

Super Necromancer System

Chapter 301: [Bonus chapter] Second Vote, Second Offer

"Jin Woo's got a lotta ambition," said Tychus. "Real hungry, he is, just like his pops and his pops before him." Tychus chuckled. "World peace, he says, thinkin' real big, but I think he's forgettin' about the little people.

Makes sense, considerin' his company makes them fancy, secret tech, but here at ARMA, we're a family company - we see you folk no matter how small or big.

Everyone knows our guns, specially' the green grade line that we make sure is affordable for everyone.

Now, let's entertain Jin Woo's ideas here.

Say that this plan to turn the Titans into our lil pets doesn't work, then what? We just kicked the mother of all hornet's nests without a plan B, C, D, E, or F.

If it's order you want, Thanatos, then we gotta start small.

Jin Woo's a bright kid, and he's right about one thing: the variants do gotta go.

But we gotta start small. We gotta make sure the families are protected first. Then, when homes and cities are all clear, we can think about the big stuff."

"Again, can you get to your offer?" said Aldrich, stopping Tychus from rambling on about family this and that - empty appeals to emotion to pressure Aldrich.

In the corner of Aldrich's vision, he thought he could see Jin Woo's shoulders go up and down in a chuckle.

"Sure thing." Tychus kept his grin and composure, more used to pushback than Jin Woo was. "I jus' want a tough guy like you to show the variants hell the way ya want to. But the thing is, my Blue Force boys ain't the type that'll fit ya.

They make sure the streets are safe in the cities, but goin' out to Wasteland territory and knockin' down variants, it ain't their thing."

Aldrich wondered where Tychus was going with this. ARMA's Blue Force was the largest private police force in the world, operating in practically every major country.

Basically, outsourced peacekeeping.

Like most of ARMA's wares, the Blue Force was quantity over quality for the most part, their contracts affordable and done with men in bulk. Not at all the place for Aldrich, who, if he was a mercenary, would be more like a specialty elite unit.

On top of that, the Blue Force were well regulated in spite of their quantity, operating under fairly strict procedures that minimized losses, liability to the company, and potentially bad PR incidents with the public.

In that regard, Imugi was a far better offer for Aldrich as far as freedom went.

But Tychus knew that already. He had something else up his sleeve.

"But I ain't about to let that stop me!" Tychus declared. "See, ARMA's run our Blue Force boys with the idea that we'd sweep the streets, and outside the walls, the AA would pack the punch to the variants.

It's worked for decades, specially' when Vanguard was out there laying a smackdown when it mattered.

Now, though, there ain't no Vanguard. The AA's been havin' it tough, losin' that bright star of theirs, not to mention other issues. I feel sorry for em', it ain't right they gotta shoulder such a big burden all by their lonesome selves.

I think it's about time the AA got some help. It's about time ARMA stopped jus' lookin' at the streets and went beyond.

And so I'm unveilin' plans to start a hero corp of my own. Plans ain't really set with it, hell, I ain't even got a name for it yet, but believe me, once I get my gears runnin', things ought to fall in place quick."

Tychus pointed at Aldrich. "You, Thanatos, I'm hopin' to see right at the very top of it."

Everyone else was muted, but Aldrich picked up a wave of motion coursing through the entire crowd of examiners, all of them turning to talk with each other at this huge revelation.

The AA had stood without competition for close to a hundred years, founded directly with the support of Vanguard, the former world symbol of hope.

But with Vanguard gone, the AA also lost more of its shine. Right now, the AA was at its lowest, weakest state. The perfect time for a competitor to rise up.

And ARMA, with its friendly image, spotless PR, and wide revenue stream that beat out Imugi by a fair margin - in fact, as far as net worths went, ARMA was nearly practically number 1 in the world - had both the support and funds to do just that.

Aldrich did not seriously consider this offer either. If he did, he was just going to be the mouthpiece for Tychus's new pet project. Not what he wanted.

Jin Woo's offer was more typical of a corporate Suit. More self centered. He wanted Aldrich's power for his own, and he wanted it only for himself.

Tychus was wilder, almost insane with his proposition. He wanted to bring the fight to the AA, an organization thought to practically be an immovable monolith. Aldrich was just one piece in the bigger weapon that would try to bring the AA down.

In large manner, the offers mirrored the personalities of their respective CEOs.

But both offers missed Aldrich. Expected, too. His goal was first and foremost to be a Sentinel, but nobody here would accept that. It would be like striking gold and just burying it over.

This was a room of hungry, opportunistic vultures.

Not happening.

It was up to Aldrich to demand his freedom, real freedom, but before he did, he wanted to hear what people here wanted to say. Mostly to get a read on them. He got an idea of how the two Fortune CEOs were like, so next was the United Front of nation states.

"So, how about it, champ? Want to make a difference? With me?" Tychus smiled brightly. "For everyone?"

"And what about the United Front?" said Aldrich, motioning to the government representatives.

"United? Heh, ain't the word I'd use for em', but I'll pass the mic over to their side." Tychus shrugged. "Think it through, Thanatos, cause' this is an opportunity of a lifetime.

A chance to make the biggest difference you can think of." Tychus tipped his cowboy hat and pressed a holograph screen in front of him, removing him from sound projection.

"I'll present my motion first." The green light shone over the United States. The secretary of defense, Emmet Rye, known as the 'Gator' for his crocodilian mutant traits, stood up. "On behalf of the United States."

Chapter 302: Sentinel

Aldrich inspected Emmet. As far as mutants went, his mutation was not severe. His skin had a dark green tint to it from his thick, leathery scales. But overall, he was quite humanoid, with a square face, yellow glared slit eyes, and visibly sharp teeth that still made it clear that even if he was recognizable as a man, he still very much had quite a bit of mutant in him.

