

# **Super Necromancer System #Chapter 169: Imprisoned - Read Super Necromancer System Chapter 169: Imprisoned**

Chapter 169: Imprisoned

Aldrich said those last few words without any hint of threat in them.

The intent was, of course, a threatening one.

At face value, it seemed like Aldrich was telling Solomon Solar that he was one of the few genuine ones out there, but in reality, it was a jab at the fact that Solomon Solar, the golden hero who everyone looked up to, was anything but clean.

Still, Aldrich did not want Solomon to know that Aldrich knew this. That was why he kept his tone neutral. He would keep the rank 1 hero guessing until it was too late, until Aldrich had Solomon dancing right in the palm of his hand, at which point Aldrich would close his fist and crush Solomon.

All the knowledge that Aldrich knew about Solomon, about Blackwater, about his criminal involvement, about his son, all of that would come crashing down on the golden hero soon enough.

But now was not the right time. Solomon Solar's smile cracked for the slightest of moments as he stared at Aldrich with a questioning gaze. But his usual smile returned right afterwards

so that the media could never capture him without it.

"Further delays will not be tolerated," said the two Guardians that came back to Aldrich's sides. "Please proceed to the transport or face retaliatory force."

"Ah, looks like my time is up here," said Aldrich. "I'll keep you to your word, Solar. Once I get out, I want to see you here, in Haven, so that we can work together. You called me a 'friend'.

I'm looking forward for you to prove that."

Aldrich looked over to the crowd and spoke up, over the din of the carrier above. "Before I leave, I want you to remember what happened tonight. Solomon Solar promised his assistance to me, and with that, Haven's renewal is all but guaranteed.

Until I come back, though, keep yourselves safe. Keep yourselves healthy. I just sat down and got to know all of your names - I'd feel bad if I couldn't see some of you again."

Aldrich stepped away and let the Guardians escort him. They marched behind Aldrich, pushing him towards the open carrier.

"Remove all armor and armaments from your body" stated the Guardians.

"This armor is a part of me," said Aldrich. "It cannot be removed."

"Initializing confirmation scan...," One of the Guardians pointed their mechanical hands at Aldrich, and the hand broke down into a cloud of grey particulates that then quickly reshaped into a cylindrical scanning mechanism. A green light streamed out from the mechanism, washing over Aldrich.

"Physical scans show an irregular skeletal system covered by unidentifiable metals and organic matter," said the Guardian. "Attempting AC scan..."

"Forget the AC scan," said Aldrich. "My powers are automatically concealed. You won't get anything out of me even if I wanted to show you."

The Guardian ignored Aldrich and continued to scan Aldrich. After a few seconds, it reported, "Scan unsuccessful. Unable to determine whether removing armor from the target will cause physical distress.

Erring on the side of safety, we will allow you to maintain possession your armor. Be warned that any hostile action will be met with appropriate force and-"

"I understand, so get on with it." Aldrich nodded and stepped forward, right below the square shaped opening that led directly into the black and purple light of the Iron Box.

He looked up at the glowing darkness above expectantly. He had removed his Materius, stripping away his physical flesh to leave nothing but his skeletal

form covered by Volantis.

This made it seem that Volantis was a part of Aldrich's being or, at the very least, absolutely necessary to keep him alive.

Aldrich saw as a sudden blue beam projected downwards in a pillar that completely covered him.

Aldrich felt weight push down on every inch of his being. The Guardians stepped aside, and as they did so, the weight bearing down on Aldrich suddenly completely faded, instead turning into the direct opposite sensation of complete weightlessness.

A fast retrieval gravity beam. A high-tech piece of equipment located on new transport aircraft that allowed them to easily pick up personnel or key targets on the ground. Normally reserved for high level military or hero operations.

Aldrich was in the big leagues now. Any force used against him was going to be near the highest end. High tech like this, the Guardians, S rank heroes, those were all free game to use against him.

It was both a compliment and a warning.

A compliment in that it confirmed Aldrich's power and potential influence.

A warning in that if Aldrich made a misstep, then all this force would rain down on Aldrich with no restrictions.

So be it. Aldrich had never been the type to take risk before. This was the first time he had ever taken as much risk as he did, but he had to admit, he was not opposed to it.

It made him anticipate just how much sweeter his victory would be.

The gravity beam picked Aldrich up, taking him in with surprising speed. In just a quick second, he was within the Null Box. Beneath him, the hatch of the carrier slid shut, followed by the heavy metal floor of the box sliding shut right after.

With that, Aldrich was now in complete and utter isolation, locked inside a metal cube of lined with nothing but darkness and an eerie dark purple blacklight glow.

The walls of his prison were just plain, solid metal with the Null Ore lining the edges of the cube structure in strips.

The space around the Null Ore seemed to be vaguely distorted. An odd visual property of Null Ore that nobody knew the cause of.

The box was deathly silent, and Aldrich could hear absolutely nothing outside of it. The place was so quiet that had he been alive, he could have probably heard his own heart beating.

This was another property of Null Ore.

Whatever enclosed space it was lined isolated itself from the outside world. It did not create a completely different dimension, but it did distort space in such away that it was extremely difficult for anything outside of an enclosed Null Space to interact with anything within it.

Aldrich had heard stories of some prisoners that went insane when they were isolated in a Null Box for too long. Many of them killed themselves, believing that the sound of their heartbeats, of the gurgling and churning of their very own innards, was too loud to bear.

But to Aldrich, this complete and utter silence was calming. It was a good change of pace from the hectic chaos of the night. It gave him time to think and focus.

Aldrich had long since theorized this, but just based on how his abilities seemed to circumvent every known rule for Alter powers, he figured that Null based containment methods did not work on him either.

Aldrich was half right in this regard. He could still circulate mana through his body and he could feel that if he tried, he could cast spells. He imagined the same went for Volantis, too. His personal combat capability, therefore, was not affected by Null containment.

However, Aldrich realized that he was not entirely unaffected either.

What Null containment did hamper was his telepathic links. He could not look into the minds of his units in a way very similar to how he was disconnected from his units when they entered a separate dimensional space like the Nexus or Necropolis.

But Aldrich did not worry much. He had made sure to keep mental tabs on Casimir and Valera and their respective forces, and he had confirmed that Casimir had made it well out of the city and Valera had entered the Nexus. By now, the Red Circle had also been reduced to ashes, leaving zero leads to ever reach back to Aldrich.

This just meant that all Aldrich had to do was wait. Wait until he was transferred over to a proper grounded prison.

There he would have one whole week to himself.

Aldrich prepared himself mentally. It might have seemed like he had an entire week of isolation and silence to himself, but that could not be farther from the truth.

No.

Null based containment had one glaring weakness: it was impossible to keep surveillance over anyone inside of it as it disrupted technology too. That meant that Aldrich could do whatever he wanted while he was imprisoned without fear of anyone watching him.

Plenty of free time for Aldrich to use the Sign Stone gifted to him from the Death Lord to enter the Nexus and clear his Trial Quests.

In the end, Aldrich's 'prison' would be nothing more than just a nice and isolated space to power level free of potential distractions and dangers..

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## **Chapter 170: Another Round of Questioning**

Aldrich spent the next hour strategizing about how he would clear the Trial Quests. He had no idea whether the quests were still the exact same now that the Death Lord had taken over, but it was still a good idea to prepare.

With how strong Aldrich was now, especially with Okeanos under his command, he should have no issue clearing the Trial Quests available to him.

Only the last one might be difficult as it involved fighting a powerful boss known as Dark Eye Deimos, a level 50+ warlock whose mastery of demonic summoning made for an incredibly difficult army vs army challenge.

Demons would clash with undead, and demons on average were much stronger than the average undead.

