

Super Necromancer System

Chapter 201: Boundary Overcome

Aldrich emerged from the enveloping darkness and found himself back in the Death Lord's realm. He was not standing, but laying down, staring up at the yawning void of darkness within the Bell of Absolution.

It was a jarring sensation, being in one realm, then another with barely a hint of transition. What was even more jarring was the immediate sense of weakness he felt, like his body was still made of frail flesh and had gone through a week of starvation.

The culprit for all this, however, was right in front of him. No, to be more precise, she was sprawled on top of him.

Valera was sprawled atop Aldrich, legs pinned against his waist in a vice grip as she sunk her warm fangs deep into his neck. Her arms were hugged tightly around Aldrich in an embrace that managed to be both caring and firm.

"I-I'm back," managed out Aldrich as he felt his health rapidly deteriorating.

"Stop doing weird things to him!" The Chrysalis pushed against Valera, though with how strong Valera was, the push barely even registered to her.

"Mmm. My apologies, master," said Valera as she tore herself away from Aldrich's neck with trembling effort. Her voice was a little listless, like she was under the influence, and she did not even register the Chrysalis's presence.

When her face was far enough away, he immediately felt his instincts send a signal of alarm.

Her red eyes were wide and manic with a wide, fanged, bloodsmeared smile oozing with overwhelming, crazed desire. She looked down at Aldrich's neck, then at his lips, and licked her own like a hungry predator. "B-but your blood...you know how sweet it is for me...how warm it makes me inside-,"

Valera started to slowly reach down again, back to Aldrich's neck. This time, he stopped her with a light bonk to the top of her head with a chopping motion.

"Not now - there are children here," said Aldrich.

That tap to her head calmed her down a little.

"A-a child?" Valera's red gaze glanced over to the Chrysalis, finally registering things properly. "Let me cool down, master," said Valera with heavy breaths. She began to regulate them, probably through some meditative method she learned from her warrior's training. And as she did so, the flush in her pale cheeks started to die down.

Aldrich was about to let his hand go from her head, but she kept it there with her own hand. "Keep your hand there. I like it. And it helps me focus."

Aldrich did as she asked, and in thirty seconds, she nodded and opened her eyes. This time, her eyes did not shine with feral desire anymore. They were calm. Dignified. Like they usually were.

She shyly looked away from Aldrich. "Apologies. That was unseemly behavior from me."

"No, I understand. It's just a side effect of drinking my blood." Aldrich tried to get up from under Valera but realized he could not budge her monstrous strength. Without any enhancements from the Death Lord, he truly was a whole tier below real physical powerhouses like Valera and Volantis.

"I believe your master wishes to actually move." The Death Lord came into Aldrich's vision. "Goodness, as a lady, you must learn to control yourself. Or else your dear master may find himself enthralled in the presence of a real lady such as my-"

Valera instantly got off of Aldrich in attack, swiping at the Death Lord's neck with her bare black claws. She stopped right before the claws touched the Death Lord's neck.

"Are you going to finish that sentence?" hissed Valera. She glared at the Death Lord. "You may be worthy enough in strength to stand by my master, but until he acknowledges you himself, I will never accept you."

The Death Lord smiled at Valera, not at all caring that sharp black claws were just a centimeter away from reaching into her exposed neck. "Look, I got you off of him so quickly. And do not be so feral, vampire. I will not stand in your way. At best, I may stand with you if your master allows it. And if I find myself even interested enough to entertain the idea."

Valera frowned but withdrew her claws. She could not really do anything to the Death Lord anyway. Her initial attack was probably an instinctive reaction meant to tear apart anyone that tried to tear Aldrich away from her.

Aldrich looked at Valera, then at the Death Lord. He had no idea that the Death Lord would ever be interested in him in that way. But it was surface level interest, at best.

Good, honestly. Any more than that and he would have a headache. He had not even begun to properly navigate his relationship with Valera, let alone anyone else, if even that was something he wanted.

"Ladylike behavior? Bollocks." Rella growled from afar, watching with her muscular arms crossed in front of her chest. "When strong women lie with strong men, there is no room for 'ladies' and 'gentlemen'. Only raw passion."

Just as Aldrich was wondering and pitying about the men that had been crushed under Rella, the Chrysalis spoke up. "I don't get all this. What's everyone talking about?"

"Nothing," said Aldrich quickly as he got on his feet. The Chrysalis hugged his leg and peered up at all the strange women around her.

"This is the Chrysalis," said Aldrich.

"That crystal creature turned into this...child?" Valera cocked her head at the Chrysalis.

"The creature created a soul and filled it in with the Death Walker as a base," said the Death Lord. "It is almost identical to what happens when a mother bears a child. A child-like form is thus quite fitting."

"I see." Valera put a thinking hand to her chin. "So my master has given birth," she said, completely serious.

"I would very much prefer if you all did not put it like that," said Aldrich with a sigh.

"In any case, any child of my master's is a child of mine to protect!" Valera declared as she knelt down and tried extending an inviting hand to the Chrysalis. "Come, let me hold you, child."

The Chrysalis hid behind Aldrich's legs, avoiding Valera.

"Crazy woman," said the Chrysalis.

Valera looked like she had suffered emotional damage. She looked up at Aldrich with pleading eyes, wordlessly asking him what she should do.

"...Just give her some time," said Aldrich. He had to admit he was not an expert either.

"Hah! You have no idea how to deal with a child, I see," said the Death Lord. "As expected a vampire whelp. Watch me."

The Death Lord looked down at the Chrysalis with a cold, calculating gaze like she was assessing how ripe a fruit was. "My my, you have quite the potential. How about it, then, do you wish to inherit some of my grand magics? Magics that have turned entire kingdoms of people into naught but bloodied icicles, their screams of terror eternally captured in their frozen tombs?

Does that not sound wondrously fun?"

The Chrysalis widened her eyes at the Death Lord and the horrifying images she drew up with her words. She kept hiding behind Aldrich. "Scary woman...",

"And who was supposed to be the expert here?" said Valera as she eyed the Death Lord with a triumphant smile, as if she had done any better.

"This...this usually works." The Death Lord faintly blushed as she put a hand to her chin, completely lost on why her 'approach' did not work.

Aldrich stared blankly at Valera and the Death Lord. He had always had a soft spot for children and their innocence, but he knew he was bad with them because of his lack of expressiveness.

But these two had way, way too much expressiveness, and none of it good. They were even worse than he was when it came to parenting.

"Children are simple creatures," began Rella as she started to come closer with thudding steps. "They grow best under danger, just as I did. I suggest-,"

Aldrich, Valera, and the Death Lord all simultaneously stared at Rella with disapproving looks. Even though all of them were bad at handling children, they still knew Rella would be worse than bad - a veritable disaster.

She probably thought about tossing the kid into a dungeon or something.

"...I will stop now," said Rella.

"Good." Aldrich sighed. As he did so, he felt a sharp pain at his chest, where his heart was. It was that same feeling of a blade twisting in his heart. The feeling he had pressed on through when he had come face to face with his deepest fear.

He grimaced as he clutched his heart.

"Are you okay?" the Chrysalis was first to respond to Aldrich, tugging worriedly at his pant leg.

"Master-," began Valera in a worry of her own.

"Do not work yourselves up over this." The Death Lord, in contrast to everyone else, smiled proudly. "Instead, rejoice! This is a cause for celebration - the Death Walker has truly unlocked his Boundary.

That feeling, Death Walker, that is your Trigger to unseal your Boundary. Keep that feeling in your mind. Engrave it in your being. Never forget it.

When you wish to unseal your Boundary, imagine that feeling again. That pain. It will be the key to unlock your inner realm and expand it upon your current plane of existence."

Aldrich took in a deep breath as he felt the pain of his heart getting pierced. He committed it deeply to his memory as the Death Lord said, though that was not hard considering how strongly he had felt it just minutes before.

"Alright, then I'll test it out now-," began Aldrich as he held out a hand, keeping that feeling of his heart tearing in his mind. Waves of darkness began to flicker around his body.

Chapter 202: Boundary Details

Aldrich did not waste any time. He began the process of summoning his Boundary. He wanted to see exactly how developed his personal space was. And, some part of him still wanted to see if that little apartment room full of warm memories was still there.

But to get there, Aldrich had to unlock it with a key. That key being the memory of pain, that feeling of something sharp, something brutal, gouging into his heart and twisting it.

It was not very pleasant, holding the feeling, but the Death Lord was right: holding it made the image of his Boundary space much clearer in his head.

Aldrich held out his hand in front of him, his palm open. Darkness shrouded his arms, undulating like flowing water.

"Manifesting a Boundary already?" Rella watched Aldrich intently, her gleaming white eyes narrowed. She leaned forward, eager, a smile tugging at the edges of her lips. "After just barely encountering his core? What is he, some kind of monster?"

"Yes, you would know much about that," said the Death Lord. She put a hand to her chin as she watched Aldrich intently. "I would like to see this happen, but-,"

The Death Lord appeared in front of Aldrich with a single high speed movement.

Aldrich could not react to her, not only because of her speed, but because of the concentration he put in trying to manifest his Boundary. It felt like his body was encumbered by chains all around. His mind, too, was slow. Concentrating on the Boundary and the knife to heart image took a huge amount of mental energy.

The shadows manifesting around Aldrich reacted violently towards the Death Lord, lashing out their tendrils towards her. She smiled as she projected her own magical energy.

This energy aura, however, was different than her regular one.

The aura swirled out in a flurry of white snowflakes, indicating that this was not her usual green necromancy tinged mana. When the cloud of bright white snowflakes hit his darkness, they overwhelmed the shadows with ease, scattering the dark away like the sun would when it rose on a dark landscape.

"Not yet, Death Walker." The Death Lord put her hand on Aldrich's and guided it down. The sound of Valera crushing the metal of her armor was heard not very far away. "Not yet. I am curious to see whether you can manifest your Boundary fully on your first try, but it is unwise for your wellbeing.

Let your mind process what has happened. Let the magic within your body settle.

Rest.

Then, you may try. I shall guide you through the process."

"...Alright." Aldrich broke his concentration, and he felt a massive wave of exhaustion hit him like a tidal wave. It was not physical exhaustion - his undead body did not feel that. But more mental, more spiritual.

"Look! I can do this!" The Chrysalis spoke up from beside Aldrich, and they turned their attention to her.

The Chrysalis had copied Aldrich, holding her hand out in front of her in the same posture as she concentrated, her brows furrowing together. Her lip quivered in exertion as her whole body trembled.

Black sparks crackled from in front of the Chrysalis's hand before they turned into circle of darkness - the same kind that Aldrich manifested. From that circle of watery dark, a figure plopped out.

A human, it seemed, dressed up in a tattered brown suit that looked unfashionably like the shade of excrement. Despite his tattered clothes, he slept without a care in the world, snoring liberally.

"What is this thing?" The Death Lord eyed the human with confusion.

"A weakling, I ought to say," said Rella.

"An Alterhuman," remarked Valera, now comfortable with the term.

"Right. The Editor I snatched up," said Aldrich.

"Ah yes, one of those new humans," said the Death Lord walked over to the sleeping Alter and stood over him. "Still, I cannot understand how these humans manage to create such a variety of abilities. I do like what is new, though. Perhaps I may request you send another one of these to my realm.

Medula may quite like experimenting upon one."

"Dissection is not my specialty, but any research is research, I suppose," said Medula, glancing at the Editor with a slightly more interested look than usual.

"Where were you keeping him?" Aldrich asked the Chrysalis.

"He was sleepy, so I just tucked him in a bed," said the Chrysalis.

Notably, the Editor had gotten lot better treatment than the Butcher. It was as if the shadows beneath the space the Chrysalis made had claimed the Butcher for themselves. It hinted further to the possibility that the shadows represented the darker aspects of Aldrich's mind, the part that had wanted to cause as much agony to the Butcher as possible.

Then, did the Chrysalis represent what was good in him? What was pure? That might explain her childlike appearance and innocence.

Aldrich could not know for sure. He was not an expert at getting symbols out of context clues. That was a job for empty headed academics, not him.

"And he's still sleeping? Impressive," said Aldrich. He nodded to the Chrysalis and her tired face. "You should take a rest, too. I know taking something in and out of your territory is taxing on you."

Before the Boundary had developed, the Chrysalis could barely take objects in and out for more than a few instances before needing long recharge periods.

Aldrich had hoped that with the Boundary's development and the Chrysalis obtaining a soul that she would get better, but he did not let any disappointment show as he did not want to hurt the Chrysalis.

"No, that was because he was a strange man. He didn't belong in my space," said the Chrysalis. She pouted, wanting to impress Aldrich. "But-but I can do better. Look at this!"

The Chrysalis furrowed her brows again, and from the shadow portal she made, objects started to fall out.

First, it was a series of random household objects. Forks, spoons, chopsticks, a random mug or two that shattered on the ground, and so on.

Then, Aldrich's eyes widened as he saw something valuable. A white porcelain vase holding roses.

Aldrich instantly recognized it was a vase from his mother. From the room. Before the vase could shatter on the cold, hard stone below, he instantly grabbed it.

Then, a small stack of comic books fell out. He grabbed that too in his other hand.

Then, a moderately sized painting of a house on a green hill popped out. This was too big for him to carry in either of his hands, and he did not want to let it get ruined by mug shards from below. He deftly kicked it back.

"Valera!" said Aldrich.

"I have it, master!" Valera responded like she was a soldier responding to a life or death order from a general. She caught the painting in her hands.

"And...and..." The Chrysalis's eyes began to flutter as her little body swayed from side to side, growing tired. "I'm sleepy."

With that, the Chrysalis closed her eyes. Before she could plop down on the messy, shard scattered ground, the Death Lord picked her up by the neck of her white dress like she was picking a puppy up by the scruff.

"Hmm." The Death Lord stared intently at the sleeping Chrysalis. "I see now. Your Boundary is split. One part of your Boundary hails from this girl, and another from you.

An exceedingly rare case."

"Is that a good thing?" said Aldrich.

"It depends," said the Death Lord. She nodded towards the Chrysalis. She slept peacefully. "On her, for I trust your competency.

Two souls sharing one Boundary means control is shared. If both souls are competent and in sync, then they may operate the Boundary with incredible efficiency. If not, the more competent soul will have to do double the work.

There was one Lich who rebelled against me that had this condition, what was their name, ah yes, Kal'Ves. A twin mage sister and warrior brother duo who fused together due to their kindred closeness upon reaching undeath and Lichdom.

Their Split Boundary was exceptional due to how in sync they were.

You witnessed before, did you not, how my aura of white overpowered your shadows?"

"Yes."

"That was the energy of my Boundary clashing against yours."

When two Liches unseal their Boundaries, the Boundary that is more developed and stable will take over more space than the other. If the difference is great enough, the stronger Boundary will completely devour the lesser and use it as fuel," said the Death Lord. She shrugged. "Of course, we are in my Boundary already, so I have an advantage, but I digress."

The twins were particularly fierce because they could unseal two fully developed Boundaries that worked together, effectively doubling the space and complexity of their Boundary.

The brother created a world of swords. The sister created a world of magic crystals. They could combine these worlds together for a world of magic infused blades.

This made them a deadly foe against foes even a dozen levels higher than them.

However, more often than not, a Split Boundary harms more than it does good.

Two disparate souls, for example, will create Boundaries that are so vastly different from each other that they cannot mesh, risking even devouring each other."

Chapter 203: Resting

Aldrich looked down at his hands, at the last flickers of shadow leaving them, flowing past the flower vase and stack of books he held. "So what? Does that mean my Boundary has a high probability of being useless?"

"I would not say so." The Death Lord held the sleeping Chrysalis out towards Aldrich. "This one may have her own unique soul, but at the same time, it is not truly unique."

It is a soul that developed using your own as a template. She may be a separate being, but fundamentally, she is still you. Odd, though." The Death Lord cocked her head at the Chrysalis's sleeping, sweetly innocent smile. "I would never have expected you to have a side like this within you."

"If there was ever a side of me like that, it's long gone," said Aldrich.

"Hmm. Not gone. Buried." The Death Lord smiled. "It is not a bad thing, to have a side of light, of warmth, like this within you. It balances your being and makes you more interesting."

Creatures that are pure dark or pure light are boring abominations. Like that blindingly awful goddess."

Aldrich gently placed the flower vase and books down and took the Chrysalis from the Death Lord, holding the girl. She felt snug in his warm. Incredibly warm, too, contrasting deeply with the chill of his undead skin.

"It is my current theory that you two represent two halves of one soul," said the Death Lord. "Thus, your Boundary is still technically of one soul. Interference only occurs when two separate souls project incompatible boundaries.

The greater the closeness of the souls, the greater the compatibility. Kal'Ves, twins by birth, could project a perfectly complementary Boundary.

I should surmise that this little girl, created of your own soul, possesses an even closer link than that of birth twins. I do not see an issue with your Boundary developing.

It will just require more training to use properly."

"Training? This isn't an innate racial ability?" said Aldrich.

"The ability to project a Boundary is innate to any sufficiently powerful Lich, but to actually develop and control it properly requires training." The Death Lord reached out and squeezed Aldrich's shoulder muscles. "Your muscles are part of your natural body, are they not?

And yet to maximize their strength you must break them down and build them up - you must train them. It is just the same for your Boundary.

That is another interesting thing I have noted from you. The knowledge to use spells seems to imbue naturally within you. You have no need to train to wield them. But for racial abilities, you seem to require training just like the rest of us."

The Death Lord put her hand to her chin and looked away, talking to herself in a quieter tone. "Perhaps it is because this system of transferral did not account for racial changes, hm..."

"System of transferral?" said Aldrich.

The Death Lord looked up. "Hm? Yes. This 'system' of yours is a function meant to transfer power. You may be asking from where, and that, even I do not know originally.

Now that I have taken it over, that power comes from me, but in the beginning, who or what it was bestowed this system upon you is something that eludes me."

"..." Aldrich thought about the mystery of his system's origin and how few clues he had to actually figuring out how it had originated.

There were so many unanswered questions and too little context to answer them. At best, his main lead was researching the Elden World game, his console, if it still existed, and tracking down the seller, but these were all a long shot.

"But do not think so hard, Death Walker," said the Death Lord. "And take some rest. It may not have seemed like it, but you spent several hours vying against your Boundary core.

And you may still feel powerful, tireless with your undead body, but you should allow your mind to rest. To that end, I have prepared proper quarters for you and your guardian knight."

"The Trial Quests-," began Aldrich.

The Death Lord rolled her eyes. "Come now, slow down a little. What, are you that eager to clear your mere second Trial Quest? You alone could annihilate any little being in that.

You have all this time to spend with my wondrous looks and personality, and you choose the Trial Quests?"

"If possible, yes," said Aldrich.

The Death Lord pouted. "Goodness, you truly are an odd specimen. But heed my advice, Death Walker. You must take some time to rest. Your Boundary core is still stabilizing. Casting magic on an unstable core is a risky endeavor that I highly advise against.

Rest assured, you are not wasting time here. While you rest, I will devise a method to train both you and the Chrysalis in utilizing your Boundary. There are also some rare items gathering dust I would like to bequeath you, mostly for your followers, but only if you pass a few trials of my own."

"And what would those trials be?"

The Death Lord smiled and shrugged. "I do not know. I have not thought of them yet. So get your rest, Death Walker, and give a lady some time to think."

Aldrich sat upon a large, king sized bed of plush silken green covers and royal purple blankets. The bedframe oozed with ornate luxury, made of gold carved into patterns of bones and lilies. Behind the bed, he had hung the painting of a house on a meadow that his mother had made. On a stand off to the side, his father's comics and his mother's flower vase stood.

'This is a spare bed I had, but I suppose you can use it. Laying upon it will increase the recovery of your soul, mana, and body tremendously!' The Death Lord's words rung in Aldrich's mind.

As did the rest of her words, though these were spoken in whispers. 'And of course, I am sure you are interested in body recovery, are you not? It cannot be helped, being a young man of vigor as you are.'

Aldrich sighed and put a hand to his forehead. The thought of doing anything like that beside his parents' mementos felt incredibly wrong. Not to mention the Chrysalis was here, sleeping in her own smaller bed off to the side.

Aldrich took his hand off his face and looked at it. At the scars and calluses that marred it. He wondered whether it was actually okay to just sit around and do, well, nothing.

It felt incredibly odd.

It seemed like his entire life, all his actions and thoughts, was devoted to some kind of purpose.

Mostly vengeance, he realized. But that too, was mostly gone. He had killed Seth Solar and the Butcher now suffered eternal torture.

There was, of course, the rest of the Trident to take down, but that was a faceless entity and a much larger goal than just capturing the Butcher. He could not pursue that goal with vengeance, he had to approach it with cold calculation.

And that was the thing. Now that personal vengeance was done and over with, he was left with much larger goals to take care of.

Taking down the Trident was one thing, but the biggest goal of all, to bring his idea of order into the world, to essentially conquer it as Volantis said, was on another scale entirely.

He had no clear plan yet as to how he would do it. He just knew for now he had to get stronger and find out more about where he stood in the world, and then he would know what pieces to play and when.

Right now, though, Aldrich was meant to just rest.

According to the Death Lord, he was not even supposed to think too hard about things and just stay in a state of calm, mindless rest.

Aldrich look over to his side, at a smaller bed where the Chrysalis lay sleeping, curled up in a ball reminiscent of how she had looked when she was a crystalline serpent. She still slept soundly.

Aldrich shrugged and laid down on the soft bed. Everything from the bed to the feeling of his new clothes felt soft.

Too soft for his liking.

His training garb had been taken away and replaced with what was known as spiritweave clothing. This was magical clothing conjured up using a catalyst from Aldrich - in his case strands of hair - that would manifest with his Materius, fixing his flashing problem.

Even more useful was that the clothing was bound to his Materius, basically being a part of it. If he regenerated his Materius, he could regenerate his clothing too.

Granted, spiritweave clothing did not have very strong stats and little capacity to hold extra magical enchantments, but it was still useful regardless for walking around in human form.

As for its design, Wai'ki had looked into Aldrich's memory and fashioned a sleek black suit as she had no idea what a suit looked like. Right now, he had dematerialized his suit jacket and dress shirt, leaving him in a form fitting white undershirt and pants.

In a way, this was very similar to how Strand, the world's premiere costume making company for heroes, made their outfits for heroes who were too physically strong to use conventional body armor or who had powers like intangibility or invisibility that made conventional clothing inconvenient.

They took strands of hair or other genetic material from heroes and built what was basically a 'second skin' that would interact properly with the hero's powers, preventing accidental nudity.

Could not have heroes walking around naked after fights or using their powers, after all. That was just not good for public image and ratings, and ratings were everything for heroes that only cared about credits and fame.

Aldrich laid down on his bed and looked up. Across a ceiling and walls of gray stone were dotted magic crystals carved into the shape of lilies that shone with faint white light, illuminating the room.

When was the last time he had ever just laid down and relaxed like this? He could not really remember. Anytime he ever took a rest, it was to make sure he recovered from an injury or a workout.

Rest was just a tool to leverage. That was how he thought of it.

Technically, he supposed, this was like that, what with needing to recover his spiritual stability. But it still felt strange.

Unnatural.

Or, perhaps, he was the unnatural one.

Someone who had, over time and abuse and suffering, simply lost the ability to wind down and enjoy life at his own pace.

In stark contrast to the Chrysalis who rested without a care in the world.

Like he had done when he was a child.

Aldrich watched the Chrysalis, at her rhythmic breathing, at her sweet smile she managed even while sleeping, and sighed.

That was the thing, though. In the world Aldrich lived in, he could never enjoy anything 'at his own pace'.

That was a luxury for those that did not need to do more than just struggle to survive, struggle to be heard, struggle to be accepted, struggle with every fiber of muscle and bone just to make an impact, just to carve out even a tiny bit of satisfactory vengeance.

If possible, Aldrich wanted to fashion a world where people like him did not need to struggle like that anymore.

A strong series of knocks echoed through the room.

Aldrich sighed. It was probably the Death Lord here to harass him again. He got off the bed with a flip just to feel like he was active and went over to his door.

"What is it now?" said Aldrich gruffly as he opened the door, but instead of the Death Lord, there was Valera.

She stood in the doorway in her revealing black dress, her red eyes looking shyly down as a small blush tinted her white cheeks. "May...may I come in?"

Chapter 204: Love, Past and Present

"..." Aldrich took a moment to process Valera's appearance in his doorframe. Well, it was not entirely out of possibility. His quarters were on a refurbished first floor of the Necropolis, and the Death Lord had given Valera a room right next to his.

"If this is not a good time, I can take my leave, master," began Valera.

"No, come in. I was just a little surprised, that's all." Aldrich moved out the way of the door, and Valera shyly came in.

"What brings you here?" asked Aldrich as he closed the door of ebony wood shut. It flashed briefly with green as it locked closed with some form of magical safety mechanism that also dampened noise.

Valera looked around the room with her hands clasped together. She blushed as she avoided eye contact with Aldrich. "Well, ahem, I do not have a place to stay for the night."

"You don't? Your room is right by, isn't it?" said Aldrich.

"W-well...about that-," began Valera. "I no longer have a bed."

"What?" Aldrich had taken a brief look at Valera's room and known for sure she had a bed. Her room was a little smaller than his, but it still had very basic furnishings like his hid. "

"I was resting on the bed, you see, keeping awake vigil in the case that there were intruders to my master's room, when in one sudden moment, it simply...disappeared," said Valera. "It faded away as if it had never been there before and all that was left was the Death Lord's voice echoing through my room."

"Did she announce anything particularly important?" said Aldrich as he perked up, wondering if the Death Lord was done preparing her own trials and training methods.

"N-no," said Valera. Her blush deepened a few more shades of red as she looked shyly away, focusing on the painting above Aldrich's bed to not look too awkward.

"Then what did she say?"

"It-it was a recorded message," stammered Valera. "She t-told me that if I was hearing it, that meant I had wasted my time not making a move upon you! That the whole purpose of separate rooms was so I could have the luxury of surprising you by walking into yours, that men liked that sort of thing and other nonsense. That by taking away my bed, now I must barge into your quarters!

She-that snake truly does not understand privacy, nor a Guardian Knight's vows."

Valera shook her head rapidly, cooling down. "Master, I know - I will stand outside and watch your room in guard. Who knows what that intrusive snake may do - she may even slither her way in here, and I cannot bear the thought of her enchanting you with that seductive gaze of hers."

She clenched her fist resolutely, making sure to absolutely stop the Death Lord from breaking into Aldrich's room in whatever imaginary scenario she conjured up.

"No, you don't have to go. I want you to stay, actually" said Aldrich. "I've been meaning to do this for some time now."

He looked around to see if he had a table or chairs to sit her down with, but he realized he just had the bed. Probably that too was by the Death Lord's design. He put a tired face to his forehead as he sat down on the bed. He patted the spot beside him, gesturing for Valera to come.

Valera's face turned beet red. "M-master, wh-what are you suggesting? Well, you are a young man, as that snake said, and you were a human, so you must have some of your youthful urges left over so-,"

"It's not what you think," said Aldrich. His tone became serious. "I just wanted to talk. About answering your feelings for me. I know I've been putting it off for some time, especially with how many things that have happened recently that have taken up our attention."

Valera cooled down when she heard Aldrich's serious tone and saw his serious expression. She, too, understood the gravity of this situation, and she nodded as she sat down beside Aldrich. Her hand shook a little.

"Are you fine? Is anything wrong with your status?" said Aldrich as he nodded towards her hand.

"Ah, this? N-no," said Valera as she clasped her hands together tight, hiding the trembling. "I...I am just nervous about your answer. B-but, whatever it is, I am willing to accept it."

Aldrich understood. She was not sure whether to face acceptance or rejection, and that made her nervous. More nervous than he had ever seen her before.

Right now, the way she looked, her gaze cast away, her hands shaking, her posture hunched forward - she looked so incredibly vulnerable. She had never shown even an ounce of this against any fight of threat they had encountered so far.

Always, she had stood tall, ready to punch down anything, no matter how big or strong or tough it was.

Aldrich did not like to see her like this, and it made it harder for him to talk. He did not want to risk hurting her, and so he took a long pause, not exactly sure how to word himself perfectly. He was not rejecting her, but he wanted to warn her about himself.

About how he was not sure whether he could love her the way she loved him.

Words never were his weak point.

He could be articulate and he could also be to the point, and even if he had to play a character to try and trick others, he could do it. He could even try to be a suave flirt if he wanted, but he could only do that because he knew it was all fake.

All a ruse to get what he wanted.

Right now, in front of Valera's raw, honest vulnerability, he was forced to show who he really was as well, and behind all the veneer and veils, he was wordless, utterly inexperienced in navigating his way around situations like this.

Valera sensed Aldrich's difficulty and took in a deep breath. She stopped trembling at her hands and looked at Aldrich with a smile. "Master, no, your name in this world, Aldrich, is it not?"

Aldrich nodded.

"I know how you are thinking. You must be thinking of the perfect things to say to me, no?" said Valera.

Aldrich nodded.

"You do not have to," said Valera. "Whatever is on your mind, tell it to me. And whatever decision you make, I will respect. I will still follow you, Aldrich, whether it is as your shield or something more."

"It's something I've been thinking about, this situation," said Aldrich. He looked at Valera's gentle smile and felt more at ease to go on. "My feelings. Yours. I wanted to start by asking you: why do you have these feelings for me?"

Valera looked momentarily surprised but then nodded. "Of course. You know the tale of my pitiable life, but I will tell it again, if only to make me remember strongly how I felt. And how strongly that past of mine makes me feel about you."

She sighed and closed her eyes, reminiscing to times long, long ago.

"I was of noble birth.

Child to the vampire count Vandel and Dullahan warrior Lera. It was an union that felt like it was torn from the pages of a romantic tale. My father met my mother on the battlefield as enemies, but in clashing with each other, grew to admire each other, then, when the battle was fought and done, love each other.

In the pages of a book or in the song of a bard, that union might have been beautiful, full of love, but in reality, it was unholy.

Vampires hold the purity of blood to high standard. The Dullahan clans never take kindly to outsiders.

I was an abomination to both sides, and my father and mother suffered from it.

My mother was captured from my father's fort and executed by her own peoples for bearing an outsider's blood.

My father took up renewed arms against the Dullahan clans once more, rejecting the peace treaties that the other vampire counts proposed. For that, he was assassinated.

In my early years, when I was still with my father, I remember being happy. All around me, I felt cold eyes from my vampire brethren for my mixed blood.

But my father, I dearly cherished. From him, I learned everything a royal lady should. Etiquette, the arts, the sciences, magic, and fighting, yes, fighting, though so very unlady-like, I fell into so deeply.

I remember when I trained to fight, it was not because I wanted to harm. It was because I wanted to protect. I knew my father warred often, and I wanted to protect him. Whenever my little self told him that, he would laugh so very heartily and tell me he needed no others to guard him.

On the battlefield, he may have been right. But when my father was assassinated and his kin risen to take his place, I no longer held any allies. There was no longer any warmth in my father's own fort, only those eyes that stared at me as if I was nothing but a monster.

In respect for my half noble blood, I was not executed but sent to the Midnight Order to take the oath of a Guardian Knight.

To take that oath is to vow not only lifelong service to a chosen, to become another's shield, but also to take a vow of celibacy. A convenient and bloodless way to end my unclean bloodline.

Chapter 205: [Bonus chapter] Love, Past and Present

2

Aldrich watched Valera take a moment to collect herself. Her lips twisted into a faint frown, baring a sliver of her sharp fangs. She clutched at her arm, her black fingernails pressing in dangerously hard, just shy of breaking the skin.

Valera did not like remembering her past.

This, Aldrich knew.

In Elden World, there was a surprisingly extensive amount of interaction with NPCs that allowed one to develop strong relationships with them.

How strong one's relationship was with a NPC allowed not only for more fluff things like romance paths to open up, but practical things like access to specific NPC questlines that usually had unique locations, items, bosses, and the like.

When Aldrich played, he had maxed out his relationship meter with Valera, though no paths actually led to a direct romance because of how much effort it took her to open up.

Valera was a cold, stoic, and prickly character when first summoned that just did her job to protect her summoner. She replied with one word answers to most questions and did not like being questioned about her past.

Actually getting her to open up and form a bond with her took most of the entire game because of how troubled her past was.

This left too little time to get into a proper romance with her, but before battling the Howling Dark - the final boss - she did promise to stay with the player character forever. That was essentially a declaration of love.

The idea was that after the game, there was an implied happily ever after where the player reunited with Valera.

This was why Valera was so attached to Aldrich upon being summoned. She had the highest level of relationship built with Aldrich - the player - already.

But that was just the game. It was a whole different thing to deal with it in real life. It felt almost wrong. She had all these genuine memories with him, but to him, it had all just been nothing more than a game.

This was the biggest reason why Aldrich could not give her a good answer. Her feelings for him were genuine, but how would she react when she realized that to him, it had never truly been 'real?'

That, and Aldrich already had no idea what to do in situations like this. He hovered his arm over Valera's back, wondering if this would comfort her.

Valera noticed Aldrich's awkward effort. She looked at his hand with a quizzical expression.

"If you're uncomfortable-," began Aldrich as he withdrew his hand.

"No." Valera grabbed Aldrich's hand tightly and held it like a precious jewel. She smiled at him.

Her hand felt strangely warm in spite of how cold she should have been as an undead. He felt prickles of warmth flowing through his body: the warmth of emotion that he had long forgotten and then buried further under his undead transformation.

The warmth of being loved.

"This helps. Holding your hand like this - it truly does. More than anything," said Valera. She closed her eyes again, remembering more. "When I completed my training in the Midnight Order, I was to be the sworn shield of a lady.

Nalia. A daughter of a matriarch in one of the Nokol clans."

Aldrich nodded. The Nokol were a race of demihumans that had bat-like traits. Because they were nocturnal, they were part of the Midnight Alliance of most night faring races including vampires.

"She was spoiled. Difficult to work with. She complained about this and that little thing, and there were many times when I wanted to smack some sense into her." Valera shook her head and then smiled sadly. "But she was a kind girl, she was.

When her mother was assassinated by rivals, she was cast out, forced to run as an exile. Everybody abandoned her aside from myself, perhaps because I saw some of myself in her. Another princess exiled due to a world that rejected them, how could I not pity her?

And also because I wanted to keep my vow to protect my chosen.

Always, I have wanted to protect someone worthy to me. Ever since my father's death, when I could not protect him - that was my dream. So I stuck with her.

The years after were long and difficult. She had to learn how to survive without the pampering touch of attendants that would dress her in warm fineries and make sure food was upon her plate every day.

But I taught her, and together, we survived. She grew so very attached to me. I was her mentor. Her shield to support herself on when times were tough. Her shoulder to lean on when she needed to cry.

And in spite of myself, I found myself appreciating her. She was like a dear little sister to me. And for her happiness, I would have given everything.

But that night, that awful, awful night-," Valera trembled in anger, her expression twisting darkly.

"We can stop here, if you want," said Aldrich. He knew this part of her past, and he knew it would be painful for her. "I just wanted to hear why you have these feelings for me, but if it involves moving through your past-"

"Not at all." Valera shook her head and took in a deep breath. "This is important. This cursed past of mine. To show you why my feelings burn so bright for you." She nodded to herself, calming down. "One night, when I was away from camp to find a cure for a sickness she had contracted on the road, she was slaughtered by rival clans that still sought her out, wanting to eliminate any trace of her royal blood to make sure she never laid claim to the throne.

Slaughter is too light a word. She had been tortured to within an inch of her life, healed, then tortured again. Nails torn back, wings ripped apart, eyes gouged out, body defiled, skin flayed - over and over again.

I cannot imagine the amount of pain she must have felt. How much she must have yearned for me, for my shield, for my strength.

And that-seeing her corpse-that made me understand: I was a failure. My shield had never once protected anyone it was vowed to.

The world around me had cast me out because I was an abomination. A monster.

My entire life, I had dedicated myself to protecting, for deep down, I did not wish to be called a monster.

But if it was a monster they wanted, it was a monster that I would give them.

I killed every single being responsible for my lady's death. I started with the assassins they hired and any affiliated with them.

Humans, elves, dwarves, young or old, it did not matter. I killed them.

Then I attacked the Nokol royal clans. I killed countless of their winged soldiers. I snapped the necks of dozens of their royalty. I was feared. I was reviled. I became known as the 'Exile', the disgraced princess turned wandering monster of vengeance.

To gain the power to destroy the royal clans, I sacrificed my soul to the Nether.

In exchange for this power, upon my death, I would enter into the Nether for all eternity. I would no longer enter the cycle of reincarnation. Instead, my soul would be chained to serve summoners of the dark for all eternity.

The path of vengeance was sweet. I reveled in it, in the bloody carnage that I wrought with my own fists. But that is the thing with vengeance. It must always end.

Either you reach the end of that path with no more left to kill, or you are killed while walking its brutal roads.

For me, it was the latter. Despite the power and levels I received from the Nether, it was not enough.

Eventually, the entire Midnight Alliance, not just the Nokols, saw me as a force of nature - a monster for adventurers to put down. I did kill any that got in my way, after all, and that included vampires as well.

The Alliance enlisted the aid of a mighty hero, and he slew me.

Since then, my soul rested in the Nether.

Whenever a dark summoner wished for my shield, I had to serve them. That went on for centuries.

I did not care. It was my just punishment for failing to protect everyone I wanted to protect - that was what I thought.

I gave up on ever protecting someone close to me. To serve someone worthy. Because I was a failure."

Valera squeezed Aldrich's hand gently. "Then you came along. You called me to your service. At first, I felt nothing. Just another mage of the dark arts desiring a shield to protect his frail body until the corrupting influence of the dark arts eventually rotted your brain and rendered you insane. Just another victim to the Nether.

But you overcame the Nether. You stayed with me.

You believed in me. You tried to understand me. You accepted who I was. You accepted what I had become.

I was not a monster to you, I was a valued companion. I was truly your shield.

I...I liked that so much. It was the first time I had felt warmth in my heart for centuries. It was not just that you believed in me, but I could also believe in you with all my heart.

You had grand visions. You wanted to save the world. Deep down, in your heart, you were one I could admire and devote myself to.

I felt like finally, I had found someone worthy.

And that was when I made a promise to myself: I would never, ever, ever let you go. I would never fail in my duties as a Guardian Knight ever again. I would wield my shield proudly for you til the end of time - til beyond the ends of time."

Valera nodded to Aldrich. The hints of tears welled up in the sides of her eyes from remembering and voicing her feelings. "And that-that is why I have these feelings for you.

That...is why I love you."

Chapter 206: Love, Past and Present 3

I love you.

Those were three words Aldrich had not heard in a long, long time. Not since his parents were alive. Of course, it was different when it came from them and when it came from Valera, but the warmth of the words was still the same.

Aldrich was taken aback. He had expected to hear them, and they still surprised him. He knew she had feelings for him, but to hear them for real and not just within the confines of virtual reality was an entirely different thing.

The way she looked at him right now, her breath caught in her throat, her eyes faintly red and wide, her hands clutched around his, still trembling in spite of her efforts - it made him realize beyond anything else that this was all real.

Very real.

Aldrich had known that she and all the other game elements he had brought to this world were real from the very beginning, but to some subconscious degree, he had still considered Valera more like an asset. A tool to leverage and use. A combat unit just as she had been in the game.

But when Aldrich saw Valera as she was right now, vulnerable, remembering a past of pain, scared and hopeful of his answer, he felt even more pressure.

He was not dealing with a NPC in front of him, he was dealing with someone that had an entire lifetime behind their backs, someone that had gone through just as much pain as he had, someone that deeply cared about him, someone whose heart was very, very real.

And that heart, he held in his hands. His answer could comfort it or scar it. This was the exact type of situation he had never wanted to be in. Part of him had closed himself to everyone else after the death of his parents because he knew that anyone close to him, anyone he opened his own heart to, was just a liability to hurt him.

Just like with Adam and Elaine. It was a twisted way to think, but some part of him had been relieved they had died when they had. Because if they had survived and

graduated Blackwater, Aldrich would have bid them farewell and cut them off as he went into a hunt for his parents' killers, knowing full well that hunt could have easily endangered them.

"Aldrich - if you do not want to answer me now, then that is fine too." Valera squeezed Aldrich's hands and smiled comfortingly at him. Even now, she saw how hard he was thinking and thought about him. She wanted to hear his feelings, that was for sure, but if it meant pressuring him, she could wait.

"No. I do have an answer for you," said Aldrich. "Or rather, it's more like an explanation. Valera, you know I am a different person now than when I was with you, right?"

Valera nodded. "I do. This is your reincarnation in a new and strange world, but I am happy you still remember me."

"That's the thing," said Aldrich. "I do remember you, but...but the memories aren't as strong as yours." He paused for a moment, trying to explain the concept of a game to her. "You remember simulation crystals, right?"

In Elden World, simulation crystals were an item for players to use to record replays or enter into tutorial battles. It was not an exact 1 to 1 comparison to a game, but it was close enough.

"Yes."

"My life in that other world, it was like I was in one massive simulation crystal. Everything I did, I did with an understanding that it wasn't real. That it was something I could quit out of at anytime and put away." Aldrich shook his head.

He thought about trying to dress up his words a little to make them hurt less, but if Valera showed her honest self to him, he did not feel it right to give her anything less. "You lived a lifetime of adventure with me, but for me, it was not real. It wasn't my real life.

And the real life I lead now, it isn't a life that's shaped me into someone I think can love you as much as you love me.

I've never loved anyone else because I know that I would drag them down to this path of mine, and it isn't one that leads to happiness. It's one that's hard. Painful. I don't want that for anyone that cares about me."

"I see." Valera looked away and closed her eyes for a few seconds.

Aldrich thought he might see more tears, but instead Valera took in a deep breath, and when she opened her eyes, she stared at him with strength, her trembling gone.

"I want to ask you a few questions," said Valera.

Aldrich nodded, wondering where this was going.

"Do you think I am unsightly to look at?"

"Hm? No, not at all-," began Aldrich, confused.

"Then do you think I am unpleasant to be around?"

"No, you're responsible and capable."

"Then do you think I am too weak to walk this path of yours? Do you think I am too frail of heart to bear its struggles? Will you have to push me away because I am weak?"

"No, in terms of strength and reliability, you're perfect, and I'll need your strength in the long run." Aldrich raised a brow. "I don't get where you're going with this-,"

Valera put a soft finger on Aldrich's lips, quieting him. "Then what is there to worry about? You think highly of my appearance, you do not mind my personality even with its rough edges, and you recognize my strength to walk beside you."

"Yes, that is true, but what about our memories not being real?" said Aldrich.

"Your memories may not be real," corrected Valera. "But mine are. All these feelings of mine are real. And they always have been. Everything you did for me - all real."

"My feelings for you do not change with you saying this. And, Aldrich, you said so much, but you still did not give me a proper answer of yes or no."

"It truly doesn't bother you that I said it all felt like a simulation crystal?" said Aldrich.

"It does. Or rather, it did."

"I knew you were not entirely the same person I knew the moment I was summoned to this realm. You looked different. We were both weaker. You had lived an entire lifetime here as a new person." Valera put her hand down to Aldrich's chest, over his heart. "But the more I watched you in this new world, the more I made sure deep down, you are still the same."

"You are competent, far thinking, reliable, and strong. Strong in mind and body. And, perhaps most important of all, you still care."

"You are cold and calculating when you need to be, but when it matters, you still care."

Otherwise, you would not bother to consider my feelings and worry about them so deeply. Our life in the other realm may have been but a simulation to you, but you still made your choices there, and no matter how far removed they may have been to your real self, some part of those decisions came from your heart.

And this heart of yours-," Valera blushed, red brightly tinting her white cheeks. "It is embarrassing, but I will say it again: this heart of yours, I love."

"You really don't mind?" said Aldrich.

"You are repeating yourself. How unlike you." Valera smiled. "I am not asking you to fall for me as deeply as I have fallen for you. That would be selfish of me, especially when, as you have said, your memories are not as strong as mine.

What I am asking is for you to try.

I am pleasing to your eyes, my personality is one you can trust, and my strength is something you recognize as helping you, not slowing you down."

Valera briefly looked away, remembering something in the past. Unlike before, she did not a grim expression, keeping her smile. "There was this little heartfelt piece I read from my father's library, when I was but a little girl.

It said that love is nothing but trying. Trying to understand each other, to feel each other, to build each other up. Sometimes, what you build lasts, sometimes, it collapses.

A long time ago, when I was a little girl, I had thought that meant love was hard and full of effort.

Why would anyone put themselves through so much trying? Especially when what you build together may not even last? When it can all collapse on top of you and hurt you?

But now I know: when you find the right person, it does not feel like trying. Whether what you build lasts or falls, it does not matter. The building effort, the trying, that alone is worth it.

I have found the person right for me.

Will you try to find that person in me?

Will you let me walk this path of yours? Step by step from the very beginning, together? Hand in hand? Heart to heart?"

Chapter 207: Love, Past and Present 4

Aldrich looked at Valera's hopeful eyes and smiled back. "If you put it like that, then there's no reason for me to refuse, is there?"

Valera's eyes widened further. "Does that mean...you are saying..."

"Yes. It means I'm saying yes. I'm willing to try. I don't know where this path will lead us, but I'm willing to walk it with you. " Aldrich nodded. He did not know too well what he was getting into.

He knew how to play the part of a confident flirt in case he needed to infiltrate enemy spaces via a woman, but he figured he would never have to play that part beyond just regular flirting.

Actually being in a dedicated, long term relationship was something he had never factored as a valuable asset to him. Because, he had figured, he would be dead long before he could get into a relationship like that. Or if he did, it would only just cause pain for both parties.

But Valera made it obvious that he did not have to worry about that. She was strong. The only thing he worried about was hurting her because his memories were not as real as hers or being unable to properly love her, but she was willing to accept that.

To try, as she had said.

And, Aldrich would never admit this out loud, but he liked this feeling. Of being loved.

It was a feeling he had almost forgotten until his encounter with his Boundary core. Maybe it was because that memory was so recent that he was more open to it now as well.

