

## **Super Necromancer System**

### **- Chapter 307: [Bonus chapter] Aftermath of the Judicata |**

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Aldrich, in the next instant, found himself floating in space that he could tell from a distinct feeling of weightlessness. Space was cold, and that was about all he felt from it. The vacuum environment did nothing to Volantis or his lich body. What struck him was how pretty it was, how if he turned from Earth, he could so clearly see the infinite vastness of the cosmos, the inky dark canvas upon which countless little specks of golden stars were scattered.

But Aldrich had little time to admire the scenery because most of the examiners could not survive in space. Some of them could, having the ability to levitate or having guards or heroes that could help out, but just as many just floated about, breathless, soon to perish under the harsh emptiness of space.

Aldrich clasped his hands together and activated his cloak. The souls making it up groaned, their voices audible even in the soundless expanse of space. They spread apart, whirling about as they left wispy green trails that eventually created a sphere of misty green.

Within this sphere, the [Hallowed Ground], there was absolute safety. Nothing from outside could harm anything within, and on top of that, the active also had the clause of keeping anyone within immune to any status effects or environmental damage.

Several examiners sucked in deep breaths, the [Hallowed Ground] providing them the opportunity to breathe.

"Everyone alright?" said Aldrich.

"I'm quite fine," said Jin Woo. "And soon to make my leave. Serpents, prepare for warp."

The six Serpents marched into formation around Jin Woo and his faction of corporate reps.

"Now ain't this a fancy ability?" said Tychus. He tentatively walked around, finding that he could take steps wherever he wanted in the [Hallowed Ground]. He reached out to one of the floating spirits, but before he could make contact with it, the spirit howled and flew away. "Ain't ever seen the likes of it. You sure you don't want a piece of my new agency?"

"I prefer to work alone," said Aldrich.

"Sounds about right, heh. Well, Thanatos, I ain't about to pressure you into a deal you don't want. This ol' boy's takin's his leave too. Let's go, fellas." Tychus clapped his hands, and one of his mercenaries tapped the side of his head, channeling his own warp ability.

"Those of you that can warp out or find safe passage down to earth, do what you can," said Aldrich. "But for those of you that can't, Machine Emperor said he'd be okay with giving you all a ride down."

It was then that Aldrich sensed a massive surge of energy through his helmet vision. A surge so strong that it completely engulfed his sight in white. He turned towards the direction of the Judicata. The walls of the [Hallowed Ground] were see through to Aldrich and his units, though to others like the examiners, it was impossible to see through.

Aldrich saw an explosion engulf the Judicata. But that was not from the self-destruction sequence. He had seen a Pillar self-destruct before on the news when variants had managed to infiltrate it. The explosion was awing, but nothing compared to this.

What Aldrich saw was a blast of gold laced with blue electricity so massive that it looked like the sun been dropped right there. It was such an enormous blast that it must have been visible from Earth, and the shockwave it generated would have crushed the vast majority of people in the [Hallowed Ground] to a pulp.

Luckily, the [Hallowed Ground] rendered them invulnerable to any outside damage.

That was the combined firepower of Indra, Star Spartan, and the Judicata's self-destruction all mixed together. None of the Panopticon bots could have survived that. But what about bots elsewhere? If the Stranger could take over one Pillar, then what about the others?

Aldrich jumped, leaving the [Hallowed Ground]. He floated in space for a second before Volantis unfurled his draconic wings. The wings generated their own lift through magical energy, so Aldrich could still fly through the zero G environment of space.

Chunks of floating, melted debris were the only thing left behind of the Judicata and all its bots. The S-class heroes rapidly approached. Star Spartan rushed in the fastest with

his blazing comet form. No surprise. His hero data indicated that Star Spartan could get so fast he could circle the entire planet in thirty minutes – around mach 60.

Behind him was Indra, flying with a trail of lightning crackling behind him. At absolute top speeds, by turning into pure lightning, Indra could reach a high of mach 350. But he rarely, if ever did that. His reaction speed did not scale with his top speed, so he was liable to cause significant collateral damage moving as pure lightning, especially since his lightning was far more destructive than its natural equivalent.

Machine Emperor flew behind them while carrying Mushin with an arm.

And last, but not least, Dracul moved as a formless mass of darkness that shaped into his human self when he got closer.

"Glad to see you're alright, Thanatos," said Star Spartan as he stopped before Aldrich, a shockwave of force hitting Aldrich's armor as the S class hero stopped.

"Sorry about that, I try to keep my stops slow, but I was in a rush," said Star Spartan.

"An understandable rush. It's fine." Aldrich nodded. From hero data, Star Spartan was one of the 'good ones'. No bad track record. A few botched missions, a few side casualties from the nature of his destructive power, but nothing that his good did not overshadow.

"Are the examiners in there?" said Star Spartan, pointing his golden energy spear at the [Hallowed Ground] sphere.

"Yes. Minimal damage. I just need help with the evacuation," said Aldrich.

"Crazy!" Indra stopped before the [Hallowed Ground]. He hovered his hand over the wall of spirits. "What is this shit? It's freaky as fuck! You've got some cool powers, my guy. You know who you remind me of?"

Archmage. From Korea. He's got that crazy fantasy shit going on too!"

"Right." Aldrich knew where Indra was coming from.

Archmage was also a S class hero, one of two from Korea. He was under the rarest 'Trump' category of Alter powers that did not really fit with all the others. Archmage had a low level of reality warping that let him have the powers of a typical fantasy mage, using magic circles to toss out fireballs, summon elementals, and the like.

Decidedly, though, Archmage was an Alter with an Alter organ. His 'spells' and 'summons' had Ether traces in them that typical power scanners could recognize.

Entirely unlike Aldrich whose power came completely from other sources.

But still, Aldrich did want to meet Archmage and see whether there was more than met the eye to the hero's abilities.

"Right? That's all you've got to say? C'mon, your power's amazing!" said Indra. He crackled in front of Aldrich and slapped his back, bouncing sparks of electricity between them. Up close, Aldrich could see that Indra was young, almost as young as Aldrich.

Indra could not have been older than the early twenties, and he had been a top hero for ten years already. Meaning he was active since he was barely a teenager. A man blessed with godlike strength almost from birth.

"But I'll stop bothering you. You did help my brother out, after all. He still in there?" said Indra.

"He is. You're free to meet up with him," said Aldrich.

"Don't mind if I do. I'll have to give him an earful about going to dangerous places without me. Wait, technically, I was here with him, ah whatever." Indra shrugged and floated into the [Hallowed Ground] where, Aldrich saw, Indra reached out and hugged his older brother.

"So much for coordinates, huh?" Machine Emperor got near Aldrich. "You didn't warp that far at all."

'I can do much better!' protested Chrysa, though she spoke only in Aldrich's head. 'Tell the tin man that I can do a lot better if it was just father!'

"It was the best that could have been done given the tight timeframe," said Aldrich.

"I understand. I've sent a signal out to my space station. My shuttles will be here in a few minutes," said Machine Emperor. "Though, are you sure the examiners are okay in there? You might have warped out of the blast radius, but you were still in range of the shockwave."

"You can go in there and find out yourself, if you want. But they're all fine."

"I'm not ragging on you or anything, just surprised that this barrier's so durable. The blast was big enough to easily level a city – the shockwave would have been equally nasty. Your powers are so diverse and so powerful – you're quite possibly the most interesting person that's come out of the woodworks in the past fifty years."

"Indeed," said Mushin, his body covered in a lattice of orange light – Machine Emperor's shielding that protected him from space. He put a hand to his chin, gazing at Aldrich inquisitively.

"Ah, there goes Dracul." Star Spartan watched as Dracul's formless darkness rippled overhead, passing by and heading down to Earth. He had said what he had wanted to say, so there was no need to waste any more time.

Until Aldrich reached out to Dracul, he would probably see little of the Sentinel.

"I wish he helped out more. A man of his power would help the world greatly, but after getting his vengeance, he's done little," said Star Spartan.

"Sometimes, the vengeance is all there is," said Aldrich, looking out at Dracul's distantly shrinking form. "And once that's gone, there's not much else."

## **Chapter 308: The End of the Attack**

"Broken men are dangerous," said Star Spartan, shaking his head. "And men broken under vengeance are worse. Vengeance cuts in deep, deep enough that even when the wound is healed, it is never the same.

And Dracul is not healed. Far from it."

"Hm." Aldrich pondered Star Spartan's words for a moment. Was he the same? Had he healed wrong? No. Star Spartan was wrong. It was not a matter of healing wrong. The vengeance that Aldrich had nursed and fulfilled, that was a battle scar.

Something he could wear proudly as a sign of what he had weathered.

"Shuttles are on their way. Qilin, the assistant A.I. I use, will guide everyone to where they want, though she might be a little sassy about it," said Machine Emperor.

"You're connected to your networks. How are things on earth? Have any other Pillars been infiltrated?" asked Aldrich, wondering if the Stranger had initiated a mass worldwide attack.

What it had done right now was a blatant attack against the entirety of the Panopticon and AA. If it wanted to cause the most damage, it had to do it now, when the iron was hot, when nobody knew how to defend against it.

"No," said Machine Emperor. "The Panopticon's initiated a worldwide shutdown of their Pillars until they figure out how to shield themselves from further attacks. I predict most companies will similarly be shutting down services to try and figure out how to protect themselves from similar infiltration."

"Damn, that means I won't be seeing Lightning Returns 2 on Vision+!" complained Indra.

"Lightning Returns? Isn't that your movie? And 2? Isn't that redundant with 'returns?'" said Machine Emperor.

"The title's up to the writers, I'm not up for all that brainy stuff. And it's because it's my movie that I want to watch it more," said Indra.

"Then what about variant defense? The Panopticon handles nearly 70% of all variant attacks worldwide," said Star Spartan.

"The Alterhuman Agency will have to pick up the pace if they want to have any hope of salvaging their public trust. Which means we'll be working overtime," said Machine Emperor, and Indra groaned. "On that note, I have to get going quickly. I assume I'll be needed. Pretty badly, too.

Good luck everyone."

Machine Emperor gave a small salute to Aldrich and Star Spartan before flying away, keeping Mushin in tow.

"May we meet again." Mushin tried as best as he could to bow to Aldrich before he was whisked away.

Aldrich watched as the two S class heroes left. He wondered how he would stack up against them. Machine Emperor was the weakest out of the S class here, but he had the most versatility with a whole array of combat suits, each of them suited to a different type of enemy.

Machine Emperor's current suit was called the V-Solar. A fairly low powered one that Aldrich believed he could take out one versus one now, even without instant death magic. But Machine Emperor did have far stronger suits.

The strongest one the public knew was called the V-Nova, and its fiery beams could easily wipe out Aldrich and his legion. If given prep time and battle data, Aldrich was sure Machine Emperor could devise a suit that could best counter Aldrich as well.

Mushin was the ultimate single person combatant.

His invisible blade could wipe anything out of existence down to the atomic level. Durability did not matter at all.

Aldrich had no vitals to wipe out, and he could regenerate chunks wiped out from him, but that sword was still incredibly dangerous. On top of that, Mushin's hero costume – his grey hakama and gi – could apply some of his power to turn him invisible for brief periods of time.

That, combined with Mushin's incredible physical abilities, particularly his godlike reflexes and combat speed, and Aldrich knew he could not take Mushin one on one.

Not many could. In a solo fight, against humanoid enemies, Mushin was arguably number 1.

A small, hyper-agile target that could one shot kill practically anything was a horrible match for anyone one on one.

But against Aldrich's entire army? A legion that also knew no vitals nor fear? And capable of regenerating under his mist?

Mushin would have a much harder time.

Once Aldrich upgraded his legion with even tougher units, he was confident he could deal with Mushin.

The real top tier S class heroes, though, Indra and Star Spartan – they were out of Aldrich's league, even if he used his full legion. They had it all. Insane physical stats and destructive power, very much like Solomon Solar.

The only way Aldrich could think of a way to take them down was to kill them with instant death magic.

Star Spartan was too fast, strong, and durable. Indra was almost perfect to beat Aldrich with his fiery lightning, absurd speed, and destructive area of effect power.

"I'm back," said Indra.

"How was your brother?" said Star Spartan.

"Holding up well. Dude's a little shaken up, but he's tough, just like me. He's no Dud, that's for sure, heh," said Indra.

"Stop that. 'Pure Human' is the better word," said Star Spartan, his tone admonishing, showing the wisdom of additional years and a generally more selfless heart.

"Yeah, yeah, you're too much of a goody two shoes, sometimes, Spartan." Indra shrugged dismissively. He leered as he saw Kinesis in the distance, flying by with the U.S. examiners in a mind construct ball of white outlined in black. "You stay a stickler for the rules too much, and you'll end up like her. Selfish bitch."

Aldrich looked to Earth, ignoring the conversation. The word 'Dud' was basically commonplace vocabulary now. It was a slur, yes, but so common that fewer people used the term 'pure human' than they did 'Dud'.



The fact that Indra used it was not surprising. And there was no point making a ruckus about it right now.

And the term 'Dud' felt strangely far away from Aldrich now. Maybe because he was no longer even human to begin with. It did not feel like it applied to him anymore, and truly, in every aspect, it no longer did.

Aldrich stared at earth.

"Kinesis...she's an odd one. I believe this is her first real public appearance," said Star Spartan.

"Yeah? I'll make sure to let my six hundred million Snapshot followers know how much of an asshole she is," said Indra.

"I wouldn't do that were I you," said Star Spartan. "Social media is a weapon as potent as any firearm. Aiming it at a fellow S class hero is...questionable."

"...Whatever." Indra pouted.

"I still cannot fathom her. Why would she stay so loyal to the terms of her contract? To the United States?" said Star Spartan.

"She's a government dog," said Aldrich. His skeletal jaw set beneath his helm.

Machine Emperor, Mushin, Indra, Star Spartan - these were the wrong heroes to be thinking about fighting.

If Aldrich was going to be standing against the United States, his main threat was Kinesis. But there was very little information about her. Her fights were rarely, if ever recorded. Only reported about, and she chose to keep her mission records as secretive as possible.

She had gotten her S class position by single-handedly defeating a S rank variant. What type of variant, how she had done so, and other questions about battle data were all an utter mystery.

What Aldrich did know was that she was not going to be a pushover. If she was a government dog, he needed to be ready to kill her.

He needed to get stronger.

"Maybe. That is where she is based," said Star Spartan.

"Stop giving her the benefit of the doubt, Spartan. They probably have some dirt on her. Maybe she's into some weird ass shit that they'll leak to the public. Tch." Indra nodded



to Aldrich. "Yo, Thanatos, if you ever get beef with her, send me a call. If my PR team doesn't shout down my ear, I'll lend a bolt or two to help you out."

"Noted," said Aldrich. "Where will you two go from here?"

"I have plenty of assignments across Europe," said Star Spartan. "And due to the nature of my powers, I am wanted in many places, now more so than ever."

"Same here. I only like taking missions with high AP, but damn, I can't just let my home get ass blasted by variants," said Indra.

"What about you?" said Star Spartan. "Now that your status as Sentinel is all but guaranteed?"

"Me?" Aldrich put a hand to the pointed chin of his metal and bone helmet. If the Stranger was bold enough to make such an attack, that meant he was ready for an all out conflict. Not just with Aldrich, but with the whole world.

The Trident's half-baked plans to try and topple AA and Panopticon – the Stranger was probably going to set all that in motion.

And Aldrich would be there to stop it. "Preparing for war."

## **Chapter 309: Settling Down**

Aldrich sat in a plush swiveling chair with black leather that shone with a polish that sparkled dollar signs. Facing away from a desk, he looked out at a bullet and bombproof glass wall, staring down at Haven from the top of a forty floor view.

Bulky orange and yellow repair bots dotted the streets, carrying steel beams and vats of reinforced concrete. Smaller bots did repairs, filling in cracks and holes in roads and buildings. Flying drones buzzed about, scanning structural integrity and assessing repair procedures for the land-based bots.

All of the machinery had the logo of a white hammerhead shark's distinctive head against a circle of black emblazoned upon them.

Hammerhead Industries - Seismic's biggest sponsor.

Like muscles and bones knitting back together after injury, the city was healing.

Aldrich nodded in content. A natural reaction, considering he was Haven's Sentinel. Despite the fact that he had been Sentinel for just a week, he still felt proud ownership

over it, and seeing it build back stronger tickled a soft spot in him, sort of like how he felt when he saw Chrysa grow.

A parent's pride.

As it just so happened, in spite of Aldrich's dramatic declaration, war had not come. There were no more attacks following the Stranger's attack on the Judicata and there likely would not be for quite some time.

Right after the attack, Aldrich had consulted with Medula and the Death Lord about the Stranger, using Supermind's corpse, still imbued with demonic energy, and Volantis's recorded memories.

Medula had definitively stated that the Stranger was a demon, but, as Volantis pointed out, the Stranger was a demon from a realm other than Elduin. As a result, neither Medula nor the Death Lord knew who exactly the Stranger was.

They had been able to, however, make general assessments about the Stranger.

First, the Stranger was strong. The magnitude of cursed energy it used in attacking Supermind and the Judicata was considerable, making it at the minimum an Archdemon.

Archdemons started out at level 70, and unlike with Anhil and Nilah - the archdemons of the trial quest, the Stranger was very likely fully incarnated, meaning he did not need a host body to operate and therefore at max strength.

Second, the stunt the Stranger pulled on the Judicata was something it could not do over and over again. Medula did not know the specific cursed magic that the Stranger used, but she knew as a member of the same species that it was a form of Possession. One that could target machines and their neural networks both physically and in cyberspace.

Medula had also identified what she called 'mana flicker' in the cursed energy in the possession spell.

These traces indicated that the mana pool fueling the cursed energy was undergoing huge shifts, 'flickering' because of the instability of mass amounts of energy going up or down.

Usually, this meant that the mana pool was draining rapidly.

Unlike Aldrich, who had easy access to full heals and mana restoration with his build and the Nexus, the Stranger was probably on its own to restore mana. Demons generally did not have easy ways to replenish their curse magic, and in Elden World, a

viable strategy to beat demons was to let them run out of mana, at which point they were out of juice.

At best, Demons consumed souls to restore mana like a Necromancer, but they were actually less efficient than Necromancers at this. The Stranger, especially at its high level, likely required a mass amount of souls to top up its mana pool to an appreciable level again.

Which meant that the Stranger was not in any position to make an attack for some time. Medula calculated that it would take one month for the Stranger to be able to pull off a mass possession like that.

This was also evidenced by Aldrich's nomad contacts that kept tabs on the Trident civil war.

The Russian Prong had backed down for now, turtling up in specific strongholds or disappearing altogether. And, to confirm the Stranger's involvement, there were reports of bots that nobody could detect joining the fray.

Aldrich had decided to take the Stranger's brief retreat to get settled. He needed to establish himself strongly first before really revving up the gear on going into any conflicts.

That meant making sure Haven was his. And that the United States government did not get in his way.

So far, things were, well, best put - neutral.

The United States still refused to directly acknowledge Aldrich, or rather Thanatos, as a Sentinel as none of their reps voted for Aldrich. A super majority from the other nations carried Thanatos readily into Sentinel status on the global stage, but the United States used their no votes to try and justify their opposition.

That said, the United States could not directly do anything to Aldrich. Because, as circumstance just so happened to decide, he was now allied with Dracul.

A two Sentinel alliance was near unprecedented - Sentinels were usually always highly individualistic, stubborn, powerful entities, and those never got along - but said alliance was deadly enough that the United States was forced to tiptoe around Aldrich.

Granted, the United States cut Haven off from their economy, prohibiting any trade or supply lines to it. However, Haven managed so far with private industries carrying them.

That, and a very comprehensive network of nomads coming to and fro from the city.

Once Aldrich obtained Sentinel status, the nomad chiefs barring Desmond and Z recognized him. Their tribes used Haven as a large base of operations, and soon enough, practically all of the nomads on the East Coast were calling Haven, well, a haven.

Haven afforded them security. Aldrich had set up a defense line of undead summons and variants all along the walls, with the most formidable defense being all the giant sand worms from Aldrich's second trial quest.

But most of all, Haven gave the nomads respect. Most cities, especially tier 2 and 1 cities, considered nomads wasteland pests and forbid them from entry.

Haven had no such restrictions. Granted, there was still law and order, but the rules were generally laxer. People had more freedom to do what they wanted.

This did lead to an explosion of illegal trade in Haven, but Casimir regulated that with an experienced hand.

On the AA-Panopticon side of things, Aldrich was comfortably in the clear for now. They were far too busy to deal with Aldrich, especially when he presented himself as a non-threat that cooperated with humanity.

Panopticon systems were still down as they scrambled to find a way to fend against the Stranger, so the AA was stretched far too thin and wide to make a ruckus about Aldrich.

Variant attacks were still on the rise. Aldrich had helped out here and there when he had time, and he had now farmed up to level 52 and padded his undead army with a wide host of insect type variants that generally populated the area around Haven.

But most of the time, Aldrich was too busy getting briefings and managing the city to fight. This was just temporary, though. Once his position was a bit more stable, he planned on passing the rulership torch to Casimir who was much better suited to this sort of stuff.

"Thinking hard, are we?" said Valera. She had crept up behind Aldrich, surprising him for a brief moment. She put her hands on his shoulders, massaging them.

"I don't eat, sleep, or drink. Might as well think," said Aldrich.

"I do not understand how you do it sometimes. I like spending time with my head cleared in meditation, but you actually like it when your brain is all crammed with thought," said Valera.

"Force of habit," said Aldrich. "How's Chrysa doing?"

"She's fallen head first into that thing you call a 'game'," said Valera, concerned. "She spends so much time in her room here, staring at that screen, punching at the device that lets her move her projections to and fro. I fear it is corrupting her, taking her from her training, rotting her brain."

"You sound exactly like a mom," said Aldrich, remembering similar words pouring into his ears from his own mother. A long time ago.

"Eheheh, do I? I suppose I do have to show you I will be an able wife, no?"

"Hold up now, marriage is way down the line."

"Bah, I do not understand it. Among vampires, when passion boils our blood, we choose our mates in the thrill of the moment."

"And as far as I recall, there's a suspiciously high mortality rate among wedded vampires."

Valera shrugged. "A consequence of passion. It is unpredictable."

Aldrich wondered if something like that was in line for him in the future, especially considering Valera's Berserker abilities. "I want to take my time before going too far. There's still so much to do, so many fights to be had, so many-,"

"I know." Valera smiled and patted Aldrich's shoulder, perhaps a bit wistfully. "I know."

A howling wind blew through the room in spite of the fact that it was completely insulated from the outside.

Valera leered.

Aldrich perked up.

Before Aldrich's desk, visible blue tinted winds gathered into a sphere which then formed into a tall, slender woman. In contrast to Valera, this woman had no hint of muscle on her frame at all - she was all long legs and skinny runway body.

She was wrapped up in a ghostly white dress, and a mass of jet black, wavy hair fell from her head in an untamed waterfall, completely covering her face. She looked like she had jumped right out of a horror movie.

Several eyes grew from her hair, wide open with unblinking red pupils.

"Vexa," said Aldrich, addressing his second Chosen Undead.

## Chapter 310: Vexa's Merits

"I come bearing tidings of great interest," said Vexa. She kept her head forward and hanging low, angled so that her flood of eyed hair would fall in front of her like a veil.

"What is it?" said Aldrich. Vexa's title in the game was known as the Kaleidoscope. She was the Chosen Undead with the most utility for scouting areas, using butterfly summons to cast surveillance networks, explore new areas, or track targets.

Her practical combat ability was low, but the idea was that with Vexa around, the player character could use her to limit surprise as a non-factor. Even in multiple playthroughs, there were many parts of the game that were not randomized. Many enemy spawn points, enemy types, or even boss locations could shift around, influenced by the smallest of changes from in-game decisions or just sheer random luck.

Vexa could prevent surprise ganks from enemies the player character did not expect. In fact, according to the lore, she was the very creator of the whole 'floating spy eyeball' type of summoning spell.

Aldrich had to choose between adding more raw power to himself or utility, and he figured he had enough power for now. Even if he did not, he could get more over time.

As for utility, he had to choose between Hadar, the Golden Bone, and Vexa. Hadar would guarantee Haven's prosperity in a purely economical sense, but in light of recent events, especially the surprise attack from the Stranger, Aldrich valued surveillance much more.

"My darlings have cast their wings across this city of yours. This world is all quite unfamiliar to me and my darlings, but I do believe we have a grasp of it," said Vexa. She gathered her hands together, and they disappeared under her loose white sleeves. Her posture looked very much like that belonging to some wise sage or advisor in a Asian period drama.

"And they have found conspirators plotting to take your throne, great emperor."

"Show us these conspirators," said Valera, crossing her arms. "When you first arrived here, you had no idea what even a 'car' was. I must make sure your judgments are correct."

Aldrich raised a brow. Valera still referred to cars as metal beasts out of habit, but he let that slide. Because Valera and Vexa were both his Chosen Undead, they were bonded to his memories to a degree, which, at the very least, let them navigate the modern world decently.

It was a function of the Nether where they were from. The Nether stored souls promised to it, keeping them as summons that those attuned with the dark arts could tap into.

However, the souls in the Nether could come from ancient times thousands of years in the past, and so to make sure they did not freak out being summoned in time periods or locations vastly separated from them, their bond with their summoner gave them contextual memories and understanding of their summoner's era.

Granted, it was not perfect. For example, Valera calling cars metal beasts or Vexa referring to Aldrich as an emperor, for in her life she had been a court adviser.

"I can handle myself, shieldbearer," said Vexa. "But here, I will show you:"

Vexa unclasped her sleeves and flicked her hands out like she was tossing sand. Butterflies flew out from under her sleeves, all of them having bright red eyes on their jet black wings.

"[Swarm Vision]," chanted Vexa.

The butterflies oriented themselves into a circular pattern. The space between them filled in with solid white light which then functioned as a screen for images to project.

The screen split into twelve different sections, each showcasing an aerial view of what seemed to be a nomad. From what Aldrich could tell, the nomads came from various different tribes as marked by the insignia on their cloaks.

Some of them were familiar, belonging to the chiefs that allied themselves with Aldrich. Others were from various nomad gangs from further out in the Wastelands.

The nomads all seemed to be doing their own thing, some drinking in a bar, some repairing their rides, some setting up makeshift shops to sell wares, and so on and so forth.

"I see nothing of importance," said Valera.

"That is because you are a warrior unfit for such subtleties. Let the emperor see," said Vexa.

"Why you - do not get so cocky now that my master has chosen you. You are still merely a second choice. When the time comes to protect him, there is none suited for it better than I," protested Valera.

"And, if my darlings do well, there will no longer be a need to raise your weapons in the emperor's name. As the grand regent Sun-Shu stated, 'the best time to crush a threat is before it becomes one'.



To resort to raising arms is a final and barbaric resort," said Vexa. "Though I do wonder, once my darlings secure the emperor, what use will there be for you? I suppose we can both be bedwarmers, though as I was once a courtesan, it is likely you will not be needed."

Aldrich raised a warning hand. "Stop that. No need to bicker among ourselves."

"Very true," said Vexa, calm. "I apologize, shieldbearer, for my rudeness."

Valera just leered at Vexa.

In many regards, they were polar opposites. Valera was forward and chose to crush her threats with direct force and rage. Vexa, on the other hand, rarely showed her emotions or her face, making her nigh impossible to read, and she thought fighting unnecessary.

That meant that they would inevitably have clashes, and Aldrich fully expected this. However, he banked on Vexa's usefulness outweighing any potential conflict. And also, Valera was more understanding than before.

"I see," said Aldrich. The nomads' activities on the projected recording were sped up, and he noted that despite all being from separate tribes, at one point, they all convened in a single apartment building. "That is suspicious."

"From what I know, these men hail from differing clans. Yet, they meet in a single location under the cover of night. My instincts tell me these are conspirators crafting a plot against you," said Vexa.

"Or they're looking for somebody," said Aldrich, cracking a faint smile. "Thank you, Vexa. Send me the locations of each of these guys and their meeting spot to me telepathically, and I'll deal with it."

How are my other requests going?"

Aldrich had also directed Vexa to send her butterflies to Blackwater and Neo-York. Blackwater was an instrumental location for the Trident, though exactly why, Aldrich still did not know.

He had an Evileye from a while back still tracking the general school grounds, but all the buildings, the important ones, at the least, were guarded with constant forcefields that prevented the Evileye from breaching them.

Plus, just one Evileye could not cover much ground. At best, Aldrich had gotten confirmation that his old dorm had been cleaned out. There were new pure humans there now.

The butterflies ran into the same issue as the Evileye being unable to get into sensitive areas, but since there were many more of them, it was easier to track what was happening overall.

As for Neo-York, Aldrich sent butterflies there to keep an eye on Solomon Solar who had a tie not just to Blackwater, but also to the Trident.

"They are on their way. I have sent them slowly and cautiously. Hidden though they are, I still wish to be careful in the case they are discovered or hunted on odd chance by the many strange beasts that roam this land," said Vexa. "But in a day, they shall have made their nests in your desired locations, your majesty."

"Good. Anything else?"

"That is all that is worthy of your time."

"Then you're dismissed, Vexa."

"It is an honor to serve." Vexa drew her sleeves together and performed a dainty bow. She then disappeared, fading away into chilling winds. When the temperature of the room went back up, indicating Vexa was gone, Valera spoke up.

"I do not like that one," Valera muttered.

"I know," said Aldrich. "And she does seem rather prickly, personality wise. But try to put up with her for now. I myself am a bit wary of her, given her past, but I'm giving her the benefit of the doubt due to the usefulness of her powers."

Vexa, when she was alive, had betrayed the emperor she had sworn service to. The emperor relied only on her as his eyes on his empire, and she had used her surveillance network to mislead the emperor, lulling him into a false sense of security. She took advantage of that lull, assassinating the emperor and becoming empress for a little bit before she herself was killed by a military coup.

Granted, said emperor had become a mad, raving tyrant, so she had plenty of justification, but Aldrich did not know the specifics. He had never used Vexa, after all. He was not familiar with all her background and personality as he was with Valera.

But still, Aldrich could deny how useful she was.

Now that she had tracked out the 'conspirators', Aldrich could proceed on closing the net around Desmond and taking the first step against the Trident.

## **Chapter 311: [Bonus chapter] Project Arachnophobia**

"Those conspirators that Vexa took note of, are they..." Valera's question trailed off, waiting for Aldrich to confirm her suspicions.

"They're spiders," said Aldrich. He had good reason to believe that these were nomads under Desmond's service, though obviously, they were hiding themselves. "And I'm never one to shy away from crushing a few bugs."

Valera grinned, her pure white fangs glaring under the high ceiling lights of Aldrich's new office. "Will we come to fight soon? It has been long since I have feasted on blood."

"It's only been a few days since the last time we had to go out of the walls to take out a few variants," pointed out Aldrich.

"Bleh." Valera made a face, sticking her tongue out. "I hate insect blood, and it is no different in this realm. There is something about it that is thoroughly lacking."

"Maybe a lack of iron content."

"Iron? Does metal flow in the blood of men here?"

"It's...I'll explain it in detail later. But to answer your first question: no, there won't be fighting yet." Aldrich stood up, stretching his arms in front of him. His knuckles cracked as a faint smile flickered at his pale red lips.

"Ah, but you do have something in mind, do you not? I know that smile all too well," said Valera, smiling herself with mischievous intent. "What's next, then, my master?"

Aldrich materialized his suit jacket and moved to leave his office. "Mindgames."

"I've got to break it to you, this is one hell of an upgrade," said V, a balloon of bubblegum expanding from her lips. She sat in a spacious, dark basement, cooled to a chill to prevent jacked in technos from overheating.

All around V were rows and rows of physical servers, stacked up like bookshelves. It sort of reminded Aldrich of Medula's bookshelf, though here, they were arranged in circular fashion with V sitting at the very epicenter, her cord-like hair stretching out in a complex web that interfaced with the technology.

"More's coming soon," said Aldrich as he looked down at V. She sat almost with a child-like position, legs crossed and arms planted on the ground as her eyes glowed bright blue, flickering rapidly as she processed untold amounts of raw information.

"All of this is just re-purposed stuff from the AA building we're using. Casimir's trying to broker a deal with Aarav to get even more," said Aldrich.

V whistled. "That's big boy Fortune money for you, huh? I'd love to play with anything I can get. No offense to Casimir, the Magellan had a lot of processing power, but it doesn't compare to this.

The sheer thrill of feeling so much information flow through your head, electrifying your nerves, like you have an entire world just ready to dance at your fingertips-", V moaned in pleasure. "It's a rush you can't ever beat."

"Limit the suggestive noises to a minimum," said Valera, though she only said this absent-mindedly, too engrossed in the technology around her. She probably had no idea what she was looking at, so it must have been rather overwhelming for her.

"That's my bad. I just can't help it with this," said V.

"How's the city overall?" said Aldrich.

V was connected to a Central Node that let her access information about the entire city like net connectivity, the electric grid, cameras, and, most importantly, the Panopticon walls and their various forcefield generators placed atop key city buildings.

Normally, Central Nodes were entirely operated by the Panopticon, but the recent attacks had forced the Panopticon to limit their presence as much as possible. AA techno teams were managing the the nodes across tier 1 cities, but for many tier 3 and even tier 2 cities, a shortage of available manpower meant that rolling blackouts had become a lot more frequent.

For Haven, it was even worse.

The Panopticon had disconnected entirely from Haven and the AA wasn't about to send any support, so in practice, it should have been completely blacked out.

"Doing juuust fine," said V. "Electric grids are finally coming back online. Maybe like, 80% capacity? Amazing what that Locus can do."

"In spite of his many complaints, yes," said Aldrich. Cut off from both the U.S. government and the Panop-AA complex, Haven was left with only its independent emergency generators for power.

Those could only sustain around 40% of the city's power needs sustainably.

Okeanos, though, with assistance from a Builder-Techno called Shani - courtesy of Aarav's impressive network of connections - powered most of the city's energy needs using a specially made generator.

Of course, that meant Okeanos had to stay stuck in one spot, which he hated immensely, but until Aldrich could remodel the power grid to be self-sufficient, Okeanos had to carry it.

A collaborative effort between Hammerhead Industries and Aarav would soon ensure that the entire energy grid was self-sustaining. Normally, cities were not allowed to be entirely energy independent to decentralize power, but as a Sentinel state, Haven was no longer bound to any rules.

"That's good enough," said Aldrich. "What about the forcefields? Can you co-opt them?"

"Nah. Panopticon tech is still hard coded to Panopticon personnel," said V. "In spite of how much that Stranger guy embarrassed the Panop, I can't pull the same flashy stuff."

"I don't blame you. They were using magic," said Aldrich.

"Magic, huh. Crazy to think that exists." V shuddered. "Makes me scared I could just get taken over with a snap of a finger."

"Not as long as you have that around your neck." Aldrich motioned to a necklace visible on V's low cut shirt. The string was jet black, shimmering with dark energy, and the 'jewel' consisted of a crystallized eyeball.

This was from Medula, crafted from Nilah's soul fragment. It replicated Nilah's Mora ability to absorb and nullify anything which would, in theory, utterly nullify the Stranger trying to possess V.

At the least, Medula was nearly entirely certain it would afford enough protection, and Aldrich deferred to her expertise on demonic matters.

"It's creepy as hell having an eyeball for a necklace, but you gotta do what you gotta do, I guess," said V.

"Mhm. It must be quite nice receiving a gift from our master." Valera smiled, though a nerve popped visibly on her forehead, annoyed at V's ungratefulness.

"On second thought, this is totally my style. Maybe I'll switch back to my goth girl phase," said V. "But it isn't like we even need that forcefield," she said to Aldrich. "That jellyfish cover we've got is basically the same thing."

"I still like to keep myself as protected as possible," said Aldrich. V was referring to his huge army of floating jellyfish that comprised the bulk of his undead legion.

They lay scattered above Haven, creating not just a forcefield, but also a potent lightning death ray for anything that got too near the city walls.