It was a test for a Legion Necromancer to effectively leverage the might of their numbers properly against strong individuals. But a challenge that Aldrich could easily surpass considering he was far, far stronger than what a player character of his level should have been like with his forbidden Lich transformation.

What Aldrich anticipated most about that quest, though, was obtaining Dark Eye Deimos as an undead. Normally, in Elden World, it was impossible to raise boss monsters, but Fler'Gan already disproved this.

Raising Dark Eye Deimos meant Aldrich could have access to Demonic Summoning, and that was something that could massively boost him. Demons were not mortal creatures. They, especially stronger ones, were more like forces of nature that embodied primal sins.

Because Demons were more like aspects and not truly flesh and blood creatures, it was impossible to fully put them down permanently without some form of holy magic.

And where was the holy magic in the real world? Where were the priests and paladins?

In the real world, Demons might as well be unstoppable immortal monsters. Heroes and weapons could break their bones, blast off their limbs, or even turn them into nothing but scattered atoms, but none of that mattered.

So long as a Demon's Spiritual Core remained stable, they would always, always reform.

And Aldrich also wondered about the Demons. Did they have more knowledge about the Elden World reality? None of Aldrich's current Elden World undead seemed to have a good idea of how and why they had been transported to this different reality.

But perhaps the Demons were different.

Another important goal Aldrich had for the Trial Quests were ingredients.

Ingredients for Fler'Gan to use for his experimentations and for a special concoction that Aldrich had requested him to make once he was in a safe and secure space with Casimir.

Aldrich could just easily [Mist Phase] out of any prison he was in, as though Null containment hampered his telepathic links, it did not seem to stop magic-based teleportation. Like that, he could go to the Nexus, get his ingredients, transfer them over to Fler'Gan, and transfer back to his cell.

Before Aldrich's hearing, he would get back to Fler'Gan for his commissioned goods. Just something to make it easier for the people running the hearing to make Aldrich's words a little more convincing.

Granted, if he could convince the hearing by himself, he would not resort to using it.

Now, for what Aldrich could already do. He had thirty levels of [Dark Wisdom] to spread around among his units, but he was not yet entirely sure who to give them to. [Dark

Wisdom] seemingly only allowed units to increase their levels to a set 'maximum potential', and it could not increase the levels of units ahead of Aldrich already.

Thus, [Dark Wisdom] was best used on units that were currently weak but had good potential to grow stronger. The biggest targets for this that came into Aldrich's mind were the Alters under him. Dynamite Girl, the Geist, and Portal Girl all had incredible potential to grow stronger.

[Dark Wisdom] would accelerate that even further.

But there were other good candidates, too. Like Chiros and his knights or Fler'Gan or the variant mini bosses he had taken over. The Blackwater students were also excellent candidates as they were all in the A class because of their high potential.

Ace, especially, was known as someone that had the potential to surpass Seth Solar when he got older and developed and matured his powers more.

It was a difficult choice, and one Aldrich would ponder over for quite some time.

In the meanwhile, he made the easier decision to choose where the stats from his level ups went.

In total, Aldrich had leveled up twice from 42 to 44 over the night. Almost three times, too, but the experience limiter on the fishmen had kicked in just before he could break through to level 45.

This gave him 10 stat points to distribute, and he just pumped them all into attunement.

[+10 to Attunement, increased to +20 with affinity bonuses]

[Attunement: 245 > 265]

[Inner Circle Limit: 49 > 53]

[Outer Circle Limit: 245 > 265]

There was no doubt that by now, Aldrich's single greatest stat was Attunement. Of course, that did not mean he could neglect his other stats, especially Magic and Perception, but Attunement was by and large the best stat to dump into.

A faint green aura shimmered over Aldrich as the power from his levels flowed into him, lighting up the dark insides of the Null Box for a moment.

A few minutes after Aldrich's stat distribution, something somewhat surprising happened. The wall opposite to Aldrich slid open just barely enough for Aldrich to get a



peek outside. Light from the insides of the transport carrier streamed into the dark innards of the Null Box, struggling and failing to overpower the blacklight of the Null Ore.

Aldrich did not move. He just sat there and stared ahead. There, in the tiny space opened up by the wall, stood a man decked out in military uniform and beret. Only a portion of his face containing a single red eye was visible, but the look on that eye made it clear enough that the face it belonged to was not smiling at Aldrich.

"I had a feeling I had visitors on this private jet ride of mine," said Aldrich. "So you got bored, did you? I was wondering when I would start getting questioned."

"..." The man did not respond to Aldrich.

"Silence is it?" said Aldrich. "Are you trying to intimidate me? Because if so, you can go ahead and close that door again. I don't need to waste my time with you."

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## **Chapter 171: The Colonel**

Aldrich waited for the mysterious military man to respond, and after a few extra seconds of silence, he did.

"Do you understand the position you're in right now?" said the man gruffly.

"No. Why don't you tell me?" said Aldrich.

"Don't get smart with me," said the man as his brow scrunched up in displeasure.

"Smart with you? First, you have to convince me that you're even worth the effort," said Aldrich.

"You son of a-," The man caught himself and took in a deep breath, calming himself. When he spoke again, his words had a threatening edge to them. "You have no idea where you're going. You could be getting tossed deep into a prison pit with your key thrown out and forgotten.

You might think yourself strong, but you have no way out of this, not with the Null containment screwing you over.

You still want to put up an attitude?"

"I see, so we're starting off with a threat," said Aldrich. "Quite a harsh way to start off congratulating the man who saved an entire city, no?"

"I don't give a rat's ass what you did," said the man. "Keep up that easygoing attitude, and I'll make sure you never see the light of day again. You understand me?"

"You won't do that," said Aldrich plainly.

"No? You willing to bet your life on that?"

"My life?" Aldrich scoffed. "It's your lives that are on the line here. I am the only existence in history that has ever been able to control a Locus. That must make you and your higher ups wonder, doesn't it?"

What if I could control even above that? Maybe even a Titan?

Wouldn't that end it all? This entire conflict with the variants? You are afraid of me because you don't know who I am or what I want to do, but you can't let go of me either, because otherwise you lose what could be your biggest ticket to ensuring humanity's survival."

"..." The man sighed, defeated, knowing that Aldrich was right. "I'm only asking for you to take this seriously."

"Seriously? Don't be mistaken, I am taking this situation seriously," said Aldrich. "What I am not taking seriously is you."

You aren't someone that's used to interrogating, are you? No, you're used to giving orders, but questioning, that isn't your specialty. You're too straightforward. Too easily riled up when your authority is challenged.

You're someone higher up with people even higher telling you to get something out of me.

But let me make this clear.

You are not here to take anything from me.

You are here to ask me for things, and it is my choice whether to give them to you or not.

So, if you understand and you want me to talk, then drop this tough guy act.

Tell me what you want, and I'll think about telling you what I can do."

The man stared at Aldrich for a few seconds before shaking his head. "Alright then, you've seen right through me. Let me start this over. My name is Colonel Davos. I oversee the Irregulars Department of the U.S. government."

"Irregulars?" said Aldrich. He had never heard of this department before.

"We aren't known to the public," said Davos. "But to give you a brief rundown, we handle unexplainable phenomena."

"Such as?" said Aldrich.

"That, I am not obligated to disclose to you," said Davos. "But just know that your powers and what you did tonight with that Locus falls under the category of 'unexplainable phenomena'."

"I see," said Aldrich. "Then what is it you want from me?"

"First and foremost, your intentions," said Davos. "I and the government need to know whether you are on our side. On humanity's side."

"I am," said Aldrich.

"Good. Then you understand that for national security, no, global security, that your powers are crucial, correct? You yourself stated how important they could be," said Davos. "I'm here to broker a deal with you."

