

# Super Necromancer System

## Chapter 401: {Aftermath}

Kinesis stood up, a little shake in her movements. Not the type you would expect from someone that had gotten a skull splitting bashing to their head. No, that would have been expected. Instead, what came over her was an odd, unnatural tremor that shivered down from head to toe, like she was a glitching model in an ill-optimized game.

The moment passed, and when it did, Kinesis's helmet was fully repaired, the gaping, ugly crack sealed over. She raised a hand in the air and crushed it into a fist. The grey construct energy spread throughout the storage room collapsed into her fist.

The odd, ringed darkness was gone without a single trace, as if it had never been there at all. With it gone, Earth's natural flow of energy could resume. Almost immediately, a drone zipped into the room through the hole Arthur had blasted out of.

It was an odd thing, unlike anything that any arms manufacturing corporation would have recognized. The drone's spherical grey head was attached to three prehensile, segmented tails, making it look like an oversized cell swimming about with flagellum.

Unlike regular drones, this one did not really fly or even hover, it looked like it organically swam through air in spite of its distinctively mechanical, metallic appearance, almost like a seamless fusion of machine and meat.

The drone's blinking red eye landed on Kinesis, and from it, a rough, grating man's voice grunted outwards.

"Is it done?"

"It is," said Kinesis. "I do not recognize your voice. You are not the usual one giving me orders."

A harsh laugh echoed out from the drone.

At the other end of the line was a powerfully built man sitting on what looked like a command chair surrounded by a ring of grey energy inscribed with strange, unrecognizable sigils of black. Recognizable technology like monitors and unrecognizable things that looked like pulsating metal folds of fleshy innards formed the walls of the odd room that contained him.

"There's been a sudden change in leadership," said the man with a wide grin made wider by rough scars that jutted out from his lips to his cheeks. Smoke trailed from a freshly lit cigar stuck between his oddly sharp teeth. His eyes were shaped like four pointed stars filled in with inky black while his white, blood-streaked hair stood straight in a spiky, short-cut mess. "Colonel Davos isn't leading this joint anymore."

"What does that mean?" said Kinesis.

"Right, you alien fuckers don't understand shut unless it's literal," said the man. "Means Colonel Davos has stepped down from the Irregulars Department."

"Stepped down? That is not possible. The department operates utilizing the Mother's shell and psycho-dimensional networks, and those are bonded only to those she chooses as her 'kin'."

"True. But there's another way to get in the Mother's good graces," said the man. He wiped his mouth, and blood stained a streak across his face.

Kinesis understood. "I see now. You have defeated Colonel Davos and consumed his blood."

"You figure things out quick, don't you?"

"The United States government does not oppose to this shift in leadership?"

"Government likes whoever can get results. And old Davos was being a little too nice for his own good."

If he had more balls, this Thanatos shitstorm would have been squashed on day one. I would've personally nuked that alien fucker as soon as he showed up from his pit in Haven," said the man. He spat in disgust. "But Davos was too weak. He gave books to Thanatos and said he felt a 'determination' in that thing's voice that'd help humanity. What a load of shit."

But that won't happen anymore.

Won't let alien scum walk all over the states and this world, taking advantage of our goodwill like parasites to get stronger and stronger."

"What about 22? I predict she will oppose your control over her."

"It does whatever I tell it to do, whether it wants to or not," said the man. "And you're asking too many questions for a walking, talking outworld disease. You made sure to kill Hammerhead, yeah?"

"I did."

"Nice. And the Zero Factor? You confirmed it works?"

"I have confirmed that it can eliminate any flow of positive energy whether it originates from this planet or not."

"That's what I like to hear. Managing to steal that sample from the Panopticon was one hell of a godsend, I tell you."

Once we finish synthesizing that up, it'll finally be time to free humanity from not just you alien scum, but the Hivemind too. Now isn't that something to get excited about, eh?"

"I am not concerned about the progress of your species. However, I desire to reconfirm the status of my previous agreement with Colonel Davos and the United States government."

"What, think I'm not trustworthy, is that it?"

"Yes." Kinesis replied bluntly and without hesitation.

The man grinned. "Well, guess that's one thing I like about you. You're honest. Though that doesn't count for shit if you're not human enough to know the weight behind a lie. But don't worry, S-class dog, your deal's still intact."

You help us clean house and takeover, and we'll connect you back to the Core and send you right back on to your home, wherever the hell it is."

"Understood."

"Now clear the area and return to base. Tie up any loose ends if you have to. And await further orders."

"Understood."

Kinesis saw the drone fly away, zipping back out of the crater with speed that outperformed any ordinary drone. She had two orders to fulfill. To tie up any loose ends – a phrase she was familiar with – and to return to base.

She acted on the first order, floating down the storage area and into the mansion. She descended three stories until she reached a room secured with fortified metal doors.

Or, more accurately, previously secured. The doors were warped and broken apart from the middle as if a bomb had gone off.

Through the doors was a sterile, white-tiled room reminiscent of a hospital. There, lying on the ground, was Bart Hammerhead. Large high-caliber bullet holes riddled his back, still leaking fresh blood that painted the clean white tiles with fresh red.

His arm was stretched out towards a hospital bed where a young woman lay nestled inside a medical chamber that looked like an advanced coffin. Tubes and wires jutted out of the chamber and into the woman, particularly around her lungs and gills, giving her the support to breathe.

Kinesis briefly analyzed the room. Bart Hammerhead's death would be ruled as an unlucky case of rogue A.I. involving Arthur.

The high caliber rounds that killed Hammerhead had been made from Kinesis's energy constructs but were created to exactly match the ammunition available to Arthur and the drones under his control.

The cause for Arthur's sudden insanity would be ruled as infiltration from Thanatos, who would now longer be present to defend himself, giving casus belli for the United States government to enact strong action against Haven.

In addition, Caliburn, a company that had long opposed the U.S. government by refusing to compromise itself and share data it had on high profile clients to the government, would now lose a massive amount of trust among its customers, most likely destroying it completely.

But Kinesis did not care much about these results, if at all. All she cared about was the orders she was given. Each one took her one step closer to returning home. Back to the Formless Grey. Back where she would become whole again.

Kinesis pointed her arm towards the girl entombed in the coffin that gave her life. Bullets shaped in the air beside her hand.

The girl's chest heaved up, then down in rhythmic, mechanically assisted motion. Her eyes were closed, her body still, unable to resist or, indeed, perceive anything at all.

Kinesis put her hand down. The constructs faded. She had only been given an order to 'tie up loose ends'. That was a vague statement open for interpretation. At its baseline, it meant there could be no survivors left.

But this fragile lifeform would die soon anyway. The networks in this domicile would shutdown in minutes. It would only take a few more minutes after that for her to suffocate. There was no need to assure her death.

Kinesis flew away.

## **Chapter 402: {Oni }**

Explosion after explosion rocked the air. Shockwaves unleashed a staccato sonata of destruction. Any man in the vicinity would have had their eardrums blasted to smithereens, but alas, the unfortunate audience to this performance of ruin were only machines, their smoldering metal chunks and crackling, ripped wire innards strewn in droves across desert dry orange earth.

"You've improved, Fifth!" Clint leaped in mid air, a majestic set of brown feathered avian wings stretched out from his back. Harsh sunlight streamed down from various holes in the now not so very defensive dome that protected Meteor Labs.

The pupils in Clint's eyes narrowed into hyper-focused slits as they took in his target: Shuten Doji.

Where Clint's wings showed free flowing mastery over the skies, Shuten Doji's bare feet, his rough, callused toes digging, no cracking into the firm earth like mini anchors, showcased a rock-solid affinity for the earth.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Unbreakable!?" said Shuten Doji. He raised an enormous kanabo - a Japanese club that looked like an oversized baseball bat lined with bone shattering, brain splattering studs - in the air.

The kanabo was made seemingly of frozen purple liquid. It was surrounded by a permanent coating of wispy lavender fog reminiscent of the condensed air that liquid nitrogen gave off.

"Settling the score, that's what!" boomed Clint. He raised his clenched fists. They were covered in a crackling orange glow. A rough imitation of Stella's explosive blood.

"You've gone insane!" said Shuten Doji. "The truce we had - you break it now!? All the Swords will be upon you! Shit-!"

Shuten Doji leaped backwards, the firm earth shattering under the weight and power of his sudden movement. Almost immediately afterwards, the two footprints he left were engulfed in an explosion of bright orange light.

"You're mad! Reckless!" Shuten Doji narrowed his eyes as the shockwave of the explosion crashed into him. It was a shockwave powerful enough to have shattered the ordinary Alter's ribcage, but it bounced off Shuten Doji's body like rain on a windshield. "Your tribe still has not recovered from our past conflict! You would bring bloodshed on them again!?"

"Nah. This time, it's purely personal. Just me payin' back my debts." The aftermath of Clint bringing down two explosive fists on the ground drove up a cloud of debris, making nothing but the reds of his gleaming eyes visible.

Shuten Doji noticed they were glowing a shade brighter than usual. He placed his kanabo in front of him, in line with Clint's gaze. Red hot beams slammed into Shuten Doji's icy club with a sizzling impact. The kinetic force was enough to send Shuten Doji skidding backwards, but not by much.

The club did not melt, either.

Shuten Doji could breathe out alcohol as intense fire, but he could also do the reverse. He could change the chemical structure of alcohol and structure it into an incredibly dense, battle-ready frost structure.

'He hasn't improved at all since five years ago,' thought Shuten Doji as he carefully moved his kanabo in line with Clint's gaze, preventing the beams from hitting him. 'He's grown complacent. But I can't blame him. I would have too if I had that logic-defying, cheat-like ability of his.'

"You've improved a lot," reiterated Clint. The force of his eye beams had scattered the dust cloud, revealing his towering, musclebound figure. He had on no clothes at this point, destroyed as they were by repeated explosions - both from his own and from tanking Shuten Doji's.

Plate-like armor scales covered most of Clint's body. His genitals - a potential weak spot unneeded for battle - had disappeared upon sensing a fight.

'A good thing, too. Fighting naked men is not something I relish,' thought Shuten Doji.

"But it won't be enough for me. This time, I'll stick to you. I'll make sure to evolve past anything you throw at me. I'll make sure you're dead," said Clint.

"What changed?" said Shuten Doji, his tone accusatory. "What drives you now to seek me out? After years?"

"Like I said. A score to settle."

"Nonsense!" Shuten Doji spat out. "You killed my fellow Swords. You killed my students. Before that, when you destroyed Bushido, you killed my father, my uncle! You massacred hundreds of innocents.

Husbands, wives, daughters, sons!

Yet you dare to fight in the name of your loss!? One measly lover!?"

Clint stopped mid step. His jaw set. Before, his eyes were serious but not particularly driven. Now, they were. Driven by cold, long-nurtured anger. "Then how about we put our losses on the line."

"What?" asked Shuten Doji. He held back a desire to involuntarily step back.

"Your losses against mine," said Clint. "If you win, you get to give justice to all those countless lives you're talking about. If I win, I get to prove my wife's loss was deeper than everyone you're jabberin' about."

"What kind of might makes right philosophy is that? More nonsense!"

"You're right. It is nonsense. But that's the thing. Loss is nonsensical. It hurts hard no matter what the numbers say or how the scales lie." Clint's arm morphed, splitting down the middle.

Muscle fibers and severed bone detached and re-arranged into a bladed structure. A metallic grey sheen covered over the bio-blade for a final glossy touch.

"Then you fight to soothe the pain? The old wounds?" Shuten Doji shook his head. "Killing me will not heal that pain. If it did, you would have come for me far sooner, when the hurt was still fresh."

"Maybe. Maybe not. I'll let your corpse know whether you were right or not." Clint disappeared, skin refracting light into pure invisibility.

Shuten Doji remained calm and waited. Then, he sensed it. Subtle changes in wind pressure from behind him. He reacted with the adaptability of a trained professional, no, more than a simple experienced merc.

A Sword.

One of the best fighters in the entire world.

His power was classed under the 'Trump' category that involved abilities that overlapped across multiple categories. In this case, his power could convert alcohol into several different effects.

There was, as he showcased now, the Creator class ability to create ice constructs. He also had the Blaster class ability to breathe fire or explosive fireballs.

But to truly dance with the top of the top, where physical powerhouses were a dime a dozen, Shuten Doji relied the most on his ability's Augmenter category application.

He could circulate alcohol throughout his veins and convert it into a body strengthening agent, dramatically increasing his physical stats, his strength, speed, and even reflexes, at the cost of increasing his drunkenness.

Shuten Doji swayed backwards, folding back at the waist like he was an extreme limbo master. His bare skin showed glowing purple veins - a visual indicator that the alcohol was strengthening him.

Clint's blade arm zipped above Shuten Doji with a whining sound. He stared down at Shuten Doji with narrowed eyes, but he was still stuck mid-swing, wide open for a counter attack.

Shuten Doji sprung back, pushing off the ground with a handstand that fueled a double kick right into Clint's jaw. Impact, or rather, the explosion of the blow sent Clint hurtling several dozens of meters into the air in an instant.

Clint's wings furled out, stopping him from flying up any higher. He put a hand to his mouth and drew fingers coated with copious amounts of blood back. His jaw had shattered down the middle, dangling down in two pieces. His tongue barely hung in his mouth cavity by a thread of remaining muscle. His teeth had split apart into ugly shards.

"Heh." Clint gurgled out. He grabbed his loose jaw and ripped it off. Almost instantly, a new one formed, raw red flesh covering the gaping wound like bubbling foam before stabilizing into a new jaw.

This time, the jaw was covered in thicker armor plating that made it look like he was wearing a bronze mask. He no longer had a visible mouth. Just pure protective plate.

"You hit a lot harder than before," said Clint, his voice projecting outwards through little holes in his mouth plate. "Your strength, speed, reactivity - every part of you's improved. What changed for you?"

"Figured out there's a lot more in life to fight for than I'd once thought," said Shuten Doji as he swayed back to standing. He shifted from side to side, his body lithe with free flowing drunken movement. His wild, lengthy hair swayed with him.

His eyes were a bright violet, the blood vessels gleaming bright against the canvas of the eye whites. Like this, with his stubby horns, he looked like a demon - like Shuten Doji, the drunken oni which he was named after.

"Damn. And here I thought I'd sworn off day drinkin'." He glared up at Clint with shaky, unfocused eyes, but Clint knew better than anyone else that those drunken eyes were a thousand times more threatening than any other expression Shuten Doji could have made.

"I tried talkin' ya outta this, I really did. But if it's a fight ya want, then it's a fight yer gonna have!"

## **- Chapter 403: Happiness 2 |**



## Chapter 403: Happiness 2

Years passed.

At seventeen, the boy became less a boy, but not quite a man. A real man, his father often told him, was marked by self sacrifice. The will to give away a piece of yourself for someone else was what made man more than simple beast.

Not just that.

It made man into something greater than themselves.

It made a man into a hero.

And now, the boy had a chance to prove himself.

"It's over." The boy said, his voice accented with a wheeze speckled with blood. His hero costume was a good match of colorful and military with a meshweave black bodysuit balanced out with circuit-like streaks of glowing light, almost white green. The streaks drew out an insignia of a three pointed shield on his chest - the symbol he had chosen to represent himself as a hero.

That symbol was now thoroughly defaced with a smoking diagonal char running across it, almost as if someone had taken a superheated pen and crossed the entire thing out. The skin revealed by the line was red and raw, thoroughly burned and beaten through battle.

"No. No it's not." Another boy of the same age floated in the air, a dozen or so meters away. He had on a plain black bodysuit. One with no real flair to it, mass produced and soulless. His face was by every definition the archetype of the golden era comic book hero. Square jawed, radiating strength.

But his eyes, his bright golden eyes that did not so much shine as they did burn, were searing mirrors into a tortured soul.

"Look around you, Seth." The boy who wanted to prove himself a hero motioned around him. There was nothing but smoking rubble and above, a night sky with a pale moon that looked down with indifference, the same kind of indifference it must have had in the many millions of years it had seen disaster after disaster come and go upon the surface of its host planet.

"Blackwater's nothing but rubble. Solomon Solar's been captured. The rest of the Trident's been busted. There is no great revolution. There is no new Age of Villains.

There's nothing left for you to fight for."

"But there is," said Seth Solar. When he spoke, his breath distorted the air with heat waves. His golden hair, once slicked back, now shimmered up in the air like live flames. Bright, sunlit cracks traveled across his hands, his face, his entire body, like he was a porcelain doll ready to shatter into pieces at any moment.

"It's all of you. All of you that got to live happy lives, parading around in proper hero academies, deluding yourselves that you're fighting for something good in this world.

In this idiotic world that makes no sense and cares about nothing. I'm going to break it. Burn it all down.

Then, at least, there'll be peace."

"You don't want to do that," said the boy. He put his hand out. A round shield of pale mint green energy forged itself around his forearm. It mimicked that of Minuteman, a proud hero who once stood as the current era's representative of Golden Era heroism, when heroes gave all they have for a better, brighter tomorrow.

Minuteman had been the boy's teacher before an attack by the Trident ended the noble hero's life all too early. Now, it was up to the boy to lift this shield in honor of his teacher.

In honor of everyone that he protected and loved.

"Just...give up, man." Another boy's voice echoed through the air. A collapsed roof slid over to the side, and beneath it, a muscular boy crawled out with a girl behind him.

"Adam. Elaine." The shield bearing boy nodded, smiling. He knew deep down that his close friends, both trainee heroes like him, were not dead. But it still warmed his heart to see them alive and kicking.

But figured. Adam was too stubborn to ever die. And Elaine too smart.

Adam pointed an accusing finger at Seth. "Nihilism is totally out of fashion, dude. And it must suck ass living for nothing. Or trying to make everything nothing.

I promise you, there's a better alternative to fix your issues than burning everything down.

Maybe therapy-,"

A blast of solar energy from Seth Solar's fist sped towards Adam like a shooting star.

Adam's gained a chromatic luster as his skin turned into durable metametal in preparation to take the hit.

Before the solar blast could hit, however, it unraveled, breaking apart into various strands that coiled around each other in an ever shrinking ball. Eventually, the ball just disappeared out of existence.

"Running that mouth of yours again..." Elaine coughed blood, her rainbow eyes bloodshot from using her energy control powers excessively. Her long hazel hair was burnt and cut up in awkward spots.

"Elaine, don't burn yourself out!" said Adam. He raised a fist at Seth. "You - I'll get you for that!"

"If you didn't say anything, he wouldn't have done anything," commented Elaine.

"...Right."

"And you're in no condition to move. It's taking you all you have just to stay standing with metalform on."

"Which means he's going to kick your ass instead!" Adam pointed at the shield boy.

"You should have stayed under the rubble." Seth grinned as he sped forward, fist cocked back, ready to unleash it right into Adam's face.

The fist clanged backwards, hitting the boy's shield. Force reflected backwards, sending Seth flying back in the air. He stopped his recoil mid-air and spat in disgust.

"Your friends are just sitting ducks. Weakness that'll anchor you down, make you waste energy. Sooner or later, they'll be the death of you," said Seth.

"I don't care," said the boy. "A hero...is meant to protect, no matter what the cost is."

"Yeah? That so?" Seth laughed. Then he laughed some more, doubling over, losing his breath in his peals.

"Did he go nuts?" whispered Adam.

"Quiet," said Elaine. "Take this time to rest."

"I don't get the point of you heroes. Or wait, you three aren't even real heroes yet," said Seth. "But still. You make my stomach crawl. Especially your type, the Golden Era cosplayers that think they're making a difference."

At least the average hero knows that their cape and costume are just for show. They know they just want fame and credits.

But you-," Seth looked down at the boy and his friends in disgust.

"You protect, no matter the cost, huh?

Then where was your kind when I was born? When my shitty dad knocked up my shitty mother to make his own personal punching bag? Where were you to stop him? To stop a miserable life from growing up in this shithole of a world?

Where were you when I was tortured, beaten, shaped to be something I never wanted to be? I never asked for anything much. All I wanted to do was be happy. Normal.

Have a mom. A dad. A life that I could call mine and only mine, not just some egomaniac's pet project.

No, let's forget about me.

Let's forget about the big bads you can see in front of your face. The kind you can just beat down, put in prison, and forget about.

Where the hell are you for the starving child in the streets? In the outskirts of so many cities?

Where are you for this system of heroes that lets people like my father thrive? What about the corporations? The way the Panopticon controls the world's credits, funneling them to the top while everyone below just chokes on shit?