"Like double bagging condoms," said V. "Or wait, doesn't that make the protection worse?"

"It makes it worse," said Aldrich.

"...Condoms?" Valera tilted her head, curious. "Is this a defensive fortification we can acquire? If so, I will gladly search for it."

"It's nothing." Aldrich replied quick, shutting down the possibility that Valera would entertain any funny thoughts.

"Heh." V smirked at the interaction before her smile grew thin-lipped, serious. "So, boss, I figure we're done with the routine questionings. What did you really need?"

"You're starting to get a read of me, huh?" said Aldrich.

"Nothing better than some good old fashioned time to get to know someone," said V.

"I want to know if your arachnophobia project is done," said Aldrich.

"Oh. That. Yeah, it's been done for a while," said V.

Project Arachnophobia (coined by V, not Aldrich), was V's attempt in creating a bug to infiltrate Desmond's Spider Web.

Desmond's Alter power allowed him to create a 'web' of mental links with various technos, many of whom were riders in his tribe.

This let Desmond operate one of the largest, most connected, most reliable information underground information networks because though he had many 'spiders' receiving information tips, they all reported back to one head, much like a hivemind.

Aldrich's [Grave Ward] had picked up snippets of information in Desmond's base, which was how Aldrich got to know how Desmond's Alter power worked in the first place.

Unfortunately, three days ago, the [Grave Ward], fragile as it was, had dissolved when the base was struck by an unidentified attack.

That said, V still tracked Desmond's operations in the Darknet, and he was still very much active, indicating that the attack had not set him back much at all.

"But we can't use our bug spray now, can we?" said V. "I need physical contact for this one. Have to jack it right into Desmond's neural port.

That eyeball you had shackled up in Desmond's base kept tabs on his physical location, but without that, finding Desmond will be like trying to find a needle in a haystack.

The dude is ultra giga paranoid. His mobi-base has every stealth option known to mankind. He moves ALL the time.

Damn, and I'd worked on this thing really hard, too."

"Don't worry, your project's still salvageable," said Aldrich. "I'm going to bring Desmond to us,"

## Chapter 312: New Laboratory

V blinked. For a moment, all the myriad of lights flashing across the servers also blinked. "Huh? What? You can do that? You got some kind of mind control shenanigan on him? Or, or, let me guess, is it magic?"

"Magic, yes, but not mine." Aldrich nodded to V. "Have your project prepped and ready to go. Transfer the bug to a Viral Round or Jacker."

Viral Rounds or Jackers were physical receptacles, either bullets or needle like injectors, for transferring bugs directly into others or machines. Generally speaking, it was the most efficient way of carrying a bug over, especially with Alters whose minds had natural levels of mental protection surrounding them.

It was the same innate mental protection that prevented an Alter with a weak AC count from mind controlling, say, a S class hero.

For a high level techno like Desmond, Virals were necessary to ensure the bug successfully infiltrated his mind.

Casimir had plenty of viral rounds and jackers to work with. All V had to do was upload her custom made bug.

"Will do, boss. Make sure to show up every once in a while, yeah? Does get a little lonely down here, locked up in a basement and all," said V.

"I thought technos liked that kind of environment," said Aldrich.

"It...can get tiring. Especially when it's all you've known your whole life," said V. She sighed, her pep fading away. "See you soon, boss."

Aldrich entered the 30th floor of his new tower base, pressing his hand on a biometric scanner screen that opened up two doors of solid, reinforced neosteel.

As the doors groaned open, they loosed a pressurized click and hiss. Within, there was nothing but darkness. Darkness that Aldrich could see in, of course.



"Ah, Elder, welcome!" said Fler'Gan, much happier than usual. "And do enter quickly, for I require a sealed environment."

Aldrich did as instructed, stepping in with Valera promptly. The doors automatically closed behind them, sealing tightly shut.

"So this is what you have been up to, Mind Eater." Valera looked around inquisitively.

After Aldrich took over the AA tower in Haven for his own base, he had given Fler'Gan, as promised, a proper lab space.

Fler'Gan had shut himself in for several days, obsessively ordering things to his own liking. This was probably the first time he had any visitors.

But the results were good. Fler'Gan had repurposed the AA tower's lab and building rooms into his very own personal paradise of research. His alchemical equipment lay organized neatly across several tables, intermingling with regular lab equipment with surprising fluidity.

Variant test subjects lay in various stages of dissection, some displayed on tables, others swimming in vats of alchemical red liquid.

"Any breakthroughs?" asked Aldrich.

"Many. Very many. That Editor sample was truly the key I needed, O Elder," said Fler'Gan. "I am now capable of crafting potions that can introduce magic to these 'Alter Organs', though so far, only temporarily."

Fler'Gan rushed over to a series of vats where Alter organs lay suspended in homonculi fluid. He tapped the glass, sending an arc of mana into it. In response, the Alter organ, a fleshy, sphere shaped mass, undulated, rippling and moving in response to the mana. It glowed briefly blue, channeling the foreign energy.

"That's extremely impressive," said Aldrich. "You really are a genius."

"O Elder, you praise me too much," said Fler'Gan. "As a former alchemist of the Order, I would bring shame to my predecessors were I not capable even of this."

"Quite...gross," commented Valera as she poked an insect variant strapped to a dissecting table, flayed open down the middle to reveal all of its innards.

"Such is the nature of true discovery. Discovery that pioneers, that pushes boundaries, is always 'dirty'. Many revile it, brand it as heresy, but there is simply no better way to progress," said Fler'Gan. "And without any threat of Excommunication in this realm, I am free to experiment as I please!"

Fler'Gan loosed a garbled underwater laugh, truly embodying the entire mad scientist trope.

"And this...", Aldrich walked over to a section of the room seemingly dedicated to robotics. Cybernetic parts, data chips, augmentations, engines, basically a whole cornucopia of tech lay scattered about in various states of disrepair. "You're trying to understand modern technology?"

"Trying would be an understatement, O Elder." As if to prove his point, Fler'Gan pressed a few buttons on the touchscreen of a wristband wrapped around his mauve skin.

In response, a few drones buzzed from the tables and into the air. Aldrich recognized them as salvaged drones from the attack on Haven.

"The golemancy of these humans is astounding," said Fler'Gan. "Complicated beyond measure, and yet, operate on logical principles that are surprisingly easy to grasp."

"How did you do that?" asked Aldrich.

"Manual overriding using a cyberdeck." Fler'Gan reached under a table and withdrew a handheld, blocky device with a keyboard, screen, and various jacker cables hanging from it.

"I see," said Aldrich, putting a hand to his chin with a nod.

To hack into technology, one had to enter Cyberspace and interface with said piece of tech's cyberspace signature. There, it was possible to modify the signature, essentially reprogramming the technology or, if needed, destroy it outright.

There were three ways to achieve this.

First, using technopathy, quite literally entering cyberspace and invading technology with solely the power of one's mind. Only higher level techno Alters could do this, and even then, most, like V, still preferred to physically jack into tech to establish a more stable and secure connection.

Second, using neural ports. These ports were cybernetic enhancements carved into either the wrist, base of the neck, or back of the head in order of what provided the strongest connections.

Non-techno Alters who wanted to deep dive into Cyberspace in order to link with technology needed these ports to gain access.

The third, and least invasive, was using a cyberdeck. Devices separated from the physical body. Because of this degree of separation, cyberdecks were the safest if you wanted to hack with them.

Directly deep diving into cyberspace with your mind left it open to attack, but a cyberdeck only created a virtual avatar in cyberspace. Killing the avatar would fry the cyberdeck, but the person operating the cyberdeck was fine.

There were downsides, of course. Manually typing in commands and controls on a cyberdeck was vastly slower than navigating cyberspace with just your thoughts. That reason alone made cyberdecks relatively obsolete.

On top of that, the quality of a cyberdeck directly influenced how 'strong' your cyberspace avatar was, and without an avatar with enough processing power and a competent operator, it was impossible to fight someone jacking into cyberspace directly with a neural port, let alone high level technos that navigated cyberspace like it was their second home.

In the past, Aldrich and especially Elaine had programmed their Frames using cyberdecks as they could not afford neural ports.

"I am attempting to look into the potential of entering myself into Cyberspace directly," said Fler'Gan. "Either through a neural port or, if I obtain an apt enough techno specimen, obtaining their power."

"Hold up, that obtaining power part - you can do that?" asked Aldrich.

"It is merely a theory so far," said Fler'Gan. "You brought variants to me called Shiftbugs that can alter their form to large degree. Well, by breaking them down and understanding them better, I believe I am capable of formulating a liquid solution that 'shifts' to allow even foreign Alter organs to work within them.

In theory, I can go a step further. This realm is advanced in many ways, but in manipulating flesh, in combining disparate entities, alchemy simply reigns supreme.

I can break down both the organ and the shifting liquid solution and fuse them together to create a concoction that, if ingested, could grant temporary access to that organ's power."

"Get on that ASAP," said Aldrich.

"Ah, for that, however, I do require additional samples of shifters. Specifically, Alterhumans. The variant shifting solution seems largely incompatible with Alterhuman organs."

"Is that so?"

"Indeed. Variants themselves do not rely on organs for power - their whole bodies from claw to gut process Ether into strength. Fundamentally, variants and Alterhumans operate differently."

"Hm." So, basically, Aldrich needed to kidnap a shapeshifting Alter. There was Kat, but, well, Fler'Gan's experiments were decidedly lethal, even for an undead considering he either broke things down to pure liquid or took out the organ entirely.

Aldrich's Mist could regenerate Alter organs, but it could not change them nor could it create more of them.

Permanently disintegrating an Alter organ from one of his undead would not leave them dead, but it would make them powerless.

"I'll try my best," said Aldrich. "I'm sure I'll be hitting some conflict quite soon. On that end, I'm here for Feather."

"Ah, that one. He is in the Learning Room," said Fler'Gan, pointing to a suspiciously well hidden door on the other side of the room.

"Learning Room?" asked Valera. Her brows were furrowed, mouth slightly agape as she tried to figure out what was going on in half of the conversations that Aldrich and Fler'Gan had just shared.

Fler'Gan nodded. "Where those that must learn to obey the Elder go."

## **Chapter 313: Learning Room**

"Learning room, is it? Let's see how good of a teacher you are," said Aldrich as he made his way over to the door that Fler'Gan pointed to.

"I have a feeling that it will be gross again," said Valera as she followed behind him.

"Such a clumsy and unpleasant word," commented Fler'Gan. "It is not fit to describe the likes of my research and methodology. Even in teaching others how to serve, I make leaps and strides with every new pupil. That one you are about to see, I am especially proud of."

Aldrich put his hand on the door. Ordinarily, this led into a storage space for equipment. There were inscriptions on the door as well, glowing a faint blue, and when his eyes lingered on them, Fler'Gan called out, "That is a glamor spell that hides the door when active."

Aldrich nodded, appreciating Fler'Gan's carefulness. Unlike most doors in post-Alter architecture that seemed to have quite the obsession with being automated and sliding, this one was more old fashioned, needing to be manually opened via a handle.

Aldrich grabbed the handle and twisted it, unlocking the door. A pressurized hiss escaped as he slid open the door. Chilling air that smelled like the ocean wafted in his face, introducing quite the scene.

"Gross," declared Valera, narrowing her eyes.

The storage space, perhaps a 30 x 30 meter square, had been converted entirely into a horrific, alien landscape. The stainless steel walls were covered in dark purple flesh ribbed with undulating protrusions and deep blue veins. Within these veins, many as large as human torsos, it was possible to see the dark silhouette of tailed, tadpole-like creatures swimming about, navigating the fleshscape.

Tendrils of flesh grew down from the ceiling to the floor, wrapping around each other to form thick, pillar like chords. Each of these pillars were ordered neatly in rows that packed the space with precision efficiency.

From these pillars grew eyes on flexible stalks, their unblinking, lidless pupils glowing with light blue bioluminescence reminiscent of that belonging to deep sea creatures.

"Interesting," said Aldrich.

"Now that is the proper reaction," said Fler'Gan as he made his way to Aldrich's side. "It reminds me of how appreciative you are of my efforts, O Elder. Unlike some others."

The Mind Eater cast a three eyed leer at Valera.

"I am still a lady, you know. There are some things that even I cannot stomach."

"But blood and guts fall within ladylike decorum?" countered Fler'Gan.

"I am a vampire, and one trained for war. It is simply who I am," said Valera.

"And this-," Fler'Gan entered the room and motioned all around him with triumphantly raised hands. "Is who I am. Welcome, O Elder and Commander, to the Learning Room."

"This is a nursery, isn't it?" said Aldrich, taking steps into the flesh-infested room. His shoes squelched as they sunk into yielding mass. Tiny little wriggling tendrils brushed at his shoes with every step.

"..." Valera saw the tendrils on the ground, then looked down at her relatively exposed feet in heels. She was dressed in business casual, which was to say, with skirt and all, not the best attire for this. "I will stay here, if you do not mind, master."

"I don't." Aldrich and Fler'Gan began to walk side by side.

"To answer your question, O Elder, yes, indeed, this is a nursery. Mind Eaters such as myself may 'reproduce' by asexually creating Mind Leeches and inserting them into other creatures.

Upon insertion, the leeches take over their host's body, creating a new Mind Eater. However, unless we are connected to a proper Elder Mind, the leeches are not fertilized.

Yet, fertilized or not, the leeches still remain potent tools for mind control" said Fler'Gan. He tapped at a large blue vein, pointing to the swimming creatures within. "But even creating one or two, especially in my old age, is quite a taxing effort. Leeches can, however, self-replicate within a proper nursery."

"How did you create this nursery to begin with?" said Aldrich.

"Self-experimentation!" declared Fler'Gan. "One of the variant samples you granted me called the Broodmother is capable of ingesting flesh and re-birthing it as a child. I modified the variant's mind and body such that by feeding it my own flesh, it produces more of it.

Mind Eater flesh is malleable, easily directed with the mind. With enough of it, I could create this nursery."

"Your own flesh? How much?"

"Ah, I dismembered my arm fifty seven times to produce enough biomass to work with," said Fler'Gan. "With the undead ability to dampen my pain and my species' own natural regeneration, it was a simple task."

Aldrich nodded slowly. Fler'Gan's casual voice made it very clear that even if he did feel pain cutting off his arm, he would have done it just as many times for the sake of progress.

At the very least, Aldrich respected the Mind Eater's drive.

"And now, I have an ever-renewing farm of leeches to use in my alchemical concoctions. Or, as in this case-," Fler'Gan walked up to a flesh pillar and tapped it.

Some of the intertwined tendrils comprising the pillar peeled apart, revealing the upper body of a naked, blank eyed man covered in viscous, clear ooze.

Several leeches jutted out from his head, their purple, shiny bodies undulating rapidly as they played about with the man's brain.

"For education purposes."

"So this is how you've been taking care of Feather," said Aldrich. "So, has his learning process been?"

"Excellent," said Fler'Gan. "All Alterhumans possess varying degrees of mental resistance, but this one's was especially potent. But days spent in isolation and learning have made his mind more agreeable.

He will listen to you."

"Good." Aldrich nodded, pleased at these results.

The Stranger had provided Feather's location as a gesture of goodwill, sending the information to V as well. Although Aldrich had ended up rejecting the Stranger, he did not see why he should not take what was given to him, and V thought much the same.

While Aldrich was busy in the Judicata, V sent the same hit squad led by Ace, Kat, Tox, and Chiros to Feather. As it so happened, Feather was holed up in a personal underground bunker in the Wastelands.

Feather had been tipped off that people were looking for him, leading him to escape the hit squad's first capture attempt in the free city of Westpoint.

The hit squad's first attempt had captured Feather's men, including the nomad informant that told Feather about what the nomad councils did, but none of them had useful information. They were hired on a per contract basis and shifted out routinely, meaning they did not have longterm relationships with Feather.

Alden, the nomad informant, was equally useless. The Trident kept their tracks minimal when it came to informants, and Alden only knew what he needed to know to complete his jobs.

Which was not much at all, considering all he had to do was tell Feather about happenings among the nomad tribes.

Thus, they all were now in various pieces in Fler'Gan's lab.

Feather was the main guy to capture. A captain in the Italian prong of the Trident who had quite a bit of power and knowledge. And now, he was here, courtesy of the Stranger.

Aldrich snapped his fingers in front of Feather's face. The man's eyes regained focus.

"Wh..what?" mumbled Feather, his voice faint.

"I have questions," said Aldrich.



"And you shall answer," said Fler'Gan. Feather, hearing Fler'Gan's voice, jerked his head up to attention.

"Yes," said Feather, obedient.

## **Chapter 314: [Bonus chapter] Spider Bait**

"Tell me, who tipped you off at Westpoint? You left your men to dry there on awfully short notice," said Aldrich.

"Desmond. He told me he suspected an attack was coming my way."

Desmond. The Spider. Aldrich had a good idea it was this guy, but taking him out had been difficult with the hearing coming up so soon and his constant moving. Plus, further research suggested that Desmond's ties with the Trident, specifically the Italian Prong, granted him quite the personal security entourage. Tough and secure enough that a hit squad would not work unless Aldrich used the likes of Okeanos, and Okeanos emitted way too much energy to not be noticed from miles away.

"And how did Desmond know that?"

"Desmond said he had good reason. That's all I know. I trust him, so I listened and scrambled away to my bunker for code red situations like this. I left my men to rot, but they were all temporary mercs, anyway. I could always replace them."

"I see." Aldrich was curious as to how Desmond knew the hit squad was coming, but he would find out soon enough from the Spider himself. "And tell me, does the Trident or Desmond know where you are right now?"

"I told the underboss that I was lying low. He understood. When capos like me need to hide, we're given leeway. So no, the Trident doesn't know where I am. Desmond still thinks I'm at my bunker, but he doesn't know where that is either."

"Good, good." Aldrich gave an appreciative nod to Fler'Gan. "This is seriously impressive, Fler'Gan. You've completely bypassed his mental defenses, and he has a decent AC count of around 4000 - within the B rank range.

I have to hand it to you, you've done a lot in just a week."

"When given space and time, a mind focused on progress blooms wondrously," said Fler'Gan with a bow. "Though as is the nature of progress, there is no end to it.

I still fear I am unable to crack the minds of those in the 'A rank' range, those holding a concentration of Alter Cells in the 5000 and above threshold."

"Let me guess, if I get you a good enough mind controlling Alterhuman sample, you can make a breakthrough."

"You catch on quickly, O Elder."

"A shifting Alter and a mind controlling Alter. Got it. I'll put that on the ever growing list of things I need to do," said Aldrich. He resumed questioning Feather. "What's your relationship like with Desmond? Seniority wise, who defers to who?"

"Desmond defers to me," said Feather. "Absolutely. I'm his handler for the Italian Prong. Without me, he doesn't get the funding or security he needs, especially now, with that shitshow of a civil war going on with those screw-loose Russians."

"I figured as much. Someone had to be paying Desmond enough to turn on his chiefs, and anything less than direct support from a Trident higher-up wouldn't have been worth it.

Now then, the most important question. Riddle me this, if you tell Desmond to jump, will he jump for you?"

"Pardon?" Feather stared at Aldrich blankly.

"Hmm. The metaphorical conception of the mind seems to be somewhat damaged," said Fler'Gan. He tapped notes on his wristpad. "I must make note of this for improvement."

"If you tell Desmond what to do, will he obey you?" clarified Aldrich.

"Yeah. As long as it's within reason."

"If you tell him to meet you, would he do it?"

"Here? No. He doesn't know where this is. I don't know where this is."

Aldrich side-eyed Fler'Gan, and the Mind Eater nodded. "It is safe to tell him of our location, O Elder. His mind is mine permanently. What he knows will never spread to anyone else."

"We're in Haven," said Aldrich.

"Haven, huh? No way. Desmond wouldn't step foot within a fifty mile radius of it."

"Then what about outside of it? At your personal bunker?"

Feather thought about it for a few seconds. "That ought to work."

"Alright then, that's good enough." Aldrich turned around, readying to leave. "Fler'Gan, clean the slime off Feather and get him out of there. I'm going to send a few skeletons here to make him more presentable afterwards.

It's about time he gets a reunion with his friend."

Aldrich took the elevator down the control tower, Valera following close behind him. She was oddly quiet, her gaze shifty, and he knew something was wrong. Though, if she was not voicing it, probably not anything serious. He would give her some time to say what was on her mind in silence.

In the elevator, Aldrich punched in a code on the control panel. NXS0101. When that registered, the lights in the elevator, an unassuming white, shifted into red.

With a jolt, the elevator began a deep descent down to an underground bunker area where Aldrich kept a copy of a Sign he had gotten for reaching level 50 from the Death Lord.

It finally felt right having a Sign in a proper base. Like Fler'Gan, V, and his many other legion members, he was also getting settled in, making this place his new home.

"Master...have I lately not been doing enough?" Valera said finally.

"Hm? What makes you think that?" Aldrich said.

"It is just that...you praise all your underlings from that courtesan to the Mind Eater, but recently, not me. Is there something wrong?" Valera looked at Aldrich with genuine concern.

Aldrich shook his head, smiling faintly. So that's what this was. She was just worried. And also needed attention. Nothing he could not handle. "No, it's fine. Think of it like this: I'm used to you enough where if I'm not saying anything, that's praise in of itself. It means everything's going smoothly without me having to point it out."

"Understood, master. That does make me feel better." Valera sighed. "I am worried, master, about how things are to be. I know it sounds silly of me, insulting to your efforts, even, but I cherish the quiet we have now.

Before, it felt as if we had been fighting every single day, every single moment. And now, there is peace. For once, I have grown to like it. To get attached to it.

Maybe..." She looked down at her hands, her claws lengthening. "I am losing my edge as a warrior. I have never thought this way before. Especially when I was an Exile. I fought to kill every single day, and I lusted for the fight.

But now..."

Valera looked ahead, at Aldrich's reflection cast in the glossy black surface of the elevator doors. "I fear the fight, not for who I am to face, but who I could lose."

## **Chapter 315: Back to the Nexus**

Loss.

It was a terrible word, but at the same time, it could also promise strength. Because once you lost enough, once there was nothing more to lose, there was something fierce and savage, primal in its ruthlessness, that rose to fill the void.

Valera had experienced it when she was an Exile, after she had lost the princess she was sworn to protect.

Aldrich had experienced it when he had lost his parents and, later, Adam and Elaine.

But the thing about that power, borne from loss, was that it was unstable. The moment you started to fill that loss carved void in with something brighter was the moment you lost the savage rush of strength that came with its emptiness.

Even now, Aldrich was afraid of losing that strength. He had promised Valera he would try his best for her as a lover, but...it was hard. Just because he said he would did not mean he could undo a lifetime's worth of conditioning.

He was afraid that the moment he truly started reciprocating her feelings, seeing her as something more, something precious, a part of himself, that he would grow weak. That he could no longer command her to the throes of danger.

And he worried that such weakness could lead to his end.

Valera felt the same way. No, she was much further down the road to healing her loss than Aldrich was. She had filled her void with him, and at first, it had given her strength. There was nothing more she wanted to do than to defend and fight with him.

But now, fighting came with the risk of losing him, and that outweighed any rush she got from side-by-side fighting.

Aldrich did not care whether that made her weaker. He was not that heartless to hold it against her.

He understood.

But...he could not let her waver now. Now when conflict was going to come soon. With Feather as a mind controlled puppet, Aldrich could send him as a spy for the Italian Prong.

Not only that, but if Feather managed to lure Desmond into capture, then Aldrich could gain a mass amount of intel into Trident operations.

Aldrich, right now, wanted to take over Blackwater. But he needed to strike at the right time.

According to Casimir, it was still operating normally as an academy to prevent government investigation, hence the newly recruited pure humans to make it seem like everything was just hunky-dory.

But Clint and Gerard had told Aldrich that their riders thought conflict was brewing. Each Prong of the Trident was starting to hire mercenaries and mobilize in-house villains towards Blackwater.

Conflict was brewing over the academy.

If Aldrich took it over too soon, he would face the full wrath of all three Trident Prongs. He could not handle that, not when he had to spread his forces thin to maintain Haven.

No, he had to strike after everyone else had moved in, precisely when they were all at their weakest fighting each other.

For that, Aldrich needed Desmond whose intel in the Trident would be invaluable.

For that, Aldrich needed his Legion's military strength to be top notch.

Especially Valera's, for she guaranteed Aldrich's safety.

"I know how you feel," began Aldrich.

"Truly?" Valera said. "Do you perhaps...feel the same?"

"..." Aldrich closed his eyes, a twinge of pain strumming at his cold, dead heartstrings. "But I still have more to do. I hope you can understand that."

Aldrich wanted Valera to be as strong as possible. To not hesitate. For that, he could not reflect her feelings back to her. Not yet.

Valera put a hand on Aldrich's chest, over his heart, as if she could sense the pain. "I do understand. Remember, my master, I am no frail maiden. I am still a Guardian Knight. Placing duty over my emotions is not new to me."

The elevator stopped with an abrupt jolt. The doors slid open, and cold, dry underground air rushed in.

"Looks like we're here," said Aldrich. He strode through the doors into the emergency bunker. It was a largely unfinished bunker - courtesy of Haven's tier 3 status not warranting much funding or effort - but that, in a way, seemed fitting.

The bunker was very much more cave than man-made structures, with uneven, rocky ground and ceiling full of rock formations and stalactites. Further in, the ground was carved flat and laid over with metal tiling. Atop the tiling was a miniature base of sorts. Originally, there had been an array of monitors at the end that could interface with the Control Tower to check on intruders, but Aldrich had torn that all out.

He wanted this place to be as low tech as possible to prevent infiltration. There were not even lights here since he could see in the dark.

Well, there was one light.

As Aldrich approached, a glowing green Sign welcomed him, carved into the air at the end of the room. He held out his arm, and Valera held it as he floated over to the Sign, his cape of souls billowing and softly wailing behind him.

The Sign glowed brighter in Aldrich's presence. He touched it, accessing the Nexus.

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Aldrich and Valera sat around a table in Medula's study. Medula, the Death Lord, and Wai'ki sat with them. Above them, Supermind's body floated, tethered in place with ghostly blue string made from Wai'ki's staff of eerie blue flowers.

"I see," said Aldrich. "So that's how he knew I was 'Irregular'."

He looked down at the center of the table where one of Supermind's removed eyeballs stared back at him. The eyeball held Supermind's unique cross shaped black pupils, but around them, there was a ring of iridescent rainbow.

"The [All-Seeing Eye]" said Medula with a tentative nod. She sipped a cup of steaming tea. "It is said to be able to pierce the veil of realms and see that which does not belong. In particular, it is an impressive tool to uncover demons that wish to hide among natives, for the eye will reveal them no matter how well they possess a native body."

"It explains why the Stranger was willing to risk so much. Why he angered the entire world. He just wanted to kill Supermind," said Aldrich. "And he didn't care what it took to do it. Which leads me to believe that in my world, this was the only thing capable of identifying the Stranger."

"Fortunately, you took the body before it was destroyed," said Medula. She narrowed her crimson eyes, inspecting Supermind's body. "This specimen is quite magnificent in its own right. The amount of power that must have flowed through it when it was yet in its prime would have been considerable."

"Not enough to beat me, though," said the Death Lord, jade prosthetic hand on her cheek, bored.

"I would not be so sure." Medula clasped her gloved fingers together in thought. "I have but rough calculations and an even rougher grasp of this energy known as 'Ether', but if Ether and mana are roughly equal, this specimen had enough raw power to force you out of your armor, at the least."

"Is that so?" The Death Lord's pointed ears twitched. "That makes me ever more curious. Perhaps I myself will wander out and wreak havoc to see who can stop me.

But alas, I am trapped."

"A good thing, too. I don't want you making a mess of a world that's mine," said Aldrich.

## **Chapter 316: A Deal with a Demon**

"Your world? Spoken like a true conquerer, heh." The Death Lord laughed. "But I like this attitude of yours. I know you have recently acquired territory of your own. It seems that has made you more receptive to the idea of conquest."

"Control, not conquest," countered Aldrich.

"Oft times, they are the same thing." The Death Lord shrugged. "But think of it as you may, so long as you grow strong enough to take my power, I do not care much what you think. As long as it does not make you boring."

"That eye-," said Aldrich, changing the subject. "Do you think Volantis could incorporate it into himself? He does have the Shattered Bone necromancy, after all, and that's all about stitching parts. Alterhuman and Variant parts are too foreign for him, but the [All-Seeing Eye] is from Elduin."

"Correction. Not from Elduin per say," said Medula. "The [All-Seeing Eye] exists across many realms. It is a naturally occurring phenomenon that we demons are taught to be wary of, though exceedingly rare."

"I see. That still doesn't preclude the possibility that Volantis can incorporate it."

"He likely can," said Medula. "It will simply take some time for his form to get used to it."



"Good." Aldrich pondered Supermind's last words for a bit.

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

Those words had more meaning now. Supermind was telling Aldrich to see as he did. To literally take his eye and defeat the Stranger. Not just the Stranger, too. The eye could identify Aldrich as someone not native to Earth, likely meaning it could do the same for any other alien entity.

"But, I will not give the eye to you," said Medula as she waved her hand, telekinetically floating the eye into it.

"That is ours by right!" protested Valera.

"Right? Did you not take it from a corpse? One slain by the demon you call the Stranger? What spoils of war right is that? That of the vulture?" said Medula.

The Death Lord was surprised. "Medula, what are you-,"

"I am tired of giving and not receiving enough, Mel," said Medula. "I know you are resigned to your fate, that you are fine giving away pieces of yourself until there is nothing left. It is your way of atoning. I understand that.

But that is not me. I am curiosity incarnate. I abhor being chained here when there is so much before me to explore."

"M-Meddy, w-what are you saying?" squaked Wai'ki, her deer ears fluttering down in fear. "Are you...rebelling?"

"My mind," said Medula. "It is fine, Wai'Ki. I am not rebelling. I am simply asking for a fair price for my efforts."

"Name your price, then," said Aldrich, calm. "You were the one to analyze Supermind and Randall's bodies. You processed the Cursevein into a necklace to fend against the Stranger. You gave me the [Night Parade of a Thousand Spirits].

I understand where you're coming from.

So, name your price."

"Hm. You are more agreeable than usual today," said Medula.

"I'm being reasonable. I do owe you one."

"Then I will be straightforward." Medula pointed at Supermind's suspended body. "I want that body."

"Why?" Aldrich raised a brow. He was going to bury Supermind's body as he did not want to turn the legendary hero into a zombie. He wanted to give Supermind the respect he deserved.

"It is a suitable body for me to possess," said Medula. "Powerful and capable. Were I to inhabit it, I, as demon, creature beyond realms, could walk in your realm unbound by the Necropolis. All I need to do is reshape it into a form that mimics my current one.

You promised me before that in exchange for processing your curse vein, you would find a suitable host for me. Well, you have found one. I am here to claim my just reward."

"I see." Aldrich thought about this. Medula, it seemed, was the only one in the Necropolis that could permanently escape it, and that was because as a demon, she had an innate ability to traverse between realms.

Provided, of course, she had a host body.

And, it seemed, the stronger the host body, the higher the chance of her leaving the Necropolis.

But it was understandable. Medula could see her ticket out of here dangling right in front of her face, just inches away from her. Of course, she would try to reach out for it.

Aldrich had not known so far, but he could tell now that Medula had the most 'discord' with the Death Lord. She was the one that spoke her mind the most and disagreed the most. The one that had the least loyalty.

That did not mean Medula was not loyal. She certainly was. But not loyal enough to stay in an eternal prison when she had a way out.

Aldrich was not too worried about her annihilating the Alter world if she got out. Medula was a 'benevolent' demon in that she despised killing. All she really cared about was learning new things.

But he still did not want to give her Supermind's body. It was TOO powerful. If she managed to rejuvenate it once she possessed it, she would be nigh-unstoppable.

And Medula did not have as much leverage as her attitude would make it seem. Yes, she could live on earth permanently with a strong host body, but she could not make the jump from the Necropolis to earth by herself. Otherwise, she would have already tried.

Aldrich needed to take her out manually in the first place.

"You do understand that even if you make that host body, unless I personally take you out of here, you're still stuck here, right?" said Aldrich.

"I know. That is why I am keeping the body and the eye," said Mēdula.

Aldrich glanced at the Death Lord, wondering if she would intervene.

"O-oh Mel, can't you stop this? I hate fighting among friends," said Wai'ki as she nudged the Death Lord's shoulder.

"I will let the Usurper talk. When necessary, I will intervene," declared the Death Lord.

"You demons, always a greedy lot," muttered Valera, but she deferred to Aldrich to negotiate.

"Let's cut a deal, then," said Aldrich.

"It best be a good deal, Usurper," said Mēdula.

"Depends on how reasonable you are." Aldrich continued. "That body has importance to me. I want to bury it, same with the other one. I cannot give it to you.

But-," He raised a finger. "I can give you this. In time, a time I assume is nothing compared to your immortal lifespan, I am going to initiate a wide-scale attack in an area populated with Alters, many of them strong just like that one.

I had asked for a favor once, when I lost my divine flask. It was for you to cast [Outworld Imprisonment] when I needed you to."

"Another favor, is it?" said Mēdula, annoyed.

"A favor for both of us. If I remember correctly, [Outworld Imprisonment] creates a prison realm that's neutral. It has no 'natives', so it doesn't reject anyone.

Which means as long as it's active, you can move around in it without a host body."

"That is correct."

"Then here's the deal. Not a favor, a deal - something that can work for both of us.

You cast [Outworld Imprisonment] to start my attack, as promised. Normally, after that, you go back to the Necropolis. This time, though, you stay inside the prison realm. There, you can take your pick of whoever you want to be your next host."

## **Chapter 317: A Reasonable Understanding**

Medula rubbed her forehead, sighing. "Why should I take this deal? Can I simply not keep this body forever mine? There is nothing you can do about it."

"Like I said, I want us to be reasonable here," said Aldrich. "Because if we get unreasonable, that tends to teeter us to extremes, and I am very much in home with extremes."

"Is that so? Tell me, what is your idea of an extreme?" countered Medula.

"That body is a worldwide treasure in the Alter world. Even now, people are looking for it, among them, the most powerful beings on the planet. I could tip the world off and lead them to a Sign, join them all as my party members, and help them reclaim what is rightfully theirs.

This realm is powerful, yes, but against an attack from an entire world? The odds are questionable."

"You would dare to invade the Necropolis?" Medula narrowed her crimson eyes as they burned with infernal glint. "To ruin that which has given you so much already?"

"Y-you're going to attack us!?" squeaked Wai'ki.

"Not an attack. Just helping my world take back what's theirs," said Aldrich.

"As if you are not the one that sent this body to us for analysis in the first place...", said Medula.

"And now that we're done with it, I fully intend on returning it and burying it properly. That man used to be one of my heroes. I am not above finding value from his corpse - that is what necromancers do - but preferably, I would like to give him rest now that his usefulness is at an end."

The truth was, Aldrich would have raised Supermind as a zombie if he had to. He had done so with Adam and Elaine to survive when he first got his powers, after all, and they meant more to him than Supermind. But he was not in a situation of life or death at this point and he did not want to give that corpse to Medula.

This was, of course, quite a big bluff on Aldrich's part. Leading the heroes into the Sign was nothing short of disastrous for both Aldrich and the Necropolis, but it was the extreme of that disaster that gave weight to this bluff.

Because even if it was unlikely that Aldrich would see through on his bluff, even a 1% chance that he could was risk enough.

"A bluff," Medula aptly called out. "Too big to be realistic so as to be a threat to me."

"Oh, but it isn't a threat to just you, is it?" Aldrich eyed the Death Lord and Wai'ki and, by extension, the entirety of the Necropolis. All of them were going to be under threat, not just Medula.

This forced everyone here to weigh Medula's self-interest against the interest of the many.

Was she willing to compromise the safety of the entire Necropolis for her freedom?

And even before that, would the Death Lord allow it?

Would the rest of the Deathguard?

