

Super Necromancer System

#Chapter 43: The Death Lord - Read Super Necromancer System Chapter 43: The Death Lord

Chapter 43: The Death Lord

Aldrich braced himself before feeling the familiar sensation of his body warping to a different location. It was a brief moment of weightlessness that ended when his surroundings shifted in a blurred instant. No longer was he in the dilapidated underground study of Fler'Gan.

Now, Aldrich found himself in the midst of a throne room that somehow merged perfectly merged both royal grandeur and the decay of time. Dark and grey stone layered with dusty white ash stretched out everywhere, building up a massive hallway and twenty pairs of towering pillars.

Atop each pillar stood majestically carved statues of knights and mages, and by their spiked armor and skull patterned vestments, it was apparent that these were practitioners of the dark arts. Hanging from each pillar were dark green, nearly black banners etched with a coat of arms consisting of a skull attached to a bare spine.

The throne room was massive. Large enough that it could fit two football stadiums inside of it at the very least.

And at the very end, in the distance, was the throne. A throne of bones. Bones of every kind. Human, monster, dragon - if it was a creature that once lived, its bones were here, fused together to form a seat of honor for no less than the Death Lord itself.

"Master...is that it? The Lord of Death?" said Valera, and Aldrich nodded both in understanding and relief.

He could sense that all of his undead were with him, standing behind him. They had thankfully all been transported here with him.

"Yeah," said Aldrich. "But different. More dangerous."

Aldrich said this because the Death Lord seemed to be sentient as well. And if it could think for itself with all its immense power given to it not only by its level 100 status and the immense strength that the game lore said it possessed, then it was probably the most dangerous threat that Aldrich could think of.

Far more dangerous than Seth Solar.

No, forget that. Not even the Protectorate, the top 10 heroes across the entire world, were as much of a threat.

"More dangerous? Than that foul thing already was?" Valera weakly leaned against her shield, still heavily damaged. "We...we are not strong enough, master. We have barely triumphed over the first trial quest. And we are now to face the Death Lord? The final and twelfth trial?"

"To think we would face the Death Lord now -," Fler'Gan trembled before shaking his head. "O Elder, I will bring forth the greatest extent of mine strength, but know that it will be like bearing forth a single ember before a wildfire."

"Yeah, that armored monster's got me feelin' real small. Like I'm just an ant lookin' up at a massive steel-toed boot," said Dynamite Girl.

"W-when will this end already!?" said Fisk in a panic.

"Gehhh..." The Geist hid behind Valera and Dynamite Girl like a child, but because it was so massive and muscled, it looked ridiculous in its efforts.

Aldrich remained silent and wary, but he knew everyone was right.

The 12th Trial Quest for the Necromancer class was the final and hardest one. A Necromancer had to be level 100 to challenge it and even then, they had to fight it with a full party of eight fellow heroes. These heroes came from a list of A.I. companions the player could bring together, but every single hero was level 70 at the minimum.

And all of that to face just to face the Death Lord and its army.

Lore wise, the final trial quest was meant for the Necromancer player to defeat the Death Lord and usurp its vast power, taking away one of the evil gods supporting the Howling Dark. Defeating the Death Lord also destroyed all of the enslaved liches under its control, eliminating a sizable portion of the Howling Dark's final army.

In other words, Aldrich was horribly, horrendously outmatched.

"WELCOME TO MY ABODE, DEATH WALKER." The Death Lord's voice boomed through the entire hallway.

It stood up with the heavy clanking of metal.

It appeared to be a three-meter-tall hulking behemoth of an armored knight with dark grey, spiked armor and a menacingly horned helmet. The Death Lord's armor seemed to be hollow inside with a green glow of energy - the very same kind that adorned Aldrich - shining through gaps in the armor.

The armor's torso was shaped like a pair of metal ribs, and one could see through the gaps in those metal bones that inside was not a flesh body, but just an orb of pure green, flaming energy.

The Death Lord jumped and easily cleared the near entire length of the hallway in a single leap, standing right before Aldrich with a heavy crash.

"SO? DEATH WALKER? HOW DOES IT FEEL TO STAND BEFORE THE PRESENCE OF A TRUE MASTER OF DEATH?" said the Death Lord as it stared down at Aldrich.

"I wonder what you're still doing here alive," said Aldrich, not intimidated in the least. "Last I remember, I beat you and absorbed your soul."

"HAH! I REMEMBER THAT TOO," said the Death Lord. "BUT I AM BACK AGAIN! AS STRONG AS EVER BEFORE. AND YOU, MY LITTLE DEATH WALKER, ARE NOTHING COMPARED TO WHAT YOU WERE. AND YOUR FRIENDS? YOUR FELLOW HEROES? GONE.

AND YOUR UNDEAD LEGION?"

The Death Lord waved an arm towards Aldrich's undead. "WHAT HAS HAPPENED? THIS IS WHAT YOU BRING FORTH TO CHALLENGE ME? PATHETIC."

The Death Lord turned around dismissively and crossed its arms.

"You dare to call my master pathetic? You? A mere ghost that hides in this realm of yours!?" said Valera.

"OH, IT'S YOU AGAIN, THE 'LADY' KNIGHT WHO ONLY KNOWS HOW TO THROW A PUNCH!" the Death Lord turned to Valera and looked her up and down/

"What of it, you brute?" said Valera. "I hate your type - all you meat headed heavy armor muscle maniacs - the most."

"HM. I SUPPOSE YOU'VE ALREADY TAKEN THAT LOOK FOR YOURSELF." The Death Lord shrugged and gestured towards Valera's own bulky suit of armor.

"The Death Lord does have a point," said Fler'Gan.

Dynamite Girl smacked the tentacled monster on his head. "You forget whose side you're on!?"

"Argh!" Fler'Gan rubbed his lightly dented, soft purple head and glared at Dynamite Girl and Valera. "Gone are the days of proper, quiet, and gentle women, I suppose," he grumbled, thoroughly speaking like a disgruntled old man.

"Quiet," said Aldrich.

"YOU KNOW, I DON'T WANT TO USE A LOOK THAT THIS BOORISH DEATH KNIGHT HAS ALREADY TAKEN. PLUS, YOU'VE ALREADY SEEN AND FOUGHT ME LIKE THIS." The Death Lord took its gauntleted hand and tapped its breastplate.

With that, its huge metal body glowed bright green before dissolving away, leaving just the orb of glowing green energy housed within the armor.

The orb then turned into the silhouette of not an enormously muscled man, but a woman.

A woman of Aldrich's height, actually. She stood confidently with a hand on her hip clothed in flowing green robes, a majestic grey fur coat with a gleaming green fringe, and a long skirt adorned with bones with a slit that showed off pale, shapely long legs.

The Death Lord flipped flowing locks of long white hair behind her head and stared at Aldrich with a confident, sharp-toothed smile and gleaming green eyes with reptilian pupils. Draconic horns jutted from the sides of her head.

"So? How is it, gazing upon my true form? The last we met, the goddess Amara had weakened me so greatly I was confined only to my battle armor," said the Death Lord.