In exchange for your services to the government, we will give you back your freedom."

An under the table deal with a shadow government department. If comic books and TV shows were anything to go by, then these deals usually never ended well. Granted, that was just fiction, but it was grounded in common sense too.

The whole point of having a shadow department like this was to remove any sense of accountability. To keep Aldrich on a leash that could be terminated at any moment with no consequence.

"My freedom? Colonel, you seem to be under the very mistaken impression that I lack freedom," said Aldrich.

Colonel Davos's eye looked down at Aldrich's cuffs. "You don't seem very free to me."

"Freedom is all a matter of perspective, colonel," said Aldrich as he raised up his cuffed arms. "These mean precious little to me. Let's just say as I am right now, I don't feel particularly chained down. In other words: freedom isn't something you can use to bargain with me."

And this was very true. Aldrich was only negotiating with the government, the AA, the Panopticon, the current power structure of the world, because he wanted to give them a chance. If they made it too hard for him, he could just as easily cut his losses and go out

into the Wastelands to amass his power or even try to join and overtake a villain organization from within.

Aldrich was the one with the freedom to act here.

"What? You think you'll walk away scot free in that hearing you talked about?" Colonel Davos shook his head. "You think that just because you broadcasted on national news that you would get that hearing that you're entitled to it?"

It's entirely possible you never make it to your hearing. You might encounter an unfortunate accident-"

"I'll only say this once, colonel, but threatening my life is the last thing you should be doing," said Aldrich. His voice, usually calm, perhaps a little sarcastic, now turned icy cold, laced with an inhuman rattle from his Lich body.

Hearing this voice, the colonel instinctively shivered, his survival instincts flaring and forcing him to step back.

Colonel Davos stepped forward again, regaining his confidence. "I'm offering you an easy way out. If you get to that hearing, there's no guarantee that the tribunal there will be lenient to you.

No, I would bet money that they'll order you to hand over everything you have, your knowledge, your troops, access to your powers, and if you disobey that, then you make yourself an enemy of not only the government, but the AA and the Panopticon.

I don't have the power to change the minds on that hearing - that's outside of my jurisdiction. But what I can do is induct you into my department.

You would disappear from the public eye forever, but you would still be free, and you wouldn't have to worry about the entire government hunting you down every single day of your life."

"Free? Now that doesn't sound like freedom to me," said Aldrich. "I would be little more than your pet at that point, wouldn't I?"

"Call it what you want. It's either that or you get hunted down," said colonel Davos. "Because you're far too dangerous to be kept alone."

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## **Chapter 172: Second Deal**

"And that's the best you can offer me?" said Aldrich. "A collar and a leash?"

"It's a better deal than what anyone else can give you," said Colonel Davos. "So tell me. Are you going to take it or not?"

"Say, hypothetically, that I do take you up on your generous offer, then what do you want from me?" said Aldrich.

"You have zero records anywhere," said Colonel Davos. "You're like a ghost. A phantom that just decided to pop up one day. Attempts to scan and analyze your powers fail. Attempts to read your past fail.

I want a full explanation of who you are and what your powers are."

"I see. I can sense that isn't all you want. So go on, tell me more," said Aldrich.

"Next, I would want full access to all the specimen under your control. That includes, of course, the Locus. We would need to run extensive testing on them. You would be part of that testing," said Colonel Davos.

"Naturally," said Aldrich. "Alright, then. Anything else?"

"Once we've researched you and your powers and devised a means to counteract them, you'll be inducted into a covert operations team to put your powers to good use," said Colonel Davos.

"Interesting," said Aldrich. "And what about Seismic? He's in government custody now, isn't he? Why not run those tests on him?"

"He's protected by Hammerhead," said Colonel Davos. "We can't get to him easily. But if you make him, then that's a different story."

"What makes you think I can control Seismic just like that?" said Aldrich.

"You could control the rest of your forces. I assume Seismic isn't an exception. But even if he was, he's not the most important one. It's the Locus we want the most," said Colonel Davos. "Cough up the Locus, and we can let Seismic do what he wants."

"I see," said Aldrich. He paused before he spoke again. "I have a question, Colonel."

"What is it?"

"Tell me, do I look like a fast-food drive through to you?"

"What?" Colonel Davos exclaimed in surprise.

"Did you seriously expect me to take that offer? You take everything from me and give me nothing in return? I already told you, your freedom means nothing to me," said Aldrich.

"I would guarantee your safety!" said Colonel Davos, now distinctively aggravated. "Your life! That doesn't matter to you? Not even you can survive a manhunt from the entire might of the United States."

"Is that what you think?" said Aldrich. "You didn't even know I even existed just twenty-four hours ago. How can you be so confident that you can hunt me down now?"

I've heard enough, Colonel, and just as I told you before, it is my choice to decide whether to give you anything of mine or not.

And my choice here is simple: I give you nothing.

As for my supposed 'freedom', well, I'll take my chances at the hearing I'm owed."

"You-," began Colonel Davos angrily before another voice cut him off.

"Good god, you're awful at this. And you're taking up the time I paid for. Get out of the way, man." This was a much younger man's voice. Far less gruff and innately aggressive than the colonel's, but not one that sounded weak either.

Colonel Davis got shoved aside, revealing a thinner man dressed in a cheap looking navy-blue suit. He put his face close to the small gap in the Null Box door, revealing large black shades that and a wild mess of ragged black hair.

"Oh, there you are," said the man as he peered right at Aldrich. He turned around and barked out an order with the practiced ease of someone used to ordering others around. "Open this door, will you? How can I talk to him through this little peephole, huh?"

"He's too dangerous-," Colonel Davos's voice chimed in.

"Screw dangerous! Just open the goddamn door! What do I pay you guys for, huh? Just open it enough for me to get in, yeah?"

"Just enough for you to get in," repeated Colonel Davos. "Just be warned that if anything happens to you, I can't do anything about it. In fact, as far as I'm concerned-,"

"As far as you're concerned you don't exist, you were never here, yada yada blah blah, okay, now open the door," said the man with the shades.

The door slid open just a bit more, allowing the man to squeeze through with a labored grunt, and behind him. Once he was inside the Null Box with Aldrich, he turned around and gestured for the door to close. "Now shut it! I want some privacy here! Especially from you government rats!"

As the doors closed, Aldrich observed the man. The suit he wore had seen far better days. It did not quite fit the man's tall and lanky frame properly, and there were some

scratched up parts and oddly discolored patches where they had been roughly tailored over with fabric that did not quite match the suit's original color.

There were segment lines on his brown skin, indicating dermal cybernetic procedures, and when he patted his hands together, Aldrich could observe that there were indents on his palms that opened up to jack into tech.

A techno, then.

"And you are?" said Aldrich.

"Aarav. Aarav Singh." The man walked straight beside Aldrich with zero hint of fear and plopped down right beside him, sitting against the wall right next to Aldrich.

"Aarav...Singh. That name sounds familiar," said Aldrich.

"Sheshanaga Biotechnology and Cybernetics," said Aarav. "That ring a bell?"

"It does," said Aldrich.

Sheshanaga was a mega corporation based out of India that held one of twelve revered and immensely powerful seats on the Council of Fortune, the coalition of the largest and most influential companies throughout the entire globe.

As far as biotechnology went, Sheshanaga was the top dog in the world, though in pure cybernetics it fell behind Rheingold Cyberworks which, though not a Council of Fortune member due to its smaller, more specialized size, was the undisputed world leader in cybernetic research and technology.

Regardless, as a member of the Council of Fortune, Sheshanaga could easily be said to have influence on par with an entire country. Combined together, the Council of Fortune as a whole entity had as much power as any of the major world organizations like the AA and the Panopticon, quite literally controlling the entire flow of the world's economies in their hands.