What are you going to do about all that? About this system that's so rotten down to the core that it deserves nothing but to be burned down?"

"Change it," said the boy firmly. "I don't know the details. I don't know the path I'll take to get there. But I'll change it. One step at a time.

You and I are the same in that way. We want to see the world change. But where you want to see it burn, I want to see it get better. And deep down, that's what you want too, isn't it?"

"No. I'd rather see ashes than progress in spite of me." Seth Solar roared as his eyes flashed, unleashing twin beams of golden, superheated solar energy.

Seth Solar was not rationing his solar energy anymore. He was going all out even when his body was breaking apart from within. He had let his emotions - his rage, mostly - overcome him.

Had Seth rationed his energy, kept making attacks against Adam and Elaine to distract the boy, then he would have tired the boy and his shields out in a long, drawn out fight.

But now, this was going to be the final confrontation.

The boy raised his arm, blocking the beams. The rubble in front of him started to glow molten orange just from the sheer heat radiating off of the beams.

The flesh around the boy's arm began to sizzle and bubble, melting off through his heat resistant suit and trained body.

But still, the boy took a step forward, against the scorching tide. He closed his eyes so as to not be blinded.

Step by step, he went forwards, ever forwards, just like the change he had promised.

## **Chapter 404: {To the Vaults}**

"This is it." Valera hovered over a cocoon of thickly woven grey matter. Unlike the gaseous clouds, this was a far more solid structure, as if someone had taken the cloud matter and turned it into thread to spin and weave with.

The cocoon was just big enough to contain one large person, and Valera knew who that was: Aldrich. She could sense it from the magical energy radiating around the cocoon in shimmering waves of pure blue.

In this dimension of lifeless, color-drained grey, the blue of mana stood out in sheer, stark contrast. The mana had given Valera the connection she needed to pinpoint Aldrich's presence. She had lost track of how long she had spent traveling.

It was most definitely more than a month. But after a month, she simply lost track of time. It was easy to do for her. Vampires like her that lived for many centuries, if not an eternity, had an innate capacity to mentally phase through time.

It was something like an active hibernation. A necessary adaptation for long lived creatures to prevent their minds from falling to the forgetfulness and, in extreme cases, flat out madness of Immortalic Rot.

Roughly, Valera guessed, she could have spent several years traveling, moving from grey cloud to grey cloud in this infinite dark expanse. But to find Aldrich, her love, she would spare no effort. No, rather, it was simply necessary.

Still, this place was...odd, to say the least. When Valera looked around, she saw a vast network of grey cocoons all connected together in a massive web. The web spanned far into the horizon to the point where she almost thought this mega structure could be infinite.

There must have been thousands, no millions of cocoons here, but Valera paid no heed to any of them. If they contained other beings, it was dangerous to try and mess with them to wake up what was within.

All she cared about was Aldrich.

But how was she going to get him out?

Valera knelt down atop the cocoon, feeling the magical energy emanating from it warm her. Her grey body regained proper color as the mana infused back into her.

In the first place, she had little idea where this mana was even coming from, but she did not complain.

The fact that it was here was a godsend. With it, Aldrich could teleport them out once he awakened.

The awakening part was the important thing here.

Aldrich was in a 'dormant' mental state here, preventing him from using the mana given to him. Liches and undead could enter dormant states to pass time, say, for example, when resting in tombs of graves or whatnot. It was a form of hibernation to reset the mind and counter Immortalic Rot.

But somehow, Aldrich had been forced into a dormant state. Normally, Valera could awaken him with telepathy, but it was impossible to reach him through the cocoon.

However -

Valera tentatively sunk her hand into the cocoon. It yielded surprisingly easily. She felt her hand sink into what felt like water. Sensing no harm, she put an entire arm in. She felt it plunge into a deep space far larger than what the cocoon showed from the outside.

Aldrich was deep within this strange dimensional prison, and, though it was hard to tell, Valera could sense that the further she went down, the stronger her link with Aldrich became.

If Valera dove down fully, swam into the heart of this cocoon, then she determined she could touch with Aldrich's mind again and forcibly awaken him.

There were so very many things to consider, though. What if there were threats within? What was within in the first place? Would she actually be able to awaken him, even if she managed to make contact with him? And if she dove deep enough, what guaranteed that she could get out?

Valera shook her head. All her doubts, questions, and fears dissipated.

The man she loved needed her.

That was all the reason she needed.

Without hesitation, Valera sunk into the cocoon.

"Arghh! When is this going to end!?" Falco hunkered down behind a metal crate, hands over his head. His Aztech Enervator-2 was out of his hands, dangling from a smartlink chord attached from gun barrel to his wrist port.

Ahead of him, in a narrow hallway, a ceiling turret unleashed a constant salvo of bullets, as did several humanoid battle bots wielding smartlink rifles of their own.

"We wouldn't be in this spot if you didn't trip the motion sensors in the first place," said Kris, taking cover beside Falco. "My cloud disables cameras and surveillance from IDing us, but tripping a physical sensor's going to mess shit up no matter what."

"I'm sorry, okay, I didn't see it!" protested Falco.

"Now the elevators are locked out." Kris put his knuckles to his forehead in frustration. "We have to go down three extra floors that we wouldn't have had to to get to the vaults."

"It's fine." Diamondback's voice rung clear through the earlink comms.

The turrets and drones redirected their aim from the crate to straight down the hallway, right to Diamondback as he trudged forwards without giving a damn for cover.

Or, to be more accurate, with his diamond metamaterial skin, he WAS the cover.

"INTRUDERS DETECTED. UTILIZING LETHAL FORCE." The drones chanted in robotic unison, firing at will.

All the bullets pinged off Diamondback. Even the high caliber rounds from the turret.

Diamondback sprinted forward with heavy, clanking steps like an armored tank, ignoring everything thrown at him. He leaped into the air and grabbed the turret, his crystalline blue hands sinking into the metal with a wrenching grip.

With a grunt, Diamondback tore the turret right off in a shower of sparks and shredded metal parts. He spun to make momentum before tossing the large turret at the drones. The turret was like a cannonball, shattering the first line of drones in half outright while knocking more behind backwards.

The rest, Diamondback dealt with methodically, throwing out palm strikes that shot out diamond buckshot that shredded through the battle bots like they were made of paper.

"Fine? I would have thought you would be the last one to be fine with this," said Kris. He was not the type to raise his voice, but he was getting close.

"What's done is done. How we adapt to unforeseen events is how we'll succeed," said Diamondback. "There's no point wasting emotions and energy on mistakes."

"Cleared out the Cyclops here," said Stella's voice. She, Tox, Ace, Alan, and Alexis were at the other end of the hallway where they were dealing with two Cyclops bots.

Diamondback had taken Kris and Falco, the weaker members of the group, passed the dangerous Cyclops to the end of the hallway where Kris could jack into a control panel and open up the doors to the next floor.

"Good," said Diamondback. "Any losses?"

"No. EMP charges don't work as well as you advertised on the Cyclops. They can still move around," said Stella. "But it does mess their aim and movement up. Enough that dealing with them was just a matter of breaching their tough hides over time."

"They must've upgraded," said Diamondback. "The data we got from Casimir about this place is about a year outdated. But upgrading bots as high end as the Cyclops would've taken time and resources..."

Diamondback trudged forward, thinking while throwing out diamond shards on autopilot, as if the drones were just minor nuisances.

"It's like they expected this place to get attacked."

"They couldn't have predicted us," said Stella. "Unless there was a tiny ass chance that they had a seer with them."

'Seer' was the term given to Psionic class Alters who could see through the flow of time. They were extremely rare with only a select few individuals even known to have this ability across the entire globe. And even then, most could only see into the past.

Seeing into the future was deemed near impossible, with most visions being extremely inaccurate. The only Alter in the world who had relatively accurate visions was Prophet who was part of the AA, and he could only give vague visions of wide scale disaster.

Nothing specific.



"Unlikely, like you said," said Diamondback. "What I'm thinking is that they've made some breakthroughs here that's netted them something valuable. Something worth upping the security over."

"Well, whatever it is, we either blow it the fuck up or we take it," said Stella.

"Agreed. The mission stays the same. I've cleared the way to the next floor, but stay on your toes. The defenses are light now, but they know we're in here now. And anyone that isn't blind or stupid will know we're after the vaults.

We don't have the element of surprise anymore. They'll have time to stack their defenses sky high down in the vaults."

## **Chapter 405: {Subject 6A }**

"Quickly! Get the N-Ring out of here!" A voice that strained to stay loud against the weathering effects of age blasted through the hazmat suits of every scientist on the RRF (Ring Research Floor).

"Initiating Ring Lockdown Procedure!" said Emi. She sprinted over to the main control panel monitoring the N-Ring. Flashing alarm lights on the ceiling cast a threatening red hue over the entire research floor. They were soundless so as to prevent the N-Ring from reacting too much, but the silence only made the situation that much more tense.

Emi pressed the wrist of her suit against the touchscreen. The screen read a strip of light on her suit and reacted. The images and numbers showing the ring's structure and stability disappeared.

Instead, large red letters spelling of LOCKDOWN covered the now blackened screen.

The metal tiles and panels under the N-ring's spherical container opened up, revealing a tubular pathway that led further undergone, down into the deepest depths of the vaults.

Several voices echoed through the scientists' communications.

"Energizing magnetic rails!"

"Booting anti-gravity stabilization!"

"Encasing the ring with Null-alloy shielding!"

Mechanical arms attached interlocking pieces of vantablack null-ore around the N-Ring container. The tube underneath it lit up with twin strips of light as the magnetic rail system readied.

In the span of ten seconds, everything was ready. This was technology on par with the best labs in the world, those funded directly by the Panopticon or Megacorporations. Nobody would have expected something like this to be in the desert wasteland dumps in the middle of nowhere, especially not in Meteor Labs, a research center that, on paper, focused on variant cell culture grafts - an incredibly over saturated field dominated near entirely by Sheshanaga and its heads.

The N-Ring container slid down, guided by a magnetic rail system that ensured a speedy and stable escape. It would head down to the lowest floor of the vaults, in a specially designed chamber that was, for all intents and purposes, absolutely impenetrable.

"What's the deal! What's going on?" said a scientist. "Dr. Ziegler, your orders!?"

"I am assessing the situation," said Dr. Ziegler, head of the research team at Meteor Labs. A former U.S. government researcher who was even now wanted with a bounty of 10 million credits - a 'S-rank' bounty - solely from the knowledge he had about alien technology.

His voice was aged, weak, and yet, full of strength borne from years of experience.

Dr. Ziegler swiped at the space in front of him, creating a holographic screen with his power. From it, he could interface with all the technology coded to him and modify it.

In essence, the entirety of the labs was under his control, though with his advanced age and Crystallization, not nearly at the level it had been when he used to be the A rank hero called Machine Mind.

"I see," said Dr. Ziegler.

"What do you see!? Now's not the time for cryptic one liners, old man!" said a panicked scientist. "We have to get down to-,"

The scientist's voice stopped.

"I have cut Jonathan from our communications," said Dr. Ziegler. "Panic is a disease whose spread I care very little for. Now, I will explain what we are to do.

Currently, Shuten Doji is engaged in combat against the Unbreakable."

"The Unbreakable!?" said Emi. "My dad can't handle him! He lost to him before already. He's going to die!"

"As I have stated before, I will not tolerate panic. Emi, I afford you one transgression due to your excellent work, but no more than that," said Dr. Ziegler.

Emi gulped and said nothing.

"Shuten Doji is not the same man he was five years ago, but it is undeniable that any fight against the Unbreakable is one that eventually becomes a losing one," said Dr. Ziegler. "The ether traces left by the recent geostorm have cut us off from outside communications for approximately another forty minutes.

I am seeing the battle between Shuten Doji and Unbreakable through every camera, sensor, and drone linked to this network, and my assessment is that Shuten Doji is capable of holding off the Unbreakable for that long."

"How about sending him reinforcements?" said Emi, calmer now, though there was still urgency in her voice. "We have a ton of Cyclops battle bots from ARMA. Red grade, too, best of the best. And newly upgraded just a few months ago. Those should help, right?"

"That is where a problem arises. We have been infiltrated," said Dr. Ziegler.

"Infiltrated? So the Unbreakable's attack is just a cover up? Who is it? Nomads?" said a scientist.

Dr. Ziegler looked at the screen in front of him as it flipped from outside cameras to inside ones, showing the warpath of the infiltration group. Already they had taken down one Cyclops with a high end, custom designed EMP charge. Not just that, but they were a formidable force too on their own.

"I am scanning the faces of the intruders and referencing them to a facial recognition databases." Dr. Ziegler nodded after a few seconds. "One of the attackers is Diamondback, second in command of the Spearhorns. Expected, considering the Unbreakable is here.

But the others...

There are former students from Blackwater."

"...Blackwater? What is that?"

Dr. Ziegler ignored the question. Most of the scientists here were just that: scientists. All of them knew they were working in a criminal enterprise, but beyond that, there was not a single illegal bone within them. They were here for their love of discovery and progress. And, of course, generous compensation that toiling away in government labs could simply not afford.

"Consider it like a mercenary organization," said Dr. Ziegler. He pondered this development. The Blackwater students, to his knowledge, had gone missing during the Haven raid and then turned up as allies of Thanatos.

The Trident still speculated as to how Thanatos managed to do this, but the prevailing consensus was that his abilities, once utilized on those that were dead, could allow him to freely control them.

Much like Nzambe, the S rank villain that threatened to destroy the fabric of the Pan-African Alliance a decade ago. She with her army of unending zombies had been called a 'Queen of Death', but now it seemed a king had risen to take her place.

Troublesome.

It meant that Thanatos had started to make his move against the Trident. And there was no worse time than now.

With Thanatos housing Casimir and causing the Red Circle slaughter, it was inevitable that conflict would soon bubble.

But this was much too soon. The executives thought that Thanatos would have too much on his hands establishing his new Sentinel state to worry about the Trident.

It was why the Prongs were rapidly mobilizing to defend Blackwater until they could find a suitable techno to inherit the Machine Heart.

Or, perhaps - did Thanatos know? Was he seeking to strike while the Prongs were weakened, their forces stretched thin in Blackwater? To take the blue N-Ring during this recent inter-Trident civil war?

In any case, he knew that there giving up the N-ring now was not possible. It was one of the keys to control the world. To understand beyond this world, too.

To give it up to the hands of a megalomaniac lord of death was an utter waste.

"Stephenson. Garrick. Reed. You three come with me," said Dr. Ziegler. "Emi, take the rest of the team down to the bunker. Take refuge there and maintain diagnostics over the N-ring's condition."

"And what about you, doctor?"

"The infiltrating force is dangerous, but not outside of my scope to handle," said Dr. Ziegler. He paused as the screen in front of him showed the face of Ace. "The force was stealthed until the seventeenth floor. I wonder if they were supposed to have been stealthed all the way to here, but no matter. This gives me time to organize a most rigorous defense against these intruders."

"Doctor, why did you have us stay behind?" said Reed, a young, brilliant scientist newly graduated from one of the top variant research institutions in the United States.

"And...why are we in the Biostudies Vault?"

"I've...never been here before," said Stephenson, another young, bright mind.

"It's creepy," commented Garrick, the most talented of them all, being here at the young age of seventeen.

They were in a rectangular room about as big as an empty warehouse. Instead of storage and shipping containers, there were instead two rows of cylindrical glass chambers filled with blue tinted liquid. Within them, the silhouette of various monstrous entities - variants - lay suspended in animation.

The Vaults were organized into three different storage units. One for weaponry, one for biological specimen, and another for extraterrestrial containment.

Aside from Dr. Ziegler, nobody, not even the lab staff, were allowed entry into the vaults without explicit authorization.

"I require your assistance," said Dr. Ziegler simply. Behind him, two Cyclops battle bots, each standing an imposing four meters tall with gleaming red dot eyes that fit snugly into the archetype of 'murder bot', followed behind with heavy, powerful steps whirring with hydraulics and moving machine parts.

Dr. Ziegler headed to the end of the vault where one container lay separated from the rest. Within the glowing blue liquid of this chamber, there was not the silhouette of a variant, but rather a humanoid.

"What...is this?" said one of the young researchers. They stood close to the chamber with wide eyes behind their hazmat suits, their innate curiosity stoked.

"A human specimen? Dr. Ziegler, I know we aren't operating strictly in legal boundaries, but isn't this...unethical?"

Dr. Ziegler spoke. "Prepare subject for awakening."

In response, the chamber's blue liquid lit up until it looked like a pillar of solid light, completely engulfing the specimen within.

The three researchers jumped back, but they were stopped dead in their tracks by the two Cyclops bots. The bots stood in front of Dr. Ziegler now, their twin autocannon arms aimed at the researchers.

"SUBJECT 6A IS NOT FULLY DEVELOPED," said a female A.I. voice. "IT WILL LACK A SUFFICIENTLY DEVELOPED MIND TO OPERATE WITH."

"Prepare for biomass integration."

"PROCEEDING..."

The floor in front of the chamber, where the three young researchers stood, filled with countless glowing blue rings that swayed chaotically like distorted space.

"Dr. Ziegler!? What's going on?" said one of the researchers.

The three young scientists tried to move away only to find their feet were anchored to the ground, the blue rings wrapping around their feet in a chain link of energy that crawled rapidly upwards, attempting to enmesh them whole.

"You devoted your lives to progress. Now, you can prove that devotion to its end," said Dr. Ziegler. "Your sacrifices will provide a mind for my child. A brilliant, youthful mind."

The young scientists screamed for only a minute second before the link of rings covered their mouths, eyes, noses, everything. The rings dug into their flesh like butcher hooks before splitting them apart.

Not in a grotesque way. Rather, in a strangely clean, methodical way. It was as if the three men were made of countless little cubes, little pixels, that unraveled down into the ground as the rings pulled their biomass apart.

Where the three men stood, multiple circuit-like streaks of bright blue energy started to path upwards, into the chamber.

"BEGINNING GENESIS OF SUBJECT 6A..."

"APPROXIMATE TIME UNTIL GENESIS: 9 MINUTES"

9 minutes. Not enough time until the infiltrating force made their way down here. As things were right now, the labs were not well defended enough to withstand a task force of that caliber, especially when they could handle the Cyclops with their EMP charges.

But subject 6A, well, that was an entirely different matter.

If Subject 6A got out, then Dr. Ziegler was confident that he could repel the invaders. It would be the least he could ask for with the three brilliant young minds he had sacrificed.

Dr. Ziegler had to thank fate, if such a fickle concept even existed, that the task force had so sloppily tripped a sensor to give him the time to set this up.

But even then, it was hard to tell if subject 6A had the time to leave its birthing chamber.

Dr. Ziegler looked around, gazing at the twenty other chambers, all with variant specimen floating within them.

"Release all other specimen when I leave," said Dr. Ziegler.

## Chapter 406: {Break In}

At the thoroughly armored, double locked doors leading into the Ring Research Room -

The doors distended down the middle like a bulging belly, glowing red hot before the built up heat and pressure was too much. The doors shattered with a resonating explosion, sending huge chunks of molten metal flying inwards.

Stella stood in the doorway, her arms thrust out. She breathed heavily, red steam - her blood vaporizing - pouring out of her mouth, eyes, and ears, sweat glands, every orifice - encasing her in an aura of crimson-orange that made her look positively demonic.

"Now that's what I'm talking about!" said Stella. "Being able to use my powers without any drawbacks. Train them beyond their limit. It's the best feeling ever!"

Diamondback sprinted in along with Ace. They, as the two most durable of the group, swept every room.

Several ceiling turrets fell down, firing salvos at the two of them. The two of them stood there, looking around like the bullets were just a casual after workout shower.

"Room is clear aside from these turrets," said Diamondback.

"Then it's not clear!" said Tox.

Diamondback sighed. "Let's clean up."

Diamondback and Ace methodically went around destroying each turret. Ace, in particular, fly about with a single-minded gusto, flying through the turrets like a living baseball.

After the turrets were cleared and everyone in the room, Tox pointed to control panel behind a blacked out widescreen monitor.

"Kris, why don't you jack in?" said Tox. "This looks important enough."

"No," said Kris.

"But isn't this your job?" said Falco as he shifted his weight from boot to boot, his hands gripped tight around his Aztech laser gun. It was obvious his nerves were on edge.

Kris gave a pointed stare to Flaco bordering on a glare. It was very evident that Kris's patience with Flaco was running quite thin.