It was nostalgic and warm. It reminded him of good times he had long forgotten.

As Aldrich reminisced, Valera collapsed into him, embracing him in a full hug. Unlike her usual hugs full of force and impulsive desire, this one was tender, like she was holding something the most precious thing in the world to her. She buried her face in his chest, and he could feel warm tears on his shirt.

"Are you okay, Valera?" said Aldrich, somewhat concerned. He held her back this time, not feeling awkward about it. There was something about becoming 'official' that really did make some things easier.

"Yes, yes I am. I was simply nervous," said Valera. She looked up at Aldrich with a beaming smile, the faint remnants of tears gracing the corners of her red eyes. "I was willing to accept any answer you gave me, but-but I was still so nervous. I was shaking like a coward – it was unsightly."

She turned her head away, ashamed. "My apologies."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. Dealing with a fight and dealing with this are entirely different things. You're no coward for reacting like that." said Aldrich. He could sympathize with her, especially after he had faced his fears in his Boundary core.

He, like her, could face life threatening danger without batting an eye, but when it came to matters of the heart, they were just nervous trainees that either did not know what to do or had run from their fights.

"Thank you for understanding. For always understanding." Valera closed her eyes in bliss as she snuggled up to Aldrich.

"I'll keep trying to," said Aldrich. He immediately began to think of what trying meant and how to optimize it. "What do you exactly mean by 'trying', by the way? In what ways do you want me to try? What do you think is the most efficient way-,"

Valera giggled at Aldrich's voiced thoughts.

"Hm? What is it?" said Aldrich.

"Always thinking so far ahead. Always thinking about the details," said Valera. She shook her head. "When you put it like that, it really does kill the romance out of what I said, does it not? But it is so very much like you. I like that side of you, but for now, all I want you do is to hold me.

And when you hold me, I don't want you to think of anything. I want you to just stay with me in the present. Let your mind be close with me, not wandering and getting lost in a future we have no idea about."

Aldrich held her, and she kept up her content smile as she basked in his embrace. He looked down at her and took her advice. He stopped thinking so hard for a moment, just focusing on her, on her warm body, on her happiness, and...and he managed to relax.

It was an almost draining feeling. For so many years, he had never once been able to relax his mind like this. But focusing on her warmth, he could do it. Striking memories surfaced. Of how it had felt to be held by his parents when he was a child without a single care in the world, how comforting and warm and wonderful it all was when he could just let go.

Maybe...maybe this was not so bad. Relaxing.

Aldrich fell into Valera's embrace with more ease now, his usual tenseness fading away. He closed his eyes.

They stayed like that together for what felt like

"I want hugs too."

Aldrich and Valera both immediately opened their eyes and drew away, looking at the source of the voice. The Chrysalis was on the edge of the bed, but because she was so small, only the top of her head and her curious green eyes peeped out. She put her pale hands over the top of the bed, asking to be raised up.

"I love hugs. Not fair you two get them but not me," said the Chrysalis.

Aldrich briefly glanced at Valera, wondering if she was ticked off about this interruption. But on the contrary, she looked at the Chrysalis with a gentle and amused expression.

"Is that so?" Valera got off the bed and picked the Chrysalis up in her arms. "Then will you let me hold you? Even though I am scary?"

"You give good hugs. I want it," said the Chrysalis. She cocked her head and looked at Aldrich. She pointed at him. "But...but he gives good hugs too, especially at the end. I want both."

"Come here, then, child." Valera held the Chrysalis gently, and the Chrysalis nodded in contentment.

"Not bad," said the Chrysalis like she was some kind of connoisseur. She pointed at Aldrich again. "Now it's your turn."

"What is this, an interview?" Aldrich sighed but could not help but feel amused. He took the Chrysalis into his arms as well, and as he did so, he wondered about the Chrysalis. According to the Death Lord, the Chrysalis was essentially a manifestation of his soul's 'good' side.

And it would seem that good side was all from when he was little. Before he had been shaped by the world into the killer he was today

In a way, then, the Chrysalis was a living embodiment of the childlike innocence and goodness that he had buried long ago. Did that mean she picked up his habits as a kid, too? That included things like boundless curiosity and a penchant for asking for hugs.

"Bad," said the Chrysalis. She shook her head vigorously.

"What? What parameters are you using to judge this?" said Aldrich.

"You think too much. Not a big hug." The Chrysalis pointed to Valera. "Not like the one you gave her."

"Well, that's different. That's a special case," said Aldrich.

"S-special?" Valera blushed.

"Anyways," continued Aldrich. "I'll give you back to her, and when you're done, you should get some rest again. You're going to go through training soon, and you'll need to be on maximal efficiency for that."

"Training? With the other scary lady?" The Chrysalis widened her eyes in fear.

"She's not that bad," said Aldrich.

"Can you promise?" said the Chrysalis.

"I don't like promises. Nothing is a hundred percent certain-," began Aldrich, but then he noticed the Chrysalis getting even more nervous and Valera giving him a disapproving look.

"Okay, yes, I promise," said Aldrich.

"Okay then, I trust you." The Chrysalis nodded.

"Good. Then get your rest." Aldrich handed the Chrysalis over to Valera.

Valera gently held the Chrysalis until the little girl grew sleepy. It did not take very long, just a few minutes considering how tired the Chrysalis already was. When the Chrysalis slept, Valera laid the girl down on her bed, putting blanket covers over her.

"I had thought you had no idea what to do with children," said Aldrich. "But you know, you're not bad. Far better than I am."

"Nalia was a small girl when I first became her Guardian Knight," explained Valera. She stroked the Chrysalis's white hair with a tender touch. "Not much older than this. If I could deal with her, spoiled and infinitely louder as she was, then I can deal with this."

After the Chrysalis was fully entranced in a cozy slumber, Valera went back to Aldrich. She shyly looked around at the ground. "Well, h-how do you want us to sleep?"

"Together, of course," said Aldrich simply.

"S-so forward!" said Valera taken aback and turning even redder.

"There's a child here, so no funny business," said Aldrich. "Just sleeping together."

"Yes, yes, of course." Valera took a calming breath and laid on the bed with Aldrich.

They laid with space between them, staring up at the magic crystals that acted like room lights.

"You prefer darkness, don't you? I'll turn those off." Aldrich waved his hand, sending out strands of his magical energy. When they touched the crystals, they flickered off according to his will.

As he did this, his mind wandered to thinking about sleeping. Undead did not have to technically eat, sleep, or rest. They could run out of mana or, in the case of Alters, ether based energy to fuel their powers, but regular physical stamina or needs were not issues.

The only reason to sleep was to just pass time. For some undead, Aldrich recalled from lore, they got so bored that they just went into coffins and slept for centuries at a time, wanting to wake up when things were more exciting.

"A-Aldrich?" said Valera from the other end of the huge king sized bed.

"Hm?"

"C-can I hold your hand? While we sleep?" said Valera.

"Sorry, I was thinking again," said Aldrich. "Come here."

Aldrich reached out and grasped Valera's hand, to which she gasped at the sudden forward movement. He drew her in close with her hand until they were once again touching skin to skin, lying side by side together.

"A-a-are you truly alright sleeping like this? So close? On our first night together?" said Valera as she looked up at Aldrich, her face beet red.

"What's the issue? You've been just as close when you were blood drunk," said Aldrich.

"Th-that's different!" pouted Valera. "I-I got blood drunk because my heart was too frail to handle this sober!"

"Oh? If this isn't comfortable for you-," said Aldrich.

"No," came the immediate response. "I am perfectly fine with this."

Valera looked up at Aldrich with blushing wonder. "Still, you are alright with this? I thought you had no experience in these matters. Perhaps...perhaps you had other women before?" Valera looked down, biting her thumb nail in mild irritation, probably imagining phantom women he had been with. "It makes sense, considering your looks and charm, but I just know none of them were worthy! How can weak humans ever be by your side!"

"No, nothing like that. This would be the first time I've ever decided to open my heart up like this," said Aldrich. "It just felt right to be close, after how we opened up to each

other. At least, it did for me. And..." Aldrich felt mildly embarrassed to say this, but he decided to be honest. "I like it. I like the warmth. It's something I've been without for so long."

"Then you are a natural flirt!" Valera looked shocked, then whispered under her breath, "How dangerous..." But in the end, when she looked up at Aldrich, seeing an expression of contentment she had never before seen on his face, she sighed, smiled, and lay by Aldrich's side.

"As long as you are happy, I am happy too, Aldrich," said Valera as she laid her head on Aldrich's shoulder.

"..." Aldrich looked down at Valera as she prepared to drift off. "I am," he said, no louder than a small whisper.

Together like that, close and warm, they let the gentle hold of sleep take them over.

Chapter 208: Ambition and Training

Aldrich woke up first, probably because he was still not too used to letting himself just go and sleep like that. He looked up at the ceiling. Dark still. He considered his internal clock quite consistent, and he roughly estimated he had slept seven hours. He felt incredibly refreshed from just sleeping, his mind feeling clear.

According to game lore, mages would feel mental exhaustion the lower their mana became, and this made it more difficult to control their spells. For example, though it was not actually possible in the game itself, the lore stated that mages were capable of controlling details of their spells like projectile speed, output, area of effect, and so on by finely manipulating the mana that went into it.

Mages often did this by chanting their spells, delaying the cast and giving it away but in exchange letting them customize its effects a little.

Aldrich himself was capable of doing this, but so far, only with what felt like simple changes like changing the trajectory of a [Death Bolt] or willing a [Bone Wall] to rise up faster. The Death Lord had noted he did not actually have to sit down and study years to formulate a spell – the knowledge was imparted into him automatically – but knowing how to use a spell and how to use it to maximal efficiency was different.

In that regard, Aldrich likely needed more training and experimentation. Now that he had slept and refreshed his mind, he was ready to push his mental limits.

Valera stirred beside him, sensing him waking up. She had slept on her side, with her head on his shoulder and her hand and leg placed over his body. She had wanted to

sleep facing him, and Aldrich thought he had heard some somewhat concerningly intense whispers of 'I love you' throughout his sleep that he chose to wisely ignore for his own safety.

"Is something the matter?" said Valera. She was quiet, moderating her voice not to wake the Chrysalis. She looked at Aldrich with half open eyes, strands of black hair cast across her forehead in a curtain of messy bed hair.

"No, I was just wondering how to train my magic," said Aldrich.

"Wandering again, I see," said Valera. "In my adventures across our old realm, I heard gossip from women across many a tavern counter that loving a man with ambition is a hassle. They said that ambition becomes like their second lover, taking up so much of their attention, but when you try to pull them from it, you also feel awful inside, for it feels as if you are pulling them from their dreams."

"Is that how you think?"

Valera smiled and shook her head. She put a hand on Aldrich's cheek, gazing at him with a tender look. "Not at all. I think a man must have ambition. No, to be more precise, I do not mind men or women content with simple lives and simple dreams.

But I believe men that seek power should have ambition they put that power towards. The more power a man has, the more they gain, the more ambition they must have, for what else do they sit upon that power for?

Power is so often taken from others. From gaining experience in combat by killing to taking a position that would have gone to another – it is difficult not to gain power without taking. There must be something that justifies that taking in the end.

There is nothing worse to me than those that hoard power and sit upon it, or worse, take it from others, ruining the lives of many, without attempting even the slightest bit to use it for anything other than stroking their egos and desire for power."

"I agree with you," said Aldrich.

Valera spoke from a place of personal hurt, for her father was assassinated and taken over by relatives for no other reason than simply to take power. But what she said also rang true in this world where so many corporations or heroes or celebrities did nothing with their power except sit on it to feel good about it.

"Your ambition in this world, can I ask what it is?" said Valera. "In the past, I knew you wished to save the realm as any grand hero would. What about now?"

"Maybe you're right. Maybe I am still the same, whether it was me in your past memories or me here. I still want to 'save the realm'. But unlike in the g-," He stopped

himself from saying 'game' as it felt like it trivialized Valera's life experiences. "Unlike before, there isn't one massive, big bad tentacled monstrosity like the Howling Dark to defeat.

There's a little bit of bad everywhere. Villains, variants, false heroes, destructive corporations, the list goes on."

"And you wish to stamp that all out?" said Valera.

"I'm realistic. I don't consider that a good possibility. There will always be some bad out there. Hell, I'm also that 'bad' in many peoples' eyes," said Aldrich. "I still want to save this realm, and though I am a Lich now, I still have an attachment to humans.

But how will I do it? Do I do that by destroying every villain and corrupt hero? Do I destroy every variant that threatens humanity? Is that even enough?

Do I go further and dismantle every corporation and government that stands in my way?

Do I sit back and let the world fix its own mistakes, only acting to help and guide them?

Or do I take over entirely? World domination, as Volantis said?

How far do I go? How many am I willing to sacrifice for it?

All of these are questions I do not have answers to yet. I'm sure back in the day, when Vanguard was at the prime of his power and could shape the world as he wanted to, he thought about these very same questions.

All I know is that I want to keep walking the path I'm walking and trust that the more I walk it, the more I figure out my powers and how I stand in this world, the more I'll know what to do eventually."

"And I will walk that path by your side forever, no matter where it leads us. I owe at least that much to you for what you have done for me." Valera stroked Aldrich's cheek with a soft touch.

"Where it leads us, huh?" Aldrich looked up at the painting from his mother he had saved from the Boundary. It depicted a house, a modest one-story house, atop a rolling green meadow as a bright sun started to rise in the distance, casting a warm orange glow across the dusk kissed landscape.

"A pretty piece, that one," said Valera.

"It's from my mother" explained Aldrich. "When my parents were alive, they dreamed about saving enough money to buy a little house in a nature zone."

"Nature zone?" asked Valera.

Aldrich wondered how to explain the economics of housing and how the modern housing market was almost entirely rent driven. A good chunk of the world's land being either uninhabitable or infested with variants meant that buildings had to be built high to sustain concentrated population densities, and that meant no individual ownership of houses.

Instead, corporations and governments owned practically all housing.

The only exceptions were granted, obviously, to the ultra-rich for whom spots in nature, away from the chaos of big cities, were zoned out and cleared of variants. These were nature zones where the wealthy could build homes for exorbitant prices.

There were some nature zones, however, that were less pricey due to a variety of issues. Maybe they were too remote, maybe they were not as well maintained, maybe they were not as safe, maybe they did not have the best views, and so on and so forth.

It was in one of these that Aldrich's parents had seen a pretty little meadow they wanted to build a house on and retire to, living simple lives by quiet nature.

In the end, instead of explaining the economics behind it all, he just decided to tell her what she would understand. "Basically, my parents, when they were done working, wanted to settle somewhere far away, away from these massive cities. Somewhere quiet and green."

"Is that what you desire as well? After you have finished walking this path of ambition?" asked Valera curiously.

"Maybe. I've come to realize that the reason I've never let myself slow down and enjoy things was might have been because that opportunity was robbed from me," said Aldrich. "I wouldn't mind living a quiet life in a quiet place when I'm satisfied with how things are."

But easier said than done. I know myself better than anyone.

I doubt I will ever be satisfied."

At that moment, Aldrich and Valera both instantly hopped out of the bed, sensing the impending approach of a powerful presence. Valera immediately materialized her shield while Aldrich's [Death Essence Barrier] shone bright in an orb around him.

Instantly, the door their room was flung open with violent force. The Death Lord stood in the doorway with her hands on her hips and a triumphant smile upon her face, showing all her fangs. Notably, she had replaced her destroyed arm with an emerald green prosthetic decorated with scaled patterns.

"Now then! Tell me all about the fine consummation of this love!" said the Death Lord, beaming. "There is nothing that excites this immortal heart of mine more than the blooming of love between young hearts!"

"Oh, it's just you." Aldrich put a hand to his face, lowering his guard.

"Now, now, what is that reaction?" The Death Lord pouted, putting her nose in the air. "Hmph. After all I have done in allowing this momentous consummation to pass."

"C-consummation? What nonsense are you speaking of!?" said Valera, red.

"Ah, you were a knight of the Midnight Order, no? And a Guardian Knight at that, having to take that crusty old vow of celibacy.

Goodness, how can one enjoy an eternal life without the pleasures of the flesh every now and then?" The Death Lord laughed. "I understand you may be ashamed to admit it, little lady, but I know it happened! So, tell me!"

"Nothing happened," said Aldrich.

"Hoh? Have I misjudged you, Death Walker?" The Death Lord squinted her eyes and put a hand to her chin. "I thought myself a most excellent reader of character, but I did not know you did not desire women. Then I hope Chiros with his elegant looks has taken to your heart-"

Aldrich face palmed again. "No, it's not that."

"Then what is it? Hm? Ah, are you perhaps respecting my customs?" said the Death Lord. "The draconic mating rite of locking bodies together in battle first, then in desire?"

"No, I didn't even know that was a thing," said Aldrich.

"You came all the way down here to bombard us with this silly topic!?" said Valera.

"Why not?" The Death Lord. "I ensured the bed was spacious and quite sturdy, the room silenced so none outside could hear, and even took away your own bed.

Of course I would wish to see the fruits of my labor sprout!"

At that moment, the Chrysalis came to Aldrich's side, tugging at his pant leg. She pointed at the Death Lord. "The scary lady. Do I have to go with her?"

The Death Lord looked down at the Chrysalis, then at Aldrich. She was the one to face palm now, though with how powerful the motion was, it sounded like a concrete block smashing against a brick wall. "Bah! I forgot that you humanoid races do not like consummating your love in front of your hatchlings. What a bizarre custom."

"Con-consume?" The Chrysalis looked up at Aldrich quizzically.

Aldrich blinked at the Chrysalis, thinking about how to explain what 'consummation' meant but instead gave up. He instead talked to the Death Lord. "How about you stop corrupting the youth and tell me something useful?"

"Ever ready to fight and grow stronger," said the Death Lord. "I do like that. In any case, I have found the perfect solution for developing your boundary.

Medula, master of warp magics as she is, is the perfect mentor for the Chrysalis, and a training regimen that I have approved has been outlined already.

While Medula trains your Chrysalis, you may now clear those Trial Quests of yours so you do not waste time. I have even planned the feast that Volantis desired. We shall end every day of training with a well deserved time of merriment.

By the time you leave my realm, I should say you will be an entire tier of strength above where you stand now." She closed her fist in excitement. "Soon, none of those pesky humans from the new realm will offer a challenge to you."

Chapter 209: Learning

Aldrich and Valera followed the Death Lord down the hallway outside their rooms. The Chrysalis walked between them, cautiously sneaking wary glances at the Death Lord.

"Apologies for the rather rough state of this floor." The Death Lord looked around at the bare, undecorated rocky floor and ceiling that made up the first floor. "But I do not have enough power to make things pretty. Sustaining this place is tiring as is."

"I would have thought it unwise to get yourself into life threatening sparring sessions if that were the case," said Aldrich as he stared at the Death Lord's new prosthetic emerald arm. "But it looks like you're slowly restoring yourself."

"Indeed." The Death Lord put her emerald arm in front of her, admiring the prosthetic arm. The arm moved around a ball joint at the elbow, and yet with remarkable fluidity easily rivaling that of a natural arm.

No, as the Death Lord showed by rotating her arms in unnatural angles, the range of motion even outstripped a regular flesh and bone arm. "Pretty, is it not? Functional, too, but function without form is simply crude. The patterns of lilies engraved upon this gemstone emerald do catch my eye – I must give Bel my thanks again."

"Bel?" said Aldrich.

"My personal giant blacksmith," said the Death Lord.

"How many do you have?"

"My, when did this become an interrogation? Are you assessing the strength I have?" The Death Lord laughed to herself. "I have five giant smiths. Four in my command now that Bors is under yours. Rest assured, Death Walker, even one giant smith is generosity enough, I cannot grant you more as they are quite busy maintaining this realm's structures."

Aldrich nodded. "Your troops: can you bring them out of this realm?"

"If you could do that, then we could add to our war power tremendously," noted Valera.

"No," said the Death Lord. She thought about this for another second and then shrugged. "Technically only I am absolutely bound here, for if I leave, it all collapses. But it is possible, I suppose, to lend you troops by temporary shifting their ownership to you. Through you, they could leave.

But I must dash your hopes right now: unless you take full ownership of my troops, they will still be tethered to me. The cost to maintain even a single skeleton outside in your realm would be enormous. At best, they can manifest under your partial ownership for, hm, thirty seconds?

And I am quite unwilling to part with my dear troops unless you earn them."

"Earn them, is it?" Valera smiled coyly at the Death Lord. "We will have your troops under us before that ancient body of yours even knows what has happened."

"I look forward to seeing it, little lady." The Death Lord returned the coy smile. "And you would do well to bear the passing years as a badge of honor. The fact that I have lived long enough to become millennial dragon is one I am proud of."

"Got it." Aldrich spoke to himself, mostly, ignoring the two women getting into a miniature staredown. He filed down all the information. It might not have seemed valuable, but it started to give him ideas.

"Ah, here we are." The Death Lord reached a dead end in the hallway. Before her, there was a slightly upraised platform of rock studded with a smoothed-out mana crystal at the center. "Hop on. I will have Medula warp us to her study.

There, the Chrysalis will learn warp magic from Medula.

You two may go down to the crypts where your throne is. Reconvene with your troops and challenge the Trials. Volantis will be there as well, and I hear he has been missing your absence."

"Did you give Wai'ki my thanks?" said Aldrich. Before the whole sleep rest incident, Aldrich had made sure he had gotten ownership of the illusion that Wai'ki made of Volantis. He had then sent it out of the Nexus to the real world so it could serve as a convincing decoy.

Aldrich had even interrogated the illusion to make sure it did not seem too suspicious, and it was surprisingly functional. It did not mimic Volantis, but instead Aldrich based on Volantis's memories of him.

The result was a slightly exaggerated version of Aldrich that seemed much 'cooler' with grander one liners, and he wondered whether that was because Volantis's perception of him was skewed.

Anyways, it worked enough where Aldrich figured that it would take a high level interrogator to know something was off, and they would also need to have known Aldrich originally as a reference. So far, nobody knew who Aldrich was, so there was no worry of that.

"I did," said the Death Lord. "She appreciated it greatly. Looking to woo her heart, too, hm? Eyeing such a pure and frail girl – you are quite fierce some, are you not?"

"He-he is doing no such thing!" protested Valera. "Who do you think my master is? Some sort of predator?"

"Perhaps. He has hungry eyes. Always looking forward. Always wanting." The Death Lord licked her lips with her forked tongue. "Men with eyes like that may hunger only for their ambition, but mark my words, little lady, once he tastes a woman, he will turn that same hunger upon you." The Death Lord eyed Valera up and down. "A good body, but inexperienced.

How will that inexperienced body of yours manage such hunger, I wonder?"

"W-what?" Valera turned away from the Death Lord's intrusive gaze but then nodded in realization when she looked up at Aldrich. "No, she's right. When you pulled me into you so strongly, without hesitation too, and you merely said it 'felt right'. Master...do you truly wish to consume me like that? If-if so, I promise you I will try not to disappoint!"

"I'm confused. Everyone talk about things I don't know." The Chrysalis pouted. "I feel dumb. I don't like feeling dumb."

"You're not dumb, some people just like to talk about pointless things they shouldn't be talking about in the first place." Aldrich patted the Chrysalis's head and gave an accusing glance to the Death Lord and Valera.

The Death Lord simply ignored Aldrich's gaze and looked down at the Chrysalis with eager eyes. "Come, child, you will learn warp magic soon. No longer will you be dumb!

You should be thankful – there are few masters of the magic as accomplished as Medula. She may be a harsh teacher, but soon, you will learn and if you are even half as capable as your father, you will reach tremendous heights!"

"Father...?" The Chrysalis looked up at Aldrich.

"I...guess that's what I am?" said Aldrich.

"Can I call you that?" said the Chrysalis. She looked up at him with eager green eyes.

"Yes."

The Chrysalis then hid behind Aldrich's leg and pointed at the Death Lord. "Father – I don't want to go with her. Scary lady."

"I'll go with you, if it helps. Make sure she doesn't do anything bad or say anything dumb," said Aldrich.

"...Dumb? Me? How?" The Death Lord put a hand to her chin in thought, wondering what she said was dumb. She just shrugged, not understanding parent-child behaviors. Or, Aldrich figured, it was probably very different for dragons.

Dragons were left to fend for themselves when they were young, and most dragons largely forgot about their early infancy – their first century of living or so – anyway.

"Okay, if father comes, I'll go," said the Chrysalis with a confident nod.

Aldrich then spoke to Valera. "Can you check on the troops for me? Organize them until I get back. You remember our Trial Quests as well, don't you?"

"Yes," said Valera.

"Then organize the units into several groups according to specifications I give you. The second and third quests shouldn't be an issue for us to clear, so I want to run a little experiment with both of them," said Aldrich.

"Understood, master." Valera recognized Aldrich's serious tone of voice and matched it instantly, materializing her full suit of armor. She stepped atop the platform. "Take care this snake does not whisper strange obscenities in your ear."

"I only speak truths, my dear." The Death Lord smiled as she snapped her fingers, causing the platform to light up. Valera faded away in the burst of light, transporting down to the crypts, or, more accurately, Aldrich's throne room.

"Now then, on we go to Medula." The Death Lord stepped on the platform, and Aldrich followed with the Chrysalis.

The Death Lord snapped her fingers again, and light engulfed them.

Immediately, the scenery shifted into a massive library. Dozen meter tall bookshelf after bookshelf of ebony wood stood in nearly ordered rows like soldiers standing at attention. They were packed with books and tomes of all kinds, and it seemed they were strictly organized according to their size and what color of light they glowed with.

Aside from the glow of magical tomes, the library was utterly dark, granting it a rather eerie feeling had not everyone possessed darkvision, including the Chrysalis.

From the distance, Medula flew in with her hands clasped behind her back.

"You're here. Slightly late, but what else should I have expected?" said Medula.

"So you'll be teaching the Chrysalis warp magic?" said Aldrich.

Medula eyed the Chrysalis with cold and calculating eyes, causing the Chrysalis to hide behind Aldrich's leg.

"I will assess her potential and guide her to its maximum capacity," said Medula. "But do not harbor any delusions. If that maximum capacity is low, then I will make it clearly known, and will not have anything further to do with her.

What I do not recall is being tasked to accommodate you, Usurper."

"I'm here to watch over the lesson to see that it goes well," said Aldrich.

"Mm. A concerned parent, are you? The worst bother for any teacher." Medula shook her head.

"Father isn't a bother!" protested the Chrysalis.

"Is that so?" Medula gazed at the Chrysalis with her tired and unfeeling eyes. Surprisingly, she acquiesced. "I will allow your presence for this first lesson only. Now then, is there any other request you have that takes me even more from my precious research?"

"Yes," said Aldrich. He stared right at Medula's infernal orange eyes with a piercing gaze. "I want you under my service."

Chapter 210: Mana Flow

"Mm." Medula looked unfazed, but her eye did twitch in reaction. "Did I hear that right? Service? Me under you?"

"Hoh, you wish to take Medula?" said the Death Lord. "Well, if ever there was one I was loathe to be parted with, it would be her. She does manage quite a bit around here."

"It wouldn't be permanent service," said Aldrich. "I recognize how important Medula is to maintaining the Necropolis. You mentioned before you could lend some of your troops to me in temporary service, right? That's what I want here."

"Temporary service? Yes, indeed, but for what, a meagre ten or so seconds?" said the Death Lord. "Did you forget what else I said, Death Walker? There is a great degree of separation between this realm and the one you call home. So long as Medula remains under me, she cannot manifest for long in yours, even with temporary ownership under you."

"If even I will allow that," said Medula. "I am spending quite a bit of time away from my research with this child already. To accommodate this usurper as well would grate on my nerves quite a bit."

"Ten seconds is more than enough," said Aldrich.

"Oh, is it?" The Death Lord smiled coyly at him.

Aldrich ignored the innuendo behind that and continued. "Tell me, would the troops you give temporary ownership to me over be weakened away? Incapable of using some spells, for example?"

"No," said the Death Lord. "Their spells come from their own mana reserves, after all. It is in materializing them outside of my realm in the first place where the difficulty lies."

"Then there's no issue," said Aldrich.

"There is an issue," said Medula, annoyed. "My consent."

"Of course, I'll get to that later." Aldrich crossed his arms as he flung an accusing look at the Death Lord. "You do owe me, after all."

"What? How?" The Death Lord raised a brow.

"My divine class artifact – it's useless at this point." Aldrich manifested his [Restorative Flask] and held it out towards the Death Lord. She recoiled in disgust at the faint golden light emanating from it.

"You never even relied upon that vile thing in the first place!" protested the Death Lord.

"No, but that was just because I was careful. Losing a contingency feels pretty bad, you know? And a divine class artifact at that? I'd like some level of compensation here," said Aldrich.

"We have already fashioned that throne for you," said Medula. "Do you understand how much effort that took me? Connecting that throne to the Necropolis and the warpways that I so carefully weaved across this realm? If I had connected that throne to the warpway with even a miniscule amount of error, all of it would have come crumbling down."

"And in recognition of that skill, I want to hire your services," said Aldrich.

"I shall allow it." The Death Lord nodded.

"And you are certain?" Medula looked incredulous. "I know that look in your eyes. You find this thoroughly entertaining, do you not? What part of letting this realm crumble without my expertise is so amusing, hm?"

The Death Lord laughed and slapped Medula lightly on the back. "Lighten up, Curator. A ten second absence is not enough to collapse this place. I do not think the Death Walker's request is unreasonable. And I find it quite interesting as to what he plans with you."

"I will not go unless I have a clear idea of what this 'favor' entails," said Medula, conceding some ground.

Aldrich lifted a single finger into the air. "All I want you to do is cast one spell."

"Mm." Medula cocked her head and slowly nodded in understanding. "I believe I do understand where this is leading."

"[Outworld Imprisonment]" said Aldrich. "Cast that, and you can return to your research or whatever it is that calls to you."

"Perhaps the strongest spell in my arsenal. Though if you wished to obtain the most from a minor few seconds of my service, then I expected no less," said Medula. "Tell me, why do you require a tenth circle spell far beyond your current capabilities?"

Aldrich briefly pondered the question.

[Outworld Imprisonment] was an immensely powerful spell that trapped a massive location in a huge void from which there was no escape. One needed to have incredibly powerful anti-magic or an equally powerful warp magic user to counter it. It was a useful spell for completely negating large swathes of enemies for periods of time or forcing favorable duels.

The imprisoning void even lasted for an entire hour after being cast regardless of whether the caster was there or not.

A spell like this of the tenth tier was absurdly useful on its own, and Aldrich would have liked to keep it in his back pocket. But there was another, more specific reason he wanted to use this spell.

"There's a place I'd like isolated. In exchange, to sweeten this deal for you, you can take most of the Alterhumans there for experimentation," said Aldrich. "You just have to leave one for me."

"Mm." At the mention of potential test subjects to learn about the new world, Medula's pointed ears twitched in curiosity. "Fine. I will agree to this. Now do not waste my time any further. I want to get this lesson over with as soon as possible."

Aldrich watched Medula and the Chrysalis train. He stood with back against the wall of a circular stone room. Though technically a room of Medula's study and library, this place had no books. Just stone walls inscribed with demonic runes here and there that absorbed and nullified magic.

This was where Medula went to test out spells or volatile magics. A blast room of sorts where any unwanted explosions would get dampened.

Aldrich recognized those runes as belonging to the demon god of war, Carnassus. The fact that Medula, who most decidedly was not a war demon judging by her personality, had these was a curiosity, but when he thought about it, it did make sense.

Medula had probably been a follower of Velen, the demon god of knowledge who sought to learn about civilizations he encountered before destroying them by exploiting their own greed with cursed pacts that seemed sweet on the surface but had poisoned pills within. Velen and his demons also were not above harvesting the knowledge of other demons.

"Focus and release your mana. Feel as if you're reaching into your heart and taking it out with your mind," said Medula. She knelt behind the Chrysalis, watching intently. The Chrysalis's brows were knitted together in sheer focus, her little lip trembling as she thrust her hands out to channel her magic.

The Chrysalis nodded. Colorless magical energy that looked like it distorted space emanated from the Chrysalis, wreathing her arms in little tongues.

"..." Medula looked briefly surprised before maintaining her usual calm. "Good. Very good. How does it feel to release that mana?"

Medula placed a hand on the Chrysalis's back and fed magical energy through it. The Chrysalis lost mana by releasing it, but with Medula replaced what the girl lost as soon as she lost it.

"Keep releasing your mana. Don't worry about getting tired. I shall assist you. Simply focus on the feeling of releasing that mana. How does it feel?" said Medula.

"It feels...feels warm. Like a good hug," said the Chrysalis.

"Good. Then that is your Trigger. To cast magic is a deeply personal endeavor. A Trigger is a set of feelings and sensations uniquely important to you that you call upon to release the flow of mana." Medula spoke softly. "Now try to shape that mana."

"I-into what?" asked the Chrysalis, nervous.

"Anything you want. A simple ball will do," said Medula.

The Chrysalis bit her lip as she exerted serious concentration. She glanced at Aldrich, trying to gauge what he expected of her.

Medula put her bandaged hand over the Chrysalis's eyes. "Do not look. I am sure he simply wants you to try your best. And to do that, you need to shut everything out. Everything except that feeling in your heart and the image in your head.

Visualize what you want to shape. Focus."

The Chrysalis nodded, and after a few seconds, managed to make a tiny, unstable bubble of mana that looked like a little ripple in space.

"Good, good." Medula nodded. "It has been an hour. Take some time to rest." She took her hand off of the Chrysalis's back, and the Chrysalis sighed.

"Phew. That was hard." The Chrysalis wiped sweat off her forehead with her small arm. She looked up at Medula worriedly. "What you said before...am I a bother?"

"You take up my time, that is undeniable," said Medula, and the Chrysalis looked down in sorrow. "But you are no bother. I enjoy teaching others. Particularly those with talent. Now go rest. I will need to talk to your father for a bit, so if you want to say anything to him, make it short."

The Chrysalis nodded enthusiastically before she hopped over to Aldrich, going as fast as her little legs could carry her.

"How did I do?" said the Chrysalis. She was starting to become more and more expressive now, a solid smile beaming on her face.

"You did well. Very well." Aldrich patted the Chrysalis on the head. "Now go rest, like your teacher said."

"Okay. I'll look at the shiny books!" The Chrysalis ran out of the room, a stone door automatically sliding open for her when she got close enough.

When the Chrysalis was gone, Aldrich told Medula as she stood up, patting dust off her coat.

"You're quite good at teaching children. I didn't expect that. Or were you just keeping up good behavior because I was here?" teased Aldrich.

"Nonsense. I enjoy teaching when it is worthwhile. When there is truly talent to sculpt. When there is nothing, I simply do not bother," said Medula. "And I loathe practically every species in existence, including my own demonkin, but children are different. They are refreshing to see, largely untainted by the filth of the world around them. Thus, they are easy to shape and to feel kindness for."

"They're innocent. I understand what you mean," said Aldrich. He had a soft spot for children because they were a reminder of the innocence he had lost. And the innocence he would like to protect.

As a Lich, he knew that he was separated enough from humanity that he would not sacrifice himself over children, but he could still find it in him to treat them kindly.

He imagined it was the same for Medula as an Archdemon; a species that generally did not see humans as much more than food or playthings.

"I suppose that is one commonality between us," said Medula.

"I'm sure if we tried, we could find much more than that," said Aldrich.

Medula cocked her head. "Are you...flirting with me?"

"Hm? What, no," said Aldrich. "I was being literal. I can sense that we might have some more things in common, not that I'm flirting with you. Where did you get that nonsense?"

"Perhaps the Death Lord was right. It comes naturally to you, without you even knowing," said Medula. She shrugged.

"I usually file away anything she says about that topic into the nonsense section of my brain," said Aldrich. "Now then, judging from what you've said, it looks like the Chrysalis is worth teaching, no?"

Medula nodded. "She is a prodigy."

- Chapter 211: The Chrysalis's Talents |

Chapter 211: The Chrysalis's Talents

"A prodigy?" Aldrich raised a brow, surprised.

In the distance, he heard the Chrysalis marveling at the many large tomes, remarking to herself, "Blue book! Red book! Spiky book! Big book!"

"Magic isn't something I've ever had to consciously learn," said Aldrich. "The knowledge just funnels into me, so I don't know how to tell whether someone is 'good' at using magic or not."

It was an odd phenomenon. According to lore, mages had to dedicate years to actually know how to cast magic. They had to spend large amounts of time meditating to figure out how to control the flow of their mana, and then they had to spend even more time understanding how to temper that flow and shape it into a reliable spell.

For Aldrich, all of that knowledge was just downloaded into his head. Though, he did note, what he got was a base amount of knowledge that let him use the spell, but using it to its peak capability was something he might be able to train for.

The Outer Trait," explained Medula.

Aldrich was surprised. He did not know this was something that beings from the game would know about. Or at the very least, it was not something he had read about in the lore. He just assumed this was convenient game mechanics so that he could cast spells immediately without having to study them for months.

"It is not a widely known phenomenon," continued Medula. "Precious few knew of it in our realm of yore. Only those that studied beyond the Starry Veil, gazing upon the infinite dark of the Outer itself, knew of this.

And a pithy few studied beyond the stars. Mortals are too absorbed with magic that could change the present around them while many immortals did not have the patience or capability to study the Outer.

Demons such as myself, however, are not bound to any single realm. We have crossed through the stars before, long ago, and we are long lived. Velen, demon god of knowledge and my former teacher, was particularly interested in the Outer.

That interest passed down to me, hence my penchant for warp magics that can bend the fabric of space"

"And what exactly does this phenomenon entail?" Aldrich noted that Medula's guard slightly dropped when she got into talking about her knowledge. There was a genuine passion within her not just for obtaining knowledge, but sharing it.

Hence, why she made a good teacher as well.

"There are certain existences that are touched with cosmic power from the Outer that grant them tremendous power. One such power being this quaint ability of yours to assimilate the knowledge of spells and skills with little to no training at all."

"There were more people with this ability?" Aldrich perked up, interested. He reasonably assumed that he could auto-learn spells because of video game mechanics granted by his system.

Medula's words, however, indicated one of two things.

One, that this ability was in fact something that naturally occurred.

Or, second, that there were other beings in Elduin that had held a system.

Medula nodded curtly. "I suppose the lack of knowledge is largely due to how rare this phenomenon is. In the entire history of Elduin, there were precious few existences touched by the Outer.

The primordial dragon who was said to have seeded the origins of many species upon the world, and in death, became the first Old Spirit.

The Arcane Emperor and the Enlightened One who were said to have spread all of the magic and skills known among Elduin, becoming the first two gods to ever exist.

And, of course-," Medula narrowed her eyes at Aldrich. "You. The hero."

"Do you have an idea of what this 'Outer' entails? Where the power comes from?" said Aldrich.

"Prying into my research, are we?" Medula shook her head. "But no. I have studied the Outer for the better part of a thousand years, but it is a deep mystery.

My teacher could not parse its secrets either. All we knew was that the Outer was a fundamental force that predated the existence of the Elduin realm. An embodiment of the vast, cosmic unknown.

In scope, too, it truly is tremendous.

We demons are a nomadic body that travel across realms, across planets, and among the myriad of worlds our history descended upon and devoured, we encountered

specimen touched by the Outer, indicating that the influence of the Outer reaches far and wide."

"I see," said Aldrich. "And my powers come from there, this 'Outer?'"

"Some part of it, most likely. To what extent? I do not know."

"In your expert opinion, do you find it possible that a specific entity has granted me this power? An entity with their own reasons and goals?"

"Ah, thinking of whether you are being controlled? Practical." Medula just shrugged. "I know little. The Outer is difficult to study. All I know from studying past observations recorded by my teacher is that those touched by the Outer do not seem to lose any autonomy."

Granted, the sample size is low, and the observations rather unreliable when we cannot understand the Outer at a fundamental level to begin with.

But my teacher theorized the Outer was an 'element' that only a few chosen could harness. It is not something with a form or will, an entity as you fear, it is simply something that is. Woven into the fabric of all existence at the dawn of creation.

Those touched by the Outer could draw upon it in the same way a mage with an affinity for flame could call upon fire. A mundane fire mage does not treat flame as an entity, but rather a resource.

The Outer is the same.

At least, according to my teacher. I myself have had differing opinions, but nothing certain."

"And what were your opinions?"

"I would like to keep that research to myself. It is yet unformed and unfinished." Medula became curt again. "Let us return to the matter of the Chrysalis."

There is both good and bad."

"Tell me both."

"I was going to regardless of your desire. A guardian should know both the strengths and weaknesses of the one they care for."

The good. As I have said before, she is a prodigy. Specifically in controlling the flow of mana. In the same way that some beasts know how to hunt and fend for themselves through sheer instinct bred into their being, she can control mana with natural ease.

It may not seem like it now with how much she struggled, but I assure you, that is leagues beyond what an ordinary mage could accomplish even in months of training.

I predict in a few days, she will have near absolute control of her mana flow.

In addition, her mana is colorless. The color of one's mana indicates the elemental affinity one has, and a colorless one is mythical in its rarity, for it means she is naturally attuned to the control of space."

"And the bad?" Aldrich noted a pause from Medula.

"She has not inherited your Outer strength," said Medula.

"Well, that only means she has to learn how to cast spells from scratch, no?"

"Beyond simply lacking your Outer trait, it seems she has inverted it. She cannot learn any spell. You are familiar with the concept of magic tomes, are you not?"

"Yes." Aldrich knew that in the lore, magic tomes had the stored knowledge of spells. By reading the tome and linking one's magic with it, it was possible to gain access to using spells within it, though actually being able to cast them involved a long process of training.

It was that training that Aldrich could completely ignore that separated him the most from ordinary mages.

"I tried attempting to instill upon her a few spells from a tome, one suited to her colorless mana, but none worked," said Medula. "She is incapable of shaping her mana into a spell."

"Do you potentially know why this is the case?"

"I have theories, but nothing set in stone."

Aldrich raised a brow at her, wanting more, and she relented this time, giving more information.

"My current theory is that it is because she is an existence native to this new realm of yours. Though she has learned to manipulate mana, there is likely some 'gate' that prevents her from accessing the formed spells that originate from Elduin," explained Medula.

"Hm. If that's all she can do, then that's concerning. For her own safety." Aldrich put a thinking hand to his chin.

"I would not worry too greatly were I you. She simply cannot access the magic established by the Arcane Emperor," said Medula. "But that does not mean she is helpless. She can still approximate ancient arts that predate the magic system established by the emperor."

"Do you know of any? If I'm to have her with me out there, I want her to be able to fend for herself."

"A few, and these I will teach her. However, none of these arts are particularly useful in combat, if this is your concern." Medula sighed. She looked at Aldrich's concerned expression and shrugged. "Soothe those concerns, usurper."

There is another art you are familiar with. One that predates the Arcane Emperor. One suited purely for combat. One that involves the shaping of mana that your daughter is a prodigy at."

"Volantis," realized Aldrich.

Chapter 212: Shaping

Chapter 212 Shaping" That's right. If what she's limited to is shaping her mana, well, then, Shaping would obviously be the perfect match for her," said Aldrich.

"Indeed." Medula nodded. "It was a wise decision to unlock Volantis's suppressed self. Though you could not have foreseen this, I assume."

"Nope, but sometimes, things just fall into place, and I take what I can get," said Aldrich. "I assume this means you won't have as many lessons with the Chrysalis?"

"I can still guide her towards controlling her mana efficiently, but beyond those bare means, I have little more to teach." Medula manifested a notepad and a black feathered quill. While she scribbled notes down, she continued, "I will have to tell the Death Lord of this new development such that she can adjust her own training plans."

"She wanted to train the Chrysalis too?"

"Hm?" Medula briefly glanced at Aldrich. "Of course. I suppose she was too caught up in nonsensical talk to tell you this."

Aldrich sighed, remembering the Death Lord had barged in and talked about nothing except what he and Valera had or had not done. It was amusing, he had to admit to some degree. In small part, it reminded him of how Adam would have acted.

Headstrong and impulsive. The opposite of Aldrich. But, perhaps, there was some truth in the saying that 'opposites attract'.

"Nostalgic memories, I presume?" noted Medula.

"I'm surprised you could read my expression," said Aldrich. "I've trained them to never give away anything."

"I noted that as well. But when you remember a fond memory in the past, your training cracks just the slightest bit. The brutes around me in this tower could never pick it up, but it does not escape me," said Medula.

"Then I'll have to fix it."

Medula looked up from her notepad. "If that is what you desire, but do take take: closing your heart to everything is the easiest way to fall into Immortalic Mania."

"Immortalic Mania?"

"The longer lived a sentient being is, the easier they find it to descend into madness.

Whether it is through a loss of goals, a loss of loved ones, or simply forgetting all that was precious. And there is no easier method to forget what is precious than closing it off," said Medula. She shrugged. "But do not mind me. I am beginning to sound like one of the Death Lord's lectures."

"So underneath that cold exterior of yours, you can care," said Aldrich.

"Hmph. Do not mistake my clinical advice for care." Medula finished writing her note down and tore the white page off from her book. She flicked the paper in the air, and it disappeared in a flash of white light, teleported away to the Death Lord, presumably.

"As for what the Death Lord wanted to tell you, it is this: she voiced concern that since your Boundary is split, if, say the Chrysalis lacked the power or will to operate her half properly, then it would hinder you."

"Right," said Aldrich. It was basically akin to being in a car with a mounted turret. Both the driver and the gunner were crucially important.

If the driver was awful, then the car would crash or the gunner would not get good line of sight. If the gunner was bad, then no matter how well the driver maneuvered, it would be hard to take down enemies.

"But technically, since you hold a Master-Familiar link over the Chrysalis, it should be possible to completely shut down her free will and take over her half of the Boundary.

Provided you understand how her half of the Boundary works, of course.”

”I see.” Aldrich did not like the idea of stripping the Chrysalis of her free will, but then again, he would only do it when he needed to.

”However, it is still entirely possible for her to operate the Boundary herself,” said Medula. “That note I sent indicated that she possesses tremendous amounts of magical potential. Her mana pool alone will grow to such a degree I foresee no issue in maintaining a Boundary.