The Singh family headed Sheshanaga, making Aarav here one of its members, though Aldrich was not well versed enough with the company to know what position Aarav had.

"And what does a Council of Fortune family member want to do with me?" said Aldrich.

"I want to offer you a deal," said Aarav. "A proper deal. Not whatever abomination of a deal that blockheaded colonel wanted to throw your way."

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## **Chapter 173: Company Politics**

"A deal? I'm interested." Aldrich already held Aarav in far better standing than Colonel Davos. Aarav had the courage to sit right next to Aldrich knowing how dangerous Aldrich could be.

Though Null Ore could dampen powers, it was not it they just erased Alter Cells and Organs entirely.

Null Ore worked mainly by compromising the proper functioning of the Alter cells and organs, severely disrupting the processing of additional energy.

But the physical strengthening that Alter cells and organs provided from years and years of enriching musculature, blood vessels, bones, and so on remained.

For someone like Aldrich who Aarav had every reason to expect had a massively high AC count, it was an entirely reasonable threat for Aldrich to just reach out and snap Aarav's neck, especially considering the fact that technos tended to have weaker bodies even with high AC counts.

The fact that Aarav just sat calmly like this, right next to Aldrich, indicated that he was willing to place his trust in Aldrich.

Plus the fact that Aarav did not just start off negotiations by threatening Aldrich's life definitely helped.

"Have you been keeping up with news about Sheshanaga?" said Aarav.

"That's one area where I'm not the most researched on," said Aldrich.

"That's fine," said Aarav. "You don't particularly have to know anything. And now that I think about it, you wouldn't really find anything on the news either. It's all mostly secret stuff.

Anyway, to get to the point: the CEO of Sheshanaga is looking for a new successor."

"A new successor?" said Aldrich. "I would have expected that to be on the news."

Anything related to a shift in the power structure of a Council of Fortune company would make immediate global headlines because it would have been almost akin to hearing about a regime change in a government.

No, a more apt analogy would have been a change in a kingdom, because that's what these companies were: modern day kingdoms. Many of them were ruled by familial dynasties and the power struggles that went into deciding who took the crown after the family heads died often shed quite the blood.



"It's all secret and on the down low for now," said Aarav with a shrug. "My old man didn't want to make the news public."

"Old man? So, you're the heir to Sheshanaga?" said Aldrich.

"Yeah. Along with five other kids, no, wait, counting the illegitimate hooker spawn, of which I am one, there's ten, no, twelve others?" said Aarav. He shrugged again. "It doesn't matter, really, so long as there's even a tiny drop of his blood in one of us. The old man's looking for whoever can meet his will, not whoever came out of the right vagina."

"I see where this is going," said Aldrich. "You want to meet his will and take over the company, and for that, you need me."

"You catch on quick. I like that. I like that a lot," said Aarav. He nodded enthusiastically. He reached into his coat pocket and placed a black tipped cigarette deftly into his mouth. He put the tip of his index finger near the cigarette, and a small flame emerged from several small holes in his finger, lighting it.

He reached out his case of cigarettes to Aldrich. "Want one? Just a warning: they're not anything special. You could pick them up at the nearest gas station."

"I don't smoke," said Aldrich.

"Understandable. Very healthy, too. If my old man thought like you, maybe he would be living longer," said Aarav. He put the cigarette case away and blew out a breath of smoke. "But unfortunately, he's due for a permanent trip to the other side in a few months, and now he's sent out all his heirs on a wild goose chase for the greatest secret of all.

The one secret we still haven't cracked with all these crazy new powers and fancy new technology."

"And that is?" said Aldrich.

"The secret of immortality," said Aarav.

"I see," said Aldrich. "I assume you believe I can help you with that."

"With immortality? Hell yeah," said Aarav. "You've made quite the waves out there, Mr. Thanatos. The power to raise the dead, the power to raise a Locus – I'm sure everyone will want a piece of you soon. Every company worth a damn, at least.

And not all of them will be incompetent monkey brains like sir green beret out there.

That's the problem with men that take authority for granted. They don't realize that it's earned. And when you call them out on it, it's like you've insulted their whole being."

"And what about you? Do you believe you deserve authority?" said Aldrich, scoping out Aarav's character.

"Me? Sure, in some ways, when it's been earned. But with you, of course not. You're the one with all the power here, Mr. Thanatos – a fact that colonel out there really could not stand," said Aarav. "You see, I like to consider myself a self-made man, though I guess that's relative.

I did start out with a loan of ten thousand credits from my old man. The maximum amount he would give an illegitimate like me.

Nothing compared to the ten million he gave his real kids, but then again, at least I didn't start off begging in the streets.

Anyways, I took that ten thousand and built up my very own company. Big enough that I get a seat at Sheshanaga's table in spite of the dirty looks I get all the time from the real heirs.

What that journey from bottom to the top did make me realize was exactly where I stood in the world at any given moment. It taught me when to know I held power. Authority.

And it also taught me when I was weak and needed others for support.

And to you, Mr. Thanatos, I know I have to pitch myself. I need your support. I need to convince you I'm a worthy investment."

"So? Are you?" said Aldrich.

"I have a hunch about you, Mr. Thanatos, and that's that you don't really care about the credits, do you? You might care a little just to make sure a lack of credits isn't an issue but sitting atop a mountain of them isn't your end goal, is it?" said Aarav.

"You would be guessing correctly," said Aldrich.

"That's what I thought. We think along similar lines, then," said Aarav as he adjusted his ragged suit jacket. "So, to start off, I'll offer you what any other large corp would.

Credits and political support and whatever. I can essentially guarantee you'll make it to your hearing unharmed, though I can't guarantee I can bribe every single person on the tribunal. But even if that doesn't work, I can promise to rebuild Haven and make it a better place.

I'll be honest here and add that I don't have as much backing as a proper Council of Fortune company or even as much as some my own brothers and sisters."

Aarav made a dismissive gesture. "But all that, I can promise later once I take over the company and kick the unruly variables out.

At that point, the real fun begins.

You'll have access to everything Sheshanaga can offer. All of its research and technology.

Anyways, that's the gist of what I can offer you. If you want more, you can always ask me."

"And in exchange? What do you want from me?" said Aldrich. "Considering you're talking about taking over the company, I assume you want me to help you in fulfilling your father's wish for immortality."

Aarav took a deep draw from his cigarette. "You know, I never understood why the average rich prick likes cigars so much. I'm a rich prick too, but what makes cigars so much better than the average Marlo cig?" said Aarav as he went off on a seeming tangent, but Aldrich could tell there was meaning behind it.

"Image and prestige, I imagine," said Aldrich.

"Image and prestige, yes," said Aarav. "Old things that old people love to cling to. But to hell with that, I say. Out with the old, in with the new." Aarav snuffed out his nearly burnt-out cigarette with the tip of his finger.

The red hot cigarette head sizzled as it made contact with Aarav's hardened skin. "I don't want you to give my father immortality. That's all just a ploy for him to rule forever and keep making the same mistakes again and again, wasting the company's tech and research and potential.

No, I want you to help me kill him."

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"Kill your father? Now isn't that a bold proposition to throw at me so soon?" said Aldrich. He leaned forward, the metal of his armor clicking with the movement. Beside Aarav, a man of average height, Aldrich, in his thick armor especially, looked like a hulk of a man.

But despite that, Aarav did not care. He just waited patiently for Aldrich to talk.

"Taking out the head of a Council of Fortune megacorp is basically akin to assassinating the head of a state," said Aldrich. "You're asking me to take a risk as big as that? This is a massive gamble, isn't it? Either you and I take out your father and we get everything you promised.