"I-I mean you're the tech guy, right? And a Phantom to boot! Once you jack in, we can figure out everything about the vaults and the defenses they've set up, right?"

"Defenses they have time to set up solely because of your incompetence. But that's not the worst part," said Kris. "Files state they have a techno here. Guy who used to be called Machine Mind. A ranker back like twenty or thirty years ago.

He's the head of security and research. And he's in control of the network now and ready to intercept threats. I'm a solid infiltrator, but just like in realspace, an ambush only works when the enemy isn't expecting it.

Now that Machine Mind's ready for us, he'll have set up cyberspace defenses to catch me. And considering his A rank, I'm liable to fry my brain by jacking in now."

"I've heard of him," said Stella. "He piloted a whole legion of mechs with his power.

Didn't end well for him, though. He was forced to retire after deciding to abandon a sinking ship to save another with more passengers in it.

That started a whole debate in the hero community about what to do in cases like that."

"Seems to me he made the right choice," said Alexis.

"Yeah, but it still looks like an asshole move," said Tox.

"He doesn't care about human lives. Not in the way normal people do. He just sees numbers. It's typical of him," said Ace. He clenched his fist. "We need to find him. And I need to make him pay."

"I know I never pried into your past, but is he...?" Tox's question trailed off.

"Yeah. He's the one that raised me. Treated me like a lab rat and then when I wasn't considered good enough, I was sold off to a merc group," said Ace. "He's got a lot of scars to pay for. My body might have healed from everything he put me through, all the shock, burn, poison, and variant combat tests, but my mind - those scars are still fresh.

If I wasn't undead, I wouldn't be able to control myself right now."

Stella put a hand on Ace's shoulder. "It's alright."

"Is it?" said Ace, about to speak more on the abuse he had taken, but he stopped when he saw Stella smiling.

"What? You thought I'd tell you to live and let live? Shit, that's not my style. There's a reason I was never a good hero aside from my pretty face and heart attack inducing powers. It's because I never managed to put up a pretty personality to match my face



for the cameras." Stella grinned. "We find the bastard, we make him pay, and then, considering his powers, we keep him around for our boss."

Ace nodded.

"It's good we have personal motivators here and all," said Kris. "But we have to act quickly." He tapped his goggles, projecting a layout of the circular research room. "Casimir's data had almost nothing about what was being studied here, but it does show us the general layout. The elevators leading down to the Vaults don't work, obviously." Kris shot another acidic look at Falco, and the young man hung his head down in shame. "But look."

Kris pointed at the center of the circle. There was another circle there.

"Room kinda looks like a boob when you see it like this," said Tox.

"Ignoring that," said Kris. "The research room is oriented around a central study point. The middle ring-,"

"The nipple," Tox nodded.

"The middle ring housed what they were studying. Obviously, that thing is gone," said Kris. "But the room's architecture suggests that there's only one way it could have gone: down.

And it couldn't have taken the elevator, that's for sure considering its size."

Kris motioned forward, ahead of the control panel. There, the ground gave way to a six meter depression that formed a ring shape. The bottom of the ring was covered in metal tiles that blended in with the rest of the room's austere decor.

"I see," said Diamondback. "That should open up and lead down."

"Correct," said Kris. "We just need firepower to blast it open."

Everyone looked at Stella again.

"Aw, y'all are making me blush." Stella grinned as she leaped down the depression, hands aglow. "Time to break in!"

After Stella blasted apart the floor of the center ring, it revealed a gaping, dark hole leading down.

"Magnetic rail strips on either end," said Alan as he peered down. "Though deactivated. Whatever it was that they were studying, they wanted it out of here fast. This whole mechanism is pretty complicated, the type you'd see with Panopticon fast rail."

"What could it be, I wonder?" said Stella. "If it wasn't in the files that Cas gave us, then it must be hella important."

"In any case, that's not our priority," said Diamondback. "We need the Kryptic first and foremost. Kris, does this link to the weapons vault?"

"Not directly, but to power something like this, it has to be in close proximity to established infrastructure. Basically, if we blast open a hole at the right depth, we should be able to access the floor the weapons vault is on," said Kris.

"So we need another round of explosives," said Diamondback.

"Correct," responded Kris.

Everyone looked at Stella again.

"Okay, now I'm starting to feel a little used here, but alright." Stella shrugged and headed down the hole.

## Chapter 407: {Twin}

"Goddamn! Are we out in the Wastelands or something!? Why the hell are there so many variants!?" Stella shouted as she sent an uppercut right into the chin of a chimeric fusion of lion and turtle. Her glowing fist sent an explosive blast upwards, knocking the lion straight into the air with half its face blown off.

The lion's corpse fell limp onto cold, rocky earth. These were the vaults, and most of it used a tunnel and cavern network that already existed underground.

"They all look ugly as hell, too! Like someone just took random variants and mashed them together like a modern day Frankenstein."

"They're everywhere!" said Falco. He moved with jittery, adrenaline controlled steps, aiming this way and that, firing his Aztech lasergun freely. The green laser bolts, guided by smartlink technology, auto-aimed and precisely bored through the eyes of several variants.

The neon green gun had a red strip of light running down its barrel that indicated how much energy it had left, and it was almost completely gone.

"I-I'm running out!"

A variant, this one a large, fire-wreathed serpent with the face of a man, lunged at Falco.

Diamondback rushed in, tackling the serpent and sending it flying back where it smacked back more waiting variants like a bowling ball.

"Steady, kid. Don't lose your calm," said Diamondback.

"Easy for you to say! You're invincible!" said Falco.

"Here." Alan came by to Falco and grabbed his gun. A burst of red electrical charge ran from Alan's segmented, cybernetic fist and into Falco's gun, charging the weapon back up.

"Thanks, dude," said Falco. "You're a real one."

"You remind me of how I used to be is all," said Alan. He got back to fighting, aiming his wrist at a bat and spider fusion flapping its grotesque form towards them.

His forearm opened up, revealing the pointed head of a rocket. The rocket shot out like a firecracker and blew the incoming variant apart like a pinata, sending guts and fur and shredded wings everywhere.

"Holy crap, you're really cybered out!" said Falco. "That's some premium stuff, too. Who'd you go to!? I'm looking to get cybernetics too."

"I did it myself," was all Alan said.

"You're absolutely nuts, that's what you are," said Tox. She moved about with more ease, having had more combat training. Plus, she was basically indestructible too.

Her noxious purple slime form slithered about, expanding and engulfing several dog and cockroach fusion variants. They flailed about in her body before melting away into bones within seconds. "Self-operating is hard as all hell, and you managed to replace like, 70% of yourself."

"Focus!" said Diamondback. "Maintain circular formation. Keep up suppressive fire. Protect Kris at all costs. He's the one that's going to crack us into the vaults."

The way the team was arranged was in a ring with Kris in the center. Kris provided what fire he could with his pistol, a Freefire Six Blaster revolver that fired high powered explosive shots. However, most of his cybernetics were made to enhance his neural processing, not his combat efficiency.

Alexis stood guard beside Kris, channeling a green storm cloud overhead which constantly fired lightning bolts like a sentry turret.

"Shit, one thing goes wrong and it spawns ten more issues. This is why rookies shouldn't be allowed on high profile missions," said Kris. "Diamondback, I'm beginning

to question the sharpness of your judgment here. I could see Clint giving into the kid's demands, but you? Weren't you supposed to be the rational one to balance things out in the Spearhorns?"

"Yeah, well, there's only so much I can do. Riding with the Spearhorns, especially Clint, you come to realize that planning ahead doesn't really do you much good other than piling on more stress.

It's how you adapt to the chaos he creates that's important," said Diamondback as he caved in the skull of a tiger and shark hybrid. Several bird and mosquito hybrid variants fluttered around him, trying to stab through his diamond exterior with their blade-like needle mouths to no avail.

"Fair enough," said Kris. "I should've expected a contract from Clint wasn't going to exactly be squeaky clean."

"This isn't right," said Ace. He was with Stella, right in the thick of close combat. He used his hands like clamps to prevent a huge leech variant with centipede legs from clamping down on him.

With a grunt, he cleanly ripped the variant in half, a faint blue-white glow surrounding his hands as he used tactile telekinesis to distribute his force precisely to tear the creature down the middle.

"What's the matter?" said Stella as she blew back a group dog sized rats with spider heads.

"These variants...I recognize them. They're part of the biostudies team. The team that studied me," said Ace. "But they shouldn't be coordinated like this. They're all 'imperfect'. Mindless. They should be tearing into each other as much as they're tearing into us."

"Improvements in research, maybe?" said Stella.

"Maybe." Ace punched a gorilla type variant in the chest. The creature's sternum shattered and caved in as it flew back like a cannonball had been blasted into it. "Something's just...off. All of these guys, they have a scent on them. It's...strange.

It reminds me of...myself?"

"Hey, Ace, know you don't like talking about your past, but if there's anything that you know that'll get us out of here, now's the time to spill it out," said Tox as she formed an empty ring in her stomach. "Damn it! I hate fire! Ace, take this guy out for me!"

A fireball passed through it that Ace caught.

"Yeah." Ace reached into the rock below. A neat circle of blue-white formed around his hand. He pulled back, driving up a perfect sphere of rock that he threw like a bullet at the culprit: a beetle type variant with an abdomen that seethed smoke and flame like a furnace.

The rock splattered the beetle's face, killing it instantly.

"Honestly, if I did know something, I would have told you guys. I'm not selfish enough to keep all that to myself. I just don't remember too much. All I remember is the doctor and what he did to me. But things that didn't relate to me directly - it's all foggy," said Ace.

"Numbers are starting to thin," said Diamondback. "Which is good. As far as threats go, none of these variants measured up to the Cyclops. At best, the toughest of them were high C rank threats."

"Which worries me, because there should be ten more Cyclops left," said Kris.

"Probably waiting for us in the weapons vault," said Diamondback. "I can see the variants not attacking each other, but I figure it's harder to get them to recognize machines as friends.

In any case, if Machine Mind packed all the Cyclops near the vault, that just makes them easier to EMP."

At that moment, a tenseness hung in the atmosphere. It cut through the chaos of the variant attacks. In fact, the variants, their numbers now drastically thinned, began to retreat, scurrying away through dark tunnels.

Everyone felt this shift in atmosphere.

"Threat is coming from here," said Diamondback, perking up as he tossed aside the mangled corpses of the bird mosquitoes that had been pecking at him before.

He stared ahead, down the dark depths of a large tunnel - one of the main paths leading to the vaults. "This tunnel leads to the Biostudies vault. I'll scout it out." Diamondback hurriedly trudged forwards. He had no nightvision, but that did not matter to him.

After all, he normally fought while completely blind. His diamond metamaterial skin was flexible, allowing him to cover all his joints, but it had one weakness: it was not see-through.

But Diamondback had mitigated even that weakness, training to fight without the need of sight at all. He navigated the dark of the tunnel with ease, stepping ahead with confidence.

"Everyone else-,"

In the next moment, Diamondback was sent hurtling back. An extremely impressive feat considering he weighed close to half a ton.

Ace caught Diamondback in mid-air.

Diamondback's chest had a small, fist-sized indent on it.

"What the-?" Diamondback instinctively put a hand to the damage on his chest.

"Someone actually managed to hurt Diamondback...?" said Falco, eyes wide.

"Not important. Falco, Alan, get back, now!" said Diamondback. Without him, Falco and Alan were utterly defenseless and closest to whatever threat it was that had sent him flying.

Diamondback fell to the ground.

The sound of hard material smashing against hard material at extreme speeds echoed through the innards of the vault caverns. A shockwave of force exploded outward from in front of Alan and Falco, knocking Falco flat on his back. Alan managed to dig his heels in.

"W-what?" Falco blinked as he looked up.

Ace was there. No...there were...two Aces?

One Ace uniformed in black floated in the air, both hands trembling as they struggled against the fist of another completely naked Ace. Their faces were utterly identical. Same square jaw, white, spiked up hair, and light blue eyes.

The only difference was that the naked Ace was noticeably more muscular.

"Two Aces!? What's going on!?" said Tox. She looked down. "And I really did NOT want to see that from my friend."

"All of you, on alert!" said Diamondback. His calm exterior, like his chest, had cracked. "That thing, clone, whatever it is...it's strong."

"Not...as strong..." Ace grunted out, slowly giving ground in the air as his clone pushed back against both his hands with a single fist. "As me!"

Light blue enveloped the cloned Ace's back.

Ace used tactile telekinesis to transfer the force of his push to the clone's back. This pushed the clone forward with even more force, but instead of making it overpower Ace,

he stopped resisting and instead used the clone's sudden momentum against it, redirecting the clone into the ceiling.

The clone smashed through the sturdy rock of the tunnel like it was made of brittle glass.

Ace breathed out, hands still shaking from exertion.

"Splendid." The clone popped down from the crater it had made, landing on the ground. The voice did not come from the clone's mouth -which did not move- but instead from its head.

"...Doctor," said Ace, leering.

"Correct, my child. I see the prodigal son has returned," said Dr. Ziegler.

"Don't call me that. I am not your child," said Ace. "But I will be your killer."

"Unfortunately, that is simply not possible. And I apologize. I will stop calling you child, though I regret that you do not hold endearment towards me as I did to you. But regardless, this new child of mine is a suitable replacement for you.

He is far closer to perfection than you are," said Dr. Ziegler. The clone floated forwards menacingly. "All of you have made it far, but this heist of yours ends now."

## Chapter 408: A Dream

"Why didn't you kill me?" Seth Solar sat cross-legged atop a sea of scorched rubble. He was surrounded by Panopticon elite droids. His hands were shackled together with null cuffs. Cracks lined his skin, glowing with barely contained light. Patches of him were gone like shards broken off a porcelain doll.

"I don't know. Pity, I guess. When I see you, I have an odd sense I can see what could have been" said the boy. No, not a boy anymore. He had saved the day. He had protected his friends. He had put it all on the line and won. He had done what it had taken to be a man.

More than a man – a hero.

Not without cost, though. One of the man's eyes was scorched shut with blackened, charred flesh.

"I don't need your pity," said Seth.

"I know you don't. Just don't make me regret handing it out to you." The man nodded at the droids. "Take him in."

The droids corralled Seth into a waiting HV (Hover Vehicle) convoy. Before the doors closed on Seth, however, he stopped and turned. "Pity, huh. Keep showing this world pity. Let's see how far you go before you have no more left to give."

"We'll see."

The door closed shut, and the convoy sped away through the night sky.

"Shit man, we did it!" Adam hobbled over to the man and gave him a light punch on the shoulder. Elaine followed close behind. Both had wide smiles on their faces. Smiles of triumph over a desperate struggle.

"Take it easy, Adam," said the man. "There's still some cleanup left to do. Trident affiliates and goons we have to dig out of the dirt."

"Yeah, that can wait after a long, long break," said Adam. "Or maybe someone else can handle it. After all, with this mission, we're gonna be superstars! We stopped the reactor from blowing up AND we uncovered Solomon Solar's crazy family shenanigans. Plus we jailed his crazy kid.

I bet we're gonna get placed in the B, no, maybe A rank to start off with! We'll be rich!"

"We can think about that later. And we can't rely on anyone else to do this. We were the ones that figured everything out, even when nobody believed us. It's up to us to see this all the way through," said the man. He held a fist, showing his mint green shield. "Even if it means more sleepless nights."

"Aw man, you're killing me over here with these work hours," said Adam. "If only I was like, a zombie or something, I'd have no issue working like a dog all the time."

"A...zombie?" The man blinked, mouth slightly agape. He wondered why that word sounded so familiar? He stayed silent for a few awkward seconds, lost in strange thought.

"You alright?" said Adam.

"You're too tired," said Elaine. She grasped the man's hand in hers. "And Adam, for once, is right. We're super, but we're still just people at the end of the day. Rest is important. But more than that, I really am glad that you're alive.

She hugged the man, and that touch broke the man out of his sudden train of odd thought, dragging him back to reality. He smiled and hugged her back.



"Yeah, you're right," said the man.

"Damn, even with one toasted eye, you still beat me out, huh," grumbled Adam, but he smiled anyway, happy to see his two closest friends getting even closer. He looked beyond the two, at the sky. The dark veil of night scattered as the rising sun cast down its amber rays.

The sun was proof of a new day. A new tomorrow. That all they had faced and struggled and won over in the past night was, well, past.

...

...

...

Ten years later-

The man, now the undisputed rank 1 hero in the world, stood in the starry void of space. Behind him was the blue and green world he had called his home. Across the continents were stretches of angry red like freshly opened scars.

Signs of conflict all over the entire planet as it struggled against a devastating attack from an extraterrestrial species called the 'Grey'.

Against this formidable foe that touched down just five years ago, humanity fought back with all its might. No, not just humanity. After the Hero had met with the mysterious entity known as the Voice – the hivemind behind all variants – they had agreed to ally and fight back the alien invaders.

Countries and heroes and corporations joined together in this defense, forming a united front not seen throughout the history of human civilization.

No less was demanded of the immense threat that was the Grey, however.

The Grey were a mighty warrior race, each one of them being living weapons of unparalleled destruction. But most deadly was their ability to assimilate the powers of worthy fighters they felled. For each great hero that died in conflict was another Grey that took that power to bolster their own ranks.

But now, the fate of this conflict now teetered at the brink.

The hero stood against the One, the mightiest warrior among the Grey and the maintainer of the Rift, a color-leeched tear in space which the Grey used to channel their invasion.

"Get out...of my planet!" The man, now the rank 1 hero in the world, shouted at the One. His voice did not project through the soundless void of space, but his thoughts radiated through the One's mind regardless as the Grey were capable of telepathic thought.

"Resisting assimilation to this degree is pointless," said the One. "Embrace it as all others have before you. Then, the losses will end. Your species will live on within the Grey where there is no hatred, no fear, no conflict of body or mind that has fraught your planet and people since the moment they became more than mere beast."

It was humanoid in a very rough sense, standing upright on two legs, but the similarities ended there. This being was far larger than the average man, and instead of being covered with soft, yielding skin, grey carapace clad its body like armor. Instead of having two arms, it had six, all of them ending in fists covered with gauntlet carapace.

The One did not have a discernible face. Its body was bulky and oval shaped, covered in thick grey carapace plating like every other Grey. However, the upper half of its body donned a resplendent mane of thick, regal white hair – a sign that the One was truly special among all the other Greys.

Above the mane was a dark strip with two glowing white, circular eyes that stared at the Hero with unblinking fortitude.

A ring of white energy floated above the One. Much like a halo, though instead of being a sign of angelic comfort, it now became synonymous with mass carnage.

"Sorry," said the Hero. He raised his shield above his head, clenching his fist as he channeled his final attack – humanity's final attack. "But a dream you force on others is nothing but a nightmare."

## **Chapter 409: A Dream 2**

"You have done well to reach the Rift," said the One. It raised its six arms to its sides, hands outstretched. Shining light enveloped each of its hands. The light was angelic in its glimmer, and the One's posture was just as celestial – it looked like a many-armed bodhisattva standing firm in meditation, though here, it was in meditative intent to destroy.

"But this is where your struggle ends."

The glow around the One's six hands turned into atomic rings that rotated around each fist. A colossal amount of energy began to surge from each fist, stretching the space in a spiral twist.

The Hero grit his teeth as he stared at the buildup of energy. The sheer amount of heat being given off by the incoming attack was enough to rival the surface of the sun. Had the Hero not mastered his power to its absolute limits, allowing him to envelop every atom of his body in an invincible 'shield', he would have been sundered into atoms right then and there.

"I will utilize the power of your second strongest defender," said the One. "The one you knew as 'Superforce'. He gave me the greatest fight thus far. I will honor his struggle in my own against you. He believed he controlled the power of fusion.

However, with my superior processing power and adaptive physical perfection granted to me by the Grey, I can unlock the full potential of this ability: the capability to manipulate the cosmic energies of the universe."

The swirling spirals of distorted space around each hand turned into what looked like miniature galaxies, filled with tiny little star speckles and milky cosmic streaks.

"Power rivaling the creation of the universe. Can you withstand this?" said the One as it slowly began to bring all six of its fists together, aiming them at the Hero. "No, you must withstand it. Elsewise that tiny planet you defend will be no more."

"Give me your best shot," said the Hero. All he did against the grand, fundamental force bending display of the enemy was raise his shield. It was a humble display, and yet, the sheer simplicity of it made its declaration of resistance that much more impactful. "Just know that if you don't take me out with this, I'll reflect it back to you and win."

