

Super Necromancer System #Chapter 159: Exposing Hat Trick - Read Super Necromancer System Chapter 159: Exposing Hat Trick

Chapter 159: Exposing Hat Trick

Aldrich tossed those numbers around in his head.

Ten million credits to Aldrich. Fifteen million to Seismic. A total of a twenty-five million credit investment.

This was an amount of money that Aldrich would only have dreamt of even grasping at.

His parents, as relatively regular D and C rank heroes, earned almost two hundred thousand credits a year together in Neo-York, which sounded like a lot, but living costs in Neo-York, a tier 1 city, were absurdly high.

Even if his parents could take all of their earnings without spending anything on rent, they would need one hundred and twenty-five years to match what Hat Trick was offering.

But Aldrich did not care about how much that credit amount meant to him. Because soon enough, he was going to have enough power and influence that credits were not going to be an issue.

No, what he wanted to know was how much that amount meant to Hat Trick.

From what Aldrich knew, it was at the A rank that heroes started becoming superstar earners that could earn millions of credits a year. He did not know exactly how much Hat Trick himself earned, but on average, he figured that an A ranker with a strong social media presence and decent sponsors made around the ballpark of ten million credits a year.

'I see,' said Aldrich. Hat Trick was a new A ranker and had only been working for five years.

If Aldrich recalled correctly, then, his lifetime earnings were around 50 million credits, but like most superstars, Hat Trick was not exactly frugal with his spending.

Aldrich figured those 25 million credits was close to almost all of what Hat Trick could cough up at a short notice. 'And how did you respond to that offer?'

'I didn't,' said Seismic. 'I was waiting for your decision. I will make this clear now. I will follow you. I will walk the path you pave. It's what I owe you for giving me back this life.'

If you take a step one day that I don't think I can follow, I will tell you. Then, you can turn me mindless, I don't care. This body isn't mine anymore. It's yours. So do what you want with it.

But besides that - are you going to take Hat Trick's offer?'

'Of course not,' scoffed Aldrich. 'I only asked to humor myself. I wanted to know how much Hat Trick thought his life was worth.'

'And? Do you agree with the number he put out?' said Seismic.

Aldrich paused for a moment before he stared at Hat Trick, at the hero's fake smile that he flashed towards the disbelieving, disgruntled, tired, now homeless citizens of Haven.

The fakeness of it all almost made Aldrich's undead stomach sick, if that was even possible. 'Let's just say I would never sell something worthless for that many credits,'

"You there, newcomer!" Hat Trick's voice resonated outwards, aimed right at Aldrich. He waved at Aldrich with a nervous and now barely maintained smile, though perhaps due to years of training his fake smile, he could still keep it up in the face of so much public opposition. "I can't thank you enough for the service you've done today.

I know you are no hero, but with the valiant efforts of tonight, I'm sure you'll be recognized by the agency.

I'm sure you've talked with Seismic about how the agency works with its heroes, yeah?"

"Yes," said Aldrich. Hat Trick here was speaking in double meanings. He could not just reveal to the public the blatant corruption he wanted Aldrich to pull off, so he veiled it in seemingly 'proper' hero related talk.

"Good, good," said Hat Trick. He sighed dramatically. "It's not often that I need to prove myself, but I guess that's on me for forgetting to record my fights.

It's hard to remember that when I fight variants to protect, not to profit."

Hat Trick shook his head and cast a look of judgement around the crowd before looking up at Aldrich with a hopeful smile. "But I'm sure you understand, don't you, newcomer?

You've been in the dark for so long, probably fighting without any recognition all that time. You understand me, don't you?"

"...", Aldrich did not respond, and that silence unnerved Hat Trick.

Good.

Hat Trick paused awkwardly, and the crowd stared at him with ruthless silence, showing very obviously whose word they trusted at this point.

Right now, everything short of Hat Trick's life, his entire career, his reputation, all those movie deals and sponsorships, were on the line. No, that might just be worth his entire life to him.

"If you talked with Seismic, then you know, right? What I did?" said Hat Trick. "Then I'd like you to tell the people here about the role I played in tonight's defense. Just like how you were at the frontlines, beating back that monster of a Locus, I was at the coastline, beating back the reinforcements."

At this moment, Hat Trick's eyes narrowed as he lowered his gaze, his long locks of red hair falling across his face in disheveled manner that gave his stare a pointedly threatening aura to it.

"Heroes stand tall because we have each other's backs, isn't that right?"

This was Hat Trick's direct call to get Aldrich to lie. Hat Trick's words seemed harmless at first, but in reality, he was reminding Aldrich of what he had told Seismic.

Heroes have each other's backs. Or, more accurately, they cover up for each other's faults.

This was a veiled command to Aldrich, telling him to cover for Hat Trick now.

At this moment, the crowd's attention shifted to Aldrich. They instinctively understood that it was now up to Aldrich.

For him to lay down judgement.

Aldrich remembered Ghost. He remembered Seth Solar. He remembered how he had judged them.

He would judge Hat Trick just the same now.

Aldrich began to walk forwards. He towered over most of the people in the crowd, and he trudged forward, the crowd automatically parted way.

With every step towards Hat Trick, with every passing second of silence, the hero grew increasingly more nervous. When the female team members behind Hat Trick saw Aldrich's menacing, bone spiked, blood infused form trudge forward with the heavy click of armor, they slunk backwards, afraid.

None of them were fighters. All of them were just pretty playthings for Hat Trick. Things he used to make himself look and feel good. Symbolic of how Hat Trick lived his life and how he saw the world. As playthings.

One big playground to do whatever he wanted in. He could leave his toys whenever he wanted. Throw them away whenever he wanted. Break them whenever he wanted.

All that mattered was what he wanted.

Not anymore.

When Aldrich stood right before Hat Trick, he stood half a head over the hero. Hat Trick maintained his smile, but he was forced to look up at Aldrich's unnerving red dot helm.

Aldrich stared right down at Hat Trick and spoke, his voice echoing outwards and reaching the whole crowd. "Here's what you did tonight - nothing.

You left the moment the Locus came. Seismic and every single hero and police force outside these walls can attest to this. You left because you were a coward. You left because you thought everyone here would die, leaving no witnesses to your sickening weakness.

Had you stayed, had you held even the smallest shred of bravery in that pathetic excuse of a heart of yours, you could have fought with Seismic and beaten the Locus.

But now look at you. You have to come back here with this poorly made-up excuse, relying on me and Seismic, no, bribing us both to try and back you, because you know you can't keep this a secret.

Everything about you reeks of desperation. And nothing smells worse than the filth of desperation from scum like you."

Hat Trick made several steps back, his eyes wide in shock. His female team members blinked as they broke their practiced smiles and nervously stared at Hat Trick, wondering what to do.

The crowd erupted in a united chant of hatred against Hat Trick, spurred on by Aldrich.

"Coward!"

"You ran! And you come back to us again with lies like this!?"

One particular anguished man shoved his way to the front and pointed an accusing finger at Hat Trick. "You're the reason my son died out there.

Just a boy, torn to shreds like that - you, I'm just one man, someone so insignificant you can just leave behind to die, but I'm going to do my best for the rest of my life that you never get another deal, another sponsorship, ever again! That everyone in the world hears about this!"

The crowd roared in agreement, their chants and proclamations of how they would make sure Hat Trick's image never recovered melding together into a weapon that could hurt even Hat Trick.

Individually, all of these people were weak and without influence, but together, they could at least make sure the consequences of Hat Trick's actions caught up with him.

Hat Trick stepped back again, still shocked. He looked around at the rage contorted faces screaming up at him, and he stammered out, "D-don't you all love me? Remember my movies-,"

"We don't give a sh*t about your corny ass movies! Get out of here!"

"Get out!"

"Get out!"

"Get out!"

A unified chant formed, and with each 'get out', Hat Trick's gaze dropped lower and lower, until his hat fully covered his facial expression.

People started to throw things at him. Rubble. Half eaten rations. Broken electronics. Whatever they had on him, they pelted at him, some with considerable force considering there were a few Augmenter alters there.

Of course, everything just bounced off Hat Trick's tough body, but his female team members shrieked at the sudden outburst and rain of projectiles and scattered away like scared cats, leaving Hat Trick utterly alone.

That was when Aldrich noticed a shift in Hat Trick's body language. It was incredibly slight, almost imperceptible, but alarming.

Hat Trick stiffened up, and it was not in shock either.

It felt nearly violent, like how a beast might stiffen up right before they lunged to kill.

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Chapter 160: Time's Up

"Everyone, back!" Aldrich said as he stepped forward while manifesting his [Death Essence Barrier]. He roughly shoved several people behind him, sending them flying back, but better safe than sorry.

Hat Trick smashed his fist into the ground, sending out a shockwave of force that crashed against Aldrich's barrier harmlessly.

Hat Trick's shockwave had not really been meant to harm. It was more like a way to vent his frustration.

The crowd grew silent in fear and confusion as they took nervous, tentative steps backwards.

Even if this was the case that Hat Trick was just unleashing a man child tantrum, Aldrich had to be wary that it could devolve into something dangerous. He could not think of a more dangerous and volatile person than an egotistical hero who had fallen from all the grace and praise they once took for granted.

From what Aldrich knew through publicly available information, Hat Trick's Alter power was categorized under the Augmenter main category, but he had a Trump subcategory that indicated that his powers could traverse across multiple other categories under certain conditions.