"I know there are things you are holding back from me," Aldrich said to the Death Lord. "Like how you lost your arm. I know it wasn't from a simple sparring session with Rella. But because of your generosity so far, I've held back on pressing on the matter.

But maybe I should start looking for answers."

"You would dare to threaten my realm?" The Death Lord's fangs bared, her canines lengthening into serpentine curves. She gripped the edge of the grey stone table and shattered a chunk off of it with ease. Her magical aura surged, raging out in a purple and green aura that looked cascaded far into the ceiling.

The entire library shook, cracks starting to etch their way across every large surface.

Wai'ki whimpered as she put her hands over her head and shut her eyes. Medula herself stood up in alarm, the white energy signature of dimensional magic rippling around her gloved hands.

Valera instantly stood up, utterly fearless in the might of a level 100 boss. She positioned herself right beside Aldrich, ready to manifest her shield.

But Aldrich remained calm, staring back at the Death Lord's gleaming lavender eyes without giving a single inch.

If he died, she died.

Not just her, but everyone around her.

And, Aldrich knew, she cared. She cared about the people under her. Otherwise, she would have had a mindless army. He knew that because he did just the same with his own Legion.

If he died, the entire realm collapsed - mass genocide.

The Death Lord laughed.

A deep, hearty laugh with her hands around her robed belly. She hunched over, the peals of her laughter echoing about, each ring of mirth lowering the intensity of her flaring aura bit by bit until, finally, when she was done laughing, the energy was gone.

"Oh, what entertainment." The Death Lord shook her head. "In my thousands of years of life, not a single being has challenged me so fearlessly as you, Usurper. Not even the gods I slew, no, they whimpered and begged and averted their rune-filled eyes the most.

The sheer audacity to suggest an invasion of my realm...it tickles my stone-covered heart so."

"So, what will it be?" said Aldrich.

"I would let you and Medula bicker more, but I cannot risk the Necropolis for it. And you, Usurper, may just be insane enough to follow through on that bluff of yours." The Death Lord spoke to Medula. "Take that deal, Medula."

"I do not need deals, I need-," began Medula.

"Take it." The Death Lord's voice was firm, extremely uncharacteristic of her usual laid back nature. It showed that underneath her veil of casualness, she was still very much the warlord conqueror that had slaughtered millions.

Which brought a question to Aldrich's mind: what exactly was she atoning for? What could hit her conscience so hard that she was willing to just...fade away? Without even trying to change her fate like Medula?

"And you need to make a contract with me before you can gallivant around my world freely," said Aldrich.

"More conditions...?" said Medula.

"Just a simple one," said Aldrich. "That being this: you will not disturb the balance of the world. You may travel and learn and defend yourself, but influencing the world directly? Killing a mass amount of people? Spreading your name to crowds or, to other realms - realms that could find my world? Raising acolytes?

Not happening.

You will not give your name. Your origins. Your magic. Or access to any of it all."

Gods, demons, and high ranking spirits could make contracts with others that they absolutely could not resist lest they suffer severe consequences.

Granted, it was possible to find ways to skirt around contract restrictions - that was what many demons did to trick mortals into making deals with them - but Medula, Aldrich determined, was too straightforward to work that way.

Most knowledge demons were.

They, like war demons, were surprisingly the most 'pure' in their pursuit of what they wanted. They wanted knowledge and to spread it among their chosen followers.

Granted, these followers usually ended up being zealous, questionably brainwashed cultists, but it was generally a better fate than making a contract with, say, a war demon who gave you power at the cost of unquenchable bloodthirst or a secret demon who would want nothing more than to see you fall into despair and destruction.

"Is that your perception of a 'simple' contract?" said Medula.

"Yes," was all Aldrich had to offer.

"I think it simple enough," said the Death Lord. "Simple enough for you to accept this deal, no?"

Though the Death Lord posed a question, the tone behind it was very much not questioning.

"...I suppose I did see something like this coming. You do hold the fate of this entire realm in your unlife. Only I have the tools to escape your grasp over us, this glorified prison, but I cannot ignore my comrades either." Medula glanced at Wai'ki before she sighed. "It was worth a try, I suppose. I will take the deal, Usurper, though note that it is very much under duress."

"I'm glad we came to an understanding," said Aldrich. "A reasonable one."

## **Chapter 318: The Forest**

Aldrich flew through the air with Volantis fully armored around him. Beforehand, the living armor had been playing with Chrysa in the Control Tower, or rather, training with her, giving her light sparring sessions with a live enemy.

Draconic wings stretched out to Aldrich's sides, generating their magical flight field to keep him soaring through the skies. It was dark, as dark as it got, to keep cover.

Inside his Boundary were Chrysa, Valera, Chiros, and Feather. He made sure to bring all Elden World units for this mission to avoid as much tech-based surveillance as possible. Even flying was a little risky as satellite surveillance could detect fast flying,

human sized objects. Courtesy of there being so many of them around now post-Altering.

But in the Wastelands, where Aldrich currently flew, satellites had less coverage, especially in airspace that geo-storms passed by. The energy trail they left created a sort of 'glare' that prevented even the best satellites from really picking up on what was going on there. Flying Alters could therefore reliably fly in 'stealth' by mapping out paths where geo-storms had passed through within the past seven days.

The glare was invisible to the naked eye, but to anything lens and tech based, it was astoundingly disruptive. Some people speculated that geo-storms, like variants, could adapt to technology as they were both parts of nature. Others thought that was terrible logic and reaching.

Regardless, it helped Aldrich stay low and out of sight. The path he followed was one that Gerard and his Eagle riders mapped out for him, and if word around the nomad community was true, Gerard was the absolute best at pathing through the Wastelands undetected.

Courtesy of his age and experience.

ACD (Alter Cell Detection) satellites were just about the only things that worked out here, being capable of tracking dense alter cell energy signatures through even storm-glare, but because Aldrich used 100% Elden World power sources, he was, functionally speaking, completely invisible.

The only thing that could catch Aldrich right now something like radar, but he doubted any flying vehicle was around him. Not here in the Wastelands.

"How is the new eye, Volantis?" said Aldrich.

"It is quite something," said Volantis. Supermind's [All-Seeing Eye] opened up on the forehead of Aldrich's face plate via a slit that popped through the metal. The eye goggled around lazily, the rainbow ringed pupil unable to focus. "I can stitch it to my form, but I require a day to reliably make it mine."

"A day? Not bad at all. How did Chrysa do today?" Chrysa slept right now, all tucked out and tired from fighting all day. Valera kept watch over her, putting her to bed by recounting glorious tales of her many battles as an exile.

Surprisingly, Chrysa loved them, even with the rather questionably gory descriptions that Valera loved to put in. Looking at them through his mind, Aldrich could see a proper bond forming. Valera, at heart, was a good caretaker.



Loss had made her cold and unforgiving, but when she let someone get close to her, they became her everything. At first, that was just Aldrich, but she eagerly welcomed Chrysa too, probably because she was technically Aldrich's child.

Born through some strange spirit-based self reproduction, yes, but a child nonetheless.

"She is talented in the art of battle," said Volantis. "Eager to learn. Eager to fight. Were she an orc, she would have done mighty well!"

"How's her magic? Better?"

"Quite so. It still drains her considerably - such is the nature of magic that manipulates the fabric of space - but as it is her natural affinity, her mastery and efficiency with it grows by the day.

I have taught her how to Shape it, to let it mimic and give strength to her physical movements, and she has taken to the art like a bird to the sky." Volantis laughed. "An affinity of Space - it is one of pure legend. In time, I am sure she will also be like legend, worthy of standing side by side with my warmother of old, Thel."

Thel. The orc warmother who had led Volantis when he was still flesh and bone. Indisputably the strongest recorded orc as well, sitting at level 85, very close to the realm of the gods themselves. One of few known godslayers as well.

"I'm curious, Volantis, do you still have any loyalty to Thel?" asked Aldrich.

"I am grateful to her. She accepted me in spite of my grave sins, but loyalty? No. She is gone, far gone, and I have chosen to bind you as my Armored.

That is not a decision lightly made. And it is not a decision lightly broken."

"I see." Aldrich looked down. The Wastelands had changed considerably here. Instead of endless swathes of dry, cracked earth, he beheld quite the odd forest. It was comprised of just a small gathering of giant trees, many as tall as sixty meters and incredibly wide to boot.

A wild network of vines connected the treetops together, creating a thick net of biomass where strange car-sized flowers and plants grew, most of them with great big maws like oversized venus flytraps, devouring insect variants that happened upon them.

According to rudimentary data, the predominant type of variant here were flying insects, but there was not much more information than that.

Not even the AA scouted reliably this far deep into the Wastelands.

This, remarkably, was where Feather had his bunker. According to Feather, most of the variants were insect types that lived on and nest in the treetops and vine network.

They did not bother with anything on the forest floor.

However, because even a cursory AC scan would identify thousands of variants mingling in the trees, nobody dared to step into it.

Aldrich lowered altitude, floating into the thick of the giant forest low to the ground to prevent attention from any of the bugs above. None of them were really big threats, averaging at the D rank, but it would still be annoying to get swarmed by thousands of them at once.

On the forest floor, Aldrich felt a distinct sense of emptiness. Everything was quiet. Eerily so. The treetops where the insect variants lived were so high up that any noise they made did not carry down.

"Strange," said Aldrich as he meandered about, looking for the bunker. Apparently, it was not even underground - that was how confident Feather was that nobody would look for him here. "One would think that with a lush forest like this, you would find life at the bottom, too."

"It is indeed an oddity. I am still getting used to the novelty of this new realm," said Volantis. "These towering trees, in particular, are quite odd. Energy signatures within their bark grow quite dim.

Perhaps there is something hidden within?"

"Let's not mess around with anything just yet. Not until I get what I need out of this bunker. Speaking of-," Aldrich found the bunker. It was quite literally just a mobile home, parked beside a tree trunk that utterly dwarfed it.

He tapped his Phylactery, willing Chrysa awake. She groggily replied, 'Yes, father?'

"Can you bring our new guest out?" said Aldrich.

'Okay...' Chrysa yawned audibly.

A white silhouette crackled in front of Aldrich, filling in with color to reveal Feather, dressed up in a proper suit and tie to look presentable. He had sunglasses with a douchey slick-back haircut more grease than anything else.

"Is this it?" Aldrich pointed to the bunker.

"Yeah, this is it." Feather nodded at the mobile home. He was more in control of himself as it had been half a day of flying, which meant several hours outside of the Learning Room.

But the brainwashing was still potent enough that Feather would listen to everything Aldrich said for another few days at least. Feather just got to show more of his personality while he did so.

"Doesn't look convincing a a good bunker spot, yeah, I know, and yeah, I also know that technically, that ain't actually a bunker, but I guaran-fucking-tee this is safer than a nun's twat," said Feather.

"How did you even find out about this place?"

"Eh, a villain referred me. S-ranker called Leshen. Complete oddball, that one, said he loved to unwind here where nobody would find him cause' the voices he heard soothed him. Dude was nuts, but he treated me good enough.

Probably because I was about one of a couple people that didn't straight up drop dead from his poison gas. Hard to make friends when you got no choice but to kill everybody within twelve steps of you," said Feather.

Feather's power was plain old regeneration, though as a B rank Alter, it was good enough to let him grow back an arm in a few seconds. He could also move his consciousness around, letting him survive as a tiny little nugget of flesh and come back whole again. "Shame Valkyrie had to lock him up. Whenever he did security detail for me, I felt like the safest guy in the world."

"And you're sure the variants won't attack you?" said Aldrich.

"They're way the hell up there." Feather craned his neck and looked up high to the treetops. "And I haven't ever seen em' get down here. They don't even crawl down the trunks, just stay above the branches."

Aldrich remembered that incident. It was maybe ten years ago that Leshen, already known for being mentally unstable, went absolutely berserk guarding a Dark Six lab. He grew an entire forest of toxic and carnivorous plants, destroying the lab and everyone in it.

The flesh eating forest would have spread uncontrollably had Valkyrie, a S-class hero who also used plant based powers, not subdued Leshen.

Now, Leshen was probably rotting in some hidden Null cell.

"Alright then. Your friend Desmond is going to be coming here soon. So let's get started making you presentable." Aldrich stepped up to Feather, dwarfing the average sized man.

"What are you-," began Feather, but he was cut off when Aldrich slammed his fist into the man's stomach, going through the flesh.

## **Chapter 319: A Trapped Spider**

Desmond's red tinted eyes fidgeted, looking from side to side, up to down: everywhere for a threat. All he saw were dirt and trees. Giant trees. In front of them, he felt small, constantly watched.

Out of every bad feeling in the world, Desmond hated the idea of being watched the most. It was one of the reasons why he hated coming to this bunker. The idea of being watched by nature, that there were thousands of creatures above, was unpleasant, to say the least.

Lately, he had been experiencing that feeling more and more in general, never quite being able to shake off the idea that somebody or something was watching him.

It was probably just his nerves, though, especially with the civil war going on with the Trident. A debacle that was, to say the absolute least. The balance was right there, Italian, Japanese and Russian Prongs working seamlessly. As they had been for over 50 years.

But all it took was one bad day, one, utterly insane day, for it all to break apart. Desmond still remembered the meeting with the Three Prongs. The speech the Russian Prong rep said before he blew himself up.

'All of you are thinking too small. You care about balance and the profits that come with it. All you see is this tiny little rock that you call your home, that you think is special. And because of that, you're caged. Like dogs. Old, mangy dogs.

Now, it's time to put the dogs down.'

Just like that, war. War on the tide of mass variant attacks.

War against not only the Italian and Japanese Prongs, but the entire world - the AA-Panop Complex - as well.

What was the Russian Prong thinking?

What was Ivan thinking? He had been head for twenty years, years of secrecy, granted, but was that all to plan for this stunt? Was Ivan really the head anymore?

"We're within ten miles of the bunker coordinates," said Mollusk, one of two of Desmond's highest end bodyguards. The other, Refraction, followed behind, ready to warp everyone out if anything got even the slightest bit suspicious.

Desmond hated traveling in person when he could make do with drones, but Feather, as a capo in the Italian Prong, had status enough to demand a physical presence.

Even then, Desmond was not going to let his guard down. Not with the new cloaking tech the Russian Prong's bots used that kept the world up at night with how deadly it had been.

The only person in the Underworld so far who could devise any countermeasure against it was Mad Jack, and even then, that was up to the whims of Jack's twisted, ever unstable mind.

"Stop here." Desmond pointed forward, into the dark of the forest. In response, several black, dog-sized spider drones unlatched from his back, hovering through the air as they paved the way forward, scanning it all.

"Are you sure about this?" said Mollusk, his slimy, octopus-like blue head pulsating. "Feather's a capo. He won't like that you're implying the safety he guarantees isn't enough."

"Feather will have to deal with it," said Desmond. "There's only so much respect I can afford in times like this."

"So, are you here or not?" Feather sat in front of an empty metal table, impatiently tapping the steely grey surface with his fingers.

Around Feather, several spider drones floated around, directing their red, grid-patterned scanning beams across every inch of the mobile home's dingy unkempt insides.

"I need to secure the area first." Desmond's voice emanated through the drones.

"You do know I'm a capo, right? I deserve more respect than this. Without me, you wouldn't even be halfway where you are now." Feather frowned, his shaded eyes staring at the drones.

"I understand you are my biggest investor and tie to the Trident, but I cannot afford to be less than careful now," said Desmond. "Custom has to take a backseat with the civil war going on."

And, if I remember correctly, I was the one that tipped you off on that kidnapping attempt."

"Tch. Yeah. Fuckers almost got me, too." Feather snorted. "Too bad you and I are always one step ahead of the game, eh?"

"Stay complacent, and you'll fall behind sooner than you think. Now, more so than ever. The world's started to up its pace in terms of pure chaos. Thankfully, the war's cooled down for a bit - you're safe to leave after our meeting."

"Yeah, ain't that true." Feather rapped his knuckles on the table, more impatient than ever. "It's been five minutes of this scanning shit. Get your ass over here so we can talk business."

"We could talk business like this." A spider drone hovered in front of Feather, across the table.

"Fuck that. The more we get cool tech toys like this, the more we have to value tradition. Why the fuck would I drag you out here if I was going to talk to you through a damn screen? Scratch that, this drone of yours doesn't even have a screen.

Is this how you're going to insult me?'

"...I'm on my way. I've confirmed that your surroundings are safe."

"Excellent observation, genius. Think I'd be here if I didn't know that?" Feather snorted. "I'll let this slide this time. Now get your ass over here."

Desmond sat across from Feather. Mollusk and Refraction stood on alert, ready to deal with any possible threat. Spider drones floated outside, ready to report the slightest disturbance.

In a single instant, Refraction could warp everyone out here if needed. He was, after all, one of Desmond's most trusted bodyguards. Mollusk did not fall far behind either. As an A-rank mutant, he was more than enough muscle to deal with all but the absolute highest class of threats.

"You don't have any guards with you?" Desmond asked Feather.

"Couldn't bring any after that short notice you gave me. Fucking lit a match right under my ass, you did. Think I had time to hire anyone new?" said Feather.

"This is why you need to build up relations with your guards," said Desmond.

"Past three capos before me got shanked or betrayed by their close guard. Ain't letting that happen to me." Feather grinned. "Anyway, how are things on the outside?"

"The Russian Prong's gone mad," said Desmond.

"Madder than Mad Jack?"

"Madder, if that was even possible. They attacked the Judicata and took down Supermind."

"Shit, Supermind? Really? Rest in piece, you sweet old legend. And how the fuck did they pull something like that off?"

"Unknown technology," said Desmond. "Current reigning theory is that it's alien."

"Alien, huh? Thought nobody could work with that shit."

"That's what we thought. But we're the criminal underworld - we aren't the experts in that field. The government is. But that's a different topic." Desmond shifted in his seat, uncomfortable, feeling tense. "Why did you bring me out here? You said you had important information that was urgent."

About what?"

"Your death." Aldrich's voice echoed outwards, permeating through the room, though nobody could pinpoint where it came from.

But Desmond was not about to find out. He instantly stood up. "Get us out!"

"Roger." Refraction immediately opened up his palms, creating two transparent mirror constructs. But, before the constructs could form properly, they shattered into a rain of fading shards.

Warp-Lock.

## **Chapter 320: Capturing the Spider**

"What is the meaning of this!?" shouted Desmond in a rage, his eyes flashing bright red. His synthetic dreadlocked hair, made of fiber-net cable, glowed crimson in various segments that lined each lock. He looked around everywhere, and his spider drones spun about, scanning, but they could not identify where that voice came from.

But, at the very least, there was no immediate threat.

"Just business, Des," said Feather. "Our line of work always comes with a hefty side serving of betrayal. You ought to know that best."

"You..." Desmond's lips twisted into a snarl, but he quickly turned to Refraction, needing to get out before venting any anger. "The Warp-Lock's range can't be infinite. Let's go!"

Refraction nodded and shouted to Mollusk. "I'm breaking us out of here!"

Refraction rushed to one of the mobile home's walls, winding back a palm strike to blow it away.

"No you don't." Aldrich materialized behind Refraction in a shower of white sparks, tightly gripping the mercenary's wrist.

"Y-you!" Desmond's eyes went wide as he recognized Aldrich. Or, rather, Thanatos. "It was always you, wasn't it!? The one watching me!? Ever since our meeting, I've always had a feeling of being watched...it was you!"

Aldrich did not respond. He was curious how Desmond knew that, but that did not matter right now. He could tear answers out of Desmond later. What was important was separating Refraction, a warp-capable Alter, from Desmond.

Mollusk reacted to Aldrich, his arm splitting into six suckered tentacles that rushed at Aldrich at impressive speed. The tentacles, however, stopped, clanging against an enormous shield.

Behind it stood Valera, fully armored, the jagged teeth of her hound helm bared.

"I have to deal with another tentacled monstrosity?" muttered Valera. "Gross."

"Not alone." Chiros materialized beside Feather and dashed past the line of tentacles, his orange-red [Hellfire Blade], obtained from the third trial quest, roaring with a coating of fire.

Thin, high-temperature orange lines drew vertically downwards all of Mollusk's arm tentacles before they split apart, neatly severed.

"Gah!" Mollusk withdrew his severed tentacles, smoke sizzling out from their charred stumps.

Aldrich nodded, seeing his legion grow. Chiros, too had grown now to level 45 from some extra Dark Wisdom Aldrich had accrued in the past week.

His appreciation was cut short, however, with Refraction unleashing a backwards kick.

Aldrich dodged the kick and used [Organ Stiching: Giant's Muscles] to pad his armored arms full of bright red muscle fiber. With the extra power, he slammed the back of Refraction's head with a mighty slap like a less than model parent disciplining their child.



Refraction planted into the ground face first, his head burying into the metal in almost comical manner. He grew still, unconscious.

That was Desmond's ticket out of here gone.

"How!? I scanned this entire area! I made sure there were no threats!" said Desmond, shrinking back against a wall as Aldrich approached. Desmond had no real combat capabilities. His Alter power was entirely utility based. His drones could take out maybe D rank Alters, but Thanatos - not a snowball's chance in hell.

Mollusk could not make a move as he faced both Valera and Chiro.

Aldrich opened a palm towards Feather.

"F-fuck..." Feather grabbed his stomach in pain before it burst open. The Phylactery flew out, landing in Aldrich's open hand. He placed it back into his chest, the armor plating opening up and snugly wrapping back around it.

Feather's gaping stomach wound closed back up in a few seconds with his regeneration.

"Wh-what? What was that!?" demanded Desmond, but Aldrich did not respond. Showing the Phylactery was his way of showing Desmond how he had lost, but Desmond did not understand because it was magic.

And Aldrich was not about to stand here and lecture Desmond on magic.

"There's nothing more dangerous than an enemy you don't understand. Or expect. Take that lesson with you to your grave." Aldrich grabbed Desmond's head and raised him up.

Desmond struggled, trying to pry Aldrich's arm away, but it was like a toddler trying to push back against a fully grown man: futile.

Aldrich reached into his Phylactery and materialized V's Viral Jacker. He clicked a button on the end of the syringe-like construct, and a three pronged needle-port extended out the other end, a line of purple energy glowing bright through it.

Desmond's eyes widened in panic, knowing what was going to happen.

"Wait-!"

Aldrich jammed the jacker into the back of Desmond's head. Sparks and arcs of electricity crackled around Desmond's head, and he seized violently until his eyes glazed. At that point, Desmond went limp.

V's bug worked perfectly, as promised.

'Good job with the Warp-Lock, Chrysa. I know it's a new technique, but you did great,' said Aldrich. 'Now, can you take this guy in?'

'Thanks father! I trained tons for it!' Chrysa said, though her voice was still laced with tiredness. 'And another one? So many weird guys end up here...but alright, I can handle it for father.'

Strands of white emerged from Aldrich's chest, wrapping around Desmond before warping him away into the Boundary. The viral jacker needed some time to fully work on Desmond, so until then, he would nap in peace and quiet in the Boundary.

"Now then." Aldrich turned to Mollusk. The Alter had regenerated his tentacle arms and shifted his round, unblinking, octopus-like eyes between Chiros and Valera. "About you and your unconscious friend over there."

"With Desmond gone, we've got no reason to fight you," said Mollusk. "Let me and Refraction go, and you won't hear anymore from us."

"Right. But you saw what happened here today. You saw Feather turning over to my side," said Aldrich. "And I have many more plans for Feather. I'm afraid things aren't that simple."

"It's the easiest way to do things for both of us," said Mollusk. "You're strong, no doubt, but I'm no slouch. I'm an A-ranker. There's always an easier way out. Something that works for both parties involved."

If you want us to keep our mouths shut, you could even hire us. That ought to do the trick."

"Such brazen behavior!" said Valera. "You would dare to demand payment even now?"

"Not demand. Negotiating," said Mollusk.

Aldrich recalled back to Medula. "I'm a little tired of negotiating, unfortunately. And-," Aldrich closed his fists, his green necromancy magic swirling around them. "There are other ways to make you two work for me."

## **Chapter 321: Mollusk Hunt**

"I saw you on the news," said Mollusk. His face was very much like Fler'Gan's, octopus like with a large, round head of slimy skin that shimmered, the color of the skin shifting from light green to red. His eyes were unblinking, the pupils simple round dots.

His body was generally humanoid, big, too, easily matching Aldrich's own height at over two meters, with the most monstrous part of him being that his arms and legs split down at their elbow and knee joints into a multitude of suckered tentacles.

"You can hijack corpses. A nasty power. No wonder you decided to be a Sentinel. World would have rejected you otherwise."

"Popularity ratings say otherwise," said Aldrich.

"Believe me, if the people here did not love my master, I would have made them," said Valera. She stood behind her newly awarded [Burnmaw Bulwark] that Aldrich received as a reward from completing the third trial quest.

The shield was like a solid, rectangular slab of iron with an angry red face melted at its front, the wide open mouth agape in a fierce roar from which hellfire flames sputtered, noticeable from a black tint outlining their flickering forms.

"People love pretty things," said Mollusk. "They accept you now because they need you. But in time, when you aren't needed, they'll shun you."

But enough talk.

It's about time I started to fight for my life."

"Yes." Aldrich did not want to make the first move too readily. Mollusk was an A-ranker. He was certifiably strong.

But because he was A-rank, especially as a mercenary that needed to advertise their strength, there was readily available information about him.

Aldrich had done his homework with V helping out the research, and from that, he knew Mollusk's baseline power was that he was a Mutant Alter who had cephalopod traits. He had rapid regeneration, a powerful, prehensile body, the ability to change the color of his skin to blend with his surroundings, and high physical stats easily on par with that of A rank augmenters.

Even then, Mollusk likely had a few trump cards under his belt that were not so readily known.

Refraction was even more secretive. Warp powers were so highly sought after that mercenaries only had to list that in their qualifications to get hired by top dogs in the underworld. As a result, Flux Alters that had warp capability had the luxury of hiding any combat applications their power had.

That was why Aldrich had knocked Refraction out as soon as possible. On top of that, he had imparted the [Bonebearing Curse] on Refraction with that blow, which was

practically a death sentence as the spell was mind control that circumvented Alter mental defenses.

[Bonebearing Curse's] lore text stated that it allowed the caster to control a flesh and bone creature by literally manipulating their skeleton like it was a puppet. Since it was more physical manipulation than mental, Alter mental defenses did not work against it.

"And let's add one more to this fight." Aldrich raised his right hand, wreathed in black cursed energy.

Refraction stood up with jerky movements, very much as if someone was controlling him using puppet strings.

"Refraction...?" Mollusk said. "No, you're controlling him. But he's not dead. So you can control others even while they're alive, hm? Probably through physical touch. And they need to be unconscious, too."

Quick observational capability. Mollusk had sensed something was off immediately from the differences in Refraction's movement. Though he was wrong about Aldrich needing someone to be unconscious to curse them, it was still a solid guess.

"Four against one, huh?" Mollusk slithered backwards.

"Shitty odds, yeah. Not like the odds weren't shit before. Why don't you just die? It'll be easy on everyone," said Feather as he leaned back in his chair and propped his feet on the table to watch.

"No can do. I still very much have things to do and places to be." Mollusk unleashed a wave of tentacles from both his arms. Ten in total. They expanded in size as they extended outwards, almost completely filling up the confines of the mobile home.

"[Roar!]" Valera commanded her shield.

The [Burnmaw Bulwark] unleashed an explosive stream of hellfire that seared through the incoming wave of tentacles, disintegrating them into dust and leaving a gaping hole where a wall had been.

Mollusk was gone.

"I still see you." Aldrich leaped into the air with his draconic wings unfurling. Volantis's Truesight picked up on Mollusk slithering away at quick speeds while camouflaged. Mollusk had used the tentacle wave as a distraction for a quick getaway.

'Damn it! How many powers does this guy have!' thought Mollusk as he regenerated his tentacles again, but he was helpless against a ranged assault from above.

Chiros and Valera shot forward, faster than Aldrich, with Chiros being the definitive fastest with his more agility oriented combat build. They could both track Mollusk through Aldrich's Truesight.

'Too many targets. Have to even the numbers a bit.' Mollusk deactivated his camouflage to keep his energy usage minimal before his ten arm tentacles severed off on their own.

The tentacles grew rapidly, turning into large, worm-like tendrils each the size of a large car. They swarmed around Chiros and Valera.

Chiros whirled around with his blade, slicing five of the tendrils in half, but the halves grew back bigger, adding five additional tendrils.

An infinitely multiplying army.

"Ah, so that's how it is," said Chiros. "This was my mistake."

"Use your [Crystal Blood Venom]! No slicing attacks, only piercing!" said Valera. "We have to kill these disgusting things in one fell swoop!"

"Yes, commander." Chiros dug his nails into his palm and dripped blood on his blade. A crimson aura emanated from the fiery weapon. He flipped over two tendrils slamming into where he was, each slam strong enough to blow apart big chunks in the dirt.

Chiros stabbed into both tendrils as he gracefully soared past them. Glowing red lines like veins permeated through the point of contact as the venom spread.

"[Roar!] [Roar!] Melt, you slimy nuisances!" shouted Valera as she used her shield like a flamethrower, unleashing a mass amount of fire that disintegrated any tentacle in sight.

The tendrils, however, seemed to have capable minds of their own, and though Valera engulfed a good six of them in flames, rendering them down to ashes, many of them escaped, dodging backwards.

Meanwhile, Aldrich pursued Mollusk.

Mollusk's stunt in removing his arm tentacles had worked to give him space and isolate Valera and Chiros.

However, all Mollusk could do now was run, slithering through the forest at high speeds easily beating out any race car.

Notably, Mollusk did not regenerate his arm tentacles. Or rather, he could not. It was very likely that creating autonomous tendrils like that was much more taxing energy wise.

Aldrich fired two [Death Bolts], and they homed in on Mollusk. Aldrich had trained to improve his mana control, and that meant he could now more freely direct the trajectory of his spells.

Mollusk, however, was fast. He zig-zagged at rapid speeds, trying to throw the bolts off.

When he noticed the bolts changing direction to follow him, he leaped up, latched onto a tree trunk, and then went around it in an instant by extending one of his tentacles several dozen meters like a climbing hook, attaching it onto the bark with its suckers before reeling himself in.

This threw the bolts off, causing them to smash into the bark with explosive green impacts.

On the other side of the trunk, though, Refraction awaited, having scaled the tree with sheer running speed.

Aldrich commanded Refraction to use his powers to attack. Refraction, however, only punched Mollusk in the face.

Mollusk's soft body easily rolled with the impact, minimizing the force greatly. With a swift movement, he unlatched one of his leg tentacles and wrapped it around Refraction before tossing the Alter away.

'I see. It looks like the [Bonebearing Curse] isn't as good as undead control. If I don't know how an Alter's power works, I can't get them to use it,' said Aldrich.

Refraction was also noticeably less coordinated than a properly controlled undead was. This made Aldrich assess that [Bonebearing Curse] should be used more as a disruption tool to disable enemies rather than actual proper mind control.

'Still, I can't deny that this guy is strong,' thought Aldrich.

Mollusk had very much trained his body's abilities to a honed knife's edge. He used every aspect of his biology exceedingly well. His soft, squishy body coupled with the slime and martial arts experience to roll with hits meant that most physical blows were completely useless against him.

On top of that, slashing attacks ran the risk of just multiplying more tentacles. His coordination in moving with his tentacles, using them to climb and maneuver, was also outstanding.

And he had very good tactical awareness, instantly cutting Valera and Chiros off at the cost of half his tentacles without a moment of hesitation.

If Mollusk was not fighting at a numbers disadvantage, Aldrich estimated that the Mutant would win against Chiro's eight times out of ten and fight a very long but losing fight against Valera.

Quite respectable. And all the more reason to add Mollusk to Aldrich's legion.

## Chapter 322: Mollusk Hunt 2

Aldrich floated in the air, firing [Death Bolts] mostly to keep Mollusk moving.

Mollusk dodged like mad, moving about the cratered tree trunk to dodge the incoming bolts. The way the alter moved was erratic, utterly inhuman, and, coupled with his capable speed, and Aldrich had a hard time tracking him.

Aldrich could only fire two bolts at a time, so he could not exactly overwhelm Mollusk with them either. He could, however, use the bolts like suppressive fire, keeping Mollusk from doing anything while he planned his next moves.

He decided to use more of his newly outfitted arsenal. He had padded out his spell count to twenty now, the maximum he could sit on until he hit level 60.

As he had wanted before, he had now augmented his instant death magic considerably with two unique and powerful spells.

The first one was [Anti-Life Beam]. It was a sixth circle spell that instantly disintegrated any unit that did not have enough vitality and health.

If it could not instantly kill, it dealt continual disintegrating damage, with constant exposure under the ray continually edging targets closer and closer to complete disintegration.

It also had the useful trait of very quickly dusting non-living materials, making it the perfect siegebreaking attack. It was mostly Aldrich's way to clear out fodder since it was relatively cheap and one shot weaker enemies in crowds.

But it took too long against tough targets to be reliable as instant death magic.

That was the nature of most instant death magics, though.

Since it was such a broken mechanic to one shot an enemy through their durability or health, it was balanced in many ways.

Boss units, for example, were generally immune to the effect.



And, most of the time, instant death magic was resisted by high vitality. The higher one's vitality, the lower the chance of the magic proccing. Mages could deal with it in different ways using spellbreakers or shields.

But there were certain spells that could circumvent these defenses reliably.

An example being his second new instant death spell: [Heart in My Hands]. It was an eighth circle spell, the highest in his arsenal barring the Night Parade.

By touching a unit, Aldrich could impart a curse on them, creating a magical copy of their heart in his hand. Crushing the fake heart crushed the real heart.

In the game, this dealt massive physical damage and, if the target was below 30% maximum health, instantly executed them.

But in the real world, a crushed heart was lethal to the vast majority of Alters, regardless of whether they were at '30% max HP' or not.

It was, in essence, a way for Aldrich to use the lore text on his spells to his unique advantage.

The biggest weakness of this spell, however, was that Aldrich needed to physically get in melee range and touch his desired target. It was the same weakness as trying to get [Bonebearing Curse] to work.

In a frontal confrontation, especially against a tough, fast, strong enemy, getting a touch in was going to be difficult.

Which was why Aldrich built around it.

"[Heart in My Hands]" Aldrich chanted. Crimson energy emanated around his right hand. Then, he chanted again. "[Undying Guardian: Pursuer]."

This was a spell Aldrich got from the dark arts tome awarded by the third trial quest. It allowed him to summon a single higher tier undead, and he had chosen the Pursuer, the undead he felt was most suited for his build.

Behind Aldrich, shadows swirled, forming into a black-cloaked, hooded figure whose face or body was not visible under its cloth of living dark. The entity was distinctively spiritual in form, its lower body ending in billowing wisps of darkness.

It loosed a piercing wail as it wrapped around Aldrich's form, its hooded void of a face looking about for its target.

"Take this," said Aldrich, raising his crimson wreathed hand up.



The Pursuer extended its hands from its robes. They were skeletal, the fingers curving into cruel hooks meant for digging in and never letting go.

The Pursuer tapped Aldrich's hand, and the curse transferred to it.

"And-," Aldrich fired off another [Death Bolt], this one forcing Mollusk to loop around from behind the tree trunk to in front of it, in line of sight with the Pursuer. "There's your target."

The Pursuer shrieked, letting go of Aldrich and speeding forwards at remarkable speeds. Once the Pursuer locked onto a target, it would never let go.

As a spiritual entity, it was immune to physical attacks, could phase through walls, and had rapid regeneration.

Unless it was destroyed all at once, it would keep coming back.

Once the Pursuer latched onto its target, it would transfer any debuffs or curses the summoner put on it. On top of that, the Pursuer would deal significant damage, acting like a parasite that drained its targets life force, slowing enemies while continually dealing damage.

It also lowered resistances, including instant death resistance, dramatically.

Basically, it turned into a massive pain in the ass for its target.

The only issue with the Pursuer was that if Aldrich sent it out, he could not recall it, and high tier undead like it required an entire day to resummon.

