

Super Necromancer System

Chapter 251: Road Trip

Chapter 251 Road Trip

An hour later, and Aldrich was out on the road in his ARMA armored car. The same one he had taken from the leader of the Odinsons nomad gang that felt like an eternity ago. He had briefly wondered back then how the Odinsons could have afforded such a nice car, but now he realized: they made a hefty profit flipping and modifying Z's false CID templates.

Aldrich looked out his window, seeing nothing but endless stretches of dry wasteland. It was hard to think about how anything could even survive here, out in these swathes of barren, rust colored earth that had nothing green growing in them.

But still, life found a way.

Whether underground, around rare oases of blue and green, or inside cliff faces, life adapted and continued.

"You sure you don't want me to drive? This highway ain't maintained right, specially not around these parts," said Diamondback, Clint's right hand man. "And you've been behind the wheel for ten hours now."

"No. I like the feeling of driving. Plus, I don't really feel tired," said Aldrich.

"I've been meaning to ask, and I don't mean offense, but think this is a good idea? Taking a road trip now of all times?" said Diamondback. The man sat with straight posture even after ten consecutive hours of slogging through a road trip with mind numbingly boring scenery.

Unlike Clint, Diamondback was stiff. Stern. It showed in his permanent ramrod straight posture. In the rigid tone of his voice. In the deep furrows in his forehead – marks of stress that Clint definitely did not have.

It did make sense. Someone had to balance out Clint's brand of crazy, otherwise any group he led would probably die early deaths. Glorious early deaths, granted, but still deaths.

"It's a valid question. The situation's tense with the Dark Six, and here I am on a road trip with...with my family," said Aldrich as he glanced at the rearview mirror. Valera was in the backseat with the Chrysalis in her lap. They were both sleeping.

Or rather, choosing to sleep to alleviate the boredom of the road trip.

It was a little uncomfortable referring to them as wife and child and family, especially considering how young Aldrich was, but he figured the more he said it, the easier it would get.

"Considering the fact that you manage most of the Spearhorn tribe's decisions, you'd want the best for them. And the fact that Clint's yoked your whole group to me on what seems like an impulse must make you worried.

It's probably why you decided to take the job to be my bodyguard. You get to double up and see how I am as a person too."

"And so? Does anything justify this trip?" said Diamondback.

Despite Diamondback being a physically built specimen of a man with intimidating split pupiled blue eyes, his voice never oozed any hint of hostility.

And there was plenty to back any hostility if Diamondback was willing to put it out. Aldrich wore a pair of shades now that had built in AC scanning, and Diamondback had a reading of 6800.

The bar for entry to be an A- ranked hero, for reference, was generally set around an AC count of 5000.

In fact, if pure AC count was the only metric of strength considered, Diamondback was the highest among the Spearhorns. Even Clint hovered around 5000, but it seemed his numbers could violently fluctuate upwards over time.

"A child's happiness," replied Aldrich. "Do I have to say more than that?"

"...If that's enough for you, then sure. But what about for the rest of us?" said Diamondback.

"What else is there to do? The point is to lay low until the hearing's over, especially with the Dark Six threat looming over us all. Plus, I have some errands to run," said Aldrich.

Before making this trip, Aldrich had worked with Z to try and unlock Elaine's personal server. Surprisingly, the password that Aldrich and Elaine shared over their Blackwater projects did not work.

That left Aldrich with no way to access it. Not even V could break into it, leaving her confused as to how a non-techno like Elaine, a Dud no less, could create cyber defenses so tight.

According to Elaine's spirit, whatever she left behind had been for her adoptive father Randall. Aldrich figured then that he knew how to access the server.

Aldrich had gotten V to track Randall down after hearing from nomad sources that the nomad commune that Randall had been a part of had moved back into a city.

That city was where Aldrich was headed now. A tier 3 city called Redrock a solid half day's worth of driving down one of the intercontinental highways that connected the U.S. together.

"I hope these errands are worth the trouble, specially' with the risk involved," said Diamondback.

"If you came here to complain, then you should've had someone else be our guard," said Aldrich.

Diamondback shook his head. "I don't trust nobody for a mission of this caliber aside from myself. There could be enemies anywhere. You're not out of the clear, you understand that, don't you?"

This false identity, this 'Bruce Vane' persona, is on the Dark Six's radar. From my intel, it's what you used to bait the Dark Six into the Red Circle for Casimir's suicidal stunt.

There isn't a bounty on you yet cause nobody even knows whether you were real or some boogeyman Casimir made up. But once they realize, you better bet your ass that you'll also have a fat bounty over your head.

Why didn't you just make a new one? Z could have done that for you. And for your wife and daughter too."

"...Wife," murmured Valera with a smile in her sleep.

"...Father," Chrysa whispered, also in her sleep, also with a smile.

"They're in danger too," said Diamondback.

Aldrich almost smiled. "I wouldn't worry about them. Especially not my wife.

In any case, I've decided to keep this identity because I have no intention of being buddy buddy with the Dark Six.

I'm sure Clint could sense it. I want them gone. I want what's theirs to be mine.

And I want them to know who did it. I want them to have a name they can fear.”

“...Maybe you do have a crazy streak in you as well.” Diamondback glanced at Aldrich with concern. “Probably why Clint took such a big liking to you. Off his rocker just like his old man.” He sighed. “But it is true.

Clint wants the Dark Six burned to the ground. That’s the least he can pay them back for after they took his pa, wife, and daughter from him.

And I’ll back Clint in that journey with my life. Which means I’m in this wild ride with you as well.”

“The more the merrier, right?” Aldrich grew quiet as he started to stop his car. Along the highway, there were two police cars built heavy and sturdy to rove along the harsh wasteland terrain.

Their bright red and blue lights were on, indicating for the car to stop.

“Something don’t feel right. Road checks ought to be maintained by Panop drones out in remote road like this,” said Diamondback. “Though it’s not absolutely impossible for cops to be out this far either.”

“I’ll make a stop. Let’s see what they have to say,” said Aldrich.

Chapter 252: 'Cops'

Aldrich stopped his car by the side of the highway. The scene looked all manners of off. It was in the dead of night with the moon hiding behind a thicket of clouds. Most of the light around came from the harsh glare of reds and blues generated by the cop cars.

Dealing with cops was not really an issue. Police forces within cities, especially lower tier cities, were easy victims to corruption. Whether they were fed by the hand of a corporation or an organized crime group, the difference was minimal.

But highway cops were held to a much higher standard. The intercontinental highway system was crucial for maintaining transportation and supply lines through the wastelands where variants, villains, and nomads were all routine threats.

The Panopticon often managed the roads with drones in association with heroes from the Alterhuman Agency, but in stretches of highway like this, in remote areas with low variant activity, cops often made up manpower deficits.

They were responsible generally for scanning who went through the roads and reporting back any suspicious activity. Essentially like border patrol.

"Is something amiss?" Valera said from the backseat. She had sensed the shift in atmosphere while asleep and instantly woken up, her battle hardened experience letting her easily transition from deep sleep to alertness.

Chrysa, however, remained snoozing in Valera's arms.

"Those two vehicles up there belong to government authority. Think of it like a city watch," said Aldrich.

"Will they present an issue for us?" said Valera.

"Hopefully not," said Diamondback. "You all have solid fake CIDs, so if they're regular highway patrol, they'll just scan those and let us be on our way."

"Something is off," said Aldrich as he spied the twin cop cars. They were built sturdy and heavy. ARMA Blue from the HT (Harsh Terrain) model line meant for roaming across the wastes.

As far as cop car models went, nothing was wrong. Heavier cars like this were normal on the wastes.

It was their numbers that brought immediate alarm to Aldrich. "Highway patrols don't happen in groups of two. Even in low risk areas like this, you need more than two cars in case you get unlucky and a tough variant just so happens to be prowling around looking for dinner.

They get hungry enough, and they can just shove past AV (Anti-Variant) fields as well, especially weaker ones like the type on these roads."

"Yeah. Should be six cars minimum. Sometimes, though, patrols can split up." Diamondback said. His black pupil narrowed down to reptilian slits. "But I don't see net antenna on either of those cars. Those are out here cold."

"That's the biggest issue," said Aldrich. "If they're cop cars, they'd want net connectivity to report back anything they see. That's the whole point of patrolling in the first place."

"There's no base net connection here either." Diamondback looked down at his phone to confirm.

"I do not understand most of this conversation, but I can sense that those guards are not to be trusted. Shall I be ready for a fight?" said Valera.

"You can fight too?" Diamondback raised a brow. "I understand Bruce here's concealing his AC count somehow, but you are too?"

"I am far from helpless," said Valera defiantly.

"I know Clint insisted on you coming with us, but you might find yourself bored if you came here just to guard us," said Aldrich.

"...We'll see. Someone's coming." Diamondback pointed at one of the cop cars. A figure emerged from the passenger side, indicating another presence obscured under tinted window on the driver's side.

A police officer dressed in grey uniform - the standard color for highway patrol - walked up towards Aldrich's car.

"Pretty normal gear for a highway cop," observed Diamondback. "Variant grade heavy rifle, anti-personnel pistol, AC visor, and radio."

"You've got targeted EMP charges, don't you?" said Aldrich.

"Yeah." Diamondback's hand was already at his waist, thumbing a rectangular pouch on his belt. He pressed an indent on his skin where a cybernetic implant called an AC suppressor activated, dramatically lowering his AC reading, though it did nothing to actually lower his power. "You think things are gonna get nasty?"

"I'd be ready." Aldrich rolled down his window as the officer approached. His demeanor instantly changed, a slight smile forming on his lips as his eyes altered their sharp gaze into a welcoming one you'd see on any average passerby.

"How can I help you, officer?" said Aldrich.

"I'd like to do a full inspection of your vehicle," said the officer gruffly. He eyed Aldrich through his red visor and paused for a moment. "You a Dud?"

"That's how things are, yes."

The officer nodded to himself slowly before looking over to Diamondback. "And who's that? Your friend?"

"Yes."

The officer's stare lingered on Diamondback for longer. His body language was calculating and tense. Like a stalking predator sizing up its prey. He was assessing Diamondback's threat.

The officer's tense shoulders slumped when he did not read a particularly high rating from Diamondback. AC suppressant cybernetic implants were not too rare, used by a large chunk of mercenaries and villains and other Alters that wanted to keep themselves a secret.

But a suppressant on Diamondback's scale, one that could reduce his A rank ratings down to something in the D range, were far and few between.

"Any other passengers?" said the officer.

"Wife and my child in the back," said Aldrich.

"You got a kid? Look mighty young to be popping one out."

"Well, I guess things just happen."

"Yeah, they do. Like this inspection. Get yourself and all passengers out of the car. Me and my boys will do a thorough check of the vehicle. Routine inspection for this part of the road, hope you understand."

"I don't believe you have the right to do so," said Aldrich.

"Here's my badge," said the officer impatiently, reaching into his pocket and thrusting a star shaped card at Aldrich's face.

Nothing was off about the badge.

Aldrich tested the officer more.

"I'm afraid that doesn't cut it, officer," said Aldrich. "To search my personal vehicle, you need to have probable cause, especially if you don't determine us a threat."

The officer chuckled as he put away his badge. He unholstered his pistol and clicked the safety off. "Listen here, you Dud piece of shit, I'm getting real tired of checking cars over and over again, and you're the first one to be giving me lip about your rights, as if powerless freaks like you even deserve them in the first place.

Now do as I say, or my little friend here-," The officer waved his gun towards Aldrich's face. "Might do the talking instead of me. And you don't want him to do any talking."

"Ah, I get it. You're not a real cop, are you?" said Aldrich.

"Yeah, fuck if I'm not? I-,"

Aldrich reached out and grabbed the officer's wrist, the same hand that waved the gun so casually in his face, with lightning quick speed. He twisted the man's wrist with such strength that he sent the officer off his feet.

"W-what the fuck!?" the officer exclaimed first in surprise, then in pain as Aldrich tightened his grip hard on the wrist.

"Argh!" the officer dropped his gun.

As this scene unfolded, Aldrich spied the other cop cars opening up, unleashing a team of fake cops out.

"Diamondback. It's time you earned your pay," said Aldrich. "Though technically, I guess you aren't being paid for this."

"A little action's payment enough." Diamondback, for the first time ever during the entire ten hour car ride, cracked a grin. One less manic than the type Clint bore during a fight, but one still packed with enough bloodlusted fervor that Aldrich wondered if everyone in the Spearhorn tribe was like this.

Diamondback got out of the car in a swift motion, simultaneously taking out a thin black rectangular EMP charge. He pressed his thumb on a button, arming the charge and causing it to glow with three bright white strips.

Diamondback tossed the charge towards the cars. It exploded in the midst of them, unleashing an omnidirectional wave of crackling green energy. The energy wave did not harm the cops, but any tech they had got fried.

The radios on the cops' hips sputtered in showers of sparks, rendered inactive. The visors on cops' faces cracked and sparked, some sparks painfully getting into eyes and eliciting grunts of pain.

The harsh red and blue light from the police cars cut off, abruptly drenching the scene in darkness.

The only source of light came from Aldrich headlights illuminating Diamondback's shining, sparkling figure, light blue crystals completely covering him from head to toe in a sturdy suit of armor.

Chapter 253: Diamondback

Aldrich watched Diamondback, his black shades tinting the crystal covered man's scintillating shine. He looked like he was completely covered in fully cut, polished diamond, reflecting the dim glow of Aldrich's car's headlights and magnifying it through its many facets in dazzling, sparkling brightness.

Had Diamondback been under the sun, he probably would have shone bright enough to flat out blind the average passerby with his 100,000 carat diamond body.

"Who does that gemstudded brute think he is, taking over my role to guard my master?" said Valera. She made a motion to reach for the car door and leave. Aldrich raised a hand in the air, stopping her.

"Don't worry. Let's see just how good our bodyguard is supposed to be. After all, it's good to know how capable our allies are, no?" said Aldrich. He glanced at the rearview mirror. Chrysa was still snugly asleep in Valera's lap through all this commotion.

To say that she was a heavy sleeper was an understatement. As far as sleeping went, she was probably a world heavyweight champion at this point.

Maybe because she was a growing girl.

"Plus, Chrysa looks happy sleeping where she is now. Let her get some rest."

"Understood, master," said Valera. She gently patted Chrysa's silvery hair. "She is a gentle little thing. Perhaps it is best she sleeps and does not witness the battle."

"Soon, she'll have to. But for now, I'd like her to enjoy the time she has with me without the stress of phony cops. Isn't that right, 'officer'?" Aldrich looked over his window to the cop still struggling against him.

With his arm wrapped around and over his back to the limit of its range of motion, the cop was in a painful spot where if he tried to use his other arm to pick up his dropped pistol or do much of anything, he practically guaranteed the arm under Aldrich's control a one way ticket to snap city.

"Who do you think you are!?" said the fake officer. "No, do you even know who we are? Who you're messing with!?"

"Nobody important, evidently, based on how weak you are," said Aldrich. "Your AC count is 2000. You're barely D grade. Where do you even get all this courage?"

"And you're a powerless Dud! You don't get to talk that way to me!"

"Watch what you say, human." Valera's voice cut across to the officer with a chilling intensity, an intensity that made the man's spine crawl with cold, primal fear.

That shut the officer up immediately. The radio at his hip crackled with indiscernible audio. He had been away from the range of the EMP charge, but radio in particular was sensitive to charges like that, rendering the device near useless.

Regardless, Aldrich knew he did not want to take any chances. He briefly let the officer's arm go, and he blinked in momentary surprise and relief. Relief that lasted less than a second before Aldrich slammed his bulky car door open, knocking the officer flat on his face.

As the officer groaned in pain, Aldrich took his radio and crushed it under his foot, grinding the metal and plastic and electronics into a mush of black bits and sparks.

Aldrich knelt down on the officer's back, pinning him prone to the ground, and grabbed the officer by the head, raising his face up to watch what was unfolding in front of him.

"Let's see how well my bodyguard does against your friends, shall we?" said Aldrich.

There was a standoff between Diamondback and seven of the 'cops'. The cops hid behind their black, blue and white painted armored cars, aiming their sizable anti-variant rifles at Diamondback.

Diamondback stood a dozen meters away, staring at the officers with still posture, his expression hidden. The diamond-like crystals did not wrap around his head to fit its form, instead, they structured themselves in a helmet-like arrangement that reminded Aldrich of a square bucket helm - armored, heavy, and powerful.

"Who are you!?" said one of the officers. He eyed Diamondback, then Aldrich manhandling his companion. "None of you are normal. Are you bounty hunters? Mercs?"

"..." Diamondback just stared them down. When he spoke, he spoke to Aldrich. "What do you want to do with them?"

"Take them down. Keep them alive - we can still get information out of them. But since there's seven of them, it's fine if one or two die. And we have to make it quick. We can't be stalled on the side of the road for long like this, even if this is remote road that isn't being monitored," said Aldrich.

"Alright," replied Diamondback.

"Alright!? You really want to fight here? On the highway?" said an officer. "You leave behind any evidence, and eventually, the Panop or the AA are going to come by and investigate."

"Then we leave no trace, right?" Aldrich nodded to Diamondback. "But I'm sure an expert like you already knew that."

"...My powers ain't suited for restraining without killing. I can try to keep them alive, but no guarantees." Diamondback cocked back his fist and unleashed a palm strike. Seven shards of diamond crystal shot out like bullets, slicing through the armor plating of the cop cars like they were made of paper sheets before spearing straight through each of the officers' shoulders.

Collective yells of pain cut through the air as the officers dropped their rifles.

In this moment of pain, this moment of distraction, Diamondback charged like a rugby player, all raging weight and mass and destructive force. And incredible speed, too. He was upon the first cop car before they could even recover from their pain.

Diamondback shoved the heavy car to the side like it was a toy, sending it tumbling on its back. He executed the three officers hiding behind the car in clean, consecutive motions, snapping their necks with single, efficient motions, like he was working on an assembly line.

"We have to get out of here! Slow him down with explosives and give me some space!" said one of the officers, the leader, presumably, by his commanding tone, as he backed away.

The three remaining other cops withdrew grenades, intending to unpin and use them even without the use of one arm. One of them did so because he had a prehensile monkey tail, the other because he could regenerate the hole in his shoulder, and the third using a robotic arm on his back.

Diamondback thrust his palm out again, and this time, he aimed with lethal intent, evidently determining that he did not want to risk cleaning up after explosives. Crystal shards shot out of his hands like buckshot, riddling the officers' bodies with gaping holes that instantly killed them before they could even register unpinning the grenades.

Three swiss cheesed bodies fell back in bloody piles, leaving just the leader.

"I've got you," said the leader as he put a hand to his head. His eyes shone bright red as he furrowed his brows and set his jaw, straining in effort.

Aldrich could not see any visible effect, no projectile or weapon or the like.

"It's over," grunted the officer underneath Aldrich. "When our boss lets his mind control loose, nobody can stop it. That big diamond bastard's going to be on you now."

"Hm. That may be a problem." Aldrich unholstered the officer's pistol and aimed it towards the mind controlling Alter. "But he can't function with a bullet in his brain, can he?"

"No need." Diamondback raised a hand, stopping Aldrich. "Picking up after bullets is a chore I don't want to deal with."

"W-what...how are you resisting me!?" the leader strained, sweat pooling across his face in mental exertion. "No...I can't even get in in the first place!"

"My crystals block out mental interference. But my AC count is high enough a nobody like you couldn't even get through my natural defenses in the first place." Diamondback rushed forward, closing the distance between himself and the leader in an instant.

Before the leader could react, Diamond back grabbed both of the man's arms and crushed them. He then swiftly tore off his belt and took away any guns and ammunition with precise motions. He finished that all off with a low kick that completely snapped the leader's leg, making him scream as he fell to the ground.

Diamondback cut the scream off by shoving his crystal covered hand over the agonized man's mouth. "Quit your crying. None of those wounds are lethal. You're one cut above the trash here. Luckily, or maybe unluckily for you, your body's strong enough to survive this."

"Guess that's that," said Aldrich. He put the pistol down, instead pressing it against the back of the head of the officer beneath him.

"P-please, let me go! I swear to god man, I'm just here for an odd job, nothing to do with you, nothing personal at least!" said the man.

"Good, you're willing to talk," said Aldrich. He called over to Diamondback. "Bring the leader over too. Check if he's willing to talk."

Chapter 254: Lnterrogation

Chapter 254 Lnterrogation

Diamondback carried over the mind controlling Alter's broken and battered body to Aldrich, tossing the man beside the cop Aldrich restrained. They lined up perfectly together, two men thoroughly broken in both body and spirit.

Though, Aldrich did note, the guy he was restraining had it pretty good. No broken bones anywhere. Just a week ago, and he would have more than considered snapping things already. Maybe he had softened up.

Probably not.

Aldrich was still a lich. An existence separated from the living, related to humans only in the same vestigial lens that normal men saw monkeys through. Though he did actively try to stop this way of thinking from infecting him too much.

The fact of the matter was that if Aldrich grew too far from his own humanity, the more liable he was to becoming too much a monster. And, if he surmised correctly, that was a one-way ticket to suffering from a bad case of immortality induced insanity.

Or maybe it was simpler than this. Maybe he was just more patient.

Who knew. In any case, it was now time for questioning.

"You two look pretty buddy buddy," said Aldrich, sarcasm dripping from his voice.

"Shut it," said the mind controlling Alter with strained voice.

"I'm surprised you're even conscious. Your AC count must be pretty high for you to have a body this tough even without Augmenter abilities." Aldrich tapped his shades as he scanned the Alter. AC count of 3400.

Not bad. A thorough C ranker.

Even D rankers had superhuman physicals, provided they trained. Enough to weather a few stone splitting hits or recover from a broken bone in two or three weeks.

And now, Aldrich could see that a C ranker could take shattered arms and an annihilated leg and stay conscious. Something that would have been absolutely lethal for humans pre-Altering.

"They're both nothing but chumps. If we want to question them, we'll have to make it quick." Diamondback loomed over both restrained cops.

"Right." Aldrich nodded down towards the two Alters. "I'll ask things nicely. Consider that a warning. If I don't like what I'm hearing, I'm going to start breaking things. Do we have an agreement?"

"Yes, yes, we do!" said the Alter under Aldrich.

"Be quiet, Tommy, and let me do the talking," said the leader. He glared up at Aldrich and Diamondback. "What do you two want to hear, huh?"

"You still have an attitude in this situation? Interesting. Well, to start off with, it's pretty obvious you two aren't cops," said Aldrich.

"No shit," said the leader. "Agh!"

Diamondback had shot a crystal shard into the leader's thigh, lowering the velocity so that it stayed stuck to minimize blood loss.

"Sorry. I dropped that," said Diamondback. He hovered his hand over the leader's head. "I might drop it again, too, unless you take up a better tone with us, boy."

"What's the point? You two are going to kill us anyway," said the leader.

"Not necessarily. You, in particular, might be useful to keep around with that power of yours," said Aldrich. "The fact that you aren't using it, though, makes me wonder. You need to put your hand on your head to channel it, right?"

“...” The leader stayed quiet.

Diamondback hovered his palm over the leader's other leg. Aldrich raised a hand to stop him from firing another shard. “It's okay. Silence is answer enough sometimes. Now, why are you patrolling remote highway like this? And posing as cops? Where did you even get these cop cars? Highway patrol cars aren't easy to come by, and as far as I know, all of them have trackers to stop them getting lost in the Wastelands.

If you're using them for dumb stuff like this, you obviously took the trackers off too, and that requires some serious techno tinkering.”

A brief silence.

“You've already killed my crew. I've got nothing more to give you,” said the leader.

Aldrich looked into his red tinted eyes. It was said that the eyes were a window to a person's soul. Aldrich fully believed this. He could tell so much from the eyes. And what he saw was determination. Some resignation.

This guy was ready to die. He probably truly had cared about his crew.

Well, that just meant he wasn't as useful. Aldrich could raise him as an undead and get answers that way, but that would give away his Thanatos identity too quickly.

“And you?” Aldrich tapped his pistol on the head of the guy he was restraining. “You have anything to give us? Looks like your boss here is letting you down. He says his crew's dead, but he doesn't even count you.”

“I'll tell! I don't give a fuck about this crew, I'm just a new recruit anyway!”

“That's what I like to hear,” said Aldrich. “Answer the questions I gave to your boss.”

“We were out here cause we took a free for all contract floating around the Darknet. Five hundred thousand credits just for useful tips on people coming in and out of cities in this area related to the Burning,” said the underling, his voice panicked. “That's why we were on this road, cause it leads to a city, shit, what was its name?”

“Redrock.” Aldrich paused for a moment. “It's just a tier 3 city. Relatively unimportant. But you still set up a watch here?”

“Tougher and better hunters than us have set up watches all around the tier 2 and 1 cities. Plus, we're not that good of a crew to take on leftovers from the Burning,” said the underling.

“Burning?” said Aldrich.

"It's what the underworld calls the whole Red Circle disaster," said the underling. "Shit was fucking wild. Biggest thing that happened to upset the balance since, like, Dracul going apeshit and completely breaking up one of the Dark Six. And that was fifteen years ago."

Aldrich nodded. Dracul, one of the world's few Sentinels. A man Aldrich wanted to meet once he got on the global stage. He probably would join Aldrich's fight against the rest of the Dark Six. "And who was the contract from?"

"Contract was anonymous, but everyone knows it's probably a pissed off Dark Six."

"Any extra details on what the contract wanted? What are the criteria for useful tips?" said Aldrich.

"Anyone and anything related to the Red Circle. That's all we know! Five hundred thousand was just a shit ton of money. You understand why we had to be here, right? Shit, if you aren't related to any of this, no, even if you are, I can just pretend nothing ever happened. I swear!"

"I don't think we're going to get anymore out of this low level hired guns," said Diamondback. "Technically, they aren't even hired guns. They're just freelancers that have no real relation to the Dark Six."

No real point of connection.

Even if you thought about baiting the Dark Six by forcing them to say they had a good tip, the info probably goes through too many layers of screening for us to infiltrate the Dark Six."

"Yeah, that's what I figured too. These guys are just one crew out of probably thousands just roaming around. No useful information. All nuisance." Aldrich sighed. "Well, at least we know that there's more of them out there. And that this contract's relatively recent."

I would've heard about it from my technos if it was before I got on the road, so it got uploaded within the past ten hours."

"If you want to get into a city safely, now is probably the best time," said Diamondback. "Not enough time's passed for too many crews to get in on this and set themselves up. Especially not around a tier 3 city."

The question is getting out. Things might get messier. Messy enough that it might be better to reconsider this trip entirely."

Aldrich shook his head. From what V said, Randall, Elaine's adoptive father, was now close to death from a terminal illness called Waste Lung. Developed when toxic

particles in the air remaining from geostorms accumulated in the lungs, slowly rotting them over time.

If Aldrich did not get into Redrock now, Randall might pass away before Aldrich could make good on Elaine's last wishes.

"We're still going," said Aldrich. "I told you, I have errands to run. And a promise to keep."

"What about leaving?" said Diamondback. "These guys may be chumps, but 500k isn't chump change. It's enough for decently strong hunters to start camping in and around even tier 3 cities."

"That's what I have you for, isn't it? You're supposed to be my bodyguard," said Aldrich.

"..." Diamondback sighed. "I guess. Yeah. That is true. And I don't think we'll ever run into a crew strong enough to take me out. That's the nature of a free for all job like this. You end up netting in a lot of crews, but most of them will be trash."

Diamondback shook his head. "I still think you should've changed your CID completely."

"That would make things too easy now, wouldn't it?" Aldrich looked at Diamondback's judgmental face and sighed. "That was a joke. My techno is extremely capable and familiar with Z's CID template.

She can remotely alter some details on our CIDs if we have to.

I can minimize our risks going into and out of the city, but the fact of the matter is I'm pretty decided on going in."

"I'll do my job regardless of what your decision is," said Diamondback.

"Good." Aldrich looked down at the two fake cops. "And now it's time we got rid of these guys."

Diamondback nodded. "Yeah."

Chapter 255: Settling Down In Redrock

"Get...get rid of us!? We-," the underling briefly glanced at his boss. "No, I told you everything I knew! You can't do this to me!"

"You're a hunter, aren't you?" said Aldrich.

"Y-yeah, but why does that matter!?"

"Then you know what risks this job comes with. You hunt down other people. You bring them in dead or alive. You do this knowing full well you're also flipping a coin. One side dead, one side alive. Tonight, both of you got unlucky." Aldrich pressed the gun against the back of the underling's head. "Accept the results of the draw. They won't change."

"Wait-wait!-,"

Aldrich fired the gun. Instead of the echoing roar a normal gun would've blasted out on the wide-open wastes, there was instead more of a higher pitched 'ping' from the gun's built in silencer. Standard issue for hunters that often needed to work in cities, dodging police and heroes.

The underling's head jerked forward. His body shivered once as lead gored through his brain, making his nervous system jolt in one last death throe. Then, he transitioned fully from man to corpse, the body growing still as a light pool of blood started to already form around the head.

"And you've already been ready to die," said Aldrich to the boss.

The boss stared at him wordlessly and just closed his eyes. He must have had a strong bond with his crew. Except for the newly onboarded underling, of course. A bond close to family, if their loss meant this guy could stare down death without a whimper or a whine.

Aldrich did not feel much of anything towards the man. He was just exterminating pests. When it came to taking out targets, his 'lich brain' revved fully into gear, and it became much harder for him to separate man from meat. To think of people like this as more than just a bag of bones and flesh all waiting to rot and decay.

An inevitable casualty. Whether by quick bullet or the comparatively slower wear and tear of time, there was no real difference to Aldrich.

They were not useful to Aldrich as undead either, even if he could somehow tell Diamondback to leave and raise them discretely. The mind controlling Alter, maybe, but his power seemed to have too many limitations and it did not work on legitimately strong targets.

Not too worth the effort. Fler'Gan was better.

Aldrich nodded to Diamondback.

Diamondback executed the boss with one quick shot of a crystal shard. Clean. Efficient. That was how he did things. Aldrich liked it.

"About clean up." Aldrich stood up from the underling's corpse beneath him. He looked around at the scene of devastation, the upturned cars, the blood pooled corpses, the scattered weapons, and saw more nuisances to deal with. "How are we going to do this?"

"Some of my boys are trailing us from farther away. Not close enough to draw attention on us but not far enough where they can't handle the clean-up for situations just like this," said Diamondback. "I'll pack all the evidence we have up here, the bodies and guns and so on, and cram it all into the cars. Afterwards, I'll toss the cars a couple miles down for my boys to get rid of."

"You foresaw this happening?"

Diamondback shrugged. Whenever he moved, the noise from his crystal body sounded like a series of clicks and cracks. Notably, though, his diamond body, though seemingly completely rigid uniformly, bended flexibly to accommodate movement.

Whatever crystal Diamondback was made from, even if it did resemble diamond, was something far more durable and far easier to shape.

"I've been working as muscle for forty years," said Diamondback. "Ever since I was fifteen. Worked all the way back with Daz, Clint's pa and living legend. I've picked up a thing or two about how things go in this line of dirty work."

Diamondback moved reached down and picked up the two corpses, slinging them over his shoulder. Compared to his massive frame, the corpses looked almost like they belonged to children.

"The blood?" Aldrich watched blood trickle down from the head shots on the corpses, dripping down like raindrops on window glass across Diamondback's body.

"You're new to the Wastes, I forget. The Wastes round these parts are dry. The earth is thirsty. Greedy. It'll suck the blood right up." Diamondback tossed the corpses on top of the two police cars.

Aldrich saw that Diamondback was right. Whatever blood pooled on the cracked, parched earth seeped into it in a manner of seconds. A few little dark splotches atop the orange earth were all that remained of the once warm and fresh blood, and even that would fade away with winds carrying dust and more dirt.

"I'll handle all of this. You're tough enough to handle yourself for a bit, aren't you? Your girl too, she's got attitude, and I bet she can back it up. Drive the car down. Try not to let the little girl see this." Diamondback walked away, towards the cop cars, picking up any guns and other odd pieces of evidence he found along the way. "I'll catch up soon."

"Thanks," said Aldrich. "I owe you one."

"Yeah? Then treat me to some donuts in the city. It's nice eating fresh hunted meat out in the Wastes, but sometimes a man's a got a sweet tooth he's gotta satisfy."

Aldrich nodded, amused that a tough guy like Diamondback had such a strong sweet tooth. "If that's what you want, then sure."

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The rest of the way into Redrock went by without much issue. Just two more hours of driving through endless stretch of road with Chrysa sleeping through it all. Noticeably, Aldrich sensed her mana pool seemingly growing by the minute, likely influenced both by her natural growth and the newly established link between herself and Aldrich.

The roads were more peaceful because the closer Aldrich drove to Redrock, to highway under direct surveillance by Panopticon drones or real police or heroes flying by, the harder it was for hunters or underworld criminals in general to just camp in areas to harass people.

Plus, closer to Redrock, there were more civilian cars around too, and though Aldrich's car, a solid 300,000 credit behemoth of comfort and power of advanced air conditioning and armor plating, stood out considerably, he did not stand out so much that he looked any different from a rich guy cautious about his safety.

Especially now that flight was hyper regulated.

In the post-Monstering age, commercial flight was a lot more difficult to work with. Airspace was shared with variants now, after all, and nothing put a damper on flights more than a giant bird or bug ready to tear into a plane's hull.

There was also a phenomenon known as variant resistance to consider. Over time, in a form of natural selection-evolution on steroids, variants would respond to human activity and begin to counter it. If there were too many things dominating airspace, more and more variants would start to develop flight capabilities, and that was the last thing the Panopticon wanted.

Flight capable variants were much harder to deal with than grounded ones. And they made walled cities much harder to defend logistically.

Most airspace in the modern post-Monstering age was therefore dedicated solely to trade. Transporting goods and supplies from one place to the other so that the global economy could still be, well, global. Unmanned or one-man piloted airplanes and drones did not seem to incite variant resistance nearly as much as commercial craft packed with tons of Alter lives either.

There were exceptions with urgent government or Panop-AA sanctioned flights like the one that had taken Thanatos out to the Crypt, but in general, aside for the ultra-wealthy, easy commercial flights were a thing of the past.

Even flying heroes needed to have a specific license to have the authority to fly around from one place to the other. Very few like Solomon Solar had unrestricted access to airspace. Generally speaking, only A rankers and above had complete access whenever and wherever they wanted.

Aside from desperate situations like with Haven's attack, most other heroes needed their flight paths pre-authorized.

"Damn, donuts really do hit a good spot. Especially after a good fight." Diamondback leaned back on a plush brown couch, watching a wide screen HD telescreen playing the news. On his lap were a box of two dozen donuts. A variety pack, some chocolate glazed, some strawberry glazed, others sprinkled, others plain, etcetera.

The big man ate the donuts like they were little pieces of candy, swallowing them straight whole.

"Language," said Aldrich. He sat on a desk in front of a laptop, prepping a connection with V. Valera sat beside him, peering curiously at the screen to try and make a sense of it.

"What is that?" Chrysa sat beside Diamondback, cocking her head curiously at the colorful donuts. "Give me one!"

"Sure, kid." Diamondback held out the box of donuts towards Chrysa, and she scanned the colorful assortment of baked goods before she picked out a sprinkled one.

"Sprinkles, huh? Good taste." Diamondback downed another donut.

"Itsh good!" Chrysa said, crumbs falling from her mouth as she spoke while she chewed.

"Don't talk while you eat. It ain't polite," said Diamondback.

Chrysa gulped down the rest of her donut and nodded. "Okay."

Aldrich nodded at the interaction. Diamondback was better with kids than he reckoned.

Aldrich had rented out a decent hotel in Redrock's center district. In walled cities, the further to the center you were, the higher the land prices generally.

Most of the hotels here were on the better side, too, most requiring a check of a CID to determine things like criminal background and credit history. For Bruce Vayne, a

supposed multi-millionaire trust fund child and his wife, child, and their bodyguard, getting entry was easy.

For the average lowlife hunter, though, entry was much harder. Fake CIDs let hunters move in and out of cities and some districts because most border CID checks were quick, easy, and light.

But they did not pass closer security checks, especially in wealthier areas that cared more about security and took their time.

You needed a CID properly rigged by a good techno for that, and Aldrich had precisely that now that Z had upgraded his CIDs. Diamondback's fake CID was also pretty solid, likely due to needing it for his work.

Among the Spearhorns, he did the most business in the cities, probably because he was the only one among them that had the cool to hold down a proper conversation.

Now feeling just a bit safer, Aldrich got ready to contact V and get things ready. He needed to confirm Randall's location here, check on the status of his troops and Casimir still in the Wastes, any extra news about the Dark Six's plans against him, and whether there was any useful information mined from the bug on Desmond.

Chapter 256: V Correspondence

Chapter 256 V Correspondence

Aldrich nodded as his laptop finished booting up. It was metallic white and sleek in design as most things were these days, probably trying to market to a sense of futurism to make up for such an uncertain present. Or maybe it just looked cool, either way, it worked.

The white coloring and industrial grey dot logo indicated it was eye-tech property, the leading corporation in consumer end electronics. A higher end model, too, fetching a cool three thousand credits. And most importantly, modified so that it did not have the liberal amounts of spyware and bloatware jammed into it.

“This little thing can access the sum total of this realm’s humanity’s knowledge?” said Valera. She leaned forward like a curious child, her red and black eyes narrowed in scrutinizing intensity.

“No, there’s this virtual space called the Net that holds all that. It’s a place where everyone can upload information and the aggregation of it all means that you can practically find anything there,” said Aldrich.

“...I do not follow,” said Valera. She hung her head in shame. “I am sorry for the incompetence.”

“Don’t be sorry. You’ll pick up on it over time. Here, let me explain it better terms for you,” said Aldrich. “You know...”

Aldrich glanced over at Diamondback. The man seemed pretty occupied feeding himself and Chrysa donuts, but Aldrich did not want to spill info about his and Valera’s otherworldly natures.

So he spoke telepathically. ‘You know the soul stream, right?’

‘Of course,’ said Valera.

‘It’s a massive spiritual swirl where practically every mortal soul flows in when their physical bodies die. Because of that, it’s packed with information, the memories and experiences and countless many across vast stretches of time.

Spiritcallers can dip into the soul stream and fish out memories from any of the countless souls in there. Atleast, until they’re wiped clean and entered into reincarnation.’

‘Ah, I see, so this Net works on similar principles.’

‘Right. Except you don’t have to die to add info to it. It’s completely in the realm of physical.’

‘But I cannot see the Net as a space?’

‘It’s completely in the physical but it’s also not tangible. It’s called virtual space. A little difficult to fully explain. Once we have time, I’ll let you explore around the Net. It gets easier to figure things out when you spend time on it.’

Valera nodded excitedly. ‘And I do not need any ritual to access it? No mystic mark to grant me access? Simply one of these devices?’

‘That’s right,’ said Aldrich. ‘Not just one of these, but smaller handheld ones called phones as well. Practically everyone goes in and out of the Net; it’s part of their daily lives now.’

Valera rested her chin on her hands, leaning on the coffee table. “I am disappointed, to be honest.”

Aldrich inserted a security key into a port in his laptop. This would let him link to V in a secure manner. ‘How so?’

'You say the humanity of this realm, every single one no matter how insignificant or great, holds access to this vast treasure trove of information. I can see that they have accomplished great marvels, and yet, I would have thought man with their wit and urgency would have achieved even greater.'

Always, the kingdoms of man held advantage over the likes of us vampires or elves or other long lived peoples for those traits. Their short lives mean they must aspire to accomplish in the span of decades where other peoples were content to let their accomplishments build up over centuries.

I would have thought that man, with this much information to wield, would have become masters of their own world, at least. But they still seem to bicker among themselves, to squabble in their differences and live in fear of monsters.'

'Humanity has always been fractured,' said Aldrich. 'That's one downside of mortality. You never get to see man learn from their mistakes for very long. They scramble to achieve and go high, and all too often, they stumble over the same traps that others did throughout history.'

'...Perhaps you can change that, master,' said Valera, an eager glint in her eye.

'What do you mean?' said Aldrich.

'Perhaps...perhaps you can grant them all immortality? All undeath? If you are to be their conqueror, then would it not be wondrous to have an undying kingdom? One that spans across an entire realm?

You may even reach out towards the stars, toward other realms like the ones the old gods or demons hailed from. You could have it all in your palm forever.'

'Now that sounds like something straight out of a villain tyrant's playbook. Like some kind of immortal overlord,' said Aldrich.

'But that is what you are, no?' said Valera. 'A lich, immortal walker of death. And in time, lord over death too.' She smiled, imagining a future where Aldrich ruled everything. 'Lord over all realms. Forever. With me by your side.'

'I thought you considered retiring at one point,' said Aldrich. 'Living a quiet life.'

Valera hugged Aldrich's arm, drawing it into her chest. 'I can do that too, master, as long as it is with you. But I am willing to fight for your conquest as well, because I know deep in my heart of hearts that you are fit to rule over it all.'

Aldrich mulled over the thought for a brief moment. Ruler of everything, huh? He felt neutral about it. Such a goal felt so far away. And was there even life outside of this

planet anyway? At least, life that was not some unfathomable light year scale distance away?

Sure, there was the Elden World realm, but there was no guarantee it was even possible to access it either.

‘Let’s not get ahead of ourselves here. I don’t know if I’m cut out to exactly be a ruler. If that’s what I have to do to make sure the world’s safe, that it’s a world where nobody will have to go through the same things I did, then sure, I’ll do it.

But I haven’t even gotten close to taking over this world, let alone others.’

‘Yes, yes, true, I am simply getting lost in my fantasies,’ said Valera.

“Glad to see you doing well.” V’s voice crackled out from Aldrich’s laptop.

A black screen took over Aldrich’s laptop, as if it had shut down. But the laptop’s near imperceptible hum made it clear it was still on.

Aldrich popped in some wired headphones for privacy. Valera did not need any because she could easily sync her hearing with Aldrich’s own.

V’s face flickered into display, her flickering LED blue eyes narrowing a little in faint disgust as she saw Valera leaning into Aldrich. “Doing very well, actually.”

“Nothing seems to have changed about you. Still in that dark control room of yours,” said Aldrich.

“Not alone, atleast. I finally need some help. I got your other techno, Fisk, I think his name was? He’s not good enough to handle himself with higher security stuff, but he’s pretty legit at sifting through data.

Better than having to make a bot, at least.”

“Good to see Fisk still has things to do. Anyways, to get to the point, how are things there? As far as I’m aware, Casimir’s side, that includes you and the Blackwater students, are all on the move. All the other nomad chiefs have separated other than the Spearhorns that are with us, correct?”

“Yeah,” said V. “Aside from the Spiders, the other chiefs have plans to regroup just before the hearing as well. Speaking of, you’ve got a hell of a stage for that.

I don’t know what magic wand you waved, but Aarav Singh’s going mega top gear for you. He might just be the CEO of a biotech corp, a big one sure, but his personal wealth means he’s got solid boardroom say in quite a few social media and news media companies.

The Thanatos hearing is all anyone talks about these days.”

Aldrich glanced towards the telescreen, where Diamondback had the news on. As V had said, the news just talked about Thanatos, a large headline stating ‘THE THANATOS HEARING: WILL THE HAVEN SAVIOR FIND JUSTICE?’

V continued with enthusiasm, absolutely loving to be part of something so big. “And I’ve got to say, you’re like the second freaking coming of Jesus here, though I guess if Jesus really cared he’d have popped on down from the clouds during the Monstering, but I digress.

Almost nobody’s against Thanatos.

People are out there in all tier cities protesting and wondering where the hell Thanatos is.

They think he’s humanity’s superweapon against the variants, especially with the new attacks. There’s this clip of you raising Locus-44, the name they use for Shrimp, that’s going absolutely viral.

Saying ‘Serve’ and all, totally badass.

Shit like this has never happened before.

Ever. Controlling a Locus? That’s crazy. Impossible. Scientific nuttury.

And it just happened. Nothing like a miracle to really get public morale up in a time of crisis.

Everyone thinks Thanatos is what’s going to turn the tides once and for all. Scratch that, you practically are like the second coming of old Jesus, miracles and all, except instead of water into wine and white robes and halos there’s more armor and necromancer and dark lord energy.

Of course, positive media always nets a negative response too, but the negative here is just an aftershock of the much bigger impact the positive has.”

Chapter 257: V Correspondence 2

Chapter 257 V Correspondence 2

“The more the world has us up on a pedestal, the harder it gets for the authorities to push us down,” said Aldrich. “With this level of media momentum, anything short of a

widely broadcasted public hearing won't be accepted by the public. And I can't imagine the uproar a hearing ending in jailing would drive up.

People are getting desperate, it seems. They see the variants and Loci rising up and they want something to rally around. Something new, not just the S rankers they're already familiar with."

"Right. But there's one thing about the whole public nature of this that's a downside," said V. She frowned a bit, her brows knitting together in concentration. "Hey, Fisky, I sent you the deets about the hearing. You break it down yet?"

"Uh, uh yeah." Fisk's voice came from a corner of the room. "I was just a little busy."

"Busy?" V raised a brow. "Busy playing those weeb games of yours, yeah." She sighed. "Alright, just hit me with the analysis."

"These games have artistic merit, you know," complained Fisk. "Good plot too."

"Yeah, real big plot, I'll tell you that." V paused for a moment as her eyes lit up a bit, processing data. "Anyways, the huge attention from the hearing's made it so that real high end officials, both AA and gov, are going to be the judges.

I have a finalized list of people for you that Fisk sent me that I'll forward to you now. You can take a look at it when you have time."

"Interesting. Very interesting," said Aldrich as he briefly glanced at the document containing the list of names.

There were a total of 50 officials attending, split roughly evenly 24 to 24 among AA and government. There were 2 Panopticon Arbiters, former operators turned into policy advisors, too.

On the government side, Aldrich saw none were without influence. The vice president of the U.S. was there as well as the secretary of the department of defense, to name a few. Similarly ranked officials from countries like China and India made it as well.

The AA had sent a host of notable executives as well from a variety of departments that ranged from variant defense to even marketing. There were also popular retired heroes, many of them veterans of the early Monstering when things were at their worst, turned policy advisors.

This included quite a few heroes that Aldrich revered as a kid, looking at their comics, buying their merch, all in the hopes of becoming something other than a powerless waste of life.

Foremost among them was Supermind, a powerful telepath who once was part of Vanguard's team. Now, he was aged, suffering from Crystallization and confined to a wheelchair, but even if his powers, power that could once freeze the minds of an entire city's populace, had waned, his judgment was still sharp.

Aldrich was in for one hell of a questioning. But the good thing was he did not think he had cause to use Fler'Gan's potion anymore.

