

Super Necromancer System

- Chapter 179: Volantis (2) |

Volantis remained quiet, as if pondering what Aldrich said. Then, after a small spell of silence, the living armor spoke again. "An orc? Even I find that difficult to believe. I had always thought orcs as vile, simple, brutish creatures.

I myself have drenched my hands in their blood many times. Few I have ever found worthy to add their bones to my collection."

"I'm almost completely sure about this," said Aldrich. He put a hand to his chin out of habit as he continued to think and remember.

There was almost no doubt in Aldrich's mind: Volantis had been an orc.

Orcs in Elden World were generally regarded as gruff, unintelligent, barbaric creatures by other races due to their bloodthirsty warmongering ways that sought conflict seemingly with their every waking moment.

Many races looked down on orcs because of this, and Volantis himself, with his memories erased, saw them as brutes. But it was simply a difference in culture and circumstance. A matter of perspective.

Orcs did not care about building towering cities or longstanding civilizations that would last through the test of time. The Shatterlands from which they hailed from raged with routine devastating storms that would wipe out any attempt to build a city.

Hence, the orcs were nomadic, but this also meant they were mocked as uncivilized.

They did not have grand archives that told thousand-year histories of their people. They moved far too much to ever have a place to store any kind of document of their lives.

Instead, the orcs told their tales through stories passed down from generation to generation, causing other peoples to believe they lacked any real sense of culture.

The orcs did not worship a god or a pantheon of gods, for as a people, they were too scattered, too fragmented in countless different nomadic tribes, to ever ball up their faith enough to sustain a proper god. Nor could the orcs who lived for the moment, for the present, ever stand the often intangible nature of more major gods that shared their presence only with a precious few priests. Instead, they worshipped what they could tangibly see around them every day—nature. But this also meant some peoples, particularly the zealous followers of the goddess Amara, believed the orcs to be godless heretics.

Orcs loved to battle, with the thirst for the fight wired into their very blood, and thus they were perceived as bloodthirsty brutes.

But that trait kept the orcs alive in an ever changing yet constantly harsh environment. Their culture reflected this reverence and desire for the fight with their penchant for taking bones as war trophies. A sign of respect among their ways, but to other peoples, such an act screamed of horrifying barbarism. Volantis's striking obsession with fighting powerful enemies and harvesting their bones likely came directly from this orc practice.

But then who was this leader that Volantis had followed? This leader that had

influenced Volantis so strongly that he retained vague memories of them even through the forcing process to become a Living Armor. A powerful forging process crafted by demons meant to wipe out any memories of the original soul.

That level of soul manipulation was outside the boundaries of even Legion Necromancers. It took a Lich at the minimum to get there, showcasing just how advanced the demons' smithing process was and how strong this memory must have been to linger in on Volantis even through all that.

"Then the leader followed was also an orc?" said Volantis. "It cannot be. For so long, I had thought of orcs as simple creatures to slaughter. You are to say that I was one of them?"

"Yes, I'm pretty sure that's right," said Aldrich. "You mentioned leaving the steppes and going into forest and snow and fire. That indicates you traveled across huge swathes of land, far beyond the Shatterlands that the orcs called home that's mostly barren steppes.

I know that at a certain point, orcs started to unify every so often under a warfather or warmother, creating great hordes that traveled past the forbidding mountain ranges and even the stormy seas to other lands in large scale raids.

You must have been a member of one of these hordes."

"A..horde...?" Volantis spoke slowly, as if he himself was trying to understand what he was hearing.

"You left the steppes, into forests, deserts, snow, and fire...am, not many

warfathers or warmothers could have made it that far. That should narrow it down, but who was it exactly..." Aldrich, absorbed in his thoughts, continued to parse through his memories of Elden World's rich and extensive lore.

The reason Aldrich needed to focus so much to recall this lore was because of how Elden World was structured. When it came to lore, Elden World was incredibly hands off. The player had a main goal - to defeat the Howling Dark — and that was really it. How they approached this goal and how much of the world they explored in doing so was entirely dependent on the player.

For example, for a Necromancer like Aldrich, one of his final boss fights involved the goddess Amara sealing the Death Lord in the Nexus to defeat as the 12th and final Trial Quest. After defeating the Death Lord, the player character received a huge buff to their strength which they then used in a climactic final boss fight against the Howling Dark and its minions.

But that was the endgame for the Necromancer. There were various other paths for Warriors, Priests, Assassins, and so on and so forth to the point that Aldrich himself, even with his extensive playtime, had only scratched the surface of the secrets in the game.

What his familiarity with the Necromancer class did do, however, was force Aldrich to explore the world considerably. It made him pay attention to small things like item descriptions, the appearance of environments, and seemingly unimportant pieces of NPC dialogue to find out exactly where to find the best creatures to raise.

Because of this, and because Aldrich himself had a strong interest in finding

out lore, he had a very solid understanding of the parts of the world that his class could explore. It was not a perfect understanding as there were surely countless other secrets known only to those that did playthrough with other classes, but it was still extensive enough that Aldrich knew a good amount about everything.

"Fire..." repeated Aldrich. "Ah, right, the only land of fire is Helith, the home of the demons, and it is incredibly far from the Shatterlands to the point where only one Orc leader has ever reached it. Warmother Thela.

Or, as other races would have known her, Thela the Conqueror. Her horde, the Golden Horde, had a serious shot of building a serious empire if she hadn't been assassinated by demons.

Does that all ring a bell?"

"Thela...? I-I don't know," began Volantis, his voice cracking uncharacteristically.

Aldrich immediately perked up in alarm. He sensed the metal of Volantis start to rattle around his body of bones. "Volantis, is something wrong?"

"Thela? Warmother? Conqueror?" Volantis spoke almost as if in a trance. "I should not know this, and yet, why does this sound so familiar? This..should not be possible. I should not remember-I cannot remember. Gh...gh!"

Volantis instantly opened up his armored body, separating into countless strands of metal that peeled back to bare Aldrich to the open air. He instantly rolled forwards, the dark grey bones of his Lich body clattering against the metal in the Null Box.

Thankfully, the Null Box was such an insulated space that Aldrich doubted anything going on inside of it could be heard outside.

Aldrich watched Volantis with green light flashing in his eye sockets.

Volantis's form was still opened up, but all around the black metal of his body, both inside and outside, there were countless odd red sigils gleaming with a burning intensity. The shade of red emanating from them was unmistakable — these were demonic runes.

Aldrich did not understand what was happening. He assumed he had triggered some kind of mechanism embedded within Volantis, one embedded from the demons that forged him, the prevented him from recalling his past.

Volantis's voice echoed out from his peeled open form, but the voice was not directed to Aldrich. When Volantis spoke, his voice lost the smooth, elegant tone. The voice that had made him sound almost robotic sometimes, like a perfect AI.

Instead, this new voice came out with a far rawer timber. The voice was deeper, more guttural, and laced with a permanent growl.

"Thela...they left you. They let the demons do this to you. What do I do? Without your dream? All I am...all I am is a monster. You were the one that showed me I could be more.

But...if a monster is what they want, it's what I'll give them.

Orcs...humans...elves...dragons...demons - I'll take their bones...

I'll take...

And take...

And take...

Until there is nothing left..."

Aldrich felt magical energy rising around Volantis, rising up in blood colored steam from all the red runes around his metal body.

As a being of innate mystical power, Aldrich could immediately tell through sheer instinct that the amount of magic emanating from Volantis was considerable. He briefly worried whether it could be sensed by even those that were not magically sensitive, but he pushed that concern away.

If nobody had been able to perceive Aldrich's mana up to this point, then nobody would sense this now.

Still, Aldrich prepared his own magic, green strands curling around his skeletal fingers. Just in case something happened that required him to defend himself. But nothing more happened.

Instead, the steam-like magical energy around Volantis suddenly dissipated. The glowing red runes lost their light and faded away. Volantis reformed back to his full self, but instead of his eye dot being red, it was now a simple blank white.

"Volantis?" said Aldrich cautiously.

"This armor is undergoing forced repair to correct internal issues" said Volantis in his usual smooth, controlled tone, though it was very evident to Aldrich now that this voice was not actually his.

It was a voice that the demons had implanted within him. "It will still be operational, but some functions will be compromised until repairs are finished.

Sensing Armored in vicinity."

Volantis opened up again, and Aldrich asked a question. "How long until this armor is repaired? What does a repair entail?"

"Estimated time of repair completion: unknown," said the voice. "Query: repair function registered. Answering: A repair indicates a full return of internal systems to their most recent state before corruption in order to preserve accumulated battle experience and Armored compatibility."

"I see," said Aldrich. So it was basically like a computer rebooting itself to its last known good configuration. In this case, Volantis would return to how he was exactly before he had started to remember his past fully.

"It is recommended that the Armored still wear the unit," said the armor.

"Repair functions are greatly enhanced and stabilized by anchoring to an Armored."

Aldrich tentatively stepped back into the armor. It was not that he was not cautious about Volantis's sudden shift and the possibility that something might go wrong wearing him.

But Aldrich did not want to reveal his true form or even his Material human appearance.

So, Aldrich took the risk. Volantis's metal strands closed in around Aldrich, knitting back into a full, regal armor.

Aldrich felt nothing was off. He sensed no danger. The only issue was, as whatever runic mechanism present in Volantis had said, some functions were unavailable. Aldrich could access the enhanced stats that Volantis offered, but

not any of Volantis's stitching or anything really that Volantis himself operated.

It felt similar to working with a Frame that had it's A.I. shut down.

Well, this had been utterly surprising.

Aldrich sighed as he leaned back against the wall of the Null Box again. He was not an omniscient being. He could not predict everything, but usually, if he planned or thought hard enough, he could expect what kind of surprises he would face.

But this was completely out of his grasp. Aldrich's lore knowledge about demons was good but not perfect. Legion Necromancers had very little reason to travel to Helith. He did not know all the tiny details that went into forging a Living Armor. Had he done a playthrough as a Warlock, then he might have known more, but there was no use thinking about what ifs.

All Aldrich could really do was wait and see if Volantis returned back to normal in time. If not, he could still go to the Nexus and reach out to the Death Lord or, if the Trial Quests were still there, kill and raise Deimos the warlock who probably knew more about this than Aldrich did.

The biggest thing that annoyed Aldrich was that he lost his talking partner for the rest of his trip.

It took a total of roughly twelve hours for Aldrich's transport to arrive to its location. He did not know exactly when the transport moved or stopped because of the isolating nature of the Null Box, but he figured that when the box's door opened up, revealing Colonel Davos again, that it was time to get

out.

Aldrich had put the High Threat Null Restraints, or, more easily known as null cuffs, back on to remove any hint of suspicion from himself. The null cuffs, thankfully, did not have any complicated tech in them that could track whether they had been taken on or off.

"We're here," said Colonel Davos.

"My cell, I assume?" said Aldrich.

"Consider it protective custody," said Colonel Davos. He narrowed his eyes at Aldrich's helmet. "What happened to your face? I heard you mentioned to the Guardians that this armor of yours functions as a life support system of some kind.

Has anything changed about your condition?"

"You try weathering a twelve-hour plane ride with nothing to do, Colonel," said Aldrich. "Don't worry about it. The color of the dot on my helmet doesn't mean much. This just represents my boredom."

"Well, you better get prepared for more of that," said Colonel Davos. "Where you're going, it'll be pretty much the same. Now step out of the Null Box."

Aldrich did as asked and stepped out, and when he stood by Colonel Davos, he stood a full head taller than the man.

"Hold out those cuffs for me," said Colonel Davos. He took out a baton from a sheathe on his hip, and with the press of a button on the handle, it glowed a bright white, humming with energy.

Aldrich held out his cuffed arms, and Colonel Davos struck the center part of

the cuffs linking Aldrich's arms together with the baton. A burst of electricity ran through the metal, and the metal of the cuffs dissolved away, breaking apart into countless little rice grain sized particles.

All that was left of the cuffs on Aldrich were two large, surprisingly thin rings that emanated blacklight. This was the Null Ore. They loosely clattered against Aldrich's wrists, giving him ample space to just slip out of them.

Colonel Davos took the baton, pressed another button on the handle, turning it purple, and hovered it above the ground. The little grains of metal that the cuffs had dissolved into all drew towards the baton like it was a magnet, merging together into a metal case around the structure.

Nanotech, Aldrich noted. Specifically, memory metal. Advanced nanotech that utilized any external connections or internal processing did not work in proximity to Null Ore, but memory metal only required a specific charge to run through it to fix itself into pre-determined shapes. In this case, that shape had been cuffs.

"I'll take those." Colonel Davos took the Null Ore rings, fixing them to a utility belt.

"You're not afraid, Colonel?" said Aldrich as he looked right down at Davos, completely uncuffed. In Colonel Davos's eyes, Aldrich was now completely free to use his powers.

It was possible that Davos was incredibly strong himself, but though competent as a fighter, Aldrich could not feel the same amount of threat he would feel from someone genuinely strong as, say, Seismic or Solomon Solar.

"If I was, I wouldn't have this job," said Colonel Davos. "I also do have some backup.

22, show yourself.."

Chapter 181: 22

A small, white haired, white eyed, white robed woman manifested above, near the ceiling of the sizable transport. She was small and made herself even smaller by sitting with her legs drawn up and her arms hugging them like a child. She floated in the air as if in zero gravity.

"Hello, Irregular," said the woman as she waved at Aldrich in a greeting. Her voice showed no hint of emotion. Neither did her face. She was unreadable to Aldrich not in the same way as Solomon Solar who had lived a fake life for so long he was a master at hiding himself.

No, she was unreadable because there literally was nothing to read.

As if she was not a human at all.

There was something strangely off about this woman. Aldrich could not quite place it, but when he looked at her, he felt like he saw something completely uncanny. Something that did not belong. Like seeing a car in a medieval village.

One thing Aldrich did note, though, was that he could sense threat from her. His instinct was not so sharp that he could accurately parse exactly how strong she was – he needed Volantis's truesight for that – but it was honed enough to know what was a threat or not.

And this woman was a threat.

"And I assume you're his guard dog meant to take me down if I misbehave?" said Aldrich.

"We will protect that one if needed," said the woman, or, as Colonel Davos called her, '22'. "But we would prefer not to engage in hostilities with you. You are too powerful to engage without being willing to sacrifice much of us."

"Then that makes two of us. I'm not here to fight, I'm here to wait for my hearing," said Aldrich. He briefly scanned the room, trying to wonder what the woman meant by 'we', but figured that it was an oddity of hers to refer to herself in the plural.

Aldrich realized that the plane was still moving, still in the air. "I would ask you to take me to my cell, but considering we're still in the air, I assume you have a few things you want to talk to me about."

"Just a few things you should note," said Colonel Davos. "The place you're going to is known as a Crypt. It's a 'Cold' Crypt, meaning it's meant for safe containment of individuals or small groups only."

Down there, you'll be protected to the absolute best of our abilities.

Nobody knows about this location except a select few, and 22 here will be your guard to ensure nothing tries to get to you in the off chance that someone, say that corporate suit, somehow managed to leak where you are."

"Safe containment? You're throwing me down a pit and telling me it's for my safety?" said Aldrich. "I guess that's amusing in its own way."

"Trust me, that Crypt is one of the safest places in this world that I know of," said Colonel Davos. "And I know far more than I should."

Here's what will happen. At my command, a hatch will open up, and you'll be beamed down into the Crypt. You will be going several hundred meters underground into a naturally occurring Null Zone.

Do not be alarmed – the gravity beam won't cut off due to the Null Zone, and it will penetrate deep enough to land you safely.

At the bottom, you'll find yourself in a secured, cylindrical structure of metal thick enough that without powers, you're never going to drill through it.

When you're situated at the bottom, the Crypt will close.

Rations will be dropped down to you in intervals of three days, and they will be more than enough to sustain you. A tracker will come with them. Press the button on it, and it'll float back up to the top – this is how we confirm you're still alive.

I understand that I don't know whether you need specific accommodations to keep you alive. The Guardians' bioscans of you all came out with unreadable results.

All I know is that you need this armor. That it's the only thing stopping you from being just a pile of bone.

If you have any other requirements, now's the time to let me know."

"None, Colonel," said Aldrich. The less he asked, the less anyone would pay attention to him. "I'm sure whatever bland MRE bar you throw down will be enough to keep me

alive. Send down a book or two while you're at it so I don't pass from boredom, will you?"

"I'll submit that request," said Colonel Davos. He walked over to a control panel, and when he pressed his hand on it for a scan, a holographic screen popped up. He pressed a few buttons, prompting both the floor and ceiling of the Null Box to slide open.

The Null Box was attached to a pillar of metal above that housed a gravity beam mechanism, and that activated now. Circuit patterns running across the pillar glowed purple, and a beam of the same color passed through the Null Box and down into the windy depths below.

"Step into the Null Box again-," began Colonel Davos.

"I know," said Aldrich. He walked in, and instead of falling straight down through the open hatch below, he stood suspended in air, weightless. He turned to Colonel Davos. "If we do meet again, Colonel, let's meet on better terms. Because my patience may not be as generous as it was this time."

"Noted," said Colonel Davos, maintaining a steely exterior. At least one thing was true: the colonel did not feel fear.

"Bye." 22 waved at Aldrich innocently. He just nodded to her. He could not really fathom her.

She was an Irregular, no doubt about it, and so she had no public presence that Aldrich could reference. She possessed threatening power, and yet, Aldrich could not read any hostile intent from her, if he could even accurately read her through her complete expressionlessness.

A complete wild card. Aldrich would have to be careful in dealing with her.

The colonel pressed a few more buttons on the holographic screen, and Aldrich beamed downwards. He looked down to see night sky, then soon, a yawning dark void surrounded by an empty stretch of dry, cracked earth.

And into that void, Aldrich went.

Colonel Davos watched as the hatch door sealed shut, the sound of wind whirling into the transport fading away into near silence. His gaze lingered on the shut door for a moment. He had come out of this whole interaction with Thanatos not knowing exactly where that man, no, that Irregular, stood.

He wanted to trust Thanatos if only because it would prevent the massive headache of trying to contain an active, living Irregular of that power, but he knew in his line of work that Irregulars were always difficult to trust.

More often than not, they simply lacked human sensibilities. Or if they did have them, it was because they had observed, adapted, and stolen human behavior as a survival mechanism like 22 had.

Thanatos had been classified hastily as an Irregular, but was he truly one? Colonel Davos knew by now when he was talking to a man or something that pretended to be a man. And he did not get the sense he was talking to the latter with Thanatos.

Colonel Davos sighed in exhaustion as he rubbed his forehead. It was too hard to tell. Regardless, his job here was done. Or he hoped so. The only time Colonel Davos would see Thanatos again was if he was called to contain him.

So long as Thanatos did not do anything drastic that would label him as a threat, his classification as an Irregular would probably get dropped, especially if he managed to peacefully integrate with authorities.

But it was still better to be prepared.

"Do you think you can beat him?" said Colonel Davos.

"We are unsure," said 22 as she floated down to the ground and landed on it with her bare feet. "We sense that one is a considerable threat that we would not engage with unless commanded. We would sacrifice approximately 64% of ourselves at the minimum to ensure appreciable chances of success."

"64%? That's not bad," said Colonel Davos. He grunted, ridding himself of that optimistic notion. "But he has an entire army hidden somewhere with at least two beings rivaling, if not exceeding his strength.

Three if I count Seismic.

These damn mega corporations. They start wars and now they ruin investigations. If Hammerhead wasn't a major subsidiary of a Council of Fortune member, I could've had Seismic in my custody."

Colonel Davos looked at 22 and saw she was still staring at the Null Box where Thanatos had been. "What? You've taken a liking to him?"

"We are simply interested," said 22 simply.

"Remember that you're supposed to guard him," said Colonel Davos. "If I get a sense that you don't understand what that duty entails, then you know the consequences."

"Release of a mechanism that causes drastic decay to us," said 22. "We understand."

"Good," said Colonel Davos. "I'm going to open a door after Thanatos has been fully secured. Go out through that and keep an eye on him. Make sure nothing gets to him. Use lethal force as required."

"We understand" said 22.

Colonel Davos nodded as he walked back to the pilot cockpit, and when he left, 22 still stood there, staring eerily at the box that once held the Irregular.

'As we thought, you are not from home. You cannot take us back,' thought 22. 'But your scent is not from here either.

Like us, you do not belong on this planet.'

Chapter 182: Into the Nexus

Aldrich stood at the bottom of his Crypt, doing what he did best: observing. He had expected to be dumped straight into a natural Null Zone.

He did not know exactly what Null Zones looked like, but if rumors on the Net had any weight behind them, they were supposed to be areas filled with giant Null Ore that protruded from the ground in forests of blacklight crystal.

There were also rumors that monsters even more terrifying than variants roamed them, but these were entirely unfounded.