'What the hell is that!?' Mollusk panicked as he saw some kind of dementor thing rushing at him. 'This guy has too many tricks up his sleeve. I can't keep letting him pull them out. And if I stay constantly on the defense, I'll die eventually.'

My ranged combat is nearly non-existent, but I've found a way to make something work.

Well, here goes nothing.'

He bunched his leg tentacles together and flattened them, compacting energy in them like springs, waiting.

Once the black dementor thing got close, he would unleash the potential energy built in his legs, shooting forward like a living cannonball to evade the thing and hit Thanatos.

'This has to hurt,' thought Mollusk, staring right at Thanatos. 'And if I miss or if he dodges, all the better. I'll make a lot of distance between us, and then I can keep launching myself from tree to tree to get out of here.'

'A desperate move,' thought Aldrich, observing Mollusk's preparatory motions. 'He has no tentacle arms, but if he's doing this, he must have a way of hurting me beyond just slamming his mass into me at super speed.'

Mollusk did not have his arm tentacles anymore, but he did have deadly neurotoxins in his slime and, at his chest, a hidden, retractable beak that could easily crush the likes of diamond. By extending it at the very last moment, he could essentially act like a spear, shattering right through Thanatos.

When the Pursuer came close, he extended his leg tentacles, shooting himself forward at Aldrich at dizzying speeds that could easily rival a missile.

'The output of this attack is tremendous!' said Volantis, his telepathic words transmitting to Aldrich at accelerated speed. 'I cannot use a defensive stitching for I am maintaining flight! Use your cloak's Hallowed Ground, Armored.'

'No. We have to take the attack directly. If we dodge, he can get away. In fact, I'll wager that's what he's planning. Hallowed Ground turns us intangible - he'll phase through us.'

'I'll keep us in the air. Prepare defensive stitching. I'll assist you.' Aldrich slammed his palms together, his green aura surging as Mollusk approached rapidly.

No time for a chant.

Mollusk smashed into Aldrich, but instead of breaking Aldrich apart, it was Mollusk that blasted down to the ground, utterly repelled. With a deafening crack, the Mutant slammed into the base of a tree trunk with enough force that he broke right through it.

A remarkable testament to the sheer force Mollusk could output. For reference, Aldrich's [Death Bolts] had barely been able to char and crack the durable wood.

Mollusk lay stunned on the ground, covered in chunks of wood skewered into his body. His regeneration pushed them out, but it was too late.

The Pursuer caught up to Mollusk in his moment of recovery. With a howling shriek, the spirit ripped its hooked claws into Mollusk's body.

Mollusk jolted in pain, immediately feeling dizzy and sluggish. He tried to stand up, but found that every single movement felt hard, as if his entire body was made out of stone. He was not getting away anymore.

"Damn. Guess this is the end of the line for me," said Mollusk as he stood up, the Pursuer latched firmly onto his back. He looked ahead at Thanatos and just sighed. "You're a Sentinel for a reason. Thought they gave you the title just for saving their asses, but your power's the real deal, too."

Aldrich floated in the air with a large green ribcage surrounding him, acting like armor. Another new spell: [Ribcage of the Fleshless One].

A powerful defensive spell that summoned the ribcage of an old undead deity.

The ribs were thoroughly cracked, chipping away by the moment, but they had weathered Mollusk's final hit.

On top of that, his armor glinted with a silvery sheen, the pattern of scales visible upon it. Mountindrake Scales, hard and shock resistant, courtesy of Volantis.

Both combined had repelled Mollusk completely.

Aldrich noted that this combination was tough enough to reliably weather an attack powerful enough to hurt even S-class heroes.

Good information for later.

"That was good practice," said Aldrich. He floated down, his cloak billowing behind him.

"That's all I was in the end, huh. Practice," said Mollusk. He did not seem bitter, more amused than anything else.

Aldrich held his right hand up, a magic construct heart forming in his palm. "Practice is more than could be said for plenty before you."

"A compliment. I'll take it before I die. I rarely get any of those, heh."

Aldrich nodded in acknowledgement. Pure humans faced horrible discrimination in post-Alter society, but arguably severely malformed mutants had it even worse, for they were legitimate monsters.

Most of the time, Mutant Alters that mutated too far from alterhuman physiology were generally stronger, but also more mentally unstable and liable as a threat to society. Hence, they were shunned not only as dangers, but as freaks of nature.

It was why there was a nation state of mutants in the Arctic. They escaped society to make their own.

Their situation was the opposite of pure humans who looked just like any other human but could not contribute to society due to their lack of powers.

A mutant like Mollusk would have never known love or recognition, just fear, fear for how he looked, fear for his power. He had leveraged that fear to get power as a mercenary, but that was power born from fear regardless.

"It was a good fight," said Aldrich. He crushed the heart in his hand.

Mollusk coughed up a spurt of blue blood from both his mouth and stomach beak as his heart exploded. He slumped over, his pliable body expanding like a puddle.

A soul floated above Mollusk's corpse.

"At the very least, nobody will judge you for what you are in my ranks," said Aldrich. He put his hand over the soul. "Serve."

## **Chapter 323: Winding Down?**

Aldrich watched as green tendrils of energy flowed around Mollusk's sprawled out body. With a sudden jolt of energy, like a corpse being reanimated with an electric shock to the spine, Mollusk sprung back up, his tentacles puffing out and regaining their size and strength.

"So this...is what coming back from death feels like," said Mollusk. He looked down at his arms, and the arm tentacles regenerated from green mist that flowed into it, the vapor solidifying and reconstructing what once was. "I think I saw a light at the end of a long, long tunnel."

"Really?" Aldrich raised a brow. No other undead had mentioned seeing anything like that before. Plenty of religions, crazy ones and non-crazy, said that there was something beyond death.

Of course, it was proven to Aldrich that souls did go somewhere after death, but not a cushy paradise or place of eternal torment. That was all too convenient. Souls were just one aspect of many forces that regulated existence. When they were kicked out of their mortal coils, they went to the soul stream and were scrubbed clean for reincarnation.

At least, that was how it was for Elden World's soul stream. He knew that from the Death Lord there was a soul stream here as well, but how it exactly worked, he did not have an exact idea of.

"Just kidding." Mollusk shrugged. "Didn't see anything. Figured I'd be coming back as your minion anyway. That said, it's interesting that I can think for myself."

"I like to give my legion independence," said Aldrich. "Unless they prove they cannot handle it."

"Really? You seem pretty careful. What if one of your 'legion' members attacks you? Or plots against you?" said Mollusk.

"I have ways around that. Like this." Aldrich closed his fist, and Mollusk froze up, completely unable to move. "You lost your free will when you died. Whatever you have now is a privilege that I allow. I could wipe it and render you mindless at a moment's notice."

Aldrich unclenched his fist, and Mollusk moved again, drawing in a relieved breath. "Got it, got it. Well, looks like this is my new life now. It's easier to accept than I thought."

"That just means you didn't have any particularly hard feelings against me in the first place," said Aldrich. Unless a legion unit actively despised Aldrich to a tremendous extent before turning into an undead, they were automatically conditioned upon revival into seeing him in a favorable light.

So far, the only person that had enough of a grudge against Aldrich to actively despise him had been Evan Harker, one of Seth Solar's old lackeys, and Aldrich had turned that rat into dust a while back already.

"Guess not. I mean, I didn't really know anything about you. So, what's my new life, or un-life, I guess, look like under you?" asked Mollusk.

"An eternity of worthy service!" said Volantis out loud. "To conquer this world and the stars beyond!"

"...Something like that. Judging from your skillset, you'll do the same thing you've always done. Fight," said Aldrich. "Except this time, I'm sure that nobody will judge you for what you are. They'll judge you for your strength, which you have plenty of."

"Really now?" Mollusk sounded disbelieving. "Is this how things are in your sentinel state?"

"I have variants, Alters, and pure humans living side by side together. Do you really think how you look matters at all?" said Aldrich.

"Touche." Mollusk nodded. "How's the pay? Is there pay? Do you have health insurance? Paid time off? Vacation time?"

"I'll refer you to someone that can answer those questions better than me," said Aldrich, Casimir's mask popping in his thoughts. The guy always could make anything he offered sound good. "For now, prepare to head back to my state."

"Well, I'm ready when you are," said Mollusk.

"I need to add your friend into my service in a more permanent capacity first." Aldrich waved his hand, and Refraction landed in front of him. "I didn't get to see you fight at all, but you'll have your chance to impress me later."

Aldrich rammed his fist through Refraction's chest, punching through his heart.

Refraction grew limp. The [Bonebearing Curse] left his body in dark, wispy trails.

"This doesn't bother you?" Aldrich withdrew his hand. The blood and gore wrapped around his arm faded away, Volantis absorbing it.

"He's a business partner, not really a friend. I never had close friends," said Mollusk. "And in the underworld, this isn't exactly new. If you reach the A or, hell, even B rank, and you die in enemy territory, you can't bet your ass that your corpse is going to get experimented on. Regardless of whether you're a mutant like me or not."

"I see. Well, it isn't like the AA is any better in that regard. All of us do what we need to stay one step ahead," said Aldrich. He knew that the AA, at least to the public, stated that they gave respectful burials to their villains, but when they could get away with it, when the villains were too important and had no family connections, it was a near open secret that they experimented on those corpses.

"Yeah. Just the way things are," said Mollusk.

"Serve." Aldrich pointed at Refraction, and Refraction stood up with a groan, the hole in his chest filling up with regenerative mist.

"What happened?" said Refraction. He looked at Aldrich, then down at the shrinking hole in his chest. "Shit. I lost, didn't I?"

"Yeah. You got taken out pretty much instantly. And Desmond had the nerve to pay you more than me. Discrimination, I ought to tell you," complained Mollusk.

"Come on, you and I both know it's because of my warp power," said Refraction, crossing his black and gold color themed combat suit defensively. "And I'll have you know I'm quite open minded. I appreciate everyone human equally, pure human, mutant, or whatever."

"Then you'll have no issue serving under me," said Aldrich.

Aldrich could not see Refraction's facial expression as it was hidden under a helmet, but he did not sense open hostility. "I don't have a choice to go against you, do I?"

"No, you don't," was Aldrich's very simple answer. But yes, you'll get paid. Mollusk can fill you in on the rest of the details as we head to Haven."

In that moment, a woman's voice rung out, "Master!"

Valera flew in from above, landing before Aldrich with a crash while holding Feather slung across her shoulder. Chiros leaped in behind her, more elegantly landing on the

tips of his feet with nary a sound, his long white hair flowing behind him in luscious, sparkling waves.

"We have dispatched those foul tendrils! And we are here to-," Valera looked at Mollusk. "Ah, you ended this already?"

"That, I did," said Aldrich.

"Damn it, lady, you broke half my ribs with that landing...", complained Feather, still held like a sack by Valera.

"Be grateful you even got to touch a lady like myself." Valera dropped Feather down unceremoniously, and he crashed onto the dirt.

"You're too important to be out in the open. Go back to the Boundary." Aldrich put a hand on Feather's shoulder and warped him away to his inner realm.

"I was useless again..." muttered Valera.

"No, you did well holding those tendrils off," said Aldrich. "If they were here, they would have caused me serious trouble."

The Pursuer was immune to physical attacks, but it still had a physical form. That is, if a physical attack smacked it away, it would take 0 damage but still be sent flying.

Ten tendrils defending Mollusk would have made the Pursuer's job a lot more difficult, to say the least.

"My tentacles are not 'foul'," said Mollusk. "But he's right: it's impressive. Each of those tendrils, when I detach them at least, are around 70% as strong as I am. That's my strongest move."

Valera nodded at Mollusk. "You have a better attitude than the other tentacled one in our ranks."

"There's another one like me?" Mollusk said curiously.

Now that Aldrich thought about it, Mollusk and Fler'Gan were pretty similar appearance wise. Mollusk was like a more beefed up, roided out version of Fler'Gan. "Sort of."

"Cool. Can't wait to meet the guy."

"Then we set road for Haven. I've gotten everything I need from here," said Aldrich.

That was when he heard a rumble. A deep, earth-shaking rumble from something very, very big.

## Chapter 324: [Bonus chapter] A New Challenger

"What was that?" said Mollusk, but even as he asked that question, everyone present - all battle hardened - got into defensive form.

Aldrich's magical energy swirled around him. Valera raised her shield up and stood in front of him. Chiros held his flaming saber up. Mollusk's arm tentacles wriggled around him, ready for action.

Refraction, now free to display his skills, got into a shoulder width stance with open hands held out in front of him. A martial arts stance. Some form of kung-fu, Aldrich recognized.

"I see," said Aldrich. When he looked to the direction where the sound came from, he saw that it emanated from one of the giant trees. The one that Mollusk smashed through.

The entire sixty meter tall tree was shaking, giant leaves and branches falling from above with its thrashing. Some insect variant eggs fell as well, splattering on the forest floor into goo.

"A tremendous surge of energy is leaking from that hole," said Volantis. "The bark, it seemed, served as a form of insulator, hiding the flow from my senses. But now, I see clearly. I will mark the flow for you, Armored."

Aldrich saw a see-through display of a huge pillar of green within the tree trunk that ran lengthwise through it. Something was in there. Something enormous.

Something that had awakened.

From above, at the treetops, he could see countless strands of energy funneling into the trunk. It clicked then, why there were so many carnivorous plants on the treetops. Why the habitat above devoured and nurtured insect variants.

The variants were food. Nourishment for what was within.

The earth began to shake. Cracks began to line the thick, durable bark of the tree. Loud impacts resonated throughout the forest as the trunk shook from something within banging against it.

Like a chrysalis splintering, the butterfly within struggling to emerge.

"Refraction, you've got a scanner in your helmet. Read that!" said Mollusk as he swatted away a huge branch from landing on his head.



"I'm on it." Refraction put a hand to the golden visor of his helmet. "Shit...that reading's astronomical. Variant AC ratings are always inflated, but this...this is disaster class.

At the very least, a B+ rank disaster, maybe A, maybe higher - whatever's in there hasn't broken out fully yet. The readings aren't completely accurate, but I don't like what I'm seeing!"

Refraction slammed his hands together. Aldrich noticed and mentally got Chrysa to stop her Warp-Lock.

'Thanks, father. Keeping that lock thingy up makes me really sleepy...but I have to stay up and watch this! More exciting stuff is happening!'

When Refraction pulled his hands apart, he generated two large, golden rectangular mirrors from his palms. He put one mirror on one side of the group, then another on the other side.

"We're getting out of here!" said Refraction, shouting to be heard over the din of shaking earth, crashing tree branches, and the buzzing of hundreds of flying insect variants roused by the sudden disturbance. "Once my mirrors collapse on each other, I can warp us far. I don't know where exactly, but definitely not here!"

Aldrich raised a hand. "Wait. Have your warp ready, but don't take us out of here completely."

"What do you mean, wait!?" said Refraction. "There's almost a hundred of these giant trees around. Imagine if all of them start unleashing what they're keeping holed up. Not to mention the variants in their branches!"

"Observe carefully," said Chiros, pointing his blade to the other colossal trunks in the distance. "None of them are moving. Only this one."

"And the insects are flying away. Not to us," said Valera, having a potent [Danger Sense] skill.

"They're flying away because this is dangerous!" said Refraction.

"I said wait," said Aldrich. "As a mercenary, you're naturally risk averse. You've always picked and chosen what's best for you. But you aren't a mercenary anymore. And if you defy me, I'm taking your free will.

If it helps you feel any better, I can regenerate you from almost any injury."

The tree trunk broke apart, the many shards of its bark, most as large as houses, falling to the ground with thudding impact. An iridescent shine emanated from where the tree was, localized around two pairs of butterfly wings crumpled up in sap.

Even then, condensed as they were, it was easy to tell just from their length that once those wings fanned out, they would dwarf entire city blocks under their majestic shadow.

The wings attached to a huge, thirty meter long segmented body colored dark brown like wood.

No, it was wood. The creature was made out of bark, gnarled patterns and tree rings running across its entire body.

Six giant, insectoid wooden legs started to spread out from its abdomen, now free from their tree trunk cocoon. Despite not having functional wings, the creature remained suspended in the air.

The butterfly monster's tail ended in a curved, sickle-like stinger encased in glowing green energy. Not the pale, deathly shade of green that Aldrich's magic had, but a deep, verdant green that brimmed with life.

The tail hovered right above the forest floor, and where the dark green light touched, life sprung wildly. Vines and plants and trees all sprouted up in a manner of seconds, twisting around each other in a frenzy of uncontrolled growth.

The creature's head was not insectoid. It was...surprisingly human in its general shape and structure.

Unlike its body of dark, almost black wood, the skull was an ashen grey with sunken in, empty eye sockets and eerily human teeth guarded by solid black pincers that curved from the sides of its jaws.

Its forehead split down the middle, and a large, dark green eye emerged with loud squelching, its dot-like white pupil lolling about before focusing on Aldrich and his group.

"What the hell...is that?" said Refraction, terrified at the ungodly fusion of human skull, butterfly body, and plant mass. "Mollusk, what is that!?"

"How should I know? I'm not a variant expert! Are you assuming I know just because I look like a variant!? What happened to being open-minded!?" said Mollusk.

"It's a Geist. You can tell from its humanoid physical traits, though this one is a lot more monstrous than most I've seen. A lot bigger, too," said Aldrich.

Mercenaries like Mollusk and Refraction were usually never hired to fight variants. Especially not ones in the Deep Wastelands like this. "But I don't know much more beyond that."

"Then we have to leave! Geists exist only to eat human guts!" said Refraction, his mirror portals still up and ready to go. "That thing could have any number of powers. And we're right in its territory!"

The Geist, or Boss Geist, as Aldrich now dubbed it, clicked its pincers and unleashed a haunting wail so loud it would have ruptured the eardrums of the average Alterhuman.

Hearing this, insect variants from the treetops fled en masse, darkening the sky with their panicked numbers.

The Boss Geist hovered towards Aldrich, its pincers open in aggression.

"No warping. Not now. Keep your distance. Focus on luring it out of the forest."

"What are you planning?" said Mollusk.

"My legion has been lacking a proper boss type monster, hasn't it, Valera? Something that really makes an impact when you land on a battlefield with it," said Aldrich.

Valera grinned like mad under her helm, anticipating great battle. "Yes, very much so, my master."

## **Chapter 325: Boss Geist**

Refraction stared at Aldrich and Valera, and even under his golden helmet visor, it was easy to tell he was dumbfounded. "You two...are actually EAGER to fight that thing?"

"Yes!" shouted Valera as she started to take steps forward.

"The fighting is secondary," said Aldrich. "I enjoy it, but what I see is a massive opportunity for my new state."

In particular, the moment he saw that the boss geist could manipulate plant life was the moment he decided that he needed to raise this creature. He currently had an Arsellies Treeseed from the third trial quest.

It currently could not grow into a full Arsillow Tree without the 'divine blessing of growth' from an elven nature goddess. Normally, in game, Aldrich would have turned it into an item buff or an item, but he figured he could try to unlock its full lore potential.

Hiring nomads with chlorokinetic powers yielded no results, arguably because they were too weak.

The other alternative was to ask the strongest chlorokinetics in the world, Valkyrie, S-class hero and arguably the best fighter in the planet, or Ori, a sentinel from Africa.

Too many issues and risks dealing with them, though.

First off, Valkyrie was part of New Dawn, Solomon Solar's team.

And Ori was a reclusive sentinel who only managed his own state, nothing more.

But maybe this variant would suffice.

At the very least, with it, Aldrich would not have to worry about farmland and crop-based resources.

The Panopticon had a global monopoly over that with Skyfields, giant, A.I. maintained platforms in the sky that cultivated approximately 50% of the world's global food needs.

But with a variant like this, Aldrich could make Haven self-sufficient.

That was to say, Aldrich was very much willing to take risks to make sure this thing died.

"Okay, sure, but how's this going to work!?" said Refraction.

"Be quiet, Frac, and let the man think. He has like a thousand powers. I'm sure he can pull one out of his ass," said Mollusk.

The boss geist made its first move. It slammed its stinger deep into the earth, the earth splintering around it.

Then, a flood of spiked vines emerged, cascading towards Aldrich's group like a tidal wave of biomass.

"Well, he better think fast!" said Refraction.

"Chiros. Deal with that." Aldrich turned to Refraction. "Now then, tell me briefly how your powers work."

"Understood, high commander," said Chiros.

He leaped into the air, landing in front of everyone with confident poise, flicking his lengthy silver hair back with stylish, practiced flair.

The incoming wave of thorns and vines was so high that it utterly dwarfed him, and his tiny sword looked laughable compared to its sheer bulk.

"Reverting..." said Chiros. His form fitting crimson and white patterned armor began to glow a faint white. White, red streaked crystals began to form all around his body, replacing his armor.

The crystals looked less polished than his armor, more raw with jagged edges and rough facets all over.

The crystal layer covered his face as well, and the V-shaped visor that he kept over his eyes crystallized and became a part of his head like horns. His teeth grew longer, more feral, and sparkling, crystalline claws extended from his fingers and toes.

His legs changed shape, turning from humanoid into digitigrade, much like that of a hound's.

As a result, his posture leaned forward, becoming more savage, and every time he breathed out, white and purple sparkle laden dust filled the air around him.

This was [Reversion].

Strong enough vampires, particularly those from noble bloodlines, could 'revert' back to incredibly powerful monstrous forms that were said to be how their species were in days of old, before they decided to adapt to humanoid culture.

These primal vampires were called [True Vampires] and in Elden World, by the time the player arrived, they were all but extinct. But their power was undeniable. Even one fully matured [True Vampire] was a kingdom level threat.

Reversion tapped into that primal power, and it gave vampires a massive boost in their racial abilities at the cost of making them more blood drunk.

Chiros, however, could only revert 50%, meaning he could only get halfway to his true vampire form.

That kept his sanity and coordination intact, though it did remove his ability to talk.

With a roar, he emitted a huge cloud of sparkling dust towards the incoming vine wave. He then took his [Hellfire Blade] and swung it horizontally, unleashing a slash of black outlined flames.

The moment the flames came into contact with the cloud of dust, it detonated into a tremendous purple, red, and orange tinted explosion. When the colorful smoke and light subsided, it showed that the mass of vines had charred down to nothingness, leaving behind a long, char-black trail.

The boss geist saw this with its singular green forehead eye curiously, pausing, as if to contemplate the situation.

Chiros's ancestral vampires were subterranean creatures that adapted to cave-life.

Thus, they were blind and in tune with the earth around them, capable of generating crystal structures all over themselves.

This was the source of Chiros's Crystalblood Venom, a venom that, when placed within a living creature's blood in sufficient quantities, would rapidly burst through the veins and trap its victim in a crystal tomb made of their own lifeblood.

The crystalblood in dust form, however, was highly explosive and reactive to fire, complementing Chiros's fiery blade very well.

"I kind of get it. The ones wearing the fantasy style gear have a bajillion powers like you," said Mollusk to Aldrich. "Kind of like you three were ripped right out of a RPG."

"Yeah, I'm getting deja vu from seeing the Haven fight coverage, but this does look exactly like a scene you'd see from like Dark Wills," said Refraction.

"That one's a little too restrictive with its powers for my taste. I prefer games with a more varied power system," said Aldrich.

"Yeah, I get what you mean - wait, hold up, you play videogames?" Refraction stared at Aldrich's giant, spike-armored, threatening figure in disbelief.

Aldrich ignored the question. "So, tell me your abilities. Chiros will hold ranged attacks off."

"I can create two mirrors at once. I can warp anything caught inside of them when I slam them together. Alternatively, I can use the mirrors to reflect almost any attack, though not ones that dwarf their surface area," explained Refraction. "My effective range for warping is 10 miles."

"Good. Then on my mark, I want you to be ready to use your warp on her," Aldrich pointed to Valera, who shuddered eagerly, ready to fight.

"Uh, okay," said Refraction, noticing Valera's deep breathing and general insane energy.

"Valera, time to showcase your improvements. Let's use our Target Isolation Strategy," said Aldrich.

"Understood, my master." Valera cracked her neck. "Shall I use [To the Death!]?"

Aldrich nodded.

[To the Death] was a powerful single target Berserker skill that placed an afflicted target under a potent, rage inducing taunt. In exchange, the Berserker was also taunted to that target, forcing both parties to engage in a fight to the death.

It was one of Valera's most useful skills as it allowed her to take strong single units completely out of a fight.

The downside was that, of course, Aldrich lost access to Valera's Shielder skills, but he had more than enough tools to defend himself with now.

The Target Isolation Strategy involved Valera afflicting a unit with [To the Death!] and then teleporting both Valera and the target away to an isolated location, drawing the target away from their support and into the thick of an undead legion.

If the target was immune to teleportation, then that was fine too. They were forced to follow Valera due to the skill, and it gave them a trail to follow even if Valera disappeared from line of sight.

"The longer [Fight to the Death] is active, the more my berserker's rage will deepen. And with that, I will begin to [Revert]. Is this okay?" said Valera.

"It's fine. You'll still be sane enough for the warp. You can go all out when this thing catches up to you," said Aldrich. "After all, we're aiming to kill here."

"I was hoping you would say that, my dear master." Valera grinned, the glint of her fangs showing under her hound helm.

## Chapter 326: To the Death!

The boss geist began to float into the air, and its slime covered butterfly wings tried their best to unfurl, though drenched as they were, they still could not fan out. It bat its wings towards Aldrich, sending a gust of rainbow speckled wind.

"Stand behind her," commanded Aldrich.

Valera knew what to do, even in the midst of her ever increasing bloodlust. Chiros grunted and leaped backwards, still maintaining the elegant flow of his motions while reverting. He flipped and landed behind Valera as she switched places with him at the very front.

She slammed her shield down and used an active skill called [Guardian's Veil]. A dome of shimmering red emerged all around Aldrich and the rest of his newly raised party, creating a defensive barrier.

Shielders like Valera relied mostly on physical defense to block attacks, which meant that in general, area of effect abilities that flowed past their shields, such as energy attacks or in this case air particles, served as natural counters.

But that did not mean Shielders were entirely defenseless. They had some barrier type abilities, but they just were not as effective or sustainable as mages who were more specialized in magically constructing them.

The wall of rainbow speckled wind crashed into the barrier, but not at any speed that was particularly harmful.

"What is this?" said Refraction. "The wind velocity was enough to knock an A-class off balance, but it wasn't any real threat."

"The wind wasn't the threat," assessed Mollusk accurately.

Aldrich put his black and red armored hand out of the barrier.

[Undead Mind Control immunity activated]

"I see," said Aldrich. "These are particles that are meant to take over your mind."

"Shit, really? Guess we aren't stepping out of this barrier," said Refraction. "My mirrors can't reflect things that come from every direction like this."

"No need. As undead, we are all immune to mind control," said Aldrich. "Valera, drop the barrier. Taunt the boss while it's still distracted keeping up this useless attack."

"H-hold up-!" Refraction began.

Valera raised her shield, and the barrier faded away. She then rushed forwards, cutting through the incoming whirl of wind like a knife, rapidly getting into range to cast [To the Death!].

"See?" Aldrich said. "No effect."

"W-wow. You're right." Refraction looked at the rainbow particles glimmering against his armor. Mollusk did the same.

"Being dead is more convenient than I thought," said Mollusk.

"That, I agree with," said Aldrich. "Refraction, follow behind Valera. Get ready to warp her on my mark."



Refraction took a look at the giant boss geist's chill-incuding skeletal face and insectoid body and shivered. "Breathing techniques. Breathing techniques..." He breathed in, deep.

After exhaling, his body language changed entirely.

He became focused. Stiff. Ready. Like a panther ready to pounce upon prey.

"Mission mode: engaged," said Refraction, not a hint of panic in his voice any longer. "Supporting forward vanguard."

He sprinted forward with surprising speed, each of his strides covering huge swathes of distance. Aldrich realized then that the soles of his boots were encased in reflective gold. He was using the energy reflecting property of his mirrors to amplify his steps, boosting himself forward at superspeed.

"Hm. So he's from Ember," said Aldrich.

Ember was the same mercenary training group that Tox came from, famous for instilling in their recruits secondary personalities that were deadly efficient, focused, and ruthless.

Tox was from the very same group, though several years younger than Refraction.

"Yeah. All of them are batshit crazy. Deep down," said Mollusk, watching Refraction speed ahead, rapidly catching up with Valera. "I haven't met a single Ember that didn't give me the creeps.

Refraction's conditioning is pretty lax, but even he turns into a completely different person."

"I honestly like him better this way," commented Aldrich.

"He gets stuff done like this." Mollusk shrugged. "But it's no way to really live. You aren't yourself - the real you gets shoved and crammed away into a dark corner of your mind, and it gets really tiring to not accept who you are like that for long."

The boss geist saw Valera and Refraction approaching and stopped batting its wings, realizing its mind controlling dust or spores were not effective. Instead, it's dot-like white forehead pupil dilated, and from it, beams shot out.

Valera began to raise her shield, but Refraction was even faster. He threw out a golden mirror in front of her, and the beam hit it and reflected backwards, hitting the boss geist right in the face.

With a ghostly wail, the boss geist recoiled, its six legs writhing as it dealt with a rapidly withering chunk in its bony cheek. The ashen wood there rotted, sloughs of blackened bark flecking away.

"So its stinger injects life but its eyes take it away," said Aldrich.

"Indeed," said Volantis. "A curious creature. I am still greatly saddened that I cannot stitch the beasts and warriors of this realm into my body."

"Give Fler'Gan some time, and we'll figure that out," said Aldrich.

"[To the Death]!" Valera shouted, now within fifty meters of the boss geist. She raised her fist towards the creature, and a deep red aura raged around her.

The same aura enveloped the boss geist, indicating that the spell's conditions had been fulfilled.

With another piercing wail, the boss geist attacked Valera with much more open hostility than before, slamming its giant stinger down like a club.

"Now," Aldrich commanded Refraction.

Refraction, in one, fluid motion, sent out two mirrors from either of his hands and then clasped his palms together, slamming the mirrors against each other with Valera in between.

The mirrors disappeared, revealing that Valera was gone. The stinger crashed into where she had been, shattering the earth. A wild uprising of vines, thorns, and brightly toxic flora emerged.

Refraction dodged, air-walking away by stepping on mirrors.

However, the boss geist ignored Refraction. It ignored everyone. It instead followed a blood-red trail in the air that unspooled far out, away from the forest, toward where Valera was.

Valera, teleported outside of the forest, shivered as she waited out in the open. She dropped her shield, and it dematerialized. She had enough presence of mind to stand still, heeding her master's orders to draw out the boss.

But when the boss came, she would unleash herself fully.

Black, bat-like wings began to sprout from her back as bloody red waves of energy swirled around her.

## Chapter 327: Worthy

The boss geist moved full speed along the red trail. Rather than floating rather slowly, it landed upon the ground and skittered forward with all the frenzy of an overloaded locomotive, its six huge legs driving up piles of dirt.

"Permission to engage the target while it is distracted?" Refraction said, having warped to Aldrich's side. They watched as the boss geist ignored them, barreling past.

"You warped her out of the forest, correct?" said Aldrich.

"Correct."

"Then let it go. [To the Death] can get broken by outside interference like damage," said Aldrich.

"Understood, control," said Refraction.

"In the meanwhile, we follow the geist until it's outside the forest. It hasn't triggered any of the other trees to hatch, and I intend on letting things stay that way," said Aldrich. He took to the air, Volantis's draconic wings unfurling.

Chiros used [Air Step], a common martial art skill to walk on air, to follow Aldrich. Refraction followed with his own version, walking on mirrors he generated beneath his boots.

"It seems we have a problem." Mollusk stared up at them. "I can't fly."

"Here." Aldrich reached behind his back, grasped his cloak of souls, and tossed it towards Mollusk. The cloak billowed forth, wrapping behind Mollusk and lifting him in the air.

"Cool. I can count on one hand the number of times I've flown before," said Mollusk.

"Don't get used to it," said Aldrich. "The cloak is personal property. Mostly."

"I'll take what I can get," said Mollusk.

Together, Aldrich and everyone followed close behind the boss geist, making sure that it kept following the [To the Death!] trail without disturbing other trees.

The boss geist was fast enough that it only took a few minutes for it to get out of the forest. A solid distance of thirty miles covered with the force of six raging, bloodlusted legs.

As the geist moved, its butterfly wings rapidly vibrated, flinging slime off to dry themselves. By the time the geist exited the forest, the wings would be fully functional.

"How will we keep the target grounded?" said Refraction.

"[To the Death!] will keep it fighting Valera," said Aldrich.

"Like a taunt. In a game," said Mollusk.

"Precisely that," said Aldrich.

"But you said the taunt wears off if we hit the thing, right? Doesn't that mean that we're just going to be bystanders? It'll come down literally to a 1 vs 1. And I'm not sure she can handle this from what I've seen. Don't get me wrong, she's tough, but variants like this - disaster variants - you need to deal with in groups.

Or atleast that's what the AA says."

"Right. Conventional wisdom dictates that to fight something like an A rank disaster variant, you need at least a group of ten A rank heroes. But that's primarily a judgement call based on the fact that disaster variants will have many strong powers where as a hero will only have one.

The numbers make up for that power deficit.

In our case, though, we have enough power flexibility to compensate."

"Be that as it may, but does she really have the firepower needed to take this thing down? Look at its face, Refraction reflected back its rot beam thing, but the wound's completely healed already."

"She doesn't need to kill it all by herself. We can support her, just not directly." To prove his point, Aldrich cast [Heart in My Hands], wrapping his right hand in crimson. He could not recast his Pursuer because of its long cooldown, but the boss geist would not pay him attention anyway.

He flew downwards and gently tapped the boss geist's back, initiating the curse.

[Heart in My Hands] showed a grey indicator on Aldrich's vision that meant that it did not work on the boss geist for it had no heart. However, it did not just rupture hearts, it was a flat out execute if the cursed target went below 30% max HP whether they had a heart or not.

Valera had ways to increase that threshold up to 50%.

All she had to do was solo the boss geist down to half health, at which point Aldrich could instantly end this fight.

He flew back up, the boss geist ignoring him as he had technically not done any damage to it. "As long as you don't damage it directly, the taunt still holds up."

"Got it," said Mollusk. "That means I'll be useless. I don't have any 'support' type abilities."

Chiros grunted, affirming that he too was a combatant, not a supporter.

"I can be of assistance," said Refraction.

"I know, but hold off for a while," said Aldrich. Lately, Valera had been feeling a little down here and there, believing she hadn't quite gotten a chance to prove her worth. "I want to give her a chance to show off."

Valera waited atop a hill-like formation of boulders, trembling as her bloodlust continually grew. Her shield was planted like a gravestone beside her, embedded into the rock.

[To the Death!] enforced [Berserker's Rage] on her, and that skill continually increased physical stats while providing increasing damage reduction at the cost of sanity. At the end of the rage, she also suffered a large portion of the negated damage all at once.

In Valera's case, her [Berserker] class abilities had started to merge with her emerging racial abilities. [Berserker's Rage] was now [Bloody Berserker's Rage].

The basic effects of the rage were the same, but it had the bonus effect of continually increasing her Reversion until it hit her max of 80%, at which point she became less a knight and more a wild monster.

Valera's noble blood of Etal belonged to an ancient [True Vampire] called a [Goredrinker]. They roamed from battlefield to battlefield like forces of nature, destroying both sides equally without care to relish in the blood and gore to mature and grow stronger.

Among all noble bloodlines, the Etal were the most suited for physical combat, though that prowess came with a penchant for falling into hot-blooded passion and rage.

But Valera kept her calm, knowing that if she followed her bloody instincts now, she would disobey her master and stop the boss geist from leaving the forest.

As always, her master had a way to deal with everything. It was why she could rely upon him so. To entrust to him both her body and heart.

'Valera, incoming target.' Aldrich's voice permeated through Valera's head like cool ice, quelling her burning instincts for a second.

'Understood, master. I am ready.'