"Interesting. It has been long since a backwards civilization has managed resistance to this degree. Very well. I will entertain your challenge. You claim your meager power can turn my strength against me. Prove it." The One slammed its fists together, combining its six miniature galaxies together into one orb of cosmic radiance.

The One pressed its hands down on the orb, each of its arms trembling in exertion. Cracks began to spiderweb across the surface of the sphere. The energy contained within, constantly magnifying exponentially upon itself in a reaction of unfathomable proportions, got closer and closer to bursting out.

"Now, begone." The One, with one final crushing move, shattered the orb entirely.

It was as if the universe was a liquid and the One had popped open a hole in its container. A beam of energy comprised of countless miniature stars – red, dwarf, blue, novas – streamed forth in a deluge of primordial devastation that easily dwarfed the tiny blue planet known as earth.

The Hero always had the ability to read the general energy levels of other beings. When he saw this incoming attack, his vision shattered, his eyes exploding like popped balloons, unable to comprehend the scale of this attack.

But even against this, the Hero stood firm. He even smiled, closing his eyes as trails of blood streaked down his face.

"It isn't just my challenge," said the Hero. "It's ours."

The Hero's shield began to glow. Threads of energy, so faint that they were almost invisible, rippled through the darkness of space. They came from the planet behind him, the world that looked up to him, placing all their hopes on the symbol of his protection: his shield.

The threads circulated around the shield, creating a supersized lattice that extended outwards using the shield as a centerpoint. In a near instant, it covered the entirety of the planet in a mesh of defense.

The One's attack roared through the entire world, like it was a pebble caught in the midst of a raging stream.

"What is this?" said the One.

"It's a combination of all our efforts. All of humanity working together. I don't know if it's ever happened before or if it will ever happen again, but I sure as hell am not letting this chance slip by now," said the Hero. "The dimensional web you use to maintain mental links with every single one of your soldiers – the woman I love reverse-engineered it.

The biggest governments and corporations in the world helped add our version of that web to Cyberspace – the space all of us are now linked to using mass produced neuralinks for humans and the Voice's hivemind for the variants.

Every man, woman, child, and even variant are looking up at the sky right now, watching our battle, putting all their hopes, their dreams, their futures – all of it on my, no, our shield."

The planetary lattice began to glow from green to red, cracking in parts. The Hero's body began to turn into pure white energy, slowly disassembling as he channeled power beyond anything his mortal body was meant to comprehend.

Yet, as the Hero had done so many times before, he stood tall. He stood strong.

He did not yield.

His shield did not fall. He would not let it. He would let his entire body disintegrate before he dropped that shield. No, even if his body was gone, his will would keep it up.

The indomitable will of the human spirit - now was the time for it to prove its worth against the cruel inevitability of destruction that the universe promised.

An indeterminate amount of time passed. It was impossible to accurately tell. When energy on this scale clashed, energy that drew from manipulating the fundamental fabrics of existence, time and space and everything that one took for granted in reality became meaningless.

But there was one undeniable truth at the end of it.

The Hero...was still standing.

His shield was still raised.

The lattice around the planet was completely red, completely covered in cracks, liable to break apart with just one more tiny touch, but it was still there.

"And now-," said the Hero. His shield glowed with the energy of the cosmos, the shine of countless different stars swimming across its surface. He smiled and aimed the shield at the One, at the Rift behind it. "We win."

The power of destructive creation stored within the shield unleashed forth towards the One.

With that, humanity proved itself worthy to survive.

## **Chapter 410: A Dream 3**

The reflected tide of cosmic judgement washed over the One.

The One placed its six arms forward, attempting to try and manipulate the energies, to absorb or dissipate them somehow. For a moment, the tidal wave of star speckled force stopped as if it hit a vertical dam wall.

Behind the One was the Rift, the greyscale tear in space that acted not just as a dimensional gate to earth, but also as the main node of connection for the Grey to coordinate and function. If the One did not stop this attack here and now, it would inevitably sunder the Rift apart, leading to the end of this invasion.

However, the outcome of this struggle was already decided. The attack, capable of turning a planet into ashes in one fell moment, was multiplied again by the reflective properties of the Hero's shield. It was not an attack that any being that existed within the scope of reason could hope to survive.

"Your challenge...was worthy," said the One. The carapace around its fists began to crack, leaking white energy before its arms disintegrated entirely. And with that, the wall that kept the flood of reflected power broke down.

The energy wave coursed past the One. Its form crumbled apart like sand caught in an ocean wave. Powerful streams of force flowed into the Rift. Like a sink, the Rift absorbed the entirety of the colossal attack. The color drained grey scar in space briefly filled in with light, revealing a network of webs shining with vibrant, rainbow iridescence.

Only for a brief moment, however.

The Rift closed upon itself in an abrupt instant, zipping shut to show nothing but the emptiness of space. But it was a welcome stillness to the Hero. He floated freely with a smile on his face, floating against the weightlessness of the universe with satisfaction.

The satisfaction of victory. Of being the Hero again, the Hero he had always wanted to be. To save the day for an entire world – he felt as if he had reached the height of his life. He thought, just maybe, if he faded now, he would be happy with what he had done.

Blood trickled from his closed eyes, and when it left the protective shield layer that covered his skin, it froze up in the cold embrace of space. His shield layer began to fade as well, a mesh of hexagonal green outlining his body starting to become visible in brief flickers.

The countless little shields he placed over each of his cells to protect himself from danger, to keep his body intact and functioning in space, was now disappearing. He turned around, reaching his arm back out towards the planet he called home, where all his friends, his lover, his unborn child, all the many lives that now had a future because of him, resided.

Through the frosty touch of space, a hand of warmth clutched the Hero's back. It was not a gentle touch, nor much of a caring one. Fingers wrapped around the base of the Hero's neck like a man holding a dog by the scruff.

"Looking to die so quickly?" A voice crackled into the Hero's earlink. He had thought it had been toasted in the cosmic scale confrontation he had with the One, but since it was within his ear canal, it had been protected by his body shield.

"...Seth?"

"Yeah." The hand pulled the Hero away from the empty, lonely stretch of space and back towards home, towards the planet where the lives that owed their tomorrows to him awaited.

"You...why did you come here?" said the Hero. Seth Solar, like many villains, had been freed after the invasion of the Greys as humanity could spare nothing against the formidable approach of the aliens. If even variants could side with humanity, then it was just a matter of upholding a duty as a human, as a denizen of earth, for the villains to fight as well.

During the five years of conflict, Seth Solar had developed his powers to new heights, reaching higher even than his father to become one of the strongest war powers against the Greys.

"Because I pitied you," said Seth Solar. "And because I'm the only space flight capable Alter left. Without me, you'd spend a couple hours out here turning into an ice block, and I don't think the world wants that."

Seth Solar flew towards earth with the Hero in his one remaining hand. The other had been torn off by an elite Grey that had taken the cholorokinetic powers of Valkyrie.

That Grey was the final opponent Seth had taken out before the Rift closed and all the Greys dissipated, their extradimensional existences unable to maintain material form without the support of the Rift in this foreign realm.

The Hero smiled.

"In the end, your pity got you far," said Seth Solar. "It never broke you down under its weight. It actually gave you strength. I saw that and reconsidered how I thought about things. I thought maybe I should try it out, too."

"That's not pity," said the Hero. "Feeling for others, for those that have less, and fighting for them, to bring them up - it's not pity. It's understanding, it's empathy, it's...being a hero."

"Yeah, well, to me, it's still pity," said Seth Solar. "I see the weak beneath me and pity their miserable existences. But now, instead of ignoring them or letting them break each other apart in their weakness, I'll use my strength to make them better. More than the weakness that they are."

That should keep me out of jail after this, at least."

"Hah, we'll see about that," said the Hero.

The two shared a silent moment of camaraderie as they returned to earth. For the past five years, they had been companions in war. Granted, their start was rocky, filled with more than a few fights with each other, but in time, all that wear and tear, like a broken bone mending, had built their bond back strong.

"Try to put me in jail in your condition, and you'll be seeing me as the world's new ruler from the afterlife," grumbled Seth. "But for now, you can't die. You've got your dumbass Adam to see. And Elaine's carrying a miniature version of you."

A girl, by the way."



"A girl, huh?" said the Hero. He never would have expected to get the news of his child's gender reveal out in space with both his eyes popped, but fate worked in mysterious ways.

"Just hope she isn't as self-righteously annoying as you are," said Seth.

More years passed.

In those years, the world built itself back.

The Hero, with his triumphant victory over the One and the Grey, was given influence beyond measure. He had the hearts of the entire global populace. In contrast, all other symbols of power before the Greys were gone or vastly damaged.

Corporations were mere shadows of themselves. The Alterhuman Agency had dissolved entirely. The Panopticon had lost over 90% of its drone forces. World governments were thoroughly hurting.

There was a massive power vacuum to fill and an even bigger rebuilding project to handle.

The Hero, with the aid of his close friends, filled that vacuum and tackled the project. The Hero wanted the world to be better than it had ever been, when there was so much infighting and ceaseless conflict over dwindling resources.

The Hero still valued freedom, but he did not want life to be a race. A struggle to the top that involved trampling down on others to get there.

The Panopticon and the Hero collaborated and created a halo around the planet, constructing a shield that prevented any beings from other dimensions from entering the world ever again.

The Hero brokered peace between the Voice and the world's governments and corporations, creating a tentative balance between wild and civilization.

Finally, the Hero made sure to rebuild everything back with progress in mind. Consolidating techno talent from across heroes, the Panopticon, private interests, and villains, the Hero and his friends rebuilt cities with a utopian ideal in mind where machine worked and man rested.

There were many struggles, many conflicting interests, but in time, across the years, the Hero finally managed to create the world of hope he once dreamed of. A world that the man he used to look up to, the former number one hero Vanguard, could only dream of.

Yet, like any dream, it was all destined to end-



## Chapter 411: A Dream 4

More time passed -

The Altering began in 2000 and with it came the Age of Villains.

The Age of Villains, full of strife between superpowered individuals that thought themselves lords rather than men, ended in 2045 when Vanguard struck down Zahak.

From Zahak's end bloomed the Monsterring, throwing the world into even deeper chaos.

The Monsterring ended in 2070 as Vanguard's power reached heights never before seen, pushing back the great Titans that killed billions.

A full seventy years of conflict throughout the world. By that point, peace was a faraway concept - a distant dream. And that dream never came back.

2077 and 2090 saw the first and second Corpowars.

2100 saw the death of Vanguard.

2120 heralded the invasion of the Greys.

But now, finally, after over a century of constant devastation, mankind grasped that lost dream again.

2035 began a new age.

The Age of Peace.

The Hero stood at the rooftop of a pristine white tower tall enough to stand shoulder to shoulder with the clouds. The sun was bright, its golden rays an ever warm welcome. The skies were blue - bluer than they had ever been after world initiatives to maintain the planet's ecosystem with the aid of the Voice.

The Hero moved to the edge of the rooftop, looking down with arms crossed. A large black shield with three points shone with neon light on the face of the tower beneath him. Each of the points flickered with a differently colored light.

One mint green like the Hero's personal bulwark. A symbol of the Hero.

One a pure, snowy white. A symbol of the Voice that regulated the world's variants.

One a deep, ultramarine blue. A symbol of the Panopticon.

Together, they created the WPA (World Protection Alliance) that was responsible for ushering in this Age of Peace.

Carefully programmed machines, guided under the regulated superintelligence of the Panopticon, now transitioned mankind into a post-work, post-scarcity era. And with that transition came a new blooming of mankind's development.

Without grappling with the base struggle for survival, to fill one's stomach or to fight for one's life, mankind devoted themselves solely to progress.

A progress borne out of a century of wartime trauma. A progress that, hopefully, would make the very idea of war a fairytale in time to come. A progress that, under the WPA's guidance, contributed to the Starbound Movement.

The Voice agreed to shelter humanity on earth, but only on the condition that mankind find a way off the world in time.

Thus, the Starbound Movement was formed. Now, the best and brightest minds across the planet devoted themselves to moving man to the stars. Humanity was now growing up, leaving the guiding hand of its mother earth to seek the vast infinity of the cosmos beyond.

"Dad, what are you looking so serious about?"

The Hero looked back to see his daughter. She was now fifteen, nearly a full grown woman. She was dressed in a black costume streaked with lines of neon rainbow. She had inherited mostly her mother's ability to control the flow of energy, and it showed in her multicolored, iridescent eyes and hair strands.

She was a hero in her own right, though, having been born after the Grey invasion, she had never known any conflict above stopping the occasional street thug.

The very concept of heroes themselves were becoming outdated. Automation - true automation, not the kind fragmented by corporate interests and Panopticon directive shortcomings - had vastly improved global security.

However, the Hero always made sure to reason with the Panopticon, never going too far to create a surveillance state where man was stripped of their will.

By now, the idea of a hero was mostly a way to reminisce on old times. Old warriors who had lived and died for the greater good.

"I'm just amazed at how far we've come," said the Hero, looking down again. His heightened vision could see far below, down to the streets of Haven.

They thrived with activity, full of people with smiles on their faces - a stark contrast to the grim, dirty, frown-ridden masses that populated practically every city before the Age of Peace.

The streets were spotless clean and presented an oddly harmonious fusion between nature and futurism. Vines crawled down drone cleaned buildings of pure white. Trees, grasses, and flowers and flowing blue waters stood side by side with streets and mega buildings.

"You're in one of your reflecting moods again, huh? But you know, this is all how far YOU'VE come," said the daughter. She crossed her arms. "Me, I feel like I haven't done anything. Which feels even worse considering I have an incredibly awesome dad who basically saved the world."

"I couldn't have done it myself. I needed everyone. Especially your mother," said the Hero.

"Glad to see you acknowledge me." Elaine warped in through a swirl of distorted space. A white labcoat trailed behind her as she adjusted cracked goggles above her head.

"Hah, I thought you were listening around," said the Hero, smiling. "I never do get the chance to bad mouth you, huh?"

Elaine raised a brow as she stood beside the Hero. "And you feel like doing that?"

"No, not really - you get what I mean," said the Hero.

"Dad, I think you should stop while you're ahead," said the daughter.

The Hero sighed. "You're right, Krysa. Your dad can handle planetary threats, but your mother? And you? Now that's a struggle."

"Oh, you-," Elaine playfully punched the Hero's shoulder. She motioned downwards to the peaceful streets far below. "You know, before all of this, you used to always be serious."

You always had to work toward something even if it meant you had to skip a meal. Or take an extra hit.

Now, though, you're so much brighter. Like you changed with the world."

"Sorry I catfished you. Thought you were shacking up with the serious, brooding type, huh?" said the Hero.

"No." Elaine smiled. "I always knew you were like this. Deep, deep down. Plus, the other alternative was Adam. And, well, that wouldn't have worked at all."

"I can't imagine uncle Adam settling down with a single person at all," said Krysa, shuddering. "He has a different girl by his side like, every week."

"He was always the greedy type," said the Hero. "One of the first things he told me was that he wanted to be a hero to eat burgers. Because as a street rat, he'd never gotten to try one that wasn't fished out of a dumpster."

"It really is crazy how much the world has changed since your time," said Krysa.

"Yeah, it really is. Almost...unbelievable. Almost too perfect," said the Hero. He put his hand out, reaching towards the streets. "It almost feels...unreal."

"Stop that," said Elaine. She put a gentle hand on the Hero's shoulder. "All the blood that was spilled, all the times we pushed through pain and terror, all the times we got back up after we knocked down - all of it built this up.

If our struggles were real, then so is this."

"You're right," said the Hero, nodding.

Elaine nodded with the Hero. "You always need something in front of you. A big goal, a big enemy, something you can reach out to and overcome. Now that it's not there, you're left wondering whether you really can enjoy the good around you, whether there isn't some fight to be had somewhere else you don't know about."

Elaine stood on her tiptoes and kissed the Hero's cheek. "But it's time to rest now, honey. You've earned it. You more than anyone else."

"Hold up..." said Krysa. She squinted her eyes, looking out to the distance. "You guys see that?"

The Hero's eyes widened. In the clear blue sky, a color that the Hero never wanted to see again manifested.

Grey.

Grey that swirled around in a circular, spiral arrangement, tearing away at space as it leeched color from the deep blue sky and its pure white clouds.

It was...a Rift?

"What is that?" wondered Krysa. She had never personally encountered this, but the Hero knew better than anyone else what this was.

An invasion.

"Elaine, check with the Panopticon. Our planetary dimensional shield should still be stable!" said the Hero.

"I'm on it." Elaine put a hand to her head, her eyes flashing. She furrowed her brows. "The shield is still up and stable."

"Then how..." The Hero shook his head. "No, this isn't the time to be asking these types of questions. I have to deal with that now, before the Rift opens up anymore than it already has."

He put a stern hand on Krysa's shoulder. "Krysa, go with your mother and engage planetary defenses. I'll handle that."

"But dad, I can help-," began Krya.

The Hero shook his head. "No. This...is too dangerous for you. And my shield's managed to shut down a Rift before. It can do it again. Stay with your mother and protect her.

I can trust you on this, right?"

Krysa nodded. "I got it, dad."

"Good." The Hero broke his seriousness for a brief moment, smiling at his wife and child. "I'll be back soon, alright?"

With that, the Hero pushed off the rooftop, soaring toward the Rift as his dark green cape billowed behind him.

## **Chapter 412: Dream's End 1**

The Hero's fists flew forward with cannonball power, aimed right at the grey Rift. His knuckles were encased in a pale mint green - stabilizing energy meant to knit back together the dimensional tear.

But before the Hero's blow could strike true at the tear, he was stopped.

An arm jutted out from the tear, holding a mass of foggy grey that rebuffed the Hero's blow. The Hero flew backwards from the might of his own strike but righted himself in mid-air.

From the Rift, the rest of the entity belonging to that arm crawled out. It looked like a humanoid made out of fog, comprised of misty, formless grey. The entity's body seemed

to love company in its colorlessness, sapping vibrance out of its surroundings, leeching the azure blues out of the clear sky.

"Who are you!?" said the Hero. He manifested his shield on his right arm. As the symbol of humanity's hope, the Hero had changed the design of his shield from the plain three pointed structure that looked like it belonged to a medieval fare.

Now it was shaped like a diadem and far larger than before, almost big enough to encompass most of the Hero's powerful frame. It was a bright emerald green with a shining seven pointed golden star emblazoned upon its gleaming surface.

The star shone bright like the sun, having inherited a fragment of Seth Solar's solar reactor during the Grey War.

The formless humanoid did not move. It simply stood there, holding its own shield of rippling fog.

"Not much for talking, I see." The Hero narrowed his eyes, peering behind the entity at the Rift. It was still open, an ugly scar in this bright, beautiful world.

If the Hero wanted to close it, he needed to get through this guardian first. He looked down at its shield of fog.

"A mirror matchup, eh?" The Hero smiled as he brought his shield up. "Alright, let's do this!"

The Hero held his shield out with one arm and punched it with the other. The star symbol shone before unleashing a blazing solar beam.

The formless entity raised his shield. The golden beam struck but broke apart as it reached the shield, the light turning dull grey before scattering like falling flower petals.

'Guess ranged attacks won't work,' thought the Hero. He clenched his free fist tight. 'But the punch I landed before didn't hurt me. Fine by me - I'll handle this with my fists.'

The Hero flew forward, cocking back his arm, the muscles on his developed arm rippling and coiling and charging power.

The entity flew forward too, meeting the Hero's fist with its shield.

"Get out of my world!" roared the Hero as he unleashed his punch. The punch accelerated exponentially, the countless 'shields' infused in his cells storing and expelling energy to massively amplify his attack.

It was an attack that could rival the likes of Vanguard in his prime. No less was demanded of the Hero who defeated the Greys.

The Hero was sent flying backwards, hurtling down to the ground like a falling meteor. In an instant, he lost sight of the entity as he smashed through clouds. He was not hurt, but his eyes were wide open. He had been repelled so easily.

No, that was not exactly it-

'It didn't feel like I was hitting anything,' thought the Hero. 'When I hit the shield, my fist got stopped, but I didn't make any real contact. It felt like I was just phasing through air.

Hm...'

The Hero kicked his legs down, generating force to stop his descent. He was now low enough that he could see the shining white city of Haven below, full of people he needed to protect.

"Panopticon, Heroes, requesting backup!" said the Hero as he put a hand to his ear.