Considering Aldrich was underground, he figured he would have been in some kind of cave filled with the crystals.

That got him excited about the possibility of taking some for himself, but no, beneath him was a metal floor, around him were metal walls, and above him, far, far up, at least a hundred and fifty meters up, there was a series of giant metal ceilings that locked together to form a thick, entrapping seal.

Yet, through the metal, Aldrich could see the faint shine of Null. The metal was not grey but tinted a slight purple. Null energy permeated through almost all known metals, and it did not take much exposure to disable an Alter.

In fact, if containing a live prisoner was the goal, then it was better to keep the Null exposure insulated to some degree as it was in the Null Box. There were studies done on captive variants showing that extended complete exposure to Null energy caused the body to start breaking apart from within.

Flesh rotted, blood vessels burst, bones cracked, and internal growths akin to rampant cancer flared up.

Most likely because with the Alter organ prevented from circulating its unique cells, the body that relied on its enriching effects quickly broke apart.

Aldrich placed a hand on a wall. A thick layer of dust puffed up in a cloud around his black metaled fingers.

Nobody had been here in some time. The surface of the metal was relatively smooth, but there were small dents and scratches here and there, some leading into a discernable pattern upwards. Evidently, prior visitors to this place had tried to escape.

Aldrich tracked the patterns up, but they stopped past fifty or so meters up. Something prevented them from going any further.

Aldrich rapped his fist on the wall with minor impact. The metal vibrated, echoing the impact surprisingly well with a dull ring.

"I see," said Aldrich with a nod. He had an idea of how the Crypt worked.

Essentially, there WAS a larger area with Null Ore within it. Presumably a cavern of some sort. But this giant metal cylinder was dropped within it, presumably exactly to prevent people from trying to mess with the Null crystals or finding some way out via underground passageways.

The fact that there were very few dents on the metal likely meant that there was some way to track if someone was trying to break through. The sudden disappearance of climbing marks after fifty meters indicated a countermeasure for those trying to climb up.

Likely tied with this metal's property to channel vibrations well. Aldrich's theory was that any appreciable impact caused enough vibrations to trigger sensors above the influence of Null's tech disrupting properties.

Aldrich sat down and made himself comfortable. He was not intending on escaping anyway, he just wanted to make sure he knew what his surroundings were like. The only thing that really mattered to him was that surveillance was impossible, and the presence of Null light did exactly that.

Now then, with that confirmed, Aldrich got ready to get to work. He had taken enough of a break from fighting, it was time for a little bit of excitement now. He placed his hand on the ground, and a green light burst from it.

Aldrich revealed his hand, a faint trail of smoke curled around his palm, baring a glowing green sigil.

[1x Sign Stone consumed]

The sigil, Aldrich noted, was different. It consisted of simple line patterns that formed a shape reminiscent of a tower. He did not pay it much mind because he sensed nothing was off about it. Instead, he put his hand over the sign, and it reacted, glowing bright.

[Will you enter the Nexus?]

Of course, Aldrich's answer was yes. When he willed this, the light from the sigil surged up, engulfing him. As he felt the darkness of his prison turn into the darkness of dimensional shifting, he thanked circumstance for putting him in this jail.

The world probably thought that they had Aldrich secure here, especially with that '22' entity, an entity unbound by any law, ready to fight him and try to kill him, but all the government had provided Aldrich was a very neat, very private spot to grow stronger.

It reminded him of meditation caves where cultivators in some Chinese novels went to grow stronger.

Though, unlike them, Aldrich would not take 500 years. Probably. He hoped the Death Lord had not changed too much, but knowing her unpredictable personality, really anything went. Regardless, he was prepared for the worst.

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But when Aldrich manifested into the Nexus, the worst was not what he got. Instead, the moment he materialized, he was hit full force with what felt like a speeding truck.

Aldrich crashed into the ground, skidding backwards.

"Oof," managed out Aldrich as he looked down to see Valera tackling him down with a full hug.

"Master...you don't know how much I missed you!" said Valera.

"It...hasn't even been a day," said Aldrich with struggling breath. Valera's hugs had always been dangerous, but with her level now almost reaching 50, they were now no joke.

"A day without you is like an eternity to me," said Valera as she let out a sigh of contentment in holding Aldrich.

"I...appreciate you too," said Aldrich. As Valera snuggled into his chest, he hovered his hand over her back, wavering, wondering if this was the right thing to do.

"Hm?" Valera suddenly detached from Aldrich, letting him stand up. She circled around him, narrowing her red eyes as she inspected Aldrich's body like a wary cat.

"What is it?" said Aldrich as he looked around to get a brief idea of his surroundings. He was not in the Nexus at all.

He was outside, standing in a vast field of grass that stretched out into the horizon. Countless beautiful white lilies swayed in a gentle breeze, all of them glowing with a ghostly purple light.

There was no sun here, leaving this place in permanent night. There was still light, though, shining from high above, in a huge green orb atop an enormous tower that stretched into the skies. The orb mimicked the role of a moon, casting pale silver light tinted with green downwards.

The Necropolis.

This was...the Death Lord's realm? Had Aldrich been ported here? No, Sign Stones worked only for the Nexus. Had she merged the Necropolis with the Nexus, then?

"What happened to the armor? He always complained about his personal space, I would have thought he would speak out now," said Valera.

"Volantis...is undergoing repairs" said Aldrich.

"Repairs?" Valera put a hand to her lip in concern. She was dressed in her black dress set, and there, standing in the grass, amid a field of glowing purple lilies, she looked stunning, like something straight out of a masterpiece painting.

Physical beauty did not affect Aldrich due to his Lich status, but he could still understand and appreciate it.

"Will he be alright?" said Valera, concerned.

"I'm surprised you would ask about his wellbeing," said Aldrich.

"I am envious of how close he gets to be with you, and thoroughly annoyed by how he prevents me from expressing my loyalty" said Valera. "But that does not mean I can take away from what he does for you. What he does for this Legion by protecting you when I cannot."

"You're becoming more open minded," noted Aldrich.

"It was a habit of mine to think myself your only defender," said Valera. She smiled proudly. "After all, I am your guardian knight. None should be deserving to shield you

but I!" She shook her head. "But that is simply not true. I cannot be there with you all the time, nor am I the only one that deserves to protect you.

I realized it when I saw that little girl with the spatial magic work so very hard even under my harsh expectations. All of us – the entire Legion – are your guardian knight, and each of us has a role to play in it.

My feelings cannot be allowed to break the order of our Legion, especially not when I hold such a high role within it."

"What a fine commander you have, Death Walker!" The Death Lord before Aldrich and Valera. She pointed to Valera with her pipe, trails of lavender smoke curling from her lips as she spoke. "She learns so very quickly. Reminds me of myself when I was younger. But enough of this idle chatter!"

The Death Lord raised a proud arm in the air, the pipe in her fingers drawing a trail of smoke with her movements. Aldrich noticed then that she only had a single arm. "And welcome to your new and much improved Nexus!"

Chapter 183: [Bonus chapter] Into the Nexus 2

Chapter 183: [Bonus chapter] Into the Nexus 2 [Bonus chapter for keeping me in top 20 powerstones/golden tickets] Aldrich paused to stare at the Death Lord, noting the drastic changes to her. One of her arms was completely gone, her robes hanging loosely around the area. One of her shining, emerald green draconic eyes was gone, covered over by a black eyepatch. Under the eyepatch, the hints of burned flesh were visible. One of the Death Lord's black horns had been severed, crumbled down to the base.

All of the damage she took, it seemed, was localized to her right side. The injuries stood in contrast to her regal robes, but she still proudly strutted about as if nothing was wrong at all, showing her shapely legs under the slit of her robes and putting out her chest with all the confidence in the world. "... Valera side eyed Aldrich with a narrow gaze. "What happened to you?" said Aldrich. "Oh, this?" The Death Lord looked down at her missing arm. "Nothing, really. A sparring session with one of my Deathguard that turned a little intense." "Your First Deathguard, I assume? That's the only one that could injure you like this," said Aldrich. Among the Death Lord's and Deathguard, the number in the guard did not indicate strength.

Volantis, for example, was fifth, but at his peak, when he went on his warrior's journey to become stronger and obtained the [Hand of the Blood God], he became the second or third strongest. But the First Deathguard was no doubt the undisputed strongest. Rella the God Slayer was her name. She was the estranged daughter of a High God called Rathos who was basically the equivalent of Zeus in Elden World, and in raw power, she exceeded even the Death Lord with massive areas of electrical lightning

barrages. "Rella does not find it difficult to control herself sometimes," nodded the Death Lord. "But enough about my injuries, they hardly weaken me."

How about I introduce you to the much-needed changes I made to this pitiable space that ignorant goddess deemed the 'Nexus'?" "You're weakened, you say?" said Aldrich. "Then what happens if I challenge you here and now? Do I have a chance to usurp your power all at once?" "Hoh? You would approach me like that?"

Challenge me to now?" The Death Lord smiled, baring her many sharp, draconic teeth. "If taking down this snake is what you require-," Valera put her arm out to the side and stood firmly by Aldrich's side, her cross-shield materializing around her arm. "Then I will be happy to oblige, master." "Hm. I may be weakened, Death Walker, but you are being too confident just because you've received some power. Uncharacteristically confident," said the Death Lord. "It was just a hypothetical," said Aldrich. "Heh, an interesting one to consider, my Death Walker, but patience."

We will have our destined battle soon. And you're not at full strength either, though, are you?" said the Death Lord as she breathed out a ring of purple smoke that floated towards Aldrich's helm. It would have landed on his white dot eye before he batted the smoke out the way. "What did you do to my dear Volantis? I allow him to serve you and he comes back like this."

Poor thing." "He'll be here soon," said Aldrich. He looked around. "Where are the rest of my units?" "Ah, they are resting in the Nexus," said the Death Lord. She waved her pipe, beckoning Aldrich forward. "Come, come!"

I am just dying to show you how much I have changed things for the better! Oh, I am already dead, but you understand what I mean." The Death Lord strutted away, walking towards the imposing castle gate of the towering Necropolis. Valera held her shield tight still, but Aldrich put his hand on her shoulder. "It's alright." He started to follow the Death Lord. One thing he noted was that the Death Lord was actually not that good at hiding her expressions and emotions in the way that, say, Solomon Solar was.

She was too expressive when her true appearance was laid bare like this. She probably relied on her enormous full body armor covering her face to make her unreadable. But Aldrich could tell she was not entirely comfortable with his questioning. It was in the way her eyes shifted, in the way her serpentine tongue flicked out in a hint of displeasure, in the way her eye ever so slightly twitched, that he got the idea that she was not exactly telling the truth of her injuries. Aldrich did not press on further in this matter, though. The Death Lord was probably never going to give him a straight answer, and so long as she did not pose a direct threat, he could tolerate her. Valera nodded, her shield dematerializing.

She gave the spot where Aldrich had touched a lingering, loving gaze, before quickly following behind Aldrich. The Death Lord walked up to the bone decorated castle gate of the Necropolis and waved her hand in front of it. The door crackled with green magical energy, but it did not move. "Ugh. My magic is still not what it was," said the Death Lord.

"I will just do this." The Death Lord took her pipe between her fingers and cast a spell. "[Outer Mist Phase]." The smoke emanating from her pipe turned green, amplifying in mass into clouds that covered Aldrich and Valera. "You can afford to cast a 8th circle spell like this but not open a simple door?" said Aldrich. "You are quite critical of me today."

"I almost feel shy," said the Death Lord as she made a mock gesture to hide the low cut of the robes that barely hid her chest. "But alas, I am Lord of Death, and shame is not part of my being. Now, take this warp with me to the Nexus. There, you may be reunited with the rest of your budding Legion." The Death Lord flashed a mischievous smile. "And quite the change to, well, everything in that accursed place ranging from that dreary old smith to those putrid divine waters to the shadowy mannequin of that disgusting light loving wench."

Chapter 184: Complete Overhaul

As the [Outer Mist Phase] took Aldrich, Valera, and the Death Lord to the Nexus in a warp, Aldrich asked Valera, "By the way, what were you doing out there? If everyone else is in the Nexus still?"

"Well, I wanted the privilege of seeing you first, master," said Valera. "Did I...do anything wrong? Perhaps I left the Legion unattended?"

"No, it's fine. I'm sure you wouldn't have left them if you didn't think their safety at least somewhat guaranteed," said Aldrich with a nod that Valera smiled at.

"My, young love – such a wonderful sight to see. Sickeningly sweet, I must say," said the Death Lord as she frowned and waved her hand, speeding up the [Outer Mist Phase].

"W-what, it is not like that!" protested Valera. "Not yet at least, no, what am I saying – I am his Guardian Knight! It would go against my vows to fall for the one I am sworn to defend."

"Yes, yes, because rules are never broken, of course," said the Death Lord as she rolled her eyes and twirled her pipe, causing the warp to finalize.

The mist that gathered around the group fluxed and thickened, and in the next instant, Aldrich felt his vision blacken and his body grow weightless as he underwent the warp. When the darkness faded away, Aldrich found himself staring at an enormous pillar of pure green, crystallized energy.

The crystal structure looked like the branches of a tree stretching upwards, latching onto an incredibly high ceiling of dark stone that stood almost a hundred meters high.

"You've made the place much bigger," noted Aldrich as he looked around. The Nexus was originally a small space that functioned more like an audience chamber to meet with the goddess Amara, so it was limited in space.

Now, though, Aldrich found himself inside a massive hallway that could easily seat an entire football stadium inside of it.

This was a complete and utter overhaul of the entire Nexus. No, this place could not even be called the same anymore.

Aldrich heard a massive commotion behind him, and he turned around to see his Legion, or at least the monstrous units he had decided to take into the Nexus, all gathered, ready to meet him.

At the head of them stood Okeanos with the Geist, Crab, and Merman behind the Locus.

"Glad to see you all made it," said Aldrich with a smile.

"We are happy to see you, master," said Okeanos with a bow of his head. "We waited long."

'Long? It's barely been a day,' thought Aldrich, but then again, he had heard the exact same thing from Valera. He did not complain, though. It just meant his units were that loyal to him.

"Geh! (You're back!)" said the Geist. "Gehgeh (When do we fight again?)"

The crab monsters Aldrich had under his command waved their pincers in the air in their signature dance, and Crab followed along with its giant pincers, probably having taken a liking to the dance and practiced it.

"Khos-Khal! (The king is returned!)" said Merman as he clasped his many hands together in a gesture of deference.

"Geh? (What are you doing?)" The Geist clasped his hands together to mimic Merman.

"Khos-Vul (Praising the king)" said Merman.

The Geist showed his clasped hands to Merman. "Geh? (Like this?)"

"Vo. Mil-Kan-il-Khos-Vul (Yes. But the more arms bound together, the greater the respect shown)," said Merman.

"Gehgeh! (Oh, then like this!)" The Geist focused on his hands and shuddered before explosively growing out an additional pair of much thinner arms, clasping them together.

"Moro (Better)," said Merman.

At that moment, from the back, the Zombie Giant roared and beat his chest to acknowledge Aldrich's return, completely drowning out every other sound in a thunderous burst of volume.

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

"Vo. (Yes)," agreed Merman.

Aldrich saw that development and noted how incredibly fast the Geist was growing in training its powers. It had figured out how to apply its explosive growth ability not just to heal its wounds, but to grow entirely new body parts as well.

That made Aldrich consider the Geist even higher for Dark Wisdom levels.

"Your Legion has grown so much," said Valera as she stood by Aldrich, smiling as she looked at the diverse crowd of creatures of all shapes and sizes interacting with each other. "Far greater than it has ever been when you were a mortal."

"Our Legion has grown," corrected Aldrich. "Without you, I wouldn't have had the firepower or defensive capability to make all this happen."

"I only followed you." A red tint flushed in Valera's pale cheeks. "But if-if you say so, my master."

Aldrich looked beyond his army of monsters and to their surroundings. The giant hallway was empty, made entirely of austere grey or black stone lit up only by the green glow of the huge crystal root structure behind him.

Though quite empty, the hallway felt strangely similar in design, and when he reflected on his memory, he came to realize why.

"Is this design a replica of your Throne Room?" said Aldrich. "Minus the banners, throne, and, well, basically any decoration. Where did the rest of the Nexus go? The Trial Quest pillars, the blacksmith, the goddess Amara, and the Wellspring of Life?"

The Death Lord's eye twitched when she heard the name 'Amara', but she kept her cool.

"My, you could tell?" said the Death Lord with a sly smile. "And my apologies for its emptiness. I did not have much time to work with. But it is fitting. This Throne Room of yours is merely the beginning of your journey as Usurper."

When my powers are yours, this Throne Room shall be complete, filled with your proud Legion and, of course, a Throne. That is what this will be." The Death Lord tapped the

enormous crystal roots with her pipe, letting out the sound of wood hitting glass. "By interacting with this Throne Shard, you may access those spaces you known as 'Trial Quests'."

The Throne Shard glowed, emitting an eerie, deep echo before projecting multiple small portals outlined in fiery green in front of Aldrich. Within each portal, Aldrich could see snippets of different scenery. A muddy swamp in one, a scorching desert in another, huge swathes of storm clouds here, and eerie abandoned ruins there.

These were all snapshots of the environments in the Trial Quests available to Aldrich. Specifically, Trial Quests 1, 2, 3, and 4, though, of course, Aldrich had already cleared the 1st quest.

Aldrich inspected the portals and the Throne Shard, wondering how to interact with them.

"This Throne Shard is akin to an extension of your own will," said the Death Lord. "Simply bare your thoughts to it, and it will fulfill your wishes."

Aldrich nodded and willed the Throne Shard to show him the rest of the Trial Quests. Bright bolts of green energy crackled outwards as Aldrich established a connection with the Throne Shard for the first time. He felt a jolting sensation in his mind, but it quickly passed, and when it did, he felt the Throne Shard linked to his mind.

The Throne Shard glowed and released its deep hum before showing seven more portals: the rest of Aldrich's Trial Quests.

"Hm?" Aldrich noted something off. The portals for Trial Quests 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 were filled out with green, not revealing what was within him. That, he could understand as he technically was not high enough level to access them.

But Trial Quests 11 and 12 were completely blacked out.

"Those final two Trial Quests are not available to you," explained the Death Lord. "After all, originally, they were intended to seal my Deathguard and myself. But since we are here, those Trial Quests are merely empty space now."

"Empty space? Why can't I access them, then?" said Aldrich.

"They possess the same level-based restriction as with the other Trial Quests," said the Death Lord. She shrugged. "I suppose once you reach those levels, you may use those quest spaces as storage of some sort."

Quite anticlimactic, thought Aldrich. The two final epic showdowns staged in the ultra endgame against the Deathguard and Death Lord respectively were now reduced to just storage.

"And where's the Wellspring, goddess, and blacksmith?" said Aldrich.

"Wellspring? Bah, that pool of disgusting sewer water? Why would you even wonder of its presence? Those waters would rejuvenate lesser undead, but to the likes of us higher undead, it is nothing more than foul poison," said the Death Lord. "I would have destroyed it outright, but, there was still magical energy within the Wellspring that I found a waste to discard.

Thus, I had it refashioned into something far better fitting for you, Usurper."

The Death Lord tapped the Throne Shard proudly with her pipe.

"...You turned the Wellspring into the Throne Shard?" said Aldrich.

"Precisely!" The Death Lord laughed. "And that ugly drawing of that even uglier goddess, I broke into raw magic and infused into the throne as well.

There was surprisingly little to use in that scribble of a shell, though, but then again, I should not be surprised that a goddess that relied upon the mindless faith of masses held little strength herself."

"I see," said Aldrich. "And the blacksmith? He was quite useful to me."

"Sindri was but a slave to Amara," said the Death Lord. "He too was a simple drawn shell, but I found it right to shatter it and free him, if indeed there was truly anything of him in there."

"So...I've lost access to all my crafting and healing?" said Aldrich.

"You called that crafting?" The Death Lord was offended. "Rolling the dice over and over again for this treasure and that? No!"

The Death Lord placed her pipe in her mouth and snapped her fingers. In response, behind the Throne Shard, another portal opened up. A much larger one indicating that something big was coming through it.

A giant stepped out with his face covered in a helmet that looked like a welding mask. He was garbed in protective metal and thick cloth that indicated not a warrior's armor, but a blacksmith's coverings.

Blacksmithing tools like a hammer and a drill like item were skewered into the flesh of one of his arms. Dull black flames flickered around the length of his other arm.

The giant carried a sizable anvil in one hand and an inactive, cylindrical furnace in the other. Despite his immense size, the giant very gently set down the anvil and furnace on the floor before turning around and waving to Aldrich.

"Hullo. My name is Bors. I smith for you now." The giant's voice was surprisingly mellow. Not at all like the thunderous rumbling roars that Aldrich's own undead giant could let out. Bors sounded positively friendly, on the contrary.

