

Super Necromancer System

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Here's an updated status sheet for the main character to keep things easy to track.

Last Updated: Chapter 44

Name: Aldrich Yang

Race: Undead

Class: Necromancer (Occultation of Legion)

Level: 11

EXP Bar: 870/1400

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HP: [30] 60/60 (99/99)

*HP Values in [] indicate a barrier/shield

Mana: 93/93 (183/183)

Coins: 20

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Stats-

Strength: 11

Agility: 10

Vitality: 20 (33)

Magic: 31 (61)

Attunement: 51 (76)

Perception: 8 (13)

*Stat values in () indicate values after passives and gear are accounted for

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Equipment Stat Bonuses:

+30 Magic

+13 Vitality

+25 Attunement

+5 Perception

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Units Controlled: 17/22

Attuned Spell Limit: 7

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Passives:

1. Undead Body

The host has become an undead. They do not require sustenance, sleep, or rest to function. Their stamina is virtually limitless. Any wound aside from a critical head injury will not compromise the host's mobility or bodily functions, but damage will still be registered to the host's total HP pool. However, the host will not receive any bonus damage from being struck in locations other than the head.

-Necrotic/Negative energy damage is converted to healing

-Healing is converted to damage

-Immunity to disease and sickness

-Immunity to psychic damage

-Immunity to poison damage

-50% resistance to cold damage

- 50% resistance to curse damage
- 90% resistance to piercing damage unless struck in the head
- 50% resistance to slashing damage unless struck in the head
- Double damage taken from crushing/bludgeoning damage
- Double damage taken from fire type attacks

2. Call of the Legion Rank 1

+5 to units controlled

3. Carrion Barrier

Grants a barrier made of corpses with a healthpool equal to 30% of the caster's maximum health. The barrier may be replenished by absorbing corpses into it.

4. Death Sense

The caster is capable of tracking units around them that are below 10% maximum health (near death state).

5. Anti-Life Shell (Passive)

The caster constantly conjures a 'shell' of negative energy around them, restoring the health of undead in its vicinity while draining the life force of the living. The rate of draining/restoration is at 5% of current health per second.

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Attuned Spells (7/7):

[Mass Grave Consumption]

Rank: Cantrip

Type: Single Target/Multiple Targets

Cost: None

Cooldown: 5 seconds for single target/10 seconds for multiple targets

Effects:

The caster may consume available graves to heal 5% of their maximum health. The caster may also consume risen or summoned undead and gain 10% of their maximum health. This may be used on all available graves or undead in a twenty meter radius as well.

[Chill Bolt]

Rank: Cantrip

Type: Single Target

Cost: 4 Mana

Cooldown: None

Effects:

The caster fires a high speed bolt of chilling energy from their hands or a magical catalyst. The bolt inflicts both piercing damage and freezing damage. As a cantrip, this spell possesses no cooldown or cast time. The damage on this spell scales with the Magic stat.

[Mass Raise Undead]

Rank: 3rd Circle

Type: Single Target/Multiple Targets

Cost: 5 Mana for each corpse, 10% of maximum Mana for sufficiently powerful corpses, continuous life and mana drain for boss level creatures

Cooldown: 5 seconds for single target/15 seconds for multiple targets

Effects:

The caster raises an eligible corpse OR all corpses in a twenty meter radius to become an undead. Depending on the state of the corpse's condition, the undead will either be a zombie or a skeleton. Zombies will possess a rotting aura and touch that inflicts necrotic damage scaling off of the caster's Magic stat.

The raised corpse retains all powers that it had while alive but will lack coordination and strong independent thinking.

Cooldown reduces with scaling based on the caster's Attunement stat.

[Anti-Life Shell Rank 2 (Active)]

Rank: 3rd Circle

Type: Area of Effect (10 meter radius)

Cost: 5% maximum mana per second

Cooldown: 10 seconds after deactivation

Effects:

The caster's Anti-Life Shell's draining capacity intensifies. The rate of draining and healing is doubled and all non-undead units within the range of the shell are slowed with the slow dramatically increasing depending on how low the unit's health is.

[Create Greater Undead (1st Ring)]

Rank: 4th Circle

Type: Single Target

Cost: 10 Mana, 10 Health

Cooldown: 15 seconds

Effects:

The caster creates greater undead from the 1st Ring, selecting from the following list:

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Zombeast

Skeleton Marksman

Skeleton Assassin

Deildegast

Grave Ward

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Created 1st ring greater undead match the caster's level up to a cap of 20.

The cooldown of this spell reduces scaling off the Attunement stat.

At 100 Attunement, this spell upgrades to [Mass Create Undead (1st Ring)]

[Negative Surge]

Rank: 2nd Circle

Type: Single Target Buff

Cost: 15 Mana

Cooldown: 10 Seconds

Effects:

The caster selects an ally or self to receive a surge of negative energy designed to strengthen the undead body. The targeted undead gains a bonus to their strength, agility, and perception stats equivalent to 20% of the caster's magic stat.

[Horror Warp]

Rank: 2nd Circle

Type: Single Target

Cost: 20 Mana

Cooldown: 20 Seconds

Effects:

The caster shoots forth a cloud of malevolent, mind-twisting energies. Any enemy struck by the cloud will be assaulted with a nightmare of constant horror and pain, stunning them and inflicting psychic damage upon them.

The stun lasts ten seconds but has reduced duration depending on the victim's Perception and psychic damage resistance.

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Equipment"

Weapon [Lantern of the Accursed One] (One-Hand)

Rank: Uncommon+

Stats:

+10 Magic

+5 Vitality

+5 Attunement

Effects:

Protection of the Old Flame (Passive) - The wearer receives half damage from all fire type damage.

Eye of the Watcher (Passive) - Any unit revealed or targeted by this item continually attains stacks of a debuff that reduces resistance to curse type damage. The debuffs stack up to ten times, requiring a total exposure time in this light of 30 seconds. This debuff lasts for three seconds after the unit escapes the light of the item, at which point the stacks will rapidly decay. In addition, any unit suffering this debuff is Revealed, preventing them from entering stealth.

Disintegrating Gaze (Active)

Cost: 20 mana per activation

Cooldown: 5 seconds

The eye within this item fully opens, shooting forth a cone of destructive light that deals disintegrating type damage with a 5% chance to instantly kill. The higher the affected unit's vitality, the higher their resistance to this instant death effect.

If this skill affects a unit with ten stacks of the Eye of the Watcher passive applied to them, it is guaranteed to instantly kill unless the affected target possesses a minimum of 50 vitality. If they possess more than 80 vitality, they will still be Maimed, losing a body part and taking significant damage.

Head [Hood of the Grave Reaper]

+3 Magic

+5 Perception

Body [Vestments of the Grave Reaper]

+5 Vitality

+5 Magic

Waist [Unholy Sash of the Grave Reaper]

+5 Attunement

+2 Magic

Arms [Spinal Bracers of the Grave Reaper]

+5 Magic

+5 Attunement

Legs [Base of the Grave Reaper]

+5 Attunement

+3 Vitality

Accessories (2/5)

-[Phantasmal Mask]

Rank: Uncommon +

Type: Head Gear (Light)

Stats:

+5 Magic

Effects:

Phantasmal Shroud (Passive) - The wearer obtains a permanent passive that grants them a 10% chance to dodge an incoming attack by phasing through it.

Ghost Walk (Active) - By activating this item, the wearer may enter a Phase state where they are rendered invisible and pass-through solid objects with 50% boosted movement speed. [Ghost Walk] lasts for 3 seconds. While this ability is on cooldown, Phantasmal Shroud is disabled.

Cost: 30 Mana

Cooldown: 15 Seconds

[Ring of Avarice]

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[Restorative Flask Rank 2]

Rank: Divine

Description:

Use to consume the waters of life, healing 30% of one's total maximum health/mana or 10 health/mana depending on which value is greater. Attune charges to either health or mana and restore charges at the Wellspring of Life in the Nexus. May be upgraded upon the completion of Trial Quests to hold more charges

Available Charges: 6

Healing Charges: 3

Mana Charges: 3

-UNIQUE

-UNDROPPABLE

-UNSELLABLE

[Staff of Stilling Pollen]

[Phylactery]

Chapter 0.2

High Undead:

-Valera Lvl 16

Arisen Undead (undead raised with their souls intact):

-Geist Lvl 17

-Dynamite Girl Lvl 14

-Fler'Gan lvl 20+

-Fisk Lvl 3

Non-Risen Undead (Zombies, skeletons, etc):

-Z Adam Lvl 3

- Z Elaine Lvl 3
- Z Big-arm grizzly lvl 9
- Z Alloywing Eagle lvl 8
- Z Alpha Striker lvl 7
- Evil Eye 1 lvl 7
- Evil Eye 2 lvl 7
- Troll Chieftain lvl 15
- Mud Crab 1 lvl 12
- Mud Crab 2 lvl 12
- Grave Ward Lvl 11
- Ghast Lvl 10

Chapter 1: Prologue: A Dark World

It happened right at the start of the year 2001.

Right on dot with the clock striking midnight and heralding not just a new year, but a new century and a new millennium.

Huge crowds gathered across the world to celebrate modern human history graduating to this new age.

It was a time of new beginnings.

And a time of new disasters.

Something, even now, nobody really knows how it happened or what it was, but something came from space.

Not aliens, nothing as dramatic as that. Something far, far less personal. At least, if it was aliens, then humanity could have rallied together. Maybe they could have brought their scattered pieces, all their different ideals and borders and peoples, together to make something whole if only there was some definite target they could see and hate together properly.

But whatever happened on this new year, well, there was no rhyme or reason for it.

It was just pure chance. Pure chaos.

The incident known as the Altering.

A solar flare, maybe. Still a topic of debate even now, a hundred years later. Some scientists postulated that it was the leftover emissions from a far-off star that had gone supernova.

Whatever it was, it washed over the world, filling the skies with auroras of countless colors that felt so horribly alien that some went insane gazing at the phenomenon, dooming them into wide-eyed comas that they never awoke from.

Almost forty million people fell into this eternal sleep and never woke up from it. Forty million sounds like a lot, but in the global scheme of things, it was just over half a percent of the world's population.

Those, arguably, were the lucky minority of minorities, for they did not have to live through the chaos that came next.

As strange auroras of madness-inducing patterns and seemingly impossible colors lit up the sky, electronics failed all across the planet. Energy grids grew faulty. Vehicles went haywire.

Technology, the defining crown that humanity prided itself on wearing, slipped off its head and broke its owner's toe.

But that was not it. Not even the least of it.

Technology recovered back to normal after just a month or two, but the Altering had left behind a far more permanent marker for humanity, carving this reminder deep into their bodies.

Individuals all across the world began to develop powers.

Powers that corresponded with spontaneously manifested growths in their bodies.

For some, these powers affected them little. Perhaps they could send out sparks from their fingertips. Or maybe they could make a pebble float with their minds.

For others, it came to define their lives, twisting their bodies into monstrous forms or rendering their minds unstable.

For further others, it made them something far, far beyond human.

Forgive the rather on the nose wording, but one could even say they became superhuman.

People with marvelous powers that let them soar through the skies faster than jets, lift entire buildings, engulf entire cities in flame or flood, or build technological wonders only seen in the realm of science fiction films.

All of these powers came from those tiny little pebble sized growths that would come to later be known as the Alter Organs.

With the mass spread of powers, chaos and turmoil naturally followed as no government entity had any way to regulate this strange new phenomenon.

It did not take long before particularly powerful Altered individuals sought to use their powers to rule the world around them. Naturally, other Altered individuals rose up to meet them, starting the age-old conflict between villains and heroes.

Clashes between heroes and villains left the world in mass disarray. Some Alterhumans desired to keep the status quo, wishing for peace in the world and for humanity to progress. Others saw their newfound powers and believed themselves worthy of taking a piece of the world for themselves. Still others, driven mad or delusional by their strength, became little more than unpredictable forces of nature.