The big time names in this hearing meant that overall, they were ready to accept Aldrich. Maybe not as a Sentinel – he would have to argue for that – but definitely as some kind of hero.

There was no way so many officials with so much to their names would risk their public images being part of a trial that threw Thanatos to the curb.

Had the hearing been more secret, more prone to being rigged, Aldrich would not have hesitated to use Fler'Gan's potion and initiate some kind of attack on the hearing using either his unknown forces or the Death Lord's, though he probably had to give her a favor for that to happen.

With the threat of an attack looming over the hearing, Aldrich would have used the potion, its effects amplified by situations of intense emotion like the type felt under survival situations, to sway the hearing to his side.

But now, with the public fully behind Aldrich, the potion became less necessary and riskier to use. A higher profile hearing meant even higher profile security checking, and though Aldrich could pass by practically all of them with his magic based powers, there was always the off chance of something he did not expect blindsiding him.

Aldrich would still have Fler'Gan make it. Perhaps to use on the nomad chiefs. Whatever the case, it was a useful tool to have. Plus, the Geist's efforts would have all gone to waste otherwise.

"V, keep tabs on that list. Notify me if anything changes," said Aldrich. "Now on to other things. You've analyzed the server I directed you to again, right? You still can't crack it?"

"That thing? It's impossible," said V. "It has security the likes of I've never seen before, and I mean that in a very literal sense. It's something I'm completely unfamiliar with. If you saw it in the Cyaverse, you'd see it as some kind of strange glitchy box. Nothing I have can even begin to unravel it.

The only thing that works is a biomarker. Specifically belonging to that old guy I've been keeping track of."

“...” Aldrich wondered how Elaine had managed such a thing. She might have been a genius, but was she really that much of a genius that she could create security measures that could block out V, a genius in her own right specialized in infiltration?

That was the biggest reason why Aldrich risked so much to come to Redrock. He wanted the secret behind what this personal server was. Elaine’s spirit had not made much of a deal about it, but the more Aldrich investigated it, the bigger the mystery surrounding it became.

“Anyways, Randall’s holed up in a shack in the city outskirts. I’ll scan the area around you and make sure you’ve got a clear path to him. One without having to deal with pesky bounty hunters and the like.

You better pay me some nice overtime, because I’m doing, like, everything right now. Techno work and being your navigator, too” said V.

“I’ll try and get more technos to help you out when I can,” said Aldrich. “And thanks. Try and get me an early morning trip to Randall. I know his health isn’t the greatest, and I don’t want him dying on me before I get there.”

“You got it, boss,” said V. “Can I call you that? Boss? It sounds super official, you know, and if we’re going to be something big, then I figure it sounds right.”

“Sure.” Aldrich nodded, moving on. “CEO of Hammerhead. How’s that meeting going?”

“He’s been in contact with me. Infrequently because he’s not trying to draw any attention to himself. But he wants to wait until the hearing’s over. Probably because he sees the news now and sees that there’s a real good chance Thanatos gets accepted. If he meets Thanatos now, that’s sus, but if it’s after Thanatos is an established big shot name, then it’s all good, you get me?”

“I do. Any Dark Six news?” asked Aldrich.

“Something real interesting. You’re familiar with the Trident, right?”

Aldrich narrowed his eyes. “I am.”

“Something’s wrong with them. It’s just rumors, hard to confirm and all, but I think there’s some infighting,” said V. “The Russian prong of the Trident’s gone rogue is what I hear, going against the Japanese and Italian prongs. Techno support and supply lines from the Russians aren’t flowing properly to the Italian prong.”

“Surprising,” said Aldrich. “The Trident, all three prongs combined, is half the Dark Six. Even one of them going rogue is a massive deal. Do you have any idea why?”

“Nobody really knows,” said V. “Some people deep in the underworld like Casimir knew that the Dark Six wanted to plot some kind of revolt, bring in a new world order and all that villain crap, and theorycrafting about sitting on the throne is nice and all, but the execution is a whole lot messier.

The Dark Six have fought on how to bring out this big revolution, whether they even want to threaten their livelihoods to do it, how much each of them will have to give up, and blah blah blah, lots of arguments, basically.

The Russian prong’s the least loyal because they’re so new. I can imagine them being a weak link to this.”

“I see,” said Aldrich. He knew that Dracul had torn down the former Russian prong of the Trident fifteen years ago.

A new prong had risen up to take their place in the Trident, hailing from a few remote crime families that hailed from deep Siberia, but because they were new, they had less longstanding loyalty to the larger organization as a whole.

Especially because before the Trident, they were a splinter group of technos that did freelance work. They were likely used to working on their own terms. But even then, they had worked just fine with the others for a decade.

What had changed? Something massive must have happened.

“Investigate this situation, V. Try to get to the bottom of this. I want a reason for why the Russian prong’s going rogue. If we can find that, then it’s possible we can manipulate them. Exploit them and break the Dark Six from the inside out,” said Aldrich.

“Right-o. I will tell you, though, that quite a few reported fights between the Russian and Italian prongs happened after Casimir’s Haven stunt,” said V. “They might be feeling the pressure with all the info we got about their stored weapons, drugs, labs, and the like.

The Russian prong’s always been insanely secretive, though, so it’s hard to figure out what it is they’re actually disagreeing about.”

“Yeah. I know a good deal about the Japanese and Italian prongs, but the Russian one, I’m in the dark about as well. Can you infiltrate them?”

“The Russian prong’s the main tech hand of the Trident. I don’t know how they sharpened their skills out in the balls freezing wastes of Siberia, but I do know they’re pretty damn good.

They live up to their rep as the ‘Reapers of the Cybaverse’, that’s for sure. Hard to spot, hard to track, and real deadly as well.

They've got a few Den trained technos like me to really nail themselves in as a threat. Top of the line, same potential as me, but with even more experience.

I can't snoop around their infrastructure in the Cyberverspace without getting caught. Desmond's Cyberverspace infrastructure might be like a castle, but the Reapers, well, they're like an invisible helicarrier, something you're never going to find unless you have inside info."

"Do what you can. I mostly want a clearer read on this situation. If you get any info, make sure to ping me in my earpiece," said Aldrich.

"Sure thing, boss. Anything else?"

"About Desmond, how's that going?"

"Tons of trash. The parasites have split 2231 times since they were planted in Desmond's tip server. Most of that are just random ass people, nomads and hunters and the like, throwing out info tips to Desmond about seeing this wanted guy there, this group of variants worth hunting here, and so on, nothing too useful for us.

Around half of them port into the Cyberverspace using burner terminals, so my bugs die there. The other half that use personal devices don't seem to belong to anyone important.

Good thing is, ol' Flsky here has analyzed the trash and picked out a nugget of gold.

There's this one guy that sends tips to Desmond somewhat routinely and on a private device. It's secure, but not that secure. Guy's not an amateur, but he's no seasoned techno either.

I've gotten access to all his devices and figured out he's a nomad scout affiliated with the Dark Six. Also affiliated with Gerard. Basically, a spy."

Aldrich perked up instantly. "A spy?"

"Yeah. I'll forward you all his info, but basically, he tips off the Dark Six about what's going on with the chiefs. He's not important, so he doesn't know too much."

"But at the minimum, he's a security risk. He knows Casimir's met the chiefs," said Aldrich. "He knows about us."

"All he knows is Casimir came here, talked, then left. Doesn't know what was talked about or what's going on," said V. "And he hasn't had a chance to dump his info either.

From what I can tell from his call and location histories, he does that when his tribe, uh, the Eagles, make a pit stop in a specific commune. He meets a Dark Six handler there who prefers getting the info physically.”

“A handler?” Aldrich’s eyes lit up as he saw a golden chance manifest before him. “Get Blackwater ready. Contact Fler’Gan. I’m going to schedule an old fashioned kidnapping.”

Chapter 258: Ready to Go

Aldrich woke up in his hotel room bed, mind completely refreshed. The dark of night was gone, rays of golden early morning sunlight streaming past white curtains. On one side of his bed was Valera, cuddled up close to him. On the other, Chrysa slept, curled up in a ball with her tail touching her head, kind of like how dogs sometimes slept.

He had spent much of the night into five A.M. planning the kidnapping with V. In total, he had gotten 2 hours of sleep, but as an undead, sleep itself was an optional luxury. He mostly did it for Chrysa's sake, as she, though an undead, seemed strangely different from the norm, needing sleep to grow and get stronger over time. Just like a human child.

And she slept better with Aldrich by her side.

As for the kidnapping, Aldrich had finalized all the details, picking out where to go, what to do, and who to use.

The slimy little rat in Gerard's tribe was, as V said, nobody really important. A nomad by the name of Alden Smith who had no real influence. He was just a runner, someone that muled supplies here and there, and even then, he was not authorized for any important jobs.

A guy that laid low, mostly, doing the bare minimum of what was required of him and scraping by. But maybe that mediocrity act was just that: an act. Something to drive attention away from him.

In any case, Aldrich would figure that all out soon.

Gerard's nomads routinely stopped at Westpost, a free city, so called because it was not officially recognized by the Panopticon's tiering system and thus did not have the super organization's signature walls, drones, and general support. AA presence was also minimal to nonexistent there.

Free cities were sweet spots in the Wastelands where people could gather and build something, but still too unstable that the Panopticon could not register it as a spot

suitable for one of their own cities. Technically, they were under jurisdiction of the U.S. government, but in practice, they were almost like wild west lawless zones where men and women of the underworld, from nomads to bounty hunters to the hunted themselves, came and went by or even settled.

At Westpost, Gerard's nomads would take a break, settling down and eating some city foods they missed, catching up on the news, getting proper repairs or supply themselves with the latest tech, or even hitting up brothels.

Things did get lonely out in the Wastelands, even for the most seasoned of nomad loners. Humans were inherently social creatures in the end, after all.

But where the other Eagle nomads relaxed, Alden informed, meeting his Dark Six handler, a guy that went by the codename of 'Feather'.

Feather was more careful than Alden, preferring to get his info solely through in person talk, preventing surveillance as much as possible.

Unfortunately for Feather, Alden was far less careful, a nobody rabble rouser that often spent his afternoons getting mildly drunk and adding fuel to a dumpster fire of a gambling addiction, the same addiction that probably had him working with the Dark Six in the first place.

From what Aldrich could tell, Feather operated out of a bar in Westpoint, and he had quite a few tough men under him. He was similar in standing to Joe Peperelli, the Dark Six captain in Haven whose squadron of elite soldiers Aldrich had slaughtered with the cold might of his undead.

Aside from that, Alden's personal devices had no more records of Feather, leaving Aldrich in the dark about Feather's exact capabilities. As a result, Aldrich assembled quite the task force for this.

Kat for her invaluable espionage and assassination experience. Ace, Chiros, and Tox for serious firepower in case things went awry. Damian for getaways and utility as his ability to conjure up flight platforms was always useful.

And, finally, Fler'Gan for his Mind Eater brainwashing abilities.

The mission was simple: capture Feather alive and mind control him.

Aldrich had a mission of his own to finish today too. He got up out of bed briskly, though he was careful not to wake Chrysa. He wanted to give her a few extra minutes of sleep. He manifested his spiritweave dress shirt, suit jacket and pants over the simple undershirt and briefs setup he slept in.

The black clothing materialized over Aldrich's body in faint blue waves, as if his body was a digital canvas and each wave was a brush that added a preset layer over him.

Valera silently got off the bed as well, stretching her arms over her head, both the soft curves of her hips and chest and the hard curves of her athletic musculature hugging against the tight fabric of her dress.

"Hm? Do you want me, master?" Valera threw a mischievous glance Aldrich's way.

"We're busy right now," said Aldrich. He grabbed his phone from a circular charging pad on a coffee table and nodded. V had mapped Randall's location to him and also identified as many known hunters or villains she could find in the area.

Surprisingly, not too many. Aldrich figured that, like Diamondback had said, most of the hunters were in the tier 2 or 1 cities.

"Ah, no fun," said Valera. She then cracked her knuckles and her neck in thoroughly unladylike, more 'ready to beat something' like fashion, an excited, fanged smile gracing her dark red lips. "But I suppose slaughtering enemies with my dearest master shall always be a favorite activity of mine."

"The goal is to not get spotted," said Aldrich. "Go get dressed, Valera. I have spiritweave clothing, but you don't. I brought over some stuff that'll let you fit in, though. And make sure to throw on a cloak."

Aldrich pointed to the hotel room closet.

"My, I am eager to try on clothes that you have picked out for me," said Valera as she zoomed over to the closet.

Aldrich pocketed his phone, made sure his earpiece linking to V was set snug in his ear, and then knelt beside the bed, putting a hand on Chrysa's head.

Chrysa stirred, unconsciously uncurling from her ball-like sleeping position. She hugged Aldrich's hand, murmuring the faint word, "hero".

Aldrich patted Chrysa's shoulder, surprised. She woke up, her sleep-droopy green eyes blinking slowly, lazily. She smiled brightly when she saw Aldrich.

"I'm sleepy...but it's adventure time, isn't it?" said Chrysa.

"It is," said Aldrich. "Why did you say that word, Chrysa? The word 'hero?'"

"...Hero?" Chrysa murmured, confused. "...I think I heard it on the people box." She pointed at the telescreen.

"Telescreen," said Aldrich. "That's what it's called. And there aren't people in there, it's just images."

"Oh, right, I knew that," said Chrysa. "And...and I remember it in my dream. I was playing with someone little like me. But a boy. He had black hair and black eyes and a big smile, really big, and it made me really happy. I think I heard it from him as well."

Aldrich patted Chrysa's head. "I hope it was a good dream."

Chrysa nodded, enjoying the head pats.

"You should get ready to leave, Chrysa," said Aldrich. "It's time for an adventure."

"Okay!" said Chrysa. She hopped off the bed, patting her plain white dress clean. It seemed to be a part of her body, manifested using the Chrysalis's limited ability to create things. As a result, it was always clean, which made things easier for Aldrich parenting wise.

Aldrich briefly wondered about Chrysa's dream. That boy she had met, he had little doubt it was him. Was this an effect of the soul synchronization? Before he could think more about it, Valera barged out of the closet with a proud smile.

"Master, here I am," said Valera, doing a light twirl to show herself off. She was dressed up casually in a baggy cream colored t-shirt with jeans that really brought out her long legs and nicely shaped, exercise toned butt.

"You look good," said Aldrich. "Human fashion suits you. As does a casual look. Or maybe I'm just used to seeing you in a formal dress all the time."

"Indeed," said Valera. "And it is quite comfortable, too. The leggings stretch with my movements and this underwear should not restrict my punches at all."

"Again, the point is to not draw attention to ourselves. Now here-," Aldrich tossed a sandy brown cloak towards Valera from atop a dresser, taking one for himself as well. He handed a smaller one to Chrysa.

"Ah, to dress so differently only to hide it all with a bare cloak like this." Valera held the cloak over her body, and it really did hide everything.

"That's the point," said Aldrich. "We can take the cloaks off later, after my errands done. For now, we've got to do this. Think of this like a disguise." Aldrich put on his shades.

"Disguise!" Chrysa put her cloak on and jumped up and down. "I'm invisible!"

"You're only invisible while you stay close by me, understand?" said Aldrich. He held out his hand, and Chrysa took it.

"Okay," said Chrysa with an understanding nod.

Chapter 259: Randall's Repairs

Chapter 259 Randall's Repairs

Aldrich made his way through the streets of Redrock. Like every tiered city, Redrock was built high and packed together with industrial efficiency. Neo-Modern architecture valued utility above all else, taking the bare austerity of modernism and drenching it with acidic utilitarianism to bleach it further of any vibrancy.

Buildings from the Panopticon came in black, white, or grey, and that was it, as if the Panop was allergic to any real sense of color. Designs were simple and geometric, consisting mostly of various flavors of cube and not too much else.

Granted, the Panop did allow for independent contractors to build, but only in select spots and for a fee, making buildings that stepped out of this maze of blocks and cubes and rectangles and dull colors a luxury afforded to, well, those who could afford it.

Funny how rampant consumerism and economic inequality never died down even after an apocalypse. One would have thought a globe shaking event that culled near half of humanity could have changed society completely, but then again, people did fear change.

Made sense why the Panopticon had worked with corporations and governments to keep things as similar as possible even after the Monsterings.

"Blocks everywhere" Chrysa remarked as she looked up, squinting her eyes at the crowded urban skyline. "Can't see the sky." She pranced to the side, getting closer to Aldrich as a group of suited up corporate workers passed by her. "Everything feels so crowded. It feels scary."

"I am not used to it as well. The constant din of these metal beasts called 'cars', the way so many humans pack themselves into these narrow streets and tall buildings, and the flashing lights and signs, so many of them in the place of hawkers; it truly is overwhelming," said Valera. "The cities of man have become unlike anything I have seen before. It feels marvelous and yet, strangely dreary at the same time."

"Just a week seeing cities and you're already burnt out, huh?" said Aldrich. He looked down at his phone, analyzing a map of his surroundings. Red dots indicated where V tracked movements of known bounty hunters and villains, though she did warn that if there was an experienced one, they knew how to hide themselves from her.

"It simply feels odd," said Valera. "It reminds me of the spire colonies of the Kitan. Towers of earth and drones all buzzing about."

"I see where you're coming from." Aldrich nodded. The Kitan in Elden World were an ant-like insectoid peoples that lived in cities of towering rock spires that looked similar to modern day urban cities. "Some people feel the city suffocating them. They feel like drones or cogs in a machine, so they leave. That's how you get nomads."

"Were I to have lived in this realm, I surely would have become like such," said Valera.

"Hero!" Chrysa pointed to a black costumed and helmeted hero making a patrol across a street. He had twin katanas on his back, but the metal sheaths were scratched up enough that it was obvious the guy was not exactly drowning in money.

Chrysa waved at the hero, and he waved back before he got back to his patrol, his gait lazy and tired even though it was early morning.

"I figure he's tired of the job. He won't last more than a year or two," said Aldrich.

"But I thought heroes always protected everyone," said Chrysa.

Aldrich glanced at Chrysa. She must have heard that from her dream, from Aldrich's younger self. "Some do. Some don't. People are complicated. Being a hero doesn't change that."

"If they uphold an oath of duty, though, they should keep it," muttered Valera.

"Not too many are as stubbornly devoted as you are," teased Aldrich.

"This devotion of mine has saved you countless times, you know?" Valera crossed her arms.

"I know." Aldrich faintly smiled. The Death Lord was right. Valera really was easy to tease.

A man, a suit with a cybernetic arm, bumped into Aldrich roughly. Not because he was on his phone, unawares, no, he fully saw Aldrich, but because he did not care to get out of the way.

But instead of pushing Aldrich to the side, the suit fell backwards, ass to the dirty pavement, like he had hit a brick wall.

"Get out of the way, nomad!" growled the suit. He got up and patted his suit down, but noticeably kept some distance because he had felt Aldrich's body was like steel – tempered and tough. "Fucking dirt eaters crawling around even here, in the inner district. Looks like I've gotta make it to a T2 city to stop seeing your kind."

Aldrich sensed Valera's bloodlust rising. He put a hand on her shoulder, calming her. Chrysa huddled behind Aldrich's legs, scared of the angry energy around her.

Aldrich walked straight up to the suit.

"Wh-what, you want to fight? There's a hero right there-" the suit began to say in panic, looking up at Aldrich's height.

Aldrich just walked straight through the suit, making him scramble away to the side in fear. He did not spare a second glance as he left the suit behind.

"We're not here to make a scene," said Aldrich. "No fighting."

"Shall we take these cloaks off?" said Valera. "That human seemed fixated on them, deeming us 'nomads' to revile."

"No. Redrock's known for having a lot of nomads coming in and out of it. They're a little rarer in the inner district where things are slightly more upscale, but not so out of the ordinary that it warranted a reaction like that," said Aldrich. "The further we move from the center, the more and more we blend in."

"Then why was the man angry?" asked Chrysa. "Why did he hate us?"

Aldrich paused for a moment. "Because it's easy to hate." He looked down to see that Chrysa did not quite understand. He patted her head.

"I don't like the city," muttered Chrysa. She now instinctively shrank from every suited person coming by, and in the inner district, there were plenty.

"After I'm done with what I need to do, I'll treat you to something nice," said Aldrich. He wondered what he had liked as a kid. "I'll take you to the arcade. We can get ice cream right after."

"Arcade? Ice cream?" Chrysa said quizzically, though with how her ears twitched, it was obvious she was interested.

"Fun things. Tasty things," said Aldrich. "You'll see."

Aldrich stepped out into the edge district, so called because they bordered the very edge of the city's walls and forcefield. Out here were the ghettos. The closer to the walls, the cheaper rent prices got, and the cheaper things were, the less incentive there was to maintain anything.

The streets were dirty, littered with trash. There were no suits here, mostly cloaked people shifting in and out.

Buildings were not high – they only got tall closer to the city center. Most of what Aldrich saw here were shacks of pieced together, rusted metal or weather beaten trailers crudely sandwiched atop each other to form some facsimile of an apartment.

“Quiet,” said Chrysa. She walked more confidently beside Aldrich now. “I like it better.”

“I agree,” said Valera. “There is far less going on here.”

“And that’s why this place is so poor,” said Aldrich. He stopped in front of a trailer home with three deep claw marks gouged out into its metal grey side.

Bolted to the top of the trailer was a sputtering, half-lit sign that read ‘RANDALL’S REPAIRS. “And we’re here.”

Aldrich checked his phone, making sure he had everything he needed, before he stepped up to the door and knocked on it, each knock emanating a dull, hollow clang.

A few seconds of silence. Before Aldrich wondered whether he was going to tear the door off, it opened, slowly sliding to the side with an awful metallic screech and groan that made Chrysa cover her ears.

“What do you want?” A tired young man with deep dark bags under his eyes stared up at Aldrich. His skin was pale and sallow. Goggles on his head, grease smears on his face, wrench in hand, and a tool belt at his hip indicated he worked here.

Aldrich knew that Elaine was not the only assistant Randall had. She mentioned he had another one, someone called Alan.

“Alan, I assume?” said Aldrich.

“Yeah, that’s me. You need something fixed?” said Alan. He looked down at Chrysa. “And I’d prefer if you kept the kid out. I do my repairs out in the open. Sparks flying and saws buzzing and all that. And I don’t do well with kids.”

“No, just here to see Randall,” said Aldrich.

“Randall?” Alan tilted his head back, brows raised. It was evident not many people ever asked about Randall. “What you need him for? If it’s repairs, then I’ve gotta say you’re too late. Old man’s not in any condition to do them anymore.”

“No, just want to talk to him. I knew Elaine,” said Aldrich.

Alan dropped his wrench. It clattered on the metal floor. He grabbed Aldrich by his cloak, but could not move Aldrich at all.

Even then, though Alan could probably already tell there was a heaven and earth difference in physical specs between them, he glared at Aldrich. "You...you must be from that school. The fuck are you here for? Pity? Give us a few credits for killing her, huh!?"

Again, Aldrich sensed Valera's bloodlust. He raised a hand, stopping her.

"Take care of Chrysa," said Aldrich. Valera nodded and scooped Chrysa's scared, trembling body into her arms.

"Answer me!" said Alan.

"Let's take this inside," said Aldrich.

"The hell we will! I'm not letting the likes of you anywhere near here! Get out!" said Alan.

Aldrich grabbed Alan's arm and pried it off of him with no effort. "Let's take this inside," repeated Aldrich, a stronger edge in his voice. "I'm just here to talk, and I'd prefer to do it without the shouting."

Alan struggled for a second before realizing there was no use. He stopped resisting, and Aldrich let go of his arm.

Alan whirled around and walked into the trailer, passing by boxes and shelves packed with gears, bolts, chips, and other miscellaneous items.

Aldrich followed, motioning for Valera and Chrysa to follow. He closed the door behind them, leaving dim, sputtering yellowed lights the only light source available.

"Keep watch, but stay hidden," Aldrich activated his earpiece by pressing into it with a finger.

"Roger." Diamondback's voice replied. He had followed Aldrich from a distance, tailing him so as to not draw attention.

"Got men around here, too? All that manpower and you didn't even have the decency to bring her body back?" said Alan. He stood behind a worktable cluttered with engine parts and cybernetic limbs. The wrench in his hand had been replaced with a bolter pistol.

Alan trembled as he held the pistol, entirely unused to using it, but what kept his hostility up was hate against Aldrich. It was evident that Alan thought Aldrich was associated with Blackwater somehow, part of the organization that, in Alan's eyes, had taken Elaine from him.

Aldrich shook his head. "Put that thing down. You're only going to hurt yourself."

"No." Alan pointed the pistol at Aldrich. A red strip running from his middle finger up his arm lit up bright, and the bolter crackled with energy as Alan boosted it somehow with his powers. "She was everything to the old man. Everything to me as well. And you took her from us."

Aldrich sighed. This was not going to go anywhere with calm talking. He pulled down the hood of his cloak and took off his shades.

Alan dropped his gun, grey eyes wide and unblinking. "You...you-re!"

"Yeah." Aldrich walked up to the worktable. He reached out towards Alan, and the mechanic cringed in fear. Aldrich put his hand on Alan's shoulder. "I'm not part of Blackwater. I'm here to fulfill her last wishes."

Chapter 260: Resolution

"How are you even alive!? This doesn't make any sense!" Alan put a hand to his head, his face contorting as the whites around his steel grey eyes reddened and watered. "I must be in a dream. Yeah, a nice dream for once, after busting my balls off repairing and wiring and taking care of the old man..."

"Calm down," said Aldrich. "Let's take this slow. What do you know about what happened to us?"

Aldrich gently put pressure down on Alan's shoulder, getting him to sit down. Alan slumped into his chair and took in a deep breath. He closed his eyes, took a few seconds, and then, when he opened them, his face was fine.

A tiny wet trail from a single half formed tear trickled slowly down his face, flowing fast from all the grease and oil caked on the skin.

"Sorry," said Alan. "Really, I'm sorry about that." He took the chunky bolter pistol on the table and stored it in a shelf. "I don't usually get like this...all in a wreck, all worked up for nothing."

"Not nothing. Elaine meant a lot to you. Just like she did to me. That's not nothing," said Aldrich. He sat down as well, taking a creaky seat in front of Alan. Because of how much larger Aldrich had gotten, he barely fit in the chair, but he managed by leaning forwards.

"Right. She sent videos of you, you know, you and Adam. Every week or so, just to let us know she'd made friends and that she was doing well," said Alan. "From what she told me, I thought she was happy. She seemed to be on track to graduating and getting

her license. AA technos get paid well - she was so excited to bring us back some money."

"Us - where are the rest of you?" Aldrich looked around, seeing nothing but the messy innards of the workshop where tools and half built machine parts and whirring engines and cybernetic metal shells lay scattered but not the two other apprentices under Randall that should have been here.

"Oh, Sarah and Amhed? They both dipped out a while ago," said Alan. "When the old man's Waste Lung got too hard for them to deal with and the customers stopped coming in."

"But you stayed?"

"Yeah." Alan put his hands together, staring at them, at the cracks and old scars and calluses that stood as testament to all he had built and repaired. "Randall took me in when I was nothing but a shitty little scrapper stealing things in free cities. Would've probably gotten taken out to the back of some seedy building and shot if he hadn't.

I owe him a big one. I owe him everything I know. I couldn't just leave him."

"Elaine did always say you were the best here," said Aldrich. "She said you had the skills to make it in a chop shop in a proper tiered city."

"She said that?" Alan's face brightened up for a brief moment before he shook his head. "She always exaggerates things. I'm not like her. I'm no genius.

I can deal with most cybernetics, but a chop shop in a walled city? You'll be hard pressed to find anyone that'll take a dirty old nomad like me.

Why do you think I'm out here in the edge districts where hookers and junkies come to keel over and died? Because nobody, not even here in this shitty tier 3 city, wants to hire me."

Alan looked up at Aldrich. "But you must know a thing or two about that. You, Elaine, and her other friend, Adam, all three of you were powerless, weren't you?

Must have gone through a hell of a worse time than me, people looking down at you like you're just old trash waiting to be cycled out of the system."

"It's just something we had to learn how to deal with," said Aldrich.

"Yeah, I figure." Alan scratched his dirt stained grey hair. "Anyway, Blackwater sent us a message when you all died. Said that you guys wandered too far from the compound and got eaten up by variants.

No bodies, nothing left to send, nothing left to bury.

Just a shitty little fifty thousand credit compensation fee.

We tried to ask for your belongings, but Blackwater said they had to lock that shit up too, that it was technically their property.

Fuck those slimy bastards."

"Do you want to hear what actually happened?" said Aldrich.

"Sure as hell I do."

"It isn't pleasant. Are you sure?"

"Hit me. I can take it."

"We were all killed in cold blood. Blackwater covered up our deaths. Why they confiscated our property, well, I'm going to get to the bottom of that soon."

Alan stared at Aldrich with wonder. Then how are you alive? And who are those two behind you?"

"The two behind me, well, that's difficult to explain, so I won't get into it. Just know they're my allies," said Aldrich. "As for how I'm alive...that's also hard to get into.

I'd prefer not getting into it at all.

Just know I'm dedicated to taking down Blackwater."

Alan spoke firmly. "I can't let you see the old man unless you tell me something that'll convince me you're you. You could be someone with a shapeshifting power."

"Thought you might get suspicious." Aldrich reached into his cloak and took out a chip from his suit pocket. "Here. Plug that into your body port."

"Let me scan it first." Alan took the little golden chip and held it up to one eye. The pupil narrowed and whirred and clicked, revealing that it was in fact cybernetic. "Nothing wrong with it. Alright."

Alan put the chip into a rectangular opening in his wrist. His eyes started to glow as he processed the contents of the chip. His mouth opened in surprise. "These...these..."

"Yeah," said Aldrich simply. Those were recordings from the shared server Aldrich and Elaine had. There, they recorded moments they had together. Combat exercises, experiments with upgrading their Frames, birthdays, pranks, gaming milestones, and

the like. "That's stuff from the server I shared with her. You need proper biomarkers and mind signatures to access it.

A shapeshifter can forge fingerprints, but a mind signature's unique to every brain - you can't forge that."

Alan sat still in silence, taking in the recorded moments. He smiled. "Atleast...atleast she was happy. Truly happy. I always thought in those video chats with us, she was just faking it for our sakes."

"Keep the chip. Both you and Randall. It belongs to you two just as much as it did to me," said Aldrich. "Reach the end of the files there. And be ready. It isn't pleasant."

"Alright." Alan concentrated for a few seconds, his mind navigating the tech. His face showed surprise at first, then, after a minute, anger, his lip twisting into a snarl as he put a fist to the worktable.

Alan had found the last recording Elaine had taken. The one she had threatened to release before they all died. "Those bastards! That's...that's how they killed you all? Like that!? Just like that!?"

Put down like dogs!?"

I swear, when the old man's passed, I'm going to hunt them all down-,"

Aldrich shook his head. "No need. Every single person you saw and heard in that recording, everyone directly responsible for killing us - they're all dead."

Randall blinked. "What? How?"

Aldrich's eyes flashed green, his gaze narrowing. "I killed them all. I hunted them down. So you don't have to."

Alan shrank back in his chair, fearful, knowing full well the glint in Aldrich's eyes, one of pure determination seeped in killing experience, did not show a single scrap of falsity.

It was also a stare that made Alan more than aware that he should not be questioning it. That it was backed by many, many deaths.

"And Blackwater as an organization is next," finished Aldrich. "Rest assured, if it's vengeance you want, it's what you'll get."

"I'll come with you for it. There's more meaning in it if I join in as well" Alan fumbled for the bolter pistol under the table.

"No you won't. I'm not storming Blackwater the moment I leave this place. And besides, I won't have the blood of Elaine's family on my hands," said Aldrich.

"I can handle myself!" said Alan.

"Even if you could, I wouldn't let it happen. That's another thing I came here to talk about. I'm taking this shop over. I'm going to give you two a space to work with that's safe. Randall will get the best care credits can afford. I know there's an experimental cure for Waste Lung out there too."

"Wh-what? With what money? With what influence?" Alan stared at Aldrich in disbelief, but when he saw Aldrich's dead serious expression, he knew there was only truth there. "You're actually serious?"

"Yes. And I'm sorry to say, but you don't have a say in it either. The moment I revealed myself to you was the moment you worked for me. Don't worry, though, I haven't been called a terrible boss yet," said Aldrich.

Alan looked puzzled at first, then excited, then, something hit him, a wave of negativity that brought his lightening spirits dead down, his stare dragging to the table, his head shaking.

Aldrich furrowed his brow. "What?"

"Credits won't save Randall. Care...care is all we can give him. Cure? At this point, there is none," said Alan. He stood up. "Here. I'll show you into his room." He looked at Valera and the Chrysalis and tried to smile. "You two coming? I promise I won't go grabbing bolters and lashing out and whatnot."

"You had better not lest you value your life, threatening my dear like that," said Valera.

"Huh?" Alan blinked.

"She's joking." Aldrich shooed Alan forward.

"I am not-," began Valera, and Aldrich gave her a look that got her quiet.

"O-okay." Alan walked down a corridor, lifting his legs up high to dodge odd bits and pieces of metal and parts here and there.

As Aldrich followed, he turned back to give Chrysa a pat on the head. "Are you okay?"

"Mhm," said Chrysa. "The grey man scared me for a moment, but I realized he was just being sad. He's a good person, isn't he?"

"He is," said Aldrich.

"Then we save him? Fight for him? Like heroes?"

"Heroes don't always have to save and fight and do all that big stuff," said Aldrich. "Sometimes, just helping is enough. That's what we're doing now."

Chrysa nodded.

"We're here," said Alan at the end of the corridor. It was completely dark here, even the dim lights from before shut completely off. "Sorry that it's lights out. Randall doesn't like light. He spends most of his time sleeping, anyway."

"We're used to the dark," said Aldrich.

Alan nodded. He slowly turned the doorknob of a beat up, spark scorched door. A door that must have seen decades of repairing and welding and torching across the years now left alone in the dark.

Aldrich could see Randall's body even before he went into the room with his[Death Sense]. It looked like a glowing green silhouette. A frail, thin, small things, crumpled up and wasted away so much it was hard to believe it was even human.

Valera, too, grimaced, smelling impending death in the air.

"Someone's hurting..." said Chrysa, she too having some form of ability to sense death. Perhaps from melding with Aldrich?

The door opened. Alan stepped through and held it open.

Inside, it looked just like a hospital room. Randall's stick-figure like body, the skin all darkened and wrinkled and wasted away, lay atop a queen sized white sheeted bed that seemed to utterly dwarf him, as if at any moment, the bed could just snap up and devour the deteriorated old man whole.

Beeping from life support machines and the rhythmic ebb and flow of ventilator assisted breathing sounded from a small bed in the middle of the room.

Unlike the rest of the shop, this room was completely clean, wiped down and mopped to a sterile shine.

Alan noticed Aldrich glancing at the floors. "I try to keep this place as clean as possible. Don't want the old man catching anything."

Aldrich nodded. He came over to the edge of Randall's bed.

Randall's sunken in black eyes looked like little dots as they stared up at Aldrich.

Alan pulled up a few rolling seats for Aldrich, Valera and Chrysa by the bed. He put a comforting hand on Randall's shoulder and asked, "Old man, you have visitors. You remember Elaine's friend? Aldrich. This is him."

Randall blinked. His hands trembled but the rest of his body did not move - that was the extent of how much he could move. Waste Lung did not just destroy the lungs, it eventually poisoned the entire body, disabling the connection between nerves and the brain.

Cruelly, the brain was the last to go, some scientists theorizing that it was because aside from the Alter Organ, the brain held the highest concentration of Ether energy.

But because the brain lasted, sufferers of Waste Lung were conscious until the very end of their ever decaying lives.

"I remember." A synthetic voice chimed out of a screen jacked into a body port on the back of Randall's head, translating his thoughts into spoken word.

"It's the first time I'm getting to see you, Randall," said Aldrich with a respectful nod. "I heard a lot about you from Elaine."

"How are you alive?" said Randall, getting right to the point. "Is Elaine alive?"

Aldrich motioned to Alan to bring out the chip. "Can he handle this?"

"His mind's still there, even if his body's like this," said Alan. "And Randall's tough. Always been tough." He took the chip and inserted it into Randall's wrist port. "These are recordings that Elaine took in Blackwater."

"Take your time looking through them. It's my attempt at giving you closure. In the end, you'll see how she died. How we all died," said Aldrich, not sugarcoating his words.

Randall did not react. His beady black eyes glimmered with a faint glow as he sifted through the recordings. Slower than Alan; Randall took more time to enjoy each and every moment Elaine had saved.

The elderly man's eyes glistened, tears flowing freely, pattering into growing splotches on the bed.

"Can we help him?" said Chrysa, worried.

"We are," said Aldrich. "That crying-it's the good kind."

Chapter 261: Last Dream

Chrysa nodded thoughtfully, making Aldrich wonder exactly how much she knew of the world around her. She seemed to have been born knowing some basic things and emotions, but there were other things she did not know either.

Basically, she was like a human child, which was not surprising considering she copied off of Aldrich's soul, most likely how his soul had been when he was little, but he still did not know for sure what she did know or did not.

It was a learning experience.

Like parenting.

"How are you alive?" asked Randall.

"Don't ask that," said Alan. "It's not something he wants to get into. But trust me, he's the real deal, and somehow, he's made it big. He says he's going to take this shop over and give it a nice facelift. He'll hire me, too, and get me a nice job, the kind you always wanted for me.

Shit, you and Elaine always complained I was wasting my time here even though I'm a good for nothing junkyard rat. Guess I get to prove you guys right for once, huh?"

"Really?" said Randall.

"Yes," said Aldrich. "I don't know how much my word means to you, but I can promise that."

"I guess I don't have much time left to be wondering," said Randall. "About Elaine - I'm glad she was happy. Thank you for giving her that time. It must have meant so much to her. Out here, she had nobody. As a pure human, she struggled so much.

It tore my heart to see her grow up and face the reality of the world.

Every single time I had to tell her some truths, that her parents abandoned her, that the Alters hated her for who she was, that this would never change, it felt like I was breaking off a piece of my heart.

Every time I had to tell her those truths, her smiles got smaller and smaller.

By the time she went off to Blackwater, she hardly ever smiled at all. But she smiled with you two.

That alone is enough for me."

"You were an incredible father to her," said Aldrich. "The best she could ask for - those were her own words."

"Was I?" Randall paused for a moment. His voice was modulated, lacking strong inflection. His face, like most of his body, was frozen, unable to show any expression. His breathing moved up and down in forced and unbreaking rhythm. It was impossible to show any emotion, and yet, that pause spoke volumes.

It spoke of deep regret.

"I don't know. I still think I failed her, sending her to that school and letting her die. I told her it was fine and that I didn't need her help, but that was a lie she saw straight through.

In the end, it didn't matter. My condition would have killed me before she graduated. But I hid that truth from her too. I didn't want her to give up on her dreams because I also knew if she got that license, she could do so much better for herself, even if I was gone.

But that lie made her stay there. It killed her.

When I got too weak to get out of this bed, I dreamed so much. Sometimes it got hard to tell whether I was alive or in a dream.

It hurt to be in either.

Alive, I saw my body get robbed from me, but at least I could stop feeling pain.

In my dreams, all I saw were my mistakes. And the pain that came with them.

All those smiles I took from her. Lying to her.

The world is cruel - I've known this my whole life. I've felt it since I was young.

I took in children that knew nothing but that cruelty, hoping to give them something better than what I had.

But in the end, I keep wondering to myself; was I selfish? What if someone else had taken in Elaine? That smart, wonderful, sweet child? Someone better than me?

She would still be alive. Maybe she would be on the news, leading some new innovation - there are so many these days, I know she could have been behind one of them."

"Don't think that way, old man," said Alan. "You've done your best for us. That's all we asked for. And it was a hell of a lot better than rotting out on the streets, that's for sure."

"Alan's right," said Aldrich. "You can't blame yourself. You're a good man, Randall, and a good father. Elaine would want you to be happy knowing that."

"...You two are right," said Randall. "Wishing for more, especially now, doesn't mean anything. Still, it hurts. It hurts so much to know a crippled, broken, expired old thing like me is still breathing and my lovely, bright and incredible daughter is gone.

It feels wrong."

"It is wrong," said Alan. His tone grew hard, laced with pain packed rage. "And that's why Aldrich is going to make Blackwater pay."

"Don't get hung up on the anger, Alan," said Randall. "You always let your emotions drag you around. One day, they'll drag you someplace you don't want to go, and I won't be there to pull you back out."

"He's right." Aldrich nodded to Alan. "This is above what you can handle. I'm offering you protection, but I can't guarantee it if you get reckless."

"How do you have the right to hunt them down, satisfy your own vengeance, but not me?" said Alan.

"Because I have power. You don't."

The blunt words left Alan quiet. Because harshly blunt though they were, they were just as true.

"I'm...I'm going to cool off. If you need me, I'll be out front taking a smoke," said Alan. He took in a deep breath, purging his rising emotions, and left the room.

"Don't let him do anything stupid," said Randall. "He already got in trouble once, with the local gang here."

Aldrich raised a brow. "How?"

"Nothing big. They made a ruckus about us paying them protection money because this was part of their territory. Silly stuff like that. He wouldn't take it, so he got in a fist fight with them. Came back here with a broken arm that set the shop back a whole month."

"I see. I won't let him do anything dumb. He is Elaine's brother, after all. She wanted a good life for you two, and I'm here to respect that wish and make sure it happens," said Aldrich. "About you, Randall, I can have you arranged to a better medical facility than this. I have the credits to make it happen.

I also know someone in biotech who can secure a Regenerol treatment for you. It's not available to the public, but I can make it happen.

I hear the procedure's got a 70% success rate for Waste Lung."

Aldrich said this, but his words were more empty condolences than anything else. Regenerol's success rate came with healthy and young patients. It involved introducing a stem cell culture from a regenerating variant into the body, and the weaker and older a body was, the easier it was for it to reject the cells.

The chances of Randall finding any benefits were close to zero.

"No. I've lived long enough. And I can tell how close my body is to failing, even if I can't feel anything anymore.

It's just a hunch, but I know I'm not long before I get into one of my long dreams. One that I'll never wake up from."

Aldrich knew that as well. He could sense it strongly. As a Lich, he was keenly aware of death. It had an indescribable 'feeling' to it, a certain calming chill that he could measure and sense, and Randall was cold. Very cold.

"But, Aldrich, I can see it in your eyes. You didn't come here just for me, did you? You needed something," said Randall.

Aldrich was surprised. "You could tell?"

Very few people were ever capable of parsing Aldrich's intentions from his face.

"You pick up a thing or two living this long out in the Wastes," said Randall. "So, what is it?"

Aldrich took out his phone and displayed the screen to Randall. It showed the dark, blue gridded world of Cyberspace, and there, the amorphous, glitchy mass of cubes that made up Elaine's hidden server.

"Elaine left this server for me, but it needs your biomarker to open," said Aldrich.

"Really? I've never seen anything like this. I'm a techno myself, and I've been around for a long time. I was there when the Omega Expansion first happened, when technology fused with Cyberspace.

Cyberspace back then was much more unstable, full of odd elements and daemons and the like, but nothing like this.

This doesn't even feel like it belongs."

Aldrich had to agree. From a purely geometric standpoint, everything in Cyberspace was made up of cubes that represented data. But the glitchy mess of Elaine's personal server was a wobbly, ever changing mass that looked utterly unlike anything around it.

"How did Elaine make this?" asked Randall.

"I don't know. She didn't tell me about it either. I was hoping I would find answers when I got access to it," said Aldrich.

"Let's find out. Bring that phone up to my thumb," said Randall.

Aldrich did as Randall bid. The touchscreen flashed, sensing a biomarker. A rotating little ball camera embedded at the top of the phone projected a holographic green scan that registered Randall's fingerprint.

'ACCESS TO - - - - - GRANTED'

Aldrich saw the bold green words stretch out on his screen. The name of the server was completely covered in a glitched out mess.

All of a sudden, the phone began to vibrate rapidly, the screen glowing bright white. The metal heated up until it was near burning.

Aldrich immediately reacted by dashing to the corner of the room, moving the phone away from Randall.

"Valera," commanded Aldrich, and Valera reacted in an instant, manifesting her shield to cover Chrysa and Randall.

The light from the phone spread out from its screen to encompass its entirety, and it was so bright it felt like the sun had been shoved inside the tiny, dark room, completely blinding everyone.

Almost as soon as that light flashed, though, it died down.

Aldrich looked down at his hand. The phone had disintegrated into dust. In its place, he saw a small symbol inscribed on his palm. It looked like a silvery white, thirteen pronged branch, with two of the branches ending in a circle.

The symbol glowed bright for a moment before fading away, as if it had never been there at all.

Aldrich stared at his hand in wonder. Valera and Chrysa both stayed silent, curious as to what had happened.

"What was that?" asked Randall.

"I'm...not sure," said Aldrich. He did not feel anything wrong with him. His system had not registered anything either. He put two fingers to his earpiece. "V, check on the server in Cyberspace. Tell me what happened to it."

After a brief pause, V's voice crackled in his ear. "Sure thing...it's not there."

"No trace of it at all?"

"No. Gone. Poof. Like a fart in the wind."

"Right. Tell me if you find anything notable. Scan the surroundings here, too, while you're at it."

"I don't see anything sus around you," said V. "Just broken down streets. Nobody nearby other than Diamondback as well."

"Got it. Report to me if you find anything about the server." Aldrich moved his hand from his ear, disconnecting himself.

"I know I said I was experienced, but I'll tell you know that I have no idea what happened," said Randall.

"I know," said Aldrich. He needed to figure out what had happened. Get somewhere private and run some tests on himself to make sure nothing was wrong.

No medical science was going to explain anything going on with this body. He was too unique now as a lich. But he could return to the Nexus. The Death Lord would know far better.

"I'm sorry to cut this short, Randall, but I'm going to take my leave right now. I need to investigate what just happened. You'll be safe, though, I can assure you."

Aldrich intended on leaving Diamondback around to secure the area until he could move Randall and Alan safely.

"Safety? Leave that for Alan. That boy needs it more than this broken old body does," said Randall. "I'm ready to dream my last now, knowing Alan will be taken care of. And knowing that Elaine still had it in her to smile."

It doesn't sound all that bad, really. Dying in my sleep. It's an end many times better than what I thought I deserved."

"You've done enough good to deserve as much," said Aldrich.

"Have I?" Randall did not look at Aldrich. His eyes instead stared straight up, at the sterile metal ceiling, lost in thought, lost in the past.

