grizzly loosed a bellowing roar as it charged into the encampment on all fours, barreling forwards in a full ton of raging claws and jaws and fury. Ahead of it ran the Alpha Striker.

The seven trolls pointed at the grizzly and striker and grunted and roared before charging against them. The surged forwards with confidence, seeing that it was seven against two.

"Time to help your friends out." Aldrich strategically dropped the Geist in the middle of the trolls as they charged.

"Geh!" The Geist rolled up into a cannonball again to minimize damage done to itself from the fall. It smashed straight down against a troll, squashing it. Several other trolls scattered backwards, surprised from the sudden drop of a massively muscled freak of nature right into their midst.

The Geist's drop separated the trolls right down the middle, so discounting the troll that got squashed there were now three trolls facing the Geist and three facing the Big-arm Grizzly and Alpha Striker.

Aldrich did not help. He wanted to conserve his health and mana as much as possible.

The Big-arm Grizzly smashed into a troll with a mighty shoulder bash, sending the troll hurtling backwards. The Grizzly then stood up on its hind legs and wrestled another troll, savagely chomping down on the troll's head and crushing its head like a watermelon under a hydraulic press.

The Alpha Striker stood between the Grizzly and the third troll and unleashed its shockwave ability, knocking the troll back and stopping it from helping out against the Grizzly. While the troll was downed, the Alpha Striker leaped on top of it and started to tear into its throat.

"Geheheh." The Geist echoed its chattering laugh as it dodged clumsy troll club swings and claw swipes.

"Geh!" The Geist punched a troll hard into its chest, shattering his sternum and sending him flying into a campfire where he burned to death. The troll screamed as its flesh cauterized and melted at accelerated rate.

The Big-arm Grizzly saw this and used its oversized arms to carry the now headless corpse of the troll and toss it into a fire.

The Alpha Striker squealed as the troll it fought managed to grab it and tear it off from its throat.

Before the troll could crush the Striker, the Big-arm Grizzly lunged forwards and swiped at the troll's head. Its oversized arm and club-like paw smacked the troll's head and twisted it a full three hundred sixty degrees, shattering and twisting the neck twice over.

The troll let go of the Alpha Striker while it gurgled, its head slowly untwisting and regenerating.

The Big-arm Grizzly and the Alpha Striker both worked together to drag the troll by their teeth into a fire where it joined its brethren in a funeral pyre before it regenerated.

The Geist utterly decimated the remaining two trolls.

After all, it outleveled the trolls by almost two to one.

The Geist unleashed a hammer fist straight down onto a troll, sinking his head into his neck cavity before tossing the troll into fire.

The one remaining troll of the group struck at the Geist with a club, the Geist used its mini dash to appear behind the troll.

The Geist punched straight through the troll's chest and carried the flailing troll into a fire where it burned the monster into a crisp using its arm like a kebab skewer.

The Geist withdrew its own burned arm and stared at it for a few seconds. The burned flesh sloughed off, replaced with fresh white skin within seconds.

[7x Grey Troll defeated!]

[+280 EXP]

[1x Grey Troll Chieftain defeated!]

[+100 EXP]

[EXP Bar: 240/1200] 620/1200]

"Good work, everyone," said Aldrich as he had the eagle bring him down into the camp. The smell of putrid, cooked flesh filled the air. "The trolls are dead. Eat them if you want. Their meat probably tastes better cooked."

The Big-arm Grizzly, Alloywing Eagle, and the Alpha Striker all took out the burning troll corpses and started to devour them piece by piece after snuffing out the flames.

Aldrich made his way into the troll chieftain's tent with the Geist behind him. He saw the troll chieftain lying limp in the ground, his head rotted as the rogue continued to stab him in the brain over and over again while the Great Centipede kept its tight hold on the monster.

"Okay now, I know undead are tireless, but he's already dead," said Aldrich. "Get off the corpse. This one's strong enough to introduce into our fold."

The Skeleton Rogue nodded and bowed before moving away. The Great Centipede unlatched from the Variant and crawled over to the side.

"Serve," said Aldrich as he snapped his fingers.