But more man than monster. Emmet was dressed up in appropriate military garb decorated with badges to signify outstanding heroism and his position as a general.

As far as public information showed, Aldrich knew that Emmet was a war hero who had put his life on the line more times than the average man ever had the balls to do in multiple lifetimes.

Aldrich did not know how much of that was PR, but he could respect a man that could risk their lives for others.

"First, a few questions for Thanatos," said Emmet. "Our reports on you show what you did, but little about who you are, and for you to be part of anything defensible, we've got to know you a bit better.

So, why don't you introduce yourself?

Where'd you come from? Who really are you, under that armor of yours? You showed up in Haven, which is U.S. territory. You from there?"

Jin Woo's voice cut in with a guillotine edge. "I'd like to object to this line of questioning. Thanatos should have a right to privacy. Tychus and I have respectfully tread around personal questions, but it seems that the U.S., as usual, lacks tact."

"I agree with Jin Woo on that one," said Tychus. "Ain't right for a man to get hounded so much after what he's been through, locked up like that after he got done savin' a whole city."

Aldrich understood what was going on here.

Emmet, and by extension the United States, naturally wanted more information on him. After all, the Fortune CEOs had done practically no questioning. All they had done was tossed their offers in the air.

Though Emmet was being friendly, it was obvious that his questioning would soon try to to pry into how Aldrich's powers functioned or how many troops he had.

The questions were meant to mine data. Data to determine Aldrich's threat level.

This reflected the U.S. government's attitude. They treated him as an unknown variable that they still had to figure out whether to oppose or not. Not even the government could directly oppose two Fortune CEOs, so it had cast a yes vote for Thanatos not being a threat.

But that did not mean they did not truly consider Aldrich a threat. It just meant they were pressured to say yes at this hearing.

If push came to shove and the government did deem him a threat post-hearing, Aldrich had no illusion that they could and would make his unlife much harder in both direct and indirect ways.

Indirectly, they could cut off support for Haven. Directly, they could send military force against Aldrich, especially if he rejected the protection the CEOs tacitly promised.

Speaking of, the Fortune CEOs did not try to block these questions out of generosity.

They saw Aldrich basically as their next new shiny and classified project, though less classified in Tychus's case. Even then, if Aldrich was going to be the face of a new hero organization, he probably would not have all his information revealed to begin with.

Naturally, the CEOs wanted to minimize knowledge of Aldrich's abilities, origins, literally everything about him, as much as possible. Because all of that was valuable information on their new project that other competitors could use.

"Thanatos can answer for himself," countered Emmet. He met Jin Woo's sharp voice with gritty calm. "And he can choose to remain silent as well, if that's what he wants."

"General Rye, what's the end goal of all this questioning? Are you going to offer me something? Or do you want me to share valuable information for nothing?" said Aldrich. Again, he wanted to get to the point.

If he did cooperate with the government, where would that get him?

"The point of this second case is to debate how you should be integrated into global defense of which the states is a major part of. I have to mention too that your operations so far have all been on U.S. soil, and as an unknown entity, I'm sure you know how much of a headache that poses for both of us.

I'm no legal expert or even a proper politician, but even a layman like myself understands that it'll be one massive knot to untie.

Unless, that is, we can come to an agreement here." Emmet motioned to Jin Woo and Tychus. "It's all the rage to work for a big company these days. More money in it compared to a government job.

But I'll say this: there are things that the government can do and know that companies, no matter how important they like to think they are, can't get their grubby hands on.

And, I don't know if this applies to you, but I still believe there's some honor in serving your country."

"I see," said Aldrich. This went about how he expected it to go. The U.S. was essentially using the leverage they had over Aldrich - the fact that Haven and all his actions were on U.S. soil - against him.

Granted, the government also offered a job, probably planning to turn Aldrich into a government operative and lab rat.

Aldrich figured he had a good enough read of how things would go from here. The United Front nation states would try to get information from Aldrich, and the corporations would try their best to keep him privatized.

Other countries had less leverage than the U.S. on Aldrich, but maybe they would offer more freedom or more resources to try and sway him from the U.S.

But unless that freedom was absolute, Aldrich did not care about it. He did not want to be anyone's tool. He had fought enough battles and amassed enough power not to bow his head to anyone.

That last part about service to country, that was particularly laughable. As a Dud, Aldrich had been a nobody his entire life, and the government had barely done anything to change that.

Aldrich had no loyalty to any flag. His only loyalty was, as always, to himself.

"I see," repeated Aldrich.

"See what?" said Emmet.

"I see that it doesn't matter whether you're a general, a government rep, or a Fortune CEO. You're all the same. You want to use me for your own good," said Aldrich. "Which is completely understandable. I don't judge any of you for wanting this.

It's simply logical to want the best for yourselves.

But then again, wouldn't it also be logical for me to look out for myself?"

The Operator chimed in. "I will remind the examined that the purpose of this hearing is to determine integration. If you reject motions drafted for you, there will be pushback."

"Pushback? Locked in a cell for a week after saving thousands of lives sounds like pushback already." Aldrich shrugged. "Relax. I'm not here to stand against all of you. If I wanted to, I wouldn't even be here to begin with."

Even now, I could disappear without a trace, and none of you could ever catch me."

An uncomfortable series of looks switched between many of the examiners, though some, the big dogs like the Fortune CEOs and the reps of the bigger countries, did not bat an eye.

They likely already determined that there was no way Thanatos would hand himself over to the authorities unless he had some kind of insurance to get out.