"Unexpected," said Aldrich with some level of confusion as he stared at the Death Lord. He knew the Death Lord's true form was hidden, and he knew that according to the lore, before the Death lord became a lich, it had been a dragon.

He had no idea of the Death Lord's gender, but he had always thought by default it was male.

"People expect a certain image from a 'Death Lord', hence, how you perceived me before. But to you, my dear, who wishes to become a lich just like me, I will not hide behind threatening armor. I will meet you in my true and proper form," said the Death Lord.

"Master...", Valera looked at Aldrich staring at the Death Lord and then she slammed her shield down, drawing the Death Lord's attention. "You! You wish to tempt my master, is it!? You think he will fall for the likes of you!? You snake!?"

"Quiet, muscle-head," said the Death Lord. She stretched her arms up, puffing out her sizable chest. "You are standing in the presence of a true lady here. Or lord, if you prefer that."

"So?" said Aldrich, unimpressed. "What is it? If you wanted to kill us, you could have."

"Oh, of course," said the Death Lord. "But that's not the point. This isn't like when we last met, when you fought me to kill me. No, you're reaching out to me this time for my power, are you not? You want to become a lich.

And for that, you need an Obelisk forged from my own essence."

"And? Are you going to give it or not?" said Aldrich.

"Oh my, so forward, asking for my essence just like that?" The Death Lord crossed her arms and smiled, licking her lips with a forked, snake-like tongue. "No. I welcome any and all who wish to become a lich. All I require is that you pass a trial of my own. Ah, and it looks like you have one of my rejects among you already."

The Death Lord waved a green clawed finger towards Fler'Gan. "He made quite the beautiful phylactery, that one, but like all empty-headed academics and mages, he might have had the brains, but he didn't have the stones to make it through my trial."

"He doesn't remember your trial," said Aldrich. "But I'm assuming it's impossibly difficult, is it?"

"Hmmm." The Death Lord put a finger to her lips and cocked her head innocently. "I don't think so. I like to think I mete out rather fair trials. And why would I not? I would love to see more of my kind. Those too weak that end up becoming my slaves, well, that's that, they simply weren't worthy.

But you, Death Walker, you have already proven yourself worthy by defeating me before."

"And yet here I am getting the sense that you'll still be giving me a trial," said Aldrich.

"Well, I don't give out my power for free, even with our past together," The Death Lord nodded to herself. "Ah, I know what to do."

The Death Lord put a hand into her chest and it sunk into it like it sunk into a pool of water, rippling into some interdimensional inventory space. She withdrew a green Sign Stone and tossed it to Aldrich.

"You will start at the bottom of my great royal tower, my beloved Necropolis. Clear as many floors as you can. You go high enough, and you will receive my Obelisk. And I will be generous, too.

Any treasure you find, any monsters you raise as your own, any levels you extract, you keep.

Plus, you get three tries. Three lives. But you only get to keep the rewards from your best try.

Ah, and this, too. Last you faced me, you faced me with an entire party of heroes. If you can cough together your friends again, then I'll let them form a party with you again.

And that's all I'm giving you. Now go."

The Death Lord clapped her hands together, and Aldrich and his undead found himself teleported away again. This time, in the midst of a dark, spacious crypt packed with shattered tombstones.

A message flashed in his status screen.

[Necropolis: Floor 1]

Aldrich found himself fully healed with his mana restored, and the same happened with everyone else in his undead.

[New Quest: Ritual of Eternity obtained]

[Attempt 1 started]

Aldrich sighed as he heard groans and moans from zombies rising from the tombs around him. Everyone in his army tensed up, ready for battle.

"Here we go," said Aldrich as he cracked his neck.

Chapter 44: Ritual of Eternity

Aldrich and his undead moved through the Necropolis floors with utter ease for the first five floors. These floors lay in the multi-story crypt located at the very bottom of the Death Lord's royal tower, and here, only low-level zombies came out to fight them.

The difficulty of these lower levels was in the sheer number of zombies. They came out in small waves at first, but then their numbers increased until it seemed like there was an infinite amount of them.

The point of these floors, Aldrich realized, was to find a dimensional exit gate up to the next floor before the zombies hit a critical mass.

However, no matter how many zombies there were, they were no match for Aldrich.

Dynamite Girl and Fler'Gan wiped out the zombies with utter ease. Fler'Gan, especially as a level 20 boss that retained all his heightened stats, annihilated weak zombies with his powerful fire magic.

During this time, Aldrich obtained more information about the quest to obtain the Death Lord's Obelisk.

He needed to reach the fifteenth floor to obtain the Obelisk.

Aldrich never knew what the Necropolis held in it. In the game, the Necropolis had been destroyed by the goddess of light and life Amara before the player character came to it. And, as the Death Lord stated, Amara had isolated the Death Lord in a pocket dimension that was the twelfth trial quest for the player to defeat.

But so far, Aldrich was not impressed.

The zombies of the first five floors did not exceed level 10. However, on the sixth floor, the crypt fed out into the first proper floor of the Necropolis, and here, the enemies upgraded from zombies into death knights.

Death knights were at the minimum level 15. At max, they could hit level 40, though thankfully, he did not see death knights at this high of a level range.

Again, Aldrich relied on Fler'Gan heavily to abuse undead fire weaknesses, but the fight became increasingly harder and harder until by the tenth floor, Aldrich found himself walking into a room full of level 20 death knights headed by a level 30 vampire crimson knight.

Seeing that, Aldrich used the Sign Stone he received from the Death Lord to exit the Necropolis, manifesting back into the Nexus.

Aldrich had not expected to clear the trial as he was now. He simply used the first attempt he was given maximally to analyze and observe how much stronger he needed to get to reach the 20th floor. He estimated about level 30 to 40.

This made sense. In the game, liches that were not mindless started out at level 30 at the minimum, indicating they too had been around the 30-40 range by the time they were strong enough to obtain an Obelisk.

But Aldrich was just level 11 for now. He needed to get much stronger.

Or he needed to find a strong enough party to join him.

Aldrich's first instinct was to immediately rule out the idea of a party. His power was a secret known only to him. Trying to recruit some top hero to help him would blow his secret wide open. Yet, he felt that it was a massive waste not to use all the resources given to him.

But how?

Aldrich mulled this over for later and went up to the System in the Nexus. The System sat at its crafting table, awaiting Aldrich.

"Crafting," said Aldrich.

"Ye got it, lad!" the System.

"Specifically, a Fusion," said Aldrich. He looked through his inventory and selected Fler'Gan's lantern. The [Lantern of Old Flame]. The lantern granted significant fire resistance, enough to completely neutralize Aldrich's weakness to fire. It also granted Aldrich massive bonuses to fire based spells, but he could not learn any.

However, by upgrading the lantern by fusing it with certain materials, it was possible to change the properties of the lantern to better suit Aldrich.

"Fuse the [Eye of Azoth] into the [Lantern of the Old Flame]" said Aldrich.

"Got it!" the System received two orbs, one containing the icon of the purple Eye of Azoth, and another containing the red and orange icon of the lantern. He stacked the orbs atop each other and smashed them together with a strike of its stick figure hand.