Yet, it is telling that this period of human history is known as the 'Age of Villains', for more often than not, it was the villains that won out against the heroes.

For almost fifty years, Alterhumans fought and triumphed and won and lost in cycles, but no side could ever triumph, and the endless conflict made many believe the world was to break under its pressure.

Major governments collapsed. The threat of global nuclear annihilation came and went. Countless millions died.

But it all ended with the emergence of those developing powers far beyond even all others.

Superhumans among superhumans.

God-like beings that shone shoulders and heads above even ordinary Alterhumans that made the average, unenhanced human seem like a defective, broken product.

Among these mighty beings was Vanguard, a paragon of might who donned the first proper costume and cape, hearkening to superhero tradition that previously was only in the domain of fiction.

With overwhelming strength, he brought peace bit by bit to the world, for no villain could ever challenge him.

After three hard fought years, Vanguard ended the Age of Villains in 2040 by striking down Zahak, the mightiest villain of all whose power to freely take, manipulate, and alter powers made him worth a thousand Alterhumans by himself.

Yet, Zahak's death was not the end of it.

When Zahak fell, quite literally, into the depths of the earth, some say a volcano, others say a fissure or even an underwater trench, something in him, perhaps it was the stolen powers of countless many, exploded outwards, infusing with the earth itself.

From the end of the greatest villain known to man came the beginning of the greatest crisis known to man: the Monsterring.

Monsters known as Variants emerged from the villain's corpse, seemingly binding with the planet, and soon, they proliferated around the entire world, spawning from the dirt or seas with unique powers of their own.

In attempting to beat back the Variants, heroes and villains alike had to band together, and in the end, after ten grueling years, the strongest Variants were beaten back to a few select deep rifts in the world, though the threat of variants spontaneously spawning all across the world never truly ended.

The Monsterring left humanity with just half its populace and much of the planet inhospitable. The struggle to survive became intense, but with heroes and villains working together, humanity stood through it all.

The Alter Agency was formed to regulate supers, and the Panopticon, a coalition of technology-oriented Alterhumans, was formed to consolidate progress and development, and with these two organizations, societies restructured in the new and harsh world.

World governments formed again, and a sense of normalcy returned.

Now, fifty years later, at the turn of 2100, the start of yet another monumental century of human, no, superhuman history, the world seems to rumble once more with the echoes of chaos.

Vanguard's disappearance in 2090 catalyzed a return of villainy that only ever simmered beneath the public eye.

But now, crime and villainy has started to return ever stronger, taking advantage of Vanguard's absence.

On top of this, Variant spawning rates have accelerated dangerously, as if sensing Vanguard's loss, threatening cities all across the world at a rate not seen since the Monsterring began.

This is the world where Aldrich was born into.

A dark world full of monstrosities and rising villains without any powers of his own. Though, as he would find out later, he would not be so powerless after all.

Chapter 2: To Be A Hero

When Aldrich was a child, he always dreamed about being a hero. It was a thoroughly uninspired dream considering basically every single kid ever thought about being a hero at some point. Largely unsurprising considering that it was practically impossible to escape hearing about heroes in this day and age of hero worship.

Aldrich heard about a thousand different bedtime tales about how the great hero Vanguard vanquished villainy with his invincible fists, saving countless lives as he ended the Age of Villainy.

When he grew older, he constantly saw heroes on the telescreen with their colorful costumes and capes and big muscles and big smiles. He saw as the heroes carried people out of burning buildings and when scary Variants showed up, how they swooped in to beat the monsters down and save the day.

Heroes popped up in holographic or talk shows or social media or streaming sites - anywhere they could get exposure, they got it.

But most importantly, Aldrich wanted to be a hero because of his parents.

They were both heroes, though not particularly famous ones. His dad could shoot flames from his hands, and though he could light up a car or melt through a wall, he wasn't anything like the bigshot heroes like Blue-Blaze who could melt building sized Variants into ash in seconds.

Aldrich's mother was the exact opposite of his father, being able to control water, though again, just like his dad, not to any super notable degree.

His parents might have just been average heroes to the general public, but because they were his parents, they were the biggest heroes ever to Aldrich.

They seemed so much larger than life, standing tall and strong and raising him to respect justice. They told him about how justice was what heroes believed in, that at the end of the day, though it might take some time, it was a force that made things right and people smile.

Raised on a healthy diet of justice and heroism and capes and costumes, Aldrich wanted desperately to be a hero.

Unfortunately, though, Aldrich soon came to the crushing realization that he had no powers.

90% of humanity were either born with the Alter Organ - the mysterious little mass that was responsible for superpowers - or developed them by the age of ten. Anyone that reached the age of ten without showing any signs of hosting an Organ was categorized as a 'Dud', so called because they were defective - a human being that failed to work properly in this day and age where powers were instrumental to surviving against Variants.

Aldrich was a complete freak of nature - in the rare 5% of the world population in all the wrong ways.

In a society that valued superpowers and their ability to contribute to humanity's survival Variants, Aldrich was considered dead weight. A relic of the past that should have been exterminated. His genes were tainted and unevolved.

Nobody would ever marry him. Nobody would ever associate him.

Aldrich was literally a subhuman in this new world where Alterhumans were the new stage of human evolution. Forget being a hero, nobody would even hire him considering that every single job out there had someone whose Alter power made them better suited for it.

Needless to say, throughout most of Aldrich's youth, he was relentlessly bullied for his lack of powers, often coming back from school with cuts and bruises and tears and a hurting heart, but through it all, his parents supported him as well as they could.

They tried to raise him with good and upstanding and 'heroic' values, telling him to keep his chin up, to try and see the good in things, to never let go of his dreams, but even this came to a premature end.

On Aldrich's 13th birthday, he spent the night alone in his house, waiting for his parents to come back from a mission hunting down Variants let loose by a powerful criminal organization on the rise known as the Trident.

Then came the one memory that defined Aldrich's being down to the very core.

At midnight, telescreen in Aldrich's living room buzzed on by itself and a foreign feed broadcasted on it. He saw both his parents strapped down to iron chairs in a dirty, grimy, bloody cell.

They were beaten, bruised, and scarred, their once colorful red and blue costumes torn and broken apart. He could only watch numbly as a red-masked man addressed Aldrich, telling him that this was the price for his parents acting against the Trident.

Aldrich watched as multiple men began to break his parents down piece by piece. Fingernails torn off, then the fingers ripped off. Skin cut and burnt and ripped apart and then flayed. Electric shocks, acid, poison that made pain worse, then poison that hurt -

For what seemed like an eternity, Aldrich saw his parents dismantled like meat at a butcher's shop, their screams of pain interlacing and giving voice to their suffering.

That was when the feed cut off and police and heroes barged into Aldrich's house, tearing his wide-eyed, still body away from the telescreen and taking him to the hospital.

Aldrich did not cry that night, nor did he ever cry again. Something deep within him had broken, and whatever had sealed those cracks up was something cold where once there had been warmth.

Over the days, there was an attempted search for Aldrich's parents and the villains that had killed them, but nothing worked out.

Aldrich realized then that there was no such thing as justice in the world.

At least, not in the sense that his parents had believed in.

Justice was not some omnipresent force that calculated everyone's karma and meted out a fitting punishment in time.

No, justice was not a force, it was an action, and only those that had the power to hammer it down could make justice real.

Aldrich let vengeance consume him, fueling him to become the hammer that would strike justice down through the skulls of those that deserved it. But how would he put down these villains? He needed a hero's license to try and even start to track villains without having heroes start hunting him down for being an unlicensed vigilante.

But no hero academy would ever accept him without powers.

Thankfully, luck worked for him at least once in his life.

His parents bequeathed him a good sum of money to live off of for a few years and a birthday letter telling him that as insiders in the hero industry, they knew of an upcoming new government program called the Frame Initiative that was to be instated in three years.

It was basically a welfare program for people with no powers like Aldrich wherein they could apply to hero academies to train in mechanical powersuits called Frames so that when the time came, even the worthless 5% of powerless humanity could get drafted to fight Variants.

Among those in the Frame Initiative, outstanding individuals could even become licensed heroes.

His parents had written him nothing but encouragement in that letter, praise that he had made it so far, and support.

It hurt to hold that letter, to read it while hearing their voices in his head, but he took the pain to heart and let it fuel him.

The Frame Initiative would be rigorous in its selection. It chose those with both the best physical fitness and mental aptitude to take orders and make heroic decisions.

Aldrich trained his body for three years, honing it to a sharp knife's edge, mastering martial arts and sculpting his muscles to their max, but his mental evaluations made things difficult for him. He was far too willing to kill, far too willing to put down scum, and far too willing to disobey orders when he thought that the sacrifices of the few for the good of the many had to be made.

One time, when an evaluating Alter tried to reach into Aldrich's mind to figure out his mental profile, Aldrich had made her suffer a mild seizure from, presumably, how 'irregular' or 'broken' his head was.

Needless to say, none of the top tier or even mid-tier academies would ever consider Aldrich despite him scoring in the highest percentile on every physical fitness metric.

Still, Aldrich managed to get into an academy willing to take him in.

A no-name, smalltime academy called Blackwater. The academy had little information surrounding it, making it immediately suspicious, but it was willing to see past Aldrich's poor mental evaluation.

Thus, at the age of sixteen, Aldrich entered into a hero academy just as he had always dreamed of doing when he was little, though where before he had wanted a license to save, he now wanted a license to hunt.

Chapter 3: To Blackwater

-September 30, 2116-

Today was the big day.

The day that Aldrich would leave for Blackwater Academy, the very first step of a long and no doubt hard journey to avenge his parents.

Aldrich woke up at five thirty in the morning, thirty minutes before an officer was scheduled to pick him up.

Precisely as the clock struck six, an academy officer showed up to his apartment door, making his presence obviously known by slamming his fist into the door several times in what was the most violent knock Aldrich had ever heard before.

Aldrich was ready and packed. His apartment, the house he had lived in for his whole life, was cleaned out to complete emptiness, ready for another renter to move in. Blackwater would provide food and board for the four years it took to graduate, so what he packed was mostly personal stuff that had some kind of emotional weight to them.

Memorabilia from his late parents that included a family picture with Aldrich and some trinkets from their hero costumes. His birthday letter that had gotten him to get into this academy in the first place. Also his personal gaming rig that he sometimes used to destress after training.

There was a small collection of games on the rig, mostly solo RPGs because Aldrich did not really like playing online and interacting with random people online. Among the RPGs he played, there was one in particular that was his favorite.

A strangely hidden but amazingly fun game called Elden World which he had picked up at a rundown game store, a store that had long since closed down and been bulldozed away.

At first, Aldrich had thought the game was just a piece of junk. Some unfinished, buggy monstrosity considering that almost no games were sold in disc format anymore. To further fan the flames of suspicion, the disc that stored the game was unmarked and unregistered on any network, meaning that in all likelihood, it was some kind of indie development that never made it to the light of the public market.

Aldrich had zero hopes for it. Sometimes he liked to trawl around no name game shops for old retro games from the early 2000s era, and sometimes he struck trash, and sometimes he struck gold.

This, though, he had thought was trash.

Surprisingly,, the game was a shinier shade of gold than any he had found so far. Elden World was highly fleshed out and basically complete, and Aldrich had sunk in hundreds of hours of gameplay in it.

Most of these hours, Aldrich spent maxing out his necromancer game character all the way up to level 100, but he did not stop just there. Afterwards, he obsessively min-maxed his stats and equipment, trawling through the most obscure corners of the game to find materials and upgrades to make himself as overpowered as possible.

Eventually, Aldrich could beat anything with zero challenge, and though some people thought that was boring, he enjoyed it. The feeling of being strong.

Maybe it was the constant years of feeling powerless that made Aldrich want to be as strong as he could in the game.