Or we fail, your head rolls, and I become a target."

"Every deal has some level of risk," said Aarav. "And you seem to know a thing or two about gambles. Why do you think I'm offering you so much, Mr. Thanatos? What is essentially joint ownership of Sheshanaga? It's reward commensurate with the risk.

And the actual offing the old man part – I will handle most of that. I know exactly how to get to him.

My old man thinks of himself like a god, deserving of the gift of immortality, but in the end, all he is is just a weak little insecure man, destined to go under the dirt and turn into maggot food like the rest of us.

I know how he thinks. What he wants. What he fears. I know how to manipulate him. Believe me, I've planned for this moment my entire life. All I needed was one missing puzzle piece to fit into place, and I believe you can be that piece."

"I'll humor you then: tell me how you're going to take down your father," said Aldrich.

"It's quite simple, really," said Aarav. "My old man trusts nobody in his old age and declining health. He sees all of us, his sons and daughters, own blood and flesh, as vultures circling above, just waiting to pick into his corpse.

And he would be exactly right about that.

He's got exactly one person he trusts, and that's his assistant-mistress. A girl he picked up from the streets to groom into his perfect woman."

"I'm assuming you've got this woman compromised somehow, then," said Aldrich.

"You've got that right. I won't go into the details of it, but she's essentially my agent. But that alone isn't enough," said Aarav. "Because no matter how much my old man trusts his mistress, it's not to the point where she can dictate his will for him.

And I can't just off the old man without getting ownership of the company first. That's why I need to win this dumb immortality rat race competition of his against all my siblings. He'll give me rights then in a grand ceremony, passing off the company while he enjoys his eternal retirement."

"Retirement? Then is there a need to kill him?" said Aldrich. "It seems to me that all you need on your end is something that will convince your father that he'll stay on living."

"That's the thing. That's what he told us. That he'll step down. But I know my old man better than that. He might not have spent time with me like he did with his real children, but it's because of that that I know exactly the type of man he is.

He can't keep his hands off what he thinks belongs to him. And when he doesn't get his way, he'll break it so that nobody else can have it. That's what he did to my mother. That's what he'll do to the company.

Even if he steps down, he'll have a high enough position in the company to 'oversee' things that he could stage a coup anytime he wanted. He might step back for a few months, years, even, but eventually, he'll get hungry again, and he'll do whatever it takes to carve back that power, even if it means burning it all down.

It's better to eliminate him as a rogue variable sooner rather than later."

Aldrich took a moment to think about Aarav's words.

They were ruthless and harsh, yes, but not out of the ordinary. Company politics were brutal in the age of mega corporations. The Corporate Wars of 2077 and 2090 that killed hundreds of thousands were a testament to how bloody and brutal company conflicts could get.

In the highest echelons of corporate maneuvering, there was no room for sympathy. It was kill or be killed. Deceive or be deceived.

For this reason, Aldrich could not fully trust Aarav, but he knew he would have to deal with corporations because they were such huge powers on the global playing field. It was inevitable for Aldrich to have to wade through the web of deceit and conflict woven into these mega corporations.

What Aldrich needed to do was choose his spider carefully. He needed the right spider that would help him navigate this web and hunt down the others that would get in his way.

"I know I said this was a gamble, Mr. Thanatos," said Aarav as he noticed Aldrich's pause. "And it is, don't get me wrong, but now, you yourself don't have to go all in. That's for me to do.

This is how I envisioned our potential partnership to go.

I help you out right now and do my best to get you through your hearing. Consider that a down payment, that you can take for free from me.

Afterwards, when you are more established, we start R and D together. You see, my old man is quite the suspicious type, so he won't be taking any secret immortality formula without being absolutely sure it won't backfire on him.

At the very least, he won't accept your powers as they are now. I doubt that paranoid old mind of his will accept the risk of dying and resurrecting only to potentially be under your control. He'll want something else, something more digestible to his sensibilities.

That's where the R and D comes into play. We create something over an extended period of time that seemingly replicates your powers in a way that my old man will accept it."

"That means access to my powers. To my units," said Aldrich.

"It will," said Aarav. "But I understand that trust is a two-way road. In exchange, I will give you access to my tech, my laboratories, and my research. If you need anything from us, I can get it done. As long as it isn't an unreasonable request, of course.

Vimana – my company – specializes in the cybernetics side of biotech, and it is accomplished enough to be one of Sheshanaga's top subsidiaries.

I don't know whether you care about research, but even if you don't, if you're just interested in the cybernetic armor and monofilament wire weapons and dermal skin plating and whatnot, then you won't be disappointed.

I'm confident my company's cybernetics have enough combat potential to warrant your interest. It would take at the minimum an A rank hero to afford my company's direct line, but you'll have it essentially for free.

My company's influence is also not anything to scoff at. At the very least, it will give you enough standing where anyone, even the most influential of figures in the world, will have to think twice before crossing you.

And I would practically become your corporate sponsor.

Plus, at any given moment, if you think our partnership is not up to your standards, you have free reign to end it as you wish. You can consider this a trial period to grow our trust with each other with free cancellation if something doesn't suit your fancy.

If another company approaches you with an even sweeter deal, then you are free to take it – I will not stop you.

But just let me know first to see whether I can match it."

"A tempting offer," said Aldrich. He could not even begin to imagine the potential that this deal had.

Fler'Gan was curious about this world's technology. If he had unfettered access to high end laboratories, especially those related to biotechnology and cybernetics, then he essentially had the perfect playground to merge magic and mechanization together.

This was not to mention the immediate high-end equipment that would come Aldrich's way.

"But if you're here in front of me, then I'm sure your siblings will come as well," said Aldrich. "And I assume each of them hold companies of significant merit too. Companies even larger than yours, you admitted.

What separates you from them?"

"Commitment," said Aarav. "I told you that you didn't have to go all in. But I'm all in. I'm willing to spend everything I have, everything I've built up, and bank it on you, Mr. Thanatos. My siblings or any other company, really, will not do the same.

They will not trust you. They will be wary of you. None of them will give you as much as I am willing to give you. They will want more from you. They will place more conditions on you."

"And why is it that you are different?" said Aldrich. "What makes you so willing to bet it all on me? You don't even know whether my powers can even be replicated in the way you want it to be."

"Didn't I already say? I'm all in," said Aarav. "And all in means I'm willing to take the risk that our R and D partnership might not work out as well as I envision it.

But even then, I would still be willing to bet on you.

And there's a very good reason for that.

You should have wondered by now why I picked up on you so quickly. Why it was that I managed to pay my way onto this isolated prison transport.

This is the reason." Aarav took off his shades, revealing one normal brown eye. And one other eye with a pupil completely black and shaped into the pattern of a lotus flower. "When I close this eye of mine, I can see a silk thread.

A golden silk thread that floats atop a sea of darkness.

When I think about making some, how should I put this, unhealthy decisions, the thread shrinks.

When I think about making healthy decisions, the thread grows.

When I think about our collaboration, the thread never ends."

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"I see," said Aldrich as he beheld Aarav's right eye. He had not quite seen anything like it before. It was not the odd lotus shaped pupil itself that caught Aldrich's attention.

Alters could manifest odd physical traits a plenty, not to mention with how colorful fashion was these days, there more than a few people wore eye contacts with all sorts of strange shapes.

What caught Aldrich's attention was the feeling he got from looking at the eye. When he stared at it, it seemed to expand before him, turning into an engulfing void that radiated a strange sense of...cold.

Not a chill, not the kind that crawled through the body with fear, but something strangely, well, comforting.

It was hard to put exactly into words. But when Aldrich felt that cold, it felt like he was being introduced to an old friend, something that had been lost but now was found.