[Eye of Azoth] + [Lantern of the Old Flame] = [Lantern of the Accursed Eye]

Unlike crafting weapons and equipment from scratch that functioned off a roll-based system, fusing existing equipment with materials yielded far less variability. For example, if Aldrich obtained say, the skin of a fire salamander, and he wanted to fuse it with his grave reaper's mantle, then he could know with near 100% certainty that he would get bonus fire resistance.

The only downside to this was that items could only be fused up to a limit of three times.

[1x Lantern of the Accursed Eye obtained]

[Rank: Uncommon+]

[Stats: +10 Magic

+5 Vitality

+5 Attunement]

[Effects:

Protection of the Old Flame (Passive) - The wearer receives half damage from all fire type damage.

Eye of the Watcher (Passive) - Any unit revealed or targeted by this item continually attains stacks of a debuff that reduces resistance to curse type damage. The debuffs stack up to ten times, requiring a total exposure time in this light of 30 seconds. This debuff lasts for three seconds after the unit escapes the light of the item, at which point the stacks will rapidly decay. In addition, any unit suffering this debuff is Revealed, preventing them from entering stealth.

Gaze of the Accursed (Active) - The eye within this item fully opens, shooting forth a cone of destructive light that deals a strong burst of disintegrating type damage with a 5% chance to instantly kill.

The higher the affected unit's vitality, the higher their resistance to this instant death effect.

If this skill affects a unit with ten stacks of the Eye of the Watcher passive applied to them, it is guaranteed to instantly kill unless the affected target possesses a minimum of 80 vitality. If they possess more than 80 vitality, they will still be Maimed, losing a body part and taking significant damage.]

"Thanks," said Aldrich as he absorbed the [Lantern of the Accursed Eye] into him and then equipped it for it was far better than the [Staff of Stilling Pollen] he used. In fact, this item was so good that Aldrich was willing to use it all the way up to level 50 using the Rank Upgrade function.

Rank Upgrade allowed the player to upgrade the rank of their equipment by sacrificing five pieces of the same equipment type of a higher rank. This normally was too costly to consider most of the time as it meant losing five higher rank pieces of gear just to bring one piece up.

However, for rare pieces of gear like this lantern which had multiple passives and good skills, it was highly worth it.

[-500 Coin]

[Coin: 520] 20]

Aldrich ate the massive coin cost for the Fusion because this lantern was worth it. It covered his fire weakness and made instant death magic massively better. And instant death magic mastery was what he was building towards.

"I have failed you, master, but we are almost there," said Valera. She clenched her fist as she remembered their failure to get to the fifteenth floor. "We must reach the fifteenth floor of that hideous snake's den, is it? All we need are a few more levels."

"Levels, yes. That's a simple solution. We could find more Variants to hunt. Move around to Variant Nests in the Wastelands and clear them," said Aldrich. "Or alternatively we could clear the quest with party members.

The only issue is getting party members that won't ever reveal the secret of my powers and are also strong enough to make it worth recruiting them.

But at that point, why don't I spend the time to just level up and raise stronger undead?"

"Indeed," said Valera.

Aldrich tapped existed the Nexus and when he entered the real world, he heard Fler'Gan murmur in wonder.

"Where-where is this?" said Fler'Gan. His three red eyes were wide with surprise. "I had heard you talk of a new world. Is this it? An entirely new realm of existence? Truly?"

"Yes," said Aldrich. "How is it? Must feel nice to be free from however many decades you spent in that study."

Fler'Gan breathed in deeply and curled his mouth tendrils in disgust. "The air here is tainted. Smoky. Unclean."

"And here I thought global anti-pollution policies were doing well," said Aldrich.

"Anti-pollution policies? Global? The peoples of this realm are united across the entire world? This-this is a wonder," said Fler'Gan. His mouth tendrils wriggled excitedly as he rubbed his hands together. "There will be an abundance of new knowledge to absorb. Knowledge that has never before been analyzed!"

"That's right," said Aldrich. He stared at Fler'Gan. He was a Mind Eater. He had basic racial abilities that included mind control and memory absorption. He came to a realization. "You...you will be the key to this quest."

Aldrich stared at the new quest he had registered.

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Quest: Ritual of Eternity

Difficulty:???

Time Limit: None

Attempts Remaining: 2

Description:

You have begun the path to become a lich. To undergo the Ritual of Eternity, you must fulfill three objectives.

Objectives:

1. Construct a Phylactery [Completed]
2. Sever all personal bonds [Incomplete]
3. Obtain an Obelisk by reaching the 15th floor of the Necropolis [Incomplete]

Rewards:

1x Obelisk

Variable EXP

]]

Aldrich realized immediately that step 2 was not complete. Sever all personal bonds: he thought he had done this already. Adam and Elaine were no longer truly here, and his parents were long dead.

What more was there left for him?

However, Aldrich did not have much time to think about this. The Evil Eyes he had left behind to scout the forest and Blackwater picked up on movement heading towards them, towards the clearing where he had killed Ghost.

He saw through their eyes and saw a search party. An entourage of Hovercars roving up the main road.

Chapter 45: Planning

As the squadron of sleek black hovercars with Blackwater's insignia painted on their doors got closer and closer, Aldrich motioned for his undead to leave.

"We have to go," said Aldrich. He sprinted away into the depths of the forest, making sure to clear up any humanoid tracks. If the search party for Ghost saw human tracks, there would be immediate alarm and suspicion of foul play.

However, Aldrich did not bother covering up the more monstrous tracks because he wanted the search party to see them when they got to the clearing.

The team would dig up Ghost's used up needles and find bits and pieces of his body that Aldrich had strategically left behind. Then, they would see Variant tracks and rule out the possibility of murder.

They would instantly rule that Ghost had died to a variant attack while too high off his mind to defend himself.

And if all evidence pointed towards Ghost dying to Variants, and indeed, there was already plenty of evidence to point towards that conclusion, then Blackwater would rest their search case on Ghost soon enough.

In the off-chance that they actually searched even harder, Aldrich was willing to move out of the Variant forest and establish a second Sign closer to Haven city to escape back into the Nexus until things fully blew over.

Aldrich and his undead party moved out as discreetly as possible. The Geist and the crabs carried anyone with humanoid footsteps to minimize tracks.

While he and his undead moved into the forest, he checked back up on the two Evil Eyes he had positioned.

Aldrich kept a close look on the hovercars using his Evil Eye. He could not look through his Evil Eyes while he was in the Nexus or another dimension, but he could keep them strategically positioned and ready in the real world.

One of his Evil Eyes tracked the search party of hovercars approaching while the other one roamed around Blackwater campus.

From the Evil Eyes, Aldrich knew that Seth Solar and his crew were not in their dorms in Blackwater. They were in one of the hovercars approaching the Variant forest.

The hovercars stopped and parked on the side of the main road, getting out along with several powerful faculty members.

A search squad consisting of twenty-two men in sleek black power armor and high tech firearms with flashlight attachments streamed out. Two technos opened laptops and powered on several search drones to fly over the forest.

By the way they parked almost right beside Ghost's dumping spot, Aldrich could tell that Seth Solar knew where Ghost put away his drugs.

