

# **Super Necromancer System**

## **#Chapter 49: The Bloodspitter - Read Super**

## **Necromancer System Chapter 49: The Bloodspitter**

### **Chapter 49: The Bloodspitter**

Aldrich and Fler'Gan stepped up to the precipice of a ledge leading down into a large nest scattered with blackened scorch marks. Charred and torn apart lizard corpses and destroyed eggshell shards lay strewn about everywhere - the remnants of Valera and Stella destroying everything in their path together.

They might not have gotten along in other circumstances, but in battle, in killing, well, they were best friends.

"Good to see you, master!" said Valera as she raised her cross shield as Stella hunkered down behind her.

A much larger lizard, almost twice the size of the other ones, hissed at Valera.

It did not have the blurring camouflage effect on its scales, and indeed, it seemed that its scales were meant to be shown off. They were spiked and oriented in thick plates like armor. Two noticeable, large red glowing horns jutted out from the sides of its head.

The lizard's yellow eyes turned bright red before firing off a twin stream of highly pressurized blood. The blood slammed against Valera's shield with a crashing impact, but she dug her greaves in and held her ground. The blood crashed and splattered behind her, and anywhere the blood touched, it ate away at, melting the rocky ground with ease.

Aldrich did not know what the variant was.

Because Blackwater thoroughly neglected the Dud students, Aldrich had no access to classified AA information about variants. The more common ones, he could find info on through the Net, but stronger and rarer ones like this - nothing.

"Can I get some help here!" said Stella. "Squid face!?"

"Shall I?" said Fler'Gan.

"Go ahead." Aldrich nodded.

Fler'Gan floated in the air and clasped his hands together. "I suppose you young ones do require the assistance of a true master."

Stella was about to say something, but she heard Fler'Gan's words and stopped.

Bright orange magic circles formed around Fler'Gan's hands. "And I am eager to see how the creatures of this new world deal with proper magic."

Fler'Gan cast [Flame Lance], shooting out a concentrated spear of bright orange and red flame.

The blood shooting lizard stopped its blood spray and looked up before the fire slammed into it. The magically condensed flames acted like a spear, too, stabbing into the lizard's stomach with piercing damage.

The lizard just sat there as the flames exploded over it, taking zero damage.

"Hm." Aldrich noted this development with interest. He saw that the lizard's spiked scales were distorting, and not just because of the heat waves from Fler'Gan's flames. They were doing something to nullify the damage.

"This thing's a Bloodspitter Lizard!" said Stella. "Its hide's resistant to practically any damage! You gotta hurt it internally!"

"You tell me this now!?" said Fler'Gan.

"Well, I kinda wanted to see you makin' a fool of yourself after actin' all cocky." Stella smiled a little before she grew serious. "But yeah, now that you know, go ahead and toast this thing from the inside if you can.

These things are practically indestructible, but they're slow, and they need to breathe.

Burn up the air here and cook this thing out!"

"A surprisingly apt strategy coming from one such as yourself." Fler'Gan prepared to cast [Flamethrower] and constantly generate flames to fill the area with smoke to drain it of oxygen.

"Wait." Aldrich raised his hand. "I'll do it myself."

Aldrich jumped up and landed behind Valera.

"Give me some protection," said Aldrich.

"Understood, master!" Valera stood firmly in front of Aldrich with her shield up.

"One last thing I wanted to test out," said Aldrich. He took out his lantern and flashed its eerie red light at the lizard. He did not fully open the eye of the lantern for its disintegration effect. Instead, he just kept the foggy passive light on the lizard.

The lizard cocked its head and blinked its eyes, wondering what the light was supposed to do.

Unless Aldrich opened the eye held within the lantern, it did not do damage. It just stacked the [Eye of the Watcher] passive. Three seconds of exposure under the light for one stack of the passive, with the stacks applying up to ten times.

Each stack reduced resistances to curse type damage, and there was one type of magic that Aldrich knew that fell under curse type damage that he was very curious about.

Instant death magic.

The bloodspitter lizard growled, still a little confused as to why nobody was reaching out to attack it.

After five seconds, it grew impatient and decided to shoot out its acidic blood streams again from its eyes.

Valera raised her shield again while Aldrich actually moved out of the shield and strafed to the side, content in knowing that the lizard had distracted itself firing its initial blast at Valera.

He lost his cover against the blood, but this allowed him to cast the light continually on the lizard without Valera's shield and the splashing of blood to obscure him.

The lizard ignored Aldrich and just kept its blood spray on Valera and Stella, obviously registering them as far more of a threat.

Aldrich waited as he cast the light on the lizard. He had expected to dodge the blood or an attack or anything hostile, but the lizard simply did not care about him.

It could not feel pain, so it ignored him.

"It appears the creatures of this new world do not understand the concept of debuffs," noted Fler'Gan.

"Or this variant is simply stupid. Most likely, a combination of both," said Aldrich.  
"Regardless, it's time for me to begin my instant death experiment."

Thirty seconds passed, stacking the [Eye of the Watcher] debuff on the bloodspitter lizard fully.

A shimmering red haze flickered around the lizard, signifying that it was fully debuffed, its resistance to instant death neutralized incredibly low.

Even more so against the lantern's active disintegration attack.

"Let's test how your invincible scales deal with this." Aldrich opened the eye of his lantern, casting [Disintegrating Gaze].

When the eye suspended within the lantern opened up, it was horribly bloodshot with a dark purple iris and blazing red, hateful pupil.

The normal foggy red light the lantern cast transformed into a solid, conical beam that washed over the lizard.

Aldrich was careful only to let the beam hit the lizard's head as he wanted to preserve its body.

The lizard managed to let out one confused shriek before its head turned solid white before breaking apart into a pile of ash. The creature slumped over, dead, its neck stub utterly cauterized so that not even blood pooled out.

"Looks like Alter powers, or at the least this one, can't defend against instant death. Good to know." Aldrich walked over to the lizard's headless corpse and waited to see whether a soul appeared.

None.

But a grave marker did.

Aldrich had wanted to see whether he craft an item, specifically an accessory like a ring, to give him some of the lizard's invulnerability. But unfortunately, no soul popped up.

[Bloodspitter Lizard defeated!]

[+300 EXP]

[EXP Bar: 1200/1600 ] 1500/1600]

"Serve." Aldrich put a hand over the headless lizard corpse. Strands of green energy trickled into its body, making it shake and stand up. However, it immediately just collapsed back down again after the initial jolt of negative energy had reanimated it.

This was because its brain was destroyed, preventing it from processing any thoughts.

Unlike skeletons that did not need brains to move at all, it seemed that zombies and higher undead still required their heads to function.

Hence why Aldrich could get put down if his brain was blasted apart.

Aldrich could, however, manually manipulate the lizard to move, and this he did now until his passive [Anti-Life Shell] healed the creature back up over time.

[-5 Mana]

[Mana: 99/183 ] 94/183]

[Bloodspitter Lizard Lvl 14 Raised]

[Units Controlled: 19/22 ] 20/22]

He checked the lizard's powers.

It possessed three powers like the Geist.

First, its scales were essentially completely immune to damage. They distorted space to prevent any harmful matter from breaching them, hence the heat wave like distortions.

This did not, however, apply to areas without scales such as their eyes, nose, or internal organs.

Secondly, it could fire highly acidic blood streams from its eyes. The blood was acidic enough that if it hit an average man, it would reduce said unlucky bag of flesh into nothing but a gooey puddle within a second.

Third, it possessed a heightened form of kinetic vision that allowed its eyes to track targets with extreme accuracy on top of zooming in across a distance of one mile (1.6 km).

Overall, the lizard was quite powerful. Very likely one of the strongest variants within this nest.

"Good work, everyone," said Aldrich. "But there's more. The Grave Ward has scouted another series of tunnels leading further down. Next, we'll be fighting ants."

"Bugs. I hate them," said Stella.

"I must agree with you on this," said Valera. "How their many legs skitter and scatter - it is truly grotesque."

"Bah, this is why it is not prudent to have women in a party," said Fler'Gan. "They are so dainty and clutch their skirts over such little things."

Valera and Stella both gave Fler'Gan a death stare that made him go quiet. Fler'Gan truly was like an old grandpa, complaining about his painful lower back, young people this, women that, and whatnot.

"Enough distractions," said Aldrich. "I want to clear most of this nest out fast. Enough to get as many levels as possible but without destroying it fully, otherwise it might attract attention."

## **Chapter 50: Sudden Attack**

For the next thirty minutes, Aldrich and his undead traveled through tunnels that grew smaller and narrower. Here, oversized ants the size of dogs crawled about en masse. The tunnels were a tight enough fit that the group had to travel in a single file line, making it impossible for everyone to fight at once.

Aldrich created an easy formation to get around this issue. He placed Fler'Gan ahead of him and Stella at the back. Those two had the strongest area of effect abilities, and so Fler'Gan just had to torch his way forward and Stella could blast whatever ants tried to swarm from behind.

Meanwhile, Aldrich and Valera leisurely walked between them, letting the two barbecue any threats that came their way.

"Rockjaw ants," explained Dynamite Girl as she finger flicked a small cloud of sparkles out - her sublimated blood - and detonated it, annihilating a group of cluster of ten ants. "So called because their mandibles can shatter rock. They eat the minerals or somethin' inside of them."

"Do they have a queen?" said Aldrich. Information about ant variants was widespread enough that it was relatively well known that they largely tended to reproduce asexually, creating egg clusters on their abdomens after absorbing enough nutrients.

However, in rare cases and under circumstances that were as of yet not researched too well, ants could form a large colony under a queen that took over the reproductive process completely. These colonies became incredibly dangerous extremely quickly for in short generations, they could create ants with a variety of alter powers.

Information about this was so prevalent because fifteen years ago, there had been a massive, unchecked ant colony in South Korea that killed over a hundred thousand people. The disaster had required the intervention of the country's two S-ranked heroes to eliminate.

A similar incident had struck the west coast of the United States as well, and that had taken a team of fifteen top A-class heroes to deal with.

"Nah. They're rogue ants. Look at their behavior. Zero coordination. And if there was a queen, we'd be fightin' soldiers with powers by now."

"Good." Aldrich knew that if this was a proper colony, he was ill equipped to deal with it unless it had formed very recently. But since these were just rogue, nearly mindless ants, he and his undead breezed through the ant infested tunnels.

Over thirty minutes, Dynamite Girl and Fler'Gan had killed over a hundred ants, easily giving Aldrich enough EXP to level up.

[ 140 Rockjaw Ants defeated!]

[+700 EXP]

[EXP Bar: 1500/1600 ] 2200/1600]

[EXP Bar: 600/1800]

[Level Up!]

[Level 12 ] 13]

[+5 stat points available to distribute]

Aldrich invested 5 points into agility.

[Agility: 10 ] 15]

He then looked ahead as Fler'Gan casually used his [Flamethrower] spell to annihilate ants before they could even get within twenty meters of the group.

Because Fler'Gan retained his boss stats, his mana pool was incredibly large and in addition, he knew spells that he did not use back in the game. In particular, he had a useful spell called [Clarity] that restored 10% of the caster and any friendly units' maximum mana.

Fler'Gan used this whenever he could, topping up not only his mana pool, but Aldrich's as well.

[Mana: 99/183 ] 183/183]

The only issue with [Clarity] was that it had a long one-minute cooldown, but that was long only in terms of the game. In the real world, one minute was nothing.

As a boss, Fler'Gan only had a pre-programmed moveset, but as a real life being, he knew spells he should have known as a studied scholar who had knowledge of many magical fields.

"How much more magic do you know other than fire magic?" said Aldrich.

"I have dabbled in Arcanism," said Fler'Gan.

Arcanism was the magical field where utility spells like clairvoyance, divination, status checking and meta-magic fell in. [Clarity] fell in this field too.

"But I am a mere amateur in the field. I only studied enough to enhance my fire magic," said Fler'Gan. "I was always more of a researcher, you see. I preferred the comfort of my study and a laboratory over the thrill of weaving magic circles and manifesting grand, instant effects.