The troll chieftain's body convulsed before getting on a knee first before standing up. It was a sizable unit, this one, slightly taller than even the 10 foot tall (3 meter) Geist.

[1 x Zombie (Grey Troll Chieftain) reanimated]

[Units Controlled: 15/18] 16/18]

Aldrich hoped the chieftain would have dropped a soul to perhaps craft an accessory that held its regeneration, but no luck. Seeing the loot he wanted behind the troll chieftain, though, made him feel a lot better.

Another wooden chest. Aldrich went over and opened this one and received the Body and Waist pieces of the [Grave Reaper] set.

One other thing, though - Aldrich looked at the cursed stone axe the chieftain was supposed to use. Ordinarily, the item did not drop from the troll and faded with his corpse.

Yet, there it was, just lying on the ground. It seemed that the weapons that monsters wielded did not just disappear as they did in Elden World. They were always dropped.

Aldrich tapped it with his staff and realized he could take it. The axe dissolved into green particles that flowed into his inventory.

[1 x Cursed Stone Axe obtained]

Now this was an excellent find.

Aldrich himself could not use it. He did not have the necessary strength stat requirement, but Valera could. Her offensive capabilities were limited using her [Bone

Vanguard Cross-Shield], but the axe would let her spec into pure damage when she needed to.

Not to mention the axe's interesting property of inflicting a [Execution Curse] on those it struck, casting an instant death effect on those below 10% maximum health.

This instant death effect could be resisted with a high enough magic stat, but who else in the real world had magic except Aldrich?

Didn't that mean absolutely nobody was resistant to this effect?

Aldrich could now start to formulate a strategy against Seth Solar.

Aldrich's [Anti-Life Shell] reduced health by a current health percentage. After clearing the Trial Quest, the [Anti-Life Shell] would rank up as well, granting it an active usage that increased the rate of life drain.

Seth Solar was extremely durable. It was said that he could take a barrage of armor piercing artillery rounds to the face with just a slight bruise.

None of Aldrich's units could deal reliable damage to him.

But maybe, if he could stall Seth Solar somehow, let him drain his health, and then execute him with death magic, then maybe it could work.

Still an incomplete plan, though. How was Aldrich going to trap him? Or, for that matter, trap the piece of scum in such a way that he did not just kill Aldrich?

These questions, Aldrich would try to find a workaround to later. For now, thinking of Valera made him check up on her.

He started to see through her eyes -

==

Valera and Dynamite Girl stood outside the pitch-black, gaping entrance into a cave of dark rock.

"Let me guess, that's where the final big baddie is, huh?" said Dynamite Girl.

"Well, don't we have quite the genius on our hands," said Valera sarcastically.

"Y'know, I have a limit to my patience, too. A real low limit, too," said Dynamite Girl as sparks started to crack from her fingertips.

"You wish to fight now?" Valera readied her shield in front of her.

Dynamite Girl stared at Valera for several tense seconds before she shook her head. "No. We'll just be wastin' our damn energy. And I know why you got such an attitude towards me. You think I like the captain, huh?"

"Hmph. You think you can read my mind?" Valera crossed her arms. After an awkward pause, she added on, "Well, do you?"

"Sure."

Valera's hand tightened against her shield, and the strength of her grip was such that the groaning screech of metal scraping against metal echoed through the air.

"By that, I mean I like him as a captain. As a leader. Not that I know a lot about him, but I ain't got nothin' to complain about, anyhow," said Dynamite Girl.

"Nor will you complain ever. The master is perfect. He has led me through countless battles against odds and enemies the likes of which you could not comprehend. He is intelligent, strong, and his moody silence draws forth his inherent charisma so very well."

"Nevermind me. You like him, don't you. Like like him. Beyond the whole follower to leader relationships," said Dynamite Girl.

"W-what? How could you suggest that? A knight is always loyal to her master, and a relationship in such a professional relationship is forbidden!" said Valera, though she squirmed and blushed under her armor and helmet.

"Yeah, sure," said Dynamite Girl with a smile. "I'll just tell you now I won't be buttin' heads with you over him or anything like that. You got here first, after all. Gotta respect seniority and whatnot. Anyways, ain't we here to fight this slime thing?"

C'mon, let's go."