In Hat Trick's case, depending on what color his hat was and what trick he performed with it, he obtained different sets of powers.

What these powers exactly were was kept more of a secret, but his marketing team showcased most often his ability to turn his body into lasers and another one where he obtained a completely crystalline, diamond like body.

But even at his base state, Hat Trick had a high enough AC count that his raw physical stats were considerably developed already.

Hat Trick began to laugh. It was a full bellied, extended laugh that continued on and on until he ran out of breath.

"Back," repeated Aldrich with more force, and the crowd all shuffled away, behind Seismic as a second layer of protection.

"A joke. A sick fucking joke," muttered Hat Trick. He finally looked up at Aldrich, his face revealing under his hat. There was no anger there. No frustration. His eyes had tears of laughter welling up within them. "This is what this all is."

All that work, the monster hunting, the plastic surgeries, the hair transplants, the marketing, the movies, the acting, so much fucking acting on set, off set, so much some days I couldn't even tell what was real anymore - all that just to get flipped over by a no name fuckup like you.

It's a joke, isn't it?"

"Hat Trick, if you don't stand down-," snarled Seismic as he stepped forward, but Aldrich raised a hand, stopping Seismic.

Aldrich wanted Hat Trick to break down here. It would give Aldrich even more leverage to work with.

"But you know what I've come to realize?" Hat Trick's smile turned into a cold, emotionless void. "I might like tricks, but I fucking hate jokes."

The rim around Hat Trick's hat glowed blue. The hero then took off his hat in one smooth motion and opened it up towards Aldrich.

The empty space inside the head of the hat glowed bright with energy that fluxed before shooting outwards in a brilliant beam.

'The energy output vested within that attack presents minimal risk,' stated Volantis. Though Volantis spoke to Aldrich, it was more accurate to say his words were mentally transmitted, meaning their meaning reached Aldrich's mind near instantly.

This allowed Aldrich to react to things based off of Volantis's observations even in tense, time sensitive situations.

Aldrich just kept his barrier up. With how high its energy resistance was, Hat Trick's laser would not get through it.

The crowd started to scream in fright and alarm as they witnessed Hat Trick's laser, his so-called Blue Blaster, used against Aldrich.

'Get everyone out of here,' said Aldrich as he put his hand in front of him, watching as the blue laser crashed into his green barrier, absorbing into it without dealing much collateral damage elsewhere.

'I know,' came Seismic's response.

"Everyone, move out! Back to shelter!" said Seismic as he waved the crowd away, standing in front of them with an eye on Hat Trick to make sure he was ready to intercept any attack.

Hat Trick's Blue Blaster faded down, revealing his smoking, blue energy tinted hat. The hero started to hover in the air as he stared down at Aldrich with a smile that could only be described as broken.

"What do you think you're doing?" said Aldrich, his voice terse.

"Oh, me? I probably won't be a hero much longer, will I?" said Hat Trick. "No, that's not true. I'll probably get demoted to writhe with the rest of the B rank maggots that have to wring their hands and beg for their paychecks.

That humble life, to be honest, isn't the life for me.

So why don't I have a little fun first? Before I make my career change? Show my new recruiters that I've got what it takes, eh?"

"You think a tempter tantrum like this is going to impress the Underworld?" said Aldrich.

With his hero career nuked, Hat Trick was planning on becoming either a villain or a mercenary. And he wanted to prove himself to them now, very likely by causing damage or by killing.

Aldrich was a decent judge of people, and he knew within Hat Trick's multi-colored eyes that there was zero morality there, zero sense of consideration for others, only consideration for the self.

There was no doubt in Aldrich's mind that Hat Trick had the capacity to kill with cold blood.

"Maybe it will. Maybe it won't. But at the very least, I'll get to feel a lot better bashing in that tin can head of yours," said Hat Trick. "While all of your little friends are out there fighting those disgusting fish freaks."

"Tell me, how much of the fight did you see broadcasted?" said Aldrich. He questioned Hat Trick mostly to buy time. Hat Trick was self-absorbed enough to continuously talk, and that gave Seismic the opportunity to move civilians away while also allowing Aldrich to get his own battle pieces ready. "You should know I'm no easy target."

"The broadcast? Didn't pay much attention, really. Only saw the end of it, when you killed the Locus after everyone did the hard work for you," said Hat Trick. "I have no doubt you're still strong, though, so I won't go easy on you.

And you're still weaker alone, especially with that old geezer busy handling civvies." Hat Trick palmed the crown of his hat in his palm and raised it up in the air like a magician ready to pull a rabbit out of it.

"So, how about it, want to see another trick?"

"Go ahead," said Aldrich.

Hat Trick smiled at Aldrich and put his other gloved hand into the hat to take out a large rose.

"Red," said Hat Trick. The hat's band changed from blue to red, and the rose burned up in flames, crumbling away into nothingness.

Hat Trick's entire body erupted in flames as he put on his hat again. His eyes glowed a fiery orange-red now as he flashed a cocky smile down at Aldrich.

"You have access to multiple powers...an incredibly rare ability. No wonder you were in the A rank," said Aldrich with mock surprise. He already knew Hat Trick had more than one power. He just wanted to keep Hat Trick distracted by playing into his giant sized ego.

"Of course," said Hat Trick. "How else do you think I distinguished myself from the average E, D, C, even B rank rabble?"

Do you think I rose through the ranks like some kind of modern era peasant, moving to this city and that, hunting this small fry variant here and there, managing my social media myself, begging for interviews and sponsors?"

"I figured you worked your way up down from the E rank like any normal hero," said Aldrich, now insulting Hat Trick's pride after building it up and goading him into more talk.

Like this, Aldrich constantly psychologically manipulated Hat Trick into talking and talking and talking.

Hat Trick's face distorted into anger, and as he spoke, flames started to crackle and roar upwards all around his body, matching the rising tone of his voice. "No! All of that came to me on its own!

Like moths flocking to a flame, all of that, the fame, the credits, the deals, the women, all of it came to me because I was special! I deserved it all! I killed an A rank variant by myself, and after that, the world loved me! Everyone knew how much I was worth!

But you -, " Hat Trick pointed a flaming finger at Aldrich. "You, the newbie that doesn't know a single thing about how this hero game is played, you just had to screw it all up, didn't you? I know what you think.

You think you're doing the right thing here, aren't you? Exposing me?

Think again, idiot. With this, nobody will have your back in this industry again. You've doomed your chances here even before you got started!"

"Alright, time's up. You can stop talking now, puppet," said Aldrich. An edge manifested in his voice, and Hat Trick paused in surprise for a moment at how utterly cold that voice felt.

It did not feel human. Even surrounded by intense flames, Hat Trick felt a chill run through his body.

"Wh-what did you say to me?" said Hat Trick as he put his hands together, starting to generate a ball of flame.

"I said-" Aldrich crossed his arms. "Time's up."

"Yeah, for you-," Hat Trick raised his hands into the air, channeling an ever-growing ball of fire, but before it could grow into anything notable, a bright ball of green and blue light erupted behind him.

The light emerged and faded in an instant, allowing Hat Trick to see what it was.

Hat Trick's eyes instantly widened in fear.

It was the Locus.

Chapter 161: One Last Trick

When Hat Trick's gaze befell the Locus, at that terror of a variant that had single-handedly lain waste to an entire city on its own, and his time perception slowed to a brief crawl as his brain worked to its maximum, telling him that in those gleaming rainbow eyes poised so hatefully against him, there was foretold nothing but his death.

But how? This was Hat Trick's thought as he saw the Locus appear so suddenly. The Locus was supposed to be all the way out at the battle site. Why was it here?

The answer was simple. Teleportation. Well, it would have been a simple answer had Hat Trick actually bothered to check on the stream.

But instead, Aldrich bet that once Seismic had died, Hat Trick had probably just completely tuned out of anything Haven related because he thought the city was guaranteed to fall and thus had zero relevance to him.

This, Aldrich had confirmed with his questioning towards Hat Trick.

After all, what were a few hundred thousand lives to him but just more voices that needed to be silenced?

Hat Trick, befitting of the strength of an A class hero, reacted nigh instantaneously to Okeanos, throwing his fireball towards the Locus. The sphere of flame shot forth like a

cannonball, impacting against Okeanos in a crackling explosion of fire that scattered outwards with enough range to easily engulf an entire house wholesale.

The shadow of Okeanos's figure darkened through the raging flames, and Okeanos burst outwards unharmed, flames catching on his shell but not doing any real damage.

"Sh*t!" Hat Trick fumbled with his hat, putting it on an extended finger to spin it for another trick to access another power. Probably one more suited to fighting in close combat.

But too late.

Okeanos used Burst, shrouding himself in an aura of crackling green bolts, and then moved so quickly he disappeared from sight.

"Behind me-," Hat Trick said as he whirled around ready to counter attack or evade. Instead, all Hat Trick saw was just empty air, and in the distance, Aldrich watching calmly with his arms crossed.

It was natural for Hat Trick to expect Okeanos to have made an attack at his blind spot like that.

That was the most common angle people with teleportation or powers that functioned similarly to it attacked through. Okeanos had actually attacked like that several times beforehand, always trying to get behind his enemies, but Aldrich had countered that, and now, Okeanos had learned.

Instead, Okeanos had manifested right underneath Hat Trick. Before Hat Trick could recover and react, Okeanos reached out and grabbed Hat Trick's ankle in a powerful grip.