It was then that Aldrich felt a discernible chill in the atmosphere. Entirely unlike the cold aura that emanated from Randall's dying body. This was more physical, less spiritual.

The temperature of the room had noticeably dropped.

Aldrich felt uneasy. Chrysa hopped over to his side, clutching at his leg, feeling the uneasiness as well.

Valera stood from her chair, her pointed ears perking up. Her eyes flickered red, her magical energy emanating around her body in a tight wrapping of wispy crimson.

"Valera, is something-,"

Valera instantly tensed up, veins on her toned arms turning visible as blood pumped through her body - an unmistakable preparation for combat. Her perception, her battle instinct, was far sharper than Aldrich's.

She had sensed something. Something threatening.

But before Aldrich could react, his vision flooded with bright blue light as the chill of the room turned into intense freezing.

Chapter 262: An Unseen Cold

Force and cold rocked across Aldrich in an oppressive tidal wave, as if all the fury of a Himalayan avalanche had been condensed into a single beam of power.

Valera stood strong in front of Aldrich, her black greatshield holding against the wave of energy like a fortress wall. However, the attack was energy based in nature, flowing out like a raging tide. Aside from a small area behind Valera that protected Aldrich and Chrysa, the blast swept past and engulfed everything else.

That must have included Randall, but he could not go out from behind Valera to check.

Blinding pale blue light shone all around Aldrich, as if he had been dunked into the depths of a blue sun, but instead of unfathomable heat, there was instead freezing cold.

The light made it impossible for Aldrich to tell what was going on. But he knew that stepping into it would immediately freeze him.

"Father, what's happening!?" cried Chrysa, her warm breath visibly foggy in the chill air. She plunged her face into Aldrich's chest.

"Get into my Domain," said Aldrich urgently, his voice making it very clear he would not take no for an answer. "Where it's safe."

Chrysa nodded obediently through panicked tears. Her little body glowed bright white before fading into a shower of particles that flowed into Aldrich's chest, right where his phylactery was.

With Chrysa accounted for, Aldrich focused back on Randall. Yet, he knew all too well that any mental energy he spent on focusing was in vain. Aldrich's [Death Sense] no longer picked up on Randall's signature.

The light died down, confirming what Aldrich already knew.

There was no more shop No more Randall's Repairs. The walls and ceiling had all been blown apart like a tornado had raged right through it.

What little was left, miscellaneous odd bits of furniture, gears, and tech, was completely frozen over, encased in waves of ice that glistened under the morning sun.

That included Randall himself, his twig-like, wrinkled body encased in ice atop his bed, frozen in a snapshot of how he had been just seconds ago.

Aldrich's emotions were muted with his undeath, smothered over in a layer of ice, but seeing Randall, family to Elaine, one of his only friends, thawed that ice.

Emotion bubbled upwards, swelling up like a backed up geyser. '

Whoever had done this needed to die.

"Randall!" Alan shouted as he came sprinting by, lit cigarette slipping out of his mouth. He banged his hands against the ice prison that held Randall. "Help him! He won't last in there!"

Alan was in disbelief. Or maybe, by shouting that Randal was still alive, that he could be alive if he just got out quick enough, he was trying to convince himself that his words were real.

Aldrich might have felt emotion, but unlike Alan, he regulated it, never losing focus of the danger at hand. He looked around, trying to scan his surroundings for the enemy.

The direction the blast came from was easy to tell based on where Valera faced her shield, and yet, there was nothing there, just more trailers and shacks.

Like cockroaches under a light, the poverty worn denizens of these homes scrambled out and scampered away upon hearing the explosion. None of them screamed or made a ruckus like ordinary city folk.

They just ran. Over years of living in the edge district, they had learned not to question when things blew up or scream or waste their energy on anything other than running.

Aldrich ignored the runners. There was plenty of cover around with trailers, car clusters, and shacks, but not so much that both Aldrich and Valera combined with their perception could not easily pick out an enemy.

Whoever this attacker was, they were cloaking themselves through tech or Alter power. If they were a speedster, there would have been traces of their movement.

"Valera, we've got a stealthed enemy. Take care," said Aldrich. He walked over to the ice ridge forming Randall's cold coffin. He lacing his palm on the light blue wall of frost.

"Can you get him out!?" said Alan, panicked. "Is there anything you can do to help him!? Please, any little bit ought to do - if you need me to help, to get you anything, I'll do it!"

"..." Aldrich could not believe it. He was ready to crack open the ice and revive Randall as an undead before the soul expired, but -

There was no soul.

Randall's soul was gone. It was not as if he was alive in the ice, Aldrich's [Death Sense] showed that Randall was well and truly dead.

Then how?

The only explanation Aldrich knew related to Elden World game mechanics.

Whenever a unit died, their soul floated above their corpse for around a minute, perhaps longer depending on certain passives, spells, or equipment. Essentially, that was how long the souls stayed until they moved into the spiritual plain, into the flow of the great Soul Stream.

However, there was a way to kill units in such a way that their souls were sent directly to the Soul Stream, and that involved either purging holy attacks or damning cursed attacks. Both, if used to kill a mortal body, booted the soul straight to the Soul Stream.

This also made strong priests incredibly good at countering necromancers since they could mass purge souls to stop necromancers from using them. Similarly, demons, masters of curse magic, were also tough opponents.

But that was the game. This was real life.

There were no goddess anointed priests or knighted paladins or curse engorged great demons.

Aldrich tried to get a feel of the ice, attempting to sense whether it was, by some chance, magical in nature.

He could not tell.

Was this some form of Alter power then? One that could affect the soul? It was not entirely impossible, and Aldrich was far from knowing everything.

Alan looked up at Aldrich hopefully.

Aldrich shook his head.

"No! No, no, no!" Alan yelled as he slumped down to his knees, his hands dragging across the ice, yearning to get in.

Aldrich could sympathize with Alan, but he knew also that this was not the time to be trying to console a grieving, emotionally unstable wildcard. One that Aldrich needed to protect as well.

"I'm sorry to do this-," said Aldrich. Before Alan could react, Aldrich knocked Alan out with a precise blow to his jaw. Alan fell to the ground like ragdoll, his whole body going limp like a puppet with its strings cut.

Before Alan hit the dirt, Aldrich held him up.

"Chrysa, take him in," said Aldrich.

'I'm scared, father, what's happening!?' Chrysa's voice rang in Aldrich's head.

'No questions, Chrysa,' said Aldrich, stern. 'Not now.'

'O-okay' whimpered Chrysa, audibly terrified.

Aldrich did not know what to say to comfort her.

Nobody had ever taught him how to deal with the intensity of a fight or life and death situation. His parents had showered him with love and shelter and never once had taught him about how harsh a fight could be.

He learned that himself, facing intense, illegal combat simulations in virtual reality that were liable to fry his brain with how realistic and exhausting they were.

But he had learned basically just through endless repetition, smashing his psyche against the wall of hurt and struggle until he calloused himself enough where nothing could ever hurt him again.

That wasn't something he could just teach with the snap of a finger. There just was no time to think about it. He had to default to stern treatment.

Tendrils of white light emanated from Aldrich's chest, grasping Alan. Alan's unresisting body dematerialized in a shower of white particles, though notably, it took much longer than it did for Chrysa to transport herself.

Where Chrysa did it in just a second, Alan needed over ten seconds to fully dematerialize.

All the while, Valera kept her shield up, staying close to Aldrich.

Judging from her eyes that flit from side to side, he could tell she did not know where their attacker was, if even the attacker was still here.

"The hell happened?" Diamondback's rough voice crackled in Aldrich's ear.

"I don't know," said Aldrich. "But it's looking like an ambush."

"What do you want me to do?" Diamondback did not ask what was going on or how or other unnecessary questions. He only asked what was needed of him.

The mark of a trained man.

"Stay in the vicinity, but don't show yourself yet," said Aldrich. "If there's an attacker out there, they're probably cloaking themselves. I'll try to track them down."

"Roger," said Diamondback.

Chapter 263: An Unseen Cold 2

Aldrich switched comms channels in his earpiece by tapping it, linking with V.

"V, we're under attack," said Aldrich as he tapped his earpiece. He took out his shades and put them on, trying to scan for AC signatures. Nothing. "You scanned this area before.

Are you sure there was nothing here?"

"Shit, you're under attack!?" V sounded panicked, completely blindsided. She had probably been working on something else after believing that Aldrich was safe once she confirmed that nothing was wrong in the area with her scans.

"H-hold up, I swear there was diddly squat there! I jumped through every camera in the area, every phone, every little bit of audio reception and image recording capability out there. And not to mention, if your attacker had even the slightest bit of tech on them, I would have sensed that too.

Whoever's attacking you, they have to be doing it cold."

"Cold is right," said Aldrich, glancing at the ice all around him. Even under the bright daylight, the ice did not show any signs of melting.

But when V said cold, she meant that the attacker was not relying on any tech at all. No communications either. A completely isolated Alter.

Then likely a multi-class Alter. The type that had multiple abilities in one. Like Seth Solar or Solomon Solar who had flight, powerful bodies, and heat generation all packed together. "Blackout this area. Cut off net signals, phones, whatever you can.

I don't want cops and low ranking heroes to get here, if they even do bother with edge districts like this."

"I'm on it...wait-," V's voice crackled.

"What is it?" said Aldrich.

V spoke again, but her voice came out in a static filled garble. She was being jammed. Before Aldrich could worry, though, her voice came through again. "Something's starting to black everything out already.

It tried to cut me out, too, but this, at least I can deal with. I'm still linked to your earpiece and the visuals from your shades.

Shitty thing is I can't access any of the tech nearby anymore because it's all disabled.

It sucks to say this, boss, especially because I sold myself as a do it all expert, but I'm basically blind right now as far as helping you navigate is concerned.

Can't spot you any visuals by hijacking cameras or audio.

Fuck. I've never been this useless in my life! I'm so sorry-"

"Don't waste effort being sorry. I still believe in your capabilities. Trace the blackout source," said Aldrich, calming V down. He had heard that geniuses tended to break when their talent was questioned, and he could sense that from her.

So, he guided her, making sure to keep a firm but understanding tone to make her know he was not disappointed. "If they're shutting us out, then they want to stay and fight. To isolate us and hunt us down.

But it also means they're not running cold. They have to use some kind of tech for this.

Either for that, or for the cloaking they have running. In any case, it means they're trackable now, and you specialize in infiltration.

Hunt them down. Take them out if they're cybernetic."

Aldrich was fairly confident in this assessment.

Multiclass powers generally all fell under one overarching main power. The Solar family, for example, generated their power, flight, and heat beams with their main solar battery power.

It was extremely rare, if not impossible, for an Alter to have powers wildly unrelated to each other.

On top of that, it was a general rule that Alters with body boosting powers usually never crossed over with Psionic class powers that related to the mind or interfacing with technology.

Cloaking, ice beams, and tech disruption was a combo that just did not work together.

V spoke with the strain of wounded pride and disbelief. "I can't find them."

"What?" Aldrich said. By now, even he was in surprise, not expecting V to get pressed to this degree.

V was top shelf talent.

Where she was trained, the Den, was famous for producing underworld technos so capable that they could threaten mega corporations and major governments. Case in point, Z, also Den produced, had indirectly ended the 2077 Corpwar almost single-handedly with her bug, infiltrating a Fortune megacorp's servers which made finding a needle in a haystack look like child's play.

Not even Blackwater, the equivalent of a prestigious hero academy for villains, could get more than one Den spawn. That being V herself.

And V was specialized in infiltration, in invading and taking over tech and infrastructure in the Cyberverspace, and everything that connected to the Net was connected to the Cyberverspace, exhibiting a cyberspace structure or signature that one could interact with or, in V's case, infiltrate, corrupt, or destroy.

There was no way this could be beyond her.

"This is beyond me," said V. "Whatever tech they're using isn't something I've ever encountered before. Totally alien. Not as freakshow as that glitchy server, but still wack.

I'm in the Cyberverses right now, but I can't pinpoint a source for the interference. Shit! I've never, ever been this useless!"

This was probably the very first time V had felt so useless. She was always loud and cocksure, and for good reason. Her resume gave her the right to be like that.

"No, I'm better than this." V was defiant. "I'll give this my max effort. I'm not letting ANYONE be better than me. I'm going to think out of the box."

Aldrich waited a few tense seconds before a small screen showed up in the periphery of his vision. A minimap of the surrounding area projected by V.

A red dot flashed in and out of existence in intervals.

The dot circled around Aldrich about a hundred meters away, taking a tracking pattern reminiscent of a lion moving about a wounded impala. Predator eyeing prey.

"I can't track the bastard down directly - the tech's MIA, even in Cyberspace - but what I've noticed is the tech they use blacks out in omnidirectional waves pulsating from single point, as if someone's constantly setting off EMP charges," observed V.

"Pinpointing the center of those waves gets me the tricky little shitter's location, but be warned, because I'm following the blackout waves to their center, the tracking is delayed.

Think of it like bad ping in a game. 300 ping, give or take."

"Forward the location to Diamondback," said Aldrich.

"Already done."

"Good job. Switching." Aldrich tapped his earpiece to reach Diamondback. "You see that?"

"Yeah," said Diamondback. "I can get right up there in one jump if you need me to."

"Do that. Expect a three second delay in positional data. From how the dot's moving, the target's shifting in and out of cover, probably trying to get a good shot on me.

Flush the target out.

If you can manage to grab them, good, but if not, focus on making distance. Don't try and go behind them. Keep yourself between them and me." Aldrich reached at his hip and withdrew a pistol from a utility belt holster.

The pistol clicked into action with a low buzz - the hum of stored energy.

It was a bolter type pistol, but unlike the clunky, prone to jam, prone to explode in your hands type that were a dime a dozen, this was compact.

Still on the heavier side, but sleeker, with a shining coal black and bloody red paint job that made it obvious that whatever factory had pumped this gun out had done so with proud experience in the art of killing things by blowing holes through them via massively supersonic rail.

This was ARMA red grade. The elite, high end weapons line of the military tech mega-corp.

Same type that made Joe Peperelli's techno goons from the Red Circle attack, most of them no better than D listers, into veritable super soldiers with aimbot that had put bullets through half the heads of Casimir's men.

Since Aldrich could not rely too much on his powers to conceal his identity, he had to fall back on his training. Guns and martial arts. Explosives, too. He had a whole utility belt on him right now.

Was that going to be enough, though?

Conventional firearms, even if they were solid, could only take you so far.

Against the real top tiers, the A rank and above, you needed ultra futuristic tech from top end technos or weapons designed to counter them.

It was impossible to tell so far what level of threat Aldrich was dealing with. At the very least, the frost blast alone was enough to tip them over D rank or even C rank.

"Roger. I'll give you some space. You better have an answer to this cloaking soon, though," said Diamondback.

In the distance, Aldrich saw Diamondback back leap into the air, sparkling bright blue under the sun's reflective rays. He landed right where the red dot should have been, steering himself in the right direction through an eye scanner that V sent coordinates to.

Diamondback punched down as he landed, creating a shockwave blast of force that sent a group of roughshod cars and bikes flying away, tumbling and making a wrenching ruckus as their metal bodies rolled on hard road and pavement.

Area of effect to try and flush the target out. If the shockwave hit the target, it was possible it could even distort or disrupt their cloaking as well.

However, there was nothing behind that cover.

Aldrich saw the red dot go backwards on the minimap with considerable speed. Even with a few seconds of advance notice, dodging a hit from Diamondback's superhuman physicals was no small feat.

But overall, the situation was good. Diamondback driving the target back meant Aldrich had time of his own.

He took this time to counter the cloaking. He raised his palm up and summoned a [Grave Ward]. Because the creature was invisible to begin with, he did not worry about it getting spotted.

The [Grave Ward] spawned above Aldrich's hand, forming from a lump of malformed flesh and quickly growing into its three eyed, floating form.

'Go find the attacker' said Aldrich. He directly connected mentally with the [Grave Ward], manually piloting it.

The [Grave Ward] floated out towards the red dot obediently, its large, bulbous directing their unblinking stare in the direction.

With its area of effect vision that spanned a radius of twenty five meters, once it reached the general area of the red dot, it could reveal the attacker without the 'ping' that made them hard to directly catch.

Then, it was just a matter of having Valera hold down the attacker for her and Diamondback to slaughter.

Aldrich sincerely doubted anyone short of an A ranker with a purely physical power boosting ability could deal with both of them.

And the presence of a powerful ice generation ability severely undercut that possibility.

This fight was over the moment the [Grave Ward] got to the red dot.

Especially because there was no counter to magical stealth.

Aldrich sent the [Grave Ward] past Valera, beyond her protective range, confident nothing could strike it down.

Aldrich blinked. Valera almost dropped her shield.

The [Grave Ward] splattered apart, blasted asunder with an accurately placed shot of blue energy that made it very clear that there were, in fact, counters.

Chapter 264: An Unseen Cold 3

The surprise, like any other distraction in the heat of a fight, fled from Aldrich. Or, to be more precise, he rolled it up, crushed it, and tossed it away into the same void he booted distracting thoughts during a fight into.

His mind geared into complete focus, and like a well oiled engine, ran a dozen thoughts at once.

Once more, he was in the 'zone', the world all around him slowing down to a crawl.

The ice bolt that targeted the Grave Ward had followed a linear trajectory. That meant it lead directly to whoever had fired it. He traced the travel path of the bolt back to a spot behind a four wheeler painted a dull blue powdered with dust and dirt.

With a fluid series of trained motions, Aldrich held his bolter pistol in front of him, taking aim. He felt the edges of his vision strain and darken, his psyche automatically cutting out everything except the car, everything except the target.

Absolute focus.

Aldrich pulled the trigger.

The model of the bolter was called the Red Wail, and it was obvious why. Parallel lines of red running across the pistol's extended barrel supercharged, and a high pitched rumble echoed out - the wail of a weapon meant to destroy with every single shot.

A deafening bang unleashed itself from the pistol as a bolter round, more metal spike than bullet, shot out in a shower of sparks and red crackles.

The depleted uranium round punched through the car as if it was a two bit cardboard model before making solid impact with something right behind it. The harsh crack of metal splitting apart resonated through the air accompanied by a light show of blue and orange sparks.

A chaotically flickering silhouette crashed backwards into the dirt with a dull thud, the spike-like round jutting out visibly to mark Aldrich's success.

Direct hit.

Aldrich got out of the zone, his vision briefly blurring as he relaxed his mind. The black around his vision disappeared.

"You have him!" exclaimed Valera. "What a mighty weapon that is!"

"This isn't over yet," said Aldrich. He put his fingers to his earpiece. "Diamondback, we're dealing with either a Frame or a bot."

Aldrich could tell as much from how the round had hit based on the sparks and rending metal.

"The bolter round should give you a visual marker to follow. Prioritize capture. Now it's time to earn your pay," said Aldrich.

"I'll need a bonus at this rate," said Diamondback.

Diamondback appeared from the air, aiming a kick at the downed enemy.

The target dodged to the side, recovering respectably. Diamondback's foot smashed into sun dried earth and split it apart in a crater. But that was probably the last time the target was going to dodge anything.

The target had evaded with stiff, jerky movements, indicating damage. Sparks continued to sputter out from the embedded bolter round. The silhouette's flickering gave way to more and more of its hidden appearance.

The problem with cloaking technology was that it was finicky, prone to malfunctioning with the slightest bit of damage. Soon, it would deactivate, revealing the culprit fully.

"Shall I assist him?" said Valera.

"No, stay with me," said Aldrich. "There may be more like him nearby."

He raised his palm in the air and summoned another [Grave Ward]. This time, instead of sending it out on its own, he kept it floating beside him, where he and Valera could both protect it.

The instant Aldrich said this, he whirled around as his [Grave Ward] revealed a cloaked mass behind him. He found himself instinctively reacting, grabbing at and stopping two metallic wrists belonging to robotic hands reaching out for his throat.

Aldrich, with the [Grave Ward], got a good look at his attacker.

It was a machine, no doubt about it, a humanoid construct two meters tall made of grey and pale blue metal plates seamlessly interlocked together. At the robot's chestplate was a shining blue circle of light that likely indicated a power source of some sort.

The robot stared at Aldrich with a thin blue line of light on its faceplate. A cold, mechanical stare. Curved horns of metal jutted out from the sides of the machine's head, likely for aesthetic purposes.

To Aldrich's surprise, he could not just overpower the machine and force its hands away from him. The bot was strong enough to match Aldrich's already superhuman strength, no -

The machine started to overpower Aldrich, the whirl of gears and the groaning of straining metal emanating from its arms. Its stealth function disappeared, replaced now by a white fog that poured out of vents located in various in its body.

Inexorably, driven by the endless determination of programming, the bot inched closer to Aldrich's throat with its open hands.

Aldrich's arms, directly in the emitted fog, froze over like they had been dunked into liquid nitrogen. Had he not been undead with natural cold resistance, his hands would have turned brittle and shattered already.

"Die, golem!" Valera rushed to Aldrich's side and punched the robot in the face, burying its head down into the dirt in an almost cartoonish display. With savage intent, she loomed over the bot. She slammed her shield into the machine over and over again, each blow ripping apart metal and sparking wires.

The bot was thoroughly subdued, the light in its eye line fading into black.

"That's enough," said Aldrich.

Immediately, Valera paused, stopping her shield from once more tearing into the machine.

"Let me see." Aldrich looked down at the bot. Its chest had been thoroughly torn apart, revealing a complex array of moving metal parts and patterns of circuits and wires.

The thing that grabbed his attention the most was a spherical blue orb at the center that must have been the power source. As far as bot power sources went, it looked fairly standard.

Quite a few battle bots used engine cores like this.

But that was about all Aldrich knew. The parts, the circuitry, the wiring - he had no idea about. "I don't recognize this tech from anywhere, but that makes sense.

A bot strong enough to beat me in physicals on top of powers like stealth and ice generation - this has to be beyond tech, and if it's beyond tech, it makes sense why I wouldn't know anything about it."

"Beyond what?" asked Valera.

"It's a little difficult to explain fully. Just know that this thing is special. As far as golems go, it's on the stronger end," said Aldrich.

Beyond tech was the term coined for technology that escaped 'beyond' the realm of current human possibility. Only the highest end of technos could create beyond tech, and any one that could make functioning battle bots this strong should have been world famous.

Aldrich could scratch off any heroes or public figures, then, that could have been behind this.

That left the criminal underworld.

And even there, Aldrich could count the entities that could hire or house a techno capable of this on his own two hands.

Specifically, six fingers - the Dark Six.

"V, you're seeing this, aren't you?" said Aldrich. He did not check up on Diamondback. He trusted the man to take down the damaged bot and to say anything if something was wrong.

"Yeah," said V. "That thing's a bot I've never seen the likes of. Beyond tech, I guess.

But the security measures that made it invisible to me are gone now. Even if it's beyond tech, it's still connected to the same cyberverses everyone else uses.

I'm going to dive in and take as much info as I can out of this scrap bastard, make sure it never blindsides me again."

A faint purple light flickered in the bot's eye line, indicating that V had infiltrated it.

"Where's this thing from?" said Aldrich.

"...Damn it, and here I was thinking I'd get a freebie. The thing's insides are secured. Any info I can access in its memory's locked up.

It's strange. This thing's like a weird mash of known and unknown. It's as if an alien saw our tech and decided to try and make their own version of it, getting the basic design right while everything inside is wildly different."

"Can you break into it given time? I'm planning on taking this thing with me."

"Yeah, I can totes do it. Give me a few days. Once I crack this thing once, I'll be able to crack any other bot operating on similar systems," said V.

"Got it." Aldrich took his hand from his earpiece and talked to Valera. "Let's carry this thing out of here. I wanted to stay in this city a little while longer, show you and Chrysa an arcade and a nice dinner and maybe even a movie, but it doesn't look like we have time."

Valera balled her fist and gnashed her teeth. "Accursed golems! Daring to take a date with my master away from me! Whoever the golemancer is that shaped these foul abominations, I will wring his head from his pitiful neck."

"A date, huh?" said Aldrich. He had not been thinking of it as a date, more just a way to increase Chrysa's bond to boost her soul synchronization. What it would have meant to Valera did not even register to him.

But he had to stop thinking like that.

He had to start thinking more about Valera's feelings as well. He was too used to thinking of her as a unit to move around like a game piece. He needed to start training himself to think of her as much more - he had promised to give her love a chance, after all.

In lieu of this decision, making up the date became an important objective as well.

Aldrich sighed. "Then it looks like I've screwed up our date and a fun time for Chrysa. I'll have to make up for this somehow."

"No need," said Valera, bowing her head. "Duty comes first-,"

"You don't want to go on a date?" said Aldrich.

"..." Valera kept her head bowed, hiding an obvious blush. She whispered softly, shyly. "I do."

"Then let me make it up to you," said Aldrich. He did not know whether training himself to think of her was a good thing, whether it should have all come to him naturally, but maybe this was just how he was.

He had always solved his problems with training and preparation. Made sense he would approach dating the same as well.

Valera squealed in delight, finally unable to control herself. She hugged her shield and swayed from side to side. "A date? Our first real date? Truly? What will we do? Where will we go?"

"Slow down, I don't think that fast," said Aldrich. "I-,"

"Critical systems failure detected." The robot interrupted Aldrich. "Attempted intrusion of memory storage detected. Initiating purge protocol..."

The robot's blue core started to glow brightly, swelling with energy that made it very clear that it was getting ready to blow.

Chapter 265: Unanswered Questions

"Purge protocol? What manner of witchcraft is this golem speaking of?" said Valera, brows knitted together in thorough confusion.

"Get that thing out of here!" said Aldrich. He gestured to the sky, and with just that, Valera knew what to do, picking up on the rare urgency in Aldrich's voice.

Valera grabbed the android's dented head in her hand, her black claw tipped fingers digging into the metal for a firm grip.

"ORA!" With a bellow, Valera spun to build momentum before throwing the bot high into the air where the machine ragdolled for a bit before its core overloaded, completely enveloping it in blue light.

The bot self destructed right afterwards, its core shattering and unleashing a nova of energy decorated with scattered metal bits.

But before the explosion could fan outwards, potentially dropping parts to analyze, the energy collapsed upon itself, sucking into a singularity point where everything disappeared.

No traces left. Nothing to use.

"Whoever created these golems must be quite possessive of them," said Valera as she stared up at the fading explosion. "To use such extreme measures to prevent their designs from spreading."

"It's actually quite common.

The 'golems' of this world aren't like the ones in Elduin, where golemancers spend their lives building up constructs that they treat like dear art pieces that they would never think about blowing up," said Aldrich. "But here, golems are created with utility in mind, not passion.

Most of the time, that is."

It was actually concerning that this bot had a self destruct function. That meant whoever had built these treated them as expendable tools. Just two units out of many. And these things were no joke.

Aldrich determined that they could kill a C rank hero with medium difficulty. Even someone like Minuteman who ranked, say, around the 70th percentile of the B rank in terms of power would struggle against them.

Whatever this was, whoever was behind this, Aldrich needed to get to the bottom of it. He grimaced. He had come here to answer questions about Elaine's server, but all he left with were more questions and Randall's cold, frozen corpse.

Aldrich went over to the ice tomb holding Randall and punched it in uncharacteristic frustration. Even then, he vented his frustration out productively, shattering the ice to free Randall's body, for he intended on taking it to analyze.

Still, disappointment and anger wracked Aldrich's mind. He did not feel this way with practically any human, but for Randall, someone that Elaine cared about so much, he had enough mortal empathy to suffer loss.

That loss solidified Aldrich's decisions. Once he found who was responsible, they were going down.

No questions about it.

Diamondback landed beside Aldrich, his heavy crystal body crushing the pavement beneath his feet. In the distance, a secondary blue explosion flared in the sky.

"I handled the other one. Couldn't capture it intact, though, for obvious reasons," said Diamondback. "Damn near lost my right arm in the self destruct blast."

"I understand." Aldrich knelt down and picked Randall's stiff, still frozen body.

"..." Diamondback and Valera both stood in silence, watching Aldrich hold Randall's corpse in quiet.

"Did he mean much to you?" said Diamondback.

"To me, personally, no. But he was my friend's father. A good friend," said Aldrich.

"If it's going to be hard for you, me and my boys can arrange a burial," said Diamondback.

"No need. I can handle it." That, and Aldrich knew that Alan had more of a say on how Randall's body was buried.

"V, you there?" Aldrich tapped his earpiece.

"Ugh...feels like someone whopped my head in with a hammer, but yeah," said V, reeling from having her mind booted from the android. Most likely, the android had a self destruct function for both its body and its data, and V, poking around in its memory space, had been caught in it.

Thankfully, V was good enough to get out quickly. Less experienced infiltrators would have gotten suck and had their brains fried in the purge protocol.

"Good, you're alive," said Aldrich.

"Hey now, I know I was a useless piece of shit this time around, but sometimes I'd like a little more than that for comfort," said V.

"You did as well as you could have. I don't hold anything against you."

"Really? Do you actually mean that?" V's normally peppy and confident voice wavered, and it was then that Aldrich could sense that the confidence was more a veneer.

A veil covering over something much more fragile, much more tender.

"Of course. Part of growing up the way I did was knowing exactly what I was capable of. And that came with understanding that disappointment is a massive waste of time and energy.

You work with what you have when you can. That's what I expected for myself, and that's all I expect from you."

"Huh, that's an interesting way to think about things. You sure it doesn't just make you lazy?"

"Do I look lazy?"

"Good point. Well, I should be getting off my ass instead of sulking as well. I did manage to get some data.

Obviously, cracking the bot's memory wasn't something I could do just like that, but there was a bug floating around from an outside source that I managed to get a good look at."

"A bug? The android was hacked in some way?"

"I'm not sure exactly how much the bug was doing, just that it was there. It might be something like my V parasite, just chilling low key. Once I'm done scanning it, I'll fill you in on the deets."

"Got it. Keep me informed." Aldrich sighed as he disconnected from V. He got up, still holding Randall's corpse in his arms. The elderly man felt like a rock - that was how deeply the frost had seeped in.

"Shall I carry that body?" said Valera.

"No, that's too conspicuous." Aldrich turned to Diamondback. "This has drawn too much attention already. Go back to the hotel and get our stuff. Regroup with me by the southern exit."

Diamondback grunted and jumped away.

Chapter 266: Emergency

"I'll have Chrysa store the corpse," said Aldrich, making sure Diamondback was gone. He was fully on guard now after this attack as he had no idea how and why the bots had targeted him.

Had they been lead to him via information leak? Aldrich did not distrust Diamondback, but he did become a suspect in this regard.

Did they know who he was?

What did they want from him?

Where had they come from in the first place?

All new and dizzyingly annoying questions to deal with.

"In time, we will find answers to everything," said Valera, sensing Aldrich's thoughts. "And when that time comes, I will take great pleasure in tearing the spines from those that dared to destroy our date."

"I hope so." Aldrich put a hand to his chest, over his phylactery, and telepathically communicated with Chrysa. 'Chrysa, can you transport this body?'

There was no response.

Aldrich tried again, closing his eyes to focus more on establishing a mental link and to read her status. 'Chrysa?'

His mental voice echoed out in the dark mental landscape conjured up by his closed eyes, and heeding his voice was not Chrysa, but instead a rapidly approaching mass of

writhing, tendriled shadows that stood out even darker than black, like a black hole made manifest into some unholy abomination of a creature.

When Aldrich beheld that thing approach him, he opened his eyes, emerging from his mental landscape. He felt a distinct sense of numbness in his head, and he touched a pale palm to the side of his temple.

What was that? He did not know.

So many things he did not know just popping up one after the other.

Valera took Aldrich's arm and looked up at him, worried. "Is something amiss, master?"

"Chrysa, she's...asleep?" Aldrich wondered out loud, seeing that when he checked her status, she seemed to be in deep sleep. Unharmd physically in the boundaries of his Domain, but in a sleep that he could not prod her out of, even when he tried to control her using his master-familiar privilege.

The sleep was not peaceful, either.

Chrysa tossed and turned atop the couch of the domain's living room, sweat trickling down her silvery hair as her breaths quickened and slowed erratically, struggling with some phantom danger. Darkness trickled out from her body in little water current like waves, slowly splotching her pure white dress dark and tinting her moonlit hair the shade of night.

Or perhaps it was not illusory at all.

Again, Aldrich did not know.

What he did know was that Chrysa was also interfering with him. A likely downside of being synchronized together. Spatial distortions shimmered around Chrysa's body like heat waves in the desert.

It was her innate power going out of control, warping the space of his Domain, twisting and blurring colors together, taking the fabric of space and pulling it hard so that little tears showed here and there.

And from those tears, darkness dripped out. The darkness of the basement.

Aldrich had little idea what the risks were to let this damage keep going on, but he knew it was not good. Already, he suffered from one massive drawback - he suffered a debuff called [Spatial Lock] which prevented him from teleporting himself.

[Spatial Lock] in PvE was useful for trapping rare teleporting creatures to farm them or, in PvP, to prevent people from warping away to dodge spells or escape from

encounters. To beat [Spatial Lock] required a spell on the 8th circle and above, and Aldrich's [Mist Phase] fell quite short, sitting at the 6th circle.

The only teleportation that Aldrich could access to overcome the debuff was through a Sign.

Signs were considered a 'game mechanic' spell that spatial lock could not affect. The only thing that could hinder Sign related teleportation was being in combat to prevent easy fast travel inside battle encounters.

The biggest issue here was where the Signs were.

So far, Aldrich had Signs at the now burned down Red Circle, the forests outside Blackwater, and the Crypt.

Going into a city, especially Haven, posed too much risk. There were too many bounty hunters on the main roads. Panopticon and hero presence in Haven was also especially high right now incase variants attacked again.

Going to Blackwater took too much time. Same issue with the Crypt.

There was a way around this, though. Fler'Gan had arcane type spells, spells relating to utility, that could dispel [Spatial Lock]. From there, it was an easy [Mist Phase] out to a Sign to get to the Death Lord.

However, Fler'Gan was all the way back in the compound, almost ten hours from Redrock. And getting farther away by the minute.

Valera closed her eyes, and by virtue of her strong bond with Aldrich as his chosen, she could sense Chrysa too. "She is suffering- we must tend to her." She looked to Aldrich, but saw in his eyes the same confusion she had. "But if even you do not know what ails her, then the only one left we can turn to is that snake."

The Death Lord. Aldrich knew Valera was right. If there was someone that knew what was going on with Chrysa, it was her.

"We need to go. And we need to do it now. She's not suffering any physical damage I can heal, but if this is hurting her mind, I don't know how much she can take," said Aldrich urgently. His jaw set in simmering discontent.

Aldrich laid Randall's body down and pointed to a tarp hanging from a shack. "Wrap the body in this and carry it out."

"Yes, my master," said Valera.

As she went to tear the tarp away, Aldrich contacted V.

"What, missed me or something?" said V.

"Get Casimir on the line," said Aldrich.

V sensed the seriousness in Aldrich's voice and immediately did as he asked.

A few seconds later, and Casimir smooth voice flowed into Aldrich's ear piece. "Ah, Mr. Vane, I trust things are going remarkably on your end, no?"

"No time for small talk," said Aldrich.

"I understand." Casimir's tone shifted, and though it kept its friendly fluidity, it was easy to tell that if Aldrich saw Casimir now, the emote on the mask would have shifted from a smile to a straight lipped, focused gaze. "What is it you desire of me?"

"I'm going to send you some coordinates. Get an Airbird to me," said Aldrich.

"Emergency evac. In the meanwhile, stop the base until I get there."

Air flight was strictly regulated in the post-Monstering era, so nobody in the underworld attempted it. It was an easy way to get the hammer of both the Panopticon and AA beating down on them.

Regardless, Casimir had two Airbirds, medium sized transport jets, as an insurance policy for a quick and desperate getaways. It was always better to travel by land and not draw attention, but when push came to shove, air travel was faster.

If possible, Aldrich would have sent Ace over, but he was busy on the mission to capture Feather.

This was risky. Even if the airbird took Aldrich outside of the city, he was still in range of Panopticon/AA surveillance.

But it was a risk Aldrich was willing to take.

"The airbird?" said Casimir, surprised. "Airspace is quite tightly controlled around walled cities, even if they are a meager tier 3 - are you certain this is the only way?"

You will no doubt draw lingering gazes not only from rabble bounty hunters and underworld eyes, but also Panopticon surveillance and the AA itself.

A breach of city airspace may warrant quite an unpleasant response.

Normally, you would not get more than a few inquiring drones and perhaps a C rank hero, all annoyances you can swat away, but in light of the Locus Raids, you may end up dealing with an ill disposed B, no, perhaps A rank hero."

"Get Clint on board," said Aldrich. Clint was a natural deterrent. His reputation as the 'Unbreakable' was not just limited to nomad communities.

Heroes would know of him too. Even an A rank hero would think more than twice before trying to chase a flight with Clint on it. "And tell him I owe him a favor and a drink for this."

Chapter 267: Airbird

Aldrich pressed his foot against the accelerator of his car. The sturdy beast of armored dark green roared, its twin etherite powercell engines venting out two tails of fiery exhaust powering the car to speeds over two hundred miles per hour.

"You know what's going on?" said Diamondback, raising his voice to be heard over the constant rumble of the car engines. "I thought you we came to Redrock to show your kid a fun time. Now we're leaving with an iced dead body and no kid in sight."

It had been an hour since Aldrich had driven out of Redrock. That hour was spent in tense silence. For the first half hour, he had gone slow, avoiding suspicion and police encounters. Now, though, he was far enough away from the city that he could hit the gas and go full speed.

The evac point was an hour and a half away, with the last half of the trip being off road to minimize surveillance.

"Unexpected circumstances," said Aldrich. "If you don't mind, I'm keeping the details of what happened under wraps."

"You're suspecting me of leaking info?" asked Diamondback. He was not offended. Just curious.

"Suspicion is a strong word. Careful is more like it. If you're worried about the child, she's safe."

"That's understandable." Diamondback crossed his arms from the backseat and stared at the motion blurred orange-red background of the Wastelands. "I hear you called for air evac from Clint. I would say that's a stupid decision, but you're not the type to make those kind of decisions.

Not intentionally, anyways."

Valera glared back at Diamondback.

"What? Everyone can make mistakes, no matter how sharp you are up here."
Diamondback pointed to his temple.

"He's right," said Aldrich. "In this case, it's less mistake and more unpredictability. There's only so much you can prepare for."

"Ain't that right. I haven't seen bots like that before," said Diamondback. "They were tough, but not the worst I've dealt with. It was just the feeling I got from them. They didn't feel entirely machine."

Aldrich raised a brow. "What do you mean?"

"Whenever I fight someone, I can tell when I'm fighting a man or machine. There's a feeling a man gives off that a machine can't replicate. Machines are programming and adaptation, all response to stimuli.

Man is more fluid. There's something about how a man moves that makes them human.

The bot I fought felt mostly machine, but there was an odd bit of man there too."

"I sensed that too," said Valera.

"...I see." Aldrich had not picked up on this because he did not have as much direct combat experience as either Diamondback or Valera. Most of his fighting was done in virtual simulations, which, though hyper-realistic, did not simulate the 'human' aspect of combat too much.

Looking into a simulated Alter's eyes yielded nothing except programming. Much like fighting a machine.

In that regard, Aldrich understood he was below top class martial artists. His technical skill might have been up there from endless drilling, but his ability to read living, thinking beings in the heat of combat fell short of people like Valera and Diamondback who had made long careers out of endless fighting.

Were the machines cyborgs, then? Part man? Not possible. V would have pointed that out immediately.

Perhaps they operated off of a new form of programming that was more human? Maybe they even utilized a downgraded version of True A.I., the type of machine learning that could become sentient.

True A.I. was outlawed after the Altering when a sentient A.I. called Infinity threatened humanity's extinction by taking control over all of its nuclear arsenal and technological infrastructure.

It took the heroic sacrifice of Omega, a legendary techno, to infiltrate the A.I.'s mind and destroy it.

Omega sacrificed his own mind in the process, and the resulting aftermath caused a sort of psychic rift that created the Cyberverser.

This was the Omega Expansion that Randall had talked about, when technology inextricably merged with the Cyberverser.

But true A.I. was basically extinct now. The Panop-AA complex in cooperation with world governments made sure of that, strictly destroying anyone that tried developing such programs.

The likelihood that Aldrich was dealing with True A.I. was low, but not an impossibility.

Recent events had stretched Aldrich's definition of 'impossible' further and further. Soon, he figured, he would throw away that word entirely from his vocabulary, replacing it at best with 'improbable.'

"Another thing I noticed: we aren't getting harassed by hunters," said Diamondback.

"The open contract's been called off," said Aldrich. V had informed him of this at the start of his car ride. It was a surprise, but a pleasant one. A much needed reprieve after bad surprise after bad surprise.

"Calling off a big open contract like that after what, a day? That's not good business practice, even for the Dark Six. Hunters will lose trust in their contracts now," said Diamondback. He raised a bushy black brow. "The only explanation I can think of is they're dealing with something big.

Big enough that they can't afford to keep eyes and ears on this contract.

I don't like the feeling of this. Something big's brewing in the Underworld.

And when it blows, it's going to get bad."

"Things are already bad," said Aldrich. He could visualize Chrysa clearly, suffering in the Domain, her little body twisting and turning, the tears in space growing deeper .

With silent gasps, she mouthed the word 'father'.

Aldrich was not her real father, but...he still felt her pain. Her fear. Her loneliness. He saw the suffering he felt when his parents were torn from him reflected starkly back at him.

Whether he felt these emotions so strongly because he was linked with Chrysa did not matter.

What he did know for sure was that he was going to get to the bottom of this, no matter what it took. "And I'm going to make sure someone pays for it."

Aldrich reached the off road evacuation point without issue. The airbird was already waiting for him, landed atop cracked earth on its two legs. Tripod toes drilled firmly into the earth, anchoring the airbird in place.

These legs were the defining feature of the airbird and the reason for its namesake, making it look somewhat like a perched bird. This function let the airbird anchor to most surfaces reliably, letting it evacuate across a variety of terrain.

The rear cargo door was open, funneling out a ramp that Aldrich drove into. The moment he did, the ramp retracted and the hatch closed. The airbird's engines whirred as it hovered in the air, its legs folding into its belly to maintain aerodynamic shape.

Aldrich got out of the car with Valera and Diamondback.

"Hey boss!" Fisk waved from the cargo hold entrance. "Good to see you again. Heard we're in some real shit. If there's anything I can do for you, I've got your back."

Fisk flashed an optimistic smile that looked a little too innocent for his biker gang getup of mohawk blonde hair and motorcycle jacket. Then again, this was just how Fisk was.

"I appreciate it," said Aldrich. "V didn't need you?"

"Naw. Me and Spybird both got some time off from her to fly this thing." Fisk sighed. "V, now, she's a looker alright, I could totally see her as that cute e-girl. Totally my type, if it wasn't for the fact that she works me like a farm dog."

"Take it as a compliment. She's a perfectionist through and through, and if she thought you were going to hurt her standards, I don't think she would have let you near anything she did."

Chapter 268: [Bonus chapter] Clint's Job

Fisk nodded, taking in Aldrich's words.

"Yeah, when you put it that way, it does make sense. That makes me feel a little better about it all. Anyways, I hope you don't mind me enjoying this vacation, boss." Fisk shrugged before he pulled out a gamedeck, a portable console. A chrome blue X

shaped logo showed that it was from Exceed, a top end video game corp based in Japan.

Unsurprisingly, as far as gaming went, Fisk spared no expenses.

"You sure Spybird doesn't need your help piloting this?" said Aldrich.

"Got no experience interfacing with planes," said Fisk. "I just BS'd to V that I could to get out of her hair. Literally."

"Haha!" A deep laugh boomed through the innards of the plane, echoing off of every wall with near deafening intensity. "Look what we have here!"

Clint stepped into the cargo hold, dwarfing Fisk in both size and personality.

Diamondback smiled. "Yeah, I'm seeing a good for nothing punk."

"Heh, I've grown outta that phase a long time ago," said Clint. He nodded to Aldrich and Valera. "How was Diamondback and his boys? Real good, ain't they?"

"Good enough," said Aldrich.

"Indeed," said Valera.

"Y'all are tough customers, huh? But ya ain't got nothin' to worry bout' anymore! Cause ya got the best of the best." Clint pointed a thumb proudly at himself. "And that's me!"

Spybird's voice emanated through a PA system. "Lifting off now. Every second we spend here is more time for pesky heroes or drones to catch us. Flight may be a little shaky because I am going fast, not careful.

And I am drunk."

"...Is he truly capable of steering a flying mount while drunk?" said Valera.

"I wouldn't want it any other way!" said Clint. "Survivin' a plane crash has a thrill of its own, y'know. Worst comes to worst, I can fly y'all back too. A crash ought to give my body enough reason to grow some wings."

Aldrich glanced at Clint with a questioning look, but then again, if there was anyone out there that enjoyed exploding airplanes for fun, it would have been Clint.

The airbird rocket violently as it hovered in the air.

"Nooo!" Fisk slipped off balance, though everyone else remained standing fine. His gamedeck flew away from his hands, heading straight for a demolition course against a wall.

"Got ya, big guy!" Clint picked Fisk up like he was a puppy by the back of his jacket. "And that!"

Clint used his other arm to reach out for the gamedeck. It stretched out like it was made from rubber. He grabbed the console and brought it right back to Fisk.

Aldrich got a good understanding of Clint's powers by now. It was, in essence, some form of adaptive evolution. He could alter his biology according to what he needed, but though the range of powers seemed incredibly varied, it was largely reactive in nature.

Most likely, Clint could not consciously control his evolution.

Aldrich had read up on Clint's feats after Stella had brought him up, scraping together as much info that was available about the legendary Unbreakable.

Judging from his research, if every rumor or tall tale about Clint was actually legitimate, then Clint truly was essentially unkillable.

A good contingency against Clint would be instant death magic applied quickly, before he had a chance to realize the dangers and develop a way to escape.

Aldrich cleared his head. It was in his nature to start thinking of ways to take others down, even if they were his allies, but there was a point where such thoughts became intrusive and counterproductive.

Especially when it came to pure hearted guys like Clint that were easy to read and thus easy to judge whether they were friend or foe.

"Hey put me down!" complained Fisk. "I ain't a kid!"

"Huh? You're like a kid to me, though!" said Clint with a big chuckle. "Don't touch that game of yours until we're cruisin' unless ya wanna see it tumblin' down again."

When Aldrich saw Clint lecture Fisk, he could tell that once, Clint had been a father. According to Diamondback, Clint had lost both wife and daughter to the Dark Six.

It made Aldrich that much more aware of Chrysa's situation. How he was in danger of losing her. He would have smiled faintly at Clint and Fisk's shenanigans, but right now, he was not in the mood.