"A-ahem, yes," said Valera. She took in a breath and calmed herself. "Now that I have your word you are not a threat, we can proceed. First, however, I must know your capabilities better."

"Sure thing." Dynamite Girl raised an open palm up. The pale skin of her palm started to glow orange as sparks cracked out from it. The orange glow was not limited to her palm, however. Strands of glowing orange streaked through her arm and localized around her chest where her tattered costume still retained a glowing white circle surrounded by a ring of metal.

"Is that a core of some kind?" said Valera.

"You can kind of call it that, but no, it doesn't power me. It's designed to control my powers," said Dynamite Girl. "I got a power called Dyna-Blood. My heart's like an engine and it pumps special blood that's got explosive properties when it's exposed outside my body.

This chest piece is supposed help me get my heart pumpin' and my blood flowin' better.

But I can do without it. I just got less control."

"Quite interesting," said Valera. "I have never known a spell or power like this in my world. And one that does not operate off of magic, either. The master had already told me that some humans like yourselves had unique powers but seeing it firsthand is eye opening."

"Yeah, and I'm real interested in all your powers, too. All that mana and magic crap - didn't know it even existed. Anyhows, I'll go into more detail. See here-," Dynamite Girl pointed to her arm. The strands of glowing orange energy shone through her skin in a veiny pattern. "My explosive blood travels from heart through the veins.

When I concentrate it on my palm like this, the blood, uh, what was that fancy science term again, yeah, it sublimates. Turns into gas particles that travel outta my hand and gets exposed to the air. I can control how many particles move out, so I can go from this-,"

Dynamite Girl's palm started crackle as several sparks shot out.

"To this."

She raised her hand in the air, away from Valera, and created a small, fiery explosion.

"Aha," said Valera. "And you do not get harmed by this?"

"Nah," said Dynamite Girl. "My whole body's super resistant to heat and my skin's explosion proof."

"That utterly neutralizes one of your weaknesses as an undead. Fire immunity and undeath is a combination that is most rare. You will be a valuable asset to the master," said Valera.

"Don't like bein' called an asset, but guess as long as I'm useful, I ain't complainin'," said Dynamite Girl. "I have some limits, too. Like I said, my blood pumps through the heart. If I pump it too much, it really strains me.

Symptoms range all the way from feelin' light-headed to straight up havin' a heart attack.

Not to mention if the explosion's big enough, it hurts me too.

I'm heat proof, sure, and my skin can neutralize shockwave type damage, but that's only up to a point. A big enough explosion's gonna' have a a shockwave that'll knock me on my ass too.

Here's an example. I have this attack I named the Bunker Buster. It's like my total max safe output. As strong as a conventional bunker buster, around 4 tons of TNT in yield."

"TNT?" said Valera.

"Oh right, you must be from a fantasy world that don't have TNT. Well, uh, let's just say the explosion's pretty damn big," said Dynamite Girl. "But I can't use the Bunker Buster more than once, or else my heart's at risk to stop. Plus, the shockwave usually breaks whatever limb I shoot the explosion out of."

"But you are undead, no? Heart failure alone should not matter to you," said Valera. "Broken bones, too, mean little."

Dynamite Girl blinked several times. "Huh...y'know what? You're right. You're goddamn right."

All of a sudden, she smiled widely, grinning like a madman towards the cave entrance. "Y'know...I have a feeling I kept this a secret before, but don't see a point now: I really, really like blowing sh*t up.

And I got the biggest urge to do just that with what you've told me."

"Ah, the urge to cause carnage. I can very much relate. Perhaps we will get along better than I thought." Valera also smiled.

Chapter 37: Clearing the Trial Quest 3

"Cool. I can see through the dark now," said Dynamite Girl as she walked through the narrow trails of the cave. Within, there was no light and the only sounds audible were the drips and drops of water falling from stalactites hanging low from the cave ceiling. "Don't even need night-vision goggles."

"See to it that you thank the master for your newfound body," said Valera. "I do wonder how you humans wander about in your weak prisons of human flesh. A little stab in an organ here and you keel over dead, leaking life blood like and deflating like a pierced balloon.