The only question is her will. She, it seems, holds the innocence of a child.

Can she wield that power in the midst of combat? Can she face life and death dangers?”

At that moment, the Chrysalis popped into the room. She held a large book over her head. Its cover was decorated with skulls and bones that glowed green with death energy. “Look, father, it’s you!”

”We’ll see,” Aldrich said to Medula before walking up to the Chrysalis. He took the book from her and inspected it. A skull with gleaming eye sockets stared back at him from the cover. “Yeah, it does look like me.”

”Can I keep it?” said the Chrysalis.

”Sadly, that isn’t my decision to make,” said Aldrich. He tossed it over to Medula, and she caught it with trained reactions.

”The Death Lord intends to have quite a few of these tomes – my beloved collection I have amassed over centuries – given to you for rewards,” said Medula. “This one, too, the [Teachings of Kain], will be yours in time. But until then, they will keep me rightful company.”

”Of course, that is your right,” said Aldrich.

”So long as you understand.” Medula gestured to the Chrysalis. “Come, child, we have some more training to complete. You, Usurper, should make your way down to your throne room, as I presume you believe my teaching satisfactory enough not to intrude upon it any further.

Ah, and bring Volantis up here. I must see if he is a capable teacher.”

Aldrich nodded.

”Father, I feel stronger. I know how to use my magic better and better,” said the Chrysalis as she tugged at Aldrich’s pant leg. “Soon, I’ll be just like you.”

"Just like me, huh?" said Aldrich, and as he looked down at her beaming, innocent smile, he wondered if that was a good thing. "Make sure to listen to your teacher, then, okay?"

"Okay." The Chrysalis nodded enthusiastically as she hopped on over to Medula.

Aldrich patted the Chrysalis's head and then left the spell testing room wearing a faint smile that faded into a grim frown.

Chapter 213: Competition

Aldrich used the same warp point he had come in to Medula's study with to leave it. He willed himself to go down to the throne room, and when he did, he beheld all of his units standing at attention, ready to fight for him.

Or at least, all the units that could stand. Most were four legged, slithering or crawling creatures.

"Your master has returned!" Valera declared with commanding force from beside the throne. Suited in her full armor like that, she undeniably projected commander type energy.

"Finally!" roared Volantis from Aldrich's other side as he slapped Aldrich's back, sending him skidding forwards with the impact.

"Good to see you two," said Aldrich, registering damage.

The units before Aldrich welcomed Aldrich back with grunts and growls and clicks and other auditory cues using their monstrous bodies.

"I know you've all been waiting some time for me. And I'm sure you've been bored doing nothing but sitting around here," said Aldrich.

"Geh! Geh! (No, I made lots of new friends!)" said the Geist as he pumped his fists into the air, his permanent smile beaming at the aquatic variants Aldrich had recently raised.

Around the Geist, the bosses of the aquatic variant army - Crab, Merman, and Okeanos, stood.

"You're all getting along. Good. But I might be shaking up some of that friendship a bit," said Aldrich.

Many of monsters stirred, wondering what Aldrich meant.

"I've noticed that we can still enter the first trial quest. That means we can go in there and harvest resources," said Aldrich. "I'll be splitting you all up into two groups. One will move through the first trial quest and harvest some things I'll need and some things I don't need.

The other group, a smaller, more elite fighting force, will take on the second trial quest."

Okeanos made a massive jump to Aldrich's side when he heard what Aldrich said.

"Master, I have a request to make," said Okeanos.

"What is it?" asked Aldrich.

"You promised me something I wanted, right?"

"Yes, I did."

Okeanos raised a fit of resolve in the air. "The second quest: I want to fight it alone. I want to show you my strength so you never think of leaving me again."

"Hmm." Aldrich put a hand to his chin, thinking. The second trial quest was meant for a level range of 20-30, maybe nearing 40 if counting the hidden boss there, but Okeanos was more than strong enough to deal with the enemies.

The second trial quest also did not particularly have that many valuable resources. It was mostly a pure combat test involving fighting a myriad of worm like enemies in a vast, scorching desert.

"I did promise you something, and if that's what you want, then I'm fine with it," said Aldrich.

"Thank you," Okeanos nodded, his antennae twitching in appreciation.

"But just one thing - there is a hidden enemy there I want you to find and fight there. Your biggest test won't be one of strength: it'll be one of wits. To that end, I'll give you exactly one clue: pay attention to the currents."

"Currents...like the oceans?" said Okeanos.

Aldrich cocked his head. "Yes, I guess you could say that. If you want, I can have Valera here accompany you and give you more hints-,"

"No," said Okeanos firmly. He saw that Valera leered at him, and he explained. "I respect you, but you are by my master's sided more than me. I want to prove I can be there just as much as you."

"I like that drive. Then get ready, Okeanos, and don't disappoint me."

"Never." Okeanos nodded firmly.

"As for the rest of you-," Aldrich motioned over to the comparatively lower leveled members of his legion. "I'm going to make this a competition of sorts. In the first trial quest, there are plants called eyeflowers. They look like roses with yellow eyes on them - they're impossible to miss.

Fler'Gan needs eyeflowers. As many as he can get.

Harvest those flowers for me. The one with the most flowers will receive my Dark Wisdom."

A murmur went around the monsters. Dark Wisdom was incredibly tempting. It would increase their levels and make them more relevant to staying with Aldrich. Not only that, but at a basic level, it would make it easier for them to survive.

"But I'll make this clear right now: at the end of this harvesting session, you'll be able to challenge each other in combat for eyeflowers. The only exception is if you manage to get, let's say, 10 eyeflowers.

That's a majority of what should be in the trial quest, so there's no competition at that point."

This sent even more of a commotion around the legion. This basically discounted the weaker units from competing because stronger ones could just challenge them and take their flowers.

Most of the monsters looked towards the strongest among them.

Crab smashed his enormous pincers together. The zombie giant grinned in anticipation. Merman crossed his arms in triumphant pose. Crow's six red eyes gleamed with ferocity.

Seeing such strength, most of the monsters understood they had no chance, and they did not feel bad about it. It was just instinct. They were content with not crossing fangs with their superiors.

"If you feel you are not strong enough to compete for the flowers, then harvest other resources. Valera will tell you what to look out for," said Aldrich. "You can, however, work together. I can't give a group working together all Dark Wisdom, but you can elect a leader, and my levels will transfer to them."

"A fierce competition, is it!?" Volantis nodded as he gazed upon the legion. "But you all have already lost! For I-,"

"You're not going to be doing any fighting," said Aldrich.

"What!?" Volantis sounded shocked.

"Medula wants you to try and teach the Chrysalis. Go to her study, and she'll explain."

"Ah, well, I suppose nurturing the youth is also a noble duty. Then onwards I shall go to that dreary demon's book grave."

"What about you, master?" said Okeanos. "Where are you going?"

"I have somewhere to go outside of this realm," said Aldrich. "For something important."

"You will not watch my efforts?" asked Okeanos.

Aldrich put a hand on Okeanos's shoulder to comfort him. "Don't worry. I'll be recording how you all do later. Plus, if I go with you, it defeats the purpose of you handling the quest by yourself, doesn't it?"

Okeanos nodded.

Aldrich saw that Okeanos understood and spoke out once more to his legion. "Prepare yourselves. Once I leave, Valera will handle your transport to the first trial quest. When I come back, I'll be expecting great things."

The monsters voiced their understanding, but notably, the Geist was quiet. He was in deep thought with himself, most likely, and Aldrich wanted that.

Among all the units there, Aldrich believed the Geist to have the most potential. But he did not want to just give the Geist dark wisdom. He wanted to know if the Geist could take these rules he had been given and find a way to make it to the top, thus showcasing not just raw power potential, but good leadership and thinking capability.

After all, the bigger Aldrich's forces got and the more spread out they became, the more he needed leaders under him to manage the legion. Valera was competent, but she was just one extra person.

"Now then, it's about time I got back to the real world." Aldrich materialized his suit jacket and stepped up to the throne room crystal. He touched it, and it glowed brightly, ready to send him out of the Nexus.

"Make sure they don't start tearing each other apart," Aldrich said to Valera.

"Of course, master," said Valera with a bow. "I will eagerly await your return."

"As will I!" said Volantis. "The Death Lord has promised a feast, and I expect you to be there, Armored - for in orcish ways, for a warleader to miss their feast of succession means that followers such as myself have no choice but to reject you."

"There is a chance you may turn against us?" Valera stared at Volantis.

"Really?" said Aldrich.

"No, that was a jest! A jest!" Volantis complained. "But it would mean a lot if you could come."

Aldrich sighed but smiled. "I know. I'll be there."

With that, Aldrich willed himself out of the Nexus, back into the Crypt.

Chapter 214: Returning to the Crypt

Aldrich manifested in the Crypt once more. The bright green light of the throne shard in the Nexus was replaced by permeating, purple outlined darkness from Null emissions. It was a little jarring coming back to the Crypt and witnessing darkness.

Real darkness. Because Aldrich had racial nightvision, he could see through ordinary dark, but the kind of dark the Null ore emitted was something his sight could not pierce. There were very few circumstances in which he would ever find himself unable to see in the dark, but if there was ever a case of it, this was it.

Regardless, Aldrich had enough visibility to maybe three of four meters ahead of him.

"You are back, Warleader!" said Volantis. Or rather, the illusion of Volantis. The voice sounded just the same, though, and it boomed throughout the metallic structure of the Crypt.

"Keep it down," said Aldrich. "It's difficult to get any surveillance down here, but what little there is, I assume it's based off of sensing vibrations. Likely through a physical trigger system that doesn't have to rely on tech."

In other words, you're being too loud."

"Apologies," said the illusion.

Aldrich sighed. The illusion was sitting cross legged on the ground, and even upon a close inspection, he could not find anything that seemed off about it. He was not an expert in controlling and sensing mana because his system did most of it for him, but when he did try, he could not find anything wrong about the illusion in that regard either.

To be expected, though. Wai'ki might not have been the best direct combatant, but her illusions were no joke. She could create copies that were almost as strong as the original. To Aldrich's memory, the strongest copies she had made were a level 70 copy of Rella and a level 80 copy of the Death Lord's Shattered Bone armor form.

Aldrich knew that this illusion of Volantis was weaker than usual because it had been created on a time constraint and focused more on longevity, not on power. It was maybe around level 25 in terms of stats.

Maybe, Aldrich wondered, he could enlist Wai'ki's aid further. Her highest tier clones had both power and longevity. And creating a functional illusion of himself was something that had any number of uses after all.

First, though, Aldrich had to establish a 'public' persona separate from his Thanatos identity. That would be his Bruce Vane alter ego. Which was one of the reasons he had come out of the Nexus.

Aldrich wanted to regroup with Casimir and figure out where to go from here. What Aldrich wanted for his Bruce Vane persona was almost the opposite of 'Thanatos'.

Where Thantos would fight and stay in the spotlight of the world, Bruce Vane would stay in the shadows as an influential and relatively secretive figure that people could trust for business deals. The optimal goal was for Bruce Vane to infiltrate corporate networks of connections and, if possible, villain networks as well. Often, villain and corporate networks were inextricably linked, so if he managed to break into one, he would naturally break into the other.

The problem was establishing Bruce Vane beyond being a fake I.D. boogeyman.

Casimir would help Aldrich do that with his resources. Despite losing support from the Dark Six, Casimir actually did not rely on them entirely. How he had built up his empire in the first place was through a fiercely loyal network of nomads that allowed Haven to become a hotspot for ferrying blackmail, drugs, illegal tech, and other contraband across the hostile yet untrackable Wastelands.

By now, Casimir had grouped with the nomads that supported him. It was about time Aldrich, no, Bruce Vane, introduced himself. Hence, why he had requested his spiritweave clothing to be in the form of a suit.

Had to look presentable, after all.

"Huh, would you look at that." Aldrich knelt down and found a plastic and foam wrapped rectangular package about a meter long and half a meter tall. He tore it open to reveal a trove of tightly packed ration bars, bottles of water, and a stack of books.

Aldrich picked out a note jutting out from one of the books. The typed of words read:

'I know you requested books, but I don't know you read. The sample you see has a wide variety. If you want something specific, there's a pen in this ration pack. Write on the back of this note and send it up with the pack.

Instructions to activate the pack's retrieval mechanism are detailed below.'

A note from colonel Davos. How thoughtful.

Aldrich briefly scanned the book titles Davos had brought and found that they were decidedly uninspired and awfully dry. There was an encyclopedia, a self help book to get motivated, a book about how to climb the corporate ladder, and even an adult drawing book.

Aldrich shrugged. He took the books and rations out, ordered them neatly, and with the pen in the pack, wrote on the colonel's note a simple 'This is fine.' He then tossed the emptied pack down a vent. It rolled down an indeterminate distance, stopping most likely at some kind of storage zone where a gravbeam would pull it back up.

"Whenever one of those packs come down, do exactly what I did to get rid of it," said Aldrich.

"Understood, great warleader," said the illusion.

Aldrich nodded a goodbye. He adjusted his suit, making sure it was not wrinkled. Spiritweave was self-cleaning and self-adjusting, so the dark fabric looked like it was in pristine condition.

With that, Aldrich cast [Mist Phase]. Green mist emanated from his body, swirling in waves that surrounded him, completely obscuring his form. When the mist faded, he was gone, leaving the illusion alone.

"Ah, alone again." The illusion sighed. He noticed the books nearby and picked one up. "But perhaps in my solitude I will learn much about this new world."

The illusion popped open the book that looked ridiculously tiny in his gauntlet hands and remained silent for a few seconds. After a minute, he closed the book and put it aside.

"Ah yes. I can't read this writing," said the illusion.

Aldrich materialized in the holding zone of a large cargo truck. The smell of acrid chemicals and burning flesh indicated that he was in the familiar presence of alchemy from Fler'Gan.

Aldrich confirmed then that [Mist Phase] had worked properly, even across massive distances.

"Ah, Elder One, it is a pleasure to meet you again," said Fler'Gan. He moved about the tables of his study with a beaker and dropper in his purple hands.

Fler'Gan's study had been packed into this truck, and though the space was large, it was still pretty cramped.

"Good to see you too," said Aldrich. "Any progress on your research?"

"Unlike your meteoric rise in power, O Elder, my studies seem to be taking considerably more time," said Fler'Gan apologetically.

"No worries. As undead, time is something we have plenty of," said Aldrich, remembering the Death Lord's words. He looked around at the cramped laboratory and nodded. "And soon enough, once I get control of Haven and have some space, you'll have a proper laboratory too."

"I do eagerly anticipate that day. And, O Elder, I am not entirely without progress," said Fler'Gan. He put down his beaker and dropper on a rack and hurried over to a large fridge hooked. He gave the fridge an admiring glance. "The wonders of this new world's humans and their ingenuity never cease to amaze me. Cooling without magic. Quite impressive. But regardless, gaze upon this-,"

Fler'Gan opened the fridge, revealing a large see through canister filled with red liquid. Suspended within was a golfball sized black mass that seemed to tremble of its own accord.

Aldrich immediately recognized what that mass was. "That's an alter organ. And it isn't disintegrating from being removed from its host body. You've found a way to preserve it?"

Chapter 215: Nomads

Chapter 215 Nomads"Indeed," said Fler'Gan. "You are familiar with the concept of homonculi, no?"

"Yes," said Aldrich. "Alchemically created organisms. How does that apply here?"

"The normal method to create homonculi starts with creating a 'womb' of primordial liquid. This liquid is often the refined, processed flesh of other creatures," said Fler'Gan. "I have little in the way of materials I am familiar with for my alchemy, but I do have the tools to refine with.

Thus, I reduced that Alter specimen you so generously granted me into primordial liquid. I then placed the Alter organ within this liquid before it could decay.

The first attempt was a failure. The organ deteriorated too quickly and I did not know how to adjust my refinement process to Alterhumans that I had never worked with before.

But by learning upon my errors, I have managed to preserve the Alter organ of the second specimen!"

"That's...quite incredible," said Aldrich, surprised. It seemed like such a small thing, but managing to preserve an Alter organ was something quite literally nobody had ever managed to do before.

The closest anyone had gotten was via an Alter scientist who could use his own power to attach growths on organs to trick them into thinking they were alive.

This method accomplished worked on the same principles by tricking the Alter organ into believing it was still in its host body. This method, however, was vastly superior.

The Alter scientist had a limited range and duration on his powers. What Fler'Gan did was create an easy way to transport and store live Alter organs.

"What about the self-destruct mechanism that the organs have when you try to study them?" said Aldrich. This was the greatest block to Alter organ research and one of the reasons why Aldrich could not just force an undead organ to stop disintegrating.

If Aldrich tried to force an organ into doing what it was not meant to do, when it would disintegrate regardless of whether he attempted to regenerate it with magic.

It was one of the reasons why Aldrich could not heal Seismic from his Crystallization condition. Aldrich could sense if he tampered with the organ, it would self-destruct.

Oddly, the organ would accept healing to restore it to its base state, but not any changes to the base state itself. It was almost as if the organs had their own independent will that made them fiercely stubborn and strangely aware of their surroundings, able to discern between what helped them and what tried to change them.

"That will require some more research," said Fler'Gan. "But for now, I revel in this progress, however minute it may be."

"It isn't minute by any measure," said Aldrich. "Well done, Fler'Gan. I'll have the editor sample you requested to you tomorrow along with plenty of eyeflowers and other magical materials you need for your alchemy."

"Your praise is much appreciated, O Elder." Fler'Gan bowed his head. "And once you grant me the materials I need, I can craft any potion you desire. To recall, what you desire is one that will impart your voice with powerful hypnotic suggestion, no?"

"That's right," said Aldrich. "Powerful enough to affect multiple people. Subtle enough that it will be hard to detect. And one that I can consume and have its effects come in after a delay so that the potion itself won't get caught in a search."

Fler'Gan closed the fridge and curled his mouth tentacles in thought. "I have drafted a formula for such a potion, but in doing so, I must warn you that there may be shortcomings.

My alchemical technique is considerable, but it is not on the level of dedicated Arch-Alchemists. If I am to devise a potion within those specifications, it will have to sacrifice some strength, allowing those with strong will to resist it. In addition, the hypnotic suggestion will last a pithy amount of time, requiring constant re-application via your voice. The duration this potion enhances your voice will also not be infinite, taking up perhaps a time span just shy of thirty minutes."

"Those are acceptable shortcomings," said Aldrich. "I'll have what you need to you soon. I'll be meeting Casimir now, but again, you've done a great job. Keep up the good work."

"I humbly accept your praise, O Elder," said Fler'Gan.

Aldrich exited the truck, opening the doors to reveal bright sunshine and barren, parched earth. But on this cracked and dry earth was a whole host of activity.

A small compound had been set up with large mobile homes parked and attached together to create what were basically makeshift buildings. Accompanying all this was a scattering of various tents and quickly constructed shacks and work benches.

Nomads bustled about with their recognizable cloaks and goggles, going about their daily life. Some fixed their personal bikes while others maintained the engines and repaired damage on the more communal mobile homes. There were nomads fixing up their cybernetics or tending to wounds in tents marked with red crosses.

The sheer number of nomads surprised Aldrich. There were men and women and children a plenty. He figured that there were easily several hundred people here.

This was practically a village on wheels.

Aldrich had the image in his mind of nomads as simply being roving bands of thugs that did odd jobs for criminal organizations, but looking at this, it just felt like these were people living their own lives.

There were nomads sitting about talking and laughing with each other. Kids ran around and played and laughed with pieces of metal scrap molded into the shape of toys.

"Ah, awful sunlight." Fler'Gan squinted his red eyes as he saw bright light stream into the truck. "Do close those doors on the way out, O Elder. The sun is terrible for drying out this skin of mine."

Aldrich nodded as he hopped out the truck, closing the doors. When he landed, a voice spoke from behind him.

"You actually managed to come, huh? At least Casimir's still reliable about making sure he and his accomplices show up."

Aldrich instantly turned around, alert. It was not easy to sneak up on him like that, what with his highly tuned senses. He found himself staring at a young man cloaked in dirt speckled and dusted gray. The guy could not have been much older than Aldrich, probably no older than twenty five, and yet, his stare, much like Aldrich's, looked considerably older with sunken in, tired black eyes.

"And who might you be?" said Aldrich. He could not accurately sense how strong Alters were without a scanner of some sorts, but his combat experience and instincts told him that this man was strong.

It was in the way he carried himself. He seemed to radiate cool confidence outwardly, but inwardly, he was ready to react and attack or defend at a moment's notice.

"Call me Knife," said the man. "I'm a bodyguard for one of Casimir's friends. She happens to be the leader of this compound. I'm here to take you to where they are where, hopefully, you can help explain this disastrous mess Casimir's gotten himself into and why we should help you."

Chapter 216: The Nomad Chiefs

"Casimir made a bet on me that he thought would pay off. It's as simple as that," said Aldrich.

"Really now? Sure doesn't seem like it. Seems more like we're way far up shit creek with the Dark Six against us," said Knife.

He leered at Aldrich, and that was when Aldrich noticed that Knife's dark eyes were cybernetic, the pupils indented with subtle lines that indicated they were not soft flesh but metal. "Well, I'm just a bodyguard. I don't really do much of the thinking. I leave that up to my boss.

Also, I appreciate that you're dressed formally, but this isn't the right place for a suit. Here-,"

Knife looked around until he saw a nomad man passing by.

"Hey, you! Yeah, you, the chump with the wack mohawk, come here!" said Knife.

The nomad came up to knife with a nervous smile. "Uh, what is it, Knife? Somethin' wrong?" He gave Aldrich a quizzical look that quickly turned into suspicion. "And who is this? Why's a suit standin' around in our compound?"

"You don't need to be asking questions. Just give me your cloak and be on your merry way," said Knife.

"I just got this! Completely geostorm shock proof, too!" complained the nomad.

"I'll pay back the credits, so buzz off," said Knife.

"Alright, fine." The nomad grumbled before he took off his cloak and handed it to Knife.

As the nomad left, Knife tossed the cloak towards Aldrich. "Nomads don't take kindly to looking like a suit. Keep that on you so you don't stick out like a sore thumb and blow a sensitive fuse somewhere."

"..." Aldrich wrapped the cloak around himself, and it covered his whole body, draping down to ankles. It was meant for full body protection against geostorms, the umbrella term coined by all the types of storms generated in the Wastelands due to instable fluxes of ether energy within the earth.

The biggest issue that nomads faced with these storms was something known as charge-death. Geostorms stimulated alter organs with constant energy output, enhancing the powers of Alters within them, but this could quickly overload, rapidly causing alter organ failure and, subsequently, death.

The damage to the alter organ could also be permanent even if one survived a mild case of charge-death.

Thus, nomads all wore cloaks that prevented that energy buildup. It was made from materials harvested by variants that managed to live around these storms, using the energy rich environment to their advantage.

"There, aside from that annoyingly good looking face, you look just like one of us," said Knife.

"Just take me where I need to be," said Aldrich.

As Aldrich followed Knife through the compound, he felt some prying eyes on him. He had a good sense of when he was being watched, but when he checked the eyes on him, he saw most of them were just curious, not hostile.

"I didn't know so many nomads could live together like this," said Aldrich.

"What? You thought nomads were just a bunch of bike riding maniacs that just looted and pillaged?" said Knife.

Aldrich just stared at Knife. That was indeed what Aldrich thought, largely because information about nomads was so limited, but he did not let it show.

"...Yeah sure, there is SOME looting, but we try to take from the rich, y'know, the people that have it all and don't need what they got," said Knife. "You strike me as a city boy. Where? Neo-York?"

"You could tell?"

"Just a hunch. I got a good nose for sniffing out city folk." Knife shrugged. "Being a nomad is a way of life. Some of us are criminals fleeing justice, yeah, but even more of us are just people that didn't belong.

In the new world order that the Panop and the corps built, there isn't a space for people who really want to think for themselves. Corps force ads and their bootlicking ideology down your throat 24/7 in cities. It's fucking nauseating.

Most of the people out here just want to be free from that."

"So what? You would describe yourself as a community of free spirited individualists?" said Aldrich, somewhat sarcastically.

"Yeah, that has a nice ring to it," said Knife, not catching the sarcasm at all. "Oh, and we're here."

Knife pointed to a vehicle that looked like a giant mechanical wheel. It was easily the size of a three story house, anchored to the ground via giant mechanical legs that extended out from the sides of a house sized sphere that housed the crew that operated this war machine. These legs also formed ladders to get up to the inside.

The design of its sleek black plating made it very obvious that this was multiple grades above the often makeshift bikes that many of the other nomads had. No, as Aldrich observed closer, seeing a logo of a serpent devouring its tail, this was not just good, but the best of best.

This was Imugi tech. Probably the highest end military tech company in the world.

"I see you're admiring the Wanyudo," said Knife proudly. "It was a hell of a fight to steal this thing. Had to beat up a couple B ranker mercs and hold off Shogun, tough bastard that he is."

Aldrich made note of this information. Shogun was an A rank hero in Japan famous for being a living tank with a suit of samurai style armor that seemed to organically grow around him.

It was undeniable that Shogun was more of a 'combat' hero and not a 'popularity' hero, his A rank earned through feats of strength, not crowd pleasing. Much like Seismic.

The fact that Knife could hold someone like Shogun indicated a tremendous amount of strength. Or it was possible that Knife's power just had a good matchup against Shogun.

Either way, Aldrich could not underestimate Knife. It also made him understand that whoever Casimir was dealing with in the Wanyudo had the influence and resources to hire a bodyguard that could take on an A rank hero.

"What, getting cold feet now?" said Knife, noticing Aldrich's thinking pause.

Aldrich did not respond and just walked up the anchor leg. When he got close to the wheel, a door sensed his movement and slid to the side with a pressurized click.

Peering into the sphere, Aldrich saw gray metal tile flooring and walls. Thoroughly bare and military in design unlike the stylish and sleek plating on the outside with its shining black paint job.

In here, Aldrich saw a large table around which seven people sat, one of whom was Casimir. Notably, there was one empty chair. More people stood on the outskirts of the table, and by how they carried themselves, they were combat personnel.

Aldrich stepped in, and the hatch door of the Wanyudo shut behind him, clicking with a heavy sounding locking mechanism.

"Ah, Mr. Vane! We have been thoroughly awaiting your arrival!" Casimir stood up from his seat and waved Aldrich forward. Behind Casimir stood Walters, Smoke, Hirondelle, and Blanca. His three strongest guards and his trusted secretary.

Casimir pointed to the empty seat, and before Aldrich sat in it, he spied the others around the table. Four men and two women. None younger than thirty. The oldest was a man that looked close to seventy.

All with grizzled looks in their eyes. People who had gone through tough times a plenty, survived them, and come out on top.

The air around this table was tense. Everyone except Casimir stared at Aldrich with barely concealed suspicion.

Aldrich sat down and stared back, not backing down a single bit.

"You haven't been here for our first two meetings. Why is that, I wonder?" said the oldest of the group. He had a cybernetic monocle that extended slightly like a miniature binocular, inspecting Aldrich.

"I was busy. I'm sure you can understand that," replied Aldrich coolly.

"Chiefs, this is, as I have mentioned before, Mr. Bruce Vane." Casimir motioned to the table around him. "And Mr. Vane, these are six nomad chiefs that I am well acquainted with. They have been instrumental in helping me build my empire of connections."

"Your former empire, Casimir," said a woman with piercing purple eyes and a mechanical mask shaped like a beast's jaw over her mouth. Her voice rang out through the mask, undulating with a threatening ring. "With this stunt you've pulled off, you've gotten the Dark Six to paint a massive target on your back.

You're lucky we're even entertaining you here for the sake of our old partnership.

Every second you sit here, the chances of the Dark Six targeting us goes up too.

You better have a very good explanation as to why we should keep working with you."

"From the ashes, the phoenix rises, no?" said Casimir. "And Mr. Vane here will be that phoenix."

Chapter 217: Negotiating with the Chiefs

Chapter 217 Negotiating with the Chiefs "A phoenix? Fairy tale nonsense!" said the oldest nomad chief as he slammed a cybernetic metal fist onto the table with a loud clang. "You've gone mad, Casimir. We trusted you to handle all our shipments in this area, and now you have nothing. Only enemies.

You expect us to bet on this...this boy!?"

"Technically, that is not fairy tale, but mythology. And you all have trusted my judgement before," said Casimir. "Especially you, Gerald. And luck has always been on my side. You would be wise to bet with me, not against me."

"Bet?" Another chieftain, a dark skinned man with dreadlocks reaching down to his neck, shook his head as he stared at Casimir with striking golden eyes. "I don't like risk. The biggest one I took was when you approached us twenty years ago with almost nothing to your name, asking for our help to build your empire.

Back then, I was not a chief. I was younger and more ambitious. Now, I have people whose lives hang on every word and decision I make.

You will have to do very, very well to convince me to support you.”

Aldrich noticed that most of the chiefs were ignoring him. They focused on Casimir, likely believing him the true mastermind for all this. In no small part, they likely underestimated Aldrich due to his age and his unknown status.

The only one, Aldrich noted with his sharp gaze, that paid him heed was the mask wearing woman and a bulky man with bull’s horns jutting from his head. Notably, they were both the youngest in the group, not much older than thirty.

Regardless, Aldrich needed to make an impression. And set the record straight.

”I see we’ve started off on the wrong foot,” said Aldrich with a sigh. “My apologies.”

”Your apologies mean nothing,” said Gerald dismissively. He turned to Casimir again . “Twenty years, we built up this network, and now, it’s all gone in a single night. So many decades wasted just like that.”

”What I mean when we started off on the wrong foot-,” said Aldrich, his voice maintaining an edge that made everyone pay attention to him. “Is that you all seem to be misunderstanding the nature of this meeting.

You see, I’m not here to negotiate with you. You’re here to negotiate with me. I’m here to see which of you are capable of working together with me as I build something far bigger than what you can ever dream of.”

Gerald’s face darkened. It was evident he did not like being talked down to. “What!? Do you understand the position you are in? You have absolutely nothing-,”

”And who decided that?” said Aldrich. “I have under my beck and call Thanatos, a figure with a power so rare that every government worth a damn, every corporation, is willing to scramble to recruit him. The Dark Six, too, no doubt have their eyes on him.”

The bull horned man burst out into laughter. It was not mocking laughter, rather, he was truly entertained. “To talk to us like that, you’ve got guts! And I admire that. The fossils around me might not listen to you, but I’ll bite: if I do decide to work with you, what am I getting myself into?”

”To begin with, we have no idea if Thanatos is even with him!” protested Gerard.

”You are being willfully blind,” said the masked woman. She leered at Gerard with admonishing purple eyes. “Casimir has brought Thanatos’s forces with him. Do you

think Thanatos would do that if Casimir, and, by extension, Mr. Vane here did not have his full trust?"

"You, Zena, you support this...this upstart?" said Gerard.

"Support? No. Not yet. But I am not against it. What I am against is putting my people in danger," said Zena, and the dark skinned chief nodded.

"Enough with the side chatter," said the bull horned chief. "I want to hear from the man himself."

"Thanatos will establish a sentinel state using the currently torn down Haven as his main jurisdiction," said Aldrich. "You all already used Haven to ferry your goods, relying on Casimir to be your distributor.

However, you do all this under constant threat of capture and surveillance. No doubt, most, if not all of you have bounties on your head.

But if you affiliate with a sentinel state, you essentially have an entire government backing you. You would be under my protection. To harm you or your operations would be akin to harming me.

There would be retaliation. And you've already seen the army that Thanatos can field. There's far, far more where that came from."

"Haven is a ruin," countered Gerard, taking Aldrich more seriously now.

"Cities can always be rebuilt. There will be no shortage of companies willing to build it back if they think they can have Thanatos on their side," said Aldrich.

"There are only so many entities you can make deals with. You make a deal with one, you lose deals with others. And most of us nomads deeply distrust corps," said the dark skinned chief. "Many of us are here because we left corp control. Or we are refugees from the Corpowars, as is the case with myself."

"Casimir has managed to smooth out relations between you, villain organizations, and corporations with his diplomatic skill. That was how he built so much up in the first place.

That was why you all supported him to begin with. He still has those skills," said Aldrich.

"What about the Dark Six?" said the bull horned chief. "You gonna fight them too? Cause they're real pissed off to the point I think a little talking ain't gonna do the trick."

"And, if my intel is correct, the Dark Six is trying to take over Haven as well to salvage their Blackwater project," said Zena. "If Thanatos wants to do this, he would be

competing directly with the Dark Six, and they have companies and influence of their own."

This was true, thought Aldrich. If the Dark Six were against him acquiring Haven, then he needed to basically enter into a bidding war against their collective resources, and they had quite a few decently sized companies and politicians under their thumb.

"Ah yes, but not the backing of a Council of Fortune member, no?" remarked Casimir.

The room fell silent. That was how influential the Council of Fortune was. As a combined power, the Council of Fortune was a global superpower easily on par with the Panopticon and Alterhuman Agency.

A single one of its council member companies had the resources to fuel a large scale war as the Corpowars and the millions dead from them showcased.

The companies the Dark Six owned were plenty, but none of them compared to a legitimate Council of Fortune member.

"Aarav Singh, possible next heir of Sheshanaga Biotechnology, has publicly voiced his desire to invest heavily into Haven, pledging specifically to aid Thanatos in his declaration to rebuild the variant torn city," said Casimir.

"...When was this?" said Gerard, his anger gone and voice now reduced to quiet.

Blanca looked up from her tablet and casually declared, "Ten minutes ago."

Aldrich smiled internally as he watched the silent and shocked expressions on the chiefs' faces. He had been wondering whether Aarav would make good on his word. Looked like the man would be as useful as he claimed to be.

Chapter 218: Negotiating with the Chiefs 2

Aldrich saw the awed reactions around him, noting just how much influence a potential, not even legitimate Fortune of Council member could have. He capitalized on this moment.

"Thanatos and I hold far more influence than meets the eye," said Aldrich. "What you see is just the tip of the iceberg."

"Then it is true? The rumors?" said Gerard suspiciously, tugging at his ragged white beard. His extending monocle zoomed in on Aldrich.

"What rumors?"

"That Thanatos comes from a hidden organization. How else could he have managed to gather so much power? So many troops? All without anyone noticing? That armor of his alone means he has a high class Alter that nobody knows about making equipment for him." Gerard pointed at Aldrich. "You too then, have to be from one of these organizations."

I can't sense any AC count from you, but I've heard that Thanatos didn't show any either. Is that new tech too? Are you Thanatos's handler? What are your motives? Who are you?"

"Stop rambling, you geriatric fart," said the bull horned chief. "And let the man speak."

Aldrich saw that all the chiefs stared at him with expectation, and it was understandable. There was strong evidence out there that there were hidden organizations on par with established villain bodies like the Dark Six.

Strange ciphered codes that led to hidden recruitment centers, pieces of tech disappearing without a trace, traces of abandoned and demolished research facilities, and variants mysteriously slaughtered before they reached population centers - all of these made people wildly theorize there were hidden forces out there.

The fact that the Panopticon actively censored this information from circulating only fanned the flames of curiosity further.

Aldrich himself believed that it was a strong possibility, but he had no way of knowing for sure. Between denial and rabid conspiracy theorist, he placed himself in a healthy medium where he was open to investigating.

"A man needs to have some secrets, no?" said Aldrich. "Where I come from and who I am does not matter. Just now whatever power you think I have behind me, I stand at the very top of. That includes, of course, Thanatos."

This was, of course, a bluff. Aldrich did not have an unfathomably large organization behind him. Well, technically, he did if he counted the Necropolis, so he was not exactly lying.

"Interesting. Then Aarav Singh is in on this?" said the masked woman. She leaned back in her chair and crossed one leg over the author. Her body language seemed to ease up a little more, surprisingly.

"That's a reasonable assumption, isn't it?" said Aldrich.

"Don't be so coy, kid," said Gerard. "If you want my nomads working with you, you need to give us far better details than this."

"I'm in!" The bull horned chief declared with a booming voice. He slammed a fist down on the solid metal table, easily denting it.

"What!?" Gerard stared at the man. "Have you gone nuts, Clint? You barely know anything about this boy!"

"And that makes it even more exciting," said Clint with a broad grin. "When my pa was the leader of the Spearhorn nomads, he told me when Casimir showed up, he got the biggest laugh out of him.

Dressed all in rags with burns all over his face, but he still proudly wore a gold ring he probably stole and spoke that same smooth and confident silver tongue, like he just knew he was going to be at the top.

My pa had the time of his life with wild bets, and I've been itching to make one too. I ain't gonna let up this chance to go all in."

"What of your people? You willing to use them as chips for this bet of yours?" said the chief with dreadlocks.

"My people ain't like yours, Des," said Clint. "Spearhorns love risk. We left the cities cause they were too damn boring, too damn suffocating. You bet your ass they'd ride or die with me all the way to a burning grave so long as it got a good laugh outta us at the end.

And shit, secret organizations, Thanatos, beating the Dark Six? You fuckin' kiddin' me? I'm in."

"It's Desmond. I'm not your friend." Desmond sighed. "Well if that is your decision, then so be it. But if Mr. Vane over here is unwilling to reveal anything about his self and his potential organization, then I cannot risk the Spiders over him."

"Your pa would be disappointed, Des," said Clint. "He knew how to have a good time. Where'd that all go?"

"His 'good times' killed two hundred of us," said Desmond coldly. His demeanor immediately changed from being open to now shut off and cold. "No more." He looked at Aldrich with a polite shake of his head. "As things stand, I am afraid I cannot lend you my assistance, Mr. Vane. Maybe some other time."

"Are you sure, Desmond?" said Casimir. "It is foolhardy to bet on a stock when its prices are high. You capitalize on the profit when it is low and developing."

"That's another thing. Stocks and corps - my people are tired of it all. If Mr. Vane is going to affiliate himself with a fortune heir, I see no way I can convince them to help, even if I wanted to."

Desmond stood up, wrapping white cloak around himself. On its back was emblazoned a large black spider. "I am done with this negotiation. I wish you all the best of luck."

Everyone waited until Desmond left with four of his bodyguards.

"Did you have to do that?" the masked woman said to Clint.

Clint raised his hands up. "What do you mean? I'm innocent. Haven't done nothin'.

"Bring up his father like that? You practically forced him out of this meeting," said the woman.

Aldrich had to agree. The moment Desmond had his father brought up, his entire demeanor had changed, closing of from this whole deal.

Clint shrugged. "Heh, I don't like working with Des, slimy little shit he is. Pretends like he loves his people and their lives and how much he bitches and moans about the corps.

But he's the one that makes me the most backhanded deals outta all of us with the corps. All so he can pad his pockets and make sure his people don't get caught in any crossfires.

Y'all know this, don't you? Why everytime there's a fight, the Spiders magically ain't there no more? Just fuckin' gone like bugs under light?"

Aldrich sat back and observed quietly, analyzing the dynamic between the chiefs. From the muted silence that Clint's words generated, he could tell they were likely true.

But the fact that the chiefs allowed Desmond in as part of them still meant that Desmond had some value to them that made him indispensable.

"Enough about us," said Gerard. He looked to the two chiefs that had not spoken yet. "You two, Rock and Crone, what do you think?"

One was a mountain of a man who seemed to be a mutant with a body made entirely of rock. His head was shaped like a helmet, and underneath two glowing yellow dots - his eyes - shone through. On his cloak was the symbol of, rather fittingly, a rock.

The other was a hunched up, small old lady with disheveled white hair and a blue visor covering her eyes. On her cloak was the symbol of a red flower: a poppy.

"I don't mind working with the new guy, and I have no real opinions either way. I'll go with whatever's the majority. Discounting Desmond, of course," said Rock.

The rest awaited for Crone, but she remained silent.

"Is she...sleeping?" said Aldrich, noting the old lady's rhythmic breathing and unresponsiveness.

"She does that sometimes," said Gerard. "But it is no big deal. She'll remember everything that happened here and get back to us when she wakes up."

"I see," said Aldrich. He figured the sleeping must have been some condition to her power.

"How bout' you then, Z?" said Clint, nodding towards the masked woman.

Z looked to Aldrich with analytical purple eyes that made him instantly aware of how perceptive she was. They were eyes similar to his own. Trained. Sensitive. Sharp.

"I will help you halfway," said Z. "I handle the tech side of this joint endeavor, and I can help you with that. I already have, really, with that fake identity of yours."

"You're the one that created it?" said Aldrich.

"I am the one who invented the template for it," said Z. "And made it so easy to customize that even a third rate techno can fool up to a tier 2 city. But that CID of yours won't pass by higher level checks and tier 1 cities.

You'll need my help for that. Among other things. This, I can provide on the side. But my full support, I cannot promise until this whole feud between you and the Dark Six is settled in some way."

"That's the main thing holding me back too," said Gerard. "The risk of the Dark Six. And the lack of respect you youths have these days, but I'm used to that by now."

"Fuck the Dark Six," said Clint. "We'll make our own dark...somethin'. No need to listen to those villain goons no more."

"What I'm getting at, then, is the main thing holding you all back is the threat of the Dark Six. How much of it do you want me to neutralize? Do you expect me to topple their empire?" said Aldrich. "Or, would obtaining Haven as a sentinel state and driving the Dark Six out be enough?"

"Sentinel statehood would suffice for me. IF you can achieve it," said Z.

"I can stomach that," said Gerard. "But unlike Z, I can't aid you even a little bit until then. Too risky for me."

"And I'm ready to kick some fucking villain ass!" said Clint.

Chapter 219: Negotiating with the Chiefs 3

Aldrich leaned forward, taking a look at every one of the chiefs. He analyzed them closely, reading their eyes and body language, gaging just how committed they were.

Clint, obviously seemed to be all in. He had a wide smile plastered on his rugged face. He was honest, easy to read, and incredibly straightforward. When he said he was in on Aldrich, he was not lying.

Gerard was a little more reserved. Notably, he was fidgety, moving his hands very often, but not really because he was guilty about anything. He probably just did this as a minor tic when talking about something serious. He seemed to be a grumpy old man on the exterior, but rather soft on the inside.

Though Gerard had voiced the most loud opposition against Aldrich, Aldrich did not consider Gerard opposition. The old man just wanted security that Aldrich could deliver on anything he promised, and that was completely reasonable.

Z seemed neutral, if a bit positively inclined. She was the hardest to read out of all of them, her sharp lavender eyes matching Aldrich's own analytical gaze.

Desmond, too, when he was in this meeting, had been difficult to read. Even more so than Z. Even more so than even Solomon Solar. His body language was stiff but not aggressive. His eyes were serious yet not threatening. His voice never leaked much emotion, the only exception being when Clint brought Desmond's father.

Desmond had been trained to not give away anything. And people like that were dangerous. Aldrich knew this because he was one of those people. One did not learn to hide themselves away like that unless they had a very good reason to.

In Aldrich's case, it was because he had wanted to master the art of infiltration. In Desmond's case, well, who knew?

The other two chieftains were, for now, completely neutral. Stone said he would just go with the majority. Crone was asleep, so she was a complete wild card.

That meant out of the five chiefs, one was for Aldrich, three neutral, one against, and one unknown.

Of the three neutral opinions, two - Z and Gerard - Aldrich could sway by obtaining sentinel statehood.

"In the end, then, this all lies on Thanatos obtaining sentinel statehood over Haven, doesn't it?" said Aldrich.

"Summed up, yes," said Z. "But obtaining sentinel status? Far easier said and thought of than done. The powers that be love to maintain control. Sentinel statehood is a sign of independence that flies directly against that. Though, with a fortune heir, it may well be possible."

"You don't know that," countered Gerard. "Last I heard, they locked Thanatos up. The Panop and the government are on extreme alert, and who can blame them? The recent variant attacks have thrown the whole damn world into chaos."

The fortune are a force to be reckoned with, but Aarav Singh is just a heir. Powerful he might be in his own right, he isn't the head of Sheshanaga. That's his father.

Now, if Aarav had his father's backing, things might be different."

"He does," said Aldrich.

"...Are you sure, boy?" said Gerard. "Sheshanaga really is willing to commit to you? The entire megacorporation? They're willing to make an enemy out of the Dark Six? Be in shaky standing with the U.S. government and the Panopticon?"

"You'll find out soon enough," said Aldrich. "But even if Aarav didn't have his father's backing, as far as I'm aware, his company is the largest subsidiary that Sheshanaga holds. His voice is the largest there out of all the other potential heirs."

"It still may not be enough is our cause for concern," said Z. "And say that all this goes well. What do you want from us?"

"Everything you provided Casimir, for one," said Aldrich. "Fast, efficient, and untrackable supply routes for contraband. Access to technology that can fool even high tier city security. Access to nomads that have both the power and expertise to hijack even this entire war machine right under the nose of Imugi, a fortune megacorp. The usual."

When Thanatos obtains sentinel statehood, Haven will need trade and supply routes. I'm sure corporations can cover the official ones. But the 'unofficial' ones are just as important, and that's where you all come in."

"I got ya covered with the heists. That's the job for me and my boys!" said Clint.

"And?" said Z. "You said 'for one'. You want more, don't you?"

"I'm not entirely familiar with you nomads," said Aldrich. "But as far as I'm aware, you all know how to navigate the Wastelands better than anyone."

The AA and Panopticon can track the location of variant nests because they're stationary. But they can't easily track variants that fade in and out of geostorms.

I want you to help me locate them."

Gerard crossed his arms. "My Hawks handle most of the scouting. But I don't want to commit much to you unless I know for sure you can guarantee our safety from the Dark Six."

"Fair enough," said Aldrich.

"If this hypothetical partnership went through," said Z. "It would be a symbiotic relationship. Once Haven stabilizes, we would expect support from it as well.

Not just protection from the Dark Six - that's a basic given for me and Gerard to consider officially partnering with you. But I would also ask for access to resources that only a city can get. Parts and tech and manpower that are hard to come by in the Wastes."

"Done," said Aldrich.

In terms of sheer competency, Aldrich held the nomads in high regard. He had thought about partnering with them the moment he found out that Casimir's Kryptic had come from them.