Thankfully, with the thirty minutes advance notice, Aldrich was far, far away from the search party by the time they reached Ghost's drug drop site.

Aldrich stopped and rested by sitting on a fallen tree trunk. He talked to Fler'Gan while he multi-tasked and kept his sight linked with the Evil Eye spying on the search and rescue group.

"You told me there were three steps to fulfilling this 'Ritual of Eternity' to become a lich," said Aldrich. "I've fulfilled one of three conditions, and that's just because I have your Phylactery in my inventory. And obviously, I need to get that Obelisk."

"I assume then, that you desire my counsel on how to fulfill a severing of your mortal bonds?" said Fler'Gan.

"Yeah," said Aldrich. "You see, I have no close bonds."

"Not any? Are you sure, master!?" said Valera.

"The keyword is 'mortal' bond," said Fler'Gan, soothing Valera's worry that Aldrich was not bonded to her. "A bond with immortal undead such as we falls outside of this delineation."

"That's the thing. I am pretty sure I have no mortal bonds." Aldrich looked to Adam and Elaine, and they stared blankly at him with their cloudy eyes. "They used to be my close friends. But that's the thing. Used to.

They aren't anymore, and I know they aren't truly here by this point. They're just zombies.

I was close to my parents, but they died years ago.

I had no other attachments. No friends. No loves. Nothing."

"No loves?" Valera shuddered in anticipation as she hugged herself. "You have yet to have your 'first'? My my..."

Aldrich ignored Valera and let her fantasize while he continued talking with Fler'Gan.

"So that means I should have no attachments. But apparently, I still haven't 'severed my mortal bonds'," said Aldrich.

"O great Elder, perhaps you are envisioning the concept of mortal attachment too narrowly," said Fler'Gan. Now that the insanity induced by his dream state was gone, his voice was calm, oozing the wisdom of an intellectual that had spent over a century studying and absorbing knowledge. "You believe attachment as love or friendship.

A bond of warmth that keeps you connected with others.

But what of hate and vengeance? They are just as strong a bond. No, they can be even stronger. Chains that can lock you with even greater hold than friendship."

"Vengeance." Aldrich repeated this word as he saw through his Evil Eye Seth Solar hovering over Ghost's clearing. He saw Seth Solar's friends behind him with their arms crossed and shaking their heads.

He felt fire in his cold, dead heart. He felt vengeance. He felt a twinge of satisfaction knowing that those miserable maggots had lost one of themselves, but that satisfaction was not nearly enough to quench the fire within Aldrich.

"I see now," said Aldrich. "Vengeance is what's keeping me here. Hm." He put a thinking hand to his chin and narrowed his eyes. "Of all the people to have an unhealthy vengeance fixation on, it had to be Seth Solar, one of the toughest targets to take down that I know."

"Together, we can triumph over anyone," said Valera hopefully, ever optimistic.

"Hold up, Solar?" said Dynamite Girl. "I-I think I remember him now. You're goin' to try and fight THE Solomon Solar?"

"No, Solomon Solar is a proper, public top hero. Trying to target him would be a logistics nightmare and an impossibility to do secretly," said Aldrich. "I'm taking out another member of his family. An asshole that comes from an illegitimate line.

Weaker than the main guy and hidden from the public's eye. But even then, you're right to be surprised. Anyone with the Solar surname will be strong."

"How strong could this mere man possibly be?" said Valera as she saw through the Evil Eye with Aldrich. She spied him hovering a meter or so in the air, scanning his surroundings. "He can fly, it seems, but I sense no other power emanating from him."

"Because his power isn't dependent on magic or levels," said Aldrich. "You have to get used to never underestimating anyone in this world. Anyone could have a powerful power and you would never be able to sense it."

"Not unless you got a scanner like me!" said Fisk.

"That reminds me, hand over your scanner," said Aldrich. "You won't be seeing too much direct combat. Your scanner will be much more useful on me."

"Here boss." Fisk tossed Aldrich his red visor. Aldrich caught it deftly and experimented, attempting to put it into his inventory. He found he could not. Only magical items could go in there, it seemed. He put the visor over his eyes and watched as little numbers and screens in the periphery of his red-tinted vision started to flicker and calibrate.

"You don't need this for diving?" said Aldrich. Diving was the term for those that used a head jack to deep dive into the virtual world of the Net.

"Nah, I use my eye for that." Fisk pointed to his mechanical blue eye as it clacked and whirred. "I mainly wore that to look cool cause' that's ARMA blue-grade. The kind that those ARMA police agents got to look all tactical and sh*t."

"I see," said Aldrich. He wondered how he looked. A man in loose necromancer robes holding a lantern made of burnt bone with a glowing red eyeball suspended inside of it. On top of all this, he had on a futuristic red visor.

Something about these two aesthetics did not line up.

"You look wonderful, master!" said Valera.

Well, at least he had one supporter.

"Power that is not based off magic nor levels nor spells nor skills..." Fler'Gan rubbed his slimy purple hands together. "How quaint. How very, very interesting. I must find more knowledge about this. You-," He pointed a long finger at Dynamite Girl and stared at her with wide eyed desire for knowledge. "You must have one of these powers. Will you consent to my experimentations? I promise they shall not be uncomfortable."

"Geeze, at least you ask for consent, but I'm gonna' have to say no, squid face. I know how 'experiments' with tentacle freaks like you end up, and I ain't about to be part of it," said Dynamite Girl.

"What experiments did you have in mind?" said Aldrich, curious.

"What!? You're gonna' take his side, captain? You..." Dynamite Girl narrowed her eyes at Aldrich. "You're not a perv too, are you?"

"There is nobody as upstanding and dutiful as my master!" protested Valera. She blushed slightly. "Though...if he does have that side to him...I would accept him too."

"So?" said Aldrich, ignoring both women and pressing Fler'Gan for an answer.

"Whether it is possible to mesh the abilities that those of this world seem to harbor within their bodies with the powers vested unto us through mana and magic," said Fler'Gan. "Among many other topics of interest, of course."

"I'm rather curious about that too, actually. But you'll have to let go of Dynamite Girl as your experiment. I assume I'll be needing her for quite some time. I'll find you another Alter to work on soon," said Aldrich.

"Alter? So that is what these strange new humans are called." Fler'Gan hungrily twitched his mouth tendrils. "So be it, O Elder. I shall look forward to when I can begin my experimentations. I must warn you, though, my investigations may perhaps cause some...distress within subjects."

"As long as you get results," said Aldrich. "I'll provide appropriate subjects deserving of distress later. For now, I need to figure out what I want to do."

He looked down at his watch. It was now early into the dusk of Wednesday. Just a few more days until Saturday when Seth Solar and his crew all gathered together at the Red Circle.

Now, was there a way he could face all of them, including the mercenaries and villains in the Red Circle by himself at that point in time? Just three days from now?

No. Not unless Aldrich became a lich and received the massive upgrades that came with the transformation.

But here was now the issue: to become a lich, he had to kill Seth Solar first.

Aldrich had been banking on turning into a lich before facing Seth Solar, but now that was flat out impossible, and without turning into a lich, even with luck on his side any fight with Seth Solar would be one of extreme difficulty.