'You're going to have to solo this one for the most part. I have the heart exploding curse on the boss, so all you have to do is get it below the execution threshold. But doing that will be all you.

Can I trust you with this?'

Valera nodded vigorously. Finally! A great task worthy of her, one she could prove to show her greatness to her master. It was a dream come true. For so long, she had done administrative work, making sure the legion was stationed properly and listening to reports, but deep down, all of that bored her to no end.

She was most at home with the fight.

Aldrich felt her intent from the nods. 'Here we go.'

In the distance, from the treeline, the boss geist emerged, a thirty meter long mass of multi-legged, multi-ton fury. It split apart the dry earth outside of the forest with the sheer force of its aggressive stomps, rushing to Valera with eager intent to fight.

Valera smiled at this raw sign of aggression. This primal declaration of war, as if each crashing footstep was the beat of a war drum.

"Come!" Valera roared as she took her shield out. "Today we fight to the death!"

The boss geist spotted Valera and fully unfurled its wings, taking to the air. Its wingspan was mythical in its scale, reaching sixty meters, covering the sun and casting a great shadow upon the earth.

It reminded her of when she and her master had fought Kryos, Archdragon of Eternal Winter, how the dragon's great wings utterly covered the sun, drenching the world in darkness steeped in bitter cold.

No, this hardly measured up to that.

That was one of the greatest battles Valera had fought with her master, when they were at the peaks of their power at level 100. One of the moments she held close to her heart, when she knew she was making her summoned life matter after the failure of her original life.

But it still made her blood boil all the same.

What proper knight would not see a great beast, one that could shade the sun itself, and not see a creature to slay?

Especially a knight sworn in service to a man of her master's caliber, no less?

With a howling, alien wail, the boss geist's eye-patterned rainbow wings glowed bright. Hundreds, no, thousands of streaks of iridescent light emerged from them, soaring in the air in beautiful arcs aimed in a large-scale artillery bombardment straight at Valera's position.

Valera leaped off her hill. Black wings stretched out from her back, claws tipped at their ends. She soared in the sky, her shield held up. The rainbow light bolts crashed against her shield in an unending stream.

A heavy storm of destruction, each raindrop of light unloading high temperature explosions that scorched her skin. But she grinned wildly and just pushed forward, splitting through that unceasing rain with her shield held up high and her wings beating strong.

No less was expected of her as a guardian knight, and no less would she give.

That was her motto as she soared into the fray of light.

## **Chapter 328: Etal Reversion**

Aldrich watched the fight take place from high above, away from the thick of the mass destruction.

"She's going through all THAT?" said Mollusk, dumbfounded.

Valera flew against the tide of rainbow light, getting within a hundred meters of the boss geist now.

The hill she once stood on eviscerated under the endless barrage, each bolt carving out huge, molten chunks in the rocks until they had eaten the entire hill up into nothing but a steaming crater.

The entire landscape suffered similarly, gouged out with countless deep holes.

"Where was all this when she fought me?" said Mollusk.

"She's a defender, but deep down, she's far more suited to offense," explained Aldrich. "When she really lets loose, she's undeniably a force to be reckoned with."

The more hits Valera took, scorching heat from the explosions billowing past her shield and burning her body, the more her rage deepened, and the more she reverted.

Her black claws grew out from her fingers, through her armor. They extended from her feet as well, claws she normally kept hidden as she thought them unseemly to be seen on a lady.

Her wings grew. Dark spikes emerged from her elbows. Her overall muscle mass swelled. Her bones snapped and reconfigured into a bigger frame.

A raging red aura whirled around her before solidifying into gleaming red, plate-like flesh that wrapped tight around her body, turning into natural armor that covered her from head to toe. From her back and shoulders, spines of red began to jut out, now fully erasing her knightly stature and replacing it with primal, vampiric, monstrous brawn.

This was her [Crimson Exoskeleton], an upgrade of her [Crimson Furnace] ability that generated a spherical barrier of blood around her. It not only granted her an incredibly durable natural layer of armor, but it also boosted her physical abilities.

On top of that, the spines and spikes gave her access to slashing damage. Like her [Crimson Furnace], the exoskeleton could also drink in blood to regenerate and, when needed, detonate itself in an explosive burst that scaled with how much damage it had taken.

Considering her build was meant for tanking and draining through as much damage as possible, the output of her exoskeleton's self-destruction could reach so high that Aldrich classed it as the strongest attack he ever had access to barring 12th tier spells.

"ORA!" Valera, now within a hundred meters, tossed her shield at the boss geist.

The shield broke through the sound barrier with ease, a shockwave tail of force trailing behind it as it smashed into the boss geist's chest with powerful impact.

The shield embedded right into the boss geist's wooden carapace.

Valera's body melted down into bloody mist that traveled forth at near teleportation levels of speed. She reformed right as she neared her shield and used her insane momentum to deliver a powerful shield bash.

An explosion of bloody energy blasted outwards, sending the boss geist's towering bulk flying backwards in devastating impact.

That was [Bloodburst].



It was the signature ability of her vampiric bloodline that allowed them to wreath their blows in bloody energy. Upon impact, the energy accelerated outwards in all directions rapidly, creating an explosion of kinetic force.

'She's getting stronger and stronger. At this point, there's no question that in a pure 1 vs. 1, I'd simply be out of her league,' thought Aldrich. 'Unlike me, she's had the luxury of investing all of her power into direct combat stats like strength, agility, and vitality. And she has an affinity in all of them on top of building around it.'

The difference between a mage type like Aldrich that had to invest most stats in magic and attunement and a pure warrior like Valera was starkly evident.

"What do you think, Frac? What would you rate her as a threat?" said Mollusk.

"I would not take an assignment on her," said Refraction simply. "But if I had to offer an estimate, she would be an A ranked disaster at the minimum."

Or, in other words, Aldrich noted, it would take an S class hero to reliably put someone like Valera down solo. Beforehand, Okeanos had been the only one to reach that level, but Valera, having broken past level 50 - when she fully unlocked her Reversion - had bridged that gap.

Now, Aldrich had two threats that needed S rankers to deal with. On top of that, he had an entire legion's worth of units elsewhere.

Steadily, he was climbing up the ladder of power in this world. The highest of ladders at the highest of peaks.

Chiros watched with his arms crossed. His reverted form was gone as he did not like being in it for extended periods of time. "It is true, that the Old Blood grants tremendous power. But it is maddening. Inelegant.

Yet, for her, it does seem fitting."

"It's what she knows best. The rage," said Aldrich. But a question gnawed at him from within. Was that how it should be?

Should Valera be someone who made rage like this part of her being?

Wasn't it better for her to move past it, to bury it? For her sake?

Aldrich pushed that question aside for now. It circled back to the conversation in the elevator. He needed her to be strong for this war. After it was all done, she could rest.

He could rest with her.

But what if it never ended?

Aldrich was not in the mood to get into deep self-reflection. He was here to acquire a tremendous resource for his new state.

Nothing more, nothing less.

"RAH!" Valera slammed Bloodburst punches over and over against the boss geist's body, flying at rapid speeds so that the bombardment of explosive blows never landed in the same place twice.

The boss geist buffeted about in mid-air, huge holes cracking into its carapace.

Valera soared above the boss geist's skull and then went down rapidly, her red wrapped fists held together overhead to slam down like a hammer.

The boss geist reacted, twisting its head a full three hundred sixty degrees to clamp down on her with its black pincers.

Valera could not really think clearly anymore, but her battle instincts were sharper than ever. She knew when danger was coming, she could feel it, and those pincers were deadly sharp, even against her exoskeleton.

But she did not care. She went straight down, smashing her fists down on the geist's head. Meanwhile, the pincers clamped shut, severing her in half from the midsection.

## **Chapter 329: Execution**

The bloodburst blow sent the geist hurtling down to the ground head first, a huge dent in its ashen skull. It had sunken in its forehead eye to avoid damage, but now it was exposed, its skull roofing smashed inward into pieces.

With the skull fully exposed, it was possible to see that the eye was the only fleshy part in the entire head, residing in the hollow of its skull chamber. Countless green vines kept the eye tethered within the skull.

The eye start to look less and less like an eye and more like a brain.

A target.

Valera watched as her severed legs fell down. Strands of bright red flesh reached out from both halves of her body, tying together to re-attach the halves of her body without issue.

The more she reverted, the more her regenerative abilities grew as a vampire. And the Etal bloodline of vampires, as the fiercest fighters among them all, had among the best regeneration in the entire species.

Nothing less of absolute eradication or holy damage could overcome said regeneration.

[Reversion 60%]

Another pair of wings erupted from Valera's lower back. A tail covered in spikes like a brutal torturer's weapon grew out from her exoskeleton.

The only emotion she felt now was rage. Pure, blinding, hot, seething rage. Everything that caused her rage boiled within her, bubbling out from the depths of her dark memories in a scorching swell.

She remembered her father's death.

The eradication of her entire bloodline.

The death of the princess she had loved as a sister.

The constant hunts against her, the way they looked at her like an object, a bounty to take.

And, when she grew too strong, too feared for mere bounty hunters, when she made her own attacks against those that had taken everything from her, the way they looked at her like a deranged demon when they were the ones to force that life on her.

The boss geist looked up at Valera with its eye, and Valera looked back down with her claws upraised. She had long since dematerialized her shield for she knew she did not have the wits to use any martial arts skills.

She could not even properly see, really. Her exoskeleton flesh covered her eyes, returning her physical form ever closer to ancient True Vampires of the night who, in eternal dark, never had the need to evolve eyesight.

The geist could tell Valera's target clearly: it's eye.

In response, the geist rooted its stinger into the ground.

The barren wasteland earth turned into a lush forest in an instant. Fully grown trees, giant thorns, toxic flowers, powerful vines, poisonous spores, fungal growths, and countless other flora emerged in an entire ecosystem turned into colossal battering ram.

Valera roared as she met the avalanche of plant life head on. She clenched her claws together into fists and punched down as fast as possible.

With machine gun speed, her blows, each of them charged with bloodburst, blew apart the incoming forest chunk by chunk.

She punched faster than the forest could grow, and slowly but surely, she made her way down, closer and closer to that eye she would rip and tear apart.

[Reversion: 70%]

Her memories of the past faded away. They no longer gave her as much rage as they used to. Instead, the image of her master appeared in her mind. Her master, hurt, broken, dead.

That gave her more rage.

Fresh rage.

The rage to sustain her Reversion further. She punched with even more vigor, growing another pair of arms with her exoskeleton to double her efforts.

Eventually, she broke past the forest to see the eye gazing at her, right in front of her. She unloaded a mighty punch upon it, sending it flying back into its skull cavity.

Surprisingly, the eye was durable enough to withstand that punch, though it leaked white tinted blood from tears the bloodburst explosion caused.

Valera landed inside the skull, the claws on all four of her arms unsheathed, ready to tear soft flesh instead of punching.

In response, the eye's shining white pupil dilated, illuminating Valera in a spotlight of rot. She took struggling steps forward, her blood armor turning black and rotting away and regenerating in near equal speeds.

The light had a 'weight' to it that made it harder to move in the closer one was to it.

On top of that, the closer she got, the more severe the rot became until, right in front of the eye, it overpowered her regeneration. Patches in her exoskeleton became visible, and underneath, chunks of her flesh started to decay.

Valera, moving slowly, sunk her claws into the eye. Warm blood squirted outwards as she reached in deeper and deeper. The exoskeleton covering her eyes rotted away, and she was left staring into pure, blinding white light.

There, she was again confronted with the image of Aldrich's death. Him lying on her lap not in restful sleep, but in true death. But this time, she did not feel anger.

She felt fear.

[Reversion Disabled]

Without the rage to sustain her reversion, Valera reeled from the lost power and regenerative boosts, stepping back, her body breaking apart in every direction.

Was she...going to lose?

But then it ended.

The eye's pupil turned up before dimming into a dull grey.

The light disappeared.

Aldrich landed beside Valera within the boss geist's skull. His right fist was clenched, blood pooling down from it from the heart he had crushed.

Valera's constant attacks built up a debuff called [Goredrinker's Mark] which gradually increased the threshold of execution effects.

This included [Heart in My Hand], which allowed Aldrich to instantly kill the boss geist once its eye -its 'core' as it was - was damaged enough.

"Are you alright?" said Aldrich, sending his mist over to Valera's half-decayed body. She had lost both her legs and an arm from the boss geist. With the mist, she quickly recovered, recovering her full form in seconds.

"I...I am fine," said Valera. She blinked, looking at her hands questioningly, as if they had betrayed her.

Aldrich knew something was wrong. She was on track to killing the boss geist solo, but her Reversion had stopped mid-way. "Did the boss have a way to disable your reversion?"

"No...I don't know." Valera clenched her fists and sighed. Then, she smiled. "Do not worry about me, master. It was a simple mistake, but I will not make it again.

For now, let us bask in the glory of our victory.

Another strong one among our ranks is always a cause for celebration."

Valera motioned to the boss geist's eye.

From the eye, Aldrich could see that a Soul floated above.

## Chapter 330: Boundary

"I want to make sure there isn't anything hidden between us," said Aldrich. "Are you sure you're okay?"

He asked while he put his hand over the gleaming green soul, casting [Raise Undead]. Since this was a boss grade monster, his health and mana began to funnel into the soul in a helix of green and blue.

Though, since this geist was weaker than Okeanos, Aldrich doubted he would run out of health or mana before raising it.

Chiros, Refraction, and Mollusk were above, standing atop a mirror platform. Aldrich had wanted to keep them there for privacy's sake.

His chosen bond with Valera allowed him to synchronize his feelings with her, but when there was emotional turmoil or conflict within, it got harder.

Right now, it was hard to reach Valera with the bond, like trying to swim upstream against a fierce current.

"This much is fine, master!" said Valera, wriggling her newly grown arms and legs. "I took this much damage routinely in our more serious battles. Even in this realm, I was reduced to a mere head against Okeanos."

"I don't mean that. Your physical injuries, I don't worry about. You're tough. I mean here." Aldrich tapped his chest, at his heart. "I'll ask again: are you okay?"

Valera stared at Aldrich with her mouth slightly agape, her fangs glinting. She wanted to answer him truthfully, but the truth of it was, she herself did not know what she was going through.

It was something she had never been through. The feeling of having her rage so suddenly quenched, like a pail of icy water had been dumped all over the flame that fueled her wrath.

Cold, cold fear.

But she knew before her own feelings that her master's goals came first. It was her duty as his guardian to ensure that.

To that end, she could not fail. She could not show weakness, not now, not ever.

"I am fine," said Valera resolutely. "A simple slip up, that is all. I assure you it will not happen again."

Aldrich nodded. He could tell things were not 100% okay, but he was not going to pressure Valera.

He wanted to give her time to think things through on her own first.

He knew that what he had said back in the elevator, about wanting her to put aside her feelings and fears until things were over, was a lot to ask for.

He had always thought that, when it came to emotions, he was better at reacting than reaching out. Or, maybe, that was just what he thought to cope with the fact that he did not really know how to reach out to others.

Not in the same way that normal people did. He remembered when Seismic comforted the men and women in Haven during the attack.

Seismic managed to connect with the personal lives of each human there to make them feel listened to.

Protected.

Aldrich had copied that well enough, enough to gain the trust of the citizens, but at the core of it all, it was still just that: a copy.

It was because, frankly, he did not care about the Haven citizens too much. Rather, he cared as much as a lich could.

But it was difficult for him to care beyond a certain threshold.

Things were different with Valera, though. She was his chosen undead. He cared more. She deserved just as much for all she had done.

But that was where things got difficult. Difficult enough where Aldrich figured that the best thing to do here was let her know she was heard and supported, to give her an open channel in case she needed it.

"Just know that I'm always available to talk things through." He turned to the soul and focused on raising the geist.

After several seconds of draining his health and mana, the process was complete.

Aldrich felt a connection tether to the boss geist as their relationship as undead and master stabilized. There was something he was deeply curious about.

Variants, for the most part, lacked souls.

Now, that did not mean they lacked sentience. It simply meant they lacked a spiritual marker that would enter the soul stream upon their deaths.

There were plenty of creatures that had sentience but no souls, if Elden World was to be believed.

Sufficiently advanced golems, for example, could think and feel but had no soul. Many monsters had sentience, but not all had souls.

Though in many cases, the more intelligent and emotionally developed a sentient being was, the higher the chance that they could, over time, develop a soul from scratch.

It just required time to accumulate to 'solidify' the personality and memories and emotions to create a distinct soul.

Variants seemed to follow a similar pattern. Regular animal-like variants lacked a soul. But there were a few exceptions like Okeanos, the Geist and, now, this Boss Geist.

What exactly was it about the Geists and Okeanos that set them apart? Aldrich's Geist in particular seemed quite odd. It had only started to really think for itself after becoming an undead, and when questioned, remembered very little of its past life before Aldrich.

Then how did it have a soul when all the other variants lacked one?

But perhaps this Boss Geist was different? Perhaps it would remember?

The Boss Geist's splattered eye began to reform, the flesh regenerating on its own. The skull began to reform as well, the bark growing back in strips.

"Let's go," said Aldrich. He jumped out of the skull, and Valera followed close behind.

In front of the boss geist's giant skull-face, Aldrich waited. Its singular forehead eye popped back out on its forehead, staring down at Aldrich in recognition.

"Can you speak?" said Aldrich.

'You...you are my new master?' a voice rang in Aldrich's head.

This was telepathy, but not the kind inherent in the undead-master bond. It was the Boss Geist's own ability.

"I am," said Aldrich. "And new master? Who did you serve beforehand? Do you remember?"



'I...' began the Boss Geist, but it paused.

Aldrich was about to press the variant further, but it was then that he felt a bright white light flash in his mind, blinding his vision and headspace.

...

...

...

In the next instant, Aldrich found himself standing in what looked like a circular chamber of rock.

The chamber was enormous, probably easily the size of an entire city, and in the distance, at its center, he spied a floating white orb of pure energy.

That orb served as the only light source.

And a faltering one at that. Compared to the vast, dark expanse around it, the orb was small, its light, though bright, dwarfed by the encroaching darkness around it.

Darkness that did not seem natural. It was too thick, too powerful, as if shade and shadow had layered atop each other in a condensation of all things black meant to choke out whatever light it could get its tendrils on.

"What is this place?" Aldrich asked Volantis, requesting the living armor do a scan, but he realized that he was not wearing any armor.

All he had on was his soulweave suit.

Aldrich's Death Knell started to ring by his hip with a clear, crisp jingle. It was the [Kindred Resonance] that played when there was a soul nearby that was similar to his own. This was the very first time the bell had ever played that resonance.

"Welcome to my Boundary, Kindred."

Aldrich recognized this tone. Distinctively coded female, and yet, utterly neutral in its inflection, almost robotic. This was the Voice. The entity that once controlled Okeanos.

He turned around to the source of the sound and beheld someone that should have been dead for sixty years.

A tall, hunched over figure dressed in an odd patchwork of robes.

There were robes of fur.

There were robes of leathery skin.

Robes of scaled skin.

Robes of slimy flesh that looked like it would have belonged to Mollusk, to many sorts of deep sea creatures.

There were even robes layered in sheets of glinting metal and crystal.

All of many different colors, the bright and dull shades shimmering and shifting in constant, dizzying flux to create an amalgamate pattern of hues that seemed oddly maddening.

No, it was maddening.

[Undead mental immunity triggered]

The robes hid its wearer's body, but Aldrich could tell it was vaguely humanoid and large, easily four meters tall, tall enough that he had to look up at its hooded face.

A face with no discernible features. Just a bright white spiral pattern surrounded by a void of starry black that formed its 'face', if it could even be called that.

It looked like if Aldrich reached into the hood, his hand would pass right through, into a void.

This utterly bizarre being was someone that Aldrich recognized.

Someone that practically every single person in the world who gave a single damn about history would recognize.

One of the two most influential figures in the Post-Altering Era. The one whose death had been ground zero for the Monstering itself.

This... was Zahak, the greatest villain of all time.

## **Chapter 331: The Entity**

"This one sees that you are surprised, Kindred," said Zahak. "And at unease."

"You easily have the power to kill me as I am," said Aldrich. "Your battles with Vanguard reshaped entire landscapes. You by yourself could have wiped out all of humanity."

Hell, after dying, you almost did with the Monstering.

There's no reason I shouldn't be on guard."

"You do not have true physical existence here." Zahak, to prove his words, reached out a hand covered in so many layers of cloth that it was impossible to see the skin to Aldrich.

Aldrich raised his arms in a guard, but Zahak's arm phased through him.

"There is no means by which this one may harm you," continued Zahak. "And the connection we share now is but fleeting and unstable, generated in the brief instant where your Outer might overwrites my own, intertwining our essences in the slightest of moments.

A connection far too weak to offer you harm to the mind.

And this one is not here to harm you, Kindred."

Aldrich had heard voice recordings of Zahak before, and they distinctively presented the villain as male, though due to the nature of the villain's ability to consume and take on the forms of others, that voice could shift freely.

But...it did not feel like this was Zahak. Granted, information about Zahak's actual personality was sparse. At best, there were statements from the AA and the Triune stating that Zahak was a psychopathic mass murderer, and his insane kill count gave plenty of credence to that.

However, Aldrich did not make his judgment based off that. It was simply by the fact that this voice did not particularly feel like anything human to begin with.

The detachment in its tone was similar to 22, the guard that colonel Fletcher had brought as insurance against Thanatos during the trip to the Crypt.

"What are you doing here, Zahak?" Aldrich motioned to the dark cavern around them. "Are you even Zahak to begin with?"

"Zahak? An old name. That is not who this one is, though this form may suggest so."

"Then who are you?"

"This one holds no singular identity. In the past, this one was Zahak, that cannot be denied. It was also known briefly as Lyanna.

Now, it is something beyond both."

"Lyanna?" Aldrich questioned, sifting through his memories to try and find a match for that name.

"A kin of the one you knew as Zahak."

"I see." Aldrich narrowed his eyes in contemplation, finding out who 'Zahak' was talking about.

Details about Zahak's personal life were extremely difficult to come by.

What he did, who he killed, how he was stopped - that was well documented, eulogized, and memorialized.

But what kind of person he was and who he was close to was a mystery.

A mystery by design.

The Panop-AA complex kept it a secret, though for what exact reason, it was hard to tell.

The reigning theory was that it was to villainize Zahak in the eyes of the global public.

But Aldrich had always thought that theory strange.

Zahak had personally killed over a billion people.

Throughout human history, he was probably the single most prolific killer both during life and after death if you counted the Monsterings to be caused by him.

If ever there was someone that did not need help getting villainized, it was him.

But Aldrich did know who Lyanna was. She was Zahak's daughter from before the Altering, though beyond her name, nobody knew really who she was or how she had ended up after the Monsterings.

She presumably died before the Altering as there were no records of her past it.

"That still answers almost nothing," said Aldrich.

"Let this one make it clearer." Zahak placed a robe covered hand on his chest.  
"Originally, this one was Zahak. Then, this one was Lyanna. Then, this one became something more."

"What are you, then, some kind of entity that switches between bodies?" said Aldrich.

"In a way, yes," said the entity.

"In a way? Anything more specific you can offer me?"

"..." The entity did not respond. Either it could not, or it chose not to. The result was the same.

Aldrich chose a different branch of questioning, breaking down the entity's statement. "Originally? That implies you were someone else before Zahak."

"Before, this one was formless. Mindless. Without memory or thought."

"Then what are you, exactly? Right now?"

"The World" declared the entity, its neutral tone rising.

"...The world?" Aldrich did not quite know what this entity meant by that.

"The Voice of the World. Of Life."

"If you couldn't tell by me line of questioning, I don't like dealing with cryptic messages."

"This one's memories as 'Zahak' and 'Lyanna' are unclear, but this one will attempt to enlighten you, Kindred.

In the event humans consider as the 'Altering', energy from the deep cosmos seeded itself into the planet, instigating the rapid development of powers and environmental changes.

The seeding process involved the coalescence of energies in the planet's core, and from there, this one's current form was born.

A nascent egg of power.

This one remained dormant, mindless, slumbering, empty as humanity waged senseless slaughter upon itself on the world's surface. with their newfound might.

War that this one now knows as ingrained within humanity's self-destructive nature; a cruel nature that seeks to bring all those around it into its own inevitable demise.

One of these humans, the one you knew as Zahak, emerged possessing great power. Power touched by the Outer.

Power that was me.

He consumed many, taking them into his own body, Including his own offspring, for he greatly desired her power.

A power to shift her consciousness into another.

But before Zahak could finish consuming that power, he was struck down into the depths of the planet.

Into the slumbering egg at the center of this planet.

There, it was the will of 'Lyanna', Zahak's offspring, still holding onto her own will in the endless sea of lives her parent had absorbed, that reached into that empty egg.

This one awoke, then, for with will entering that empty vessel, there was form where before there was nothing."

## **Chapter 332: The Entity 2**

"..." Aldrich took in these revelations with a hand to his chin. This was groundbreaking information that practically nobody knew about.

One thing that immediately came to his mind was that this confirmed that it was not just Vanguard that had an 'Irregular' power that did not belong to this world, but Zahak as well. And Zahak had a power from the 'Outer' - the very same source that Aldrich derived his Elden World powers from.

At the same time, the knowledge just broke open the seals to a complex chamber of questions.

"This one senses you hold many questions, Kindred, but this one advises against it. The connection this one holds with you is short. There will be no time to answer your thirst for knowledge," said the entity.

"The Altering seeded an egg into the planet's core, and Lyanna filled it in using her power to transfer her consciousness," said Aldrich. Though he did note that Lyanna's power had not shifted her consciousness but instead created a new entity entirely.

"But that begs the question: who or what was the egg originally for?"

"..." The entity did not answer again. But after a pause, it did elaborate a little. "This one cannot answer that. For this one does not know. This one holds no memories from before it filled the emptiness of the vessel.

All this one truly knows and follows is the will left behind by Lyanna, this one's 'mother.'"

"That will being?" asked Aldrich.

"The will of Zahak was to consume all life into One. The will of Lyanna, on the other hand, was to protect life," said the entity. "This one seeks to enforce the will of Lyanna."

Aldrich almost laughed at the absurdity of the statement. This entity, by controlling Okeanos and dozens of other Locuses, had killed over a million people worldwide in just two days.

Preserving life seemed to be on the last of its priorities. "I'm beginning to connect the dots here.

Scientists have observed that variants have an instinctive 'trigger' to follow a leading creature, a Locus.

And they determined that from Locus energy signatures during battle, especially regeneration, that they receive energy from an outside source.

This led to the idea of a hivemind theory.

The center of that hivemind, it's you, isn't it?"

"That is so."

"Then how is it that you are protecting life?" said Aldrich. "To me, it seems like you've waged active war on humanity already, and that's involved killing countless people.

Not to mention the Monstering. The Titans. That killed billions."

"Humanity is not 'life'" said the entity. "It is a disease. It is a self-destructive parasite that leeches until its host is dry. It will be the inevitable end of all true life upon this world.

All life that grows to gather together and amass the might and will to take over their host planet is no true life at all."

"I see. So your solution is to wipe all of humanity out," said Aldrich calmly.

"That is so, Kindred," said the entity with its characteristic lack of inflection. Despite having a will born from Lyanna, who likely had been a compassionate woman, this entity was far from human.

It truly did not consider humanity anything more than a pest to get rid of.

"And this one senses you do not hold true anger over such a statement, Kindred. You protect the humans, but even now, in speaking of their annihilation, you hold no strong emotion.

Do you truly care about them?"

"Reasonably so."

"Disappointing, Kindred. This one has sensed that you have taken care of one of this one's children, and yet you have corrupted her to be more human. To embrace a nature that leads to the inevitable end."

Aldrich understood that the entity talked about Chrysa. "My parenting is none of your business."

"This one understands that. That is why this one has called you here, Kindred."

"To discuss Chrysa?"

"So that is what you have named her. No. Not her. She is fully yours, Kindred. She no longer holds any connection to this one."

This one wishes to discuss the fate of humanity."

Aldrich crossed his arms. "Tell me what you have to say."

"If you, Kindred, truly wish to protect humanity, then this one will not stop you," said the entity. "Take humanity and make it yours. But rid yourselves of this world. Take your scourge and spread it elsewhere."

"And if I disagree?"

"Then this one shall unleash the Titans once more."

"..." Aldrich figured that the entity would go to that. If the entity was a nation state, then the titans were the 'nuclear option'. Unleashing them now, especially now, would doom humanity to extinction.

The only way Aldrich saw a way for humanity to survive was if everyone banded together to kill a Titan, at which point, Aldrich could try to raise it.

But that was impossible.

First off, it was unclear whether Aldrich could even raise a Titan to begin with. It seemed that raising undead overwrote the hivemind control that the entity placed on its variants, but it was hard to tell whether the same would apply to Titans.

And Aldrich knew that in his current state, with how he lost mana and health with stronger 'boss' type beings, would not be able to raise a Titan.

The Titans were simply on another scale of power entirely.

Of the original twenty titans, humanity could handle exactly eight of them.



Each of those eight could total countries in a matter of days, but a coalition of the strongest heroes and villains could stop their ceaseless march of destruction.

The remaining twelve titans were not just much stronger, but they were almost completely immortal.

Not even Vanguard could kill them.

In the end, the twelve titans, weakened but unable to die, returned to their personal lairs where, according to energy scans and readings, they lay dormant in unreachable pocket dimensions.

"But the Titans are still resting. And this one does not wish to rouse its children when they are not ready to wake. But make no mistake, Kindred, if this one is pushed, this one shall not hesitate to wake its children once more."

"You seem confident that you can win. Even when my powers can override your control," said Aldrich.

"That is because there is simply no other alternative, Kindred. Look-," The entity pointed to the ball of white in the distance, the faint white light surrounded by hungry, approaching dark. "That is a manifestation of this world's life force.

If you defeat the Titans, then that meager light dies.

This one dies.

But so too does this world. It will rot and shatter, leaving mankind to face extinction.

Whether at the hands of this one's children or planetary destruction, the end is the same."

## **Chapter 333: Arcadia**

Aldrich mulled over what the entity had said. It was either shepherd humanity to outer space or suffer the wrath of the titans. Both options were bad, to say the least.

The nearest habitable planet was light years away. Despite the diverse spectrum of fantastical powers that the Alter Organs granted, the physics constant remained that nobody could surpass the speed of light. And nobody could warp themselves away to those kinds of distances.

Not to mention the fact that without ether in earth's atmosphere, all Alters would run out of energy to fuel their powers and advanced technology. Humanity had gotten so reliant

on ether that it was impossible to tear them away from it. Some mutants might even just flat out die without an ether supported environment.

And Aldrich did not have the influence to steer all of humanity under his helm to begin with. Even now, the U.S. stood against him, and that was just one nation out of many. A powerful nation, granted, but still nothing compared to the entire world.

The alternative was to face the Titans. Also an impossibility.

For now.

Supermind's conversation with Aldrich rang in his head.

The heir to Vanguard' power. That was the key to this. If Aldrich could make that power his, he was confident he could take on the Titans.

But even that lead to a dead end.

If the Titans were defeated again, then the entity would die, and then there would be no planet earth anyway.

The end result was, as the entity said, just the same: extinction.

There was no scenario in which Aldrich saw a way to make a right decision at the moment. Every single route lead to a bad end.

He needed time.

Time to think. Time to gather strength.

"I get it now. Those mass variant attacks were a warning, weren't they?" said Aldrich. "Telling me of things that could come."

"That is so, Kindred. But not entirely. Humanity has been expanding more and more beyond their cities, so this one simply saw fit to remind them that they do not own this world; they are simply allowed to exist on it for now."

"You must understand that I can't simply wave my hands and have humanity all bend their wills to me," said Aldrich.

"This one understands, Kindred," said the entity, staring at Aldrich with its expressionless spiral of a face. "This one understands well the chaos and division that the scourge of man so easily devastates itself with."

"Then I need time."

"This one grants time to you liberally. So long as humanity does not strike with aggression against this one's children, you shall have time, Kindred."

"How much time are we talking here?"

"As much as you require, Kindred. We are both timeless beings. There is no need to rush."

"I see. I'm beginning to see why you called me here. This is a ceasefire, isn't it?"

"That is so. This one shall not bear the might of its children against humanity unless this one is provoked. But bear in mind, this one does not control the vast breadth of the sea of life growing upon it.

Most live by their own wills and instincts. This one has no control over right to hunt.

But over the Geists and Locuses, heralds of this one meant to cull the scourge of man, this one shall hold back.

That should grant you ample time to amass might to bend the chaos of man to your will, Kindred."

In essence, normal variants would still live their day to day lives which occasionally involved rampaging through a city here and there. But Geists and Locuses that were targeted special forces against humanity would stay dormant.

A good deal. But the issue was upholding it.

Especially on mankind's side.

Aldrich knew that if humanity could, they would try to take back land from the Wastelands that variants took from them.

To reclaim what they believed was rightfully theirs.

The past few U.S. presidents heavily campaigned on this to the point where not doing so was considered political suicide. And this was a fairly popular opinion across the entire world.

It fostered unity among peoples that there was a unified enemy, some manifest destiny goal to conquer.

In actuality, that was mostly just a talking point.

The Wastelands, especially the Deep zones, were too hostile to make ground against with powerful, unknown variants and geo-storms.

But if humanity saw variant activity as a whole declining, it could embolden them to make a mistake.

Aldrich needed to have the influence to stop that from happening. The good thing was, this ceasefire gave him time to grow stronger and stronger.

"And what if I take over more of your children? What if I need to to get the strength necessary to convince humanity?" asked Aldrich.

"That is acceptable. Life and death cannot exist without the other.

If you choose to hunt my children upon the surface, then that is your natural right, Kindred, just as it is in my childrens' natural right to hunger and feast upon man when they stray too far from their cities.

But to lead attacks of great scale or to target the dearest of my children - the Titans - this one cannot allow."

Aldrich looked over to the sphere of light at the center of the dark cavern. Though the light flickered weakly, it still seemed to grow ever so slowly. "Time benefits you as well. It strengthens you too."

"It is not strengthening. Strengthening implies a usage for war. That is not so. It is healing. Healing that this world sorely deserves."

"Healing that involves force to purge what you consider a disease."

"But healing nonetheless."

"I suppose it's all a matter of perspective in the end."

"That is so. There is one more condition that this one wishes to impose."

"Go ahead."

"Contain the power you call from beyond this world."

Aldrich raised a brow. "You yourself are power from beyond it, though."

"That is so. This one does not know where from the Outer this one came from, but that matters not any longer. Now, this one is this world.

But it is because we share origins that this one grants you leeway. You may use your own powers, Kindred, but nothing beyond that.

This one fears that the misuse of power from beyond may lead to more unwanted pests."

'You already have one,' was Aldrich's thought. The Stranger was a demon that had, like a parasite, latched himself upon this planet. But Aldrich kept that thought to himself for now.

He wasn't about to let the entity know about the Stranger right now. There was a chance that the entity could even help against the Stranger considering its words, but Aldrich could not trust it to that degree.

"I can accept those conditions. The realm I get my powers from is fine, but all others are not. Is that how things will be?" said Aldrich.

"That is so."

"Then we have a ceasefire," said Aldrich.

"There is no more to speak of." The entity turned around, and Aldrich's figure started to blur, fading. "This one must now lie dormant.

But it shall trust that you, as a Kindred, will see to it that our desires are fulfilled.

Elsewise both of us shall face our ruins."

Aldrich nodded, staying silent, in thought. In a few moments, his vision whitened, and he was back in front of the Boss Geist.

"We have done it, master!" said Valera in glee, prancing about the huge skull of the geist. "We have raised it! With this, Haven will never know hunger!"

Aldrich briefly glanced around to realize that practically no time had passed. That entire conversation filled with earth shaking revelations had transpired in the course of a simple second, if even that.

"Insane. You really can control anything," said Mollusk as he hopped off Refraction's golden mirror platform and landed beside Aldrich. "Oh right, and I'm going to return this."