"I want to work with all of you," continued Aldrich. "After all, as you all have so aptly laid out, you have resources and power."

But only on the condition that I be free."

"As an examined, you do not have the right to present motions of your own," said the Operator. "As indicated by article-,"

"Article 44A, yes, I read through the rules for the hearing when I got here," said Aldrich.

"What are you suggesting then?" said Supermind, his hand on his chin.

"Mr. Park, you said before that if I worked with you, I would not bow to anyone under heaven and earth except you, correct?" said Aldrich. "Well, I want to go a step further."

I will not bow for you, or for anyone else here.

If I'm going to be working with you all, for global defense, then it won't be as a subordinate; it will be as an equal."

Supermind's X shaped pupils widened in recognition. The same recognition flickered across the faces of many of the examiners.

Dracul, normally utterly emotionless, faintly smiled.

"You can't mean..." began Supermind.

"I want to be recognized as a Sentinel. I want my own power. My own authority," said Aldrich. "Authority on par with an entire nation. Or a global mega-corporation."

Because that is how much my power is worth."

Chapter 303: Sentinel Vote...?

A massive commotion, one far bigger than any before, ran across the whole hearing like lightning, electrifying the examiners. Suited men and women talked among each other, turning their heads, checking screens, phones, devices, anything to try and shed some light on this sudden turnaround.

"Power on par with nations? Sure, that's debatable. There are some nations out here that are worth nothing without the alliances they're in," said Jin Woo. "But equal to us? The Council of Fortune? With a snap of our fingers, we could set send our fragile global economy into a freefall it'll never recover from.

You think you have that much power?"

"Now, let's not get too rowdy here. We don't see eye to eye on too many things on that council," said Tychus, his smile for once fading. "See, the world's a buncha movin' parts that work together.

If you stand out from it, the whole machine's liable to jus' break down.

But if there's one thing we all agree on, it's that we want that machine to keep runnin'. You step outta line, threaten to tip the machine over, then I ain't sure what'll happen."

"Those generous offers turned into threats quick," said Aldrich.

"Ain't a threat. More like course correction," said Tychus.

So this was what happened when Aldrich tried to shake up the world order. If accepting a deal with anyone here was poking the hornet's nest, then declaring Sentinel status was like taking the nest, stomping it apart, and then torching the hornets.

"You do understand you'll only complicate your situation even further?" said Emmet. "Becoming a Sentinel - an independent actor - and taking over U.S. territory: tell me, if that isn't an invasion, then what is?"

"I am curious." Dracul spoke, his voice echoing softly with a slight rasp - a voice meant for a night creature. The moment Dracul spoke, everyone else grew quiet, showing, in the end, who really had the most power here. "Do you think you have the power to be like us? To be a Sentinel? To be beyond everything?"

Aldrich took in that question. He had read up on how governments and the AA had started to classify Thanatos. Generally, Thanatos was considered an A rank disaster,

which according to typical AA guidelines was the classification granted to variants or villains that needed multiple coordinated A rankers to stop.

That was respectable, but a Sentinel was an entire level above that. They were basically the firepower of a major country packed into one Alter.

Aldrich was not yet at that level. But that was just in terms of raw power.

"Do I think I personally have that power? Maybe not." Aldrich put his gauntleted hand to his heart with a heavy thud of metal. "But I am not alone. I am legion.

If any of you makes me an enemy today, you make an enemy not just of me, but of countless others. Beings as strong as me, stronger than me, and countless many weaker - they all stand united with me.

And united against my enemies."

"How much military strength do you even have?" said Emmet. "You act like you can stand against the entirety of the U.S."

"Enough to be confident. Enough to make it clear that if all of you today decide to stand against me, I won't be afraid to fight back," said Aldrich. "But again, it's your choice whether to accept me or not.

Either I become a Sentinel, or a villain the likes of which you have never seen since the Age of Villains."

"You would stand here and declare the entire world your enemy?" said Emmet.

"I could" said Aldrich.

He was bluffing, of course. Taking on the whole world was impossible right now. But escaping deep into the Wastelands and building up an unstoppable variant army?

That was very, very possible.

And making himself into an impossibly large threat incentivized the examiners to grant him Sentinel status that much more. Otherwise, instead of a Sentinel, they would have a villain on their hands.

"Hahahah." Dracul chuckled, amused. He leaned forward with eager smile. "That confidence, I will acknowledge it. I hear from my crows in the Underworld that you are to stand against the Trident.

Is that true?"

"It is," declared Aldrich. "I have a personal stake in seeing their destruction."

"As do I." Dracul nodded. "The Trident is like a cancer. It spreads its tumors everywhere. In every government. In every company. Trying to rip them out is impossible."

Always, there will be a bribed official, a corrupt politician, a bought out suit to stand in your way.

They stood in my way too long. My family died. I took things into my own hands.

I broke all the rules.

Now, I am Sentinel.

Is this what you wish as well?"

"It's what I need" said Aldrich, staring right at Dracul.

Dracul's dark eyes were hard to read, but the intensity behind them, honed by lost love and vengeance, was an intensity that Aldrich could reflect in his own eyes.

"Operator, Supermind, I acknowledge Sentinel status for Thanatos," said Dracul.

"This current case has nothing to do with Sentinel status" said the Operator.

"Oh, but it does," said Aldrich. "According to your own rules, nothing forbids the examined from ever asking for Sentinel status. The idea being that if you're strong enough to even consider it, nobody can say 'no' to you anyway."

"..." the Operator pursed her lips, unsure of herself.