"Wha-," managed Hat Trick before Okeanos slammed Hat Trick down to the ground with all his tremendous force.

After going through several evolutions, one of which had actively increased Okeanos's size and muscle mass, his physical strength had peaked through the roof.

Hat Trick shot downwards as a human projectile, a trail of shockwaves marking out his painful descent as he crashed into the ground below. He broke through the huge ad board, splitting it in half in a shower of severed, sparking wires and metal frame before gouging out a sizable crater into the concrete below.

Hat Trick coughed up spit and blood and air from getting his back shoved through several meters of solid concrete mass, but he was still an A rank hero. Hat Trick might not have been as tough as Seismic, but he could still easily survive a throw like that.

The attack had mostly just knocked the wind out of him, stunning him.

"Follow that up," said Aldrich. "Show me that punch of yours you were so proud of. Make it hurt."

Okeanos nodded, and as he fell towards Hat Trick, cocked back a fist, and the biomechanical piston structure in his forearms locked in, the twin bands of green and blue lined across the shell glowing halfway. It was a half-charged punch as Aldrich did not want Okeanos to completely obliterate his surroundings.

Still, when Okeanos let that punch loose right into Hat Trick's chest, the effect was as if an energy bomb had gone off.

Green tinted blue energy poured out of Okeanos's fist with an explosive sound effect. The outburst of ocean wave shaped energy spread all around Okeanos, quickly engulfing him and Hat Trick in an ever growing sphere that ate away at everything it came into contact with.

The sphere reached up to Aldrich, and he just casually took a few steps backwards as his perception stat along with Volantis's truesight let him know exactly how much energy was there.

When the energy from the punch died down, it revealed a deep molten, smoking crater with Okeanos standing at the center and Hat Trick lying down still, a fist shaped indent nailed into his chest.

At the very last moment, Hat Trick had managed activate his Diamond Body power, covering himself in hardy green crystals. However, though these crystals had saved Hat Trick from near death, they had not been enough to keep him from getting knocked out.

The crystals around Hat Trick's upper body were shattered, and his body was limp as his head fell to the side, completely severed from any motor control.

Had Hat Trick been completely prepared from the start, he might have put up a much better, much longer fight with Okeanos, but that would have entailed Hat Trick actually being careful and planning ahead, two things that Aldrich sincerely doubted Hat Trick did much of.

"Now, I know you can't hear me, but I do remember hearing that you were going to quit being a hero and turn to villainy, no?" said Aldrich. "How about I end that promising new career of yours before it even begins?"

"Should I kill?" Okeanos looked over to Aldrich with the eager eyes of a child looking for approval.

Before Aldrich could respond, Seismic put a hand on his shoulder.

'Don't think that's a good idea,' said Seismic. 'I understand killing him. I would too. But Hat Trick is technically still an A rank hero until the AA formally disavows him. Kill him now, and you'd be justified, but parties that stand against you might use this against you.'

'Parties that want to stand against me will stand against me regardless of what excuse they need,' said Aldrich. 'I understand the risks, but another A rank unit to add is too good to pass up. This guarantees that those powers of his won't be wasted like they have been up until now.'

'That's also a valid decision,' said Seismic.

'End him for me,' said Aldrich telepathically to Okeanos.

Okeanos raised his fist again, locking another energy punch in, but at that very moment, Hat Trick's hat, still in his hand, spontaneously disintegrated into blue flecks.

With that final trick, Hat Trick's whole body turned bright blue. Into pure energy.

Okeanos's antennae twitched in confusion as Hat Trick's body almost instantly disappeared, beaming away into the distance far, far away.

"Hm," said Aldrich. "A last resort safety. I didn't think him careful enough to have had one. And it activates even when he's unconscious, meaning most likely, he isn't choosing a specific location to beam himself to, but has a pre-determined safe space where he's programmed his power to send him to."

"Considering the fact that he's unconscious, if you searched hard enough, you might be able to find him," said Seismic. "He won't be moving anytime soon."

"There's no guarantee I would find him," said Aldrich. "And no guarantee on how long it would take either." He sighed. "As much as I hate to have loose ends, this very well may be one of my first ones. I have too much on hand to do here."

"You do?" said Seismic. "I imagine the variants are nearly all routed. Dead or pushed back to the water by now. There's no more fighting."

Aldrich confirmed Seismic's words by linking his sight with the Grave Wards that still had a bird's eye view of the battlefield. From there, he could see that Seismic was right: the fighting was recently finished. There were no more fishmen left on land.

Seismic's battle instincts were insanely sharp. The old hero might not have had any sense in how to really make good people connections or maintain a good image, but when it came to fighting, he truly was like a wild beast: it was like his entire mind and being was just crafted for it.

In that sense, Seismic was quite similar to Valera.

Notably, a good amount of fishmen had escaped back to the ocean, preventing Aldrich from reaching his level up, but that was not too important. He had plenty more chances to level up later.

"The fighting's over," said Aldrich. "But this is just the beginning. I have to deal with the world now."

The fighting was just a prelude to the plans that Aldrich envisioned for himself. And this next stage involved putting himself in in perhaps the greatest risk he had ever done so to date.

Aldrich put a hand to his ear, and Volantis activated his earpiece.

"Fisk. Spybird. Just confirming, but neither of you have heard any news about the AA or Panopticon sending forces here to question me or assess the city yet, right?" said Aldrich.

"Nah, not yet, but I'll tell you right now that the stream's views mega blew up towards the end. Like, millions on millions of views level. Damn, if we were monetized, we would've made a decent buck," said Fisk.

"Non hero sanctioned violent activity makes no money on stream, friend," said Spybird. "But dah, as for your question, no news. News, though, right now, is strangely quiet on you. I would think with all you do here, all the views on that stream, the news would have something by now."

"Silence is an answer of its own," said Aldrich. He knew that if there was nothing on the media about him even now, that meant that time was ticking... "Get Casimir on the line now."

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Chapter 162: Last Stage Planning

Got it, boss." Fisk's voice echoed through Aldrich's ear, as laid back as ever in tone. Aldrich did not mind Fisk's attitude, though, even if it was the polar opposite to his own stern seriousness. As long as Fisk got the work he needed to done.

Within a few seconds, and Casimir's smooth talking voice was on the line as ordered.

"Now that was a spectacular finale, I must say, Mr. Vane," said Casimir. "I haven't seen anything quite like it, and let me tell you now that I've seen quite a few things in my tenure as a Connector for the underworld."

"I appreciate the compliments, but now's not the time," said Aldrich. "I want you to get ready to initiate your Cinder Protocol."

"There was once a time that even thinking about that protocol would have wrenched my heart, but considering the sorry state the Red Circle is already in, I suppose there isn't much left to burn down," said Casimir. "It will be done when you so desire. At a moment's notice, the Red Circle will be reduced to nothing but cinders within a meager hour."

Aldrich and Casimir had exchanged quite a few conversations in the planning it took to set up the party that led to Blackwater's demise, and during that time, Casimir had acquainted Aldrich deeply with what he did, who he knew, and what he was capable of.

Like any smart man that held onto blackmail and criminal contraband, Casimir had an easy self-destruct switch to make sure everything sensitive in the Red Circle's vaults went down in flames. Normally, the Cinder Protocol was something Casimir would have had automatically initiated in the event of his death or when the Red Circle faced unstoppable intrusion.

In any case, it would have been a last resort. Something to symbolize the end of it all.

Now, instead, the Cinder Protocol was being used to burn everything down to start something new from the ashes.

Had Casimir been given more time to wax and wane about this decision, he probably would have remarked on the philosophical beauty of such an action, but time was unfortunately too tense.

"How much of your contraband do you think you've managed to salvage?" said Aldrich.

"Hmm. It is difficult to place a numerical value on finer, less tangible products like blackmail, but I should say around seventy percent of my collection is loaded out into the cargo trucks we use for drug smuggling," said Casimir. "Fortunately, you gave me good advance notice to make this exit, though I should say a variant disaster was perhaps one of the variables I least expected would spur it on.

But whether I make my leave now due to the threat of villains and mercenary gunfire or variant teeth and claws makes no difference in the end, I suppose."

Originally, Aldrich had wanted Casimir to make an exit plan because once Aldrich finished slaughtering Blackwater, it was inevitable that the entire criminal underworld would unite against Casimir.

At that point, Casimir needed to lay low and escape for some time until Aldrich established himself better.

Though, as Casimir pointed out, it was a variant attack in the end that forced him out. And, all things considered, this was actually quite fortunate. An attack like this would prevent the underworld from checking in on Casimir until the situation in the city was sorted out.

In fact, to villains looking into Haven from the outside, it was hard to tell whether Casimir and the Red Circle had even survived the variant attack, especially if they came in later to check and saw that it had all been burned down.

The variant attack thus gave Casimir cover to work with.

"Good," said Aldrich. "We'll be working with contraband quite a bit soon. Your contacts in the Wastelands – are they still active?"

"Mr. Vane, I assure you, there will be no issues in our grand escape tonight," said Casimir. "You need not worry so much about so many little issues – stress kills men more than any bullet or blade. I have handled everything on my end accordingly."

"You're right. I just have a tendency to want to micromanage things," said Aldrich. "What I needed to confirm the most was your transport space. I know you need trucks for your contraband, equipment, and your own personnel. But I need you to free up space to take in a couple of my people. I would say space for around thirty should be enough."