A type of escapist fantasy, he supposed.

Aldrich opened the door to his apartment, sliding the smooth metal entryway open with a mechanical click. Standing in the doorway was a tall, black-uniformed man staring down at him with sharp, squinting black eyes.

The man looked down at his Eye-Phone, presumably to check some details.

"Are you Aldrich Yang?" said the man. "Student enrolled in the Frame Initiative for Blackwater Academy?"

"Yes," said Aldrich simply.

"Show me some I.D.," said the man.

Aldrich held up his Eye-Phone, and Darius scanned it with his own phone's camera, logging Aldrich's electronic Citizen Identification Card (CID), matching his identity to a worldwide database maintained by the Alterhuman Agency in cooperation with world governments.

"Good. My name is Darius Fletcher, and I'm a Blackwater officer here to take you in," said the man, his voice tired and unpleasant. He looked down at Aldrich with dead eyes that made it abundantly clear that he thought Aldrich was not worth his time.

"Nice to meet you," said Aldrich respectfully as he held out a hand to shake.

Darius swatted the hand away with enough force to make Aldrich's sting with a bruise.

"Don't touch me, you dirty, powerless, maggot," said Darius. "And from now on, you will address me only as Officer Fletcher. If you do not, you'll wish your mother never popped you out of her rank cunt."

"..." Aldrich nodded. There was nothing he could do about this type of abuse, and honestly, he was prepared for it. He had been bullied and looked down on his whole life thousands upon thousands of times. Going to an academy would only ever make that a hundred times worse.

So far, this was just as Aldrich had calculated. Abuse he was willing to take and stomach to get his hero's license.

"Follow me," said officer Fletcher curtly.

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Aldrich followed the officer in silence outside his apartment building to a bulky, armored hover-car that looked like it could seat about six people. It levitated by the sidewalk, the whirring of its anti-gravity engines grating against Aldrich's ears.

"Get in," said officer Fletcher as he tapped his phone, causing one of the bulky doors of the black metaled car to open up. The insides of the car were lit in dull red with two rows of seats facing each other.

Aldrich sat himself inside wordlessly, noting the presence of other people around him. Fellow students, it seemed, judging by how young they looked. The car door closed as the officer made his way up to the driver's seat separated from the passenger compartment by a metal grate.

Felt like a prison car more so than military transport.

"Hey, you're part of the Frame Initiative too, right?" A young man, probably around sixteen like Aldrich, with wide doe eyes and curly black hair smiled at Aldrich from the seat across from him.

"Yeah," said Aldrich simply. He looked around to see that there were a total of three other students in the car.

Two guys and one girl. All probably part of the Frame Initiative.

"Great!" said the curly haired guy. He held out his hand for Aldrich to shake. "My name's Adam, by the way. It's incredible to see that there are so many of us without powers. My whole life, I thought I was the only one. Felt totally cursed. You feel what I mean?"

Aldrich stared at Adam's hand for a few seconds before shaking it. Aldrich was not the energetic type, but he was not an asshole either,

"Yeah," said Aldrich, and that was all he said. Granted, he wasn't the talkative type either.

"Shut the fuck up back there!" came officer Fletcher's rough voice blaring through a sound system. Everyone in the car flinched except Aldrich. "My day is already down the sh*tter driving you worthless drains on society. I prefer my drives quiet, and if I hear one peep, one little fucking whisper, I promise that when you get to Blackwater I will make your lives more of a miserable living hell than it already is!"

"Somebody's not having a good day, huh," whispered Adam.

Aldrich ignored Adam to get the kid to shut up for both his safety and Aldrich's own. He crossed his arms and leaned back into his seat, staring at the depressingly red tinted ceiling of the car before closing his eyes to get some more much needed sleep.

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Chapter 4: Blackwater and Bullies

Blackwater Academy was located on the east coast of the United States, its compound located right beside a massive crater gouged out by an A-Class Variant twenty years ago. The academy got its name from the blackened waters in the crater. Remnants of the monster's blood and corpse that had sunk deep down to the ocean floor below.

The crater itself formed a natural harbor leading out to the Atlantic Ocean, and a small port city called Haven stood there, presumably being the main source of supplies and people coming in and out of Blackwater.

All in all, Blackwater was quite isolated. Almost eerily so.

Getting to Blackwater consisted of a two hour long drive followed by a one hour long helicopter flight over vast swathes of overgrown forests infested with Variants.

Forests like these were commonplace after the Monstering as Variants spawned consistently throughout the world, with certain areas spawning them at enough rates that clearing them out and settling cities in was too difficult to maintain.

"You try to run from Blackwater, and Variants will eat your powerless asses before you can count to ten," said officer Fletcher from the pilot seat of the helicopter, making the obvious observation that ran through everyone's heads that much clearer.

Yeah, thought Aldrich. This place was definitely more a prison than an academy.

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After landing in Blackwater, Aldrich and the three Duds that comprised the Frame Initiative were given uniforms, led to their dorm rooms, and barked orders to unpack and be out at the Training Grounds by three in the afternoon or suffer severe consequences

Notably, the dorms for the Frame Initiative students were segregated in their own little, rundown barracks infested with enormous cockroaches and non-functioning heating or cooling. It was obvious this was a building meant to be demolished that had been repurposed for the Frame Initiative students.

Wouldn't do to have Duds with those with real powers, after all.

As if to remind the Frame students what the academy thought of them, the actual student barracks was visible from their windows, and it was a proper three-story building with a sleek, modern cubic design that seemed surprisingly advanced considering the fact that Blackwatch was supposed to be a small academy.

"Well, atleast we get a place to ourselves!" said Adam as the group of four Frame students roamed around the hallways of the tiny barracks. Adam was the only one with any energy in him, actively swatting down cockroaches here and there with a stick when he could.

"The heating's broken, and it's nearly winter," said Jake, another Frame student. "They know we have no powers. We're going to freeze to death before we graduate at this rate."

"It's all good. I brought extra blankets," said Adam. "Come on, less gloom and doom here, folks. Together, we'll make it through this."

"How do you stay so optimistic?" said Elaine, the one girl that was part of the powerless group.

"I don't know," said Adam. "But what I do know is if I wasn't optimistic, I would have gone insane years ago. Or maybe I am insane, and I don't know it, heh."

Aldrich remained mostly silent as did Frank, the last of the Frame students, though where Frank stayed quiet due to fear highly evident from his barely contained trembling, Aldrich's quiet was more observant. Calm.

Footsteps from across the hallway, footsteps that did not belong to any of the Frame students, made everyone stand on alert.

"Huh, so this is where the Duds live," said a tall, built guy with slicked back black hair and sharp, predatory grey eyes. A student, it seemed, from the black uniform distinct from the officer's uniforms in that they lacked any stripes beneath the white wave crest on the uniform's breast.

Behind him, three more students followed.

"What a dump. But then again, a dumpster is the best place to throw out trash, no?" said the guy as he strolled forwards with a cocky smile and hands in his pockets. His companions laughed at his comment behind him.

These were students with powers.

Adam stood in front of the Frame group with confidence that Aldrich just shook his head at. Aldrich knew from experience that standing up to bullies like this only made you a

bigger target. He wondered how Adam, a Dud just like him, had managed to even survive by being confident like this.

"You guys lost? These aren't your dorms," said Adam.

The slick back student walked right up to Adam, their faces just a few inches apart, and stared down Adam.

Then, a blur of movement followed by a cracking sound of impact.

Adam fell backwards, clutching at his face to stem blood pouring from a broken nose while he groaned in pain. He had been struck by an attack was too fast for the human eye to perceive.

"None of you Duds seem to understand," said the leader of the student bullies. "All of you are here to fill up a little diversity quota so that the academy can get some more funding. Overall, you're still just as worthless as you are in society. Those of us with powers, proper powers, we own you guys.

You will NOT talk back to us, and you will do what we tell you to do like obedient little dogs. That said, we'll try and not to dirty ourselves with this place too much. We'll only be coming around when we want to let off some steam, are short a few bucks here and there, or just feel like fucking with you."

"Can't fight without a sucker punch, huh?" said Adam as he shakily stood up only to eat a powerful kick to the stomach that sent him rolling several meters back, this time silent as he grit his teeth through pain while trying to stop himself from vomiting.

"Or you end up like him," said the leader. He smiled. "Oh, and just to make this really fucking crystal clear from the beginning: you try and bitch and moan about us and all the officers here will just laugh at you. Nobody gives a damn about Duds like you. Plus, I might as well make this clear from the start: I'm the son of this Academy's head - I'm untouchable, and so are my boys here.

Basically, unless we outright kill you, nothing will ever happen to us. Understand?"

All the students remained in silence. This time, all of them were silent in fear except, of course, Aldrich who just stood in the back and minimized attention to himself.

"Good," said the leader. He scanned his sharp eyes around the room, his smile growing manically wider as he indulged in the fear he inflicted. When his eyes landed on Elaine, he nodded to himself as he stared at her like a piece of good meat.

Elaine shivered.

"And you, you're not bad looking. Shame you're a Dud," said the leader. "But my boys and I can be surprisingly...open minded when it comes to girls like you. If you want to come to our dorm and 'hang out', I wouldn't mind being nice to you."

The leader stared down at his watch. "Oh, evaluations are about to start." His sadistic smile grew even wider as he eyed everyone expectantly. "I very much look forward to seeing you all at the training grounds."

With that, the leader waved a callous goodbye and strolled out with his posse, leaving Aldrich as the first to tend to Adam because Aldrich was the only one calm enough to tend to the downed man.

"Your stomach will be bruised for a couple of days. That nose won't set properly either, considering how badly broken it is," said Aldrich as he inspected Adam.

"Fuuuck," said Adam. He smiled a bloody smile. "Good thing I'm already ugly as sin. Broken nose won't change a damn thing."

Aldrich could not help but ever so slightly smile.

"Hah, got you to smile! Think I wouldn't notice?" said Adam.

"Be quiet," said Aldrich as he rolled his eyes and called out to the rest of the room. "Anyone have first aid supplies? If not, I have some of my own."

"I brought a med-kit. I'll go get it," said Elaine as she rushed to her room.

"I-I don't want to do this!" said Frank, the quiet kid, his fear finally spilling over and making him talk. "First chance I get, I'm going to quit this program. This isn't what I signed up for!"

"Yeah?" Adam stood up as Aldrich supported him. "And then what? Crawl back to society where you'll get sh*t on anyway? Where you won't even get hired to sweep the streets or unclog the sewers because there's an Alter out there with a power for it?"

This is our only shot of ever making it big. Feel free to waste it if you want. But I'm staying and when I graduate, I'll be a hero and make enough money to stay off the streets. You feel me, Aldy?"

"Yeah," said Aldrich, wondering when Adam found it comfortable enough to call him 'Aldy'. Regardless, Aldrich did find respect for Adam. The guy's words were packed with genuine determination that Aldrich could relate to, though where it came from was different.

For Aldrich, his determination came from his drive for vengeance. For Adam, it seemed like the guy had been homeless and this was his only ticket to getting off the streets.

Either way, it was evident that the two of them had the highest drive out of anyone in the group by a long shot.

Jake seemed to just be your average guy, and average was not going to cut it here.

Frank seemed like he was too soft. Someone who, even as a Dud cast down by society, had not suffered too much hardship. Probably was a spontaneous Dud like Aldrich, meaning that his parents had powers but he had unfortunately popped out with none.

Regardless, seemed like Frank got enough sheltering from his parents that this was not the right place for him.

In a way, Aldrich would have been like that too. If his parents had stayed alive.

Elaine, surprisingly, Aldrich could see some strength in. Despite the leader of the bullies blatantly harassing her, she, though visibly fearful and unnerved like the rest, still managed to stay composed enough to get a medkit when asked.

Regardless, Aldrich only hoped that determination would be enough to get them all through what seemed like would be four years of pure suffering.