"That is true," said Supermind. "But in all past cases, those that have tried to get Sentinel status have been no brainer decisions. Either they were blatantly above the rules, or they were delusional and in over their heads."

You, though, are maybe the first where things aren't so clear cut.

In the end, your Sentinel status would have to come down to a vote."

"Vote? A silly joke." Dracul leaned back in his seat of solidified darkness, putting his elbow on an armrest of shadow while resting his stubble decorated chin on his fist. "All of you here know that Sentinels are not appointed by vote, they are appointed by necessity."

Any man worthy to be Sentinel is raw, untamed power. If you do not respect it, it will turn against you.

Is that not why I was appointed Sentinel? Because all of you fear that if you do not give me respect, I will swallow one of your countries whole in darkness.

But go ahead. Cast your votes. And Thanatos, when you are done with this charade, you are free to reach out to me on the matter of the Trident."

"I'll keep that in mind" said Aldrich. He turned to Supermind. "Then go ahead and start that vote."

"Are you sure about this? Like I said, this isn't an open and shut case. The vote could go either way. And if it doesn't go the way you want it to, by global law, you will be considered an outlaw.

In the eyes of the U.S., you'd instantly be promoted to an invader."

"I'm sure. I want to make this happen while all of you are here in one place." Aldrich readied Fler'Gan's potion, having his mental trigger finger on the hypnotic suggestion effect's activation.

"I will go ahead and authorize a Sentinel Status Consideration Vote" said Supermind. "Operator, load the appropriate information and voting procedurals."

Once the vote started, Aldrich would use the suggestive effect to get as much of the examiners on board as possible. He was fairly certain he could not get everyone here on his side. At least a few of them had to have had strong enough wills to resist.

But could he get a majority?

Aldrich was fairly confident, but there was a definite possibility it would not work out. In that case, he would default to his plan of setting up base in the Wastelands, which he was much more confident in doing now because he had Dracul's support.

Not many would dare to go after Aldrich if they thought it meant crossing Dracul.

"Operator?" Supermind furrowed his brows, his hovering wheelchair floating up to the Operator's side.

The Operator seemed to be blankly staring in front of her, as if in a daze. Her eyes turned from teal green to bright, icy blue. The same shade of blue of the frost bots.

With a violent motion, the Operator whirled around and slammed her fist into Supermind's chest. Her mechsuit arm punched right through Supermind's age weakened flesh and bone and even popped right through his hovering chair.

Sparks crackled out from the hole in the chair outlining the Operator's arm, illuminating shreds of viscera and spatters of blood on once clean white plating.

Spermind's cross shaped pupils dilated, then thinned into nothing but blank white.

Dark tendrils erupted from the Operator's shadow, impaling her up high and away from Supermind.

Supermind slumped over, falling forward onto clean white tiles. A gaping hole lay bare in his chest, where his heart used to be.

"Get him treatment!" roared Dracul as he got off his chair of darkness, fully mobilized.

The Judicata, the entirety of the space station, started to shake. The lighting turned pale blue. The lights in all of the bots present, all of the deadly Panopticon battle drones and bots, flickered from green to the same shade.

The Operator was connected to the Judicata and every single piece of robotics within it. If she had been taken over, then everything else was too.

The bots and drones were the least of anyones worries here. The S class heroes were more than enough to annihilate the machines.

It was the Judicata itself. If the structure had been taken over, then -

The floor started to violently shake.

"The self-destruction sequence has been initiated!" shouted a visored techno.

Chapter 304: Attack on the Judicata

Chaos unfolded all around Aldrich as machines turned rogue. The cacophony of lasers and energy weapons from Panopticon bots made up a wild lightshow of zig-zagging blasts, some of which managed to bore through examiners, burning out sizzling, scorch lined holes in them.

Thankfully, the blasts did not burn through the Judicata's walls because they were shielded, but the self-destruction sequence rendered that a moot point for celebration.

Aldrich briefly assessed the situation with the examiners.

First, the United Front -

The S class heroes, as expected, were holding up just fine. Mushin and Machine Emperor protected the Asian Alliance.

Mushin used his invisible sword and expert agility, darting from bot to bot with superhuman physicals, erasing chunks of the bots out of existence with swings so fast that Aldrich could not even perceive them.

Machine Emperor had gone from tacky purple and gold two piece suit to his signature silver mechsuit in an instant using nanotech. A glowing gold core shone at his chest, showcasing the star reactor that powered it.

With energy beams of his own, Machine Emperor annihilated hordes of bots with ease, his golden rays melting through the Panopticon machines like a molten hot knife through butter.

"Chain lightning!" Indra shouted as he blasted bots with bright blue arcs of electricity that bounced from bot to bot, causing them to short circuit before turning molting hot and exploding.

"Chain lightning!" Indra flew around rapidly, his body half physical, half energy, as he spammed the same move over and over again.

Star Spartan guarded both the Eastern European Block and the European Union, flying around rapidly with his spear struck forward, turning into a living comet that blew apart bots at extreme speeds, swiftly changing direction even at awkward angles.

Kinesis guarded the United States using her signature mind constructs - bright white energy structures made with force of will. A forcefield was erected all around the U.S. representatives while she created a machine gun construct that gunned down bots en masse.

It was hard to tell whether Kinesis was putting in any effort considering she always had a visored mask on, but Aldrich doubted it. The world hailed her as the next Supermind, someone who, given time, could stand near, if not at the top of the hero world.

Though it was hard to tell anything more about her. She was secretive. No interviews. No publicity. The fact that she was even here was a surprise in of itself.

The rest of the United Front states did alright, even without S class heroes. A rankers combined with bodyguards did just fine against the rampaging bots.