There was no contact. His commlink was dead. The entity must have been capable of some kind of interference, but this was to be expected. Extradimensional beings always interfered with technology in some capacity - the Grey War had made that clear enough.

But that was alright. The Hero knew the value of his friends and comrades, but he was the Hero because he could fight by himself when it mattered.

Pushing off the air, the Hero soared up again with valiant stride, resolve filling his heart to defend the peaceful world he had worked so hard to make.

"What the hell is going on!?" The Hero threw punch after punch at the shield of fog. All of his hits stopped short, repelled by some invisible, imperceivable force.

But that was not the worrying part.

He and the entity were on street level now. The city was thoroughly broken apart from the shockwaves of the Hero's clash. But even that was to be expected.

The Hero would have liked to keep the fight in the air, out of civilian reach, but he knew that if it came down to it, he would fight on the streets while everyone else focused on evacuating.

The Panopticon's new efficient evac system would have cleared the city in just thirty minutes.

But there...was nobody here?

The streets were empty. The buildings, once a resplendent white, were dulling, turning grey.

"Rah!" The Hero slammed his shield on the ground, creating a massive detonation of energy that blasted the entity backwards. It smashed through several buildings like they were made of cardboard. However, its destructive path back made no sounds, no crack and shatter or rubble.

Even the explosions it created from smashing through vehicles were soundless.

It was like the entity was leeching everything away from the world. Not just color, but sound as well.

"Where is everyone!?" said the Hero, panicked. He used his brief moment of respite to look around, trying to gage what happened.

Like the fleeting color and sound, the people had gone too. The greying city was a foreboding symbol of not hope, but apocalypse, of emptiness and loss.

The Hero grimaced. Were they all dead? Had they just been abducted? Elaine and Krysa - were they okay?

Was this an illusion?

An...illusion?

The Hero fell down to a knee, putting a hand to the side of his head. A skull splitting headache crackled through his brain.

"Wh-what?" The Hero closed his eyes in pain. When he opened them again, he saw for a flickering moment the streets of Haven as they had been before the Age of Peace.

Scarred with graffiti. Populated by rats and trash as much as it was people. The people walking through these streets were shadowy blurs. One of them walked near him.

He reached out to it, but the moment he made contact, the vision of Haven disappeared, leaving him in his own world again.

The world had turned a shade more grey, more dark.

The entity was in front of the Hero again.

"What kind of trick is this!?" said the Hero, raising his shield. "My head - you're in my head, aren't you!?"

The Hero could shield every single one of his neurons such that he was utterly immune to any attack that affected his mind.

So how was this happening?



The entity did not respond to the Hero. Instead, it just stood there, shield by its side, as if waiting.

Waiting for what...the Hero did not know.

The Hero blinked. It was...snowing?

No. Not snowing.

Ashes.

Ashes were falling from the sky. He glanced up. The sky was no more. It was completely black. Not by night, but as if some godlike force had taken a black marker and scribbled all over the once bright and beautiful sky.

"You-don't think you've won!" said the Hero. "Wherever you sent everyone, whatever you did with them - I'll reverse it all! I'll fight to my dying breath!"

"Looks like you need some help!" A voice from the sky.

From the dark, Adam crashed down, his body encased in metal. He stood in between the Hero and the entity.

"Adam!" the Hero felt relieved to see an old companion. "What happened to Elaine and Krysa!? To everyone!?"

"They told me to help out, so here I am!" said Adam. He looked at the entity. "This thing's giving you trouble? You're losing your touch, man. Here, I'll show you how this is done!"

Adam charged forth, punch cocked back.

"Wait, attacks won't work!" began the Hero, but it was too late.

Adam punched into the entity' shield.

"What the-?" Adam raised a brow as his fist stopped against the shield.

The entity used its free arm to grasp Adam's face.

And then -

He broke down, scattering into crumbling fragments.

Adam was no more.

## Chapter 413: Dream's End 2

"No!" roared the Hero. He charged the entity, slamming it with his shield with all his might. They crashed through the cityscape, plowing through highrise building after building.

Adam was dead.

The closest friend that the Hero had ever had.

Rage filled him, fueled him, propelling his power to heights it had never reached before. The air around the Hero and the entity ignited from the friction of high speed movement, turning them into a shining meteorite that quickly sped past the city, entering into the Wastelands.

Or formerly the Wastelands. They had been renewed with green and growth oncemore. But the entity had taken that green and made it grey and lifeless just like everything else.

Memories of Adam flowed into the Hero's mind, spurred by his loss.

When Adam had saved the Hero from the jaws of a variant during their Hero License examination.

How Adam had knocked himself out in a several week long coma taking a hit from a powerful villain meant for the Hero.

How Adam groaned as a living corpse, eyes lifeless, pale flesh rotting in patches.

The Hero stopped his charge, skidding to a burning halt upon a now char scarred meadow. The entity flew backwards, into the distance.

The Hero fell to his hands and knees, eyes wide, headache splitting down his brain with lumberjack axe force.

"What was that?" whispered the Hero.

That memory of Adam...

The entity was back again. It stood over the Hero again.

The world turned one shade darker. It was now like permanent night.

A beam from above blasted the entity but like all other attacks, scattered into nothingness.

"Pathetic. Here I am pitying you for the first time in a while." Seth Solar spoke from above. "But you deserve some help for saving the world."

"W-wait..." began the Hero weakly, raising his hand toward Seth.

Seth, however, as hot headed as ever, did not wait. He charged down, punching at the entity.

Like Adam, Seth fragmented into pieces before crumbling into nothingness.

"Seth..." The Hero's hand reached out, grasping a golden fragment - the last of Seth's being - before that crumbled away too.

Seth...the world's second strongest defender, gone just like that.

The former villain who had joined the Hero when the Greys came, putting aside differences to save the world.

The man that had killed the Hero by punching his heart out.

Another headache assailed the Hero. It felt like his mind was a glass vessel and each headache another crack with each crack threatening to shatter the entire thing.

The world turned even darker.

It was now hard to see beyond a hundred or so meters ahead. Everything beyond that was just pure, utter darkness.

There was just the Hero and the entity together upon a hill of grey, surrounded by a void of nothingness.

"Why...?" the Hero weakly stood up. The pain in his head made everything feel shaky. His vision kept blurring in and out, each blur shifting the landscape around him from colorless grass to cracked earth and back.

"Why are you doing this?" the Hero said to the entity. "Why?"

"Dad!"

The Hero turned around, hope blooming in the pits of his despair tainted stomach.

Krysa and Elaine appeared through a portal.

"Stay-stay back!" the Hero put a hand up, warding his wife and daughter away. "The moment you get close to this thing, you'll fade away!"

"Everything's gone, dad," said Krysa. She floated towards the Hero, and he panicked for a moment, looking back at the entity to see if it made a move.

The entity just stood there, away from the Hero, as if to give him space.

"What do you mean?" the Hero planted his shield in front of him, between the entity and his family.

"The whole world's gone," said Krysa.

"Gone?" the Hero murmured in disbelief. All those decades of fighting and protecting. All of it...was for nothing? "Destroyed?"

It would all end just like this?

"Not destroyed." Elaine put a hand on the Hero's shoulder. Her touch, even now, even in this apocalyptic moment, was calming. "Our time was just up."

"Our time? What? Elaine, what are you saying?" the Hero glanced back at Elaine, confused.

She stared up at the Hero with speckling her rainbow tinted eyes.

"This world was never meant to be. Remember, my love." Elaine turned the Hero around and put her hand to his cheek. "Remember, Aldrich."

Memories.

So many memories with Elaine. Their struggles together. The laughs they had between each other. The love they shared. The daughter they raised.

And -

Elaine as a zombie.

Then, it was then that the Hero knew.

"None of this...none of this is real," murmured the Hero, blinking, putting a disbelieving hand to his forehead.

"That depends on your definition of real," said Elaine. "In many ways, it was. The life you had here, the life we had together - it was real to me. It was real to our daughter. In

that way, it was real. Even if everything here was a creation of your mind, creation still has substance.

But it isn't 'real' in the sense that this isn't where you belong."

"Like mom said, our time is up," said Krysa. "Now that you're starting to remember, this world's ending. And now, it's time for you to get back to yours."

The Hero knelt down, dropping his shield. Warm tears began to trickle down his cheeks. "I-all of this- you two, the people I loved the most in this world, everything - I can't go, not like this, not so suddenly."

Krysa hugged the Hero, sniffing. "I know, dad, I know. I don't want to say goodbye either. But mom showed me everything. There's a ton of people that are waiting for you out there, hoping for you.

You have a daughter there too, someone just like me. And she's little: she's going to cry a lot harder than I am if you never come back. She needs her dad more than I do."

Elaine joined the hug. "I know everything's breaking apart so quickly. I felt the same way too, but I came to realize that this peace we had, this peace you built - it shows that our story here is over.

You won here.

But out there, you still have a fight to get to.

I want you, no, I need you to be strong.

I need you to save the world out there like you did with ours.

And, most importantly-," Elaine's voice caught in her throat. She held on to the Hero tight, the tightest she had ever held him, never wanting to let him go yet knowing she had to. "I want you to love out there properly. I want you to find happiness. Just like you did here."

The Hero held the two close to him. "I don't want to go. I don't want to let you two go. I don't want to let you two die."

Krysa tried to say something, but her words caught in her throat. Instead, she began to sob into the Hero's chest.

"Death doesn't have to be the end, my love. Nor does it have to be cold and lonely. In your arms like this, I'm reminded of the years of happiness we had. In your warmth, I feel enough comfort to let you go," said Elaine. She rested her cheek against the Hero's

own. "Keep us in your memories. The lessons you learned in being happy, in knowing how to love and raise a daughter - use them out there.

Because just like me, there's someone out there waiting to hold you."

The Hero lurched forward, his arms now empty. Rainbow fragments floated away like cherry blossoms in a springtime breeze. Ephemeral. Transient. Disappearing shards of what once was.

The Hero watched as the petals shone, reflecting a lifetime of memories, of love and happiness and family, before fading away into the darkness.

The world turned darker.

Now, there was nothing except the dark.

The Hero stood up. He turned around.

The entity was there. Its shield was gone. Instead, it held out its foggy hand.

The Hero, no Aldrich, reached out and took it.

As their hands locked together, light bloomed from the touch, engulfing everything.

## **Chapter 414: Raid's End 1**

"That was a good old scrap. Best I had in a damn while." Clint exhaled as he stood over a pile of half-melted rubble. His breath was visible, tinged with toxic lavender.

Underneath the rubble, pinned below a pillar of concrete, was Shuten Doji. He lay flat on his back, arms out to his sides in exhaustion. Despite the multi-ton pillar of concrete bearing down on him, it was more like a paperweight that held him in place more than anything that really hurt him.

"Screw you, Unbreakable," said Shuten Doji, his voice a little strained from the weight on his chest. "I said it before and I'll say it again: coming here just for the sake of your personal vengeance - it's a foolish decision.

You probably believe your alliance with Thanatos gave you the freedom to strike, but soon enough, an upstart like him, even a Sentinel, won't be enough.

And when that happens, you'll regret breaking the peace we brokered."

"A peace?" Clint shrugged. Various inhuman parts on his body - the carapace on his skin, the feathered gills on his neck to filter out poison, the insulating blubber under the carapace to fend against fire - glowed white before fading away like dust. "That ain't a peace. It was a ceasefire."

"And you broke it. You understand what that means, don't you? You still have an entire tribe to take care of. You - you're an interesting specimen, Unbreakable, one of the only Alters to have undergone Metamorphosis without dying.

You could have helped the world so much by lending your body to science, but here you are, licking old wounds like a bitter dog."

"Here I am," said Clint. He glanced at the facility's now shattered dome entrance. "So that's what you're studying here? Metamorphosis?"

"Why's it matter to you?"

"It matters to the team that's infiltrating the labs right now," said Clint.

"What!?" Shuten Doji exclaimed. "This wasn't about your vengeance?" He blinked, recalling parts

"Oh, believe me, that's been in the back of my mind," said Clint. "But I've had time to calm down about that. A little. I'll still kill your kind if it comes down to it, but you're right. Ain't about to go on a rampage with my tribe on the line.

That is, until now.

All that talk about vengeance was to keep you fightin' me, ya blockhead."

Shuten Doji furrowed his brows together, his glowing purple veins visible under his skin. "What!? You would dare to steal our research? You're making a mistake, Unbreakable! This research - it isn't petty R and D for the next killing weapon - it's the key to our future! To humanity's future!"

"Really now?" Clint sat down on the pillar cross-legged. He rested his stubbled chin on his hand casually. "Kinda interestin' comin' from a group of thugs. Suited up thugs, granted, but still thugs, y'know?"

"You know nothing," said Shuten Doji. His eyes flickered in recognition as he recalled their battle. The battle that had utterly destroyed the lab's shield dome and, he realized, its communication lines.

Clint had made absolutely sure to keep Shuten Doji isolated here, leveraging the fact that he was the one and only Unbreakable - the one man army who had taken down an

entire high tier corporation by himself with a personal vendetta to boot - to bait Shuten Doji into thinking only about the fight here.

Shuten Doji put a resisting hand against the pillar pinning him. His fingers easily dug into the solid concrete like it was made of putty. "Down there is mankind's only hope to survive the future. You cannot destroy the research there. Not if you actually care about this world."

"Huh." Clint raised a brow at Shuten Doji. "You're being serious, aren't ya? Desperate, too. But not in a way to try and spare you, cause' no self-respecting Sword is ever gonna beg for their lives."

You really do think the world's hope is down there."

"Yes," said Shuten Doji. "As is mine."

"Tell ya what," said Clint. "Your comms may be down, but mine ain't. When my team makes contact with the lab, you tell em' to stand down, and I guarantee we won't touch nothin' there."

"Promise me you won't hurt a single one of the scientists either," said Shuten Doji.

Clint nodded. "Sure. Killing innocents ain't my style anymore anyhow."

"Hang on, everyone." Alexis spoke with practiced calm. Her white hair swayed in the air, glowing and starting to crackle like living lightning. A green circular barrier projected around her, and beneath it, Stella, Tox, Diamondback, Kris, Akan, and Falco.

Outside of the barrier was nothing but exploding carnage. Missiles and high caliber bullets and explosives boomed everywhere, drowning everything out in bright hot hellfire.

'All of you will regret trying to stop our research. Research to evolve humanity beyond compare. Beyond the chains that bind it to this world.' Machine Mind's voice projected mentally to everyone.

"Outta my head, you old creep!" Stella slapped the side of her head.

"Can he read our minds!?" said Tox, alarmed.

"Nah," said Stella. "Telepathy's an extension of him being able to project his mind out. A good amount of higher end technos got it. But he can only communicate. Can't read your mind or anything fancy like that."

"Most of the firepower here is from the Cyclops, r-right?" said Falco. "Sooner or later, they'll run out of ammo!"



"Did you not read the mission report?" said Alan. "Cyclops are like mini factories. They have nanoprinting cores that give them an infinite supply of missiles and bullets."

"That's cheating!" said Falco.

"Infinite until they run out of energy," said Alan.

Kris scoffed. "If only Machine Mind wasn't personally supplying them with his A rank energy reserves. I swear, I'm being severely underpaid for this mission."

"Quit complaining," said Diamondback. "What's done is done. Just focus on getting out of this. This is purely suppressive fire meant to keep us down. Stall us out until the storm's traces pass and they can reach out to reinforcements."

Our EMP charges didn't work," said Alexis. "And my jamming lightning isn't doing as well as I'd hoped either."

"Because Machine Mind is strengthening every single bot here," said Kris. "He's got higher end technopathy that lets him move machines manually even when you blow out their circuits."

If we want to get out of this, we'll have to destroy the rest of the Cyclops the hard way. Note that I am heavily resisting the urge to put down this newbie again."

"Noted," said Diamondback. "Now let's get to thinking productively. I can deal with this myself. The Cyclops can't break through my armor. The issue is that the moment this barrier comes down is when we get hit by an explosion."

I know most of you are tough enough to weather it, but Falco can't. And yes, Kris, I understand your frustration - don't voice it again."

Kris grumbled unintelligibly.

"I can do it," said Tox.

"Hm?" Diamondback stared down at her.

"I can get us out of this. I just need to...switch," said Tox. "My trigger. It doesn't just change how I think. It makes my power stronger too. I can bore down through the rock below us and take out the bots surrounding us without Lexis ever having to put the barrier down."

"Perfect," said Diamondback.

"I just don't like changing. It isn't who I am." Tox sighed. "But I have to. We have to clear these guys. Only then can I go back and help Ace."

"Wait." Stella put a hand to her ear. "I've got comms from Clint."

She cocked her head, listening for a few seconds before smiling.

"What's going on?" asked Tox.

"Looks like we won't be needing to fight our way through after all," said Stella. She took in a deep breath and then yelled, "Hey you geriatric mind-peeper! Listen up! Your Sword on the surface has authorized us to get what we want!"

Almost immediately, the missile and gunfire stopped.

## Chapter 415: Raid's End 2

"Am I dead?" Falco looked around from the dirt, hands covered over his head.

"No, not yet." Alan grabbed Falco by the shoulder and hoisted him up. "In spite of your best efforts."

"Hey, and here I thought at least you had my back. Being a newbie like me and all," said Falco.

"The machines have stopped moving," said Alexis, her crackling eyes scanning their surroundings. Her barrier was in the center of a smoking, scorch blackened crater. All around them was a ring formation of mechs comprised of standard gun toting droids led by the hulking Cyclops with their missile launchers and quadruple high caliber autocannon arms.

All of the machines had glowing golden circuit patterns wreathed through their bodies – signs of Machine Mind manually controlling them.

"Stella, update us," said Diamondback.

"Ol' Clint out in the front beat the tar outta the Sword, but not just that. He got the Sword to send an executive command here to let us in and out to get what we want," said Stella. "I just relayed that info to the mind creeper here."

"Seriously?" said Tox. She instantly put an impatient hand against Alexis's barrier. "Lexy, take this thing down. I have to help Ace."

Alexis nodded, but Diamondback held up a hand.

"Not yet," said Diamondback. "I understand how you feel, but we need to ascertain the situation."

"No, you don't understand!" said Tox, exasperated. "These machines might stop, but that thing, that clone, it isn't a machine! Machine Mind can't control it – it might still be beating Ace up!"

"Correct." Machine Mind's voice resonated all throughout the cavern, echoing from each and every mech present. "I will uphold this ceasefire, but I cannot guarantee the safety of your companion. He has, unfortunately, destroyed the operating device I implanted within the clone's brain."

"That must mean Ace beat it, right?" said Tox hopefully.

"Inconclusive," said Machine Mind. "That clone is a near perfect specimen. Almost as perfect as the one you used to breach this lab. A simple brain injury would be insufficient in destroying him."

"Clint...?" said Stella, narrowing her eyes. "He's involved with this somehow? Are y'all studying him?"

"I have said too much. This does not concern your narrow minds. I will open the vaults and give you the Kryptic. But in exchange, you will leave peacefully. You will not damage our research any further."

"Understood," said Diamondback.

"Is that going to be it?" said Alan. "Weren't we supposed to make them hurt?"

"No. We were supposed to 'make some noise'," said Diamondback. "We've done that already. The Kryptic is all we are here for. We get it – we get out. No further need to risk ourselves."

"Damn, now that's something I can agree on," said Kris with a sigh.

"Y-yeah, getting outta here doesn't sound all too bad," said Falco.

"No. No, this is too easy," said Alan. "The Trident has so much here. So much that could be taken from them-,"

"This is not the time to let your personal grudges interfere." Diamondback's voice was stern. Final.

Alexis clasped her hands together. Her barrier rippled. "I'm shutting out sound so he can't hear us. I just want to weigh in and say that I'm sort of on the new guy's side. JUST getting the Kryptic seems like a letdown. And what's the point of leaving Machine Mind and the researchers behind?

Won't they just alert the rest of the Trident?"

"But that's the point, isn't it?" said Diamondback. "It forces the Trident to split their forces over here. As for them knowing the Kryptic is gone, I imagine that's a calculated move on part of Thanatos. If I understand correctly, the Trident's biggest leverage over Solomon Solar is the Kryptic.

Whoever has that Kryptic holds Solomon's collar. In this case, that'll be Thanatos.

Once Solomon understands that the Trident no longer has it, what do you think an abused, chained dog will do? It'll lash out. Or worse."