Thus, I am most versed in alchemy. I have earned recognition in all both sub fields of Potionology and Metamorphics. Alas, I fear my knowledge utterly useless now in this strange new world. With no magic and mana in the air, none of the flora, fauna, and ores I am familiar working with are present."

"I assume that's why you are so interested in researching whether you can teach magic to the Geist," said Aldrich. "If you can get magic to work here, then you won't be lacking in raw materials for your alchemy anymore."

"You think correctly, O Elder." Fler'Gan's mouth tendrils quivered in anticipation. "An old scholar friend of mine, before I was cast out of the Order, was an accomplished artificer and enchanter. I requested a spell tome from him with the [Construct Base] spell imbued within it.

I further tailored that spell so that it could conjure a small copy of a working alchemical laboratory. Yet without raw materials, that laboratory is nothing but a study desk. I require raw materials or living creatures with magic imbued within them for my experimentations."

Aldrich knew that in the game's lore, mages could technically learn multiple magical fields. However, due to the constraints of game mechanics, a mage could only specialize in up to three different sub fields of magic. For Necromancers, they were even more limited to just practicing the dark arts.

"Is it possible for you to create spell tomes for me?" said Aldrich.

"Certainly," said Fler'Gan. "But to create a tome, I again require the appropriate materials. Enchanted vellum. A binding fashioned from some magical creature. Ink with the essence of mana crystals imbued within it. All of these, I am thoroughly lacking."

"Hmm." Aldrich put a hand to his chin, thinking. "Maybe you're not thinking wide enough. There's a chance that your alchemy still works. If you can create a laboratory, then you should still try to process materials from this world and see whether they can be used."



"You are correct, O Elder. And that was most certainly my attention," said Fler'Gan. "I simply require a more...permanent location to set up this laboratory of mine, for I possess only two charges of [Create Base] to utilize.

That forest is too open an area to construct my laboratory within. I would like a space more private and defensible."

"In time, I'll see to it that we settle down somewhere outside of that forest," said Aldrich.

"Settling down with master, oh, how wonderful that does sound," said Valera.

Fler'Gan stopped channeling [Flamethrower], and his three eyes narrowed down to slits.

"What is it?" said Aldrich.

"There are no more ants," said Fler'Gan. "Or rather, they have fled. This is quite the ominous development."

"Yeah." Aldrich immediately put a finger to his temple, checking in on his Grave Ward. He could not look simultaneously through every single undead he had at once. At best, he could multi-task and look through two, maybe three different pairs of eyes.

However, he placed specific triggers on his undead to link his sight to them such as if they encountered an Alter human or if they faced significant danger.

Thus, while Aldrich was distracted talking with Fler'Gan, he was not linked with the Grave Ward.

However, he was confident the Grave Ward would notify him if anything was out of the ordinary, and yet, when Aldrich checked in now, he could see that his Grave Ward was in fact dead.

It had not died long ago. It had fallen literally the second before Aldrich checked in on it.

[Units Controlled: 20/22 ] 19/22]

Whatever had killed it had done so very recently, and most likely, it was coming for Aldrich and his group now. That was when Aldrich saw the tunnel around him start to shift. The entire place started to quake as the rocky ceiling and floor undulated like waves on water.

"What is this phenomenon?" said Fler'Gan. "It appears similar to a teleportation spell, and yet the exact amplitude of spatial distortion that I observe does not align with any form of magic I know."

"Master, with me!" Valera stood right beside Aldrich, her shield ready to protect him.

"I don't know," confessed Aldrich. "This isn't magical, to be sure. This is Alter based warping."

"Sh\*t. I can't believe it..." began Stella as she looked around with quick, alert head motions.

"What is it?" said Aldrich. Out of everyone here, Stella had the most knowledge of Variants, and if she was worried, Aldrich was worried too.

"Everyone, stick together! Grab a hold of each other!" shouted Stella. Her voice was urgent enough that Aldrich did not question her, he just followed her.

Everyone grabbed each other, and at that moment, the tunnel surroundings rapidly warped away.

## **Chapter 51: The Chrysalis**

In the next moment, Aldrich and his undead found themselves in a sudden free fall. Aldrich immediately gathered his bearings and looked around to see any surfaces to hold on to.

He could see they were surrounded by large walls of rock, but the walls were far away and the tops of the walls too high up to grab, at the very least needing a fifty meter jump up.

Good thing two of Aldrich's undead could fly.

Fler'Gan grasped Aldrich while Stella held both Valera and the bloodspitter lizard to stop them from falling any further.

"Head back up there. And what was that, Stella?" said Aldrich, remaining calm.

"This thing's a Chrysalis!" said Stella as she made her way up with short bursts of explosions trailing down from her feet.

"..." Aldrich had no idea what that was. It seemed to be a Variant whose existence was too hidden for him to know from Net surfing.

"Most of the time, the planet kinda just coughs out nests at random. It's a real passive and random process," explained Stella. "But there are special variants out there that can make entire nests themselves.

A variant that can make a nest is called a Chrysalis, and they're real fuckin' dangerous because once they register you a threat, they'll use everything in the nest to kill you.

That includes tossin' out waves of variants at you on top of warping you away here and there to death traps."

"So it tries to defeat us by dropping us from great height? Is that all it can do?" said Valera.

As if to challenge her words, a sudden pulling pressure stopped everyone from moving upwards.

Instead, it overpowered any form of flight and drew them down, into the bottom of the deep chasm. It was a pull akin to magnetism that ignored the effects of gravity and resisting force. No matter how much Stella or Fler'Gan struggled to move up, they just kept falling down at a steady pace.

A pace slower than falling, but going downwards nonetheless.

"You had to say somethin', huh?" said Stella to Valera with a shake of her head.

"A living nest, is it?" said Fler'Gan as he took in his surroundings and started to think. "Then is it not possible to defeat it by creating mass amounts of environmental destruction? If these walls and rock are part of the creature, then I believe it most prudent to simply drill an escape through its body."

"Nah." Stella shook her head. "It ain't like that. Only a few parts of the nest are legit parts of its body. Plus the nest is its own dimensional space. Bigger in the inside than on the outside. Who knows how much rock you gotta blast through to get out?"

And the Chrysalis can keep warpin' us to different areas, stoppin' us from ever leavin' if it got really serious.

Normal AA protocol says to clear a Chrysalis Nest out, you need a team with warp powers to get out in case things get bad, location trackin' to get a hold of its brain, and then enough firepower to bore through the layers of rock and walls probably guardin' the brain."

"Brain? Like a monster core," said Aldrich.

"Yeah. It's real similar."

"The only issue is we don't have scanning as good as that, especially not for Alters," said Aldrich. He opened up his inventory and put a lingering gaze on the Sign Stone he had from clearing the first Trial Quest.

That was his get out of jail free card to teleport away when something went wrong. But would he use it now?

Did he have to?

"We wait this out for now. We aren't in immediate danger. The speed of a fall like this shouldn't do any damage to us." Aldrich said this but kept himself wary, ready at a moment's notice to warp out to the Nexus using his Sign Stone. He could also choose all of his undead to come with him remotely, so it did not matter too much if they were separated either.

"Look. It would appear that a mere leisurely fall such as this was not our intended method of demise," stated Fler'Gan as he gestured down.

Below, the fall ended into a large pit of whirling sand. Aldrich could spy several ants and lizards within it, but they were not guards. No, they were struggling for their lives. They tried to move out of the sand pool with desperate struggles, but the sand was soft, breaking apart under any amount of weight and sucking them in.

Quicksand.

On top of this, the sand pool created strong spiraling currents towards the center that sunk those unfortunate enough to be in it even deeper. When an the ants and lizards fell down to the center of the spiral, a large stake of sand solidified into rock skewered them all, impaling them before sucking them in.

"Antlion," said Stella. "Creates these sand traps. Usually has an anti-flight ability of some sorts. Then guts whatever reaches the center of their trap with sand spikes."

"What rank of variant is this?" said Aldrich.

"D+ rank," noted Stella. "It ain't that impressive on its own. Its just hard to reach it through the sand because it creates a natural sort of insulatin' barrier. Most likely, this variant's what the Chrysalis chose as its dedicated method of killin'.

Chrysales, once they get woken up, don't like usin' their warpin' or changin' their insides too much.

Costs too much energy.

So, usually, they'll warp intruders into a trap they've set up. Usually with variants that they keep nice and fat and happy to do their biddin'.

"A symbiotic relationship," said Aldrich. He looked down at the sand pool drawing ever nearer. They were now thirty meters above it. "But this isn't much of an issue, is it? You have the firepower. Just go down and use your Bunker Buster on it."

"Yeah, but then I gotta drop Valera and this lizard, and then they'll get caught up in the blast-," began Stella.

"Throw them to me. Fler'Gan will carry us all," said Aldrich.

"I am afraid my back will give out from such strenuous physical activity," said Fler'Gan. "My elderly form simply lacks the muscular strength to hold all of you together."

"Don't worry about that." Aldrich casted [Negative Surge] on Fler'Gan, boosting his physical stats for ten seconds.

[-15 Mana]

[Mana: 183/183 ] 168/183]

"Oh? I have not had such strength in fifty years!" Fler'Gan's mouth tendrils quivered in delight. "I feel as light as the day I was birthed from the Elder Brain!"

"Give them to me. And go," said Aldrich. "Show me as much destruction as you can. Blow this thing up."

Stella's eyes alighted with a glint of pure excitement. Her body started to shine, her veins becoming visible through her skin as they gleamed orange.

"Off you go to your boyfriend." Stella tossed Valera to Aldrich, and he grabbed her by the waist under the crook of his arm. Then Stella tossed the lizard, which Aldrich too grabbed the same way.

"B-b-boyfriend!?" Valera looked up at Aldrich with a blush and then looked at how she was being carried. It looked like she was being carried unceremoniously like a sack of potatoes.

"Sorry, but I have to carry both of you. If it was just you, I could have done better," said Aldrich. This was just the easiest way to carry her since his other hand was occupied with the lizard.

Valera glared at the headless lizard. "I will remember this....," she said under her breath.

Stella went straight down, a comet tail of light trailing behind her as she neared the whirling sand pool. She thrust her hands out in front of her.

"Bunker Buster!" she shouted, her whole body turning blindingly bright before she detonated right above the sand.

There was first a burst of incredibly blinding light, then the deafening sound of an explosion followed by a mighty shockwave that sent everyone hurtling upwards.

The chasm shook and trembled from the blast. The explosion blasted away all of the sand below, scattering it against the walls like Moses had parted the red sea. And in the middle of this uncovered sea of sand was simply a gaping, smoking crater.

Standing in the middle of the crater was Stella triumphantly holding up the charred remnants of the antlion's head. The head was as large as her upper body with one remaining mandible that could easily have chopped a man in two.

Aldrich had Fler'Gan drop everyone down where it was now safe.

"Excellent work." Aldrich nodded to Stella and had her put the antlion head down. A grave marker floated over it. "Serve."

[-5 Mana]

[Mana: 168/183 ] 163/183]

[Zombie Antlion Level 15 raised]

[Units Controlled: 19/22 ] 20/22]

Aldrich took the reanimated, twitching head of the Antlion and then used its mandible to hook it into an exposed part of the lizard's back, locking them together so that it was easier to carry them both.

"All in a day's work," said Stella as her light died down and she flipped her hair, resetting her manic, explosion loving grin into something more calm.

"I must agree with the master. Your capacity to enact destruction is formidable. I like it," said Valera.

"Least there's one thing we agree on," said Stella.

"Indeed. Such power coming from not a trace of mana. Unfathomable," said Fler'Gan. "Are you certain you do not wish to undergo any experimentation?"

Once I have my laboratory set, I can even ensure that the process is utterly painless. You will be unconscious even, if needs be."

"Sorry, but I'll pass again," said Stella. "The idea of bein' unconscious with you just made the whole, uh, 'experience' seem a lot worse."

"The fight's not over," said Aldrich. "Stay focused, all of you. Stella, you're the most experienced at dealing with variants out of all of us, and I'm giving you full reign over your memories to remember anything related to this chrysalis thing.

How would you suggest dealing with this? Or getting out?"