Chapter 5: Combat Evaluation

The Training Grounds were quite impressive, to say the least. They were largely located outdoors and consisted of several five-hundred-meter radius rings lined with towering metal walls that served as arenas.

The walls were made of thickly reinforced metal, but their design was sleek and futuristic with blinking lights of various colors dotted around their surface, indicating the status of various moving pieces of tech within the walls.

Aldrich stared at the arenas while standing in a single file line with the rest of the Frame students. They were, as expected, separated from the rest of the main student body, but a cursory glance gave Aldrich an estimate that there were approximately two hundred or so 'normal' students.

In terms of numbers, Blackwater was small as most decently ranked hero academies operated with student bodies numbering well over a thousand, with only the highest tier academies like Shield and Invictus having small student bodies due to a difficulty to get in.

Most likely, Aldrich figured that Blackwater had so few students because they lacked funding for being too low tier. At the same time, he could not shake off the sense that something was wrong.

The arenas were built with state-of-the-art technology with many of them capable of terraforming simulated combat terrain. Some of them had built in obstacles and battle drones undergoing auto-repair and maintenance beneath them, ready to surface whenever the arenas were activated.

A low tier academy like Blackwater should not have been capable of funding any of this.

"Listen closely!" came a thunderous voice that Aldrich recognized as belonging to officer Fletcher. The officer had his arms behind his back as he shouted at the neatly ordered crowd of students. "Because I won't say this again! We already know your powers and your AC count."

Aldrich noted this. Blackwater had a record of every single student's ability and their Alter Cell (AC count). Meant that it was possible to pull up student profiles and figure out who was dangerous and who was not provided Aldrich could get into the system somehow.

AC count was especially important because it determined how capable an Alter's power was to respond to training and growth. High AC counts also granted natural amounts of superhuman strength, durability, speed, and a minor healing factor regardless of whether the power it granted affected those traits or not.

"But cell count and a bullet point summary of your powers doesn't mean sh*t out there where you'll be fighting for your fucking lives against Variants or other Alters. Combat is where we really determine your worth. Where you really use those powers you were born with.

Today's evaluation will test your ability to fight!"

A slight murmur ran through the crowd of students as they heard this. Some were nervous. Some were happy to fight.

Every single Frame student other than Aldrich, however, gulped down a ball of nervousness because how the hell were they going to fight superpowered students when they had not even taken a single class yet on how to use their Frames?

Hell, they had not even seen their Frames yet.

"Where you place in this evaluation will determine which class you are put in!" continued officer Fletcher. "And believe me, what class you are in will be the difference between living like kings and ants!

Classes range from A to B to C to D to F. If you're in A, then good, you're worth the food and space your sorry asses are taking up here. Below that, though, you better train real fuckin' hard!

Depending on which class you're placed in, you'll get access to more of our equipment, direct training, more credits for treatment at the infirmary, and authorized days off to the nearby town to do whatever the fuck you want.

Hell, if you manage to place in class A, we'll even give you a monthly stipend for you ungrateful little sh*tts to spend on whatever you want."

Officer Fletcher turned and walked up to a control panel standing outside of the nearest arena. He put his palm on the screen, and it turned on with bright green lights, analyzing his handprint.

A holographic projection of a keypad and several screens detailing functions for the arena lit upwards, and he began to fiddle with them, causing the arena to creak and groan as several large mechanisms started to rev up and whirl in its walls and underground.

"Now then, on to the details of this combat evaluation. It's going to be real simple: a good old free for all fucking beatdown!" Officer Fletcher grinned, showing a rare sign of emotion in anticipation of seeing violence. "There are two hundred of you, and I will split you into four equal groups across four arenas.

The arenas will run an algorithm based on all your recorded power profiles and cell counts to assign what it determines to be the 'fairest' groups, but again, this evaluation is your chance to prove that you're worth more than your basic cell count."

"Excuse me, sir!" said Adam.

Aldrich sighed and shook his head, knowing that Adam was going to be taking some more abuse.

All heads turned to Adam, at the insane man who was willing to speak up when nobody else did.

"What about us?" said Adam as he motioned to the Frame students. "We have no cell count or power profile. How do we fit into this?"

Officer Fletcher cracked his neck and walked up to Adam. Adam looked straight into the officer's eyes as the academy superior stared him down.

"Someone's already fucked you up, huh kid?" said officer Fletcher as he noted Adam's bandaged nose. "Well, I won't mess with your face, at the very least, though, got to say, there isn't much to save there."

The officer put his hand on Adam's shoulder, seemingly at first in a nice gesture, but then Adam started to scream in pain as the officer's hand glowed a bright white,

encasing itself in searing hot heat that sizzled through Adam's uniform and melted into his flesh.

Adam knelt into the ground, clutching at his smoking shoulder while gritting his teeth to prevent himself from crying out more. Aldrich just shook his head at Adam while the other Frame students cringed and looked away in palpable fear.

"None of your powerless fucks are to ever, I repeat, EVER, talk to me unless prompted. Let this idiot be a lesson to you all," said officer Fletcher. "But I'm feeling generous today, so I'll answer his question.

Your Frames are inside the arena you will be assigned to. You can pilot them when the fighting begins."

"But...but how do we use them?" said Adam, still managing to speak up even as Aldrich desperately wanted to tell him to just shut the hell up for once.

This time, the officer did not further abuse Adam, being evidently bored of it, and shrugged. "Fuck if I know. It's up to you powerless pieces of trash to figure that one out."

With that, officer Fletcher turned around and strolled back to his control panel, pressing a few more holographic buttons to bring up a large projected board full of student names. Beside the student names were green circles and numbers ranging from 1 to 4.

Officer Fletcher pointed at the board. "Look for your name and report to the corresponding arena number beside it! The arena will constantly scan for your bio-signatures to determine whether you are capable of fighting or not.

Once you're knocked out or deemed incapable of continuing to fight, that green circle will turn red and you will be transported out by drones!

How long you last, how many hits you dish out, how many hits you take, and footage analysis of what strategies you use will all accumulate points to determine your class position! A leaderboard will be projected showing who has the most points, and at the end of ninety minutes, the fighting stops and the leaderboard finalizes!

Now get to it, maggots!"

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Chapter 6: Frame Perfect

As it just so happened, Aldrich and the rest of the Frame students ended up in the same arena: arena number 1, making the total number of students in that arena from 50 to 54.

However, the algorithm that calculated power fairness literally determined all the Frame students to be zero threat, hence why adding them to an already full arena changed nothing.

"How do I even move in this thing?" groaned Adam, only his face visible from the upturned helmet of his Frame powersuit. He was in a fixed T-pose state like an unloaded game character, and already, other students were laughing at him.

Aldrich looked at his Frame towering in front of him.

It was a two-meter-tall humanoid suit of segmented black metal plates. Thick coils of wiry dark grey cable were visible under the plates, functioning as a shock absorbent layer and a flexible mesh that acted like the 'muscles' that supported the suit's four hundred pound (~180 kg) weight.

A nondescript, round black helmet with a rectangular, glossy blue ceramic and duraplastic face plate stared down at Aldrich.

Aldrich put his hand on the Frame's chest, and it read his handprint.

A robotic, gender-neutral voice rung out from the Frame.

"Identifying..."

"Access to Subject 1 Granted."

The Frame opened up with hydraulic clicks and the release of pressurized air, bidding Aldrich to step in and let the metal envelop him in a cold embrace.

"Subjects, huh," said Aldrich. "That's all we are to this world."

"Damn, you got it to open up properly? I must have jammed it or messed up something. And who made you subject number 1, huh?" said Adam. "Come on, hop in and figure this damn thing out so you can help me out."

Adam groaned as he struggled against his suit, but he was stuck in his Frame, not knowing how to operate it at all. Mostly because Adam had not actually accessed his Frame properly. He had just kicked the suit until it opened up, registering an emergency access, but because he had not scanned his biosignature on it first, the Frame did not recognize him as a proper owner.

Hence why Adam was now basically just trapped.

It was obvious that Blackwater did not give a single damn about the Frame students. They were just there to fill up a diversity quota as the leader of the bullies had said. Now

that they were enrolled, the academy got their nice fat slice of government funding for hosting Frame students.

Hosting did not mean training or even remotely caring for, though, and Aldrich knew that Blackwater fully expected everyone to drop out or drop dead, whatever came first.

"Aww, look, the Duds can't even use their crutches! Looks like their heads are as disabled as their powers are!" a student pointed at Adam, causing many to join in a round of mocking laughter.

"Dumbasses thought they actually belonged here. With us, when we have real powers," said another.

"Don't mind them. Alters are the next stage of human evolution. Sooner or later, nature will weed the weak like them out," said a girl who crossed her arms together in a posture with a scowl that indicated she had probably not laughed at a joke for her entire life.

"Makes me sick even breathing the same air as them," said a musclebound, serious faced student.

Adam heard all of this and snorted. "They won't be so cocky once I punch their faces in."

"And you're going to do that how? By T-posing?" said Aldrich.

"You step in this suit and try to figure it out!" complained Adam. "Christ, I don't even know how I got this thing to open up!"

Suddenly, a voice blared throughout the arena. Officer Fletcher's voice. "The arenas are now active!"

The arena started to shake, the ground underneath rocking and rolling up and down as if a massive earthquake was dancing beneath it. The walls surrounding the arena, already a dozen meters tall, started to look even more imposing as they trembled, their metal structures heavily groaning as they started to light up with bright white circuit patterns.

Then, a dome of pure, translucent energy projected from the walls, sealing the entire one-thousand-meter diameter of the arena shut in a forcefield.

Almost miraculously, Aldrich saw as the entire arena covered over with a holographic grid pattern that rendered out the outline of a rocky landscape with large boulders, deep fissures, and floating stone platforms.

"Hardlight Environments are rendering! Do not move a single muscle until the environment is finished rendering!" came officer Fletcher's orders.

"Well, at least I can do that with no issue," said Adam in his frozen T-pose.

Aldrich watched as the grid-patterned outlines filled in with solid color, creating the floating rocks and giant boulders with near perfect realism. He knew that Hardlight technology existed, but this was the first time he had seen it with his own two eyes.

Hardlight tech allowed for entire environments to be simulated under a controlled forcefield.

The largest hero groups and academies used this kind of tech for their training to simulate real life combat scenarios as accurately as possible.

Granted, Hardlight constructs could not mimic objects perfectly, only controlling for basic physical properties like texture, hardness, and mass, but even then, this was expensive tech easily costing hundreds of millions of credits.

What the hell was Blackwater, an academy ranked well near the bottom, doing with it? How could they even afford it?

Aldrich did not have time to ponder that question before officer Fletcher's voice roared through the intercom again.

"You now have thirty seconds before combat evaluation begins! Take that time to position yourselves in your new environment. Once the buzzer sounds, all of you are enemies! And just to make this clear, hiding and running will NOT rank you high. You will get the most points by incapacitating other students, so get fighting!"

Almost immediately, Aldrich could feel stares all over him and the rest of the Frame students. They were all sitting ducks. Easy points.

A large holographic timer appeared in the sky, counting down from thirty.

"T-this is insanity," said Frank. He pushed up his glasses and frantically looked his Frame up and down while shivering at the predatory glares of all the other students resting on him, sensing his weakness.

"Yeah, have to agree," said Jake. "We don't know how to pilot these things. What the hell do they expect us to do?"

"Doesn't mean we can't try," said Elaine. She had been watching Aldrich from before, and she copied him, putting her hand on her Frame and causing it to open up.

Aldrich knew how to use the Frame. He knew it very, very well.

In fact, his gaming rig had virtual reality support that had a Frame combat training simulation downloaded on it. It was a program that was not released to the general public. One that his parents had managed to secure with their hero industry connections before they were killed, wanting to give it to Aldrich so he could have a head start before the initiative was rolled out.