Perhaps it was because Aldrich was linked to Chrysa, but he felt now more so than ever a deep sense of uncertainty.

Uncertainty about the future. About the world that was so much bigger than he originally envisioned. At the end of the day, he was still new to this power and the responsibilities and risks it carried.

No matter how much he prepared himself, there would always be risk.

Valera sensed Aldrich's thoughts, the worry that plagued him, the loneliness and fear he felt reflected back at him from Chrysa. She reached out and held Aldrich's hand.

Aldrich blinked in surprise. Valera normally would have been too shy to ever make a move like this unless she was blood crazed.

But Valera was not blushing. Her eyes - they were determined.

'We will get through this,' said Valera with her mind. 'Together. So long as I am your guardian knight, you will never face a fight alone.'

Aldrich saw that look in her eyes and it was then that he felt close to her. Oddly, he had never felt like this during the many fights they had battled through together.

It was only now, when there were no shockwaves or energy blasts to deal with, just the abstract idea of facing an uncertain future, that he felt comfort in the firmness of her hand that would always be there for him.

Aldrich nodded to Valera and squeezed her hand back.

"We are in the air now," said Spybird. "Congratulations, all. No crash. But bad news, too. Worse than crash." The sound of him taking a gulp of liquor echoed through the cargo hold. "Hero" spat Spybird, disgusted.

A display screen hanging from the ceiling showed a super floating in front of the airbird. Two wings of golden energy stretched out from his back in a wide wingspan that nearly matched the size of the entire plane. He wore a white super bodysuit with flowing outer layers of fabric that looked like a toga.

The hero put a hand to his ear, connecting his earpiece to the airbird's speakers. He stared at the airbird with bright white eyes, flowing locks of shoulder length golden blonde hair billowing in the wind. "Turn this unauthorized flight and land immediately. If you resist, you should know that I am authorized to enforce justice upon you with lethal force."

Aldrich sighed. Another nuisance. At least, he had fully prepared for this one.

Diamondback started to grow his blue crystal armor over his skin. "That's Seraph. A ranker, though he's down in the minus league. Known for being a real hardass, that one.

Stickler for the rules. A little too trigger happy about killing for the sake of 'justice', whatever that means.

Damn, if we weren't flying, I could deal with him."

"Shall I?" said Valera. She could deal with flying targets surprisingly well using a martial arts skill called [Air Jump] that, as the name of the skill would indicate, let her jump on air.

"No, I brought Clint here for a reason. This is precisely why," said Aldrich. He had fully prepared for this exact scenario after hearing it could happen from Casimir.

Nobody other than Clint had the power to deal with an A ranker and also reliably survive and escape solo. "You mind taking this one? Next drink's on me."

"Heheh, you do know the way to my heart, huh?" said Clint. An eager grin imprinted on his face. "Sure, I got this. Next drink ought to be real nice, though."

"I'll have Casimir dig up something vintage," said Aldrich. "What do you like? Liquor? Some kind of artisanal beer?"

"Vintage, artisanal? Psh!" Clint stepped up to the hatch with a disgusted face. "Don't insult me with that fancy crap! Gimme enough shitty beer to knock me out, and ya got a deal!"

The hatch door clicked open, roaring winds whipping through the cargo hold.

"See y'all later!" Clint winked before he jumped out with gusto, the flesh on his back rippling before tearing apart to make way for newly grown, feathered white wings.

Chapter 269: Seraph

The moment Clint left, the airbird, hovering in place, turned, aiming to fly past Seraph. From the screen, Aldrich saw Seraph raise a golden brow.

"You've made your decision to resist an A-class hero's orders. Lethal force has been authorized. Prepare yourselves," said Seraph. He flew higher in the air until he looked down at the airbird. The twin wings of gold on his back changed shape, the energy they were made of fluxing with fluid movement until their winglike forms narrowed into spikes.

Spikes ready to punch holes straight through the airbird, no doubt. Aldrich noted down for future reference that Seraph's flight did not seem contingent on him maintaining his energy tendrils into wings.

Seraph's face, even on the cusp of killing an entire plane's worth of passengers, remained stone-faced cold. Aldrich did not expect anything else.

Seraph was among the more brutal of the A rankers, and he probably ate more lethal force misuse cases than a street rat in an all you can eat buffet. His marketing team's futile efforts to try and portray him as some kind of angelic figure did nothing but play to irony at this point.

Still, the simple fact that he was A rank meant even with horrible popularity ratings, he could do practically whatever he wanted so long as he did not actively kill innocent people. In fact, in that regard, Seismic was way worse, having legitimately caused the deaths of hundreds of civilians via collateral damage.

"This looks real bad!" said Fisk as he clutched his gamedeck to his chest like it was his literal baby. "You sure he can deal with this guy!? I know Clint's like, strong and stuff, but this dude's a legit A ranker!"

"Relax, kid." Diamondback crossed his arms and looked up at the screen showing Seraph's impending attack. "Clint's never lost a fight yet."

Before Seraph could thrust his spike riddled energy tendrils into the airbird, he was knocked out of vision, turning into a white blur like a train had rammed right into him.

That train being, of course, Clint.

Clint smiled broadly at the airbird and pointed away, telling everyone 'Go'. He disappeared out of the screen's vision, feathered white wings flapping as he pursued Seraph.

"Spybird, get us out of here," said Aldrich.

"You got it." Spybird responded through the PA system. The airbird lurched, and had Aldrich's body been fully mortal still, he might have felt some sense of nausea from the brief weightlessness he felt.

Whirring that increased in intensity resonated through the airbird as its engines charged up. Then, without much warning, the aircraft shot away now that nobody was blocking it.

"Noooo! My baby!" Fisk fell backwards from the sudden acceleration, and his gamedeck shot out of his hands and smashed against a wall, sputtering in sparks and a shower of separated pieces.

Fisk slammed his fist against the floor as a tear welled out of his eye. "Damn..! Clint would've caught that. Miss that big guy already."

"I'll get you another one." Aldrich reached down and helped Fisk up. "For now, just be glad we're safe."

"We aren't gonna support Clint at all, though?" said Fisk as he nodded in thanks at Aldrich. "Dude's out there all alone!"

"Clint fights best alone. Think of him like a natural disaster," said Diamondback. "Do you 'backup' a tornado? A hurricane? No, you get of its way and let it destroy whatever's in its path."

"Now that's badass," said Fisk.

"I could have taken that fight too," said Valera, not wanting to get one upped.

"You could have, but then you wouldn't be with me, would you?" said Aldrich.

"A fair point." Valera cracked her neck and licked her lips. "Though it is a shame I did not get to fight. That winged man did look to be quite the worthy challenge."

Aldrich wondered whether Valera could beat Seraph. Of course, he did not know Seraph's full powers, but from recorded fights and reports, in terms of pure physical stats, Valera and Seraph were evenly matched.

Whether Valera could beat out Seraph's energy tendrils with her array of martial arts skills was an open ended question.

A question that, hopefully, Clint would settle by taking out Seraph permanently.

"Die! Die!" Seraph stood over Clint in the middle of a cratered road, raining down punches that sent ever deepening cracks throughout the already stressed asphalt.

His energy tendrils complemented his punches, stabbing down with blade like points.

Blood and guts and other miscellaneous parts, scales, fur, eyes, teeth, fins, sputtered up in a frankensteinian geyser of gore.

Seraph now looked utterly deranged, his pure white toga costume drenched in so much red it was hard to tell that it had once even been white. His pale, smooth skin suffered a similar fate, turning into a canvas of blood where only his glowing, blank white eyes shone through.

A thickly muscled tree trunk of an arm covered in bulging veins shot out from beneath Seraph, slamming into his chest and sending him flying dozens of meters in the air.

Clint stood up. The crater he was in was so deep that it reached up to his shoulders, and he was already a big man, getting bigger by the second, too.

"Nao thish ish a fhight!" shouted Clint, words slurring because his lower jaw had been punched so hard it had detached, dangling down like an accessory.

Horrific injuries was an understatement to describe Clint's state. His body was filled with so many holes he might as well have been swiss cheese. He was missing an arm and a big chunk of one of his legs, the red and raw flesh underneath spurting blood.

Yet, in spite of all this, Clint's red eyes sparkled with excitement. He took his torn jaw and set it back in place. Newly grown fibers of flesh eagerly reached out and attached his mouth back together in one piece. The rest of his wounds quickly healed up too, the holes covering up within a single second.

Where Clint healed, his skin solidified, growing dark green scales. With the full body injuries he had suffered, the scales covered his entire body, making him like some kind of reptilian humanoid, especially with his signature curved horns.

"Why won't you die!?" shouted Seraph in frustration. He put a hand at his chest, nursing a burning bruise from the uppercut that had sent him flying.

That hit was much stronger than before too. Atleast twice as strong.

"Hahah! I'm fucking unbreakable!" Clint flew in the air. He no longer needed wings.

It had been twenty minutes since he started his fight with Seraph. Since then, his evolution had progressed so much he had obtained the following powers:

Levitation based flight.

Hardened scales.

Shock absorbent chitin.

Enhanced regeneration.

Empowered muscle fibers.

A constant cocktail of pain reducing, performance enhancing hormones.

Not bad, but not great either. Clint was maybe 30 percent of the way to getting really fired up. A shame that this A lister could not even bring him to 50 percent, even after he had gotten all his hopes up from seeing the young uns that Vane had shown him taking down the Megaloptera.

"You really are as unbreakable as the reports say you are," said Seraph.

"Made a name for myself in the cities, too, huh?" Clint laughed. "Pa would've been proud."

"You won't live to pass down that evil of yours," said Seraph. He briefly glanced around. The Panopticon drones had not shown up yet, let alone media drones.

Good.

Seraph often requested delays in Panopticon support because he did not like interference. That, and he hated being watched. He was always judged for killing, for enforcing justice, but he knew better than anyone that the only way to make sure a villain stayed down was to end them once and for all.

And this man, Clint, the Unbreakable, with a bounty of 20 million credits, was one of the biggest figures of the underworld. A man Seraph had to take down in the name of justice and good and law.

"Pass down, huh?" Clint looked down with a wistful gaze, remembering.

Seraph's eyes widened as he saw Clint's guard go down. With a burst of speed, he flew at Clint with jetspeed force. His energy tendrils coiled in front of him, whirling around in the form of an oversized drill.

If Seraph drilled Clint's body from the center and blew it apart, he could separate all the component pieces and make sure they did not regenerate. That was how he had dealt with multiple regenerating villains before.

"What!?" Seraph.

Clint stopped Seraph's drill attack with one hand. Like a broken power tool, the drill tried to spin, but Clint's impossibly tough grip kept it rooted in place.

"You've made me remember some good times," said Clint. His smile twisted into rage, baring teeth that were now monstrously sharp. "But also some bad times."

With a roar, Clint grabbed Seraph's two tendrils, mashing them together between his hands to form a pulley, and used that to yank Seraph and slam the hero into the ground. The crater that Seraph had gouged out with Clint was nothing compared to what Clint bashed out now.

Seraph lay gasping for breath, embedded in the center a massive swathe of sunken in road. His eyes flickered shut and open as he struggled to stay conscious.

Clint floated down, standing over Seraph. "Y'know, kid, you're too serious for your own good. Learn to let go and smile once in a while, heh."

Clint's ears twitched as he picked up the blaring siren of Panopticon drones far in the distance. It was now time to go. He rapidly evolved a teleportation based power, his skin rippling in distorted waves of space.

"See ya, kid." Clint waved and turned around. The ripples intensified swallowing Clint up in a ball of stretched out space before disappearing, leaving no trace of him behind.

Chapter 270: Cure

A good minute after Clint left, Seraph broke himself out of his impression in the crater. Rubble and dust fell off of him in droves. His once perfect, glossy, wavy gold hair now fell down in messy, dust caked strands that veiled the blood painted all over his face.

From a minor assessment, Seraph figured he had suffered a fracture in his vertebrae and a minor concussion. Thankfully, the fracture did not paralyze him, and his base Alter healing factor smoothed the concussion over quickly.

With a growl more animal than man, Seraph stomped the ground, shattering the already damaged street even more. He had let evil get away yet again. He was meant to exterminate evil, and yet, he had been defeated just like that.

There was so much evil in this world.

So much evil that was powerful.

Seraph needed to get stronger. No matter what it took. Until every last shred of evil was exterminated.

Evil had taken everything from him. He would take everything from evil.

Seraph's receiver buzzed into life in his ear. "Who were they?"

"The right ones. Then Unbreakable was there," said Seraph.

"The Unbreakable? Then I'm assuming you're lying on the ground, all fucked up, aren't you?" The voice deepened in intensity, honing into a threatening edge.

"Standing, actually. But I could not enforce justice on them," said Seraph.

"Pathetic. I don't understand why so many people love you A rankers. You're all still useless. Then again, nobody loves you, justice-obsessed psychopath that you are."

"I have principles I stand by. Unlike you, Solar," countered Seraph. "And to think I once looked up to you."

"And I'm still looking down on you. Remember, Seraph, we're all in this together. Any one of us fails, and this house of card comes tumbling down on us. It crashes on me first, because I'm up higher than you, but when the crash does get to you, it'll have built up enough momentum to squish you into a tiny little smear on the pavement,"

"I know. I would have exterminated you in the name of justice already otherwise."

"Flexible principles, huh? You and I aren't so different."

"Flexible is a far cry from non-existent." Seraph said coolly. If there was thing he had long since learned to forget, it was fear.

"Just know where you stand. At the bottom of this all. Where you'll get crushed by circumstance or, if you get unlucky, my boot. And no amount of falsely placed confidence will save you from me.

I'm expecting better news from you later."

Solomon Solar's voice cut off, leaving Seraph in a brief moment of silence that soon would be cut off by the arrival of Panopticon drones. And a flurry of media drones asking him questions about this and that.

Seraph had long since committed to just ignoring the media completely. What use was popularity in the name of conducting absolute justice? Even if everyone in the world reviled him, as long as in the end he had cleansed the world, no matter how many bodies he piled beneath him to reach that point, he would be content.

But that single-minded focus had driven him into mistakes. Into risks. Into the situation he was in now, led around like a dog by Solomon Solar and the Trident.

Seraph grit his teeth as he saw flashing red dots approach him from the sky. Panopticon drones. One day, he would break free. One day, he would execute justice upon all of them.

Aldrich laid Chrysa down on Fler'Gan's lab table. She was still curled up in her sleeping ball position with tail touching her head. Shimmers of distorted space rippled all around her, warping the colors around her in a surrealistic slurry.

"How is she?" said Aldrich.

Fler'Gan inspected Chrysa with a monocle. He adjusted the monocle ring, and it clicked every so often as it engaged into different settings. This was a [Mana Reader] that could more accurately discern the flow of mana.

To Aldrich, it was useless because he had no real knowledge of how to read mana. The way he shaped and used mana was done almost completely for him via the system,

though recently, experimentation had let him modify his spells a little such as with curving the trajectory of his [Death Bolts].

Still, that did not mean Aldrich had any of the book smarts knowledge that Fler'Gan had which was necessary to properly read mana.

"As you may know, mana is the power of the soul given form through physical vessels. A living being's mental state can heavily affect the flow of mana within their bodies, and in this child's case, these distortions are a clear sign of emotional anguish," said Fler'Gan.

"That much is obvious, is it not?" said Valera, pressing for a more specific answer.

"Patience, vampire. I was about to explain." Fler'Gan continued. "You are familiar with creatures such as succubi and incubi, are you not?"

"Yes," said Aldrich.

Valera eyed Aldrich suspiciously.

"In a purely academic manner," said Aldrich, and Valera's suspicion died down. "And in facing them in a fight."

"Then you know they are masters of nightmare magics. When a creature is in sleep, their soul is the most vulnerable. Normally, the soul is well guarded. An alert, active, stable mind is difficult to penetrate. Dreamstalkers such as succubi can take advantage of a somnolent state and freely drain mana from their victims.

The way this child's mana flickers indicates distress from a nightmare forcibly imposed upon her."

"From who?" said Aldrich.

"From you," said Fler'Gan.

"What?"

"I have traced the origin of this nightmare. It comes from you. It is yours. I see that the Death Lord has imposed a ritual of synchronicity upon you two. But that is a link that flows in two ways.

Your soul, O Elder, is one dark and seeped in negative energy. This little one, on the other hand, is pure and positive. Yet, your soul, your mental strength, is far greater, and if one side of the scale holds greater weight, is it not inevitable for the scale to tip?"

"Inevitable? The Death Lord didn't make it out like there would be risks like this," said Aldrich. He remembered what he had seen when he tried to meld his mind with Chrysa's. The mass of tentacled darkness. "When I linked with her head, I also saw something. A mass of darkness."

"A beast constructed in the throes of a nightmare. I am sure that is not uncommon. However, I will warn you that I am not entirely certain about this," said Fler'Gan. "I am not an expert in soul magic. Its art was lost long before I was birthed. All I know of it are small, hazy bits and pieces from long forgotten and incomplete texts."

If you seek clearer answers, then you must go to the Death Lord."

Aldrich nodded.

"To that end, I will go ahead and disable the [Spatial Lock] imposed upon you two," said Fler'Gan. He took a few steps back, raised his hands towards Aldrich and Chrysa, and chanted, "[Great Dispel]."

A pale blue light emanated from his tendriled hands, washing over Aldrich and Chrysa. From his system status, he could see that the [Spatial Lock] was gone.

Thankfully, whatever was afflicting Chrysa was purely related to Elden World magic. Meaning that Aldrich had the resources to help her.

"Thanks, Fler'Gan. I owe you one," said Aldrich. He scooped Chrysa's limp body in his arms. Green mist started to emanate from him, surrounding his body.

"Grant me a new laboratory space in return," said Fler'Gan. "I am growing tired of this cramped space."

"You got it." Aldrich turned to Valera. "Valera, stay here for now. Keep a watch over this place and defend it in case anyone tracked us. I've had a [Grave Ward] follow us ever since we got ambushed, but I won't need it in the Necropolis. Keep it with you."

A [Grave Ward] floating behind Aldrich hovered over to Valera, and she grabbed the mass of giant eyes like it was a plushie. "Understood, master."

Aldrich then disappeared, his [Mist Phase] warping him away.

In the Necropolis -

"Hmm." The Death Lord circled Chrysa's prone body, furrowing her brows as she put a hand to her chin in thinking gesture. "Hmm," she repeated, deep in thought.

They were in Medula's magic experimentation room with blankets and pillows under Chrysa to give her some comfort.

"Do you know what's going on?" said Aldrich.

"Yes, and it is actually quite simple," said the Death Lord.

"What? Explain yourself."

"You two had a fight, didn't you?" said the Death Lord simply. "A fairly big one, too. The little one could not handle the stress of the moment, and that was enough weakness for the negative energy in your soul to seep through and wash over her."

Chapter 271: Expectations and Rewards

"That was all it took to disable her?" said Aldrich. He shook his head, shaking himself of his impulsive habit to see others through a lens of utility. He knew better now, after Haven, when he saw firsthand how important it was to connect with others to gain their loyalty. "No, that's the wrong question. How do I cure her?"

The Death Lord waved her hand dismissively. "Curing her of this nightmare is simple enough. I merely need a few minutes alone with her. What is important here is that this does not happen again."

"That's the thing. I didn't expect something like this to happen in the first place." Aldrich stared at the Death Lord, accusation sharpening his eyes. "You made it seem like there were no risks here. That even if she linked to me, to all the awful mess that's in my soul, that it would be okay."

"I thought her strong enough to handle it," was the Death Lord's explanation.

"...I should have known better." Aldrich sighed. "You're too used to thinking of children as miniature monsters that just need some time to grow up to get strong. You, as a dragon, were raised like that, hatched alone, nobody to depend on except yourself."

It stands to reason that even if you try, even if you read books on parenting, you can't empathize."

"Children are stronger than you think, Usurper. Look at yourself. All you needed was time and experience to hone yourself into the beast you are today."

Give the little one a push, and she will rise to meet your expectations."

Aldrich closed his eyes for a brief moment, his mind wading through a shallow pool of happy memories that no longer existed. "That 'experience' robbed me of my childhood. One of the reasons why I have such a soft spot for children is because they remind me of what I couldn't have."

Making her go through that isn't something I want to resort to."

The Death Lord shook her head in corrective manner. "That little one is special. Her soul may be unique, but that physical vessel of hers, the creature known as the 'Chrysalis', is more like...like a machine. A golem."

Aldrich raised a brow. "What do you mean?"

"From what I could glean, the Chrysalis is a creature that naturally connects to a higher entity and adapts to serving them. They will shape the space around them and their very own forms to suit the needs of the one they are bound to.

This is why the little one could mold herself using your soul so easily." The Death Lord put the jade finger of her crystalline prosthetic arm against Aldrich's chest. "And this is why it is important you push her. Tell her your desires, and she will by natural instinct shape herself into the best possible form to achieve your goals.

But if you do not push her, she may shape herself into a complacent, weak-minded state. Just the way she is now."

"...I see." Aldrich looked over at Chrysa, at her small, sleeping figure. She was more stable now, the rippling space around her body reduced to no more than slight flickers of distorted color. Her breathing was easier, more rhythmic.

Aldrich knew that Chrysa was not human at heart, and that she could easily deal with people suffering so long as they were 'bad people'. But the way she panicked and broke under pressure during the sudden attack from the invisible bots made him question exactly what she could handle.

The Death Lord sensed Aldrich's thoughts. "Put her through pressure. Put her in situations of life and death.

Do not fear doping this.

She will adapt, I am sure of it. It is in her blood, in the instincts bred into her.

You are not mistreating her this way. She exists to meet your expectations; it is wired into her very blood.

Lay your expectations out to her clearly, and she will strive her best to meet them, even if they will involve fighting and hurt."

"I'll consider it," said Aldrich.

"There is no consideration. Only doing. That third trial quest of yours is an apt opportunity for this," said the Death Lord. She took in a breath, magical energy swirling

around her in green waves. "I do not like doing this, but I will enforce my will." Her voice quietened a bit, as if she was talking more to herself than Aldrich. "That little one must grow stronger. And she must grow fast."

Aldrich saw a message show up on his system interface screen.

[Quest: Bond By Trial received]

[Description: Clear the third trial quest with Chrysa. No other units are allowed with you. In exchange, you will receive certain bonuses to compensate for the loss of units you can take.]

[Rewards: 1x a choice of spell tome from Medula's library (provided she does not need it), 1x Nether Idol, Dark Wisdom Booster (50 levels)]

"A nether idol?" The sudden quest was surprising, but the nether idol as a reward overshadowed all of that.

With a nether idol, Aldrich could reach into the Nether and forge a bond with another Chosen Undead.

It was a massive reward that would not have been possible to get in the game.

"Indeed," said the Death Lord. "It is the only nether idol I have left, so you should be quite grateful I am willing to part with it. That is, if you can survive the quest with just the little one."

"Can I take Volantis?" said Aldrich.

"No. Only the little one. There will be no interference between you two. But I will grant you some equipment to compensate." The Death Lord waved Aldrich away. "Go to your throne room. I will have your things sent there. In the meanwhile, I will awaken the little one."

Aldrich summoned a [Grave Ward] from his palm. "If you don't mind, I'm going to keep watch over what you do to her. Considering your severe lack of child care skills, I feel that this more than reasonable enough."

And Aldrich did not quite like the way the Death Lord was pressuring Chrysa to grow. He wondered whether there was an underlying motive behind it, but if it was a negative one, she would never admit it.

If it was positive, purely for Aldrich's well being - which was entirely possible considering how much she had nurtured him so far - then there was not much to worry about. Just her typical recklessness when it came to children.

"I do not like being watched, but so be it," complained the Death Lord. "I did not take you for the peeping type. But we all have our hidden desires, no?"

Aldrich rolled his eyes and began to leave. "Make sure Chrysa's well when I get back."

"I will. I swear that to you, Death Walker." The Death Lord nodded solemnly.

Aldrich stared down at his palm in wonder. There, he beheld a golden ring whose surface rippled with mottled reds and oranges like the surface of the sun. "It's done already?"

"The Death Lord make me work fast!" Bors, the giant blacksmith, nodded once, his big helmeted head moving up and down with a kind of oak tree weight to it. "The core was new, so I thought the forge be hard, but there no trick, so I do it quick!"

Aldrich slipped the ring onto his finger.

[Solar Seal equipped]

Almost immediately, Aldrich felt power funnel into his body. It was a bright, hot, almost burning kind of power. Strands of what looked like solar energy danced around him, lighting his pale undead skin almost an uniform white, as if his whole body was turning into pure light.

Aldrich read the description of the item in his system interface.

[Solar Seal]

[Rank: Mythic (Limited)]

[Description:

A seal forged from a soul containing the essence of the sun. Wearing this seal grants the user access to a variety of spells and passives.

Passives:

Solar Battery: Through exposure to sunlight, the wearer is able to stockpile solar energy that passively enhances their strength, agility, and vitality. In addition, the wearer is granted 80% damage reduction against all fire based damage. The higher the solar energy reserves, the higher these stat bonuses are. Thus expending solar energy reduces these bonuses.

Karmic Light: Against enemies that have negative 'karma' that have caused or absorbed great amounts of negative energy, the wearer of this seal obtains a bonus burning effect

on all their attacks against them. The worse the karma of the target, the worse this burning effect becomes.

Spells:

Lightforged Array: The user can forge stored sunlight into a variety of weapons ranging as such: sword, spear, shield, bow, and gauntlets. These constructs deal holy type damage, dealing especially high burning damage to those with negative karma.

Restoring Radiance: By expending sunlight, the user can heal others with positive energy. This will burn and destroy undead instead. This is considered holy type damage and will also purge souls from afflicted undead.

This spell can be cast with an area of effect pulse form as well.

Heat Ray: By expending sunlight, the user can fire a beam of heat energy.

Blinding Burst: By expending sunlight, the user can create a blinding flash that robs all nearby of their eyesight temporarily.

Sunlit: By fully activating the seal, the user can temporarily access a tremendous amount of power, granting them tremendous physical abilities, flight, and the ability to fire heat rays. In essence, they will fully be able to use the range of powers that once belonged to the original bearer of the soul core used to forge this seal.

This will rapidly absorb sunlight and disable access to all other spells and equipment.]

[Note: Limited indicates that an item is being equipped below its recommended level range. The item's stats and abilities will be adjusted to the wearer.]

Chapter 272: More Loot

"This is an impressive piece, Bors." Aldrich closed his fist, observing the golden glint of his Solar Seal. "How did you manage to implement holy type damage into this? And the healing?"

From what Aldrich could tell, Seth Solar's powers did not involve any form of healing. Or, at the very least, not any healing that affected others. It was true that Seth could recover from wounds quickly, but not to the extent it was considered an Alter power on its own.

At best, Seth could recover a broken bone in, say, a few days opposed to the weeks it took for an Alter of his grade to naturally do so with just cell count alone.

Even Seth's father, Solomon, who had a far more trained version of the power, could at best recover a broken arm in the span of an hour which, though impressive, was not anything close to a specialized Alter power.

For example, the Geist could easily recover an entirely torn arm within seconds. Solomon Solar could not come close to that knitting together a fractured bone, let alone actually growing an entirely new limb.

"Lord gave me some glass from flask you had. Had shiny magic in it. I forge that magic into the seal," said Bors. "Soul you gave me was shiny too. Matched very well."

"I see." So the Death Lord had Bors reforge the healing flask from Amara into something that Aldrich could use more effectively. Quite a good idea, Aldrich had to admit.

Aldrich tested out the sea. He channeled magical energy into it, and it flashed gold. In his hand, a longsword made of solid golden light manifested. An aura of warm light emanated around the outline of the construct, capable of burning any being with negative karma.

Aldrich was curious about that. Beings in Elden World received negative karma the more negative energy they harnessed or created in others with negative energy most easily produced from emotions like pain and fear.

Some beings like undead and demons were inherently creatures that had negative energy flowing through them regardless of whether they caused terror in others, so holy attacks were particularly effective against them.

But how would this work in the real world? Would these attacks do bonus burning damage to those who had caused more suffering? How would that even be determined?

Would this potentially be a good way to spot who was 'evil' and who was not? Even if they put up a goody two shoes front?

It was an interesting topic to think about.

"I like it," said Aldrich. He made three swift slashes in front of him. The golden longsword left trails of dimming light like the comet of a tail. "This will come in incredibly handy. Thanks, Bors."

"That's not all!" Bors said with glee. He reached down from his enormous worktable that completely dwarfed Aldrich and withdrew a cloak and a bell. Both items sat atop the cracked grey skin of his giant palm.

Aldrich's eyes widened as he recognized the cloak. At cursory glance, it looked rather ragged, comprised of tattered dark green cloth with frayed ends. A green glow rose up and down the cloak in a constantly flowing pattern, and wherever that glow passed, it revealed the silhouette of skulls and eyes trapped within the fabric - the ancient souls of countless worthy victims all knitted together to create this revered item.

It was the [Hallowed Gravecloak]. One of the Death Lord's personal items. It was a divine grade item, the highest grade there was, and in terms of sheer defensive usage it was potentially the absolute best in the entire game.

The cloak had a defensive passive called [Within the Grave] that made any attacks below a certain damage threshold just disappear upon reaching the wearer, making the wearer completely invulnerable to units under a certain power level.

It also granted flight to whoever it was on, which was especially useful because the cloak had a third passive called [Spirit Movement] that let it fly around freely, leaving its wearer to attach on others to grant them flight and defensive bonuses or stay fixed in specific spots.

[Spirit Movement] set up the cloak's active ability which really gave it its divine grade status.

Its active, known as [Hallowed Grave], created a circular zone where any unit within was rendered absolutely invulnerable to damage that originated from outside the boundary. It also prevented units from outside the zone from seeing within or targeting units within it.

In essence, it was the ultimate version of the [Spirit Boundary] that the Deildegahasts could cast.

The biggest weakness was that while casting [Hallowed Grave], the cloak had to stay fixed in one position.

There were other issues, too, like the fact that Aldrich was severely underleveled for the cloak. It was therefore [Limited], meaning that Aldrich could access heavily nerfed versions of the equipment's actives and bonuses.

"You get this cloak after finishing quest," said Bors. "But this, you have now." He pointed at the bell atop his palm with a huge finger that threatened to just ground the comparatively tiny accessory into dust.

"What is it?" said Aldrich.

"I dunno. The Lord made it herself for you. Using the rest of the shiny stuff."

Aldrich took the cloak and bell from Bors. The moment he touched the cloak, it flew to his back, attaching to his shoulders and adjusting its length to exactly match Aldrich's proportions.

Decked out in a black suit and dark green, tattered cloak, Aldrich expected to look ridiculous, but oddly, the cloak still had a sort of royal air to it that fit better than expected.

Besides fashion, Aldrich was more interested in the bell. It was a silver construct that he could comfortably hold via a handle of ivory white bone in his hand. He analyzed the bell using his system.

[Item: Death Knell]

[Grade: Divine (Limited)]

[Description: An item reforged using the blessed sun shards of the goddess Amara. The shards, upon being seeped into the waters of death, have quenched and tempered into a form more fitting for a death walker.

The Death Knell is capable of storing graves within it. By ringing the bell, the graves may be used to summon undead or be consumed for healing or mana restoration.

The current storage capacity is at 200. This capacity limit will increase as the user's level matches the item's grade.

Any undead summoned using a stored grave will be 'shallow', meaning that they are temporary constructs that will deteriorate over time. The rate of deterioration increases the longer the undead exist.

Cooldown: 1 Hour per usage

In addition, the Death Knell possesses two passives.

Threat Resonance: The bell will lightly vibrate when the user is in proximity to danger or killing intent directed towards them.

Kindred Resonance: The bell will ring when the user is in proximity to a kindred soul to them. That is, a soul that is similar to their own, allowing the user to more easily determine loyal subjects or allies.

However, the user must be warned that similarity does not necessarily mean compatibility.]

Aldrich equipped the bell, and it automatically floated to his waist, tethering to his hip like a utility belt gadget. Coupled with the Solar Seal, he now had 2/5 of the max amount of accessories he could have on at any given time.

The bell was much worse than the crystalline flask for pure healing or mana regeneration purposes. The 1 hour cooldown was the worst part. But it was infinitely more useful in every other regard.

Made sense.

The Death Lord could not replicate Amara's healing ability, even if she talked big. But the Death Lord had compensated in other ways.

Aldrich was satisfied. His playstyle already involved taking less risk to prevent getting damaged in the first place. The [Threat Resonance] would help Aldrich greatly, not to mention the capacity to summon up to 200 extra undead at a moment's notice.

Overall, Aldrich felt much, much stronger than before. With his as of yet untested [Frosthallowed War Scythe], Volantis's newly gained consciousness, the [Solar Seal], and the [Hallowed Gravecloak], and his new [Death Knell], Aldrich was itching to get into a real fight.

He felt an almost giddy rush that he had almost missed - the kind any gamer got when they scored a ton of rare loot.

With all of these tools combined, Aldrich was confident he could take on an A rank hero by himself if he used Seismic as a litmus test. Depending on combat compatibility, he might even be able to take out an S ranker.

Chapter 273: Immortal Advice

"Liking my wares, are we?" The Death Lord materialized behind Aldrich, and he immediately whirled around, the blade of solid sunlight in his hands. The tip of the golden sword hovered just an inch away from the Death Lord's pale, dainty neck.

The Death Lord's serpentine tongue slithered out, curling around the blade tip in quite the suggestive manner before she smirked and drew it back in. "Always ready for a fight. Admirable."

"It's just you." Aldrich sighed and lowered the blade. The weight felt nice in his hands, perfectly tailored to his preferences. He had some knowledge of how to use swords because vibroblades, monofilament whip-blades, and heatrend swords were pretty commonplace.

Guns were nice and all, but against heavily armored mutants or Alters with skin that could bounce missiles off? Techblades were the way to go.

"Just me? How rude." The Death Lord pouted.

"And Chrysa?" Aldrich asked about what was most important to him at the moment.

The Death Lord nodded and waved forward. A black armored death knight gently carried Chrysa in its arms. She slept peacefully now, without any hint of spatial disturbance bothering her.

Aldrich had overseen the Death Lord's treatment and saw nothing off about it. She simply cast a healing spell and broke Chrysa out of her nightmare, granting her instead pleasant dreams.

And since the soul link flowed in two ways, Aldrich could sense that Chrysa's mind was at peace.

The Death Lord eyed Aldrich's cape. Or, more specifically, her own cape. "How do you like it? That priceless piece of fashion you don't cost me five hundred years to stitch together, cobbling together the souls of the finest warriors known throughout the realms."

"I'm more than happy with it," Aldrich admitted.

"Once you complete your quest, that shall be yours. But beyond that, that bell of yours will serve you to even greater degree."

Aldrich raised a brow. "Will it now?"

The Death Lord nodded with confidence. "It is modeled after the great bell that sits atop the Necropolis. Once, that bell was small much like yours, a thing to be held snug in a hand more for comfort than any real use.

It was gifted to me by one quite dear to me, and it rang whenever it sensed a friend. A kindred soul.

That allowed me to build up my legions like a true commander, full of those I trust."

"I did wonder about that." Aldrich dematerialized his longsword. "Every other necromancer I faced, at least to my knowledge, barely ever kept their units capable of thinking.

To me, it made sense. Otherwise, what's the difference between a necromancer and an ordinary commander if you have to worry about your units rebelling?"

"Yet you seem to allow liberal freedom to your undead now."

Aldrich nodded. "I do. I realized if I kept expanding my pool of undead, I couldn't focus on all of them with the same amount of attention, no matter how good my micro was.

I knew that from the very moment I started fielding undead. I started off with next to mana - leagues below what you probably had. And my mind was still human.

No matter how fast I could think, there was always going to be a limit to how far I could spread my consciousness. Probably much lower of a threshold than, again, what you could naturally put out.

If I wanted my units to always be at top capability, then I needed them to know how to think and fend for themselves.

Of course, that presents risks like them making errors of their own or potentially harboring rebellious thoughts, but I've made efforts to minimize those confounding variables."

"Then you understand why I too built my legion the way I did," said the Death Lord. "At first, when I was new to the dark arts, I did as you surmised. I commanded vast armies of undead with my insurmountable draconic mana pool, and I kept them all mindless.

But the greater my ambitions grew, the more I had to spread my undead, and the more and more defeats I faced. It even led to my first sealing under the champions of that sunlit wench's father."

"Right." Aldrich knew that in the lore, the Death Lord had been sealed throughout most of the game's history by an enigmatic light blessed champion known only as the Shining One who was, as the Death Lord said, powered by the goddess Amara's father, the high god of light and life known as Eos.

"My forces fell and scattered. When at times holy magics severed my connection from them, many of them chose to end their own undead lives or actively fight against me," recounted the Death Lord. "And now, I have learned from my mistakes.

Most of my undead willingly serve me."

"Most?"

The Death Lord shrugged. "You cannot please everyone. Some I render mindless if they are too valuable to let go."

Aldrich looked at Chrysa.

"Are you considering that fate for her?" the Death Lord looked surprised.

"No. Well, in a way, yes." Aldrich paused, taking a moment to word this in a way that it did not sound an awful lot like enslaving a child. "I'm still wondering if I can't just control her manually during stressful situations. It would give her less of an emotional burden and let me operate efficiently too."

"You two share a Boundary." The Death Lord put her hand to her chest, where her heart sat under considerable amounts of padding. "Both of you are responsible for growing it. If you control her, you may be able to wield her powers as they are now, but she will never grow, and if she never grows, she will never be able to add to your Boundary."

True, you need power, stable power, now, but again, you have an eternity. Think to the future, Death Walker. The little one must grow for you to achieve your greatest strength.

That is the point of this quest."

"I get it." Aldrich walked up to the Death Knight and took Chrysa from its armored skeletal hands. He looked down at her sleeping face.

"Father..." she whispered, nuzzling into Aldrich, still asleep.

"I still want to shield her," Aldrich admitted. "From hurt and struggle. I know she will have to see fights in her future. It's inevitable just from being with me."

But it's still difficult. In a way, when I look at her, at the innocence there that I want to protect, I still feel warmth in myself, and I don't want to let it fade away."

When you see her, you feel your humanity," said the Death Lord. "Or the vestiges of it that you harbor. I see now. Your desire to protect innocence - this is the single greatest anchor there is upon your soul."

"Is it a bad thing?" Aldrich asked.

"It is a matter of perspective and moderation." The Death Lord turned away, focusing on something else, some other time in her life. "I was always immortal, so I do not understand as well. But I do know that the longer lived you are, the more you must harbor strong goals, strong desires."

These are what will propel you forward. To prevent your mind and soul from rotting stagnant. Immortal Rot sets in faster than you think, especially with an immortal's perception of time, and once it sets in, the apathy, the hopelessness, you become nothing more than a void that sucks in the hopes of others.

Some undead find their spiritual anchors in little flames of humanity they still hold alight in their hearts. Others in ambitious, far ranging goals. Others in simple duty. Others in love, others in hate - so many anchors across so many eternal lives that bloomed from death.

Keep that flame of humanity of yours if it anchors your soul. But do not let it burn you when you must reach beyond it.

You must be willing to make sacrifices when you have to. You must not let it become a weakness."

"That, I've already resolved myself to do," said Aldrich.

"Indeed. I could read that in your soul from the moment I met you." The Death Lord turned to Aldrich and looked deeply into his eyes. "You were firm in your willingness to sacrifice.

And to no surprise. Your entire life in this new realm was walked upon the road of sacrifice and loss.

If that road grants you strength, then do not stray from it."

The Death Lord pointed to Chrysa. "And let her walk it also. She is born of your soul. The road that granted you strength will grant her strength too.

Through trial by fire, you were tempered and forged. She will mold under the same conditions.

Protect her, you may, but do not rob her of her choice, for choice is where she learns resolve, and resolve is where she builds strength."

Aldrich nodded. "You can be surprisingly poetic at times."

"It comes with the years," said the Death Lord. She smiled up at the air, to something that no longer was. "Or perhaps, in a different life, if things were different, I would have liked to be one."

The Death Lord turned around and began to leave, her hands behind her back like some kind of old sage. Her draconic emerald scaled tail swished behind her. "I will take my leave. The little one is in light sleep. Awaken her when you desire and enter the trial quest when you can."

"One thing," said Aldrich.

The Death Lord stopped. "Hm?"

"There's a corpse of a frozen old human I brought here. I'd like you to investigate it and see if you can find anything odd about it. Whatever killed him purged his soul, preventing me from raising him as an undead," said Aldrich.

The Death Lord cocked her head. "Truly? Odd. I will see to it that Medula and I thoroughly break it apart."

"No breaking it apart. I need it for burial," said Aldrich.

"Fine. I will try my best now to rend it asunder, even if it will be difficult with how fragile the humans of the new realm are," said the Death Lord. She walked away for a few steps before she faded away, teleporting.

Aldrich was left looking down at Chrysa. He stroked her hair, pulling a few moonlight white strands from her closed eyes. She looked so very peaceful - the embodiment of the peace that Aldrich wanted for her and all others like her - but the Death Lord was right.

If Chrysa wanted to walk Aldrich's path of struggle with him, he had to give her that choice. He carried her all the way over to his incomplete throne of emerald crystal and sat down upon it. He closed his eyes and focused on his Boundary, and like that, he and Chrysa both faded, leaving behind just the purple orb that formed Aldrich's phylactery.

Chapter 274: Resolve to Fight

Aldrich looked around his Boundary and took in a deep breath, nostalgia washing over him. The living room that he was so familiar with, his mother's paintings, his father's comics, all of the warm memories associated with it all welled up in his heart.

This was a good place. And he could thank one little girl for all of it.

"...Father?" Chrysa whispered out, her voice still shaky with sleep. She sat on the couch, in front of the telescreen. She rubbed her eyes, wiping away sparkling tears of sleepiness.

"How are you feeling?" Aldrich sat down beside her.

"I'm okay," said Chrysa. She hung her head low, placing her hands together in pensive gesture. "I'm sorry for being scared."

"It's fine." Aldrich patted Chrysa's head, and she started to smile. "It's fine to be scared in a situation like that. We were in a fight, a real fight, and you probably couldn't handle the stress."

"Nuh-uh." Chrysa shook her head defiantly. "The loud booms and bright lights and fighting didn't scare me!" Her smile tipped upside down into a frown. "It was...it was..."

"Go on. You can tell me."

Chrysa side eyed Aldrich. "Promise you won't talk to me mean?"

"Of course. I promise."

"You also promised a fun time in the city."

"I'm still keeping that promise. When things settle down, we'll all have a good time, and I won't let anybody get in the way of it."

"Okay." Chrysa took in a deep breath, psyching herself up, then confessed. "I wasn't scared of the fight, I was scared of you, father."

Aldrich blinked. "Me?"

Chrysa nodded. "Not you you, because seeing father always makes me happy, but what you wanted from me.

Okay, I was scared at first, when the big lights and big sounds first happened, but not for too long!

I thought about fighting and using what I learned from Meddy, but I didn't know if you wanted that. Because you didn't want me getting hurt.

I got confused, and that made me more scared, and then, and then, I fell asleep."

"I see." Aldrich put his hand on Chrysa's head again in a comforting gesture. The reason she had gotten overwhelmed was not so much because she was scared of the fighting, but because she did not know what to do, and that confusion only made her fright even worse.

The Death Lord had been right. Aldrich had coddled her too much. He had not given her any expectation to fight. No, he had actively tried to shield her from everything. As a result, when danger came, she did not know what she should have been doing, and that shut her down.

It was easy for people to freeze up in intense situations. Aldrich had only made that reaction worse.

Aldrich asked her. "Then what do you want, Chrysa? Do you want to fight?"

Chrysa balled her fists and shook them up and down with vigor. "Mhm! I want to fight! I want to make booms and pows and whacks!" She peppered her sounds with gestures, clawing and punching at the air.

Aldrich raised a brow. Even now, it felt odd to let her, with all her childlike reactions, fight. To really fight. To throw her into the thick of fire and force where blood, tears, and screams could flow like water. "Are you sure? You could get hurt. Hurt badly, even. I can always heal you, but that won't stop the pain."

"I know. I know I can die too." Chrysa looked down at her little hands, at the milky white claws that protruded from her fingers. "But if anyone wants to hurt you, father, and make you cry or mad, then I'll try my best to kill them! Even if I get hurt too!"

Chrysa's innocently voiced declaration to kill Aldrich's enemies sobered him up more. It made him even more distinctly aware of the fact she was not human and he could not treat her like a normal human child.

Aldrich nodded. That was the tipping point. He would still care for Chrysa as a child, but he would also not hold back her variant instincts. "Then, Chrysa, I'm all for it. If you want to fight, you should. I shouldn't be holding you back from what you want.

From what your instincts drive you to do.

But tell me this, is this really, really what you want? Don't just think of doing it for me. It has to be something you want for yourself."

"It is!" Chrysa closed her eyes, and a sweet smile settled on her face as she thought of something happy. "Lately, I've been having dreams. A dream about a small white house on a bright green hill.

There, father is smiling all the time, and that makes me smile all the time too. Everything is quiet and warm and happy.

I want to make that dream come true!"

Chrysa looked down, twiddling her thumbs.

"But...but I know that father won't ever smile like that for a long time. Something bad happened to father, and you don't smile like that anymore.

I know that because sometimes, when I dream, I feel a little bit of what father feels, and because of that, I know father won't have big smiles and live in a quiet white house until he's done fighting.

Until then, I will fight with father! Make my dream happen! Make father smile one day!"

"I see." Aldrich saw determination in Chrysa's eyes. It was a kind of determination that was childlike in its purity, and at the same time, there was another glint there, one fiercer, sharper, belonging to a beast more than capable of fighting, that made it clear that when Chrysa said she wanted to fight, she knew what she was saying.

She knew the risks involved. The hurt and pain and struggle she might face.

And she was still willing to fight.

"Then that settles it." Aldrich got up off the couch.

Chrysa followed, hopping off and looking way up at Aldrich in wonder. "What is it?"

Aldrich rolled up his sleeves. "I'm going to be teaching you how to fight."

- Chapter 275: Simmering |

Chapter 275: Simmering

Aldrich sat at the top of a signal tower erected on the Magellan, the name that Casimir bestowed upon their mini town on wheels. Most people would have expected a name like that to be christened on a massive battleship or aircraft, but it honestly fit rather well here too.

The Magellan was quite spectacular. It was comprised of six mobile bases, each big enough to house fifty people, transformed together into one behemoth of churning metal that chugged along the desert on twenty four wheels and twelve high powered, high purity etherite engines.