The Antarctic Settlers, in particular, were in their element. As a nation state of mutants that valued strength, their representatives were all tough in their own right. They were their own bodyguards.

With claws, jaws, tendrils, spikes, and tails, they tore through the bots like they were scrap.

Then, the Fortune CEOs -

Jin Woo sat in calm against the torrent of lasers. His bodyguards protected Imugi's personnel with ease. There were only six of them, all armored in head to toe with sleek black combat armor lined with bright blue energy lines. Their helmets had single horns jutting from the sides.

These were the Six Serpents, Jin Woo's personal security detail that was said to have never failed.

With energy swords, shields, and a combination of Alter powers that, from a quick glance, Aldrich identified as telekinesis that could blow things apart from the inside out, threads of energy that could control bots like puppets, and an ability to project after-images at superspeed to cut down bots, the Six Serpents annihilated any rogue machinery that came near their vicinity.

One of the Serpents knelt down with a hand on their chest, and in a few seconds, a spatial distortion rippled out, but then fizzled out, the warped space quickly returning to normal.

Aldrich understood what had happened. Jin Woo had tried to warp out, but the Judicata, like all Panopticon Pillars, was Warp-Locked.

Nothing could warp in or out as a security measure.

"Hm." Aldrich punched a bot that got close to him in the face, knocking its head off. He fired a few [Death Bolts], destroying several clusters of drones.

Energy bolts rained down on him, though they could not get through his energy resistant [Death Essence Barrier].

But the fighting was just routine habit, like taking a stroll in the park - his mental energy was diverted to figuring this situation out.

The higher tier bots, armed with serious, explosive firepower, would be up here soon. Those were no joke. The class 2 and 1 drones, for example, were said to be capable of taking out A rank disasters.

The Judicata was shaped like an ordinary Panopticon Pillar, that is, a lengthy, roughly cylindrical structure with bots and drones packed into every nook and cranny from top to bottom.

The hearing room was situated at the very top while the strongest bots were packed at the bottom. If the whole Pillar was taken over, then the bots were on their way up.

From below, Aldrich saw thousands of drones and humanoid bots flying their way up, forming a massive locust swarm of white plated metal bodies - an apocalyptic plague of mechanical destruction.

Three minutes until this place blows!" shouted the techno from before.

Not to mention the looming threat of self destruction.

Aldrich manifested his new cloak and flew into the air, landing on Supermind's platform. Dracul landed beside him. Several combat medics followed, thrusters from their boots and the backs of their combat suits letting them fly in. They knelt over Supermind's body, their compound eye like green goggles emitting scanning beams all over Supermind's body.

A dome of shadows rose up around everyone, blocking out blasts.

"Can you see in the dark?" said Dracul.

"Yes" said Aldrich. He inspected Supermind. The elderly man's heart was completely pulverized.

Yet, remarkably, Supermind was still alive, though barely. The perks of being a top tier Alter. His eyes, now blank, roughly focused on Aldrich. "Ir-irregular..."

"His condition's too far gone," said one of the medics. "Initiate cryostasis. The least we can do is preserve his body."

Aldrich's [Death Sense] triggered, and he could see Supermind's body lit in a green silhouette, near death. However, he could also see something else. A gray tint to the silhouette.

Supermind was cursed.

Aldrich had theorized before that the way that the Stranger's attacks seemingly had a curse like function to it that rendered whatever it killed, such as Randall, unable to be raised as an undead.

Or rather, one could raise them as a corpse, but not with their soul intact.

However, it was impossible to tell. The soul purging was like the purifying or curse effects in Elden World, but other than that, there was nothing to tie it to the game.

It could have been an Alter power that did the same. Or an alien one.

But now, it was more obvious. This energy was very much like the curse effect in Elden World, registering as such in his [Death Sense].

'Volantis, tell me, is that demonic?' relayed Aldrich. 'Your ability to sense energy is the best there is. The best even among the Necropolis.'

'It is. But unlike any demon I have encountered before,' said Volantis. 'But I must you remind you, O Armored, that demons are creatures of many realms. They are spread across a wide breadth, many of them in realms so far from each other that they know not the slightest bit about each other.'

Over time, these differences, especially with our ability to adapt to new realms, may grow to such extent that some demons may be unrecognizable from others."

'I see.' It was basically divergent evolution. Demons that settled in different realms over time could develop so many differences that they essentially became new species.

'Our power, 'curse magic', as the Elduin Realm called it, is one that predates the realm. It is a primordial force of erasure that represents the inevitable end of all things, and it can take many shapes and forms across many different realms.

This cursed energy is unlike any I have encountered before.'

'So a demon from another realm,' said Aldrich.

'That is my guess.'

'Good. Then I know more about what I'm dealing with.' Aldrich mentally took note that the Stranger had tried his best to conceal his demonic origins before.

With the frost bots, their energy was more concealed. 'Cleaner' as it were, harder to trace. But with this, a direct attack, probably from the Stranger himself, his energy signature was right here in a much stronger concentration.

It would be possible to identify the Stranger by analyzing the energy signature. He was sure Medula and the Death Lord could focus on using Supermind's body far better than Randall's.

However, that meant taking Supermind's body - the body of a worldwide treasure and hero.

"Get the cryo-injection" said the medic.

"Wait" said Aldrich.

"Will you restore him?" said Dracul.

"No, once he dies, he dies. But I can track his killer down with the body."

"If you can do that, we can too. We can't just give up his body to you," said the medic.

"You can and you will, if you value finding the killer at all. There are things that I alone can do." Aldrich nodded to Dracul. "If I have his body, I can take the next step in breaking the Trident apart as well."