The thing was, though, Aldrich was not willing to tell the other students how to use their Frames, even if he did feel bad for them. Telling them when the other students were eyeing them would only paint a bigger target on his back.

And he wanted them to underestimate him.

Aldrich stepped into his Frame, and so did the other students. They would get overloaded with several floating screens containing massive amounts of information that would be impossible to read through in thirty seconds, meaning they would have no idea how to use any of the suit's weapon systems.

But at the very least, they could move around properly unlike Adam. Adam was just screwed at this point, immobile until he was pried out of his Frame manually.

The blue face plate snapped over Aldrich's head, temporarily blinding his vision before his eyes adjusted. The world around him was slightly blue tinted and, as expected, a dozen different screens floated in his vision, introducing him to the Frame's functions, offering him a tutorial, and so on.

Aldrich ignored them and just looked up at the timer in the sky. Twenty seconds.

He heard as the other Frame suits fell heavily to the ground, the students inside of them not knowing at all how to move in them with all the sudden weight around them.

"Hah! Look at them! They can't even walk properly!"

Aldrich stayed still, intentionally trying to seem like he could not move.

"And look at that one, he can't even move!"

"So, how are these points claimed? Do we just knock them out? Or do we just have to break their suits?"

"Why not both? I'll enjoy ripping them from their metal shells. Like eating crab. Ought to be just as easy, too."

Ten seconds left.

Aldrich heard as two of the Frames started to run away shakily, one of them constantly tripping.

"Come back here!"

Aldrich heard footsteps as several students ran out to chase the runners.

"You okay?" said Elaine from her Frame.

"Yeah," said Aldrich.

"You and Adam can't move, but I'll try and help as best as I can," said Elaine.

"..." Aldrich appreciated the gesture, but he had no time to respond.

The counter read zero, and the buzzer sounded, blaring out across the arena.

"You're mine!"

Aldrich saw a student leap up in the air with a cocked fist, his entire arm transmuting into solid layers of dense, hard green crystals. From the confident smile on the student's face, it was obvious that he thought he would smash right through Aldrich's helmet and beat him bloody and unconscious.

Elaine tried to help but she stumbled and dropped to a knee, unused to the weight strain that Frames placed on the body.

"Boosters 4,5 engage," said Aldrich rapidly, making sure his voice was not projected. Hidden thrusters in the heels of his Frame suit shot out jets of flame, boosting his movement.

Aldrich used his martial arts training to predict the crystal fist student's punch and spun to the side. The student smashed his fist into the ground, shattering the ground underneath. Just as the student's confident smile started to fade away into surprise, Aldrich grabbed the kid by the arm.

In response, the student covered his entire body in thick crystals, prepared for any punch.

Aldrich instead used the kid's arm as a lever and threw him over his shoulder. Hydraulics clicked and pressurized air vented from Aldrich's Frame joints as he slammed the student full force into the ground with an expert judo throw.

The student's crystal armor shattered as he gouged out a solid crater in the dirt, the shockwaves of impact permeating through his armor and into his body. He gasped for air like a landed fish, the breath knocked straight out of him.

Aldrich kicked the student in the head with just enough force to knock him out.

"H-huh!?" said Elaine in complete disbelief as she stared at Aldrich annihilating a student with proper powers. "What? How?"

Elaine's surprise was not limited to her. It spread among the Alter students.

"Wh-what the fuck?" said a bewildered student. "That kid, that Frame kid, he knocked out Dorian with a single hit!"

"Yeah, beat them up!" said Adam enthusiastically. "Always knew you had it in you, Aldy!"

"Shut up! You powerless cockroaches just got lucky!" said the formerly surprised, now angry student. He fired a blast of red energy from his hands, hitting Adam square in the face, knocking him out and tipping his T-posing Frame over.

Aldrich used this moment of distraction that Adam bought.

"Boosters 4,5 maximum output. Engage left flare," said Aldrich. He sped towards the surprised student and held out his left hand. A blinding white flare emerged, acting like a flashbang.

The student winced and held his arms out to protect himself. His hands started to shimmer with waves of red energy, charging another shot.

Aldrich used his maxed out boosters to circle around the student and slam a roundhouse kick into his ribs, dodging twin red beams while sending the student flying back with shattered ribs, completely incapacitated.

"Initiate unit scan and full-scale view," said Aldrich, and the localized interface A.I. complied. He saw a screen in the side of his vision mapping out red dots where other students were. There were still a good dozen students surrounding him.

Full-scale view started, giving Aldrich a 360-degree range of sight, making sure nothing blindsided him. But to deal with a crowd like this, he needed more firepower. "Available weapons systems report."

"No weapons systems installed," came the A.I.'s response.

"Sh*t," said Aldrich. He knew that finalized Frames were to be fitted with various forms of crowd control arms and munitions, but it seemed that these were prototypes lacking any real weapons.

"That fucker's dangerous! Take him out!" A student wildly pointed at Aldrich.

Aldrich took in a breath through his teeth. This was it for him if they ganged up on him. He had no weapons. Maybe he could take down two or three more, but now that the

element of surprise was gone, proper Alters, especially strong ones, would make short work of him.

The ones he had knocked out so far were complete fodder. Weak kids with powers they had not trained at all to their maximum potentials.

"Relax, you idiots." A voice came from above, belonging to a student floating in the air with crossed arms and a wide, sadistic smile and slicked back hair. "It's just a Dud in a metal can. The fuck are you so afraid of?"

The leader of the bullies from back at the dorm again. And he looked like a proper superpowered Alter threat. There was just an aura of threat about him that made it obvious he was multiple grades above the regular student power level.

This was the kind of superhuman power that Aldrich would never be able to beat.

Chapter 7: Ghost

"Holy sh*t, it's Seth Solar in the flesh," came the awed voices of Alter students as they looked up at the cocky slick-back creep like he was the second coming of Jesus.

Aldrich observed carefully.

Of the dozen Alter students that had circled around him, six were preoccupied staring in awe at Seth, gawking at him. The other six immediately turned tail and started to run, not caring to break Aldrich apart and take his points.

This meant one thing: Seth Solar was dangerous.

As predatory and dangerous to his fellow Alter students as he was to the Duds like Aldrich.

Aldrich carefully assessed what he could do against Seth, and in all likelihood, he realized he could do nothing.

The 'Solar' surname was one that almost everyone knew. Alter organs and their powers had some hereditary component to them, and the descendants of strong heroes would likely get similarly strong powers related to ones from their parents.

As a result, powerful top heroes formed dynasties where their descendants took up their capes, power, and influence.

The Solar family was one of these dynasties. Its head and strongest member was Solomon Solar, a hero of incredible power that stood at rank 15 out of the Superboard

100 that determined the heroes with the most influence throughout the North American continent.

Solomon Solar's ability was called Sunlight Overdrive, and with it, he could absorb solar energy into himself at immensely increased efficiency, using it to make his body insanely strong, fast, and durable. Not to mention he could fly at supersonic speeds and blast out intensely hot beams from his eyes.

If Seth Solar had inherited even one hundredth of Solomon Solar's powers, then there was nothing Aldrich could do against him. Not now, not ever.

There was a rumor that the Solar heroes had a specific weakness that crippled them, but whatever it was, the Solar dynasty had hired top end PR firms and net security companies to scrub any trace of it from the Globe Net.

Seth shook his head at the two limp Alter students that Aldrich had beaten up.

"Imagine. An Alter losing to a Dud dressing up in a tin can. The sheer disgrace of it. And all of you-," Seth sneered at the six Alters surrounding Aldrich. "How have you not beaten this Dud yet? All of you are just as pathetic as these powerless unevolved idiots."

Seth shot downwards like a comet, white bolts of energy crackling around his black uniform bodysuit. He moved so fast he was nearly impossible to perceive with the human eye, barely even a blur, and when he landed in front of Aldrich, he gouged out a massive crater with a rumbling impact and shockwave that sent both Aldrich and every Alter in the vicinity tumbling backwards.

Aldrich immediately flipped in mid-air, showcasing a level of agility with the bulky Frame suit that was nothing short of masterful, and landed back on his feet. Even in the face of overwhelming power, he would not give up.

The Alter students, however, were far less trained, and they had fallen flat on their backs, groaning at the impact.

"Pathetic," spat Seth as he heard the Alter students complain. He then disappeared in a flash, reappearing beside every individual Alter student for just a moment to unleash a powerful blow in their guts that rendered them completely immobile, making a couple vomit, knocking others out entirely, and shattering ribs here and there.

Seth then appeared directly in front of Aldrich with a wide, nearly manic smile.

That whole process of beating down six Alters had taken Seth just one split second.

This was power. Unimaginable, godgiven power from birth.

Aldrich hated that kind of power. The privilege of the strong who had everything since they were literal babies. That kind of privilege made these superpowered scum feel special and entitled beyond measure.

"So? You must think you're hot stuff, beating trash level Alters like that. Come on, here's a real challenge," said Seth as he waved his hand in front of Aldrich's face plate. "I'm right in front of you. Do something, you useless fucking waste of air!"

Aldrich engaged the thrusters in his right arm and sent out a solid boosted right straight into Seth's face.

Seth tanked the hit with his head straight on. The sound of cracking impact echoed through the air, and when Aldrich withdrew his hand, he found that the metal around his fist had warped as if they had hit an impossibly hard surface.

Seth smiled at Aldrich, not a single hair on his head harmed.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. No matter how hard you try, this is all you amount to. What? You thought you could actually train to be as good as us? You thought 'working hard' could make up the difference between us?" said Seth. "Between someone born strong and, well, whatever the hell you are?"

Seth thrust out his open palm, smashing into Aldrich's chest before he could even react. Aldrich felt like a truck had crashed into him, sending him hurtling a dozen meters backwards, skidding across the dirt in his bulky frame.

Red alert lights flashed in Aldrich's vision and he saw a diagram of his Frame suit highlighted in the corner of his vision. Large red patches over the Frame's chest and stomach area indicated critical damage.

Aldrich struggled to get up, but the impact had not only shattered some of his ribs, but it had also damaged the hydraulic support systems and metal-fiber muscle weave of the Frame to the point where the power suit was now little more than dead weight. All he could do was shakily get back on one knee.

Elaine stumbled in front of Aldrich, her arms raised up in a guard.

"Can you stand?" said Elaine. "I can hold him off for a couple of seconds, but I can't guarantee anything more than that."

"Oh, look at you. You're that girl from before. Lots of spirit in you, heh." Seth licked his lips.

"I like that. But I won't beat you up. Don't want to ruin your face, after all. Plus, if it isn't obvious enough already, none of you are worth my time. I just wanted to show you ants how useless it was to think you were worth anything in this world," said Seth as he

crossed his arms and started to levitate in the air. "Ghost, deal with them. I'm going to crush some Alters more on my level."

With that, Seth flew away, leaving Aldrich and Elaine alone with Adam still unconscious.

"Ghost?" said Elaine as she looked around, trying to figure out where this 'ghost' was.

Based on obvious context clues such as the fact that this guy was not visible and he was called 'ghost', Aldrich figured this was an invisible enemy,

"Scan...Scanning systems. There's thermal imagery, sound-based radar, and AC scans," said Aldrich with a cough as he grit his teeth and held down the massive amounts of pain burning at his ribs and stomach. He tried to get his Frame's scanners to start working, but Seth's hit had broken most of his suit's functions.

"Got it," said Elaine. She moved more fluidly now, getting used to her Frame surprisingly quickly.

"There you are!" said Elaine as she used her Frame's scans. She rotated around and threw out a roundhouse kick aimed right at the head level of a human sized enemy in front of her. However, her kick just went through plain air.

"Sorry, but that won't work on me," came a quiet voice from seemingly nowhere.

Aldrich watched as little ripples - distortions in space - formed around the metal of Elaine's Frame legs. Then, the metal crumpled and tore apart in arm-sized holes. Elaine fell heavily down face first, her movement disabled.