"We could try to blast our way out of here, but the issue is we got no way to tell where to direct our firepower to get us out. Plus, like I said, the inside of a Chrysalis Nest is way bigger than the outside.

Granted, a Chrysalis that can only host D rank variants is probably not gonna be that big, but it isn't a certainty either." Stella paused. "Or we could wait it out. It's tryin' to get rid of us cause' it thinks we're a threat to it. But if it knows we aren't, it might decide to go dormant again and let us leave.

This whole warpin' and changin' its insides thing costs a hell of a lot of juice. I doubt this thing can do it much more."

As if in response to Stella, the surroundings warped into a blur again.

"You just had to say something, hm?" said Valera, mimicking what Stella said to her before.

Stella sighed. "Guess we're even now."

They were warped into a much tighter space. A spherical cavern of strange red and pink rock that looked strangely organic. The cavern's walls were grooved and ridged, and when they undulated like a living organ, that was when Aldrich realized - this was not rock, this was flesh.

The cavern's walls contracted and started to slowly squeeze inwards, attempting to crush everyone.

"It's tryin' to eat us whole!" said Stella. She started to glow. "I'm gonna blast a hole right through this damned thing!"

"Wait, young one," said Fler'Gan. "Our powers are far too destructive and this space far too confined. The Elder and the knight will be caught in the crossfire."

"He's right," said Aldrich. But without firepower to drill out of here, what could he do? He again hovered his attention over the Sign Stone in his inventory.

But he held off on using it even now.

"ORAA!" Valera dropped her shield and slammed a massive punch against a stomach wall. Her fist caved in a great crater in the rocky flesh, but it healed immediately.

"Unless you get the Chrysalis brain itself, its core, punches ain't gonna' do anything," said Stella. "This thing's committed completely to killin' us, no matter how much energy it takes."

"Tell me, Stella, are these stomach walls connected to the Chrysalis?" said Aldrich, his mind racing.

"No, don't think so. Chrysales tend to hide their core out in brain chambers separated from their stomachs," said Stella.

"But say that the Chrysalis was a human being. Would you say that this stomach chamber is connected to its brain in the same way that a human's stomach is in the same body as their brain? That they're both part of the same body?" said Aldrich.

"Yeah. I'd say so. I've heard tell of some heroes poisonin' the stomach chambers to get the brains to freeze up, so seems like it," said Stella.

"Good." Aldrich held up his lantern and cast the light towards the stomach walls.

This Chrysalis was too big and healed too quickly for conventional damage to deal with it.

But what countered regeneration better than instant death?

## **Chapter 52: Chrysalis 2**

Fler'Gan stood right beside Aldrich, enveloping him in the Mind Eater's [Pyro Shield] while casting smaller, focused blasts like [Fire Bolts] at the ever-approaching stomach walls. Stella tackled the opposite side of the stomach, throwing out punches and kicks with focused detonations that blew back the stomach wall as much as possible.

"ORA! ORA! ORA! ORA!" Valera madly punched against the approaching walls with all her might, her strength significantly boosted by the red aura of her [Berserker's Rage]. Each of her punches gouged out significant craters in the wall, but it was like putting a dent into Styrofoam - the holes just bounced back and sealed over as quickly as they were made.

Ten seconds.

Aldrich watched as his undead tried their best, but the walls continued their approach through volleys of flame and explosions and punches.

Twenty seconds.

By now, everyone was corralled back-to-back. The more the walls progressed, the less effective Fler'Gan and Dynamite Girl became as they did not have space to unleash their area of effect. If anyone had claustrophobia at this point, they would probably have fainted as a living cave tried to crush them whole from all sides.



At this rate, they would not be able to hold on until Aldrich had inflicted the full ten stacks of the [Gaze of the Watcher] debuff on the Chrysalis stomach. Aldrich manifested the Sign Stone in his other hand.

"Master, no. I will take care of this. You can rely on me as you always have and always will." Valera put a hand on Aldrich's shoulder. She squeezed his shoulder ever so gently with a comforting nod. A nod that showed that out of everyone here, out of anyone, really, Valera cared for Aldrich the most.

Cared for him deeply on a personal level and would do anything to make him happy.

Valera took in a deep breath and then said with resolution. "Everyone, huddle around me."

She drew a wide stance, digging in her greaves, and put her hands up. As the walls closed in, she stopped them from crushing everyone with pure, brute force strength, pushing back against them with tremendous force. Her armor groaned and creaked as her body trembled.

[Berserker's Rage] boosted her physical stats, helping her push back, but she was going against an immense amount of solid pressure from all sides.

Aldrich heard the snapping sound of her leg and arms breaking.

She buckled down onto one knee, her back rounding under strain, but she held on, using her undead body to weather through her broken bones.

And the more damage she took, the stronger [Berserker's Rage] became. The aura of red around her became even stronger, raging like a veil of flames.

"I WILL NOT ALLOW YOU TO TOUCH MY MASTER!" shouted Valera as she held on with all her immense power.

She held on and on until -

Thirty seconds passed.

Aldrich wasted no time. He casted [Disintegrating Gaze] with his lantern. The eye suspended in gleaming amber fluid within the lantern opened up instantly, blood shot and ready to kill, and fired its beam of disintegration.

Aldrich thumbed the Sign Stone in his off hand nervously. He did not know exactly if this would work.

His theory was that because the stomach was linked to the main body of the Chrysalis, instant death magic cast on its stomach would transfer to its brain as well. After all, that

was what happened with normal beings. Just because instant death was struck on say, their foot, did not mean they did not die.

All he could do was watch and wait.

The beam fired into the stomach walls and turned what it hit into a petrified white state ready to crumble into ash at any moment. Then, the petrification spread rapidly, covering all of the stomach walls. The walls completely froze up and no longer crushed against Valera, giving her some rest.

She slumped over, exhausted and panting. Blood pooled from her greaves and gauntlets, probably because broken bone had torn through her flesh and mangled her limbs.

Stella wrapped an arm around Valera to support her. Aldrich did the same.

"Seriously impressive sh\*t. You did amazing, Val," said Stella. She smiled down at Valera. Aldrich could tell that despite their petty squabbles here and there, they had a special camaraderie together. Almost sisterly. "Can I call you that?"

"...I suppose," said Valera.

"I agree." Aldrich nodded to her. He paused for a moment. "And...thank you. For being willing to sacrifice so much for me."

It meant even more because unlike the undead Aldrich arose, Valera did not have a pre-programmed drive to be loyal to Aldrich. She did this all out of her own volition. Her own free will.

"Heh, a thanks from my master? What a wonderful reward." Valera looked up as ash fell all around everyone like snow. "We have won, master."

Aldrich looked up to see the stomach walls disintegrating, and not just them, the disintegration spread rapidly in all directions. Soon, cracks of sunlight started to stream in from above as the entire nest fell apart.

The nest trembled and shook like a dying creature before it finally disintegrated fully, leaving Aldrich and his undead in a large hole gouged into the side of the cliff. A dry breeze and bright sun light washed over everyone.

Aldrich looked around in wonder. The hole around them was not that large. Maybe the size of a large house. Much, much smaller than how massive the nest had been from within.

[Chrysalis defeated!]

[+1000 EXP]

[EXP Bar: 600/1800 ] 1600/1800]

Aldrich sighed in relief, getting final confirmation that he had won. He, along with Valera and Stella, walked to the edge of the hole carved into the cliff and out at the yawning view of sunlit ridges and canyons stretching out in front of them.

"Feels cinematic, doesn't it? Getting' a view like this after a fight like that," said Stella.

"Mhm. But not as wonderful as my master's praise," said Valera.

Aldrich looked out at the view, but his mind was elsewhere. He was planning what to do later tonight at the Red Circle when he met Casimir, the club's manager and the key to his plan on Saturday to kill Seth Solar.

A large part of this plan involved meeting Casimir at the Red Circle and asking him to exit into a more private location using Aldrich's supposed influence as Bruce Vane. Doing this would draw Casimir away from the safety of the Red Circle, at which point he would have a hidden Fler'Gan use his Mind Eater racial skills to brainwash the man.

But the logistics of this was going to be difficult. Getting Fler'Gan into the city and hiding him properly was hard, but not impossible. With Bruce Vane's gold rank citizenship, wall security would not bother to search the car of a wealthy, connected man, so Aldrich could stow Fler'Gan away in the trunk.

Summoning a Ghast could disrupt surveillance cameras to hide Fler'Gan away within the city.

But if Casimir was a more cautious man, he would not meet Aldrich without guards, even in a private location.

That was not that bad.

Aldrich would bring Valera as his supposed wife, and as long as Casimir did not bring a whole squadron of villains, Aldrich could overpower the guards and kill Casimir to raise him as an undead.

Yet what happened if Casimir refused to leave the Red Circle at all? After all, there were private rooms in the club. What if he insisted on meeting there in his stronghold? Was that not the safest and most logical choice for Casimir?

"O Elder, you will want to see this," said Fler'Gan.

Aldrich turned to see Fler'Gan holding a small, crystalline centipede curled up in an ouroboric ball, its mandibles latched onto its tail.

"That's the Chrysalis," said Stella with wonder. "They start out as these tiny crystal bug things, but once they anchor onto an area, they start fusing with the environment, attractin' variants to live in them, and so on until they get all big and hard to deal with just like that.

But now that it's dead, I guess it reverts back to how it was."

Aldrich's own eyes widened as he saw something else that made his mind race with possibilities.

A grave marker floated over the Chrysalis corpse.

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(Author's Note: The novel has now gone premium, thanks for reading up until this point and I hope you will stay to read, but if you can't that's understandable too!)

### **Chapter 53: Raising the Chrysalis**

Aldrich went over to the Chrysalis and knelt down by it. He picked the creature up. It was odd, staring at it. The Chrysalis was not much larger than a basketball. An entire dimensional space generated from something this tiny.

"It is exceptional that such a minute creature was capable of harboring such vast space." Fler'Gan voiced Aldrich's thoughts, thinking the exact same thing.

"Yeah. And I'm excited what this variant can do for me in undeath." Aldrich placed the Chrysalis down and chanted. "Serve."

Green energy flowed into the crystal centipede, and as it did so, the ruby red luster of the Chrysalis changed into a dark light emerald green.

[-10 Mana]

[Mana: 163/183 ] 153/183]

[Units Controlled: 20/22 ] 21/22]

Aldrich intently waited, watching the Chrysalis to see how it would move. The Chrysalis uncurled from its ouroboric position with slow, lethargic movements. Its many legs moved for just a few seconds before they froze over and the Chrysalis once more curled back up, completely still.

"Hm." Aldrich put a hand to his chin. He sensed its intentions. "It wants energy. Without it, it can't move properly or do much of anything."

"Specifically, an Ether Deposit," said Stella as she came to Aldrich's side with Valera by her side. By now, the bloodspitter lizard had regenerated its head, and it strutted forwards beside Aldrich too.

"Ether deposit, is it?" Aldrich pondered this.

Ether was an odd type of energy that had manifested on Earth after the Altering. In its purest state, it appeared to be a glowing white light with an atomic structure that constantly fluxed, making it impossible to stabilize and study.

There were even theories that Ether seemed semi-sapient, oddly self-destructing when confined in laboratories.

On its own, Ether was worth little to nothing. It had zero reactivity nor malleability, so science and technology could not generate energy from Ether or change its form into something more useful.

But oddly, in the presence of Alter powers, specifically with Alter Organs and cells, Ether reacted. Or perhaps it was the other way round with the organs being capable of interfacing with Ether. Some people thought Ether created Alter powers, others thought Alter powers generated Ether - it was an endless debate akin to the question of whether the chicken or the egg came first.

Regardless, Ether and Alter powers were inextricably linked. All Alters generated trace energy signatures of Ether, especially when they used their powers. The Ether energy signature was what scanners used to detect powers.

The denser an Alter's cell count, the stronger the Ether signature they generated.