"Bors is one of my finest smiths! Among the best of my giant forgers!" declared the Death Lord. "Any work he produces here will be of the finest quality, and no longer will you need to rely on luck for your smithing wants.

Instead, Bors will listen to your requests and work to meet them directly!"

"Bors?" Aldrich stepped around the Throne Shard and in front of Bors. The giant was large, standing at around 8 meters tall, but denitely a good amount shorter than Aldrich Zombie Giant which stood at 12 meters.

Bors also looked a little more misshapen than Aldrich's giant. Where Aldrich's giant had a powerful, muscular body with good proportions like a powerlifter, Bors had a hunched back, big torso, and comparatively skinnier arms and legs.

"You're an Earth Giant," noted Aldrich.

In Elden World, most giants like Aldrich's zombie giant lived in a faraway northern land of towering mountains. There, the giants used enormous swathes of solid mystic clouds like giant aerial plains, living upon them or using them to cross from mountaintop to mountaintop.

Thus, these giants were aptly called Sky Giants.

Bors, however, was a giant descended from ancient clans that split o from the Borean line, deciding to give up life atop the skies and instead tread upon the humble dirt. Because they decided to forego the skies to live upon the earth, they were called Earth Giants.

"Yes, I am! Like earth I am strong, so smith I can long!" said Bors enthusiastically.

Bors's face was covered under his welding helm, but the giant probably had a bright smile underneath it.

Earth giants tended to be less intelligent than their sky giant counterparts, but at the same time, they were far less aggressive and one of the friendliest races in Elden World.

Gentle giants through and through. Which made them easy to exploit, causing many civilizations to enslave them not only for their prodigious strength, but their strong connection to the earth that granted them an affinity for metal working.

"I rescued Bors from a life of suering as an Elven tower builder," said the Death Lord. "I found him when I alighted down and utterly obliterated that little city, what was its name, ah, Ars Fisteria.

They had that puny tree tower that the elves are so fond of building in their cities, nothing at all compared to my Necropolis, but I do give them respect for their eorts." The Death Lord shook her head. "I granted the elves three chances to surrender, but they refused to yield. Far too proud a people for their own good, I dare say."

"Does Bors need coins to take a smithing request?" said Aldrich. He got a closer look at Bors and saw scorch marks and whip wounds scarring his arms a plenty. Signs of the giant's past as a slave.

"Coins? Nonsense," said the Death Lord. "Bors is only limited by the time it takes for him to forge what you desire and the resources you bestow upon him."

Aldrich briefly wondered what he would do with the coins in his inventory, but he set that issue aside for later.

"Strong I am! Forge I can!" said Bors as he nodded several times at Aldrich.

"Bors, what can you do with this?" said Aldrich as he materialized the soul of Seth Solar. The ghostly white orb glowed in Aldrich's hand. This was, other than the Locus, the greatest prize Aldrich had won in the past night. A symbol of his fulfilled vengeance and a new age of strength.

"My, that is quite an interesting soul," said the Death Lord as she licked out her forked tongue. "From one of these New Worlders, no? Powerful, too, I can sense it. Go on, Bors, tell us how you will forge this."

Bors sat down behind his giant anvil and furnace. He held out an open palm, and the soul floated above it, looking positively tiny in his huge, scarred hand. Bors craned his neck down as he stared at the soul.

"I never see anything like this before. But I make it work!" said Bors. He looked to Aldrich. "What you want?"

"You best not forge a weapon, my dear Usurper," said the Death Lord. "Without even using my beautiful scythe even once! So ckle – how will your lover there think of your loyalty if she sees you hop from wondrous weapon after the other?"

"H-huh? My master is the utmost symbol of loyalty!" protested Valera.

"Of course, of course," said the Death Lord with a smile. "You are so very easy to tease, Guardian."

"..." Valera pouted as she turned to Aldrich. "Master...I must resist a rising urge

to duel that...that woman."

"We'll get that duel in time," said Aldrich as he glanced to the Death Lord.

"Won't we?"

"Yes. Yes you shall," said the Death Lord with bared fangs and excited grin.

"As for what I want, Bors," began Aldrich. He did not want a weapon, because the Death Lord was right. The [Forsthallowed War Scythe] was already a superb quality item. Aldrich also already had an armor set that would grow with him in the form of Volantis. "Can you forge me a seal?"

"A seal? Yes I can! Forge I can!" said Bors.

A seal was a catalyst that aided in spellcasting, but unlike weapon catalysts, seals had no inherent offensive usage. They were mostly handheld talismans that one could not really use as a weapon like a staff or a scythe.

In exchange, however, where catalyst weapons usually only had a single strong active ability, a seal provided several active spells as well as stronger passive effects. To use the active spells of a seal, one had to materialize it and wield it in one hand, preventing two handed use of a weapon.

However, the good thing about seals was that you could wear them as an accessory when their active spells were not needed, granting permanent access to their passives.

"Thanks, Bors," said Aldrich.

"What kind of spells you want?" said Bors. "Tell me, and I try to do all!"

"Hm," said Aldrich. Considering Seth's rough strength at around level 40, he figured he could get a Seal at the Epic+ rank. The higher the rank of a seal, the

more spells it could store, and at the epic rank, a seal could store 4 spells. "An area of effect damage spell. A high single target damage spell. A healing spell. And a stat boosting buff."

Bors nodded along to Aldrich's words, tapping a finger to his head to try and help him follow along and remember. It took a solid thirty seconds after Aldrich stopped speaking for Bors to respond.

"Okay! I get it," said Bors. "I do all that. My hammer will strike loud, and soon, you be proud!"

Bors took the soul in his hand and led it to his furnace. He opened the metal cylinder up and funneled in some of the black flames imbued on one of his arms. The furnace roared with activity, arcing with dark red and embers. He studied the soul in and closed the door shut.

"I think I be done in five days" said Bors.

"Five days? That should be fine," said Aldrich. He could not help but like Bors. Bors was a gentle giant through and through, dutiful and always positive. But most of all, innocent. "I expect a lot from you, Bors."

"No worries! My work always good," said Bors as he sat down in front of the furnace cross-legged.

"Now then," said the Death Lord. She looked Aldrich over from head to toe, closely inspecting him.

"Where are you looking?" said Valera suspiciously.

"Ogling your lover, is it not evident?"

Before Valera could react, the Death Lord laughed as she put her hand to her lip.

"A jest. No, I was simply checking on my dear Deathguard Volantis.

Instead of forging new toys, how about we take the time to x poor old Volantis now?"

Chapter 186: Fixing Volantis

"Volantis? Whatever software the demons use for him told me that he's undergoing self-repair. Do you mean you want to accelerate that process?" Aldrich asked the Death Lord.

"Software...?" The Death Lord ever so slightly tilted her head, making Aldrich realize that she obviously would have no idea what that word meant. "I do not grasp that word, but I understand the essence of what you are saying. And to answer: yes and no.

We will restore Volantis, but not in the way the demons wished."

"Explain," said Aldrich.

"The fact that you have caused the Demonwill entrapped within Volantis to manifest like this, to try and scrub Volantis's soul, means you managed to get him to reclaim a shard of his former soul. Quite likely through recalling old memories, no?" said the Death Lord.

"You would be right about that," said Aldrich.

"Excellent!" The Death Lord tapped her pipe with her index finger in a positive gesture. "Then that signals the Demonwill is weakened near to its destruction. Weakened enough to be completely dispelled.

If the Demonwill is purged, then Volantis will return with the full extent of his old soul. But-," The Death Lord narrowed her one eye as she stared at Aldrich. "It is your decision whether you desire this or not. Volantis was a proud warrior in his life of yore, and he followed a leader he devoted himself greatly to. It may be that should he return with his old spirit intact, he will not recognize you as his own."

"Is that why you never tried to restore Volantis when he was under your command?" said Aldrich.

"Partially. Mostly, it was because the Demonwill was too powerful for even myself to sunder," said the Death Lord. "Which is an interesting aspect of this whole situation to note. It would appear that without the Flame Arcs in this New World of yours, demonic influence is at its weakest."

Aldrich did not know everything about demon lore, but he did know what Flame Arcs were. Demons were not actually native existences to Elduin, the main physical realm that Elden World mostly operated on.

Demons instead hailed from a hell like separate realm of eternal flame called the Pyre. Because of their extradimensional status, demons needed some kind of physical anchor in Elduin to manifest.

For most demons, this was the Flame Arc, an enormous collected of demonic runes that generated a constant field of infernal energy from the Pyre that sustained demonic presence. Demons that relied upon the Flame Arc were called Incarnated demons for their physical forms were literally built up and incarnated by the Flame Arcs.

Other demons, particularly those that were converted from Elduin native to demon, were called Anchored demons, for they were permanently 'anchored' to a specific physical body. In Volantis's case, this was his armor form.

Flame Arcs also supported the vast majority of demonic magics, so it made sense that in earth, where there were no Flame Arcs or any demons, really, the magic that kept Volantis's soul chained would weaken.

"What will your decision be, Usurper?" said the Death Lord. "If you do nothing, the Demonwill within that armor will still have the strength to restore Volantis to a state where he knew nothing of his original soul.

And you need not worry of the Demonwill weakening to such an extent that it will fade away entirely – like a parasite, it will eternally sustain itself to a minimum extent off of Volantis's own soul and power."

"In the case that Volantis does rebel against me, do I have an option of subjugating him?" said Aldrich.

Technically speaking, Volantis was not one of Aldrich's undead. He could not just enforce his will on Volantis and be done with it.

This was because demons were one of the very few existences immune to being raised as undead.

When Aldrich 'raised' units from the Necropolis, he did so using sigils – symbols of power – granted to him by the Death Lord.

All those symbols did was transfer ownership over to Aldrich.

For most of the undead, switching ownership meant they became his own undead with no issue.

But in Volantis's case, all it meant was that he just switched literal physical ownership over to Aldrich like two players swapping items with each other.

"Yes," said the Death Lord. "But it would be a difficult one. You could defeat him in combat, which would weaken his soul and allow the Demonwill to take over again.

I have an Arena to isolate Volantis for this purpose.

That is, if you do desire his awakening."

"Volantis is strong, but he can't handle facing my Legion alone. The risk isn't significant to take him down. I just need to know whether there are actually any benefits to letting Volantis have his old memories," said Aldrich, speaking from a point of view of pure rationality.

Aldrich valued Volantis, it was true, and if possible, he would have liked Volantis to have his old self without the chains of the Demonwill erasing who he originally was.

But the thing was, if all this just made Volantis an enemy, if there was no discernible benefit to Aldrich, then he would not go through with it either.

"Volantis would gain access to the martial skills and experiences he would have had in life," said the Death Lord. "In my research, I knew Volantis to be an Orclord, just shy of a Warmother or Warfather which leads entire hordes.

The soul also influences one's physical form to an extent.

With his original soul fully awakened, his armored body may undergo direct changes that no doubt will increase his strength.

The amount of power he receives will be appreciable. And if he accepts you as his Armored still, then it may very well be that over time, those powers and traits may transfer over to you."

Aldrich had an idea of what Volantis could gain.

Orcs in Elden World were immense physical powerhouses with their defining trait being their endurance.

Unlike trolls, orcs did not have regeneration, but what they did have was an indomitable will and bodies that seemingly never tired, letting them fight and fight and fight for days even while they hungered or even nursed near lethal wounds.

Volantis would also gain access to the skills he would have had as an orc warrior.

Orc warriors practiced their own unique combat art called Shaping that involved martial arts moves that manipulated the elements of nature around them.

Depending on what tribe they were from, they could shape earth, fire, or wind.

Aldrich did not know exactly which tribe Volantis was from, but if he was an Orclord, he should at least be a master in one of those shaping arts, potentially multiple.

"Alright, I'll do it," said Aldrich. "Take me to your Arena."

"As you wish, my dear Usurper," said the Death Lord. She tapped the Throne Shard with her pipe, causing it to crackle with energy.

A list of various small portals appeared representing each of the floors of the Necropolis.

As she started to scroll through them with flicks of her pipe, Aldrich asked, "Do I have access to the Necropolis through this Throne Shard as well?"

"My, getting greedy now, are we? But I do like that. However, no, not past the fifteenth floor which you cleared and claimed as your own," said the Death Lord. "All others are still under my control. But you will be given opportunity to challenge them and make them yours over time."

"Over time, then, this entire Necropolis will be mine?" said Aldrich.

"That is the end goal of this, yes," said the Death Lord. "Ah, here we are."

She tapped a small portal showing in insides of a colosseum like arena with her pipe.

The portal expanded greatly, engulfing all the others to create one singular portal.

"The preparations are complete," said the Death Lord. "Take whoever you wish for this. In the case that Volantis is...less than cooperative. Orcs can be a troublesome bunch in that regard."

"Valera, Okeanos," said Aldrich. "Come with me."

"I am ever by your side, master," said Valera with a bow of her head.

Okeanos jumped a dozen meters in the air and landed right behind Aldrich. "I serve."

"Good," said Aldrich. In the case that Volantis did turn aggressive, Aldrich had to make battle plans against the armor.

Volantis had powerful area of effect Shattered Bone necromancy spells, so Aldrich did not want to take any units that might die in the crossfire. He wanted to take strong individual units that would overwhelm Volantis and protect Aldrich.

Okeanos and Valera were good enough for this purpose.

Valera could guard Aldrich, and Okeanos was strong enough to overwhelm Volantis, not to mention Aldrich himself had decent firepower too. He did not take other strong units like the giant, Crab, or Merman because in the case that this whole restoration attempt turned sour, he wanted to test out Okeanos's strength.

"This is all you are taking?" said the Death Lord. "I should not doubt your judgement, though. And my, this one-," The Death Lord immediately manifested behind Okeanos, inspecting the variant with curious, gleaming emerald green eyes.

As she spoke, lavender smoke curled out from her lips and flickered around Okeanos. "Is quite the specimen. The New World has its own fair share of mighty creatures, that is to be for certain."

Okeanos whirled around and swiped at the Death Lord in complete reflexive instinct, his rainbow colored eyes wide in utter surprise that someone could just completely blindside him like that.

"Ah, my apologies." The Death Lord swayed backwards flexibly, deftly dodging the blow. A gust of pressurized wind passed her face from the forceful swipe, blowing her faint purple hair backwards.

"Stand down, Okeanos," said Aldrich.

"...Yes," said Okeanos as he warily stared down at the Death Lord.

"I let my curiosity get the better of me. That was rude," said the Death Lord. She strutted back to Aldrich. "Sometimes, I cannot help myself. I do love things that interest me. As an immortal, that is one of the few things that casts away the boredom of eternity.

Now, enough wasting time."

'...But you were the one wasting time' thought Aldrich, but he did not voice this intrusive thought.

The Death Lord nodded at Aldrich and passed through the portal.

Aldrich sighed. The Death Lord's personality was almost like his opposite. She was less serious, more impulsive, and quite vocal about everything. The type of person he would not have gotten along with well in the real world, but he dealt with the cards he was given.

"Let's go," said Aldrich. He looked down at his clawed hands. Claws that might turn against him soon. "And prepare for a fight."

"I am ready," said Okeanos as he clenched his fists, surges of crackling green and blue energy traveling around his colorful shell.

"As am I," said Valera as she materialized her shield and armor.

Chapter 187: Second and Fourth Deathguard

[Bonus chapter for getting me to top 20 golden tickets/powerstones!]

Aldrich passed through the portal, followed by Okeanos and Valera. They warped into the Death Lord's Arena, standing in the center of an enormous colosseum.

They were in the actual fighting pit itself, surrounded by a stage of sand dotted with shards of shattered bone and bits and pieces of hacked off armor. Evidently, this place had seen quite some action in the past.

Now, though, as Aldrich looked around, seeing the many empty stands and seats towering around the pit, he felt a distinct sense of emptiness. Of abandonment.

The Death Lord followed Aldrich's gaze and sighed. "Yes, this place has seen better days. Roaring crowds and battles to make the blood of even the coldest hearted of undead boil. But since the Severing of Realms, I fear I do not have enough under my command for such spectacle, with less than a third of my troops remaining with me."

"Severing of Realms?" said Aldrich.

"It is a term that Medula, my precious second, coined the strange incident that tore us from the Elduin realm and into this...this limbo space," said the Death Lord. "This space bound strangely to your existence.

If you fall, we all fall, so do take that into note and try not to die, my dear Usurper."

"I've been meaning to ask about that, actually. Do you have any idea what happened to transfer you over here?" said Aldrich.

He had always been curious exactly how the game world had manifested into reality, but he had no ways to get an answer. There was his game console in Blackwater, and he did have plans to retrieve it. However, it had been some time since Aldrich had been in Blackwater.

Most likely, his dorm room had been cleared out by now. And trying to get back to the rundown store that sold Aldrich the game would be impossible.

Aldrich remembered that store. It was a Shack store, a rundown, temporary store set up around the outskirts of Neo-York. The owner of the shack had been a man with a cybernetic black mask who had said nothing to Aldrich, just sold him the single copy of Elden World in his store for fifty or so credits.

Shack stores like that which sold antique physical copies of games on top of random pieces of hardware and junk propped up and disappeared so often that he highly doubted the store even still existed.

And the store owner's status as a Nomad meant he had no citizenship recorded anywhere on top of never settling down in any one location. It would be incredibly difficult, if not near impossible to track him down, if he was even alive.

But if the Death Lord had the resources of her Necropolis, it might have been possible for her to get a much better understanding than Aldrich.

"You wish to know the answer?" said the Death Lord. "The truth of the dark secret that lies in the this merging of realms?"

"Yes," said Aldrich.

"Then good, I do too." The Death Lord shrugged.

"..." Aldrich put a palm to his face before speaking again. "Let's get on with fixing Volantis."

The Death Lord smiled and nodded. "Medula, Wai'ki, it's about time you show yourselves."

In response, a portal appeared behind the Death Lord. This portal was not green like hers or Aldrich's, but instead a bright, infernal red. The tell tale coloring of demonic energy.

From there, two women stepped out that looked dramatically different from each other.

One of the women was tall and skinny, standing about level with Valera. She was dressed in a long black trench coat, with the coat tail reaching almost down her ankles. Almost all of her skin was covered, her hands wrapped in what looked like bandages and her feet clothed in black boots.

The lower half of her face was wrapped in bandages as well. The only thing really visible about her was her upper face, the skin pale in shade and marked along the

cheeks with a line of gleaming red runes. Her eyes were a fiery orange-red, covered a little by a thin curtain of white bangs.

Deep, tired crease lines and dark circles decorated her eyes, giving her a positively 'done with this all' aura.

She peered at Aldrich with this tired gaze. "So, this is who our new master will be? I expected more."

This was Curator Medula. Second among the Deathguard. Four red horns sprouted from the sides of her white hair, indicating her status as an Archdemon. If Aldrich remembered correctly, she was level 80+.

She served as the curator of the Necropolis, specializing in spatial magics to keep things moving throughout the forbiddingly large structure.

"D-don't say that – we don't know what kind of person he is! He might be wonderful!" said the woman beside her. She was a much smaller woman in comparison to Medula and held a far more welcoming aura with a shy but big smile.

She daintily grasped a wooden staff ending with a glowing blue flower head in front of her. Her garb consisted of a chest covering and ankle length skirt made of leaves and flowers knitted together with bones. Unlike with Medula, this outfit bared quite a bit of her tanned skin.

Her lengthy, forest green hair was tied in a bun set with narrow bone spikes as hair pins. Deer antlers glowing with a spectral blue shine sprouted from her head.

And this, Aldrich recognized, was Wai'Ki the Spirit Caller, the fourth of the Deathguard. Level 60+.

"I always set my bar low," said Medula. "That way, I'm never disappointed."

"Stop spreading your negativity everywhere!" said Wai'ki. She turned to Aldrich and gave him a deep bow. "Greetings, Usurper. I am Wai'Ki, fourth among the Deathguard. I look forward to working with you!"

Medula shrugged. "What she said."

"Why are you two here?" said Aldrich.

"To fix Volantis, of course," said the Death Lord. "My powers can destroy, but restoration is not my specialty. These two are far better at that."

"I see," said Aldrich. "Medula as an Archdemon probably has knowledge of Volantis, and Wai'Ki's spirit magic helps in dealing with Volantis's soul."

"Precisely," said the Death Lord. "My spirit magic is nothing to scoff at, but it is still at the level of a novice compared to Wai'Ki."

"Oh, don't say that, you're plenty special too, Melly!" said Wai'Ki.

"Melly? That's your name?" said Aldrich to the Death Lord. He had never actually known the Death Lord's name in the lore because she was just known as, well, the Death Lord.

"W-what?" The Death Lord was flustered. "No, that is a simple nickname. And so what if it is? Hm? Do you think it unbecoming of someone my status?"

"No, I don't particularly care," said Aldrich.