So how?

Chapter 46: Planning 2

As Aldrich thought of this bigger question, he went ahead and enjoyed the final piece of rewards from completing his first Trial Quest. Specifically, the stat points he got from leveling and the [Tome of Enhancement].

He first distributed the stat points from leveling up and distributed the attunement points he got from wearing a full set of equipment.

=

[Equipment Stat Bonuses]

+25 Magic

+13 Vitality

+25 Attunement

+5 Perception

=

Aldrich invested 2 points into Magic and 3 into Attunement.

[+2 to Magic, +4 with affinity bonuses]

[Magic: 27/27] 31/31 (56)]

[Mana: 81/81] 93/93 (168/168)

[+3 to Attunement, +6 with stat affinity bonuses]

[Attunement: 45] 51 (76)]

[Base Attunement at 50 = Raise Undead spell upgraded to Mass Raise Undead]

[5 Attunement Points available]

[Spells Attuned: 6/6] 6/7]

[Units Controlled: 16/18] 16/22]

He then materialized the [Tome of Enhancement] awarded from clearing the Trial Quest from his inventory. It was a far less morbid book than what the flesh knitted covers of his necromancy tomes suggested, being a more conventional leather-bound green book.

He absorbed the tome into his being.

A [Tome of Enhancement] could be used to upgrade three spells, and in this case, he chose [Anti-Life Shell], [Create Undead 1st Circle] and [Grave Consumption].

[Anti Life Shell Rank 1] Rank 2]

[-Anti Life Shell has now obtained an active function that drains 5% of max mana per second in order to enhance the life drain and greatly enhance the undead healing. In addition, all non-undead units within the shell are slowed.]

[Create Undead 1st Circle] Create Greater Undead 1st Circle]

[-All undead that can be summoned from the 1st circle are upgraded. Undead level cap for the 1st circle raised to level 20]

[Grave Consumption] Mass Grave Consumption]

[-Grave Consumption may now be cast at all graves within a twenty-meter radius of the caster]

With that done, Aldrich started to piece together a plan. First thing was first, if he wanted to assault the Red Circle, he needed to know its defenses inside and out.

"[Create Greater Undead]" said Aldrich, raising his new [Lantern of the Accursed Eye] into the air. He shook the lantern by its chain, and the clicking of the metal followed the creation of an upgraded Evil Eye known as a Grave Ward.

A triple cluster of basketball sized eyes materialized in front of Aldrich. Unlike the Evil Eye which was made entirely of floating, invisible flesh, the Grave Ward was mostly incorporeal. Its eyes seemed to fade in and out of a cloud of darkness much like the Ghast.

Like the Ghast, the Grave Ward was [Incorporeal], granting it a defensive passive that made it highly resistant to physical attacks but much weaker to elemental or energy-based damage.

Also, unlike, the Evil Eye, the Grave Ward could change its mass and dimensions so that it could squeeze through gaps half a meter wide, though it could not entirely phase through barriers or walls.

[-10 Mana]

[-10 Health]

[Mana: 168/168] 158/168]

[HP: [30] 99/99] 89/89

[Units Controlled: 16/18] 17/22]

"Go to the Red Circle," said Aldrich, and the cluster of three smoky eyeballs floated away. It was twice as fast as an ordinary Evil Eye, flying out at the speed of an ordinary person going on a light run.

Not particularly fast, granted, but still noticeably much better than the regular Evil Eye.

Aldrich then sat in place, staring through the Evil Eye watching Ghost's drug dump site. He felt hot hate grow and fester inside of him as he grit his teeth watching Seth Solar and the rest of his trash friends mull about, completely free and healthy.

The search team investigated the dumping site and found Ghost's needles and scraps of his body. They also found the Striker, monster, and Variant tracks that Aldrich had intentionally left behind.

There was some discussion, but Aldrich could not hear through the Evil Eye for it had no ears.

All he could do was watch. He could see Seth Solar talking to the security team, shoving one of them hard into a tree in minor anger. For a moment, Aldrich wondered if Seth Solar felt even the smallest bit of pain that Aldrich had felt in losing friends.

Another of the security team soldiers picked up Ghost's torn finger from the ground with a pair of extended forceps, showing it to Seth Solar.

Seth Solar stared at Ghost's finger with zero emotion on his face as the sociopath registered the confirmed death of his friend. He shrugged before firing a small beam of white energy from his eyes, disintegrating the finger of his former friend with zero remorse.

He then just shrugged casually and dropped the security team member he pinned against the tree.

He waved the rest of his crew forwards and left, getting into a hovercar that started driving back towards Blackwater.

Good. That meant that Aldrich's plan had worked: he had convinced Seth Solar and Blackwater that Ghost had died to variants.

As the search team packed up, calling back their drones and getting into their cars, Aldrich locked his fingers together and rested his chin on his hands, thinking.

He thought.

Then thought some more.

To become a lich, Aldrich had to sever his mortal bonds and obtain the Obelisk.

To sever his mortal attachments, he had to fulfill his vengeance against Seth Solar and his crew.

To obtain the Obelisk, he needed to clear the fifteenth floor of the Necropolis which he was too weak to do now.

These seemed like two mutually exclusive objectives, and it was obvious the order in which Aldrich should go about clearing them.

First, Aldrich had to grind and obtain the Obelisk. Then, with the levels and rewards from clearing fifteen floors, he would devise a way to kill Seth Solar using a trap involving instant death magic.

But he could not shake off the feeling that there was an easier way to go about this.

It did not take much longer before he came to a striking realization: there was a way to destroy Seth Solar and obtain the Obelisk at the same time.

"Fisk," said Aldrich.

"Yes, boss?"

"Appointments at the Red Circle can be set up online, no?" said Aldrich. "Contact them. Get in touch with the manager, this guy called 'Casimir'. Tell them a certain Mr. Bruce Vane wants to meet about investing some of his multi-million credit inheritance. Tell them Mr. Vane is also thinking about hosting a nice private party this weekend as well.

Tell them to meet privately. And of course, this goes without saying, but make sure you aren't traceable."

"You got it, boss," said Fisk as he took his laptop out of the bag Aldrich had taken out of the Odinson base. Fisk plugged himself into the laptop via his headjack, operating the tech mentally.

"Oh, and check the AA bulletin for any Variant Nests in the Wastelands," said Aldrich. "Give me a thorough list of all Variant Nests within a two mile radius of here. I don't want to waste all of daylight tomorrow just hiding in this forest.

I need to hunt for levels. And this forest is running out of variants strong enough to raise my levels fast enough."

"On it." Fisk raised a thumbs up to Aldrich.

"The rest of you, do as you want for now," said Aldrich to the other undead. "Train, talk, or hunt more Variants."

With this command, all of Aldrich's Variant undead scattered out into the forest to hunt. The Troll Chieftain and the two Mud Crabs also followed.

"Wanna train?" said Dynamite Girl to Valera. "Pure hand to hand combat, y'know? Cause' I can't be startin' a fire here or anythin'. Plus, I think my martial arts is gettin' real rusty."