"I see too, as you can obviously tell," said Aarav with a small smile before he grew serious again. He rubbed his right eye with a painful motion, and when he withdrew his hand from it, the black lotus shape was gone, revealing a plain brown pupil.

"That's quite interesting," said Aldrich as he put a hand to his chin, the metal around his body clinking with the movement. "I thought you were a techno, considering the body ports you have in your palms. But this doesn't seem like it would fit into a techno power category. No, it's more like a Flux.

That is, unless you're a Multi-Growth."

It was a common misconception that Alter powers were categorized under what type of power they were. To be more precise, they were categorized according to the shape and location of their organ first, then the nature of their power second.

Techno powers fell under the main category known as Psionics which generally exhibited powers related to the mind. Things like future sight, however, fell under the Flux category that governed manipulation of space-time.

The only way Aarav could have both the power to deep dive into technology via ports and future sight was if he was a Multi-Growth, a rare Alter who possessed more than one organ.

"I'm not blessed enough to be a Multi-Growth," said Aarav. He put his shades back on. "My main category is a Psionic. Subcategory: techno. I'm about as commonplace as any street rat chrome head selling cracked hardware in rundown shacks. The only difference is my processing power.



To be honest, Mr. Thanatos, there is no point probing me with questions about this eye of mine. Because I have no idea about it either.

All I know are three things.

One, that I was not born with it.

Second, that it is not an Alter power. I have had it analyzed and appraised by Editors to no avail. It's basically an unreadable mystery.

Third, this is not something I actively control. Unlike my Alter power which feels as natural to use as moving the muscles on my body, I have no real control over this eye. I can will it to open and close, but that's about it. I cannot control anything else about it. Not what it shows nor what it does.

I feel as if I am merely a host to it.

All I can do is witness the sight it grants me, and that is the silk floating ever so precariously upon a dark sea."

"I see," said Aldrich. "Then at the end of the day, you're basically guessing what that vision even means. Through trial and error where you experimented in making decisions that either shortened or lengthened your lifespan, you've figured out that the golden thread represents your life."

"Correct," said Aarav. "And you can see now why I would see an unending thread and determine your partnership so very valuable, no?"

"I understand now. Still, a power that doesn't fit under any rules is something quite noteworthy," said Aldrich, his mind on the matter of Aarav's peculiar power.

It was not an Alter power. It was not something he was born with. It was not something he controlled.

This was completely unheard of. A power that did not fit under any conventional rules known about Alter powers just like how Aldrich's video game powers did not fit under any known power framework.

Granted, Aldrich himself did not know too much about the world either. He had been a relatively thorough researcher, but he could not access anything hidden to the public eye. There were plenty of secrets out there in the world, with Colonel Davos's Irregulars Department being one of them.

That said, Aldrich figured that people like Aarav were who Colonel Davos routinely targeted.

"You are infinitely more of an Irregular than I am, that's for sure. Which is why colonel brickhead wanted you under his 'care' so desperately.

But still, if that colonel out there knew about this eye, I'm sure he would quite love to spread that care around and have me crammed into a test tube," said Aarav, thinking along the same lines as Aldrich.

"Which is why you willingly came into the Null Box. So that you could reveal this power of yours without having any prying eyes peeking in," said Aldrich.

"That's right."

"I've made up my mind: I'll take your deal," said Aldrich.

Aarav raised a brow. "And that is your final decision?"

"Final decision? No. You said it first: I get to start off on a free trial – I can call it quits on our deal anytime I want," said Aldrich. "That's why I'm willing to accept so quickly. I'll wait to see if you can fulfill your down payment, and then we can go from there."

"Ah, right, I did say that," said Aarav. "Usually, I'm not this lenient on my business deals, so that slipped my mind. But for you, Mr. Thanatos, exceptions can and will be made. Now as for that down payment, I promised to get you to your hearing unharmed, didn't I?"

"Yes," said Aldrich. "I have no fears about my personal safety, but I don't want to be dealing with people like the colonel over and over again. Whatever prison I'm being taken to, I want to make sure I am absolutely not disturbed, whether it's by shadow government organizations or opportunistic corporate hounds."

"Hm, where you're going, I doubt guests will be much of an issue," said Aarav.

"And where is that?"

"Where the vilest of the vile, the worst of the worst, the most dangerous of the dangerous go down to wither away and die," said Aarav. "A Crypt."

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Crypts.

Aldrich had only ever heard about them on the Net as urban legends. Supposedly, they were deep pits far underground where uncontrollable threats were essentially just buried. Threats that just had no way to be dealt with normally.

Villains that were too unstable and powerful to ever see the light of day without being a threat to society were cast down into Crypts and just locked up forever. Alters or Variants that could not die by any conventional means were also sent down into Crypts to essentially just be sealed away until time immemorial.

Often times, Crypts were reused again and again, tossing in villains and variants into the same forsaken pit for them to brutalize each other.

The biggest reason why Crypts were considered urban legend despite their name and function being mentioned from leaked government documents was due to the fact that nobody had ever found a Crypt.

"A Crypt? Are they trying to kill me?" said Aldrich.

"No. Not yet at least," said Aarav. "How much do you know about Crypts?"

"The basics," said Aldrich. "The impression I get from them is that they're death pits where insane villains and unkillable monsters are all piled down together and locked up in one pit of festering agony."

"Yeah, you would be pretty accurate with that impression," said Aarav. "Just one thing to note. Most Crypts aren't that big."

Crypts are containment chambers built around underground Null Zones, and most of the larger Null Zones are in territory too hostile to reliably man.

That means most Crypts are on the smaller end. Not much larger than single person occupancy, I hear, so you won't have any unsavory bunkmates. I've also confirmed that the Crypt you're going to is empty.

Granted, there are a few larger Crypts where it truly is a mosh pit straight out of hell, but that's not where you're going.

You're wanted alive, so you get an empty Crypt.

But you're also perceived as dangerous and unpredictable, so you still end up in a Crypt."

"That explains why Crypts are so difficult to find," said Aldrich. "Null Zones should interfere with any way to search for them, tech or Alter power wise. Building a prison around a Null Zone should make it near untraceable."

"For good reason, too," said Aarav. "With all the nutjobs and crazies and new age cultists out there, can you imagine if they could track down a Crypt and free whatever insanity was trapped within? But anyways, you get what I mean when I say that guests won't be an issue, no?"

Even I can't stay on this transport all the way to your Crypt. They don't want me knowing the coordinates to it."

"Hm." Aldrich leaned back against the wall and looked up at the blacklight ceiling of the Null Box, thinking.

Aarav raised a finger. "But, Mr. Thanatos, I have the power to change that. This transport will make a stop in Kerala to drop me off, but I have a little bit of authority there, you see. Just enough to make a very convincing argument for this transport to transfer you over to an AA department there, one that just so happens to be quite friendly with me.

I can't completely free you, but I can arrange to have your containment be a little more comfortable.

Something akin to a house arrest at a villa, for example – no cuffs needed. Granted, you will still be under constant surveillance and have no Net access, but I assume it'll still be much better than-,"

"That's perfect," said Aldrich with a nod as he stopped looking at the ceiling and stared ahead. "That's absolutely perfect."

"Then you'd prefer house arrest?" said Aarav.

"What? No," said Aldrich. "I meant the Crypt."

"Let me get this straight: you WANT to go to the Crypt?" said Aarav, taken aback.

"Yes, the Crypt is the perfect spot," said Aldrich. The government, AA, and Panopticon all probably thought that sending Aldrich down to the Crypt was the absolute highest form of security they could chain him down with.