"Alright, enough chatter," said Mula. She rubbed her forehead. "I have enough research and tower maintenance as is. Let's get on with this. You-," She pointed a bandage wrapped finger at Aldrich. "Get naked."

"Excuse me!?" Valera stepped forward.

"I need Volantis off to inspect him," said Mula. She looked at Valera, inspecting her briefly before shooing her away. "You, you're useless. Go wait somewhere else."

"If I am to be your new master in the future, then you should know a thing or two about treating others with respect," said Aldrich as he stepped in for Valera.

"Mm. What I mean is she's a warrior. She doesn't have the knowledge to be here. She'll get in the way. Same with that shellfish," said Mula as she stared at Aldrich with her unbrokenly fatigued stare.

"I never get in the way of the master," protested Okeanos.

"Mula is an academic through and through. She has spent her eternity secluding herself in a study like a recluse," said the Death Lord as she yanked Mula back with her coat. Mula just stared tiredly as she was lifted up and placed behind the Death Lord like an unruly puppy. "She has not learned how to filter her thoughts. Nor has she learned a shred of decorum, no matter how much I try to teach her."

But she is right, Volantis must come off for this procedure to continue."

"I understand," said Aldrich. He willed Volantis to detach, and the Demonwill's voice echoed in Aldrich's mind.

'Removing Armor' said the Demonwill.

Aldrich watched as the armor started to break apart into flexible metal strips, peeling off of his body.

"M-master? With no hesitation at all? I will give you your privacy!" Valera put her hands in front of her eyes, though noticeably, she left a gap between her fingers to peek.

And as the armor fully unpeeled, it revealed Aldrich in his full, naked glory. As a skeleton, of course.

"I still feel strangely naked, even as a skeleton," commented Aldrich as he looked down at his body of bare bone. Then, his magical aura manifested, turning into a bright sphere of glowing green energy that covered his lower body. "Much better."

Valera sighed in mild disappointment as she took her hands from her eyes.

"Inspecting now," said Medula as she twirled her hand. A faint purple outline covered Volantis's now empty armor form. The armor levitated in the air and plopped down right in front of Medula. "Wai'Ki, get over here and be ready."

"Yes!" Wai'Ki hopped over to Medula's side, peering at Volantis.

"How long will this take?" said Aldrich to the Death Lord.

"Not long at all. A mere minute or so, I should say," said the Death Lord, gazing at Medula and Wai'ki like a proud parent. "After all, these are my precious Deathguard. Their abilities are top class."

"The Demonwill has become this weakened from the New World? Interesting...", said Medula. She put a hand on the helm of the armor, directly over the white eye dot. "Isolating Demonwill."

Medula withdrew her hand, and from the eye dot, a strand of fiery red energy emerged. The energy snaked upwards, coiling across Medula's fingers and up her arm like a living worm of energy.

"Containing," said Medula as she opened her palm. A baseball sized black hole like void manifested above her hand, sucking in the Demonwill before collapsing in upon itself. This was Medula's Warp Magic, the Mystic Path that she specialized in the most.

Where warriors could devote themselves to Combat Arts and Weapon Arts that indicated specialties in specific martial arts and weapons, mages followed Mystic Paths that indicated the field of magic they practiced.

Medula nodded to Wai'Ki. "Your turn."

"O-okay, I'll try my best!" Wai'Ki took her staff and gently put the flower head on Volantis's helm. "Volantis, you were such a wonderful mentor to me. Always driven to get stronger and so confident, too! Now-now I'll try and help you out."

"---,---,---,---" Wai'Ki started to chant in a tongue that no human vocal chord could ever utter. It sounded like multiple voices layered into one. Utterly indecipherable.

As she spoke, her antlers glowed brightly, and strange, ghostly wisps started to emanate from the ground below Volantis, circling the armor in gently dancing light.

Chapter 188: Volantis Restored

The strange chant that Wai'Ki uttered was the Ancestral Tongue, a language of Old Spirits where every single word held power in them.

Even if Aldrich had a spell or passive that gave him Allspeak, the ability to understand every language, it still would not have let him understand this tongue for, according to the lore, it predated any regular spell.

In Elden World, the Elduin realm was ruled over by a variety of deities, but these gods were outsiders from other realms that had spread their influence upon the world.

Before them all, the Old Spirits ruled the land, acting as aspects of nature that represented everything from forests to the realm's three great moons.

With the arrival of the Elder Gods, however, the Old Spirits were cast away, their influence relegated only to the Soul Stream - the great spiritual realm where all souls were cast back into upon death, to be washed and cleansed anew for renewal and rebirth.

As a result, though the Old Spirits lost the capacity to grant their followers power over nature or the elements, they could still grant a strong affinity to spiritual magic.

In particular, where the new gods used written Runes to infuse their power, the Old Spirits used spoken words in the form of the Ancestral Tongue to grant their followers an avenue to access their strength.

The issue was that with the advent of the gods, the followers of the Old Spirits thinned out from a variety of reasons ranging from active purging to simply a loss of followers over time.

Wai'ki's race, the Rusa - humanoids with features of deers - were one of the few peoples that maintained a connection with the Old Spirits.

Aldrich remembered how the Death Lord mentioned the Soul Stream in trying to revive Adam and Elaine. How the Soul Stream of this new world was inaccessible to her.

Yet could Wai'ki achieve what the Death Lord could not through the Old Spirits?

No, to begin with, were the Old Spirits even here to channel from?

"How will Wai'Ki channel the Soul Stream? I'm assuming the Old Spirits haven't transported over here," asked Aldrich to the Death Lord.

"No, not even she can reach into the waters of a foreign Soul Stream," said the Death Lord. "And she cannot call upon the Old Spirits directly. However, their words of power that comprise the Ancestral Tongue still hold sway for a reason I cannot fathom.

Medula is still investigating why.

There are many things I do not know yet, so you may find questioning me rather unhelpful."

"I see," said Aldrich. "I'm also curious about how all this happened. I have to spend the majority of my time in what you call the 'New World', so I can't devote myself to figuring this all out. But you have the time and resources to get answers.

If you find any, let me know."

"I shall when I can," said the Death Lord.

"When you can?"

"I plan on secluding myself in my Throne Room for some time to recover my injuries. Worry not, though. I shall still grant you quests that continue to give you more and more of my power," said the Death Lord. "I doubt Medula will answer you even if you call to her – she does hate to be removed from that dreary study of hers – but I will give her an order to let you know of any breakthroughs in her research."

"Done!" said Wai'ki cheerfully. She wiped a few beads of sweat away from her forehead. The blue glow around her antlers started to fade away, leaving them to their original color of bone white.

Aldrich inspected Volantis. Nothing about the armor seemed changed. It just stood there as if in suspended animation, unmoving and unresponsive. The eye dot was still white as well.

"Are you sure?" said Aldrich.

"O-of course I am! Oh, maybe something did go wrong, I don't know -I always mess things up somehow." Wai'ki frowned as she nervously held her staff.

At that very moment, Volantis responded. Smooth streams of blue energy swirled out from Volantis, and in the creases and crevices of his armor body, an eerie glow

permeated through. Like an overcharged lightbulb, that glow exploded outwards in a flash.

"Eep!" Wai'ki yelped as she pranced backwards, closing her eyes and holding her staff out defensively. Her deer ears twitched in terror. There was no doubt about it: Wai'ki was never meant to be a fighter.

Volantis started to twitch, the metal body of his loosing a rattle as he began to regain movement. A good sign.

"O-oh, it worked!" Wai'ki sighed, her ears flopping down in relief.

Aldrich felt a twinge of pity for Wai'ki in how she had died in Elden World. When the goddess Amara laid siege upon the Necropolis and defeated the Deathguard, Wai'ki was the first among them to go for she was the weakest.

She had been ambushed on a journey to harvest mortal souls for the Death Lord. While isolated, Prelates – high level assassins of the Radiant Faith that served Amara – ambushed Wai'ki and her subordinates.

To save her subordinates, Wai'ki stalled the prelates for her life.

It must have been a tremendously difficult decision for someone with such a frail heart like her to make the brave decision to give up everything for another. She must have felt terrified and utterly helpless going against trained, ruthless killers of the light when she herself had little to no combat ability.

In a way, that was perhaps the biggest fundamental difference between Aldrich and a true hero.

Real heroes were willing to lay down everything on the line for others. Aldrich was not. He did not consider himself any less because of that – it was simply a difference in ideology.

Conversely, he did not look down on the golden age heroes that sacrificed themselves. In fact, he respected them.

It just was not the path he wanted to take. Not after he had seen what it had done for his parents.

"I sense turmoil within you, Death Walker." The Death Lord put a hand on Aldrich's shoulder. "Is anything amiss?"

Aldrich glanced at the Death Lord, at her gaze maintained regal dignity and yet still showed sympathy. She had been like this with Aldrich when he had said goodbye to

Adam and Elaine as well. Even as a warlord of death that sought the demise of all living beings, she was strangely perceptive of the emotions of others.

"No. I'm fine," said Aldrich.

"You are strong, Death Walker, and growing stronger by the day" said the Death Lord as she withdrew her hand. She glanced back at Valera who looked at the Death Lord's hand with suspicious eyes. "But you as a Necromancer of Legion should know more than any that it is always fine to rely on others.

And that is not only in matters of strength as well.

There are others like that girl who would support you through matters of the mind, for it is often that the battles we hold within ourselves are the greatest we struggle through.

Far greater than any blade or magic we face upon the battlefield."

"I've dealt with myself for as long as I can remember. I'm used to it," said Aldrich.

"The strength of youth. Ah, it is wonderful to see," said the Death Lord with a gentle shake of her head, as if she was remembering a fond memory. "But simply know this: to face one's feelings, to face one's inner battles, is not a sign of weakness.

It is in fleeing from them, in locking them up, that one faces defeat."

Before Aldrich could respond, Volantis spoke.

"Where...am I?" Volantis's voice was guttural. Deep. Natural. Not at all like the smooth, programmed elegance of the Demonwill. This was his true self. "I-I don't remember."

Volantis grasped at his helm head in confusion.

"Oh, this will help!" Wai'ki reached out with her staff and tapped the flower head upon Volantis's head.

"Don't touch me!" Volantis roared as he swiped at Wai'ki, causing her to yelp and fall backwards.

"D-don't hurt me! I'm just trying to help!" said Wai'ki.

Medula instantly stepped in front of Wai'ki. Though her expression was still unchangingly bored, it was obvious she cared a great deal about protecting her allies.

Immediately, Aldrich and Valera were behind Volantis, holding back his arms on either end.

The Death Lord stood behind, her eyes narrowed as her magical energy surged in a green aura around her, ready to deal with Volantis if needed.

But whatever Wai'ki had intended to do worked. From where she had touched his head, blue butterflies of pure energy flickered about, the fluttering of their wings releasing glittery little sparkles.

As those sparkles hit Volantis, he calmed down.

"I get it now," said Volantis. "It's all coming back to me. My life, no, my lives."

Valera looked to Aldrich, wordlessly asking if she should let the armor go. Aldrich nodded, and together, they released Volantis.

Volantis stood up, looking at his armored body. He put a clawed hand up to the air, splaying his fingers out as he inspected them. "This is what I am now. A chunk of metal. All that muscle and bone I was so proud – all gone.

Gorr the Bone Taker. The Butcher of Demons. Turned to nothing but a heap of scrap for the same horned monsters I used to slaughter."

Chapter 189: [Bonus chapter] Worthy

[Bonus chapter for getting me to top 20 golden tickets/powerstones!]

"Volantis, do you remember me?" said Aldrich.

Volantis turned to Aldrich. "I do. I chose you as my Armored."

"And have your feelings changed?" said Aldrich.

"..." Volantis did not respond for a good minute. In that time, both Valera and Okeanos were tensed up, ready to fight if needed. "No. The feelings I had in the past do not matter now.

My past life is just that: the past.

I cannot change who or what I am now, but I know that I did choose you. I will not go back on my word so easily." He turned to Wai'ki. She shrunk back in fear at his gaze. "Wai'ki...I remember you too. I apologize for my behavior. It was not right. I was confused, and I do not like when others touch me without my awareness."

"It-it's okay," said Wai'ki. She put on a happy smile. "As long as you're happy now, I'm happy too!"

"...Happy? Am I happy?" Volantis pondered over those words. "These memories that I have now are...painful. I remember my death.

On a molten mountain, surrounded by a field of swords and demon corpses. I felt the pain of dying then.

Then I felt the pain of being forged into something I was not. Having my soul hammered over and over again. It felt like I was in a dream, watching my memories float in front of me, seeing pieces of them get shattered and scattered.

I felt the desperation of trying to reach out for those memories regardless of whether they were sorrowful or joyful, because I knew that those memories were still me.

The pain of losing who you are and being helpless to stop it – it is the greatest pain I have ever felt.

It is worse than any battle wound that scarred or scorched me.

Remembering that pain – I almost feel as if I want to forget it all again."

Volantis closed his fists and stared at them. When he spoke again, he spoke with hearty strength in his voice. His eye dot was still white, but it was far more expressive than when it was red, undulating and changing shape and size like a normal eye to showcase his emotions.

He sounded much more like an orc, the people famous for never tiring, for never letting anything hold them down for very long. "But pain is temporary! It has never slowed me down, and it will not now! You-,"

Volantis turned and pointed to Aldrich. "I called you my Armored, no?"

"You did," said Aldrich. He noticed that Volantis still spoke with a measure of articulation. Usually, orcs had simpler speech patterns.

Most likely, the habits from Volantis's new and old lives were merged together.

"I did that because some part of me believed it was right to do," said Volantis. "I will stand by those words. But to be happy, truly happy-," Volantis clenched his fists again, but this time, in an expression of force.

His magical energy surged around him in a white aura distinct from the red of his past self. This was the type of aura that orcs gave off. Their 'warrior's spirit' as they called it. "I need to make sure you are truly worthy now that I am in full control of myself."

Aldrich had an idea of where this was going. His own magical energy started to surge, green waves emanating from his already half energy body.

Volantis was, after all, an orc, and there was nothing that orcs loved more than a good fight. "And how do you propose we do that?"

Volantis laughed. Something he had never done before. He could not physically smile as a living armor, but in the rising tone of his voice, it was easy to tell that had he a mouth, he would have grinned. "In the way of my people, of course. Battle!"

"I don't know whether I prefer you now or as you were before," said Valera. She grinned eagerly too. "But if it is battle you desire, it is battle you will have."

"I will fight too," said Okeanos.

Valera and Okeanos stood on either side of Aldrich, two mighty warriors ready to fight with all they had.

"I would like to fight you two as well, but this is between me and the Armored," said Volantis.

"That is simply not fair," said Valera. "My master is powerful, but his might is in commanding others. You, on the other hand, are built for close combat."

"I can help with that," said the Death Lord. She gestured towards Aldrich with her hand and chanted, "[Death Surge]. That should even the odds in terms of physical strength, and within the Necropolis, I can maintain that spell for practically an eternity."

An octagonal mesh of green energy lined Aldrich's bone body, greatly strengthening his physical stats. With the Death Lord's immense magic stat, the boost was enough that Aldrich could compete with a pure melee fighter of similar level like Volantis.

Though, Aldrich did note, [Death Surge] had a cap to the stats it could grant. As he was now, he would still fall short of Volantis's raw brute force, especially considering Shaping boosted Volantis's stats as well.

"There. Now the duel is honorable," said Volantis. "I am sorry, but this is the only way I know to choose who is worthy. A fight where we clash blow for blow. There is a saying among my people – the harder someone is willing to hit you, the better a friend they make."

"Then I'll take this fight," said Aldrich. "And prove to you how good a 'friend' I can be."

"Good!" said Volantis. "Any last preparations you would like to make, Armored?"

"Just one," said Aldrich. He manifested his Materius as if he was going to get into a close ranged fight, which he absolutely would be against the likes of Volantis, then he wanted to be in prime condition for it.

For now, Aldrich was not as used to fighting hand to hand as he was with his flesh and blood body.

Sinews spontaneously grew from Aldrich's bones, snuffing out the green energy that his body constantly let out. A set of organs, mostly for decoration at this point, filled in his ribcage before a covering of flesh wrapped over them. Skin grew around the raw muscle and the rest of Aldrich's features filled in right after.

"That feels much better," said Aldrich as he cracked his neck and rolled his shoulders, his trained, sculpted muscles rippling with the movement.

"M-master, are you going to fight like that!?" Valera squealed as she covered her eyes with hands that had more than enough space between the fingers to peer through.

"W-wah! He's naked!" Wai'ki blushed as she closed her eyes.

"Come now, this is too much for your innocence." Medula put her bandaged hand over Wai'ki's eyes and led her away.

"Oh, right," said Aldrich. "My clothes disintegrate every time I switch in and out of my Materius."

"I will have a solution for that later," said the Death Lord, to which Valera let out an annoyed 'tch!'.

"This will do for now." Medula snapped her fingers, causing a small black void to open up in front of her. She withdrew a pair of black pants and tossed them to Aldrich.

Aldrich grabbed them, and when he willed himself to wear them, they dematerialized and materialized back around Aldrich's lower body.

[1x Training Wear (Legs) equipped].

"Training Wear is indestructible and does not affect stats, so it should not yield you any advantage other than preventing you from assaulting our eyes," said Medula.

"Hah! I quite preferred when he was bare!" said Volantis. "Fighting without any covering is the truest form of battle! Man to man at its best! Except-," Volantis looked down at his metal body. "I cannot do that any longer."

"Thanks." Aldrich nodded to Medula.

"Everyone else, come with me," said Medula. "I will transport us to the stands as audience members."

"Finally, a proper fight to enjoy! I will finally get my coin's worth out of this colosseum!" The Death Lord laughed in glee as she followed Medula.

"Master, show that stubborn armor the might I respect so dearly," said Valera as she passed by Aldrich.

"Master will win. I know it. He always knows what to do at the right time," said Okeanos.

"I'll make sure I live up to your expectations," said Aldrich. "Thanks."

Everyone then warped away to the stands via another black void from Medula, leaving Aldrich and Volantis the only ones in the sandy fighting pit.

"Now then," said Aldrich as he cracked his knuckles. "About rules. Am I allowed to use weapons? Magic? Items in general?"

"Do whatever you want," said Volantis. "I will be fighting in the Orc way: with nothing but my fists and Shaping. Until one of us can no longer fight or I recognize you as worthy."

"Alright, then," said Aldrich. "This is a matter of getting you to consider me worthy, right? Then I'll play along by your rules. I won't use any equipment or items. Just my fists. I don't have Shaping, so I'll substitute that with my spells. But I won't use summons.

I'll keep this as close to 'man to man' as I can."

"Heh, I like you already," said Volantis. "Then let us fight now! To the death! To lay bare the warrior's spirits within us!"

Chapter 190: Orcish Might

As Volantis's resounding declaration of battle boomed through the fighting pit, Aldrich responded with a simple nod as he took up his stance, raising his fists up in a guard.

He got into a rhythm, hopping up and down in quick intervals. He geared himself mentally and physically to stay mobile, because he would need it.

If Volantis was fighting solely with orcish might, he was going to basically be a heavyweight tank with slow but heavy hits.

Aldrich, comparatively lighter, less durable, and weaker in sheer physicals, needed to abuse his mobility as much as possible.

Then again, this was the style that Aldrich was the most comfortable with. He had used it all his life in fighting Alters who were consistently naturally stronger than him.

It was in essence mixed martial arts, but it had a heavy focus on striking and throws. He trained considerably in boxing, Muay Thai, kickboxing, Taekwondo, and even some aspects of Chinese martial arts to maximize his footwork mobility and striking strength.

Aldrich was weakest when it came to grappling because usually, it was complete suicide to grapple with Alters when they were just flat out stronger than him.

Granted, he did have a good grasp of Judo for its quick throws, but he rarely liked to go on the ground to grapple and wrestle unless he could go for a quick dislocation or if he was on even physical grounds with an enemy.

Against Volantis, Aldrich doubted he would ever get a chance to grapple. Even getting in a clinch would be dangerous.

It was better to stay mobile and throw out hits at maximal range.

"Hoh, so that is your stance?" Volantis said. "It is trained, I can tell from a single glance. But will it be enough to take me on?"

"We'll find out, won't we?" said Aldrich simply. "Now let's get on with this."

"Your spirit is commendable!" Volantis roared. "Then, let us begin! I shall make the first move!"

Aldrich took in deep breath, then exhaled as he watched Volantis with an eagle eye, wary of every single move the once orc living armor made.

Volantis was around thirty meters away. Enough distance where any attack he made, Aldrich had ample time to react to. But what came next surprised Aldrich.

Volantis looked up to the skies, to the green crystal dotted ceiling of the colosseum, and roared. It was a roar that sounded like it belonged to some enormous monster ten times his size.

"Eep!" In the stands, Wai'ki hunched over and put her hands over her flopped down ears at the sudden explosion of noise.