But Ether also occurred naturally in deposits all across the planet. Variant ecosystems bloomed around Ether deposits and Alterhumans competed with variants to vie for Ether for in the presence of Ether, Alter powers grew stronger. And, more importantly, higher tier techno Alters could fully harness Ether to fuel their sci-fi superweapons, processing the seemingly useless particle into a hyper-efficient, physics defying energy.

"From what I remember, Chrysales are created deep underground. Nobody knows exactly where, but they do know that wherever there are Ether deposits, Chrysales aren't far behind. They latch onto the deposits, drain them, and fuse with their environments," said Stella. "They attract variants usin' Ether and sorta farm em'. Variants come and breed and die inside their nests, and whatever dies turns into nutrients. Usin' those nutrients, they expand."

She stared down at the Chrysalis's stiff, unmoving form. "Guess this little guy's all outta' juice. And without another deposit to anchor onto, it ain't gonna' be movin', maybe not ever."

"Hmm. So I need to find an Ether deposit to even make this thing usable?" said Aldrich.

"I figure. And in most cases, it takes months to years for a Chrysalis to make a proper nest," said Stella.

Aldrich picked up the Chrysalis and wondered whether it was worth it to keep the creature. Ether deposits were not uncommon, but it was hard to find one that some mega corporation did not mine out or where variants gathered en masse.

"Energy, you say?" Fler'Gan clapped his hands together, but because his skin was soft and moist, it made a squelching sound. "May I propose, O Elder, a rather interesting potential solution?"

"What is it?" said Aldrich.

"Your Phylactery," said Fler'Gan. "It may not seem like it, but there is an incredible amount of energy hosted within it. Enough such that if fully unleashed, the arcane shockwave alone could flatten half a human city."

"Really now? I couldn't sense anything coming from it when I held it," said Aldrich.

"Because the energy is tightly sealed within. Otherwise, it would be far too easy to track the magical trail of the Phylactery, and that defeats the purpose of having a safe, undetectable place to house one's soul, no?" Fler'Gan stretched out an open hand to Aldrich, beckoning for the Phylactery.

Aldrich materialized the Phylactery and gave it to Fler'Gan, trusting the learned Mind Eater's decisions.

"But perhaps if I undo a few seals...", Fler'Gan hunched over the purple orb and traced his slimy fingers around the many lines of sigils inscribed upon it. They glowed blue, and he started to use the tip of one of his lengthy digits to rewrite the letterings.

"Watch it, old man. Make sure not to blow us all up," said Stella.

"You insult me, my dear," said Fler'Gan with a scoff. "I am more learned than you could ever be with that brash and impatient attitude of yours. Now stay in silence as I work."

Fler'Gan reordered multiples lines of sigils over a hundred times at rapid speed, obviously showcasing a level of familiarity with the Phylactery that stood as evidence of his decades of research building it.

"There." After one minute, Fler'Gan finished. The Phylactery clicked slightly, and a few crack-like seams opened across its surface. Beneath these cracks glowed bright green energy: the color of necromancy.

Aldrich saw in high interest as the Chrysalis in his hand started to twitch, coming back from dormancy as it sensed the Phylactery's energy. It was not Ether, it was mana, and yet, the Chrysalis still recognized it.

"I sense you are just as excited as I, O Elder," said Fler'Gan. "To witness whether this world and our world may mesh together."

Valera patted Stella on the back as she stood up on her own now, healed enough by Aldrich's passive [Anti-Life Shell].

"Master... are you sure about this?" Valera said. "That Phylactery - you need it to become a lich. Who knows what this crystal thing will do to it."

"I assure you, Phylacteries are not so fragile a construct," said Fler'Gan. "If indeed this creature requires months to years to siphon a deposit of this energy form known as 'Ether', then I sincerely doubt it can significantly drain the Phylactery's reserves before the Elder halts it or destroys it."

"I'm curious about this too," said Aldrich. "I understand your concern, Valera, but I'm alert. I've mentally commanded the Chrysalis not to harm the Phylactery at all, only to see if it can absorb the mana. If anything happens out of the ordinary, I won't hesitate to force the Chrysalis to stop or destroy it if needs be."

"Understood, master," said Valera.

Aldrich put the twitching Chrysalis down. It moved with surprising speed, immediately leaping and latching into the Phylactery. The Chrysalis circled all around the purple orb, curling back into its ouroboric position across the Phylactery's surface.

Aldrich waited tensely, seeing if the Chrysalis regained its energy. Instead, something unexpected happened.

The Chrysalis sunk into the Phylactery like it had fallen into water.

"Master!" said Valera.

Aldrich raised a hand to calm her. He could still sense the Chrysalis within, and it did not exhibit any sign of hostility or disobedience to him.

"The creature has fused into the Phylactery." Fler'Gan picked the orb up and began to navigate the many glowing lines of sigils on it again.

"Yeah, we can see that," said Stella. "But is that a good thing or not?"

"No, you do not understand. This fusion, it is remarkably complete. It is not merely that the creature has sunk within the Phylactery, it has become the Phylactery. They are now one and the same." Fler'Gan's three red eyes widened as he saw the cracks he had formed on the Phylactery sealing up on their own. "Marvelous! Look! This experiment has been a resounding success! Our world and this world, its fusion - a success!"

Fler'Gan held the orb out excitedly for everyone to watch. Within the glassy glowing purple orb, the dark silhouette of the curled-up Chrysalis could be seen.

"It's...adjusting," said Aldrich as he felt what the Chrysalis was going through and the intentions it projected. "It's taking in mana, but it isn't using it. It's getting used to it, trying to process it.

And to do that...it wants to be close to me. I'm the source of its life, and there's mana inside me, too. It wants to link with my body, to fuse with me as well so that it can analyze my mana first. My mana's more familiar, and once it's done processing that, it shouldn't have an issue getting used to the Phylactery."

Aldrich took the Phylactery from Fler'Gan's hand and gazed at it, feeling a distinct draw to it.

He knew what to do with this.

He dematerialized the gear on his upper body, leaving him bare naked from the waist up. His body had noticeably bulked up since the beginning of his undeath due to the stats he had pumped into it. He had always been physically fit from his training, but now he was even bigger.

Not overly big like a bodybuilder, but he still had a sizable amount of muscle that straddled a perfect balance between strength and speed.

Lean and strong. Ready to overpower and crush in one moment, then sprint and chase in the other.

"Oh, master, you do look so very ravishing," said Valera as she licked her lips, her fangs showing. She blushed in shyness but still panted and leaned forwards like a predator eyeing a prize they had hunted for days. And in her case, she had been on the hunt for years.

On top of this, her usual shyness as an upstanding knight melted away because she was still low health and craving blood. And for vampires, the act of craving and drawing blood was closely linked with sexual desire.



"This is a serious moment, you." Stella bonked Valera's helmetless head with a karate chop. "Keep that horniness in check."

Valera growled but stayed still, understanding that Stella was right.

Aldrich looked down at his body. In the center of all that muscle, right below his plate-like pectorals, there was the massive hole that Seth Solar had gouged out. He placed the Phylactery tentatively within it and then -

The Phylactery glowed before tendrils of pink flesh emerged out of it, latching onto Aldrich's insides. More and more of these tendrils appeared rapidly, soon quickly filling up the gaping hole left behind in Aldrich's chest.

There was now only the glowing purple surface of the Phylactery jutting from his chest, covered seamlessly in pale skin and regrown bone and muscle.

Aldrich went down into one knee as he saw complete and utter darkness.

"Captain!"

"Master!"

Valera and Stella immediately rushed to Aldrich's help, but he waved them back.

"I'm fine," said Aldrich as he saw nothing but darkness. He realized this was what the Chrysalis saw. "There's nothing in the Phylactery. Just darkness."

"That is to be expected," said Fler'Gan. "After all, a Phylactery is ultimately a vessel to contain a soul. Once your soul transfers within, the darkness you see will be painted over by the color of your soul. It will become your very own inner world: a manifestation of the self.

And now with this creature nested in the Phylactery, you have an additional layer of defense if anyone attempts to target your Phylactery directly. Perhaps the creature may utilize its spatial manipulation to conjure portals that bend deadly attacks to your soul away. Perhaps it may even absorb them. Perhaps it may even learn magic and cast spells of its own.

The possibilities are simply endless, and to grasp them, we require further experimentation."

"Defense, is it?" Aldrich returned to his own vision as the Chrysalis became more and more used to its newfound energy source. He willed the Chrysalis to try and attack from within the Phylactery.

Aldrich tapped the Phylactery, and it crackled with arcs of red energy before turning a solid vantablack, almost like a black hole. This was a dimensional portal. A tiny one, granted, but a portal nonetheless: the Chrysalis was starting to use mana to fuel its warp powers.

Small tendrils of darkness stretched out from it, slithering slowly on the ground, picking up pebbles here and there before sinking back into the Phylactery.

"What the hell was that!?" Stella jumped back at the sudden emergence of surprise tentacles.

"The creature is learning at an exceptional rate," said Fler'Gan. "That darkness was some of the mana stored within the Phylactery. The creature has managed to control the mana, using it to create tendrils to interact with the world.

Yet, judging by the minute size and chaotic shape of those tendrils, it is unused to shaping mana."

Aldrich felt the Chrysalis protest within him. It cost a significant amount of energy to make it open a portal, even a portal that small, from the Phylactery and draw things in.

"Not just that," said Aldrich. "Like you said, by design, anything inside the Phylactery is completely sealed off from the outside to prevent energy leaks. That includes the dimension that the Chrysalis creates.

So anytime it wants to attack, it has to open a portal, and portals are costly. It's too small and weak, so its 'max mana pool' isn't large enough to do much more than open that tiny portal and spew out a few mana tendrils.

It needs time to rest, absorb, and grow like it did with an Ether deposit.

I know you want to experiment even more, but give the Chrysalis some time. We can start testing its limits as it grows."

"As you wish, O Elder," said Fler'Gan with a barely concealed sigh, disappointed he could not see and experiment more.

Aldrich, too, wanted to experiment, but he remained patient. He could only imagine how incredibly useful this Chrysalis-Phylactery fusion would be. One of the biggest issues he had was that he could not carry around his undead without attracting attention.

But with the Chrysalis, he could store and release them at will.

"Then what now?" said Stella.

Aldrich snapped his fingers and bid the alloywing eagle down to the cavern. "We head to Haven City."

## **Chapter 54: Alchemy**

Aldrich and his undead made their way back up to the top of the cliff they got started on. He got Fler'Gan, Stella, and the eagle to get into the backseats of their armored car.

Now, carrying the bloodspitter lizard and antlion was difficult because of how big they were, and Aldrich unfortunately had to tear off their body parts until they could fit into the trunk.

Good thing was, as zombies, they did not really feel pain, so no harm really done.

"I'll be back to drive in a bit," said Aldrich to Stella through the rolled down backseat window. "I need to talk to Valera."

He glanced over at Valera. She was some distance away, shuddering and in withdrawal for blood due to her low health and constant exposure to combat. He needed to deal with that, probably heal her for a bit longer with his [Anti-Life Shell].

"Got it, captain," said Stella. "Have fun."

She whistled casually and rolled up the window, though occasionally she would sneak back glances to see what Aldrich and Valera were up to.

Aldrich walked up to Valera. She had dematerialized her armor, leaving her in basic black leather leggings and a form fitting, short sleeved white tunic. There were still deep, visible wounds on her body. Large streaks of torn flesh on her arms from the bone shattering and piercing through.

"Are you alright? Here, let me heal you. This should make you feel better." Aldrich started to release the green mist of his [Anti-Life Shell], but Valera turned and shook her head, putting a tight hand on his shoulder.

"No, I don't want that." Valera looked at Aldrich longingly, her fangs protruding from her bright red lips. Her lower lip trembled as she spoke. "Master, may I...may I feed on you?"

"Are you sure? I remember you saying undead blood didn't suit you," said Aldrich.

"Yes. I hate, hate the taste of undead blood. It tastes rotten and cold and, worst of all, it makes me feel sleepy."

"Then-," began Aldrich, but Valera put a pale finger to his lips as she drew closer, placing a hand on his chest. She stared with hunger in her eyes at him, but her lips formed into a smile that was surprisingly warm and gentle.