"There will be no issues with that," said Casimir. "It is unfortunate, but the loss of so many of my dear staff means that there is more than enough space." Casimir sighed. "Mr. Vane, I do not know what it is about you, but I believe in your judgement and vision. I simply hope that the blood of my staff was not simply cast away into the wind."

"I don't spill blood without a reason. Whether it is the blood of my enemies or the blood of those in my service," said Aldrich. "That blood will always mean something. It will always build into something bigger."

I'm going to send select personnel under me to your location at the mega complex. Once they get there, start moving, and start moving fast. Get out of the city and into Wasteland territory where it'll be hard to track you.

I'll signal you to initiate the Cinder Protocol when I can, but in the case that I can't for some reason, just start it when you reach outside the city walls."

"Understood, Mr. Vane," said Casimir. "I suppose, then, that this may be our last communication for some time?"

"Most likely," said Aldrich. "You were an incredible help, Casimir. I'll see you soon."

"I am most honored," said Casimir. "And I wish you only the best of luck dealing with the AA and their positively revolting pettiness."

With that, Casimir's voice cut off. Fisk and Spybird did not return on the line either, for they were now getting ready to pack up and move out of the city.

Aldrich then began communications with Portal Girl.

'Portal Girl,' said Aldrich as he put a hand to the side of his helmed head.

'Yes, sir?' came Portal Girl's alert voice.

'I'm going to gather all my forces back to the Deildeghast line. Once everyone's grouped there, I want you to start protaling them back towards the Red Circle,' said Aldrich. 'Once you've gotten all my forces there, you should regroup with Casimir at the mega complex.'

'Roger that!' said Portal Girl enthusiastically.

Aldrich switched his telepathy now to Ace, the de facto leader of Blackwater's A class as its rank 3.

'Ace, do you read me?' said Aldrich.

'Yeah, I got you,' said Ace. 'If it's about fighting, I don't see anything to rip apart anymore.'

'The fighting's done,' said Aldrich. 'Fly Damian out to the outer battle site where the flying heroes went. You'll find variants under my control there. Get Damian to move the variants back to the Deildeghast line.'

Once you're back at the line, I need you to group your class and take Portal Girl's portals back into the city. Once you get close enough, go ahead and convene with Casimir at the Red Circle.'

'Sounds easy enough,' said Ace as he got to work.

Now then, there was finally just one more person Aldrich needed to talk to.

'Valera, are you there?' said Aldrich mentally.

'For you, my dear master, always,' said Valera.

'Have Crow drop off the Blackwater students with Casimir. Then, head to the Red Circle,' said Aldrich.

'Ah, is it time already?' Sadness welled up in Valera's voice.

The reason why Aldrich sent all his troops back to the Red Circle was to transport them to the Nexus. At the Red Circle, there was still a Sign marker to access the Nexus, and there, all of his troops would be completely safe and isolated.

When the AA, Panopticon, and government inevitably descended on Aldrich, there was no doubt that they would try to analyze and capture Aldrich's units whether through force or negotiation. He wanted to remove that possibility from them entirely.

Aldrich could not reliably look after an entire army of units out in the open, especially the larger and more monstrous ones, so he needed to send them away for now, and what better place than the Nexus?

Soon enough, Aldrich himself would also enter the Nexus, and he needed troops there to support him as he accessed the Trial Quests his many level ups should have unlocked.

And unfortunately for Valera, she was among the troops that Aldrich wanted to enter the Nexus. Mostly because when it came to facing threats from Elden World, Aldrich knew he could not rely on anyone better than Valera.

'It's time,' said Aldrich. 'I wanted to give you a more proper goodbye, but taking care of Hat Trick took more time than expected.'

'That accursed mortal...if my eyes land upon him one more time, I swear that I will tear his spine from his cowardly back,' said Valera with venom, though with a sigh, that faded away back to sadness again. 'Will you be gone long, master?'

'Not if I can help it,' said Aldrich. 'I'll be in the Nexus soon, don't worry.. I hate the thought of incomplete quests there anyway.'

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Chapter 163: Superior Halo

Valera sighed through the telepathic link. 'I know. Ever the one to never leave a quest incomplete, regardless of whether they hail from the lowliest of commoner or the greatest of gods. I suppose, though, that is yet another thing I do like about you.

A one track mind that finds goals, seeks them out, and achieves them with no room for distraction. When I first met you, my master, and my purpose so very lost, it was your determination that I used to anchor myself to.'

'Once I get things settled here, I look forward to clearing out those quests in the Nexus with you,' said Aldrich. 'It'll be just like old times, won't it?'

Except this time, for Aldrich at least, it would be for real. Valera had lived all the quest and adventures she had gone through with Aldrich. They were a deeply personal part of her being and cherished memories that defined her character now.

But to Aldrich, all that had been a game.

Now, though, it would all be real, and he looked forward to it. Who knew that the game that had once been his escape, his hideaway from a world that tried its best to crush him under its heel, would turn into something that changed his life like this?

'Like old times, yes,' said Valera. 'I would have wanted to stay with you a little longer, I always do, but I suppose promises of good times together brutalizing our foes in quests will have to do.

...'

A pause. Aldrich waited, having a feeling that Valera still wanted to say something.

'Master? About that time in the Red Circle...no, never mind,' said Valera. 'I should know better than to distract you any further. I will await you in the Nexus, tending to your Legion with all the care I can give them.

I know I do not have to say this to you, but I will still say it, just because it makes my heart ache a little less: please stay safe, my master, for I would not know what to do without you. I would sooner tear this strange new world down into nothing but bare wreckage than bear the thought of walking it without you.'

'Nonsense,' said Aldrich. 'We'll clear the Trial quests together. And we'll take over this world together too.'

'Together...', Valera repeated the word, savoring it on her tongue. 'Understood, master. I shall ensure that all our forces make it to the Nexus without harm. Until then-'

'Until then,' repeated Aldrich, and their communication ended.

Aldrich took a moment for himself to gather his own thoughts about Valera. He knew what she wanted to ask. She wanted to ask what his feelings for her were. After all, he did promise to give her an answer.

What was his answer going to be? He had not thought about it much, admittedly, and that was not only because he had been so busy this fighting and managing his units and whatnot. It was because, to be honest, he did not know what his answer was.

At first, it seemed so obvious. Here was Valera, a beautiful woman fiercely devoted to him, who believed him her world and more. Who would not say yes to that? Who would

pass up a chance like that? If Adam had been in Aldrich's place, he knew that simpleminded guy would have said yes a million times over.

But it was precisely because Aldrich could feel so much love from her that he did not know what to do.

Throughout his entire life, the only people he had loved were his parents, and even that had been torn from him. Something warm like love was foreign, almost alien, to him now. He had no idea whether he could feel love or give it properly.

Aldrich did not like to admit it, but he was afraid. He was never afraid of fighting, of facing monstrous variants or staring down the hateful eyes of powerful Alters that wanted nothing more than to reduce him into a bloody smear on the pavement.

Fighting and struggling and surviving – Aldrich had never felt fear from all that.

But Aldrich was afraid now.

Afraid that he did not have it within him, within that broken void carved into him from the horrors of his life, to give Valera the love she deserved. To give her just as much as she gave him. He just did not know whether he was capable, and he did not know whether he wanted to find out.

"I don't like the sight of that," said Seismic as he snapped Aldrich out of his thoughts.

"What is it?" Aldrich turned to Seismic, seeing the older man look up into the sky. There, in the distance, he could see that several Panopticon Bugs had formed into clusters that blinked brightly with green light.

"Bright green. That's a Clear Signal," said Aldrich.

Once Panopticon drone fleet responses came and finished what they were assigned to do, which was usually wiping out variant threats, they formed green signal lights to allow civilians some peace of mind and also to guide heroes for post battle operations like tending and evacuating the wounded, repairing critical infrastructure, clearing corpses, and so on and so forth.

There were other, differently colored signals for things like asking for reinforcements, abandoning an area, detection of poisons, etcetera.

"You're surprisingly knowledgeable about how the AA works," said Seismic.

"I did my research. But my knowledge isn't absolute," said Aldrich. "If you know something, tell me."

Seismic nodded as he pointed at the drone clusters forming the signals. "The Clear Signal is a good sign. But it's their arrangement I don't like."

Aldrich observed as the blinking green lights that the Bugs formed arranged into a discernable shape. "A ring?"

"A halo. Superior Halo," said Seismic.

"..." Aldrich look at the ring-shaped arrangement of drone clusters, at how their blinking green shapes marked out a halo that phased in and out of visibility.

What a Superior Halo indicated was the incoming appearance of a S class hero. Aldrich had seen it on the news, in videos. There was nobody that had not. It was a symbol synonymous with humanity's might. Something that promised that whatever threat was present, it was going to go away soon.

Even the reason that the halo was green, normally a color for safety, was to indicate that regardless of whether there was an active threat or not, an S rank hero would guarantee the dawning of safety.

In the background of the sky, Aldrich's storm moved, its haunting green glow brightly passing over the Superior Halo as it too made its way towards the Red Circle.

"You don't seem too surprised," said Seismic.

"I knew they would send heroes here," said Aldrich. "Heroes to take me and my forces into custody."

"You're prepared for that."

"I am. What I did not expect was that they would send a S-rank hero here," said Aldrich. "The fighting is over. They shouldn't be expecting any threats from variants, or at the very least, not anything that warrants that level of firepower."

"Pretty..." Okeanos muttered as he looked up at the sky, his rainbow eyes staring right at the halo.