Sound waves echoed from Volantis's helm, distorting his face. The sand all around Volantis gusted away as if blown apart by hurricane force winds, creating a natural smokescreen all around him.

'Looks like orcs aren't all brawn over brains,' thought Aldrich as he went on the immediate defensive, taking steps backwards. The Arena was huge, easily reaching the length of a football field, so he was not worried about getting backed into a corner.

Aldrich kept his eyes closely trained on the huge cloud of sand. He heard a huge impact that sounded like stone shattering.

Then, he saw a flicker of movement in the cloud, and not a moment later, a line of violently upturned rock from beneath the sand rapidly approached Aldrich.

Aldrich jumped to the side, easily dodging the line of rocks.

This was Volantis's Shaping.

Aldrich did not know which type of Shaping Volantis practiced, but this made it obvious: it was Earth Shaping.

Though, of course, Volantis might know more than one element.

Aldrich glanced to his right side, looking at the newly created wall of stone. The jagged raised stones would have smashed into Aldrich from below, dealing considerable damage, but that was just one thing that made them an issue.

They also formed a natural barrier that limited his movement.

Another flicker of movement from the sand cloud. This time, Volantis emerged, charging forth like a mad bull. He came from the opposite side of the rock wall, aiming to try and limit Aldrich by corralling him against the wall.

Aldrich raised a hand into the air. "[Bone Wall]"

He did not need to chant spells, but it did help. It was easier to focus on them which let him direct them more accurately, and he needed that accuracy to know exactly where to place the wall.

A massive wall of interlocked skeletons rose up in a near instant to halt Volantis's incoming charge.

"You think this will stop me!" Volantis just smashed into the wall with no concern for harm done to his body.

Remarkably, despite [Bone Wall] being a 4th circle spell meant to be casted by level 40 magic users, Volantis barreled through the wall with ease. The wall exploded apart like a bomb had gone off in it, a shower of broken apart bone scattering around Volantis as he made his way through.

"Huh?" Volantis stopped his charge as he realized Aldrich was not in front of him.

"Gah!" Volantis jerked to the side as the helix shaped energy of a [Death Bolt] slammed into his ribs with explosive impact. Another [Death Bolt] then hit his back, causing him to stagger forwards.

Aldrich had circled around the [Bone Wall] the moment Volantis crashed into it, using the brief moment Volantis would not have sight to take Volantis's blind spot and make more distance from the rock wall.

"You think I am helpless at range!?" Volantis turned and crossed his arms in front of his face to block another [Death Bolt]. His armor glowed with streaks of bright hot green from where the bolts struck. "Do you know how many whose skulls I have taken that thought the very same!?"

Volantis, to make good on his word, smashed his hand into the earth.

With a roar, Volantis raised his arm up, dredging up an enormous boulder easily the size of a large car over his head. The shadow the boulder cast completely covered Volantis, speaking to its bulk.

The thing must have weighed several tons, and Volantis carried it like it a piece of paper.

Though, Aldrich noted, Volantis was not lifting the boulder entirely with his own strength. He was using Shaping to not only sculpt the boulder from the ground, but also to make it easier to hold.

"RAH!" Volantis threw the boulder at extreme speed using a Shaping skill known as [Boulder Toss].

The actual weight of the boulder, though, was just as heavy as it looked, and that made this projectile attack an immense danger that had the threat of chunking Aldrich for probably over 30% of his max health, maybe more considering his weakness to crushing damage.

Aldrich did not bother casting [Bone Wall]. That would do nothing against a projectile that big and fast.

"[Death Bolt]" Aldrich chanted. He chanted because he needed more focus to manipulate the spell beyond a simple linear trajectory. He threw out the [Death Bolt] with a curve ball path that swerved to hit the boulder from the side.

That threw the boulder off its intended path to crush Aldrich enough that he could dodge it relatively easily.

The boulder slammed into the earth behind Aldrich with a rumbling impact, crashing up a geyser of sand.

"Is that it?" goaded Aldrich as he stayed at a respectable distance, wanting to bait Volantis out in using another ranged attack.

It was true that Volantis was not helpless at range, but he was no expert either.

Orc Shaping, derived from their affinity to nature, did give them ranged combat options, but they usually had slow wind-up times and telegraphed moves compared to spamable projectiles from mages.

Even Wind Shapers, the most suited to fight at range among the orcs, had this weakness. Their ranged attacks were incredibly powerful, but they were slow.

"Not at all! If you want to stay all the way over there, then fine! Try to dodge this!" Volantis knelt on one knee and buried his arms into the ground.

He roared again, shockwaves of sound echoing from his helm as he stared into the ceiling. His entire body shook with tremors, rattling out metal echoes in exertion as if he was trying to lift up some massive weight.

The ground around Volantis in a massive area started to glow a faint orange. This area covered where Aldrich was standing and more, stretching far behind him.

Aldrich stood still, remaining patient. He knew what was coming. He just needed to get the timing right.

After exactly a second, Aldrich put power into his legs and leaped into the air.

Volantis's roar reached a high point as he stood up, ripping his arms violently out of the ground. It was as if Volantis had started an earthquake.

The entirety of the orange-lit area around him blew apart in a massive seismic shockwave, casting up a mass amount of sand. Deep cracks littered every inch of the ground, and had Aldrich remained there, his legs would have turned into complete mush from that hit.

Instead, Aldrich used the blown up sand as a smokescreen of his own. He reached Volantis from the air and threw out a spinning kick right at the side of his head.

Volantis took the hit, blinded by the sand dredged up from his own attack.

The impact rang out clear and loud. The sound of reinforced flesh impacting against pure metal.

Volantis slammed into the ground from that unexpected hit, skidding across the cracked earth in a shower of sparks.

Chapter 191: [Bonus chapter] A Hard Headed Counter

Bonus chapter for getting me into golden ticket and powerstone rank 20!

Volantis lay helm first on the ground, completely still.

"What?" said Aldrich. "Is that all?"

"I was merely admiring how wonderfully struck that blow was," said Volantis as he pushed himself up, not much worse for wear. There was a small dent on the side of his head where Aldrich's foot had made impact. "Marvelous! Let us go again!"

"Alright then-" Aldrich made the first move this time, setting off on a sprint towards the Living Armor.

From that last blow, one thing Aldrich could confirm was this: Volantis could not use his Truesight when using his Orcish powers or else he would have seen Aldrich's hit coming from the sand smokescreen.

"Come!" Volantis gleefully welcomed Aldrich's attack. He smashed his foot into the ground, causing another row of jagged rocks to rush against Aldrich.

Aldrich did not want to break his momentum by swerving to the side.

Also, if he dodged to the side, there was a good possibility that Volantis would just slam out another row of rocks on the other side of Aldrich to basically corral him in a pen of rock walls.

That would limit Aldrich either to retreat or an offense that would force him on a narrow and predictable path to Volantis.

Instead, Aldrich jumped into the air, avoiding the skywards reaching rock spikes. Without losing almost any momentum, he flipped in the air and landed midway across the wall of upturned stone.

Instead of getting skewered on the jagged edges, he instead gracefully grasped two rock spikes in either of his hands, using them as a surface to push off of.

Like that, Aldrich closed the distance to Volantis without losing almost any time.

Volantis stared up at him with his fists clenched and white eye burning with eager battle lust.

In midair, Aldrich clapped his hands together and withdrew twin [Death Bolts]. He fired them one after the other, minimizing the time Volantis had to react to Aldrich.

Volantis grunted as he blocked one [Death Bolt]. Volantis prepped himself to block the second [Death Bolt], but it narrowly missed him. However, this was by design.

The [Death Bolt] instead exploded in front of Volantis and drove up another cloud of sand.

By the time Volantis could react to what had happened, Aldrich was right in front of him.

Aldrich took in a breath, staring at Volantis. The Living Armor had turned his head around to look behind him, where he had expected Aldrich to appear. After all, what was the point of a smokescreen otherwise?

But Aldrich had predicted that. Now, with Volantis briefly distracted looking backwards, Aldrich had free reign to get hits in. But he needed to think about how to maximize his DPS.

The Living Armor stood about two heads taller than Aldrich and looked considerably bulkier. Not only that, but his body was pure metal and bone. There were no places to hit like the liver or solar plexus that would knock down a bigger enemy made of flesh and blood.

But that also meant Aldrich did not have to focus much on where to hit. So long as he did damage, any attack worked.

First, Aldrich unleashed a front kick aimed at the stomach to bend Volantis's upper body forward.

Then, an uppercut to knock Volantis's now forward leaning head up.

"Gah!" Volantis let out a grunt of pain as his head whipped upwards from the echoing impact of the uppercut. This bared his entire body to further attacks.

Aldrich exhaled as he unleashed what could only be described as a hurricane of punches and kicks.

With how much his stats had been amplified, he looked like a raging mass of attacks, his blows blurring and meshing with each other into one giant, deadly, seamless combination.

The sound of strong force ringing against metal rang through the air again and again and again in gunfire-rapid rhythm. Now that Aldrich was undead with infinite stamina, if he got in the rhythm of attacking someone, he could chain hit after hit together in an infinite combo akin to a permanent stunlock.

Aldrich drove Volantis back dozens of meters with this storm of strikes, but as he did so, he realized one thing: Volantis was not even trying to guard them.

Volantis suffered under the attacks, that was for sure - his eye dot was scrunched up in pain. But he just stood there like an unbreakable wall, his arms hanging by his sides, his fists clenched not to ready a punch, but to endure.

Suddenly, Volantis reached out and grabbed Aldrich's arm before it hit his chest. The grip was like a vice, nigh unbreakable in its firmness. Like a dam lowered against a raging river, this stopped the flow of Aldrich's endless attacks.

With a roar, Volantis unleashed a mighty headbutt down on Aldrich. The blow connected with a concussive shockwave, blasting Aldrich several meters away like he had been hit with an artillery shell.

"Those strikes were fine and mighty. Like a storm they were, yes, as beautiful as that unleashed by any master I have seen!" said Volantis. "But there is nothing that trumps the unbreakable will of an orc!"

In duels like these, we take all blows head on. We learn by feeling these blows engrave their lessons into our very skin, and we return that lesson with power tenfold!"

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In the stands, Okeanos stood up, alarmed. His iridescent rainbow eyes were trained on Aldrich's prone body. "Is...the master defeated?"

"Sure looks like it," said Medula.

"Oh, will he need healing? I'm always ready to heal!" said Wai'ki with a worried tremble on her lips.

The Death Lord simply watched silently.

"No," said Valera. She watched the battle below with crossed arms and a confident smile. "You should know this better than anyone, youngling. Our master never falls so easily."

Aldrich stood up as he put a hand on his head, right where Volantis had hit him with a high speed headbutt delivered from a skull of pure metal. The skin around his forehead was completely torn open, blood dripping liberally from the wound, but beneath, the visible bone of his skull was a dark, almost black metallic shine.

"I had a contingency in case you managed to counter me," said Aldrich as he stared at Volantis, streams of blood dripping around his green eyes, rimming them a menacing red. "But I didn't expect to use it so soon."

Aldrich had used [Rite of Bone Binding] on himself before the head butt, greatly strengthening his skeleton. But even then, Volantis's attack had dealt a considerable amount of damage.

The [Death Essence Barrier] was not suited to dealing with strong physical blows. It could not mitigate damage from physical hits that crossed a certain threshold, so Aldrich had taken that head butt counter, well, head on.

Thankfully, the [Rite of Bone Binding] prevented Aldrich from dealing with a huge hole in his skull, reducing 50% of incoming physical damage, though that value would decrease dramatically with each successive strong hit endured.

"You still manage to stand? After that?" Volantis paused before breaking out into a hearty laugh, his white dot eye squinting jovially. "Marvelous!

"You're not bad yourself," said Aldrich. "You managed to read my moves and catch me off guard. That's not easy to do when our stats are almost equalized."

"Hah, after taking that many blows, even a gork would learn!" said Volantis.

If Aldrich remembered correctly, a gork was an insult used among orcs for those that were particularly dumb among them. He shook his head and smiled, a part of him feeling good that Volantis could enjoy himself truly as himself.

And, Aldrich had to admit, he enjoyed this too. It was an extremely rare thing for him to ever spar with someone around his level. Almost every single time he fought, it was with his life or death in mind. Or it was against someone superior to him in every way. He had never been in a fair fight, only struggles for survival.

But this was a good old fashioned fair fight. Something he had practically never experienced before. He enjoyed it, that was for sure. But at the same time, he also was not the type to let his fights drag out, even in lower stakes situations like this.

"You know, you said something interesting before." Aldrich started to walk towards Volantis, staring at the Living Armor with a piercing gaze. "You said that in duels like this, orcs always take their enemy's hits head on, right? No guarding?"

"That is right!" Volantis proclaimed proudly as he beat his chest with his fist, letting out a metallic ring. "You are free to guard as you wish - you are no orc. But in a fight like this, I would never forego the chance to carve your blows into my memory!"

Volantis said this, but it was clear he was not unharmed. Taking all those hits straight on had damaged him significantly. There were countless dents all over his body, and even as he tried to stand tall and proud, he hobbled a bit.

"I see. Alright then," said Aldrich. He took a deep breath, then let it out slowly through his teeth.

His body started to distort, heat waves rippling from all around his skin. The blood pouring out from his open forehead started to steam first, then burst into flames.

All of his veins began to pop out grotesquely. His eyes grew intensely bloodshot, turning their color into a shade of dark, almost black green.

The veins on his chest where his heart was became the most visible and engorged with blood.

The sound of his heartbeat became highly audible, losing a rapid rhythm of deep beats that sounded like war drums. Every single time his heart beat, its engorged, enlarged form visibly pushed against the flesh of his chest, overclocked far past its physical limits.

"Then try to keep up with this."

Chapter 192: Burning Agony

Volantis smashed his fists together, letting out a metallic cry of confidence. "A new form, is it!? Like a spirit of fire! Or a war demon! Good! Show me your strength, your warrior's will, O Armored!"

Aldrich got into his fighting stance, and as he did so, he felt burning, searing pain across every single inch of his body. After all, right now, he was literally on fire. His blood had ignited, bursting through his bulging veins in scorching red flames that covered him in a raging aura of heat.

Patches of his skin were starting to melt off, revealing raw muscle beneath that, and soon, even that would melt down until there was nothing but bone.

This was [Burning Agony]. The spell Aldrich used to buff his flesh undead into raging, burning fighters as fierce as any war demon. The way the spell worked was that it provided a strong base level boost of 50 to all stats or a stat multiplier depending on which was greater.

For Aldrich, the stat multiplier yielded far better results, granting him nearly double all of his physical stats. The amount of power he felt brimming within him, coursing through his veins in burning intensity, was staggering. In this state, he could probably even beat down Valera and Okeanos in close combat.

Though, the biggest issue was stamina. This only lasted as long as Aldrich's Materius did, and that was probably not much longer than thirty seconds. The effects of the spell also decayed over time as the flesh burned away.

On top of that, the spell dealt damage to Aldrich. His Materius might have just been a construct of flesh, but the burning flames from the ignited blood still scorched his true body of bone, and bone was weak to flame.

Aldrich calculated that [Burning Agony], if toggled for as long as possible, would cut down between 30-40% of his maximum health.

Thus, using this spell was a declaration to end a fight quickly.

And Aldrich made true on that declaration. His center of gravity slightly lowered, his knees bending as he got into a position to charge.

Volantis clenched his fists and puffed his chest out, ready to take any hit head on. Without guarding, as he had promised.

When Aldrich charged, he disappeared. The only thing left behind where he was were a pair of molten footprints.

"Wh-," Volantis managed in surprise before an immensely powerful punch, orders of magnitudes beyond any that Aldrich had thrown before, crashed into his stomach like a flaming meteor.

Aldrich grit his teeth as he put all his strength into that punch, aiming not to hit Volantis, but to hit THROUGH him. The blood vessels around his arms popped in fiery bursts, wreathing his arm in a swirling gauntlet of intensely hot flame.

Cracks shattered out from where Aldrich hit Volantis. The metal around Volantis's entire torso started to superheat up, turning from obsidian black to bright hot red.

Then, all of Volantis's sizable bulk was sent flying far backwards like a pinball.

"Look at him! I knew my Usurper would not fail to entertain!" said the Death Lord proudly. She leaned forward against her seat, her forked tongue flitting out in excitement.

"See, youngling?" said Valera, equally proud. "Our master always has a way to win."

"..." Okeanos watched and nodded in awe. "But the master is taking damage. He cannot do this for long."

"That does not mean anything if Volantis does not guard," said Medula. She watched the fight hunched forward, her elbows rested on her legs and her chin resting on her

interlocked hands. "Taking damage is not all that goes into weathering a strike. The time it takes to reel and recover is also crucial. Without guarding, Volantis leaves himself to get struck over and over again.

Were he to simply guard or even try to retreat, he could easily find a path to victory.

What he is doing now is simply idiotic and irrational - I simply cannot grasp it."

"D-don't call Vol that!" said Wai'ki. She lightly punched Medula on the shoulder. "Taking all those hits like that - he's kind of cool, don't you think?"

"Mmm. He seems more akin to a training dummy to me." Medula shrugged.

"You simply do not understand a warrior's honor," said Valera. "But that is to be expected for someone that never steps out of their study."

"I do not indulge myself in shouting and beating matches, yes," said Medula. "But I suppose activities like that would suit a woman like you."

Valera and Medula both glared at each other, leaving Wai'ki nervously glancing between them, her mouth open as she wondered what to say to calm the two down.

"Quiet down, ladies," said the Death Lord. Her eyes were still glued to the fight. "The final exchange is near, and I want to enjoy it in silence."

Aldrich exhaled, and blood from his melted throat spilled out in tongues of fire. He briefly looked down at his fist. It was utterly mangled. The flesh around the arm was completely gone now, leaving just raw muscle. The muscles around his hand were ripped apart, baring black bone beneath.

'It's not just burning from the spell that limits its duration,' thought Aldrich. 'It's the power from my hits too. Because they're getting thrown out beyond my normal limits, they break apart my Materius.'

All the more reason to end this as soon as possible.

Aldrich charged again, disappearing with his speed once more. He reached Volantis literally in mid air and slammed him back down into the ground with an axe kick.

In an explosion of flame, Volantis plummeted down, smashing into the dirt and carving out a sizable crater.

Aldrich dropped down in front of Volantis and prepped another hit. He realized he could not really chain his hits into smooth, fluid combinations like before. The way his body rapidly deteriorated plus his lack of experience with this level of stat boost meant he did not have the high level coordination necessary.

Still, that did not mean Aldrich's individual blows did not have devastating power behind them.

Volantis got up to a knee. His whole body was red hot from exposure to Aldrich's flames. His eye dot was narrowed in pain.

Aldrich sped forward again, preparing another punch.

Volantis reacted this time, showcasing his incredible capability to read Aldrich's movements. It was quite likely that subconsciously, Volantis was tapping into his demonic Truesight even if he consciously wanted to only use his orcish powers.

Volantis tried to grab Aldrich's arm again, but even if Volantis could react, he was just too slow.

Aldrich just weaved under Volantis's grab attempt. He got a hold of Volantis's arm, turned around, and then threw the Living Armor over his shoulder. He did not throw Volantis into the ground, but instead straight away, into the towering walls of the Arena fighting pit.

Wreathed in a ball of ignited blood from Aldrich, Volantis shot out like a shooting star and smashed into the grey stone walls with ear rupturing impact. The durable stone wall cracked under the force of the attack, embedding Volantis slightly within it.

It was a testament to how durable the wall was that Volantis did not just straight up smash through it.

In an instant, Aldrich was upon Volantis again. An issue with this form was because the power was so explosive, it was hard to pin a target down for multiple attacks. Each of his blows sent Volantis flying, making Aldrich waste time traveling between attacks.

But now, with Volantis pinned against the Arena wall like this, that problem had been erased.

Aldrich could go all out with no issues.

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Bonus chapter for getting me into golden ticket and powerstone rank 20!

Aldrich roared in exertion as he unloaded a barrage of attacks. They were sloppier in execution than before. Thrown out more wildly. The punches and kicks did not chain together with as much fluid motion, but did that even

matter when Aldrich threw out attacks that were several times stronger and several times the speed?

Technique mattered to a point, but overwhelming power achieved just the same, if not more. At the end of the day, technique was an optimizer. It made you use what you had efficiently.

But if what you had was not enough, you would always lose.

That was a lesson that Aldrich knew deeply well in his fights against stronger Alters.

It was Aldrich this time, though, that was on the side of overwhelming force.

Each of his attacks sounded like high ordnance bombs going off. Bursts of flame accompanied all of his hits, and because of how quickly they were thrown out, it looked like Aldrich was just completely covered in a pillar of red fire that roared up and down to the chaotic rhythm of his hits, like a snake charmed to the tune of a horrendous beating.