Vampires were seductive by nature. Valera kept her instincts under control through strict knightly training that prevented her from having any real experience with men, but beneath all that, her instincts still made her know exactly how to tempt.

"But if it's you, I don't mind. When a vampire devotes themselves to someone. Devotes themselves truly, body and mind and soul, then that blood becomes the sweetest of all. Nothing else ever compares to it. Not even the blood of those I rip limb from limb."

Aldrich blinked, remembering lore about vampires. In Elden World, vampires, though known as seductive creatures that drew blood through charm just as much as they did through force, were strictly monogamous.

When they coupled with an individual, they did so for life, hence why strict vampiric royal lineages existed.

"I know that you do not like taking damage, you never have across all our many battles," continued Valera. "That is why here, in this world, I have never asked to draw your blood. Even now, I feel bad asking-,"

"Go ahead," said Aldrich. "It's the least I can do to thank you."

A switch flipped on in Valera when Aldrich gave the okay, and any sense of reason she had just faded. She wrapped herself around him as much as she could. Her arms wrapped around his neck in a tight hug while she leaned against him, raising and pressing her leg tightly against his.

Her heavy, hot breathing landed on his neck, and she licked the cold, undead skin gently before she sunk her teeth in.

Normally, a human would find themselves completely numb, charmed, and in ecstatic pleasure from a vampire sinking their fangs into them. But as Aldrich was undead, he was immune to all those status effects.

And because of his arisen purpose, he did not feel drawn to Valera. He appreciated her, he truly did, but love and desire were not emotions he felt strongly now. Not until his purpose was fulfilled. He put a hand on Valera's bare upper back, comforting her as he saw his health drain and her health go up.

Surprisingly, Aldrich noted that Valera's health increased at breakneck speeds. She was still at around fifty percent health, but within five seconds of draining Aldrich's blood, she was back to full, the huge web work of scars around her arms fading away.

Valera drew back when she was full health. Aldrich had lost a quarter of his health. A near 2:1 health exchange ratio.

Highly useful.

Aldrich felt slightly bad thinking about the usefulness of this, especially when Valera considered it something so special to her, but he could not help it. He had always been goal oriented, and as an undead, his goal of vengeance permeated every single aspect of his decision making and life.

Valera drew back when she was full health and swayed and staggered, her eyelids heavy. Gone was that brief flash of seductive confidence, replaced with incoming drowsiness.

"Ah, I drank too much," said Valera. "I'm sorry, master."

"It's fine." Aldrich held Valera as she leaned into him putting her head on his shoulder and smiling as she drifted off.

"Master?" Valera whispered into Aldrich's ear, but judging by the sleepy tenor of her voice, it was hard to tell whether she was sleep talking or conscious.

"Hm?"

"Do you know that I want to be with you? Now and forever and ever?"

"I know." Aldrich paused awkwardly. At the end of the day, he also had no experience with women. It came with being a permanent social outcast looked down in society as an unevolved waste of air. "Thanks," he managed out stiffly.

Valera smiled and grew quiet, breathing in an even pattern that made it obvious she had fallen asleep. Aldrich supported her to the car where he placed her in the front passenger seat and got ready to drive. Valera instinctively leaned to her side, resting her head snugly on his shoulder.

"Sooo, what happened back there, huh?" said Stella.

"Once my alchemical laboratory has formed, O Elder, I am quite capable of creating a concoction that significantly increases your performance. Many an elderly mage in the Arcanist's Order has asked for my-,"

"Nothing happened," said Aldrich with a shake of his head, though he did slightly smile at the banter.

"Sure," said Stella with a raised brow of disbelief.

"Talk all you want. I'll just be driving," said Aldrich as he started the car.

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Aldrich first regrouped in the variant forest.

"Boss! Thought you were a goner!" Fisk put his laptop down as he saw Aldrich appear in their clearing. Fler'Gan, Stella, and the now woken up but still groggy Valera walked behind him.

The Geist was hanging out with the two mud crabs. The mud crabs raised their large pincers in the air and waved them side to side in a small 'dance' they did with fellow crabs, and the Geist mimicked them, waving its arms in the air.

When the Geist saw Aldrich, it stopped and stood at attention, clapping its hands excitedly.

"Can't you sense whether I'm alive or not?" said Aldrich.

"Well, yeah, but that don't mean I don't worry, y'know," said Fisk. "Plus, alive doesn't mean unhurt."

"Geh (He's right)," said the Geist.

"I appreciate all the concern. How have things been on this end?" said Aldrich.

Fisk shrugged. "Nothing much has happened. These two have kept me company, though." He pointed to Adam and Elaine sitting beside him on a fallen tree trunk. "I booted up Dark Sins, and they totally admire my gaming skills!

When I was doing a no damage boss rush, they had their eyes glued on my screen, I tell ya!"

"Really now?" Aldrich looked at Adam and Elaine with hope, at their rotted, lifeless faces and eyes, trying to see if something was there.

"Lesser undead may have some remnant behaviors from their past lives, but they are not like arisen undead. There are no memories, no true thought, no true being. And even if they were arisen, they would no longer truly be the same," said Fler'Gan.

"Hey, don't rain on his parade now, those were his friends," said Stella as she bumped an elbow into Fler'Gan's side.

Fler'Gan glared at Stella as he rubbed his side painfully. "It is better that the Elder knows this for certain."

"I know," said Aldrich. "I've always known. Hm. I never thought I was the hopeful type. But I've known enough disappointment not to trust in hope in any case."

Aldrich waved Fler'Gan forwards. "About what we discussed-,"

"Of course." Fler'Gan moved to the center of the clearing and closed his eyes while raising his hands. In front of his palms, two blue magic circles formed.

Throughout the car ride back to the forest, Aldrich and Fler'Gan had talked about setting up his alchemical laboratory. Soon enough, the Chrysalis would grow eventually grow to a point that the pocket dimension it created could house the lab.

At which point, Aldrich could move Fler'Gan and the lab into the Phylactery, taking them in and out when needed. Like this, Fler'Gan could experiment at minimal risk as what was more secure than an entirely separate dimension?

But until then, Aldrich needed Fler'Gan alchemy. Especially for tonight at the Red Circle.

"Crazy cool, all this magic stuff," said Fisk as he watched.

"Yeah," said Stella.

Valera came to Aldrich's side, and he rested her on the tree trunk, sitting beside her.

"Master...I did not do anything embarrassing, did I?" said Valera as she blushed furiously. "I remember wanting to draw your blood, then nothing, I-,"

"No," said Aldrich simply. "Nothing you would regret, at least."

Valera sighed in relief. "Thank the many gods."

She tentatively reached out and squeezed Aldrich's hand. Aldrich did the same.

Fler'Gan chanted. "[Create Base]"

In front of Fler'Gan, blue outlines, almost like they were drawn, of tables, beakers, tubes, forceps, knives, forceps, and dozens of other alchemical tools emerged. The outlines then filled in, turning into solid matter.

The end result was three worktables. One table filled with beakers and tubes and pots for chemical reactions. One table containing several glass chambers within which reactions could be safely carried out. And the last table that was the most ominous, holding restraints and sharp, cutting tools for dissections and, as Fler'Gan called it, 'live experimentations.'

"To see my laboratory once more, and to think of all the new specimens I may dissect and dissolve! Ah, how this elderly heart beats!" Fler'Gan raised his hands in the air like a mad scientist.

"Boss, I really appreciate the guy's passion, but should we be, uh, worried that we'll be a part of his experiments?" said Fisk.

"Tell me about it," said Stella.

"Not for now," said Aldrich.

"...For now?" said Fisk, but Aldrich ignored him and went up to Fler'Gan to talk business.

By now, Aldrich's Grave Ward had snuck into the Red Circle and gotten a look at Casimir, the manager, as well. There were several places in the Red Circle that were impossible to sneak into, guarded by forcefields, but Casimir's main office was not.

And judging by how Casimir carried himself with four guards at the minimum, he was a careful man. He would underestimate Aldrich and Valera because they had no AC count, but Aldrich could not rely completely on that.

"You know what I requested, right?" said Aldrich.

"You desire a potion that can control the minds of up to ten able bodied men. The potion must also be as tasteless as possible." Fler'Gan nodded. He went to his chemical table and retrieved a vat filled with liquid. His stomach then heaved as he vomited in three purple, finger length worms. The worm's heads were comprised of wriggling, spiked tentacles.

These were Pupae. Mind Eaters reproduced by capturing live beings and forcing them to ingest pupae. Pupae would then travel to their host's brain and latch on, creating a cascading effect that would brainwash them and also turn them into Mind Eaters.

Fler'Gan wiped off slime from his mouth tendrils as he looked at the pupae swimming inside, inspecting their quality. "I can only produce three pupae a month at this old age, and they are a little withered, but this will be enough. I will be done processing my pupae into potion form in five hours."

Aldrich checked his watch. It was now barely noon.

"What time is the meeting with Casimir?" said Aldrich.

"Uh-," Fisk scrambled to his laptop, utterly distracted by Fler'Gan's simultaneously gross yet interesting display. "It's eleven tonight."



"Good," said Aldrich. "More than enough time."

The first real steps to initiating Aldrich's vengeance against Seth Solar now began.

## **Chapter 55: {A Meeting to Be}**

Author's note: titles bracketed under { } = different PoV

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The Red Circle

6:00 P.M., November 3, 2117

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Casimir leaned back in his plush velvet leather chair; elbows rested upon imported wood carved from the bark of a plant type variant. Anything made from variants was all the rage nowadays, and Casimir was never one to fall behind trends, particularly when it pertained to the currents of luxury.

That was easily evident by the quality of his white snowfur deerskin suit, his scaled marsh alligator dress shoes, and the sparkling gold and diamond encrusted watch made by Regal, one of, if not the top luxury watchmaker in the world.

"So, my dear, tell me about that appointment tonight. The one with that fund heir," said Casimir. His voice projected through an oval shaped mask lit up with a neon display showing simple emotes that conveyed his emotion state.

For now, the emote projected was highly neutral, if a little annoyed (-\_-).

"I've run a thorough background check on him." A slim young woman dressed in white suit and skirt spoke. The side of her head was cleanly shaved and plated with chrome. From here, she withdrew a cable which she attached a laptop port before opening the computer up on Casimir's desk.

"I've compiled a concise report on Bruce Vane for you to read," said the woman.

"Now, my dear Blanca, you've worked as my secretary far too long to know I bore of reports. Tell me what I need to know," said Casimir. "After all, it would be such a shame to waste an opportunity to hear that lovely voice of yours."

Blanca paused for a moment. "Yes sir. I will begin with the potential client's wealth. Bruce Vane possesses a gold rank citizenship in Neo-York."

Casimir whistled. "A gold? In Neo-York of all places? Heh, I like what I'm hearing. Go on."

"I will advise you to keep your safety in mind with this client. There is little to no public information about him. His wealth was inherited through a fund created from a company called Vane Industries that specialized in textile manufacturing."

"Then why not run a check on the company? Surely there's data on that," said Casimir.

"According to the details Mr. Vane was willing to share with us, his family company was a Pre-Monstering manufacturer based in Germany. All public records related to the company were lost during the tumult of the Monstering," said Blanca. "The company's wealth was consolidated and maintained, however, in the form of a trust that passed on to successive Vane generations."

The Vanes have maintained that fund in relative secrecy through a diverse portfolio of hidden investments.

Furthermore, Mr. Vane is unwilling to share proof of finances for it would force him to reveal his investments, citing a concern for safety and anonymity."

"A man of secrecy, I see." Casimir laughed. "Not entirely uncommon in our line of business, no? But still, how convenient is it that his family company's records are lost to time? And his investments are an entire mystery case of their own."

"I agree," said Blanca. "I have coordinated the meeting such that Mr. Vane meets you alone and in the safety of the Red Circle. He will have to go through thorough security checks and though he requested a private meeting, I have arranged it so that you may bring up to four Red Circle mercenaries or villains to your side."

"Ohoh. As cautious as ever, Blanca," said Casimir.

"Need I remind you that I am paid to ensure my caution keeps you safe?" said Blanca.