A small broken bone prevents you from moving at all unless healed or, gods forbid, you wait days upon weeks upon months to heal the tiniest crack.

So fragile. So weak."

"Hey, don't knock us down too much," said Dynamite Girl. "Back before humanity evolved, sure, we were like that, but with the Altering, it's all different. Some of us can go on with huge holes in our chests. Some of us can heal the worst injuries in seconds."

"But will you not agree that these powers, especially this power of yours that strains the heart, is one best shown potential in a body of undeath?" said Valera. "A body that never hungers, never tires, and never fears?"

Dynamite Girl thought about this for a moment. "Yeah. Guess so. Can't really think of much a downside."

"Precisely," said Valera. "And to enter into the eternal embrace of the master and to take his commands - no knight would want anything else!"

"Forget just likin' him, you really, really like him, huh?" said Dynamite Girl.

"E-excuse me?" Valera stopped in embarrassment.

"Sh*t, watch out!" Dynamite Girl rushed in front of Valera and put her hands out in front of her. Her palms glowed orange and sparked briefly before unleashing a cone of explosive and fire-laden power that lit up the cave in light.

The sound of liquid sizzling and evaporated filled the air as Dynamite Girl's explosion collided with viscous green slime tendrils.

Spatters of the slime scattered around cave rock, boring into it and melting it like acid.

"Where is this thing!?" said Dynamite Girl as she looked around and found only the narrow path around them. There was no space for a slime to be around.

A high-pitched, ghostly wail echoed through the cave walls, but because of the echo, it was hard to pinpoint where it came from.

"There." Valera pointed at a hole in the ceiling where the slime had bored through with a tendril to throw out a surprise attack. "I have a passive skill that allows me to sense threats, but I was too distracted to fend for myself." She raised her shield in front of her. "I apologize."

"Nah, it was cause' I brought up your master in the first place. Y'know where this slime thing is?" said Dynamite Girl.

"Yes. I know exactly which paths to take to reach it. It lies deeper in the cave within a main cavern. The longer we spend in these paths, the higher the chance the slime will strike us from odd angles," said Valera.

"Then here, lemme make it up to you. Lead me to this slime ball, and I'll give you a front row seat to blowin' it up to fuckin' smithereens!" said Dynamite Girl.

"I do like the sound of that," said Valera.

"Yeah?" Dynamite Girl cracked her neck and smiled. "Then let's get goin'."

Valera sprinted ahead, and Dynamite Girl followed. A few slime tendrils attacks shot out from here and there, but Valera defended against all of them with her shield. In a minute, the two breached the main cavern - a wide, circular arena - and at the center, there was the slime.

It was a huge mass of bubbling green liquid with several round yellow eyes suspended in the fluid. They looked like googly eyes, but despite how silly the slime looked, it was obvious that it was not a joke.

It was easily six meters by six meters in size, large enough to swallow an entire car whole and then some. It reacted to Valera and Dynamite Girls' intrusion by shooting forth a wave of acidic slime.

"Behind me!" Valera slammed her cross-shield in front of her and casted the skill [Bone Guard]. Bones grew out from her shield rapidly, interlocking and creating a large domed barrier. The acid wave flowed past the bones harmlessly, but the giant slime did not relent.

The slime gurgled as it shot forth a volley of acid tendrils, constantly wearing away at the shield and bones, not to mention the heavy impact of high-density liquid slamming into the shield at formidable velocities.

Valera trudged forwards against the constant barrage of slime blows and acid. "The closer I get, the more it'll pay attention to me! I can't hurt it with physical attacks, but you-,"

"Yeah, I get you," said Dynamite Girl. She accelerated her blood flow to her maximum safe output. Her heart started to beat rapidly, and as it did, the circular miniature reactor on her chest glowed a bright white. Her veins lit up with orange energy, concentrating light and heat around her hands and feet. The blood vessels in her eyes also glowed orange, completely covering them in a glowing sheen. "Moment you open up, I'm wipin' this bastard off the face of this planet."

"Now!" Valera took a few more steps until the [Bone Guard] was on its last legs, the bony barrier melting and shattering all around.