A drone tapped at the barrier, making everyone glance up at it. It was a small flying drone meant for underground excavation with several clasping appendage extending from its body. From one of its appendages was a large black case.

"Letting sound flow back in," said Alexis.

"What is this?" said Stella.

"The Kryptic," said Machine Mind. "While you all were busy bickering among yourselves, I've decided to give you more incentive to get out of here. And, of course, the knowledge that in ten minutes, reinforcements will arrive."

"Let's take it and leave." Diamondback stepped forward, tapping at the barrier, indicating for Alexis to take it down.

Alexis glanced at Stella for permission.

"Alright," said Stella.

Alexis put the front of the barrier down. Diamondback stepped in, using his bulk to cover everyone behind him incase Machine Mind decided to double cross them. However, no such treachery occurred.

Diamondback took the case without issue from the drone and stepped back into the barrier.

"And now out you go. Through the elevators which I have graciously reactivated for you," said Machine Mind. "On the way, you are free to check up on your straggler friend."

"Let's hurry," said Tox, worried.

"NO!" A voice boomed through the cavern, filled with animalistic rage.

"Wh-what the hell is that!? Some kind of monster!?" said Falco, shaken.

"No...that's Ace!" said Tox, eyes wide and bright. She turned around to the source of the voice only for confusion to mar her happiness. "What...happened?"

Sometime prior –

Ace laid down in a pit of shattered earth, blood streaming from his mouth. Blood also trickled from his white eyes – a sign of him overusing his tactile telekinesis. Pain assailed every part of his body. He was sure he had fractured multiple bones all throughout his body, but thankfully, his undead body let him move.

"What a sorry sight." The clone floated above Ace, staring down at him with blank, bright white eyes. Machine Mind's voice echoed from the clone's head. "Look at you, my child. So weak, so...imperfect. To think there was once a time I thought you perfect. You, of all things. Just because you proved superior to your siblings."

Ace grit his teeth. Many of them were cracked. He floated back up out of his crater, lip quivering, eyes half closed in equal parts anguish and anger. His childhood returned to him –

His first memories. Waking up from a deep underwater slumber, coughing out thick amniotic fluid from his burning lungs as he desperately tried to adjust to oxygen. He was smaller, then, probably no bigger than a five year old child developmentally.

He floundered on cold, hard lab ground. Firm but gentle hands raised him up.

The hands of his brother. Square jawed and white haired – an exact image of what Ace would have looked like grown up.

"You're special, aren't you?"

"I-I am?"

"Yeah, special in the head. C'mon, stand up straight. Father doesn't tolerate weakness."

...

Memories lining up in a cold, sterile white room. Beside him were three of his brothers. One ten years old. Another fifteen. Another twenty. All of them stood in order of their age, forming a natural linear graph of heights and builds.

They held their balled fists to their sides, all of them trembling in exertion against a seemingly invisible force.

"Come now, exert your minds." Father's voice echoed through the room. "This is merely twenty tons of gravitational force. It should be nothing for specimens like yourselves. Push through the pain and the weakness, my children."

## Chapter 416: Raid's End 3

Afterwards -

Ace remembered kneeling on the floor. It was not cold anymore, warm as it was with a thick sheen of his blood. Red poured out from his mouth and his bloodshot eyes.

The twelve hours of straining against heightened, crushing gravity had worn its toll on the little boy.

When he saw the blood, his stomach turned in disgust, but at the same time, he was drawn to it. It was warm, and warmth, he knew very, very little of.

"Get up, Ace." The biggest, oldest Ace grabbed little Ace's shoulder and raised him up.

Ace kept looking down at his blood in a lightheaded daze.

"Stop that." The oldest clone shook Ace, forcing his gaze up where their eyes met. "Or else you'll turn into a weirdo psycho."

"Huh...?" said Ace.

"Are your ears clogged or something?" the oldest clone peered at Ace's ears. Blood streamed from them too. "Oh yeah, they would be. Here-," The clone tapped Ace's forehead. The blood popped out of his ears, moved by telekinetic force. "Better?"

"Yes." Little Ace nodded.

"Then listen to me, alright?" said the biggest Ace. "Don't ever let me catch you looking down like that, like you belong in the dirt. Because trust me, you don't. None of us do.

Like father said, we're all special. But especially you. And what business do special people like us have staring at the ground, huh? That makes sense, yeah?"

"Yes." Little Ace nodded again.

"Good. Maybe you aren't so special in the head after all." Bigger Ace smiled and patted little Ace's shoulder. "Now stand up straight before father gets here."

Year after year passed filled with training, or 'trials' as father called them.

At first, they just involved pushing back against gravitational force. Then, they became harder and harder. Fights against live variants. And afterwards, being forced to consume their meat in its rawest, most disgusting state.

Exposure to poisons, electric shocks, and countless other types of beatings.

So many times, Ace left those tests looking down, beaten, bloodied, bruised in body and soul, teetering between the boundary of life and death.

And every single time, bigger Ace would grab his shoulder, raise him up, and tell him to stop looking down.

One day -

"Hey, wake up." Ace opened his eyes, awoken by gentle shakes. He rubbed his eyes as he got up from the bed of his tiny pod. "Brother...?"

Ace looked at the oldest version of him who, by now, truly was old. The eldest Ace looked to be over sixty now with thin, age worn limbs, sparse, thinning white hair, and wrinkles covering his hands, face, and feet that showed through the standard issue bodysuit all the Aces had to wear.

"Yeah, it's me. Look, we got a surprise. C'mere." Old Ace floated away, and little Ace followed.

All the Aces lived in their own pods which housed little more than their beds. Each of them had a few personal possessions to their name. Toys, a poster, maybe, and other miscellaneous things they kept in their pods, but most of the time, father had these confiscated because he did not like to breed the 'weakness of individuality'.

But every so often, other scientists, 'uncles' and 'aunts' as they were called, would come in and give the Aces something from the world outside the lab.

A mystery world that little Ace still knew nothing about. Old Ace apparently had even gotten a glimpse of it one day when one of the uncles led him out to sightsee.

Old Ace said it was uglier than he thought. That it was nothing but hot, dusty air and earth that looked broken beyond repair.

The uncle that let Old Ace out was never seen again, but all the Aces were envious of old Ace's unique experience. By now, there were twenty Aces, some male, some female, some growing older than others, some growing slower than others, but all of them were united in one shared hope: to see the outside world.

Old Ace's grim revelation was, therefore, taken as the ramblings of an older man that the rest of the Aces did not really believe in.

Especially since sometimes, uncles and aunts would talk about the outside world and how wonderful it was, filled with giant buildings and caped heroes and good foods. All

the toys that the Aces got were from there, after all, and how could a barren wasteland produce all of that?

"Here." Old Ace led little Ace into the living room that connected to all the pods. There, all twenty Aces were huddled about.

All of the Aces were bigger than little Ace despite half of them being younger. They, like old Ace, grew fast. Little Ace, on the other hand, grew slow.

Little Ace hated that about himself. He was ten years old but he was still so tiny. Other Aces that were his age were already like the uncles and aunts - fully grown adults.

Little Ace wanted to get big and strong fast, too. But he was always the runt of the litter. Not that the Aces picked on him much. They knew they were all in this together.

Seeing each other suffer near daily from constant trials was more than enough motivation not to inflict the same pain on each other outside of them.

"What is that?" Little Ace's eyes widened when he saw a colorful pillar of red standing atop a large plate. Atop it was a single candle burning with a sad, dying flame.

"It's called a cake," said Old Ace. "You eat it to celebrate the day you were born, and apparently, all of us were born on the same day. Or maybe the uncles and aunts are being lazy, I don't know.

Regardless, it's something you eat."

"...Cake." Little Ace nodded, committing that name to his mind.

"This one is strawberry flavored, too," said Old Ace. He shrugged. "Though I imagine you have no idea what that tastes like."

"Strawberry." Little Ace nodded again.

"How did the uncle get this through father?" one of the Aces said, eyeing the large cake suspiciously. "Something might be in it."

"I already had a small bite before," said Old Ace. "It's fine. And a thousand times better than the slop we have to eat normally."

Most of the meals provided to the Aces were mushy white paste engineered with nutrients in mind, not taste. They also encouraged strong bodily growth and healing from the wounds they suffered routinely from their trials.



All of the Aces stared at the cake like hungry wolves, desperation gleaming in their white eyes. They glanced at Old Ace, the de facto leader they put in charge because he was the first among them.

"Go on. Start eating," said Old Ace.

The Aces rushed in, breaking the cake apart with their hands, shoveling food into their mouths. But they made sure not to take too much, being mindful to share with each other.

"Can I go and eat too?" said Little Ace, mouth watering. He looked up at Old Ace to find Old Ace was staring past the cake, into the distance.

"Yeah, yeah, go ahead," said Old Ace. He shook his head and patted Little Ace's shoulder.

"I'll save some for you," said Little Ace.

Old Ace shook his head sadly, and at the time, Little Ace did not know why. "Take my portion, Ace. You deserve it more. You're special, after all."

That night was when the final trial happened.

When all the Aces, all of them having honed their power and bodies to their absolute limits, were placed in an inescapable room. There, father told them it was now time to face their greatest foes yet: each other.

They were made to fight to the death. Only the last one standing would leave the room alive.

The cake they had was not to celebrate their births. It was to commemorate their deaths.

Memories that Ace did not know, memories he had buried deep down, under lock and key and chain and gate, were sundered open.

He remembered.

He did not remember the fighting. That was not important. He remembered -

"I knew it." Old Ace looked up at Little Ace. Old Ace was just an upper body now, his lower half having been severed during the final trial.

The thick, plated tiles of the room were painted red, drenched in gore. Severed limbs, chunks of bone, eyeballs, brain matter - all manner of viscera and broken body parts lay scattered in an artpiece of suffering and madness.

Little Ace stared down at Old Ace, his eyes glowing through a thick coating of blood on his face.

"I knew it...you're...special." Old Ace smiled at Little Ace.

Little Ace looked down at his crimson coated hands, hands coated with the lives of all of his brothers and sisters, and trembled. Tears began to well up from the corners of his eyes. Clear, pure tears that quickly tainted with the red on his face.

"Don't...cry." Old Ace reached his hand up and gently patted Little Ace's arm.

"Don't...look down. I told you - never...look down. You're special. Look...up."

Old Ace's hand fell to the ground, splashing on a pool of blood.

"I remember it all." Ace held out his hand, grabbing a punch from his clone. A shockwave of force echoed out, but Ace did not budge a single inch.

Ace's eyes were widened in the shock of recall, of breaking into a past he had kept locked away.

"Ah, you remember now?" Machine Mind's voice echoed from the clone's head. "Do you understand your place, then, my son? You, so special, ordained with the greatest compatibility to Superforce's DNA and blessed with the touch of the Blue Ring?"

You may be imperfect, but you are imperfect only due to your mind. A mind that has grown tainted with individuality. Your body, however, is still near perfect, its potential merely held down by that weak mind of yours."

"I understand now," said Ace.

"You do?" The clone pulled back. Machine's Mind's voice was hopeful. "Then-,"

"I understand that you have to die. Everyone here does." Ace unleashed a punch at the clone's skull. A blue ring glowed at his chest, over where his heart was. Gleaming cerulean energy patterns filled his veins, making them visible through his skin and bodysuit.

The punch collided with the clone's forehead. Waves of blue energy coursed from the point of impact through the clone's head, caving the skull in like a hammer taken to an egg.

The clone fell backwards, the yolk of his skull oozing out in spilled grey matter. In the middle of the brain matter was a blinking golden orb - the control device that Machine Mind used.

"You do not understand, my son." Machine Mind's voice echoed from the orb. "The sheer potential you have. You were taken by Ember after you were deemed a research failure, but you were taken against my will. I always saw potential in you.

You can come back and lead the world into a new era. You just have to come back to me. You-,"

Ace crushed the orb under his foot. It crunched and splattered in mechanical failure. He turned his gaze to the corpse of his clone. A fainter blue ring glowed from its chest. Ace punched his fist into the ring and ripped out the clone's still beating heart.

He crushed the tender organ. Its gleaming blue blood flowed into Ace's skin, into his own veins, his own heart, fueling him with strength to carry out his purpose.

Vengeance.

## Chapter 417: Raid's End 4

Diamondback put a crystal encased hand forward against Ace. "Stand down. We have what we need. Mission's over."

"Not over. Never. Over." Ace floated forward, not sparing a glance at Diamondback. He only looked ahead, towards the enemy he knew he had to destroy. The enemy that had taken everything from him once.

Machine Mind's army of gold eyed, gold circuited mechanoids stared at Ace with cold, unfeeling gazes.

"I knew it! The ace did not fail!" The scientist's voice boomed with very human energy, echoing from each and every machine in a cacophony of joyous shrieks. "Behold, you philistines - the peak of my research! The next stage of Alterhuman evolution! Heir of the Stars to lead us into the new age!"

"Stop. Talking." Ace kept forwards, but Diamondback stopped him with his arm.

"Mission's over. I understand you have a personal grudge, but so does Alan here. So does Clint. You don't take priority over any of us," said Diamondback.

"..." Ace did not stare at Diamondback's crystal helm face with anything resembling animosity. It was an oddly blank stare, one that registered Diamondback as less than nothing.

Ace put his hand on Diamondback's forearm.

Diamondback instantly pulled his arm back. Not just that, but he took a dashing step back too, his crystalline heel digging into the rock.

"What's wrong!?" asked Falco.

Diamondback had felt it. The moment Ace had touched his arm. His instincts bringing into the forefront of his mind a very, very primal feeling: the fear of death.

"What the hell?" Kris tapped his goggles. The purple lenses clicked and whirred as they picked up on Diamondback's arm. "The diamond's gone. Unraveled like old cloth."

It was true. The incredibly durable crystalline metamaterial that encased Diamondback's arm had, like Kris pointed out, frayed apart in strands that should have been impossible to make with such a durable, hard material.

Blue tinges of energy outlined the green diamond strands.

"All of you, go." Ace pointed back while looking forwards. "And stay out."

There was no hint of threat in Ace's voice, but perhaps the lack of it was even more ominous. It was too neutral, as if he considered everyone there to simply be nothing.

Ace flew by, and this time, nobody stood in his way, very much for their own good.

"We DO already have the Kryptic," said Stella, briefcase in hand. "And what's a little ol' double crossing to a criminal org like this, huh?"

"Take the Kryptic, you fools," said Machine Mind. "All I need is my Ace."

"Something's wrong about this whole situation," said Tox, biting her lip. Her gaze lingered at Ace's back. "Machine Mind's just seen that Ace is way, WAY stronger than before. I mean, just look at him, he's got glowing blue energy flowing all through his veins, in his heart - that's totally a big powerup, right?"

But the geriatric tinkerer still wants to duke it out with Ace? He must have a plan."

"Of course I have a plan. I have plans atop of plans atop of plans. Plans are all that I am, all that I have been. Plans have been the product of all the research and blood I have shed," said Machine Mind. "I cannot say I predicted this moment, but I certainly welcome it nonetheless.

As for the rest of you, well, none of you are worth my time."

Machine Mind punctuated the end of his sentence by getting all of his bots into combat mode. There was still a sizable army of them. At least five Cyclops and a veritable horde of smaller flying drones and humanoid droids supporting them.

A maelstrom of missile fire, lead, fire, and lasers blast out from all the bots.

"Barrier going up!" shouted Alexis. She raised her hands up, and everyone huddled near her. But in the next moment, she raised a brow, witnessing with everyone else as all of the projectiles were stopped seemingly in midair.

Ace had his hands thrust out, like he was pushing against a wall. He remembered the sensation of resisting gravity, of pushing against force weighing down on every inch of his body.

"Brother..." Ace whispered under his breath, memories welling up from deep within, from his heart, pumping sentiment fueled power through all his veins.

Every single projectile - bullets, missiles, even less tangible things like lasers - hovered in the air, outlined in blue energy.

Ace was holding everything back with seemingly utter ease. His tactile telekinesis had evolved beyond compare. Beforehand, he was essentially just a flying brick type Alter. He was strong and could fly but that was about it. His tactile telekinesis was just a slight cherry on the top that let him carry things better or leverage his force efficiently.

Now, it was basically on the level of advanced telekinesis.

"I see now," said Kris, his goggles whirring as he analyzed the situation. "When he touched DB and broke apart the diamond - he literally unraveled it using telekinesis. Not just that, he basically changed the metamaterial's atomic structure from hard as hell to soft and clothly in an instant."

"Go." Ace did not look back. He kept forwards, his each and every single step making the wall of projectiles fall back in synch.

"Ace-," began Tox.

"Go." Ace's voice was cold. Emotionless.

Tox heard it with pain. It was not a voice she would have ever expected from her old, old friend. At the very least, she had thought she would never have to hear that tone from him again. He had it before, way back when they first met, when he knew nothing about friends or happiness.

"I'm making a judgment call here as team leader," said Stella. She patted Tox's shoulder gently. "We should go. Ace is strong. Stronger than ever before. He won't lose here. At the very least, not until we regroup with Clint up top.

Anything Machine Mind is planning - we'll stop it once we get Clint back."

Tox nodded slowly, hesitantly. Her gaze lingered on Ace's back. She closed her eyes and nodded, this time with more confidence. "OK. Let's go."

"Let's scram!" shouted Stella.

"Keep in the barrier," said Diamondback. "Falco, Alan, near me."

The group made an escape formation around Alexis's barrier, and within its teal green fold, they rapidly disappeared from the cavern, Kryptic in tow.

It took only a few seconds for them to be out of sight, and a few more seconds after that to be out of hearing, their footsteps dulling away.

During these seconds, an atmosphere intensified between Ace and Machine Mind. One of silence, but in that silence, there was much said. A tale of mad desire and the pain it wrought. And the vengeance that flowered from it like blood lilies sprouting atop decayed skulls.

"It appears a little more destructive capability is required here." Machine's Mind's voice resonated throughout the bots, and as it did, the golden circuit patterns shining through their bodies glowed even brighter.

With mechanical clicks and the crunching of disassembling metal, the bots unraveled into floating pieces. Every one of them broke apart, not just the small flying drones, but also the tank sized Cyclops. They formed into a whirling storm of machine parts that quickly locked back together, reforming into a droid design.

Humanoid - two arms, two legs, and a bucket helm shaped head with a single glowing golden dot for an eye. The droid stood a full head over Ace with a body made bulky through metal plating like a man shaped war machine.

The segments and seams within the droid's metal plate and body glowed with bright gold, enveloping it in a scintillating aura that lit up the dark depths of the cavern.

"Now, we can begin-," said Machine Mind.

"..." Ace's expression did not change. He clapped his hands together. The enormous volley of projectiles he held in midair hurtled back towards Machine Mind, collapsing in on the reformed droid and causing a cataclysmic, earth shaking nova of an explosion.

A huge cloud of dust and smoke and upturned debris geysered up into the air, destroying all visibility. Ace looked at this cloud unperturbed, waiting to see if Machine Mind was dead.

From the cloud, a flash of gold alerted Ace.

A beam slammed into Ace's heart, where a ring of blue shone through his black bodysuit.

Ace slid back several meters in instant impact before he resisted, halting. The beam of energy was intensely hot, so hot that the air around Ace warped and the solid bedrock beneath his feet began to melt.

"Not dead," commented Ace as he put his hand against the beam and started to walk through it. "Good."

Ace rapidly sped up, flying through the beam to crash his open hand against the droid's throat. He flew the droid back dozens of meters until they smashed into the heavily armored vault door.

With a sharp, splitting sound - the telltale sign of reactive neosteel being overloaded beyond its reactive atomic structure's capability to handle kinetic force - Ace drove the droid straight through the vault as well.

The end result of Ace's flying rampage was that the droid was flat on the ground, in the midst of a crater with Ace's hand still wrapped around its throat. Black light shone from the vault's innards, indicating the presence of a Null field.

"Im...pressive." Machine Mind's voice cracked from the droid as it looked up at Ace. The droid's body had suffered catastrophic damage with severe dents wreathed across its chest and back. Sparks sputtered from every broken part of it.

The Null field was disrupting Machine Mind's connection to the droid. While type A Null fields - the strongest of them all - disabled both technology and Alter powers, type B - the more commercially desirable variant - only dampened Alter powers, allowing technos to find a loophole and operate machinery within them.

"Null does not affect you," said Machine Mind, even now curiously analytical. "But this was already proven long...ago...your power comes from the Ring, and the Ring is from beyond this planet. Within...the...Outer."