"True. Very true. Let me see, then. Mr. Vane wished to meet me to invest in the Red Circle, no?"

"That is correct. And I've received an update on that." Blanca tapped her the plate on her head, and her violet eyes lit up as she processed more digital information. "He specifically wants to involve himself with the Red Circle to sample our liquors."

"Liquors? How strong?" said Casimir, a note of interest bleeding into his mechanical voice.

Liquor was a key word for mercenaries and villains. Hired help or security, essentially. Especially help that did not care about the law.

"As strong as they can get," said Blanca. "He has revealed further that the reason for this is because he and his wife are Duds."

Casimir almost fell off his chair. "Duds? Did I hear that right?"

"Yes. They have sent in a preliminary AC scan to confirm this, though of course, upon arrival to the Red Circle, they will receive a thorough one from us as well."

Casimir's guard dropped. "Duds, are they? Then that makes sense why Mr. Vane would keep his profile so hidden. A wealthy Dud is a Dud just waiting to be captured and extorted. Remind me again, is he coming alone?"

"No. He wishes to bring his wife along."

"A wife? Then that's fine. No guards?"

Blanca shook her head. "I would not allow him to bring any form of threat within the Red Circle. His background is far too tenuous to allow that."

"Blanca, my dear, I have made it this far in the criminal underworld because of how open I am to receiving clients of any kind, whether they dress themselves in fine suits or wallow in the bloody mud of violence.

If indeed, Mr. Vane and his wife are both Duds and they pass through all our security checks, then I sincerely doubt they are threats of any kind." Casimir waved his hand. "Arrange this meeting."

"One more thing: Mr. Vane wishes to bring a bottle of wine with him. He strongly prefers his own drinks," said Blanca.

"Oh? A man of strong tastes. I can respect that. What does he want to bring? You did ask him, yes?"

"Of course. As you said, I have worked with you long enough. It is a 2080 Celeste. Market price: six thousand credits."

"Six thousand? A respectable vintage, then." Casimir's emote face raised an eye in curiosity. "Though certainly not the most expensive I have received. Any cheaper than that, and I would have rejected it.

But it will serve as preliminary proof of Mr. Vane's finances. And indeed, I do quite find myself wanting to savor a dry red.

Tell Mr. Vane his bottle service request is approved. Though, of course, it will have to go through all security checks as well.

That will be all."

"Understood, sir," said Blanca. She unplugged herself from her sleek black laptop and held it to her side. She turned to leave but paused. "This is simply my opinion, sir, but I still cannot shake an uneasy feeling about this meeting."

"All these years we have known each other I did not take you to be a superstitious woman, Blanca. But your sincere worries do touch me. Here, I will use my power." Casimir reached into his suit's breast pocket and retrieved a plain white dice. He rattled it in his hand, and as he did so, his hand glowed a bright white.

Then, he rolled the dice on his table.

It rolled a solid 1.

"There. I will not suffer even a single scratch of harm to my body in the next twenty four hours," said Casimir. His power involved rolling a dice to determine his safety within a 24 hour timeframe.

A 1 indicated no harm done to Casimir while a 6 meant certain death.

Depending on his mental state and physical condition, the timeframe his power could calculate fluctuated, but even at its worst, it could see up to nine hours ahead.

And Casimir was in tip top condition right now. It was this power, a power that fell under the ultra-rare Flux category that manipulated fundamental aspects of reality like space, time, causality and probability, that had allowed him to survive and rise in the criminal underworld.

That and his sharp business acumen, of course.

The only downside to this power was that it possessed a three day long period in which it was unable to be used.

Blanca nodded, believing fully in the dice. It had saved her more times than she could count over all the years she had worked with Casimir as well, back when they were both nothing more than poor and desperate hoodlums begging on dirty streets for their next meal.

"Finalize the arrangements, Blanca." Casimir rolled around in his chair, looking out from the third story of his night club. His view shot over thick, bulletproof, tinted glass down to the cracked, broken streets of Southside Haven below. "I am now rather curious to see how Mr. Vane carries himself.

As a Dud, I am sure he has had his share of hardships despite his wealth. And hardship breeds ambition.

Perhaps he shares an entrepreneurial spirit such as myself."

## **Chapter 56: Meeting in the Red Circle**

Aldrich could only drive his armored car up within a block of the Red Circle before he hit a security check. Or rather, it was a mandatory valet service, but judging by the two-story tall, armor-plated valet booth that looked suspiciously like a sentry tower, it was pretty obvious that this was a security check.

Aldrich stopped his car in front of the boom barrier set down by the booth. The barrier itself glowed with a streak of white energy, indicating Etherium power - processed Ether - that meant it was custom made by a techno.

It was no ordinary flimsy line of metal meant to stop traffic. Most likely, it had some function to stop cars that tried to ignore it.

That was not Aldrich's intention, though. He was here for a chat, after all.

He watched as two guards standing on either end of the barrier approached. They looked to be mercenaries rather than villains. Where villains liked to have a distinctive costume to make an impact and be recognized, mercenaries focused far more on practicality, donning themselves with cybernetics and military gear meant for efficiency rather than flashiness.

"Are we to fight now, master?" said Valera from the passenger seat. She was dressed in her black dress set while Aldrich had just bought a 3000-credit suit to keep up appearances a wealthy fund inheritor.

"No fighting. Not unless we absolutely must," said Aldrich. "Carry that with you and act as politely as you can. But try to leave all the talking to me."

Aldrich motioned to a rectangular wooden case containing the 2080 Celeste bottle of wine. That had costed 6000 credits, leaving Aldrich with just 1000 left. It was mind boggling how the wealthy spent so many credits on seemingly ordinary things like clothes and drinks.

He had thought 10,000 credits a decent amount to start off with, but he quickly began to realize if he really wanted to keep up his appearances as an ultra-wealthy man, he needed to find a way to get more credits quickly.

Valera nodded and picked up the case of wine.

Mercenaries approached Aldrich's windshield. He rolled the window down and stared at the mercenary's dot-like cybernetic red eyes and mouth mask that made each of his heavy breaths sound deeply raspy.

"Here to see the manager. 11 appointment," said Aldrich.

"Yeah, I know. Valet service. Mandatory. Give me your keys."

Aldrich turned off his car and tossed the keys to the mercenary. He grabbed them and nodded. "Walk past the barrier to the club. You'll face more security checks there. And just so you know, if we find anything here that's even remotely suspicious-,"

"You won't." Aldrich ignored him and waved Valera forward. Together, they walked past the now upraised boom barrier towards the club.

Valera tucked her arm in the crook of Aldrich's, and like this, they walked forward like gentleman and lady at a high-profile dance.

Aldrich appreciated how Valera was right now. She kept a calm, confident poise. Her posture was straight and elegant, each of her steps even matching the Aldrich's pace. Even though she was a knight, she was also a lady hailing from a royal vampiric lineage, and that showed now.

At the front of the club, Aldrich noted in the periphery of his sharp vision multiple cameras as well as several crawler drones in dormant state latched on the walls of the building, ready at a moment's notice to be active and crawl about while unloading machine gun fire.

The club's entrance was surprisingly far more elegant than Aldrich would have thought a seedy club in Southside Haven - the broken down, crime infested part of the city - to be. Large, black tinted glass double doors surrounded by a frame of red and gold shaped into floral patterns awaited Aldrich and Valera.

A well-maintained, spotlessly clean red carpet led out of the doors, and flanking this carpet were several Red Circle staff noticeable from their white and red suits. One of these staff members came up to Aldrich and Valera with a bow.

"Welcome to the Red Circle, Mr. and Mrs. Vane," said the woman. She had no cybernetics to speak of, but her organic eyes flashed with an odd, fluctuating green tint that made it obvious she was a powered Alter. "I will be your server and guide for tonight. You may call me Hirondelle."

"A pleasure to meet you, Hirondelle." Aldrich nodded and smiled uncharacteristically. He had practiced for hours to put up the fake persona of a wealthy socialite so as not to draw attention.

"Follow me." Hironnelle smiled and led Aldrich towards the doors. "We have prepared nothing but the finest for you, Mr. and Mrs. Vane, as we treat each client with the utmost level of respect they deserve. However, there are some minor security hurdles we simply must press upon you. Red Circle policy, I am afraid."

"I perfectly understand," said Aldrich. "Safety is a real issue these days, isn't it?"

"I appreciate the cooperation." Hironnelle nodded to the rest of the staff. Several people came forwards. Some waved Etherium and metal detecting sticks over Aldrich and Valera. Others scanned them from a distance not with visors, but their very own powers, their eyes glowing or their hands projecting analyzing light.

Hironnelle bowed and held out a hand towards Valera. "The bottle, Mrs. Vane, might my team analyze it? I assure you we will take the greatest of cares so that the taste and integrity of the wine is not harmed a single bit."

Valera daintily held out the bottle, and Hironnelle grasped it in one hand before handing it over to a staff member who disappeared into the club.

"Tech sweep complete: nothing," said a staff member.

"AC scan complete: count at 0," said another.

"Wonderful," said Hironnelle. "Once we have returned your bottle, I will lead you to your meeting. I hope you will enjoy your stay, Mr. Vane, and that this meeting ends with an investment that you can look back upon with a smile."

Aldrich smiled, and this time, it was genuine. "I hope so too."

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Once Hironnelle returned with Aldrich's bottle and handed it back to Valera, she guided them as promised. Through the sliding double glass doors, Aldrich and Valera continued on through more red carpet.

The first floor was a massive dance floor, though by the walls were highly upraised booths with tables for those that wished to pay for a premium experience. At the end of the dance floor stood a white platform meant for performers with large stage lights and sound systems ahead. Everything was powered off, however.

The Red Circle only functioned as a club during the weekends. All other days was when 'business' happened.

Aldrich knew the ins and outs of the Red Circle. His Grave Ward had scouted out almost everything it could. That included the room on the third floor they were head to where a masked man that was most likely Casimir sat waiting with a guard.



There were a few mystery rooms blocked with forcefields, but Aldrich would know what was behind those soon enough.

Hirondelle led Aldrich and Valera to the end of the dance floor to a platform elevator hidden behind the performance stage. The elevator ferried them all to the third floor, and here, everything was deathly silent. The walls were heavily sound proofed, isolating it from the tumult of the dance floor below.

The third floor comprised of brightly lit hallways lined with red carpet and decorated with expensive paintings and sculptures, some of which dated Pre-Monstering, easily fetching over a hundred thousand credits.

"Right this way." Hirondelle led Aldrich and Valera down these hallways to a room. She opened a varnished, carved oak door, and bowed.

Inside, the room felt like it belonged to an upscale fine dining restaurant. It was lit by elaborate chandelier, and beneath it stood a round dining table covered with white cloth. Casimir sat here with a plate, utensils, and three types of wine glasses in front of him. The same arrangement was repeated twice for Aldrich and Valera.

Immediately, Casimir stood up.

"Mr. Vane! You've come right on time!" Casimir said warmly, the emoter on his mask smiling.

"Casimir, I presume?" Aldrich held out a hand, and Casimir shook it thoroughly.

"My, that is a powerful handshake right there," said Casimir. He playfully tapped Aldrich's shoulder. "You must train that body of yours quite dutifully, hm? But the sad state of the world now is that one must always be ready for danger."

Casimir then bowed lightly to Valera. "Mrs. Vane, is it? A pleasure to make your acquaintance. Your husband has been nothing but warm and charming to me in our prior communications. Ah, and that bottle, I should not let a lady such as yourself carry it."

Casimir snapped his fingers. "Walters, be good to me and take this off the lady."

One of the two guards, a Red Circle waiter, it seemed, judging from his white and red suit, came forwards and took the bottle from Valera with a gracious nod. He had sharp, angular features with slit pupils and slicked a short buzzcut.

Contrary to his brutish appearance, Walters carefully began to open the case and retrieve a tray of wine opening tools like he was a world class surgeon performing the world's most sensitive operation.



Aldrich and Valera could both tell from a single glance that Walter was not some ordinary waiter. He was strong. They could not sense Ether energy, but they could tell how physically capable someone was, and Walters was six foot six (2 meters) with enough muscle that he seemed like he could burst out of his suit at any given moment.