Valera broke off the [Bone Guard], and the moment it did, Dynamite Girl jumped up, dodging a wave of acid. She emitted several small bursts of explosion in her feet to 'air walk' over to the slime.

The slime reacted by throwing out several more tendrils at Dynamite Girl.

Dynamite Girl swung her arm out in an arc, scattering a cloud of sparkling orange dots. When the slime hit the dots, they acted like triggered mines, exploding and incinerating the acid.

Through the layer of smoke they emitted, Dynamite Girl emerged, and this time, she was right above the giant slime.

"Bunker Buster!" Dynamite Girl slammed her hands down towards the slime and unleashed her strongest attack.

Valera instinctively sensed danger and raised her shield and hunkered behind it.

A massive burst of blinding light first engulfed the cavern, then the explosion erupted with an ear-rattling crash. The whole cavern shook, stalactites breaking off from the ceiling in a rain of rock.

Valera felt the shockwave of the explosion slam into her, and even as she dug in her greaves into the dirt with all her prodigious strength, she still skidded back a good dozen meters. She peeked through her shield and paused in admiration.

There was a sizable, blackened, and smoking crater bored into the ground where the slime was. Dynamite Girl was lodged inside a crater in the ceiling, blown back as she had been by the force of her own massive explosion.

"Yeah, lemme' see you flingin' that acid on us now, huh!?" said Dynamite Girl as she dislodged herself from her crater bit by bit. She was bloody and bruised all over but despite her injuries, she had the widest smile on her face.

She fell onto the ground, breaking her fall with a small explosion burst. She peered down into the several meter deep, smoke filled crater she had bored out.

Valera grabbed Dynamite Girl roughly by the shoulder and shoved her back, sending her hurtling back several meters.

"The hell was that for!?" said Dynamite Girl as she stood back up.

"The slime is yet to fall." Valera blocked a few tendril shots of slime with her shield before she reached in and withdrew a watermelon sized, crystalline emerald rock - the slime's core. She threw the core down to the earth and then split it in half with her shield.

The glowing green core dimmed down in light, and the acid surrounding it faded away. Inside of the core was a dried purple eyeball - the Eye of Azoth.

"Damn, thanks for savin' my ass," said Dynamite Girl. "Thing coulda' messed up my pretty face."

"Pretty? You think too highly of yourself. But yes, you saved me, so I save you. I must commend you though: your power is formidable.

Enough to destroy a level 15 Giant Green Slime in just a single strike.

And when I think about how much carnage you will loose among our enemies with that attack - my, I am starting to like you more and more," said Valera.

"Think I broke both my arms and a couple ribs, though," said Dynamite Girl. She put a hand to her chest and deactivated her power, causing her veins to lose their glow and her heart to stop shining white through her chest. "And I just miiight have suffered a heart attack. But y'know, none of that bothers me anymore.

You're right: being undead has its perks. I think I can start takin' my power up to the next level."

"Not to mention an eternal life. Imagine being able to spend an entire eternity with the one you serve. There is no greater blessing." Valera flicked acid off her arm before she picked the eye up. "And now, my master's search has ended."

"Excellent work, you two." Aldrich walked into the cavern with his undead army in tow behind him.

"Here, master, the Eye of Azoth." Valera knelt before Aldrich and offered up the eye.

Aldrich looked at the baseball sized, wrinkled up and dried out eye in Valera's palm expectantly. With this, he could craft a powerful weapon that could carry him all the way to the second Trial Quest, potentially even the third.

"Thank you. Thank you to all of you," said Aldrich. "All of you have far exceeded my expectations."

Aldrich grasped the eye and dissolved it into his inventory.

[1x Eye of Azoth obtained]

[Giant Green Slime defeated!]

[+150 EXP]

[EXP Bar: 620/1200] 770/1200]

Then, while his hand was on Valera's, he grabbed her hand and lifted her up.

"We still have another fight to go, remember?" said Aldrich. He checked the timer on the quest. 30 minutes. "No kneeling just yet."

Aldrich then headed over to a chest in the corner of the cavern and tapped it with his staff again. There, he obtained the head piece for the [Grave Reaper] set.