Like the desert version of the polar express, it traveled the endless wastes with a heavyset determination, metal parts clacking and groaning like the utterances of a living beast. Turrets and smaller sensor tower jutted out the back of the Magellan like spines.

"Is it going to be okay?" Chrysa, in Aldrich's arms, looked down at the Magellan, at its four large front lights that looked like the eyes of some strange insectoid creature. "It sounds like it's working hard!"

"It'll be fine," said Aldrich.

Though, he did have to confess, he still had no idea how something like this could run so well and for so long. Scientists called Ether the real god particle, capable of anything and everything, and Aldrich had to agree.

The Magellan was like a literal transformer, and high purity etherite made that possible. It was a shame that most of the world could not get their hands on it.

Only nomads insane enough to not only chase deadly geostorms, but make that chase a way of living, could harvest ether energy in such a pure state.

That was not to take away from the Magellan's craftsmanship either. According to Casimir, it had been built up by Arksman, a legendary nomad craftsman specializing in vehicle construction who had taken a fortune of twenty five million credits to shape it all up.

Arksman's work looked shoddy, almost disheveled, like odd ends and bits and pieces cobbled together, but in pure functionality, his rides matched the best technos in the AA or the corporate world.

Aldrich looked away from the Magellan. He was high up enough where he could see way into the deep dark stretches of night, taking in the oddly haunting beauty of the barren wasteland landscape painted silver under the moon.

There was something about the sheer scale and solitude of it all that comforted Aldrich, though he could imagine someone more skittish, someone more people oriented like Adam or Eileen would think it was all so empty and lonely.

"It's pretty," said Chrysa. She twirled her fingers in her hair. "The shiny, it looks like my hair."

"The moonlight," said Aldrich. "And it does."

Chrysa shifted around in Aldrich's grasp with impatient energy.

"What is it?" said Aldrich.

"Why'd we come out here?" Chrysa asked. "I like spending time with father, but you promised to teach me how to fight!"

"I know. I just needed to make sure of some things out here first," said Aldrich. He had checked up on multiple information threads.

V's investigation on the bug she found in the ice bots yielded that it was Trident sourced. Specifically from a renowned techno in the Italian prong of the Trident called Mad Jack.

Mad Jack was an utter menace in the underworld with a troubling penchant for creating bugs that could take over practically any tech and rendering the mad. He was a wildcard who loved chaos more than anything, spreading his viruses even among his allies.

The type of guy that Aldrich hated the most. Chaos for the sake of chaos was just meaningless misery for everyone involved.

That brought the Trident into the mix for the ice bot mystery. And yet, that did not answer any questions. Sure, Mad Jack could have infected the bots, but where did they come from in the first place?

A rival of the Tridents? Perhaps from within the Trident themselves considering the recent infighting?

That, Aldrich left V and Fisk to figure out.

Clint and the Spearhorns had uncovered a good amount of details in the Trident civil war. The Italian and Japanese prongs stood against the Russians.

The Russians wanted to move forward with their plans for revolution, to topple the world order set by governments and the Panop-AA complex. But the Japanese and Italian prongs wanted more stability, savoring the taste of profit and balance, especially knowing that the more variants attacked, the weaker the heroes got.

The rift was big enough that in a diplomatic meeting where several higher ups from each of the prongs met up, the Russian prong's representative detonated a suicide bomb, instigating a full on civil war.

That incident was also the reason why the hunt on Casimir and anyone related to him had been called off so abruptly. Compared to an internal war of that scale, Casimir, a fugitive, a rich fugitive, granted, but a fugitive no less, was not a priority.

That was good news for Aldrich. It meant the Trident, half of the entire Dark Six, was weakened, and would get weaker by the passing day. If Aldrich made the right moves against them while they struggled among themselves, he could be the figurative straw to break the camel's back.

The AA was not blind, either. They had caught wind of the conflict too. In response, they were probably readying heroes in case the Trident conflict grew hot and reached civilians.

Where it mattered to Aldrich was that the AA pushed up Aldrich's hearing date, probably not wanting to spend as much time and effort on it. They might even give Aldrich, or rather, Thanatos, more leniency.

With variants and the Trident being problems, Aldrich doubted the AA wanted to add Thanatos to that list as well.

Aldrich's new hearing date was thus pushed to just a day and a half from now. Not much time left at all.

"Father, are you worried?" asked Chrysa.

"You can tell?" Aldrich never showed worry, or much of any emotion, on his face well.

"Mhm." Chrysa nodded.

Made sense. Chrysa and Aldrich were soul linked. Not just that, but she probably understood him better than anyone because she had been born of his own soul.

"I am," said Aldrich. He looked up at the full moon. "But not the bad type of worry. It's more...like anticipation."

"Antsy-pant-shun" Chrysa said the word out slowly.

"Anticipation," Aldrich repeated, letting her get a better read of it. "It means I'm worried, but I have an idea of what's going to happen. And depending on what I do, I can make things good or bad."

"To make things good, do we have to fight?"

"Probably."

Chrysa pumped her fists in the air. "Then I will! I'll learn! Let's go!"

Aldrich patted Chrysa's head. "Slow down there. Fighting's not always about rushing in. In fact, that's the last thing you should do. Stay back, watch, and figure things out before you go in.

You should have at least your first three moves mapped out in your head before you do anything."

"Three!?" Chrysa's eyes widened in shock. "I can't think that hard! Father can? Father's a genius!"

"You can. Just give yourself some time." If Chrysa inherited more and more of Aldrich's talents and skills, then there was no doubt she could develop a battle ready analytical mind like him.

That was when Aldrich's earpiece crackled into life. He immediately pressed his finger to it. He did not want to miss this.

"Boss? You there?" came Ace's voice.

"Yes."

"..."

"What is it?" Aldrich narrowed his eyes. "Did you catch Feather?"

In light of recent news about the Trident, Aldrich wanted Feather even more. Feather was fairly high up. Getting him could lead to a treasure trove of information about the Trident civil war.

The underworld knew of the major details, but the ones that mattered, the nitty gritty, nobody except those affiliated with the Trident had an idea of.

"We fucked up his men and nabbed the nomad snitch, but Feather's not here. Sorry, boss," said Ace.

"I see. Have you tried interrogating the men?"

"Yeah. Kat's been real good at it. Has this special poison or whatever that can cause the worst pain ever she says. But the men don't know shit. They thought they were going to meet the snitch as always, but even they were surprised when Feather didn't show up."

"Disappointing. But not the worst thing in the world. Try and take back as many of the men as possible. I'll make them useful somehow," said Aldrich, thinking of Fler'Gan.

There was no shortage of need for Alter test subjects.

"Sure thing. We'll try and look around more here in case we missed something."

"Go ahead and do that. Report to Valera when you're done. I'm going to be out for the next day."

Aldrich disconnected from the earpiece and sighed. Kat was an incredibly good assassin. Feather could not have gotten away from her unless he had prior knowledge.

Or, maybe, the Trident conflict had torn Feather away by sheer dumb circumstance,

But then why had Feather left his men in the dark like that?

Something strange was at play here, and Aldrich could not shake the sensation that everything was starting to simmer like the short few moments of bubbling before water on a burner broke out into a rolling, roaring, blazing boil.

"Father, are you sure you're doing an anticipation? Aren't you just worried?" said Chrysa. She tugged at Aldrich's dress shirt with worried grasps.

"Maybe. I don't know everything, after all. But that's where preparation matters even more. Whether it's in planning or fighting, you always need to stay active. You always need to try and set the pace.

The moment you become passive and let things happen to you is when you lose your footing, slip, and never get back up."

Chrysa nodded thoughtfully.

"But I can teach you that better when we get into a fight." Aldrich started to cast [Mist Phase], beginning the process of returning to the Necropolis where he would now challenge the third trial quest. "Which we're going to now."

"Yay!" Chrysa clapped her hands in glee.

Chapter 276: Trial Quest

"Are you ready?" Aldrich stood in front of his throne, looking up at the circuit network like criss cross patterns of green energy stretching up to the tall ceiling from his emerald crystal throne.

All those circuits, those pathways of magical energy, tethered to the Necropolis, drawing power from it. Or, maybe better put, took from it. The more Aldrich progressed in power, the more of the Necropolis he inherited.

When would the time come when Aldrich could harness the full might of the tower? And when he got that power, the question arose; did he work with the world?

Or, as Volantis and Valera wanted, would he take over the world? Bend it to his rule?

"Wow, father looks so strong!" Chrysa tugged at Aldrich's new cloak. The skulls and faces, spirits of those stitched within, emitted low wails of protest.

"I need to be in top condition for this," said Aldrich. "After all, this is our first mission together."

"I won't disappoint!" Chrysa punched the air in front of her.

Aldrich gave himself a cursory glance. Shiny new golden ring. Cloak of souls. Scythe of ice. He would need all of that and more if he was going to take on the third trial quest with all the restrictions on him.

First, he had no access to his units aside from Chrysa.

Second, he could not create units, limiting a good chunk of his personal spells. To compensate for this, Aldrich had consumed the spellbook awarded to him from the second trial quest.

The spellbook granted bone based spells which were the best for direct, non-unit based combat.

Aldrich had replaced his [Bone Missile Array] and added two additional spells. In total, he had learned [Skeletal Limbs], [Boneripper], and [Bonebearing Curse].

[Skeletal Limbs], as the name so obviously hinted, let Aldrich create two additional bone limbs from his body to wield additional weapons or fire spells.

[Boneripper] and [Bonebearing Curse] were both curses that Aldrich could list among the most deadly of his new spells. [Boneripper] imbued one of his hands with the effect to, upon touch, tear out the bones of a flesh and blood being. It could also break apart skeletal undead.

[Bonebearing Curse] let Aldrich fire a symbol at a target. It was slow moving and easy to dodge, but to compensate, it had the exceptionally useful ability to control bones it came into contact with for a short period of time.

Aldrich could not summon other units, but if he could control other beings that already existed, he could circumvent the no summoning units rule.

But beyond all that, Aldrich had another useful tool: Dark Wisdom levels. He had been saving them up because he had seen no real use to giving them to anyone yet, especially because he could impart the levels all at once in an instant.

That made the levels a very potent sudden powerup that could catch enemies off guard.

Yet, Aldrich had an even better use for them here. As a means to grow Chrysa up.

Aldrich knelt down to Chrysa's level and held his palms towards her. Chrysa punched his hands playfully.

"Once, I had this dream of father training, he moved just like this. Bam! Bam!" Chrysa punctuated her words with punches.

"Pretty good," said Aldrich, and he was not just saying it to make her feel good. She was legitimately talented. Her movements were fairly compact, lacking much of the wide swinging and wasted movement that beginners had.

It was almost as if Chrysa had already trained. And in a way, she had. She did not just see Aldrich's memories like in a dream, she felt them, experienced them.

Aldrich wondered how much of his expertise and skills would transfer over to her. And how quickly.

"But punches are always better with power behind them." Aldrich caught Chrysa's punches. "I'm going to give you some power."

"Okay." Chrysa nodded.

Aldrich closed his eyes and summoned up his Dark Wisdom. He knew that there was a limit to how many levels he could grant his units. They could not exceed his own level and they could not receive more levels than their bodies could handle.

From plot events and lore, Aldrich knew that some liches were reckless with accumulated Dark Wisdom, overloading units and causing them to literally explode in both body and soul.

Aldrich could not tell how much Chrysa could handle. He started slowly. A purple glow radiated from his palms. The glow permeated through Chrysa's arms, lighting up her blood vessels and nerves.

"That was ten levels," said Aldrich. "How do you feel?"

"Levels?" Chrysa asked.

"It's a measure of power. The higher you are, the better."

"What's the highest I can go?"

"A hundred."

"Then I'll go past it!"

Aldrich smiled faintly. "Now now, let's slow down here. Tell me how ten levels feel, and we can go from here."

"I feel strong!" Chrysa nodded vigorously.

"Okay then, tell me when you feel something's off." Aldrich closed his eyes and imparted more Dark Wisdom. He was not really stingy about it. The wording of the awards stated that Aldrich's Dark Wisdom reserve would get set to 50, so he had no incentive to save his thirty or so odd stored levels.

Whatever Aldrich could not use, he would distribute among his other units, the Geist and Stella being primary candidates.

"I feel a little...dizzy." Chrysa's head bobbed from side to side with woozy slowness. All of her arms now shone with purple.

Aldrich let go of Chrysa's hands. "That was twenty levels. Let's stop here. You need to be in good condition to train and fight."

Chrysa clenched her fists. "I'm all ready!"

She looked just fine, the burdening effects of the Dark Wisdom having worn off just like that. The issue was that Aldrich could sense she was reaching her limit to take in levels, and he did not want to push his luck further.

"I have power, I can feel it!" Chrysa looked at her hands in wonder. A white aura enveloped her body. "What do I do with it?"

"Do you see any numbers anywhere? In the corner of your vision?" asked Aldrich, wondering if she had inherited the system.

"Numbers...? No." Chrysa blinked, confused. "But that's a good thing. I hate numbers!"

Well, there was one difference between Aldrich and Chrysa.

"Hm, then about controlling your powers-," began Aldrich.

"It's okay, I know. Meddy taught me." Chrysa took in a deep breath and clasped her hands together in a meditative pose. The white aura around her stabilized. "I'll make my magic grow and grow! Be just like father!"

"Make sure to keep your body strong, too. There's no point having a ton of magic power if your body can't take a hit. And you need to have something to rely on if your magic gets cut off."

"Okay." Chrysa finalized distributing her stats, or whatever the equivalent of it was like for her.

Aldrich tapped the magical screen his throne projected, selecting the third trial quest. A circle displayed an image of what looked like a village on fire. "Now we don't have much time to waste. Time flows slower here, but we're still on a deadline. This quest is going to take a good amount of time, especially with just the two of us."

"I'm ready!"

"Good." Aldrich tapped the circle with his palm, and a white light enveloped both of them.

Chapter 277: Demons

Aldrich and Chrysa stood side by side in the midst of a forest. The trees towered around them like a gathering of miniature towers, reaching high up and spreading their boughs of blue leaves in a ghostly glowing ceiling of flora.

"It's snowing?" Chrysa held out her hand, watching as little dots of white dropped down on her palm.

"That's not snow. That's ash." Aldrich took in a shallow breath, feeling precious little oxygen, and what little oxygen he did get, it was hot, almost burning.

Not that he even needed oxygen.

"Ash?" Chrysa cocked her head. "That means fire, right?"

"It does. Smart." Aldrich patted Chrysa's head. It was curious what she knew and what she did not know. It was not like she had gone through any sort of schooling. What she did know was probably based off of Aldrich's own memories, but exactly how much?

"Mhm." Chrysa smiled happily as she nodded at Aldrich's praise.

A system message appeared in front of Aldrich's vision.

[Trial Quest 3: The Arc started]

[Main Objective: Defeat Dark Eye Deimos]

[Secondary Objectives:

- Close the Flame Arc

- Save the Velis Temple

- Retrieve the Arselis Seed]

Aldrich moved his hand from Chrysa's head to in front of her face. A spine jutted out of his palm, blood trickling down and pattering on the dirt.

"Quite rude. I was barely done reading." Aldrich pulled his hand back and tore the spine out of his hand. Little threads of muscle and chips of bone clung to it as he tore the serrated edge out.

Chattering clicks echoed above. Aldrich and Chrysa saw a hunchbacked humanoid clinging to the tree trunk. Its long, gangly limbs ended in barbed claws that dug into the wood like climbing hooks.

Spines lined its back and its joints, showing exactly where Aldrich had gotten his injury.

The creature was small, not much larger than a child, with pale, lightly purple tinted skin and a face fused with mangled, burned flesh onto what looked like a tiki mask showing an exaggerated blue lipped grin and angled, angry solid white eyes.

"What is that? It looks gross," said Chrysa. She looked at the grotesque creature with no fear, just a hint of disgust.

"That's an imp. A weak type of demon. From its mask, its under Mur'Kon'Ree, demon god of secrets," said Aldrich.

Chrysa slapped her hands together like she was crushing a bug. The space around the imp distorted before collapsing in on it, splattering it into a pulp as if two invisible walls had crashed against it.

Little flecks of purple skin mixed into a slurry of bright red blood and innards flowed out between the spatial walls.

"You're right, father, it's weak," said Chrysa. "So I made sure it will never hurt you again!"

"Impressive." Aldrich nodded. The imp was probably level 15, but Chrysa had one shot it with minimal effort, despite being just level 20 herself.

Most likely, this was because of Chrysa's real world powers. Chrysalises could naturally manipulate and change shape according to their wills, or, as the Death Lord had noted, at the behest of a greater entity.

Some sort of 'alpha' or 'boss' creature, as Chrysalises naturally formed symbiotic relationships with strong individual creatures they housed within their lairs.

To Chrysa, Aldrich was her 'boss monster', though, because of how their souls were intertwined, the boss to lair relationship was changed to more of a father to daughter one.

"I'm strong, I told you! The 'levels' father gave me made me way stronger too!" Chrysa twirled around proudly.

"You're good, Chrysa. But remember, you can always be better," said Aldrich.

"Mhm."

"And here's more chances to improve." Aldrich looked up as several more imps crawled out of the literal woodworks, crawling down treetops with insectoid efficiency. "Make sure to pace yourself. Use as little mana as possible to deal with them because you don't know what you need to save for later.

Anything could come up."

This was not entirely true. Aldrich had a good idea of what was going to happen since he had gone through these quests before. This third one was quite hard.

In terms of relative difficulty, it was one of the hardest. Among the top five, in Aldrich's opinion, beaten out only by the super endgame quests.

The quest involved defeating Deimos, a dark elf warlock, who wanted to rip open a tear into Morhal, the dimension of the demons. He had made a pact with one of Mur'Kon'Ree's Greater Demons to obtain magic in exchange for granting dimensional access to more of the demon's kin.

Deimos was using an elven town as a sacrificial ritual to try and rip open a pathway for Mur'Kon'Ree's demons to come through. The quest involved fighting through a veritable horde of demons - it was no cakewalk, that was for sure.

"Ah, and there you are." Aldrich stepped in front of Chrysa as another demon appeared. This one landed on the ground, a half dozen meters away from Aldrich.

It was bigger. Just a bit shorter than Aldrich. Humanoid, still, but instead of being a curve backed, misshapen spawn of a thing, it was more refined with balanced and athletic proportions.

Same purple tinted skin. Same tiki mask face, but this time with a mouth shaped into an overly curved grin. Black bat wings fanned out from its bat, and it topped off its demonic look with a pair of horns, one curving up, the other curving down.

This was a [Grinner Demon]. Unlike the imps, which were lesser demons, Grinners started at minimum from level 25.

This one in particular was level 30.

"I'll handle this," said Aldrich. "Chrysa, you take care of the little ones."

"Okay, father." Chrysa smiled, fangs bared. Her fingers flared out, space rippling between them.

"And it's about time I tested out my new equipment." Aldrich stepped forward, making it clear that he was going to take on the bigger demon one on one.

"Death Walker, why do you resist us?" said the demon. "We seek only a new home for our displaced brethren."

"You can spare me the self-pity. From what I know, all of you are glorified parasites anyway," said Aldrich. "Latching onto new dimensions, taking on the forms of the natives, doing as you please for no real greater good."

"Greater good? Is such a thing necessary? Is survival not enough?" said the demon.

"Not in my eyes." Aldrich had talked with demons some, but the game obviously did not have all the dialog options a real life encounter brought. "Plus, all of you here are just more experience and, if I'm lucky, item drops."

"Brave talk, Death Walker. My eyes are keen. You are burdened. You have no legion with you. You cannot draw upon the forces of the dead."

"I see. So you can tell?" Aldrich filed down the information that demons could track his status as they could in the game. It was an interesting mechanic that in Elden World, beings related to demons or gods could see things about the player that only a player would know. Like the location of their last save file or how full their inventory was or even reading through game files to check the player's real name.

It was a fun little gimmick that made gods and demons more 'ethereal', as if they were beyond the scope of the mortal game denizens.

Apparently, that transferred to the demons being able to read some aspects about Aldrich's system, particularly the restrictions his quest imposed on him.

"As you are now, you are but a third rate caster. What is a death walker without the dead to heed his call?" said the demon.

Aldrich cracked his neck and knuckles. "Your death."

Chapter 278: The Grinner

"Good luck, father!" Chrysa yelled out before she pranced away, opposite from Aldrich, towards the gathering of imps on the treetops. In response, the imps loosed strange cries that sounded like rapid, deep clicks.

"You too, Chrysa. Remember, efficiency is key. Don't waste your mana on the small fry," said Aldrich.

Chrysa nodded as she hopped in the air. She furrowed her white brows and managed to create little platforms of distorted space beneath her feet. Impressively, she had a natural baseline familiarity with her powers, which did make sense.

Variants, unlike Alters, were born knowing how to use their powers far better. It was part of their instincts. Still, Chrysa had some room to improve. She was a little shaky on her way up, her space platforms tilted unevenly.

That would improve in time with training. With fighting to hone her instincts down to a sharpened edge.

Aldrich had trimmed the fat off his instincts to make it a lean, mean, killing machine through countless combat simulations. He did not even really have a specific training regiment. He dumped himself in extremely difficult missions like 'storm the base with eighty men in it and survive' or more bluntly 'kill one hundred men in hand to hand combat' and just bashed his head against the wall over and over, dying in virtual reality hundreds, no, thousands upon thousands of times until he succeeded.

In a way, this was a similar training method for Chrysa, though instead of virtual reality there were trial quests. Instead of infinite retries there was just one life, but Aldrich was there to guide her.

"A pity you cannot cooperate with us," said the Grinner. It closed its fists, and from its forearms, spikes of bone jutted out, ripping through the flesh in blood streaked white.

Aldrich clasped his hands together, charging up mana for a Death Bolt.

The large grin on the Grinner's tribal mask flashed with red.

[Afflicted by Mora]

[Spell: Death Bolt sealed]

"This is a spell you have relied on greatly, it seems. How will you do without it, mage?" the Grinner said, its voice oozing with sinister intent.

"Hm. Expected. Looks like you follow your programming to some degree. Or maybe 'programming' is more like a function of your instincts and personality." Aldrich noted that the Grinner sealed [Death Bolt] as expected.

Grinners generally always sealed the offensive spell or skill used the most, so in Aldrich's case this was the [Death Bolt]. As for how it sealed the spell, it did so with [Mora], which was a unique type of aura that demons could project that imparted debuffs on all in their surroundings.

It was the direct opposite of Aura that gods held buffed their allies or selves.

The effects of [Mora] were generally unique to the clan a demon hailed from. In the case of the Grinner, a secret demon, this usually manifested in a sealing effect.

"Expected? Yes, you have torn through our ranks once before. But that was with a legion at your back. Now you have nothing but a child," said the Grinner. "What else do you-,"

Before the Grinner stopped talking, Aldrich rushed in with [Negative Surge]. Criss-cross patterns of green lined his legs and arms, reinforcing his limbs to superspeed as he unleashed a solid punch right into the demon's gut.

The impact sounded like a whip cracking, Aldrich's hardened fist driving in deep to the demon's stomach. The snapping sound of several broken ribs rang through the air.

Aldrich drew back his fist, and the demon spurted black blood from the gaps in its mask.

"I have my fists." Aldrich then launched a missile strike of an uppercut right into the demon's jaw, knocking the fell creature's head up and sending it flying backwards like a truck had rammed into it.

The demon fell on its back heavily, its mask heavily cracked.

"And by the looks of it, that's more than enough for the likes of you." Aldrich stared down at the demon. The creature shuddered in struggling pain as it attempted to regain its breath and get back up.

Aldrich did not spare any mercy. He lifted his leg up high, then drew it down like an executioner's guillotine, shattering the demon's neck.

The demon's body drew still with an unnatural quickness. The blank white light in its mask eyes disappeared like a burst light bulb. Unlike regular living creatures that took some time to fully settle into death, always breathing or beating their hearts for just a few more seconds after lethal injury, demons went full rigor mortis instantly.

It was a side effect of the fact that the physical forms that demons wore were just that: clothing of flesh much like Aldrich's Materius.

[Mora effects disabled]

[Death Bolt restored]

The demon's chest area, where its heart was, glowed a bright purple. Demons had a spiritual core called a Demonheart that they reformed around if their physical forms died. The greater the injury and the more times they died, the longer it took for demons to recover, but no matter what, they always came back.

Unless, of course, one had a holy weapon or spell to purge them.

Aldrich held out his hand. "[Lightforged Array]" he chanted, vocalizing the spell to get a better feel of it. Warm streaks of bright sunlight flowed across his arm, swirling into a ball at his hand that formed itself into a longsword.

With the blade of gold in hand, Aldrich shoved it down into the demon's core. A loud sizzling sound crackled through the air. Smoke poured out of the contact point, as if Aldrich was a blacksmith that had just dunked a molten blade into cold water.

Aldrich felt his blade hit liquid weight, like it was caught in thick, viscous slime, and he knew this was it. He twisted the sword, breaking the demonheart apart.

The Grinner's physical body melted away into nothingness, leaving what looked like a large purple marble behind. Aldrich picked the trinket up and pocketed it into his inventory.

[1x Purified Basic Demonheart obtained]

Demons and gods were both immune to necromancy, so Aldrich had no qualms about just killing the Grinner. Demons did, however, drop demonhearts that could be used for all manner of things related to curses, so it was not a total waste.

"Father, that was quick!" Chrysa landed right beside Aldrich. She was covered in black splotches of blood. He looked behind her to see imp parts strewn all across the trees in a chaotic mess like a picasso piece painted in gore.

Aldrich did not care about purifying the imp demonhearts. They were too weak to be worth anything. Granted, this meant the imps would come back, but the weaker a demon, the longer it took for them to piece together their corporeal forms.

Weaklings like the imps would take days to bring themselves together after getting blown apart like this. They were as good as dead.

"Good, you saved most of your mana." Aldrich patted Chrysa's head. "You're a quick learner. I'm sorry to have underestimated you."

"I'm ready to fight again!" said Chrysa, eager to win more of Aldrich's praise.

"That's the spirit. Well, make sure you're ready, because there's a good reason I made you save your mana so much." Aldrich stepped forward, into the dark of the forest.

Chrysa followed with happy skips, the bloody black splotches fading from her skin as she automatically cleaned herself with her spatial magic.

Now, Aldrich was headed to the elven village of Ars Telvin where in front of a great temple, he would square off with a Greater Demon that he did not know if he could even beat by himself, even with his new gear.

Thankfully, this was where Chrysa could prove herself.

Chapter 279: [Bonus chapter] Greater Demon

"What is that, father?" Chrysa pointed high up to the sky. The night was darker than dark, the little light of the stars suffocated under a cloud of thick smoke.

Where the moon was, there was instead a bright red V drawn in stark contrast against the smoke. A scar of infernal energy torn into the sky; a half formed gateway into Morhal where demons awaited on the other side like hungry zombies banging against a closed door. "Why is the moon so weird?"

"Not the moon. A Flame Arc. A type of dimensional doorway that demons use to enter into different dimensions," said Aldrich. It was half formed. A complete Flame Arc had another V beneath it, interlocking the letters together to create a diadem shaped portal.

Deimos, the warlock here and the main boss, was well on the way to complete a ritual that involved processing all the souls of the elves here to fuel the ritual.

Beneath the fiery V, burning light illuminated a snowfall of ash and a massive tree that towered into the sky. Indents, tunnels, houses, bridges, and pathways carved all throughout the tree indicated it had been well lived in.

This was an Arsillow, a life giving tree that elves built their settlements around.

"Oooh." Chrysa looked at the Flame Arc, the orange and red light reflected in her green eyes. "It's space-y. I think...I think if I touched it, I might be able to play with it!"

"Really?" Aldrich raised a brow. "Can you close it?"

"I think so!" Chrysa nodded.

"I see." Aldrich understood now the Death Lord's intentions in setting up these quest restrictions.

At first, Aldrich had thought there was no real way to complete the quest fully.

The ultimate end goal of this quest was to kill Dark Eye Deimos, the warlock responsible for trying to complete this Flame Arc. That, Aldrich could do by killing Deimos.

The other objectives, though, were much, much tougher because he had no real army to sustain through all of this. The point of the third trial quest was to test how well a necromancer could manage their existing units.

Since demons were immune to necromancy, the difficulty was in minimizing losses and making the best of every single unit in the legion. Especially since demons were on average much tougher than the normal undead.

The way Aldrich would have approached the quest normally was simple. He would have gotten to Velis Temple, guarded by demons, and freed it. There, he would have

obtained an item called the Pureflame Lantern, a temporary item from Mira, a goddess of holy fire that the elves worshipped.

The item enchanted Aldrich's undead with the ability to permanently put down demons.

Then, he would have worked his way up the Arsillow tree, fighting a miniboss to obtain one of its seeds before reaching the top where he would fight Deimos to seal the Flame Arc.

But that was if Aldrich had his legion.

With just Chrysa, Aldrich had expected it would have been hard just to take out Deimos.

But the Death Lord had given her tools to work around all this.

First, she had made sure to make Bors speed up the [Solar Seal]'s creation, giving Aldrich a way to kill the demons here for good.

Second was Chrysa herself. She could close the Flame Arc if she got to it. If Aldrich managed to get Chrysa up to the Flame Arc, she could close it first, preventing any demonic reinforcements from pouring in.

In addition, without a Flame Arc, demons had difficulty maintaining a physical form. They would slowly fade away until they finally died, unable to survive without some larger physical anchor giving them a presence in the realm.

Now, the issue was how to get to the top of the Arsillow fast, before demons could swarm Aldrich. And also how to avoid Deimos because he, as a level 50+ boss, could defeat Aldrich, especially under the empowering light of the Flame Arc.

Thankfully, as usual, there was a way and a plan for all of this.

"Alright, Chrysa, here's what we're going to do." Aldrich pointed down, away from the sky, down sloping hills towards the elven village. Countless houses, more like little dens made of entwined branches and glowing blue and white leaves, withered and wilted under blazing fire.

Elves, tall and fair skinned with their signature pointed ears and leaf-knit robes, shambled about like zombies, their eyes glazed over, bright red Vs scorched into their foreheads.

They were all [Possessed], a negative status effect that demonic influence could impart on mortals to slowly change them in both body and soul. Demons were inherently parasitic creatures, and nowhere was this quality more obvious than in possession.

Possession prepped beings to host demons, incarnating them. Demons sought hosts because of how unstable they were in the realm, needing a Flame Arc to manifest. However, if they could incarnate into a proper host, taking the native body over, they could stay around as long as they wanted.

However, if nothing had changed in the quest, none of the elves were fully possessed, meaning no demons piloting them. They were basically just zombies, nerfed, mindless versions of who they once were.

Several demons, at least three dozen Grinnners and a hundred plus imps, crawled about.

"Do we save them?" said Chrysa, pointing to the elves.

"No." Aldrich said this without a hint of hesitation. There was no point saving the elves. Not only were they already basically dead, their souls rotted out from within, but he could not afford trying to purify them with the [Solar Seal].

It was just not worth it, and he had a finite amount of sunlight stored to use. None of the elves were strong on their own, either. At best, he could store their graves in his bell for summoning later.

Maybe it would have been interesting to hear out what the elves had to say about the trial quest, but that was a lore related luxury he could not afford.

"What we do is this." Aldrich pointed over to a particularly large cove of wood, isolated in its own space to mark its importance. A collection of branches unfurled atop the cove like the candles on a chandelier, and at their tips, tongues of white fire flickered.

A holy light emanated from the cove that prevented demons from drawing close, though there was a sort of hazy dark veil that made it clear a barrier prevented easy access into it.

This was the Velis Temple. One of the objectives Aldrich could clear.

"We go there. To that temple."

"There's a scary one in front of it." Chrysa gulped nervously.

Indeed, there was a demon noticeably different from all the others around it there. Standing right in front of the circle of white light cast from the temple was a tall, sticklike being with a body that looked like a masked pole walking on long, spindly legs. If Aldrich had to try and describe it, it looked like someone had stuck a totem atop the back of a daddy long legs spider.

This demon was much bigger than the Grinners and gave off a dangerous 'boss' like presence. The mask that comprised its face set in a bored, neutral expression with thin blank white eyes that seemed right on the verge of falling asleep.

That was a Greater Demon. Level 40. Roughly around Aldrich's own level.

"Nothing's scary if you're ready for it," said Aldrich. "We're going to take that thing down."

Chapter 280: Greater Demon 2

"That one?" Chrysa bit her lip nervously. "But it's almost as strong as father!"

"But not as strong as the two of us, right?" said Aldrich. "We're going to be working together now, so keep your ears open."

Chrysa nodded, and her pointed ears actually grew as she scrunched her brows and focused on adapting to what Aldrich wanted.

"Okay, here's what we're going to do-," Aldrich began.

Several minutes later, and Aldrich sprinted down the sheer drop of the hill slopes leading into the flame ravaged town. In his hands was a lightforged halberd. Atop his shoulders were two skeletal arms. One held Chrysa and another a lightforged shield.

It seemed Aldrich could have a maximum limit of two lightforged weapons at once, and an offensive weapon plus shield combo seemed the best for most situations.

The moment Aldrich neared the town, the flame topped branch and leaf dens getting closer and closer and the blank stares of the possessed elves clearly visible, the demons came.

Hellhounds materialized like saplings, rising up out of the ground in flickering snapshots of fire. They, like the other secret demons, had masks instead of canine faces, though that did not mean they had any less of a bite with circular, leech-like holes in the mouths of their masks.

The mouths were studded with teeth and sputtered with fire.

The hounds leaped up at Aldrich from every direction. He did not stab with his halberd, that took too much time to target just singular units. Instead, he performed wide, flowing swings, kind of like sweeping a broom. Like that, he knocked down several hellhounds with considerable force, breaking their bones and sending them flying away from him.

Aldrich did not want to waste time on weak hellhounds. They were weak mobs that ranged from levels 8 to 15 and their only danger came from their uncanny ability to hide in pockets of infernal space, particularly in the corners of buildings for jumpscare.

But since Aldrich knew their trick, he treated them more as a nuisance than anything else.

Whatever hounds Aldrich missed, Chrysa ripped apart with spatial distortions.

Aldrich reached the town itself, standing level with the burning wreckage, the static eyes of masked Grinners, imps, and hounds staring at him from every corner.

A voice echoed towards him.

"Ah, Death Walker, I was wondering when you would make your appearance in this forsaken realm."

"Barbos," acknowledged Aldrich.

This was the spider-totem fusion abomination guarding the temple further in the town, a good three to five minute sprint away.

"You remember my name! Very sweet. If I could blush like a maiden in love, I would. Though, you already are taken, no?"

"Reading my game files, are you?"

"Game files, heh. Is that what you still call this?"

"A matter of habit." Aldrich raised a brow. He had never conversed much with Barbos back in the game. Dialogue options were limited with the demon, relegated mostly to generic villainous talk about how Barbos would never let Aldrich enter the temple and wield the pureflame against the demons. "You seem less tense. How about you let me into that temple and I can consider giving you a fast death."

"Now is not that considerate? I would if I could; it would certainly be interesting. But I am bound to some rules in this realm, and one of them involves annihilating you on sight, unfortunately. Though, rest assured, I do enjoy seeing you again.

Is this not our sixth meeting? Or is it our ninth? I forget."

"Ninth." Aldrich noticed the demon mobs were not moving, letting him talk.

Nine times was how much Aldrich had played through Elden World.

"It is quite sad, in a way. Only I know how many lives you have lived because I can truly, truly see. And look at you, you are living another life again. This time, in an entirely different realm.

No wait, this was you all along, 'player'. A little disappointing, I must say. So, in the end, you were nothing but an ordinary mortal.

But that scent on you...how quaint."

A pause.

"How exciting.

Maybe I should try my best to kill you. Maybe then I can take over your body and escape this realm. If you are my jailer, then it stands to reason that you must have my keys, no?"

"Well, I never expected an outcome any different from us trying to kill each other. It's in your programming, after all," said Aldrich. "And it looks like you're more talkative than usual. You might even have information I want."

Demons could 'read' game files because they were extradimensional and could see that the player character was being controlled by a greater extradimensional entity.

The player, so to speak.

"I am quite free, you know. Freer than any of the other blind creatures trapped in these quaint little quests of yours.

But I am also very, very shy. I do not think I will tell you much."

"Don't worry. I know how to break the ice. Among other things." Aldrich readied himself to move forward. The more time he spent, the more the Flame Arc opened up.

The deeper the Flame Arc tore open, the stronger the demons got and the faster they regenerated. Aldrich needed to close it as soon as possible.

"Very good. Then let us do this dance again, Death Walker, as we have so very many times."

The voice faded away, and Aldrich saw the demons all around him start to move again. He reacted by keeping his stats boosted with the passive effect of the [Solar Seal] and the active buff of [Negative Surge].

Aldrich jumped up on a rooftop of intertwined branches. Demonfire burned atop it, but the [Solar Seal] plus his divine grade cloak gave him so much resistance he took minimal damage from it.

Either one of those items did not give Aldrich enough fire resistance to negate his undead weakness to the element, but with both combined, he had near immunity.

"Oh, things are very different. You can wade through fire. Very impressive, Death Walker, very good, very cute. Some upgrades here and there, I see, but was it worth losing your legion?"

Aldrich ignored Barbos's voice echoing through the air. On the rooftops, he could minimize getting swarmed not just by demons, but the hundreds of possessed elves. He sprinted through the roof and jumped to another close by.

There, hellhounds appeared in flashes of fire, already midair in lunges towards him. Aldrich just ducked and moved past them. He ignored as many demons as he could, focusing instead on jumping from rooftop to rooftop, getting close to the Velis Temple at staggering speeds.

On every rooftop, Aldrich slashed his way past hounds and imps, flicking them away like they were flies. Eventually, a Grinner demon stood in his way.

"Hold it!" Aldrich commanded.

Chrysa nodded and closed her eyes.

The Grinner froze, distorted space rippling all around it. Chrysa was not strong enough to tear the Grinner apart as she did with the imps, but she could keep it in place.

Aldrich thrust his halberd into the Grinner's heart and twisted, killing the demon. He did tossed the demon's dead corpse to the side, pocketing its purified heart from the tip of his halberd and putting it in his inventory.

Chrysa and Aldrich were, for the first time, truly in synch. Their soul link worked in their favor now, their instincts and senses and thoughts all melding together like the gears in a well oiled machine.

There was still work to do, practice to be had, but the Death Lord was right: Chrysa naturally had skill in protecting him.

It was part of the skillset she was born with.

Chapter 281: Greater Demon 3

Barbos spoke again. "That child of yours is something too, is it not? It smells of Elduin's magic and also of that other realm of yours. A hybrid between realms? Is that not so very interesting? Truly, children are wonderful, no?"

"Bad guy talks too much," complained Chrysa. "But he praised me, so it's okay."

"Don't let him get to you if he does start saying anything bad," said Aldrich. "He's just rambling."

"Oh, do not insult me like that. My heart is very frail, you know," responded Barbos.

Aldrich leaped over several roofs, landing on a particularly large one. Here, there were three Grinners blocking his way. Their [Mora] still just sealed his [Death Bolt], and they could not stack the effect to seal multiple of his spells.

Notably, though, the Grinners could not seal anything from Chrysa. Maybe because her powers were one part Elden World magic and another part Flux category Alter power.

But even then, three Grinners was something Aldrich did not want to waste time or effort dealing with.

The way Barbos worked was that he controlled most of the Grinners here like puppets, but in doing so, he could not defend his main body. Once Aldrich got close to Barbos, the greater demon would have to stop controlling the mobs and engage in a straight fight with Aldrich.

Or as straight a fight as it got. Barbos was tricky to deal with. Regardless, spending time here was counterproductive.

Chrysa sensed Aldrich's thoughts and put her fingers to the sides of her heads, charging up her mana. A white light burst forth from her, swallowing up the two of them.

In the next instant, Aldrich found himself far ahead of the Ginner infested rooftop. Chrysa had teleported him.

"Easy now, we need to save your mana," said Aldrich. He pointed up to the distance, to the top of the Arsellis tree. "We need to get all the way up there."

"I've got enough for that," reassured Chrysa.

"Good." Aldrich leaped down into the elven streets. He was now at in what looked like a town square with the temple sitting straight in the middle.

Barbos's towering figure stood in front of it. A shadowy veil cast over the temple, blocking entry into it. The veil was supported by Barbos and would fade away if he died or lost mana.

"Like I said, I cannot let you enter," said Barbos.

"So what?" said Aldrich. "You were hard to deal with because at this point, I wouldn't have had holy magic to put you down with.

I had to use my legion and butcher you over and over again. And since you're a Greater Demon, you regenerate fast. Fast even for your greater kind, too.

Like a cockroach, you got back up and up."

Aldrich put his glowing golden halberd out. "But things are different here. You only have one life here, Barbos."

In the game, Aldrich had needed to kill Barbos ten times before his regeneration slowed to the point the barrier behind him lifted. Now, though, just one stab to the heart, and it was over.

"Things are different, I do agree. And did I not say before? I am much freer than your other quest critters. I can think for myself, and do you think I did not see you waving that holy stick around?" Barbos clapped his dark purple arachnid legs together.

Aldrich heard rumbling come in from all directions. Not the agile steps of hounds and imps or the thuds of Grinners, but a stampede of possessed elves. They poured in from every direction, filling up the square, completely surrounding Aldrich and Chrysa.

Aldrich circled around, his halberd in front of him, but the elves did not step into his range. They just stared at him with dead eyes and motionless bodies.

"Some thing are part of my 'programming', but some things are not. I am free to fight as I please now." Barbos's sizable body disappeared in a shower of purple sparks that faded quickly into nothingness.

When he spoke again, his voice echoed in such a way that it was impossible to hear where exactly it came from. "Lesser demons cannot enjoy a host body unless it is perfect for them. But me? I can cram myself into an unfinished vessel fine enough, though I do prefer something a little more comfortable."

"So that's it?" said Aldrich. He narrowed his eyes at what must have been over a hundred elves all around him. "You're going to hide inside one of these elves? You have stay in the range of this square, I know that."

Interesting, to say the least. Barbos, in some ways, had to obey his programming like with not letting Aldrich pass. But in other ways, he could transcend it. He was programmed to fight Aldrich with his own body, but now, he had made use of possessed elves that did not seem to need as much mental control to operate as demons did, considering the fact that Barbos's barrier still stood strong.

"Why would I not? You are far, far too scary for a weak hearted one like myself to deal with.

The way you move with those fancy swings and jumps and flips - you are a much better fighter than I. Much better than in all your prior lives too. On par with a proper warrior, I'd say.

Too scary to think about fighting by myself.

So hiding it is.

The more time I spend here, the deeper the Flame Arc embeds itself.

A false Flame Arc, granted, conjured up in this silly little dream of a quest like everything else here. If it were real, I could even go home, but at the very least, I think there are some demons and infernal energy stored in there that will make your goals a tad bit harder to achieve, no?"

Aldrich stared at the elves. Men. Women. Teens. Children.

"And, maybe your heart is just as fragile as mine. Maybe you do not have it in you to mow down so many mortals. After all, I can sense, you were a mortal just so very recently too, no?"

"Chrysa, father wants you to know something," said Aldrich.

"What is it?" Chrysa clung to Aldrich's skeletal extra arm tight, tense at the sudden development.

"Some things, I do because I have to." Aldrich stomped his foot into the ground and cast [Call of the Impaler].

Chapter 282: Insight

The ground shivered, quaking as if in sheer anticipation of the blood it would soon drink. Then, stakes of bone ruptured forth, rising up from upturned piles of dirt from all around Aldrich. The sound of flesh splitting apart, rending against hardened bone, echoed through the air in a symphony of impalation.

Aldrich briefly glanced around, seeing what must have been at least a hundred elves held up high, their eyes still listless as blood poured from their bodies, trickling and painting the ashen white bone stakes in patterns of crimson.

The [Call of the Impaler] had worked incredibly, showcasing just how good it was at area of effect damage. Each stake must have had three, four, even five or six elves skewered on them - that was how tightly packed the elves had been trying to reach Aldrich, trampling over each other in a stampede of mindless, zombie-like drive.

"By all the gods! That is what the mortals of this realm say, no? You truly do terrify me!" said Barbos. His voice still echoed, still permeated in such a way that it was impossible to pinpoint him. "You massacred so many elves. Young or old, man or woman, it did not matter at all! You scare me, player, you truly do!"

Aldrich used the space he had cleared to sprint forward, halberd in hand. He cast [Negative Surge] on himself, his legs and arms reinforcing with bonus power, and swerved through the crowd of elves, slashing his halberd in wide horizontal sweeps like a lawnmower. He made sure to target necks, decapitating elves to kill them instantly.

So long as Aldrich kept himself moving, he could clear through the elves without them getting the chance to dogpile him.

Through a veritable rain of severed heads, Aldrich kept going and going, his entire body drenched in blood red, only his eyes shining visibly green through the crimson bath. Eyes of complete focus.

"How horrifying!" said Barbos. Then, as Aldrich cleaved through three more elves, the demon's voice lost its sarcastic fear. "And that little one of yours, she is no fragile flower either. I cannot read her at all with my demonic insight, but she seems quite supportive of all this mass murder."

Aldrich kept his mind in tune with Chrysa, ever vigilant of her mental state. He did not want to do this, to showcase how brutally efficient he could be when it came down to it, but Barbos had forced Aldrich's hand.

The longer Barbos stalled here, the more the Flame Arc would open, and the stronger the possessed elves and every demon would get.

Aldrich had no time to check every single elf individually, and all of them were enemies. If he killed enough of them fast enough, he would smoke Barbos out sooner or later.

'Are you okay, Chrysa?' said Aldrich as he decapitated several more elves. Blood spurted from their headless neck stumps, drenching not just Aldrich, but Chrysa as well. However, the blood did not actually get on her.

Instead, it clung just above her skin. Chrysa had erected a personal spatial barrier. Her eyes, though, were open, taking in the carnage without much issue. She had the same concerned but detached look when she saw the butcher suffering; she cared about the elves' suffering, but not nearly to the same degree an ordinary human girl would.

Chrysa had not shut off entirely like she had at the surprise attack. She was holding on. And well, too.

'I'm okay, father,' said Chrysa. 'Because I believe in you. You're smart and strong and so determined - I trust what you do, even if it means hurting people that aren't bad.'

Aldrich nodded. 'The faster I stop Barbos, the fewer elves die. This is the best way.'

When Aldrich saw how well Chrysa could accept this, he wondered, was it because of her variant instincts? Or, maybe, deep down, even in the pure and warm part of Aldrich's soul, he had always been willing to make sacrifices.

Either way, Aldrich confirmed that Chrysa would not hold him back.