Aldrich looked to Okeanos, then at Seismic. "Which means they're expecting a threat from me. From my forces."

"Yes," said Seismic simply.

"A threat worthy of a S rank hero, then, is it?" Aldrich, underneath his helm, smiled. "I'm quite flattered, to be honest. But I'm not in the mood for a fight tonight. Okeanos-,"

"Yes?" said Okeanos as his antennae perked up.

Aldrich pointed away from the Superior Halo, towards the southern skies where Crow's midnight black feathered figure moved through the air.

"Follow Crow," said Aldrich. "If you lose track of your directions, Valera will guide you."

"I leave you...so soon?" said Okeanos.

"I won't be gone long," said Aldrich. "Now go."

Okeanos nodded and sprinted off, smoking hot skid marks followed by a strong breeze from his high-speed movement. Aldrich was now nearly fully without protection. He had sent off most of his variants and larger units into the Nexus as the AA could reliably scan for strong variant signatures or giant beings. And he had sent off his humanoid units with Casimir.

As Aldrich was right now, he was almost at the weakest he could be. A Legion Necromancer without his legion.

Though his personal strength was nothing to scoff at, especially now that he had the [Frosthallowed War Scythe] as part of his gear, he could not come close to fighting a S class hero, especially if their powers were geared for combat.

But Aldrich did not intend to fight. He wanted to negotiate. And, as for as the AA and the rest of the world was concerned, they had no way of knowing where Aldrich's forces would be once they were in the Nexus. They had no idea whether he had a power to conceal them, whether he could summon them at will, or whether they were flat out gone.

And that uncertainty would make them cautious. It would make them afraid of the damage he could do if they wronged him. It would make them listen to him.

In other words, this was not only a way to make sure that none of his forces were harmed, but it was also a massive bluff.

"You sent the Locus away," said Seismic. "What about me?"

"People know who you are. They'll give weight to your words. I'll trust you'll use them to back me," said Aldrich. "Now come with me. We're heading to the shelters."

"Shelters?" asked Seismic. "For what purpose?"

Aldrich pointed at the Superior Halo.. "To make it harder for them to get rid of me."

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Chapter 164 - Standing By Haven

Aldrich and Seismic made their way to the nearest shelter where most of the crowd had fled due to Hat Tricks ridiculous manchild tantrum. The shelters were underground constructs that were essentially scaled down versions of the Panopticon Bunker that the Duds in the Southside holed themselves up in.

They were easy to find. Building tops marked with blinking white signal lights indicated the streets where they lay under, the thick plating of their round vault doors showing in the middle of the street.

Aldrich stood before the vault doors, waiting for them to open. Seismic hunched over a streetlight pole, punching his large fingers almost comically into a tiny control pad that manned entry into the shelters. Normally, people could just scan their way in via an Eye Phone app, but many heroes like Seismic could not easily carry around phones without them breaking, so they had to do things manually.

Seismic carefully punched in a seven-digit code to authorize himself and to open the vault doors.

Aldrich watched the doors rumble as they began to slide apart with a mechanical whir. While watching the doors, he reflected on how these shelters were used and who they were for.

Walled cities were designed with safety against variants in mind, and Panopticon building regulations stated that there be adequate shelter space for at minimum 50% of a city's total population to reside in. Every couple of streets had a shelter constructed underneath as a result.

An average person's gut reaction might wonder: why not a higher percentage? But 50% more than covered the Alter

Even if the average Alter did not have the multiple years of training that proper heroes and support did, they still had to by law register for a PRL (Power Regulation License) which, depending on its type and class, gave a citizen a set amount of authority with which to use their powers.

The higher the class of a PRL, the more freely a citizen could use their powers, but this came with additional required training to certify that they were capable of responsibly using their abilities.

Hero Licenses were considered the highest end of PRLs, requiring at the very minimum four years of dedicated training and two years of in field experience to obtain, but even the weakest of Alters who had a class i combat PRL, the lowest there was, still had to go through six months of training on how to use their abilities.

As a result, there were very few Alters that were truly useless in a war effort. That made the shelters mostly spaces for the young, elderly, or injured. Individuals whose abilities were in some way either compromised or underdeveloped.

Coincidentally, that was why most of the people in the crowd that Aldrich had seen was comprised of these exact demographics. The exact type of demographic that needed protection and drummed up public sympathy.

The perfect people for Aldrich to surround himself with. No hero, not even a S ranker, would want to get caught trying to harass Aldrich while he was watching over the sick and young and elderly. That was one downside of an S ranker coming here.

They might have been powerful, but simply by virtue of that power, they had fame, and with fame, they lost the ability to act without thinking about their precious image.

Time on," said Aldrich as he waved over Seismic when the doors were fully open. Below, they led down to a steely grey, empty containment chamber where newcomers could get disinfected and inspected before passing through to the main body of the shelter itself.

If a variant managed to claw their way through the doors, then the containment chamber also doubled as a trap room that had its own weapons to deal with intruders or just seal them off completely.

"One thing," said Seismic.

"Hrn?"

"How do you want me to deal with them?"

"The people down there?" Aldrich motioned to the bunker.

Seismic shook his head. He pointed up. "Up there. When they get here. They'll take me too. They'll question me. What do you want me to do?"

"Cold silence and five-word sentence answers have gotten you through multiple collateral damage disasters," said Aldrich. "I figure they'll get you through this, too."

Seismic just stared at Aldrich. Though the older hero's expression remained still, it was evident he was a little hurt by Aldrich mentioning his past incidents. It was a soft spot that the usually stoic hero had, probably because he deeply regretted the person he used to be.

"My apologies," said Aldrich. "If you want a more detailed answer, then here: you have Hammerhead Industries sponsoring you. You're their greatest asset as a well-known A ranker, even with all your past incidents. Because people might not admit it, but they

respect power, even if they don't like where it comes from or how it's used. Power is a form of popularity of its own.

Hammerhead Industries will do whatever they can to get you in the clear, and they may not be in the Council of Fortune, but they're a big enough corp to take care of you

That's what I mean by cold silence. You put it out, and your corp fills in the rest to bail you out. Do the same here, and I'll clear my own name soon."

"Understood," said Seismic as he hopped down into the containment room. Aldrich followed. Not a moment passed after the two touched down than did the vault doors above close with a heavy, groaning thud.

A green light shone throughout the room with a buzz, indicating that Seismic and Aldrich were cleared to move on. A heavily armored door on the other side of the room slid open, and after passing through a hallway, they stepped into the surprisingly spacious innards of the shelter's main body.

Here, the crowd from before had gathered together, those that could stand standing at attention in respect for Aldrich and Seismic.

"Is it over?" said the older former policeman that had thanked Aldrich for saving the city. The rest of the people there, approximately half children and half injured and elderly, peered at Aldrich and Seismic warily, all their eyes tired, too tired to be dealing with a mad hero after seeing their entire city get picked apart by variants.

"It's over," said Aldrich, and a visible wave of relief washed over everyone.

"Thank god," said the ex-police with a sigh. "World's going to hell, I tell you. Variants baring their fangs at us and heroes going mad - nothing could be worse."

"A situation can always get worse," said Aldrich, and the crowd murmured in panic among themselves. He reflected that even though he could lead fighters, maybe he was not the best person to be comforting a crowd of civilians. "But the situation outside is stable. Hat Tricks been taken care of, and the fighting's over."

Aldrich spoke over the murmurs, and the crowd settled back into order.

"You are right, though," said the former policeman. "Things CAN get worse. I don't know what no, what most of us

will be doing after this. Haven - the place we've called home for so long, the pretty little port city that I'd served for thirty years - it's gone now.

Damn near nothing's left, and I for sure know I don't have any credits lying around to make a big move."

"What about variant disaster relief, sir? asked an injured, younger policeman whose leg was held in a cast while bloody bandages wrapped around a clawed-out eye.

"Disaster relief? Son, you've got a nice sense of humor," chuckled the older policeman. "You'll see more rat shit on the streets than credits in a tier 3 city's relief fund. And those slimy politicians have been sucking those funds dry and using em' to launder their dirty money.

Hell, with how badly those funds have been getting run over roughshod, I doubt even you young ones could start a new life somewhere else."

"So then, what will you all do? said Aldrich.

A silence hung in the room for a few seconds. The former policeman spoke out first. "I don't know. Got some grandkids down south. Guess I'll have to leech off of them and watch them resent me until the day I croak"

"As things are now, I guess I'll have to move. I don't have the credits...but what's left here except for rubble and bodies?" said the younger policeman.

"Why are all of you so sad? Dad said that once the fighting's over, the heroes will build everything back again!" said a young boy around the age of nine. Old enough to try to think for himself but not old enough to know how the world truly

WaS.

The boy turned hopefully to Seismic. "Isn't that right, Seismic? You're sponsored by Hammerhead, right? He's got all those giant machines that make tall buildings, right? He can fix everything, right?"

..." Seismic looked down at the boy with a frown - a rare sign of emotion - but remained silent for the answer was obvious, albeit bleak: Hammerhead Industries would not bother wasting money rebuilding Haven if there was no profit to be had in it.

"Kid, don't pressure him. Come on, get back here and tell you where I last saw your dad," said an injured hero as she limped forward, took the boy's hand, and led him away.

As Aldrich saw the child's back fade away into the crowd, he spoke out again. "This city's been abandoned enough. It's about time someone stood by it."

"What do you mean? said the older policeman.