"To be honest, boy, this still isn't convincing," said Gerard. "A fair amount of our business already comes from the Dark Six. You'd be asking us to give that all up AND make them enemies."

This was a decent point, Aldrich acknowledged. But he had been prepared to answer it by saying that the benefits of working with him outweighed the Dark Six.

Yet this was where Casimir chimed in. "Gerard, my good old friend, what ever are you talking about? The Dark Six have already stopped business with you, have they not? Ever since my rather flamboyant exit, that is.

Yes, it has only been just over a day, but the Dark Six have severed communications with all of you, I presume. Not quite promising for future dealings, no?"

The silence in the room gave all the answer Aldrich and Casimir needed.

"You want to approach Mr. Vane here because all of you are uncertain and afraid. What if the Dark Six is already against you? Then you need another option, do you not?" said Casimir. "It is only natural for humans to seek stability in times of uncertainty.

But the way you talk, it seems almost like the Dark Six are still doing business with you. You are not bluffing, are you?"

"...How did you know that?" said Gerard.

"You all were my dearest partners, my firsts," said Casimir as he put a hand over his heart. "But as I grew, so did my network. I still have informants deeply loyal to me across the underworld that keep abreast of the situation."

"You really are a snake," said Gerard with a shake of his head. "You knew all along we were at the back foot of this negotiation, and you bring it down on us now?"

"I had to make sure a certain unstable element was out of the room first," said Casimir, referring to Desmond. "For I do trust all of you. All aside from dear old Desmond who is just so unfathomably reserved."

And, for the most part, I truly do not like those that do not express themselves properly like that."

Aldrich himself was surprised. He did not know the Dark Six had already cut off the nomads. That meant the nomads were in a far more desperate situation than he originally thought. And it also meant that Casimir had kept that information from Aldrich.

Aldrich did not believe Casimir to have done it out of any ill will. Most likely, he figured Casimir was still probing out whether Aldrich was competent, and he did not really mind that. And now that Casimir had thrown Aldrich the ball, it was up to him to score the goal.

"That boils down this negotiation to very simple terms, then," said Aldrich. "Either you work with me, or you're left out alone, wondering whether the Dark Six is out to get you. Of course, you could try and reach out to them again, but it isn't a certainty that they'll work with you again, is it?"

What I'm providing is certainty. The fact that I know you all are in a more desperate situation than I thought isn't going to change my terms. I'll still generously provide for you and secure your peoples' safeties."

"You think we can't handle ourselves?" said Gerard. He was shaken, but he still held his ground. "We've roamed the Wastelands for generations now! We can go solo just fine."

"Solo?" said Casimir. "And how many of your people are you willing to cut out for it? Your riders number so many because you have resources coming into you from the Dark Six and more, don't you?"

But if you go solo, will you not have to downsize?"

"..." Gerard sighed. "Yeah. You're right. I guess this old man's gotta say yes. A hard maybe yes, though."

Chapter 220: Agreement

"They say that age begets wisdom. Looks like that's true," said Aldrich to Gerard.

Gerard put a bashful hand on his head. "Don't you try to smooth talk your way around this old man. I'll still be keeping a close eye on you."

"Understood," said Aldrich. That meant that of the six chiefs, Clint and Gerard were now for him. But he still needed more.

Specifically, Aldrich wanted Z. She was the most useful one here with her specialization in technology. The fact that she was the creator of the fake CID (citizen identification) template meant she was an undeniable genius on par with or even above Panopticon higherups.

"Now then," Aldrich turned to Z. "Does my deal sound a little better?"

"To me, it doesn't matter much," said Z, unfazed. "Unlike Clint, I am not itching for a fight. Unlike Gerard, I don't have so many riders that any of them will go hungry. The services I provide in the criminal underworld are utterly unmatched.

Even if the Dark Six replaces me, I will have no shortage of other buyers. I might rack in fewer credits, but I don't need much to keep my riders going."

"Ah, looks like with you, I've lost my leverage, then," said Aldrich. "What about security? With a small following, you have less manpower to defend yourself with. And now more than ever's the time to have manpower."

"Quality over quantity." Z motioned behind her to Knife. "A small team means I only need a few strong individuals to secure our safety. But that is, of course, at my current level of risk.

Clint does not care at all about risk, and Gerard has made the analysis that his military strength is not enough to cover the Hawks against the Dark Six even without partnering with you.

For me and my Phantoms, we believe ourselves adequately protected already. But should I officially partner with you, then the risk grows to the point where that may not be true anymore."

"Basically, by partnering with me, you're taking on an extra burden," said Aldrich.

Z nodded. "As I have said before, I do not mind supplying you with tech as a client. But partnerships are not my forte. My principle is to provide my tech to anyone that asks and can pay.

The underworld may seem like a den of selfish lions, but an ecosystem filled only with predators dies off frighteningly quickly. My tech allows practically anyone to escape cities and become a nomad or, if they want, take it a step further and become villains. It is crucial in creating a sustainable environment.

To maintain equity of distribution, I need to remain as neutral as possible."

"Interesting," said Aldrich. "I assume you had a similar hands off approach with Casimir, then?"

"He was a client. But a partner? No," confirmed Z.

"Then what was the point of you coming to this meeting?" said Aldrich. "If you're already sure of your position."

"Because I am still part of this council," said Z. "And my vote still matters to you, doesn't it? I wanted to know what kind of person you were. If you were an unstable element that I could not take even as a client, then I could not give you my vote.

But you aren't."

Aldrich nodded. "I'll take that as a yes then?"

"You may," said Z.

"That's three for me, 1 rejection, and 2 neutral parties," said Aldrich.

"That's enough support. I'm in too," said Stone. "I don't like thinking too hard about these kind of things, but if Z and Gerard support you with their big brains, then I will too."

"Haha, you and me both," said Clint. "These nerds gotta learn how to live sometimes, I tell ya."

"The way you live, I don't imagine you living much longer," said Z.

"What's life without risk, huh? Just a boring ol' shitshow," said Clint proudly.

"A very short show, yes," sighed Gerard. "You youths have no concept of what it's like to reach a ripe old age like me. It's fulfilling in its own way."

"No way. If I die of old age, then by god, someone throw me in a ring and toss a variant at me, because hell if I'm gonna die sleepin' on a comfy bed!" said Clint.

Aldrich knew that Clint's bravado was not misplaced. One of the first things he noted the moment he sat down was that although the other nomad chiefs had powerful guards behind them, Clint had literally nobody. He was that confident in defending himself.

And considering Z had brought Knife, a bodyguard who could at least stall an A ranker, that spoke volumes to how strong Clint probably was.

"And Crone?" Aldrich motioned gently to Crone's still sleeping, frail old form.

"She's probably using her power to figure out her decision." Gerard got up and put a hand on her back and then shook his head. "No wait, she's just sleeping. I'll go ahead and fill her in on the details later, but for now, this meeting's over.

Hope you enjoy working with most of us, Mr. Vane, and I hope you can actually deliver on what you promise."

"You won't regret it," said Aldrich.

"And this is where we are staying." Casimir bowed as he gestured behind him to a series of three mobile homes fused together to create one surprisingly spacious base.

Also, 'mobile homes' was underselling what these were. They had the same basic structure as mobile homes, yes, being basically houses on wheels, but they were fitted with enough armor plating and mounted turrets that it was easier to call them 'mobile bunkers' instead.

"You had all this in reserve?" said Aldrich.

"The nomads kept it maintained for me. For no small price, of course, but it has served as quite the comfortable escape on many a rainy day," said Casimir.

"You're sure it isn't bugged, correct?"

Casimir looked offended, the emote on his mask displaying shock. "Mister Vane, goodness gracious me, you would expect me to have fallen to such amateurish standards?"

"Just making sure you didn't have any more surprising waiting for me. Like you did in the negotiations." Aldrich was not accusing Casimir of anything, he was just curious why Casimir withheld some critical information like the fact that Aarav Singh had voiced public support to Aldrich and the fact that the Dark Six had already abandoned the nomad chiefs.

"Ah that, I must apologize, but you cannot blame me. I do enjoy seeing you speak. It grants me ever more confidence that I have made the right decision in backing you, Mr. Vane," said Casimir.

"I figured as much. It was a test then, hm?" said Aldrich.

"A test, my, Mr. Vane, such harsh wording. It was simply an opportunity for me to admire an artist at their craft. And it made me feel quite useful, dropping in with those grand revelations. Did you see the look on dear old Gerard's face? Quite priceless, I must say," said Casimir.

"Yeah, it was." Aldrich smiled, remembering Gerard's complete and utter shock when Casimir revealed that he knew Gerard had nothing to leverage.

"Anyways, I want you to do something for me. Consider it payment for watching me at work," said Aldrich.

"Ah, payment, how I do love that word. What is it, Mr. Vane?"

"Desmond still trusts you to some degree, right? Could you meet with him personally, in his base? Try to reach out to him about a partnership again before he leaves. I doubt he'll agree to anything, and I don't care about that. I just need you to get in his base," said Aldrich.

"I will have Walters and Hironnelle accompany me," said Casimir. "Quite curious, this is. Mr. Vane, I do wonder what you are plotting. But I will do as you say and let the revelations come to me later. A delayed payoff is often more satisfactory than immediate reward, after all."

"That's right," said Aldrich.

As Casimir turned around, Aldrich said, "And Casimir, about your men in the Red Circle, the ones I raised. Did you get the chance to bury them?"

Casimir did not turn to meet Aldrich's gaze. He instead looked up at the blue skies and shining sun. "I did. Most of them, at the very least. They lie in graves not far from here, in these grand old wastelands."

"Are you sure you didn't want to bury them somewhere more proper?"

"I did wonder about that. When I first hired those men and women of mine, I told them I needed their service to rise to the top of the underworld.

Most of them were mirror images of my younger self. Having nothing but wanting so much. They wanted credits and safety but most of all, I came to realize, they wanted a vision.

They wanted a dream they could look forward to and believe in. They wanted the freedom to live and fight for something big.

Somewhere along that way, their service became friendship, and the rise to the top became an adventure."

Casimir smiled. "A grand old journey. And for some, their journeys ended sooner than others, but there is no shame in that.

In a way, it is fitting that they rest here, in the vast wastelands that many call the neo-frontier: the very symbol of adventure and freedom."

Casimir nodded to himself. "Now then, Mr. Vane, before I wax and wane more about this topic, I shall arrange that meeting with Desmond."

Casimir strolled away, as confident and forward looking as ever. Back tall and undaunted. Aldrich could see why Casimir would attract so many loyal followers.

Aldrich rapped on the fortified metal door leading into the base. Spybird would let him in soon, and then he would catch up on issues like contacting Aarav and Seismic.

And, most importantly, his plans to capture Blackwater.

Chapter 221: Blackwater Students

Aldrich waited in front of the base doors, admiring just how solid they were. They were like solid blocks of metal that could probably pancake someone flat under their weight. Very much like nomad craftsmanship.

Either nomad tech was light and hyper mobile or it went overboard on just stacking defensive layer on top of defensive layer to create plate packed mobile behemoths.

The doors reminded Aldrich of the neosteel castle wall that protected the Red Circle, the very same wall that needed a cannon round fired from a railgun at mach 6 to actually penetrate. But he doubted these doors had even half the durability as the neosteel doors.

Neosteel was expensive. The highest end commercially available metal on the market. Even Casimir could only afford small amounts of it.

But even neosteel was like paper compared to someone like Solomon Solar, and if Aldrich wanted to take over Blackwater, he knew he would have to go through Solomon.

There was a certain point where technology just did not keep up with superpowers, and the S rank was where that difference was incredibly noticeable.

What good was a war mech against someone who could fly at hypersonic speeds and demolish entire city blocks with punches? The only technos that could keep up with the S rank were S rank technos themselves who had technology that was so advanced it was practically magic.

As Arthur C. Clarke once said, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic".

Solomon Solar was a definite issue. Aldrich could admit very easily that in a direct fight with Solomon, even with all his recent powerups, there was no contest: Solomon could probably beat Aldrich in one minute with raw overwhelming force.

Granted, the matchup was bad with Solomon, like Seth, being Aldrich's natural counter. Extreme physical stats coupled with fire damage in the form of solar energy was a nightmare to deal with for an undead mage type like Aldrich.

But like with Seth, Aldrich would find a way to work around Solomon

Father would fall like son.

No, if Aldrich had his way, Solomon would fall far, far further than Seth ever did. After all, Solomon had so much more to lose.

"Oh, sorry about wait!" Spybird's voice buzzed through an intercom. "I was passed out for bit there. Alcohol generator not working properly, you see. But here-,"

The base doors slowly opened up with slow and rattling movement. It felt like watching some behemoth of a beast languidly rise from slumber.

Aldrich passed through the doors after a long five seconds, half wondering how a lot of the nomad tech did not just break down on the spot. It all seemed so clunky and makeshift with odd bits and pieces cobbled together.

Aldrich used his ability to sense his undead to make his way around the base. The base was made up of three mobile homes temporarily fused together like some kind of bootleg transformer.

Each of the homes roughly had different functions. One acted like a control center for anything tech related while the other two were like living quarters with recreational spaces and supplies.

The control room was his goal, but Aldrich wanted to check up on the others as well. The immediate room he was in now was a small chamber meant for decontamination from potential exposure to nasty stuff in the Wastelands, but no need for that now.

The chamber doors opened, and Aldrich strolled his way through a short hallway. Bare metal walls, floor, and ceiling. He wondered briefly how nomads could tolerate being holed up in what was basically an oversized military car for years.

When the sliding doors at the end of the hallway opened up, Aldrich realized he was quite mistaken. He found himself staring at a rather vibrant living space. Still the same metal walls and floors and ceiling, but they were decorated with warm, sunshine colored lights, posters, and several telescreens that now played various movies and shows. A surprisingly good speaker system played party music for some background noise that concealed Aldrich's entrance.

Aldrich's units sat around bolted pieces of furniture, watching the telescreens or talking amongst each other. Some played beer pong on a table while others fixed up a meal in the kitchen. Opened beer cans and bottles of liquor were everywhere.

It gave off the vibes of a college party.

And it made sense. Most of Aldrich's humanoid units were Blackwater students, and they were just that: students. With their black uniforms replaced with casual clothes, it was apparent to Aldrich that these were just teenagers.

Just like Aldrich, though he was the least 'teen-like' out of them all. Not that he minded this too much. It was good to let his troops de-stress, for even if they were undead, they could still get mentally tired and need time to reset.

Aldrich remembered sleeping with Valera, at how just the simple act of sleeping without worrying about something had been so refreshing.

"Haha, THAT'S what you do at a proper hero academy?" Ace said as he nudged Eileen's (Portal Girl) arm with his elbow. "You spend half your time thinking about how to, like, save people? Most of your exams are actually about figuring out how to lift rocks out of the way so randos don't get crushed under them?"

"W-well yeah, that's what heroes do," squeaked out Eileen. She was surrounded by Blackwater students curious about what a real hero trainee did.

"What the hell? That's like, totally so boring!" said Kat in a valley girl voice. She was Blackwater's rank 4 just behind Ace. She had lost her beetle insectoid features, now opting for cat ears and eyes. Her power let her shift to a variety of animals depending on what she ate.

Presumably, Kat only needed to eat little bits like fur of the animal whose features she wanted, otherwise the implication was that she had literally eaten a cat. "I mean, I totally get needing to save people for AP and stuff, but like, doesn't it get way boring?"

"N-no, it's honestly why I wanted to be a hero...isn't what why all of you wanted to be heroes as well?" said Eileen. "You're in a hero academy, right? Blackwater, I think?"

"Pfft. I'm just here to kick money and make ass," said Ace.

"Uh, it's 'kick ass and take money' idiot," said Kat as she rolled her eyes. She shrugged at Eileen. "And girl, honestly, I don't know. I was trained as an assassin from when I was little, so I kinda just do what my parents tell me to do."

"D-did you say assassin?" Eileen looked visibly nervous.

"Yeah. I had my first contract at like, uh, ten or something? Honestly though, it's a drag sometimes. It's not like being a merc where you can just go in blasting and punching, you have to be suuuper patient, and that's totally boring," said Kat. "I figure if I graduated from Blackwater and got my license, I'd be out hunting heroes or something."

"A-and you?" Eileen said to Ace. She looked visibly distraught, especially at the whole 'hunting heroes' part of Kat's talk, but she held on admirably. "Are you also an assassin?"

Ace scratched his head of white hair. "Honestly, I dunno. I grew up in a lab or some shit. Parents tossed me out I think. The researchers wanted me to get really strong and sent me to Blackwater for training. I don't really know why.

But I didn't complain. I love beating the shit out of people, and that's what I did all day there."

"But like, tell me more about what you did. It's totally interesting to hear how the actual good guys work," said Kat as she playfully punched Eileen's shoulder. Eileen jumped a little, scared.

Made sense. In Eileen's perspective, everyone here was a villain. Someone she was supposed to be trained to fight against.

"Stop harassing the poor girl and let her breathe." Aldrich spoke up as he strolled into the room. He did not let his guard down as he did so. This might have seemed like a casual space, but there was one thing he had some worry about.

That was the fact that Aldrich was someone that the Blackwater students knew. They had only ever interacted with 'Thanatos', but Aldrich was someone they had previously looked down upon for being a Dud.

Granted, like with Eileen, Aldrich had everyone's 'loyalty meter' cranked up so that they could maintain their personalities while not being a liability to Aldrich. This maxed out loyalty effect was strong enough that Fisk did not care at all about his previous boss dying right in front of him.

But Aldrich wondered whether it would be just as effective now.

The room grew tense as everyone looked back to stare at Aldrich. They all stopped what they were doing as recognition filled their eyes. The only sound left came from background noise the telescreens and speakers blared out.

Aldrich clenched a fist, ready to instantly withhold the free will of every Blackwater student here.

Chapter 222: Stick And Carrot

“Well, I’ll be damned, it was you all along,” said Ace. He was the first to break the silence. He smirked as he floated towards Aldrich with his arms crossed.

Aldrich’s eyes swiftly scanned from side to side, analyzing the general reaction to him. Overall, there was mostly shock. He could not sense direct aggression, and that did make sense.

One factor of his undead resurrection process seemed to be that any aggression towards him, the master, was turned down to minimal levels. This was consistent with Elden World lore that typecast those that stated that necromancers made their undead into loyal servants.

Aldrich assessed the worst case scenario.

There were definite cases of undead under liches being able to rebel against them. Rare, but possible. Usually, in Aldrich’s experience, it was when strong willed individuals opposed a necromancer so strongly that they could resist the control.

Some resisted the control to such a degree they could even reject a necromancer’s will to destroy their bodies and release their souls, thus turning them from a loyal unit into an uncontrollable enemy.

This was exceedingly rare, however. Undead control reached deep within the soul, easily being on par with the demonic soul binding that Volantis suffered under. No, in fact, demonic soul binding actually came from the Death Lord’s original necromancy ritual, copying the spell’s framework.

The mechanisms of undead control were rather sinister. A normal soul could reject foreign influence much like how a body used its immune system to fight off infection.

Undead control was a two step process.

First, it buried the past memories of the undead and locked them deeply away, though the original soul and the basic core personality traits associated with the soul remained.

Then, it basically hijacked the soul's immune system and reshaped it accordingly to serve the necromancer.

Undead control was thus much like a parasitic cancer. In rare cases, an undead could forcibly recover their sealed memories. However, the 'immune system' of their soul, now under the necromancer's control, would start to forcibly destroy these memories and thoughts as 'foreign influence'.

Deleting the memories of a soul directly was basically impossible. In addition, the memories of a soul formed its 'body'. Deleting them would basically kill the soul too.

Thus, undead control only sealed memories. That could be seen with Volantis as well. His old memories were still there, just sealed under many layers of control.

But if one tricked the soul into thinking its own memories were foreign, then it was possible to abuse its 'immune system' against itself to start cannibalizing itself.

The more an undead resisted its necromancer, the more they lost themselves. Thus, even if an undead resisted getting dispelled immediately, the length of time they could rebel was highly limited.

In summary, if Aldrich found himself encountering Blackwater students that resisted his control, he just had to wait things out. He doubted even one of these students had the willpower to resist him, and even if they did, he could control the others and subdue the odd one out.

"When did you get all this power?" said Ace, his white eyes crackling with energy.

"The fuck? Why's that the first thing on your mind, blockhead?" said Simon Wells, one of Seth Solar's past friends. "The better question is: how are you even alive?"

"Does it matter?" said Aldrich. "What matters is that you are alive solely because of me. At my will, I can have you turned back into the corpses you were when I found you."

"..." Simon paused, peering at Aldrich through his visor.

"Is there a problem?" said Aldrich.

"...Nah. I can't really find it in myself to feel like lasering you. Plus, you're right. I can kind of sense that if you die, I die, and I do like living," said Simon.

“Screw that!” shouted Evan Harker, another of Seth’s posse. “He’s just a freaking dud, lording over us like this because he got some power! You-you killed Ghost, and you killed Seth – I know it!”

“I did,” said Aldrich simply. “But so what? You killed me, don’t you remember? I only returned the favor. You should be thankful I even raised you again.”

“I won’t accept this!” shouted Evan. He stood up from his chair and shattered a beer bottle in his hand. “I-I-,”

Evan collapsed to a knee, putting his hand on his head in shock. His soul was starting to destroy itself, sensing insubordination.

“As you can see, there are consequences to going against me,” said Aldrich. He walked up to Evan, and the Blackwater students shuffled back, clearing the way for Aldrich.

Aldrich put a hand on Evan’s shoulder. “What’s the emotion driving you to go against me like this? Hate? Hate’s a strong motivator. I know that very well.”

“Wh-what’s happening to me?” said Evan as he looked up at Aldrich. “Who...who am I?”

“Nobody.” Aldrich crushed Evan’s shoulder, and the bones shattered under his grip. He then dispelled Evan completely, eliminating him from the pool of undead.

Evan’s body crumbled into dust in an instant, and then that dust pile faded into nothingness.

“Shit! Why’d you do that!?” said Simon.

“It was a reminder,” said Aldrich. He glared at Simon, and the Alter cowered under the threatening stare. “That all of you are on borrowed time. And I’m the bank.”

“Well, what do you want from us?” said Eric Glass, the Alter who had healed Minuteman. His voice quiet and soft spoken but neutral. Among the A class, Eric was perhaps the most reasonable. He, unlike everyone else, was not a combatant and had trained solely to help with injuries.

“I can overlook the suffering you all caused me. Most of you aside from Seth Solar and his group just ignored me. And my friends. Why I keep you around then, is because all of you are useful. And all of you have potential,” said Aldrich. “Otherwise, Blackwater would never have recruited you. You all would have gone into the Dark Six – the superpower of the criminal underworld.

I want to use that potential to build up a superpower of my own.

If you decide to stay with me, you can be part of that journey.” Aldrich motioned to the telescreens and alcohol. “You’ve all seemed to be enjoying it so far.

Otherwise, I can lay you to rest. Returned to dust where you belong.”

Or, the third option that Aldrich did not say out loud was that he could just all turn them mindless or completely seal their memories as he had done with Fisk.

However, the Blackwater students had so many valuable memories across a variety of criminal organizations that half their worth was their memories. Controlling them when they were mindless was also so much more of a hassle, he realized.

It required directly having to think about manipulating them, and though it did not matter as much when he had fewer undead to worry about, on the scale of hundreds, it was a formidable task.

If Aldrich was just going to mind wipe them, he was far more willing to just dispel the more useless ones and keep a core powerful few remaining.

But optimally, the strongest legion Aldrich could form was one that was loyal mostly of their own accord. Mindless units also lost the potential to experiment with their powers and grow stronger, and most of Blackwater’s potential lay not in the current strength of their students, but their future.

And maybe he had gotten a little softer, influenced by his recent experiences in the Necropolis and experiences with Casimir’s loyal subordinates.

“I have no real qualms with that,” said Eric. “I’m here to heal. Who I happen to do that for doesn’t concern me.”

“For me, strength is all that matters,” said Ace. “And you’re strong as hell. Long as I, uh, make money and kick ass, I’m all good.”

“I can’t imagine credits will be an issue,” said Aldrich. “Safety and security -these things I can guarantee.”

These words resonated with the students.

Back when Aldrich was in Blackwater, he had done extensive research on the Blackwater students to figure out their weaknesses to devise contingencies against.

Part of that research involved uncovering their backgrounds. Elaine had done most of the heavy lifting on that side, but Aldrich remembered all the info she dredged up.

Most of the Blackwater students had no such thing as family or security. They were all basically tools groomed to be mercenaries, villains, assassins, and the like.

Most of them, like Ace, were orphans taken in by organizations or labs. Comparatively few were like Kat who were raised by parents already involved with the criminal underworld.

All of them lived in fear of their handler organizations. Most of them were treated as disposable tools, tossed away and killed if they could not meet expectations. Abuse was a common thing they dealt with.

One of the reasons why they did not already leave Aldrich was because they could instinctively tell that it was safer being with him than on their own.

Deep down, they were scared kids that wanted a place to feel safe. Aldrich could, in part, sympathize. It was a feeling he had shared as an orphaned child himself.

Aldrich would not hesitate to control them with fear as he had done by making an example of Evan, but that did not mean he could not accommodate them either.

Typical stick and carrot style diplomacy.

"Think it over," said Aldrich. "Most of you will live a life miles better than what you had before, if the empty beer cans and half full liquor bottles are any indication. And the alternative is dying."

Aldrich walked past the Blackwater students, leaving the main room and heading to the control center.

Chapter 223: Technos

Aldrich stepped into the control room. If there was ever a perfect representation of ordered chaos, then this was it. The room was lit only by the pale white glow of several large screens that Spybird and several other techno Red Circle staff members sat in front of. Wires, cables, cords, generators, and a mass variety of miscellaneous gadgets lay scattered everywhere in a complete mess, though the technos seemed quite capable of navigating through it.

"The light! Get it out!" Spybird covered his eyes against the brighter light from outside that streamed in from Aldrich holding open the door.

Aldrich promptly closed the door behind him. "They say that technos tend to be shut ins. Looks like that's true."

"Light is worst thing when head rings from hangover," explained Spybird.

"You sure you can do your job like that?" said Aldrich, raising a brow.

"Bah!" Spybird put a stubby finger to the side of his temple. "If world is not shaking a little bit, then I cannot think properly. And everything is quite easy with this girl."

Spybird pointed at a young girl - a Blackwater student - with his canteen.

A girl sat on the floor, and Aldrich came to realize that quite a few of the web of black wires, cables, and cords actually came from her. Specifically, they grew out from her hair.

"Svetlanna here makes everything easy mode. She is top techno talent. All I do is make sure things do not explode," said Spybird.

"Things won't explode," said Svetlanna, annoyed. She crossed her arms and looked up at Aldrich. "And how may I help you?"

"You heard my talk with your class, didn't you?" said Aldrich.

"Yeah, I did."

"And your thoughts?"

Svetlanna cocked her head, her eyes narrowing in thought. And rapid thought, too. Her eyes looked like LED screens, images and text rapidly flickering through them as she processed everything her cable hair linked to.

"I do my job," said Svetlanna simply. "Not much more to it, really. Otherwise I get dusted."

"No greater motivation than death, eh?" Spybird raised his canteen up in mock cheer.

Svetlanna ignored Spybird. "Don't get me wrong, Aldrich, I'm not doing this because I'm being forced to. I've always wanted to work in a startup, and this is basically one, right? Way better than whatever plans the Den had for me. Probably would have shoved me in one of the Dark Six or a megacorp."

"The Den?" Spybird whistled. "You are top shelf talent, miss."

"That's right, so I'd appreciate some respect," said Svetlanna.

"Heh, I give you as much respect you want long as you keep my job easy." Spybird took another swig of his canteen. "

Aldrich nodded. He was familiar only at surface level with the Den because of its secretive nature. As far as he knew, the Den was a secretive organization that scouted and fostered top tier techno talent and fed them into villain organizations and companies.

Den technos were specialized in destroying cyberspace infrastructure and bypassing security, making them exceptional infiltrators, though, as Svetlanna demonstrated, they were competent in other fields as well.

Svetlanna ranked low among Blackwater's A class, barely making the cut for it. But that was in terms of pure combat rating. In terms of pure utility, she was one of the Blackwater students Aldrich wanted to absolutely keep.

Aldrich lacked strong techno talent. Fisk was good, but he was nowhere close to the best.

"Well, just know that I appreciate your presence here," said Aldrich. "If you need anything, let me know."

"Hah, you weren't this nice to the others." Svetlanna smiled. "Making me feel special, hm?"

"No reason not to," said Aldrich. "Now then, let me get a briefing on a few situations. You've all been keeping track of the media and any incoming communications, haven't you?"

"Da," said Spybird.

"How's Casimir's situation with the Dark Six?"

"Oh, real big shit, that" said Spybird. "He has massive bounty on him now. 20 million credits."

"20 million? The Dark Six sure know how to waste money."

"20 million dead. 40 million alive. But not surprising. Casimir was Connector. Meant to be neutral party connecting villains and orgs together," said Spybird.

"Breaking that trust in the underworld is an extreme taboo," explained Svetlanna.

"Casimir might not have killed anyone too important from the Dark Six, but the fact that he even did that means they are all against him.

And that's also one of the reasons I'm fine being here. I appreciated Casimir's vision and would have had no issues working for him after graduating, but in the end, he gave it all up to work for you.

Must mean there's something you're doing right."

"Good news about this bounty is it means Dark Six is scared of Casimir. Casimir has valuable information," said Spybird. "Locations of secret labs, hideouts, bases, operations - all that from the Dark Six.

Dark Six was planning big revolution to take over cities and establish new age of villains, but with Casimir holding info he can leak, they stop their plans until they catch him."

"Until Haven's secured, then, we have to stay moving," said Aldrich.

"Da," agreed Spybird.

"And what about Haven? Any updates on that situation?"

"All good news there," said Svetlanna. "With Singh declaring investment in Haven's rebuilding effort, the Panopticon and government can't just bulldoze the city for scrap materials and move the citizens away anymore. Especially not with public support for Thanatos skyrocketing after Spybird released some nicely edited footage that maximized his image as a savior.

They have to play ball with whoever leads the rebuilding effort.

But that's also a competition. A coalition of decently sized corporations backed by the Dark Six are going against Singh."

"What are the chances they manage to beat out Singh?" asked Aldrich.

"Moderate," said Svetlanna. "Singh can outbid them on contracts, but his company's biotech. The government can reject Singh if they feel like he can't reliably rebuild Haven, and since he's based in India, it's difficult even for him to get a domestic construction corp to work with him.

"What if I am the government?" said Aldrich.

"Then you can do whatever you want," said Svetlanna. "But sentinel statehood isn't a guarantee no matter how sure you are, and it's always nice to have backup in case it fails, right?"

Contingencies and backups. Aldrich liked Svetlanna already. "I like the way you think. So, what's your idea for a backup?"

"Roping in a U.S. based construction corp is the most obvious solution, but the Dark Six can intimidate most of them. I do have an idea, though," said Svetlanna. "Remember Seismic?"

"Of course."

"Hammerhead Industries is his sponsor. Powerful enough to take Seismic out of custody just like that." Svetlanna snapped her fingers. "Not quite Fortune level, but up there.

I've established a secure channel for anyone wanting to communicate with Thanatos and his supposed organization, and apparently, the Hammerhead CEO wants to meet up."

Aldrich put a hand to his chin. "Any reason why?"

"No. All I know is that he wants to ask you for a favor. And sometimes less is more. The fact that he's giving so few reasons means that most likely, he wants to discuss something quite important with you.

I'm sure you can leverage something out of it.

You want me to set the meeting up?"

"Go ahead," said Aldrich. "As for the meeting's security-,"

"Don't have to worry about that. If it's related to the Darknet, you can trust me," said Svetlanna.

Aldrich nodded. So long as Svetlanna did not have particularly powerful deep seated emotions against Aldrich, he could guarantee her loyalty via the master-undead link even with free will. And so far, Svetlanna was even positively disposed towards him.

"As for sentinel statehood itself-," began Aldrich.

"The chances are looking pretty good," said Svetlanna, knowing what Aldrich wanted to ask. Minuteman's sponsorship gives your claim legitimacy, and on top of that, Seismic's tossed one your way. Oh, and practically every hero that fought in Haven also gave you their sponsorship. Granted, those don't matter much, but it still looks great for your image.

Most of the citizens, too, support Thanatos. There is some pushback out there wondering whether Thanatos is really a good guy and typical crap about being a vigilante out of the law, but overall, things are nicely set up.

It all comes down to whether you can pull through in the hearing."

"Hah, now that's talent. Doing so many things at once - I feel useless already!" said Spybird. He took a swig from his canteen. "But more time for me to drink, so no complaints."

"Let's put more pressure on the government," said Aldrich. "Leak information that Thanatos is being held in prison-like conditions. Make it blow up, if you can."

"I can do that," said Svetlanna.

"That just about everything I wanted to check on, then," said Aldrich. "That was surprisingly quick."

"That tends to happen when people work with me," said Svetlanna. "I do have a favor, though."

"What is it?"

"Could you let Z know I want to meet her?"

"Z? The nomad chief?"

"Yeah, her." Svetlanna mulled over her thoughts in silence for a few seconds. "Tell her V's back home."

Aldrich could tell that Svetlanna did not want to elaborate further. "Got it. I was just about to step out and meet her."

With that, Aldrich made his way out of the base, all the while checking up on a few key units. First, he made sure that Seismic was doing fine. The old man was at home with no issues, playing ball with his son, probably waiting for Aldrich's next communications.

Aldrich let Seismic have his time off. He deserved it.

Then, Aldrich checked on the Evil Eye had had placed in Blackwater. It was still active.

And finally, he checked on the Grave Ward he had secretly attached to Casimir when they spoke outside. Casimir had managed to meet with Desmond, and, as predicted, their conversation had probably not worked out with how short it was.

The only thing that mattered, though, was Casimir getting into Desmond's base, and he had succeeded. Now, Aldrich's Grave Ward had free reign to spy over it.

Chapter 224: Okeanos's Quest

In the endless desert of the second Trial Quest –

Okeanos squinted his iridescent rainbow eyes as he felt bright and hot sun bear down on him. He did not like the sun. He much preferred the dark cold of deep water where he came from. The sun was too bright and too harsh.

Okeanos focused his powerful vision, zooming in around him. He saw nothing but endless slopes of sand marked with wavy grooves.

Pay attention to the currents. That was the precious hint the master had given, and Okeanos was determined to figure out the secret. He knew he was strong, but he wanted to show the master he was smart as well. That he was just as valuable as Valera, the commander.

Currents...currents...Okeanos's antennae twitched as he focused, but soon enough, his focus was broken from tremors causing the sand to shake all around him.

Okeanos's antennae twitched again, this time sensing danger, and he immediately leaped dozens of meters into the air. Where he had been, an enormous worm emerged. It was armored in golden brown carapace that blended near perfectly with the sand around it, and its buzzsaw like circular jaws rotated with hunger.

The worm unleashed a shrill screech as it leaped out of the sand, using momentum to drive upwards into the sky to catch Okeanos.

"You dare to approach me!?" Okeanos was angered that a weak creature like this would even consider him a meal. He was born to stand at the top of the food chain, not below this frail creature!

Okeanos pushed off the air using a burst of energy. He shot forth like a green comet, punching right through the worm's mouth. Using more energy, he smashed through the worm's insides, causing it to explode into a rain of white flesh and golden shell.

That was just the beginning, however.

Okeanos's antennae twitched again, and worms from everywhere emerged. Some smaller, only a few times bigger than a human, and with others as big as some of the human buildings.

They circled around Okeanos like vultures surrounding a carcass. Their sandy shell blended in so well with the sand that it looked like the desert had turned into water, the sands undulating like waves.

Like currents.

Okeanos paid attention to their movements, analyzing them for any discernible pattern.

The worms began to attack. The smaller ones shot out of the sand at surprisingly high speeds, aiming to latch onto Okeanos with their saw-like mouths.

Okeanos stood his ground. He punched the worms as they came to him. He did not want to use his super punch because it would make a huge explosion, stopping him from seeing their current like patterns.

Worm after worm blasted apart into bits from each of Okeanos's mighty punches.

As Okeanos punched away car sized worms with complete ease, he briefly glanced up at a screen. It had a timer on it reading 14:33 and a description underneath reading as follows:

[You have entered the Sands of Kath, the Entombed. Survive for 15 minutes to complete this quest]

Okeanos knew that there must have been something more to do here than just survive. He could do that easily – none of these worms were a match for him.

But what was it?

Okeanos focused on the worms' movements again. His brain, engineered and developed with the utmost care, processed information at astounding speeds.

That was it! It was hard to tell because the worms immediately around Okeanos only circled him, making it hard to discern any notable pattern of movement. But he could tell there were minor shifts in the currents that made it obvious that the worms were not coming from every single direction.

Like a tide, the worms originated from one spot.

Realizing this, Okeanos blasted out a burst of his stored energy, disintegrating a few incoming worms into dust. Using the space he had made, he jumped into the air, determining where exactly the currents flowed from.

As expected, Okeanos traced the worms' movements to one specific location far in the distance. He instantly pushed off in the air with Burst, propelling himself towards the spot at blurring speeds.

Almost as if sensing the intrusion, the sands beneath Okeanos trembled with a far greater intensity than before. The sands almost seemed to part in two as a worm far larger than any before emerged. It was over twice as large as the zombie giant, reaching high into the air to devour Okeanos whole in its enormous maw.

"Now you have the right to challenge me!" said Okeanos, excitement gleaming in his eyes. He pushed off the air above him, dodging below the giant worm's maw, and then unleashed a powerful punch into the worm's body.

It was not his super punch, but he still put his Burst into it, a surge of crackling green energy causing his first to propel at astounding speeds. A shockwave of force and sonic boom cracked through the air as his punch drove the giant worm back like an explosion.

The worm screeched as it began to tumble backwards, its huge form making it seem like it was moving in slow motion. There was a massive crater of caved in golden carapace and pulped white flesh where Okeanos had struck it.

The worm stopped itself from falling completely however and faced Okeanos down. The crater wound on its upper body healed over in a near instant.

Okeanos looked up at the worm, utterly unfazed even as the worm's shadow alone completely engulfed Okeanos. He did not like fighting under the hot sun anyway. Cool shade like this was much better.

The giant worm unleashed a war cry that made the sands shake, causing all other worms around Okeanos to fade away, their movements disappearing as they retreated. Spines and hooked tendrils emerged from segments in the giant worm's carapace.

[Bonus Objective: Defeat the Boss: Gigant Worm]

Okeanos jumped up with excitement. Another objective! And another creature to add to the master's family! Surely, with this giant creature, the master would praise Okeanos.

"Come!" shouted Okeanos as he cocked his fists. "Fight me and join my master's family!"

The giant worm unleashed another screech before it surged downwards, bearing down on Okeanos like a meteor of whirling jaw blades and shell plated mass.

Okeanos cocked back his fist fully this time, his forearm locking in with a powerful click. The red and green stripes on his forearm glowed brightly, signaling a mass buildup of energy as he transferred everything from his Burst into his arm. An ever escalating siren like sound welled up from his arm to signal the built up and massively multiplied energy.

Right before the worm crashed over Okeanos, he unleashed his super punch. A tidal wave of blue energy poured out in a cascade that completely engulfed the giant worm.

At first, the giant worm's dark silhouette was visible within the wave of energy, suspended in place as it struggled to resist the enormous output of force and heat.

Then, the silhouette began to break apart, the worm disintegrating from the head down.

Okeanos breathed out, and superheated air steamed out from his mouth and gills, distorting the space around it. His gills, in particular, suffered, the carapace glowing a bright molten red from having to shunt out the tremendous heat energy the super punch required.

Surprisingly, though, Okeanos felt fine. Before he joined the master's family, using his super punches hurt him on the inside, but now, even though it still hurt him, he felt like nothing was really wrong. He could move fine and ignore the pain much better.

Just another reason why the master was so amazing.

Okeanos looked ahead at the huge line of carnage his super punch hard carved out. Extending from him all the way into the distance was a line of molten hot sand that quickly started to cool into white glass.

The gigant worm was nowhere to be seen – defeated in one punch.

Okeanos had to admit – he was amazing too. He puffed his chest out, happy with himself, but then realized, what if he destroyed too much of the worm!? Then it could no longer join the master's family!

Okeanos panicked and sprinted around, trying to find traces of the worm. He calmed down when he saw there was enough of the worm left under the sand. A good building sized chunk that made up its tail – the part of the worm had been deep enough underground to survive the super punch.

Though, it seemed, not enough had survived to regenerate. Okeanos heaved the tail out of the sand and gently laid it down beside him. Well, as gently as possible. The tail itself was almost ten meters tall, so when it hit the sand, its mass drove up waves of sand.

Okeanos patted the tail with encouragement. "That was a good fight! You are worthy of joining the master's family. Now I will go see what you were hiding."

Okeanos leaped across the sand using physical force alone, saving up his Burst energy. He followed the currents in the sand to their origin point. There, the currents completely stopped, leaving a suspiciously flat and smooth patch of sand.

Okeanos landed on top of the sand patch and waited for a few seconds. Nothing was happening. Then, a voice permeated through his mine.

'So, intruder, you seek to find the treasures of the great Hierophant's tomb, do you?'

'Who are you? Where are you?' said Okeanos. He tapped his head, not quite liking that someone else other than his master was in his mind.

'I am the guardian genie of this ancient tomb!' said the voice triumphantly. 'Deep underground do I lie, and to reach me, you must answer one of my riddles-,'

'You're underground? Okay then!' Okeanos immediately started to dig at hyperspeed, excavating sand at a frighteningly fast pace.

Chapter 225: Maze

Okeanos punched and punched his way down, his arms turning into blurs as the shockwaves from his hits blasted sand away. The speed at which he excavated sand was almost frightening, every passing second getting him noticeably deeper and deeper underground.

'Wait! Wait!' said the genie. 'If you don't answer my riddle, you'll never break through the entrance! It's sealed by my magic!'

"We will see about that!" Okeanos shouted enthusiastically. After all, he was meant to be king of the seas. There was nothing he could not break. There was nothing that could be denied to him.

With a final burst of energy accentuating a punch, Okeanos smashed through to the bottom. There, over a dozen meters deep into the sand, his fist collided with solid grey rock. Upon the rock were carved the images of eyes.

Okeanos unleashed his Burst, creating an explosive aura of green energy around himself that prevented the sand from collapsing back in on him.

"So this-," Okeanos raised his fist into the air. It started to glow, a rising siren sound emanating from it as energy charged into it for a super punch. The red and green stripes on his forearm filled up with a bright gleam.

However, they did not fill up with light all the way. Okeanos kept his punch at 50% strength to make sure he did not destroy what was underneath. "Is where you are!"

Okeanos slammed his fist into the ground, unleashing a torrent of blue energy. The stone underneath glowed with a golden light that looked like some kind of shield, resisting the super punch.

Okeanos growled as he shoved his fist down even harder, the tidal wave of energy pouring out from his punch growing even further. Any sand in the nearby vicinity turned red hot, melting into glass.

'Haha! See that! In this domain, my magic is untouchable!' said the genie.

Then, the golden barrier started to flicker.

'...' the genie watched this in disbelief. 'No way, you can't possibly-,'

Then, the barrier shattered.

When the barrier broke apart, the wave of energy from Okeanos's punch pushed through and instantly obliterated the rock beneath, revealing a deep pit that seemingly had no end.

"See that? Do not underestimate me, head voice," said Okeanos as he stood up, his piston fist locking back into place. Hot air gushed out from his gills.

'...Do not get ahead of yourself!' said the genie. 'The maze of accursed bone beneath will crush you under its traps!'

"Maze? What is that?" Okeanos asked.

'It is a place of great challenge, where every path you take leads into unimaginable danger!' declared the genie dramatically.

"Sounds fun!" Okeanos jumped into the pit. Instead of free falling, he ran across the sheer vertical surface at high speeds.

Soon enough, Okeanos reached the bottom of the pit, so far down that there was no light at all. Unlike on the surface, there was no scorching sun here. Instead, it was surprisingly chilly.

Good. Okeanos liked this a lot better.

The chamber Okeanos found himself in had only one path leading into a narrow hallway.

'Step into that hallway if you dare, intruder!' said the genie. 'And challenge the maze!'

"Okay," said Okeanos simply as he made his way through the hallway with zero concerns.

As he strolled through, some tiles in the ceilings and walls opened up, shooting out arrows of bone. Okeanos sensed them the moment they fired towards him, his sensitive antennae picking up on the movements with such accuracy that he basically almost had future sight.

However, Okeanos just waltzed right by. The arrows smashed against his hardened shell and broke apart.

Okeanos stepped on an elevated tile, and the floor beneath him opened up to reveal a pit of large snakes the size of an average human. They hissed at Okeanos, baring their toxic purple fangs.

Okeanos fell down and released his Burst. His bright green energy lit up the dark area for a brief moment. He jumped out of the pit, leaving behind a grave of a dozen charred, ashen snake corpses.

'W-well then, you certainly are handling yourself well, but that was only the first hallway!' said the genie. 'Behold, the maze itself!'

At the end of the hallway, Okeanos saw that it funneled into a much larger entrance that split into a forked path, indicating the beginning of the maze proper.

Okeanos's antennae twitched as he stood in front of the split path, wondering where exactly to go.

'Choose wisely, intruder!' said the genie. 'For only one path leads to the Hierophant's tomb!'

"Really?" Okeanos looked at one path, then the other. He could not tell anything different about them. They looked the exact same.

'And no matter which path you take, you will face a horde of undead to thwart you at every step!' stated the genie.

"Sounds annoying." Okeanos stepped up, not towards any of the split paths, but towards the wall of the maze. He put a hand on the dark rock and nodded to himself.

'What is it? Have you realized the path of hardship that lies before you now!?' said the genie. 'You should have come here with an army! That way, you could have spread your troops out and figured out where to go!

But you alone will spend eons within this maze!'