"Maybe our hearts truly are similar," said Barbos. "You and I both do not mind breaking our little game pieces. I thought perhaps you were soft in a squishy, mortal way, but you surprise me, player, you surprise me well.

You are truly broken, are you not? To be a flesh and blood mortal and do all this without the faintest change in expression?"

Aldrich did not respond to Barbos. Secret demons like him were talkative and manipulative, always wanting to goad others into a reaction, to reveal things about themselves.

It was also why he was not too inclined of trying to keep Barbos around.

Aldrich could halfway purify Barbos's demonheart and then convert him into a summon, but secret demons told nothing but lies, and unlike loyal undead, demonic summons were extremely difficult to control, known notoriously for trying to overpower or control their summoners.

"There you are." Aldrich spied Barbos in the distance, past a small crowd of elves. He was in the body of a small boy, a faint red mark on the child's forehead showing possession.

Before Barbos could try and move to a different body, Aldrich drew his halberd back, and with olympic technique, threw it like a javelin.

Empowered by his superhuman base stats and buffed by [Negative Surge], the golden halberd punched through six elves' bodies before landing right on the possessed child's heart, instantly killing him.

The child tumbled back at the impact and coughed up blood. Not just blood. A cloud of wispy, purple darkness escaped from his mouth. The darkness congealed above in a ball that expanded by the moment, shaping back into Barbos's original shape.

Now was the time for Aldrich to act. A demon was weakest after being forced out of a body, their heart exposed to the world. Aldrich began to create another lightforged halberd, ready to strike Barbos down with holy energy.

"You got me! But now I have finished channeling my Mora." Barbos's voice was triumphant.

The light gathering in Aldrich's hand broke apart like glass, shards of solidified gold dissolving into nothingness. He looked at his [Solar Seal] ring. It was covered in what looked like a layer of static.

[Solar Seal disabled]

"You know me well, do you not? You should have known I would seal your items. I thought at first to take away that fine cloak of yours, but you are not relying on that, no, that ring was the issue. Now, without your sole source of holy energy, how will you ever defeat me?"

Aldrich held up his hand towards Chrysa.

Chrysa understood what Aldrich wanted. She closed her eyes and hovered her pale little palm over the ring. Spatial ripples covered the static layer before it disappeared, sucked into nothingness. She had warped it away.

[Solar Seal enabled]

This was why Aldrich said Chrysa would be important here.

Barbos's Mora, like many other secret demons, sealed something, and in his case, it was items. However, he did so by physically creating a layer of sealing energy that stuck to the item.

In theory, it made Barbos much more dangerous as the sealing layer clung to the disabled item and followed it even to the player's inventory. But in practice, that meant Chrysa could just warp the physical layer away.

Barbos lost here because he did not know what Chrysa could do as a non-Elden World native.

"...I did not foresee that. That little girl of yours, my, she is showing me that your home realm is one of remarkable power too. If only I could reach into it and feast upon the many new souls within. Regrettable," said Barbos.

Aldrich pointed his ring at Barbos and fired a beam of solar energy. A golden, red tinted line connected with Barbos's still forming body, burning it apart. Sunlight met darkness,

and as expected, drove it away, scattering the dark until Barbos's demonheart, a purple orb with glassy surface like a marble, lay bare.

The beam bore into the demonheart, cracking it, the breaks in the surface filling with light.

"I suppose this will be our last meeting. It was a good time, this one, better than all the others. It is a shame I could not escape this prison realm. Best of luck to you, my old friend, in escaping your own prison."

Aldrich stopped the beam and walked over to Barbos's floating heart.

"What? Did I say something that interested you?"

"I've thought about it," said Aldrich. "I was going to purify your core and use it to upgrade my items or spells. But there's no harm in keeping you around in this half-purified state. Unless someone offers you their body, you'll never incarnate and be a threat again."

I know I can't make you tell truths, but maybe I'll find a way. Maybe I already know someone who knows a way. Can't hurt to try."

"Hahahah, are you suggesting torturing a demon? Surely you must understand how futile that is? We do not your mortal conception of pain or suffering. There is nothing that can force me to bend to your will."

"No such thing as absolutes. Now then-" Aldrich grasped the cracked demonheart and willed it into his inventory. In this state, Barbos was classified as an item; that was how weak he was.

Barbos disappeared, but not without an amused laugh.

In the pecking order of magical beings in Elden World, demons and gods were at the top. Then nature spirits. Then dragons. Then beings like the Elder One that Fler'Gan once served that were not gods but functionally were the masters of an entire race.

There was no necromancy that could bend a demon to Aldrich's will. But maybe the Death Lord or her followers, especially Medula, a demon herself, had an alternative.

Barbos's Insight, the trait that let him read Aldrich's 'game files' and identify him as a player could come in handy.

Secret demons had the highest level of Insight among demons, far surpassing even knowledge demons like Medula.

And that last thing he said, about Aldrich being in a prison of his own, that was a topic Aldrich had invested interest in.

Aldrich still did not know the origins of his system. But perhaps he could use Barbos's Insight to find out. Or maybe - most likely - Barbos was lying.

The point was to find out.

Chapter 283: Defense

The dark, static filled veil surrounding the Velis Temple faded away. As the veil broke apart, the white glow of the temple crept forward, finally freed. All the possessed elves nearby scattered away, disappearing back into the depths of their fire and destruction torn town.

The light of the temple was holy in nature, creating a purified area from which no average demon could wander in. Not even demon influenced beings like the possessed could breach the holy boundary. In other words, it was a small safe zone.

Such an area would have damaged Aldrich, too, but as a designated 'champion' - the term given to the player for those blessed by the goddess to be heroes - he could access such areas with no issue.

Aldrich stepped through the light with Chrysa on his skeletal extra arm and entered the cavern of intertwined branches and greenery. Inside, vibrant shades of red, blue, gold, and white from glowing boughs of flowers growing on the walls and ceiling painted the temple innards with warm and inviting colors.

A stark contrast to the dozens of dead elves scattered about.

"Why are they all dead?" said Chrysa. "They don't look hurt at all. Can father bring them back?"

"Their souls are long gone," said Aldrich. "And they're hurt because of suffocation. The demons couldn't get to them physically, but smoking out all the oxygen still got to them in the end."

Chrysa nodded. "I feel bad for them. For all of them outside. Will we save them, eventually?"

"There's nothing left to save. All the living elves are too deep in possession that they've been carved out near hollow spiritually. They're like empty shells now. The moment the demonic influence ends, they'll keel over and die, their minds so deteriorated they can't even get themselves to breathe," said Aldrich.

At first, Aldrich had not cared much because he had considered all the elves and trial quests as just game events to clear. But after resurrecting Fler'Gan and talking to Barbos, he began to suspect strongly that they were not artificially constructed.

All of the Elden World beings that Aldrich encountered were alive and fully sentient. Sometimes, in the trial quests, their free will was stripped away due to 'programming', but as with Fler'Gan, once they were freed from it, they were fully conscious beings.

Barbos proved this even more.

The Death Lord, Valera, the Deathguard - they were all very, very real.

The most interesting thing that Aldrich noted was that the Elden World beings he saw could have been in 'early game' bodies, lower leveled with less gear, but still have their 'endgame' memories.

Valera, for example, showed up to Aldrich with none of her endgame stats or gear. But she retained all her memories with him. Same with the Death Lord - she was supposed to be dead, but she was still around with all her memories up to her death intact.

"That's sad," said Chrysa. "They looked like nice people."

Chrysa snapped Aldrich out of his contemplation. "It's okay, Chrysa. Sometimes, you can save them, sometimes, you can't. Not letting it crush you is how you stay on your feet, and the longer you stay on your feet, the more good you do."

Aldrich reached the end of the temple, in the deepest part of the cavern, and there, he looked up to behold a glowing white, seed-shaped construct of pure energy wrapped about in a tangle of roots. The roots attached to the walls and ceiling, acting like veins that pumped glowing white energy from the seed to the rest of the temple.

This was an Arselis seed that had the capacity to grow into a towering Arsilow tree. It was a small seed, just the size of an average human, and unblessed, meaning it could not sprout into a full tree. It could, however, still be used to create a smaller construct like this temple.

Strong life giving magics emanated from the seed. The ground around the seed grew particularly wildly, the grasses reaching as high as Aldrich's waist. Elves would prostrate themselves in this grass in worship of their goddess from, feeling the seed's life giving energy as their goddess's presence.

"It's shiny and warm. I like it." Chrysa hopped off of Aldrich's shoulder and floated towards the seed, touching it.

"Wait, that's dangerous-," began Aldrich, knowing life energy could harm undead. In the case of the seed, even the goddess's champion protection did not work.

But Chrysa touched the seed with no issue, smiling as she basked in its life giving energies. Perhaps this meant that certain undead from the real world were not affected by positive energy like this.

"I'm glad you like it, because once we're done with it, we're taking it home with us," said Aldrich.

"Really!?" said Chrysa. "I want to put it in the house!"

"Yeah, it would be a solid addition to our Boundary. But it'll be a lot smaller and weaker than it is now, so don't get your hopes up too much."

"That's not fair!"

"Tell me about it. Games always give you horrible downgraded versions of their boss or important plot items." Aldrich reached his hand towards the seed but did not touch it. A screen popped up in front of him.

[You have reached the Arselis Seed. With its holy light, you may choose two options.

1. Bless you and all allied units with holy light for the remainder of this quest.
2. Cause the seed to bloom. This will cause the seed to begin channeling and building up its stored energy. Upon the end of the channel, it will split apart and unleash a powerful wave of holy energy, purifying any demonic influence in its range.

If the seed channels enough to fully purify the town, then the quest will be considered complete.

However, you must defend the seed until the purification process is complete. If the seed is damaged too much, the channeling will end and the seed will be rendered permanently inactive, destroying all available safe zones throughout the town.

In addition, the boss of this area will notice the channeling and travel towards it.]

Aldrich pressed the second option with no hesitation.

The seed started to flux with energy. Instead of sending waves of white outwards, it now drained the energy back into itself. The grasses wilted and died. The cavern branches crumbled into dust, revealing once more the bright red and ash filled sky of the Flame Arc.

The seed floated in the air on its own, drawing a single ring around it to indicate it had begun its channeling process. Over time, it would grow two more rings, each representing 10 minutes, to signify channeling progress.

With three rings, the seed would crack open and shunt out its built up energy in a nova of positive force that would wipe out all weak demons. It would not kill Deimos, the main boss, but it would massively weaken him, and from there, it was a much easier job to get rid of Deimos and then the Flame Arc.

In essence, this turned the quest into a defense based strategy game.

But Aldrich had no intention of playing it. To defend this seed, he needed an entire army to ward off attacks from all sides. In Elden World, he enjoyed placing ranged units on rooftops, abusing chokeholds to minimize demonic swarms, and the like.

Here, though, Aldrich had no army. With literally every single demon in the area now coming to this exact spot, he had no way to survive by himself, let alone defending the seed.

But Barbos had confirmed to Aldrich one thing: you could think out of the box. You could play the game outside of its programming.

This seed was just a distraction. Aldrich had no intention of protecting it.

"Father...I don't like this," said Chrysa, her ears pointing up.

"It is scary, isn't it?" Aldrich felt the ground shake. He heard the rumbling pitter and patter of countless demonic footsteps all converging madly towards the seed like a storm of infernal might.

In the distance, at the top of the towering Arsilow tree where Deimos channeled the Flame Arc, he saw a flash of bright orange, fiery light. That was Deimos stopping the channel to move towards the seed as well.

A bright orb of orange light started to move down the tree, showing Deimos's progress to the seed. If the game was still the same, then it would take Deimos ten minutes.

"Alright, Chrysa," said Aldrich. For the first time, he manifested his [Frosthallowed War Scythe]. In sparks of pale blue, the scythe materialized, and Aldrich felt its weight sit comfortably in his hands.

From a metal staff base glowing with pale blue tint, scythe heads of pure ice on either end, allowing Aldrich to cleave from both sides of the scythe. Spikes of ice also protruded from the ends of the metal base, letting Aldrich pierce like a spear if needed as well.

Aldrich heard the rumbling of demons approach closer and closer now. These footsteps were lighter, comprised mostly of hellhounds and imps. It was only after a few minutes that heavier hitters like Grinners would show up.

"Yes, father?" Chrysa looked around nervously, though her bared fangs and claws made it clear that she was ready to fight as well.

"We're going to hold our position for, let's see, around five minutes. Cover me if something dangerous looks like it's going to hit me. But other than that, you save your mana," said Aldrich. He pointed his scythe end to the top of the Arsillow tree, where the Flame Arc was. "Because I'll need you to warp us both all the way over there."

Chapter 284: Defense 2

"All the way over there?" Chrysa pointed to the top of the Arsellis tree that grew so high that it almost looked like it could touch the sky. "I don't know if I can go that far..."

"You can," reassured Aldrich. "I know because I'm linked to you. Believe in yourself just as much as you believe in me. Got it?"

"Got it." Chrysa nodded.

"Now then. Time to deal with some unwanted guests." Aldrich briefly looked around. Elven houses blended well into nature, consisting of caverns built up of tangled branches and leaves. Many more were built into the tops or sides of large trees.

Secret demons poked their masked faces out from the tops of the caverns or from the sides of the tree houses. As expected, they were all smaller and weaker. Hellhounds and imps. Some of the imps had wings, making them more annoying to deal with, but in general, this was all fodder.

Nothing Aldrich could not deal with.

"Father, I can take them down-," began Chrysa.

"No. Save your mana. I don't know exactly how much it'll take you to get to the top of the tree, but I know it's roughly around your max. Father will be okay. Don't worry about me and focus on yourself, alright?"

"O-okay."

The good thing about the temple area that Aldrich stood on was that it was a wide stretch of flat ground. Elves did not build houses near their temples. So, nothing to sneak up on Aldrich.

Aldrich's [Death Essence Barrier] flashed green as balls of orange fire and purple light crashed against him, fired from the hands and mouths of imps and hellhounds. These

were tier 1 or 2 spells like [Firebolt] or [Demonshard] and did little to no damage against Aldrich's energy resistant barrier.

"In the past, I would have had a barrier of corpses. All flammable and easily disintegrated from demonic energy. But now, I can sit here all day without worrying about the likes of you." Aldrich stood calm and still, his scythe planted on the ground beside him. "If you want to stop the seed from blooming, you'll have to get down and do the dirty work up close."

The hellhounds hissed and the imps growled. They made their move. The hounds got to Aldrich first, their canine bodies sprinting down walls and burnt forest floor as they sprinted ahead at full speed. When they got close enough, the hellhounds leaped up, aiming to bite at Aldrich's head and throat.

Aldrich spun around with his scythe. He sliced four hounds clean in half, but there were three more that he could not cut down. No problem, though. A pale blue trail followed the scythe slash, like Aldrich was drawing with it, and then the line erupted in a burst of energy that instantly flash froze the rest of the hounds.

The frozen demons sailed past Aldrich and shattered into tiny little pieces against the ground.

"Good. Works just like how I remember it," said Aldrich.

The [Frosthallowed War Scythe] had a passive called [Frostbite Trail] that gave all of its slashes an explosive freezing aftereffect. This made it highly effective in clearing trash mobs, though the aftereffect was too weak to deal any real damage to a unit of Aldrich's equivalent level.

It did contribute to rapidly building up the [Frozen] status effect. The status effect was complete when a unit was completely encased in ice, rendered immobile, and by striking them in this state, one could shatter the unit to either one shot them or deal massive damage.

Notably, if it did not execute outright, it did percent max health damage, so Aldrich was curious whether this meant that it would take down even the toughest of supers in the real world.

Imps made their way to Aldrich now, some attacking from above, some trying to claw at him. Coupled with the hellhounds and they composed a swarming mass of demonic bodies easily numbering a hundred strong.

Aldrich performed a dance of death through the horde, slicing and slashing his way through the demons with graceful footwork that easily outpaced them. The imps were clumsy and the hellhounds moved too much on instinct.

Compared to Aldrich who had precision footwork beaten into him, the demons were easy to just dance laps around.

From above, it would have looked like Aldrich was drawing an elaborate pattern, the pale blue [Frostbite Trail] squiggling and threading through the crowd of demons. Bursts of frost energy erupted at the tail end of the trail, encasing corpses and living demons in ice.

"Father, they're at the thing!" Chrysa pointed back at the Arselis seed. Some demons had taken their attention off Aldrich, realizing he far outclassed them, and started attacking the seed. The seed was immune to projectile damage, but the demons could bite and claw at it.

"Forget about it," said Aldrich. "We're not here to protect the seed."

"Are we still going to get it?" said Chrysa. Looked like she was already developing a gamer's urge to get loot whenever possible.

"Yep. By choosing this defend the seed option, we'll get the seed guaranteed at the end of the quest, even if the demons end up breaking this one down. But you're right; if I don't defend it at all, they might get suspicious that I'm not here for it to begin with." Aldrich turned around and got to cleaning up the low-level demons around the seed.

After three minutes, the Grinners came. They came in groups of four; just the same as in the game. Later on, in the ten minute mark, they would come in waves of ten, but four was manageable solo. The Grinners came from all four cardinal directions.

Unlike the first Grinner Aldrich killed, these ones were animalistic brutes like the imps. Intelligence among demons was not guaranteed unless they were under the Greater classification or above. It was a tossup whether lesser or regular demons had intelligence, and generally, it was said that lower tier demons with intelligence had the potential to evolve higher.

[Death Bolt sealed]

The four demons closed in on Aldrich, shattering frozen chunks of their lesser comrades beneath heavy, rapid footsteps. More lesser demons closed in, though, and Aldrich sighed. It would be tough getting rid of the Grinners while trash mobs harassed Aldrich.

But Aldrich was prepared for this. And quite excited, actually. He got to use the scythe's active.

Right as the four Grinners converged on Aldrich, their burly fists cocked back, he swung his scythe in an omnidirectional sweep around him. A howling wind current raged all around Aldrich, buffeting the Grinners back. Countless little shards of ice in the wind acted like bullets, punching through all the lesser demons within.

This was called [Wailing Winds], and it effectively created a deadly combo of a small blizzard and a meat grinder of raging ice shards.

The Grinners covered their masked faces with their arms. The ice shards crashed against their skin but unlike with their weaker brethren, the shards did not break through. Instead, they spread apart on impact, rapidly building up a freezing layer that contributed to the [Frozen] status effect.

Any unit in this area was [Nearsighted] due to the foggy wind and the ice shards whirling about, but on top of that, Aldrich as the user of the scythe was actually invisible.

Abusing his invisibility, Aldrich cast [Boneripper]. Rippling black energy encased his left hand.

Wielding the scythe in his right, Aldrich got to work on the nearest Grinner. He crashed his curse wrapped hand against the demon's chest. The purple flesh shook a little, undulating like it was made of liquid before shattered rib bones burst out in a spurt of flesh and black blood.

This exposed the Grinner's beating, dark purple heart, and Aldrich stabbed into it with his scythe, instantly killing the Grinner's flesh body.

During attacks, Aldrich was still visible, so the other three Grinners rushed towards him. He slipped away, and in the wailing, raging winds, he disappeared like a phantom. He snuck right behind one of the Grinners and cast [Bonebearing Curse].

From an extended finger, an X shaped black symbol floated forward. The Grinner sensed Aldrich and whirled around, hitting him with a fist. Aldrich blocked with the light shield on his skeletal arm, though the hit was heavy enough to send him flying a few meters back.

The other two Grinners heard the impact of fist against solid, metallic light, and rushed towards Aldrich.

"Got you." Aldrich saw the [Bonebearing Curse] reach the Grinner's chest. The X marked itself on the flesh, and the Grinner seized up.

"Fight!" roared Aldrich as he leaped backwards, dodging the two Grinners as the slammed their fists down at him.

The marked Grinner charged forward, tackling one of his brethren. The [Bonebearing Curse] controlled any flesh and bone creature, and though the Grinner was technically a demon that was a spirit at base, it still inhabited a physical body that Aldrich could now manipulate.

"That leaves one." Aldrich would have to beat down the last Grinner with pure damage. No [Boneripper] curse for a cheap instant kill due to its relatively high cooldown. But if there was one thing that Aldrich knew a thing or two about, it was in giving out beatdowns.

Especially beatdowns that led to executions.

Aldrich tossed his scythe at the Grinner's head. The scythe spun rapidly before the blade dug itself right into the blank white eye of the Grinner's mask. Black blood spurted from the entry wound, and the Grinner grunted as it jolted back, grasping at the scythe to pull it out.

With [Negative Surge] buffing Aldrich's limbs, he rushed in, snapping a scything kick at the demon's knee. With a loud crack of breaking bone, the demon knelt down, one leg disabled.

Aldrich did not know how exactly a demon's vitals worked, whether they had a liver to target, so he worked with what he could directly see. He drew three fingers together and jammed them into the Grinner's other eye. His fingers broke through the mask and reached into soft, squishy flesh.

What Aldrich knew about dealing with Elden World units was that they no longer operated off of a pure HP bar. Their vitality was more like a measure of their general durability. In essence, how tough their skin, muscles, bones, and such were. But take out vital organs like the heart or brain, then they died no matter how high their vitality was.

The same principle applied to the flesh constructs that the demons used.

Aldrich gripped the Grinner's face tight, hooking his fingers jammed into its eye socket deep.

"Chrysa, get off," said Aldrich.

Chrysa floated upwards.

With her clear, Aldrich casted [Burning Agony]. His entire body burst into flames as his heartbeat pounded audibly. The flames erupted from his fingers as well, the same fingers jammed into the demon's head, and they scorched the Grinner from inside, melting away the brain within a few seconds.

The Grinner grew limp, and Aldrich pushed the demon away. The creature crashed into the frozen ground, motionless.

Chapter 285: Deimos, the Dark Eye

Aldrich exhaled flaming blood and steam as he turned [Burning Agony] off. The [Wailing Winds] ended at this point, taking up its maximum duration of twenty seconds.

When the blizzard settled down, ice shards clattering on the iced dirt, Aldrich saw that the remaining two Grinnners had been [Frozen] in a wrestling struggle against each other.

Chrysa plopped down on Aldrich's skeletal hand again. "That was so cool, father! When can I learn to fight like that!? Punching and kicking like that!?"

"Your levels give you mana and stats, but you need to learn how to use it all, that's true. Soon, Chrysa. With our link, I'm sure you'll pick up on things fast." Aldrich dislodged his scythe from the Grinner's eye and then materialized a lightforged sword, needing to execute the Grinnners with holy weaponry because they could regenerate much faster than the lesser demons.

Aldrich stabbed the solid light blade into the hearts of all four Grinnners, purifying and warping them into his inventory.

Now with a total of 5 Purified Demonhearts, Aldrich could reasonably craft quite a good curse spell or enchantment. That, Aldrich would refine into a potent instant death spell, something he was currently lacking after having to give up his old lantern to fully activate Volantis.

Instant death spells were generally all curse type spells, and there was nothing like demonhearts to construct effective curses.

In lore, demons were the origin of all curse type magic. Raw material harvested from their kind would yield the strongest curses possible.

"Once I start punching and kicking like father, nobody will ever beat me, and I'll protect father forever," said Chrysa.

"Not forever. One day, I'd like you to do your own thing. Seeing kids realize their dreams, their own dreams, not ones forced on them through necessity, makes me happy," said Aldrich. He briefly looked around to see all the demons in the vicinity had been cleared out, giving him some breathing room. "I'd like the same for you."

Chrysa cocked her head quizzically. "What I want...? But I just want to help you."

"That's fine too. In time, though, if you ever do want to do something else, I won't stand in your way. Just know I'm giving you that freedom." Aldrich knew that Chrysa protected him because she was essentially programmed to as a Chrysalis.

But the longer she grew, the more she experienced, the more she would develop into her own person. Into an individual. When that happened, Aldrich did not want her to feel shackled by him.

Aldrich felt a rumble echo under his feet. This was different from the vibrations from the stampede of demonic hordes. No, this was a deeper rumble, a solid quake that heralded not a mass of fodder, but the arrival of one powerful entity.

Aldrich spied the orange light in the distance that his system marked out to track Deimos.

Deimos had landed, having scaled down the full length of the Arsillow tree.

A certain heavy pressure landed on Aldrich's shoulders. The air grew hotter. The rain of ash from the smoke clouds above grew thicker, the slow snowfall of burnt matter turning more into a blizzard much like the one Aldrich had conjured.

"Father...I don't like this. Can we actually fight that thing?" Chrysa pointed way into the distance. She could not see Aldrich's system interface, but she could sense what he was looking at. "It feels so strong. Stronger than you, father."

"He is," said Aldrich. "Deimos the Dark Eye. Level 50+ warlock. Arguably one of the strongest bosses out of all the trial quests when considering relative difficulty adjusted to level. Supported by twin archdemons Anhil and Nilah.

Anhil's dark eye lets him severely cut down the stats of those he looks at, provided they are not bound by holy protection. Nilah's maw lets him absorb any attack, no matter how strong it is, and even replicate it.

As we are now, we have no way of beating him."

Aldrich reached up and clasped Chrysa's nervous hand. He pointed up to the top of the Arsillow tree. "But we aren't here to fight him. Take us up there, Chrysa. Deimos has wasted his time getting down here. If we warp up there, we can close the Flame Arc and weaken him."

"Got it!" Chrysa closed her eyes, took in a deep breath, and balled up her fists. She trembled in exertion, brows furrowing as her silvery hair sparkled with white. A silver aura wrapped around both Aldrich and Chrysa as the space around them began to distort.

Pieces of rubble, frozen demon chunks and clumps of ash, all swirled around Aldrich, rotating in a rapid orbit as Chrysa's spatial power fluxed in rapid, circular currents, building up intensity and power.

"Let's..." Chrysa exhaled, shouting. "Go!"

All in an instant, Chrysa unleashed her built of power. Aldrich's vision drowned out in white as bright light burst forth from Chrysa, engulfing both of them.

In the next instant, Aldrich found himself up high, the burning town beneath him little more than just a smattering of flashing orange and red dots. He stopped himself from falling using his cloak, levitating in the air. Behind him, he beheld the monumental Arsillow tree trunk, taller and wider than any skyscraper in the real world.

The bark was blackened, scarred with deep cracks of angry, burning red.

Aldrich did not have more time to admire the sheer grand scale of the tree compared to seeing it on a screen. Chrysa was not on his shoulder. He immediately tapped into his soul link with her and saw that she was higher up, falling, a speck of glowing white amid a bleak canvas of reds and oranges and blacks.

Aldrich flew upwards and took Chrysa in his arms.

"I'm tired...", said Chrysa, tears of sleepiness welling up in her green eyes.

"You did well, Chrysa," said Aldrich.

"But-but we're not at the top-," Chrysa pointed up. The top of the tree was still fifty or so meters away.

"You did your best. That's what matters the most to me." Aldrich hugged Chrysa to his chest as he flew up, the cloak of stitched souls uttering faint wails of agony instead of windy billows. He noted that the cloak let him fly approximately around his own running speed.

In a few seconds, Aldrich reached the top of the tree. The branches of the Arsillow tree had all burned off, leaving just a wide, flat, charred platform with the giant Flame Arc glowing angrily above. This would have served as the boss arena to fight Deimos, but, well, Deimos was all the way down.

Aldrich landed on burnt wood, some bits of charcoal crumbling away under his dress shoes. He looked up at the Flame Arc. It cast down bright red and orange light, and seeing into it, he felt voices indecipherable whispering in his head – countless voices of demons just waiting to break through.

"Just one more thing, Chrysa," said Aldrich. He jumped up, flying up to the Flame Arc. Despite its flaming appearance, it did not emit any heat. It did, however, emit a powerful insanity aura that would have rendered the average mortal completely braindead and quickly possessed afterwards.

Fortunately, both Aldrich and Chrysa were immune as undead, though the champions' blessing shielded them as well. "We have to close this. Can you do it?"

"I can." Chrysa shook her head and slapped her cheeks with her little hands, rousing herself. "I can!"

Chrysa floated away from Aldrich and reached out to touch the Flame Arc. In front of the enormous infernal tear in space, both Chrysa and Aldrich looked like ants.

Aldrich was not exactly sure Chrysa had it in her to close a portal of this scale. He knew that, in spite of how threateningly impressive they looked, Flame Arcs were very fragile. Until they were fully formed, they were very unstable. Even if they were large, they were like a shaky house of cards.

Just close or seal a little piece of them, and the whole thing just broke apart.

Chrysa reached her hands out. Her hands glowed a bright white, and then, from her palms, shining threads of energy spooled out, reaching one edge of the Flame Arc. The threads acted like sutures, reaching from one edge of the Flame Arc to the other, wrapping them shut tight like a sown-up wound.

Aldrich blinked. He did not have as sensitive an eye to energy signatures as Volantis did but wearing the living armor for some time had given him some more familiarity to it. And he could tell one thing; the threads that Chrysa created were almost exactly the same as the threads the Voice had used to control Okeanos back when he was under its control.

The implications were groundbreaking.

Was Chrysa herself connected to the Voice? Or, maybe more likely, was her species, the Chrysalis, connected to it?

Could Aldrich, if he dived deep enough into Chrysa's soul, reach the Voice? Or, at the very least figure out more about the Voice?

And if Aldrich's connection with Chrysa went both ways, then did he risk the Voice reaching him as well?

Before Aldrich could process it all, Chrysa shouted in glee. "Done!"

Chrysa had sutured shut just a small part of the half-formed Flame Arc, but even that was enough to start its collapse. The Flame Arc began to close from where Chrysa had sewn it, the V slowly but surely sealing into disappearance on its own.

"Look at that! It was so big but I managed to beat it!" Chrysa turned to Aldrich, proud of herself.

"You did great." Aldrich smiled. He reached out to hold Chrysa.

He sensed danger.

With sheer instinct, he activated his cloak's [Hallowed Ground]. Instantly, a cloud of light green full of emerged around them. Countless skeletal spirits swum around this cloud, half swimming in it and half forming the mass to begin with.

A fiery red spear shot into the [Hallowed Ground] but simply disappeared, swallowed up by one of the swimming spirits.

Inside the cloud of souls, Chrysa rushed to Aldrich's embrace, shaking in fear.

"What was that!?" said Chrysa.

Aldrich narrowed his eyes as he looked down. Though it was impossible to see inside the soul cloud from outside, Aldrich could see outside as if watching through a transparent screen.

"Deimos."

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Aldrich deactivated the [Hallowed Ground]. The longer he used it, the higher its cooldown would be in between usages. As of now, the base cooldown was already high at 10 seconds. Using it for a duration over 10 seconds would extend that cooldown all the way up to 1 minute.

The soul cloud collapsed, the skeletal faces on Aldrich's cloud sucking the souls in.

"It's you, hm?" Deimos looked up at Aldrich. His slender, pale arm was stretched outwards, his blackened fingers pointed towards Chrysa as if he had just finished throwing something.

Faint sparks of red danced around the elf's dark fingers. The telltale sign of demonic energy recently being used.

"So you recognize me as well." Aldrich looked Deimos up and down. The elven warlock looked the same. Short, as far as elves went, just barely hitting around 180 centimeters. His eyes were tinted red and underlined with large dark bags of sleepless nights. A mop of messy, spiky white hair sat on his head, and it was hard to tell whether they were white because of natural color or because of ash.

His features were pale and gaunt, his cheeks sunken in like he was just a few days away from flat out starving to death. "You look just as bad as you did before."

"I'm used to it." Deimos drew his hand back. His ash and char stained robes concealed most of his body, and probably not by design. The robes looked more like an oversized sack; something a homeless person might fish out of the dumpster to use as a blanket.

Deimos's right eye turned solid white - the same blank shade as that which belonged on the secret demons' mask eye holes. When his solid gaze landed on Aldrich, he felt a heavy weight descend all around him, a kind of heavy liquid weight that must have been like what swimming at the bottom of the ocean must have felt like.

A smoky black aura started to wrap all around Aldrich's body.

[Afflicted by the Curse of Anhil]

Aldrich instantly felt his stats depleting rapidly. They could continue to deplete until they were half of what they normally were. A severe nerf.

"Father-!" Chrysa patted Aldrich's head in concern. He raised his hand, telling her it was alright.

Aldrich then fired a [Death Bolt] from his hands.

Deimos did not react. Instead, a masked serpent slithered into sudden view from behind him. The bright red mouth line on the mask split apart and opened impossibly wide, the serpent's jaw unhinging to reveal a pitch black void-like mouth.

Wind currents blew in towards the mouth in a high pitched whine, and vacuum force drew the [Death Bolt] right into the darkness. The green bolt broke apart into countless little shards, and then those shards faded into nothingness as they drew further and further into the dark.

"Same moveset, too," commented Aldrich.

The serpent on Deimos's shoulder closed its mouth, restoring its red lipped tribal mask face. The serpent was black with a mane of red and orange feathers around its neck, granting it a mesoamerican flair.

That was a small aspect of Nilah, the archdemon that granted Deimos near immunity to projectiles by absorbing them and, after some time, replicating them.

"But this doesn't explain how you managed to get here so quickly," said Aldrich.

"I don't know either. You trying to close the Flame Arc triggered something. I was warped close." Deimos shrugged.

"I see." Aldrich could guess what had happened. By starting the process of closing the Flame Arc, Aldrich had triggered Deimos's boss fight. However, since Deimos was out of his boss arena, the 'game' automatically warped him back in.

"Why are you even here again?" said Deimos. "To kill me again? Go ahead. Free me from this prison. But please, I'm begging you - don't bring me back. Make it end forever."

Aldrich paused. Was this a sort of trick? "I'll gladly take you up on that offer. That is, if it's being made in good faith."

"It is. I don't want to be here. Here-," Deimos waved his bony hands all around himself. "Where I wanted to die in the first place. Reliving this again and again - I don't want it. I don't want it at all."

"I understand." Aldrich started to float down.

In the lore, Deimos had nothing going for him. He was born short for an elf with a sickly body that could not jump from tree to tree nor defend himself from the wilds, and elven society very much was attuned with the wild.

And with the wild came wild laws. Laws where the weak were culled from the herd.

Deimos was cast away to die as a boy when it was clear he would not stay weak. Yet, though his body was weak, his magic was potent, and it surfaced strongly upon his exile.

In particular, he had a special trait to connect to beings from other realms. It did not take long before he forged a pact with a demon, and he used that power for nothing more than to simply live in a hut by himself, content with peace and solitude.

For years, Deimos spent his time in quietude, but that broke apart when a young elven girl washed up near the stream he lived by. She was near death, suffering from a head wound, and he nursed her to health.

When she came to, she had no memories.

Deimos decided to raise the girl as his little sister, as the family he had never had. Years passed until it came to be that the girl was a Kindlemaiden, a young priestess destined to be sacrificed to the holy flame to keep it burning.

Deimos was left to die while his only family was taken and burned alive. It was then that he forged a much stronger, much more self destructive pact with the twin demons Anhil and Nilah. That saved him from death and granted him power.

Power that came at the cost of much of his sanity.

But Deimos did not need sanity. He was here to commit suicide, to kill as many elves as possible before he himself died. But the more his sanity faded, the more the demons he had bound himself to took over, and that was why he now tried to open a Flame Arc to bring the demons in.

"What are you saying, Deimos?" said the serpent. Her voice had a faint rattle to it as it came out in smooth, gentle waves. "The elves here are still very real, and they are responsible for burning your dear little sister. We cannot stop until all of them are gone.

No matter how many times you come back, the pain is all real, is it not? Does that not mean we have to answer in kind? To make the others suffer again and again?

Is that not what Etwa would have wanted?"

"No, she would have wanted me to rest." Deimos rubbed his eyes, tired.

"Not true. Come, listen, see, hear, feel her pain as the flames melted her skin, then her flesh, then her bone." The white eye spots on Nilah's mask flashed.

Deimos put his hands on his face as he doubled over. "You're right...all that pain - someone needs to answer for it..."

"And the rules of this realm dictate that you must fight. You may as well fight in the name of Etwa, no? So fight, Deimos, fight."

Aldrich started to cast [Boneripper], wondering if he could abuse Deimos's emotional instability and sneak in a one shot kill.

"Can we help him?" said Chrysa. "The bad people are talking to him, but maybe we can convince him to not fight us."

Aldrich stopped casting [Boneripper]. It was worth a shot. If only because he had little hopes that his one shot kill strategy would work. As long as Nilah was around, she could force Aldrich back.

"No," Aldrich called out. He landed on the burned treetop arena, a dozen meters away from Deimos's struggling figure. "You don't have to fight. You can break the rules here. You can rise above your programming. You don't have to listen to the demon.

Make your own choice, Deimos."

"My...my own choice?" Deimos paused his breathing. His voice cracked, confused.

"Yes, your own choice. You've fought and suffered long enough. You can rest now. But it has to be your choice."

"Rest...rest...that does sound nice..." Deimos closed his eyes.

"Rest? And let your sister's pain and suffering be in vain? Do you think she will forgive you if you rest while she died in agony?" Nilah chastised Deimos.

"Right - I-I have to avenge her." Deimos's eyes snapped open again. He balled his fists. He stared at Aldrich with renewed hatred. Hatred that sharpened the jagged edges of vengeance.

"That isn't true," said Aldrich. Looking at Deimos, he saw the same stare he once carried, years ago, back when his vengeance was hot, when it consumed everything about him. "You know that Etwā is gone, and she's been long gone. You knew she was a good girl who would have wanted nothing but the best for you.

Tell me, Deimos, is this the best for you? Is all this -," Aldrich motioned to the raining ash all around them. "What she would have wanted?"

"No...she would have hated this. She would have hated me." Deimos struggled, his fingers clawing into his hair, into his head.

"Yes, she would have hated you. Hated you for letting her suffer," said Nilah.

"I don't want her to hate me."

"Then fight. Avenge her."

"No. Rest." Aldrich countered. "Rest, Deimos. Let go. She doesn't hate you, and you know that. You know she would never blame you for what happened."

"She was nice...she wouldn't have blamed me," Deimos said shakily.

"That's right." Aldrich walked closer to Deimos, close enough that he could reach out and touch him, but far enough that if Nilah lashed out, he could dodge. "She would have wanted you to stop this. She wouldn't have wanted you under a demon's control. She would have wanted you free.

Free to let go."

"Free..." Deimos nodded weakly. He turned to Nilah. "I want to be...free. I don't want you anymore."

"Hm. I did not expect this." Nilah's head snaked back. She jerked her head to Aldrich, facing him with an unnatural snap of a motion. "But too late, player."

Nilah opened her jaw, and Aldrich stepped back, wary of an attack.

Instead, Nilah bit down on Deimos's head. She swallowed him whole like a python, and the shape of Deimos's body visibly bulged against her scaly skin.

"No! No!" Deimos shouted, his cries muffled.

Aldrich reacted, thrusting a lightforged halberd point right at Nilah's masked face.

A burst of dark energy erupted from Nilah, knocking Aldrich several meters back and enshrouding the serpent demon in a cloud of black smog.

Aldrich skidded to a halt on one knee. He leered as he got a visual of Nilah.

The smog cleared up. Nilah stepped forward. She had completely fused with Deimos's body and taken it over.

"That was an interesting discussion," said Nilah. "You almost took my beloved pact holder away. But I have been with him too long. I am one with him now."

Chapter 287: Power of the Sun

Aldrich half reached out towards Deimos, perhaps some small shade of him wanting to help someone that had been just like him, but he stopped as combat instinct kicked in. There was no saving Deimos.

In fact, it was likely that Nilah had complete control over Deimos this whole time. She had been letting Deimos struggle just for her amusement.

For that was how demons were. Inhuman in the sense that they were so beyond humanity it was nigh impossible for their horned kind to ever relate to mortal blood and struggle. In the same way that people perceived ants, demons perceived people with an indiscriminate coldness that often manifested as cruelty, though at its heart, it was mostly indifference.

Aldrich could relate to that too.

Those thoughts, of seeing humans as lesser, as just bags of meat and blood, lay readily in the back of his head, and he knew very well that if he let go even just a bit, if he let the last shard of his humanity break, then the floodgates would open and he would become just the same as Nilah or any other inherently superior immortal species.

"We couldn't save him..." Chrysa hung her head down.

And in a way, Chrysa was the light that shone on Aldrich's human self. No, she was his human self reflected right before him, borne of that warm part of his soul that still let him empathize.

"You do not mourn for him? It seemed that you two had quite the touching conversation ongoing," said Nilah to Aldrich.

"I'm over it," said Aldrich. "Though, I do have to say, indiscriminate cruelty is distasteful."

"Not cruelty. It is-,"

"Indifference. Or maybe curiosity. Like a child tearing the wings off a fly. Yet, at the end, it's still cruelty," said Aldrich.

"These mortals, even this one, an elf that can live five hundred years, are little specks in the vastness of the realms. Their suffering or their joy - none of it matters in the end, no?

They are just food. Or pieces to play with to ease the boredom of infinity. Though you, young as you are, have yet to feel that."

"You're right." Aldrich cracked his knuckles. "So unfortunately for you, I can't quite empathize."

"Then you will strike me down? Very unfortunate. I am nearly fully incarnated now. If you wish, I could accompany you in your journey," said Nilah.

"Not happening. Secrets are the lifeblood of betrayal. Trusting a secret demon isn't something I'm gullible enough to do. At best, I'll incinerate you down into a half purified heart and see if I can bend you to my will," said Aldrich.

"I am an Archdemon, Lich," said Nilah. "I am not like Barbos. This vessel of mine harbors merely a fragment of my being. My true self is still realms away, in the depths of Morhal. You may be able to wear me down into energy you can use, but my will? It will return to Morhal."

"So Morhal exists?" Aldrich raised a brow.

"Of course." Nilah pointed to the now nearly closed Flame Arc. "That is a sorry fake conjured up by this prison realm. If it were the real thing, I could have shown you Morhal in its full glory. Though you would have been torn apart before you could truly enjoy it.

What I do wonder about is if I can escape to your new realm. Surely, it must be teeming with souls, no? If I can harvest enough, then could I not open a new, real Flame Arc?

I could bring Armageddon upon your realm and bask in the flames with all my beloved brethren." Nilah stroked a black wrapped hand over her right eye. It still projected the [Curse of Anhil] debuff. "I would see my dear brother Anhil again too."

"She's a bad guy!" Chrysa pointed an accusing finger at Nilah. "She wants to mess up the world!"

"I suppose I am. Trickery will not work on you, Lich, so I am making it clear to you what my desires are. Your death. Perhaps your body, if I can take it. My freedom. Then, your realm."

"Surprisingly straightforward for a secret demon," said Aldrich. "But that makes things easy. You die, or I do."

"Yes," Nilah replied simply.

"Father, I know we're supposed to beat the bad guys, but how do we beat her?" Chrysa grasped at her dress with shaky hands. "I-I want to help, but I used up all my mana."

"That's fine, Chrysa. I want you to get into my Boundary. Out of harm's way. This is too high level for you - I'll handle it."

"But-,"

"No ifs and buts." Aldrich gave Chrysa a stern look.

Chrysa nodded. "Okay, father. I'll see you win on the telescreen!"

With that, Chrysa disappeared in a shower of white particles that gathered into Aldrich's chest, where his Phylactery was.

"Curious little thing, her," said Nilah. "Once I am done ending you, I will keep her alive some. I sense she may be an even better vessel for me to enter your realm with her ability to touch the currents of the Outer."

"The Outer?" Aldrich narrowed his eyes. He remembered his discussion with Medula.

The Outer was the mysterious source from which Elduin natives drew forth new types of power. The circle based magic system, skill system, and class system, for example,

was not, according to lore, native to Elduin, but developed by the first two gods: the Arcane Emperor and the Enlightened One.

Aldrich's character was also touched by the Outer, the 'hero' of the story that was said to be guided by will higher than any god or entity. That existence being the player himself.

If there was one topic that Aldrich could crack to get at the secrets of his system, it was the Outer.

"The Outer, yes. But I do not know much about it. The Knowledge demons are more obsessed with that topic.

And even if I did know, I would not reveal it, for there would be no greater secret worth keeping.

And, as you have noted, I am a secret demon." Nilah stretched her arms out to her sides. Red and orange hellfire wrapped around the limbs in a coat of blazing heat.

Unlike ordinary fire, hellfire did true damage that disintegrated targets directly. "But enough chatter.

I have no use talking to one soon to perish. For I see no way you can defeat me.

You have a few new toys, yes, but you have no legion.

Closing the Flame Arc while I was distracted was clever, but it will do you no good. Unlike before, I have nearly fully taken over this elf's body. I do not need a Flame Arc to sustain my existence. I am already anchored into this vessel.

My strength has reached a new height that you cannot hope to surpass."

"You're right."

"Hm? Did I hear that correctly? You acknowledge my superiority?"

"I do. You've nerfed my stats to half with that eye. I have no units to distract your line of sight. On top of that, you still have access to your own absorption power and Deimos's slew of warlock spells. And, as you said, half-incarnating using Deimos's body means you not only are not getting nerfed by the Flame Arc closing, but on the contrary, your stats are buffed.

You must be what, level 60 now?"

"A crude measurement of power, but yes," said Nilah. "If you accept your weakness, then, it will not be difficult to accept your death. I will make it swift, Lich, in honor of the times we had spent together in past."

"But one thing I've noticed is that you secret demons, despite having high Insight, don't know what equipment or units from Alter sources can do," said Aldrich.

"...Alter?" Nilah quizzically tilted her head. "Is that name of the realm that your little spawn originates from? And that ring of yours?"

Aldrich took that response as confirmation: secret demons could not read into things from the real world. They could identify it, recognize it as something new, but they could not see deep into it and figure out details as they could with Elden World elements.

Some items that completely lacked magical signatures like Aldrich's earpiece - still embedded in his ear - they could not pick up on at all.

"You've underestimated me, demon." Aldrich dematerialized his scythe and his cloak, leaving him with just his suit and body.

And the [Solar Seal]. He held his hand up, and the golden ring around his index finger shone bright. "And you've underestimated my world."

Aldrich activated the [Sunlit] function.

An eruption of power sweltered around Aldrich, manifesting as a golden pillar of cascading light that constantly fluxed above him. A sound like rock cracking echoed through the air.

Deep, brilliant gold lines started to weave their way through Aldrich's body, starting first from the skin around his ring, then traveling everywhere. It was as if a sun was being born inside Aldrich, its light and heat ready to crack his body apart and escape at any given moment in one huge nova.

When the cracks reached his eyes, they turned from green into radiant gold.

Aldrich started to float into the air, not with the aid of a mystical cloak, but with Alterhuman force. He felt heat inside of him. Burning, intense heat. Painful heat, as if by the second, he was melting away, dissolving into fuel for radiant light.