The booming echoes of impact as Aldrich punched Volantis over and over again thundered through the Arena. The wall shook with each hit as Aldrich drove Volantis in deeper and deeper into it.

Hit after hit after hit. Aldrich kept going on and on. Every single punch he threw out, more and more of his body melted. Chunks of his flesh literally blew apart from bursting, among blood vessels.

His eyes were bleeding, starting to melt out of their sockets.

Each time he breathed in and breathed out, among blood poured out of his mouth. His tongue spilled out of his mouth in a chunk of fleshy blood, burning

up before it even hit the ground.

Aldrich's Materius still felt pain and normal sensation as otherwise, he would be unused to operating it optimally. As a result, he had felt the intense pain of [Burning Agony].

Pain, however, was an old friend, and if it was just pain, he could handle it.

But now, the pain had faded away, turning into something akin to pure bloodlust. A side effect of [Burning Agony]: it rendered affected units Berserk, but Aldrich had been confident he could control it.

And yet, this was an intoxicating sensation that he felt himself slipping into, slowly but surely losing control, giving him the unstoppable urge to hit harder and again and again.

The urge to destroy. The urge to tear. The urge to kill.

This was not an urge his normally calculated mind had ever faced. It overwhelmed him, grasping at the heels of his mind and dragging it under a lake of brimstone and re and aggression. The world around him blurred under a thick veil of bright red.

He did not know what he was hitting anymore. He did not care. So long as he got to hit something.

"Never hit a man when they're down." A voice rang in Aldrich's mind, in the depths of his consciousness. He thought he could feel a familiar, cool touch on his back. That was father's voice. His father's hand.

He felt another hand on his back. A softer one. Warmer. Not burning hot like the rage, but a gentle, accepting warmth.

"When they're down, you help them up." His mother's voice.

That instantly drove him out of his punch drunk stupor, sobering him up in a cold instant. The red in his vision sapped away.

Aldrich's st was frozen midway in the air. He looked down. He and Volantis were in a deep, molten red crater. Volantis was knocked out, his white eye dot turned o.

The metal of his chest had completely melted o, baring a webwork of vein-like red magical energy channels that formed a 'body' that Volantis used to operate himself.

Volantis had probably sustained too much damage to go on some time ago.

Aldrich's [Burning Agony] turned o, all of his esh burned o by now. He felt his head clear. He reached down and slung Volantis over the bare skeleton of his shoulder.

"Sorry, Volantis," whispered Aldrich as he carried the armor out of the tunnel he had punched out. Outside, everyone was waiting.

"Congratulations on your victory, Death Walker!" proclaimed the Death Lord in glee. "I always knew there was a beast festering within you, locked up and gorging on all that negative energy of yours, but I did not expect that it had such...ferocity to it.

I do wonder how much stronger you will be when you tame it."

The Death Lord licked her lips, causing their faintly purple hue to glisten.

"Healing." Aldrich ignored the Death Lord and gently placed Volantis down.

"On it!" said Wai'ki as she shifted her way over to Volantis's side. "Oh, why did

you take all those hits, Vol? It was cool, but Med is right - it was also dumb."

"Not at all!" Volantis suddenly roared, his white eye dot coming back to life.

"Eep!" Wai'ki yelped as she scrambled backwards at Volantis's sudden reanimation.

Volantis got himself to a standing position with shaky arms and legs. But still, he managed to stand, even with a gaping melted hole in his chest.

Everyone stared at Volantis with surprise. By all rights, Volantis should have been completely near death. And yet, he managed to stand just like that.

"What?" Volantis looked around. "None of you have seen the spirit of an orc, I see! That is our way - we stand down to only three things: time, death, and a worthy leader! And there is no rust on my armor nor is death ready to reap my soul."

Volantis turned to Aldrich and fell down to a knee. "But there is a worthy leader before me."

"I appreciate it, Volantis," said Aldrich. "But you shaking like that while you say all this isn't very convincing. Wai'ki, can you treat him?"

"Heh, I always made it a point to stay standing in battle. Even in the end, upon that hill of swords, I died standing. I am not proud of the monster I became by that point, but I am proud of that." Volantis collapsed down to his knees and sighed. "But I suppose it is time for a rest."

That was well fought, Armored. Such ferocity of strength I have seen hardly the likes of! It rivals the likes of the Archdemons of Carnasus, the demon god of war himself!

I only wish I could show you the full range of my moves. I can shape re, too, but alas, I was taken by surprise and struck down before I even realized!"

"..." Aldrich did not know whether to take that as a compliment. He did not like losing control like that. Whenever he fought, it was not with crazed bloodlust. Vengeance, yes, but not berserk rage. Every time he struck a hit, it was always with purpose.

This felt senseless.

"Master, are you alright?" said Valera as she came close to Aldrich's side. She alone among everyone here had sensed something was o.

"I am," said Aldrich. He glanced at her red eyes. He wondered how she was able to keep such a rm handle on her berserk rage. Was it training? Or something else.

He wanted to learn, because there was no doubt about it that [Burning Agony] was an extremely powerful trump card for Aldrich.

But if Aldrich could not wield it with a cool head, it became considerably less useful.

"When I'm done, you will be as good as new! So just sit still!" said Wai'ki as she sat on her knees and guided her sta over the hole in Volantis's chest. She closed her eyes, her deer ears uttering as she channeled magical energy. An aura of blue swirled around her in leafy patterns.

"[- - - , - - - , - - - - -]" Wai'ki chanted the Ancestral Tongue, and as she did so, her magical energy coalesced into a small cloud of blue butteries that landed on Volantis's wound. The butteries melted, turning into a salve that

started to seal the damage up.

"Ahh, I feel as good as new already!" said Volantis.

"The healing has barely started. You still have a massive hole in your chest," remarked Medula in matter-of-fact tone.

"A hole that serves as a reminder of the might of my Armored. What better reminder could there be?" said Volantis.

"I-" Medula stopped herself and shrugged. "Yes. Whatever works for you. I should not try to understand all this warrior spirit nonsense."

"You must consider it sometime!" said Volantis. "There is nothing that makes the heart beat and the soul thunder so. Your demonic brethren under Carnasus knew this well."

"The spawn of Carnasus are a barbaric, brutish horde of abominations that I want nothing to do with. The amount of mindless blood shed and time wasted on their end sickens me," said Medula as she walked away, brooding away to the side.

"Hm, she is as prickly as I remember," said Volantis. "But no matter. This is a cause for celebration!

When a warmaster like myself accepts a warfather, custom dictates merry drink and feasting and ghting for three days."

"I would like to, Volantis," said Aldrich. "But there isn't enough time. I need you to stay out of the Nexus and act as me now that you're fully operational again. That way, nobody will suspect my disappearance even if they somehow check on me."

"Of course," said Volantis. "Yes, of course. Ah, I forget that there is always something to do. Will I be alone out in that pit?"

"Unfortunately, yes," said Aldrich.

"Unfortunately? Do not use that term," said Volantis. "Under a capable warfather, there is no such thing as 'un-fortune'. Solitude is something I am used to. I will keep watch, Armored."

"You do not have to," said the Death Lord. "Once Wai'ki is done channeling her healing, she can cast potent illusion magic to craft a copy of you. I doubt any mortal eye unused to the flow of magic will ever see through it.

As for this feast of yours, I find it an interesting idea. I shall arrange for it."

"I have to clear the Trial Quests-," began Aldrich.

"Death Walker, you have an eternity to spend. Do try to enjoy it some, or else you will find yourself quite bored. That is, if you do not get yourself killed first.

Come, walk with me a little," said the Death Lord.

Aldrich peered over to Valera. She stared at the Death Lord with suspicious eyes.

"It'll be just for a moment. And thank you, Valera, for understanding what I was feeling."

"Then I will allow it. And you do not have to thank me, master. Always, I will try my best for you. To understand you," said Valera.

Aldrich nodded and walked over to the Death Lord. As he trailed behind her, he asked, "So, what is it?"

"You are harboring something within your soul, are you not? Within your Phylactery?" said the Death Lord. She drew a breath from her pipe, purple

smoke gently ickering around her lips. "I sensed it the moment you stepped foot in this realm."

The Chrysalis.

"Yes. What about it? said Aldrich.

The Death Lord cocked her head, her brows furrowing in thought. She mulled over something in her head for a few seconds before nodding to herself. "I can help you hatch it."

Chapter 194: Boundary

Chapter 194: Boundary

"You can make it hatch?" said Aldrich. "That's interesting. I would have thought your powers wouldn't be able to interact with it so easily, considering it isn't from Elduin."

"Yes, but there is something else here that is from Elduin, is there not?" The Death Lord turned to Aldrich and tapped the bone of his sternum with her pipe. Underneath his ribcage, his dark purple Phylactery was barely visible, surrounding by his passively generated aura of green energy.

"Me?" said Aldrich.

"Yes, my dear, you. Through my link with you, I can sense what is going on to a degree," said the Death Lord. "Now then, I am sure you understand some idea of what is happening within your Phylactery, yes?"

Aldrich nodded. To recap, the Chrysalis was essentially incubating inside of his Phylactery. It did so as an adaptive response to mana exposure. Chrysales

changed themselves to use the resources around them, and if all that was available was mana, then it would change itself to use it.

However, complex manipulation of mana required a functional soul. As a result, it had been feeding o not only Aldrich's mana, but his soul as well, analyzing it to try and replicate it.

The end result would be a being that derived its existence directly from Aldrich. In Fler'Gan's somewhat uncomfortable wording, it was basically akin to having a child.

"I do," said Aldrich. "I'm surprised you do, considering you were holed up here most of the time."

"We are always connected, Death Walker. We always have been, from the very moment you became an undead and called upon your Necromancy." said the Death Lord. She gazed at Aldrich with an inspecting look. "The more I think about it, the more my interest in you grows.

The Necromancy you practice, the Occultations of Shattered Bone and Legion and Cold Rot - all of those hail from me.

Necromancy was an old power that predated even my ancient birth, but it was I who gathered it into a proper art. To use any of its spells is to in part draw from me in the same way that a Lifelight priest draws from that ugly goddess when they cast their self-righteous little sparkles.

For you to use Necromancy necessitates my existence. Thus, I manifested, as if in response to your need.

It would seem you are quite literally a 'Nexus' point by which all of us from

Elduin may derive existence.

Hence, why I do not want you o in a hurry to die so quickly.

If you die, I fear that you, our 'anchor' to this realm, will fade, and we will return to oblivion once more."

"This is mainly for my curiosity, but do you remember where you were before you came here?" said Aldrich.

"Dead, was I not?" said the Death Lord. "The is the last memory I have, at the least. You and all your heroes wearing me down. I would have been ne falling to the hands of worthy heroes.

But in the end, that lthy wench of a goddess was the one to appear, stopping you when I was all but defeated. Of course, she was too coward to face me herself.

And of course, she had to preach about saving the world before smiting me down and taking the killing blow.

Gah! Even thinking about the memory drives my stress dangerously high-,"

The Death Lord clenched her st, snapping her pipe into pieces. "Ah, apologies.

That was unseemly of me."

"I see," said Aldrich. It seemed that for people like the Death Lord who had died in the story of Elden World, they remembered up to their deaths. For people like Valera who were still supposed to be alive, they remembered falling into a vague, dreamlike state of waiting.

There was not enough information for Aldrich to make a conclusion out of, but he kept all this in the back of his head.

"But as for that thing you are hosting, I am assuming the Mind Eater told you to incubate it within your Phylactery. And by keeping the Phylactery close to your being, you kept conditions stable for the creature," said the Death Lord.

"You would be right about that. What he didn't tell me was how long I would have to do it. I haven't received any signals from the Chrysalis that it's ready to hatch. Even trying to reach out to it with a mental link doesn't yield much of a response."

"Ah, so it is called a Chrysalis? An aptly fitting name. I shall tell you then: the time is now. It is ready to hatch. It simply needs an infusion of magical energy," said the Death Lord.

"Really? That's all it takes?" said Aldrich. "A mana infusion? Even I can do that."

To prove his point, Aldrich swirled his mana around himself. Green strands flowed all around him in rhythmic, flowing patterns.

"Impressive mana control, Death Walker. Unlike ordinary mages that spend long years learning how to direct the flow of mana, the knowledge seems to be directly engraved into your being," said the Death Lord. "But that alone is not enough."

The Chrysalis is held within your Phylactery, no? Then you need someone that can unseal it.

Granted, the Mind Eater can do so, considering he was the one that crafted it. But what he does not have is the magic.

The sheer quantity of magical energy this creature needs is staggering.

Only I with the Necropolis can provide it."

"What would the Chrysalis need that much magical energy for?" wondered

Aldrich. "To forge its soul? I was under the impression it could do that

naturally, given time and exposure to my own soul and mana."

"No, no, not that. Tell me, Death Walker, you must be familiar with the concept of a Boundary, are you not?"

Aldrich raised a brow in recognition, and the Death Lord smiled.

"Yes, of course you would," said the Death Lord. "Some undead that are attuned well with the ow of spirits may create Boundaries where the owers of death blooms their strongest.

But powerful undead are all naturally attuned to spirits, to the ow of death.

Thus, they all develop Boundaries of their own as a matter of course in their growth.

The stronger the undead, the stronger their Boundary, as you can see."

The Death Lord gestured to the Arena around her, to the entire Necropolis that housed it. This was her Boundary. A massive dimension akin to an entire city. .

"I know where you're getting at," said Aldrich. "If I'm following correctly, then the Chrysalis is...trying to create its own Boundary?"

"Your Boundary," corrected the Death Lord.

"Hm." Aldrich put a hand to his chin. "But if I remember correctly, Liches don't develop proper Boundaries until they ascend into becoming an Arch Lich.

That's level 60 at least."

"Oh, please, dear Death Walker, do you compare yourself even now with the

ordinary Lich?" The Death Lord rolled her eyes. "Come now. With such a strong connection to me, did you truly think you would grow like the normal Lich, wasting away in study and experimentation and training for centuries to try and replicate a fraction of my strength?

No, you receive my power directly. Your growth, therefore, will naturally be exceptional."

"A boundary, hm..." Aldrich put a hand to his ribs in contemplation.

Unlike say, the [Spirit Boundary] of lower leveled undead like the Deildegast or Ghast, Boundaries from high leveled undead were much stronger and much more varied.

A proper Boundary took, as the Death Lord described, centuries to properly develop. Liches naturally started to develop Boundaries at a certain stage in their existence, but most regular Liches could only project an incomplete Boundary.

These looked like large swathes of watery darkness yet to be shaped into anything specic. But even those were deadly.

In incomplete Boundaries, Liches grew considerably stronger, gaining additional stats, bus to their units, and bonuses to some of their spells.

But that was nothing compared to a complete Boundary. A complete Boundary was quite literally like a separate dimension.

This dimension was unique to every single Lich, representing their inner world - their very soul.

Thus, most later game boss ghts against Arch Liches often involved a second

phase where the Arch Lich unleashed their Boundary, forcing the player to ght them in an inner world of their making.

An extreme example was the Death Lord's Necropolis and Death Realm. These technically were just her Boundary. No other Lich came close to having a Boundary that large and developed, but if Aldrich was going to succeed her, it meant he was destined for it.

Now it made sense. Why the Death Realm and Necropolis were merged into the Nexus. Slowly but surely, the Death Lord was preparing to hand down this entire realm to him.

"Still, even I did not expect you to develop a Boundary this quickly," said the Death Lord. "Even with absorption of my powers. I have not given you that much yet. I was waiting, as you said, for you to reach the power level of an Arch Lich, for I had not thought you ready.

You may thank this 'Chrysalis' for this. It seems to be a creature with an anity for manipulating space, and it has created a 'shell' of a surprisingly developed Boundary for you.

All it requires is an infusion of magical energy that will serve as the raw building material to ll in that 'shell'."

Basically, Aldrich noted, the Chrysalis had drawn up the blueprints for the Boundary, but it lacked the magical energy - the bricks and stones and wood - to actually build it. This, the Death Lord said she was going to provide.

"How complete exactly is this Boundary?" said Aldrich. "And I thought Liches could customize their own Boundaries according to their wills. In my case,

though, something else has essentially made it for me."

"An oversimplification," explained the Death Lord. "Boundaries are malleable yes, but at their core, they are inexorable. They represent who you are at a fundamental level, and that is something difficult, if not impossible, to alter.

What we do when we develop our Boundaries is build upon that core. We layer over it, often creating grand realms, but that core remains the same. The core of my realm, for example, is a small room no larger than a few paces wide.

But that miniscule room represents who I am at the deepest level. All of this, the elds of spectral lilies, the towering Necropolis itself, are simply accessories.

You may change some aspects of a Boundary. Increase its size, its beneficial effects, and so on and so forth, but the core it builds upon remains the exact same.

The Chrysalis has shaped that 'core' of your Boundary. As for how much more development it has done over it, hm..."

The Death Lord narrowed her eyes as she stared at Aldrich. She shrugged. "I cannot tell too well.

The Chrysalis is, after all, still a foreign entity to me. I cannot sense it completely.

At the very least, you should not witness simple darkness as is common with Liches that manage to project incomplete Boundaries for the first time.

There will be a defined core there. A space you can interact with beyond splashing around in raw energy.

But how dened it is, how large it is, what is actually within it - I simply do not know.

All I know is that it will represent who you are. It will show the deepest, most fundamental part of your self.

I will warn you now, Death Walker. The very rst time you gaze upon the shape of your Boundary may be a harrowing experience.

It brings you face to face with the deepest parts of your being. And for very many, what they choose to harbor in those depths is not something they ever wish to see. Often, they use those dark depths to hide that which they do not wish to bring to the light.

It may very well be the same for you."

Chapter 195: Top of the Necropolis 1

"The depths of my being, is it?" said Aldrich. "As in, something like my greatest fear?"

"Potentially. A great fear is not an uncommon core for a Boundary form around, for there are precious few emotions that shape the soul to greater extent than fear." The Death Lord paused. "Or it can be that your core holds warmth. It may well be that it is a reminder of something you cherish dearly, for that too molds the soul well.

Yet, I will say this. I have never met one with a Boundary core that is anywhere in between. Either it is warm, or it is cold.

You, Death Walker, I sense are the type that does not hold much warmth within you. You have the marks of one that has suffered, of one whose feelings and actions have chipped and worn away with abuse."

"And which of those were you? Warm or cold?"

"Warm. Very warm." The faint suggestion of a smile tugged at the edges of the Death Lord's lips. It was hard to read, almost imperceptible, but it did not escape Aldrich's sharp sight.

The smile, if it had fully formed, would have been a nostalgic one. The type one got when looking back at old times. Good, happy old times. But times old enough that they would never come back.

"Does the answer surprise you?" said the Death Lord.

"A little. I would have expected otherwise from a warmongering lord of death whose ultimate goal was to turn all life undead."

"Just because I hold warmth in the deepest depths of my soul does not mean I am not capable of cruelty," said the Death Lord. "No, sometimes, those with Boundary cores that are warmest are the most brutal in their ways."

For often, the warmth they hold dear is something they have lost. Something that was taken from them. An endless reminder of pain of what once was but now is lost."

"Was that the case for you?"

The Death Lord nodded. "Yes," she said, her voice soft. "But that is enough about me. It is your evolution that is near. Do you accept my offer, then? To infuse your Chrysalis with energy to force its hatching?"

"When you first brought this topic up, I sensed some hesitation on your end." Aldrich had picked this up from body and vocal cues from the Death Lord. Pauses and tenseness. "I'm assuming there's more of a risk than you're letting on?"

"My, quite sharp, are we not?" The Death Lord raised a brow at Aldrich. "There is one more risk. And that is the sheer quantity of magical energy that will funnel into you. I would be forcing you to develop a Boundary that Arch Liches nearly twenty levels your superior form."

Granted, that Chrysalis creature will likely handle most of the energy processing, but in the case that it cannot, there is a risk that the excess power may wildly surge within and tear you apart from the inside out.

That is not damage that you can easily recover from, for it is damage that sunders the foundations of the soul. Wai'ki can perhaps piece together your broken pieces, but you may not ever be the same."

"Is that the only extra risk you foresee?" said Aldrich.

"That is not a considerable risk to you? Brave." The Death Lord mulled over Aldrich's question for a bit, then shrugged. "But yes, I believe so."

"Then I have a contingency for it," said Aldrich. "I'll need to take Valera, though."

"Ah, your Guardian Knight," said the Death Lord. "Good, I encourage it. It is often better to have someone close to you by your side when you encounter your core for the first time. The closer they are, the better. They can serve as an emotional anchor to lean against."

The Death Lord waved towards Valera. "You there! Knight! Come to your master's side."

Valera responded near instantly, leaping into the air with her superhuman strength to reach Aldrich's side in a single bound.

"What is it?" said Valera. She snuck a suspicious glance to the Death Lord. "Has this snake been whispering strange ideas into your ear, master?"