"Now sit, sit! You must rest yourselves. The drive here was so very dangerous, no?" Casimir personally drew back Aldrich and Valeras' seats, beckoning them to sit.

As everyone settled into the dining table, Casimir continued. "I am deeply sorry that my establishment lies in this rather rough neighborhood. I do not mean to pry, but I noticed your AC counts were zero. It is no wonder that you had to drive here in an armored car, particularly when I had to request that you arrive with no security force."

"Oh, trust me, it wasn't much of an issue," said Aldrich. "You have been more than welcoming enough so far."

"I appreciate your politeness, Mr. Vane. I tell you, some of the clients I receive, they know nothing. They cannot tell a street market leather from Guccini finery. Nor, as you no doubt know, some mass-produced red wine swirl with a proper Celeste vintage."

Aldrich noted that Casimir's compliments were quite targeted. Aldrich's current suit was from Guccini and of course, that damned overpriced wine was a Celeste or some bullsh\*t fancy sounding name.

"And that ring! That twin coiling snake design with the silver and gold, my, that is expert work right there," said Casimir as he gestured to the [Ring of Avarice] on Aldrich's finger. "Might I ask who made it?"

"Unfortunately, this is strictly artisanal. A custom order," said Aldrich.

"Custom, is it? After our talk, you must acquaint me with your jeweler. I would almost kill to have a piece such as that for myself," said Casimir as he stretched out his hands, showcasing a sparkling watch and several polished rings studded with rare gems of all kinds. "But you strike me as a more serious man, Mr. Vane, so let's get to talking business, shall we?"

"You read me perfectly," said Aldrich.

"Walters, pour us some prosecco to begin," said Casimir. "Your wine, that Celeste, we must save for later. My chef will prepare a course that suits its dry yet subtle flavors beautifully."

Walters nodded and took a bottle from a chilled cabinet. He popped the carbonated bottle open and held it by the base with his palm as he went around the table, filling up smaller, thinner glasses.

Casimir held up the gleaming, golden colored sparkling alcohol to the light of the chandelier. "A preliminary toast, perhaps?"

"Of course." Aldrich raised his glass, and so did Valera.

Casimir drew the glass close to his mask, and the lower half retracted, revealing a severely burnt, disfigured face. He sipped the prosecco before continuing business talk. "I understand that you wish to speak with me about sampling our liquor selection."

"Just as we discussed before, yes," said Aldrich. He had sent this message to get a good look into the Red Circle's list of mercenaries and villains to prepare for them. Plus, it was good cover and fit with the story of a wealthy Dud that wanted security.

"Our liquor selection is acceptable, but not the finest. I am afraid that our in house store does not exceed the B rank. For any higher, you must reach larger establishments. But that is what the Red Circle specializes in. Connections.

We are one of the largest hubs for Connectors from the largest organizations. The Four Dragons, the Rakshashas, the Moon, the Trident - any big names you can think of, we have ties to."

Aldrich heard the word Trident and involuntarily narrowed an eye.

"Ah, are you interested in the Trident?" said Casimir, catching even that tiny eye motion expertly.

"Of course. Who wouldn't be?" said Aldrich as he maintained his smile.

## **Chapter 57: Meeting in the Red Circle 2**

"I did take you as a man who could see potential," said Casimir. "And you are right on the mark with that: there is no other organization in our line of work growing faster than the Trident.

And who could have predicted it?

A ragtag alliance of estranged yakuza, mafia, and triad families banding together after the Monstering in a most meteoric rise. It is truly admirable how hardship can make the fellow man set aside differences and work together.

If I was an investing man such as yourself, I would place my credits in the Trident.

But of course, I should not lecture an experience investor like you."

"By all means, go ahead. I'm always in a learning mindset," said Aldrich. He kept his smile, but he could not hide the disgust welling up within him as Casimir talked about the Trident like they were some rags to riches story to be admired.

The Trident built their empire off the blood and suffering of countless many. There was nothing to respect about them.

And soon, once Aldrich saw to it, that empire would crumble into dust.

"Something big is happening, Mr. Vane," said Casimir. "I can feel it in the air. In the fabric of this tumultuous society around us.

Can you not? It is in the ever-increasing cases of theft by Nomads in the Wastelands. It is in the spirits of the downtrodden in the ghettos and broken-down streets of walled cities.

Do you know what I call this?"

"Entertain me," said Aldrich.

Casimir raised a finger. "Desperation. The Panopticon and the Alterhuman Agency are meant to protect humanity, but they are failing. Variants attacks are astronomically on the rise, and I hear whispers that the Titans stir in their slumber.

Are you familiar with the Prophet, Mr. Vane?"

"Ah, the Alter with future sight, correct? The one who makes a prophecy about humanity's safety every fifteen years," said Aldrich. "Who wouldn't be? His prophecies are the most watched live broadcasts on telescreen networks."

"Yes, yes, that's the one. The doddering old man with that wispy head of white hair and bleak, blank eyes. Oh, I do feel for him, that man, to constantly have to foresee the fate of an entire civilization - it must take a toll on the mind." Casimir shook his head. "But besides his personal suffering, have you heard of his latest prophecy?"

"Who hasn't," said Aldrich. "Two years ago, yes? 2115. If my memory isn't failing me, he's guaranteed humanity's safety for the next fifteen years yet again."

"There is some tell among my sources that it is all a lie. A sham conjured up by the Alterhuman Agency and the Panopticon," said Casimir. "I hear that the Prophet has, in truth, foretold humanity's doom."

"Is that so?" said Aldrich, raising a brow in interest.

"Is it? Who knows? Even my own sources cannot penetrate deep into the internal politics of the AA and the Panopticon. All I hear are whispers and rumors. Second-hand accounts. Mutterings.

But you know what, Mr. Vane?" Casimir leaned forwards, the emote on his mask smiling at Aldrich intensely. "Even a whisper is bound to be heard when it is telling the truth."

Aldrich remained quiet, letting Casimir talk.

Casimir spoke. "I make no guarantees, but I feel that perhaps something BIG will happen.

With the vast majority of modern-day Supers degenerating into nothing but glorified pop stars, prancing about on their live streams and vying for the most likes on their social media platforms, who is left to defend the common man?

When will the desperation that is ever growing on the streets reach a breaking point?

And when it does, when that breaking point shatters the order of society, who will pick up the pieces?"

"Ah, I see what you're getting at," said Aldrich. "You're saying that the villains want to take control. With enough Variant attacks and enough desperation, some perhaps artificially fueled, there's bound to be chaos.

And who better to navigate chaos than villains?"

"I am not saying anything. I am merely asking questions. Presenting a thought experiment, yes," said Casimir coyly. "But you understand what I mean.

So, it is quite wise of you to divest some of your investments here, especially if you wish to keep yourself and your dear wife safe in times to come.

Now then, for our in-house liquor selections."

Casimir tapped the side of his mask three times, and the emote disappeared into a bright white screen. From there, a holographic series of images projected outwards onto the dining table. These images formed into profiles that listed out several mercenaries and villains for hire.

The profiles listed a threat ranking if the subject had one, or if they were hidden, an estimated threat ranking. It showed an image of them, a list of their successful missions, how many credits and assets they had earned for their clients, their general personality traits, and so on.

Like reviewing resumes.

Aldrich noted that out of the dozen profiles Casimir projected, only one was at B-rank.

"It seems you are a little disappointed with our in-house selection, and that is understandable." Casimir said this when Aldrich spent several seconds looking without saying anything. "Again, we do not have the finest cream of the crop.

For that, you would have to travel to a larger city such as Neo-York.

However, for you, Mr. Vane, I can offer more options.

No doubt, if you have researched enough to connect with us, you know of Blackwater. One of few academies in the underground network that specializes in producing insider informants within the AA.

But among them, many will also be promising mercenaries.

If you so desire, I could arrange a meeting between you and some members of the A-rank class.

Young as they are, they may not be as disciplined, but their potential, I am sure if properly groomed, will exceed our in-house selections."

"An interesting consideration," said Aldrich. "You truly do have a wide selection to offer. But could I be just a little greedier and ask to see if there are even more?"

"Of course, Mr. Vane, and I welcome greed. Greed is good. Greed is what drives us all." Casimir tapped his mask again. This time, Aldrich saw red tinted profiles projected. Many of these had far more impressive accomplishments and higher average threat rankings than before.

One thing tied them all together: they had an affiliation with the Trident.

"I know you were interested about the trident. Here is a list of most of the villains they have working for them that they can outsource as independent contractors.

Unfortunately, none of them are in such a small city as Haven, but I could certainly arrange a meeting for you with any one of them," said Casimir.

Aldrich looked over the profiles before he settled on one.

One that he remembered in crystal clear, perfect detail.

A villain with a burly, bristle furred body with a butcher's apron as a costume.

This was the same man that had chopped Aldrich's parents into little pieces.

Aldrich's undead mind allowed him to process a massive surge of emotions, of hate and vengeance and bloodlust, away so as not to draw attention. But even then, his finger trembled ever so slightly as he pointed at the man's photo.

"This one. I want this one," said Aldrich.

"Oh? The Butcher?" Casimir cocked his head in surprise. "He is not quite suited for guarding jobs. His personality is rather erratic, and his patience is rather limited. A condition of his power, it is said.

He is far more suited for torture, ah, wait."

Casimir smiled at Aldrich. "Don't tell me, Mr. Vane, you weren't here to hire a guard at all, were you?"

"Hm?" said Aldrich, wondering if Casimir had suspected him.

"You want someone gone. Someone who has wronged you. And you want them to suffer. Am I correct?" said Casimir.

Aldrich smiled. In a way, Casimir was right. Very, very right. "How could you tell?"

"I have a knack for sensing out my clients," said Casimir. "Mr. Vane, you really did not have to skirt around what you wanted. You could have told me from the beginning instead of dancing about and pretending to hire a guard.

I understand you are unfamiliar with how the underworld works, but you may be straightforward here.

Within the underworld, all desires hidden and locked away may be laid bare. That includes a need to make someone disappear. Forever."

"You're right. I am unused to working with all of this. Thank you for the tip, I'll keep it in mind," said Aldrich.

"I am always willing to help," said Casimir. "Will this be your final selection, Mr. Vane? Do understand that once you have reached out to arrange a meeting, it cannot easily be cancelled."

"I'm sure of it," said Aldrich.

"Excellent!" Casimir clapped his hands triumphantly, and his mask stopped projecting images and returned to its emote face. "I will have my secretary arrange the meeting within the Red Circle by this very week! Details regarding payment and contract details, numbers and words that spoil the mood - I leave to our respective staffs."

Right then, the doors opened, and three more waiters entered carrying a rolling tray with three large plates covered by cloches, a breadbasket, and an assortment of small plates ranging from seafood bites to salads.

"For now, how about we enjoy the beginning of this fruitful relationship with a meal?" said Casimir.

The waiters came by and arranged the plates neatly before Aldrich, Valera and Casimir. They then raised the cloches, revealing neatly seared chunks of steak glowing in a bath of still sizzling butter. Butter baked baby carrots and rich, creamy scoops of mashed potatoes accompanied the meat.

"70-day dry aged Quake-Hoof Bison steaks," said Casimir. "Seared and basted in goldcream butter. I sincerely hope you can stay and enjoy this meal."

"It smells incredible," said Aldrich, and he did not lie. This was food that he could never have afforded to even look at throughout his entire life. The kind of food that costed hundreds of credits a meal that only the richest of the rich could afford.

"I must agree with my husband," said Valera as she put a hand on Aldrich's. "This is quite the treat you have prepared for us."

"Oh, it's nothing. A simple token of appreciation," said Casimir.

Aldrich stayed focused and hinted to Casimir. "But I do feel like it's missing something."

"A certain Celeste vintage, no? Don't think I forgot, Mr. Vane," said Casimir. "Come, Walters, uncork that wine and give us a pour."

The hulking, muscled brute of a waiter came forwards with surprising elegance, bowing as he poured at the red wine in everyone's glasses.