The pain was considerable, but [Burning Agony] had taught him to resist it.

[Curse of Anhil dispelled with holy energy]

Aldrich's stats skyrocketed, but he could not check them. Fusing with the Solar Battery power - an Alter superpower - seemed to mess up his system, completely glitching it out. It would likely stay that way until his [Sunlit] state faded.

All he knew was that he was strong. Stronger than ever before.

This was power. The power of not just Seth Solar, but Solomon Solar, a man who once was in contention to be the strongest hero in all of the united states.

The power of the sun.

"Ah. I did not expect this either." Nilah stepped back, light shining all around her, as if highlighting a spotlight on her mistake.

Chapter 288: Power of the Sun 2

Aldrich unleashed all that power, the might of a sun, inside of him. He flew forwards at hyperspeed, so fast that he easily shattered past the sound barrier. Unused to the sudden cocktail rush of speed, he could not get out a punch. Instead, he crudely shoulder bashed into Nilah, but even that hit so hard that Nilah shot backwards like a pinball, her head whipping back as her figure accelerated out of the boss arena, into the distance, rapidly fading into a black dot.

Shards of pale flesh broke off from Aldrich's shoulder, where he had made impact, and fell to the floor. When the gold tinted shards touched the blackened ground, they disintegrated into a thousand little particles. The broken shards made a small indent in his shoulder, and it was not muscle and blood and bone that was visible there, but just pure light.

Aldrich was literally turning into pure energy, breaking down to host the solar battery forced inside of him. He recalled an interview with Solomon Solar, back when he was a kid that looked up to that shining symbol of heroism.

While atop the unconscious body of a giant villain, Solomon answered an interviewer's question: what's it like to use your power?

Solomon had answered with a smile that Aldrich now knew to be a meticulously constructed fake. "It feels like I'm burning up inside. Not like a fever, but like I'm turning right into the sun itself. If I stop focusing for just a little bit, I can imagine my whole body just going bam! Turning into light.

Not that I'll ever let that happen. With Vanguard gone, someone's got to pick up the slack, and I know a thing or two about hard work."

Aldrich distinctly understood what Solomon had meant. If he let his focus go for just one errant instant, he could see himself just blasting apart, all that solar energy in his body going supernova and eating up his flesh in a flash.

But now was not the time to hesitate. Aldrich always knew he would have had to rely on [Sunlit] to finish this trial quest. Without his legion, that was the only way to beat Deimos. He had wanted to weaken Deimos as much as possible to minimize the time in [Sunlit] as he did not have a good idea of the risks involved, but he had no such luxury now.

[All spells disabled]

[All equipment disabled]

[Inventory disabled]

[Interface disabled]

All Aldrich had for power was now this. He had to end things with it, and he had to end them soon.

Aldrich flew, rapidly reaching Nilah's falling body.

In the brief breather that Aldrich took, Nilah adjusted. She flew as well now, wings of pure flame stretching out from her shoulder blades. When she saw Aldrich's bright figure approach like a shooting star, she clapped her hands together and cast [Hellfire Armor].

Red and orange flames roared all around Nilah's body, turning into a moving, flickering armor that would disintegrate anything that got close. A perfect deterrent for melee fighters.

Aldrich did not care. He sped forwards and unleashed a punch, this time now more in control of his enhanced speed and strength. His cracked fist smashed into Nilah's mask-face with a golden shockwave, blasting her rapidly down.

Aldrich glanced at his fist. It was gone, broken apart by solar energy, the impact, and disintegration from briefly touching hellfire. Not that it mattered.

Kill or be killed. That was the situation at stake. No, not just that, if he lost now, then his entire world was in jeopardy against Nilah. Chrysa's life, too.

Aldrich flew downwards, reaching Nilah again mid-fall. He cocked his other fist back and slammed it into Nilah's chest, where her heart was. Another shockwave impact blasted the demon even faster into the ground where she landed with a cataclysmic crash, gouging out an enormous crater big enough to swallow up an entire building.

That Nilah managed to even stay intact in the face of such overwhelming power was impressive, but not impressive enough. The damage she had sustained from just three full power hits was starkly visible in the cracks in her mask and body of solid darkness.

The holy damage infused into Aldrich's [Sunlit] state also affected her greatly, the cracks in Nilah's body burning up, turning angry red.

Aldrich flew down for the last, fully intending on ending this. He felt fiery heat rage beneath his eyes, begging to escape in the form of heat rays, but he narrowed his eyes and held off on them. Nilah's Mora manifested in her ability to draw energy and projectiles into her maw. She could even absorb holy energy, but melee attacks, she could do nothing about.

Aldrich landed on Nilah feet first. His impact unleashed a shockwave that rippled across Nilah's crater, gouging up several eruptions of dirt and chunks of rock.

"You stopped me from landing right through you by casting [Fel Skin] at the last second, enhancing your durability," said Aldrich. His feet were planted on Nilah's stomach. His landing had caved her mid-section in, damaging it horribly and turning anything soft, any organs or bones, into mush, but demons could take more punishment than that.

Nilah's hellfire armor was gone for it was sustained by both a mana cost and health cost, and health was something she lacked sorely.

"Unexpected. I thought your new realm...unimpressive, considering your original weakness, player. But if this power comes from it, then it is far mightier than I thought." Nilah laughed.

"I wonder, how is it that secret demons like you and Barbos find so much amusement in everything?" said Aldrich.

"When your existence is meant to harbor secrets, it is often very amusing to know things that others do not," said Nilah. "It will be a wonderful challenge to conquer your new realm. I do wonder how my kind will fare against it."

"You're not getting out of here alive, so we'll never know." Aldrich raised his arm up. He had no fist anymore, but his forearm bone jutted out like a blade, and it was still enchanted with holy sunlight.

"True. Or perhaps not. No such thing as absolutes, yes?" taunted Nilah.

"Enough talking." Aldrich stabbed his bone into Nilah's chest, into her heart, and pierced through her skin of darkness and into the demonheart within. "Though I guess you won't be talking much once I turn you into an item. Or a spell."

Nilah's mask and body of darkness cracked, all of it sucking into a purple orb that Aldrich pulled out of Deimos's now revealed body's chest, skewering it on the end of his exposed bone. The orb was lined with golden cracks as holy energy continued to purify it.

Aldrich deactivated [Sunlit]. The golden aura around him faded away, though it took several seconds for the energy in his body to simmer down. In the meanwhile, he could not access his magical abilities.

Another downside to the power. Deactivation was instant, but accessing spells and equipment again was not.

"Thank...thank you." Deimos whispered to Aldrich before the light in his already tired eyes dimmed.

Aldrich nodded to Deimos, stepping off of his body in respect. The fight was over. The demons were gone. Deimos was finally at rest.

He felt his magic return to him, and with it, a slew of system messages.

Rewards.

Chapter 289: Third Trial Quest Rewards

Aldrich felt power flow into him. His levels surged at a staggering rate that he did not expect.

[Experience bonus applied from clearing this quest with limitations. All experience gains doubled]

Doubled experience. Aldrich's eyes almost popped out of his cracked sockets. That was the absolute highest modifier one could reach for experience, and that was only with every single experience boosting item and consumable stacked together in the most efficient manner.

Aldrich saw his levels rise all the way up to 49. Just shy of reaching 50 when he would get access to his next trial quest and bonus passive necromancer abilities.

The levels themselves, though, were not that remarkable. They gave him more raw stats to work with, but as he had noted with his physical abilities, the stats from levels tapered off in effectiveness the higher Aldrich's level was.

Aldrich had already hit a soft cap for stats at level 40, but he would hit another one at 60, then a hard one at 80. Each cap reduced how much his stats actually boosted him unless he applied the bonuses from levels to already low stats.

But to any stat above 60, the caps would set in.

That was also why Attunement and Magic were so useful. Attunement and Magic were affected by the caps as well, with Attunement providing less cooldown reduction and Magic providing less of a boost to magical damage, but they provided other benefits that were not affected at all, like increasing Aldrich's unit limit or his mana pool.

However, Aldrich held off on distributing his stats so far. He was safe right now, and he wanted more time to think about it after convening with the Death Lord. She might have known something that could influence his decisions.

The other trial quest rewards appeared.

[1 x Greater Tome of the Dark Arts obtained]

[1 x Hellfire Blade obtained]

[1 x Burnmaw Bulwark obtained]

[1 x Arstree Staff obtained]

[1 x Fel Body Core obtained]

[1 x Arsellis Treeseed obtained]

[1 x Pureflame Kindling obtained]

[1 x Arstree Ashes obtained]

All amazing rewards.

With the [Greater Tome of Dark Arts], Aldrich could deepen his access to undead units he could summon at will. The miscellaneous weapons he received, he could distribute among his units.

The [Burnmaw Bulwark] was a massive red and black greatshield with an angry, open mouthed demonic face carved in its front. From that maw, the shield could spit torrents of hellfire.

Valera would make great use of this.

The [Hellfire Blade] was probably best given to Chiro who had the most swordsmanship skill out of his units.

The [Fel Body Core] was a consumable orb that granted a unit that ingested it access to a few permanent demonic passives such as Fel Skin which hardened the skin. This, Aldrich had to think about a little more in regards to who to give to.

Aldrich could not make good use of it himself because he did not have a proper flesh and blood body. On top of that, it scaled with physical stats which he did not particularly invest too much in.

There was always the option to give it to a trusty physical powerhouse like Valera, but then he risked stacking too much on one unit. He would think about this a little more.

The [Arstree Staff] was a caster item that was the least flashy out of all the other item rewards. All it did was significantly boost the magic stat, but the simplicity made it easy to decide who to grant it to.

Chrysa would make the most use of it. She burned through mana quickly with her unique abilities, and having the staff would augment her ability to keep using spatial magic considerably.

The other items were more for crafting. The [Arsellis Treeseed], [Arstree Ashes], and [Pureflame Kindling] were all incredibly rare and useful crafting materials to create items or spells out of.

What Aldrich was most interested in was whether he could tap into the lore implications of the materials. The seed, for example, if given a proper blessing, could grow into a proper Arstree. The ashes could apparently call on ancient forest spirits and the kindling could forge a connection to the elven goddess.

There were more rewards on top of this. The rewards given to Aldrich via the Death Lord. Arguably those were more important, especially the [Nether Idol] that he could use to obtain another chosen undead.

Who Aldrich wanted from the Nether was an interesting choice. He felt like he had enough firepower, and if he did not, he could just get more by raising variants. He had his own defenses covered with Volantis and Valera.

No, what Aldrich valued the most right now was someone who could obtain information. And someone whose lore related powers could apply to the real world.

Even a joke option like Hadar the Golden Bone, a literal golden skeleton who had a passive that guaranteed he would be rich, might be useful if he could manifest that in the real world.

'Father - are you okay!?' Chrysa's panicked voice rang through Aldrich's mind.

'Hm? You weren't watching?' replied Aldrich.

'No, when father got all shiny golden, the telescreen messed up! Then I couldn't see through your eyes either! I wanted to come out and help, but I remembered that you said you could handle it yourself, and I always believe in father, no matter what.'

'It was best that you didn't come out,' thought Aldrich, knowing that she could not have kept up with the collateral from [Sunlit]. 'And you're right: you had no need to worry. I beat the demon. We're all set.'

'I knew it! I can feel father has gotten a lot stronger too! So, will we save the below the tree now?'

'Ah right, the elves.' Aldrich looked around. There were no homes around the base of the Arstree, but the elven town was still visible just a few minutes of a walk away. Everything was still on fire, and all the elves, though now broken of possession, were probably just broken, hollowed out husks that collapsed onto the floor, unable to do much of anything, like they were in endless comas.

Aldrich had no way to save them. But maybe someone in the Necropolis did. Wai'Ki might know a thing or two about reversing spiritual damage, though he did recall that in lore, demon caused spiritual damage was basically permanent, with not even the gods being able to do anything about it.

Nevertheless, it did not hurt to try.

But just as Aldrich thought that, the trial realm began to collapse. The ground shuddered. The skies shook and warped. Cracks began to appear in space, revealing nothing but dark void.

Aldrich furrowed his brows. This was not supposed to happen. The trial realms were always around to revisit.

So why was this one breaking apart? Did it have to do with the demons?

A system message automatically appeared in Aldrich's vision.

[Exiting the Trial Quest...]

It seemed that the system was automatically booting Aldrich, probably to prevent him from getting caught up in the realm's destruction. Probably for the best, too. Everything was collapsing rapidly, the reality of the realm peeling apart like dried paint to reveal a canvas of nothing but dark emptiness.

And, as Aldrich warped away, he could not help feel an uneasy sensation that in that darkness of nothingness, he felt something watching him.

Chapter 290: [Bonus chapter] Final Round Preparation

Aldrich returned in front of his emerald throne. There, he found himself warmly greeted by his entire legion. Or the monster side of it, at least. Roars and eager growls filled the cavern hall, and he managed out a smile as the cracks in his body healed up from the Nexus's auto healing function.

"Right on time, all of you," declared Aldrich.

"As always." Okeanos stood at the very forefront of the monster horde, posture straight and full of recognition in himself that he was the strongest. Though Volantis did stand next to Okeanos and, notably, the Geist did too.

"It is time, no? For us to conquer the world!" said Volantis with booming excitement.

The horde had been made well aware that it was soon time for them to join Aldrich again. Back out in the real world. For in just eight hours, Aldrich would get shipped on a plane out to the hearing.

"Soon," said Aldrich. "But how is progress? I hope everything I asked for has been wrapped up?"

"Gehgeh! (All the flowers are here! I got them all!)" The Geist hopped up to Aldrich and gave him a bough of eyeflowers. The eye shaped flowerheads blinked as they listlessly stared at Aldrich, a bough of deformity that would have been horrifying as a present were it not for the Geist's childlike earnestness.

"Thanks, I'll make good use of this," said Aldrich. He put the eyeflowers away into his inventory. This was the final ingredient for Fler'Gan to create his mind affecting potion. "Now then-,"

Aldrich directed his gaze over all the horde, looking down at them atop the upraised platform that held his crystal throne. "I told you that the one who collected the most flowers would become the leader of this horde. The Geist has all ten. Tell me, all of you in the back, why did you fail?"

Aldrich's words reached Crab, Merman, and the giant.

"I dunno." The giant muttered. "I thought I wait and just fight flower pickers."

Crab clicked his pincers in agreement.

Merman gruffly responded. "Gorok-Hara. Morlo-Rish. (I am unfit for such lowly labor. My fishmen failed me). He waved his many arms at the reanimated fishmen around him, and they hung their heads in shame.

"Precisely. Too much belief in your own strength. Or, in Merman's case, backseat leadership that basically amounts to laziness," said Aldrich.

"Gorok-Vim...(I do not move unless needed...)" said Merman.

"And I'm not here to force you to change your personality. But I am telling you that because of that, the Geist won. I want you all to acknowledge that despite being weaker than any of you, the Geist gets a seat as the leader of this horde along with Okeanos," said Aldrich.

The two miniboss variants and the giant nodded.

"Then it's settled. Geist, you're in the big leagues now," said Aldrich.

"Geh! Geh! (I got it! Yay)" the Geist jumped up and down in glee.

"Here, if you're going to be in the big leagues, you can't be weak either." Aldrich pointed a palm at the Geist. Dark swirls of green transferred from his hand to the Geist as he depleted his remaining Dark Wisdom.

[10 levels transferred to the Geist]

[Unit Geist Level: 35 > 45]

"Gehgeh! (I'm so much stronger!)" the Geist looked down at his hands, wiggling his bulky fingers in awe. His white skin rippled and the muscles underneath strained, visibly showing bulging veins, indicating that this was the maximum power he could absorb from Dark Wisdom for now. (Gehgeh...(I need some time to get used to it...))

"That's fine. Try to see if you can use magic later on." Soon, Aldrich estimated, the Geist could train his body to get even stronger. Hopefully, the Geist could use the Dark Wisdom power to try and develop magic on top of his powers, though that was not guaranteed.

"Geh! (I will!)"

"What about me?" Okeanos looked to Aldrich expectantly.

"You're already way too strong. And you get stronger by yourself. You don't need me to give you power," explained Aldrich.

"I see." Okeanos hung his head down in disappointment.

"Raise your heard, hordeleader!" Volantis slapped Okeanos's back. "It means your might is already recognized. It is nothing to be ashamed of!"

Okeanos nodded, heartened by Volantis's words.

"What's the status on the second trial quest?" said Aldrich.

"The genie is trying her best to restore her wishes. She says it will take a hundred years at least. She complains a lot. I think we should get rid of her," said Okeanos.

"Let's give her a chance." Aldrich. "And the worms?"

"They follow the big one. You can unleash them when you want," said Okeanos.

"Good." Aldrich had raised the giant worm in the second trial quest, and as the biggest, it had dominion over all the smaller ones there. He could, in theory, withdraw all the worms and unleash them from the Nexus.

What Aldrich intended to do with them was to reinforce Haven's defenses, especially its underground ones.

He had a lot of plans for Haven, actually. It would become a city unlike any other in the world, protected by variants and magical creatures, a piece of his own ambition realized, a utopia of his own power.

Much like what the other Sentinels did with their own city states.

But this was after he got done with the hearing.

"Listen, all of you." Aldrich spoke to the entire horde. "The time will come when you will all join me back in the Alter realm again. For now, though, I am only going to take a specific few of you with me."

Chrysa popped into existence on Aldrich's shoulder in a shower of white light. "Hello everyone..." she said shyly, intimidated by the sheer number of creatures there.

The horde grunted and growled and clicks at low volume to her, giving her friendly greetings.

"Chrysa here will take those of you I choose. Crow, Okeanos, Merman, and the Geist, come with me. I'm keeping the crew small for now.

Inside of her space, or our Boundary, nobody should track your variant energy signatures, but it isn't big enough yet to fit the rest of you."

Crow and Merman came to the front of the horde.

"And Volantis, it's time," said Aldrich.

"Time we got back together, eh?" Volantis opened his armor form up.

"...I wouldn't phrase it like that, but sure." Aldrich turned around as he stepped back into Volantis, and the living armor wrapped around him, oncemore fusing with his senses and body.

"Feels good to have my equipment back," said Aldrich as he clenched and unclenched his fists.

"I am more than mere equipment," protested Volantis.

"Of course. It's just how I phrase things." Aldrich turned to the rest of those at the horde's front. "All of you, gather in front of Chrysa. She'll transport you."

Chrysa closed her eyes and hovered her open palms toward them. In the past, she did not have the mana pool, confidence, and experience with her abilities to transport more than one thing at once. Now, though, with the aid of Dark Wisdom, battle experience, and some lessons from Medula, she could do just fine.

A white light washed over Crow, the Geist, Okeanos, and Merman, warping them into the Boundary.

'By the way, about Alan, the human I told you to take in-' began Aldrich telepathically, wondering if Alan would panic at the sudden influx of ultra deadly monsters.

'He's asleep in the bed! Whenever father wants me to bring a guest over, I put them to sleep for a long time,' said Chrysa.

'Good.' Aldrich nodded. She used the same Boundary function that kept the Editor Alter asleep on Alan. Soon, though, Aldrich would have to wake Alan up, but dealing with his emotional outburst was not something he wanted to handle now.

Not now, when there was so much to do. So much about to happen.

Very, very soon, Aldrich was going to step onto the world stage and become a world power.

Who knew how many allies he would make. Or, just as likely, how many enemies he would create?

There were just a few things, though, that Aldrich had to wrap up before he got to the hearing.

Some personal things, for one. Aldrich saw system messages flood in.

[Congratulations, Death Walker, for completing my quest. As promised, the rewards -]

[1 x Hallowed Gravecloak permanently added to inventory]

[1 x Nether Idol obtained]

[Dark Wisdom store raised to 50]

[1 x Choice of tome from Medula's library (Be careful of her anger) obtained]

[Level up (x5)]

[25 Stat Points available]

Aldrich distributed his stat points to Attunement and Magic.

[+15 Attunement, increased to +30 with affinity bonuses]

[Attunement: 221 > 251]

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

[Magic: 127 > 147]

Aldrich spent all of his attunement points this time on increasing his spell count. The maximum spell count one could reach was 25, fully accessible after level 50, and Aldrich was getting close to that threshold.

[6 AP spent]

[Spell Limit: 12 > 18]

With this, Aldrich could now fully slot in useful spells from his new [Tome of Greater Dark Arts] and his choice of selection from Medula's library.

Which, conveniently, was where Aldrich was headed. He tapped his crystal throne, accessing its teleportation function. He briefly checked on the third trial quest to see whether it could be visited again, but found it blacked out, deleted.

Aldrich selected an option to reach Medula's floor where he would get his new spell tome and hash out some final details with both the demon and the Death Lord.

First, there was his demonic loot. He needed to give Medula Barbos's demonheart to see if she could subjugate the greater demon. Then he needed to see how he could process Nilah's demonheart into an upgrade material.

Second, and more importantly, Aldrich needed to talk to the Death Lord about Chrysa and the system.

About that strange feeling of being watched. And about Chrysa's connection to the Voice.

Chapter 291: Final Prep: Necropolis

Aldrich stepped into Medula's grand library, the rows and rows of dozen meter high bookshelves of midnight black wood staring invitingly back at him.

"Lusting after my collection already, are we?" Medula dusted off a few tomes on a top shelf and floated down, two small bat wings fanned out to her sides.

"Well, I definitely don't have time to waste," said Aldrich.

Medula sighed. "I seem to be owing you more and more. First, I have allowed you to summon me - that is not so bad, I am curious to see your realm, but now this blatant theft of my collection is a little harder to stomach."

"I'll remind you that it's sponsored by your boss," said Aldrich.

"Hi Meddy" Chrysa waved at Medula from Aldrich's shoulder.

"Greetings, little one. I see you have tested yourself in a fight," said Medula.

"You can tell? It was exciting! There were so many monsters called demons, and I had wapped and bapped them with the way you told me to use my mana!" Chrysa gesticulated wildly. "Some of them were really strong, though, and really mean."

"My kind are not known for their kindness, indeed," said Medula.

"Oh right, are you okay with father and I beating up demons? Your friends?"

"There is nothing a demon hates more than another demon," said Medula. "Demons will amuse themselves with mortals they consider their lesser, but they leave all their serious rage to the gods and their own."

And, as far as I am aware, you two dealt with secret demons. I hold no friendliness to them. In fact, my kind, the demons of knowledge, are directly opposed to them, for as we relish in learning and spreading knowledge, secret demons are the opposite, seeing no greater purpose than in never telling the truth, in ever holding to their own knowledge that they do not even need."

"Nice to know that secret and knowledge demons still hate each other." Aldrich knew that in Elden World, those two demon factions had almost the worst relation with each other, rivaling the likes of idle demons not getting along with energetic war demons. "That will make this easier."

Aldrich manifested both the heart of Barbos and Nilah.

"Ah, demonhearts. Half purified, I see. Why not fully burn them away? It is not as if these secret hoarders do anything useful to merit existence," said Medula calmly.

"They could still be useful. This one-," Aldrich held up Barbos. "Is a Greater Demon whose will is fully captured in here. He claims to know things about my situation, about this entire system that brought us here."

"Of course he would. He is a secret demon. Their kind fishes for information with lies all the time. They ought to be called falsehood demons in my opinion." Medula stared at the purple orb incredulously.

"I know that. Secret demons never tell the truth, for everything they say is a secret. But I want to know if there's a way to force him to tell it."

"Force? Demonic souls are difficult to affect." Medula rubbed her dark eye bags. "As you know, necromancy cannot taint them, not even at the scale of the Death Lord. There is simply no 'controlling' a demon. The majority of us lack a mortal sense of self preservation, either, for we do not place great value in our continued existences.

Just as chaos may flicker into existence at a sudden spark, so too may it snuff out with a sudden wind. That is how most demons treat existence, hence, they have no concern whether they die or not, it is simply how things are.

Thus, torture in a mortal sense is completely useless."

Aldrich looked at the vast collection of books around them. "You don't have anything here that can make the demons talk?"

"No. Apocryphal texts make reference to divine influence that can take control over demons, but we do not have much in the way of divine presence now, do we?"

"Hm. Nevertheless, I'd like you to try. The fifth trial quest involves gods, so when I get to it, I'll collaborate with you on this matter again," said Aldrich.

"I will not disavow an opportunity to cause a secret demon to suffer, so I will certainly try." Medula reached out and took Barbos's heart. She eyed the other heart in Aldrich's hand. It was not purple but greyed out, indicating that Nilah's actual soul was not in there. "And what of that one? If my senses do not deceive me, that is an archdemon heart fragment."

"Right. This one has no soul in it, so it's just raw material. I'd like you to process this into Cursevein."

Cursevein was the refined upgrade material one processed from a demonheart. It looked like a black chord of flesh that went into the creation of curse related items or spells.

In the game, one had to go to a group of ever moving, mysterious hooded artificers and merchants called the Facestealers to get Cursevein made.

"You will need a Facestealer for that," said Medula, restating Aldrich's thoughts.

"I know, which is why I was hoping you had the knowledge," said Aldrich. "Considering that you are, you know, a demon of knowledge."

"I do, but it will take time, for the Facestealers are quite tight lipped of their methods. It will also take some effort that will involve Wai'Ki as well. I should say that warrants a favor for me, no?"

Aldrich crossed his arms. "Name your price."

Medula looked away, caressing the spine of a book. "The creature that Chrysa derives from - the Chrysalis - I want more samples of them. As many as you can give me."

"For what reason, can I ask?"

"Chrysa is naturally in tune with spatial forces due to her species' abilities. It is a rare ability. I cannot experiment on Chrysa for obvious reasons, so is it not natural, then, I would ask for additional samples?"

"That doesn't answer anything."

Medula eyed Aldrich with red gaze. She shrugged. "I will use the samples to experiment on freeing the Necropolis from you. As we are now, we are codependent, for you are our existential anchor.

If you fall, we fall, hence there is has been an unspoken alliance between us wherein we of the Necropolis support you to maintain our own existences.

But if we are able to manifest in your realm independently, then there is no more reason for this co dependence."

"And, think in my perspective for a bit, why would I allow that to happen? We may be on good terms now, but it's as you say necessitated by the fact that all of you have to rely on me to exist.

It's one of the reasons I've been rather lax on making deals with you or the Death Lord. In the end, if I'm harmed, all of you go down with me.

Take that leverage away from me, and our cooperation becomes a little...tenuous."

"Then you wish for us to remain your tool for eternity?" Medula's voice dripped with accusation.

"I see. So one of the reasons you all have been funneling power into me was to pad me up. Make me tough enough to eventually owe you enough to find a way to break you out of this prison."

Chrysa looked between Aldrich and Medula with rising concern.

"Now now, to yearn for freedom is simply natural, no?" The Death Lord's loud voice boomed throughout the normally quiet library. Medula's eyes twitched in annoyance, not at all fond of decibels above a page turning.

The Death Lord flew into the conversation, standing in front of Aldrich. She smiled at Chrysa and Aldrich, indicating no hostile intent.

Chapter 292: To Take a Tome

"I'm going to be straightforward here. I am only comfortable being friendly with all of you on the premise that you all depend on me to live. At best, I would repay you with freedom only when I feel I have enough power to challenge you on my own," said Aldrich.

"I know that well, Usurper," said the Death Lord. "And I am fine with it. My time has passed. I am content with allowing you to inherit my power and realm.

But Medula, as you may well tell, is not as tired of existence as I am."

"It is in my nature. I yearn for knowledge. And there is knowledge in vast droves in the Usurper's new realm," said Medula.

"I understand. But you will do as the Usurper wishes. Treat him with the respect that you would treat a heir of mine." The Death Lord admonished Medula.

"Fine." Medula sighed. She said to Aldrich, "Then I want another favor. I am going to split my heart into a fragment. I want you to take that fragment to your world and see if there is a suitable being that it can possess.

My lord and the rest of this realm may not share my curiosity, but I still seek the freedom to explore. That fragment will explore for me, like a probe, and in time, I will consume it back to see its memories."

Aldrich remembered Nilah. Her threat that when she reached the real world, she would open a Flame Arc and cause Armageddon.

Medula predicted Aldrich's worries. "And no, I cannot call to other demons. I have been Severed for serving a non-demon. I hold no Insight, nor can I call upon a Flame Arc to Morhal for I hold no more connection to my brethren."

"That, I can vouch for. I would not have taken her in had she still been tainted with demonic alliance," said the Death Lord.

"...I'll consider it. Give me the fragment," said Aldrich.

"It takes time to split my heart. In your next visit, I will have it readied," said Medula. "Along with your Cursevein."

"Good. Then things are settled without conflict." The Death Lord reached into her robes with her emerald prosthetic arm and withdrew a grey pyramid like object. She held it out to Aldrich. "Here is your second nether idol. The only one in my possession, might I add."

Aldrich took the idol and ported it into his inventory.

[1 x Nether Idol obtained]

"With that, you will have two chosen undead. How nice, no?" said the Death Lord.

"It's good enough. But not what I wanted you here for," said Aldrich.

"You wanted me...for more?" The Death Lord tugged at the robe fabric clung tightly to her chest.

"Father, her clothes are too tight. She can't breathe!" Chrysa pointed at the Death Lord's seductive gesture.

"Right, but she can help herself with that, can't she?" Aldrich eyed the Death Lord.

The Death Lord sighed as she moved her hand away from her chest. "It does get lonely here, you know. But fine, tell me what you desire."

"I want you to cast [Soul Lock] on Chrysa," said Aldrich.

"Hm? For what reason?" said the Death Lord.

"What's that?" asked Chrysa.

"It prevents anything from reaching your soul, Chrysa," said Aldrich.

"What about you, father? I liked your dreams! I was learning how to fight in them."

"So long as you two have your bracelets, that link will not be disrupted," said the Death Lord. She cocked her head at Aldrich. "But why the lock? Do you fear a spiritual attack in your new realm?"

"I don't know. You tell me. I gave you the corpse of that old man. Did you find anything remarkable about it?" said Aldrich.

"Not yet," interjected Medula. "I am still conducting tests on it, mostly to read into the energies infused into it during death. I have isolated an energy sample, but its composition and flow is unlike any I have encountered before.

I am cross referencing it with all other energy signatures I have stored. Within the span of another day, it will be possible to see what matches, particularly if said energy originates from Elduin magic."

"The fact of the matter stands that whether it was magic or not, it managed to destroy the soul," said Aldrich. "There's nothing in my realm that can do that. Hell, the existence of the soul itself is still a debate."

"Do not be so sure," said Medula. "Just because your realm does not have experience with soul flow does not rule out the existence of soul affecting abilities. Abilities that are not magic, either."

"I know. That's why I'm being cautious. And which is why I want a [Soul Lock]," said Aldrich. "Chrysa's species seems to have some form of connection to an entity known as the 'Voice'. My working theory is that it's like a central cluster of a hivemind, something that controls variants en masse.

I don't want it to affect her."

"Hm. Interesting. But it is better to stay safe." The Death Lord thought over this for a minute before she went over to Chrysa and held her hand. "There."

When she withdrew her hand, there was a faint green mark in the form of an ouroboros - a serpent devouring its own tail, on Chrysa's palm.

"Cool," Chrysa looked at her hand in interest.

"She is locked." The Death Lord nodded.

"Will this protect me?" Chrysa said.

"Hopefully, yes," said Aldrich.

"Not hopefully. It will. I learned that one directly from Wai'Ki. There is no need for concern." The Death Lord put a hand to her head and grimaced. Her pointed, pale ears twitched.

Medula instantly drew her gaze to the Death Lord, showing that she still cared about her lord greatly.

"Are you okay?" asked Aldrich.

"You hurt?" Chrysa held her hand out to the Death Lord, showing her the ouroboros symbol. "I can give this back if it makes you feel better!"

"No...it is nothing." The Death Lord shook her head and stood up straight and proud again. "I really should stop sparring with Rella. It is not good for my health, and yet, I throw myself there again and again.

I will take my leave to rest now."

The Death Lord walked away, her body shrouding in green as she began to teleport to some other place in the Necropolis. She did not turn as she spoke. "And, Aldrich, one last thing."

"What is it?"

"When you reach level 50, I will warn you that the fourth trial quest may be different. For the better, however, I assure you. Now go, go and spread the cold embrace of death in that realm of yours." The Death Lord disappeared in mist.

"Awfully cryptic. Do you have any idea what she's plotting?" Aldrich asked Medula.

"My lord moves to the flow of her mood. I work with structure. Thus, we do not work together often, for our personalities clash. So I hold little knowledge of her own activities or research. That is, if you believe my words," said Medula.

"I will believe what I want," said Aldrich. "And I would stay here to chat longer, but my time is running out. Let me cash in on that spell tome you promised me."

"That Mel promised you," corrected Medula with a sigh. "But fine. Choose. I will decide if it is too precious to take or not."

"We get to choose a book!?" Chrysa stood atop Aldrich's armored shoulder and clapped her hands in glee. "So many shinies! Let's choose!"

"Yes, let's," said Aldrich.

Chapter 293: Night Parade

"Now then," said Medula. She floated in the air, her bat wings fluttering, as her eyes flashed red. She stretched her arms out, motioning to the endless rows of dark bookshelves.

From above, the library must have looked like an unending, packed ribcage, each rib manifesting as a curved bookcase packed with tomes.

"What will you pick? Please remember to be reasonable. I place great value on much of these."

Aldrich looked around, and Chrysa mirrored his movements. When he looked left, she looked right. Where he analyzed with calm, she stared with wide eyed wonder.

"I recognize most of the tomes here by how their cover looks. Most aren't useful at all. Like one over there is about learning cooking spells. And another there is about creating love potions," said Aldrich. "I'm surprised you kept so much."

"Knowledge does not discriminate. Anything there is to learn, to know, I have stored," said Medula.

"Sounds like a serious case of hoarding addiction to me," said Aldrich.

"Perhaps." Medula sighed again. "Now then, does anything catch your eye?"

"There's far too much here for me to sift through. Are you trying to overwhelm me with options? You're a curator, no? I'm sure you can lead me to something I want."

"I have no obligation to do so."

"Please?" Chrysa gave Medula a puppy dog stare. "You said I could choose a shiny book when I trained."

Medula rubbed her forehead in annoyance, but she relented. "I suppose I can make an exception. I did promise the little one. I assume you wish for tomes with more combat applicability. Specifically, those that match the class engraved into your being and your rough level range."

Medula clasped her white gloved hands together. Purple bolts of energy silhouetted in white crackled from her hands. "[Shift]."

The whole library shook, little clouds of dust puffing down from the high stone ceiling. The bookshelves rapidly warped, shifting places.

"Now then," Medula motioned to the shelves around them. "All of these books meet your criteria."

"Much better." Aldrich put a hand to his chin as he walked about, taking out tomes and analyzing them. They were all for casters of a level range going from 40-60, for going any higher had risks associated with it.

"This one looks angry." Chrysa peered down curiously from Aldrich's shoulder, commenting at a book with red bones on its cover.

"This is the [Tome of Angered Bone]. It has a variety of spells like [Burning Agony] involving sacrifice of health and flesh for bonus effects," explained Aldrich.

"I don't want it! It will hurt father!" said Chrysa.

"It isn't something I was considering either," said Aldrich. He put the glowing red book back in its shelf.

"Choose well, Usurper, for I know that you do not have much time to spend here. And whatever you choose, I will not allow returns for," said Medula.

"Is that your way of trying to scam me? Low level, I have to say," said Aldrich.

"Just choose. Giving away my tomes is already irking me."

"I thought you differentiated yourself from secret demons because you shared knowledge. What's the issue here?" teased Aldrich.

"I share knowledge, but when I have to give it away, I feel less inclined, for, as you may know, I am not too generous of a soul. I treat these tomes as pieces of my very own being - a collection I have pieced together over centuries of effort, each one with a story behind them."

"Well then, I'll make this process quick. Hopefully it'll be less painful." Aldrich paused for a bit, wondering if Medula would allow this. He had a good idea from the start what he really wanted, but it was probably something she would be pressed to part with.

"Why do I get the feeling you are going to make a nigh unreasonable request of me?" said Medula, raising a dark brow.

"I want you to show me your twelfth circle spells," said Aldrich.

Medula stared at Aldrich in tight lipped silence.

The twelfth circle. The highest tier of magic. The so called 'Transcendent' realm of spells unparalleled in power and effect. To put into simple perspective, there was a twelfth circle spell called [Infinity Starfall] that rained down meteors with an ever increasing area of effect that was, in lore, capable of turning into countries into smoky ash.

There was also a spell like [Hundredfold Realm Prison] which trapped an individual and cloned them a hundred times as summons, with the prison lasting until every single clone was destroyed.

Medula's library did not have these specific spells, but Aldrich knew for sure that unless some books were missing, she did have some twelfth circle spells.

"I cannot give you those. Those are my crowning treasures. I held five in my collection, but that number has now dwindled to two. If I grant you one, I will have but a single one left," said Medula.

"I don't have to consume the tomes to learn the magic within, no?" said Aldrich. According to the lore, one could directly absorb spell knowledge from a tome in exchange for destroying it as a consumable, but normally, casters studied the tome to learn the spells themselves so as not to destroy the precious item.

"Twelfth circle spells require knowledge of magic that surpasses the highest of experts.

But in your case, you have no real knowledge - your spell mastery is simply granted to you through your system of strength.

Unless you wish to spent multiple centuries studying the tome, you will not be able to learn the magic within," said Medula. "And besides, a twelfth circle spell is far beyond what you can handle. Your body and soul would sunder apart merely even thinking of casting such formidable magic.

Even the Death Lord herself knows but two such spells, for anymore would shatter her mind."

"I don't want father to get hurt..." Chrysa tapped Aldrich's helm.

"It's okay, Chrysa, if I get what I want, it'll be fine." Aldrich spoke to Medula. "I don't know most of what's in your library, but I do remember the big ones.

All the twelfth circle spell tomes especially," said Aldrich. In fact, a reward in the game for beating Medula as a boss was to get one of her twelfth circle tomes.

Though in the game, Medula still had all five. Meaning that three had been used already. The Death Lord had notably used two, which left the question remaining as to where the other one went.

But that was not so important. Aldrich just needed to make sure the one he wanted was still here.

"Tell me, is the [Night Parade of a Thousand Spirits] still here?"

"It is," said Medula.

"I want that one," said Aldrich. "From what I recall, it's a channel based spell with a cost that scales down to the caster, draining me only as much as I can sustain it.

That should take care of the whole mind shattering body exploding issue."

The [Night Parade of a Thousand Spirits] was a channel that used the caster's self as a singularity point from which a [Dying Night] event began.

A [Dying Night] event created an unholy area where spirits and undead were at their strongest and life at its weakest. It constantly spawned undead and aggressive spirits while anything living in the area had their life energy continuously drained.

The more living beings died, the stronger the [Dying Night] became, with the affected unholy area and the strength of the spirits and undead growing more and more over time, eventually reaching a breaking point where it became a perpetual motion machine of death.

In the lore, [Dying Nights] were considered natural disasters on par with the worst calamities out there such as millennial dragon attacks or meteor strikes.

Entire civilizations had been wiped out by [Dying Nights] that grew out of control.

There were many weaknesses to the spell as well, but Aldrich would deal with them once he got it.

"Then the spell is useless to you. As you are now, you can sustain the Night Parade for what, five seconds? If even that?" said Medula. "Perhaps ten if you sacrifice your health along with your mana.

A proper Dying Night requires at the very least thirty minutes of sustained channeling.

Where will you get the fuel for it? Mass sacrifices? How many lives will that take? Ten thousand? More?"

"That's an option," said Aldrich. "But regardless, that's the spelltome I choose."

"..." Medula held back, not wishing to part with one of her dearest treasures.

"I'll sweeten the deal for you. I'll take that soul fragment of yours and ensure it gets a suitable host."

"That was already my price for granting you a Cursevein."

"There's more. If you just have a fragment there, it's still not all of you. It's like you said just a probe that has a tiny bit of you in it.

But I'll help you to put in your entire heart, your whole soul.

You can fully incarnate so you can live in my realm by yourself, free from the Necropolis if you want," said Aldrich.

Medula eyed Aldrich suspiciously. "Is that possible?"

"From my brief encounter with the archdemon in the trial quest, she seemed confident that she could take over a body and escape this system. She harped on about living in my realm and starting Armageddon, so I assume you'll have the same degree of freedom.

All the knowledge of a new realm, yours to explore, yours to take.

Sounds good, no?"

"That does sweeten things, but what I am most worried of is that my knowledge will be lost. That you will die and it all be for naught."

"If I die, then you die too, and so does the rest of your collection. Then it'll all have been for nothing. The Death Lord knows this, which is why I figure she's been generous with granting me her power.

You should know this too.

And trust me, I know how much you value your knowledge. I know how close you hold it to your heart. I won't waste it. And I certainly won't lose it by dying."

"..." Medula rubbed her temples in growing stress. But she sighed, relenting. "Fine."

Chapter 294: Stranger

Medula stabbed her hand into the air in front of her, but instead of passing through air, she ripped into the space itself, distorted ripples shimmering around her wrist.

"[Enter Vault]" Medula chanted as she ripped her arm to the side, tearing the space like a piece of paper, revealing yawning darkness tinted in purple. From the slit space, she reached in and withdrew a tome.

The moment she took out the book, the atmosphere in the library changed. It became heavier, almost oppressively heavy - the telltale sign of intense magical energy.

The book itself looked surprisingly simple. It was midnight black, like shadow given solid form, with a bright emerald green moon emblazoned upon the front.

But even looking at the book was difficult. The moment Aldrich tried to perceive it, the book started to distort in his vision, and he heard countless dead voices whispering and shouting in tandem, their catastrophic cacophony unleashing a malevolent orchestra in his brain.

Aldrich closed his eyes while raising his hand over Chrysa's face, knowing that if he looked into the book for more than a few seconds, he risked losing his mind. He knew that undead were immune to mind control, but this was different. The book did not seek to control his mind, no, it simply had so much power, so much arcane, abstract, deathly power that it overloaded his mind to a breaking point.

"If my observations are correct, your system of power can absorb any manner of spell, no matter how complex it is, and add it to your arsenal," said Medula. "This should be no different."

"It won't. I know because I took this tome from you in the past and used it as my own," said Aldrich. He knew that his system let him obtain spells without actually learning them, but he briefly wondered if it could take in a spell of this caliber.

From what he could tell, the system let him do anything the game let him do, and the player character had no issues ever learning a skill or spell. That would have been anti-fun.

"Scary book," said Chrysa. "Do you really want that one?"

"I do." Aldrich waved his hand forward, bidding Medula to bring the book to his palm to consume.

"Before you take this tome, I wish to confirm one thing with you," said Medula.

"What?"

"The Death Lord is content in letting you take, no inherit her powers as she believes you a reflection of herself. Ambitious. Driven.

Like her, you see wrong, and you wish to wipe it out, to enforce your vision of an ideal world upon all existence," said Medula.

Aldrich knew the Death Lord's goals. She wanted to essentially turn everyone in the entire Elduin realm into undead because she believed that to be undead was far better than to grow weak and old and sad.

Fundamentally, she believed herself altruistic.

One of the reasons she looked down so fiercely upon the life gods like Amara was because they were content in basking in the worship of their short lived, suffering mortals whilst not ever thinking of uplifting them to their same divine level.

Of course, in practice, the Death Lord was a brutal warlord who killed countless many to spread death, though in her eyes, she probably thought dying under her hand and rising again as an undead was a better alternative to mortal life.

"I don't know if I'd go that far. But yes, I want to use my power for something. Something big," said Aldrich. "Otherwise there's no point having this power."

"Then I want you to make the same promise I made her make to me." Medula's voice became surprisingly earnest, losing the bored, cold edge it usually always honed.

"What is it?"

"Knowledge only has meaning when it is shared, spread, and known among those can understand it. This power of yours, necromancy, it is perhaps one of the greatest powers I know for a conqueror.

But it is also dangerous for knowledge.

Among knowledge demons like myself, one of the forces we feared the most was necromancy. Not because it posed a combat threat to us, it certainly did, but more so because of its potential to destroy knowledge.

All too often, necromancers wield a collection of puppets that can no longer think nor strive to create new knowledge.

I want you to promise me, Death Walker, that when your legions grow, when your might grows, that you are not a lone soul commanding a sea of mindless bodies.

I can understand wielding puppets in the pursuit of power. But in the end, when you have your power, I do not want you to be a lone soul in command of an endless sea of unthinking souls.

If my knowledge was used for that purpose, it would go against the very fabric of my being. I simply could not allow it."

"I can promise that," said Aldrich. "You must have an idea of how I'm operating my legion. I'm allowing as much free will as I can. And it's efficient. There's no issue here."

"It is easy for you to say this now. The temptation to not simply command, but to control, will only grow over time, and time is one thing you have in droves.

Do not forget my promise."

A pause.

"Or I will have to personally raise my might against you."

"Like I said, you don't have to worry."

Medula pressed the tome against Aldrich's stretched out hand. He absorbed the item. His system broke it down without issue, consuming it and imprinting the knowledge into his being.

[Tome of the Night Parade consumed]

[Night Parade of a Thousand Spirits learned]

Aldrich opened his eyes, looking at his hand. The book was completely gone. The heavy aura it emanated was gone, too. "That was surprisingly easy."

"Yes. That system of power that you hold is quite something." Medula turned around, hands clasped behind her back. "Take care that you do not rely on it too much.

Now go, let me sulk the loss of my prized possession in solace."

Aldrich returned to the real world, or Alter realm as he started to get used to calling it in his head. First, at the Crypt, then, after [Mist Phase] ended, back to Fler'Gan.

There, Aldrich gave Fler'Gan the ten eyeflowers. Fler'Gan cut off the eyestalks and squeezed clear liquid within into his potion, granting it to Aldrich after making sure it was stable.

[1 x Mindeye Dominus Elixir obtained]

The effects of the potion were the same, with Fler'Gan repeating his warning: the potion was active only for a timespan of about ten seconds. Anything Aldrich said during this time would get embedded into the psyches of all those that heard.

For example, if Aldrich said during this time, "support me!", then even after his ten second window was over, all those that heard him would have a strong urge to support him.

The biggest issue was even that effect was not permanent. Over time, it would slowly fade away.

For permanent hypnotic suggestion, one had to directly ingest a potion, and Aldrich certainly could not forcefeed everyone elixirs.

But for the duration of the hearing, Aldrich could swing practically everyone to his side. Fler'Gan did have an additional warning that those with particularly strong wills could resist the effects, though they would not know they were affected by anything.

However, judging from experimentation that Fler'Gan had performed on normal Alters, the vast majority of individuals would not be able to strongly resist the effect.