"I was simply discussing when he would change this knight-master relationship into something more," said the Death Lord.

"W-what? Is this true?" said Valera, her composure instantly broken. She stared between Aldrich and the Death Lord rapidly.

"Too easy." The Death Lord shook her head as she strutted away towards Volantis and Wai'ki with a laugh. "I will have Wai'ki start on her illusion of Volantis. In the meanwhile, discuss with your knight what I have told you and your intentions."

"Master, was she speaking the truth?" said Valera.

"No. She was just teasing you," said Aldrich. "Probably to get you off her back. And I have to admit, it is an easy way to do that."

Valera sighed. "Yes. Of course. That troublesome snake...in any case, what do you need of me, master?"

Aldrich filled her in about what the Death Lord had told him.

"Are you certain you will be fine?" said Valera. "Diving into the shaded corners of your soul like that? I cannot say I know all of this reincarnated life you have led here, but I am not clueless either. As your Chosen, I receive snippets of your being. When my mind wanders, sometimes, parts of your life flash before me. I know you have suffered greatly, and the spawn of suffering is never a pretty or comforting sight."

"I'll be okay," said Aldrich, firmly believing in his resolve. Whatever he faced down there, he was sure he could overcome it. He had seen his parents slowly butchered before his very own eyes. There was very little he felt that could shake him anymore. "What I do need you for, Valera, is the energy overload. Before I receive the energy, I'm going to wrap myself in my Materius."

By doing that, I'll be susceptible to certain attacks that require a flesh and blood body to work. Like your vampiric blood sucking. If the amount of magical energy in my body hits an overloading point for too long, I want you to drain the excess as much as possible.

I know you don't like tasting undead blood, but this is important."

"That, I can do easily, my master," said Valera. "The honor of tasting your blood is one I will never forego, regardless of whether you are undead or not. That you are my master alone makes your essence the sweetest there is for me."

"Good." Aldrich nodded to Valera. "I'll be counting on you."

"As always, I am happy to serve." Valera smiled as she put a hand to her heart.

"We're ready." Aldrich called out to the Death Lord.

"Excellent." The Death Lord patted Wai'ki on the hand, and her ears twitched in comfort. "I will be taking Medula, but do not worry, Wai'ki, for you will not be alone. This will be a wonderful chance for you to catch up with Volantis. Do tell me if there is anything he finds unsatisfactory about his Armored. I will factor that into my evaluation of him."

"There is no flaw with my Armored!" boomed Volantis.

Wai'ki cringed and put her hands over her ears. "You know, I actually think I liked how you were before. When you were quieter. It-it was more comfortable for me. B-but I'm not criticizing you or anything! You are happy like this, so I am happy for you as well!"

"..." Volantis nodded. The hole in his chest was nearly patched up by now with Wai'ki's magic. "No, you are right. An orc's voice is ever loud, never faltering. But I had forgotten about your preference for the quiet - the memories from my several lives are still taking time to adjust.

I know how much the solitude of quiet means for you. I apologize again, Wai'ki."

"N-no! Don't apologize, not for someone like me!" said Wai'ki as she put her head down.

"Come now, little one, raise your head. You are worth that apology and much more," said Volantis.

"R-really?"

"Of course." Volantis's white eye dot narrowed in a smiling emote.

"Hm. Maybe...maybe I do like you better as you are now." Wai'ki smiled too.

As Aldrich watched that interaction, Okeanos blitzed his way to his side in a shower of crackling green and blue. "Master, I am going too."

Chapter 196: [Bonus chapter] Top of the Necropolis 2

Aldrich stared at Okeanos for a blank moment.

"I am not going?" Okeanos's antennae dropped in disappointment, already knowing the answer to this question.

"You can if you want," said Aldrich. "There's nothing stopping you."

"Nothing except me." Medula spoke as she neared Aldrich, the Death Lord beside her. "It may not look like it, but with the vastly reduced manpower in the Necropolis, many of its functions are held together with the bare minimum of stability.

And that stability comes from a generous subsidy of my own magical energy.

A warp to the top of the Necropolis is the most costly. I can understand spending that cost rationally for those absolutely needed. Irrational spending, though, I cannot accept."

Aldrich remembered that the Death Lord had mentioned almost in passing that the Necropolis had lost over half of its troops. That explained why the Immortalis Legions, an army of over a hundred thousand, seemed to be absent. Why Chiros only commanded fifteen death knights where as a captain, he would have easily been the head of a force a hundred plus strong.

It made sense that if one considered the Necropolis a complex mechanism of many moving magical parts, that the loss of manpower would affect its capacity to run.

It was also a testament to the sheer ability of Medula that she could manage a territory as vast as the Necropolis. From what Aldrich knew, Medula was basically like a dungeon master. She was the direct overseer of every trap, every warp point, every unit placement throughout the entire 100 floors of the Necropolis.

"I am sad," said Okeanos. He spoke bluntly and without inhibition like a child would. "But I understand."

"I'll make it up to you later," said Aldrich.

"Promise?" said Okeanos.

"Promise." Aldrich nodded. He was interested in Okeanos and his origins. Why his mannerisms were so childlike and how they could be so human in the first place considering his status as a variant. That, he would dive into later.

"Then all is in order," said the Death Lord. "Medula, prepare the warp."

"Yes." Medula clasped her bandaged hands together, and when she withdrew them, dark strands of energy threaded between her palms. "All of you, stay near me. I calculate that there will be no issues with the warp, but physical proximity eliminates any confounding variables."

Those coming to the top of the Necropolis drew closer to Medula.

"[Advanced Gate]" chanted Medula. She tossed out the dark strands between her hands, and they quickly expanded outwards into a spherical void that engulfed everyone.

The warp, unlike the type that Aldrich accessed through Sign Stones to get to the Nexus, took several uncomfortable seconds of feeling weightless and stranded in complete and utter darkness.

Then, the darkness faded, leaving everyone at the top of the Necropolis.

Aldrich had never actually been to the top of the Necropolis. He had not even actually cleared the entire tower. Just up to the seventieth floor.

At that point, the Necropolis was weakened enough for the goddess Amara to isolate the Death Lord in a Trial Quest even through the natural barrier the Necropolis emitted.

Where the player faced the Death Lord in that quest, the strongest troops of Amara cleared the rest of the floors. It was not a difficult thing to do, granted, with the Deathguard and the Death Lord eliminated at that point, leaving strong but still regular mobs left behind.

But Aldrich realized that Elden World had missed out on a massive opportunity in not sending the player to the top. The sight that Aldrich saw around him was nothing short of a grand spectacle.

He stood atop an enormous floating circular platform of stone. Green, circuit patterned light streaked across the stone, congregating into a large dot at the center.

"Is this fog?" Valera looked around, seeing a misty white veil all around them.

"No. These are clouds," said Aldrich. That was how high up they were.

He looked up to see an enormous bell hovering above the platform they stood upon. The structure was massive enough that it utterly dwarfed Aldrich. It was as big as the higher end mansions that stood tall in Sky Cities.

Decorative patterns of lilies and bones and dragons etched their way across the bell's dark metal body in an artistic tapestry. A faint, nearly translucent spherical orb of green covered the bell, and it pulsed in a rhythmic pattern like the beating of a heart.

Directly beneath the bell, a comparatively tiny pillar of green light shone down, linking with the dot at the center of the floating stone platform.

"Welcome, Death Walker, to the Solarium." The Death Lord pointed to the enormous bell above. Looking up into it, Aldrich saw darkness, but within that darkness, he could also make out the flickering movement of green wisps. Souls.

"That is the Bell of Eternity," said the Death Lord. "An artifact of the Divine grade, the highest there is. No, that does not do it enough justice. It stands at the top even among Divine grade artifacts. That little suckling bottle that the goddess Amara grants you heroes is worth as much as manure compared to this.

All that lazy goddess did was shape shards from her heavenly domain. Compare that to this artifact of mine. Its metal is abyssal iron harvested from the deepest, most dangerous dungeons of the realm. To find enough took me three centuries of diving into dungeons.

It was shaped in the fiery forge of Corinthus, the Dragonsmith whose lowliest artifacts are of the Mythic grade. Quenched in waters harvested from the Soul Stream itself - that was a journey that took me another two centuries.

The sacrifice of two Millennial Dragon souls went into enchanting it. The battle needed to slay those two and take their souls cost me another century and nearly my life."

"An artifact five hundred years in the making," commented Valera in awe. "I had heard of this bell in texts and tales in the libraries and study halls of Nokros, but nothing my instructors taught nor what those dusty tomes depicted ever compares to this."

"Do not get swept up by it," said Medula, still as bored as ever. "Despite my lord's grandiose words, in the end, it is simply a power source that allows this massive realm to be as stable as it is.

Nothing more than a battery, really."

"Battery? Aye, that does sound right." Another voice, not one from the current group, spoke out. It came from the pillar of green light tethering the center of the platform to the bell's spherical aura.

A woman stepped out of it. A woman that positively screamed with the word 'power'. She was easily three meters tall, towering over everyone there. Further exacerbating the weight of her physical presence was her build. She was noticeably muscular, and she did not hesitate to show it off.

Her outfit consisted of black leggings and bra that tightly clung to her curvy figure. All her developed muscles were visible regardless of whether they were clothed or not, and they looked solid enough to shatter bricks on.

Other than that, she wore a single large pauldron on her left shoulder, and behind it, a short, tattered red cloak fluttered behind her. Her hair stretched down to her waist in wild red waves while her eyes shone with a gleaming white.

What made her power most evident, though, was her aura of magical energy that raged around her in flame orange red. It was practically just as strong as the Death Lord's when she got serious.

"Cause' that is what methinks I am these days. A glorified battery holding up another battery," said the woman with a disgruntled expression. Her glowing white eyes did not have pupils in them, but instead a single elaborate golden letter in each.

Runes. A symbol of power from a god. Or, in this case, a sign that one had inherited the blood of a god.

This was Rella. First among the Deathguard and the undisputed strongest, likely being even stronger than the Death Lord herself in terms of sheer damage output.

"I understand it is not work that you may find befitting your status as First Deathguard, Rella," said the Death Lord. "But it is one of necessity. Without your vast magical energy reserves, reserves that far outstrip even mine with that divine blood of yours, maintaining the Necropolis's stability would be difficult.

In that regard, consider the duty you perform now to be of the highest importance."

"I suppose," said Rella as she crossed her arms and stared at Aldrich and Valera. "So, what do we have here? This the usurper you were telling us all about? He seems awfully small and skinny to me.

If I fought him now, he would die in just a minute, tops.

Still-" Rella liked her lips like she was looking at a piece of meat. "I do want to try."

Chapter 197: Diving into the Chrysalis

Aldrich paused for a tense moment as he heard Rella's words of challenge. Valera immediately followed suit, standing firmly beside him with a strong grip on her shield. His magical energy swirled around him in a rippling aura of green, simmering in a state right before it boiled up into full blown explosiveness.

He had never been this tense even with someone as powerful as the Death Lord because he understood the type of person she was. She might have joked about fighting Aldrich, but at the end of the day, it was just that: a joke. He could tell this in her mannerisms. In her non-committal body language and her barely concealed smile that made it obvious that most of her words were to be taken lightly.

But Rella was nearly the complete opposite. She had an easygoing and confident demeanor about her that made it seem as if most of her words were light hearted, but there was something a little more unhinged about her, in the way she smiled, in her voice, that made her far more unpredictable.

That, and her backstory. Rella was the daughter of Rathos, highest god of the Eluman peoples that were the equivalent of humans in the game. Her mother was just some nameless priestess he had forced himself upon and promptly forgot about.

When Rella reached her teenage years, Fiola, goddess and wife to Rathos, saw Rella as an abomination and a symbol of her husband's infidelity. Thus, Fiola cast Rella down into the depths of a dungeon full of the vilest creatures capable of enacting the most torturous ends known to man.

There, Rella survived for forty years by herself, and when she emerged, she was nothing but an uncontrollable ball of violence and fury. Aldrich did not know how exactly the Death Lord managed to get Rella sane enough to work for her.

What he did know was that he did not trust in Rella's mental stability enough to hold herself back from suddenly unleashing the full brunt of her power against Aldrich. And, as Aldrich was now, vastly underleveled compared to his game counterpart, Rella's endgame level strength would undeniably demolish him.

Evidently, Valera felt the same sense of threat too. Her battle instincts told her to be cautious of Rella because she was wildly unpredictable.

"Hehehe, that is a nice aura ye have," said Rella. "It would be a wondrous feeling to shatter it with my own two hands."

"There will be no shattering of anything tonight," said the Death Lord firmly, her voice resonating with authority.

Rella looked to the Death Lord and nodded without much resistance. "Course'. I was just bored was all, sitting in that pillar all day."

"I'm surprised: I thought you would have had your fill of fighting after sparring with the Death Lord," said Aldrich. This was, of course, a pointed question meant to scope out reactions from both Rella and the Death Lord. Using those, he could try to determine how much of what the Death Lord said was true about her injuries.

"Hah, her?" said Rella. "By this point, I've sparred her enough to be quite bored of what she can do. And she never goes all out with me, even when I beg her to."

"If we both go all out," said the Death Lord. "This realm crumbles.

I already grant you much in sparring sessions to alleviate you from the boredom of this task of manually channeling the Bell of Absolution as its conduit.

To let you go all out on top of that is simply too much."

"Rella wasn't even going all out and she managed to do that much damage to one side of you?" said Aldrich.

The Death Lord did not respond to this. It was Rella that took over the answering, and she was decidedly harder to read. Perhaps because of the many years she had spent in a dungeon, or maybe it was because she was half god, but her ability to make proper facial expressions was off in an almost eerie way.

"I would be ashamed of myself if my void lightning could not do even that much," said Rella. "I have trained it all my life to slay gods, no matter how tough their skin, barriers, or wills are. And it has felled more than one. Mel is no different."

"An unlucky hit, then?" Aldrich asked this directly to the Death Lord this time.

"As unlucky as can be." The Death Lord shrugged the topic away. "We are not here to discuss my sparring injuries. Let us proceed with the awakening of your Boundary."

"Alright then," said Aldrich. For now, Rella had covered for the Death Lord. Explanations were given for why Rella could have just left this post acting as a conduit for the bell.

The sparring sessions were temporary, probably made in short enough intervals that Rella's absence here was not felt. On top of that, it was actually plausible for Rella to have harmed the Death Lord to the degree of taking her arm even with a minor effort.

Rella's signature attack involved channeling lightning as her father did. However, unlike her father's divine lightning which shone a brilliant hue of bright white, her lightning was pitch black and held the property of disintegrating whatever it struck.

The disintegration effect was true damage, ignoring any resistances and bypassing almost all barriers. On top of that, it had an incredibly potent anti healing effect as well.

Theoretically, it was possible that the Death Lord had gotten careless and taken a hit from it.

Aldrich still had more than his fair share of doubts, but the more tried to press the matter, the more suspicious it would get on his end.

"Oh? A new Boundary, is it?" Rella looked Aldrich up and down. "This young lad of a lich has one already? Not bad. Maybe it will be worth allowing him to live and ripen into a proper challenge."

"He is my Usurper, after all," said the Death Lord like a proud mother. "If he was even a shade less worthy of my powers, I would have put up far more of a struggle in allowing him to receive it."

"Aren't I the only option you have?" said Aldrich. "Not like there are any others to choose from."

"That is true," agreed the Death Lord. "But I shall say this. Were you weak willed any, I would have been content to allow my realm to fade into oblivion without ever passing it on to you.

After all, I am already dead. No, wait, I am dead twice over, come to think of it. I had my turn to do what I wished. Now it is yours."

"Come on then," said Rella as she held out her hand to Aldrich. "If this will not lead into anything exciting, best to get it over with quickly."

"Finally." Medula sighed. "Someone that speaks my language."

Aldrich stared at Rella's open hand with some level of hesitation.

"Rest assured, Medula and I will both keep Rella's tendencies under control," said the Death Lord. "And she is not actually the one infusing you with energy. It is the Bell of Absolution.

Rella is simply a conduit. Her God Core allows her to multiply mana that flows into her, making her the perfect channel for the bell, but she cannot actually change how much flow the bell grants. That is strictly under my domain.

And I will try to ensure not a unit more than is needed flows into you."

"This had better work as you describe it, snake," said Valera.

"Of course it will, my dear. After all, you are here as his contingency," said the Death Lord. She raised a hand towards the bell. Sigils of green lighted upon her arm in a complex weave of patterns.

Power radiated out from these sigils, distorting the space around them. Unlike runes that gods used to manifest their powers, the Death Lord and other 'dark' entities used sigils instead. The only exception were demons, but that was because they were invaders to the Elduin realm that got their first foothold through a god's runes, hence their preference for using runes.

"O bell of mine, I call upon you to ring. To bring forth the death knell that has claimed both the lowliest and mightiest of soul."

In response to the Death Lord's voice, the enormous bell began to oscillate. The intricate patterns of dragons and lilies upon its frame lit up in bright purple, emanating a lavender hue that melded with the green sphere around it.

"Around...this much should be enough," whispered the Death Lord as she snapped her fingers. The bell tolled once, its great bulk softly moving from side to side with a heavy and slow motion. As it did so, it let out a deep and eerie ring, like what one would expect a bell of its size to sound like in some dark, watery depths.

The sound traveled not by Aldrich, but through him, radiating in vibrations all across his body of bone.

The pillar of green energy underneath the bell that usually stood unchanging and stable now flickered chaotically with newly introduced energy.

"Now take my hand," said Rella walked up to Aldrich, standing over him while holding out her open hand. "And walk into the pillar with me. When we step in, you ought to feel the power flowing into you."

"The moment you step in, you will enter your Boundary. Steel your mind as much as possible, Death Walker," said the Death Lord. "There are some Liches that meet their Boundary cores and lose their sanity, becoming little more than raving madmen."

"That's another risk you didn't tell me about," said Aldrich.

"Not a risk." The Death Lord smiled at Aldrich. "Did I not say? I would not have accepted you were you weak willed. You can handle this much. Now go."

Aldrich looked ahead at the pillar of chaotically ickering green light that would make him come face to face with the deepest core of his being. Within it, like being bathed in a waterfall, Rella stood, the light crashing around her. Her whole body lit up with a great many circuit like white patterns, showing that she was channeling the power through her.

"Come now, Usurper," said Rella as she nodded towards Aldrich. "Take my hand. Or are ye shy?"

"Give me a moment," said Aldrich as he manifested his Materius again. A red ash spread over his body, indicating he had sacrificed health. Creating his Materius took up 20% of his maximum health, but costs like that did not matter much in non combat scenarios like now.

The organs, esh, and skin of his human body all wrapped up around his grey bones, padding his frame out until he was whole again. He had Medula's training garb pants still equipped on him, so he was not ashing the world.

"A trained body. And here I thought ye a frail mage. A pleasant surprise." Rella waved her hand, beckoning Aldrich forward. "I am eager to feel your grip. I can tell much about the quality of a warrior from that alone."

"I'm going," said Aldrich. Before he took his first step forward, Valera put a hand on his shoulder.

"Master, do be careful," said Valera. She eyed Rella's hand. "Especially of that gorilla's monstrous grip. In any case, I will be vigilant here, ready to take your blood if needed."

"I'll be back soon." Aldrich went forwards. He was content in Valera's ability to drain any dangerous excess magical energy from him.

She did not have as powerful a bloodsucking ability as a full blooded vampire, but her mixed blood with a Dullahan made her uniquely suited for this type of situation.

Dullahan possessed an ability to mark an enemy for death. This rapidly

dispelled all types of bus from the target. This included not only self cast bus that boosted stats or defenses, but also connections with magical energy sources not native to the target's own being.

In most cases, this was a strong anti-mage tool when mages used Arcane utility spells to create mana orbs that they could tap into for a quick recharge.

As a hybrid, Valera's vampiric bite was combined with the Dullahan's death mark. Whoever she got a proper bite on, she could also activate the death mark against.

In Aldrich's case, that meant that she would drain him on two fronts. The death mark would rapidly dispel the foreign energy in his body and her vampiric bloodsucking would drain what was left.

"Ready?" Rella said as Aldrich came close to her.

"Ready" Aldrich conrmed as he grasped Rella's hand. Immediately, crackles and sparks of green energy screeched around the point of contact. Aldrich felt his hand start burning, sizzling as the intensely concentrated magic started owed into his body.

The pain, however, did not aect him. It was nothing at all compared to [Burning Agony].

"You do not even inch. Your hand is well sculpted. Calloused. The knuckles honed. You have beaten many a foe to death with these hands, have you not?" said Rella.

"It's part of surviving."

"Surviving, aye, I know that feeling well. We ought to get along quite well, you

and I." Rella stepped back further into the pillar, her whole body disappearing in its blinding light.