A male figure became visible, filling out from translucent ripples in space. A lanky, gaunt looking man with pale skin and white hair with feral red eyes. "Invisibility is just one thing I can do. But I can also phase through matter. And when my matter gets superimposed on existing matter-,"

Ghost knelt down and shoved his hand into the back of Elaine's Frame suit. His arm phased through the metal as if he were dipping it into water. "My matter always wins out. "

Ghost's arm phased back in, and when it did, any metal around it warped and broke apart. This caused critical damage to Elaine's Frame, and her suit whirled down, the power shutting off.

Aldrich observed. He always observed, trying to figure out weaknesses for later. He noticed that Ghost had phased his entire arm through the Frame, but though he twisted apart any metal in the way of his arm, Elaine's living, organic body was unharmed despite the fact that Ghost's arm had phased through it too.

That meant that Ghost could not use his phasing ability to harm living matter.

"Hmm. Soft," said Ghost as he sat on Elaine's prone frame and used the hole he had gouged out to start running his fingers across the skin of her exposed back. Elaine could do nothing but remain still, her Frame encasing her in a metal prison now that it was depowered. "The boss told me to spare you, but not him-,"

Ghost got off of Elaine's back and stared at Aldrich. He scooped out metal from Aldrich's chest area, baring the heavily bruised skin from Seth's strike. "Ouch. That has got to hurt. What is that? Two broken ribs? Well, another won't hurt, will it?"

Ghost pressed his finger into Aldrich's ribcage and applied pressure until he snapped one of Aldrich's ribs.

Aldrich exhaled painfully, but he did not cry out or make any sounds. He was used to pain, highly tolerant of it, and he knew that to bullies and lowlives like this, any sign of weakness was just an invitation for more pain.

"Boring," said Ghost. He shrugged at Aldrich's lack of reaction. "No screaming, no crying, no begging. Whatever."

Ghost pushed Aldrich and tipped him over, leaving him incapacitated.

"See you losers later in the F-class. Frame students in F - kinda fits, huh?" Ghost chuckled as he casually strolled away, turning invisible.

Chapter 8: Friends

The combat evaluation ended about as expected. Aldrich and the rest of the Frame students were placed right into the F-class with nobody else joining them.

Which made it obvious in hindsight that the 'F-class' was made especially for the Frame students to segregate them even further.

Aldrich and Adam spent their time in the infirmary after combat evaluation. Drones opened up their Frame suits and evacuated them from the arenas with many an observing Alter student, what few were left conscious, laughing at their misfortune.

The infirmary was a fairly sizable two-story building at the edge of the Blackwater compound, marked by its bright white metal walls and the gleam of a glowing green cross sign.

Like most things in Blackwater, the infirmary was decked out with state-of-the-art equipment, and like most things in Blackwater, Aldrich and the Frame students were not allowed to access it fully.

Instead, they were corralled into a repurposed basement where they only had access to basic medical equipment that looked like it belonged to a shoddy outpost camp in Variant territory.

Here, in beds that were hard like rock, under flickering lighting and with skittering shadows that probably were rats, Aldrich and Adam rested, bandages wrapped around their respective injuries. Elaine was there with them though she had no injuries because she said she felt safer there than alone in her dorm.

Understandable, honestly, with how blatantly creepy every Alter seemed to be towards her.

A nurse, a woman wearing a white mask with sunken in, sleepless eyes, shifted in and out, checking in on vitals wordlessly, evidently not wanting to talk to them at all.

"Where are the others, miss?" said Adam as he sat up, his injuries comparatively light. Made sense considering the fact that the only hit he had taken was a blast that had knocked him out.

"They're upstairs," said the nurse as she pointed to the cracked stone ceiling above with a stylus while clutching a thin grey Eye-Pad to her chest.

"Damn, why do they get to be up there while we're stuck down here, huh?" said Adam.

"The other two are in intensive care," said the nurse. "You are lucky to be down here. Means you at least have the energy to talk like that."

"Oh," said Adam.

Aldrich stared at the cracks in the ceiling wordlessly. He had heard what happened to Frank and Jake, the Frame students that had ran.

They had been chased down and mercilessly hunted down by Alters that smelled their fear, and they were savagely beaten again and again as the Alter students tried to fight for who got the knockout points.

Meanwhile, because Seth and his crew had personally dealt with Aldrich, Adam, and Elaine, no other Alters wanted to compete against Seth and try to claim they had beaten Aldrich and his little group.

In a way, Seth's cruelty had saved them from further harm.

"I doubt they will stay here," said the nurse. "Blackwater will probably discharge them considering the severity of their injuries, and I doubt they can afford to call in a Restorer."

It was a known fact that among Alter powers, ones that healed the body were extraordinarily rare.

Powers that healed the self were not that uncommon, but healing others manifested in such rarity that any Alter that could heal even little cuts on others was guaranteed a lifetime of wealth and employment.

Alters capable of this were categorized as Restorers, and their services cost fortunes to hire. Medical technology had advanced to the point where anything short of death could be healed, but recovery still took time and effort neither of which Blackwater was willing to spend much on Duds.

And it was a sick joke to even suggest a Frame student hire a proper high end Restorer to heal their wounds instantly.

The nurse sighed and shook her head before staring at Aldrich, Adam, and Elaine. "You three should consider leaving, too, before this place eats you up and spits you back out in broken pieces."

"Fuck that," said Adam. "I get rich, or I die trying."

"Well, I'm not really here to give life advice, so you do you." The nurse shrugged before she left, walking upstairs to tend to patients upstairs.

After a brief pause, Adam spoke again.

"You were insane out there, Aldy. You beat the sh*t out of a couple of those Alter idiots. Did you see how stupid that guy looked before you knocked him out? I could replay that moment in my head a thousand times over."

"Same here," said Aldrich.

"Why didn't you tell us you could use the Frames?" said Elaine. "Why didn't you tell us how to use them earlier?"

"..." Aldrich did not say anything.

"You wanted to keep your skills hidden, right? Make sure they underestimated you," said Adam.

Aldrich raised a brow, surprised that Adam could parse this despite seeming so dumb.

"Y'know, it's just natural. If you're good at something, you keep it to yourself, especially when you're powerless like us," said Adam. "I don't put it against you. It's just the way the world is. Every advantage you can take, you take."

"I suppose," said Elaine with a sigh. "You're right. I just thought that for Frame students like us, all we've got in this academy was each other. I was willing to fight for you two just because you were Duds like me."

"And we can still be allies," said Aldrich. "You're right. We need allies here, and no Alter is going to associate with us. In the future, it will be optimal for us to work together."

If you suspect my trustworthiness, then think about this: how could I have known our first test was going to be a free for all bloodbath?

If I had known beforehand and had time to piece together a plan, I would have informed everyone and created a strategy that maximized our strengths and covered our weaknesses.

But I can't see the future like some Alters can, can I?"

"Yes, I don't really blame you," said Elaine. "It's like Adam said. When you're a Dud like us where everyone in the world seems to be out to get you, it's just natural to take the advantages you can. I just had a bad gut reaction, but I've thought through it."

"Anyway, considering it looks like we're going to be the last three Frame students left, let's get to know each other," said Adam. He smiled at Elaine. "So, what are you all in here for? Why are you guys so desperate you're willing to get your asses kicked ten different ways just for a chance to graduate from this sh*thole?"

Elaine and Aldrich remained silent for several seconds.

Aldrich spoke first. "My parents were heroes. They were killed by the Trident. I want to get a license to hunt them down."

Adam whistled. "Damn, that's pretty hardcore. I can see why you've got so much drive behind those dead eyes of yours. And you, Elaine?"

"My parents weren't heroes, but they were Alters," said Elaine. She started to nervously run her fingers through her long locks of red hair. "When they realized I was a Dud, they disowned me and threw me out to the Wastes."

Aldrich felt a twinge of sympathy for her. The Wastes were considered areas ravaged by Variant activity where the truly desperate settled, forming ragtag, tiny towns and cities where poverty and desperation filled the air.

It was a known practice that Alters that lived in Neo-Cities - proper walled cities where wealth, heroes, and protection against monsters were concentrated - would often throw their Dud children out to the Wastes in the rare chance that they birthed one to hide the shame and burden of raising a powerless child.

"That's fucked," said Adam sympathetically. "How old were you?"

"Five, I think. It was so long ago, so I don't remember much," said Elaine.

Adam shook his head. "The world hates us, what can I say. I'm the same deal as you. Parents had powers, I had none, so they threw me out. I survived in the Wastes working odd jobs, scrapping for metal and broken tech here and there and, of course, stealing when I could.

How'd you survive?"

"An old Techno took me in," said Elaine. "I might not have had powers, but I did have a knack for coding. I helped out at his shop when I could. Tried to earn my keep but keeping drones running."

Technos were a class of Alter that were capable of manipulating technology in some enhanced capacity. That Elaine could help out a proper Techno meant the old Techno either pitied her that much or she was just that naturally talented.

"Sweet, so you're smart," said Adam.

Elaine shifted uncomfortably, unused to praise. "I do what I can." Her eyes cast down. "Randall - that's the name of the guy that took me in - he's getting old. His memory's fading and his powers don't work for him anymore. I don't want him to die in the Wastes all alone, worked to the bone like that.

I want to graduate from here, become a hero, and get him a place to live in a Neo-City where he can spend the rest of his days in quiet. That's the least I owe him."

"You've got a good heart," said Adam. "Way better than mine. All I see are credits. Hell, if I turn into a hero, I'm going to get a place by myself all to myself, one that doesn't smell like trash and fire, and buy myself three entire meals a day and eat burgers and cake and nobody can fucking stop me."

Elaine laughed, and Adam cocked his head and asked, "Huh? What's wrong?"

"Burgers and cake? That's all you want?" said Elaine.

"Yeah, I mean, I've never had either, and I see for them all the time. They must be good, right?" said Adam. "Guess I'd want a car, too. Clean water would be awesome as well. Lots of clothes. Clean clothes. And let me see..."

Adam started to list off all the tiny little things he had wanted but had never, ever gotten.

Aldrich noted this conversation in silence. He had respect for these two. Comparatively speaking, they had far harder childhoods than him. He had lived in Neo-York, a proper Neo-City, because his parents had left behind enough money and the apartment on top of being heroes that earned a decent amount.

Most importantly, his parents had not chosen to abandon him like Adam and Elaines' parents had.

"But at the end of the day, I also wanted friends," said Adam. He smiled broadly at Elaine and Adam. "And what do you know! I've got two friends already. A tech genius and a silent badass. Can't say I'm disappointed."

"You don't have much room to be disappointed," said Aldrich with a faint smile. Adam's positive energy was infectious, Aldrich had to admit.

"And friends gotta' stick together," said Adam. He put a fist to his heart. "Especially powerless people like us. I got this feeling, but if we stick together, I feel like we'll all make it through this no problem."

"Hope so," said Elaine with a sigh.

"Yeah," said Aldrich simply, not knowing how terribly wrong things would get.

Super Necromancer System #Chapter 9: The End...and the Beginning - Read Super Necromancer System Chapter 9: The End...and the Beginning

Chapter 9: The End...and the Beginning

October 30, 2117 - One year later

"This game is way too hard!" complained Adam as he sat in front of Aldrich's gaming ring, an immersive VR helmet on his head as he played through Elden World.

Adam had chosen quite fittingly a warrior barbarian to play, but even the warrior's simple skill set confused him, making him die to a basic mob of level 20 trolls after fumbling a defensive shield based skill.

"Keep at it, you'll get there," said Aldrich as he watched from his tiny dorm bed. "Make sure to cast coat your sword in Flame Oil before fighting trolls or else their regen is going to be way too hard to deal with."

"But your character just goes like, 'boom', and then they all die," said Adam.

"Because mine is a Necromancer. I use death magic, and since these trolls are low level enough, they instantly die to my [Anti-Life Shell] aura," said Aldrich.