"Listen to him" Dracul ordered. "On my authority as a Sentinel."

"..." the medics looked at each other, unsure what to do. Even with Dracul ordering them, handing over Supermind's body was something they were hesitant to do.

"It's...fine." Supermind spoke softly, the last inches of his life barely staying together. "A long time ago, back when I fought Zahak, Vanguard, when he still smiled, said something to me. He said, 'it takes an Irregular to beat an Irregular'.

I thought...it was stupid logic. But now, I think...maybe there is some truth to it.

Take my body. Hopefully, it will help you see."

Supermind's breathing slowed, his gaze drifting from Aldrich to the ceiling. "Soon, my old friend...I will be there."

The old hero, one of the three greats of old, drew his last breath.

Chapter 305: Rescue

"Thank you." Aldrich watched as Supermind's life finally faded away. His emotions towards seeing humans die were muted, but he did feel loss for Supermind.

Aldrich had looked up to the Triune when he was a child, just like countless other children. His biggest hero inspiration was Vanguard, but Supermind was a close second.

Supermind, the suave, quiet, cool character that contrasted with Vanguard's bombastic loudness. In many ways, Aldrich related more with Supermind than Vanguard.

But that was the past. When he always looked up.

Now, Aldrich stood at the precipice, at the very edge of the tip of the world. Supermind was an equal to him. And because they were equals, Supermind trusted Aldrich to avenge him.

This, above anything else, validated to Aldrich that he belonged here. At the top of the world.

"Take the body quickly. We have the machines to deal with" said Dracul.

Aldrich nodded. He placed his hand on Supermind's chest.

'Chrysa, I need you to take something in for me. A body' said Aldrich mentally.

'Another body? They're gross! But okay, father.'

White threads appeared from Aldrich's hand, wrapping all around Supermind's corpse like silk woven around prey caught in a spiderweb. With a flash of light, Supermind's body disappeared.

"What's going on?" one of the medics muttered. The other medics looked around, dazed.

"Hm. We are under attack" said Dracul. "Once I lower this dome of shadows, treat any injured you find."

"Roger that, sir."

Aldrich, like Dracul, understood what had happened. Supermind had wiped the medics' memories of this encounter to prevent them from spilling any details about the conversation that had just transpired.

Dracul's shadow sphere broke apart, and the combat medics flew away with their thrusters, activating energy shields on their arms to deflect a hailstorm of lasers and bullets as they returned to the examiners.

That same hailstorm now assailed Aldrich and Dracul.

Aldrich's [Death Essence Barrier] flickered rapidly as bolt after bolt fizzled into nothingness against it.

Dracul, on the other hand, just stood there. All the projectiles just sunk into his body, marking out little indents of pure darkness where they disappeared into an endless void.

Whenever a bot or drone got too close, tendrils of dark from Dracul's body and shadow would lash out, eviscerating them.

"That is a fine forcefield. Personal tech?" asked Dracul.

"Something like that." Aldrich assessed the situation. The situation was still relatively stable. Only a few examiners, it seemed, had died, with various others injured.

The S class heroes were holding back their strength. Mostly because they did not want to get make the Judicata explode, unstable as it already was with the self destruction sequence. But they also had to worry about the much weaker examiners getting caught in the crossfire of their area of effect attacks.

"This is a waste of time" said Aldrich, his voice projecting loud over the din of battle with the aid of Volantis. "The Judicata is set to explode. It might not take out the toughest of us, but it'll wipe out most of the examiners.

The main focus should be in getting out."

Dracul tossed Aldrich a earpiece, and he plugged it into his ear, the metal tendrils of his helm dragging the trinket into the side of his bare skull.

"I am tired of projecting my voice" said Dracul. "And that will give you access to the network the heroes are using. So, what do you suggest? I do not care much whether they die, but to you, I am sure, it is more important."

"I still need them for my vote." Aldrich tapped the side of his helm, willing Volantis to fiddle with the earpiece. "Can you store people in your shadows? I know that there's more space inside them than meets the eye."

Dracul shook his head. "My shadows are not a good place to be. Anything swallowed within them - crushed to nothingness."

"That's fine," said Aldrich. "I have a way out. I just need some coordination."

"Coordination in this chaos? Doubtful" said Dracul, eyeing the examiners as they ran around, shouted at each other, or hunkered down behind their guards and heroes.

In Aldrich's interface, he had his eyes set on Fler'Gan's potion. Its effects were dormant, ready to activate at any moment.

"I'll make it happen." Aldrich flew into the air, his dark green, tattered cape of souls billowing behind him. He connected to the channel the S class heroes used.

Immediately, he started to hear the din of several voices blaring in his ear.

"We need to get the examiners out!" Star Spartan's gruff voice rung out. "Machine Emperor, you're trying to take control of the Judicata back - how's that looking!?"

"I can't get in. Whatever took control of the Judicata - it's completely foreign, unlike any cyberspace signature I've seen."

"Then we need to do physical evac! Before this place blows!" said Star Spartan.

"This entire Pillar is compromised. All doors are locked; all escape pods or aircraft have been destroyed" said Machine Emperor. "And if you want to punch your way out, the Pillar will recognize significant enough structural damage and initiate its self destruction early.

Only we, the S class, can survive an explosion like that. And even then, Mushin cannot breathe in space."

"Damn it, that means warping is our only way out, but-," began Star Spartan.

"But the Warp-Lock is impenetrable. There is no better Warp-Lock tech in the world than the Panopticon's." Machine Emperor sighed. "We may have to cut our losses, Spartan. Save just important ones.