"Certainly," said Valera. "But do not cry when you feel utterly powerless before me."

"Heh, we'll see about that," said Dynamite Girl as they squared up against each other.

Meanwhile, Fler'Gan now hovered around the Geist, poking at the Variant with his long, slimy fingers. "A creature such as this I have never known. How quaint. How odd. How very...interesting."

"Geh...(You're creepy)" said the Geist.

"In the name of progress and knowledge, I have cast away any consideration for how others judge me," said Fler'Gan. "Come, let me see if you can learn magic, child."

"Gehgeh (I guess)" The Geist followed Fler'Gan away.

Aldrich waited for Fisk to do his work. In the meanwhile, he had Adam and Elaine sit by him on the fallen tree trunk.

"We're so close," said Aldrich. "So close to taking down Seth Solar. When it happens, I will make sure that you two have a chance to tear into him. It's the least you deserve."

Adam and Elaine groaned and growled in response.

"Yeah, that's the spirit," said Aldrich with a smile.

He wondered if he was going insane, talking to mindless zombies like this. Or maybe he had always been insane.

Hadn't he asked himself this before already?

Well, it didn't matter much now.

He was what he was, and he accepted it.

==

An hour and a half passed before Fisk spoke, looking up from his computer screen.

"Alright, boss, I sent your message to the Red Circle. Bet we'll get a response soon. As for Variant Nests, well, I pulled an official map from the AA website." Fisk turned his laptop screen to Aldrich and pointed at a big chunk of map on the east coast of the United States.

He tapped the area and zoomed into a forested batch of land before circling it in red. "That's where we are. And here are all the Variant Nests in a two hundred mile radius like you said."

Fisk zoomed out a little, and five red dots appeared indicating the location of Variant Nests.

Variant Nests were, as the name suggested, nests of Variants that did not pose an immediate threat to human civilization. In fact, these nests were actually welcomed as they became self-sustaining ecosystems for Variants where they could populate without having to encroach on human territory.

So long as the nests were not attacked, the Variants within did not attack.

When roads had to be made near them or new cities planned and built, the AA would send heroes to wipe the nests out. But otherwise, they were largely left alone.

These were the perfect spots for Aldrich to hunt for levels and new undead. Nobody would be around here. Any minor remote surveillance that was here, some satellite imaging or whatnot, he could block with a Ghast.

He looked over the five red dots and discounted going to three nests that would involve having to cross over public roads where his undead could get spotted.

Instead, his eye caught on two nests located right outside the southwestern edge of the forest. There was little to no human development here as the land was littered with huge canyons and fissures where roads could not be built.

This area was called the Shatter Zone because of how the earth looked so utterly fractured, and apparently, this had been the site of a battle between the greatest hero Vanguard and a powerful giant villain called Megalodon during the Age of Villains.

"I know where we're going now," said Aldrich as he stood up, getting ready.

"Uh, us? I'm going too? Can I...can I get a gun or something?" said Fisk.

Chapter 47: Variant Nest

Aldrich gathered all of the people coming with him on this mission to clear the Variant Nest. Valera, Dynamite Girl, Fler'Gan, and the Alloywing Eagle. He would have liked to take the Geist too, but he planned on driving down to the nest location and the Geist was simply too big to fit inside a car.

After comforting the Geist that no, it did not have to lose weight, Aldrich set off at three in the morning. He drove with Valera in the front seat and Fler'Gan, Dynamite Girl, and the eagle in the back.

"What...is this?" Fler'Gan marveled at the insides of the car as Aldrich drove. Fler'Gan looked around like a child in a candy shop. His three eyes all looked in different directions as he drew his face close up to the car seats, the windows, basically everything.

He in particular was mystified by a screen behind the middle console that showed GPS imagery of where the car was as well as some menus that indicated environmental information like the temperature and weather. The car could also connect to the Net, but Aldrich had Fisk disable that option on the car to prevent people from tracing it.

"Don't touch anything," said Aldrich as he looked through the rearview mirror, keeping an eye on Fler'Gan.

"I will contain myself, Elder," said Fler'Gan. "Yet I find it so very difficult to believe that this is all the creation of mere technology. Of metals and ores and materials created and woven together in such a way that these lights, these movements on this screen, all of this simply...happens."

"It is indeed a wonder," said Valera. "I doubted that man so weak and frail and mortal could ever stand without magic but look how far they have come. They do not need beasts of burden anymore; they simply ride these beasts of metal.

And look at how clearly they can capture images with their trinkets-,"

Valera proudly showed the picture of her and Aldrich standing side by side, covered in blood from killing the Odinsons, to Fler'Gan and Dynamite Girl.

"Uh huh, real nice, yeah," said Dynamite Girl, visibly uncomfortable.

"My, the quality of this image is superb." Fler'Gan inspected the picture intently. "I can discern that it is colors etched upon paper stiffened with some form of varnish. Yet, it is on par with the quality of an image imbued into a magic crystal or memory globe."

"And now I can gaze upon these captured memories with my master at any time I desire!" Valera took the picture back, looked at it, then hugged it to her breast like a baby.

Fler'Gan continued to look around. "What I would do to break apart all of this and study it from its base components up-,"

"Watch it, squidface, don't want you burnin' down this car," said Dynamite Girl.

"Is all that you can think about simple destruction?" scoffed Fler'Gan.

"Alright, let's stop this argument there," said Aldrich. "But you do bring up an interesting point. You were an academic and scholar, were you not?"

"I do not mean to be prideful, but I was a decreed member of the Arcanist Order," said Fler'Gan. "Before they cast me out for pursuing the dark arts."

Aldrich nodded in recognition.

The Arcanist Order was a society of scholars that stood as an independent research organization in Elden World. The scholars there came from every race and faction and did not discriminate across race or borders. All were united in not only the pursuit of knowledge, but the maintenance of history.

To be decreed in the Order meant one exhibited a superb level of dedication and intelligence. At the very minimum, Fler'Gan was well practiced across multiple magical fields. Some of these included alchemiy and even dwarven magitek, meaning very likely, Fler'Gan could pick up the scientific concepts of machine working and chemistry extremely well.

"You know, that doesn't sound like a bad idea," said Aldrich. "When we get back, talk to Fisk about this world's technology. He can introduce you to it."

"I am utterly honored to receive an opportunity to absorb such knowledge." Fler'Gan bowed his head.

Aldrich gave Fler'Gan another nod as the car drove out of the last stretch of the Variant forest. Outside of the forest was just a vast stretch of dry, cracked earth. Where before there was overwhelming green and life, there was now bleak oranges and reds without a single tree in sight.

This was a consequence of the Monsterring. The creation of Titan-class Variants immediately following the Monsterring caused enormous meteorological and environmental changes throughout the entire world, making the entire planet unstable, as if mother nature herself had decided to wage war against mankind.

Earthquakes and typhoons rocked every single continent. Water levels rose dramatically in some areas and dried down to nothing in others.

Large swathes of land became completely dead, unable to support any sort of life.

These stretches, Dead Zones as they were called, caused mass global instability through refugee crises, food shortages, water shortages, every damn type of shortage.