"I'm going to stay here," said Aldrich "And I'm going to rebuild this city...

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Chapter 165 - Rebuilding

"Rebuild this city? Haven?" said the ex-policeman. He rubbed his ear. "I think it might be time for a hearing aid. Everyone else heard him, right? He wants to build up Haven again?"

'Yeah, that's what he said,' said the younger policeman.

'You have my thanks for saving us and the city,' said the retired policeman. "But up there, the reality is that there is no more city. No more Haven."

"There's still enough of it for me to work with," said Aldrich. 'You might see nothing but waterlogged rubble and broken streets, but I still see Haven. A place you all can still call home if you're willing to stay here and help me with it.'

Silence descended upon the crowd as they looked at each other. Aldrich had just issued a call to action, asking those willing to stay and help rebuild if they wanted. But even if most of the people here had called Haven home for most of their lives, the image of the city above an desolate and destroyed was still seared into their minds.

And that image made them hesitant. Aldrich had an idea of what they were thinking. They probably thought that as individuals, especially with their injuries, what could they possibly do to help in rebuilding an entire city? It was delusional.

"I can help," said one of the injured policemen. She sat with her back against a steely grey wall as she chewed on a radon bar. "My

power's bumed out, but once it comes back online, I can haul ass and carry a few bricks here and them. ICs not like I have the credits to really make a move, either."

"We can get reassigned to a different department in another city," interjected another policeman. "I mean, are you seriously considering this? Building up a whole city brick by brick?"

"Lucky you," responded a young teenager lacking an arm. He sat cross legged on the ground with a dejected stare aimed down at a necklace in his hand. 'You get to run from all this and leave it behind. 'Reassigned'. What a nice word.

Wish that meant anything to me. My parents are dead. My house is gone. I have nothing." He balled his hand over the necklace in a tight fist. "Nothing but this wreck of a place that I used to call a home. Either I try to build it back up, or I die in the gutters of some city I don't even know."

"Reassigned my ass. They'll only reassign the useful ones. I sure as hell can't afford the cybernefics to get new legs, and without that, I'll be cut from the fume," said another injured policeman, this one talking out loud while lying down from a stretcher. Bloody

bandages were wrapped around two stumps that once held his legs. "And let's be real, most of you that are fine are still lazy bums that relied on the walls and heroes to fight the variants back and the villains to regulate their own crime.

You aren't anything special. Higher tier cities aren't going to take low level cops like you to feed on the taxpayer dime."

Despite his horrific injuries, the policeman looked at his stump legs and smiled. "So I'm down to help build Haven again. Though, gotta say, I'll need a bit of a leg up to be really useful."

A couple of his friends nearby him smiled and shook their heads at the bad pm, but they agreed. "We grew up here, and we'd like to stay

He stared at Aldrich. "I know you have power, but nobody knows you, sir. Where are your funds? Your support? Don't be mistaken, I'd like for you to build this place up, I really would, but I just want to know how."

"Call it a leap of faith," said Aldrich.

"A leap of faith "The older man sighed. "When I was younger, I was a pretty big gambler. Wife made a racket about it every weekend when she was still alive, bless her heart. But I realized that gambling almost never pays off."

"You're right, this is a gamble," said Aldrich. "But let me minimize the risk for you all. For at least two weeks, the government along with the Panopilcon will keep this city supplied while they search for potential survivors, cleanup corpses, assess damages, and start the relocation process for confirmed survivors.

During that time, I'm going to negotiate to get the support I need to rebuild this city. If I can't, then you all can go on living your lives as if I had never existed. I won't ask you all to stay beyond your means or out of the bounds of reason. If you want to leave, you can leave anytime you want.

But most of you know that once you get relocated, your life will be over. Very few of you will be able to survive in a new city with your injuries, paying for treatments and cybernetics while trying to find work. You'll get desperate and want loans, but no bank will lend to people with no prospects like you.

You'll turn to criminals, and at that point, you might as well sign your lives away.

But that's for those of you that are lucky. Most likely, the vast majority of you will waste away in the slums once whatever pittance you get from the government wastes away in a month or two."

The crowd grew silent as they looked at each other, knowing deep down that Aldrich was right. They might have survived, but their lives as they knew it were over.

"In summary, most of you are in a position where you have to bet all in," said Aldrich. "Because otherwise, you have nothing. So go all in on me. Trust in your hand, in me, to payoff."

Aldrich's intentions sounded noble, and they were, but his words had layers to them. He showed himself now as someone dedicated to

rebuilding Haven, the city that most of the people here had called home for most of their lives, and like that, he would gain their trust.

Because if Aldrich was going to be a Sentinel, he needed both territory and people. Without a good sum of people to fiercely support him, his case for becoming a Sentinel became weaker. Granted, Aldrich did not think these people were absolutely necessary for his case, but any amount of help mattered.

In his mind, Aldrich did not particularly care whether these people were actually of any real use or not in rebuilding the city. All he wanted for them to do was think about staying because the more people stayed, the greater number of voices there would be to support Aldrich.

Plus, Aldrich could help them out as well in return. It was a low risk deal where everyone won out with in the end if things paid off.

The older policeman shook his head and smiled. "You got a way with words, Ell tell you that. Had you been my casino buddy back in the day, I'd probably never have gotten out I'll bet on you."

"Me too."

"Same here. Don't have anything else going for me." "All in over here as well."

Aldrich heard and saw in facial expressions that most of the crowd agreed. The only ones that did not were those that probably felt it safer to move to another city because they probably had the means to. Most of the injured heroes there fell into this category because the AA gave them far more privileges in moving out and finding new work.

Aldrich did not care about them. If they wanted to leave, then they could. They became completely insignificant in his eyes once they decided to leave, for they had no real use for him.

As for the others that did express intent to stay-

Aldrich sat down comfortably, drawing everyone's attention back to him.

"Didn't expect you of all people to get tired," said the older policeman with a smile. "But I bet you've got real important things to do than sitting down here with us."

"Not really," said Aldrich. "I want to talk to all of you that want to stay. Get to know you and your names and your stories, because if things work out, well all be working together."

Like that Aldrich spent the next near hour talking with the people there, getting to know them as promised. He did not know exactly how to comfort them when they talked to him about their losses and their fears for a very uncertain future, but he figured he would start to try.

Aldrich had never been a particularly empathetic person and becoming a Lich had dampened his empathy even more.

Seismic helped him, though, sitting beside Aldrich and taking over when conversations got too sentimental for Aldrich to know how to navigate well. Despite Seismic's craggy exterior, he still knew how to connect with people and guide them through their losses even with minimal words.

One thing that Aldrich noted was that it was not really the words themselves that mattered as much. His generic condolences of 'I'm sorry for your loss' and 'I'll get better' and so on were not that different from what Seismic said.

It was in the way that Seismic said things that made a difference. His words felt closer, more heartfelt. Aldrich did not know yet how to talk like that, but he would ask Seismic later how it was done.

Once around forty minutes passed, the talks were cut short as a firm voice projected throughout speakers within the bunker.

"Seismic, Vigilante, I need to ask both of you exit the shelter," said the voice. "The doors will open in five seconds, and I want both of you to come up here peacefully...."

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Chapter 166 - S Rank Encounter

Aldrich and Seismic instantly looked at each other when they heard that voice. Seismic gave Aldrich a wary look, one of warning as if to tell him to be careful.

In contrast, the rest of the crowd had a bit more energetic reaction. The whole crowd perked their heads up in immediate recognition of that voice. Surprised exclamations broke out.

"Holy shit is that Solomon Solar!?" "I saw the Halo before, but they went ahead and sent the rank IP" "We get to see the rank a! Damn, I never thought I'd be lucky enough!" Aldrich observed the reactions from the crowd closely.

Solomon Solar. The current rank a mi the Superboard Top 100, the leaderboard that ranked heroes based off of AP (Achievement Points) earned and social media popularity.

Although the leaderboard did factor in strength, and yes, the top of the Superboard were always going to be at least somewhat strong as a given rule, it was not a definite indicator of raw power.

All the Superboard Top 100 meant was that Solomon Solar was the most popular hero in the country, though undeniably, Solomon Solar was still strong. Aldrich knew that from watching videos of Solomon's fights. From killing his son. And popularity was an even deadlier weapon to use against Aldrich than sheer force right now. Solomon Solar using his popularity to sway the people here against Aldrich would deal a far worse blow than any strong punch.

Was this why they had sent the most popular hero? Aldrich had expected the AA to send a purely combat focused S ranker like Valkyrie or Dark Star over had they been afraid of his powers. Heroes that did not care about getting their image dirty to put down Aldrich if things went wrong.

Had the AA perhaps caught onto what Aldrich wanted to do, then? Aldrich wanted to raise public support against the AA which would, alongside the threat of his undead, force the AA and government to cave into his wants.

If the AA wanted to counter Aldrich, then the best possible person they could have sent was Solomon Solar. Someone both popular and powerful. Yet, Aldrich doubted this. Nobody knew who he was or what he wanted, and he had not shown himself long enough to make any of his goals particularly clear. Regardless, Aldrich would find out. He looked around at the surprised crowd chatting energetically among themselves at the rank a hero's sudden appearance. Had any other S ranker been up there, Aldrich would have gotten these people to go with him, but there was 17a]? 7eall rcignlgi&nrincfiareliNgholnl ghl;TM'g& up now, aver au me ngnongs over. rarer everyone s new, mune° In someone else. "Screw the AA, and screw Solomon. If they're going to jail the vigilante, I'm going to go up there and give them a piece of my mind... 'You're free to come with me,'" said Aldrich. The people that had committed to betting all in on Aldrich preferred him over even Solomon Solar.