He took off the spirit cloak and handed it back. The cloak floated to Aldrich's back where it wailed in content.

"Thanks," said Aldrich quietly.

'Master...is something amiss?' asked Valera via telepathy.

'I'll talk to you about it once we debrief in Haven,' said Aldrich. 'For now, let's prep to get a move on.'

Even in the Deep Wastelands where satellite surveillance was less than reliable, an energy surge on the caliber that the Boss Geist released with its land-melting bullet hell was not going to go unnoticed.

"We're going to fly on your back," Aldrich said to the Boss Geist. There was no easy way to hide the Boss Geist. It was far too big to store in his and Chrysa's Boundary.

'That is acceptable,' the Boss Geist said mentally.

"Everyone hop on," said Aldrich as he leaped up, landing on the geist's back. "And since you've entered my service, I've decided to give you a new name.

Arcadia."

'Arcadia...' the geist mulled over in its mind, clamping its pincers gently together.

"Arcadia, huh?" Refraction landed by Aldrich, his trigger turning off and returning him back to his usual goofier self. "That's basically the Greek myth version of paradise, isn't it? A garden of Eden sort of deal.

Thanatos for death. Arcadia for life. Who would have thought those two would go together?"

"With me, the boundary between life and death is far thinner than usual," said Aldrich.

"Your naming sense has improved, master." Valera nodded proudly, probably because Aldrich had not simply named the geist 'Tree'.

"I do try and learn from feedback. Especially from my commander." Aldrich gave Valera an acknowledging nod, and she turned away shyly. That was when her eyes widened.

Aldrich followed her stare.

The forest of giant trees was starting to move.

## **Chapter 334: Ceasefire**

"Master, prepare for battle!" Valera shouted, immediately taking stance in front of Aldrich. The shield she had dematerialized in her reversion bloodlust reappeared in her hand, and she stood with a wide, trained stance behind it, her prior animalistic savagery gone.

"Shiiit, not again," said Mollusk. "And there's like a hundred of them too."

"This time, I really do think we should just warp out, you know," said Refraction, golden sparks of energy fluttering at his trembling fingertips. "You, uh, don't need a hundred of these things, right? Just one is good, yeah?"

Chiros awaited with calm, for he believed panic, especially for a soldier, was nothing short of inelegant. His reverted crystalline form was gone, leaving him standing upright with his blade poised in ready position by his side.

"Wait," said Aldrich. The earth started to rumble as the sheer magnitude of movement from the giant trees and their upturning roots churned the ground.

Around the trees, their roots broke up from underground, coiling around each other to form thick legs. With a heave, the roots pushed their host trees aboveground with a deafening rumble of parting earth and crumbling rock debris.

Aldrich wanted to see if the entity would truly uphold its end of the ceasefire. It said it would move back all Locuses and Geists. If Arcadia was any indication, every single one of those trees was a monumental egg gestating a Geist, which meant that the entity was supposed to pull them back.

Attacking Aldrich right now would be a surefire way to break a ceasefire before it even really began. He did not believe the entity would do that.

So, he waited.

Valera was the first to catch on. Her [Danger Sense] skill was likely not triggering, unable to sense any hostile intent or bloodlust among the trees. She tentatively began to lower her shield.

Chiros, seeing his commander ease up, followed, lowering his blade.

"Are we all just, uh surrendering here?" said Refraction. "Turning into good old mulch for those nicely oversized trees?"

"Silent mystery is part of this dude's image," said Mollusk. "But self-destructive tendencies definitely aren't. So calm your ass down, Frac."

Refraction gulped and nodded.

The entire forest began to move on their legs of roots, but not towards Aldrich. As a whole, they marched away, deeper into the Wastelands, the earth rumbling with each of their synchronized, colossal steps.

The countless insect variants that nested atop their branches buzzed about in a panic, creating a cloud of bodies that could almost blot out the sun. For a moment, Aldrich wondered if they, as natural variants, would attack as the entity had said it would respect the right of natural variants to hunt.

But the insect variants simply followed the living forest back, not wanting to leave their home of nourishing fruits and sap and warm leaves for their eggs.

After a few minutes, when the forest was well and far into the distance, Aldrich nodded in confirmation. The entity had stayed true to its words.

The ceasefire was official.

That was good news, but at the same time, Aldrich knew it was foreboding. It was the start of a timer. An hourglass that, if Aldrich did not have all of humanity under him by the time its sands sifted all the way down, things would all end.

At the same time, upon thinking about it more, Aldrich knew that there was likely some leeway here. He could infer from the way the entity spoke about the Titans that releasing them took up a large part of its life force.

In essence, it was an absolute last resort akin to a suicide attack. The entity would not resort to it unless it was absolutely pushed to the limit.

And considering the fact that the entity had spent decades recovering after the Monsterring and still had just a meager amount of life force, that indicated that Aldrich had time on the same scale of decades, if not over a century.

However, he could not get complacent.

He needed to outpace the entity's growth. And he had to use his power with more pressure.

The talk with the entity forced Aldrich to shift the balance of his approach.

Currently, he wanted to work with the world leaders, to listen to them and see what worked best for everyone. That was reasonable. But the entity had tilted Aldrich's scale of approach so that he valued control over cooperation.

Control was harsher. Crueler. But it was undeniably faster. So long as one had the power to enforce it.

"Arcadia, fly us back," said Aldrich. "Use your telepathy to get directions from me."

Arcadia clamped its pincers together in understanding and flew into the air, its huge butterfly wings sparkling like scintillating jewels under the sun. With just one flutter,



Arcadia brought the group up high into the air, and from there, it was simply a matter of gliding back to Haven.

"Whew, at least we survived that," said Refraction, sighing deeply.

"You sound like you actually went and fought anything," said Mollusk.

"I may as well have, with all that mental pressure."

"To ease pressure after a battle, there is nothing that bests a talk, especially among fellow soldiers," said Chiros, sitting down with Mollusk and Chiros with a friendly smile. "So, tell me of your lives."

Aldrich left them to converse and headed up to Arcadia's skull where he looked ahead, thinking. He felt Valera's tender hand on his shoulder.

"Such a gentle touch. I do not like it when I am touched without warning, but for the sake of our warfather, I shall allow it," said Volantis.

"This again?" Valera smacked a spike off of Volantis's shoulder plate, taking care not to cause any real damage to Volantis or Aldrich.

"Come now, that was a tooth of a drake I slew!" complained Volantis.

"You can find another - look at how many creatures there are here!" countered Valera.

"All of them upset my stomach. Until the Mind Eater devises a way for me to devour them properly, I am bound to starve! I am unlike you bloodsuckers that have less than discriminating tastes."

Valera sighed and ignored Volantis. "Master, something has come over you. The way you stand, it is rigid. Stiff. Cold. It reminds me of how you were when I first saw you in this world.

Is something amiss?"

## **Chapter 335: [Bonus chapter] Support**

Aldrich took this time to debrief Valera. He gave her a rundown of his talk with the entity.

Of course, Volantis heard this too.

"...So that is how it is," said Valera. "The world itself stands against us." She sighed softly. "I suppose the dates we planned but never managed to bring to reality will not happen."

Aldrich, for the briefest of moments, wondered how Valera could be thinking about dates right now, but he mentally shook that thought away. She had always been a responsible commander. Her intrusive thoughts meant little compared to her time tested reliability.

"But rest assured, I will stand behind you through it all." Valera raised her shield. "No matter what stands against us, whether they be the gods in our past lives or the very world in this one, I shall stand firm with you, for that is where I have sworn to be."

"I appreciate that, Valera," said Aldrich.

"Your goal does not change either, does it, Armored?" said Volantis.

"Hm?"

"We are to conquer this world, are we not! To lead the greatest warband that has ever been seen across all realms! That the world stands against us matters not, no, it gives us an even greater foe to rage against."

"We are no raging orc warband," said Valera in admonishing tone. "We do not simply go out on raids to take territory that we will lose right after the battle is fought due to a lack of planning or thought.

We must think long term."

"He's right," said Aldrich. "And so are you. We need both. More pressure to fight and 'raid'. And also a level enough mind to keep what we've taken without issues.

To take, but not destroy.

To conquer, but not humiliate.

But to do that all at once, on a time limit, too?"

Aldrich, for once, started to feel overwhelmed. He always knew that by taking the world stage, he was going to bring more and more responsibility on himself.

But having to take over all of humanity? To stave off planetary destruction?

Those were endgame issues he thought he would not have to deal with for a while.

"And we will all do that together," said Valera, smiling at Aldrich, her helmet uncovered to bare the surprising softness of her features. Her smile was warm, and in it, he did not feel alone.

The weight on his shoulders lightened.

"Hahaha! Which human territory shall we raid then!? From that curious 'telescreen' artifact, I know that this 'Neo-York' seems quite mighty with its shields, walls, and powerful warriors! And it is the premiere city of this 'United States' kingdom that refuses to recognize you!

I myself shall lead a raid against them! To teach them the greatness of my Armored!"

"That's suicide. Not happening," said Aldrich.

"To crush my dreams so quickly...ah, such is the life of a mere Armor," complained Volantis.

Aldrich heard crackling in his earpiece. Arcadia had flown close enough to human territory to start getting Net signals. He immediately contacted V.

"V, status report?"

"Boss!?" V's voice came in panicked. "Good, you're back! Just in time, too!"

"What's wrong?"

"I don't think you'll like this...but whatever you did out there, there were massive energy surges. The AA's been super careful about variant energy surges in the Deep Wastelands, you know, after the Locus attacks, they want to stop variant armies from building up before they get gathered."

"Let me guess, heroes are coming to investigate the area," said Aldrich. He knew this would happen. But he was prepared.

The AA would send a team of A rankers, most likely. Usually a group of ten, but with the Panopticon still down, the heroes were stretched out thin doing patrols or hunting variants around cities.

At best, Aldrich figured a group of 5 A rankers would show up for a remote Deep Wastelands patrol like this.

That, he and his group could more than easily handle if it came down to a fight. But it would not come down to a fight to begin with.

Aldrich's Sentinel status afforded him that much protection. And now, Aarav was his official partner. As a fortune heir, Aarav might as well have been the prince to one of the most powerful kingdoms on the planet. On top of that, Dracul, another Sentinel, was his ally, and in fact stayed in Haven at this very moment.

No ragtag group of A rankers would ever think about throwing an attack Aldrich's way unless they wanted to be the instigator of a shitstorm that was quite literally on a national scale.

"Yeah, and I know what you're thinking, the AA probably isn't going to try and start shit with you now that we're in the big boy leagues, but this...this is different."

"How so?"

"It ain't your run of the mill A rankers coming. Damn, even calling A rankers 'run of the mill' really puts into perspective how far we've come so quickly. But getting to the main point, you aren't dealing with a group of A rankers.

You've got something a grade up coming your way."

"I see. Who is it?" Aldrich understood where V was going with this. He just wanted to know exactly which S ranker he was going to have to deal with.

"It's Valkyrie and Lightspeed," said V, her voice growing stern.

Lightspeed was the current rank 2 hero on the Superboard 100.

Granted, Superboard rankings factored in popularity as much as it did power, but the top 10 were all undeniably strong no matter what.

And Lightspeed, as a Light Elemental, was very much deserving of that rank 2 spot. She held comfortably onto that spot in spite of large swathes of inactivity that she was routinely criticized for.

Even in the Locus attacks, she had stayed at home, not doing anything because she did not feel like it.

Still, her past track record of taking out S rank variants one after the other gave her more than enough accumulated AP (Achievement Points) that she could probably do nothing for quite some time without decaying in rank.

Valkyrie was rank 15 on the Superboard because she was frigid and rarely cared about anything other than taking out strong enemies. That meant she ignored most good PR tasks like rescues, only ever focusing on fights which tanked her AP.

But in pure combat power, she was widely regarded among the strongest in the planet.

Her chlorokinesis combined with the gargantuan physical stats she inherited from her mother, the past Valkyrie who was once a member of the Triune with Supermind and Vanguard, meant she was all strengths and no weaknesses.

These were too massive heavy hitters sent Aldrich's way.

If it was just one of them, he could understand, but two...

"V, call Dracul. Send him my coordinates. I'll need some support," said Aldrich.

"That guy's kinda scary, but I'll try. You sure this won't annoy him or something?"

"I know him fairly well at this point. You could even consider us friends. He'll listen."

"Of all the people you could relate to, it's that guy, huh. Makes me wonder what you two even relate about...but alright, I'll get on that."

## **Chapter 336: Lightspeed and Valkyrie**

Aldrich waited atop Arcadia's head, his cloak of souls flickering behind him as he stood tall high in the sky, a figure of imposing black armor that fit the archetype of the 'dark king' character to a T. Behind him, Valera and Chiros stood in formation, weapons raised in anticipation.

All three presented representatives of Haven. Mollusk and Refraction stood back more tentatively in case anything went wrong.

In the distance, Aldrich could see an incoming Halo Carrier, noticeable with its distinctive design of a lengthy main structure surrounded by an array of rotating rings that glowed a bright blue.

He was distinctly surprised. Carrier class ships were enormous, more akin to small floating fortresses than regular aircraft. They could man crews of hundreds with a completely self-sustaining ship environment.

Generally, they existed as mobile space stations, never really entering into the atmosphere.

And they were predominantly Panopticon tech, though some wealthy nations and companies could manufacture their own with the biggest example being the Black Dragon belonging to Imugi War Arts.

The white metal and glowing green magnetic lock strips indicated that this was definitely Panopticon tech, however.

"Is that also a human creation?" said Valera.

Aldrich nodded.

"Incredible," she muttered. "It is nothing at all like the flying ships that men made in our realm. No, it surpasses even that belonging to the dwarves."

"Humanity has come very far in this realm," said Chiros. "It does make me wonder whether they would have done the same had they not been in fierce competition with so many other peoples in ours."

"Any people who have a monopoly over all their resources can get far," said Aldrich. He also knew that monopoly bred complacency. Entitlement. Humanity felt like they deserved the world's resources, and because of that, it was going to be hard to ever get them to stand down against the entity.

Somehow, though, Aldrich needed to make that happen.

"Will that ship be a threat?" said Valera.

"I don't think so," said Aldrich. "If it wanted to attack us, it could have done so at that range. If they were hell bent on it, they might have been able to hit us from orbit."

"Orbit?"

"High up. Beyond the world's skies."

"Truly? Humanity has such capabilities? Then we must prepare our city to fend against it."

"Orbital strike capabilities are heavily regulated and easy to track," said Aldrich. "And extremely rare. If someone hit us from orbit, we would know who it was. Everyone would."

At this point, we're important enough in the world where nobody can afford to hit us with anything like that."

"So this, too, is why you have decided to show your strength to the world."

Aldrich nodded. "Recognition is a form of protection in of itself."

The Halo carrier stopped several kilometers away from Aldrich, quite high up in the sky still. It was cloaked, though he could track it with Volantis's Truesight.

From the carrier, another aircraft shot out. This one was more reasonable, being the size of a large jet.

'Still impressive, though,' thought Aldrich.

The jet was a class 1 Panopticon mech called a Dominion. It was thrice the size of Casimir's jet and outfitted with far superior technologies, its four wings packed with nano-restorative missiles and autocannons.

At the front of the jet, a triad of gleaming blue barrels emerged, each capable of firing high intensity plasma beams.

Casimir's jet looked like it belonged in this modern era, but the Dominion looked like it was ripped right out of a science fiction movie.

Like most higher end Panopticon tech, the Dominion also had a white metal ring floating around it packed with supportive drones that could repair the Dominion using nanobot infused rays that printed new parts at will, even customizing the Dominion on the fly.

When needed, the Dominion could also shift into its mech form, and it was widely considered a symbol of the Panopticon's strength.

'And, thankfully, not possessed,' noted Aldrich, unable to sense any demonic energy coming off of it. 'Still, quite odd. I didn't think the Panopticon would make any moves until they figured out how to deal with the Stranger's possession.'

As the Dominion flew down to Aldrich, he spotted a human figure flying behind it. He immediately noticed this one as Valkyrie.

Valkyrie soared down in her battle armor of gold and green, her two signature colors.

Majestic wings of leaves and golden flowers spread out from her sides, providing her with a means of flight. She approached Aldrich with a neutral, blue-eyed gaze, her face expressionless in its calm focus.

Valera tightened the grip on her shield, the sound of metal groaning under her powerful hold spreading through the air.

Chiros stiffened in alert, his blade readied.

"That one...is dangerous," said Valera. "And strong. Incredibly so."

"You can sense her strength?" asked Aldrich.

"Not directly. Sensing the strength of Alterhumans is still difficult. I do not know when a human here is born powerful, gifted with their far-ranging abilities.

But I know a fighter when I see one.

I know the poise of one who knows battles. I can tell when one does not hold the light of the fight in the eyes, when they have yet to hold their blades properly or wet them in blood.

That one...is experienced. She has seen a thousand battles."

"Not just that," said Chiro. "The way she carries herself - she knows she is unparalleled. And that confidence is not wrought from nothing - it is confirmed in the rite of countless fights.

Fights she has won, no doubt."

"I agree, Armored," said Volantis. "I can sense levels of 'energy' now within the humans of this realm, and that one holds a tremendous amount that is the highest I have encountered thus far.

It outstrips the warrior of the sun. It outstrips the warrior of the dark that you have allied with. The difference is not great, but it is still there."

"She's that strong, huh?" muttered Aldrich. He knew Valkyrie was powerful. She was in contention to be the world's strongest, after all, with her biggest competition being Huanglong from China and Ravana from India.

Together, those three were known as the modern day Triune, though Aldrich felt that was an insult to the Triune of the past. The old Triune worked together for the betterment of the world.

The new one was simply a title shoved on to the three strongest in the world, and none of them did much other than rule their own cities or, in Valkyrie's case, fight powerful beings.

Valkyrie approached first, outspeeding the Dominion. She hovered in front of Aldrich.

Her long white hair and piercing blue eyes emanated a feeling of ice that contrasted dramatically with the warm, life-radiating colors of green and gold that her powers gave off.

Close up, Aldrich could also see that her battle armor was not made of metal, but rather a gold hued wood. Though he had no illusion that said wood was probably far more durable than any metal known to man.

"..." Valkyrie simply stared at Aldrich.

The silence cloyed in the air, threatening.

When silence came from strength, threat was never far behind.



A flash of golden light burst out from beside Valkyrie, the flash expanding and forming into the silhouette of a woman. The silhouette then filled in, revealing Lightspeed, current number 2 hero in the Superboard top 100.

Lightspeed was a powerfully built woman with the curvature of her muscles showing underneath her skin-tight white and gold bodysuit. Emblazoned upon her chest was a shining white star, but aside from that, her suit was quite simple.

Classic in its design.

Like Valkyrie, however, Lightspeed's face contrasted with her suit's bright hues.

Her bright gold eyes were underlined with tired, dark bags, as if she had not known a good night's sleep in years. Her long golden hair was a ragged mess with split ends and clumped chunks from a complete disregard for maintenance.

A curtain of messy bangs fell down her forehead, covering her eyes, and she annoyingly blew air up to part them.

Lightspeed stared at Aldrich, then at Valkyrie, and sighed.

"Say something, will you?" said Lightspeed, elbowing Valkyrie. "Or do I have to do everything myself?"

"..." Valkyrie floated backwards, letting Lightspeed handle things.

"Whatever." Lightspeed hovered in the air, a faint golden silhouette surrounding her. She looked at Aldrich with an utterly bored, disinterested look. "So, here's the thing, officially, we're here to investigate a massive energy reading, the biggest the AA's registered since the Locus Raids.

I know what you're thinking, two S class heroes is overkill, but we have to give the pea-brained public some kind of confidence, yeah? Nothing like two shiny sexy strong ladies to do that, I guess.

But anyhow, the main reason we're here isn't cause of the energy readings. We figured that was you. We, well, he-," Lightspeed pointed at the Dominion as it approached close now. "Wants to meet you, Thanatos."

## **Chapter 337: The President**

Aldrich glanced over to the Dominion. It hovered near soundlessly above Arcadia, maintaining a safe distance, wary. However, its weapons, though out, were not aimed, indicating some level of trust.

But who was it in the Dominion that wanted to talk to Aldrich?

"And who is 'he'?" said Aldrich.

Lightspeed rubbed the bridge of her nose, impatient. She put down a pair of black goggles over her eyes and looked around. Little whirs clicked from the goggles, indicating that they were high tech and doing something.

"You've got a communication device in your ear," said Lightspeed. "You'll have to get rid of that."

"I can't do that until I get an explanation for why I'm needed," said Aldrich. He raised his hand and pointed up, not to the Dominion, but far beyond, to the Halo carrier. "And why the Panopticon's Halo carrier is watching from up there."

Lightspeed's brow arched, surprised that Aldrich could see through the cloaking. Or that he could see that far up. The Halo carrier, though massive, was still a huge distance away, nothing more than a small blip to the average person's eye.

Volantis, however, could easily zoom into it. And his Truesight meant cloaking was useless.

Before Lightspeed could talk, she pressed her hand to her ear, to a communications device of her own. "Okay, okay, whatever."

She shrugged at Aldrich. "You can have that device with you. Just go on up and let me be done with this. I'm wasting time I could be spending drinking this already shitty day away."

It was Aldrich this time who raised a brow, if he had one on his skull head under his helm.

'It's way too early to be drinking,' was Aldrich's intrusive thought, but he did not let that slip out. "You still haven't answered my first question. Who is 'he'?"

"Really making this hard on me now, aren't you? Fine. Emrys Du Lac. You know, president of the AA."

"I see." Aldrich nodded to himself, assessing the situation.

"You'll have to go alone, too," said Lightspeed. "We'll make sure your forces here are safe."

"Safe, is it? Interesting word for 'isolate'," said Aldrich.

"It's what my job description told me to do. However you interpret it is your choice," said Lightspeed bluntly.

'Master, are you sure you wish to go?' Valera's thoughts beamed into Aldrich's head. 'If it comes down to it, I am ready to fight. You can always wake the little one to teleport away.'

'Fighting right now isn't prudent. I don't believe they're here to pose us any direct threat. Emrys just wants to talk, and he gave me the AA's support in the form of votes in the Judicata.

He wouldn't have done that if he wanted to get rid of me. I'm also quite interested in hearing what he has to say.

Plus, I have insurance.'

"Let me leave a friend of mine here to make sure my soldiers really are safe," said Aldrich. He nodded, and the shadow he cast behind him flickered.

From it, like emerging from a sea of dark, viscous waters, Dracul appeared, trickles of solid shadow streaming off of his face and body.

Lightspeed's bored expression broke into pure surprise as she hovered backwards out of sheer instinct.

Valkyrie, however, Aldrich noticed, turned her gaze from icy cool to bright hot. She hovered closer, and in her eyes, Aldrich could see a very familiar sight, a sight he knew well from Valera.

Bloodlust.

"I have business to conduct with this man," said Dracul, jutting his chin to Aldrich. He was covered from shoulder to toe in a billowing cloak of dark, making him seem like a formless mass of black.

His face, pale and with sharp features, tall nose, sunken in, dark eyes, and flowing locks of inky black hair, made him look very much like some vampiric count.

Fitting for his code name of Dracul.

"I expect him to return in one piece."

Lightspeed's surprise faded, which was impressive in its own right. It meant that other than momentary shock, actually standing in front of Dracul, a powerful Sentinel, was not something that bothered her too much.

Either she was that bored or she was that powerful. Likely a mixture of both, from what Aldrich knew of her strength via publicly available records.

"I can assure you, we aren't here to fight. Consider us more like insurance," said Lightspeed.

"Consider me insurance," said Dracul. His gaze narrowed as he noticed Valkyrie's bloodlust, targeted right at him like a knife. He took his arm out from under his cloak, revealing shiny black armor. Around his gauntleted hand, a blade of swirling dark formed.

"I do not like when fangs are bared at me," said Dracul.

"..." Valkyrie, in response, also armed herself. She held her arm out, and from her arm, twin coiling vines emerged, winding around each other in to form a helix patterned blade of hardened plant mass.

Gold particles - spores or pollen of some kind - gathered around the vine blade.

"Knock it off, Valk." Lightspeed put a hand on Valkyrie's shoulder, shaking her head. "You pick a fight with him, with Thanatos on top of that, and we're going to be dealing with a headache I really, really don't want to deal with."

"..." Valkyrie nodded. She hovered backwards with a soft flick of her flowery wings.

"Hm." Dracul lowered his arm, though notably his darkness blade remained manifested.

"I'll go," said Aldrich. "I'm interested in what Emrys has to say."

And, Aldrich did have to acknowledge, Emrys did help with his votes.

"You should've just done that from the start," groaned Lightspeed. "No need for all this drama."

Aldrich ignored her and flew upwards, his cloak of souls softly wailing as he passed by the two S class heroes. Lightspeed did not give Aldrich a second glance, but Valkyrie did. Her lingering gaze settled on Aldrich, and he had the instinctive feeling that she had something she wanted from him, some form of interest.

Regardless, Aldrich moved on. A door atop the Dominion's head, where the cockpit was, opened up indicating where he was to go. He passed through it, settling down in a circular landing zone.

The hatch above him closed, sealing off the sound of howling winds.

"Welcome, Thanatos." In front of Aldrich stood Emrys, the enigmatic president of the Alterhuman Agency.

## Chapter 338: [Bonus chapter] The President 2

Aldrich looked Emrys over.

Emrys was an elderly man with age whitened hair, long enough to reach down to his neck and a thick, bristly moustache and beard that still retained some flecks of youthful black.

His attire was formal, suited up without any combat preparation.

Yet, in spite of that, Emrys did not feel weak. He was a large man standing exactly at two meters with a broad-shouldered, muscled build that belied his age.

What was most striking about Emrys were his eyes. They were pitch black with bright white dots for pupils.

Aldrich briefly looked around, scanning for threats. The Dominion was running on auto-pilot. Aside from some minor helper drones, the entire place was empty.

As if to confirm Aldrich's thoughts, Emrys spoke. "The Dominion has no personnel on it other than me. I apologize for bringing Lightspeed and Valkyrie. But they are, as you noted, insurance."

'This human...is strange,' said Volantis. 'My sight strains when it gazes upon him. Argh-!'

Volantis's third eye involuntarily opened up on Aldrich's forehead, gazing at Emrys for a brief second before closing. 'My apologies, Armored. The eye reacted on its own.'

"Ah, so that is where Supermind's eye went." Emrys nodded, his hands calmly clasped behind his back. He did not seem surprised at all.

"You're Irregular," said Aldrich. The All-Seeing Eye had opened and recognized Emrys as not being of this world.

"A broad term. Too broad for my tastes. But yes, that is true," said Emrys.

"What are you, then? An alien?"

"This is why I considered that eye far too broad. It identifies only things that are extraterrestrial, but has no ideas of its origins," said Emrys. He shook his head. "I am no

alien. I am very human. But alien energies have charged my eyes, and because of that, you identify me as Irregular."

"...I see," said Aldrich. He wondered exactly how Emrys's eyes had changed from alien energies, or what these alien energies even exactly were, but that would meander too far off from the point. "What do you want from me?"

"Straight to the point. That will make things quick," said Emrys. "I am not against you, Thanatos. No, it is quite the opposite. I simply wish to enter into a partnership with you."

"You? Or the AA? As far as I'm aware, most of the AA's operations are conducted under the authority of the CEO. The title of president is more ceremonial, passed down from your family line rather than anything else," said Aldrich.

The Du Lac family were founders and presidents of the AA, but notably, other than the first Du Lac, all the successors had ended up living lives of seclusion, never taking helm of the AA.

That meant that by all rights, Emrys should not have had too much power, but at the same time, contextual clues hinted against it.

It was Emrys, not the CEO, that showed up at the Judicata.

And Emrys had a Halo carrier under his control. A ceremonial title could not ever manage that.

"You already know I have more influence than meets the eye," said Emrys, reading through Aldrich's question to fish for more information.

With that, Aldrich recognized that Emrys was a good talker. And impressive at hiding his emotions. His face was impossible to read, better than Solomon Solar or Z.

"Doesn't mean I know everything there is to you," said Aldrich.

"And neither I for you. Let us keep it that way. Putting all our cards on the table to begin with is too extreme, no?"

"Then what cards are you putting down?"

"I want you to help the Panopticon recover from the Irregular hacking it suffered at the Judicata," said Emrys. "My eyes are capable of reading energy signatures at a fine-tuned level. Due to that, I know that you have some form of protection against the Irregular hacking in Haven. Give the Panopticon a sample of that, and it can replicate the defenses."

"Asking for that much to begin with? Are you sure you aren't putting all your cards down already?"

"I have more to play," was Emrys's cool answer, and because of his inscrutable face, it was impossible to tell whether Emrys was bluffing or not. "And I can choose not to play, either. It is up to you."

"That's quite a lot to ask for. The Panopticon's defense should be its own responsibility, no?" It sounded like Emrys was asking for much, and he was, but the request was not as one-sided as it seemed.

Aldrich stood against the Stranger, and if the Stranger could, whenever it had its possession capabilities up, take over high end Panopticon tech, it would be a massive pain in the ass to deal with if it could just pad itself with armies of class 2 and 1 robots and drones.

Not to mention the potential havoc it could wreak by taking over Panopticon space stations.

Valera's worry at an orbital strike became much more of a likelihood unless Aldrich provided the Panopticon a way to defend itself. And there was the cost in life, too.

The Panopticon still maintained most of the world's agriculture and infrastructure. Right now, cities were getting by on emergency reserves and limited supply transport. Sooner or later, that had to end.

"Rest assured, the Panopticon is not defenseless. It is not a stranger to Irregular power sources. In time, it will adapt," said Emrys. "But I acknowledge it may suffer an additional attack or two before that adaptation occurs.

I am simply giving you a chance to expedite that process."

And, Aldrich noted, if the Panopticon adapted on its own, Emrys nor the Panopticon owed anything to Aldrich anymore. He did not know whether this was a bluff either.

For all this time, he had operated under the principle that Alter tech was helpless against magic, but the more he found out about the world, the more he doubted that.

With the existence of Irregulars, alien technologies hidden away, and who knows how many more variables, it was entirely possible that the Panopticon could, in fact, fend off against demonic possession.

At which point Aldrich lost his leverage.

"And what are you offering me?" said Aldrich.

"I was part of Supermind's efforts in finding Vanguard's successor. He believed the heir to be humanity's new hope," said Emrys. "If Supermind gave you his eye, he no doubt believed that it would be within your self interest to find the heir as well."

I am willing to extend my assistance in tracking down the heir."

"And if we find said heir? Will you take them in? To be the new savior of mankind?" said Aldrich.

If that was the case, then there was no real benefit for Aldrich. To humanity, yes, as Vanguard's heir would surely be someone that could defend man, especially against the entity.

But Aldrich reaped no direct benefit simply finding the heir.

"No. That is too one-sided of a deal. You can have the heir," said Emrys. "Turn them into one of your soldiers, if you so wish."

## **- Chapter 339: The President 3 |**

### **Chapter 339: The President 3**

'Interesting. This guy is willing to hand over Vanguard's heir to me? Just like that?' Aldrich stared at Emrys in near disbelief.

This was a huge offer. Vanguard's heir, if said individual could actually be found, was invaluable. Not just in terms of sheer power, but in symbolic value as well.

Vanguard was the world's number one and a bright light in a swathe of dark times. The first real hero, or at the very least, the one to really popularize the hero movement, the idea being that he wanted to create a movement that provided symbols to look up to, symbols of hope when things seemed hard and hopeless.

Over time, that had twisted into a highly commercialized, gaudy industry where people like Hat Trick who only cared about credits and image showed up. But the original idea behind it was pure.

Vanguard was the sole reason humanity survived Zahak during the Altering. Then, he spearheaded the fight against the Titans in the Monstering.

If Vanguard had not been in either time, humanity would have been extinct by now.

He was a champion of the peoples. A cornerstone of human belief. Almost a messianic figure.



And the heir of a messianic figure was not to be taken lightly. Vanguard's heir would have an instantaneous massive draw with the global public. Whoever the heir affiliated with would get a golden parachute into the hearts of the world.

At the very least, Aldrich would have expected Emrys to fight more for the heir. To maybe contest who got to manage the heir.

But Emrys sounded like he was literally willing to serve the heir up to Aldrich as an undead. The implications of that by now were obvious as Aldrich's powers were widely broadcasted.

That meant killing someone who inevitably was going to be a worldwide darling.

Was Emrys trying to goad Aldrich into doing that to smear him? Even if that was the case, Aldrich was willing to do that if it meant getting the heir in his legion.

Vanguard's power was one of a kind, granting him the strength to win against any foe no matter what. Such a broken ability was invaluable and instrumental in making sure Aldrich had more leverage against the entity.

"I understand it may seem odd that I am willing to give up Vanguard's heir so easily," said Emrys, parsing Aldrich's thoughts. For a moment, Aldrich wondered if Emrys was reading his mind, but it seemed unlikely.

If Emrys could mine Aldrich for thoughts, he did not have to ask leading questions like this.

It was more likely that Emrys was just perceptive.

"But it is simply a matter of control," said Emrys. "Vanguard was unpredictable in his last years. We cannot afford that when humanity is now at the brink. If the heir is under your control, then that is still control.

As far as I am aware, you have humanity's benefit in your mind. Knowing that, I am willing to give you this hypothetical heir if only to ensure that their power is used for the greater good."

"Hypothetical? What's your intel on this heir? Is it even real?" said Aldrich, stamping out the faint possibility that Emrys was setting him on a wild goose chase.

"Supermind would not have devoted himself to a fruitless endeavor," said Emrys. "Whether you choose to believe it or not is up to you."

"I can believe that," said Aldrich, respecting Supermind. "But how close are you to finding the heir? You need to have something tangible to offer as you're requesting something quite tangible from me."

"That is true," said Emrys. "And I do not have a location for you. Not now."

"Not now?"

"Supermind and I had good reason to believe that Vanguard's power is one that has a will of its own. A sort of energy made manifest, extraterrestrial in its origins to such a degree that attempting to predict it is difficult. What we do know is that it leaves the host's body and then chooses another when suitable.

However, the devil is in the details, and the devil, if anything, knows how to hide.

Tracking where the power is headed is difficult, impossible even with my eyes that are sensitive to every strata of energy, foreign or terrestrial.

But Vanguard left clues. His last decade of life was spent finding a worthy heir, knowing that his time with his strength was burning away. Supermind has pieces of a journal he kept that detail exactly when the power will decide to find a new heir.

And potential locations for the power to manifest."

"Pieces of a journal? Why not the full thing?" asked Aldrich. He went even more specific, his curiosity flaring. After all, this was about Vanguard, a hero that Aldrich had idolized so much in his youth. "What exactly happened to Vanguard in these past two decades? Why was he so inactive?"

"Vanguard's mind deteriorated as his power did. When he reached out to us for the first time in many years, he only gave us pieces.

As for the source of his inactivity and decline, we do not know.

Not for certain, though theories are abound," said Emrys. "It is likely that a human vessel is unable to contain the tremendous nature of Vanguard's power, doubly more so considering Vanguard was a pure human with a comparatively frail body unused to regulating high levels of energy."

Aldrich would have blinked if he could have. Vanguard had been a pure human. Just like Aldrich. That was not a detail that mattered to him tactically, but in a way, it comforted him.

That his once idol had been just like him. Powerless but given the strength to make change.

"Vanguard's deteriorating mental state led him into increasing isolation. He pushed away Valkyrie and Supermind, his closest friends, leaving him in solitude," said Emrys.

"No other family and friends?" Aldrich wondered. Vanguard was massively popular. He must have had some relation somewhere. A hidden child, maybe.

"Beneath the veneer of the cameras and lights, Vanguard was always a solitary man," said Emrys. "The world always needed him. Somewhere, something had to be done. And he knew that.

He knew the weight of the world was on his shoulders, and he wanted to keep as much of that weight on himself as possible.

He was always alone.

Especially after Valkyrie stopped fighting."

Aldrich knew what Emrys was talking about.