"That's ridiculously overpowered. I should've chosen your class," said Adam.

"You get confused juggling like five skills, how do you think you'll manage micro-managing fifty units?" said Aldrich.

"Yeah, you're right." Adam paused the game and took off his VR helmet before turning on a swiveling chair to see Adam.

Elaine was there too, at the foot of the bed, reading something as she usually did on her Eye-Phone, though occasionally she would look up to check Adam's progress in the game.

Elaine did not play Elden World because there was only one copy to share between the three of them, but she was an avid gamer who had brought her own gaming rig. She mostly played other games with Aldrich where she consistently beat him no matter the genre whether it be fighting games, real time strategy, or RPGs.

Aldrich fully believed that if Elaine had played Elden World seriously that she would have easily beat him out too in terms of making a maxed-out character.

"One whole year, huh," said Adam. "Can't believe that much time has passed. And we passed our first practical too, though right by the skin of our nuts."

Aldrich nodded. It was indeed an exceptional accomplishment. The Alterhuman Agency made any hero academy hold practical exams every year to make sure graduating students were qualified, and those that did not perform well enough were cut from their academies.

Generally speaking, these practicals were not too hard, often involving basic combat and rescue exercises, but that was for people with powers.

Duds like Aldrich, Adam, and Elaine had to work fifty times as hard to pass the same basic tests, even with the practicals having an adjusted lower difficulty for Frame students.

Blackwater's class system was harshly designed so that not even the majority of Alters got proper training. Only those from the A to B classes got anything resembling a proper training regiment. C and below learned almost nothing, and so the gap between the top and the bottom only increased as time went.

This ensured that Blackwater got their best students all the attention and care they needed, but at the same time threw everyone else under the bus.

Since Aldrich and the Duds were in the F-class, they were not allowed into any useful classes or nearly any training, so they were literally self-taught heroes. Everything about proper rescue procedure, combating villains with various types of powers, and maximizing their Frame's strengths all came from a combination of online research and self-repairs.

Granted, there was a Techno Department on the compound that did repair the Frames but asking them to upgrade them or outfit them with any weapons was a near impossibility. The Technos there would just glare at Aldrich and the Duds and tell them to fuck off, that repairs were already way better than what they deserved.

At best, Aldrich and Elaine had gotten some blackmail on a Techno there who smuggled in and spread illegal drugs to students. Using that leverage, they got the Techno to sneak them some spare parts for upgrades, but actually installing them was done by Adam's experience as a mechanic.

Aldrich had wanted to get the Techno to spill who he had sold drugs to because that would give Aldrich prime blackmail on multiple students considering that Blackwater had a strict zero drugs policy. The Techno would not part with that info though, even with Aldrich threatening to end his career and get him in prison.

Meant that whoever that Techno was protecting had enough status that losing his job and going to jail was preferable to crossing them.

There were a few notable Alters in the academy, most notable of which was Seth Solar, but aside from him, of the twenty five students in the A-class, ten were from established hero dynasties, though interestingly, none were the main heirs or in the spotlight of their family's actions.

Aldrich theorized that it was these high influence students that the Techno was protecting.

Regardless, Aldrich, Adam, and Elaine had managed to persevere as the last remaining Frame students after Frank and Jake were discharged for their injuries.

The bullying from Alter students had been a serious issue as well, but after the first few months, it largely died down as the Alters had to focus on their own performance to either stay in the A or B classes or try to reach them if they were below.

In summary, they did not have time to worry about the Frame kids.

Every so often, Seth and his group would come by, often to vent anger at something that had gone wrong and beat Adam bloody because he would always talk back and try to fight. Aldrich was beaten the first few times, but because he showed zero reaction to them, they quickly lost interest in him, labeling him a deranged psycho who probably got off on pain.

"Just three more years, and we'll be out of here," said Adam as he nursed bruises on his face from yet another beating he had taken from Seth's group. "Then I can eat a burger and Elaine can make her old man proud. Isn't that right, Elaine?"

"Yeah, hope he'll still be around by then," said Elaine with a sigh from the foot of Aldrich's bed where she sat and read some articles on Frame software and hardware on her Eye-Phone. "Sometimes, when I call him, he has trouble remembering small things. The shop's not doing too well, either. I told him to get a new assistant, but he's so stubborn and says nobody else matches up to me."

"Your ability to work with the Frames is absolutely top notch," said Aldrich. "To the point where you may even compete with or beat out some Technos with sheer natural talent alone."

"Yeah, you're real smart," said Adam.

Elaine blushed. "Oh, you two. I'm not that good." She looked up from her Eye-Phone, her green eyes strikingly wide under her round reading glasses. "You two are always amazing too. Always so reliable. Aldrich, I've never met anyone that can keep their cool like you, even in the worst situations. It always seems like you can think a way out of things."

And Adam, I've never met someone that was as amazing a punching bag as you. You take so many hits-,"

Adam groaned. "Okay, yeah, compared to Aldy, I'm a dumbass that gets smacked around all the time. Don't know when to shut up so I always get beat by another hit or two."

"No, it's genuinely impressive," said Elaine. "You take so many hits and you always, always keep coming back up."

"It makes you an invaluable distraction. With how loud you are and how much you can get under Alter student nerves with your yelling, you're basically a tank with AoE taunts," said Aldrich.

"Well, guess I'm good at something at least," said Adam. He shrugged. "Y'know, sometimes I feel too dumb or too incompetent to be a hero. I can't think quick like either of you, and in the Frames where we're all the same power, thinking quick is the most important thing to have."

"Maybe," said Aldrich. He put a hand on Adam's shoulder. "But what I can tell you is that out of us, out of anyone in this entire academy, you have the most heroic heart. You always get back up and you always see the good in things."

To be honest, Aldrich envied Adam a little for this. Adam had suffered greatly in life, but his heart had stayed pure. Aldrich knew that though he was not 'evil' by any means, but deep down, he was not truly fit to be a hero.

"Thanks, man," said Adam. "Now, if I can just beat these damn trolls-,"

Right then, the door to Aldrich's dorm swung open. Or more like it was torn open.

Seth Solar was there, door frame in his hand like it was a piece of paper, and behind him was his crew including the creep Ghost. The rank smell of alcohol reeked out from them and a few of them held half drunk liquor bottles in their hand.

They were all A-class students by now, though the only one truly deserving of the A-class was Seth. But because Seth had influence in the academy due to his mother being the head, he had gotten his four stooges into the A-class with no issue.

Because they were in A-class, they got a hefty stipend to spend and days off which they spent at Haven, the nearby town, spending their money on drinks, drugs, and women.

But why the hell were they here?

Aldrich, Adam, and Elaine immediately stood up, but they felt like mice cornered by a group of cats. Without their Frames, no, even with their Frames, they were all just prey to this group. This group of dangerous drunks.

"Playing video games, huh? You cockroaches think you deserve any of this?" said Seth as he stared at Aldrich's gaming monitor. He walked towards it and slammed his fist through the screen, obliterating the rig in a shower of sparks, broken plastic, metal, and glass.

"What the fuck was that for, asshole?" said Adam as he reached out to grab Seth's arm.

Seth immediately back hand slapped Adam into the wall behind him, rattling the room with the impact.

Adam groaned as he slid down, kneeling to recover his breath.

"Today has been a bad fucking day, so I suggest you Duds stay real quiet and do as we say," said Seth.

Aldrich helped Adam up, and Adam wiped blood off a burst lip before he grinned at Seth.

"Shut up, man," whispered Aldrich. "They're drunk. You have no idea what they'll do."

"I don't care. This asshole broke your gaming rig. That was one of the last things your parents bought you - I'm not going to let him get away with it." Adam turned to Seth. "Why'd you come here? Was it because you got your ass handed to you yesterday? Bet you know what that feels like pretty well by now, huh?"

Adam was referencing news that Seth, formerly the number 1 ranked student in Blackwater, had fallen to a solid 2nd after a relatively unknown Alter called Mel had beaten him consistently in single combat. The worst of this was yesterday when Mel had officially beaten Seth to take his rank 1 spot.

She had started off in the C-class, but after training like an utter madman, she realized her power had immense growth potential, and soon, she overtook Seth where he had been complacent, believing the power he had been born with to be invincible.

Seth began to breathe heavily, his rage almost tangible, but then he smiled. "You know what? Fuck it. I've had it with you. Beating you doesn't do sh*t. You always talk back because you're too fucking stupid to learn. I'll hurt you another way." He pointed to Elaine. "Get her. Take her to our barracks. We'll show her she's wasting her time with these idiots whether she wants it or not."

Ghost licked his lips and stepped forwards, motioning the other three guys ahead. "Come on, guys. Hope you didn't drink enough that your dicks aren't working."

"I have this entire meeting recorded," said Elaine as she held up her Eye-Phone. "If you touch me, I'll leak it to the Net and the Solar family will have quite the PR mess to clean up. Everything's recorded to a private server I have. The moment I press a single button, everything gets out."

Ghost and the other three stopped, looking back at Seth.

"I don't give a sh*t at this point," said Seth. He waved his guys ahead. "Go, get her. Break her."

At this point, Aldrich began to think of a way to get out of this using Elaine's recording as leverage, but Adam reacted first.

Adam shot out a punch at Seth's face, but it was like he had punched a brick wall. Seth did not even move from the impact, leaving Adam to painfully clutch at his fist.

"Fucking worm-filth. Out of my goddamn way!" said Seth as he once more back hand slapped Adam's head to push him off.

This time, though, the slap was accompanied by a sickening crack, and Adam fell to the ground completely limp, his head twisted at an unnatural angle.

Aldrich's thoughts completely stopped at that moment as he saw Adam slumped on the ground, his eyes wide, gurgling coming out of his throat. That was not a hit he was ever going to stand back up from.

Adam was dead.

"A-Adam?" said Elaine as she immediately knelt by Adam's side, drawing his head close to her. He looked up at her with blank eyes. She started to breathe heavily, her face twisting into equal parts fear, confusion, and shock. "Adam? Talk to me. Please, please tell me you're okay."

"Sh*t!" roared Seth as he looked at his hand. "Sh*t! Sh*t! Sh*t! Why are you Duds so fragile!? Made out of fucking cardboard! Just one tap from me and he just dies like that!"

Aldrich's moment of blankness, the sheer shock of seeing one of his only friends, a friend that always got back up no matter what, fall to the ground permanently, passed as soon as he heard Seth's enraged response.

Elaine was still on the floor with wide, distraught eyes, her hand on Adam's neck, checking desperately for a pulse even when the verdict was obvious that he was dead. She was normal. Her response was expected for someone that had lost a close friend so brutally and so easily like that.

Aldrich, however, had calmed down. It was not that he did not care about Adam, it was simply that he needed to ensure his and Elaine's survival.

Adam's death did not mean that Aldrich and Elaine had to suffer and die as well.

They could and would mourn for him later. For now, they had to live. If anything, that was what Adam would have wanted.

"You, one of the heirs to the Solar family, killed him," said Aldrich. "You know how bad this situation is, right?"

You might have been able to get away with doing whatever you wanted to Elaine even if she released it. You could have hired incredible lawyers and gotten PR firms to try and clear your image while Globe-Net firms scrubbed her recording while spreading rumors that she was lying.

But this, unfortunately, is way beyond that. This is murder.

We have your recorded admission of guilt and a dead body. The Frame initiative might be bare bones, but it still tallies who goes in and out of the program, and deaths, especially, it takes seriously considering the fact that the program wants good enough PR to have plenty of willing Dud applicants.

What do you think will happen when it gets leaked that Seth Solar not only threatened sexual assault but committed casual, cold-blooded murder? Your money could have covered sexual assault, but murder? Murder with evidence like this? There's no easy way for you to weasel your way out of this, especially not with your Solar family name on the line.

Not unless you let us go."