Aldrich saw as hundreds of credits in the form of fermented liquid grapes just poured out casually like that, but he did not let his upbringing as someone who had never experienced luxury show.

Valera, however, seemed utterly at home here. She smiled with the grace of a court lady and slid her wine glass towards Walters with an eased confidence.

Walters poured, and Valera nodded ever so slightly before taking the glass and swishing it, swirling the dark red liquid about.

Aldrich mimicked her, and Casimir stood up and raised his glass.

"Now, a proper toast! To a new partnership!" said Casimir.

"A new partnership," said Aldrich as he and Valera clinked their glasses against Casimir's.

At the same time, all three took a deep sip of the wine.

Aldrich felt the deeply dry and bitter taste and held back a grimace. He did not really like alcohol as it affected his diet and training, but he did not let his displeasure show. He instead pretended to savor the taste like Casimir and Valera were doing.

When after what seemed like a eternity, Casimir finally stopped letting the wine linger in his mouth and swallowed it.

"Ah, how wonderful," said Casimir. "This kind of subtle dryness - Celeste is known for this. And what better to cut through dry with rich?"

Casimir picked up his fork and knife and reached down to cut his steak and then froze all of a sudden, as if someone had just hit the pause button on his body.

Almost immediately, the atmosphere in the room shifted.

Walters, the giant waiter, came on alert, as did the two mercenaries in the room.

Then, after a tense half second, Casimir moved again.

"Are you okay, sir?" said Walters.

"Hm? Why would I not be, Walters, in light of this breakthrough?" said Casimir as he cut his steak. "I have never felt better!"

"Same with me." Aldrich smiled as he heard Fler'Gan's voice ring in his head.

## **Chapter 58: An Experiment**

\*Thanks, Fler'Gan. Your potion worked perfectly. I owe you one,\* said Aldrich.

\*I require no thanks, great Elder, but if you are willing, perhaps a live sample? Of a human that is known as an 'Alter'?\*

Aldrich thought about this for a moment. \*Alright.\*

Walters stared at Aldrich as he loomed over the table, his suspicions evidently still not eased.



"Walters, please, you are inconveniencing our guest. This is quite unlike you," said Casimir.

All Aldrich did was smile at Walters. Walters stared at Aldrich for a few more seconds before he surrendered and walked away with a grunt.

"My apologies, Mr. Vane. Walters is normally such a lovely waiter, but tonight, he is a little off his game," said Casimir.

"It's quite alright. Everyone has their off days and their on days," said Aldrich.

Aldrich was not an idiot. He had not made Fler'Gan's mind control potion ridiculously obvious. He had given Fler'Gan further specifications on the potion he wanted made.

Most importantly, it had to be tasteless. Then, it had to be condensed down to as little liquid volume as possible so it did not increase the weight of the wine. The potion's effects finally had to be subtle as possible.

Aldrich did not want to make Casimir a brainwashed, doddering fool who drooled at the mouth and only responded to his commands. Not only would that guarantee an immediate and powerful backlash attack from Casimir's guards, it would also completely ruin the Red Circle, and Aldrich wanted the Red Circle to keep running for the foreseeable future.

Or, more accurately, Aldrich would now run the Red Circle in the shadows.

Thus, he wanted Casimir to be high-functioning enough to the point where the club manager seemed almost completely normal.

Fler'Gan's mind control potion worked so that if Casimir read, heard, or saw any requests, orders, or suggestions from Aldrich or 'Bruce Vane', he would be highly positively disposed to them.

"Let's enjoy the rest of this absolutely wonderful meal and wrap this meeting up. My wife and I have an event to go to later tonight, actually," said Aldrich.

"Ah, an after-midnight party, is it? Well, you two certainly are dressed for it. The lady, especially, my oh my. It must be quite difficult to keep prying eyes off of her, no?" said Casimir.

Aldrich distinctly remembered the Odinsons and how much disgusting animal desire he had seen in their eyes for Valera.

"My husband is more than capable of keeping prying eyes off of me. As am I," smiled Valera.

"There is nothing more beautiful in this world than a strong couple. I can attest to that," said Casimir. He sliced another chunk of steak. "Now, let's go ahead and enjoy this meal."

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Aldrich shook hands with Casimir outside of the Red Circle. His armored car was there in the front, keys in the engine and ready to be driven.

"That was an incredible dinner. And I mean it," said Aldrich honestly. He had literally never tasted anything as good as that. As a Dud, he probably would have been shot on sight if he went to a restaurant that served that.

That was an exaggeration, but it really did feel like it sometimes.

"Oh, that was nothing. You should come here in the weekends when the club is properly open. I can treat you to the finest VIP table service you can even dream of." Casimir bowed slightly. "I would dare to say that my services can match even the most prestigious of Neo-York nightlife."

"I'll be in touch with you about any additional requests," said Aldrich.

"And I will do my best to accommodate you, Mr. Vane."

Aldrich and Valera drove off promptly, returning back to the variant forest, with Valera humming in happiness through the whole ride back as she savored the act of being Aldrich's wife.

Aldrich's mind raced through the drive, however, as he now had all the pieces for his vengeance to finalize.

When it turned midnight, a status message popped in his vision.

[Ring of Avarice gift received]

[+150 Coins]

[Coin: 20 ] 170]

Every three days, the Ring of Avarice would grant Aldrich 150 coins, and this number would go up depending on Aldrich's level. Hopefully, this would help Aldrich's coin problem out, but in the case it did not, he knew that Liches and their higher evolutions could actually reach into the Nether and bind more than one chosen undead to themselves.

In that case, he would not be beyond considering binding Hadar, the in-game joke option that heavily increased coin generation.

Hadar had passives that made him incredibly lucky when related to money according to the lore, winning in gambling almost all the time.

In the game, that luck manifested in just a bonus rate of coins dropped, but Aldrich theorized that it would truly manifest as luck here, something that would draw wealth and fortune to Hadar like a magnet.

In a world dominated by the credit sign, Hadar could be an invaluable asset, more so than any warmongering fighter.

[Miscellaneous units defeated]

[+600 EXP]

[EXP Bar: 1600/1800 ] 2200/1800]

[Level up!]

[Level: 13 ] 14]

[EXP Bar: 400/2000]

[5 stat points available to distribute]

[+5 to Strength]

[Strength: 15 ] 20]

Looked like Aldrich's undead in the forest had hunted plenty themselves. He briefly looked through the list of slaughtered variants and found nothing worthy of raising. He commanded his units to stop for now as he did not want to risk drawing any further attention to the forest.

He was at a crucial juncture where everything needed to go right for Aldrich to finally enact vengeance upon those that had wronged him on Saturday.

A mere three days from now

In the forest, Aldrich got to work with Fisk and Fler'Gan.

Fler'Gan would continue his alchemical experimentations. The Mind-Eater requested live Alterhuman samples, but if Aldrich could not obtain them, the freshly slaughtered corpses of variants would do.

Fler'Gan would also continue experimentation into teaching the Geist magic as a long term project.

Fler'Gan specifically said that the Geist seemed to have a natural curiosity that made it more suited towards learning magic than any of the other arisen undead, pointing out further to Stella's disgruntlement that she was far too impatient to learn anything.

While Fler'Gan did that, Aldrich worked with Fisk to continually communicate with Casimir. Now that Casimir was under Aldrich's thrall, the club manager would do anything Aldrich wanted within reason.

Aldrich first received all the information he could about Casimir regarding the rooms in the Red Circle that were blocked off by forcefields.

Those rooms contained highly valuable contraband ranging from experimental techno weapons to potent combat drugs to blackmail on multiple important political figures and AA executives.

Among them, Casimir stated that the most valuable was a newly developed drug called Boost. It was developed in secret through a collaboration between Imugi, the corporate leader in cutting edge military technology, and Bio-Force, a corporate leader in combat enhancing biotech.

Once injected, Boost would affect the Alter Organ and cause the body's cell count to rapidly swell, significantly enhancing the power of the affected Alter.

This was not exactly a new type of drug.

There were many combat drugs out there that enhanced Alter powers, but all of them led to massive side effects that invariably spiraled down to death, not to mention severe mania and self-destructive behavior that made them wholly unviable for combat.

Boost was innovative because it was the safest, though even it was dangerous enough that using it more than once over an entire two-week period could lead to devastating side effects, not to mention that continual long-term usage apparently caused irreparable damage to the Alter Organ.

This was the contraband that the Odinson gang had stolen from an Imugi transport.

It was also what Seth Solar desperately wanted from Casimir, likely to enhance his power to beat Mel and take number 1 spot to soothe his ego.

Seth Solar's meeting on Saturday was not just a party night out, it was also a venture to obtain an early access sample of Boost.

Aldrich noted this down for later. The Boost would become useful later.

He had a near perfect plan set up to take down Seth Solar on Saturday, but he needed to get some specifics confirmed first.

Aldrich asked Casimir to bring down two D-ranked villains to the variant forest on a 'security mission'. He emphasized to Casimir that the villains be as disposable as possible so that nobody would miss them.

Casimir agreed.

The villains would head out this very night.

Aldrich waited and began his own experimentation.

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Jack Rondell drove out of Haven with his hand gripped tight around his steering wheel, his rearview mirror reflecting an expression of pure annoyance on his face. If there was one word to describe him, it would be rough.

Rough hair, rough beard, rough features - someone that bordered on the brink of looking homeless.

But Jack, or rather, the Slasher as he was known by his villain name, had to admit he looked a hell of a lot better than the guy in the passenger seat beside him.

A pale, bald guy with deeply sunken in dark eyes, thin lips, and various spikes of various lengths jutting out of his head. That was his current partner for tonight's security mission. Another guy from the Red Circle known as the Lasher.

Sometimes, Jack wondered what shadowy garbage pits of society the Red Circle dragged some of these guys out from, but then he realized that he, as a former drug addict turned serial killer, did not have much high ground to stand on.

Anyways, Jack always disliked the guy. Not only because Lasher sounded way too similar to Slasher, but because he was a total antisocial freak.

"Fuckin' Casimir. He treats us well, but a sudden call like this? Man, and I was just about to fuck this absolute bombshell of a whore, too. Maybe it was a good thing I got called out, I don't know how much self control I would've needed to stop myself from fucking her and then slicing her in pieces" said Jack, making small talk.

He glanced at Lasher.

Lasher only stared straight ahead, completely still like a corpse, his hands clasped together as if in prayer. Lasher was a member of a Neo-Cult called the Path of Pain.

Neo Cults were odd religions that popped up past the Altering and Monsterring when rapidly changing views of what it meant to be human, bleak post-modernism, and existential crises drew people to increasingly extreme views.

Around the Lasher's leather covered arms were spiked chains that grew out of his skin.

Those in the Path of Pain believed that everything in the world was false except pain.

"Not that you would know anything about that," said Jack with a laugh.

Only silence.

After a few seconds, Jack tried to make conversation again. "But you know, with all those chains and a villain name like 'Lasher', I thought you'd be a whole lot freakier."

The Lasher did not even blink as he kept staring straight ahead.

"Fuck it. Whatever." Jack sighed and just kept driving. The walls of Haven faded behind him as the forests in the distance drew closer and closer.

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After a forty-minute drive, Jack parked his car off road, hidden in a thicket of trees at the edge of the variant forest.

"Alright, get your mask on. We're meeting the client up ahead. Says he's got a couple of sorry sh\*ts he needs squealing in pain before he gets rid of them. That's totally up your ally, right? Pain inflicting chains and all, yeah?" said Jack.

"Pain is truth. Pain reveals all." The Lasher solemnly said while closing his eyes in prayer. He then exited the car while retrieving his mask - a gimp mask - from his black robes.

"The only thing I can do is turn my arms into knives. Why the fuck am I here?" Jack complained as he got out and put on his mask, a typical ski-mask you would see in a bad Slasher flick.

Hence, why Jack called himself the Slasher.

Jack was not creative, sure, but if being creative meant becoming a freakshow like the Lasher, then Jack was happy enough not to be left-brained or whatever the fuck it was that made people creative and deranged.

Like this, the Slasher and the Lasher duo went ahead into the forest.