Valkyrie's decision to lay down her fists was a global tragedy, though it happened a while before he had been born.

It happened right at the end of the first Corpwar of 2077.

Held just seven years after the Monstering, when humanity was still unstable and disorganized, corporations monopolized the strongest of Alters and, left unchecked, began to realize they could carve up the world into their own territories, taking over nations that did not agree to 'deals' that sorely disadvantaged them for their resources.

This led to massive megacorporations fielding literal armies of mercenaries and hired military forces.

Beforehand, the Panopticon took a hands off approach to humanity, only making sure everyone had equal access to food, but the 2077 Corpwar forced them to intervene once they calculated the conflicts could escalate into an extinction level event.

Once the Panopticon stepped in, the war quickly ended within six months.

In total, the 2077 Corpwar consisted of three years of grueling battles, and the last one led to Valkyrie's retirement.

Ragnarok, one of the leading military companies of the time, launched a fission bomb from its space station at Destiny Star, a Neo-Beijing based mega corporation that had and still has a huge market share in the Alter costume industry.

Hou Yi, one of China's strongest Alters at the time, diverted the unstable bomb at the cost of his life, redirecting it to remote wastelands.

The bomb's detonation, however, generated a mass energy surge that a particularly powerful variant absorbed, turning it into an infinitely evolving threat.

That threat, code named Dragon for its serpentine appearance, quickly became a S ranked disaster capable of matching the power of Titans.

The Triune mobilized to stop Dragon, and though the details of what exactly happened were iffy, the Triune did stop Dragon after a long, drawn out fight.

Victory came at the cost of Valkyrie's husband, the restorer of their team who died from collateral damage.

Grief from that loss sent Valkyrie out of the public scene, and from that moment on, she refused to raise her fists ever again for the greater good.

Vanguard exhibited a rare show of force afterwards, forcing Ragnarok to collapse by destroying all of their valuable infrastructure.

The end of the first Corpowar led to the proper establishment of the Alterhuman Agency, taking away monopolized control of Alters from corporations to serve an organization that looked out for the greater good of humanity.

The Panopticon became more hands on as well, restructuring the global economy to a credit system that only it had the capacity to maintain. This forced corporations under the Panopticon, forcing them follow protocols that prevented them from waging large scale conflicts against each other ever again.

The world had been so broken back then. And now, it was looking like round 2 was coming up.

"When exactly did Vanguard die, then?" said Aldrich. "His official disappearance was stated to be 2100, but I have a feeling there's more to that than meets the eye."

"You are correct. Vanguard did not die in 2100. That was when he decided to sever all contact, entering into complete isolation.

His power at the time had faded so low that his days of saving lives were over, in any case," said Emrys. "He did, however, hold fragments of that power within him.

Every few years, he would burn a fragment, using it to travel or perhaps fend for himself.

Supermind and I tracked those flares of energy."

"You didn't send anything to try and reach out to him?"

"We did, at first. Vanguard destroyed any attempts to reach out to him or spy on him. Eventually, we decided that it was better to let Vanguard live than to force him to burn out his powers."

Aldrich asked the most important question. "Then when was the last energy signature?"

"October 30. 2117."

## **Chapter 340: The President 4**

Aldrich stood there in silence. That date - he had almost forgotten. But hearing it being brought back up was enough for emotions to start flooding into him, thawing past the iced over surface of his undead heart.

The pain. The loss. The helplessness.

Then, the rage. The desire for vengeance.

It all came back to him in a jarring, piercing instant.

October 30th, 2117.

The day he died. As well as two of his closest friends.

'This can't be a coincidence,' thought Aldrich. 'It just can't. Vanguard dies, or at the very least, goes dark on the exact day that I die? There has to be a connection here. There must be.'

The immediate thought popped into his head: was he the heir to Vanguard's power? His gut reaction was a no. Vanguard's power was dramatically different from his.

Vanguard was for all intents and purposes basically a 'flying brick' super. He was ultra durable, ultra strong, and he could fly. The most unique part of his power was that his strength always increased, and against tough foes, it continually scaled upwards.

Records showed that at first, Vanguard was not a recognizable Alter. When the Altering first broke out, Vanguard, in a biography, professed that he tore the muscles in his arm and blew his back out lifting a small steel beam to save a few trapped people.

But the more he struggled, the greater the threat he faced, the tougher he got.

Struggling to lift a steel beam quickly became struggling to lift a multi-ton boulder.

Struggling to lift a boulder became struggling to lift an entire building.

And so on and so forth until eventually, at the height of the Monsterring, Vanguard reached levels of power against the Titans that could only be described as unreachable, when lifting up entire islands and flattening mountain ranges became child's play.

Aldrich's necromancy and game element power was completely different from that. But maybe there was more to it? Maybe Vanguard's power had been a form of inheritable reality warping, one that manifested differently depending on who used it?

"Does that date mean anything to you?" said Emrys, quietly taking note of Aldrich's extended silence.

"I was trying to figure out whether the date was of any significance. Unfortunately, I don't think so," said Aldrich. He should not be letting telling silence like that show, especially not to someone powerful and, as of now, mysterious like Emrys.

"It has not been significant to me, either," said Emrys. "But what is important is that I have a good idea of when Vanguard's power will re-manifest."

This was another argument against Aldrich being the heir. If Vanguard's journaled information indicated that his power was going to show up again in the future, then that automatically struck Aldrich being the heir out as he already had his powers.

"When?" asked Aldrich, though his tone was more of a demand than a question.

"Six months. The exact date is undefined, but that is the time range. Around that time, I will have strict surveillance on all the areas that Vanguard defined as potential locations for his power's manifestation.

You will be part of that surveillance."

"Any other details? How exactly does the power manifest? Who does it look for? And so on."

Emrys shook his head wistfully. "Were it a blessing if that information was available. Unfortunately, Vanguard's writings are cryptic at best."

"How can you trust that information, then?" countered Aldrich. If Vanguard's mind was deteriorating, then his journaling could easily have been the ramblings of a madman.

"I cannot trust it," admitted Emrys. "But Supermind did. Supermind saw in Vanguard's last correspondence a trust and lucidity that I, as someone who had limited contact with the hero, lacked.

I may not trust Vanguard's state of mind, but I do trust Supermind's decision making. I have never known him to lose a bet, hence, why I worked with him so closely.

It is also why I am willing to work with you, for it appears that Supermind has hedged a bet on you also. That he granted you that eye indicates to me that he would have wanted you on this search."

Emrys referred to, of course, Supermind giving Aldrich the All-Seeing Eye.

To Aldrich, it had seemed like a desperation move, something that Supermind did as a way to try and fight against the Stranger.

'It takes an Irregular to beat an Irregular' were the venerated hero's words.

But maybe it was not just that. Maybe Supermind saw in Aldrich something more than a simple retaliatory force against the Stranger. At the very least, Emrys seemed to think so.

"I'm considering taking this deal, but I have conditions," said Aldrich.

"I expected that. Name them," was Emrys's cool response.

"If you're going to be using my property to reinforce Panopticon defenses, I want to see how it's done," said Aldrich. "I want to be present to know exactly what it is the Panopticon will do to replicate my defense against the hacking in the Judicata."

This, Aldrich wanted to figure out whether the Panopticon could replicate magic and, if they could, how they did it.

Ordinarily, Aldrich would not have given the Panopticon the opportunity to analyze magic, but it was because Emrys said that the Panopticon could eventually adapt on its own that Aldrich was willing to do this.

However, Aldrich wanted to call Emrys out on that statement, especially if it was a bluff. He wanted to know exactly how things were done, if they could even be done in the first place.

Emrys's reaction to this demand would be telling.

"Very well," said Emrys. "I will arrange for you to be privy to the Panopticon's more inner workings."

Not even a single second of hesitation.

Interesting.

"On top of that, I want access to Vanguard's writings," continued Aldrich. "How were they sent to you? Electronically? Or physically?"

"Pen and paper."

"Good. Send me them. The original copies." Physical writing was the safest, sureproof way to record things without the risk of hacking.

And, hopefully, it meant that Aldrich could use magic to analyze it.

Magic might not work in Cyberspace, at the least not yet - maybe Fler'Gan could work something out - but physical objects could be subject to divination or scrying spells.

Emrys frowned. "They are currently preserved to the highest degree with the highest level of security with the AA. Giving them to you is...a difficult proposition, even for me.

I can send you electronic copies."

"Call me old fashioned, but I like holding a book in my hands when I read," said Aldrich.

"...I will see what I can do," said Emrys.

"Good. I'm assuming that if things go well, a friendly relationship is due between the AA and Haven, right?" said Aldrich.

"Of course. That is a given. Your cooperation will prove you a capable ally of humanity, at which point, the AA has no reason to stand against you.

After all, the core principle of the AA is to fight for humanity's survival above all."

Aldrich disagreed with the last part of Emrys's statement. The AA at heart, with its founding, might have been for humanity at an altruistic level, but plenty agreed now that it had gone hollow with commercialization.

"And I understand that many believe the AA a shell of itself. That it has turned into something flashy and gaudy," said Emrys, showing again his uncanny ability to read the flow of conversation and guess ahead. "For quite some time, I have observed the AA's decline.

Strong men create peace. Peace creates weak men. Weak men create difficult times.

We have been at a tentative peace, and that has made the average hero weak. The average executive a corporate boardmember rather than a leader." Emrys turned his back to Aldrich, looking ahead in the dark of the dimly lit ship, to the forward windows that showed the outside sky. When he spoke again, his voice had an edge of resolution to it. "But I am taking the AA back to its roots now that troubled times give cause for drastic change.

No more weak men. No more weak heroes. No more weak executives."



"I look forward to seeing that," agreed Aldrich, remembering Hat Trick, the most egregious offender of self-absorbed, commercialized hero that he knew personally. "And one more thing-,"

"More?" said Emrys, questioning. His tone was still neutral, however, hard to tell whether he was offended or curious.

"I am requesting a Blackout," said Aldrich.

A Blackout was an area where heroes could not come in, usually a temporary zone due to extreme variant danger. However, Blackouts were sometimes used for Sentinels as some opposed AA activity in their controlled territories.

"This seems counter-intuitive," commented Emrys. Especially after insinuating you wanted a more friendly, working relationship with the AA. You still want to put a Blackout over Haven?

It is within your rights as a Sentinel, of course, but I had thought you different from the average Sentinel who wields their powers like a feudal lord - selfishly without thought for the greater good."

"No, not a Blackout over Haven. We can discuss the specifics about how the AA will work with and potentially operate in or around Haven later," said Aldrich.

"Interesting. I have an idea of what you want with a Blackout, but I will not question you further. I am willing to grant you that, though I cannot extend a Blackout past twenty four hours, nor can I impose it on any populated city.

Refer me to the specific details of this later." Emrys nodded, indicating with his words that he was done talking to Aldrich. Or, more likely, done listening to demands.

With a wave of a hand, Emrys opened the hatch doors above Aldrich, signaling him free to leave.

## **Chapter 341: Spider Mining**

Back at Haven, several hours later, Aldrich stood in V's underground, fortified server room.

A floating screen in front of him played the news, showing off the only light in a vast room of cooled darkness.

A pretty, suited up reporter pointed at a map of the United States where several glowing red patches were marked indicating variant energy signatures.

The title under the reporter read: VARIANTS RETREATING?

"Variant activity worldwide has been on the decline, which comes at a great and much needed surprise after the Locus Raid the week prior," said the reporter. She closed her eyes solemnly. "An attack on a scale that has never been seen since the Monsterring itself."

She shuddered at the word 'Monsterring', for even now, the generational trauma associated with that word was staggering.

"Various variant behavior experts and researchers have analyzed the sudden retreat of variant forces, some saying that it is simply a warning for more to come, others saying that heroes and military forces have thinned enough of the herd to drive others back.

Alternatively, a new 'Thanatos Theory' has arisen that's starting to gain more traction. I'm connecting here with Dr. Vannous, head researcher at the VMI (Variant Mind Institute), and current leading proponent of the theory."

A screen appeared at the bottom right, showing Dr. Vannous at his desk. He seemed to fit the archetype of an intellectual well, with horn-rimmed spectacles, bright, intelligent green eyes, and slightly head forward posture that made it clear he spent quite a bit of time looking down and reading.

"Dr. Vannous, can you explain the Thanatos Theory to the public?" said the reporter.

"Of course, Cindy, it would be my pleasure. As you all know, I was one of the leads on the team that formulated the Hivemind Hypothesis, particularly when it comes to Locuses," said Dr. Vannous. "I won't go into the details to bore everyone watching, but prior research has indicated that the Hivemind is reasonably intelligent and above all, cautious.

We've seen this before when Sheshanaga Biotech developed the Indraastra, an Anti-Variant gas-based biological weapon.

When unleashed on a A rank disaster Geist attack in Mumbai to devastating effect, all Geists in that entire section of the country, whether they were involved in the attack or not, retreated back to Deep Wasteland territory.

This leads me to believe that Thanatos's ability to control Locus O11 showcased a powerful threat to the Hivemind, prompting a similar retreat."

"Intertesting, then will this go the same way as the Indraastra? Sheshanaga touted it as the be all end all solution to destroying all harmful variants, but within months, the variants evolved against it," said the reporter. "Will the same happen with Thanatos?"

"That's what I would like to know," said Dr. Vannous, pushing his glasses up. "The Indraastra's continuously self-evolving viral load was meant to counter variant adapation, but that obviously ended up not working.

In fact, it bred a strain of super Geists in India that to this day are resistant to any and all diseases.

However, the nature of Thanatos's power is unlike anything the world has seen before. It isn't simply biology or even conventional Alter power. It defies all conventions.

Can it defy variant resistance?"

'Yes it can,' was Aldrich's mental response. He did not know this for sure, but he was fairly certain. If the entity could just adapt against Aldrich, it would not have called for a ceasefire.

Aldrich's power was on the same 'tier' as the entity's own, both being from the Outer. Thus, one could not simply overpower the other. The reason why Aldrich's necromancy could dominate the entity's control over variants was likely a matter of specialization.

The entity could control a vast number of variants and create and evolve them. Aldrich's necromancy was more focused on taking control of the dead. If both Aldrich and the entity had 100 equal stat points to distribute, the entity had spent just 10 on 'control' while Aldrich spent more like 50.

They had the same amount of stat points, but Aldrich was simply more invested.

"That's a difficult question to answer without being able to study Thanatos's powers directly," said Dr. Vannous. "The VMI has extended an invitation to Thanatos for a study to that end."

"Oh? And has Thanatos responded?"

Dr. Vannous shook his head wistfully. "Not yet. But it's understandable. Thanatos is a new Sentinel in contention with the United States. I'm sure he has plenty on his hands to deal with already."

He stared at the camera, or rather, at Aldrich. "But, Thanatos, if by any chance you're watching this, know that we at the VMI will welcome you with open arms. For humanity's sake, let's figure this variant threat out together."

"Thank you, doctor."

"A pleasure." Dr. Vannous disconnected.

"Now, moving on our financial expert Aaron and his projection of the markets now that the variants have retreated..."

Aldrich swiped the screen, sending that news channel away.

V whistled from the ground where she sat cross-legged and hunched over as always. "Now look at that, big boy Thanatos is the main reason all the world's variants are shaking in their boots. Or scales. Or whatever."

"It's just a theory," said Aldrich. "And why didn't I get mention of this invitation?"

"You kidding me?" V blew a bubble of gum and popped it with some annoyance. "You're on the world wide stage now. You get, like, a thousand requests to meet you a day.

From country leaders, random companies, mercenaries wanting a stable job, and this doctor dude, you think he's special?

He's like, one out of a bazillion research centers that have tried to get a hold of you.

Imagine the clout one of these science festivals will get if they literally solve the variant crisis with you."

V sighed. "But yeah, I should be keeping you on top of everything. Issue is I'm not all that specialized for sorting through info. I'm good at infiltration. This boring work - no offense to Fisk, I offload most of this to him and his team - isn't my style.

I guess what I'm really saying I sorta want someone else to help me."

"I'm looking," said Aldrich. "But you know it's hard. If I'm hiring, I need to vet them thoroughly, and they need to be loyal enough to work with me for a lifetime.

It's easier for me to raise an undead at this point, but it should be obvious why I can't just assassinate a high end techno and kidnap them."

"Yeah, pesky public image stuff." V shrugged. "Downsides of being on the world stage, I guess. It's harder to get away with things compared to being in the Underworld.

Plus, I'm going to be real busy with this guy for a while."

V jutted her chin forward, pointing to Desmond. He was plugged in a techno-chair meant to help technos when they used a lot of processing power by cooling their internal temperatures to prevent their brains from literally frying.

From his head, a cable extended. A bundle of V's technopathic hairs.

"So, do you think you can take control over his network of spiders?" said Aldrich.

V shook her head. "That network's gone already. He had a deadman's switch that killed them all off if he ever got jacked.

I did actually develop my arachnophobia jacker with a dead man's switch in mind, but it was only to stop Desmond from deleting any information he had stored.

I didn't know he was straight up willing to kill off his entire tribe if he ever lost control. Shit, that's heartless."

"It comes with unhealthy paranoia," said Aldrich.

"Reminds me of a certain someone," teased V.

Aldrich raised a brow. "Are you talking about me?"

"Maybe. But you've gotten a bit better on that end. You're a little more relaxed now. Maybe cause you've got a nice girl with you, hm?" V smiled.

Aldrich remembered how heavy the weight on his shoulders felt after meeting the entity and knowing the fate of the world stood on him. He remembered also how much lighter he felt when Valera said she would be there for him no matter what.

"Potentially," said Aldrich.

"Aw, come on, you're a total tsundere type, aren't you?" V grimaced. "Damn, now I sound like Fisk."

"..." Aldrich ignored her. "If Desmond's Spiders are all dead, the news will echo to the Italian Prong soon enough. I can have Feather pretend they're still alive for a while, but that'll only last so long.

This will spur a reaction from the Italian Prong, no doubt. What I can't afford is the Italian Prong getting cold feet on maintaining the Blackwater attack."

Vexa's butterflies now comprised a careful spy network over Blackwater and its surrounding areas, and they reported that troop buildup for all three prongs of the Trident were increasing considerably.

The Italian and Japanese Prongs were closer to Blackwater and had taken up residence in Blackwater at this point, fortifying it as if for a siege.

Which meant that the Russian Prong was going to be at a disadvantage trying to break in.

All this happened under the radar of the world with the AA unable to deal with villain related activity with variant attack threats and the Panopticon still downed.

Granted, now that the variants were retreating, it was possible that the AA could start investigating the area. That was where the Blackout came in. A high level Blackout from Emrys himself would prevent any heroes from interfering with the conflict.

The only wildcard here was Solomon Solar who was deep in bed with the Trident.

Aldrich still did not know where Solomon stood in this conflict. Despite the buildup of troops and the impending conflict, Solomon had not made any move himself. Even now, he was doing a PR tour where he handed out water to a tier 3 city way up north that got leveled by the Locus Raids.

Was Solomon going to fight?

Or, to be more specific, would Aldrich have to end up fighting him?

## **Chapter 342: An Inheritance Issue**

The answer to whether Aldrich would have a showdown with Solomon Solar would all come down to what V could extract from Desmond's mind.

Desmond was potentially the biggest informant for the Italian Prong of the Trident, so he had valuable information from the top down about the prong's operations and secrets.

Incidentally, it was the Italian Prong that seemed to have the closest ties with Solomon Solar.

Of the three prongs, the Italian one could be considered the 'business' side, dealing less with combat and more with navigating deals with other organizations, managing trade routes for drugs and illegal goods setting up illegal experimentation centers.

The Japanese prong was the muscle. They were almost solely focused on cultivating the strongest fighters, creating an in-house supply of top notch, loyal talent to field to make sure no other organization thought about taking a fight with the Trident.

Among criminal organizations, the Trident was unique in this regard. Other organizations outsourced their muscle via mercenary groups, but those lacked loyalty and drive when it counted the most.

Finally, the Russian Prong managed all things cyberspace. The recent schism caused by the Stranger meant that the Italian and Japanese Prongs had lost a sizable amount of their territory in Cyberspace, but surprisingly, they held onto more than Aldrich thought.

Aldrich figured with the Stranger using magically fueled cyberspace abilities that it could completely takeover everything, but apparently the main fortresses belonging to the Italian and Japanese prongs remained unaffected, protected by the high level techno known as Mad Jack.

This posed an interesting question. How was Mad Jack able to fight off the Stranger when the Panopticon could not?

The easiest answer that came to Aldrich's head was that Mad Jack was Irregular as well.

But he would probably get an answer to that from Desmond as well.

"You know, I sorta doubt the Italian and Japanese prongs are going to back down at this point." V shook her head. "They're super duper doubling down on guarding Blackwater. Maybe there's something really important there."

"It's their renewable farm for insiders in the AA," said Aldrich. "It's how they have blackmail on a good chunk of the top heroes. Of course, if those heroes were actually proper and upstanding citizens instead of fame and drug addled maniacs, there wouldn't be an issue like that in the first place."

"Yeah, always hear stories about how this high profile hero and that does some stupid shit that ends up killing someone innocent, but it all gets swept under the rug. If I was in charge there, I'd shake that dirty nest clean harder than an angry addict mom shakes her baby."

"...Right." Stark visual from V aside, Aldrich was hopeful that Emrys would be the catalyst to clean house on the AA. It needed to in order to survive, not just because of competition from ARMA's soon to be unveiled new hero association, but also because if the AA stayed the way it did, it did not have a place in Aldrich's new world order.

"In any case," Aldrich continued. "I want to absolutely make sure this fight takes place.

Once your done mining Desmond, I'm going to go ahead and get rid of him. His Spider network is an useful ability, but I'd have to build that network, one that he's taken decades to create, up again, and I don't have that time.

I'll frame his death as a quick assassination by putting a bullet hole through his head and having Feather present the body to the Italian prong. That way, they won't panic that their sensitive information was taken.

If Desmond was assassinated by lead to the brain, nobody could jack him to access his information.

To go a step further, I'll tell Feather to put the blame on the Italian prong."



"Classic misdirection. Well, let's hope it works" V nodded.

"Make sure to wipe out any traces of infiltration when you're done."

"Psh." V looked offended. "Who do you think I am?"

"You're right. I'm relying on you this much already; it's too late to start doubting now. How long do you think it'll take for you to finish mining Desmond?"

"Another day or two. Maybe three. This guy dealt with a lot of shit, so there's going to be a lot of stuff to sift through. And he was scared enough of everyday life that I figure he might have post-mortem defenses in his cyberspace property that I need to work around.

Until then, I'll probably be pretty quiet and focused. Fisk and Casimir should report to you about meetings and other important stuff, though."

"Got it." Aldrich checked his watch, a silver and white gold piece that Casimir picked out for him. At first, Aldrich had not wanted a watch, feeling it an ancient relic in the modern era, but Casimir had insisted, saying all leaders wore one.

So Aldrich had taken the least obnoxiously shiny thing Casimir suggested.

The time was 8:55 P.M.

"Speaking of, I have some of those meetings to attend to now."

Aldrich made his way out, up to his office where he due to meet Aarav.

"We've hit a roadblock here," said Aarav. He sat across from Aldrich's personal desk on the fortieth floor, cheap cigarette tinted bright orange at its tip. "I've been talking to your masked man Casimir for the most part, and he's got us all settled with the business side of things. But this, I needed to get to you in person."

"It must be very important if it's taking you out of your busy schedule," said Aldrich, and he was not being sarcastic here. Anything that could force an in person meeting from a Fortune heir was a monumental event indeed.

"Yeah, tell me about it. But you overestimate my schedule. Once you start to set the right people up, the weight on your shoulders gets a lot lighter. Though, I figure you know a thing or two about that." Aarav nodded to Valera, who, now in her business casual getup, stood behind Aldrich.

'I like this human,' Valera said mentally. 'He understands my importance.'

'Don't let him flatter you too much.'



"Then let's get to the point here," said Aldrich.

"Right-o." Aarav adjusted his dark shades. "You remember why we made this entire business arrangement in the first place, yeah?"

"Of course. To ensure you won that race for inheritance from your father," said Aldrich. "To my knowledge, I've already extended an invitation to your father for my powers."

"Yeah, thing is, the old fart's getting cold feet. Bet it's hard standing without a spine, but I digress. I offered of course to package your power in a form of 'treatment' that's a lot more palatable than having to die first, but he's not biting that either."

"What about your siblings? Do they have an alternative solution?"

"That's the big fucking issue here. I thought they had a fat load of nothing. Talentless hacks with silver spoons shoved down their throats, all of them, but you know, my oldest brother, Arjun, he's got more grey matter in his cranium than my other four siblings combined.

Doesn't compare to me, still, but I give credit where it's due." Aarav shrugged. "You know what Regenerol is, right?"

## **Chapter 343: [Bonus chapter] An Inheritance Issue 2**

"Yes." Aldrich had offered the treatment to Randall, Elaine's adoptive father, as a means to cure his waste lung. It was an experimental treatment using regenerative variant stem cells - stem cells harvested from the disease immune geists that the news report before talked about - and coaxing a human body to accept them.

A successful treatment healed all diseases, and not just that, it granted the patient an infinitely evolving immune system exactly like that of the geists.

"Arjun's the one that made that happen. Soma, his company, has also developed a fast version of Regenerol that induces short term accelerated healing. A useful health pack for heroes or soldiers.

All from that one discovery.

He made one breakthrough and now he's milking it for all its worth.

Anyways, enough of my bitter rambling here, but Arjun has approached my father with a potential operation to make him truly immortal.

I've looked into the downsides - there's a big risk of turning my old man into a mutated half variant abomination, but maybe that's appealing to him, because he's taking more of a liking to that offer than mine."

Aldrich nodded. So competition had popped up. "What's the proposition here, then?"

"I was willing to go along with my old man's game here, but now, I'm starting to get tired of it." Aarav tapped his fingers absent-mindedly on the desk. "How about we get rid of him a little more forcefully?"

"If your father hasn't written you into his will as his successor, then killing him won't solve anything. It'll just cause a six way civil war between you and your siblings."

"As much fun as that sounds, I'd like to stop having childish fights with my brothers and sisters. I'm not suggesting we go guns blazing, full automatic rambo, napalm in the jungles and bombs in the deserts style American gusto.

I'd prefer something a little more subtle."

Aldrich nodded. "And what does subtle look like to you?"

"You see, once I realized good old Arjun was stepping up his game, I decided to get some of my best teams to create a little something that will make my old man a little more agreeable."

"A mind control agent?"

Aarav nodded.

"What kind of agent is it?" said Aldrich, wanting to know how feasible an attempt was.

"It's about as quiet as you can get. A tiny bio-capsule that, when crushed, releases an odorless, colorless, tasteless brainwashing vapor. Bio-capsule's designed so that it can change its form to stick to nondescript surfaces like, say, the roof of the mouth or the cavity of a tooth, and it's makeup doesn't trigger any alarms.

Harvested from a rare variant deep in the Abyss. Cost me over a billion credits to make on short notice without peeping toms getting in the way.

Damn, thinking about the cost and the sleepless days I forced on my teams is making me more annoyed than I usually am. "

"That sounds effective," said Aldrich. "All you need is a capable person to spread the agent."

"Therein lies the problem, Thanatos." Aarav pointed his cigarette at Aldrich. "My old man's scared of the wind. He's holed up in a tower fortified so heavily it'll survive a few rounds of judgment days, shit, forget judgment day, it'll probably take a beating from from Shiva himself.

He doesn't ever leave his room, either.

Doesn't speak with anyone face to face, only ever through a screen.

No Alter is going to get to him.

And there's a specially made Null device that projects a forcefield which stops any Alter power from penetrating while keeping all his life support medical gear online.

But I happen to know one man in this world who has powers that ignore Null."

"I see." Aldrich nodded. "You're wondering if I'm capable of getting that agent to him with my powers."

"Hell, if you've got a way to brainwash him without my bio-capsule, that'd be nice too. I'd feel a little sour pissing away a billion creds like that, but I can't be choosy here, can I?"

Aldrich thought about this for a moment. His powers did go through Null, but this situation was surprisingly more difficult to get around than he initially thought.

He could not very well just cast magic and bombard the CEO. He had to brainwash the CEO first. And an issue arose there. Fler'Gan's mind control required some level of physical contact.

Either by ingestion or, in the Judicata, sound waves. If the CEO only talked through a screen, it would not work.

There was potential to use the Pursuer to inflict the mind control status ailment, but that was way too forward. The Pursuer was not exactly invisible, even if it could phase through walls. Cameras would pick it up. If the CEO had guards or surveillance, there was no way to avoid evidence of foul play.

"Here's another one of blue's clues to get this good old euthanasia plan rolling here." Aarav leaned back in his chair. "My old man isn't entirely alone.

He keeps a girl with him as his personal maid. She sucks him off and changes the sheets when he shits the bed. Privileges of being a rich old prick, you know."

"Get to her, then we get to him."

"Bingo. Issue is, this unlucky girl's basically a slave. Never sees the day of light. Gets one day a month to leave that room, and even then, she's got a team spying on her 24/7.

On top of that, she's got tracking chips in her.

And on top of on top of that, she comes back, she gets scanned a bajillion times and sterilized so hard her cunt hairs fall off before she even gets to breathe the same air as my old man.

If we get to her, then it's gotta be done quick enough that the surveillance doesn't notice anything wrong. It's gotta be done with a means that doesn't trigger any scans."

"That's difficult, even for me," said Aldrich.

"Ah, but it does not escape my talents." Vexa's voice spread through the room.

The temperature of the room dropped, and Aarav's cigarette died.

## **Chapter 344: An Inheritance Issue 3**

Aarav witnessed Vexa's sudden appearance without a single switch in stride. All he did was look at the smoking, dimmed end of his cigarette with an annoyed face before lighting it again with his finger lighter.

"Alright, so who is this?" said Aarav.

Vexa materialized behind Aldrich - but in front of Valera - in a swirl of visible, cyan tinted winds. Her imperial robes flowed about her like a gentle breeze.

"You must be a man of some power," said Vexa, looking Aarav's calm, seated figure up and down.

"Oh? And how can you tell?" said Aarav.

"Your mannerisms. Stiff. Not in the way a scared retainer is before their lord, but rather the reverse: the stiffness of one who is used to lording. And that, in spite of the relaxed air you try to give, perhaps in a guise to relate with your underlings."

"We've got a mind reader here, do we?" Aarav blew out a curl of smoke, unphased that he had been read so easily.

Vexa's observational ability was superb. It exceeded that of Aldrich's, likely because she had a vastly more experience in navigating treacherous imperial court drama. "I'm thinking of a number between one and ten. Can you guess it?"

"Only if you are willing to give up your body to me."

Aarav raised a brow.

"Such indecency!" said Valera. "You are talking to a renowned guest of ours here."

"Despite being such an innocently sweet little thing, your mind does tend to stray towards the muck, no?" Vexa put her sleeved hands together and gave Aarav a small bow. "My apologies for the sudden appearance. But when I heard I could be of service, I simply had to intervene."

"What do you have in mind, Vexa?" said Aldrich.

"Is this man trustworthy?"

Aarav saw that his cigarette died down again in the presence of Vexa's chilling aura. He took Vexa's hint and said, "I'll take a smoke break outside. Give you all some time to talk things through."

Once Aarav left, Aldrich said to Vexa, "I know you haven't been here long, but you should stop referring to me as 'lord' or using court terminology in general. The human world here is completely different from the one you knew."

"That much is very apparent. Yet observing this world has made me realize that humanity here is still very much the same in many ways. They are still governed by the same instincts and emotions that give their actions direction, a direction that can be read with a discerning eye."

"Then what is your suggestion?" said Valera, crossing her arms.

"My, that dress looks wonderful on your, my sweeting. But to answer your question, I present another of my own. You both understand what type of being I am, no?"

"A Phantom," said Aldrich. He did not know all of Vexa's abilities. He knew her basic ones from when she could be first summoned, but in the mid-late game of levels, she would have developed a much larger host of talents that he was in the dark about.

Plus, she had been busy all this time setting up surveillance and managing it. It was hard to pin her down and get her to explain every little thing she could do.

Aldrich still had a good idea, though. "But you aren't specialized in stealth. And you can [Ghost Walk] through walls, but sufficiently powerful spirits like yourself need to stay visible to use any powerful magic or abilities."

"That is correct, my lord, but sufficiently powerful spirits such as myself are also capable of Possession."

"That is true, but at the same time, ghost based possession counts as a mental attack." Aldrich put a thinking hand to his chin. "The humans of this world find it difficult to adapt to magic, but they do have an innate resistance to mental attacks."

Sheshanaga's CEO used to be a powerful Alter. His body may have withered over time, but mental resistance wears away slower than physical ability."

"Not the leader. The girl," said Vexa. "The one that warms his bed. I can possess her with ease. However, though I am a phantom, I am still a jiangshi." She flipped her hair, and the veil of black parted to reveal her face. It was a small, angular, dainty face, the type that would have belonged to a pop star.

Her features, were, however, covered by a rectangular piece of paper attached to her forehead. Upon the weathered paper were various sigils glowing blue with power.

"As a jiangshi, I only require that my talisman transfer to another's body before I possess it," explained Vexa.

"That still poses an issue," said Aldrich. "The CEO will get rid of any talisman on the girl before she steps foot near him."

Vexa put her hand on Aldrich's table, and when she withdrew it, a blue sigil glowed upon the dark, glossy surface.

"Permanent possession requires my talisman to be on another at all times. But a temporary one is a different matter. Simply transfer this sigil to the girl and I will have free reign to enter her body. She is a girl of no consequential power and thus resistance, no?"

"It would be highly unlikely," said Aldrich.

"Then it is done. It requires but a simple touch to transfer the sigil. The sigil itself will also remain invisible once it is transferred."

"That can work," said Aldrich. He figured it was not difficult to arrange someone, especially with Aarav's resources, to just touch the girl and transfer the sigil. Anyone could pose as a street rat or vendor and brush by someone else. "But what will you do once you're in there? Use a potion from Fler'Gan? Or Aarav's bio-capsule?"

"I will handle it on my own. I need not to carry anything that may be detected."

"May I ask what abilities you are going to use?" asked Aldrich.

"I would like to keep that close to my heart," said Vexa.

"Unacceptable." Valera's tone was serious. Firm. "You are his Chosen. You do not have the luxury of bearing secrets, especially those related to your ability."

"You have a long, deep, and cherished bond with our lord, I can sense it," said Vexa.

"But it is not the same for myself. I have no qualms serving, but I wish to serve at my own pace. With my own privacy.

And, I wish to know whether you, an ever careful man, would be willing to take a leap of faith with me."

Vexa's talisman covered gaze settled at Aldrich, and even under the paper, he could tell her stare was intent.

"I'll take that leap of faith," said Aldrich.

"Are you sure, master?" said Valera, concerned. "Aarav, if I understand his position correctly, is like the prince of a great kingdom. His power and resources are a great pillar of support. Failure here may lead to that disappearing."

"I know. It wouldn't be a leap of faith if there wasn't anything to stumble over," said Aldrich. He had an idea of why Vexa was doing this.

When she was alive, the emperor she served was at first a capable ruler who turned into a paranoid despot. He used Vexa's surveillance network and created a secret police that executed anyone who even had a slightly rebellious thought.

In the end, he lost trust even in Vexa and had her killed. She, however, foresaw this, reanimated as a jiangshi, and assassinated the emperor in turn.

There was likely trust based trauma here that lingered with her. Or perhaps this was just how she operated - he could not really tell as he could not read her.

But he did trust her enough to see this through.

"Again, I'll take that leap of faith. I only hope you won't end up disappointing me," said Aldrich.

Vexa smiled warmly. " This man, this 'CEO', reminds me of the type of man I despise. The type that clings to what they have built with all the anger of a toddler, willing to see it all collapse before they give even a single piece to another.

But I happen to know exactly how to deal with this type of man. You will not be disappointed."

With that, Vexa disappeared in a rush of howling, cold winds.