Next, Aldrich caught up with V, specifically in regards to the bug she had found in the freeze bot's neural networks.

Aldrich stepped into V's workspace, finding her sitting down in the dark, her wire and cable shape hair sprawled everywhere in a complex web, lighting up screens and devices.

"What's going on?" asked Aldrich. Chrysa was not on his shoulder. She was in the Boundary, playing around with the Geist, Merman, Valera, and Okeanos.

"Wondered when you'd be back. Thought you'd almost miss this." V popped a bubble of gum from her pale red lips. "The bug was active. It's called a Rager, and I've double confirmed it's Mad Jack's ability.

Causes mass malfunction in tech, making it go haywire and target anything and everything."

"Is that why the bots attacked me?" said Aldrich.

"Yeah."

"Then that involves the Trident. If I have my memory of villains and mercs correct, Mad Jack's a techno on the Italian Prong, meaning that the owner of these bots are a Trident target too."

"I figure. But it's impossible to really tell.

Remember how I set up a way for peeps in the underworld to reach us? Well, most of it has been garbage like shitty D-lister mercs trying to see if they can get with Thanatos, but there was one guy that really piqued my interest.

It's a guy calling himself the Stranger. He says the bots were his."

"Really now?" Aldrich said, heavily interested.

"Yeah. He didn't say much more. Just that he's sorry the bots went crazy. They weren't meant to hurt you."

"Were they meant to watch me?"

"He didn't answer that. He just sent me one message, and he didn't leave a way to get back to him. His presence in Cyberspace is also insanely stealthy. Can't trace him down at all."

"Forward that message to me," said Aldrich. "For now, tell me what's important."

"That was basically it," said V. "It confused me, y'know, I thought it was spam at first, but literally nobody should have known about those bots except us.

The most important part of his message was this: he says he'll meet you soon. And that he'll make you an offer he hopes you will take."

"Where? When? And if I don't take the offer?"

V shrugged. "I don't know. No deets. It's all mystery. Kinda spooky."

"Hm. I see." Aldrich turned to leave. There was no more information to be mined here. "Keep an eye out, V."

"Gotcha. When you come back, you better be coming back as some kinda bigshot. I want to upgrade into a proper office, y'know."

Aldrich nodded. "I'll try."

"C'mon, you can't promise?"

"I don't like making promises. They're too absolute. The more you make, the less valuable they get as well." Aldrich stepped out of the control room. "And I already made one today."

Chapter 295: Familiar Faces

Aldrich sat in the depths of the Crypt oncemore, though, soon, he figured he was in for a quick ride out to his hearing. Anticipation coursed through him with a buzz not unlike adrenaline.

This was it. This was where he got onto the world stage. Where he made his name. Where he really got to start throwing around his power and making change, real, large-scale change.

So far, Aldrich had dealt with problems in the shadows, plotting and building himself up discreetly. Because of that, he could choose his targets and his enemies.

Soon, though, that would all change. As a player on the world stage, he would make enemies no matter what. Now, the dynamic was flipped. He was the one shining in the spotlight, and lurkers in the shadows would target him.

Aldrich wondered how he would handle that dynamic. His entire life, he had been a nobody. A Dud. An existence that nobody gave a second glance to. Yet soon, not a single pair of eyes that mattered could afford to ignore him.

'I sense rising tension within you, Armored,' said Volantis.

"Do you know? It looks like our link has deepened," said Aldrich. Before, Volantis could not sense Aldrich's emotions, but now, like Valera, he was starting to connect with Aldrich at that level.

'It was only a matter of time. I imagine the commander will be displeased that another bonds with you like this,' said Volantis.

"Probably. She can get jealous."

'The more the merrier, though! To share oneself to others close is a wonderful thing. And to that end, I must ask, will you not draw another Chosen from the Nether?'

"Not yet. I want to do that after I'm on the world stage. I'll have a better idea of what I need then." Aldrich looked at the back of his gauntleted hand. When he willed it, he could see the thirteen pronged branch glowing against the back of his hand, through the armor.

Neither the Death Lord nor Medula had sensed this. Aldrich had wavered on whether to tell them about it, but he had decided against it for now. There were things that the Death Lord was hiding from him that prevented him from being too open.

What, exactly, Aldrich did not know. He had already tried pressing her for the information, and she had heavily implied she did not want to give it. He did not want to press too hard, either, for it was true that he benefited from her generosity.

And, for now, Aldrich was secure in the safety that his fate and that of the Necropolis were inextricably intertwined. There was not one without the other.

'A strange thing, that is,' said Volantis. 'Thirteen branches. Two marked with circles like fruits. I cannot fathom it.'

"Can you sense anything about it? With your energy reading vision?"

'No. It utterly escapes me. In that sense, I do know something: it is not of the Elduin realm, for if it were, I could grasp it.'

"I see." Aldrich nodded.

His current hypothesis was that this was something that originated from a realm entirely foreign from either the Alter one or Elduin, which would explain why nobody could figure it out.

But then why was it on Elaine's server? How had it transferred to him? What did it do?

'At the very least, I can assure you that it is not causing you harm,' said Volantis. 'Reading your energy flow shows stable readings. There is nothing in disarray.'

"Right. I can't say I'm a fan of mystery like this. Not knowing - it's a pet peeve of mine. But without more clues, more information, there's no point grinding my head against an impassable wall," said Aldrich.

It was then that Aldrich heard rumbling from above. The sound of whirring engines traveled from the top of the Crypt down to Aldrich, pinging off crypt walls surprisingly well.

"And we have more immediate things to deal with." Aldrich stood up, the metal of his armored body creaking. He had absorbed Wai'Ki's illusion of Volantis, taking in its memories, and found nothing of note.

22, the guard stationed above, had never once made contact with the illusion. The only thing that ever got down here were supply packages which the illusion, as commanded, dutifully always sent back up to notify the authorities that would be that 'Aldrich' was still there.

'Time to take the world by storm!' said Volantis, his mighty voice ringing in a roar in Aldrich's head.

The ceiling of the Crypt began to slide open with a loud, metallic groan. Aldrich looked up and smiled. "Yes."

On his transport, Aldrich sat across from two familiar faces. Colonel Davos and Aarav Singh.

"I'm getting a sense of deja vu here," said Aldrich. He looked down at his hands. They were not cuffed. Nor was he in a Null Box. "Though I have to say, having fewer chains feels much better."

"Can't parade you in there in chains, not with social media raving about you and the world wanting your powers," said Davos. "Scientific community wants to put you under a microscope, too. They've saved a few of the Locus corpses from the coordinated attacks to see if you can do anything about them."

Aldrich perked his helmeted head up. More Locus corpses for him to raise? He could not have asked for a better out of jail gift.

"That is, if your hearing goes well," said Davos.

"Which it will," said Aarav.

"I have reports indicating that the initial support movement for Thanatos was strangely coordinated." Davos crossed his muscular arms as he stared at Aarav.

Aarav did not even glance back at Davos, puffing at a black tipped cigarette with cool poise.

"Bot accounts on social media, visibility algorithms on media sites paid off so that only good news showed, and the like.

Typical astroturfing. But on a scale that only someone with billions could afford it.

You wouldn't have anything to do with that now, would you?" said Davos.

"Hm? Why would I? It's in human nature for people to look toward a savior. Is that not why the hero industry is big enough to treat some governments like a piece of old gum under their shoe?" Aarav shrugged.

Of course, Aldrich knew that Aarav had been behind all of this. Aarav had probably spent several million credits at the very least on what was basically a concentrated PR campaign, making sure Thanatos was seen in the best light possible.

Aarav was not lying when he said he was betting his whole hand on Aldrich.

"Whatever." Colonel Davos rubbed the bridge of his nose, closing his bright red eyes. He had dark lines under his eyes, showing that he had been working overtime.

"Where's my guard?" said Aldrich. "22, that was her name, wasn't it?"

"Oh, 22? She's on an assignment somewhere else. Fortunately for you, you've been demoted considerably as a threat."

"More attacks?" asked Aldrich.

"No. 22 doesn't handle hero jobs like that."

"Then Irregular activity?"

"I'm not authorized to reveal that."

Aldrich remembered the branch symbol on his hand. Perhaps the Irregulars Department had an idea about it. But he did not trust the government yet.

"So many secrets. This is why nobody trusts the government." Aarav reached into the breast pocket of his cheap, patchmark sewn suit and tossed a phone to Aldrich. "Read through that."

"Says a corporate slime like you." Davos eyed Aarav with dislike.

Aldrich read through the phone. On it was a neat report that first showed what Aarav had done.

It showed various news media articles about Thanatos, most of them positive, most of them greatly awaiting the hearing.

The hearing was to be livestreamed as well, and already, several hours before it started, the stream had hundreds of thousands of viewers. It would probably explode to millions when the start time neared.

Current public consensus was that Thanatos was practically guaranteed at the very least an A rank status in the AA and special privileges for his team and controlled variants.

About 74% of polled individuals were even in favor of Thanatos becoming a Sentinel if it meant he could use his powers to drive the variants back. That was an incredibly high rating.

For reference, Dracul, the latest Sentinel, had a 60% approval rating from the public to be a Sentinel, and he was considered a once in a generation hero who had taken down an entire member of the Dark Six solo.

Of course, in the end, public opinion did not influence whether Aldrich became a Sentinel or not, but it certainly did help put pressure on the AA, governments, and the Panopticon.

The second part of the report detailed Haven's current status. Aarav had stopped the Panopticon's plans to demolish the city by negotiating various rebuilding projects.

The Panopticon did not have the authority to bulldoze damaged cities that had solid plans to rebuild, and Aarav's money made those plans very, very solid.

Not to mention the Sunshine Foundation, Solomon Solar's charity, had to keep their support for Haven. Otherwise, Solomon would tank a PR hit for leaving a broken city he had promised to help.

Of course, Aldrich had basically manipulated Solomon into doing that, and that showed in the fact that Solomon was donating just the bare minimum to not look bad.

But the money did not matter. Solomon's name as a S class hero mattered more, and having that attached to Haven gave it a boost in the public eye.

Overall, things were proceeding quite smoothly. And in large part due to Aarav's efforts.

Aldrich was fully ready to piece together Haven scrap by scrap, using force if necessary to gain Sentinel status over it, but Aarav had paved an easy mode road with funding and social media popularity for Aldrich to work with.

Then, the report transitioned into news of Sheshanaga Biotechnology. The CEO had made his hunt for immortality public. This was a message to Aldrich.

It meant that soon enough, Aldrich would be needed to fulfill his end of the bargain.

To help Aarav kill his father.

"I see." Aldrich tossed the phone back to Aarav. "Anything else?"

"No, that's it. I look forward to seeing this play out," said Aarav.

"That, I can agree on," said Davos.

"You seem friendlier than before, colonel," said Aldrich.

"Because you wouldn't go to these lengths, making sure the public liked you, rebuilding that city, if you didn't care about humanity," said Davos. "And that's all I really cared about."

"I see. Like I said before, I will try to help," said Aldrich. "In my own way. Without a collar or chains."

"I hope so." Davos looked away, up towards the ceiling. "I have a gut feeling that sooner or later, we'll be needing all the help we can get."

Chapter 296: Judicata

At the Judicata, Worldwide Court of Justice

Aldrich stood in a small, rectangular waiting room with white walls segmented with glowing blue strips. Typical Mag-Lock construction, favored by the Panopticon for the ease of assembly and repair.

Just take several blocks, lock them together with the special magnetic tech, and voila, you got an extremely durable structure.

It was the same tech that built up city walls. Not to mention it could easily conduct forcefield energy currents - that was the biggest bonus to them. City walls themselves were tough, but medieval style walls, though effective against mostly land based variant monsters, had limits to them, the most glaring of which was weakness to any airborne attack.

That was where the shielding came in. In fact, so important was the shielding that it was probably more accurate to say that the walls were shield conduits first, then barricades second.

What stood out to Aldrich more, though, was the view. One wall of the room was see through glass showing the planet from low orbit. He had never been to space, but being up here, seeing the earth, a blue jewel painted in swathes of green and dotted with white clouds, he felt awed.

So tiny against such an impossibly big world.

'So this is the world we will conquer,' said Volantis.

'Yeah. A lot to do, huh?' said Aldrich.

'Nothing that is beyond my Armored! If you are to surpass the warmother I once served, then an entire world is the least that I expect from you!'

'No pressure, I guess.' Aldrich nodded though, appreciating Volantis's reassurance.

Outside of this waiting room, his hearing was getting prepped. Government and AA officials were probably packed around the circular seating spaces in the hearing room.

"How are you doing, Thanatos? Is there anything you require at this moment? I have a list of eighty seven different refreshments on hand-" A floating black orb with a friendly green eye dot spoke to Aldrich. A Panopticon service bot.

"No. I'm ready whenever the world is," said Aldrich.

"The hearing is still in preparatory stage." The orb paused. "You have a visitor. Clearance code: Trinity. I will vacate these premises."

The orb floated away, a pressurized sliding door opening to let it exit while letting a person step in.

A man of average height, though were it not for his crooked back, he would have been noticeably tall. He had a slim, thin, weak build that his loose fitting navy blue suit did little to conceal.

Under the brown brim of a bowler hat, he peered at Aldrich with X shaped solid black eyes.

Eyes that anyone could recognize.

"Supermind," said Aldrich.

"I'm still famous, am I?" Supermind hobbled forwards, using a mechanical black walking stick for support. He smiled at Aldrich, wrinkles wreathed around the thin skin of his eyes and pale lips.

For a man that was 100 years old, though, he looked spectacular. An average passerby would have thought he barely pushed past 60, let alone an entire century.

"There's not a single person alive that wouldn't recognize a member of Triune," said Aldrich.

"I suppose I've got Vanguard to thank for that. Without him, I doubt anyone would've heard a peep about us." Supermind limped near Aldrich and motioned to an empty row of seats in front of him. "Do you mind?"

"Go ahead."

Supermind grunted as he got himself in the seat with some pain. "Crystallization is a pain to deal with. Sometimes, I still dream about lifting mountains with my mind. Now, I can barely get up at night to take a leak on my own."

"Why are you here?" said Aldrich. "You're the Arbiter for this hearing, aren't you? That means you're supposed to be a neutral, mediating force between me and everyone else. More of an advisor than anything else."

Meeting me before the hearing isn't exactly what I'd call neutrality."

"There is no such thing as neutrality. Everything, no matter how small, has mass. Everything tilts to one side or the other." Supermind rested his walking stick down and clasped his hands together.

Aldrich tensed up, knowing well that Supermind activated his powers with that gesture. And Supermind had been the greatest telekinetic in the entire world in his heyday.

Even with Crystallization affecting him, he could probably threaten Aldrich.

"Rest easy. I do this to calm myself," said Supermind. "You're tough enough that even if, for some god forsaken reason, I wanted to try and crack you open, I'd break my spine trying.

Or lose control and rip apart this whole station."

"You haven't answered my question. Why are you here?"

"Straight to the point, hm?" Supermind sighed. "All I'm here to do is to take a close look at you."

"Well, I'm right here."

"You don't want to know why I want to look you over?"

"Are you offering an explanation?"

"Hm. Curt. No wonder Seismic took a liking to you." Supermind did not look at Aldrich as he spoke. He looked forward, intentionally avoiding Aldrich's gaze.

Likely to make Aldrich feel safe.

Supermind's telekinetic powers were incredible, but Crystallization had worn them down to a nub. However, his telepathy was less affected. If he got a good line of sight on somebody, he could probably completely destroy their minds.

Though Aldrich was immune to mental damage. He wondered if Supermind could get through it.

"You're a man of mystery. Someone that just showed up out of nowhere. You must know some things the rest of the world doesn't."

"Maybe."

"Let me ask you: do you know where Vanguard is? Do you know if he is alive?"

Aldrich pondered the question. Supermind was not leading with it. He was genuinely curious.

Vanguard had not been seen in close to two decades. In fact, the year Aldrich was born was the year Vanguard, former top hero of the entire world, disappeared.

Nobody knew why or how. The year of his disappearance had been relatively peaceful, too.

There had been no variant attack or villain to take Vanguard down. But in the years leading up to his disappearance, it had been noted that the former top hero was getting weaker and weaker.

Seemingly older and older as well, his supposed slowed aging rapidly leaving him.

And, as a result, less and less active.

"No," Aldrich said simply.

"Hm." Supermind nodded to himself before standing up, pushing himself up with his cane.

"That's it?" asked Aldrich.

"Yes, that's it." Supermind began to walk away, back to the exit, but then paused. "I guess I do owe you more of an explanation. You'll be a top dog soon, anyway - you deserve as much.

You see, Vanguard didn't tell me or Valkyrie much. He was always more of the quiet type in private, despite how loudly he shouted about hope and good in front of cameras.

After the 2077 Corpwar, after he swallowed the equivalent of ten nukes, he started to get weaker. He cut off contact with us. With all of the world. He stopped talking to the media, his handler, his fans, everyone.

I thought he was in a depressive phase, seeing his position at the top slip away, but he was never the type to be worried much about rankings."

"Then what was it?" said Aldrich, too curious to remain silent. Throughout his whole childhood, Vanguard, the hero that ended any fight in just one punch, was his idol. Someone who swooped down when the going was roughest and brought smiles to everyone in just one fistful of hope.

"I don't know. Like I said, he cut us off, and we were the closest to him. But I've been trying to piece together clues, and I think he was trying to find a heir. His power - I

believe it's inheritable." Supermind looked at Aldrich directly. "I've been spending decades trying to find some bastard child or hidden student of his, but no luck."

"Which is why you're here," noted Aldrich.

Supermind nodded. "I was checking to see if you had inherited it, if I could feel what I felt when I looked at Vanguard, but that isn't the case.

You're different, that's for sure, special.

Irregular.

But not in the same way Vanguard was."

Supermind turned to leave. "I'm sorry for wasting your time. I'll have the hearing commence soon. I wouldn't worry, if I were you. Everyone wants a piece of you. Hopefully, you can put all that attention to good use."

Aldrich watched Supermind leave. When he did, the orb shaped helper bot entered.

"Interesting" Aldrich said to himself.

The strongest hero team to have ever existed was called the Triune, consisting of Vanguard, Supermind, and Valkyrie. Not the same Valkyrie that operated on Sunlight, Solomon Solar's team.

That Valkyrie was the daughter of the original who lived in secluded retirement now after taking a severe career ending injury she could not heal from.

Triune had kept the world in balance to a large degree, dragging them by the scruff right out of the chaos of the Altering and the initial high apocalyptic disaster of the Monsterring.

They were the lynchpin that guaranteed that humanity could survive even the toughest of attacks from Variants and also curb villain activity from getting too bad.

Once Triune was gone, especially after Vanguard's disappearance, that was when the world balance disrupted. When variant attacks got much worse. When villains started to consolidate much more power.

But if, as Supermind said, Vanguard's power - an overwhelming might that could defeat anybody in a single blow - was truly inheritable, then that would restore the balance again.

Only if that power went to the right person, though.

Supermind was probably on 24/7 watch for the heir to show up.

And now, so would Aldrich.

"Interesting story that was, hm?"

Aldrich turned to the helper bot. The voice coming from it crackled and held inflection that made it obvious it came from a living, breathing person, not an auto generated A.I. voice devoid of any real emotion.

The voice was grating, as if it was being pushed through a modulator that constantly distorted it.

"Who are you?" Aldrich narrowed his eyes under his helm.

This was not the Panopticon. But anyone that could hack into Panopticon tech was absurdly high end as far as techno ability went.

"You read my message, no? I'm your friendly neighborhood Stranger."

"Right. You." The Stranger. The entity that controlled the mysterious bots with powers that followed no proper ruleset.

Powers that Aldrich hypothesized to not belong to either Elduin or Alter realms, considering how impossible it was to read them. Though there were some holes in this hypothesis, like the fact that the bots had tech at least somewhat familiar enough that V could get into them and Mad Jack's virus could affect them.

"Yes, me." The Stranger chuckled. "Why so hostile, my friend?"

"Friend is not a term I would lightly use given our last interaction."

"An accident. Mad Jack's virus took over my bots. There was nothing I could do. And you, Thanatos, are my friend. Or at the least, I hope to make you my friend."

"And tell me, how are you going to do that?"

"I've reached out to your netpoint in Cyberspace and dropped some goodies. A location to Feather. Once you make him squeal, I'm sure he'll lead you to more important threads. Some compromising information on the Italian Prong, maybe. Or, if you're lucky, a net to catch that pesky spider Desmond."

"So this is Trident related."

"For now, yes, though I see this Trident issue as a small bump in the road compared to what is to come."

"And what is to come?"

"You'll know when you accept me as your friend."

"..."

The Stranger continued. "You and I are not so different. We both are not from this world. But that does not mean it cannot belong to us. Work with me, and we can make that happen."

Chapter 297: A Stranger's Offer

"Not from this world, are we?" said Aldrich. He stared into the unblinking green dot of the spherical helper bot. He wondered what was behind it.

An impossibly alien face too inhuman to comprehend?

Some kind of alternate reality human?

Maybe a living machine?

No way to really tell.

What Aldrich did know was that the Stranger was no pushover.

The fact that the dot did not turn from green to red meant that whoever was hacking into this was good enough not to trigger the many security measures that the Panopticon's security networks built up.

Aldrich had mentioned it in his head before, but he had to remind himself again that that was no walk in the park. If he had to give a letter rank to it in terms of pure hacking skill, then it was without a doubt S-class. Top of the S-class, even, considering the Panopticon's reputation of having an iron solid cyberspace defense.

If he made an enemy out of the Stranger, then he was making a tough one.

"No. You could say that we are, well, strangers," said the Stranger. Though he cracked a joke, his voice did not show any humor. It was chillingly stable – cold in a way that felt, at some fundamental level, inhuman.

"What are you, then? An alien?" asked Aldrich. People always figured that aliens existed – now more so than ever. Hard to harbor disbelief in aliens when there were literal superheroes flying around on the daily given power by mysterious cosmic rays.

"Alien. A very broad classification. Too broad to cram the likes of us into. But yes, alien would technically be correct." The lights in the room shifted from bright white to blue, indicating a 'get ready' to Aldrich. "Look at that. Your hearing is beginning soon."

"You can't expect me to make a deal if I have no idea who you are or what you really want."

"True. Then let me make it simple for now. The Trident is an ancient relic that refuses to change with the ever-shifting tides of time. It's an old boat on seas far too vast and rough for it.

It needs to sink. I have good reason to believe you want the same. Why can't we sink their ship together?"

Aldrich had to admit that it was a tempting proposition in the sense that anything that took down the Trident was right up his alley. He did not have an extreme personal grudge against the Trident as an organization, but he would not mind breaking it down either. "And what's your affiliation with the Trident?"

"You might know me better as the head of the Russian Prong."

Aldrich raised a brow under his helm. The Russian Prong? So, the Stranger was not just part of the Trident, he was literally the head of one of its three prongs. Or, to be more specific in light of new revelations, the instigator of the civil war between the Russian Prong and the Japanese and Italian ones.

That did not give Aldrich too much information. Unlike with the Italian and Japanese prongs, the Russian prong was shrouded in mystery. Nobody knew who the head really was or who the higher ups were.

"I know the innards of the Trident," said the Stranger. "I know how to poison the well and smoke out the rats. If you and I join forces, we can split the Trident apart and built it back better. We can enforce our wills upon the world. We can become the new world order."

"I see. From what I gather, then, you, the Russian Prong, want to go ahead with that revolution of yours to topple the current world order. But the other two prongs don't want to make that extreme of a move, so you want to get rid of them."

"Correct. Believe me, Thanatos, you are better off with me. We are 'Irregular'. The world will never accept us. They will try to use us, but accept us? No. Not possible. But since we are Irregular, we can clutch at their throats before they even know what is happening.

They do not know our powers. They have no way to fend against us. We can dismantle everything that this world has built up and make it ours.

All I need for you is to be my friend."

"That's not all, is it? Nobody does anything for free. You want me to do something for you to start off with, just like how you gave my support intel on Feather. A token of friendship, so to say."

"It certainly would make me feel a little easier at heart."

"Then name your price."

"The chill winds heed my call, and my eyes can read their whirlwind white dance. They blow in your favor. This hearing will give you freedom, that much is guaranteed, but beyond that, there will be offers. For you to join them, to join this world.

But make no mistake. These are ways for them to use you and chew you up, to pick your bones clean.

I only ask that you refuse. For your own sake as much as mine."

"Interesting." Aldrich started to walk towards the door leading to the hearing room. He stopped in front of the sliding door, built large to accommodate sizably built superhumans like himself.

"What do you say, my friend?"

"Why should I accept an offer from someone as incompetent as you?" said Aldrich.

"What?"

Aldrich continued. "I have little to nothing to judge your worth off of, so I'll use what's available to me. You let Mad Jack's virus take over your bots.

Bots which coincidentally happened to be in my area. Tracking me, most likely. Then, they threatened my life.

That's incompetence. Especially when you're talking big about taking the Trident down. If Mad Jack can do that to you, what's to say some other techno in their leagues can't do worse?

This still doesn't rule out the possibility that you're actively malicious, that you want to manipulate me for your own needs.

So my answer is no.

I want to crush the Trident with my own hand. All of it. And if that includes you, the Russian Prong, I will gladly do it."

"Are you sure about this?" said the Stranger. "If you will not have me as your friend, I will be your enemy. And I warn you now: there has not been a single enemy that has survived crossing me. Not in this world nor others."

"There's a first for everything." Aldrich did not bother to look at the helper bot. He kept his eyes trained on the door in front of him. The lights above turned blue, indicating it was now okay for him to leave. "I've accepted that a natural part of stepping into the light is that I'll have enemies crawling in the dark."

But I'm ready.

Ready to crush them whenever they rear their ugly heads.

No matter who they are. Or how strong they claim to be."

Aldrich pressed his palm against the door, and the pressure sensitive mechanism opened. The helper bot floated away from Aldrich, the Stranger cutting off from it to prevent himself from getting outed as being hacked.

Chapter 298: The Hearing Begins

Aldrich first passed through a bare hallway, the door of the waiting room shutting with a pressurized click behind him. Another helper bot detached from the ceiling and hovered beside him, though this one was not hacked.

"All members of your hearing have gathered. Do you require additional time, or are you free to proceed?" said the bot.

"Free to proceed," said Aldrich. At the other end of the hallway was one more door, then, the entire world. Eerily, he could not hear anything at all except the rhythmic hum of shield generators. Both the hallway and the waiting room seemed to be soundproofed.

Aldrich pondered whether he had done the right thing.

Fundamentally, he and the Stranger could not align their goals.

The Stranger wanted world domination. Aldrich wanted world order. They were diametrically opposed.

If the Stranger rose, Aldrich would have to strike him down to preserve order. If Aldrich rose, the Stranger would try to tear him away from the top to try and take over.

There were also too many gaps and mysteries for Aldrich to trust the Stranger. He could not blame the Stranger for this too much - the Stranger probably wanted to limit information to Aldrich until they were confirmed allies.

At best, the Stranger could give 'gestures of friendship' like Feather's location, but demanding that Aldrich step away from the world stage entirely?

Not worth it.

Aldrich did not trust the world completely either, which was why he wanted to vie for Sentinel status to operate on his own rules, but that did not change the fact that everyone out there, out in the hearing, was responsible for the lives of most of humanity.

Aldrich would rather try to work with them first, then determine whether he should break off rather than start off guns blazing as a solo player.

Ultimately, there was not enough info to work with the Stranger to begin even remotely trusting him.

But Aldrich could parse some details from their conversation. The biggest of these being that the Stranger did not know exactly who or what Aldrich was.

From the Stranger's wording, it seemed that he thought Aldrich something akin to an alien. Entirely extraterrestrial and not a human that had obtained otherworldly powers.

Which opened up Aldrich's worldview considerably. There were entities out there that were not native to earth to begin with.

And, considering Supermind's revelation, humans out there too that were like Aldrich, holding 'Irregular' powers that did not belong to this world.

Considering Supermind's rather calm reaction to Aldrich's status as an 'Irregular', it also seemed likely that there were quite a few of said Irregulars out there, though he doubted any of them had powers from Elden World.

For one, if such a person existed, Supermind would have made a connection with Aldrich. The closest Aldrich could think of was Archmage, a S class hero from Korea, but his powers were more low level reality warping that gave him the moveset of a typical fantasy mage.

Fireball, lightning strike, stuff like that. Very likely, people assumed Aldrich had the same kind of low level reality warping ability.

Secondly, Aldrich was confident Vanguard did not wield any Elden World powers. Vanguard seemed like he was just like any other caped flying brick - strong, fast, and airborne. No spell or skill from the game matched that.

Thirdly -

Aldrich stopped in front of the hallway exit, cutting his thoughts off. He closed his eyes and readied himself.

'Volantis. Keep your Truesight active at all times' commanded Aldrich. The Judicata was insanely guarded and had anti-stealth measures as well, but if there was even a slight chance that the Stranger's unseen bots could slip through them, Aldrich wanted to be prepared.

The Grave Wards could reveal the bots, and so could Volantis.

'I will. Good luck, Armored. Show the world who they'll be fighting under.'

'Yeah.' Aldrich pressed his hand on the door, and it slid open. Bright white light engulfed him. He stepped out, into the light both figuratively and physically.

Before Aldrich was an enormous round room. Looking up, he saw concentrically aligned seats wound around the walls in even rows that piled up high. From there, suited Alters, men, women, and mutants, all stared down at Aldrich in silence.

Silence that was surprising considering how many there were.

A rough guesstimate on Aldrich's part figured that at max occupancy, this entire hearing room could seat about 500 people.

Currently, there were around 400. Fewer than 100 actual officials, but they all had support staff and guards with them.

Overall, this was an astounding turnout.

For reference, Dracul's Sentinel hearing, also held in the Judicata, had yielded a turnout of about 200 total people.

Aldrich looked all around him, eyeing the crowd. A crowd made up of influence and power. Leaders and representatives of countries, the AA, and companies.

Reps from specific countries sat in areas marked with a holographic image of their nation's flag floating above. Company reps had their corporate logo projected above.

Aldrich took a moment to process the sheer scale of this. The whole world really was here.

The Pan-African Alliance. The East Asian Alliances. The Eastern European Block. The Oceanic Blocks. The European Union. The Middle Eastern Coalition. Even the Antarctic Settlers - the big dogs of every continent were here.

The corporations were just as prominent, most of them related to war.

There was the double A logo of the Alterhuman Agency, of course, but also two Council of Fortune members: the ouroboros of Imugi War Arts and the red and blue diamond of ARMA.

Corporations just a tier below them like Shatterlock Droid Systems, Blast Ballistics, Volsung Cybernetics, and Culture Biotechnology were also in attendance, but there were no companies beneath tier 1.

Anyone that got to this hearing was just that important.

And that, consequently, was how important Aldrich was.

Security was intense as well. Guards and supes crawling everywhere, and none of them were likely to be pushovers. Panopticon war drones and bots floated everywhere, the barrels of their energy weaponry highly visible.

But above all that were the S rank heroes hired to hold down the fort. S rankers from all across the world.

There was Mushin, dressed up in plain gray hakama and gi, from Japan with his power to cut anything out of existence.

Star Spartan, who, as the name would suggest, donned the garb of a spartan warrior. He was from the European Union and could turn into a living meteor. As far as response times to disasters were concerned, he was second just behind Lightspeed, the current top hero in the United States.

Aldrich spotted the crackling blue eyes of Indra who, as a lightning elemental, had both top class power and speed that made him stand near the top in India, just below Ravana, a Sentinel.

There was Machine Emperor from China whose battlesuit was considered the strongest in the entire world, said to be powered by advanced star fusion tech centuries beyond what humanity could muster currently. He was also the head of his own military tech company, though it did not seem like he had come here as a company head, more as security for the Chinese government representatives.

From the United States, there was Kinesis, widely considered to be the next Supermind with her impressive telekinetic and telepathic abilities.

And, finally, from the Eastern European Bloc, there was Dracul. He sat by himself, surrounded by waving darkness that formed a suit and cloak. He stared right at Aldrich with his eyes of solid, inky black.

It was extremely rare that a Sentinel like Dracul ever took a job like this.

After all, Sentinels were independent, basically like kings, so they could do whatever they wanted. They had no need to weigh themselves down with security contracts.

As evidenced by the fact that no other Sentinels were present. Most of them were content to sit in their own city states in luxury and content, only ever showing up in the worst of disasters.

If Dracul was here, protecting country representatives was just an excuse. He was here to see Aldrich.

"Please proceed to the podium," said the helper bot, sensing Aldrich's pause.

Aldrich nodded and stepped across a long walkway made of solid, pure blue energy that led to the center of the hearing room where he got in place behind circular white podium platform.

It was now time for the hearing.

Chapter 299: [Bonus chapter] The First Vote

Media drones buzzed about in the air, their camera eyes whirring and clicking as they took in every little piece of this scene. A scene, Aldrich was coming to realize, that was historic. He would quite literally be in a page on a history book.

To some, that might have shaken them up, but to Aldrich, it was just more motivation to get things done. Everyone was watching him. Relying on him.

It was time to step up.

The way the hearing was setup, Aldrich was at the lowest point in the room with representatives looking down at him from what were basically booth seats. It reminded him of the Roman Colosseum. Gladiators fighting down in pits while the free and wealthy watched from above.

In Aldrich's case, he was fighting for freedom. Not just that. Much more. The freedom to do whatever he wanted. To be a Sentinel.

Had Aldrich been deemed more of a threat, he would have been separated from the audience by a forcefield, but evidently, the presence of multiple S rankers made everyone confident enough to lose that layer of separation.

Before this, Aldrich had used Fler'Gan's potion. For an hour and a half timeframe, he could activate his ten second window of hypnotic suggestion. He had some worry that the hearing might last longer than that, but he had confirmed with Aarav over the plane that, most likely, it would not go over an hour.

"Think of it like an auction, really," was what Aarav had said, and had not refused to elaborate further on as he took a long nap through the rest of the trip.

Aarav was not here, however. He already had a deal with Aldrich. No point in him wasting time when he had gotten what he needed and done what he could do to help.

"Proceeding special grade hearing S64." A woman's voice resonated through the room, reaching everyone's ears with crisp quality. There were microphone and speaker systems inlaid throughout all the surfaces here to make sure volume was never going to be an issue.

Aldrich looked up to the source of the voice. It was a woman covered from head to toe in a mechanical suit of white and black that made her look almost like a bot. She was all smooth surfaces, joint segments, plating, and glowing strips of energy.

She stood atop a floating strip of solid blue energy, surrounded by a small fleet of technical and security drones.

The only part of her that was discernibly human was her face, but even that still had marks of cybernetic augmentation. Her eyes shone a bright teal green, energy lines of the same shade running lengthwise from her forehead, crossing over the eyes, and reaching down to her chin.

The teal green eyes indicated she was an Operator, a higher level operative for the Panopticon responsible for maintaining important tasks like drone fleet mobilization or, in her, maintaining this space station and running the hearings.

An Operator of an entire space station like this was a serious force to reckon with on her own. If push came to shove, Operators could freely manipulate Panopticon tech around them using a shared technopathy, making them extremely dangerous as Panopticon tech was practically everywhere.

Supermind sat on a hovering wheelchair behind her as the Arbiter meant to facilitate discourse between Aldrich and his examiners.

"This hearing brings forth the case of the enhanced individual known as 'Thanatos', who henceforth from now shall be referred to as the 'examined.'"

The purpose of this hearing today is to ascertain the examined's threat, and, if determined sufficiently low, their potential to integrate into the military-hero complex that we depend upon to maintain stability and order," said the Operator.

"To begin with, I will introduce to the examined his examiner's-,"

"Skip that part." Though sound carried well through the room, it was still easy to pinpoint where it came from. This time, it came from Imugi War Art's section.

Specifically, the CEO: Park Jin-Woo.

Everyone turned to stare at him, as did Aldrich. The man sat cross legged, leaning back in his chair lazily. Nothing really distinguished him from the rest of his company personnel; they were all dressed in slick, formal black suits. Typical corporate wear.

That is, nothing except his face, covered as it was under an angular helmet shaped in the visage of a dragon's head.

Aldrich had little to no idea about the CEO. He was incredibly reclusive, as were most of the Council of Fortune CEOs. At that level of influence, there was no need to show up for PR stunts or tours or silly little interviews.

All a Fortune company's CEO had to do to project power was simply exist.

Showing up in the public eye too often only put a target on their back.

Out of everyone in the hearing, all the government officials and company executives, the big shots with the most weight to push around were Park Jin Woo, Tychus Colt - CEO of ARMA, the other Fortune company here, and Dracul, the Sentinel.

"Pursuant to relevant codes, it is advisable to allow the hearing to continue under procedure," said the Operator. "As ignoring it may infringe on the rights afforded to the examined-,"

"Rights? What rights. You've taken him in by force already. And those of us up here that matter don't follow the rules anyway," said Jin-Woo. "So let's skip the part where we introduce nearly a hundred interested parties here and get to the real auction.

Because, let's be honest, that's what it is. An auction."

"I will remind you that we are on live news," said the Operator.

"Does that matter?"

"Now, now, let's not get too worked up here, Mr. Park." Tychus Colt spoke this time, baring a broad, silver toothed smile under a wide cowboy hat. He was of hearty build,

wide with a portly belly, though still muscular underneath a fat layer built on fine dining. "Let the cute Operator missus do her thing."

"No. I agree with Jin Woo." Dracul spoke, a faint Eastern European accent tinting his voice. "Move on."

"Moving on then." The Operator reached out and tapped various holographic screens. "Then moving forward to the first case. Is Thanatos a threat to global security? The examined is allowed time to present a defense of his own case, after which, a round of questioning will follow.

Proceeding questioning, votes will be cast.

As per procedure, a two thirds majority vote is required from all examiners to close a case."

"Skip this too," said Jin Woo, impatiently waving his hand forward. "What? Are we really going to throw Thanatos away? The only one in this entire world that can control Locuses and variants like that? Hm? Is that what's going to happen?"

There was subtle threat in his voice, as if to say that anyone who had the gall to cast a no vote was going to hear from him personally.

"Heh, I'd like him around, that's for sure," said Tychus. "Long as he sees my way of seein' things."

Dracul did not say anything, but two Fortune members voicing their opinions was enough. Nobody else voiced a dissenting opinion.

"Move on to the vote," demanded Jin Woo.

The Operator looked to Supermind.

Supermind nodded, unfazed, almost as if he had expected this.

"Moving on to the vote. When all votes are cast or at the end of an hour timeframe, whichever comes first-," began the Operator.

"One hour? Ridiculous. All of you better cast your votes within five minutes. I value my time. And I assume you all value your own time as well." Jin Woo pressed on a helper bot's screen, presumably putting his vote in with zero hesitation.

Aldrich was impressed. The sheer amount of influence Jin Woo and Tychus had was astounding. Dracul could ignore everyone because of his Sentinel status, but that did not mean anyone had to obey him.

But Jin Woo and Tychus were different. As the heads of two military megacorporations that had thrived on the chaos of variant conflict, they had their tendrils locked throughout the world, in the economies of practically every country.

ARMA's mass produced weaponry and outsourced policing forces helped keep the streets safe on a near global scale.

Imugi was less widespread than ARMA, focusing more on high end specialty tech, but their influence at the top level, in creating contracts directly with national militaries or governments, was unmatched.

And, seeing this, Aldrich got a good idea of what Aarav had meant when he said this was going to be like an auction.

This hearing was not meant to determine whether Aldrich was going to super-jail or not.

No, it was going to decide who got to keep him on their side. In essence: a bidding war.

Within five minutes, the votes were all cast.

"The examiners of this hearing have declared in a 94-0 decision that Thanatos is not a threat to global security," said the Operator.

Chapter 300: Second Vote, First Offer

"Then proceeding with the next and final case," said the Operator. She swiped her hands in front of her, shutting various holographic screens and replacing them with new ones. "As Thanatos has not been deemed a threat, he must now be integrated into global defense.

This open ended case will allow the examiners, all representatives of various arms of global defense, a discussion period to present motions.

These motions will provide frameworks to integrate Thanatos. When all motions have been heard, the examined will determine what can work with them. If multiple motions are considered, then it will come down to a vote.

The examined may also be freely questioned during this time, and they may also question the examiners."

The Operator sighed, briefly glancing at the Fortune CEOs. She probably knew where this was headed. "As it stands, many of you have already prepared motions.

If you would like to present them, please raise your hands."

Immediately, Jin Woo and Tychus raised their hands. Green lights shone above their seats. Aldrich noticed none of the tier 1 companies followed, but by the body language of their executives, they were all in support of either Jin Woo or Tychus.

In other words, corporate factions.

A few seconds after, government representatives from the various gathered nation states raised their hands.

Aldrich noticed with some curiosity two factions, however, that kept their hands down. One was Dracul, the Sentinel. The other was the Alterhuman Agency. On their section of the seats, Aldrich recognized the current president, Emrys Du Lac.

Emrys just sat there, leaning forward, elbows on his knees, hands resting atop each other. His flowing white beard contrasted starkly with his jet black eyes, eyes that looked like spatters of midnight that zoned in on Aldrich with hawk-like focus.

Recognition was just about all Aldrich had, though. If the Fortune CEOs were mysterious, then Emrys was practically a cryptid. There was almost no information about him at all, and generally, it was deemed that he was more an ancient relic, occupying the president spot simply because he was the descendant of the Du Lac family that founded the Alterhuman Agency generations ago.

The real leader of the AA, it was assumed, was Mira Harker, the current CEO of the organization.

The fact that Emrys was here and not Mira indicated to Aldrich that perhaps the AA did not care too much about him. Or, maybe, Emrys had a far bigger role than meets the eye.

Generally speaking, there were three different factions here. The corporations, the United Front that consolidated nation state voices, and the AA.

Four, if Aldrich counted Dracul, but he was more an outsider than anything else. Yet despite being an outsider, he was liable to be the most helpful out of all of them.

"Let's begin with Mr. Park's motion," said the Operator. "Mr. Park, you have the stage."

"Good." Jin Woo remained seated as he spoke. "Thanatos, that's the name you chose, right?"

Jin Woo paused, waiting for Aldrich to answer.

"Yes."

"The Greek personification of death, is it? Dark, mysterious, and brooding. No doubt, you'd be quite the marketing tool for the AA. Thanatos merchandise would sell like hotcakes on a busy street.

Maybe that will raise the all time low that the AA's hit with the public." Jin Woo shot a snide glance at Emrys, but Emrys did not register it or chose to ignore it. "But your talents have more worth than starring in the hundredth hero blockbuster or pumping out feel good speeches just to rack up AP.

I've seen what you've done. How you work.

You don't like rules, otherwise you would've reached out to the AA yourself.

You aren't the type to get bogged down in the commercial aspect of it all, otherwise Aarav would've bought you out entirely.

Oh right, and about that, I hear Aarav's father recently sent his heirs on a wild goose chase for immortality. Tsk."

Jin Woo shook his head dismissively. "Old Singh should brush up on his mythology. From Gilgamesh to the Holy Grail - quests for immortality never really go right.

Unless, of course, there just so happens to be a shortcut."

Aldrich raised a brow under his helmet. Jin Woo got straight to the point. Bluntly, too. He wondered how Aarav was reacting to this, but knowing him, he was probably unfazed.

"You're in this for something bigger than yourself," said Jin Woo. "Tell me, what is it?"

Aldrich mulled that question over for a bit. He did not want to reveal much for now, so all he did was utter one word: "Order."

"Ah, order." Jin Woo lingered on Aldrich's answer, as if savoring it. "Then we are just the same.

World peace is a little dream of mine, and the first step to that is wiping out the Titan Nests. They may be sealed off now, their energy readings still stable, but what happens when they decide to spread open again?

What happens when the Titans, apocalyptic threats, storm our cities once more?

We can't cower behind a single cape again like we did with Vanguard. There is no Vanguard. And nobody comes close to him anymore."

Jin Woo shook his head. "We have to be more creative. One punch won't solve this threat. But creativity and innovation is humanity's forte, no?

It's been well known that variant minds are practically impenetrable. In some oddball cases, with variants bred in captivity over several generations, you get critters that will fetch for you instead of ripping your arm off, but wild ones?

Not a chance.

The scientific community, using data from psionic Alters that have tried to infiltrate variant minds, have posited the Hivemind Hypothesis. That is, there's one big brain hidden out there that controls all the variants, which explains how coordinated they can get and the existence of Geists that seemingly live just to kill us.

Some variants seem especially connected to this hivemind. We call them Locuses. Thirty three of them just so happened to initiate a worldwide attack on various major cities quite recently.

If only there was a power out there that could sever that hivemind connection. Something that could rip the variants from the source of it all. If we could just develop it, replicate it, make it something to mass produce - there would be no variant threat at all, would there?

What if we could refine it further? To the point where we could control the Titans themselves? Before they ever even awoke?"

"Then get to the point. What's your offer?" said Aldrich. Jin Woo was beating around the bush, hamming up how much Aldrich could solve the variant crisis to pressure Aldrich into a position where he would lose public support if he said no.

Jin Woo paused for a stunned moment. It was probably the first time in quite a while that anyone had talked back to him like that. He chuckled. "Laconic. Very spartan. I like it.

I'll cut the fat and meat and get down to the bone, then. I'm offering you a spot as a chief operative in Imugi's Owl Department. That department focuses on classified plans, missions and research to fight against the ever present variant threat.

For the curious global public, the Anti-Variant Signal tech you see propped up in your cities and roads - you can thank the Owl Department for that.

As a chief operative, you will have virtually unlimited freedom to do all you want. The only man you will answer to throughout all heaven and earth will be me.

You will get free access to our state of the art variant database, tracking systems, and firepower with personnel as you need. Anyone that works with you now is free to work with you under me.

State of the art research will go into making your powers work the best that they can and, maybe, bring about world peace."

That last part was the biggest caveat. 'State of the art research' was just a euphemism for 'trying to copy your powers'. Aldrich did not know if it was even possible for that to happen, but he was not inclined to find out.

Aldrich was strong, yes, easily A-rank level strong, but he was not yet at the absolute top of the world. What gave him global leverage was his ability to raise undead.

Giving that away? Not likely.

Before Aldrich could answer, Tychus chimed in.

"Before you answer, Thanatos, why don't ya hear me out? I know ol' Jin Woo's offer sounds mighty tempting, but it's always good to know your options."

"I believe this is my time," said Jin Woo.

"Jus' giving him advice." Tychus maintained his sure smile.

"If there is any chance for argument, I will exercise speech muting privileges," warned the Operator.

Jin Woo shrugged, giving Tychus his say. The green light above Tychus's area shone brighter, indicating it was his time to present.