What Aldrich drove through now was a Dead Zone. Just a vast stretch of dried out and dead earth.

However, once the Titans were driven back to dormancy or destroyed, the planet stabilized. Granted, it stabilized in a damaged, utterly changed state nearly completely different than how it had been at the start of the twenty first century, but stability was stability.

It took an hour and a half of driving through the Dead Zone to make it to the Shatter Zone where Fisk had marked out the two Variant nests.

"That's a stunning view, gotta' say," said Dynamite Girl as she looked out the front window. There were canyons standing hundreds of meters tall carved out into the Dead Zone. This was the power of Vanguard, a man whose fists could change how maps were drawn.

Of course, it helped this whole landscaping project that Vanguard's opponent Megalodon had been a hundred-meter-tall behemoth who could create giant craters just by falling.

"This landscape was not carved by time, by winds and waters breaking apart rock little by little over thousands of years," said Fler'Gan. "It was carved by battle."

"This is what the strongest Alters can do," said Aldrich.

"Their power nears that of the gods themselves, then," said Valera, concerned. "Entire mountain ranges formed and felled. Destruction of this scale is possible only with a spell of the ninth or tenth circle."

"Yes, and we are far, far from that level right now," said Aldrich. "Take this as a reminder of what we need to work towards."

Aldrich got out of the car and looked down at his Eye-Phone. Specifically, Fisk's phone. Fisk had given it to Aldrich with all information about the two Variant Nests including not only their locations and appearances but also the type of Variants seen in them.

Aldrich stepped to the very edge of the canyon and looked down at a steep, hundred plus meter drop. He spied a large growth of twisted black branches and rock jutting out like a tumor about halfway down below.

That was the first of two Variant Nests. The other one should have been very close by, but Aldrich could not see it, even with a thorough AC scan and zoom ins using Fisk's visor. The last time information about these two nests had been updated on the AA database had been six months ago.

More than enough time for a nest to have faded away for any number of reasons. Sometimes Variants simply left their nests, sometimes an earthquake bust it apart, sometimes a storm washed it away, sometimes a lightning strike hit it, whatever.

At the very least, Aldrich did not feel particularly worried that one of two nests were gone. In fact, it just made it easier to decide which nest to take on.

Aldrich waved his hand and casted [Create Greater Undead]. He chose to create another Grave Ward.

[-10 HP]

[-10 Mana]

[HP: 99/99] 89/99]

[Mana: 183/183] 173/183]

[Units Controlled: 18/22] 19/22]

When the three eye balled undead formed, Aldrich sent it down to scout the nest to make sure there were no surprises.

Aldrich snapped his fingers and the Alloywing Eagle by his side. He hopped on.

"Valera, get on. Neither of us can fly," said Aldrich. He pointed at Dynamite Girl and Fler'Gan. "And you two, fly down. Don't want to weigh the eagle down too much."

"Got it, captain," said Dynamite Girl.

"Understood, Elder." Fler'Gan began to float in the air for he knew the [Flight] spell.

Aldrich watched Fler'Gan fly and wondered whether it was possible for the Mind-Eater scholar to devise a way to teach Aldrich the useful spell. After all, it was said that in the game lore that scholars of the Arcanist Order recorded and created spell tomes.

Valera plopped on behind Aldrich on the eagle's back.

The eagle squawked in protest at the sudden weight increase, especially considering Valera's heavy full plate armor.

"Dear eagle, are you implying what I think you are implying?" Valera cocked her head and stared down at the eagle with a blood chilling smile.

The eagle shivered and put its head down. Seeing that, Valera nodded before nervously looking at Aldrich.

"What is it?" said Aldrich.

"M-m-may I hold you, master? To stay safe on this eagle, of course!" said Valera.

"It's a ten second flight down-," began Aldrich before he saw Valera looking at him with big pleading puppy eyes. "Alright."

Valera squealed in delight as she wrapped her arms around Aldrich, crushing his breath out of him.

Chapter 48: Clearing the Nest

Aldrich and his undead flew into the entrance of the Variant Nest. When Aldrich and Valera hopped off the eagle and landed in the dark, subterranean entrance tunnel, he waved the eagle away.

"Wait outside. In a confined space like this, you won't do well. When I signal, come down here and pick us up," said Aldrich.

The eagle bobbed its head in a nod and then flew away.

Aldrich stared ahead into the depths of the nest. The path ahead led through a dark, winding tunnel that sank deeper down into the cliff. He tapped his red scanning visor and checked any recent heat signatures.

Nothing. The whole place was cool, almost cold. A good respite from the hot sun above. A natural place for Variants to gather and live.

Aldrich kept his eyes tuned in with the Grave Ward that he sent to scout ahead. He did not want to move into this unknown nest without having mapped out where he wanted to go beforehand. While the Grave Ward scouted, Aldrich looked down at Fisk's Eye-Phone, making sure to keep the brightness down way low so as not to attract attention.

He refreshed his memory on the few reports the AA had made about this nest, the latest of which was dated six months ago.

Beings that possessed Alter organs and cells emitted a natural energy signature that could be traced, especially when the powers were active. However, if there was a large enough density of dormant organs, such as in the case of Variant Nests, it was possible to determine a rough average estimate of energy emissions.

With that, the AA determined how 'strong' a Variant Nest was and categorized them into letter ranks that ranged from E to A to S. Broad AA guidelines suggested that ten Alters of the nest's rank were required to fully destroy it, but of course, this number was highly flexible depending on what type of variants there were and the layout and unique characteristics of the nest itself.

As for this nest, Aldrich read that it was ranked a solid D. The variants recorded here seemed to be largely reptilian with a few arthropod types, specifically ants. Not particularly threatening.

However aside from these few reports, there was precious little information about the nest.

Aldrich figured it was because as a D-rank nest, it was simply not that important.

"Dynamite Girl," said Aldrich.

"Call me Stella," said Dynamite Girl. "That was the name I remember having. And the name I remember using with people closer to me."

"Close?" Valera leered at Dynamite Girl suspiciously.

"Close as in trust," said Dynamite Girl, or Stella as she wanted to be called.

"How strong do you think we are?" said Aldrich. "In terms of how we compare to variants and heroes. What rank do you think we are?"

Stella crossed her arms and stared at everyone for a good minute or so, nodding to herself.

"Alright, here's what I think. Mind you, I'm not some kinda expert on all this. I think Valera is high up on the C rank. So C+."

"Only C+? Are you sure you are not miscalculating, hm?" said Valera.

"No, I think I'm fairly right. C'mon, don't complain, I was on the lower end of the C rank. Maybe now in the middle now that I can surpass my limits," said Stella. "Squid face is like, I dunno', low to mid B rank? You gotta understand here, there's a huge gap between the E/D ranks with C. Then there's a huge jump between B to A, then an even bigger jump from A to S."

"Then what about me? How would you class me?" said Aldrich.

"You, captain?" Stella cocked her head. "Er, well, I guess if you were workin' as a hero, maybe like, low C?"

"You dare to suggest the master is that weak? When he is the very reason you enjoy eternal life now?" protested Valera.