## **Chapter 418: Meteor Labs Demolition**

"I don't care," said Ace. He palmed the steel avatar's face and began to focus, closing his eyes. He used his telekinesis to sense the threads of energy flowing from Machine Mind, to trace it towards the frail flesh and bone body that piloted this husk of metal.

"I know you do not. It is hard to, no?" said Machine Mind. "That is inevitable. Gifted with Outer power, you have ascended beyond all of this...drivel. This planet's squabbles and shortcomings.

You are close to perfection, and perfection has nothing to do with the imperfection that is this world.

Soon, you will lose all sense of what is human. What is weak. The vengeance that fuels you now will sputter out. You will question why you cared so much for defective specimens like your siblings. You will question your allegiances, your friends, your family - if you found a new one."

"Found you." Ace opened his eyes. They were solid globes of gleaming white speckled with blue, like twin cosmoses with the dark of space turned white and the gold of stars turned blue.

Inhuman. Ethereal. Outer.

Ace crushed Machine Mind's head. Afterwards, the rest of the avatar's body began to crumble away, disintegrating into dust as its atomic structure unfolded.

"Down." Ace knelt down and placed his palm on the floor of the vault. In response, the earth started to tremble at his touch. Tremble, and then unravel.

A fissure formed, splitting the entirety of the vault, no, the entirety of the whole labs, into two.

Alarm lights blinked out of control. Sirens screeched in desperation. The labs began to lurch, its foundation destabilized. Its floors began to collapse from bottom to top in a colossal show of demolition.

But Ace did not care about the destruction. What he cared about was below, where Machine Mind was hiding. Where he would kill the man who had taken everything from him.

"Stop him!" Shuten Doji roared. He was standing now, though he had his shackled together with Null cuffs that the escaping group had taken from the labs.

The entirety of Meteor Labs was breaking apart. The sound of uncountable tons of metal and infrastructure groaning, falling, and shattering boomed through the air. The dome that kept the entry to the labs safe had capsized inwards, its two sundered halves sinking underground like they were falling into quicksand.

Clint and the raiding party stared at the lab's destruction in awe.

"How the hell is Ace doing this?" said Stella. She nudged Tox with her elbow. "You got any idea? I knew he had top potential, but this...this ain't just 'potential'. This is raw fuckin' power that's reaching the S class."



"I don't know," said Tox. "I knew Ace was born and raised in a lab, but I didn't know he was holding all this back. What I don't like was how he looked."

"What about it?"

"Like he didn't care."

Clint grimaced. "Kid's gone crazy with vengeance."

"It's not just that," said Tox. "Sure, I think vengeance is what's setting him off, but deep down, I know he wouldn't get this crazy. Normally, when I look at him, I see lonely eyes. Sad eyes."

But when I saw him down there, his eyes - there was nothing there. Emptiness. It scared me, like I was looking down into a chasm where you just know that no matter how far you go, there'll always be nothing."

"This is good, though," said Alan. "The Trident will be set back decades because of this. Their biggest base of operations for R and D and storing rare items - gone in a snap."

"Yeah, we taught them one hell of a lesson!" agreed Falco. His hands grasped his Aztech lasergun with tight trembles, his nerves still thoroughly fried from the whole ordeal.

"That wasn't the point," said Diamondback. By now, he had regrown the diamond plating over his arm. Even then, he still glanced at where the empty spot had been ever so often, starkly reminded at how easily he could have died in spite of his supposed invulnerability.

He motioned to Alexis, and she put up a noise cancelling barrier that excluded Shuten Doji.

"Hey! Let me in on this!" shouted Shuten Doji indignantly, but to no avail.

"The point was to damage, but not destroy," said Diamondback. He looked to Stella. "Wasn't it?"

"Yeah." Stella nodded. "Force the Trident to split their forces over here, but hell, if there's nothing left to defend, they're just gonna double their asses down over Blackwater."

"Thanatos will not be pleased with this. In fact, what is he thinking of this? From what I can tell, all of you have some form of mental link with him," said Diamondback.

"What he wants to tell us is his business," said Stella. "For now, you're just dealin' with me."

In reality, Stella had no idea where Aldrich was. He was not responding to her mental calls at all. It was worrying, but she trusted in him to pull through whatever situation he might have been in.

What she did now was hold her own here.

Though even that had gone all to shit. She felt ashamed at how the situation had spiraled out of control, but she did not show it.

She showed confident poise. The poise of a leader.

"We're still partners in an alliance," said Diamondback. "You should inform us of anything that Thanatos does or says."

"Stop pressing her," said Clint. "Let Thanatos operate at his own pace. And the blame for this situation isn't on any one of us. Unforeseen circumstances and all."

"Unforeseen? Ace is part of their team, no?"

"He didn't tell us anything!" said Tox. "You think any of us are seers capable of peeping into the future? And if you want to toss blame, why bring Falco, huh?"

If he wasn't here, Kris's obscuration field would've got us down to the vault and out with zero issue!"

"..." Diamondback had no real retort to that.

"I'm...I'm sorry, guys, I really am," said Falco.

"Stop it, kid." Kris surprisingly patted Falco's back. "I know I ragged on you a ton, but if you're gonna be a man, then don't spill your guts like this in an apology.

Just...think about how to be better next time. Preferably a next time that I won't be there."

"Uh...thanks, I guess?" said Falco.

"I know what to do," said Clint, nodding.

Everyone stared at him.

"I'm going down there and getting Ace out."

"Out of all of us, you got the best chance to do that, yeah," said Stella.

"As your right hand man, I have to disagree with this," said Diamondback. "You saw how easily he disassembled my diamond skin. He can do the same to you. Conventional durability means nothing.

If he gets to you and breaks you apart before you can adapt, even you might die."

"It's alright, DB, I got this." Clint nodded resolutely, making it certain that he was not taking no for an answer. He motioned to Alexis. "Put the barrier down, missy."

The barrier fell.

"So!? What plan do you have now, Unbreakable!?" said Shuten Doji, thoroughly aggravated.

Clint walked over to Shuten Doji and placed a hand on the Sword's arm.

"I'm goin' to save your daughter," said Clint.

"Wh-what?" Shuten Doji blinked.

"Shit, did I beat you so hard ya lost yer hearin' or somethin'? Ya heard me." Clint drew back his hand and turned around, facing Meteor Labs. Or what was left of it as it began to collapse inwards in a massive sinkhole.

"I'm goin' down there and savin' yer kid. I try to make it a habit not to let innocents get in our messes if I can. Killed enough of em' already."

With that, Clint leaped into the air, sprouting wings. With a sturdy flap, he zipped right into the sinkhole.

## **Chapter 419: The Return**

In the spiraling network of cocoons in a lonely, grey plane of existence, one cocoon, just one out of what could have been an infinity, shuddered. Unbeknownst to the vast majority of sentient life, that was the first a cocoon had ever moved in a number of years that would have been incomprehensible to the human mind.

At the very least, none of those orbs of cosmic silk had shook like that since the birth of the star that created the sol system.

A black clawed hand jutted out of the silk, tearing through its weave. Another hand followed, and together, they pulled, tearing open the cocoon.

Valera emerged. In this colorless realm, her eyes stood out the most in its redness. But it was a faint red, one that hearkened to the light of a dying ember.

She was tired. Thoroughly tired. She had drained almost every inch of her power, and she felt it in aching that went deep down into her very bones, in her flesh that felt like it was ready to tear apart at a moment's notice.

Gone was her armor and her shield, leaving her naked.

Despite her situation, she smiled.

When she emerged fully from the cocoon, she did so with Aldrich on her back.

Aldrich's arms were slung around her shoulders, holding her for support. He was not conscious yet, but he was alive - and to Valera, that made her happy more than anything.

The cocoon sealed back shut, forming a solid surface upon which Valera rested Aldrich down on, though she kept her hands under his head and back in case there was a chance he could slip back in.

She had almost lost him once. She could not let that happen again.

Aldrich, too, had been stripped of his armor and weaponry, leaving him just as naked as her.

Normally, Valera would have been flustered at the bareness of their bodies, but now, it made her feel closer to Aldrich. It let her feel the chill of his undead body closely.

The vulnerability made her more starkly aware of what she could have lost.

Aldrich opened his eyes. They flashed bright green in this colorless realm. He sat up, putting a hand to his forehead.

"Are you alright, Aldrich?" said Valera. She tentatively put a hand on Aldrich's back.

"I lost...everything," said Aldrich. Memories of an entire lifetime assaulted his mind.

Memories of building the perfect world he had dreamed of.

Memories of loving in a way he never could have. Love for a partner. Love for a daughter. Love he thought his mind, hardened by hurt and loss, was never capable of.

And the loss of all that -

It was unbearable. It would have driven an ordinary man insane several times over.

A tear trickled from Aldrich's eye, flowing down his face in a crystal clear trail.

But then, Aldrich felt his mind calm. Chill. Where the human mind broke easily under pressure, the undead mind - especially the mind of a Lich - was nigh-infallible.

"I'm sorry."

Aldrich looked up. He saw Valera, tears brimming in her crimson eyes.

"I'm sorry I had to do that to you," said Valera. "I tried to talk to you down there, in that other life, but my words didn't go through. All I could do was stand there and let that world crumble.

I saw how happy you were, Aldrich. I saw the woman you loved and the daughter you raised. At first, I was jealous - intensely jealous. But the more I saw you fight for them, the more I saw of them, I realized you were happy there.

Truly, truly happy.

Happy in a way I never saw before. Happy in a way that I...I don't think I could ever make you."

Valera put her hands to her eyes, trying to wipe her tears away, but more just replaced them.

"And I-I took that all from you. I knew it was what you would have wanted, and deep down, it's what I wanted too. But even then, even then-,"

Aldrich looked across at Valera. His mind was undead, but that did not mean he had forgotten that other life. He had lived a fully human life where he got to love with an open heart, a heart that had not shattered and forged back strong but broken from the death of his parents.

He...understood Valera better now. He understood that love of hers. That single-minded, fierce love that would risk everything, even the destruction of a world, to stay alive.

It was the same kind of love he had in his other life.

Elaine's last words echoed in his mind. To love here as he had loved there.

Aldrich had lived a full life in the other world, and though it had ended, he knew he had a life here to still live out.

Aldrich reached out and pulled Valera into a tight hug. Valera's eyes widened as she froze at the hug, arms held to her sides.

"I'm glad you're here," said Aldrich. "I'm glad you saved me." A pause. "I'm glad you love me."

Valera closed her eyes and wrapped her arms tight around Aldrich, and together, they stayed like that, their hearts opened, their feelings coiled around each other in understanding and affirmation.

White light enveloped the two, completely encasing them before fading away. They were gone now. Only a few sparkles of white remained as evidence that they had been in that colorless realm at all, and even those quickly faded away, letting the all-consuming grey take over once again.

Aldrich and Valera found themselves in a familiar location. The top of the Necropolis tower, before the enormous bell of souls that fueled the mega-structure.

The bell that usually shone with near blinding radiance was now dimmed down to little more than an oversized flashlight.

"Welcome back." The Death Lord addressed them. She saw the two of them naked, hands held together, and shrugged. "Guess I've been beaten. Ah well, there's always second place, eh?"

She smiled before she tore off her cloak and then split it into two before tossing both halves over to Aldrich and Valera, clothing them.

"What...happened?" said Aldrich. "Not just to me, but to you. To this realm."

The Death Lord had grown noticeably skinnier, losing a good chunk of her normally athletic physique. Her cheeks were slightly sunken in, as if she had gone fasting for days. One of her horns was gone.

Above her, in the skies of the Death Realm, there were cracks, as if the whole thing was a globe that someone had hammered.

"You were taken into a different realm, one far, far away from our Axis," said the Death Lord.

"Axis?"

"Realms similar to each other are easier to reach. Take for example your realm and my realm. Magic separates us, yes, but the lives that populate our realms are not too dissimilar. If we were to look at the humans of your realm and the Elumen, they are almost entirely the same," explained the Death Lord. "Similar realms share an Axis. The one you were sent to was to another, where the very laws of existence, of space and time, were utterly foreign."

"Why are we here?" asked Valera. "I thought we would return to the human realm."

"Returning there naked as you are? Hah, now that would be quite the sight!" the Death Lord chuckled, and Valera faintly blushed. "Fear not. I will have armor replacements for the both of you. As for why you are here, why, it is because I reached out to you."

It is my power that you felt. My mana that I sent across the void of stars for you to anchor to."

"So that was you..." murmured Valera.

"Yes, it was. And, as you can see-," the Death Lord unrolled the sleeve of her robes and tried to flex her bicep. There was not much there to show. "It took quite a bit from me."

From this entire realm.

Though, I am happy to say, my power was not wasted. Look."

The Death Lord tapped her forehead and nodded towards Aldrich, indicating him to do the same. He checked his head to see that he had a horn.

One identical to the Death Lord's, as if he had taken her missing horn.

"I must say, it does not look too shabby on you," nodded the Death Lord.

## **Chapter 420: Down to Earth**

"What is this?" Aldrich touched the horn on his head. He identified it using his system.

[You have been integrated with draconic blood. You have now obtained the passive skill: Dragonheart]

[Dragonheart allows you to harness the incredible tenacity of the draconic race renowned for a ferocious grit akin to sheer immortality. When your health drops below 30% of its maximum value, your health or mana regeneration will regenerate massively and constantly.]

More information flowed into him as well.

[You have been infused with a tremendous amount of energy...]

[Analyzing...]

[...]

[...]

[It is impossible for this system to classify the energy you were merged with. However, calculations will be made as to the amount of experience this power has granted you...]

[Calculating...]

[You have obtained a tremendous amount of power. Not all of it can be converted to experience...]

[You are now level 70...]

[New Trial Quests are available...]

[The remainder of your power has gone into breaking your Limiter. You may now exceed your Limiter, allowing you to surpass the boundary of level 100 in time]

[Due to the removal of your Limiter, you may now more freely bind souls to your being. You have no limit to the undead you can control provided they are not within thirty levels of your being. Powerful undead close to your power is now Chosen Undead and these, you may now have a limit of 100]

[Your Boundary has also evolved due to the growth you and your soul bonded experienced in the realm of ?????]

[Both of you have developed independent, yet linked boundaries...]

[Look into yourself to unlock your Boundary. The truth shall be revealed within...]

[And, if you so dare, look into the Outer, and the Greater Truth shall be made known]

[...]

Then, a voice that Aldrich heard resonate deep within him.

<Wow, so you've broken your Limiter. Very, very interesting. I'd set that so nobody from Elduin, not the gods, dragons, giants, or death lord, could achieve such a thing. There's nothing worse for a world than infinite power, you see.

If you are hearing this, you're probably the detail-sensitive, power-hungry, possibly incredibly paranoid type. But don't worry. I'm most likely long, long dead. Or at the very least, not living in any real conventional sense.

Regardless, I congratulate you for breaking one of the hard-coded limits of the System I created, the System of Magic and Skills and Levels that I enforced upon Elduin to make sure nobody got too strong.



That nobody drew the attention of the Outer. Looks like the future's going to get really interesting for you. At least way more interesting than it was for me when I got reincarnated into Elduin, hah.

Well, looks like it's true what they say: the best-laid plans of mice and men go awry, yeah? And what was that Spiderhero quote? With great power comes great responsibility. Make sure you remember that.

For your sake. And for the sake of everyone you care about. If you have anyone like that.>

Aldrich felt a huge headache assail him as the words echoed through his very being before fading away, like lone whispers in a forest. He tried to will contact that voice again, but it was gone. He, however, had a very good idea who that was.

It was the voice of the Arcane Emperor who, along with the Enlightened One, created skills, spells, and, most importantly, the leveling system that all living beings in Elduin fell under.

In the game, the Arcane Emperor showed up as a faint spirit every so often, guiding the player to lost artifacts or spells. He spoke in an archaic, grand manner befitting an ancient wizard, but now he seemed to push back that charade and bare who he really was: a man from Earth.

"What happened to everyone else that was with me?" said Aldrich. The ramifications of the emperor's voice were "Volantis? My gear? And, most importantly, Chrysa?"

"I can still sense it all within you," said the Death Lord. "Switch into your Lich form."

Aldrich nodded. He balled up his fists. Green mist emerged around him. It acted like acid, sloughing off his skin to reveal the bone of his Lich form.

"It's still here." Aldrich materialized his Frosthallowed War Scythe. His cloak of souls. Volantis.

A small black plate formed on Aldrich's sternum, but nothing more than that. On that plate, Volantis's eye emerged. "Mrhm. What is going on...?" said Volantis sleepily.

"I see, I see." The Death Lord put a hand to her chin and nodded. "You, my dear Usurper, are quite lucky. Or perhaps it is fate. That realm prison you were sent to was meant to conquer and entrap a single soul.

However, as a newly formed Lich, your soul was splintered. It is a common thing for Liches as their souls are quite, how shall I put it, malleable.

They can be moved and restructured with far more ease than with any flesh and blood being.

That is how you can sever your soul into a Phylactery. That is how your little one Chrysa bonded with a part of your soul. And because you have separate spiritual parts, one with your little one, the other with your Phylactery, the prison realm could not take all of you.

Which left a signal for me to trace and send my own power to.

It seems that the part of your soul that was bonded to your little one was trapped. As a subconscious defense mechanism, you sent all your weaponry into your Phylactery, within your Lich form."

"Then Chrysa-," began Aldrich, briefly panicking at the thought that she had potentially been trapped in the other world.

"I will draw her out," said the Death Lord, assuaging his worries. She put a hand on Aldrich's chest and performed a ripping motion out. As she did so, a white flash blinked, and from it, Chrysa emerged, falling into the Death Lord's arms unconscious.

"Wait..." Aldrich knelt down, putting a hand to Chrysa's cheek.

"She..." Valera began in recognition, though her words caught in her throat.

She was different.

Older.

A young teenager, perhaps, maybe twelve or fourteen. Her dress was gone, replaced with a bodysuit etched with lines of iridescent energy. Shining rainbow colored tips highlighted some strands of her white hair - hair inherited directly from Elaine.

"I understand now." Aldrich murmured. The reason why in the other world, his daughter with Elaine was still named Chrysa.

Chrysa had been taken with Aldrich into the other world. She had become his daughter there.

And now, she had merged with her existence from the other world.

Aldrich could not sense her because she was almost an entirely different existence. But even if she was different in appearance, she was still his daughter.

He looked down as he felt the warmth of his daughter's cheek radiate into his cold, skeletal hand. He thought he had lost everything from that other world, that happy world.

But Chrysa - his daughter - she had been saved.

For that, he was grateful. Grateful to who or what, he did not know. Fate, perhaps, as the Death Lord said. It did not matter.

What mattered was that Chrysa was here.

"I do not know entirely what transpired in that prison realm," said the Death Lord. "But I do know that it has taken a toll from you. That you show signs of loss. Great loss. Loss that I understand.

Whether your chains were a paradise or inferno, I know not. But what I do know is this," She placed a hand on Aldrich's shoulder. A comforting one. "I am glad you are back, Aldrich."

Aldrich looked up at the Death Lord. She smiled down at him. The happiness in her face was genuine. It made him question the suspicions he had regarding her.

"You have to tell me, Mel," said Aldrich, speaking to her directly, heart to heart. "What you want me for. What the end goal for all of this is. Why you're giving me your power. Why you sacrificed so much to bring me back.

Otherwise, all I can do is keep suspecting you, planning against you in the case that you stand against me one day."

"My lips, dear Usurper, are sealed." The Death Lord winked at Aldrich and put a finger to her lips. "But do keep plotting. I welcome a challenge, hah!" Her smile faded. "But now, it is time for you to go.

Your realm awaits you, after all, and as far as I can tell, there is much for you to do there.

Many who await your return. "

Aldrich nodded. He was not going to get a straight answer out of the Death Lord. But for the first time, he felt genuine trust for her.

"You're right," said Aldrich. He picked Chrysa up in his arms. "It is time for me to go."

The Death Lord snapped her fingers, creating a vortex of whirling white in front of Aldrich and Valera.

"Time for us to go." Aldrich nodded to Valera, and together, side by side, they stepped into the portal. "Time for us to make the world right again."

## Chapter 421: Lab's End

At Meteor Labs - Ace exhaled, his breath a foggy cerulean blue. The earth broke apart around him, surrendering to his otherworldly power. He held the ground ripped open with both his hands. Threads of blue energy wound out from his palms, stretching across the vaults, then up towards the labs - all of its floors - and pulled.