Okeanos pushed his palm against the rock, and it cracked easily under his tremendous strength.

A wide smile graced itself upon Okeanos's face.

'Why are you smiling!? Have you gone mad!? Why do I have a bad feeling about this?'

"I hate confusing things. Attacks from lots of directions. Paths that lead me to lots of places. So I'll make my own path!" Okeanos began to unleash a rapidfire volley of punches against the maze walls.

As expected, the walls crumbled under his strength. Boosted by his energy generation, Okeanos was confident his hits could even beat out Valera, the commander, not to mention they were even faster.

'Wait! This is not how you are supposed to do this!' exclaimed the genie in despair.

"But it's the way I want to do it," countered Okeanos. His unending volley of punches unleashed countless explosion like shockwaves through the air, blasting apart huge chunks of rock. The ceiling of the maze trembled, and it sounded like an entire demolition crew was working there.

Okeanos punched and punched, carving a very simple straight path right through the maze. Every so often, he would encounter a zombie or skeleton that had about half a second to stare at him in utter surprise before they got pulverized by his punches.

Like this, Okeanos literally just smashed his way through the area.

'You...why are you even here!? You're ridiculously strong!' said the genie about a minute in Okeanos's rampage.

"I know I am," said Okeanos proudly. If there was anything he was proud in, it was his power. His power was the biggest gift his mother had granted him. He therefore cherished it for it was the only real gift he had left from his mother.

Okeanos knew the Voice wanted his mother to kill all the humans, and his mother had birthed Okeanos with that same command. But now that he was under the master, free from the Voice, he did not really care much about that command anymore.

'No, I mean, you have too many levels of strength for this area!' complained the genie. 'You should not even be here! And wasn't this place level gated? This is completely unfair!'

"Then you should have made the maze easier!" said Okeanos.

'That defeats the entire purpose of a maze!' countered the genie. By now, enough panic had settled into the genie that its once deep, ominous voice faded away, making it evident the genie was a woman.

"I don't like boring things." Okeanos shrugged before his punches let him break into a much larger chamber. On the other end stood a huge set of closed golden doors marked with the image of an eye within a sun.

A large creature sat in front of the doors. It was the size of a tank with the body of a lion, the tail of a scorpion, and the wings of a bird. The creature growled at Okeanos.

"A big one!" said Okeanos. His energy aura started to surge around him. "Will you be worthy to join the family, I wonder?"

"Phinx, do not bother. Go back to sleep and let him pass." The genie's voice echoed through the cavern, now audible outside of Okeanos's head.

"So you are here!" said Okeanos.

"I am through those doors, yes," sighed the genie. "I am thoroughly demoralized, and I do not want this place destroyed any more than it is. You may pass through."

The monster, Phinx as it was called, moved away from the doors and curled up in a corner, going back to sleep. The doors then slid open with heavy weight, dust and rubble falling from the ceiling.

Okeanos passed through the doors, and when he did so, they closed with surprising speed behind him.

Now, Okeanos was in the biggest chamber he had been in so far. At the end, there was a large golden sarcophagus embedded in the wall, and surrounding it were treasure chests that he knew the master would want.

"But as per my own master's old orders, I do have one more trial for you!" said the genie's voice.

In response, a small army of winged soldiers made of sand materialized in front of the sarcophagus, blocking it. Each of them wielded huge greatshields and spears, forming a sturdy defensive line.

"These soldiers are indestructible in this tomb! You shall not pass through them! If you wish for me to dispel them, you **MUST** answer my final riddle, okay!?" said the genie, sounding quite desperate at the end.

Chapter 226: Invincible Formation

Okeanos's antennae twitched as he heard this creature known as a 'genie' say he needed to solve another riddle. He decided he would hear her out for once.

"Ok. Tell me what your riddle is," said Okeanos.

"Really!?" The genie sounded genuinely happy. She then materialized behind the wall of sand soldiers, in front of the golden sarcophagus. She was a tan skinned girl with loose, baggy white pants and a billowing golden cloak covering most of her. Her eyes flickered like twin tongues of fire, and her lengthy black hair floated in the air like she was underwater.

"Don't regret this - this riddle of mine is incredibly difficult!"

"Ok," said Okeanos.

"Here I go!" The genie coughed into her hand to clear her throat and then began. "Many people have me but do not want me. When I am in someone's head, I make them dim witted. When I am in someone's stomach, I make them hungry. When I am in someone's arms, they despair. What am I?"

Okeanos thought about this for a moment, his developed brain clocking into overdrive. His eyes narrowed in intense thought. After several dramatic seconds, he nodded to himself.

"Oh? Have you found out, intruder!?" said the genie.

"Yes," said Okeanos. He declared confidently, "I don't know."

The genie made a shocked face. "What!? How can you say that with so much confidence!?"

"I can think fast, but it doesn't help with this riddle," said Okeanos in wondering voice. His mind could process extreme calculations that let him know exactly how much force a punch would output, how fast someone was going, where they were going to go based on vibrational input on his antennae, and things like that, but calculating fast did not seem to help him here.

What a disappointment. And here Okeanos thought he could have a chance to show off his big brain.

But wait. Okeanos was supposed to be smart just like how he was supposed to be strong.

That meant only one thing: it was not Okeanos that was dumb here, but the riddle itself.

"This riddle is stupid," said Okeanos.

"Wha-!? The genie looked genuinely hurt. "Argh, whatever, I'll give you another one-,"

"No need. I am tired of riddles now," said Okeanos. He then clenched his fists and lowered his center of gravity, green bolts of energy starting to crackle around him.

It was very obvious that Okeanos fully intended on charging his way through.

"Nobody appreciates my riddles..." The genie sniffled in despair.

Okeanos charged, disappearing in a flash of light. He moved so quickly that it almost felt like he teleported, and yet -

Okeanos felt himself get rebuffed by the wall of sand soldier shields. He tumbled backwards at high speeds like a stepping stone, creating a line of large craters before he stopped himself.

"Hm?" Okeanos looked at the sand soldiers. They were unharmed. He had expected to just charge right past them.

"In this tomb, my sand soldiers are invulnerable," said the genie. "You cannot brute force this. This is meant to be a test of wits!"

"You think I cannot do this?" Okeanos felt his pride as the king of the oceans challenged. He would show this 'genie' he could outsmart her. "You think wrong."

Okeanos started to circle back and forth around the wall of sand soldiers, looking for an opening to get to the genie. He moved so quickly with his energy boosted movement that he melted stone underneath him.

If he got her, the source of all these constructs, he could end this.

"Wh-what are you planning!?" said the genie. Her head whipped around rapidly as she tried desperately keep up with Okeanos's rapid movements, but she was too physically weak to even remotely track him. She held her head. "Oh, I'm getting dizzy trying to keep you in my sight!"

Okeanos saw her get dizzy and used this chance while she was distracted. There were many sand soldiers, but not enough to completely cover all gaps leading to the genie. He shot forward through one of these gaps.

With nigh instantaneous reaction and speed, the soldiers shifted their formation, pushing Okeanos back again. He smashed back into the ground, gouging out another crater.

Okeanos looked down at his arms where he had braced for impact against the shields of the soldiers at the last minute. There were tiny cracks in his shell.

"Hah! It doesn't matter how strong or fast you are! No, the more you struggle, the more your own power is reflected against you!" declared the genie proudly. "I may be weak, but this sand soldier seal was devised by the great Hierophant himself, direct successor to the ancient Arcane Emperor from whom all magic derives!

The likes of you cannot defeat it! It even holds a dimensional lock that prevents all tampering of space or time!"

"No wonder my shell got cracked," said Okeanos. "It was reflecting my own power. I truly am strong!"

"Such arrogance...well, I suppose it is not entirely undeserved. But still, you will not get through this," said the genie.

"We will see." Okeanos narrowed his eyes. He charged again towards another gap in the formation. It instantly shifted to close the gap, repelling him once more.

Okeanos noticed that when the sand soldiers shifted to close the gap, they revealed others for there was a finite number of them. The biggest issue was that the soldiers compensated for this weakness by trying to reveal gaps far away from the gaps they covered, preventing an attacker from trying to feint and slip through.

Okeanos's mind began to race. He needed more information. With seemingly reckless abandon, he smashed into the sphere of winged shield bearing soldiers again and again.

A dozen crashes turned into fifty which quickly spilled over into a hundred, but he kept going. At ultra high speeds, he smashed into the soldiers, smashed back into the ground, and repeated the process.

In just a few minutes, vast swathes of the chamber around the ceiling, walls, and floor were riddled with craters, though none too deep as the stone seemed to turn indestructible past a certain point.

"What is this madness!?" exclaimed the genie. "All you are doing is hurting yourself!"

Okeanos rose up from another charge attempt. "Not madness. I was thinking hard."

He had seen enough. There was a specific set of formations that the soldiers could organize into at any given moment. He counted fifty of them in total, each meant to rebuff an attacker from any given angle, creating an iron solid defense.

And because the process was automated, requiring no real thought from the genie itself, it was near instantaneous, keeping up even with Okeanos's speed.

But it was because it was automated that it had weakness. If there was a specific pattern of movements the soldiers followed, then Okeanos could finally put his thinking brain to use.

Okeanos powered up, generating a huge swell of energy that covered him in a crackling aura of green. His iridescent rainbow shell started to shine with brilliant luster. His shell had several deep cracks in it now, though he had not suffered too much real damage to his flesh.

Still, the cracks were so visible that it looked like he had taken much more damage than he actually had.

"It's useless! Stop hurting yourself!" said the genie, concerned.

Okeanos ignored the genie and made his final move. He shot forth like a green comet, several times faster than before with his fully activated Burst. He made several rapid, calculated attacks.

Attacks from some angles caused the soldiers to enter into formations with larger gaps, and attacking multiple of these angles consecutively caused the gaps to widen as the soldiers struggled to keep up with Okeanos's speed.

When the gaps widened enough, Okeanos made a feint, then instantly slipped by one of the gaps he had baited out with a final surge of Burst energy.

In an instant, Okeanos was upon the genie. He towered over her, his eyes glowing with ferocious energy. Energy crackled from his shell as did smoke from the intense heat of his movements.

"Eep!" The genie balled up and put her arms over her head.

The sand soldiers broke apart into particles of sand.

"See? I told you I'm smart," said Okeanos.

"What? You just smashed through the soldiers! Where's the brains in that!?" complained the genie, frustrated and scared tears in her eyes.

"I see you do not understand a big brain when you see one," said Okeanos. "How sad."

Okeanos just walked past her towards the sarcophagus. He smashed the tomb open, revealing a massive amount of coins that spilled out like a flood. At the head of the sarcophagus was a long, bandaged finger.

Okeanos had no idea what these were, but he knew the master would like them. The master would be so proud of him for solving these riddles the way he had done!

Another message appeared before Okeanos.

[You have beaten the hidden objective to dispel the sand soldier seal. You will now be granted the seal to use as your own.]

Chapter 227: First Trial Quest Revisited

In the first Trial Quest -

"...And that is all I will tell you," said Valera. "Now that you know where to find the flowers, do your best to harvest them. The master has instructed me to allow you all to find the best way to harvest these flowers yourselves."

Again, there is to be NO violence during the harvesting. Only afterwards may you obtain the right to challenge others for their flowers. But do keep in mind, should one of you somehow harvest all the flowers, then there is no contest to be had."

The Geist scratched his head as he wondered what exactly to do. Valera had told everyone where to find the flowers. They grew in the depths of the swamps, in some hidden caverns, in obscure patches in the forest, and even a few growing high up on cliffsides.

If these flowers could grow everywhere, why were they so rare, huh!?

"Geh..." The Geist looked at the big hitters that would take everything. They stood in an imposing line, not bothering to look down at the weaker monsters that made space for them.

There was Crab, Merman, the zombie giant, and Crow. They all looked SO intimidating. They were bigger, stronger, and tougher than everyone else, and with the master gone and Valera not giving direct orders, they were the top dogs here.

Beneath them was the strong but not super strong like the Geist, the Antlion, Bloodspitter Lizard, and so on and so forth. The Geist briefly wondered if he could take any of them in a fight. He had trained so hard after all!

Now, the Geist could grow new body parts and control his toxic gas accurately so it did not unnecessarily hurt anyone else. The only power he had not trained so far was his toy making tongue, but he felt bad using it realizing it had not been an enjoyable experience for Stella.

The Geist scratched his head. He did not have eyes on his head, but rather small black bulbs on his body that saw, and all of his many eyes knew one thing: just looking at the strong ones made the Geist realize he was outclassed.

All of them would just squash him!

The Geist saw as everyone shuffled out, moving into the forests to go search for flowers. Everyone except the strong ones. They just watched. He wondered why.

"Geh! Geh? (Why are you staying here?)" the Geist asked Crab.

Crab clicked his claws together. "(No need for me to waste energy looking. I will just fight whoever gets the flowers.)"

The Geist then went over to the giant. The giant towered over the Geist and looked down at him with sharp green eyes. The Geist cringed in fear, and the giant smiled.

"(No fear, little one)" said the giant in a deep, throaty, booming language that sounded like a war horn bleating. "(Unless you wish to challenge me later! Then I will show you the respect a fighter deserves and crush you with no hesitation!)"

"Geh...(I'll...look forward to it)" said the Geist. He asked the same question. "Gehgeh? (Why stay here?)"

"(Why not?)" the zombie giant laid down with his hands behind his head, as if ready to just nap. "(I am too big to be picking little flowers. I just get in everyone's way. But I can fight anyone that picks them.)"

The Geist nodded and hopped over to Merman. "Gehgeh? (Why do you stay?)"

Merman crossed his four arms together, his many red eyes leering at the giant, Crab, and Crow. "Gorok-Vis. (I stay here to conserve my energy)." His gills flared, crackling with energy. "Gar-Uk. (For the fight)"

"Geh (I get it)" The Geist understood where everyone was coming from. They all knew they were the strongest, so they figured they could just take it easy and let everyone else pick the flowers. Then, they could just challenge others for their flowers.

In the end, they would end up challenging among themselves, and the strongest there would get the lion's share of the flowers and become the commander of the monster army. Because of that, the strongest monsters here wanted to wait and save their energy to use among themselves.

This whole thing was basically just a fight among the strongest to get even stronger. It made sense. All the monsters seemed to think strength mattered above anything else. And it even made sense to the Geist.

It was better for the strongest to be the commander, no?

When the Geist walked up to Crow, Crow looked down at him with such cold red eyes that the Geist did not even bother talking. He walked away with head down into the forest, wondering how to help pick the flowers. "Geh...(There's no place for a small fry like me among all these strong guys...)"

The Geist shook his head rapidly. "Geh! Geheh! (No! I can't give up now! I want to be commander. They might be strong, but all they care about is being strong. They have no friends!

I'll convince everyone else to help me! If I get all the flowers, then even the strong ones can't challenge me!)"

Once the Geist was deeper within the forest, smiling at this newfound thought, it was then that Crow landed through the trees, smashing a few along the way, and stood beside the Geist.

"Geh!? (What? Did I do something wrong!?)" said the Geist.

"(I was instructed to help you)" said Crow with a series of low growls.

"Geh!? (Really? That's great!)" said the Geist.

"(But I cannot fight for you. I can only take you where you want)" said Crow.

"Gehmm..." The Geist copied what his master did when he was in thought, putting his hand over his chin. "Geh! Gehgeh. (I know! Take me to my friends in the swamp!)"

Crow nodded his head, and the Geist hopped on Crow's back.

With that, Crow flew through the air.

"Geh! (Wow! Flying is so cool!)" said the Geist with glee as he looked at the world beneath him. Everything looked so tiny. The forest was like a big blob of green paint. The swamp a blob of brown-green paint.

The Geist had always wanted to fly because...because...he did not really remember why, he knew he wanted to fly like...someone. He did not know who, but he just knew he wanted to fly, and wow, was it incredible!

Before meeting the master, all the Geist could think about was killing humans, but now, he could enjoy things like this. For that, he was grateful to the master beyond compare.

"Geh! (There!)" the Geist pointed down at the swamp where several crabmen gathered.

"(Landing. Brace yourself.)" Crow flattened his wings and spiraled down like a missile.

"Gehhhh! (Too fast!)" The Geist's permanent smile flattened against his face from the buffeting winds as he struggled to hold on.

Soon though, the whole scary ordeal was over. Crow slowed down gradually and landed relatively softly on the marshy ground beside the swamp.

"Geh..." The Geist sighed in relief as he hopped off of Crow. He found himself staring at a host of fishmen and crabmen staring at the swamp but not actually going in it.

"Gehgeh (What are you all doing?)" said the Geist.

"(We can't swim there)" said a fishman. "(Water too bad)".

The crabmen clicked their claws together. "(The water is bad for us too.)

"Gehmm" The Geist walked around until he saw his trusty two crab friends. Seeing them, the Geist's ever present smile widened and he performed the crab dance they had taught him, waving his hands in the air.

In response, the crabs did the same.

"Gehgeh (You two can go in the water, right?)" said the Geist.

The crabs clicked their jaws together. "(We can. But we scared of picking flowers there. What if the strong ones fight us?)"

"Geh! (Don't worry about that!)" The Geist nodded with enthusiasm. "(You two are my friends, right? If you pick the flowers, I will do anything I can for you!)"

"(But how? Strong ones fight us)" said the crabs.

The Geist pointed at Crow. "Geheh! (Look! I have a strong one backing me already! You will be safe. Give me the flowers, and I'll make sure we win!

When I'm commander, I'll do something nice for you!"

"(Wow, you have a strong one with you. We follow you too)" said the crabs. They then skittered their way over to the swamp, diving into their familiar home for eyeflowers.

"Geheh (Heh, that's one down, two more to go!)" said the Geist.

The Geist hopped atop Crow's back.

"(You understand I will not actually fight for you?)" said Crow.

"Geheh (As long as I get all the flowers, it doesn't matter, right?)" said the Geist.

"(...I guess)" Crow shrugged his wings. "(Just don't complain to me if this doesn't work.)"

"Gehgeh! (This will work! After all, I have friends!)" said the Geist. He then pointed towards the forest, where his good friend the troll was. "Geh! (Onwards! To the forest!)"

Chapter 228: Flower Fight

The Geist soared over the vast forests below this time. They looked like little shrubs from so high up, and though it was awesome to see the once big forest look so tiny, it

also made the forest look all the same. He realized that he did not actually know where exactly his friend the troll was. He rubbed his head, trying to figure out where to go.

"Geh! (I know!)" said the Geist in a moment of enlightenment. "Gehgeh! (I just have to think like my troll friend! He likes dirty places with bad smells and hates fresh greens...)"

The Geist scanned the forests below, the individual black eyes on his body squeezing and compacting as they focused to their maximum extent. This was another thing that the Geist had figured out how to do.

He realized that his healing power did not just let him heal, it let him control his own body. That was how it healed in the first place.

Knowing that, he could grow new arms or make things he already had even better, like his eyes. This way, he could obtain telescopic vision.

Still, his control was not perfect. Every change he made to himself, he had to train really hard for. It was like creating and adding a new move he could use. So far, he knew how to make more arms, create more eyes and improve their vision, and create hardened armor plating in small amounts.

To improve all of this, the Geist had to train more and more. He had to think hard about how to control his power and then put it into practice again and again. He had to push himself to his limits, recover, and then do it again.

That way, the Geist slowly but surely improved his powers to their full potential.

Stella was the one that had told him how to train like this. Push your powers to their limits both creatively and physically, rest, then do it again. Like muscle fibers breaking and repairing stronger and bigger.

As the Geist zoomed in on the forests, he wondered why he had never thought about doing this before. It was a hard question to answer. Before following his current master, all he could think about was killing humans because of that loud voice in his head.

Sometimes, the voice got quieter, and he had more fun, but most of the time, the voice was so loud that was all he could do. That was no fun. He always wanted to make friends, but with that voice around, there was no way he could do any of that.

Now though, he had plenty of time and freedom to make the friends he always wanted!

"Geh! (There!)" The Geist pointed down at a particularly rotted and withered section of the forest. The trees were ashen white with gnarled grey, leafless branches that stood in stark contrast to the hearty brown trunks and leafy tops of the trees populating the rest of the forest.

Strange, toxic green colored air rose up from the trees, creating a hazy green mist. The green there was exactly the type of green that the troll would like. Not the healthy bright green of good veggies, but the browned green of something dying.

"(Landing. Be ready this time.)" said Crow.

"Geh! ("I'm ready!")" said the Geist resolutely.

Crow tucked his wings again and dived down at breakneck speeds, aiming straight for the grey patch of forest. The Geist held on admirably, morphing his fingers into hooked forms that made it easier for him to get a good grip on Crow's back.

Crow still made sure to slow down his landing this time in consideration of the Geist.

At top speeds, Crow could easily match a high end fighter jet, casually surpassing the speed of sound. But the Geist at his current state could not handle even half those speeds.

Yet, Crow knew power and potential. Especially potential. Far too many people only saw power at its height. Comparatively few knew what it took to reach those heights.

Crow knew that the Geist had the potential to reach high. Possibly even further than Crow himself. Evidently, the master had thought the same thing.

But that was the thing about potential: it took time and effort to grow. And often, it needed sacrifice. There was no greater motivator than loss.

This was Crow's personal judgement, but as he made note of the Geist hanging on his back with child like happiness, he did not think the Geist had the mind to reach the peak of his potential.

The Geist was simply too innocent. Too nice.

Yet, it was not Crow's place to make these judgements. If the master supported the Geist, then he did too.

Crow landed into the forest, toppling a few trees as he did so. He shielded the Geist from the impact with his wing, stiffening the feathers there so that they formed a flexible yet durable shield to absorb shock.

"(We're here)" said Crow.

"Geh! (Great! I survived!)" The Geist hopped off of Crow's back with his ever present smile just a bit wider and then looked around. There, he saw the confused looks of not just his troll friend, but several other trolls.

"(Looks like your guess was right)" commented Crow.

"Geh! (There you are, troll!)" said the Geist as he pointed to a troll that was particularly bigger than the others.

"(What you come here for, friend?)" said the troll chieftain in grunts and growls that made up the troll language.

"Gehgehgeh (To check up on you. Also, you made new friends?)" said the Geist, pointing at the other trolls. They warily stared at the Geist and especially at Crow's large, looming, threatening form.

"(It's OK. These all my allies)" said the troll chieftain. "(I gather more trolls to look for flowers. I think I seen some before around here. So me and the boys go find them. We find one already, actually)."

The troll chieftain grunted, and one of the trolls under him showed an Eyeflower.

"Geh...(So that's what it is)" said the Geist.

The flower consisted of a long, tendril-like purple stalk with a bulbous, closed eye attached at the end of it. When the troll poked the eye, the flesh opened up, revealing a wide and dilated red pupil.

"Gehgeh (Very cool)" commented the Geist.

"(I know, right?)" the troll chieftain nodded proudly. "(Me and the boys going to find all the flowers here!)"

"Geh...(About that...)" The Geist put his hands together like a conning salesman. "Gehgeh? (How about you give me the flowers?)"

The troll chieftain cocked his head, confused. "(Huh?)"

The Geist explained. "Gehgehgeh. Geh! (You'll have to fight the strong guys otherwise, but I can pick all the flowers, and then I'll be commander! When I'm commander, I'll do something really nice for you all!)"

"(What!? If you want to be commander, I be commander too!)" said the troll chieftain.

"Geh..." said the Geist to himself. He knew the troll chieftain was more stubborn than his other friends. "Gehgeh. Geh? (How are you going to be commander? You need all the other flowers too, dummy! Otherwise you're going to fight the strong guys. Like this guy!"

The Geist pointed back at Crow before crossing his arms smugly. "Gehgehgeh. (I'll have you know he's actually working for me.)"

"What? Really!? Have you grown in power that much, friend?" said the troll chieftain, shocked.

Troll tribes followed a very basic social hierarchy where the strongest was at the top, so for Crow to be following the Geist around must have meant that the Geist had somehow gotten leagues stronger.

"Gehgeh (I HAVE made some improvements, heh)" said the Geist.

"(Okay then. I give you flowers)" said the troll chieftain. He pointed at the Geist with a smile. "(But only if you fight me! Show me you actually stronger than me first!)"

"Gehgeh! (The commander said no fighting allowed!)" protested the Geist.

The troll chieftain laughed. "(We keep it a secret. Nobody come here because they don't like it. Bad smells and bad food, they say. But trolls like us love it.

But we also like big fights, too.)"

The chieftain grunted, and one of the trolls brought him his cursed rock club. The club alternated between owners, sometimes the Geist using it, sometimes the chieftain using it, but this time, the chieftain had it.

The chieftain grabbed the club in both hands and smiled. "(Let's fight! I want to see how much you improve, friend!)"

The Geist's permanent smile widened too. He did not like fighting too much, but he liked when his friends smiled and doing things together with them. And this time, it was going to be a fight.

Plus, the Geist could get all the flowers the trolls knew to pick.

"Gehgeh! (Okay, let's fight!)" said the Geist.

Beforehand, when the Geist first met the troll chieftain, they were mostly evenly matched when the chieftain wielded the club. The Geist was a little stronger, but the difference was not extreme.

But what about now? After all the training he had done under Stella?

The Geist was eager to find out.

Chapter 229: Training Payoff And Meeting With Z

The Geist smiled at the troll chieftain as they circled each other, ready to fight.

The rest of the trolls made a loose ring around them, chanting out a series of grunts and growls to hype the match up. They jumped up and down, for trolls loved nothing more than to see a good brawl where tusks broke, bones splintered, and blood spilled.

"(You ready!?)" roared the troll chieftain. His muscles bulged in battle ready preparation under his scabby skin. He swung the huge man sized club of cursed black rock in the air with all the ease of a feather.

"Gehgeh! (Ready when you are, friend!)" said the Geist. He had shared many a good moment with the troll chieftain, and among the many monsters in the legion, he was probably his second best friend, right behind Stella who always knew so much and always had so much patience.

"(Good! I attack now!)" the troll chieftain unleashed a guttural roar as he sprinted forwards, his arms upraised to unleash a powerful downward strike with his club.

The Geist let his friend get a hit in to see how much his friend had improved.

"Geh! (Good!)" said the Geist as he blocked the overhead blow by raising his arms above his head in a cross guard.

The cursed rock dug into the Geist's flesh, rending it apart, but it could not go through too deeply against his tough, armor like musculature. A faint black aura settled around where his flesh tore, preventing him from healing properly.

"(I strike again!)" said the troll chieftain as he whirled around and struck a horizontal blow against the Geist's open side.

The Geist recalled some of Stella's training, back when everyone was in the forest -

Stella stood a small distance from the Geist, hands on her hips as she inspected the Geist for balance in his stance and wasteful movements. "When someone comes at you with a weapon, especially a big one, you don't gotta just take it. In fact, bigger the weapon is, the harder it is to block, even for a musclehead like you. You gotta dodge it, or, if you can, redirect it.

Big weapons mean big motions. That means big recovery. Parry a big hit, you got a big window to counter. Try and hit me with a punch."

The Geist threw out a punch against Stella's head. She unleashed a flexible high kick which, coupled with a concentrated explosion at her feet, blew the Geist's arm high up in the air, way over Stella's head.

Before the Geist could pull his arm back in, Stella had rushed in, placing both her hands right against the Geist's stomach. Orange glows crackled around her palms, showing that she was ready to blow a hole right through the Geist.

"See that?" Stella pulled her hands back. "I didn't just try and muscle it out with you. I've got a pretty trained body, but it ain't gonna hold a candle up to someone with an Augmenter power like yours. So, I gotta treat your punch like a bit hit.

I didn't try and resist it directly. I directed the hit away. Less effort for me, more effort for you. This way, I can take down big bastards way stronger than me.

Same goes for you.

Get it?"

"Gehgeh! (Wow! I get it now!)" said the Geist.

The Geist took up a proper martial arts stance. Legs shoulder width apart, arms raised to guard the head, head a little low to make it less of a target. Just the way Stella had taught him.

Before training, the Geist would have seen the club coming at his side and just tried to grab it to stop it. He definitely had the strength to do so. But this time, he wanted to show off what he had learned.

The Geist unleashed a quick downward elbow against the club, changing its trajectory downwards so that instead of gouging into his side, it slammed into the ground, embedding it into the soil.

The troll chieftain grunted in surprise. He hunched over to pull the club out of the ground.

In that moment, the Geist unleashed a proper punch. One with a grounded stance, engaged core muscles, and proper rotation at the hips. This, too, he learned from Stella.

The punch shot out fast, socking the troll chieftain right in the chest and shooting him back like a bomb.

The chieftain flew into one of the other trolls, tumbling them backwards like bowling pins.

"Gehgeh! (These punches are so strong!)" the Geist exclaimed in proud glee. Before training, the Geist's punches had just been wild swings and swipes, moving no differently than a wild animal.

But by making his hits much more compact and focused, the Geist could unleash maybe three times the power he used to be able to.

The troll chieftain groaned in pain as he weakly shoved the troll on top of him away. The chieftain's chest was caved in, indicating a lethal wound had he not been undead.

"Gehgeh! (Oh no! Are you okay!?)" the Geist hopped over to the chieftain's side.

"(I am a troll! I heal fast!)" the troll chieftain stood up with little issue after a few seconds of regenerating. The dent in his chest buffed out, his bones and muscles healing due to his racial ability of heightened regeneration. "(Just like you, friend, I get better quick. Are you sure you are not a troll like me?)"

The Geist cocked his head. "Gehgeh? Geheh! (I don't know what I am. But I am happy you are okay!)"

The troll chieftain grunted in agreement and then shouted to the other trolls. "(The fight over! My friend here strong. We follow him now!)"

The other trolls roared in excited agreement.

"(Strong! Strong! Strong!)" shouted the trolls.

"Geheheh..." The Geist put a shy hand on his head, not quite used to all this praise.

"(We have flowers for you later. Me and boys remember where most of them in forest are)" said the troll chieftain. (For my favor, give me and boys big feast later!)"

"Gehgeh! (I will do my best! Thanks!)" the Geist nodded and then moved on as the trolls scattered away, looking for Eyeflowers. He hopped back on Crow and then pointed upwards, to a large mountain face at the edge of the dimensional space. "Geh! (There! Commander says last flowers grow there. I pick those myself!)"

Crow nodded and flew up with one strong beat of his wings. He hovered in the air for a bit as he charged up energy and directed himself towards the mountain face.

"(That is quite far away. I will use my top speed)" said Crow.

Then, in an explosive burst, Crow shot forth like a living bullet, easily surpassing the sound barrier with the ensuing sonic boom drowning out the Geist's terrified screeches.

Nomad Compound, Z's base (Wanyudo)

"Coffee?" asked Z as she poured some out from a press into a metal cup.

Aldrich sat at the same table he had before with the chiefs, but this time, it was only him and Z. And her guards, too. Knife was there. As were two others.

"No. I don't drink it," said Aldrich. "I'm surprised you make your own coffee."

"It is a hobby of mine," said Z. She took her cup of steaming coffee and then sat across the table, facing Aldrich. Her purple, hawkish eyes gazed at him. "Now then, Mr. Vane, what do you want?"

"What do I want? Quite direct, aren't you?" said Aldrich.

"I am not like Casimir. I am bad at smooth talking. I like to get to the point fast," said Z.

Aldrich reached into his pocket, immediately noticing that all three of Z's guards tensed up. He withdrew two CIDs. His and Valera's. He slid the two rectangular, finger sized chips across the table.

Z picked them up, inspecting them.

"Those are two CIDs I've been using. Picked them up from a gang called the Odinsons," said Aldrich. "I want you to update them to bypass tier 1 cities."

"Odinsons? The name doesn't quite ring a bell," said Z.

"Compared to you guys, they were no names," said Aldrich. "Maybe twenty to thirty in number. Small time wasteland raiders with not much to their name. From what I could tell, they peddled drugs and tech like this."

"Still doesn't register. But then again, I am not Desmond. I don't go out of my way to know every little thing around me, so it stands to reason I would not know one out of thousands of tiny raiding gangs." Z's eyes glowed in the same way Svetlanna's did when she interacted with technology. "I only pay particular attention to my tech."

"That is interesting, though, that a relatively miniscule gang like them had access to your high end tech," said Aldrich.

"I try to keep some of my tech as accessible as possible," said Z. "You have some familiarity with the criminal underworld, but you have no idea about Nomads like us."

Chapter 230: Meeting With Z (2)

"From what I know, nomads and villains are just two sides of the same coin. Villains do most of the real crime. Nomads do most of the mule work - the supplying and transportation." Aldrich said this, but he understood it was only a surface level conception of what the nomads were like.

As a city child, it was true that Aldrich knew almost nothing about nomads. And because nomads were away from society proper, there was very little information about them other than traditional media outlets that branded nomads as dangerous pillagers and criminals.

Nomads were branded even more dangerous than villains, because villains at least had a vested interest in maintaining societal order for profit.

Aldrich understood that the media had an interest in demonizing nomads, making their lifestyle away from cities less attractive, but he himself knew precious little about how nomads were or what they valued.

Not to mention his experience with the only other nomad gang he had - the Odinsons - was not particularly positive, ending in bloodshed.

"Technically right, and a very thoroughly city-centric way of looking at it.

Both villains and nomads are part of the underworld, but also fundamentally different. We share a commonality in that we hide from society proper, wallowing in its 'underworld'," said Z.

But where villains do so to amass power, nomads like us mostly do so for the sake of freedom. The vast majority of us do not or cannot live in cities, so we choose the freedom of the wastelands, no matter how hard the life may be.

And because life is hard, nomads work and stick together. We share as much as we can. That includes my tech.

Without easily accessible forged CIDs, it would be near impossible for nomads like us to survive in the wastelands. We do have to enter cities from time to time for supplies, after all.

Hence, why my false CIDs are as 'free' as possible. Easily reproducible. Easily copied. Easily updated to escape changing Panopticon security measures via myself or one of my Phantoms."

"There aren't any others that forge CIDs like you do?" asked Aldrich.

"Oh there are plenty," said Z. "But I am simply the best."

She said this with a matter of fact tone, as if being the best was just a simple and natural part of her.

"Which is why you're confident about your job security with the Dark Six."

"Correct. Of course, if the Dark Six do make a move against me, I would sever connections with them. But until that happens, I am a neutral party, Mr. Vane."

"I understand that. I wasn't here to try and convince you," said Aldrich.

"Oh?" Z took a sip of her coffee. She did so through her jaw shaped mask which seemed to have a suction function that drew in the liquid.

"There are two things I wanted to discuss with you. Or rather, one thing I wanted to discuss, one thing I wanted to tell you. Here's what I wanted to discuss: do you trust Desmond?"

Z briefly tore her gleaming purple stare from the two CIDs to Aldrich. "Seeking to sow the seeds of discord among us already?"

"No, this was just a question," said Aldrich.

"A leading question."

"Will you answer it? I have no issues if you don't."

"Hm." Z put the CIDs down and crossed her arms and legs, taking on a relaxed yet confident air. "As I have said before, nomads operate on strong bonds of trust. Desmond is no different.

He is an information broker. His spiders know things, their web of knowledge spreading far beyond even my comprehension. But the fact that he is part of this council means he will not spread knowledge about us to others."

Aldrich raised a questioning brow. "And you trust that? This idea of nomadic trust - is it really that solid? I know that look in your eyes. It's sharp. Wary. I don't think someone like you believes that."

Z shrugged. "No, I do not. But I accept it. It is simply how things are in the Wastelands. There is precious little space for duplicity. Nomads all rely on each other.

Without me and my Phantoms, there is no tech.

Without Clint and his Spearhorns, there is no muscle.

Without Gerard and his Hawks, there is nobody to scout out variants or storms.

Without Stone, travel across the harsher parts of the Waste becomes very difficult.

Without Crone and her Poppies, determining safe and efficient supply routes becomes quite the challenge.

And without Desmond and his Spiders, it is difficult to get news of Panopticon and government movement. Or, when needed, villain movement.

Had Desmond not been here, we would not have known about the incident in Haven. We would not have known about the Dark Six standing against us, either.

Should Desmond break this trust, he will be cut off, and unless he and his Spiders are willing to completely become villains, they can no longer survive in the Wastelands."

"Oh? And what if he does? What if the Dark Six offers him a deal so sweet for him and his people he thinks he can survive all he wants without all of you," said Aldrich.

"Certainly possible. But then he loses freedom," said Z. She noted Aldrich's confusion.

"You do not understand. But freedom is what drives the nomad spirit. Most of the Spiders under Desmond live here because they believe in this ideal of freedom.

Freedom from surveillance. Freedom from control. Freedom from society.

If Desmond tells them he will sell their freedom away to work for the Dark Six, he will have quite the revolt on his hands."

"I see," said Aldrich. "Freedom, is it? Seems like a silly thing to believe in so highly. But I can understand the want for it."

"Freedom is not simply a want, it is a need," said Z. "Like food and shelter. Humans by nature, even when born with tremendous powers, strive for freedom. Some wish to be freer than others. Some wish for everyone to be as free as them.

But in the end, everyone grasps for freedom." Z tapped the CID chips on the table. "And I am finished updating these."

She slid the chips over, and Aldrich pocketed them again. "What are your plans, then? With the Dark Six against you."

"My plans are to remain neutral. But I presume you mean us nomads as a whole.

All the nomad tribes will be on the move after tonight for the sake of our safety. If you manage to secure Sentinel status, then I imagine as promised, the other tribes will ally with you for security's sake.

If not, well, I do not possess Crone's future sight, but I foresee that things will be quite a bit more difficult for both of us."

"I know." Aldrich knew full well that if he did not obtain Sentinel status, the nomads could turn against him to try and get back in goodwill with the Dark Six.

He did not believe Clint and his Spearhorns would. Clint seemed to have something personal against the Dark Six which, added on to his strong want for adventure, made it much easier for him to side with Aldrich.

But the others, he did not particularly trust yet. Especially Desmond. That was why he had a Grave Ward spying on Desmond's base.

The moment Aldrich found Desmond doing anything suspicious was the moment he found a way to out Desmond and eliminate him. If possible, Aldrich wanted to raise Desmond as his undead to access the information he possessed.

But Desmond was a small fry compared to the other enemies Aldrich would make by losing Sentinel status. Aldrich would become an enemy of the AA-Panop complex and world governments, perhaps the greatest force on the planet.

Yet even then, he felt confident he could survive. He could just hide out in the Wastelands, perhaps even in areas ripe with Null ore, and build up his power in hiding.

Nobody could really stop him. No matter what, Aldrich would build up his power.

However, Aldrich wanted to hold out and see if the AA-Panop complex would work with him. He wanted access to their resources, and he knew they wanted access to his strength, now more so than ever with the recent mass locus attacks.

"I will grant your technos access to secure communication channels to get in touch with us," said Z. "Update us on Thanatos's path to Sentinel status. So far, Thanatos has quite the popular fanbase, but popularity alone may not be enough. Even the backing of a Fortune heir may not be enough."

"I will." Aldrich stood up, readying to leave. "Oh, and one more thing. V says they are home."

Z's eyes widened for a brief uncharacteristic moment before they narrowed back down to her usual sharp coolness. "Is V with you?"

"Why does it matter to you?" said Aldrich.

"..." Z looked away, and for a brief moment, Aldrich felt like he could see Z's eyes waver in something resembling sadness. "I suppose it does not. Enjoy your stay in the

compound, Mr. Vane. And get to know the other chiefs a little better if you can. After all, we must part ways by tomorrow."

Chapter 231: Blackwater Allegiance

Z watched as 'Mr. Vane' - whatever his real name was, she did not particularly care - left the Wanyudo.

"What do you think of him, Z?" said Knife.

"Sharp eyes." Z narrowed her own eyes, remembering Vane's stare that mirrored hers almost perfectly. Eyes weary of the world around them, and yet always aware, always alert.

Those were the eyes of someone whose vigilance was born from suffering and loss.

"True, he did remind me of you somehow, but now that you mention it, it's all in the eyes," said Knife. "He could even pass for your son or something."

"Son, is it?" Z shrugged. "Your imagination is running a little too wild, Knife. Take Fork and Spoon and get some rest. I need some alone time. In the meanwhile, tell my riders to give me status reports on their projects."

"Got it, boss," said Knife, and he waved his hand, motioning the other two bodyguards - Spoon and Fork - to follow him out of the meeting room.

When they left, Z found herself staring into her cup of coffee, staring at her muted reflection. It was hard to make out anything other than the purple glow of her eyes.

"V, my little daughter, you've come home, have you? After all this time?" Z sighed deeply and slid her cup away, not wanting to look at her reflection anymore. "But home...is no place for you."

Z looked at the door that Aldrich left through. Her gaze was sharp again. "I only hope you've chosen right."

Aldrich walked back into the main living room of his base. The moment he stepped in, all of the Blackwater students stopped what they were doing to pay heed to him. Not that they were doing much aside from talking, gathered around tables and furniture as they were.

Aldrich went to the kitchen area where he looked in the fridge and took out a can of beer. He ignored the almost dozen stares etched on him as he opened the can.

"What? I can't enjoy a beer?" Aldrich took a sip as he met everyone's stares. Some were eased. Most anxious. None hostile - a good sign. "This isn't like before when you guys got to go out to the city and I couldn't. And I think I deserve this after raising you all from the dead."

"Technically though, didn't you kill us?" said a lanky, long haired guy with deeply sunken in, tired golden eyes. This was Elias. Blackwater's rank 6 with a speed based power that let him boost his speed by sapping it from others.

"Even if I did, I could have just as easily left you all for dead," said Aldrich. He raised a brow. "I can do that even now, if you want. Turning any of you into dust isn't much of an issue for me."

Aldrich took another sip. "But I'd prefer not to. I'd like for us to be able to enjoy a drink like this all together, even if I am just a Dud in your eyes."

Alexis lightly chopped Elias's head. "Elias, you idiot, we all talked about this." She nodded towards Aldrich with her pale white eyes. "All of us are in agreement about staying here. Even Elias. It's just difficult for him to express himself properly."

"Beats dying again, I guess," Elias shrugged and lazily plopped down on a couch. "I have no real preference either way, but if you want to do this, Lexis, then I will too."

"You're no Dud to me, either," said Ace. "You have undeniable power, plus I hear from the news you've got some big shot Fortune heir backing this whole operation. I'm in as long as I get a fat chunk of credits."

"Credits won't be a big deal," said Aldrich. "And the rest of you?"

"Most of us here are child recruits from mercenary groups," said Alexis. "We have no real attachment to the organizations that raised us. If anything, if we're going to get paid under you, then we don't see why we shouldn't take your offer."

Especially because as Elias somewhat rudely pointed out, we would die otherwise."

"It's good to see we're all starting to get on the same page." Aldrich scanned the room. "I know almost all of you are either child soldiers picked up and raised by merc groups or laboratory experiments. You have no real familial attachments to any of these places. I can take it that most of you are fine being under my employ?"

Most of the Blackwater students nodded.

"Let's see, if I remember my research correctly, two of you here do still have families you're involved with. Gerald and Kat, you two, what do you think?" said Aldrich.

Kat was the daughter of two renowned assassins in the underworld taking up the family practice. Gerald, on the other hand, had been sold by his parents as collateral for a gambling debt they had racked up.

The criminal organization that picked Gerald up realized his power had strong potential along with Gerald himself having talent. Gerald was a soft spoken and seemingly frail minded person, but when it came to fighting, he could put focus to an almost unnatural degree.

So the merc group had trained him, then geared him towards Blackwater to complete his training.

"I'm not against the idea of working with you," said Kat, her feline ears twitching nervously. "But like, my parents will worry, and I have to see if they're okay with this and all..."

Aldrich had not expected Kat of all people to be the type to worry about her parents all that much. But this was not that much of an issue.

From what he knew, her parents were independent contractors not affiliated with any organization, meaning Kat was not an asset tied up to any organization that they had to retrieve.

If Kat just wanted to do her own thing, so long as her parents accepted it, she should have no issues working with Aldrich. "You can contact your parents. I'll set that up when possible. I can assume you aren't worrying about their safety, right?"

"No, they're total badasses. I'm sure they're fine," said Kat. "Probably looking for me, though."

"Right." Aldrich looked at Gerald. "And you?"

"I haven't seen my parents in a long time," said Gerald.

"I imagine you may not want to, considering how you ended up being in Blackwater," said Aldrich.

"Yeah..." Gerald shook his head. "But I still want to see them one more time. If I work with you, I want to ask you for that favor."

"I'll do my best," said Aldrich. "That, I can promise."

Gerald smiled warmly. "Okay then."

"Good," said Aldrich. "Then all of us have an agreement."

Aldrich nodded mostly to himself. When Blackwater did not know he was Aldrich and just Thanatos, they followed him without much question due to the heightened loyalty conditioned into them from becoming undead. However, once they realized it was Aldrich, there was some level of resistance, but it looked like it was mostly just at the surface level.

Most of the students were just like anyone else. They wanted safety and security and credits. Which Aldrich could provide. The credits, he would have to borrow from now, probably from Aarav, but he could pay that back tenfold soon enough.

And, maybe, as Z had said, the students wanted freedom.

Ironically, under Aldrich's control, they were less free than ever, but freedom was always an illusory concept. If Aldrich could make them feel freer, then he was sure they would prefer working under him than whatever forced labor they faced in their mercenary organizations.

In any case, Aldrich could not foresee the students having so much resistance against Aldrich that they could override their loyalty directive. The only one that had done that was Evan Harker, and that was because as a member of Seth Solar's gang, he had absolutely hated Aldrich.

Aldrich would keep an eye on Simon Wells, the last remaining member of that gang, but for now, allowed him to exist so long as he did not make a ruckus. Simon did not show nearly as much direct hostility against Aldrich. At the very least, not enough to surpass the loyalty directive.

Plus Simon had decent potential to grow stronger where Evan's wolf bots, though strong, were resource intensive.

On top of that, Svetlanna was a better techno than Evan in almost every metric. She was not as specialized in creating battle bots, but she could hold her own in combat using her energy absorbing hair whereas Evan was basically useless without his drones.

Evan was just dead weight. Someone who barely sat at rank 14 in Blackwater's A class, just ahead of Eric whose powers were meant mostly for healing, not fighting.