When Aldrich tracked her using his chosen bond, he could sense she was headed outside, likely to check up on her butterflies.

Aldrich pressed a button on his desk. "You can come back in." His voice projected outside.

Aarav stepped into the room again, sliding doors opening and closing shut behind him with a smooth click.

"Oh, she's gone?" Aarav said, blowing out another trail of smoke. "At least my cig won't keep dying now. So, what's the plan here?"

"She'll take care of it," said Aldrich.

"Now that's handy." Aarav sat back in his chair. "How's it going to get done?"

Aldrich put his palm on the blue sigil still left on the desk. When he withdrew his hand, he found it attached to him. He showed the sigil to Aarav. "Transfer this to your father's maid. Only requires a touch. The mark will remain invisible once moved. At that point, Vexa will handle the rest."

## Chapter 345: Hammerhead Meeting

"Hm." Aarav rubbed the bridge of his nose in temporary thought. "Yeah, sure, that works. I've mapped out the assistant's path whenever she gets her monthly day off. Shouldn't be hard to have an agent on hand there, posing as some random."

"Let's not risk anything, shall we?" Aldrich raised his hand in the air, and it glowed green as he cast his newly upgrade [Create Undead] spell. Beforehand, he had [Create Greater Undead] which let him draw undead from the 1st and 2nd rings.

Now, he could cast [Create High Undead], letting him draw undead from the 3rd ring which encompassed levels 40 - 60.

He summoned specifically a [Mistknife], the evolution of the [Skeleton Assassin].

Instead of a skeleton forming from green particles, a formal magic circle appeared on the ground, glowing green and rotating with sigils shaped like scratches.



From the circle, the [Mistknife] emerged. It was a large individual, around two meters tall, though it seemed much shorter with its hunched, low to the ground posture. It was wrapped up in a dark green, almost black cloak and hood that covered a fully armored body.

The armor itself was sleek, midnight black, and form-fitting, meant more for maneuverability than withstanding heavy blows. Beneath its hood was an obsidian dark mask with twin eyeholes that glinted bright green.

The Mistknife held a single large, curved dagger in its hand. The weapon looked ceremonial in how ornate it was with a handle of ashen bone and a blade of emerald.

An aura of deathly essence emanated from the knife, imbued as it was with a powerful death curse that made blows struck by it impossible to heal.

Surrounding the Mistknife was, as its name suggested, a veil of green mist. Within it, the undead assassin flickered in and out of visibility.

"Take the sigil and follow Aarav's commands," said Aldrich.

The Mistknife wordlessly obeyed, touching the sigil with its black gauntlets.

Most undead were capable of basic thought to comprehend commands, but High Undead were fully sentient. They had unique personalities and thoughts, and in fact, Aldrich was limited to summoning just 1 of any given High Undead, being that it was the same unique individual he was consistently re-summoning.

The Mistknife assassin however, was silent as in lore, they were an order of elite killers that took on oaths of silence so as to never be heard.

The Mistknife stood beside Aarav before fading away into nothingness. As it did so, the mist trail it left touched Aarav's cigarette and doused it again.

"Okay, I'm, giving up on having a smoke around you." Aarav took a case out from his suit pocket and stored the cigarette. "Too many unexplained, paranormal chills and winds over here.

But-," Aarav scrutinized the area where the Mistknife stood in invisibility. "That's impressive. Invisibility isn't anything new, but this guy is soundless. Scentless, too. Doesn't leave footprints either."

"I can almost guarantee nothing that can track him," said Aldrich. "At the least, no conventional scan will come close."

Magical invisibility was good in that it created a sort of 'field' around the user that removed odor, footprints, and the like, but it did not remove the user's physical form.

Theoretically, a scan could reveal something like, say, a [Skeleton Assassin] by mapping out its physical body.

Radar, too, could work.

The [Evileye], [Graveward], and the [Mistknife] had superior invisibility called Spectral Invisibility that let them hide their bodies too. In the Mistknife's case, it could dissolve its body into near formless vapor.

It was less invisible than the Evileye and Graveward which were more 'ghostly', but it did come close.

"So, then, how are we going to and convince the old codger when we do get to him? Or when that girl, Vexa, right? Gets to him?" said Aarav. "Are we using my bio-capsule. Tell me I didn't waste a billion credits here."

"I'm afraid you wasted a billion credits."

Aarav sighed. "Well, I can't complain. Any amount of R and D is still R and D. I mostly feel awful for overworking my teams, but more time off and a fatter bonus should fix that.

How's Vexa going to do it, then?"

"That, I'd like to keep a secret." Aldrich now threw Vexa's leap of faith test at Aarav.

Surprisingly, Aarav just shrugged. "Alright, as long as you get it done." He noted Aldrich's pause of surprise and smirked, raising his shades to reveal the glowing white lotuses that formed the pupils in his black eyes. "Like I said, I'm all in on you. The thread of my fate never ends as long as you're helping spin it."

"Good. Now then, since we ARE using both one of my agents to get to your father's assistant and my own means of controlling his mind, I think it's fair to start talking about additional compensation," said Aldrich.

Aarav sighed and put his shades up again. "Hearing the word 'compensation' after wasting a billion credits scratches at my ears, but I've spent more on less."

Several hours later, in a dining room at the Gilded Swallow -

Aldrich had approximately three days before V finished mining Desmond for information. During that time, she absolutely could not be disturbed unless he wanted to risk her messing up, which he very much did not want to.

Cyberspace infiltration was quite like physically breaking into a fortress. V had to avoid countless traps getting into Desmond's virtual information stores, and if she got

distracted and triggered a single trap, she could risk deadly harm to her cyberspace avatar or risk another potential deadman's switch triggering and deleting valuable information.

That meant Aldrich had time to get things settled at home, in Haven.

Aldrich, or, rather, Thanatos as he was with Volantis covering him, sat at a dining table peppered with a variety of bite sized plates. Each plate acted like a bite sized canvas for art, with food, sauces, and vegetables all decorated in aesthetically pleasing arrangements.

A hallmark of fine dining which Casimir was quite fond of. He had renovated the biggest such establishment in Haven, located aptly in the central district where the wealthiest once gathered, before the Locus attack drove them all out, and turned it into his new personal base.

A revival of the Red Circle, he stated. He had changed the name of the place as well, turning it from L'atelier De Allard to the Gilded Swallow, symbolizing, in his words, a shift from the red of molten ore to the polished gold of a finished product.

And a shift from operating a seedy nightclub circle into a more proper establishment, something he had always dreamed of doing.

Across from Aldrich sat Bart Lockfin, otherwise known more well known as the CEO of Hammerhead Industries, a tier 1 company in the United States.

## **Chapter 346: Hammerhead Meeting 2**

Bart was a mutant Alter, a hulking giant of half man, half hammerhead shark. Most notably his head was completely shark-like with the characteristic T-shaped hammer head to boot. Yet despite that, his eyes were surprisingly human in their expressiveness.

"I have to thank you for lending your company to Haven when it needed it the most," said Aldrich. "And my apologies for pushing back our meeting. I know you requested it a few weeks ago, but I had some matters to tend to."

"I understand. Becoming a Sentinel is no easy task, I bet," said Hammerhead. "And lending? That isn't the word I would use. Technically, I'm still getting paid for all this, you know. That Fortune boy you've got's putting up a pretty penny to make this contract happen."

"I'm assuming you're helping him in the Inheritance, then?"

The Inheritance was the term coined for Sheshanaga's CEO making his succession quest public to the world.

"Correct," said Aldrich.

Hammerhead nodded as best as his body let him. He very properly used knife and fork to slice of a thin chunk of steaming meat that looked all too small in his huge, toothy jaws.

Dressed up in a fine black suit, Hammerhead almost looked ridiculous, but a sight like this was not all too uncommon these days with Mutant alters being around a plenty.

"Heh, once that Fortune boy gets Sheshanaga, Haven's going to be a beast to reckon with," said Hammerhead. "First time a Fortune Company will ever ally with a Sentinel directly.

I'd be careful if I were you. Too much power draws a lot of eyes. They'll want to break you apart."

" 'They' might find that harder to do than they think," replied Aldrich. "In any case, since you took the time to get here, I'm assuming there's something you want from me, isn't there?"

"Forward, aren't we? But yes, you're right."

"Is it about Seismic? I know the, hm, legalities of using my power on him are a little in the grey area, to say the least."

Hammerhead shook his hand because he could not really shake his head that well to convey a 'no'. "Seismic's been an old friend of mine. I don't own him. I owe him, really, for saving my life when I was young, dumb, and a crook.

As long as Seismic's happy with his current arrangement, then I'm happy too."

Aldrich nodded. Currently, Seismic was halfway across the country in Neo-Seattle where he was spending time with his son and arranging him to move to Haven once it was more established.

Seismic had been there for the past few weeks as Aldrich wanted to give him a break, especially for the heroism he had shown in the Locus attack.

"Then what is it?" asked Aldrich.

Hammerhead had several construction contracts now with Haven. Haven did not have any proper currency to pay them with anything, not to mention the fact that Haven was technically a rogue state, so Aarav had stepped in as a guarantor for the deal.

Technically, Hammerhead Industries therefore had contracts with Aarav, not with Haven, but at this point, Aarav basically was Haven.

This was a massive risk on Hammerhead's part. They were a big company that operated primarily in the U.S. Taking a deal with a rogue state that the U.S. did not recognize was enough to blacklist Hammerhead from domestic projects, tanking the company's stock value by 30%.

The U.S., unlike before the Altering, was a more centralized government now. Most governments in the world were - it was a necessity to quickly organize fighting against variant threats.

It gave the government more leeway to browbeat companies into doing what they wanted. Of course, companies on the scale of those in the Fortune or the highest end of the tier 1 had power over governments, but the U.S. was one of, if not the most powerful nation state out there.

Hammerhead was a solid tier 1 company, but after going against the U.S., they teetered down into the edge of tier 2. Their gambit to deal with Haven was considered by many to be one of the riskiest investments in modern memory.

If it did not pay off soon, Hammerhead would bleed out.

Basically, Aldrich owed Bart here quite a bit, to the point where he wondered why Bart even took the deal in the first place.

Was it because of Seismic? Probably not. Aldrich already knew that Bart and Seismic were good friends. But good friendship alone did not necessitate a risk this big.

"It's about your power." Bart stopped eating, putting his fork and knife down.

"My power?" said Aldrich, surprised. He thought Bart would be asking Aldrich for more payment. But his power was an odd thing to ask about. As a construction company, Hammerhead had very little use for Aldrich's power, especially considering the fact that its work was almost entirely automated.

"It's the whole reason for this," said Hammerhead. "I believe in you, Thanatos, to reach real high, but if I was a proper businessman, I would have never taken these contracts for you.

Mind you, they're still preliminary. I'm only contracted to build up necessary infrastructure to make sure Haven's citizens can survive. Afterwards, I can pull out, most folks will say I just did my part to help the people living her survive, my company's valuation will go back up, and the government will start working with me again."

Aldrich was not fazed. Bart was not making threats here, he was just stating facts. Aldrich was more curious where this was going. What did Bart want? "Then why did you?"

"Can your power...can it fix someone? Fix someone real badly injured?" said Bart. "Like what you did with Seismic."

"It depends on the type of injury," said Aldrich. "If it's a condition that developed naturally by the body, then my power can 'freeze' it, stopping it from progressing further, but it cannot reverse it.

If the injuries are solely of a physical nature, however, my power can reverse that."

Bart took in Aldrich's words. "I'm going to send your folks a file. It'll have medical information about my daughter. I want you to tell me if you can heal her."

"Heal her?" Aldrich paused. "My power isn't exactly healing. You understand the prerequisite of my power to work, don't you? It's been reported widely enough.

I have to kill your daughter first to make it work."

Bart closed his eyes, sighing deeply. "That's fine. She's...she's not really living, the way she is right now. The file will clear it up."

With that, Bart stood up heavily, the specially arranged large chair skittering behind him. He adjusted his suit and turned away. "That's about all I wanted to ask from you. I thought...I thought enough time had passed that I could talk about this without feeling like my heart was sinking out of my chest, but I guess it isn't true: time doesn't heal all wounds.

I'm in no state or mood to talk anymore.

When you've read through the file, reach out to me.

Goodbye, Thanatos."

## **Chapter 347: Despair, Ye Mighty**

Aldrich watched as Bart left without glancing back. There was too much on the man's shoulders to be caring about how Aldrich thought about his sudden exit. Outside of the dining room's doors, Hironnelle and Walters escorted Bart out of the room where he would take a secretive back exit to an awaiting ride out of the city.

Nobody knew Bart was here. He was a CEO, after all, and showing up here was bad press. Like he said before, Haven was a no touch zone for most companies, especially those that relied on the U.S. for profit.

Hammerhead Industries was already taking a beating profit margins wise, and Bart did not want to fan those fires more by making his appearance here public.

But the simple fact that Bart had taken the risk to show up here in the first place, to even make the preliminary contracts with Haven, showed just how much he was invested.

And, now, Aldrich knew why. Bart was not looking for profit. No, he was looking for something far, far more precious than that - his daughter's life. The contrast was jarring compared to Aldrich's recent conversation with Aarav.

One powerful CEO sought profit above all else, sowing discord among their children just for the sake of extending their lives so that they could grasp onto power for as long as they could.

Another CEO valued profit and power but, in the end, understood the difference between what was profitable and what was important.

Power corrupts. That was the saying. One he believed in whole-heartedly, seeing the golden age of heroes dwindling and the rise of Alters that did nothing but mistreat him as a pure human.

But he was starting to see that it was far more nuanced than that. Power did not corrupt so much as it revealed and amplified what was there. If what was there was already rotten, then it festered. If what was there was good, then it shone.

What was within Aldrich? His use of power had killed many, and at the same time, it had saved many.

Was he rotten, deep down? Or could he shine?

The reality was, like the reality of many things, somewhere in between.

And, Aldrich knew, so long as he met his goal of saving humanity, it did not matter what was inside him. Rot or shine, as long as it got the job done, he was fine with both.

But he was starting to realize that in matters of family, especially between parent and child, he had more 'shine' than 'rot.' He empathized more. It was, he understood, one of the main anchors that rooted him to his sense of self, preventing him from drifting away into an immortal monster.

While Aldrich contemplated, Volantis moved on his own, sending out strands of metal to pick up food on the plates, devouring them.



'Delicious!' exclaimed Volantis. 'Humanity has learned well how to prepare their foods, I see. Nothing beats the feeling of tearing raw flesh off fresh bone, but this does come quite close.'

"You can thank Casimir later," said Aldrich. "As far as I'm aware, he does half the cooking personally with a lot of his staff gone."

"Hoho, he is a man of many talents, I see."

"Right." Aldrich let Volantis devour all the plates of food before he exited the room himself, making his way through the main dining room full of round tables covered in clean white cloths and decorated with fine, glinting silverware and elegant wineglasses.

There were no customers at this late hour - it was approaching midnight - but Casimir's staff still fluttered about.

Some of Casimir's higher up staff, demarcated by a red circle on their black and gold uniforms to show that they were longtime servers, trained new servers on how to arrange tablecloths, fold napkins, hold serving trays, respond to inquiries, and so on.

At another section of the room, they trained servers on how to quickly draw firearms and reload at a moment's notice.

Casimir was rebuilding the men he had lost in the Red Circle attacks. He handpicked who he took in, and most of them were quite young. Teenagers who, Aldrich realized, had the markings of loss carved into them, in the form of wounds, in the form of unsmiling faces and cold eyes.

These were people who had lost everything in the Haven attack. People that Casimir wanted to build back up to give purpose.

Among them, Aldrich recognized a few from the Haven shelters. When they saw Aldrich, or Thanatos as they recognized him, they gave acknowledging nods, parting before him like he was a reverent, godly figure.

Aldrich returned their nods and went over to the back of the building, into the spacious kitchen. There, he found Casimir washing dishes while Smoke and Cubehead, his other two higher ups, swept the floors for food debris.

Cubehead had, as his name suggested, a black cube for a head, and Aldrich wondered briefly whether it was a helmet or his actual head. Smoke looked more normal. She was a tall, athletically built woman in a grey and gold streaked bodysuit. Though she held a mop in her hands, on her back was a sheathed odachi that looked long enough to slice a man in half.



"Ah, Mr. Vane, or, rather, Thanatos, a pleasure to see you again!" said Casimir, his rolled up sleeves baring surprisingly developed forearms riddled with old scars and covered with bubbling suds. "How was the dinner?"

"It went well. I think," said Aldrich.

"You think? Such uncertainty is uncharacteristic of you," said Casimir.

"It's his daughter. Bart wants me to heal his daughter."

"Heal? Does he understand-,"

"Yes, he does. He knows she has to die first. But he believes that her condition is bad enough that resurrection is better than what she's going through now. He'll send a file detailing her exact condition later."

"Ah, I see." Casimir stopped washing dishes for a second, nodding. "The love of a parent to a child, it is incredible, is it not? So many of our primal instincts are fierce and dark and savage, but that is so very pure, so very selfless."

"Yes." Aldrich remembered the unconditional love his parents gave him. Even to this day, it was perhaps the warmest memory of his mortal life.

"I myself cannot have children, but I consider all those around me, my dear staff, to be my own," said Casimir.

"..." Aldrich asked a question that had been on his mind, one that he had skirted around for some time. "Casimir, what exactly is it that drives you to my service? That you would be willing to give up the lives of the men and women you consider your children for?"

Aldrich of course knew that it was mind control. But Fler'Gan's mind control was hypnotic suggestion. It did not brainwash, but rather suggested the mind to think a certain way. There was still thought there.

He wanted to know what Casimir's justification was for being in Aldrich's service.

"Why, you ask? I wondered that myself," said Casimir. "When I first entertained your party at the Red Circle, I understood that it would necessitate a great sacrifice. The blood of my children. My entire criminal enterprise, gone.

Yet, I still went through with it. At the time, I had little justification for it. I simply felt compelled to do it. In fact, were it not for one thing you said, I may well have even refused."

"What did I say?" said Aldrich, concerned. He did not know Casimir had been able to resist the hypnotic suggestion to the extent he could consider flat out rebelling against Aldrich.

All this time, he had thought Casimir was entirely on his side.

"You said you would change the world," said Casimir. "And that, my dear Thanatos, has always been my dream. From the times I survived on the streets with hunger and cold filling my belly, sleeping in gutters, all I could do was look down at the dirt, for that was where I thought I belonged.

At one point, though, I realized I simply could not exist like that, in the dirt, mired in there, wasting away to perish like so many others.

So, I began to look up. I started to see that the world that had been cruel to me from the start could be changed.

Step by step, piece by piece, effort by effort. And thus, I started to rise. I rose in the Underworld, allying with the Trident.

The Trident promised a change in the world as well. A great revolution to take down the current world order and replace it with something anew. I wished to be a part of that.

To topple the stagnation of corporations and heroes and Panopticon control that ensured humanity's survival, but nothing more than that. There were still countless many like me who languished in the gutter, always looking down, never having the opportunity to look up even once.

But as years passed, I realized in the end, the Trident and the AA are simply two sides of the same coin. Hero or villain, it does not matter. Self-preservation, credits, status, position - they only cared about this.

And that bred fear. Aversion to risk. An unwillingness to change a world order that benefited them.

I became jaded. In the end, I was but one man, a man who had built a small kingdom for himself, but I was no Ozymandias. No king of kings. I could not tower over the world and proudly proclaim 'despair, ye mighty!'.

Rather, it was I who despaired.

I did not have the power to reach further, no matter my efforts.

But you did. And you promised change.

That was enough to compel me, and now, I am starting to see that compulsion, I shall call it a stroke of luck, has borne fruit."

## Chapter 348: A New Party

So that was how it was.

Casimir had been mind controlled at the beginning, perhaps up to the point where he set up the party event that began Aldrich's ascension into a Lich. Afterwards, he had chosen to stay out of his own volition.

No doubt, there was pressure involved. Once the party was set up and done and Casimir had indirectly caused the deaths of representatives from all three prongs of the Trident, he no longer had any support elsewhere other than Aldrich.

But had the partnership between Casimir and Aldrich been one more based on force than mutual understanding, then Aldrich had no doubt that Casimir may have already plotted something behind his back.

It was a strong reminder to Aldrich that if he wanted to go down the route of having a legion that could think for themselves, he needed to understand them.

And it was a touching reassurance that Aldrich was working with the right person. At first, he had thought Casimir was like any other suited up crook, lavishing himself in shiny expensive things and lording over goons, but that was only at face value.

Casimir's staff were all his family. His riches, he indulged in, but did not obsess over. He had always had a bigger vision for the world.

And now, Aldrich was Casimir's gateway to making that vision happen.

"I promise you that you won't regret your decision," said Aldrich. "The world you want to change; I'll change it. But I'm a little curious, what exactly is it that you want changed?"

Aldrich had a good idea from what Casimir had said already. The man probably wanted a more equal world where humanity thrived without the class inequality that forced countless many on the streets or out in the Wastelands.

"That, I don't quite know myself." Casimir laughed. "I know that I do not want anyone to suffer as I did, languishing in nothing, but when I think of how to achieve such a thing, it escapes me.

That is the problem with grand, world-spanning goals, isn't it? They're so large that it becomes impossible to grasp all the fine details."

"Yes," agreed Aldrich. He too suffered the same thing. He knew he wanted to make the world a better place, just as his parents had wanted him to do. Though, as he was not a 'hero' anymore, he had to figure out how to do it.

As a cooperator?

As a conqueror?

Something in between?

Like Casimir said, it was easy to have a grand goal, but it was hard to visualize all the smaller details.

Casimir resumed washing dishes. "But that is the thing, Thanatos, I believe there is simply no point nitpicking over every little step along the way.

A mentor of mine told me, bless her long gone heart, that as long as you have a destination in mind, the path you take to get there will come naturally.

I have a feeling that as you and I both operate on larger and larger scales, things will become more and more complicated. Multiple paths will appear, each appealing in their own right.

But as long as we do not lose sight of what is at the end, we will be fine.

I do not know about you, but I will keep that old adage in mind to make things easier for myself."

"I will too," said Aldrich.

For a few days now, he had been plagued with the idea of saving the world and what it would take to do it. The sheer amount of choices and factors he had to consider was practically paralyzing.

He had always been good at keeping a single goal in mind and executing. Whether it be vengeance or training. But bigger things like this, he was not used to.

It made him painfully aware that even though he was an immortal lich, his prior mortal life had ended at just eighteen years. Granted, a lifetime of dealing with struggle had likely aged his mind up considerably, but the lack of experience was still there.

Hearing something like this from Casimir, a man in his late forties, was comforting.

"But I assume you have not come here to watch me clean dishes and talk to me about my dreams, no? Although I would be very much touched if that were the case," said Casimir.

"Maybe I did," said Aldrich, internally smiling.

"Hah, quite forward, my dear Thanatos, but I must say, my lovely Blanca holds my heart already," said Casimir. "And you, my good sir, have quite the fierce lady at your side already."

"You're definitely right on the 'fierce' part," said Aldrich. "But you're right, I did have something else to talk to you about. It's about food production for Haven."

"Ah, that." Casimir nodded, and though he washed and dried dishes, he ever so slightly cocked his head, listening intently.

"How's our current capacity look like?"

"As it stands, we can currently barely feed Haven's current populace for perhaps one month," said Casimir. "With the food stores left by Panopticon Skyfields, that extends to three months.

Trade with nomads, particularly hunters bringing in game and crop from the wastelands may extend that to four months.

But that is simply to feed Haven's current, vastly dwindled mouths. As it stands, the city has a population of barely fifty thousand consisting of the unfortunate that were simply too impoverished to move in the light of the Locus Raids.

However, as time passes, this city's population will increase. An infusion of nomads tired of the harsh life in the Wastelands but also tired of proper city life are settling here at high rates, and by the end of the next month, Haven will have grown to seventy thousand.

Each month that Haven lasts, rebuilding itself, giving the world more confidence that it is more stable, the more people will arrive."

"In essence, we have to deal with the food issue quickly," said Aldrich.

Casimir nodded gravely. "Correct. Within two months is my projection."

## **Chapter 349: A New Party 2**

The Panopticon controlled half the world's food supply with their Skyfields and government or corporate controlled farmlands supplied the rest.

Haven was surrounded by 'Dry' Wastelands that could not grow much of anything. The land here was dry, cracked, and parched. What hardy flora that could grow were generally classed as variants that humans could not digest.

In contrast, higher tier cities like Neo-York were generally surrounded by 'Wet Wastelands' that had plenty of greenery around them, though said greenery was still infested with variants.

Blackwater was nestled right at the edge between the dry wastelands that Haven sat on and wet wastelands that Neo-York occupied. It had forests a plenty, forests that Aldrich had roamed in when he first became an undead.

It was part of the reason why Aldrich wanted to take over Blackwater. It was like a forward base where he could start to access more life-giving land.

"Are you planning to broker a deal with the Panopticon?" said Casimir. "I have a feeling that you have something capable of withstanding the terrorist attack on the Panopticon's systems."

"I do, and the Panopticon-AA has reached out to me for my assistance," said Aldrich. "But I'm leveraging my aid for something else more important."

"Such as?"

Aldrich gave Casimir a quick rundown of the Vanguard inheritance issue.

"My, my." Casimir stopped washing dishes for a second. Cubehead and Smoke both stopped mopping the floors as well.

"This could fundamentally change the entire world," said Smoke, her grey eyes wide. "Imagine the sheer power of having Vanguard on your side."

"Let's not even think that far. The AA is willing to give Vanguard's heir to you just like that?" said Cubehead. "Sounds awfully fishy to me."

"It's why I've held off on giving aid until I know absolutely for sure that I'm getting what I want out of the deal," said Aldrich. He had made further correspondence with Emrys, and the deal was that until Aldrich got Vanguard's journal and also inspected how the Panopticon would use his power, he would not lend protection.

"It almost seems as if Emrys does not want Vanguard's heir in the first place. As if he considers the power a liability more so than an asset," said Casimir.

"Emrys's idea was that Vanguard himself had been uncontrollable later in life, but if I have control over the power, the heir, then there shouldn't be an issue," said Aldrich.

"And he says that he's determined that I will be an ally for humanity, hence, he has no issue handing the heir over to me."

Aldrich had to agree, however, that Emrys was quite cold when talking about the potential heir. The president had treated the heir like a thing more than a person.

"Quite altruistic in thought," said Casimir. "But historically, the AA has not quite lived up to its lofty, humanity serving modus operandi."

"Also true. Emrys, however, frames himself as different. He wants to clean the AA up."

"I did hear on the news about how a ton of execs were getting canned for the Locus Raids," said Cubehead. "And that it was started by the president itself."

It was a big deal. The way the AA is written up, the president has a ton of power, but he hasn't shown up almost at all until now."

"Perhaps I am simply biased against the AA," said Casimir, shrugging.

"I understand the precaution," said Aldrich. "I'm giving Emrys the benefit of the doubt for now, but I'm going to maintain a position that lets me pull out whenever I feel something is off."

"That is the most optimal route to take," said Casimir. "But I will warn you again to be careful. Particularly with this heir issue. None of us, the AA included, seem to know the true nature of Vanguard's extraterrestrial power."

It may well be a force for harm than good. Perhaps one that Emrys is sending you as a Trojan horse of sorts."

"That thought has crossed my mind, but reading Vanguard's journal should clear up some of those suspicions. In any case, I'll tread lightly."

"In any case, that is an issue six months from now. Let us circle back to the matter of feeding hungry mouths in the now."

Aldrich nodded. "Right. I'm here to tell you that I may have found a way to solve our food crisis. I've brought a powerful variant with an impressive chlorokinetic ability that operates on a large scale."

It should, in theory, completely remove need to make deals with anyone."

"Ah, you always manage to come up with something when it is needed the most." Casimir nodded. "Then let us get to it, shall we?"

"However, I have a personal project that I need the Geist for at the city center. I want you to go ahead and clear everyone out from there and resettle them as best as you can."

"I can have that arranged, though, I must warn you, taking beaten and battered citizens from their new homes, right after weathering their city's near destruction, will be quite demoralizing," said Casimir.

"This is for their own good later on," said Aldrich. "But I do know where you're coming from. You see, I'm intending on planting a seed there, one that, if cultivated properly, will grow into a tree that will form the highest structure in the city.

I'm intending on making that tree Haven's symbol.

I also want to offset the hassle this will cause for anyone I move out. So I want to make the day it happens to be something special, as it'll be the day I broadcast to the world my official claim over Haven."

"A sort of national holiday for our own commune?" said Casimir.

"Precisely. And for that, I want you to plan a party. A proper party. No holds barred. You have an unlimited budget, or rather, as much as our budget currently allows. I'll haggle Aarav into paying for it as well. Pull as many connections you still have as well.

Can you do that?"

Casimir's mask emotely smiled. "Ah, my dear Thanatos, when it comes to hosting parties, you need not look farther than me." Casimir's mask face winked. "Though, you would know a thing or two about that, would you not?"

## **Chapter 350: Relationship Progress**

Aldrich watched from top his control tower as settlers in the central district were whisked away by Casimir's men and support from the nomads. It was just starting to turn into daybreak, the early dawn rays illuminating From this high up, through clear glass walls, he saw the people like little ants, all scurrying about, carrying their meager belongings with them on their back.

Very few had cars that had survived the attack. On this front, the nomads helped out.

If Aldrich was down there, he had no doubts that he would have seen quite a few begrudging looks. Or worried ones, worried that they would have to leave yet again.



The central district was the wealthiest, filled with high end apartment complexes that had largely stayed untouched during the Haven attack. That was the point, after all, by being in the center, where the forcefields were the strongest, buildings in the central district housed the wealthiest by virtue of being the safest.

In contrast, the people that lived in these buildings now were people from Haven's poorest districts. The Outskirts, as it was called. The ones that had been the first to weather the storm and the ones who had lost the most.

Telling them to leave did leave a bad taste in his mouth, but in the end, what had to be done had to be done.

Aldrich had sent Arcadia the Arsellis Treeseed, and she had confirmed that the seed could, in fact, be cultivated. It would, however, take a tremendous amount of her power, so much so that she would have to become dormant within the base of the tree itself to continually grow it.

The seed would essentially grow around her much like how she had been encased in a giant tree beforehand. But instead of the tree nurturing her like an egg, she would be the one feeding the tree nutrients.

Once finished, Arcadia would emerge in an extremely weakened state, but the tree would be almost fully grown. It was essentially an exchange in life force.

Perhaps life force was similar enough in both Elden World and this world that such a transfer could take place easily. Whatever the case, Fler'Gan would be on standby to get valuable data about the process.

Aldrich did not know exactly what stage of growth the Arstree would end up as. From what he knew, the Arstree had four stages: sapling, juvenile, adult, and elder.

A sapling Arstree was already fifty meters tall, slightly taller than the control tower Aldrich resided in now. A juvenile was 500 meters tall. An adult was 1000. And an elder had no definite growth limit, reaching past the clouds themselves.

So long as the tree grew to the sapling stage, he was content. At that point, the tree could emanate a passive aura of protection that would shield the entire city of Haven, adding yet another layer of defense on top of the forcefields.

The shield was not physical in nature but rather more spiritual. It prevented magical intrusion which sounded useless in the Alter world, but in theory, it would completely shut out the Stranger and any other demon from trying to break into it.

This was the reason why Deimos had burned down the Arstree in the third trial quest. With it still standing, maintaining a Flame Arc to call in more demons was impossible.

This was just speculation, but Aldrich theorized that the barrier, called the Arstree Veil, would also stop surveillance as it was meant to shut out any form of prying eyes from seeing into it.

"Seeing the humans with such weary looks in their eyes, knowing not of the world shattering danger that lurks beneath them, it does remind of something my father once said," said Valera, watching beside Aldrich. "That mortals are blind to problems larger than themselves."

Aldrich had briefed Valera about the entity and how he was now on a race to control humanity before the world ended. She had taken it well, affirming once more that she would stand by him to the end.

In hindsight, he wondered why he ever doubted that she would say anything else. A part of him still found it hard to accept unconditional love, especially after losing it from his parents and never getting a hint of it again.

"That may be true, but put enough disaster in front of them, and they'll rally," said Aldrich. "It's how humanity has survived up to this point in the first place."

"I hope that is true. It will be unwieldy trying to command such an unruly species otherwise," said Valera.

"You seem quite calm about this. About taking over and, well, everything," said Aldrich.

"Why would I not be calm?" Valera smiled. "I believe in you, after all."

"Now that's more pressure to add on to my shoulders." Aldrich sighed.

"Ah, do not take my belief as pressure. Take it as comfort. That I will ever be here to shoulder any burden you have."

"Thanks." Aldrich mulled his thoughts over in silence for a bit. He voiced a feeling he had let sit for some time. "You know, I've thought about this, but there's some part of me that feels...awkward having your unconditional support."

"Oh?" Valera's pointed ears perked up.

"It feels unearned. It makes me feel as if I'm in debt, and I don't like that feeling," said Aldrich.

"Ah, but it is earned. You have done so much for me in the other world-," began Valera, but Aldrich cut her off.

"The other world is the other world. The me of now is of this world."

"Right. Sometimes, I forget that," said Valera. She cocked her head and put a finger to her lip. "Hm. Is that a problem? I believe quite a few men would love to have an ever faithful woman by their side."

"Don't get me wrong, I do appreciate it, but I think it's part of the reason why even now, I'm still not able to break that boundary between 'master and knight'," said Aldrich.

"I understand now. This still feels like 'master' and 'knight' to you, and thus, you find it difficult to find something..." Valera blushed faintly. "More."

Aldrich nodded. "Basically, I want you to voice what you want more. I want to feel like there's some give and take."

"Then shall I stop calling you 'master'?"

"That would be a start."

"Hmm." Valera nodded. "It is almost habit to me, especially as a guardian knight, but I can handle that."

"Is there anything you particularly want?" said Aldrich.

"A date," was Valera's simple answer.

"How long have you been wanting one?"

"Ever since you first mentioned it."

Aldrich paused. He had promised her one but had never ended up fulfilling it. He had been too busy. He felt bad about the whole ordeal. He had said he would commit to something more for her, but in the end, he had not even been able to give her one date.

It made him realize he himself was not putting in the grandest of efforts. Granted, it was by necessity as there were so many things happening, but the end result was still the same.

"Alright, a date...I will absolutely promise," said Aldrich. A lightbulb lit up in his head. "I'm having Casimir plan a party in a few days, we can go to that."

"Ah, another night of massacre?" Valera bared a fanged smile, remembering the first party.

"No, not like that. Zero fighting involved. Just festivities," said Aldrich.

"Oh." Valera looked mildly disappointed for a second, but her face quickly brightened up. "Then a date it is! So long as I can be with my mas-, I mean, you, I will be happy."

"Good, hopefully, it doesn't end up a disaster. With so many things up in the air, I wouldn't be surprised if U.S. doesn't bombard us from orbit when they see a giant tree popping up," said Aldrich.

"I have studied these terms, and I now know what 'orbital bombardment' is!" said Valera. "And I am confident I can deflect any such attack."

"Not on our date, you won't," said Aldrich. "I'll try to arrange everything so that we can take it easy. Volantis will pose as me the best he can."

"Can that orc really do that?"

"Believe me, that thought did cross my mind, loud and cheerful and entirely not me that he is. But I figure all he has to do is memorize and read a speech and then stay silent for most of the night."

"If that orc is the reason why our date, finally come to fruition, is ruined, he will hear no end of it from me." Valera clenched her fist, her battle aura surging red around her.

"He may enjoy the prospect of fighting you, so you'd have to find a different punishment than that." Aldrich smiled, but his smile started to fade as he saw a commotion occur on the ground.

There was a park in front of the control tower, and there, someone was getting in a scuffle with some of Casimir's men, obviously refusing to be evacuated.

Upon closer inspection via linking with Valera's sharper sight, Aldrich could see that it was Alan, Randall's adoptive son and Elaine's adoptive brother.

Aldrich sighed. "I'll go ahead and deal with that."