Aldrich followed. As he took his first real step into the light of the pillar, he braced himself for what was to come.

The moment his foot touched the light, everything turned black.

Aldrich woke up with a start, breathing heavily. He felt a cold sweat run down his face. He instantly analyzed his surroundings. He was in a dark space. Very dimly lit by ickering, lth speckled lights above that cast oddly patterned light in random intervals.

Aldrich felt cold metal under his bare upper body. He got onto a knee and inspected the ground. The metal was heavily discolored, patterned with many patches of dark that he gured was rust.

Upon closer inspection, though, he could tell that not all of the discoloration was from rust. Quite a bit of it was from dried blood.

The stench of iron and rotting meat hung heavy in his nose. It was a disgusting smell that made him frown. An ordinary person would have likely vomited by now, but perhaps because he was undead, but the smell of rot did not affect him much.

Aldrich stood up, and as he did so, he got a much better view of the room around him. Many rusted chains ending in hooks hung down from the ceiling, some of them holding up the deteriorating carcasses of pigs.

There were what looked like operating tables spaced evenly throughout the room with the occasional rusted barrel beside them that held a jumble of saws

and drills and tools of torture. Spattered blood decorated the tables, as did strong restraints meant to hold down anything that got on them.

"..." Aldrich knew where this place was. This was the room his parents had been tortured in. He felt a headache pierce through his mind, and he put a hand to his forehead, grimacing. His body felt weak and strong in waves.

Memories came back to him. Of that night. When he was just a child. Wide eyed and watching. He could have looked away. But he did not. He could not.

He saw. The tearing. The breaking.

He heard. The screaming. The crying.

Aldrich put his hand down from his face and shook his head. His green eyes stared ahead with unwavering strength. Those memories haunted him. But they did not overwhelm him.

They were not memories he buried. They were memories he kept alive. Live coals to fuel his rage. His purpose.

Was this his Boundary core? If so, he could handle it.

Aldrich heard the clatter of metal in the distance, far down the length of the room where the already faltering lights stopped working completely. Oddly enough, in here, his Night Vision granted by his racial status as an undead did not work.

Nevertheless, Aldrich stepped towards the darkness. He felt strangely compelled to do so, as if he was being led there by some greater, outer force that he could not quite resist. He had never sleepwalked before, but he gured this was what it felt like.

As Aldrich walked down the ever darkening room, it became emptier and emptier. The operating tables and barrels started to fade away, as if consumed by the darkness itself.

He kept going. He saw no light now. Just pure darkness. The only thing that reached his senses was the sensation of cold metal under his feet and the clinking of metal ahead.

The more he pressed forward into the darkness, the louder the clinking got. Eventually, after a minute or so, he could start to hear a voice. It was faint at first, its words indecipherable, but soon, he could make things out.

"P-please...no more."

"No more feeding..."

"I'm not hungry anymore..."

"Make it stop..."

Aldrich knew that voice. It was from the Butcher. As soon as he made that connection, he found himself stepping into an enormous cell. It just suddenly manifested, like an unloaded asset spontaneously loading in a videogame upon reaching a certain checkpoint.

A huge, barred cell door stood in front of Aldrich, though at the end, it was slightly open, allowing him to slip through. Within the cell, a singular light shone from above.

The light came from what looked like an eye growing in the bloodied metal of the ceiling. It was unlike any kind of eye Aldrich had ever seen before. Large, bulbous, yellow, and grotesquely filled with veins that moved and twitched like

insects were crawling through them.

Under the odd yellow spotlight cast from the eye was the Butcher. His disembodied upper body was held up by meat hooks running down the ceiling. They dug into his flesh, dried blood caked all around where they sunk their hooks in.

Tears welled up around the corners of the Butcher's eyes as he breathed heavily in agony. The stumps of his limbs looked like they had been hacked off with something with a rough, serrated edge.

Something that would not have made a clean, quick cut.

Something that would have been painful.

And from the various saw marks on his skin, some less healed than others, Aldrich could tell the Butcher's limbs had been sawed off and regenerated back in many, many cycles.

Below the Butcher, Aldrich saw a little girl. No older than ten, perhaps. She had on an immaculately white dress that stood out in strikingly clean contrast to her blood spattered, filthy strewn surroundings. She looked up at the Butcher with curious, yet strangely cold eyes of green.

When Aldrich took another step forward, past the barred cell door, the girl turned to take notice of him.

"I was waiting for you," said the girl. When Aldrich looked down at her, at her messy white hair and green eyes, he felt a strange sense of familiarity, as if he was looking at a reflection of himself in a puddle.

"You...you're the Chrysalis, aren't you?" said Aldrich, taking note of a tail that

hung low by her feet. The very same, crystalline structured tail of the Chrysalis.

"I don't know what I am now," said the girl. "But I think that's what I used to be."

"This place, is it my Boundary core?" said Aldrich.

The girl nodded. "I think so."

"Did you make all this?"

The girl shook her head. "Not this place. I don't like this place." She shivered, wrapping her arms around herself. "It's too cold."

She went to Aldrich and tugged at his pant leg in the same way a child would to her father when she wanted something. "Can we go up? I made everything upstairs. It's better there and warmer."

Chapter 199: Warmth

Chapter 199: Warmth

"Upstairs? There's more?" Aldrich asked the girl.

The Chrysalis nodded with vigor. "Yes. I built using the blocks I had, all the blocks that were a part of this thing you call a 'soul'. So it won't be new to you, but it's better than this place, I promise."

She came by Aldrich's side and looked up at his hand. He was too tall for her to take a hold of his hand, so she settled with just grasping at the fabric of his pant leg. Like a lost child.

"Okay, let's go," said Aldrich. As soon as those words escaped his lips, something happened in the jail cell.

In the thick darkness of the cell where the light of the eye above did not reach, movement ickered. Aldrich tensed up in immediate alarm. He tried to call upon his magical energy, but found that he could not.

It was not that anything prevented him from drawing out his energy. But when he felt the energy expel from him in cold waves, he felt them disappearing into some infinite void, unable to form into anything resembling a spell.

The darkness ickered again, stronger this time, and Aldrich realized that there was not movement within the dark. The darkness was the one that was moving. Like a mass of living, writhing shadow, the darkness crawled into the eerie yellow spotlight in the form of shadowy tendrils.

These, Aldrich recognized. They were the same type of shadowy tendrils that the Chrysalis used when it was dormant to draw things into its territory.

"Scary." The Chrysalis hid behind Aldrich's legs, peeping out between to see what was going on.

"You don't control the shadows?" said Aldrich.

The Chrysalis rapidly shook her head. "No. They were already here."

"But didn't you call on them?" said Aldrich. "Every time I willed you to draw something into your territory, it seemed like you were controlling them."

"They didn't have a home to be in before me. When I built this place, they moved in, and they got power. In the end, though, I think they only listen to you," said the Chrysalis.

"Hm." Aldrich watched as the tendrils hovered over the Butcher's body like hungry vultures.

"No! Get away!" the Butcher yelled, causing the Chrysalis to wince and put her fingers in her ears.

The tendrils formed into brutish saws and began shearing away at the regenerating flesh around the Butcher's arm and leg stumps. They slowly ripped apart chunks of flesh and bone, making sure the Butcher had ample time to feel the agonizing pain.

When the saw tendrils were done severing the regenerated stumps, other grasping tendrils took the bloody, torn meat and violently began shoving it into the Butcher's mouth.

When the Butcher closed his mouth and turned up his face to stop them from feeding him his own body, more tendrils, thinner and sharper in shape, dug into the Butcher's face, digging under his flesh and bulging visibly under his skin.

They acted like strings on a puppet, forcibly making the Butcher open his mouth. The tendrils even forced his eyes open to make sure he could witness everything.

The Butcher gurgled in his own blood of flesh as the tendrils crammed in his own limbs into his jaw with violent force.

Aldrich tried to will the tendrils to do something else, testing whether he had true control over them. They did not respond to him, only continuing their cycle of infinite torture against the Butcher and his regenerating body.

"Can we go now?" The Chrysalis tugged at Aldrich's pant leg again.

"Yes," said Aldrich. As he stared at the Butcher's suffering, he felt satisfaction.

This was the man that had caused his parents all that agony. It was only right that he suffer the same himself.

It was what he had intended in the first place, too. The biggest reason why he had even captured the Butcher alive. If these tendrils had not done this, then he would have made sure Fler'Gan would have created something just as painful, if not worse.

But Aldrich did not feel it was right to be reveling in this torture with the Chrysalis right beside him. Something about her childlike appearance and demeanor made it feel inappropriate to be watching this with her by his side. "Let's go." Aldrich turned to leave, and the Chrysalis followed close behind him. As he left, the bars of the cell door closed on their own. He took one last look at the cell, not at the Butcher, but at the entire cell itself.

From farther away, even the Butcher's sizable bulk seemed tiny inside the cell. Granted, he was just a torso and head, but even had he been whole, the cell would have been far too big for him.

There was an odd, eerie feeling that this cell was meant for something much, much bigger. But what - Aldrich had no idea.

"This way." Outside the cell, the Chrysalis gained more pep and took the lead forward, tugging at Aldrich's leg to follow.

Overall, the Chrysalis was rather emotionless in her expressions and tone of voice, but Aldrich could find hints of emotion beneath it all. It was the inverse of Rella who had lost how to have proper human emotions over long isolation.

The Chrysalis, Aldrich sensed, was learning how to express herself, learning

how to be comfortable with her newly developed soul.

"Up, up, up..." The Chrysalis started to walk on what seemed like thin air, taking ascending step by step like she was scaling an invisible staircase. Aldrich followed.

They were still in the ceiling-less hallway of darkness leading from the torture room into the cell, but at a certain point, the Chrysalis stopped going up.

"Here," she said as she put a small hand above her head. Her palm pressed at against an invisible surface. A circular outline of light, big enough to easily t Aldrich through, drew around her hand. The darkness within the circle then slid over like a sliding door, revealing bright light.

From that light, warmth emanated outwards.

"Much better." The Chrysalis stopped shivering as she pranced her way up and through the circle of light.

Aldrich did the same. When his head crossed the circle, he found himself peering at what looked like a regular apartment. He blinked, processing his surroundings.

"Come on up." The Chrysalis stood at the edge of a circle of darkness surrounding Aldrich. It seemed that the circle of light was inverted in color up here. She knelt down and held out her hand.

Aldrich took her hand, and she helped raise him up with surprising strength.

When Aldrich stepped out of the dark circle, it closed up with light sliding over it. When the light stopped glowing, it meshed with the rest of the hardwood oor.

"I...I know this place," said Aldrich. He stood still for a moment, blinking several times as he processed things.

He stood in the living room of an apartment. A modest one, based upon its rather cramped size.

A far cry from the enormous rooms of wealthy corporate Suite apartments that had enough space to house things like replaces that they almost never used and pianos that they probably did not even know how to play.

No, instead, the comparatively tiny living room had a sense of heart to it that made it seem much bigger than it was. None of the decorations were thoughtless, placed solely for their worth in credits.

On small stands, there were vases lled with carefully tended owers. On the walls, there were paintings of lakes and oceans and beaches that, though good, were obviously not crafted by some artisanal master. Just someone who had tried their best and was proud of what they had done.

There was a hand built, slightly crooked bookshelf of dark wood in the corner lled with colorful comics, graphic novels, manga, and hardcover ction books. All of those were rarities in today's digitized age, more collector's items than anything that people bought to really read.

Yet, each and every one of those books had little bookmark tags sticking out from their pages.

Aldrich sat down on a creaky blue couch. It felt so familiar to him. And for good reason.

This was his parent's apartment. Where he had spent all of his early years. This

was where they had raised him from a helpless infant to a child lled with dreams.

And, after they had died, this was where he had raised himself, shattering his dreams, picking up the pieces, and forging them into something deadlier.

Colder. He had emptied the place out and lled it with training gear and a VR combat simulation rig that took up most of the living room.

But this was how the apartment looked like before Aldrich's parents had passed.

When they had passed, he had over time changed everything. He had taken down all the paintings his mother had made. He had tried to keep the owers she loved alive, but he had no talent for it. When they withered and died, he had to throw them away.

The shelf full of books his father loved - Aldrich had given those away or thrown them out. It was not that he had not cherished these memories of his parents.

But in the rst year after their death, the memories were just too painful to bear. Every book, every painting - all of it was just a sharp reminder of what he had lost. He had felt better o throwing it all away and letting the oblivion o. It was a decision he came to regret later on, but by then, what had been done had been done.

Aldrich turned around to look at the biggest painting in the room: a family portrait. There was his dad, smiling wide even when the photo was supposed to be serious. There was his mother staring up at his dad with admonishing eyes,

telling him to be serious, but even then, she still smiled at her husband's antics.

Then there was Aldrich, just ve years old, between them, each of his hands held in one of theirs.

This portrait, too, Aldrich had cast away.

To see all of this again -

Aldrich took in a deep breath, feeling overwhelmed. He felt happy, that was for sure, happy that everything he had thought was lost had been immortalized in his Boundary, but at the same time, witnessing all this again - the memories and feelings hit him all at once.

Everything here reminded him of his parents' love for him. So much love. So much lost. So much he had forgotten. So much he had resolved to never feel again.

"Are you okay?" The Chrysalis sat right next to Aldrich's silent gure.

"Yes," said Aldrich.

"Do you like what I built? I used everything I felt in you that I felt was warm and nice," said the Chrysalis. Her legs dangled from the edge of the couch, and she kicked them playfully. "I like this place a lot better than the cold spot. Do you?"

Aldrich took in another deep breath, and then sighed. He smiled. "I do."

"You like it? I'm happy." The Chrysalis nodded to herself energetically. "I didn't like how cold that place below was. So I wanted to make this place as warm as possible."

"Cold, hm? That place below, if you didn't make it, do you know who did?" said Aldrich.

"The Shadows did," said the Chrysalis. The more I built, the more they built with me. I thought they were making fun of me."

"I see." Aldrich did not exactly know what this meant. What were the Shadows? If they were a part of his soul from the beginning as the Chrysalis had said, then were they just some other aspect of him? Perhaps his 'colder' side?

But then why did he lack control over it? Why was it separate to begin with?

Questions, and more questions. He would consult the Death Lord later, once he finished whatever trial he had left in here.

Speaking of, what exactly was the trial here? Was it just to witness this room? If so, it was something far less dramatic than what the Death Lord claimed the experience of encountering a Boundary core for the first time would be.

"I like it," said Aldrich. He stood up. "But I need to go."

"Go?" The Chrysalis cast her eyes downward, saddened. "Already? You don't want to stay here? Where it's warm?"

"I do," said Aldrich. He looked around at the familiar room around him, at all the warm memories they represented that he had lost. "But this is still the past.

I have other people out there that need me who live in the present."

"Then...then can I come with you?" The Chrysalis looked up at Aldrich with wide, pleading eyes.

"Don't you need to stay here to maintain all this?" said Aldrich.

The Chrysalis shook her head. "No. Once I make it, you're the one that keeps it all going."

"Alright then, I don't see an issue with you coming with me," said Aldrich.

"Yay," said the Chrysalis. She hopped o the couch and looked at Aldrich.

"Where do we go now?"

"I was hoping you would tell me," said Aldrich. "I thought you knew a way out of here."

"Me? No?" The Chrysalis cocked her head, clueless.

"Hm?" Aldrich raised a brow, now concerned. Was he trapped here? There must have been a way to leave a Boundary. He had simply thought it would have been automatic as a process. And if it was not, he thought the Death Lord would tell him the manual way to leave.

The fact that she did not made Aldrich entertain the suspicion that she wanted to trap him here. It was a rather low probability suspicion, but he did not discard it.

Aldrich heard a sudden loud crackling of static from across the room.

The Chrysalis, startled, rushed to Aldrich's leg, hugging it like a pillar of support.

A wide telescreen at the other end of the room ashed alive. At rst, there was just pure static. From the reaction of the Chrysalis, Aldrich could tell she had not turned it on.

The warm lights in the room ickered on and o rapidly before dimming o completely, letting darkness take a hold of the room. And with that darkness, an eerie chill permeated through the air. The plants in vases started to wilt. The paintings started to chip away. The books started to crumple.

Decay started to leech in everywhere. The place started to look more and more

like the depressingly empty training ground that Aldrich had turned it into.

"No-," Aldrich reached out a hand, trying to preserve everything he saw fading away. He could not let that happen, not again, and yet, there were too many things to try and save.

The telescreen's static faded away, revealing a split screen. One half was an angry red. The other half a deep, dark blue. Twin voices radiated out from each half of the screen. From the red, his father's voice. From the blue, his mother's. Their voices were not kind. They were not welcoming. They were not warm.

"Son...what happened to you?" said his father.

"Wh-what is all that behind you?" said his mother's horried voice.

Aldrich looked behind himself. Instead of seeing his family portrait, he instead saw a canvas of darkness. The darkness shaped into a host of shifting faces twisted in expressions of pain and agony. Faces he recognized. Faces he had killed.

"My god...what have you done?" said his father. "What-what made you do this?"

"No, no, no. You can't be our son," said his mother. "Not that sweet child who always smiled, even when we knew you were hurting inside. You always thought of others, just the way we taught you to. You can't be like this, like... like a monster."

A monster.

If anyone else had called Aldrich a monster, he would not have cared. He would even have agreed. But hearing it from his parents - the word pierced through

him. It felt like a blade jammed through his heart.

Those voices that had shown nothing but love and support, those voices he had always looked up to - reducing him down to nothing but a monster. The sheer horror in their voice, that sense of pure otherness, like they were talking not to their son but something to shun and curse - it hit Aldrich harder than any blow he had felt.

Aldrich felt nauseous, and he put a hand to the side of his head. This was not physical nausea. It was purely mental. It reminded him of the first year following his parents' death, when even a small memento of them would send a wave of nausea through his body.

"We told you that when someone is down-," said his father.

"You always pick them up," nished his mother.

"We loved you because you were like us."

"We loved you because you were kind."

"We loved you because we saw so much good in you."

"Where did that all go?"

"What did you do?"

"What have you become?"

"We can't love you now."

"Monster."

Aldrich fell down to a knee as he started to breath heavy. The Chrysalis looked at Aldrich with worry, then tentatively at the red and blue screen. She shivered, scared at the darkness that ickered around the edges of the screen.

She gently slapped her cheeks to gain courage and stood in front of Aldrich, opposing the screen.

"Don't say mean things to him," said the Chrysalis.

Aldrich did not hear her. He was absorbed in thought. In fear. Like with Valera, he never feared fighting and putting his life on the line. He was never scared of a bullet or eye beam or super strength.

What he was afraid of, always, deep down, at the very depths of his being, was love.

Fear that he could not love another.

And fear that he did not deserve to be loved by the only people he had loved: his parents.

He knew they would never have approved of what he had become. But he had buried that fear because he knew he would never see them again. And yet, here they were.

The fact that this came right after feeling so many good memories about them made it even worse, twisting that blade in his heart with a cruel hand.

"He-he fights hard. He gives up so much to fight. You can't say bad things to him like that when he tries so hard," said the Chrysalis, visibly nervous but still standing as tall as she could for Aldrich.

Those words reached Aldrich. It made him think. He had given up so much to be where he was now. He had given up a happy life. Love and laughter. Even his humanity. He had become a monster.

But -

"I know," said Aldrich. He stood up, the nausea leaving him. He faced the screen of red and blue with determination in his green eyes. "I know that I'm not what you wanted me to be. I know that if you two were actually alive, if you saw me as I was, learned what I did, who I killed, who I tortured, you would be horrified.

I don't know how real this is, but I've also known deep within myself that you two, if you saw me as I was now, would not be able to love me. At least, not in the way you used to when I was a child.

When...when you were still with me."

"How can we love you now? You've become a monster."

"I know. I've always known." Aldrich nodded. "But I am my own monster. I made these choices. I made these sacrifices because I thought they were necessary.

Were they the right choices?

You wouldn't think so. Plenty of others wouldn't."

Aldrich's flesh peeled off in chunks from his arms and chest, baring his inhuman skeleton.

"But who or what I am now is my choice and mine alone. This path I walk...is it right? Is it wrong? I sometimes wonder myself. But it doesn't change the fact that it's the path that I chose, and because I chose it, I will see it through to the end."

Aldrich stared at the screen, his eyes glowing bright. His magical energy started to return to him, swirling in an aura around him. In his mind, he remembered

all the happiness he felt from his parents, all those sweet and warm memories.

They owed into him nonstop, almost as if through external force, trying to get him down him down in fear and guilt. The blade in his heart twisted even further, but none of that stopped his next words.

"And the voices of happy memories long dead won't stop me."

The telescreen cracked, the red and blue images instantly shutting o into darkness. Then, the darkness of the screen expanded outwards, engulfing the room. The Chrysalis cringed as she held on tight to Aldrich's leg as the darkness swallowed them both up.