"Help yourselves to whatever you want," said Aldrich. He pointed at the empty beer cans and bottles strewn about. "Just make sure to clean up later."

Chapter 232: [Bonus Chapter] Eileen's Conversation

Chapter 232 [Bonus Chapter] Eileen's Conversation

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Outside, in the Nomad Compound, around the same time as Aldrich's talk with Blackwater –

Eileen sat on a bench with Stella, wondering at the many cloaked men and women that roamed around the cracked earth.

Stella took a big swig from a bottle of whiskey. "You know, one thing I like about this new body, aside from it not having to deal with annoying little heart attacks, is the fact that I don't get drunk anymore.

Or maybe that's a bad thing."

Eileen did not really respond, distracted not just by the nomads that she had never really seen up close before, but by what she had seen with Aldrich. She was thoroughly scared.

Aldrich was not like Minuteman. He was colder. He did not hesitate to turn that Blackwater student into dust. She wondered if she even belonged here.

"What's got you all down, kid?" asked Stella. She smiled at Eileen. "If you feel down, just tell me. I'm your senior in both life and heroism, after all!"

"You're not scared being here?" asked Eileen.

"Huh? Why would I be?" Stella cocked her head.

"Of Aldrich, he-he seems almost like a villain sometimes," said Eileen.

"Oh that, yeah, I totally agree," said Stella simply.

"R-really? But you seem so calm and okay with it all..."

"I dunno. Maybe I wasn't all that cut out to be a prim n' proper hero like that red and blue boy Minuteman," said Stella. She shrugged. "But y'know, Minuteman DID sponsor him."

"That is true..." Eileen lowered her head.

"How old are you? Like seventeen? It's no wonder you're all shaken up. Judging by your powers, you'd probably have been trained for rescue ops and mobilization. Haven't had to kill anyone then, have you?" said Stella.

Eileen shook her head. She knew it was not uncommon for heroes to have to kill. It was a relatively accepted thing, even. If a situation got tense, then heroes had authority to use lethal force.

Even Minuteman had killed people before. Villains that harmed and killed others, granted, but still people. But that was totally different from eviscerating someone because they spoke up.

"I can accept having to kill – it's just a part of this job, and I've been trained for it as well," said Eileen. "But killing just to scare people into listening? I don't know about that."

"Hmm. Is that what you think?" Stella looked around at the nomads streaming by with their cloaks and goggles. "Y'know, I grew up as a nomad too.

Not out here in the Wastelands, where there's big stretches of nothing, but in the Forestlands full of overgrown plants and variants.

Back there, in the nomad commune, my pa was pretty high up. One day, I saw him take a man out who'd been stealing meat from our hunts. My pa put the thief against a wall and gunned him down. Cold blooded execution.

After that, though, nobody stole anything. At least not for a while, until the memory of the thief's brains splattered against the walls faded.

That's what fear does – it keeps people in line. And some people only respond to fear. The type you see among those Blackwater students – they're the type that fear works on well.

You might think fear gets a bad rep, but it's necessary sometimes. Especially out here when people are just trying to survive – they've got no time to worry about drawn out trials and appeals and whatnot that you see in a city.

Shit, half the time, those are all rigged too. You ever see a business exec go behind bars? Unless another exec planned it."

"You accept it, then? The fear he uses to control?" said Eileen, shaken up.

"Do I accept it? World's not so simple. It isn't black or white or acceptance or refusal." Stella shrugged. "Best put, I understand it. It's efficient, and Aldrich is all about that."

"But efficiency above all else...don't you worry Aldrich might become someone you can't follow? Someone you can't respect?"

Stella downed the rest of her bottle and then tossed it behind her. It hit a nomad in the head who raised his hand in ready to shout something, but very quickly backed down when she shot him a life threatening glare.

She sighed before turning back to Eileen. "Think about it this way. Why did you become a hero?"

"Because I wanted to help people," said Eileen.

"Right. I knew you would say something like that," said Stella.

"You make it sound like it's a bad thing."

"No it ain't. It's just predictable. I wanted to be a hero to help people too, when I was your age. What I want to ask you is this: ever since Aldrich took you up from the dead, how many people have you saved?"

"Well, the people in Haven, for one-," began Eileen.

"Right. So thousands upon thousands of people. How many had you saved as a trainee?"

"Uhm, maybe a hundred?"

"Wow, a hundred? That's a huge number for a trainee. But compare that to a hundred thousand plus. Where's the comparison?"

"...You're right. If you look at it in terms of numbers, I've done more than I ever could have, even working as a hero."

"Precisely." Stella nodded. "I feel like I'm making an impact here. Back when I was a hero, I was weaker, that's for sure, but I also didn't see a future for myself.

Just a regular ol' D lister used as a pretty face here and there for a commercial. Hell, I didn't even get to be front and center of those commercials too, always just a background prop.

Over the years, I kinda forgot that I wanted to save people. I just did the bare minimum, scraping by to get enough AP to make credits and live a decent life.

Out here, though, I feel alive again despite technically being dead. I feel like I'm making the change I wanted to."

Stella patted Eileen's back. "This is just my advice, but if you really, REALLY want to help people and not just end up being a prop in the AA, stuck in a hellhole of fighting for the easiest and best jobs or sponsorships, then you stick with Aldrich.

If you want to be recognized for what you can do and not what you can offer for companies, then you stick with Aldrich."

"I think I'm coming to understand. I feel better now about all of this. Thanks, Stella." Eileen smiled. "I was just shaken up seeing something I wasn't used to."

Stella smiled back. "Aldrich, deep down, at least I think, is a decent guy. He wants what's best overall for everyone."

The means he uses, a lot of the time they might seem harsh, but you'll understand them in time."

"I will?"

"Yeah. The AA doesn't like to publicize the bad cases. The type that makes your gut crawl with disgust. The kind that makes you wonder whether humans are no better than rabid dogs." Stella clenched her jaw, sparks starting to fly from her fingertips as she reminisced about awful things Eileen could not even comprehend. "But you'll have to deal with those in time."

When you do, you'll come to know better why he does what he does. Until then, if you want to help others, stay here."

Stella smiled again and put a friendly, sisterly arm around Eileen's shoulder. "And I'll make sure to take care of you, cute little sweet thing you are."

Chapter 233: Stay and Fight

A few hours later -

Aldrich sat on the roof of a armored car thoroughly decked out in nomad aesthetics. If he had to find a word for the genre that nomad tech design fit in, he would say thoroughly post-apocalyptic.

Everything looked almost make shift with armor plating scrapped from various mismatched sources roughly welded and packed together, guns crammed on just for the sake of having big guns, and tribal accessories like metal horns attached to the car's front.

"How do you like my baby, huh?" Clint sat beside Aldrich, a beer bottle in his hand. The bottle looked almost like a toy prop compared to Clint's enormous size.

Aldrich himself was quite tall at around two meters, but Clint was half a meter taller even than that. But that was not uncommon among mutant Alters whose powers permanently shifted their body.

"How do these things even run?" said Aldrich. He also had a beer in his hand. He had been outside of the compound, watching Chiros drill his death knights, when Clint spotted him and asked him to sit down and have a talk over a drink. "No offense, of course, but they just seem so inefficient. Nomad tech seems to have no regard at all for weight or physics."

"I dunno', shit's too complicated for me," said Clint. "I know we got different engines. Powered by fuckin' geostorm energy - can't get any more badass than that, right?"

"Geostorms?" Aldrich raised a brow. As far as he knew, geostorms were basically just natural disasters with no real value to them. The storms, not variants, though variants did play a part, were the biggest reason why approximately 42% of Earth was still inhospitable.

They were not just ordinary natural disasters. They were supernatural in origin, powered by large swells of Ether within the planet.

Just like how Alter organs could process ether into countless different effects, geostorms seemed to use ether in remarkably unpredictable yet invariably destructive ways.

Fire storms, thunder storms, magnetic storms, disintegrating storms - any horrible person destroying effect you could think of, geostorms could probably manifest it.

Cities were built in areas where geostorms did not regularly cross, but of course, nomads had to deal with them as a way of life.

"The storms are the reason we can fuel most of our tech," said Gerard. He had joined in on this conversation as well, sitting beside Clint with a bottle of liquor instead of beer. "They release highly enriched ether in gas form whenever they pass, and some of us, stormchasers as we're called, follow the storms and store that energy for us to use."

"You can't wait for the storms to pass?" asked Aldrich.

"I wish. Wouldn't lose my men that way," said Gerard with a sigh and a swig of his bottle. "The enriched ether decays rapidly. You look at a storm after it's passed, even just half an hour later, and there's nothing.

Not even the Panopticon risks harvesting storms. Only nomads like us that need to do what we need to do to survive.

It's kind of poetic in a way.

Storms are our greatest threat, but also our livelihood.

Reminds me of the yellow river in ancient China. Millions lived by its life giving waters. Millions died by its raging floods."

"Yellow river? You didn't strike me as the type to quote stuff from China," said Aldrich.

"Why not? We live in a global society, don't we? Well, as global as can be with half of it in the wastes.

But I spent a decade there, actually, when I was young and wanted to explore the world more," said Gerard. He raised his fist in the air, and from it, a sky blue aura of energy formed. "Trained under Sifu, back when he took foreign students."

"Sifu?" Aldrich remarked, mildly surprised.

Sifu was one of China's S class heroes and a legend within Alter history, being one of the extremely rare surviving few that had lived so long he predated the Altering itself. He was almost single-handedly responsible for restoring order to the country after superpowered villains labeling themselves as 'warlords' took over large chunks of it.

"Yeah." Gerard said with a proud smile. "The Qi keeps me strong and young. Well, young as can be. I look sixty, boy, but you best be aware that I'm almost a hundred myself."

"I've never seen anyone using Qi in person. Thought it was limited to China," said Aldrich.

Sifu possessed an Editor class power that he called Qi that allowed him to create a 'dantian' within himself that could process energy - the colloquial term for bodily ether used to fuel alter organs - and convert it into powerful physical reinforcement or even projectiles. The qi also slowed his aging process, though it did not make him immortal.

By now, Sifu was probably a hundred and sixty years old, give or take, and age had weakened his powers considerably. But his legacy was what made Sifu so important.

As an Editor, Sifu could manipulate other Alters' powers. More specifically, if an Alter had the potential, he could have them grow a dantian as well. The dantian was in effect a secondary growth similar to the alter organ specialized towards creating qi.

Not everyone could grow a dantian and among those that could, not all could use it effectively. But still, enough people were compatible with it that it let Sifu create a personal army.

Because of this, the Chinese government, once re-established, took Sifu in as a national asset.

A thoroughly guarded one, too. The government let essentially no outsiders learn under Sifu.

The fact that Gerard did meant he was in China during the warlord's reign almost seventy years ago, showcasing just how old he was.

"You really are old," continued Aldrich. "Considering you must have gotten in the country during the warlords' reign."

"Bah, still spry enough to throw down in a fight if I have to," said Gerard, insulted. He side eyed Aldrich. "That's one thing I wanted to talk to you about."

You and Thanatos obtaining Sentinel status - you think that's possible?"

"I have enough leverage to make them heavily consider it," said Aldrich.

"I know that. But it's not just about leverage. It's whether you think you think you two belong in that league."

Aldrich narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean by that, exactly?"

"He means strength," said Clint. "Y'all think you got the power to stand up there as a proper Sentinel state? That's what Gerard wants to know."

"Look at the other Sentinels in the world so far," said Gerard. "Emperor in China, Semiramis in the Middle East, Dracul in Eastern Europe, Aja in Africa, Ravana in India, and Utopia who manages Neo-Eden for the world's elite."

Emperor and Dracul are top class powers widely regarded among the strongest Alters of all time. Some even say that they can match Vanguard's mountain shattering punches in his prime.

Semiramis, Oko, and Ravana have powers so dangerous or useful that nobody wants to upset them.

Utopia, well, she's just a lapdog for the establishment, so I'll leave her out of this."

"And?" said Aldrich, unimpressed. "You don't think we belong in that league. Is that what you're implying?"

"I'm just not sure," said Gerard. "And I don't like uncertainty. That's why I'm holding off on fully committing to you, even with the Dark Six against me."

I have to admit this: I am growing old."

"No shit" said Clint, and Gerard ignored him.

"There's only so much Qi can do to stave off creaking bones and wrinkling skin. I'm holding on because I want to pass onto my riders a time of peace, not whatever shitshow we have on our hands now."

"Uncertainty is exciting though," said Clint, "if we was scared of a little bit of chaos then ain't no reason we ought to have left the cities in the first place."

"There's only so much of that this heart of mine can handle. Especially now." Gerard shook his head.

"If it's peace you want, it's peace you'll get." Aldrich took in a sip of his beer. He did not like the taste, but he found himself drinking it anyway.

Must have been the mood of the conversation.

He looked ahead at the vast wide wastelands before him, stretching out seemingly infinitely into the horizon in its canvas of amber oranges and sun baked earthen yellows. "It's what I want too."

"Better be a good fight or two on the way there," said Clint.

"More than one or two, with how this Dark Six situation's brewing," said Aldrich.

Clint cracked his thickly muscled neck. "Heh, I like the sound of that."

At the mention of fights, Gerard just sighed again. An old man sigh, more tired than anything else.

"In my opinion, Gerard, you're looking at things the wrong way," said Aldrich. "Yes, there's going to be fights. Conflicts before I establish myself. Uncertainty.

But your alternative is just to run. Run deeper into the wastelands and make life for you and your riders harder.

Is what you want to do?

Flee?

Why not stay and fight? Fight to build something better to leave your people?"

"Age is gettin' to your head, old G," said Clint. "My pa always used to say: you only really start agin' when you let the age get to your head."

"I don't want to hear that from young'uns like you two." Gerard took a deep swig of his liquor. "But maybe there's merit in that. Maybe I have gotten a little too careful in my old age."

That moment, a hawk made of pure white energy alighted upon Gerard's shoulder.

"What is it?" asked Gerard. The hawk put its beak to Gerard's ear, and he immediately capped his bottle and got off the car.

"What's got ya in such a hurry, old fart?" said Clint.

"Variant movement due northeast. Closing in fast, too." Gerard tapped his cybernetic monocle, and the lens glowed blue. "I'm going to let my riders know. From what my hawk could tell, the variants are tough.

We'll need your riders, Clint. Or just you, if you're up for the job."

"Aw, hell yeah!" Clint got off with a heavy thud. He nodded to Aldrich. "Y'know, I want to know if you're any good in a fight, too. How bout' you come along with me, eh?"

"Sure." Aldrich shrugged.

Chapter 234: Megaloptera

Aldrich sat in the passenger seat of Clint's car, watching endless stretches of cracked earth speed by. He crossed his arms not to look cool, but to save space because Clint in the driver's seat was so wide he crammed Aldrich into more or less half a seat.

Aldrich wanted to take his own car out, but Clint had insisted that 'real men bond by driving together', whatever that meant.

"...Have you ever thought about making this car bigger?" said Aldrich.

"Yeah, but I had this back when I was sixteen or somethin' and a whole lot skinnier. It was my first ride! Ain't gonna give up on it now." Clint smiled as he smashed his foot against the accelerator.

The car rumbled intensely as its oversized, over-modified engine worked to its limits. Flashes of exhaust and fire burst out from the back of the car, holding so much power behind them that they lifted the vehicle straight off the ground.

Every single time the car went off the ground to accelerate, it slammed back down, making the whole thing lurch and shake violently.

"I think I'm getting dizzy," said a green skinned girl with solid colored black eyes from the backseat. When the car rocked up and down, her whole body noticeably jiggled like she was made out of jelly.

This was Tox, a Blackwater student who had been rank 7 in the A class. Like Fletcher, she was classed as an Elemental Augmenter, meaning her entire body comprised of a specific substance. In her case, a corrosive slime.

Also like Fletcher, she was considered a 'true' Elemental who lacked a targetable nervous system.

Thus, to kill her required near complete annihilation of her body.

True Elementals were considered among the strongest category of Alter powers due to how difficult it was to put them down. In fact, a good chunk of S rank heroes across the world were True Elementals.

Dracul, one of the Sentinels that Gerard had implied was above Aldrich's league, was one of them, capable of turning into pure darkness.

The only reason Tox did not rank higher in Blackwater was because of a major weakness: the more she expelled slime, the more sluggish she got. This limited her destructive capability, though she was still insanely tough to kill.

"How are YOU getting dizzy? Do you even have an actual brain?" said Ace, also from the backseat.

"Says you, you big dummy!" said Tox. "If you were asked to take an IQ test, you'd probably wonder if it was something you could eat!"

"Calm down, kids, and keep your eyes on the road," said Stella. She was the last of the Alters Aldrich had taken with him for this variant hunt. Mostly to alleviate her boredom from sitting around.

"Tell that to horn head over there! Tox pointed a jiggling, accusing finger at Clint. "His driving is horrible!"

"This is how real men drive on the Wastes! None of that sissy traffic light shit from the cities!" roared Clint.

A voice crackled through speakers in the car. Gerard's voice.

"Me and my riders have tracked the variant. It's a Megaloptera with one wing downed. On the larger side, too. It's desperate and hungry, explaining why it's coming for us. I'll send the coordinates to your car.

It can't fly, but it has a swarm of its nymphs guarding it on land.

My estimation: we need about twenty of your boys. Or just you, if you have the time. Just make sure you don't get eaten right off the bat."

"Got all the time in the world!" said Clint.

Gerard sighed through the speakers. "I don't know where you young'uns get the energy. I'm off now."

With that, Aldrich saw the car's wide dashboard light up. A very rudimentary map at its right corner showed up, showcasing one big red dot where the variants were and one small yellow dot where the car was.

"We're not far off," noted Aldrich.

"Yeah, and considering it's got a mega in its name, we ought to see the big son of a bitch by now. There she is!" Clint excitedly pointed both hands in front of him, marking out an enormous, black plated dragonfly in the distance.

The car started to swerve out of control with Clint not controlling the wheel.

"Hands on the wheel! That's basic driving school stuff!" yelled Tox.

"Haha, we can all survive a car crash or two, can't we!?" said Clint. "Otherwise you all don't belong in my car!"

"I thought you cared about this car," commented Aldrich.

"Ain't no car of mine if it can't survive a crash or two either!" Clint said as he put his hands back on the wheel, taming the wildly veering vehicle into some semblance of a straight trajectory.

Aldrich just shook his head, but he still smiled. Maybe he got along with Clint's type better than he let on. The energy was infectious, he did have to admit.

As Clint's car rapidly approached the dragonfly, its size became ever more apparent. It was as big as a three story house, easily capable of crushing a fully grown man into paste under just one of its legs. On its lengthy belly was a sizable swarm of land based nymphs that had yet to grow their wings.

Each nymph was as large as a car, and when they sensed Clint's very loud, very obvious arrival, they detached from their mother and rushed forward with remarkably quick speed.

"Let er' rip!" Clint smashed a button on his dashboard, causing it to spark. Twin mounted cannons on either side of his car boomed with concussive impact, sending out shells that exploded into countless speeding shrapnel projectiles when they slammed against the nymphs.

The shells pulped the nymphs on impact, and the shrapnel riddled the surrounding nymphs with holes that bore right through their still soft, not yet fully developed carapaces.

Clint's car kept firing shell after shell, clearing a path to the dragonfly with good old lead and explosives. However, when the shells hit the dragonfly itself, all they managed to do was slightly dent and scorch its tough hide.

"Alright, time for the real deal!" Clint slammed down on the brakes, causing the car to violently flip over itself from having to slow down so abruptly.

After six or seven or eight flips, the car stopped, thoroughly beat up and now upside down.

"That's what I call a real man's stop!" Clint laughed as he punched his door open and rolled out.

"No, that's just a crash! A total failure of a stop! I'm never getting in a car with this nomad maniac again!" said Tox.

"Quit complaining. I'll fly you back out when this is over, said Ace.

"Y'know, this is actually kind of exciting," said Stella with a grin.

"The only other girl here, and she's crazy too," sighed Tox.

Ace also punched his way out the car and hovered out. Tox followed, squeezing her viscous, liquid body out. Stella rolled out with trained movement.

Aldrich did not want to damage the poor car anymore than it had already suffered, so he just crawled out of the door Clint had punched off.

"Aw yeah, look at that! Look at how big she is! Ain't she a beauty!?" Clint turned to everyone while pointing at the giant dragonfly behind him like a child pointing at a toy. His smile beamed with nothing but pure, unadulterated thrill.

"Watch out!" said Stella, but it was too late.

"Huh?" Clint looked down to see a spine skewered through his stomach.

The dragonfly had shot out a spine from its mouth at a speed so quick that even Aldrich had difficulty reacting properly.

Aldrich wondered what to do at this point. He could not let Clint just die like this as his current greatest supporter among the nomads.

'Well, good thing I can raise the dead,' thought Aldrich, but that thought turned out to be unnecessary.

"Damn, that actually hurt!" Clint pulled the spine out of his stomach, revealing a gaping, bloody hole. It very quickly closed up, and when it did, thick, scale like brown armor covered his skin. "But now it won't work on me anymore!"

Clint tossed the spine away and faced the dragonfly with an eager grin. "Show me what you all got! If it ain't much, then you ain't gettin' my support!"

Clint sprinted ahead with surprising speed for his behemoth of a body. There were still dozens of nymphs remaining, but everytime one of the jumped on him, aiming to stab him with their mandibles, he just punched holes through their guts.

"Show him what you can do," Aldrich said to his units. "I'll be watching from here.

Make sure you save that thing's head for me."

"Will do! That guy's got an energy I really like. Really suits mine!" Stella eagerly followed Clint, blasting off the cracked earth with an explosion at her feet.

"And the nymphs? They might get to you," said Ace.

Aldrich noted that Ace was a surprisingly considerate guy, even checking on Aldrich's own safety.

But then again, Aldrich was more than strong enough to protect himself.

Aldrich took off his cloak and suit jacket, laying both across Clint's upturned car. He unbuttoned three of the top buttons of his dress shirt for ease of moment and rolled up his sleeves. He cracked his knuckles, his arm muscles rippling visibly through the fabric. "I can take care of them."

"Hmm. I like what I'm seeing," said Tox, drooling corrosive slime that melted the ground below.

Ace waved his hand in front of Tox's stare. "Snap out of it and start moving! I'll fly you up."

"Oh, right." Tox held onto Ace's arm, and before she could say another word, they were off, Ace flying high into the air as he looked for an angle of attack.

Chapter 235: Megaloptera 2

Aldrich watched the fight unfold. He did not want to fight directly because he wanted to keep up his facade of being a separate entity from Thanatos, and that involved limiting his powers to basically just his physical strength.

By having two separate identities, Aldrich had more leeway to trick or manipulate others. It also increased the 'mystique' of Thanatos. There was something strangely magnetizing about a mysterious, faceless being of power that Aldrich wanted to capitalize on.

For how long Aldrich wanted to keep this separation of identity, he did not know. Whenever he got a more stable position, maybe. All things to think about later.

Right now, Aldrich observed how much his units had grown.

"Take this, you bug bastard!" Stella yelled as she pointed her palms towards the oversized dragonfly from above. Her hand lit up bright orange before a shower of sparks crackled out from them, causing a detonation that fired a ball of orange energy.

"Impressive," said Aldrich as he put a hand to his chin.

Stella had improved dramatically. To recap, her power worked by accelerating her blood flow and making her blood turn into permeable gas that passed through her skin in the form of glowing orange particles. This gas then violently detonated with the air, creating a highly reactive explosion.

This meant that Stella could not fight well at range because her blood could not travel far before it blew up, grounding her strictly as a short or mid range fighter.

But now, she had found a way to prevent her gas form blood from exploding immediately. She could thus create projectiles that detonated only when they hit a target.

The ball of orange energy hit the dragonfly's black carapace and then wobbled chaotically before exploding in a burst of white light reminiscent of a flashbang. The air rippled as a loud explosion rocked through it.

"Damn, you're one tough bastard!" grimaced Stella as she noted that the explosive ball had not managed to pass through the carapace. It left a nasty, cracked crater oozing with cauterizing yellow blood, but it did not have enough power to punch completely through.

In response, the dragonfly started to shiver. Countless sharp black spines across its back stood up like the quills on a porcupine. Several rotated towards Stella and then fired and speeds that easily surpassed sound.

Stella reacted before the spines fired, dodging preemptively by blasting herself to the side. Still not enough. One of the spines had passed through her belly, gouging out a sizable hole.

In response, she just smiled.

Aldrich noted her incredible pain tolerance. Undeath prevented vital organs from being one hit kills, but it did not negate pain. At least, not with creatures that had functioning nervous systems like Stella.

The fact that Stella could just grin at a hole in her stomach meant she could easily ignore the pain. And it was no wonder, either. From what Aldrich could tell, she was quite literally giving herself consistent heart attacks with her powers.

That was how she trained herself.

The further an Alter pushed themselves, pushed their powers and its weaknesses to the absolute max, the stronger they reached their potential.

The downside was that overtraining was a very real issue with significant drawbacks. In Stella's case, literal heart attacks. These costs made it difficult for Alters to consistently really push themselves.

Only in life or death scenarios could they exert themselves to the extent that Stella did routinely.

It was a known phenomenon among Alters that in situations of extreme physical and emotional stress where they engaged their power beyond limits, they got noticeably stronger when they recovered.

Stella had repeated that process countless times, giving herself heart failure after heart failure.

Now, Stella was leagues beyond how she was back when Aldrich first raised her. He appraised her level.

[Unit Stella's Level: 33]

An incredibly impressive amount of growth considering Stella had not even cracked level 20 at first.

Watching Stella grow, Aldrich began to also get a better assessment of how levels determined power. It followed Elden World convention with a soft and hard cap system.

Early levels from 1-40 provided considerable amounts of power. After 40, there seemed to be a 'soft cap' where each level granted less overall strength than before.

There was another soft cap at level 60, and then a 'hard cap' at level 80 where power differences came mostly from equipment and unique spells and skills rather than stat differences.

"Then how about this!" Stella propelled her way closer to the dragonfly before unleashing twin beams of highly condensed orange energy from her hands. The beams were thin, shaped almost like needles, and they spiraled as they crashed into the variant's carapace.

Upon impact, the condensed, explosive energy detonated, creating twin eruptions that pushed out twin shockwaves that had enough power to carry a wall of dust and debris crashing all the way to Aldrich.

Aldrich made a cutting motion with his hand, his powerful strength creating a gust that blew the dust cloud away. This revealed several nymphs gaining on him, their many segmented legs crawling at a speed rivaling that of a car.

"What a nuisance." Aldrich sighed as he cracked his knuckles. "I wanted to spend some more time paying attention to my units. But I suppose I do have time to deal with you all as well."

"Let's raise some hell!" Clint roared as he shoulder tackled the last two nymphs standing in his way. They knocked over like bowling pins as he bullrushed past them. He finally got to the megaloptera. He put a surprisingly gentle palm on the black carapace and took in a deep breath. "Thank you kindly."

Clint opened his eyes with a thrill infused grin. "For the ass kickin' opportunity you've given me!"

He then started to unleash punch after powerful punch against the dragonfly. Each punch caused huge cracks to spiderweb out from the point of impact, drilling in deeper even than Stella's explosions.

Right then, Clint narrowed his eyes as a shockwave rippled past him, making his lengthy, wild brown fur-like hair wave wildly. He looked up to see the explosion girl wreaking havoc with a twin bomb way bigger and better than that weak lil' orange ball she had started out with.

"Now that's the spirit!" Clint shouted. "More explosions, more violence, let's go!"

"Speak for yourself!" Stella yelled back. "The hell are those pansy ass punches, huh? Can't even crack the shell!"

"Yeah? You want to see real power?" Clint shook his head and took in a deep breath, psyching himself up.

I need power, he thought to himself. I need strength.

As he thought that, his muscles began to swell in size. His bones broke and stretched out, making him taller. Very rapidly, he reached an inhuman height of three and a half meters.

He exhaled, and his breath steamed out in twin streams through his nostrils.

"Rah!" Clint roared, his voice deepening with a rumble that sounded more beast than man. He punched again, and this time, his fist smashed right through the megaloptera's carapace like it was just fragile glass. His arm was shoulder deep in the thing's guts.

The megaloptera released a shrill cry of pain in response. Its giant legs moved in a series of rapid motions that swung it around in a circle, violently slamming into everything around it.

Clint, with his arm stuck inside the variant already and slowed down by newly grown muscle, could only brace for impact as the megaloptera's movement ragdolled him around before finally punting him away like a field goal.

At the same time, the megaloptera unleashed a mass volley of six spines towards Stella, dealing with the aerial threat bothering it.

'Damn...that's too many!' Stella put her hands together, aiming to blow up as many in front of her as possible, but she knew even if she did, the spines moved so fast that they could pierce her before her explosions could disintegrate them.

At best, Stella could try and knock them off course, but they might still tear off a limb or two.

That was until Ace flew in front of Stella, puffing his chest out confidently. The spines clanged against Ace and bounced off like they had hit an impenetrable wall. They did not even scratch Ace past his body's barrier.

"Thanks, kid," said Stella with a relieved sigh.

Ace smiled with the confidence an ultra durable body gave him. "Hah! Taking that hit is child's play to me!"

"Where's slime girl?" Stella saw that Ace did not carry Tox around anymore.

"I dropped her off around...there." Ace pointed down to where Clint had been.

"Well, I'll be damned. With how much she complained, I thought she was squeamish. Guess not, if she's going in there like that." Stella watched as Tox used her liquid slime body to push her way into the arm sized hole Clint had made in the megaloptera.

Tox oozed herself through the megaloptera's innards.

"Ugh, gross!" said Tox as she squirmed around in the hole, but then she thought about her training.

About a single word.

"Steam," Tox whispered to herself, and her black eyes glazed over. Her disgust, her hesitation, all of that faded away as her trigger forced all distractions away and left nothing but pure, efficient killing intent.

Tox drove herself deep into the variant. The flesh around her sizzled and melted as her corrosive body made contact with it. Soon enough, she would get into the variant's gut, its vitals, and then she could complete her mission.

Chapter 236: Megaloptera 3

Chapter 236 - Megaloptera 3

Aldrich flicked his hands like he was done washing them, slinging off chunks of mashed up carapace and yellow, gooey insect guts. Around him were the corpses of the megaloptera nymphs, thoroughly put down with fist sized holes in their heads and abdomen.

Aldrich's spiritweave suit was stained with insect guts, but by just summoning a bit of his magical energy, he could get the clothing to self-clean itself, getting rid of any nasty stains or smells.

Very convenient.

In the distance, the fight continued to rage on with the megaloptera. Stella kept bombarding it from above while Ace covered her, acting a flying shield to protect her from any spines. All the while, the megaloptera faced a slow death with Tox burying herself deep inside.

Aldrich noted that Tox's mindset completely shifted when she fought. It was something he had observed back in Blackwater as well. Normally, she was loud, expressive, skittish, and picky about what to do or what to eat. But when she got into a fight, all of that washed away, leaving behind a trained killer's core.

Tox exhibited signs of thorough mental conditioning. From Aldrich's research, he knew she had been kidnapped by Scavengers - villains that snapped up orphans from variant ruined battlefields to assess them for combat potential - when she was just five or six.

Even though most Alter organs remained dormant until age ten, it was still possible to roughly measure how strong Alter children could get by analyzing the organ's potential to house Alter cells and process them.

When Tox bloomed her power as an Elemental Augmenter - one of the rarest and best power categories - she was sent to Ember, a powerful mercenary organization that comprised one of the Dark Six.

Ember was known for indoctrinating its mercenaries from a young age with conditioning techniques that were not known even to others in the criminal underworld. What was known was that once a child came out of Ember, they came out trained, ruthless, and deadly.

Ember agents were valued as top tier prizes in the criminal underworld, fetching hundreds of thousands of credits minimum for even the most minor of jobs.

From what Aldrich knew, Tox was specialized for battlefield combat. In particular, she was feared for her expertise in invading other's bodies and melting them from the inside with expert efficiency, abusing her liquid form to its maximum capability.

Aldrich figured this fight was over at this point with Tox inside the megaloptera already.

But as he thought that, the megaloptera unleashed one more struggle.

The giant creature began to flap its wings rapidly. The wings glowed bright red and orange, generating intense amounts of heat and steam.

The rapidfire movement of the huge wings pushed the heat outwards like a hurricane of scorching winds, blowing everything around it back.

The heat waves were so intensely hot that they melted the rock around the megaloptera like it was butter.

Stella and Ace both flew backwards, getting out of the range of the fiery winds.

"Now that's something," said Aldrich. He watched as the heat waves circled around the megaloptera with extreme speed, forming into a howling angry orange tornado of crushing winds, melting heat, and scorching steam.

"Ain't it?" Clint landed beside Aldrich, driving up a small crater with the impact. He looked around at the beaten nymph corpses and whistled. "Hot damn! You're no slouch either. Makin' me respect ya even more!"

Aldrich narrowed his eyes in focus, ignoring Clint. He wondered how Tox was doing inside the megaloptera. The temperatures around and within the variant must have started to get dangerously high, easily enough to harm her.

Ace evidently thought the same thing.

"I'm going down for her!" said Ace. Tox was one of his closer friends in Blackwater. He was not going to let her die again.

"That tornado's gonna be a real bitch to fly through!" shouted Stella, trying to yell over the howling winds. "Want me to blast a way in!?"

"...No! I got it!" Ace flew around the tornado, towards the side where the megaloptera's wing was torn damaged, severed in half. The winds there were weaker, causing the fiery tornado to look lopsided.

Ace braced himself and rushed in at super speeds. Flying into the tornado felt like he was getting swept up by a powerful current, but he grit his teeth and pushed through it. He did not know why, but he had an instinctive feeling that ever since he had come back from the dead, fire and heat would hurt him badly.

Ace could use his barrier to avoid the damage entirely, but he knew if the fiery winds got a hold of his skin directly, he would burst into flames.

Which also meant that Tox, already someone susceptible to fire, might be suffering particularly badly.

Knowing this, Ace redoubled his efforts to push through. Once he broke into the tornado's eye, the winds stopped.

However, Ace noted that the atmosphere within turned into a vacuum. Not that he needed to breathe anymore. The biggest issue was it was still intensely hot here, the ground turning in a bath of liquid rock the megaloptera lay upon.

Too hot for Tox to survive.

Ace flew down to the hole Tox had gouged out. He went into it but the deeper he traveled, the narrower the opening became. Most likely because Tox had probably shrunk herself, compacting her corrosiveness so that she could melt through the variant faster.

The space became so cramped that Ace had to eventually end up punching his way through, but the insides of the damned bug were almost just as tough as its outside.

Ace was strong, but he was not the strongest. He could not easily rip a variant of this size and strength apart easily. His punches blasted off chunks of flesh, but the variant, like many of its strength, had a decent healing factor that worked even through Tox's poison, hampering his progress.

He grimaced. He was still weak.

Weaker than Seth Solar.

'You're just a copy of me. An inferior one.' Seth Solar's words after Ace had suffered a decisive defeat and broken arm against the golden child.

'If you are weak, you are a failure.' Words rung in Ace's head from his time in the labs.

Chapter 237: Clint, the Unbreakable

Chapter 237 - Clint, the Unbreakable

Ace hated being weak.

He was meant to be strong. Trained to be strong. made to be strong.

If he was weak, there was no point in him even existing. He grunted as he drove his heels into the ground and then pushed his hands into the ceiling of flesh above him.

Using his tactile telekinesis, Ace extended the surface area his strength could interact with wide. A thin white sheet extended across the megaloptera's innards, and when Ace pushed, he pushed against this sheet, spreading out the force of his strength efficiently throughout.

Ace acted like a jack, prying open the megaloptera's guts to try and see where Tox was. He saw her then. She had shrunk into a tiny green puddle. Steam sizzled from her body, the intense heat of the megaloptera's innards evaporating her slowly but surely.

Tox had not been able to store enough slime within her to reach the megaloptera's vitals while weathering the heat. Or rather, she had, but she had not taken into account the fact that heat hurt her even more than before now.

"Come here," said Ace.

"Must eliminate target-," began Tox.

"Cut that crap and just get over here!" said Ace.

Ace held up the megaloptera's innards as Tox slithered towards him, snaking around his foot. "Requesting evacuation from these premises. Will formulate another method of attack once reaching safety."

"Yeah, yeah, you do that when you're bigger than a tennis ball." Ace quickly flew out, making sure to hold Tox close to him so that his telekinetic barrier could extend to her. "You're safe now. Mission's over."

"Mission...over? Huh? Already?" Tox said, her usual peppy tone of voice returning.

Outside, Ace looked down with surprise to see Clint waving up at him while knee deep in molten rock.

"You two kids get outta here!" shouted Clint. "You've shown me more than enough guts. I like it! Now let me handle the rest!"

"Wait, how are you alive?" wondered Ace, but he soon saw the answer.

Clint's whole body was covered in what looked like a layer of bubbly brown flesh. The intense heat of the air and the molten rock melted away at the flesh layers, but they regenerated as quickly as they were melted off.

In addition, the bubble structure created air pockets that diffused heat away from the brunt of Clint's flesh underneath, insulating him from the scorching environment.

Ace, of course, had no idea how any of this worked. He just saw bubble skin and figured it kept Clint alive. The mechanics of it did not concern him. He nodded to Clint and flew away, breaking past the tornado.

"Now I'm gettin' ramped up!" said Clint excitedly as he jumped into the hole that slime girl had made. The entrance was big enough even for him to stand in, speaking volumes to how deadly corrosive Tox's body was. "Hah, it really is true.

The newer generations jus' get stronger and stronger, don't they? I'm scared of what them two kids will be like when they reach their heights."

Clint grinned as he stepped deeper and deeper into the megaloptera. The innards were starting to recover more from Tox's poison, the healing factor kicking in at a pace that threatened to crush Clint with regrown flesh.

Clint just kept smiling as he let the flesh grow back all around him. Bright red light started to shine through his open smile and his eyes.

"Is she okay?" Aldrich asked Ace as he flew down in front of him. Stella followed close behind.

Ace held out his hand, and Tox pooled around his palm. A miniature version of her formed from the puddle, tiny enough to stand on Ace's hand.

"I'm perfectly fine, thank you very much," said Tox as she put her hands on her hips proudly. "I almost killed the thing, too, until it used that unfair heat attack."

"It really does take complete destruction to take you out, hm? How useful," said Aldrich analytically.

"I almost died and all you can think about is how useful I can be? How cold. But damn, you're good looking enough where I'm even starting to get into it," said Tox.

"Make no mistake, I wouldn't have let you die either way. If I had to, I would've made my way through that tornado myself to heal and retrieve you." Aldrich hovered a palm in front of Tox. His mist floated out from him, gathering around her.

The mist rapidly healed Tox, quickly building up her mass to her original size. She pooled down from Ace's hand and reformed back into her usual figure.

"Heheh, don't make me like you too much," said Tox. She turned back to the flaming tornado. "But anyways, think that crazy nomad can deal with that by himself?"

"I'm not sure. I want to know too," said Aldrich.

"Dude looked pretty confident when I was coming out," said Ace.

"He will," said Stella firmly.

"Hm?" asked Aldrich.

Stella crossed her arms and nodded. "I didn't know who Clint was cause when I was little, I was a nomad in the Forestlands, so I don't know much about the nomads here.

But even where I was from, he's famous.

Among nomads, he's a living legend.

People talked about a horned nomad so strong nothing could kill him.

Said he took down Lobo, one of the states' S-class heroes, in a fair fight. Tanked a villain's meteor attack that leveled a mountain to his face. Survived a variant explosion that blew up an entire city.

The Unbreakable, he was called. Champion of nomadic freedom that nobody, not the AA, not the Panopticon, not any villain, could take down.

Don't know how many of those tales are tall and which ones are real, but I'm pretty damn sure that's him."

At that moment, as if to prove Stella's point, a red light blinded everyone briefly. They all turned to the direction of the megaloptera. A pillar of red energy roared into the sky, completely breaking the tornado apart and utterly engulfing the megaloptera's giant size within.

There was no loud ensuing explosion or colossal shockwave. Instead, the pillar of energy rose up, reaching towards the skies, then faded back down without making much of a sound.

There was no more megaloptera left. Or not anything whole. Just several chunks of flesh and carapace that splattered down around a huge circular crater in a rain of biomass.

Aldrich wondered if there was anything left for him to raise.

Clint became visible from the sky, and he landed in front of Aldrich with an earth breaking crash and a wide grin. His skin was now completely normal and his muscles had shrunk back down to ordinary size. Well, as ordinary as possible considering how thickly built he was normally.

Clint raised most of the megaloptera's head high. "Hahah, I took the thing down! Managed to snag a trophy AND I got to see y'all got guts, too! Day don't get better than this."

Aldrich stared at the megaloptera's head. There was enough there to raise, most likely.

"Here, y'all deserve this!" Clint tossed the head towards Aldrich. He raised his arm and grabbed it by its exposed mandible.

"You're giving this to us?" Aldrich nodded. He was not about to complain. "I'll be sure to make good use of it."

Chapter 238: Infiltration

"How about we go back to the compound for some more drinks!?" said Clint. "They're all gonna be on me!"

"Free drinks? Sure," said Ace, very much liking the idea of anything free.

"Sounds good to me," said Stella.

"How about you?" Tox asked Aldrich, her body language a bit shy. "Are you free any?"

Aldrich put a hand to the side of his temple, receiving information from the Grave Ward in Desmond's base. "No, looks like I'm busy. When we get back, I have some things to tend to."

Before Tox could respond, Clint butted in. "Haha, a busy man, aren't ya? Well I don't mind, gotta respect the grind. Here, I'll give y'all an express ride back to the compound in my baby!"

What ended up happening was that Clint's car did not work anymore due to suffering damage, so Clint created the brilliant solution of going under his car and carrying it. He sprinted back to the compound with the car over his head, his legs empowered with additional muscle.

Clint was not any slower than his car. In fact, he was probably just faster sprinting, even while carrying the oversized vehicle. He probably only drove the car out of sentimentality, being his first car and all.

"You know, this is a LOT better than his driving," said Tox. "He's a straight menace behind the wheel."

"I do have to agree," said Aldrich.

"I don't get the point of cars. Why not just fly?" said Ace. He nodded. "Though I do like the idea of having a super expensive and shiny car. Or hovercars like the super rich folk."

"Because not everyone can fly, duh." Tox rolled her eyes.

"Still crazy to think we've got the Unbreakable on our side," said Stella. "If he's serious about joining us, we'd be a serious threat. If the AA wanted to class us a villain org, we'd be high up there, touching shoulders with the big leagues like the Dark Six."

"He's that strong, is he?" said Aldrich.

"Yeah, strongest man in the Wastelands," said Stella. She shrugged. "Strongest known man, I guess. There's so much unknown out there that it's hard to tell who or what's the top dog."

"Better to focus on the known, then." Aldrich paused. "You two, Ace, Tox, what do you think about the places you grew up in? The organizations that raised you?"

"Don't give a damn," said Ace. "Meteor Labs can rot in hell for all I can care."

"I don't remember most of my time in Ember," said Tox. "I'm usually always in mission mode there. But I guess since I don't remember, I don't care that much?"

"How would you two feel about taking them down?" said Aldrich.

"Huh?" said Ace and Tox in unison. Stella eyed Aldrich with a raised brow.

"Meteor Labs and Ember are both Dark Six affiliated. You'd be going to war with them if you made a move against either," said Stella.

"According to Casimir, the Dark Six have a long term plan of overthrowing the current world order and bringing it back down to the chaos of the Age of Villains." Aldrich put a hand to his chin. "I'd like to prevent that, if possible.

Withdrawing Casimir from the Dark Six with sensitive information about each of the organizations has stalled their plans. From what I assume, they're moving around or covering for compromised assets.

That will still take weeks to months for them to do, and some assets, they're going to fight to keep. Like Blackwater.

But I've been wondering." Aldrich narrowed his gaze. "What if everything they had was mine? Wouldn't I be able to make much better use of it than them?

Plus, I know the AA-Panop only tolerates villains. They're the lesser evil compared to variants. I could use standing against the Dark Six as a bargaining chip for more influence."

Aldrich himself only tolerated the Dark Six. That alone was an incredible amount of patience considering the Trident was responsible for killing his parents. He had managed to separate his personal vendetta from the Trident because he had to respect the organization's power: taking it down required him to keep a cool and clear head.

But in the long run, Aldrich knew that the Trident had no place in the world. Not in the world he wanted to make, at least.

"Damn, you're being serious here." Stella nodded at Aldrich. She crossed her arms and cocked her head, thinking. She smiled. "Y'know, as a D-lister, I would never have even been a part of a conversation as big as this.

But now? I get to hear about overthrowing the behemoth that is the Dark Six and even be a part of it."

"If you want someone to smash up Meteor Labs, I can always make time," said Ace.

"Are you sure? This all sounds so big and dangerous," said Tox. "We-we're not even an official organization or anything, right? We're still hiding."

"Six days," said Aldrich.

"Huh?" Tox looked confused.

"We have six days until the hearing with Thanatos. Six days where the Dark Six will not expect us to make a move," said Aldrich. "The sooner we strike, the more unprepared they will be.

Casimir's information against them gets less and less reliable with every passing day."

"So we're gonna get in on the first strike?" said Stella.

"Yes," said Aldrich.

"I don't know." Stella furrowed her brows. "I like the idea of taking on the Dark Six, but whole reason we're even out here is to try and get the chiefs' support, right?

I feel like dunking them into a hot war so soon will make them get cold feet. All of them except for Clint."

"You're right. That's why I haven't been making any moves so far. I wanted to wait until the chiefs were fully on my side. I thought maybe they would take my side when they realized the Dark Six cut them off, but aside from Clint, most of them, especially Gerard, seem to want to maintain some level of neutrality.

For the chiefs to really commit against the Dark Six, there needs to be a casus belli for them to rally around," said Aldrich.

"Cass Bell?" asked Ace.