If it comes down to it, I can spread my shielding to a few people, and I'll have to do that with the Asian Alliance representatives I've been tasked to escort."

"We still have Kinesis. She can create a large enough construct that we can group all the examiners in. Then, I can propel it out of the Judicata" said Star Spartan. "I can outrun the explosion with my Comet Form. The speed may hurt them, even kill some, but it will save the most lives."

"I am afraid I cannot do that" said Kinesis.

"What?" Star Spartan sounded stunned.

"I am contracted only to protect the United States examiners" said Kinesis.

"Bullshit! Now is not the time for this!" roared Star Spartan. "Most of us here don't have powers for rescue! This is up to you!"

That was on the United Front representatives, noted Aldrich. They had brought heroes that were the strongest, not the best for rescue because they wanted to project power. They would not have expected in a million years to get attacked right inside Panopticon territory.

"Agreed" said Machine Emperor. "Now's not the time to be getting leashed to a contract like some desperate dog. We're S class heroes, not mascot mutts. We have the authority to improvise.

If I could, I would call up shuttles from my space station, but even if they could get here in time, I'm locked out.

This is up to you, Kinesis."

"My brother is one of India's examiners. Kinesis, if you don't do this, I'm personally coming after your ass!" shouted Indra.

"Some of the representatives could have left already by breaching the Judicata's walls" said Mushin. "Such as the Fortune CEOs. They have Alters with forcefields and warp capability with them. They could break out of the walls, protect themselves from the blast, and warp away.

But that would doom everyone else to the explosion. The reason they have not left is because even they trust in us to come up with a solution.

A solution to save them all.

After all, that is why we are S class. When we arrive, there are supposed to be no more deaths.

Will you break that trust?"

"My contract forbids me from aiding any other nation state or group without explicit permission" said Kinesis. "And I have yet to receive orders to aid other nation states or heroes."

"A contract won't save you from me, you dumb bitch!" shouted Indra.

"I am sorry. But I am not authorized to use my abilities in this manner" said Kinesis, her voice emotionless.

"But I am." Aldrich's voice rang through the channel.

"You - Thanatos!?" said Star Spartan. "How did you get this channel!?"

"Doesn't matter." Aldrich continued. "Time is tight, so I'll explain this quickly. I can warp the examiners here out."

"The Warp-Lock-," began Machine Emperor.

"Also doesn't matter to me," said Aldrich. "I need all the examiners packed into one space. I'll have Dracul protect it. Then, I'll warp them out. Afterwards, I can keep them safe in space, but they'll be stuck to one spot.

From there, we can let the Judicata self-destruct. Without the interference, Machine Emperor, you can bring the examiners back down to Earth with your shuttles."

"How can we be so sure that this will work? That we can even trust you?" said Star Spartan.

"What other option do you have?" said Aldrich. "This is the solution that will save as many lives as possible."

"I'll go with the new kid's plan!" said Indra. "Whole lot better than doing absolutely nothing."

"Right. We can't be picky with our options here" said Machine Emperor.

"Alright then!" said Star Spartan. "Let's make this happen!"

Aldrich flew above the examiners.

'Volantis, project my voice as much as possible' said Aldrich.

'I shall, Armored. Now project your will upon these mortals.'

Aldrich activated Fler'Gan's potion.

"All of you," said Aldrich, his voice emanating outwards with powerful waves. "If you want to live, then you listen to me. When I land, gather around me. I will warp you all away.

In exchange, you will vote for me. I will have your goodwill - a fair price to pay for your lives."

Aldrich paused for a moment, letting the words sink into the examiners as they stared up at him.

Chapter 306: Rescue 2

"Seems a fair price to me." Words that oozed authority echoed in Aldrich's ear. "I, Emrys Du Lac, grant you my vote to be Sentinel, as will all others representing the Alterhuman Agency today."

Emrys nodded as he stood tall with his hands clasped behind his back. In spite of the chaos all around him, he remained utterly calm, his eyes of pure, solid black staring right at Aldrich with a fierce focus, much like the gaze of a hawk.

Around him, A ranker heroes dealt with bots, destroying them or shielding against their blasts.

"Hmph. My Serpents are more than capable enough of protecting me through the Judicata's self-destruction." Jin Woo's voice spoke to Aldrich now. "And I hoped to

create a fine partnership with you. But I suppose this is interesting in its own right. I will go ahead and cast my vote for you. All my partnered companies will as well."

"I'm game for it too," said Tychus. "I was goin' to say, no need to worry about ol' me. My buds here would've taken care of me." He gestured around himself with chubby arms, pointing out his bodyguards. Unlike with Jin Woo, they seemed to be hired guns. Mercenaries. But top of the line and professional enough to Tychus to stay cool and not think about running at all even in this situation. "But it'll be interesting to see what you do as well."

"We will acknowledge your Sentinel status," said one of the representatives in the European Union.

"As will we," said someone from the Asian Alliance.

On and on, spurred on by Fler'Gan's potion - a potion whose effects only intensified when targets were under strong emotions created by, say, the imminent threat of death - members of the United Front cast their support for Aldrich.

"There are too many of you," said Jin Woo, annoyed. "I get it. We acknowledge him. So just gather around before this place blows up before you can all finish your spiel."

Aldrich sensed that this was enough support. He landed on the ground, cape of souls billowing around him. As soon as he did so, the examiners started to rush towards him like moths to an open light.

The Fortune CEOs and Emrys took their time, letting everyone pass before them so as not to get caught in the rush of bodies. And, because they knew their safety was secured due to the sheer amount of powerful individuals they could hire.

Others, especially reps from countries with fewer resources, could not say the same. Their lives truly did depend on Aldrich.