A pit where no Alter powers worked and sealed with tons of metal like an iron sarcophagus. It was a place where they could just throw him in without ever having to worry about him escaping. They could toss him in there and chit chat among themselves about what to do with him with peace of mind.

Little did they know, the Crypt was essentially just the perfect gamer's paradise for Aldrich – a place where nothing could disturb him from leveling up. Aldrich would never get visitors down in the Crypt, at least not until they unsealed it and took him out. Nobody could even check up on him because of the tech disruption.

Aldrich turned to Aarav and spoke resolutely. "Make sure I go to the Crypt. Do you understand?"

Aarav blinked behind his shades, wondering if Aldrich was a madman that fit right in a Crypt. He pushed up his shades and shrugged. "Sure, I can do that. Even if I don't do anything, you'd be going there anyway.

Don't tell me you have a way to get out of the Crypt, Mr. Thanatos?"

"That isn't for you to worry about," said Aldrich.

"Then again, even if you did, it would be prudent for you not to escape anyway," said Aarav. "They are also experimenting. Trying to see if this containment will be enough for an Irregular like you. If you choose not to escape, then you could lull them into a false sense of confidence to use against them when it really matters.

I know I would do that if I was in your shoes. But anyways, I'll fulfill the rest of my down payment too: I'll see to it that you'll not only get your hearing, but you'll also get to it unharmed. One warning, though: it's likely the hearing will be private and off the records.

I can't do anything to change that. The Tribunal will very likely want to talk to you about sensitive matters of national and global security, and that information is probably all classified.

Just in case you were wanting to try and broadcast your hearing to drum up public support like with that other high profile hearing villain turned hero, what was his name again, ah, right, Dracul."

"That's fine," said Aldrich. "Whether it's public or not doesn't matter. All that matters is getting to the hearing."

Aarav nodded. "Now, it'll be difficult to predict who will be on the Tribunal for that hearing, so I don't think I can bribe everyone on there-,"

"You won't have to," said Aldrich. "I'll try to convince them on my own."

"...And if your words just aren't quite sweet enough?" said Aarav.

"They will be," said Aldrich.

Aarav shrugged again. "Well, if you have this much confidence in your speechmaking ability, then who I am I, a reclusive CEO famous for never making public appearances, to criticize you?

Anyways, even if the Tribunal does condemn you as an uncontrollable element, I'm still willing to work with you in a more illegal capacity. I don't really care if you end up as a hero or villain or something else."

Aarav stood up, cracked his knuckles, and walked over to the Null Box's exit. "I only have a limited amount of time with you, and that time's almost up.

It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Thanatos. This is just a hunch, but I have a feeling that this will be the beginning of something quite grand. Something to make some real change."

Aarav banged on the door as loudly as he could. On the outside, it probably registered as just faint vibrations, but enough for anyone closely looking to see and take note of.

The door began to slide open slowly. Aarav turned around to Aldrich with a final smile and a nod. "Until next time then?"

"Until next time," repeated Aldrich.

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When Aarav left, before the exit to Aldrich's Null Box closed completely, Colonel Davos's face peeked in again. He held open the sturdily reinforced door with his own bare hand, indicating that the colonel's base AC count was high enough for his strength to be decidedly superhuman.

Considering the fact that the Null Box door was pure metal and almost half a meter thick, Aldrich determined that Colonel Davos was likely an Augmenter class Alter whose muscles and bones tended to benefit the most from Alter cells.

Colonel Davos stared at Aldrich with red eyes that glowed in the dark. They were unexceptional, though, compared to Aarav's. They did not possess the same feeling of odd chill that Aarav's unique eye gave off.

"I don't know what that corporate slink offered you-," began Colonel Davos.

"Far more than you did," retaliated Aldrich.

"I can imagine," said Colonel Davos. "My department can't offer much in the same way that he can. We don't have direct influence. We can't put you on the news or pump your accounts full of credits."

"Are you here to try and offer me another deal? Did you feel intimidated by what Mr. Singh might have offered?" said Aldrich.

"I'll admit that my approach with you might have been heavy handed," said Colonel Davos. "Times are tense now. Multiple major cities are under variant attack. And they've been coordinated attacks the likes of which we've never seen before. So many questions, and right at the center of it all, you seem to pop up.

I was wary of you, everyone is. My orders were to either try and control you or destroy you, and that made me act rashly. I apologize for that."

"So? You never answered my question. Will this apology lead into another deal?" said Aldrich.

"I'm not authorized to give you a deal outside of the parameters which I was instructed to operate with," said Colonel Davos.

"And here I thought you were the head of your department," said Aldrich. "You seem considerably restricted in spite of your position."

"I am the head," said Colonel Davos. "One of several. I'm the head of Security and Containment. You were right before: I don't do negotiations. I contain threats."

"Am I safe to assume then that means the government has classified me as a threat?" said Aldrich.

"It's a default classification for safety's sake," said Colonel Davos. "The fact that you could cooperate with that corporate suit means you aren't a completely uncontrollable force of nature as some Irregulars tend to be."

Colonel Davos sighed. "Look, my higher ups want me to tell them one thing: should you be exterminated?"

"What makes you think you have the power to do that in the first place?" said Aldrich.

"I don't exactly know if I can have you destroyed. But people fear what they do not understand. They will seek to destroy it even if they don't know whether they have the firepower to take it out, and often times, they'll be willing to die trying," said Colonel Davos. "To answer your other question, I'm not here to offer you another deal, because any deal I'm authorized to make isn't one you'd accept."

But what I do want to do is ask you a question."

"I'll humor you then. Go on," said Aldrich.

"Tell me," said Colonel Davos. "All I care about is that this world finds continued peace. That humanity survives another day. I'll ask you a personal question, one that's free from bureaucratic bullshit: are you on our side?"

"I am," said Aldrich. "Don't misunderstand me, Colonel. I'm not here to wipe out humanity. I want to help if I can, but if it ends up being that the only way I can help is through my own way, then I won't be afraid to play solo."

Colonel Davos nodded. "Alright. That's all I needed to hear."



That was all the Colonel Davos said as he let go of the Null Box door, letting it close over Aldrich. The outside of the Null Box was not much louder than the sound absorbent insides.

There was only a skeleton crew on board consisting of a pilot, Colonel Davos, Aarav Singh, and a single guard to try and maintain as much secrecy as possible.

"Interesting chit chat you had there," said Aarav as he took another cigarette out of his case. "Is that what you needed to tell your owners not to kill him? A little bit of a heart to heart, man to man talk?"

"No smoking on board," was all Colonel Davos said as he walked away to the pilot's cockpit. He never liked corporate suits like Aarav. They always rubbed him the wrong way.

Aarav put his cigarette away and eyed Colonel Davos until he had sequestered himself away in the pilot's cockpit. Then, he took out his cigarette anyway.

"We sense that you may require assistance," came a soft-spoken woman's voice.

Aarav looked to the other end of the plane to see a noticeably small woman extending an incredibly pale palm towards him. At her fingertips, small sparks of white light flashed, ready to light up Aarav's cigarette.

Aarav looked at her through his shades with curiosity. This was the guard that Colonel Davos had decided to bring on, indicating that she was someone powerful, at the very least powerful enough to contend with Thanatos who had bested a variant that, though unranked, would undoubtedly be in the A rank at minimum.

Yet, looking at the woman, Aarav could not help but wonder how she could put up anything resembling a fight.

The woman was not abnormally short, but she barely passed the five-foot mark (~152cm). She dressed in flowing white robes that looked almost like rags, and beneath tiny holes and tears smattered across the fabric, her incredibly pale white skin showed.

She looked fragile. Like she was made of glass.

There was something...off about her as well. It was in her expression. Or lack of it. She seemed to lack anything resembling normal human emotion.