"Casus belli. It's a latin term meaning 'cause for war'" explained Aldrich. "The Dark Six needs to hurt them first. Give them a wound to nurse and feel the pain of so that they have the will to retaliate instead of running into the Wastelands."

"...Are you suggesting making this cause?" said Stella.

"I'm not suggesting anything," said Aldrich. "I'm just making an observation. But I do have a feeling that quite soon, we'll have to be battle ready. Enjoy your drinks, but make sure you stay alert.. Get used to these new bodies and test your limits. Keep up your training.

You might need it much sooner than you think."

Aldrich stood in his base's control room. Everyone was gone except Svetlanna who could man the entire thing herself using her powers.

Spybird was right. In pure processing power, Svetlanna was a monster, able to match Casimir's tech crew by herself.

Svetlanna sat there on the metal floor with her legs crossed and hands on the ground, her posture almost childlike. Coils of her wire and cable hair radiated outwards like a spiderweb, connecting to monitors and other devices.

"Hacking into Desmond's cyberspace? Now that's ballsy," said Svetlanna.

"Can you do it?" said Aldrich.

"I could. Infiltration's my specialty, after all. But it'll be dangerous, even for me," said Svetlanna. "You know how Cyberspace works, right?"

"I have a rough idea," said Aldrich. He knew that technology had fundamentally changed along with the Altering.

Nobody knew exactly how it happened, but at one point, all the networks and programming that connected and moved tech merged into one massive virtual space now dubbed as 'Cyberspace'.

Cyberspace was essentially a virtual reality. An entire world of its own. Or rather, a mirror world to the real world, or meatworld as technos called it.

Cyberspace looked like a three dimensional world where code and programming could be built up into tangible blocks, and those blocks could be formed and stacked to create infrastructure.

Anyone could enter Cyberspace with brainjacks and neural decks, but technos had the most 'processing power'. That is, they could more easily manipulate or create the countless blocks that built Cyberspace up.

Technos with higher processing power could manipulate the blocks to higher degrees, essentially becoming reality warpers in Cyberspace.

That was why Fisk got outscaled by Svetlanna. He had far less processing power, meaning he could not interact with the blocks to nearly the same degree as her.

"Alright then," said Svetlanna. "Because I was going to say you shouldn't expect too much from even me. A lot of people think technos basically just work magic, but it's far from that.

For an Infiltrator like me, I'm basically like a spy or assassin. Except in virtual reality. There's a lot of dangers that come with the job like surveillance and security.

Desmond's territory is pretty heavily guarded. In cyberspace, it looks like a damn near fortress. It's got some grade A defense, probably because he's storing a lot of sensitive information in it.

Without access keys, I can't do anything, and I bet he guards that with his life and more."

"I have the keys memorized," said Aldrich simply.

"You what now? How'd you even get that information!?" exclaimed Svetlanna.

Aldrich smiled lightly. "You're not the only one that knows how to spy."

Chapter 239: Desmond

"You have the keys?" Svetlanna exclaimed. She coughed into her hand, regaining her composure. "I almost can't believe it. How did you get them? Did you infiltrate Desmond's cyberfort by yourself?"

"No, if I could do that, I wouldn't be asking you now, would I?" said Aldrich. "I do have some experience in cyberspace, but nothing that compares to even a low level techno."

That was true. Non technos could access cyberspace as well with various forms of neural interfacing such as cyberdecks, head jacks, wrist ports, etcetera, but getting into the space was all they could really manage.

Unless you were a techno, manipulating code blocks that built up everything in cyberspace took massive amounts of time and effort. You had to go old school, manually writing or deleting the code within each of countless blocks whereas technos could just do it with their minds.

Techno avatars in cyberspace also had many more perks like being able to move through the space faster and more efficiently. Stronger technos with higher processing power also tended to develop unique powers in cyberspace such as the ability to hide away from security detection or corrupt security protocols.

It was better to think of cyberspace as less 'code' and more 'virtual reality.' One could only navigate the space using a virtual avatar, and if that died, they died too.

In fact, fights within cyberspace were very much like fights in the real world except everyone had varying degrees of reality warping. Technos manipulated the blocks around them to create weapons and shields and security or attack protocols that acted like summons.

Comparatively speaking, a non techno was defenseless. They could load into cyberspace with preset assets that granted them attack or defense power, but so could technos.

The biggest issue came in combat. Technos could repair their avatars or their weapons with their minds. Non technos could not. Technos could easily switch between various code constructs or alter them mid combat. Non technos could not.

The only non techno that Aldrich knew who could compete with technos in cyberspace was Elaine, and she was a one in a million genius. Someone like Aldrich was basically as helpless as a toddler in cyberspace.

Elaine. He had to make good on her last wishes too. Aldrich had sidelined that, having gotten caught up in fighting and establishing himself. But he needed to do that sooner rather than later.

Her adoptive father probably did not have much time left in him.

"What kind of security codes are we talking about?" said Svetlanna. "I can't imagine you could bug Desmond in cyberspace, so you probably have his room bugged with some kind of listening device."

"Your assumption would be correct." Aldrich was impressed by Svetlanna's deductive capability.

"Okay then, you probably have contact addresses, not keys" said Svetlanna. "I doubt Desmond and his crew try to operate visibly in meatspace, so you probably overheard him making calls.

They're probably in rooms like this, right? Dark and full of monitors that don't really show anything? Do they even have monitors at all?

Considering the fact that the only reason we have display screens is to show what's going on to non technos, I figure a full techno crew wouldn't even need any."

"Rooms are dark, yeah," said Aldrich. 'Dark' as in there were no screens to display anything. Just technos jacked in, seeing everything with their minds, not through screens. "But Desmond makes routine business calls. He shares keys there."

"If he's not sending them via message, then he probably has a few old school clients that prefer chit chat over text. How unlucky," said Svetlanna. Her eyes flashed a bright blue as she started to traverse through cyberspace. "Tell me what the addresses are."

"SPDR11a24g9b985 and LG2a22c41dd2783," said Aldrich.

"Interesting. Yeah, definitely addresses. They lead me somewhere in cyberspace, but they don't actually crack any security. These codes aren't secure enough for his main fort anyway," said Svetlanna. She crossed her arms and sighed. "In this case, they lead me to communication servers.

The good thing is, these aren't burner servers that get generated and tossed routinely.

From what I know, Desmond's an information broker that takes requests and reports from basically everywhere, so he needs stable servers with stable addresses or else he would be too hard to track down.

What I can do is if I could access this server, I could plant a bug in it that could worm its way through deeper into Desmond's more sensitive infrastructure.

He probably records everything that goes in these servers and transfers the info to his base, so I can hijack that pathway.

My cyberspace power specializes in creating bugs, so even if there's a small gap, I can abuse it."

"Then the solution seems easy," said Aldrich. "Just send him a request to chat at those addresses. I'm sure he'll oblige."

"Sure," said Svetlanna. "I'm doing that now. You can expect an answer pretty soon. But while that's pending, I wanted to ask you, what did Z say?"

"She said nothing," said Aldrich. "Well, she did ask how you were doing, but that's about it."

"Really now?" Svetlanna closed her eyes for a moment, and the room plunged into complete darkness, the only light source having come from her shining blue eyes.

When she opened her eyes back up, she shrugged. "I shouldn't have expected anything different. Thanks for going through the trouble."

"It's no problem. Do you have any relation with Z?" said Aldrich.

"She used to be my mentor. A while back. She gave me a nickname called 'V' that I still use. Other than that, there's nothing connecting us now," said Svetlanna.

"I see," said Aldrich. He could sense that Svetlanna did not want to talk about the topic anymore.

"And here's the response," said Svetlanna. "Okay, we're set. He wants to chat now. You do have to keep him busy, though, while I try and upload my bugs."

"How long are we talking?" said Aldrich.

"Five minutes, maybe?"

"And you're absolutely confident Desmond can't track you back?"

"Confident."

"Alright then, let me talk to him."

Svetlanna nodded. "I'm going to display him on a screen for your convenience. If you run out of things to talk about, hold him with some BS smalltalk or something."

Good luck."

Aldrich watched as a larger display screen lit up in front of him. It showed Desmond in a dark room lit by dim red lights that cast an ominous crimson glow over his face.

"Mr. Vane."

"Desmond."

"Why contact me again?" said Desmond. "I have already made my position clear in the meeting. I made it clear twice over with Casimir. Need I make myself clear thrice?"

"If you're entertaining this call, then I'm sure you still see some merit in working with me."

"Merit? Now isn't that up to you to convince me of?"

Aldrich crossed his arms. "I suppose you're right. From what I recall, the reason you can't work with me is because of your people, right? You don't want your people to get in the crossfire between me and the Dark Six."

"You heard correctly, yes," said Desmond, his expression quite reserved.

"What if there was no such risk?" said Aldrich.

"And how would you make that come to pass, Mr. Vane?" Desmond shook his head.

"The Dark Six has put on a massive bounty against Casimir. All of the criminal underworld ranging from freelancers to hired guns will be looking for him."

You think the Wastelands safe, but they are far from that. They are lawless and free, but they are not safe. You will find many bloodthirsty guns ready to track Casimir down across this entire country, no, beyond it, across the world.

I do not want to get involved with that."

"And if the other chiefs support me?"

Desmond shrugged. "Then that is their choice. But it will not be mine. I do not want a bounty on me or my people. I trust you know by now that I deal in selling information."

It is much harder to do that with a bag of credits looming over my head. Nethunters will track me across the depths of cyberspace. I can stay in my fort, but if my spiders and I cannot leave it to collect whispers, then we have no more livelihood.

We survive only by staying in the shadows. Joining you casts a spotlight on us that we very much cannot tolerate."

"Interesting," said Aldrich. "You don't believe in my ability to protect you or your people?"

"Ability alone is not enough," said Desmond. "In fact, the greater your power, the harder it is for us to work with you.

The more power you have, the more spotlights shine on you. Spotlights from both the criminal underworld and overworld entities such as the Panopticon and corporations.

And I have told you already: we do not appreciate spotlights, no matter where they come from.

Chapter 240: V-Parasite

"It's a shame, really," said Aldrich. "The reason I'm contacting you so often is because I see great potential in our partnership."

"And I do not, unfortunately," responded Desmond.

"What about a relationship as a client? Z could manage that with me. How about for you? I could appreciate buying some information here and there."

"I cannot do that."

"Any reason why?" Aldrich gave Desmond a pointed gaze. "The only reason I can think of for an information broker not selling me information - your livelihood - is because you already have a client working against me."

"Against you? Are you questioning my trust?" Visible annoyance showed on Desmond's face.

"Am I now? You tell me."

"Anything said among allied nomads is strictly confidential. For now, that includes you," said Desmond. "I will warn you, though, once this day passes and we all go our separate ways, that will no longer apply.

I would trust my words carefully if I were you, Mr. Vane. You might find it quite inconvenient to have spiders crawling around your room."

"Am I hearing this right? Is this a threat? Why so hostile, Desmond?" Aldrich remained calm. Collected.

"Not a threat. A possibility. One I'm sure you would like to avoid." Desmond's gaze narrowed, his pale grey pupils thinning almost impossibly. "I entertained your call now because I wanted to give you a lesson in person.

My spiders and I are of one mind. One network. And I have many spiders, Mr. Vane, crawling across every little corner of the Net.

Surfacenet or Darknet - my webs spin across all of them.

You do not want to get caught up in those webs.

I am telling you this now because there has to be balance.

Just like how the overworld maintains balance with the AA and the Panopticon, the Underworld must also maintain balance.

I saw it in your eyes.

Ambition.

Good to have, but like all things, in moderation.

If your ambition seeks to overturn the balance of things now, you will find many eyes, many hands, against you."

Aldrich eyed Svetlanna, and she lifted up one finger for him.

One minute until she was done uploading her bug. Faster than she had originally estimated.

Good. That meant Aldrich could start talking back instead of acting nice to reel Desmond in.

"If eyes and hands are the only things standing against me, then I'm quite unworried. I've crushed enough of both." Aldrich cracked his knuckles. "And I just got done crushing a few bugs, too, if you're concerned about whether I'm scared about spiders."

"..." Desmond stared at Aldrich with tense eyes before he chuckled. It was not a friendly one. More amused than anything else. "Now YOU are threatening me?"

"Oh, so you WERE threatening me. Good to see you admit it." Aldrich shook his head. "No, like you said, it's only a 'possibility'. I've afforded you three chances to work with me.

I'd have liked your skills on my side, but with all this talk about balance and sucking up to the Dark Six, I'm beginning to think that maybe you're not so neutral after all, Desmond.

Maybe you have backers already. Backers that the other nomad chiefs would be quite displeased to learn about."

"I don't want to hear you question my trust. Not from a plump city rat like you, donning your expensive suits. I will not betray my brothers and sisters." Desmond glared at Aldrich. "But if I need to convince them to get rid of a tumorous growth, I will."

Aldrich saw in his peripheral vision that Svetlanna gave him a thumbs up, indicating the bug was planted. "I appreciate your concern, Desmond, but I intend to make my cooperation with the chiefs a long term one. I only hope you don't make any mistakes in the future.

They might end up costing you."

Aldrich waved his hand, and Svetlanna cut off the channel. Desmond leaned back in his dark chair as his image crackled and snapped out from the monitor.

"Bug planted?" asked Aldrich.

"Yeah," said Svetlanna. She raised three fingers. "And three bugs from Desmond's crew taken out."

Aldrich raised a brow. "He was that bold?"

"No, these were very discrete bugs. I doubt he thought I would catch them. An ordinary techno wouldn't have caught them. Not even Spybird," said Svetlanna. "You really are lucky to have me around, you know.

If you used a letter grade to rank me compared to other technos, I would put myself nicely at a fat S."

"For that, you'll have to impress me a little more," said Aldrich.

"Pshh. Hard to please, aren't you?" Svetlanna pouted. "As for the bug I planted, it's one I've personally made called a V-Parasite.

Adapted from the Z-Parasite, if you know what that is."

"Enlighten me."

"You know the 2077 Corpwar?"

"I know of it. Not all its details."

"Right, a lot of it is under wraps. Well, you know how the Corpwar ended, yeah?"

"Yeah. Mega corporations scrapped against each other, sending out assassins and mercs and villains.

Unlike the first Corpwar, most of the fighting was 'cold', not involving civilians.

Ended with a fourth of Neo-Paris in ashes after a series of experimental bombs were detonated, forcing Vanguard to step in personally and end things.

One of the last times Vanguard did much of anything in his older age, too."

"Right, right. Those experimental bombs were Saber tech. The top dog military company of the time, having a nice and pretty seat on the Fortune Council. Meaning they had top of the line net security. The best technos and infrastructure in Cyberspace that credits could buy.

But you know what armed and detonated those bombs, blowing up half of Saber's armories and headquarters?

It was a bug. The Z-Parasite. It infected Saber's networks and stayed dormant, digging deeper and deeper until it finally got to the bombs hidden in the depths of their security."

"..." Aldrich made the connection. "I'm assuming Z is the creator of that bug?"

"Yeah. And I, her all so talented student, took that bug and made it my own with a few twists," said Svetlanna. "It's even harder to trace, though a little bit less effective penetration wise. In other words, you really don't have to worry.

Relax and kick back. I'm leagues ahead of Desmond."

"What do you think you can get out of this bug?" said Aldrich, his mind immediately racing into possibilities.

"What happened to relaxing?" Svetlanna sighed. "You'll burn yourself out at that rate. Well, let me see, my V-Parasite's security penetration isn't that deep, so I figure I'll be able to snoo around in any calls or chats that Desmond has on his communications channels."

"But can you get inside his base?" said Aldrich.

"No, not yet. His base has some thick security. Think of it like a castle gate. Once you get behind the first gate, it gets easier to storm the castle. Still hard with guards and sealed doors everywhere, but easier.

I need someone to open up that main gate for me."

"And how do you think you can get that to happen?"

"If I'm being honest, I can't. But that's the thing about my V-Parasite. It can self replicate and latch onto anyone that goes in and out of Desmond's comms channels.

Eventually, I figure we'll find someone that has a closer relationship with Desmond, and they'll unknowingly bring that bug into Desmond's castle."

"Interesting. What if that doesn't happen? What if Desmond doesn't let anyone in his castle walls other than those he truly trusts?"

"It's a possibility. At that point, you'd have to use force, and you're much better at that than I am."

"Force is meaningless unless it has direction."

"Right. And we have plenty of direction, don't we? You could kidnap one of his technos and force them carry the bug. Or I could try and infiltrate them myself, but they don't seem to ever leave their castle."

"It's a possibility, but it's too straightforward for now. I can't harm Desmond or his technos as long as he's still technically allied with the other chiefs.

If one of his technos goes missing for even a little while, I'm sure he'll know."

Svetlanna nodded. "Then we wait. I'll keep an eye out on who my V-Parasite bugs. If they're anyone important, I'll let you know."

"Got it," said Aldrich. "I'll be on my way out, then. Good job, Svetlanna."

"Just call me V. It's easier."

"Then good job, V."

Aldrich turned around, ready to leave.

"One thing," said V.

"Hm?" Aldrich paused.

"I know you want to make it big. You want to be a superpower in this world, and I'm real excited to be a part of that. But what's the end goal? What are you planning with all that power?"

"That's hard to answer, because to be honest, I don't know exactly myself," said Aldrich. "I want to make things right."

What that really means or how it ends, I don't know. But what I do know for sure is whatever path my goals take me, I'm willing to follow it to the very end."

"That's pretty dramatic. But pretty cool as well." V smiled and waved Aldrich off. "Go get some brooding time. I'll be here managing this whole thing all by my lonesome self while Spybird gets drunk to the seventh dimension."

Chapter 241: Feast

"A long day, I presume, O Elder" said Fler'gan as carefully held a crystalline crucible over a light blue flame with a pair of tongs. A pale white liquid boiled within the crucible, and a strange, damp smell filled the air.

"I got what I wanted to done," said Aldrich.

Getting Fler'gan started on his potion. Done.

Meeting with the chiefs, done.

Securing their alliance. A work in progress. Gerard still had not given his full seal of approval to Aldrich. But more done than not.

Getting the Blackwater students to stay on his side of their own will to maximize their performance. Mostly done as well. Most of them wanted material goods, and for that, he needed Sentinel status to get proper funding and a city that they could stay in.

"But I still have much more left to do." Aldrich sat in a chair within the confines of the cargo hold where Fler'gan's lab lay. He looked at the cramped, rectangular insides. "Like getting you a proper lab."

"Indeed, this lab is certainly considerably below the likes of the grand laboratories I used to toil away countless hours in." Fler'gan shrugged. "But how can this one complain?"

In the later half of my life, upon my exile from my fellow scholars, my lab always changed. From one deserted cave to another. From one forsaken land to another."

"Why were you exiled?" said Aldrich.

"The search for immortality," said Fler'gan. "O rather, the way in which I sought it.

Undeath.

Undeath disrupted the natural order of things. That is the false knowledge the gods spread, and it was the gods that sponsored the scholarly body that I was once proud of.

And the masses ate that drivel up so very easily. I can understand why. To gaze upon lesser undead, the walking, rotting corpses or the trembling white bones that should do naught but rest in graves must truly be horrifying to frail minded peoples under the gods.

Yet if defying death alone was an affront to the natural order, then the gods themselves are prime offenders with their coveted immortality."

"Why search for immortality with such drive? What made you give it all up?"

"Knowledge, O Elder. My kind are all driven to seeking knowledge. From the moment we emerge from our eggs and develop minds capable of sufficient thought, we desire to seek the unknown.

In that regard, we are quite unlike humans that hold an innate fear of the unknown."

"That desire, though, is it really yours? Is it not programmed within you?" Aldrich knew that all Mind Eaters like Fler'gan served a deity called the 'Elder One' that sought to devour all knowledge it could, especially from the brains of live subjects.

The Elder One spawned Mind Eaters and implanted within them a drive to seek out knowledge. Mind Eaters would find that knowledge, return to the Elder One, and then transfer over the memories of their lifetime. Afterwards, the empty, memory-less physical body would get melted down and recycled into a new Mind Eater.

"It may be, but if it is simply my instinctive drive, then there is nothing I can do about it, no?" Fler'gan placed the crucible down on a heat absorbing pad. "Nothing except to take that instinct and make it my own. Instead of finding myself destined to share all the valuable knowledge I learned with the Elder One, I determined it best to hold my knowledge to myself.

Whatever hand one is dealt with at birth, those instincts and drives wired into the very being, cannot be changed. What may be changed is how one handles those instincts.

The path of least resistance is to allow those instincts to take over, but the path of strength is to take those instincts and become their master."

"I see."

"Ah, this almost slipped my advanced mind. But I have encountered a minor problem of sorts in concocting your potion."

Aldrich cocked his head. "What is it?"

"These enhanced humans possess an innate resistance to mental manipulation," stated Fler'gan. "It is provided by the Alter Organs that fuel their great powers. It seems to create an internal field within the body that wards against outside manipulation."

"Right. That's a known phenomenon," said Aldrich. "It's almost impossible for Alters to use their powers within another Alter. But you're telling me the same applies for our magic based powers? I didn't encounter any issues using things like [Horror Warp]."

As a general rule of thumb, Alters could not just manifest their powers inside another Alter's bodies. For example, if somebody could create flames out of thin air, they could not just do that inside another Alter's head and instantly cook their brains.

There was an intrinsic field in live Alters fueled by the energy of Alter Cells that prevented that from happening. To a smaller degree, Aldrich knew that this also granted resistance to effects like mind control, but he had not expected it to work on magical powers.

"[Horror Warp] introduces a foreign agent from outside to within," said Fler'gan. "So it is more effective. Tell me, how well did my first potion work?"

"Quite well. There was an immediately noticeable shift," said Aldrich, recalling how Casimir warmed up to him near instantly after consuming Fler'gan's mind altering potion via wine.

"Quite interesting. The fact that the solution was drunk and introduced willingly into the body likely bypassed much of this innate defense," said Fler'gan. "Though, I suspect, considering how unrefined that initial potion was to Alter physiology, that it only worked to such a degree because the specimen was already open minded towards you to begin with."

"I can see that," said Aldrich. Casimir seemed to not be a man to hold any prejudices. He had an open mind all the time, always ready to pick out the best deals for himself, and that had been his downfall.

Or rise, depending on how a partnership with Aldrich was viewed.

"But imbuing your voice with hypnotic suggestion, I fear, will more easily be resisted," said Fler'gan. "There is a degree of separation between vocal introduction of the hypnotic effect and direct ingestion into the body."

"I only really need to know one thing: will it be effective?" said Aldrich.

"It will. But the specificities of the effectiveness will change," said Fler'gan. "Even with ten eyeflowers, I fear that the potion, when activated, will only grant you perhaps five seconds of strong suggestive capability.

Beyond those precious few seconds, the effectiveness will wane considerably."

"I see. So I really only get one sentence to convince the hearing." Aldrich thought about this for a second. He might get even less than that if the people in the hearing were powerful Alters, though he sincerely doubted it.

Generally speaking, only B rank supes and above started to have high enough AC concentrations where they could start to reliably ward off mind controlling powers.

Aldrich sincerely doubted most of the pen and paper wielders that made up the AA's upper management had high enough AC count to resist the hypnotic suggestion.

It was the time that hurt Aldrich the most. One sentence to convince an entire hearing added a considerable layer of challenge.

"A suggestion, O Elder," said Fler'gan.

"Hm?"

"I will add in an additional effect. In exchange for completely limiting the effectiveness of the hypnotic suggestion to a time frame of five seconds, thus preserving its power in a smaller threshold, I can add a condition where the suggestion grows exponentially more powerful when a listener is under strong emotions."

"Strong emotions?"

"Indeed. Particularly if those strong emotions are geared towards you," said Fler'gan.

"Interesting. So if I make them hate or fear me, then the suggestion can become even stronger?" said Aldrich.

"That is so. If the emotions are strong enough, the effect can become as permanent as if it had been willingly introduced into the body," said Fler'gan. "A thing to note. In my experience, I have observed that 'positive' emotion opens up the mind far more to invasion than 'negative' emotion, though certainly, both can work."

"Go ahead and make that change, Fler'gan," said Aldrich. "I can work with that."

"Understood, O Elder." Fler'gan's mouth tentacles curled up in reverence. "May fortune favor your future endeavors."

"Feast! Feast!" Volantis's voice boomed through the vast expanse of an enormous dining hall.

Aldrich found himself sitting at one end of a sizable rectangular table packed to the brim with large dishes of every kind. Steamed meats, grilled meats, braised meats, pickled meats, meat prepared in ways that Aldrich did not even know - all of it sat upon the table, just waiting for hungry mouths to devour them.

There were also plenty of vegetable dishes, plates of fruit, and sweet looking breads, jellies, and other confections.

"Devour to your heart's content!" the Death Lord declared from the other end of the table. "Viz, my grand chef, was a man of legend known throughout all lands for his divine skill in the culinary arts. When he heard that we were to have a feast for the first time in who knows how long, he was quite overjoyed.

I assure you, he will not disappoint!"

"I am glad you are back." Valera smiled at Aldrich from a seat beside him. She had on her dress for the occasion, matching Aldrich's suit well.

"Right," said Aldrich somewhat absent-mindedly. He thought about what his troops had accomplished for the day.

In the first trial quest, they had harvested six eyeflowers already. As Aldrich had hoped, the Geist claimed ownership of all six flowers using Crow's help, though if the Geist had not had a friendly relationship with the other creatures, Crow alone would have done nothing.

Aldrich wanted the leader of his monsters to be one capable as a leader, not just as the strongest among them all. The Geist seemed relatively well suited towards the role.

Okeanos had completely smashed through the second trial quest, and for his troubles, Aldrich had obtained the corpse of a Gigant Worm and spellbooks.

But most importantly, Aldrich received the hierophant's finger, sand seal, and a genie. The genie complained quite a bit from getting removed from her tomb, and she was thoroughly depowered to the point she had no wish conjuring power, but over time, Aldrich figured she could amass enough power to create a wish which would be invaluable.

The hierophant's finger, Aldrich had hopes that he could ask the Death Lord to try and raise. The hierophant was an immensely powerful figure of legend who was said to have the ability to call down the stars themselves, reshaping entire lands with meteor showers.

Getting that as an undead would no doubt make Aldrich's military might near unquestionable.

The sand seal was useful too, as it granted Aldrich a strong defensive matrix, though since it was immobile and anchored to one spot, it would only really get useful once he established a more permanent base.

Chapter 242: Feast 2

Aldrich knew that there was more he had to do. There was always something more to do. He still had to see how the Chrysalis developed so that he could figure out whether Boundaries could synchronize properly. He had to figure out how to approach the third trial quest now.

The Chrysalis, especially, he needed to figure out how much she could train her powers before the day of the hearing. At minimum, she would likely improve her ability to take things in and out of Aldrich's inner world, and that could prove to be invaluable.

If Aldrich wanted to make a point, to instill fear so that Fler'gan's potion worked well, he saw no better way than to showcase that he could take powerful troops with him at all times no matter where he was, ensuring that if he was made an enemy, there was never a space where anyone was safe from him.

"Oh, Aldrich, why do I sense that your mind has wandered off somewhere?" Valera poked Aldrich's shoulder and stared at him with a judging look.

Aldrich snapped out of his thoughts. "Just thinking."

Valera reached out across the table and brought a plate over to Aldrich. Atop of it were strips of grilled chicken breast laid across a creamy rich golden mashed potatoes.

"Try this. It is griffin meat, and I hear that griffin meat can make you faster and stronger," said Valera.

"Thanks." Aldrich looked over to Valera's side of the table. She did not have a plate in front of her. Just a large glass of blood red liquid. "You're not eating anything?"

"I prefer blood," said Valera. "As would most vampires. Thankfully, it seems this place is quite considerate of my kind." She swished the blood in her cup around in small, controlled circles with ladylike elegance before she sipped it. "It is quite fresh, extracted live. Not from no mere livestock either. From the blood of thinking creatures. Not quite human.

The blood profile is rather sweet, indicating that it was extracted from one experiencing pleasure and bliss.

Quite nice. Sweet blood is my favorite."

Valera held out her cup to Aldrich. "Would you like some?"

"Not quite my thing," said Aldrich.

"Oh, I see."

"Which is to say, I do appreciate the offer-,"

"I know." Valera nodded. "I simply want to get to know what you like and you do not like. The simple things. Not your favorite battle stratagem but your favorite foods and drinks and colors.

Things we should know in our relationship."

"You're right." Aldrich nodded back, filing down in his mind that if he was going to be in a proper relationship with Valera, he needed to connect with her on the small stuff too.

Or, at the very least, he needed to try.

"So, then-," began Aldrich before he was cut off.

"Haha! Are we drinking already!?" boomed Volantis. He did not sit anywhere but walked around with gusto, grabbing entire plates of food and shoveling them into his face.

His helm-face split down the middle and opened up, forming into what was basically a garbage disposal chute where he consumed anything he could get his hands on.

"At least there is one good thing about this body of steel: I can no longer grow full!"

"Don't get ahead of yourself, you armored whelp! These old bones can keep up with you a plenty!" A large horned skeleton shouted with equal might. He stood right beside Volantis, standing shoulder to shoulder with the tall armor.

The skeleton reached out and also shoveled plates of food into itself. Instead of spilling out everywhere through gaps in the bone, Aldrich saw that the food instead fed into a fire that seemed to rage within the skeleton that acted like a stomach, burning everything up that the undead 'ate'.

"Leos, before my return, I had no interest in feasts. But now, I shall show you who can truly devour the most!" said Volantis as he crammed in an entire roasted bird.

"All of you are weak." Okeanos stood with them, devouring dishes at hyperspeed. When he spoke, his words were a little garbled from eating while he was full.

Those three were in their own little world of competitive eating that Aldrich had no intention of joining. He did like to see his units were happy, though. He would have liked the units in his first trial quest such as the Geist to enjoy this as well, but they insisted on continuing to search for flowers.

"It is all so interesting." Valera looked upon the scene before her with a cocked head and a smile. "To think that we once fought against this tower, all these undead. I like to think they are more like us than the mortals we ended up defending for the sake of the realm."

"Isn't that right?" The Death Lord manifested on Aldrich's other side in a cloud of purple mist. She put a hand on Aldrich's shoulder. "How is it, Usurper? Is everything to your liking?"

"...Perhaps there is still potential for us to be enemies." Valera eyed the Death Lord's hand on Aldrich's shoulder.

"Come now, little lady, loosen up," said the Death Lord. "Were I not the one pushing for you and the Usurper's happiness, do you think you would even be where you are now?"

With that silly oath of celibacy of yours and your master too busy with himself to ever think of love?

Hmph!"

The Death Lord crossed her arms and turned up her face. "You should be showing me gratitude."

"...I suppose you do have a point." Valera sighed.

"Where is the Chrysalis?" said Aldrich.

"Perhaps it is time you named her something other than 'Chrysalis'" said the Death Lord. "It is only natural for those born to desire a unique name. But to answer your question, she is resting in Medula's study. She has tired herself out quite a bit training her powers, and I did not feel like the din of this feast a good place for her to rest."

"That was my sixteenth plate!" roared Volantis. He slammed his fist against the magic reinforced table. "Another!"

A skeletal waiter quickly rushed to Volantis's side with a plate in hand that quickly got devoured.

"Don't get cocky, boy!" The large flaming skeleton took two plates and directly shoved them into the flaming pit under its ribcage, incinerating both food and plate in one instant.

"Too slow!" complained Okeanos as he waved more skeletal waiters towards him. "Bring me more food! For master's sake, I cannot lose! Not to a bag of bones!"

"Who are you calling a bag of bones, huh, fish boy!?" said Leos as he chomped down on a slab of seared meat.

"...I can see what you mean. Her ears would have gone deaf by now." Aldrich eyed the flaming skeleton.

That was Leos, the second of the Deathguard. He was an ancient warrior from a civilization that far predated any that the player character interacted with in Elden World, belonging to the same civilization that the Hierophant did.

In life, Leos had been a revered general. In death, he was the High Commander of the Death Lord's many troops.

Where Rella, the first Deathguard, was a one man army on her own, Leos let the Death Lord's armies fight to their full potential. Though deadly serious in battle, it seemed Leos could let go and indulge himself when he wanted to.

In any case, even if Leos, Volantis, and Okeanos were quiet, there was still a large din from other tables in the enormous dining room where the Death Lord's knights conversed and ate. Even her five blacksmith giants were also present, picking away at a veritable mountain of meat.

Notably, Wai'ki and Medula were absent, but they did not seem like the type to come to these kinds of events anyway.

"But I must say," said the Death Lord. "Your little aspect is quite special in her talents and training."

"What's the progress on that like? And what about the training you proposed for her?"

"You are not planning anything strange, are you?" Valera looked at the Death Lord suspiciously.

"Hah, who do you think I am?" the Death Lord wagged a finger. "No, I have thoroughly analyzed your little one and found great insight as to how to train her.

The key is synchronization."

"Synchronization?" Aldrich asked.

"Indeed. In reading the little one's soul, I have found it exceptionally close to yours. You two are essentially two sides of a single coin.

There is a magic called synchronization that allows different individuals to bind to each other, sharing some parts of their powers.

The greater the compatibility between souls, the higher the rate of synchronization.

I have no doubt your souls are more than similar enough to synchronize.

What she currently lacks for you is combat experience and mana pool.

As a child, she lacks the mana pool to sustain her side of the Boundary properly. And in battle, it is unsure whether she can handle the stress of a fight to reliably use her abilities.

Synchronizing, however, allows you to draw on her power according to your own terms. It removes the decision making from her.

Simply put, you basically obtain her powers as your own. You decide how to cast and use them. You fuel them with your own mana pool, albeit at elevated cost.

This is the fastest way to have her powers - your Boundary powers - combat ready for you."

- Chapter 243: Feast 3 |

Chapter 243: Feast 3

"I see." Aldrich pondered the Death Lord's statement for a bit. "When you mean the fastest way to have her be battle ready, do you also mean the most optimal for her?"

"What do you mean by 'optimal'?" said the Death Lord.

"I would rather not put a child through a harmful process."

"Indeed," chimed in Valera. "The young can learn through trials of fire and hardship, but that learning damages them just as much as it forces them to grow. I know this well."

"You mean that is how your young learn." The Death Lord crossed her arms and turned up her face in haughty display. "Hmph. I simply do not understand the frailty of young among your kind. When I was born, hatched into a cold, empty cave, I had nothing and nobody.

I survived on my own merit and strength.

And you, usurper, I did not know you had such softness within you."

"I try to keep children off my hit list." Aldrich noted he used the word 'try'. Subconsciously, he understood that he was willing to go that far if he absolutely had to.

"Goodness, what do you think you two believe I am planning? To torture the little one? No, I know quite well how to care for them," said the Death Lord.

Both Aldrich and Valera stared at the Death Lord with visible disbelief.

The Death Lord looked between them and got defensive. "W-well alright, perhaps I am not entirely sure how the young of your kind are reared, but that is why I approached you with this topic! For your review!

Aldrich sighed. "Alright, so how does this synchronization work?"

"It is quite simple," said the Death Lord. "I enact the ritual, binding your souls together.

However at first, this binding is but temporary. A trial phase, if you will.

During this time, you two must actively work to strengthen the bond between yourselves. This is the most crucial aspect of this ritual.

Even similar souls cannot bind with each other if they do not share experiences and understandings with the other.

At the end of this trial phase, I will determine whether your bond is strong enough, and if so, forge it permanently in place. This will link both of you together at the spiritual level, allowing you to access her power on your own terms.

Think of it like you being able to 'borrow' the spells and powers she knows and amplify them with your own strength."

"What risks does this come with?" asked Aldrich.

"You will both be alerted to each others' emotions to a heightened level," said the Death Lord. "Over time, you will also begin to see each other's memories, most likely in your dreams, though I suppose considering how young the little one is, she will be seeing your memories more than you hers."

Aldrich crossed his arms. "Concerning. My headspace isn't great. Not a place for someone like her to be."

"The process will be gradual. The dreams hazy at first. She will have time to acclimate," explained the Death Lord.

"I have heard tell of this ritual before," said Valera. "From my time as a wandering exile. I faced a great assassin sent after me whose magics and weapons manifested not from himself, but from his twin sheltered far, far away."

"The Twinned Hunters of Astralis, the Phantom Kingdom," nodded the Death Lord. "A troublesome bunch. They tend to birth twins with opposite aspects."

One strongly rooted in the physical with powerful bodies. The other anchored to the spiritual with fragile forms but incredible mystical affinity.

Together, when soulbound, the spiritually aligned twin remotely strengthens their more combat capable twin with enhancing spells or construct weapons, creating potent fighters that are both skilled warriors and skilled mages.

The twin liches that rebelled against me hailed from that same kingdom."

"When I laid the assassin low after a battle that cost both an arm and leg, he begged me to spare his life for he said if he was to fall, his dear twin sister would fall as well," said Valera. "I still ended his life, but I wonder if that is a weakness."

"It is," said the Death Lord. "If one bound falls, the other does also."

In a similar fashion, the higher the rate of synchronization you are capable of sustaining, the more powers of the bound you may receive.

However, this comes in exchange with greater transference of undesirable sensations such as pain.

At the highest rate of synchronicity, you may even transfer over physical wounds."

"That's quite the risk," said Aldrich. "I don't think the Chrysalis would want to willingly subject herself to that kind of stress and potential pain."

"You may be surprised. Her soul is 'warmer' than yours, but it is still modeled after you."

And look at you now. You are strong. Your mind, especially.

I know you say you would not put a child in harm's way, but if it was the only option presented to you, you would do it, would you not?" the Death Lord narrowed her eyes, gazing at Aldrich intently.

"...I do what I have to do. And I haven't had to do anything like that yet."

"There are some that cannot make that decision no matter what. I have seen countless of them in my conquests." The Death Lord nodded at Aldrich. "You are not one of them. You know that you achieve what you desire, you must be willing to sacrifice."

One of the reasons why I like you. You remind me greatly of myself."

"Regardless, that isn't what we're discussing now, are we? If this is something that will hurt the Chrysalis, I don't think it's prudent to force on her. It may drive her away from me," said Aldrich.

"And once you drive a young one away with harshness, it is tremendously difficult to ever bring them back," said Valera, no doubt remembering her own experience in basically raising the princess she had guarded.

"The little one is stronger than you think. Just as you, Usurper, have suffered great hardship and grow strong from it, she too can do the same," countered the Death Lord.

"The whole point of me fighting is so that people like her won't have to make the same sacrifices I had to," said Aldrich. He paused. If he was an ordinary hero, he would have left it at that.

But he was not. "But if this is the only way, I'll try to make it work."

"A noble ideal, but indeed, this is the only way," said the Death Lord. "Elsewise you must wait for the Chrysalis to grow mentally and physically until she can handle her powers herself.

That may take time on the scale of years.

I do not know exactly how fast she matures, but you are in a tense situation where you need as much power as you can use now.

And believe me, if you are able to tap into the little one's enormous potential, to her affinity to Space itself, you will find yourself blessed with incredible powers."

The Death Lord paused for a moment. Her expression softened. Her usual cocky and proud smile disappeared into something understanding. The same expression she had used when she comforted Aldrich after he made peace with Adam and Elaine.

"I understand that ideal of yours. And I was not being mocking when I stated it was noble.

There is a merit in striving for a world of order where suffering does not befall those who do not deserve it. Such as children with no blood on their hands, no idea of the world around them that may force terror and war and plague upon them.

But ideals are nothing but faraway dreams unless you have the power to force them into reality.

The Chrysalis is a child, yes, but she is also a vast well of power. If you synchronize with her, you can take her power and make it your own. It is also the key to start developing your Boundary properly.

Her power is one you cannot let go. Not now, when you are surrounded by hostile powers, not when you need all the power you can lay your hands upon."

"..." Aldrich leaned back in his chair. He was confident about his position in the world in that he could survive and get stronger, but he also knew he was not a top dog yet.

Gerard did have a point. Compared to the strongest Sentinels, powerhouses like Emperor who arguably held the title for the strongest super in the entire world, Aldrich fell a whole league short.

He compensated with the unique nature of his powers being able to summon undead armies, but that alone, though it commanded a great deal of respect and wariness, did not put him at the top of the top just yet.

"You do have a good point. What exactly does strengthening the synchronization bond look like?"

The Death Lord smiled. "Quite simple. You spend time with her. You come to know her. You grow closer with each other. The stronger the attachment between you two, the stabler the bond becomes."

"Basically I just take care of her for a while?" said Aldrich. "No harsh training involved?"

"You will have to undergo trials of combat I will set for you two, but none she will not be able to handle. Come now, did you think I would toss her into a pit like they did with Rella?" said the Death Lord.

Aldrich and Valera eyed the Death Lord again with suspicion.

"You two - you truly have no trust in me!" the Death Lord protested.

"I'll talk to the Chrysalis and ask her if she wants to go through with the ritual," said Aldrich. "This trial phase, if can easily be undone, right?"

"Yes. There is no real bond that tethers you two together until the very end. Before then, it can be severed with no risk," said the Death Lord.

"Then it's a low risk option with high reward. I take those." Aldrich stared at the Death Lord.

"What is it now? Why stare at me with such intensity?" the Death Lord said coyly, a flirty smile on her lips.

Valera leered at the Death Lord.

"Speaking of rewards, I do believe you owe me for making my healing flask useless. That was a divine grade item, you know? I think I'm quite entitled to reparations here," said Aldrich. "And I do believe this is the second or third time I'm asking you for this, by the way."

Chapter 244: Feast 4

"W-what? You think I have been ignoring you, is it?" The Death Lord visibly balked at Aldrich's words. "Hmph! Did I hear correctly, Usurper? You wish for MORE from me?"

Aldrich shrugged. "More? Not more. I lost something because of you, and I now want something back from you. It's an equivalent exchange. Technically speaking, I'm not taking more from you."

"You never even used that little bottle!" protested the Death Lord. "And do you see me and believe I am some healer? No! I revel in carnage and death! Healing is beneath me."

"I know, but I still liked having it around me for the sake of insurance. Plus, the more my health pool gets, the more percentage heals like that get even more valuable."

Valera nodded. She faintly smiled, relishing in a chance to get in on a cooperative effort to bully the Death Lord. "He is right. I remember how many countless times that flask saved him. To be robbed of that is quite the problem."

"That goddess is nothing! You should be quite grateful I took her corrupting influence from you," the Death Lord crossed her arms dismissively.

Aldrich threw a side glance at Valera, and she glanced back at him too. When their eyes connected, it was like they had signed a partnership right then and there for the express purpose of bullying the Death Lord.

Aldrich started off. "I willingly rejected the goddess Amara's healing for you because I thought maybe you had a replacement for it, but if not even you, the Death Lord, can match Amara in that department, I guess I wouldn't feel too bad about it.

You did say it yourself: you're no expert in healing. I guess in some ways, Amara does have you beat."

"That is true. The goddess Amara had no equal in the healing arts, hence, why she had so many followers. I suppose there is no shame in understanding that there are some

things you cannot do compared to her." Valera took a cool sip of her blood wine while the Death Lord looked between her and Aldrich with increasing annoyance.

"You truly believe I fall below that foul eyesore of a god!?" said the Death Lord.

"I'm sure in some areas, you're much better than her," said Aldrich.

"Yet in the healing arts, with your hesitance to provide, it does seem quite obvious there are some fields where you are simply not quite her peer." Valera tipped her wine glass towards the Death Lord, pointing at her. "But that is to be expected, no? She is goddess of light and life, while you are master over death."

"Forget I asked," said Aldrich. He took his two pronged fork and knife and started to take bites of the grilled griffin, as if to say 'of course you can't do this, so let's get back to eating'. The griffith tasted just like chicken, which was kind of disappointing considering it was a fantasy creature. "I would be asking too much of you, and like you said, you've already done so much for me."

By this point, a light flush of hurt pride reddened across the Death Lord's pale cheeks. She bared her fangs as she exclaimed, "Fine! Fine! I will show you that anything that four faced fool can do, I can do even better! Give me that flask of yours!"

The Death Lord held out a demanding open hand towards Aldrich.

Aldrich manifested his healing flask from his inventory and handed it over to the Death Lord. She snatched the vessel away, staring at the glowing gold and blue and liquid within with abject disgust, like she had happened on raw sewage. The skin around her palm where she made contact with the flask started to singe, little wisps of smoke curling from it.

Aldrich raised a brow, concerned. The Death Lord saw this and shook her head. "What has this come to? You worry about even this tiny injury when I am the mighty Lord Over Death. The Dragonsbane. The Eternal Conqueror.

I am no damsel in distress, Usurper. My skin simply reacts more to the goddess's foul influence more yours as I am more attuned with death.

And I will show you once and for all that I am no 'second place' to Amara! I will have a replacement for you by the morrow!"

Valera put a triumphant hand on Aldrich's arm, as if to wordlessly say 'we won' and to herself, 'I finally get to bully the Death Lord after all the teasing she's thrown my way'.

"Hmph! Why do you heroes all obsess over this flask?" The Death Lord eyed the flask with a fang bearing frown. "All this does is restore your frail life. It does not add more, if simply returns you to weakness.

But why even bother when you could discard the weakness of your flesh and embrace undeath? True eternity?

I do not get it. Undeath uplifts mortals into immortals, and because of that, Amara and the goddesses feared I would sway the populaces against her. How fiercely they resisted my campaign to spread undeath across the realm for it."

"Well, you DID also have a campaign of complete massacre," said Aldrich. "Like that elven city you talked about. You completely destroyed it and killed all the residents. That's quite helpful in inciting fear, and fear is a good motivator to force men into action."

"For me, it was all or nothing. Absolute surrender or absolute defeat." The Death Lord sighed as she put the flask aside. "I gave chances for all settlements, towns, cities, fortresses, and the like that I bore down upon to surrender, and I made it quite clear that refusal meant accepting permanent death.

And why not? I thought it quite reasonable. Even in the case that I moved my power and forces in to annihilate those that resisted me, I made sure to grant all as quick and painless a death as possible.

My undead armies respect the sanctity of a pure death. We hold not the base desires of cruelty that force mortal or demonic armies into committing atrocities, torturing and taking and defiling in victory.