[1x Grave Reaper Hood obtained]

Aldrich looked over to his undead. His natural variants were waiting for his order to move out. The Geist, too, stared at him expectantly. Dynamite Girl had her arms crossed, waiting for an order. Valera stared longingly at the hand that Aldrich had grabbed.

Generally speaking, everyone was ready to fight, and Aldrich's [Anti-Life Shell] was healing the damage they took.

"This last fight is the hardest fight of this quest. A secret boss fight," said Aldrich. "And the reason why I conserved my mana and health. Ready yourselves."

Chapter 38: Secret Boss

Aldrich headed back to the very beginning of the Trial Quest. He was now fully decked out in the [Grave Reaper] set. A dark green, almost brown hood with golden trim covered his masked face, granting him the ragged yet sinister appearance of the typical necromancer.

The set covered his body in a mantle and cloak of the same dark green, covering him in loose robes marked embroidery and insignia of gold shaped in streaks with a skull emblazoned at the chest. Tatters were a common sight around these robes, but instead of detracting from the look of the robes and the hood, making Aldrich look right in place among the broken and dead of the graveyard.

He looked like a malevolent spirit. A haunting presence that roamed the land of the dead. Fitting for him.

The only bright colors on him were on his arms. He wore golden bracers carved into the shape of various interlocking bones. The bracers shone with power, and within them was stored a spell called [Unleash Vengeful Souls].

By striking the bracers together, Aldrich could release several skull shaped vengeful souls that sought out his enemies and dealt damage to them with a 10% chance to inflict instant death. The attack was utterly unavoidable without some kind of magic barrier with the spirits tracking and homing onto enemies, and the neat thing was that each spirit rolled the 10% instant death effect.

The number of the released souls increased for how much of the set pieces Aldrich possessed. At its base, the spell released 3 souls, but with the full five-piece set, the spell unleashed 13 of them, and they could be targeted at a single unit.

The instant death effect could be resisted with a high enough level or magic stat, but if Aldrich rolled enough times, he could craft the [Eye of Azoth] into a weapon that could completely negate instant death resistances.

And with instant death, Aldrich could kill Seth Solar even if the man could face an attack that could blow up the entire fucking world.

"Cool new threads, boss," said Fisk as Aldrich and his undead approached the starting spot for the Trial Quest. "Really rocking that evil mage look."

"Comes with my class," said Aldrich, knowing well that most necromancer sets looked rather stereotypically evil.

Aldrich commanded the Ghast to stop its [Spirit Boundary] ability, releasing the dome of smoke that protected Fisk, Adam, and Elaine.

"And another thing, boss, the moat behind us, it made this big ass rumbling noise, and then-," Fisk stated to gesture wildly behind him.

Aldrich raised a hand. "I know."

Aldrich stepped over to what was previously impassable terrain. Specifically, the moat of water separating the Trial Quest from the giant mountains. The water in the moat was entirely drained, leaving soggy mud and rock and, most notably, a circular rock trapdoor with a symbol of three eyes inscribed into it.

"Hell yeah." Fisk looked at the trapdoor with a grin. "Some secret boss sh*t up in here, huh? I get why you wanted me here - you were savin' me. Now it's my time to shine-,"

"You stay here again," said Aldrich. "Now more than ever. You're right: this is a secret boss. And this secret boss is a serious challenge. Stay here, no questions asked."

"Aw, alright, boss," said Fisk with a shrug.

"You can use your phone now. I'm taking the Geist with me," said Aldrich.

"Well, I'll do well by myself so long as I got my phone," said Fisk. He saluted Aldrich. "Good luck down there boss. And you-," He pointed a gloved hand to the Ghast's skull head. "I ain't gonna' miss you, that's for sure."

The Ghast protested by chattering its teeth before floating over to Aldrich's side.

"Valera, get in front of me. You remember this guy, right?" said Aldrich.

Valera took position with her shield raised right in front of Aldrich, ready to defend him at a moment's notice. "Yes, master. The Mind Eater with the powerful flame magic."

"Good. Then our strategy is the same," said Aldrich. "The Ghast uses its [Spirit Boundary] and you combine it with [Bone Guard]. That way, we block the initial spell from the Mind Eater and then we can swarm him pretty easily."