Her eyes were dull and greyed, as if she was blind, and her face did not seem to move at all as she spoke, staying permanently set in a blank stare.



"I can handle at least this much. And don't push yourself. With how pale and tiny you are, you seem a day away from kicking the bucket yourself," said Aarav as he lit his cigarette with a low output of his finger flamethrower.

"...Kicking the bucket?" said the woman.

"A figure of speech. Means you're dying," said Aarav.

"We are maintaining ourselves adequately," said the woman as she withdrew her hand, the glowing white sparks around her fingertips fading away. "Though there are times when we would desire more sustenance."

"Ah, so the colonel over there isn't even feeding you properly," said Aarav. Everything about this woman screamed 'Irregular'.

Aarav himself had only a vague idea of what the Irregulars Department did – that was how secretive they were – but if ever there was someone that fit the bill of 'Irregular', it was this odd woman.

But Aarav kept his cool and spoke as if nothing was on his mind. "He can't even keep his own workers fed, and he thinks he can win over Thanatos? Ridiculous."

"Thanatos? Is that the name of the Irregular contained there?" said the woman as she stared at the Null Box.

"You don't even know his name? If you were stationed here as a guard, I figure you'd at least know that much," said Aarav.

"We do not place much importance on names. It is a foreign concept to us. Additionally, we are not allowed to know too much or leave our confinement very often," said the woman. She continued to stare at the Null Box with her blank, emotionless gaze. "When we are allowed to leave, it is always to interact with another deemed as an 'Irregular'.

We always go, for we are hopeful that the Irregular we are tasked to meet will be like us and lead us home."

"Home? And where is that?" said Aarav.

"We are not allowed to disclose that information," said the woman. She continued on. "But we do not think that one can lead us home. That one does not seem to possess the capability."

"Yeah? Then what do you want with him?" said Aarav, taking this opportunity to try and milk as much info from this Irregular as possible while she kept talking.

"We do not have anything we desire from that one." The woman never broke her stare from the Null Box. "We are here simply to watch that one, and, if that one exhibits hostility, to become one with him."

The woman stopped staring at the Null Box and just looked straight ahead, not focusing on anything in particular. She put a pale hand to her ear. "We are being informed not to speak. We will obey that order."

"..." Aarav crossed his legs and drew in a breath from his cigarette. As he let out the smoke, he closed his right eye and thought about what would happen if he tried to blast this woman with one of his Finger Armaments.

He saw the golden silk thread of his life fall vanish, falling deep underwater, then re-emerge completely white. He did not exactly know what that meant, but he figured it was not a good sign.

This was another strange power that seemed to mess with his sight in a way that no normal Alter could.

Aarav had always prided himself in his ability to know things, but he was beginning to realize that perhaps not even he knew just how big the world could get.

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## Chapter 178

Aldrich spent the next few hours of the plane ride doing nothing at all. In the Null Box, severed from mentally communicating with any of his units, he found himself being unsurprisingly bored. There was only so much time he could devote to just constantly thinking about what he planned on doing, after all.

At a certain point, when Aldrich's boredom started to reach an appreciable mass, Volantis spoke out.

"I sense that you lack mental stimulation," said Volantis. "I may offer you stimulation, Armored."

The idea of Volantis offering Aldrich any kind of 'stimulation' repulsed him, and that was something considering Aldrich had a very high tolerance for almost anything.

"Please don't ever use that phrase with me again," said Aldrich.

"My apologies, Armored," said Volantis.

"But you're right, I do have nothing to do," said Aldrich. He paused for a moment, remembering his time talking with the people at the shelter in Haven.

He remembered how much their trust for Aldrich seemed to grow when he actually took the time to sit down there and talk with them individually to hear their stories.

Aldrich figured the same could work with Volantis.

Plus, it was a nice way to pass time. And Aldrich was curious about some thing about Volantis.

"I'm a little curious, actually, Volantis," said Aldrich. "Why serve me? Is it because you're under my control?"

"No," said Volantis. "I call you my Armored for I deem you worthy."

"Worthy? In what way?"

"You wield power with purpose. Purpose that feels nostalgic to me."

"And what purpose would that be?"

"You have never stated your purpose to me directly, but I can sense it. It is akin to world domination. You wish to mold this world into your own image."

"World domination?" Aldrich pondered this. His purpose for using his power was to try and bring order to this world. To minimize people like him that lived only to suffer and seek vengeance from being born.

To put it simply, he wanted to make the world a better place.

It was a relatively noble goal, and not one unique to Aldrich. Where it started to get unique, though, was in the lengths Aldrich was willing to go. He was willing to kill, to control minds, and sacrifice lives, even innocent ones, if he had to.

It was not that Aldrich did not care about innocent lives. No, he valued them, and if he could, he would try to preserve them. But his parents had died because they had surrendered after hostages were used against them.

Had his parents allowed the hostages to die, they might have survived and done far more good across their entire lives. They could have given Aldrich a proper and loving childhood.

Aldrich deeply respected the noble ideals his parents had been willing to uphold even to their deaths, but a part of him had felt resentment as well, especially when he had been younger. Resentment that his parents had been willing to sacrifice Aldrich's happiness for their ideals.

Over the years, Aldrich had come to terms with what his parents had done, and he no longer resented them. But it was engraved in him now that if he ever came upon a similar situation, he would not make the same mistakes his parents did.

On that note, when it came to the lengths he was willing to go to, if it ever came down to it that Aldrich had to become some kind of ruler, some kind of emperor like authority over the whole world, then he would not hesitate.

In that sense, Aldrich could see where Volantis was coming from. Aldrich was willing to dominate the world to get what he wanted.

"I guess you could say that," said Aldrich. "You mentioned that my purpose felt nostalgic, though. Does that mean you served someone else with a similar goal? The Death Lord, I assume, considering the fact that she wanted the entire realm to be part of her own realm of death?"

Aldrich actually had no idea what Volantis's backstory was like. In the game, Volantis was not fleshed out too much. He was just one of the Death Lord's mini-bosses who appeared to thwart the player during the mid game.

After getting defeated, Volantis then went on a warrior's journey to recover his honor, growing stronger and finally severing and integrating hand of the Blood God to become a fully fledged late game boss.

But aside from dialogue showcasing that Volantis was a dutiful warrior that served the Death Lord to the very end, there was very little about his actual past.

"The Death Lord also had a purpose to her power, yes, but she was never my Armored," said Volantis. "The nostalgia I feel seems to be from my past life, before I became forged into armor. I served...someone with a strong vision.

Someone that wanted to dominate the world. However, I remember only faint pieces of them. I cannot even recall their appearance. When I try, all I perceive is shadow where they once were."

"So, not the Death Lord. Interesting," said Aldrich. He knew that Volantis did not have the best memory of his past life, but if Volantis could remember even a little bit, Aldrich thought it was possible to use his knowledge of the lore to find out who Volantis had been. "Do you remember more?"

Volantis's normally smooth, calm voice grew faintly warm, as if remembering fond memories. "...I remember marching with them across dry steppes.

I remember passing the steppes, into swamps, into desert, into forest, into snow, into fire.

I remember standing atop a great mountain. They stood at the precipice and waved their arms at the world unfolding before them, saying that it would all be theirs and they would make things right.

I remember being swept away by that grand dream, feeling as if my life had purpose.

Before then, I knew I had been a fighter. But I had fought only for the sake of the fight. My mind had been simple. I ate, slept, and sought only the next challenge to kill and take their bones to add to my collection."

"I get it now," said Aldrich as he came to a realization. There was exactly one species in Elden World that lived in steppe like plains and took the bones of others as war trophies. "It's surprising, but all your memories hint to you having been an Orc in your past life."

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