"That's what I was goin' to say," said Stella. "The captain's powers ain't really suited to this whole hero thing. If he joined the agency, I don't think they'd let him use his powers, all that raisin' the dead and stuff.

But say he was a villain, then I'd say he's already way up at high B. In terms of just straight up individual strength, he's around or slightly below us, but the simple fact that he can do all this necromancy stuff means he'd get classed as an insanely high threat.

Maybe already a low A, considerin' the fact that the AA places a threat premium on villains or variants that are considered 'self-replicating' or capable of creatin' minions and more threats."

"I see," said Aldrich. "Well then, we're four C to B rank threats taking on a D rank nest. This should be no issue at all."

"Yeah, I figure," said Stella.

"Good." Aldrich figured out where to go via the Grave Ward. "It's time to start hunting."

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Aldrich spun his lantern around by the chain, a ghostly red light flickering around him from the glow of the eye entrapped within. The light lit up his surroundings, showing more than a dozen pairs of gleaming yellow, reptilian eyes staring at him.

Below these eyes were rows of sharp teeth.

Up ahead, Aldrich could hear Valera's shouts of "DIE! DIE! DIE!" in the distance accompanied by regular explosions and bursts of light from Stella.

"You do not wish for my interference?" said Fler'Gan as he walked beside Aldrich, his arms behind his back.

"No. I want to see how well I stand up compared to D rank monsters on my own. You're here as insurance in case anything surprises me," said Aldrich. "And I'll repeat this again: do NOT interfere."

"Understood, Elder." Fler'Gan nodded and watched.

"Come on." Aldrich waved his free hand towards himself, egging the Blurred Lizards onwards. Each of them were the size of large dogs with grey and brown color patterns on their scales that shifted, making them blur and camouflage into their environment.

The blurred lizards loosed shrill screams as they rushed forward.

Aldrich casted [Negative Surge] on himself, granting himself ten seconds of massively enhanced stats. He gained 12 strength, agility, and perception along with a strong aura of green.

[-15 Mana]

[Mana: 183/183] 168/183]

[Strength: 11] 23]

[Agility: 10] 22]

[Perception: 13] 25]

Aldrich back stepped, evading two lizards from chomping down on him. He swung his lantern forwards in a swiping arc that broke both lizards' necks. He immediately had to retreat again as several more lizards rushed forward, trampling over the corpses of their dead brethren to try and maul Aldrich.

Aldrich activated his [Anti-Life Shell]. A foggy green mist emanated from him, and inside, all of the lizards were slowed, their life force sapping away. Their camouflage did not matter because the light from the [Lantern of the Accursed Eye] revealed them constantly.

And now that Aldrich was considerably faster and the lizards slower, he outmaneuvered them with ease. He swung his lantern forward with expert handling, shooting out the head like a wrecking ball that caved in skulls with each strike.

"Alright," said Aldrich. He put down his lantern. "Time to test my hand to hand."

He squared up in a shoulder width stance, raising his arms in a guard. A lizard lunged at him, and he unleashed a straight kick upwards, smashing his bare foot right into the variant's chin and launching it into the rocky ceiling above.

Another lizard came forwards, leaping up and snapping at his arms.

Aldrich spun around and launched a downward elbow strike that broke the attacking lizard's skull and then used that lizard's corpse as a shield to prevent three more lizards from swarming him. The three variants instead sunk their teeth into the corpse.

Aldrich pushed and tossed the corpse away, making the lizards fall backwards.

"Good." Aldrich. His skills were not gone, and training like this helped to keep him sharp. "Now for my magic."

Aldrich deactivated the active portion of his [Anti-Life Shell] to conserve his mana.

[Mana: 168/183] 123/183]

He had only kept it up for 5 seconds but the 5% maximum mana per second drain was hefty. But expected. [Anti-Life Shell]'s active was not that useful for its mana cost until higher ranks when it obtained a stronger slow, stat debuffs, an instant death effect, and heavy buffs to undead.

"Time for my magic." Aldrich picked up his lantern and wielded it in one hand while he kept his other hand free to cast magic. Six lizards surrounded Aldrich now, making it difficult to fight them hand to hand.

Aldrich activated his [Lantern of the Accursed Eye] and shone it in front of him. A cone shaped laser of crimson light blasted forth, illuminating the three lizards in front of him and making them shriek as their flesh started to turn into ash and disintegrate.

He then dealt with the three other lizards behind him by casting [Chill Bolts] with his free hand. Two chill bolts per lizard. One to stun them, one to freeze and smash their brains.

[-24 Mana]

[Mana: 123/183] 99/183]

[12 Blur Lizards defeated!]

[+480 EXP]

[EXP Bar: 870/1400] 1350/1400]

"All done." Aldrich patted his hands together, content.

"Excellent work, Elder," said Fler'Gan. "Such competency in the dark arts along with exceptional physical abilities. It does remind me of my younger days, but now my lower back ails me far too much for such wild movement."

"Yeah." Aldrich cracked his neck. "But my weakness as a Legion Necromancer stays the same. I don't have an issue defending myself, but when I do, I have to eat through my mana rapidly. It's far more efficient to let my undead do the real heavy lifting.

Hm."

Aldrich looked at the dozen grave markers floating above the lizard corpses. His health was completely full. He did not even have to replenish his [Corpse Barrier]. In fact, he did not even have to manifest the barrier in the first place.

He could choose to keep it dormant or spontaneously generate it, but obviously, generating a barrier of corpses made it difficult to engage in hand-to-hand combat.

Maybe it was better for him to be riskier in combat. Take more damage, especially when facing larger enemies, and then use his [Grave Consumption] to restore lost health.

Aldrich noted this down for later.

More experience funneled into him from Valera and Dynamite Girl practically speed running their way through the lizard infested tunnel, blowing up or punching through anything they saw.

[30 Blur Lizards defeated!]

[+1200 EXP]

[EXP Bar: 1350/1400] 2550/1400]

[Level Up!]

[Level 11] 12]

[EXP Bar: 1200/1600]

[+5 stat points available to distribute]

Aldrich nodded. Now this was more like it. Mass EXP farming. The kind that Aldrich theorized would skyrocket his levels up.

Aldrich started to invest points back into his physical stats more. In the game, he did not invest much of anything into his physical stats, but that was because he knew the enemies he would face. He needed to be more self-sufficient in the real world.

[+5 strength]

[Strength: 11] 16]

Aldrich figured that getting his strength, agility, and perception up over twenty would make him strong enough to handle a C rank hero or villain reliably. He noted that the first few stat points he invested into his physical stats made a massive difference.

Just five points got him almost twice as stronger and faster than a normal man. But stats, or at the least the physical ones, did not seem to increase multiplicatively. Every five points did not make him twice as strong or fast.

It was difficult to quantify in numbers exactly how much stronger he got with each stat point. The only thing that mattered was that he did. He figured that the 20-30 stat threshold for his physical stats would keep him self-sufficient, especially with [Negative Surge] and, later, its upgraded version [Death Surge].

Aldrich then felt a mental signal from Valera.

Master, you should be here. There's a monster here that will be to your liking when we have slaughtered it.

On it said Aldrich.