And that made sense. There was only so much dazzling celebrity status could do. Solomon Solar had done nothing for these people. Aldrich had done everything. They knew in their hearts who to support, and this realization gave Aldrich the confidence to bring them along.

"Tell Solomon Solar who it was that saved this city, because it most certainly wasn't him," said Aldrich.

With that, Aldrich and Seismic left to the containment room, and the rest of the crowd followed. By leading them out, Aldrich created a buffer zone of people, most of whom supported him, that would protest or be witnesses to any potential mistreatment sent his way.

The downside of being a popular S ranker was that all of Solomon Solar's movements were watched by millions. The people around Aldrich essentially turned into a 'PR shield' that limited how Solomon Solar could act.

Outside, after a platform raised everyone to street level, Aldrich and Seismic stood against Solomon Solar.

Behind Solomon Solar stood a cold, metal bodied squadron of Guardians, battle bots that formed the bulk of a Panopilcon Class 3 Drone Fleet. The Guardians were just as big as Solomon's muscular and tall frame, and each of their futuristic metallic form and green dot eyes exuded an intimidating aura that made the class 5 Bugs seem like little toys in comparison.

In contrast, behind Aldrich were the broken yet still warm and living and breathing bodies of Haven's citizens.

There were countless news drones in the sky, shining down spotlights, snapping pictures, and recording everything that happened.

"Thank you for coming up here without making a fuss," said Solomon Solar with a wide, perfectly white smile that shone under a constant golden glow that emanated from all around his body. His hands rested at his tree trunk of a waist in a heroic pose. "I'm glad to see that this city is safe after we had thought it lost.

For that, I wanted to thank you, vigilante. You too, Seismic." Solomon waved his blue gloved hand over to the crowd behind Aldrich. "And all of you as well! Everyone here that fought and stood strong—all of you are heroes!"

"There would have been even more of us if you had come sooner, when there were actually variants tearing women and children from their homes on these very streets," said Aldrich

Solomon cast his gaze down with somber expression. "I know. And believe me, my friend, I tried. But the attack in Neo-York was fierce, even worse than the one here, and I had my hands tied... He balled up a fist and made a pained expression. "Thinking about the many lives I can't save because I can't be everywhere at once is a thought that crosses my mind every single day.

All I can do is pray that you can forgive me. That the dead I couldn't save knows how much I grieve for them."

Aldrich tried to analyze Solomon's expressions, but he found that it was surprisingly difficult. He knew that Solomon Solar was not clean considering Seth Solar's background and enrollment in Blackwater.

But had Aldrich not known this fact, it would have been impossible to determine whether Solomon was putting up an act or not.

Solomon's expression and words sounded so genuine that the crowd behind Aldrich remained silent. They did not support Solomon, that was for sure, but even getting them to not actively hate him was a fairly impressive feat in of itself.

Aldrich would have to force Solomon to make a misstep. 'Tell me, rank I, what are you here for? It's not to help the people here, or otherwise you wouldn't have brought so much firepower [mowing the fighting was over.

Thoughts and prayers only count for so much. I would have thought instead of bringing guns and steel, you would have brought supplies. At least those save people."

'Vigilante, would you care to tell me your name? I would hate to by just calling you 'vigilante' when I know you've done so much good already," said Solomon.

"Thanatos," replied Aldrich.

"Then, Thanatos," said Solomon with a nod. "You don't have to worry." He floated in the air to speak to everybody, and midair, he did look dazzling in a conventionally heroic way. He had flowing golden locks of hair that shone like the sun while his powerful body and hearty smile exuded an aura of both strength and safety. "All you citizens of Haven, I have an announcement for you! I know how much you all have lost and how deeply that loss hurts! I know that the city around you, the city you once called home, is in ruins!.

Solomon shook his head sadly. "I wasn't here to help when the fighting was going on, but that doesn't mean I can't help now! I will have my Sunshine Foundation personally help fund the restoration of Haven! I'll work with the AA to make sure all of you get the help you deserve!

None of you will have to move to start a new life in a strange new place. I know this isn't much, but at the very least, I know this is the right thing to do for you!"

Solomon smiled brightly at everyone, his golden aura shining a bit brighter just enough to strategically highlight his words.

An interesting play, thought Aldrich. A fairly good one.

By promising to restore the city, Solomon took away one of the bigger reasons for Haven's citizens to support him. This did not one hundred percent confirm Aldrich's suspicions that Solomon had been intentionally sent to curb Aldrich's influence, but it made it likely enough that Aldrich had to act as if it was true.

That meant that right now, Aldrich and Solomon were engaged directly in a fight. Not a fight of powers, but a fight of words. Of wits.

Aldrich looked up at Solomon's smile staring down, and even now, he could not tell whether that smile was honestly grateful or triumphant. But that did not matter at this point.

Solomon was Aldrich's enemy, and no smile would change that, genuine or not..

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Chapter 167: A Deal

Aldrich sensed a shift in the crowd behind him as they started to look up at Solomon, getting sucked into the magnetic charm and personality he had worked to build up over the years. They were not on Solomon's side yet because they likely still resented him in some capacity for not helping Haven, but Solomon navigated this resentment well by showcasing humility. Solomon admitted he could not save everyone, and offering to rebuild Haven with his personal foundation made him seem like someone that truly cared. At the very least, even if Solomon had not won over their hearts, with this move, he managed to get them to see him in a neutral light. But Aldrich had a response for this. If Solomon thought that this was enough to get Aldrich to back down, then the rank 1 hero had sorely underestimated Aldrich.

"Oh, did I hear that right?" said Aldrich. "You want to help Haven? You want to rebuild it?"

"That's right, Thanatos," said Solomon. "Seeing a city as beautiful as Haven laid so low like this just breaks my heart. Most of you don't know, but Haven holds a special place in my heart. It's where I-," "Excellent," said Aldrich, cutting Solomon Solar off from going into some heart wrenching anecdote about some bullshit one off experience he had in Haven. Or perhaps he did have genuine memories in Haven, but memories about making deals with criminal syndicates and Blackwater probably didn't work here. "That's wonderful to hear."

Solomon smiled down at Aldrich with a nod. "It's good to see your heart is in the right place, Thanatos. I appreciate that you want to see this city built back up to its former glory, and I promise you, the Sunshine Foundation will do its very best to make good on my words." "Right, I look forward to working together with you to rebuild Haven," said Aldrich coolly. Solomon paused for the smallest of moments, a moment imperceptible to the average crowdgoer, but a moment that Aldrich did not miss. A slight show of

wealmess. Of surprise. Aldrich pressed on with his own attack Solomon Solar did not expect Aldrich to co-opt the rebuilding effort like that, and by announcing it in public, Solomon was pressured even further to accept Aldrich's 'offer'. "You see, I've promised to the people of Haven here that I would rebuild the city as well," said Aldrich. "I will be honest here, at first, I didn't know if I could make that happen by myself. I knew I could come close with the manpower I had, but with you supporting me, I now know that this project is all but a guaranteed success. The Sunshine Foundation, as far as I'm aware, has done great things around the world, rebuilding broken homes and giving relief to hundreds of thousands. It would be an honor for me to work with the Sunshine Foundation to let the people behind me call this city their home again.

Wouldn't you agree, 'my friend'?" Aldrich put pressure on Solomon now Solomon had not agreed at all to help Aldrich, but since Aldrich had voiced it directly like this, in front of citizens and the news, now Solomon was backed into a corner where he had to support Aldrich.

Solomon stopped levitating and flew downwards, standing close in front of Aldrich.

Aldrich was impressively tall at this point, reaching slightly over two meters, but Solomon Solar was bigger even than that by a fair margin. Standing against each other like this, the stark contrast in image between Solomon Solar and Aldrich stood out.

There was Solomon Solar. A hero through and through. Shining gold and bright like the sun. Costumed and caped in sky blue with a shining sun shaped sigil on his chest. The favorite darling of this country that everybody knew about.

He was the light incarnate. Then there was Aldrich. Armored in black and blood and bona Spikes jutted from his armor, and no fancy sigils or symbols graced his body. The only decorations visible on him were strips of beating red, raw flesh and blood from his living armor. His hands did not end in gloved fingers meant to hold others up, but armored claws designed to shred and tear. Nobody knew who Aldrich. He was a complete and utter unknown.°

He was the darkness. 0 Yet, thought Aldrich, it would be so very difficult to know who it was here that truly stood in the light and who truly stood in the dark Countless flashes burst in an array of little lights from the many media drones circling above, capturing this near cinematic moment. There would be countless headlines about this moment, but what those headlines would read out depended on who held the upper hand coming out of this conversation. Solomon Solar stared at Aldrich in muted surprise for a moment before smiling brightly again. He held out an inviting blue gloved hand for a handshake.

"Then it's a deal," said Solomon Solar. Aldrich shook Solomon's hand, and he felt Solomon grip his hand tightly, almost malforming the metal of his hand. This was either a display of displeasure or a petty way to try and assert dominance over Aldrich. In any case, it was even more wealmess that Aldrich started to see from Solomon.