Aldrich's mind raced, thinking about the countless ways he could hold this information over Seth and his gang, making sure they never, ever raised a hand against him and Elaine again.

Seth paused for a good ten seconds, his face hard and his expression stern. In that time, his gang looked up at him hesitantly.

"What do we do, Seth?" said Ghost. "The Dud's right. Messing around with that girl, sh*t, we could've covered that up alright, but murder? The law might not give much of a sh*t about Duds, but when it comes to murder, they won't go easy on us. We're fucked, aren't we?"

Murder was a crime that was punished heavily throughout the near entirety of human history, but now more than ever it was no joke of a crime to commit.

Society still had a scarcity mindset regarding lives that any warm body, even a Dud body, was invaluable in a world where there was constant war against Variant beasts that at any moment could rise up and mow down countless thousands.

Duds might have gotten shafted in terms of employment and fair treatment and almost every other basic right, but murder was one thing they did not have to worry about, at least not from Alters that were not straight up villains.

"No," said Seth, his voice completely devoid of emotion. Utterly cold. "No we aren't."

Seth disappeared in a flash before he emerged in front of Elaine. His fist had smashed right through her chest, completely obliterating her heart.

Elaine's eyes stilled beneath her glasses as she looked down at her bloody, fist-filled chest in surprise. Blood trickled out of her mouth in red rivulets. She blinked once, and then her life fled her, her head hanging down limp.

Seth pulled back his blood-drenched arm from her chest, leaving her to fall and slump over Adam's corpse in a growing pool of red.

"What!?" said Ghost. His pale, sunken in red eyes were wide, and the others in Seth's gang shared this surprised reaction.

"We have to kill them," said Seth simply, spatters of blood painted across his black bodysuit. A stroke of red lay across his eyes, highlighting his gleaming white pupils, at how empty they were. Complete sociopathy. "Kill them before they can leak anything."

Before Aldrich could react, Seth had sped his fist through his stomach.

Aldrich felt his vision blur as he slumped to the ground, his guts and blood spilling out of a gaping hole in his chest as Seth stood over him.

This was it, Aldrich realized as he looked down at his bloody stomach. He put his hands over the hole, trying to keep his guts from spilling out.

This was it.

This was it.

This was it.

He was going to die.

Everything he had worked for, all those years, the death of his parents, the death of his friends =

All of it for nothing.

Gone in just one pathetic moment. One casual punch. All for these privileged Alter fucks to escape the consequences of their actions. All to escape judgement.

The thought of it was so agonizing, so unfair -

He had thought that when he saw his parents butchered like animals, he had lost any capability to feel strong emotion. But emotion, maybe all the hatred and bitterness that

had bottled up in him over the many agonizing years, welled up for one final moment before it all ended.

"You...you miserable fucks," said Aldrich, coughing blood. It was a miraculous effort that he could even speak, that he did not just drop dead, but somehow, through sheer force of will, he did. He raised a shaking, accusing finger at Seth Solar and his group.

"You...none of you deserve...to live. All of you-all of you-I swear, I swear I will make you suffer." Aldrich's breath began to wheeze, and he started to crawl forwards, his eyes bloodshot, his expression wild, deranged.

Everyone in the group except Seth Solar instinctively cowered backwards even though Aldrich was a dead man walking. There was something about a corpse crawling through sheer force of fucking hatred that chilled them to the bone.

"I swear...whatever Hell I go to, I'll crawl my way back out, then I'll drag you all in. I-I will be your judgement."

Aldrich stared up at Seth Solar with pure hatred, and Seth Solar stared down at him with pure, uncaring cold.

The last of Aldrich's life fled him then. He slumped over in a pool of his own blood and guts. His vision tilted and darkened. He felt numb all over. His hearing muffled and faded, echoes of the conversation around him becoming near unintelligible.

"Stop pissing your pants over a dead Dud and clean this sh*t up," said Seth Solar.
"Pack their bodies and dump them in the forest. We'll spread a rumor that they tried to run and Variants ate them.

You, Evan, you're a Techno. Hack into any tech they have here and wipe everything out..."

Aldrich's senses completely left him then, burying him in complete and utter darkness.

...

...

...

Then, Aldrich did not know how long afterwards, he saw bright white letters typing a message in plain font across the darkness that surrounded him.

[...]

[SYSTEM...initiated]

[...]

The font of the letters changed, turning gold in color and becoming more decorated with swirls and ornamental curves that looked like they belonged to a fantasy game.

To Elden World.

[Welcome, Host.]

[Choose your Class:]

Chapter 10: Necromancer

Aldrich...felt like he was in a dream. He was conscious, but not entirely there. Floating around in this sea of infinite darkness with only the gleaming golden letters of Elden World to focus on. Even then, it was so difficult to focus on those letters, as if at any moment, he would lose focus and his mind would slip away permanently into the void.

Aldrich did not so much consciously think as he did react on instinct. When he saw that familiar prompt from Elden World, he did what he had done when he had first started the game years ago.

He chose his class.

[Class: Necromancer Selected]

[As a Necromancer, death has always been by your side. It has crept by your shadow. It has lurked in the depths of your being. It has shaped who you are. But unlike many who face death and break under its abyssal gaze, you stared back and took control over the darkness.

Wielding negative energy toxic to life but nourishing to undead, you commit yourself to a path of dark magics where under your masterful touch, death is never the end. Or perhaps, to you, death is merely a beginning.

Raising undead armies, summoning rotted and bare boned monstrosities, and spreading necrotic misery and the cold of the grave all fall under your domain.

Is this the class you wish to choose?]

"Yes," said Aldrich, though in the darkness, his voice did not project. Only his thoughts.

This was the class he was most familiar with. The one he gravitated towards even in this dream-like state.

[Class: Necromancer Chosen]

[Necromancy is a broad art, as all encompassing as the dark is when the sun sets and restless spirits rise. Choose your Occultation. This will determine the type of necromancy you will practice:]

[-Occultation of the Shattered Bone

You let negative energies surge through your own body, harnessing them to strengthen it. Where others who practice necromancy have let their forms grow pale, sickly, and weakly, you have maintained a body and bones of iron.

You do not herald death with bolts and curses or undead minions, but through weapons of bone swung with your own two hands. You do not raise minions, but you modify your own body through ghastly experiments, stitching together a monstrous yet battle-ready form that will strike fear and lethal blows equally across the battlefield

Stat Affinities: Strength/Vitality/Magic]

[-Occultation of the Cold Rot

Death is cold. Death is merciless. And after death, there is always rot.

With this Occultation, you hold great mastery to inflict death. With a single bolt of death magic, you will cull unworthy lives. With a wave of your hand, you will cast fog that numbs and drains life from those that are still yet warm and living. With a mere touch, you will impart diseases and curses of rot that will cause untold pain and suffering.

Stat Affinities: Magic/Agility/Attunement]

[-Occultation of Legion

Death is never the end. With this occultation, you ensure that those that have fallen will always have a second chance. A second chance to serve under your thrall.

You take empty, lifeless corpses and breathe negative energy into them, granting them eternal undeath by your side. You may strengthen the undead, repairing their rotting flesh or strengthening their bleached bones. You may even call into the Nether and summon mighty undead who have ascended from mere nameless animated corpses to beings akin to high spirits or even gods.

You are never alone. Any battle you take, you shall have the might of countless graves supporting you.

You are Legion.

Stat Affinities: Magic/Attunement/Vitality]

Aldrich chose the [Occultation of Legion], confirming the selection without a hint of hesitation. This was the class of his Necromancer in the game, and so in his dream-like state, this was what he defaulted to.

[All selections have been finalized...]

[Necromancer of the Legion Occult, your adventure will now begin. May the -----]

The message cut off at the end, but Aldrich had barely a hazy moment to get confused by it before the darkness around him dispelled. Instead, he found himself lying down on a bed of leaves, staring up at a shadowy tree canopy above.

Beyond the trees, Aldrich could make out a few stars and the large, looming full moon.

Aldrich sat up, still feeling groggy, still feeling like he was in that dream-like state, but that soon passed, and with it, came the memories.

Memories of his death. Memories of Seth Solar murdering the only two friends he had.

Somehow, Aldrich was alive. And as long as he drew breath, he would never let that vile waste of oxygen live. Not ever. Nor his scum friends too.

Aldrich balled his fists up tightly, dead leaves cracking in his grip as his deathly pale knuckles whitened even further.

Wait, pale?

Aldrich held his hands up to himself and saw that they were indeed a shade of ghostly pale white that belonged only to corpses. His skin felt cold and almost clammy. He touched his stomach and felt a fist-sized hole in it from Seth Solar's punch.

Where his spine and organs were supposed to be, there was just gaping, empty space.

Yet, he was still alive.

Aldrich blinked several times, processing what had happened. He remembered his time in the dark space where he had gone through the Elden World character selection process. He had almost thought that a dream, but...but had it all been real?

As if to confirm Aldrich's thoughts, a status screen flashed in front of him.

Current Status: Unburdened [+5 to agility]

Name: Aldrich Yang

Race: Undead

Class: Necromancer (Occultation of Legion)

Level: 1

HP: 18/18

Mana: 15/15

Stats-

Strength: 6

Agility: 8 (13)

Vitality: 6

Magic: 5

Attunement: 5

Perception: 8

Attuned Spells-

NONE

Passives -

Undead Body

Rank: N/A

The host has become an undead. They do not require sustenance, sleep, or rest to function. Their stamina is virtually limitless. Any wound aside from a critical head injury will not compromise the host's mobility or bodily functions, but damage will still be registered to the host's total HP pool. However, the host will not receive any bonus damage from being struck in locations other than the head.

-Necrotic/Negative energy damage is converted to healing

-Healing is converted to damage

-Immunity to disease and sickness

-Immunity to psychic damage

- Immunity to poison damage
- 50% resistance to cold damage
- 50% resistance to curse damage
- 90% resistance to piercing damage unless struck in the head
- 50% resistance to slashing damage unless struck in the head
- Double damage taken from crushing/bludgeoning damage
- Double damage taken from fire type attacks

Equipment-

Head [NONE]

Body [NONE]

Waist [NONE]

Arms [NONE]

Legs [NONE]

Accessory [NONE]

]]]

Aldrich looked at this status in wonder at first, but then calm quickly after. He started to analyze it, and something within him, some natural instinct, perhaps, made him understand that he was not dreaming, that this was very, very real.

Aldrich did not need to rely on the Frame initiative anymore. That was a program for powerless students like him to get reminded of how utterly weak and worthless they were, a program where they were given hope only to have it crushed and ground under a merciless Alter boot.

Aldrich finally, finally, had the power he had only ever dreamed of. Power that was his and ONLY his.

Power that Aldrich would use for his vengeance.

First, on Seth Solar, then on the Trident.

Aldrich heard rustling around him, and he tensed up, knowing he was in danger. He knew that Seth Solar had dumped him in the forests surrounding Blackwater, which meant that this rustling could come from just one threat.

Variants.

Aldrich saw two pairs of gleaming yellow eyes with eerie, squared black pupils staring at him from the dark of the forest.

Then, a low, grumbling growling.

Before, Aldrich would have ran at first sight of this threat, not in fear, but because he knew there was absolutely no way he would ever threaten a Variant with his basic human strength.

Not even the Variants in this forest, weak Variants that did not go past D rank in terms of threat, were ever enemies he could hope to beat.

But that was when Aldrich was powerless.

Before he was a Necromancer. He might have been level 1, but he knew the ins and outs of his class to the level of almost artistic mastery. He knew what spells to get, how to level, and how to fight.

Meanwhile, nobody in this world knew what Aldrich could do. He was the only player in a game where the world would soon come to dance in his palm whether or not they would dance willingly or as undead minions.

Aldrich took in a breath, feeling how light and fast his body was, and he felt confident. He stared straight back at those monstrous yellow eyes and did not see a life ending disaster, but instead the first undead for his new Legion.