"The United States will abstain from this rescue operation," said Emmet. "We have contracted Kinesis to see through our safety. We will honor that contract."

"So be it, then." Aldrich watched as the group of U.S. reps stayed away, protected with Kinesis's barrier. They did not want to owe anything to Aldrich.

A little troublesome. That meant they wanted to maintain as much leverage as they could against Aldrich. But the U.S. was the only major country that opposed him, largely because Aldrich operated on U.S. soil.

All other countries had far less reason to reject Aldrich's offer, even if, say like China, they had the means to survive the Judicata's detonation and return to earth safely.

Dracul hovered above Aldrich and crossed his arms. He looked down with dark eyes. "Is this all of them?"

"Yes," said Aldrich.

"I guess there is some merit to keeping them alive." Dracul shrugged. Darkness rippled out from him, expanding rapidly out into a massive spherical barrier that blocked out all damage from outside, protecting the examiners and Aldrich.

"Bad news!" said Star Spartan. "Class 2 and 1 drones incoming! If they get here in a swarm, we won't be able to hold them off without blowing this whole place apart!"

"Yeah, they'll be a real pain in the ass," said Machine Emperor. "They're packed with intense firepower, too. Burstfire missiles, compact rail blasters, thermobaric cluster bombs, shit that can level a city in a couple hours.

If we fight them here, it'll be like roidheads having a wrestling match in a kiddie play pen. The place won't last. And that's in, about twenty seconds."

"Hold them off," said Aldrich. "All I need is a few seconds. Don't worry about damaging the Judicata - Dracul and I will protect the examiners.

What I'm worried about is the bots following me. I can warp, but not too far - I'll still be in space with the examiners. I can guarantee their safety there, but only in a fixed space. We'll be sitting ducks to continued attack.

We need to deal with the bots now. While they're here all at once."

"Agreed. Even a single class 2 or 1 straggler bot being left behind is a disaster. They could individually threaten thousands of lives," said Machine Emperor. "All of them have to go.

But both class 2 and 1 fleets have insanely durable defensive shield matrices. The more of them there are to link with, the stronger the matrix is, and they're all clumped together now.

It'll take at least a nuclear bomb to get through that."

"Then I'll go all out!" Star Spartan loosed a battle cry that drowned out the din of the entire battle. His body, already glowing with a golden aura, shone even brighter. The plume of his Spartan helmet flickered like living fire as his eyes, starry like the night sky, narrowed. "I'll crash my way through them all!"

"All out, huh? No better place for me as well, then." A smile of bloodlust imprinted on Indra's face as he flew up beside Star Spartan, his spiky white hair crackling with intense waves of electricity. "Remember the attack in Turkey, what, eight years ago?"

"Ah, when we combined our attacks to take down the moth variants?"

"Yeah, that one. They said back then we needed the power of a nuke to punch through the hive-barrier. That was fun. Let's do that again.

The power of a meteor and the heavens combined. Sounds kind of cool, doesn't it? What should we call our move, divine judgment?"

"Your call, my friend. I usually leave the move-naming up to my support staff." Star Spartan pointed his spear of pure star-gold energy down. "On my mark."

"I've shared my shielding with Mushin. He'll be fine once this place explodes," said Machine Emperor. "Thanatos, after these walls drop, I'll have access to my networks. Relay me your coordinates. I'll send out shuttles for evac.

Hopefully, they get there before any bots do. If any bots even survive this insane attack that I'm seeing building up."

"I appreciate it." Aldrich knelt down and put a hand to his chest, to his Phylactery.

'Chrysa, a big favor-,'

'I know, father! I was looking at what you were doing using the telescreen! You've been so cool! And it looks like the important people here all think you're cool now too! I'll help as much as I can!' said Chrysa.

Aldrich nodded. White light began to emanate from his body, spreading across the examiners. Outside, he heard the ear splitting rumble of lightning and the crackling roar of a falling meteor even through the noise canceling effect of Dracul's shadows.

Then, the ground of shadows began to violently shake. That was from Star Spartan and Indra unleashing their combo dive bomb attack, an attack that probably could have easily wiped an entire city off the face of the earth.

Many of the examiners stumbled about, crashing into each other.

"Damn it, we're going to die!" shouted an examiner in fear.

"We're trapped here - there's no way out!" said another.

"Quiet." Aldrich's voice echoed out, threatening. That silenced everyone. Chrysa's light reached to the last of the examiners.

'I'm taking everyone now...this is a lot of people - are they all friends?' asked Chrysa.

'Not quite,' said Aldrich. 'But hopefully, they will be.'

'Then I'll do my best!' With that, the light surrounding everyone intensified. Many of the examiners looked down at their hands curiously as the light settled on their bodies. The light then dimmed down, revealing nothing but darkness.

No examiners. No Thanatos. They were all gone.

"Hm. He actually did it." Dracul retracted the darkness into himself.

All around him, the Judicata was shaking, sparks flying and parts of the walls breaking off as Star Spartan and Indra drilled their way down against the horde of class 2 and 1 bots, the sheer aftershock of their descent damaging the Judicata's structural integrity considerably.

Enough to initiate the self-destruction sequence ahead of time.

"Impressive. And interesting. I had heard of the possibility of...extraterrestrial beings. Perhaps, are you one of them?" Dracul remained unfazed as chunks of metal from the damaged ceiling fell all around him.

Some of the rubble pieces landed on him, and shadows lashed out, batting them away, even those large enough to have weighed literal tons.

"I do hope you make good on my offer to contact me."

Intense light engulfed Dracul as the Judicata exploded.