"Alright, then, let's do this," said Dynamite Girl as rotated her arm to warm herself up.

"Geh." The Geist nodded.

"Valera, open the trapdoor," said Aldrich.

"As you command, master," said Valera. She stepped down to the bottom of the drained moat and dug her hands into the stone door. She heaved and lifted the heavy slab of rock upwards before tossing it away.

"Let's go," said Aldrich.

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Aldrich and his undead moved through the tunnel unearthed from the trapdoor. The tunnel got wider and wider as they progressed until finally, they reached a large door made entirely of thick fog.

This was known as a [Boss Gate] and, as the title indicated, held a boss level monster behind it.

Boss monsters were different from ordinary monsters in that their stats, health, and mana pool were generally higher than ordinary monsters of the same level. In addition, they possessed immunities to mind control, instant death, and other status effects that could 'cheese' a boss fight into a one shot.

This was partly why as a player; Aldrich did not see much of a reason for using instant death magic.

There were just too many monsters that bosses that had resistances or outright immunity to it. But now, he had to think about specializing in it much more.

He also had to think about how this would impact his ability to work through future Trial Quests where unlike in the real world, he would have to face creatures with these instant death resistances.

For now, he could easily make up for power he had lost with variants and Alters he reanimated in the real world.

"Once we pass through the Boss Gate, you'll find the Mind Eater immediately charging up a massive Pyro Bomb. That will one shot us all except Dynamite Girl with her heat resistance. That's why we have the Geist. It will use [Spirit Boundary] and this combined with Valera's [Bone Guard] will protect us," said Aldrich. "Afterwards, it is absolutely imperative that we do not let it channel a Pyro Bomb again. Understood?"

"Understood, master," said Valera.

"Yeah, got it captain," said Dynamite Girl.

"Gehgeh." The Geist chattered its teeth as its muscles flexed, ready to fight.

"Here we go," said Aldrich. His cold undead heart did not beat much anymore, but he felt excitement rush through him as he felt the thrill of facing a boss fight once more.

He stepped into the fog of the Boss Gate. At first, he saw nothing but dense white fog, and then a few more steps in, everything cleared up, revealing the boss room.

It was a circular room of black rock lit up with lanterns and bunches of mashed candles jutting from the walls like they were tumorous growths.

At the end of the room, hunched over a large desk of roughly crafted rock littered with papers and tomes and vials and strange glowing crystals was a black robed figure.

From behind, the figure looked to be a hunched human, but when it slowly turned around, it revealed a face that was purple and octopus-like with wriggling tentacles for a mouth and three red eyes.

Its hands were long and spindly.

In one hand it held a black lantern holding a ghostly red fire within it.

In the other hand, it grasped a gleaming red orb inscribed with unreadable sigils.

"Oh life...oh life...oh my eternal life. I knew you would be here for it. But you will not have it!" said the tentacled Mind-Eater, his voice raspy and undulating like it was underwater.

Fler'Gan the Zealot was this boss's name. He raised his lantern up, and an enormous fireball in the shape of a burning sun formed almost instantly above its head.

Just by the sheer size, heat, and magical power surging from the fireball, it was obvious that once this hit Aldrich, it would explode into a nova that would leave everyone as a melted smudge, especially with their fire weaknesses.

The Geist shivered, knowing with its instincts that if it was melted away wholesale, it could not regenerate.

"I can fuckin' take this tentacle freak!" said Dynamite Girl. "Blow that fire ball back with my own explosion!"

"Hold position and remember what I said!" shouted Aldrich. "Wait and save your firepower for later!"

"Behind me!" Valera slammed her shield down as she took defensive stance in front of everyone. She used [Bone Guard], creating a wall of bones in front of her.

Then, the Ghast floated in the air and remained still while it casted [Spirit Boundary]. A thick dome of smoke covered Aldrich and his undead, encasing them in a barrier resistant to elemental energy. This was the entire reason that Aldrich had summoned the Ghast in the first place.

"Perish in flames, unholy usurpers!" said Fler'Gan. He waved his lantern in front of him, and the miniature sun-fireball flew downwards before crashing against Valera's bone wall and the Ghast's smoke barrier.