Though, notably as Aldrich stared at Solomon's face, the hero's smile still seemed incredibly genuine. 'Shall I engage in battle preparations, Armored?' came Volantis's voice. 'The strength of this grip warrants more than a mere friendly gesture.' 'Relax, Volantis,' said Aldrich telepathically. 'Let me handle this.' Aldrich did not expect Solomon to give in easily, though, because from the very start, whatever Aldrich said did not particularly matter much. In Solomon's mind, Aldrich was in a checkmate position from the very start. "But, my friend, I'm sorry to break this to you," said Solomon as he withdrew his hand and shook his head with disappointment. "You're needed in custody. I myself would be honored to work with you, the man that saved Haven, but until you're out of custody, I'm afraid we'll have to put our collaboration on hold.."

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Chapter 168: Hear Me Out

This was why Aldrich was in a checkmate position. Or at the very least, why Solomon Solar thought Aldrich had no way to win.

Even if Solomon was forced to accept Aldrich's deal, he would not have to fulfill any part of it. Because the government could lock Aldrich up for any amount of time, and if he escaped, then they could just slander him as a danger to society that could not be contained.

An inevitable lose-lose situation for Aldrich. If he stayed too long in custody, people forget about him. If he escaped, he turned into a villain that Solomon could just disavow.

"Custody, is it?" said Aldrich. He looked to Solomon Solar, then towards the row of Guardians that carefully observed him, no doubt ready to engage any of their advanced weapons systems at a moment's notice. "That explains all these Guardians.

So, in the end, arresting me and throwing me in a cell somewhere matters more than all of this."

Aldrich motioned to the people behind him, towards the wreckage of the crumbling city all around him.

In response, the people of Haven spoke out.

"The hell? You're arresting him!? For what? For saving us when none of you could be bothered to get off your asses to do the same!?"

"You left us for dead! What right do you have to come here! ?"

Many more cries of protest rung out, aimed right at Solomon Solar, but he did not flinch. He maintained his composure and put on a saddened expression.

"I understand how you feel," said Solomon as his voice rung out with a powerful ring that bid silence from the crowd. "But all of you shouldn't worry.

Vigilantes that show their heroic hearts go into custody as a simple matter of Jaw and procedure, but it isn't prison by any means.

They'll just ask Thanatos here a couple of questions to make sure they know he's a good man, just as we all do, and once that's done, I'm sure he can come back and watch us build this city back better than ever before."

As if on cue, when Solomon Solar ended his sentence, an aircraft carrier descended from above. Its four engines whirred loudly as they forced squalls of wind on the ground, buffeting the crowd backwards.

Media drones zipped out of the way for the sizable carrier as it hovered in the air because it was big enough that its engines could shove the comparatively tiny media drones out of the way.

At the side of the carrier's green painted hull was a logo showing two chains crossed over in a X symbol. The mark of Lockdown, the biggest prison industry corporation in the states and in the world.

Not quite a Megacorporation, but still quite influential, especially in the United States where the prison industry historically had always thrived, even before the Altering.

The carrier opened up, revealing insides marked with black, dark purple tinged light.

"A Null Box, huh. You really did bring out all the stops to take me in," said Aldrich as he recognized the carrier. His voice could project outwards over the din of the roaring propellers and engines from the carrier, ensuring that Solomon Solar heard him.

A Null Box was a special containment cell made to take in Alters at the A rank. It was the highest level of containment that Lockdown could produce, comprised of a sturdy metal cube lined with Null Ore, an exceedingly rare substance located in deadly areas known as 'Null Zones' where absolutely no life could grow.

Null Zones also prevented Alters from using their powers properly, though there were some rare exceptions.

Null Ore replicated that power disruption process, making the Null Box one of the most reliable, albeit forbiddingly expensive ways to transport powerful Alters as trying to mine anything from a Null Zone was incredibly dangerous as most of them were located deep in the Wastelands where natural disasters and variants posed serious threats.

"It's simply a matter of security," said Solomon Solar. He crossed his arms and gave Aldrich a sympathetic look. "I hope you understand, Thanatos. I might know you as a man with a good heart, but the government doesn't.

But I'm sure once they hear how much good you've done, they'll have you out in no time. I'll make sure to support you as much as I can, my friend, and once you get out, I'll be more than happy to start rebuilding with you."

An obvious lie. If Solomon Solar got what he wanted, then Aldrich would never get out of custody.

Solomon Solar banked on the government either never releasing Aldrich, at which point the media could just paint Aldrich as a villain that they had rightfully incarcerated, or they would release him agonizingly slowly, only after they had gotten every ounce of information from Aldrich about his powers and his troops and access to all of them.

Whatever goodwill Aldrich dredged up here among Haven's citizens would get wiped out after a few weeks when the cleanup of Haven's wreckage finished, because by then, everyone that supported Aldrich would be separated and relocated.

And with those people relocated, there would be no unified body to support Aldrich.

"Please vacate the premises for your own safety." The Guardians marched ahead of Solomon and moved towards the crowd, corralling them backwards to give isolate Solomon and Aldrich. The crowd protested, but they could not stand against the Guardians and got pushed back.

One of the Guardians stepped in front of Aldrich and held out a blocky pair of metal cuffs that looked more like gauntlets with how sturdy they were.

Black tinted purple light emanated from within the cuffs, indicating they were also lined with Null Ore.

"Place your arms into these cuffs," said the Guardian in its cold mechanical voice. "Do not resist."

Another Guardian came up to Seismic with the same cuffs.

Aldrich nodded to Seismic, and they both allowed themselves to get locked down. The cuffs locked into place with a pressurized click, tightly wrapping memory structure metal around their arms.

"Citizens of Haven!" Solomon moved past Aldrich once he saw that Aldrich had been cuffed, obviously thinking Aldrich was done at this point, and spoke out to the crowd. "I'll put in my word for Thanatos here. He'll be out to help us soon, I know it!"

Aldrich looked at Solomon. The hero practically ignored him at this point, flying over to the crowd, probably believing he had won. But Solomon's victory was all predicated on the notion that Aldrich would stay in custody with no good way out without painting himself as a villain.

Aldrich would disprove that delusion. And when he did, when he came back, he would have the upper hand to force Solomon's Sunshine Foundation to siphon resources to him. Media coverage was a double edged sword in this regard.

It amplified Solomon's voice, but it also made him beholden to any promises he voiced, especially considering his spotless clean good guy image.

"A- rank hero Seismic, please proceed with me for questioning," said two Guardians as they flanked Seismic, escorting him away.

Two Guardians came by Aldrich's side in the same manner. "Vigilante, please proceed with us to the transport."

"One moment," said Aldrich as he turned around, ignoring the Guardians. He spoke out to Solomon Solar. "Solar! I'll be seeing you in a little over a week. I look forward to working with the Sunshine Foundation then!"

Solomon Solar turned to Aldrich with unblinking eyes and another momentary pause that indicated confusion. It was obvious that Solomon did not know how Aldrich could leave custody after one measly week without forcibly escaping.

The government would try to keep Aldrich kept in custody for as long as possible until they knew they could control him. A week was not enough for that. If they did not think they could control Aldrich, they might even try to terminate him.

"What?" said Aldrich. "You didn't think I was going to miss a chance to work with the Sunshine Foundation, did you? Didn't you say it yourself? That you would do your best to have me out soon? Well, I'll help you out with that. No, I'll even make it easy for you.

I have a hero that wants to sponsor me for a Hero Consideration Hearing. And, if I read the fine print properly, a sponsorship from a B rank hero or above means I'm obligated to that hearing within a week of going into voluntary custody.

I'll clear my name there."

"I'm sorry to say this, Thanatos, but Seismic is also under custody. His sponsorships won't be valid-," began Solomon.

"Not Seismic. I have someone else," said Aldrich. Solomon Solar paused, wondering who was sponsoring Aldrich.

To force a hearing required a hero that was B rank and above, and the only living B ranker in Haven was Rocket Man who was B-, just shy of being able to call for a hearing.

On top of that, Rocket Man was not popular and influential enough to really make waves in the news. Even if Rocket Man could sponsor Aldrich, it was possible the AA could just use technicalities to try and circumvent it.

There were a few other B rankers that had come to this city, but again, they were all at the B- rank.

And if they they had been raised from the dead, then a convincing argument could be made as with Seismic that their minds were compromised.

The only B ranker that had come here with enough popularity behind his name was Minuteman who had a strong following from his dashing good looks and good guy persona. Though, unlike Solomon, Minuteman's persona was not a persona. It was how he really was.

But Minuteman should have been dead as well by all accounts. He had not been a part of the larger battle and the tech disrupting storm had ensured that he could not have contacted the AA at all, meaning he would have been classified as a casualty.

Solomon probably had only received a brief damage report and gotten cocky when he saw Minuteman among the listed casualties.

"Minuteman will sponsor me," explained Aldrich.

"Minuteman is...alive?" said Solomon. "...What a relief! It would have pained me even more to know a good man like him had passed. Did you use your powers to give him a second chance?"

"My powers? No, not at all. He's alive on the merit of his own bravery," said Aldrich. Solomon's question was asked to try and confirm whether Minuteman was 'corrupted'.

If Aldrich had raised Minuteman, then that destroyed Minuteman's credibility. "You know, before this, I didn't know how Minuteman was so popular.

But there's something so inspiring about seeing a real Golden Age hero fight for their principles that I started to understand why he had so many followers.

It's about being genuine. People like to see something real in a world that's getting so fake.

But you know all about that, though, don't you, Solar?"

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