No, we promised to spread the cold embrace of death with as much purity as possible.

No torture. No defilement of bodies. No breaking of minds.

Simply death.

I had thought that quite honorable, but none of the mortals seemed to agree with me."

"That made your armies ever the more terrifying," said Valera. "It was said that your undead legions knew nothing of negotiation. They knew no emotion, no fear, no anger, simply an unextinguishable drive to kill any and all.

I understand your point. Mortal armies and forces commit countless atrocities when they are able to. I have seen it with my very own eyes. But there is something about an army that has no face, no emotion, and a pure drive to spread death that makes it even more sinister than even the most brutal of mortal armies."

The Death Lord sighed. "I simply do not understand mortal lives. Perhaps because I was already immortal dragon beforehand. Regardless-" The Death Lord smiled again. "This is no time to be reminiscing of a past of failed conquests and mortal idiocy. It is a time of feasting!"

The Death Lord stood up and clapped her hands. "Bring forth the drink! This feast is held in celebration of the Usurper, and yet, why does he have no cup!?"

"Yes!" boomed Volantis as he slammed down a huge mug, shaking the table and spilling some green colored liquid. "What is the point of this feast if the Warleader does not drink!? How can you show me your worth!?"

"I thought I already did that by fighting you-," began Aldrich.

"No, no, no!" Volantis exclaimed. "Worthiness in battle and worthiness in the feast are two entirely different things! Why do you think I battle Leos with such fierce will now!?"

Leos the burning skeleton raised his mug of green colored alcohol. "Yes, he is right! I have never heard of a leader that could not outdrink his subordinates. Come, Usurper, show me your worth! If I am ever to serve you one day, I must do so knowing it shall be under the right man!"

"I drink too! No matter what, I beat you two!" Okeanos also raised a mug.

"What?" Aldrich watched as large skeletons brought over a giant mug to Aldrich as well, topping it off with green liquid from a barrel. The liquid teetered over the edge of the cup, threatening to spill. "Is there even a point to this? Undead have poison resistance-"

"You think I do not know that?" The Death Lord said. "This is special alcohol that bypasses your resistances. Toxic to the normal mortal, but for us undead, quite the popular delicacy as it allows us to relive drinking days."

"Sounds like something an alcoholic would say." Aldrich looked at Volantis, Leos, and Okeanos drinking and thought maybe he HAD stumbled on a group of alcoholics. Immortal undead living armor, burning skeleton, and city destroying variant, yes, but still alcoholic nonetheless.

"Come now, drink up." The Death Lord pushed the mug to Aldrich. She stared at Aldrich's serious expression. "It is for one night. Take the time to ease up and bond with your troops. Look, even your guardian knight, so pure of a maiden she is, indulges herself in wine.

I will make sure if anything goes awry, if you ever need waking, to heal any intoxication from you."

"..." Aldrich sighed. "Fine."

Chapter 245: Feast 5

Aldrich took a tentative sip from the alcohol in front of him. The fact that it glowed what looked to be a suspiciously radioactive green did nothing at all to whet his appetite, but if it meant boosting his standing with his units, then so be it.

The taste was bitter, far more bitter than the Cool Lite that the Blackwater students loved to down. It was also strangely cold, not just in a refreshing way, but in a slightly numbing way.

"A tiny sip like that!? From my warleader no less!? How could this be!" Volantis shouted in despair to the heavens.

"Do not insult our master like that! He is finding out whether it is even worthy for his tastes!" said Okeanos. He was starting to get a little shaky. Seemed that in terms of sheer tolerance, he stood below the likes of Volantis and Leos.

Whether that was because Okeanos still had flesh and shell and blood while Volantis and Leos were a living set of armor and a pile of bones was up for debate.

"Hah, I knew the Usurper was but a mere boy!" Leos shook his flaming skull of a head.

"You would insult the one I chose as my own Usurper, Leos?" the Death Lord leered at the skeleton. "You will find yourself sorely mistaken. I know that my Usurper has what it takes to be Lord over Death!"

'Being death lord means crippling alcoholism...?' thought Aldrich.

"Do not pressure him," said Valera. "This way of drinking is quite inelegant." She swirled her wine glass of blood around with smooth, controlled motions. "Drink is meant to be savored, not downed like water after a long march."

"You vampires do have an obsessive wine culture. And a flair for the elegant," said the Death Lord. "And such pride, too. There was a reason I could never get your kind to join me." She cocked her head at Aldrich. "How DID you manage to tame this one, I wonder? Noble born vampire lady with an obsessive-violent streak. Hm?"

"Time and dedication," said Aldrich, and his words were honest. He was still speaking in game terms, but it was true: Valera's tie with him was high because he had spent hours and hours of time trying to unlock the highest level of bond with her, and she was perhaps one of the most difficult companion characters to do that with.

Aldrich noticed Valera had turned bright red, looking shyly away from Aldrich.

"Time and dedication, hm?" the Death Lord put a hand to her cheek. "How sweet. And admirable, Usurper. Time and dedication lets flowing water carve canyons. They are powerful tools to have, especially as an undead. But you know what is just as important?"

"What?" Aldrich said, expectant of the wisdom of an almost two thousand year old dragon.

"Drink!" the Death Lord pointed a clawed finger at Aldrich's still full mug.

"Here I thought I was going to get legitimate advice," sighed Aldrich.

"It is proper advice. Come now, look-," The Death Lord pointed over to Volantis, Leos, and Okeanos who all stared at Aldrich expectantly. "Breaking bread and sharing drink makes or breaks armies and kings. Even among dragons, it is a familiar concept."

Valera put a hand on Aldrich's arm. "If you do not want to do this-,"

"It's alright, Valera." Aldrich cracked his neck, like he was about to actually fight something. "I've got this."

Aldrich picked up his mug and started downing it. He ignored the funky taste and just focused on taking in as much liquid volume as possible.

"Now that is what I call a proper Warleader! The mightiest of Orcs would find their hearts quivering at this display!" Volantis shouted.

"Heh, I knew you had it in you, boy," said Leos.

"See? My master is the best at everything," said Okeanos.

"Hahah! Now that is the spirit!" the Death Lord waved over a skeleton waiter holding a barrel. "Bring that over!"

The skeleton raised the barrel towards the Death Lord, looking at the table for her mug but realized soon she had none. The skeleton chattered its teeth in questioning.

"I need no such thing!" the Death Lord grabbed the huge barrel from the skeleton, holding it high above her head with one hand, and then punched a hole into the wood with the other. This created a spout that poured liquid down like a flood.

The Death Lord, like a snake, literally unhinged her jaw, letting her drink the entirety of the sizable outflow.

"You really are a snake...", Valera eyed the Death Lord with equal parts repulsion at the inelegant behavior and wonder at how much she could drink.

Aldrich put down his mug. He had drank all of it. His head felt numb, the cold of the drink seeping into him.

This really did go through his undead poison immunity. He wondered how that even worked, but he found it difficult to think too hard about it. "And this is why I don't like drinking."

"Ahh, how refreshing." The Death Lord tossed her now empty barrel far away.

"Another! For the warleader!" Volantis slammed his mug down on the table, smashing it into pieces.

"Aye, I can drink to that," said Leos, the flame around his skull flickering even brighter.

"Drink for the master. Exciting!" chimed in Okeanos.

Aldrich found his mug refilled back to the brim from a skeleton waiter.

"So, how much more do I have to drink?" said Aldrich.

"How much more!? Such a question is a grave sin!" Volantis exclaimed. "In a feast for a new Warleader, the drinking and devouring does not end until all is consumed. Or until blood is drawn! Or both!"

"Sounds like chaos," said Aldrich. "Which I happen to not appreciate much."

"Indeed," said Valera.

"Sounds like a grand old time!" corrected Leos. "Hah, it is a shame you were not like this before, Volantis. I would have liked you far better instead of that serious hunk of metal you once were."

It got very tiring being the only one among the Deathguard willing to let loose once in a while."

"And now-," Volantis wrapped his arm around Okeanos in brotherly fashion. "You have two willing to drink you under the table! Or atleast until that undying flame of yours fades!"

"You seek to quench the Flame of Avarice? The flame that sent the entire Rheingold Kingdom into ruin? I accept your challenge! More drink!" Leos motioned the smaller skeleton waiters to come by.

The Death Lord stood and patted Aldrich on the shoulder, motioning her to follow. "Let's get in on this competition of theirs, shall we?"

Aldrich stood but looked to Valera, making sure she was okay or whether she wanted to join in.

"I will stay in the sidelines and watch," said Valera. "Anything other than bloodwine does not really suit my stomach well. Plus, I am simply happy looking at you enjoy yourself."

"I wouldn't call reckless drinking enjoyment," said Aldrich as he looked down at this topped up mug.

"But seeing your troops thrive is, is it not?" the Death Lord.

Aldrich took his gaze from mug to Okeanos and Volantis and their happy energy. He nodded. "Yeah. I guess it is."

Aldrich woke up in his bed in the Necropolis. The first thing his eyes saw were Valera looking down at him. He was laying in her lap, her hand stroking his hair.

"Are you feeling alright?" said Valera.

"As well as I could be, all things considered." Aldrich sighed and closed his eyes again. A headache banged at the depths of his brain, as did a general sense of nausea.

When he tried to recall what happened, he only got hazy bits and pieces that amounted to nothing decipherable. "I thought the Death Lord said she was going to stop me from getting to this point. What happened?"

"When she drank that entire barrel, I suspected she would not make good on those words. Even if she is a dragon, I assume someone like her would have made sure her drink had the ability to knock her out." Valera sighed.

"...Yeah, you do have a point." Aldrich laid there for a moment, not thinking of anything, just collecting himself. It felt nice lying there with a caring hand comforting him, but he could not stay like that forever.

Aldrich raised himself up, putting a hand to his head. "So what did happen?"

"Chaos, as you predicted," said Valera. "Okeanos was the first to fall, falling unconscious. Then Leos, his flame dimming as he too fell victim to drink. At that point, the Death Lord, three barrels in, made it well known that she was one of those drunks that causes nothing but trouble.

She challenged you to a fistfight."

"A fistfight? What?" Aldrich furrowed his brows. "I feel like with her current level, she would have killed me."

"She had the presence of mind to limit her strength at the very least."

"So? Who won?"

"You did," said Valera. "She was far too uncoordinated to do much. She mostly flailed about while yelling about how great she was. You, on the other hand, fought even better under the influence."

"Right. I'm not too surprised, I guess. I've trained to try and fight under mind control or poisons that limit my motor control," said Aldrich.

"Yes, and when she lost, she could not accept it and threw a tantrum, unleashing some of her draconic breath. She froze over most of the banquet room," said Valera as she put a palm to her face. "And that ended the feast right there. I put you and Okeanos out of harm's way, but Volantis and Leos were ice blocks for many hours.

After her tantrum, the Death Lord promptly passed out, and that was that."

"Yeah. That does sound like chaos." Aldrich sighed.

"Here." Valera put a small blue crystal fragment in Aldrich's hand. "Eat it."

"Hm? What is this?" said Aldrich.

"The Death Lord awoke from her slumber surprisingly quickly and got to work on your request. Thankfully, she did not forget. It is a prototype of your healing flask replacement," said Valera. "Apparently it should clear you of any ill effects like the poisoning from the drink."

Aldrich swallowed the fragment. It felt cold as it went down, but not numbing like the alcohol. It was a refreshing type of cold that woke you up, like stepping outside into wintry snow from a warm house.

Almost instantly, Aldrich felt better, his headache and nausea scattering away.

"Well, atleast it works," said Aldrich.

"Yes. I would have given that snake an earful if it did not after all she had you go through," said Valera.

"It wasn't the worst thing to go through," said Aldrich. "Might not have been my thing and I don't remember too much, but I guess it wasn't all bad."

Chapter 246: In Sync

"I am happy you enjoyed yourself," said Valera. "But such roughshod tavern behavior does not suit you, my dear master. Drinking and roaring and fighting like that, it reminds

me of my time in the Midnight Order there were were nothing but armored up oafs getting sloppy with drink and wanting my affection."

Valera clasped her hands together, remembering a fond memory. "If there is ever a way to return to Elduin, I would love to show you to a proper Night Dance where vampires like myself drink and dance and laugh. With elegance, of course."

"Now you sound just like Chiros."

"I suppose I do. I cannot help it. I made many happy memories during my time in the vampiric court, even if in the end, they ended up exiling me. For a time, I hated anything to do with 'elegance', but in time, I came to yearn for the parts of my home and people that made my childhood enjoyable," said Valera.

"One day, I'll try and find a way back. I want to experience that world too. With my own two eyes and hands," said Aldrich.

"Another time." Valera smiled. "We already have this world to conquer, don't we?"

"True. And we've got a lot on our plate." Aldrich got off the bed, feeling refreshed. "Any updates on eyeflower harvesting?"

"Seven flowers have been harvested so far, which leaves but three more," said Valera.

"Good. Looks like we'll have ten flowers by the end of today. Enough for Fler'gan to work with."

"The rewards from the second Trial Quest are also available to you at the throne room."

"The genie? How is she doing?"

"She has recovered from sulking. She seems quite cooperative, willing to take on a new master now that she is freed from guarding her tomb."

"Good to hear. And what about the Chrysalis?"

"She is well rested now. The Death Lord, in fact, wishes you to meet her. The synchronization ritual is ready."

"Then let's go." Aldrich materialized his suit jacket and ran his hand through his bone white hair to tidy it up a little. "I've spent enough time drinking and being knocked out."

"Are you sure this will work?" Aldrich stood in the magic testing room in Medula's study. The Chrysalis stood right beside him, her hand tugging at his pant leg as usual for comfort.

"Reasonably." The Death Lord stood a few meters away, her hands behind her back as she closed her eyes and generated magical energy. The air around her began to twist and warp, specks of misty purple swirling in concert with the distortions.

The Death Lord was channeling the [Ritual of Synchronicity] to aid the bond between Aldrich and the Chrysalis so that he could access her powers. For that, both he and the Chrysalis had to be present here.

The fact that the Death Lord had chosen this room, what was effectively a blast zone for experimenting unstable spells liable to blow up, did not give him that much confidence, so he had brought Valera along as well to protect him.

"Teacher, will I be okay?" the Chrysalis spoke to Medula.

The lanky demoness stood at the end of the room, watching a hovering series of stone panels in front of her to read the magic in the room, specifically around the Death Lord. "I do not see a high probability of your demise."

"W-what? The words were big, but that doesn't sound good." The Chrysalis looked up at Aldrich.

"Do not worry, child." Valera stood in front of both Aldrich and the Chrysalis. She had her shield readied in her arm. "If this snake causes chaos yet again, I am ready to shut it down."

"Such a lack of trust. You vampire lot, so tiresome." The Death Lord sighed. She inhaled, her chest rising, then exhaled. With her breath unraveling, the magic around her surged to incredible levels.

Aldrich knew that this room was made of stone that absorbed magic, making it a good testing ground for unstable reactions, but even with every inch of the ground, ceiling, and walls sucking in the Death Lord's magical aura, the room still shook and rattled.

"Maybe this wasn't the greatest idea," said Aldrich. "Not after what I heard you did yesterday night."

The Death Lord blushed and looked away with her eyes closed. Her surging magical aura chaotically flared a bit, managing to crack even the magic absorbing ground. "That-that was a mistake! We all make them, even great ones like myself!"

The Chrysalis shrunk back in fear at the splitting ground.

"Focus on your magic, you snake!" complained Valera.

"Fine, fine. I am almost done anyway." The Death Lord's energy rocketed in one extreme moment, lighting up the room brightly before it all faded away as soon as it had

risen up. This left the ground beneath her cracked and smoking and the Chrysalis cowering behind Aldrich's leg.

"There! All done." The Death Lord removed her hands from her back. A pale blue bracelet hung from each hand, shining with a faint glow reminiscent of the blues that Wai'ki conjured with her spiritcalling magics.

"...That's it?" Valera seed as she peeked out beneath her shield. "Bracelets?"

"That's what I was about to say," said Aldrich.

"Wow...pretty." The Chrysalis hopped in front of the shield and pointed at the bracelets. "I want one!"

"Ask, and you shall receive, little one." The Death Lord smiled. "Or I suppose you are demanding, but I will let that slide for now."

Aldrich raised his hand up, signaling Valera to put her shield aside.

"I thought the ritual would be a little more, hm, direct?" said Aldrich. "Involving some tie being forcibly tethered between myself and the Chrysalis."

"Usually, the ritual is like that. It would also involve considerable pain and mental anguish, but that would not do for the little one. Thus, I spent some time with Wai'ki modifying it so that it would cause no harm." The Death Lord knelt down as she held out a bracelet to the Chrysalis.

The Chrysalis stood in front of the Death Lord, shyly eyeing the bracelet, wondering if she could take it.

"Surprisingly considerate. For a snake like you, that is," said Valera.

"Hmph. I pored over a tome about mortal child rearing just for this. All of you should be grateful, do you hear?" said the Death Lord. She eyed Aldrich and Valera.

"Of course, of course," said Aldrich. He came up beside the Chrysalis, noting her eyes sparkle as she gazed at the bracelet. And he could understand why she was so engrossed. The bracelets seemed to call to them, as if whispering deep in their very heart of hearts to take them. "This sort of feels sinister. Almost like the Emperor of the Rings movies."

"What now?" said the Death Lord.

"Nothing. You're sure this has no ill effects, right?" said Aldrich.

"Indeed. By placing the link between you in the rings, I take out the painful process of imbuing them in your souls. The actual process of growing your bond to draw your souls closer is painless.

It is supposed to be pleasant, actually, for two souls growing close together is always a warm event." The Death Lord showed Aldrich his bracelet. It was simple in design. Basically a plain light blue, almost white ring.

In contrast, the Chrysalis's ring, smaller to fit her wrist, was more decorative, carved in with patterns of round, many petaled flowers. "Look, I even designed them to match you two."

"I like it!" the Chrysalis clasped her hands together and asked the Death Lord politely. "Can I take one?"

"Of course, little one," said the Death Lord.

The Chrysalis now looked up to Aldrich. "Can I?"

Aldrich paused for a moment, then decided to go for it. "Go ahead."

"I won't take one unless you take one. So we can match!" said the Chrysalis.

Aldrich nodded. "Alright then."

Both Aldrich and the Chrysalis took their respective bands, and when they wrapped around their wrists, they felt an immediate sensation of a frosty chill running through their minds, waking up their senses with a shudder.

For a few moments, Aldrich felt his senses heighten, his ears ringing and his vision sharpening and blurring in irregular waves. He realized it was because he was linking with the Chrysalis's senses on top of his own, enhancing his to some degree.

But if it was like this for Aldrich, then how was it like for the Chrysalis?

He looked down to see the Chrysalis breathing heavily, her hands on her head.

"Are you okay?" Aldrich immediately knelt down, putting a hand on her little shoulder in concern.

The Chrysalis's pure white, blank pupils dilated. Her breathing slowed down to a crawl, and her shudders faded into a concerning stillness.

"Right, I did forget that perhaps there may be difficulties in the little one adjusting compared to you," said the Death Lord. She scratched her head. "I forgot that you mortal little ones are exceptionally fragile."

"How do you keep forgetting this simple fact! I thought you read a tome on child rearing!" said Valera.

The Death Lord sighed and shrugged. "My own upbringing is too ingrained in my head. My first kill was within ten seconds of me leaving my egg, you know."

"I'm...I'm fine!" the Chrysalis raised her tiny arms in the air triumphantly. "I'm strong, no worries! And I can see much better! Hear so much more!"

Chapter 247: Explore Time

"Marvelous," the Death Lord remarked, wonder in her eyes. She directed her awe to the Chrysalis. "She can adapt so very quickly. I do not think either of you should worry much about her. She is strong. And as Medula has said, she has potential."

"I'm strong!" the Chrysalis exclaimed with glee.

"How much of a buff does she get with shared stats and senses?" said Aldrich. "On my end, I barely notice anything. Maybe that's because the scales are more tipped towards me."

"That factors in somewhat, but mostly, it is because you two have not had time to develop your syncretic bond," said the Death Lord. "The more the bond develops, the greater the shared essence between you two."

As of now, I doubt she has developed much more than heightened senses and strength. Enhanced to a far greater extent than what you received from her, of course, but not anything exceptional either."

"I see," said Aldrich. He looked down to the Chrysalis. She smiled up at him and asked while tugging at his pant leg, "Am I strong?"

"You will be." Aldrich patted her snowy head of hair. He asked the Death Lord, "How do you recommend I boost our bond together? How long will this take?"

"There is no secret method to unravel all." The Death Lord shrugged. "You simply must spend time with her. Time that will bring her close to you. If you focus on her, you may become close enough that I can finalize and 'lock in' the ritual fully in three to five days with how compatible your souls should already be."

It takes the average mortal, even if they are a twin, a year to establish a strong syncretic bond. That it takes mere days for you two is a testament to how similar your souls already are."

"We're the same?" The Chrysalis put her hands atop her head, resting them against Aldrich's.

"I guess so," said Aldrich.

"It is still almost unbelievable," remarked Valera. "She seems so different from you. So very innocent and wonderfully adorable."

"Everyone was a child once," said Aldrich. He looked into the Chrysalis's wide, curious, happy eyes, and he felt a twinge of pain deep down, as if digging up a pained old memory. "With wide eyes and big dreams."

Valera sensed Aldrich's emotions and comforted him, putting a hand on his arm.

"It's alright," Aldrich nodded to Valera.

"Look at that, you two are making me jealous," said the Death Lord, miffed at the display of care and affection in front of her. She crossed her arms and turned up her face. "Hmph. Go on then. Bond with your little one. Do as you want."

"About what I was promised-," began Aldrich.

"Oh, that," groaned the Death Lord. "You never let things go, do you? I am having a replacement for you. I shattered the flask to reforge it, but divine class artifacts are quite the struggle to work with. I will have a suitable replacement to you as soon as possible.

Do note, though, that the item will have restorative effects, but the way in which it manifests them may be considerably different than what the flask was capable of."

"Do you know how different?"

"No, not yet. So do not pay it much mind."

"I'll be expecting great things. Especially from a great person like you."

"Hmph. You will not be disappointed." The Death Lord still maintained her haughty, crossed arms posture, but she smiled, happy to have her greatness recognized.

"Right then, bonding time..." Aldrich looked to the Chrysalis. "What do you want to do?"

"I don't like it here," said the Chrysalis. "I want to explore! Outside!"

"Hm, I do have things I need to do here-" began Aldrich, but the Chrysalis frowned, her eyes widening not in curiosity now but sadness.

"Looks like you must leave this realm to enhance your bond," said the Death Lord. "You get a chance to show me how mortals truly raise their young."

"Right." Aldrich put a knuckle to his forehead, trying to remember how to be a good parent. He had never parented before, obviously, but he knew he was not bad with kids.

Probably because he had a lot of reference to work with using the memories of his parents.

At the least, he was confident he was better than the likes of the Death Lord, but she was the rock bottom standard, so he did not feel exactly great about comparing himself to her.

"I will have Leos keep your troops trained and occupied," said the Death Lord. "As for the third Trial Quest, I am afraid I will have to forbid you from entering it for now."

"Why not?" said Aldrich.

"I told you that the process of synchronizing is pleasant, but to finalize the bond, to forge it into permanent place, requires a time of tremendous challenge.

I have determined that time will be the third trial quest. I also require time for Medula to perform some experimentation upon it as she is curious about where demonkind has gone following the end of our home realm."

"Understood. I guess I owe you that much for what you've done so far."

"Indeed. Now enjoy your leisure time. Leave this realm to me as you usually do when you leave." The Death Lord sighed. "At this point, perhaps I should have myself and my guard all wear maid uniforms. That is what we feel like at some points."

"I'll pass," said Medula, glancing at the Death Lord with a sharp red eye of protest.

"Plans to tempt my master even more, snake?" said Valera.

"Hm? If my talk gets you all riled up like this, then maybe I will wear the uniform," the Death Lord smiled slyly.

"Explore time! Explore time!" the Chrysalis tugged at Aldrich's leg.

"Can you give me just a bit of time?" said Aldrich gently. "We can explore right after."

The Chrysalis nodded. "Okay."

Aldrich spent the next half hour gathering all the rewards from the past day. He raised the Megaloptera head and kept it in the Nexus along with the rest of his monsters.

From the second trial quest, he raised the gigant worm and left it in the quest realm to save space. He then put the spellbook and sand seal in his inventory.

As for the Hierophant's Finger, he transferred it over to one of the Death Lord's skeletal servants, requesting that she determine whether she could raise the Hierophant as an undead.

Most likely, though, Aldrich did not expect the Death Lord to be capable of such a feat. The Hierophant was a mighty demigod, and enough divine blood prevented undeath from taking root. Not even the Death Lord could break this innate divine defense.

Rella, a demigod, was not even undead. She served the Death Lord out of her own volition.

In the case that the Death Lord could not raise the Hierophant, Aldrich would have to consider who to give the finger to. Upon consumption, the finger granted an undead some magic related passives and spells. Fragments of the Hierophant's power.

Supposedly, it was possible to revive the Hierophant if a player could retrieve all of his corpse parts. This included six fingers, two arms, two legs, a torso, and a head.

Basically Exordia from a well known children's card game that Aldrich used to play as a kid.

Aldrich had never found all the parts no matter how hard he searched, so he figured it an impossibility even now, especially with the game realm gone.

Aldrich touched base with the genie who said she would take eight hundred years to generate another wish, at which point, Aldrich said she was useless.

In response, the genie cried and sulked, making communication difficult. Aldrich left her to compose herself while he addressed other concerns.

Aldrich checked up on the first trial quest briefly by telepathically communicating with his units as he had no time to go into the quest realm. He told the Geist he was doing a good job which in turn motivated the Geist to do even better with a resolute 'Geh!'.

It seemed that eyeflower harvesting was proceeding quite smoothly.

With that all done, Aldrich finally stood in front of the throne room crystal with the Chrysalis beside him.

"That was fun!" said the Chrysalis. She made big circles with her hand. "I saw a big, big worm! Big bug!"

"And you'll get to see much more, too, once we head out," said Aldrich.

"Explore time!" said the Chrysalis.

"Are you sure you want me to come?" Valera said from behind Aldrich. "I can stay behind too. You will not need the snake to manage the troops, for I can do it better than she ever could."

Aldrich sensed jealousy from Valera. Probably because she felt her job security as a commander threatened. He maneuvered to eliminate this.

"No, Valera, I need you with me," said Aldrich. "If I'm going to be exploring, I want someone that can defend me. Someone strong. Someone that I trust. That's you.

Plus, you can blend in with people and you don't show up on AC scans like me, so you're objectively the best choice."

"Only objectively?" asked Valera.

"And because I'd rather it was you than anyone else," said Aldrich.

"Now that is a good answer." Valera smiled. "Then onwards we shall go, my master. I will defend you from all our enemies. And enjoy time with you as well. What a wonderful time we shall have."

Chapter 248: Samples

Aldrich manifested back in the dark depths of the Crypt. There, he saw Wai'ki's clone of Volantis lying down, tossing a book up and down in the air to keep himself entertained.

"Ah, it's you!" said the clone. It lowered its voice when Aldrich put a finger over his mouth. "Apologies. I was simply getting bored down here."

"A mere spirit construct can feel such things? Wai'ki truly is a master," remarked Valera.

"Are you bored, mister?" The Chrysalis hopped on over to Volantis. "If you want, you can come with us to explore."

"No, he can't" said Aldrich firmly but gently. "He needs to stay here."

"That, I do," said the construct with a sigh.

Aldrich looked around. The construct had done a good job sending supplies packs up and down. Even eating the supplies. The books from the colonel were scattered about haphazardly.

"Maybe reading will help," said Aldrich.

"I cannot read this script," said the construct in despair.

"Oh, right." Aldrich shrugged. There was not much else he could do to help. Not with 22 sitting atop the Crypt, probably watching on high alert for any disturbance.

"I can help!" The Chrysalis clapped her hands. A white portal emerged in front of her hands, and from it, a few volumes of graphic novels and manga from Aldrich's Boundary popped out. "Those all have pictures. No need to read them."

'You do have to read them to figure out the plot,' thought Aldrich, but aside from that, there was a more pressing issue. "I don't want to leave traces of us behind."

"But he's so bored," said the Chrysalis. She looked up at Aldrich with wide eyes. "We can't help him?"

Aldrich sighed. "No. Sometimes, you can help others, sometimes, you can't. This is one of those times you can't."

"I am fine," said the construct. "My existence is temporary as well. You need not worry about me. I thank you for your concern, however."

"Okay," said the Chrysalis. She reached down and tapped the books she spawned, materializing them back to the Boundary. She stared at Aldrich with quizzical expression. "How will I know when to help? And when not to?"

"Hm. It's hard to tell you with words. When the time comes, I'll show you through example," said Aldrich. "Now come on, we have to get going for exploration, don't we?"

"Okay!" the Chrysalis put her hand on Aldrich's and then disappeared, warping into the Phylactery that she had made her home.

"Valera." Aldrich held his hand out towards her.

"To think I can take a look at your inner world. It is quite exciting." Valera grasped Aldrich's hand. The Chrysalis used the power she could manage to draw Valera in.

Aldrich noted that instead of dark tendrils sucking Valera in, she instead faded away into white particles, absorbing into Aldrich's chest. Perhaps a result of the Chrysalis gaining greater control over her powers due to her training.

Hopefully, when this synchronization period was over and Aldrich could use the Chrysalis's magic with his own vastly greater mana pool, he could freely take large amounts of units in and out of himself.

Or, if Aldrich felt he was in particularly high risk, keep his Phylactery somewhere else with troops inside of it to guard it.

With that, Aldrich cast [Mist Phase], warping out of the Crypt with everyone he needed in tow.

Aldrich warped to Fler'gan's laboratory.

"A pleasure to meet you again, O Elder," said Fler'Gan, nodding at Aldrich's materialization from mist.

"Same here." Aldrich spied the Mind Eater watching over a boiling spherical glass container filled with light blue liquid. The container was easily the size of a basketball, and darker blue smoke wafted from the flask neck, clouding the room in a faint haze that smelled oddly sweet. "The potion, I assume?"

"Yes, though as of yet unrefined. I must incorporate the eyeflowers before I can fully refine it. And, ah, while you are here, one of your eyes, if you do not mind suffering the damage." Fler'gan's tendril like fingers stiffened into almost spike like structures. "Or, if you would like, my mucus membrane can naturally dull pain and bleeding, allowing me to easily dissect live specimen. I can perform the extraction if you so desire."

"No, I'll do it. Being undead does have its perks, after all." Aldrich gouged his own eye out with a casual motion. As an undead, he still felt sensations, but above a certain threshold, they were muted. Especially sensations like pain that could negatively impact him. He tossed the freshly plucked eyeball towards Fler'Gan.

Fler'Gan grasped it in his slithering fingers. "Many thanks, O Elder. This potion requires considerably more resources. I hope you will understand."

"I do." Aldrich's eye socket covered up with green mist, and when the mist faded away, his eye was completely regenerated. "Your work hasn't disappointed so far.

Which does remind me, you have the most magical potential out of all my legion so far. I have a [Finger of the Hierophant] that I can potentially grant to you. It should considerably increase your strength."

If Aldrich remembered correctly, the Hierophant's finger boosted a unit's levels in the same way that Dark Wisdom did. The lower their level, the greater the boost with a cap at level 40.

Fler'Gan should at the very least go from level 20+ to level 30+, netting him a sizable boost in strength that kept him competitive with units like Merman and Crab.

Not just that, though, but the finger boosted the magic that the unit already knew, granting them access to much stronger spells depending on what their magic specialization was.

For example, Fler'Gan who specialized as a Pyromancer would learn a host of new fire based spells. He would probably even gain insight into additional alchemy skills and the like.

Notably, however, it was useless for Aldrich because Necromancy did not count as a type of magic that the finger boosted. Thus, in the game, the finger was meant to be given to a trusted magic specialized unit.

In this case, Aldrich figured his would be Fler'Gan.

"Ah, the corpse parts of the great Hierophant, last heir to the Arcane Emperor's legacy. It is said that by devouring his parts, one obtains the infinite knowledge of the emperor that shaped magic as we know it," said Fler'Gan. "Knowledge is always the golden light I strive for. If you need not the finger for your own purposes, I would be honored to partake of it."

"I'd be hard pressed to find anyone else to trust," said Aldrich.

"I am truly honored, O Elder," said Fler'Gan with a deep bow. He then reached into a cabinet and excitedly retrieved an eye-phone. He tapped it, causing the screen to light up. "And look at this, O Elder, I am beginning to understand and use the technology of the mortals in this realm use.

The one you known as Casimir granted this to me, describing it as a personalized repository of infinite information.

I must agree.

It is a manner of contraption I could not have ever fathomed. It holds so many functions. Recording events, capturing images, taking notes, and the like.

But most important of all, it holds access to an infinite store of information on a space known as the 'Net' that I have thrown myself into.

Truly, to think that the humans of this realm have managed to centralize all their accomplishments, all their thoughts and innovations, into one shared space - it does explain the frightening ubiquity and advancement of their technology.

Magic - the study of the few - cannot compare to it."

"Just make sure you don't get sucked up in the Net. It's easy to get lost in misinformation or what amounts to tons of garbage," said Aldrich. "And wait, you said you take notes on it? Doesn't that mean you know the language?"

"It is one of my Arcane spells, yes," said Fler'Gan. "One necessary as a scholar of the citadel where peoples of every corner of the realm joined."

"You said you could record your spells into tomes, right? Try to make that one a priority," said Aldrich.

The units from Elden World could speak English and other languages here, but they could not read anything, as evidenced by Volantis's construct. That was because according to lore, the Arcane Emperor unified most races so that they spoke with their souls, thus allowing everyone to communicate with each other.

However, each race had already developed their own writing systems before the Arcane Emperor's rise, and many of them kept them, thus, there was no concerted effort to unify the language. And the emperor had not or could not devise a spell to universalize writing the same way he had done with language.

"I will try," said Fler'Gan. "But I require materials from our realm. There are trees in that swamp around my study, no? Those can be processed for parchment. That will do for lower circle spells, but the [Eye of All Writ] that allows me to read and write in any system permanently is of a considerably high circle tier.

I can modify a version that allows for temporary effects, or perhaps I can mass produce items like glasses that could allow for it."

"Either or works," said Aldrich. "The item solution actually sounds better."

"I will require glass capable of enchantment of some kind," said Fler'Gan.

"I'll have that ready for you in a few days," said Aldrich. The third Trial Quest held such glass in abundance. But he would only access that until after he had built his bond up with the Chrysalis. "If that's all, Fler'Gan, I'll take my leave."

"Ah, one more thing, O Elder." Fler'Gan showed Aldrich his phone screen with surprising aptitude. Aldrich had thought Fler'Gan would have fumbled about with the phone like old people do, but he had adapted very quickly.

Aldrich saw pictures of two statues held inside large metal cargo crates. One made of blood red crystal housing a humanoid shark within. Another a statue of stone depicting a man reaching desperately upwards, as if drowning and clawing out to air.

The shark variant from the battle against the fishmen and Fletcher from Blackwater respectively.

"What will you do with these?" said Fler'Gan.

"I can't raise Shark anymore. Chiro's crystal venom damages the corpse at the cellular level so the corpse isn't stable enough for undeath.

But the crystal construct can be detonated as a powerful bomb, so I'll keep the Shark statue around for later." Aldrich narrowed his eyes at the picture of Fletcher. "As for him, his consciousness is still inside there, trapped in what must be eternal agony. I'll keep him suffering for a little while longer. Until I really need him."

Which might be surprisingly soon, considering Aldrich planned on using Fletcher when he took over Blackwater. But at minimum, that would take a week. A week trapped inside a prison of rocky nothingness must have felt almost insanity inducing already considering what a few days of solitary confinement could do to the average man.

"Understood, O Elder," said Fler'Gan.

"One more thing," said Aldrich. "I have your editor sample ready."

Chapter 249: Lnstinct

Chapter 249 Lnstinct

Aldrich tapped his chest, where his Phylactery was.

In response, the Chrysalis and Valera materialized in a shower of white particles.

"Explore time yet?" said the Chrysalis. She looked around at Fler'Gan's lab in wonder. "So many toys..."

"These are not toys, child," said Fler'Gan. "These are fine instruments of alchemy. You would do well to know the distinction."

"Squid face!" Chrysalis pointed at Fler'Gan's mouth tendrils.

"...I truly do not deal well with youth," muttered Fler'Gan.

"Can you bring out the person you've been keeping in the room?" said Aldrich. "The one you've been putting to sleep?"

"Mhm. Okay." The Chrysalis closed her eyes and concentrated. She then clapped her hands, and with that, the Editor materialized in a flash of white. He fell to the floor of the cargo space with a thump, still snoring in deep sleep.

The Editor was still dressed up in tattered grey suit from attending Aldrich's 'party'. The last real survivor, though, soon, he would lose that privilege.

"He's all yours," said Aldrich.

"Many thanks, O Elder." Fler'Gan's finger tendrils trembled in sheer excitement as he raised the Editor up with telekinetic force. "Ah, I do hope that this specimen will be the breakthrough necessary for me to finally merge the magic of our realm and the powers of this one together."

"I hope so too."

"Father, what's going to happen to him?" The Chrysalis cocked her head at the Editor Alter floating in the air. "Will squid face make friends with him?"

"No, child, I will thoroughly break apart-," began Fler'Gan before both Aldrich and Valera stared at him with judging eyes, stopping him from going on about how he was going to dissect and brutalize the Editor.

"I get it," said the Chrysalis. "He's a bad guy. You're going to get rid of him."

Aldrich blinked in surprise. He knew that if the Chrysalis represented the pure side of his soul, then murder and torture were all going to be hard things to swallow for her. For any child, really.

As a result, Aldrich kept her away in the Boundary. He could sense that unless she actively made the effort, she did not know what was going on outside, so he used the Boundary as a time out space to stop her from hearing the more unsavory things he dealt with.

Valera had kept the Chrysalis occupied in the Boundary, playing with her with hide and seek. That kept the Chrysalis from trying to hear Aldrich's conversations.

But it seemed as if the Chrysalis was fine with it all. On second thought, Aldrich recalled that she had seen the Butcher in his eternal torment in the basement. She had not had a strong reaction then as well.

"Are you...okay with that?" asked Aldrich.

"Mhm." The Chrysalis nodded. "I want to help lots and lots of people, but I also know bad things happen to bad people."

Aldrich felt a sense of deja vu. Bad things happen to bad people. This was exactly what he had said when he was a kid. What he had believed.

And it was because that belief, belief in some sort of karmic justice, had been shattered with his parents' deaths that he in large part turned into who he was today.

"I just don't know. Was he a bad person?" The Chrysalis asked Aldrich.

"Yeah. He was," said Aldrich.

"Okay. I trust father the most. So I don't feel too bad then." The Chrysalis nodded, swishing her crystalline white tail from side to side.

"Hm." Aldrich felt strongly then what should have been obvious. The Chrysalis was not human. She never had been. Even if she approximated a human's soul, fundamentally, she was not one.

As a variant, the Chrysalis's instincts meant she could take life and death in stride. Every animal knew how to kill or be killed. He could tell now that her instincts were strong enough that if she had to fight and kill, she would.

Especially when it came to 'bad guys'.

Basically, if she saw bad guys dying or suffering, if she had to even take one down, then that was simply the way things were.

"Explore time!" The Chrysalis tugged at Aldrich's pant leg. She smiled sweetly. "Enough thinking, let's go!"

"Let's go," Aldrich nodded, beholding the Chrysalis's smile. He did not mind her indifference to death when it came to bad guys. He himself found it difficult to care much at all considering his status now as a Lich.

Rather, he found it convenient. Less need to tiptoe around the Chrysalis's innocence, at least when it came to the rather morbid topic of killing.

"Perhaps the Death Lord was indeed right," said Valera as they all left the truck. She looked down at the Chrysalis happily skipping along across the dry desert brown earth. "Perhaps she is far stronger than we think."

"I think so too," confirmed Aldrich.

"I'm strong!" said the Chrysalis, confident. Her eyes were wide as she looked around at the nomad compound all around her. The early dawn sun modestly shone its rays through veils of clouds, dimly lighting trucks and motorcycles and cars that the Chrysalis wondered at.

There were a few nomads here and there moving about, some smiling and waving hello to the Chrysalis, with her waving back with enthusiasm whenever she could.

By now, Aldrich noticed, he was known enough that the nomads did not care that he wore a suit. That none of them showed any hostility to him probably also indicated that he was generally well received among them.

“Where are we going?” asked the Chrysalis after she was done waving another round of hellos.

“A place to get you a name,” said Aldrich. He stopped in front of the towering wheel structure of the Wanyudo. Aside from Desmond, the other nomad chiefs had not left just yet, though they were prepping to do so very soon.

Z was still here, and that meant she could create a CID for the Chrysalis. Which was also an opportunity to give her a proper name.

Chapter 250: Name

Chapter 250 Name

Inside the Wanyudo, Aldrich and Valera sat around the meeting table with Z across from it.

“Are the lights always this dim with you technos around?” said Aldrich. The only light in the entire room came from a few white circles in the ceiling, and it was obvious that they had been intentionally dimmed down enough where everything and everyone cast long, droopy shadows.

“Whenever we deep dive into the cyberverses, our senses go out of tune with the material world. Our body temperature rises dangerously, and even one little disturbance might tip us over into melting our brains. That disturbance might be bright, flashing lights. So, we prefer to keep things dark,” explained Z.

“Like night creatures. How relatable,” said Valera.

“Spooky.” The Chrysalis looked at the shadow she cast across a wall. She moved her tail around, making its shadow undulate like a living creature. “But fun.”

“Now then,” said Z as she leaned forward on the table, clasping her hands together. Her eyes shone a bright purple as she looked at Valera, then at Aldrich. “What are you here for?”

“We need a CID for her,” Aldrich nodded towards the Chrysalis. “Same grade as the one you gave me. Enough to easily walk around in tier 1 cities without getting discovered.”

"That can be done. Any preferences?" Z watched the Chrysalis. "How do you want me to build up her past? Is she an orphan you adopted? Was she a street rat? Nomad?"

"No, she's...", said Aldrich, fumbling for the exact classification for the Chrysalis.

"He's my father!" the Chrysalis pointed at Aldrich.

"Yeah, sure, I guess that works. She's my daughter. By blood or not, it doesn't matter," said Aldrich. "Have her be tied directly to the backstories you've constructed for us already."

"Alright then." Z peered over to Valera. "And you, I assume, will be the mother?"

"Of course!" said Valera with loud vigor, all too excited to be labeled Aldrich's wife. She coughed into her hand, lowering her voice. "Yes, indeed, that is correct."

"That can be done," said Z. "It will cost you, though. A tier 1 capable fake CID is not easy to make. The first two, I updated for you out of goodwill, but this one, I will ask a price for."

"Seemed easy enough for you to update them," said Aldrich.

"Yes, and that is why almost the entire Underworld comes to me for it. Try this request with anyone else and it will take weeks at best."

"Then what's your price?"

"I'd like Thanatos's assistance in a heist I've been planning. It will be after his hearing, of course, provided he gets out of it in one piece. If not, a few of your men will do. A few of the stronger ones."

"Any more details than that?"

"I can forward them to your techno. It will be up to you to take the request or not. Otherwise, I would ask for some information from Casimir's blackmail vault or any secret tech he's holed up over the years."

"Go ahead and send that request, then. When will you be done with the CID?" said Aldrich.

"In half an hour. Just in time for us to part ways," said Z. "Gerard seems to have taken more of a liking to you after your Megaloptera hunt."

"As far as I'm aware, not enough yet to cast his vote for me fully," said Aldrich. "My support is tenuous. I still don't know what Crone thinks of me, and Stone's support doesn't seem based on much."

“Crone has been quiet about you. Almost unnaturally so. But that tends to be a good sign. She is a woman of few words, and what few words she does speak are to foretell disaster or ill omen. That she says little about you is probably a good thing,” said Z. “As for Stone, he always moves with the majority. I would not read too deeply into it.”

“They do not know what they are missing by not placing their wholehearted loyalty,” muttered Valera.

“Uncertainty can make even the shiniest prizes seem too dull to touch,” said Z.
“Anyway, what do you want her name to be?”

“Name?” The Chrysalis hopped on over to the table. “My name?”

“Yes,” said Aldrich. “I did have an idea, actually. Chrysa.”

“...That sounds thoroughly uninspired,” said Valera.

‘Are you using that name because it is just Chrysalis shortened?’ said Valera telepathically.

‘No, I promise you there’s more thought behind it,’ responded Aldrich.

Valera stared at Aldrich, unconvinced.

‘Legitimately, there is thought behind it. The bracelet she got from the Death Lord, the flowers on it are chrysanthemums. A name that’s shortform for both that and chrysalis seems fitting, doesn’t it?’

‘...I suppose’. Valera spoke to the Chrysalis. “What do you think of the name?”

“Any name that father gives me is a good name,” nodded the Chrysalis.

“See, she likes it,” said Aldrich.

“I do not know whether that is ‘like’ or ‘acceptance’,” said Valera.

“That’s like,” said Z. “She is happy with it. And if it’s a name you like, then I’m sure she would like it too. She seems to care a great deal about your happiness.”

Aldrich raised a brow. “You seem to read children quite well.”

“You can say it comes from the experience of a mother,” said Z. She stood up, preparing to end the conversation. Aldrich briefly saw a flicker of wistfulness in her eyes, as if she had been staring at something she had lost. “I will have the CID ready for you as soon as possible. Until then, I have a few matters to attend to myself. I will contact you when the order is ready.”

Aldrich stood as well, ready to leave.

“Where are you going from here, if I may ask?” said Z.

“Me?” Aldrich took Chrysa’s hand. “We’re going on an adventure, aren’t we?”

“Adventure time!” said Chrysa. “Explore time!”

“Well, good luck with that. If you ever need to get in touch with me after our parting, your techno will know how,” said Z.