Pulled the very fabric of their atomic structure, causing everything to break apart into a swirling vortex of destruction.

Ace did not spare any of the labs. All of it was complicit in his suffering. And the very idea that these labs, ran by these people, these creatures so far beneath him, caused him suffering was inexcusable.

Everything had to go.

But most importantly -

"Found you." Ace whispered, sensing Machine Mind's energy signature. It was deep down in the earth, inside a high impenetrable doomsday bunker. There was another energy signature there, too.

One that was familiar to Ace. One that shone blue and bright. The Blue Ring. He did not know what it was, just that it did not come from this planet, but in the end, he did not really care either.

It was power he was going to soon absorb anyway. Power that belonged to him by right.

Ace pried the fissured earth with a grunt. The split halves trembled as they sundered apart from each other, creating tremendous earthquakes. Like curtains parting, the splitting earth revealed the bunker below, several hundreds meters down.

It looked pitifully weak from where Ace was. A little ball of fortified metal that he could pick apart with all the ease of shredding wet paper.

Ace flew downwards, slamming down into the bunker with his feet. As a testament to its structural integrity, the bunker trembled at the impact, but its metal - reinforced smart neosteel - absorbed the impact admirably. It glowed bright around Ace's feet, but it did not splinter apart.

The bunker was about as big as a large house. Bigger than what it looked like from above. But still nothing of consequence to Ace. He put his palm on the surface of the heated metal. Strands of blue stretched out, wrapping around the entirety of the bunker.

Then, the bunker unraveled from Ace's hand. The metal peeled apart neatly, creating a hole to welcome him in.

Below, Ace saw a circular room with the Blue Ring floating in a containment chamber at the center. Scientists in hazmat suits stared up at him, taking steps back, trembling in terror.

His gaze scanned past the scientists and landed on Machine Mind.

The elderly man had his hands on a control panel standing in front of the containment chamber. Blue circuit streaks spread out from his hands, covering the panel and reaching out to the entirety of the chamber and even the ring itself.

Machine Mind's usually golden eyes were now azure blue as they stared up at Ace triumphantly.

"Despite being an Outerworldly being, you are still weighed down by all too human sentiments of vengeance," said Machine Mind. "Which now leads to your demise, my child."

Ace blitzed downwards, his hand reaching out to grasp Machine Mind's exposed head. However, he stopped right before his hand could close around Machine's Mind's skull to crush it into a pulp.

"You think I did not have countermeasures for your kind?" said Machine Mind. His voice was shaky, reverberating with an inhuman current. Circuit patterns had emerged from the Blue Ring like arrows, shooting outwards and digging into Ace's body.

The pattern was equal parts gold and blue, indicating a fusion between Machine Mind's powers and the power of the Blue Ring.

"From the ring, your powers came. Through the ring, it may be controlled!" said Machine Mind. "I have not been above experimenting upon myself. The Blue Ring can control the force of all things - including that of your life and mind. And with my power piloting it, I can dominate anything I desire.

Anything!"

The circuit patterns spread from Ace's body and crawled slowly up toward his head, attempting to hijack his mind. He remained unphased in expression, but nobody could deny the fact that he could no longer move, nor could they ignore the circuits slowly reaching his brain.

It was only a matter of time before Ace was taken over.

"Doctor!" A violet-eyed scientist shouted, taking off her hazmat helmet. "You can't do this! The Ring's integrity is falling rapidly - if you keep this up, we might be ground zero for an explosion the world hasn't seen since the Monstering!"

And our research - all of it will be for nothing!"

"Quiet, girl!" said Machine Mind, straining. His breathing was heavy and deep. Veins popped across his wrinkled forehead. His eyes began to bleed. Every bit of him exerted as he tried to tame the power of the Blue Ring. "Our research...MY research...is right here, right here to take, so close-!"

"No." Ace moved suddenly, shocking everyone. He moved his hand up to his face, right below his eyes where the circuits had managed to get to. He clawed at them with his fingertips, peeling them off like cheap stickers.

The whole circuit pattern broke apart, showing just how unstable it was, leaving Ace's entire body free to move.

Machine Mind's eyes widened in shock before he doubled over, coughing up blood. He lurched backward, taking his hands from the control panel. With his access to the panel cut off, the power of the Blue Ring stopped flowing into him.

The circuit streaks around the ring and its containment chamber faded as well.

"You said it yourself. You made me perfect. My compatibility with the Blue Ring is high. Higher than any of my siblings you murdered. Higher than what you can ever hope to control," said Ace. He looked down at the room of scientists. "And now, none of you will control anything ever again."

Ace began to slowly close his fist. As he did so, the innards of the bunker began to crumple in on itself, as if it was being crushed inside a giant hand.

"Wait! Ace!" Clint landed with a thud atop the bunker, peering down from the open ceiling. His eyes flashed red as he took note of the situation. "Take the old man out, but keep the scientists alive!"

"No." Ace's fist began to close in more. The bunker groaned and creaked as it crumpled down further. The scientists were starting to shout and panic, getting huddled uncomfortably close to each other.

"The scientists have no blood on their hands in this!" said Clint. "Look at them - they don't even know you! And I've read their minds - their projects weren't related at all to the ones that made ya suffer."

All of that was the whacked old man's fault!"

"It doesn't matter," said Ace. "Nothing does."

"Hahaha!" Machine Mind chuckled before his throat caught on blood. After coughing it out, he stared up at Ace and Clint with a weak smile. "Do not waste your breath, Unbreakable. The being you are speaking to now is above us, above even you who have only been dipped in the Outer's blessings.

You are witnessing the birth of an Outer being beyond us all.

How glorious...it is. How prideful I was to believe that I...could control it.

Yet, none will control him.

In a way, I feel content in knowing that my research has produced a being this...magnificent."

## **Chapter 422: Unsealed**

"Enough talking," said Ace. "Your rambling hurts my ears."

He closed his fist even more, almost fully. The bunker rapidly crumpled in on itself. Several of the scientists, the ones standing at the edges of the bunker, were folded in as the walls and ceiling collapsed on top of them, reducing them to nothing but bloody pulp.

The remaining scientists, including Machine Mind, were now compacted tight. Several started to scream as their bones snapped under the pressure, but before long, but they only managed one scream before their breaths were crushed out of their chests.

"Shit. Guess talkin's over," Clint muttered. He clasped his palms together. A spiral pattern of red energy formed between them before firing as a high-speed projectile that distorted space as it flew.

Ace used his free hand as a shield to block the projectile. The energy began to warp his hand in its spiral pattern.

"A simple pattern. Easily reversed." Ace twisted his hand against the spiral. Blue threads sprung out from his hand, traveling up the spiral to hijack it, untwisting it before dissolving the projectile entirely.

Clint paused for a moment, unsure of what to do. He had been briefed that Ace had the ability to manipulate atomic structures. That meant that no matter how tough Clint was, no matter how sturdy of a shell he grew, he would still get unraveled like cheap cloth.

'I need to evolve a couple more times to resist somethin' like that, but I don't got that kinda time,' thought Clint. He leered at Ace, his jaw setting. 'But if Machine Mind's right and Ace's gone done lost his mind, it's gonna be up to me to put him down.'

I gotta get in there now. I gotta start evolving now."

Clint prepared to dive in, draconic wings behind his back stretching. Ace took note of this and kept his hand in place as if to taunt Clint to come.

"Heh..." whispered Machine Mind, spending the last dregs of his energy to gaze up at his frankenstein's monster with twisted pride. "I will get to witness the end of the Unbreakable as well. I could not ask more from my death."

"This ends now." A voice echoed through the air, carried by chill winds that did not belong in a barren desert.

In the tense space between Clint and Ace, white light bloomed. From it emerged mist. Glowing green mist. And from that mist, a black armored man stepped out.

Thanatos.

The atmosphere immediately stilled, the temperature dropping remarkably.

"What the hell!? What's kept ya from showin' up for so damn long, ya big bastard!?" said Clint, nodding at Thanatos with a barely concealed smile.

"Complications," was all Thanatos said. He hovered in the air, his cloak of stitched-together souls waving in the wind. He looked down at Ace, then at the annihilated labs. "I see that my absence has caused complications too."

Ace stared up at Thanatos with the same expressionless gaze he had chosen to don since awakening his latent powers. This time, however, he reacted offensively without being prompted for the first time, as if by sheer instinct.

Ace, or rather, the entity that he was becoming, recognized Thanatos as a threat to its existence. He shoved his free fist forward, sending out a gust of blue-tinted force.

Thanatos put his arm out as if he was holding a shield. Three massive ribs materialized before him, acting like a barricade that blocked the incoming torrent of power. The wave of energy streaked past Thanatos, hitting Clint and knocking him backward, out of sight.



The energy wave dimmed down, leaving Thanatos still there, albeit with cracks across his rib shield.

"Ah...there you are, Thanatos," said Machine Mind. He was now atop a pile of crushed metal and corpses. His body, too, was thoroughly mangled, but his head still jutted out intact from the pile, and so long as his head was intact, it seemed, he could maintain his consciousness. "I do not know what you did to Blackwater's students to maintain their loyalty, but it will not work here.

You are in the presence of power that is truly Outer. The power that I created with all my genius!"

"You could not control your creation, so now you are content with letting it rampage about?" said Thanatos. "How utterly pathetic."

Ace cocked back his fist again, ready to fire another blast of telekinetic force.

Thanatos raised his fist in the air and declared, "Take note. THIS is how you control."

A green outline shimmered around Ace's body. He closed his eyes, hard. When he opened them, they were no longer blue. They were white like they originally were, filled with the lonely sadness that they usually carried.

"What...happened here?" said Ace, looking down at his hands. The glowing blue energy visible from his heart and veins faded away bit by bit.

"I reset your mind is all I did," said Thanatos. "Leave. Join the others."

Ace weakly nodded, tired from exerting so much energy. He looked confused, but he knew better than to question Thanatos. He flew away, leaving Thanatos alone with Machine Mind in the ruins of the bunker.

"No! No! NO!" roared Machine Mind. "You would dare to ruin a perfect creation!? How!? What...what did you do!?"

"All I did was exert my right to lead my Legion," said Thanatos. The red eye dot of his helm looked unfeelingly down at Machine Mind. "A right you do not have."

Machine Mind, now reduced to a talking head, and Thanatos, in all his armored might, could not have been any different from each other if they tried.

Thanatos floated down, landing atop the containment chamber in the bunker. It alone had survived Ace's telekinetic crush, though barely. The glass was thoroughly cracked. The Blue Ring within had dimmed down, its halo structure fraying like worn cloth.

A warning screen flashed distorted across the cracked glass.

## RING STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY: 1%

When Thanatos touched the chamber, an odd reaction occurred. The ring began to glow brightly again, rejuvenated somehow. It started to rotate rapidly, its structure vibrating before it sundered apart into countless little fragments that looked like floating blue fireflies.

The fragments funneled upwards, through the containment chamber, and into Thanatos.

Thanatos stared down at his hand. The ten-branched symbol lit up in reaction. One of the branches, previously a colorless white, was now filled in with solid blue, joining a green branch and a white one that had a cracked pattern across its length.

"It's over..." Machine Mind looked at the ring with wide eyes. "My research - it really was for nothing."

Thanatos did not answer, analyzing his hand.

"Shit, that blew me back a long ways." Clint reappeared, flying into view. He blinked when he saw there was no Ace. "Uh, guess ya fixed the whole situation then, huh?"

"I did," said Thanatos.

"Damn." Clint looked down at the annihilated bunker, then up at the equally annihilated rest of the labs. "I know ya wanted us to make some noise, break some stuff here and there, but I figure total destruction wasn't what you were gunnin' for, yeah?"

"No, but what's done is done," said Thanatos. "As for you, Machine Mind, you and your team are not done yet. You mentioned the Outer. I want answers.

Answers that you and your team will provide."

"You...you intend to enslave us? Like you did with Blackwater?" said Machine Mind. He grimaced. "You may be able to take my mind, but my team, you will never have. They are gone, crushed to nothingness."

"Quiet, and let me focus." Thanatos again held his arm over his chest, as if he was holding a shield. This time, a diadem-shaped shield made of mint green energy formed.

"[Boundary: Unseal]"

## Chapter 423: Cycle of Life and Death

"What's that shield?" Clint said, nudging his chin towards the energy construct strapped to Thanatos's forearm.

"A gift," said Thanatos, somber. "And a reminder of what I have to do."

Thanatos raised his arm into the air, the shield shining in its verdant splendor. He looked almost like Minuteman, standing stalwart with a symbol of protection high above to protect all life. But the way Thanatos was armored in bone parts and blackened metal and a cloak of wailing, stitched souls made it clear that he much more than a protector of life.

He was a dealer of death.

Both guardian and destroyer.

And this boundary, too, represented that dichotomy.

Thanatos crushed his hand into a fist. The shield separated from his arm and hovered high above his head. Its diadem structure, elongated on one side, looked almost like the hand of a clock. Here, the shield pointed upwards, towards where twelve would be if it was a timepiece.

From the shield, light exploded outwards in a blinding flash.

Within the eye-crushing light, time slowed to a crawl. Here, in this white space seemingly bereft of anything, Aldrich saw a man walking towards him. Aldrich was stripped of his armor, leaving him in his human form in his suit.

The other man - it was him. The him from the other world. More muscular with a brighter smile.

More...heroic.

"Huh, so this is what you look like," said the Hero, looking Aldrich up and down. "Pretty damn grim. But I can't say I'm surprised. If things didn't go down the way they did with Minuteman saving my parents - our parents- I think I'd have gone down a similar path too."

"I thought I sensed you," said Aldrich. After he had returned from the other world, he had felt something awaken within himself. An instinctive understanding that his Boundary could activate.

All he had to do was unseal it with his willpower. He knew what it did, too, in a very general sense, like knowing where your arm was and how to move it even if you could not see it.

"When I awoke, I didn't just end that world. I...absorbed it. At least some part of it. It's how Chrysa turned out the way she did, merging with her other self.

It stands to reason the same would've happened to me."

"Perceptive, aren't you?" said the Hero.

"Which means to some degree, you were real. Everything was real. If you weren't, if that world was just an illusion, there would've been nothing to absorb."

"Right." The Hero shrugged. "But I have no clue how the details work, how your dream managed to create an entire world. And there's no point in me thinking about it either. I'm dead now, as is everything I ever knew."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." The Hero shook his head. "You probably think you destroyed everything. No, you know it. You felt it because up until a little while ago, it was a life you were living.

But it was a life and a world that existed only because you dreamed it up. And a dream, no matter how nice it is, is always destined to end when the dreamer wakes up."

"That doesn't mean your loss means nothing-," began Aldrich, but the Hero cut him off by raising his gloved hand.

"Yeah, I know, but you felt everything I lost just as much as I did. That's punishment enough. No need to add onto the pile."

Aldrich nodded, and together, the Hero and the Necromancer stood together in silence for a few moments. Moments of shared recollection over what they had both lost together.

"What are you, anyway?" said Aldrich, breaking the silence.

"I didn't think you would be the one to break the silence, brooding look and all." The Hero smirked. "But to answer your question, I don't know exactly, but whatever I am, I won't last. Like you said, you merged with that world, specifically with me.

Probably because we're literally the same person. Same as how my daughter became your daughter. But it looks like her merging was much deeper. It changed her being at a core level.

Ours is much more surface level.

You've inherited a fragment of my power. And in that power, there's a fragment of myself - which is me right now."

"A fragment..." Aldrich rolled the word in his head. He remembered what the Hero said before. "A fragment that won't last?"

"Yeah. Well, the power you've absorbed from me is permanent, make no mistake about that. But me-," the Hero pointed a thumb at himself. "This guy that's talking to you. I'm not going to last.

This talk we're having is our first and, most likely, going to be our last."

"I see."

"Yeah."

"..."

Another silence that contemplated loss. In this case, the loss of a hero. A hero that Aldrich once wanted to be. Once was.

The Hero stepped closer to Aldrich, standing right in front of him. The Hero smiled.

"Let's not end this on a sulky note," said the Hero. "In the brief time we were merged, I got a little speedrun of your memories. I know that this world is a shitshow. In way worse of a state than my one was. People are nastier, too.

It's made you do things that I never had to do. Things that mom and dad never had to do."

"I know." Aldrich saw the Hero's smile was unbroken. "You don't have any judgments about that?"

"No. Because deep down, we're still the same person. We get things done, no matter what." The Hero put a fist to his heart. "I could get things done in my own way." He put the fist to Aldrich's chest. "But you have your own way. The important thing is that once we choose our paths, we stay on them.

We don't back down no matter who stands in our way. No matter how much we stumble on the way to the finish line, we always get back up. No matter how much we hurt, we always keep running.

That's just who we are. What we are. Fighters."

"I know." Aldrich nodded. "Before, I was hesitant about seeing this path I took through to the end. This path of making the world right.

I didn't know what was at the end. I didn't know if it was the right thing to do.

But now I know from seeing you save the world. It isn't always about knowing what's ahead. It's about having the resolve to see it through, even if the road ahead is dark."

"That about sums it up. I made plenty of mistakes. There were multiple times I thought the world was going to end because of my mistakes. Mistakes that set me way back on my path. But I grit my teeth and trudged on and, eventually, I made it to the finish line.

I want that for you as well. I want you to make this world right. I want you to see the end. A good end. One you'll be satisfied with. No, screw that." The Hero put his fist out towards Aldrich. "I want you to promise me.

Promise me you'll reach the end of this path you've set on. It's the least I deserve for getting my whole world blown up."

Aldrich put his fist against the Hero's. "I promise."

"Good." The Hero smiled as he put his fist down. He began to flicker, his powerful figure turning fuzzy and dark. "Looks like my time's up." He looked up. There was nothing but white light, but he was not looking at that.

He was looking ahead. Far ahead. "Be joining you soon, Elaine. Everyone."

Aldrich stepped back, allowing the Hero to take his last moments in solace. The Hero, however, talked to him again.

"And Chrysa - our daughter - you'll raise her right, won't you? Make sure she doesn't get into trouble. Deal with dumbass dudes and the like.

The girl you knew was neat and innocent, and mine was too when she was that age, but, well, I'll just say you've inherited yourself a whole firecracker. She's just as much a fighter as us." The Hero laughed in remembrance. His smile was tinged now with sadness.

He looked to Aldrich with wet eyes. "Just...make sure she ends up happy, will you? I know that unlike me, you're willing to sacrifice practically everything to reach the end of your path, but make sure she's there by your side at the end, will you?"

Aldrich smiled. His was fainter. Less pronounced, less practiced because he had never had many opportunities to give one. But he smiled nonetheless. "I will."

## **Chapter 424: Restored**

The light that formed this temporary meeting space between Aldrich and the Hero faded away. Time resumed its normal flow. The shield continued to hover above him, tethered to a glimmering white aura that wrapped around his body.

When Aldrich moved, the shield moved with him, affixed to him.

The aura surrounding Aldrich was infused with warmth. A gentle, comforting warmth that utterly belied the carnage that Aldrich's armor of stitched fallen creatures promised.

Emanating outwards from Aldrich's greaves was a white spiral pattern that covered the ground of the annihilated lab. The pattern flickered bright, then dimmed down, then brightened again in rhythmic beats, and with each cycle of glowing and dimming, a heartbeat-like thud echoed outwards.

"This feels...strange." Clint tentatively touched down into the rubble of the labs. When his bare feet made contact with the patterned ground, he blinked. "It feels...familiar?"

"What is this?" Machine Mind said, his face jutting out of the ground enveloped in the light of the spiral. "This energy...I have not felt the likes of it anywhere. Not in all my years of research."

"I'm not so sure myself," said Aldrich. "But what I do know is that this will bring back your team. And you. But first off-,"

Aldrich stepped over to Machine Mind's head and knelt down by it. He pointed a clawed, armored finger at Machine Mind's forehead. A coiled purple beam shot out, drilling through the head scientist's head.

Then, Machine Mind's head disintegrated, destroyed by Aldrich's [Anti-Life Beam].

The rest of Machine Mind's broken, crushed body crumbled away soon afterward, facing instant death.

"Y'know, you said you were gonna bring em' back," said Clint, watching the dust flecks of what was once Machine Mind disintegrate into nothingness. "And there are a few corpses. But most of em' were turned into mush. They were broken down atom by atom and mixed into the rubble like some kinda fucked up soup. There ain't anything left to bring back."

"I thought the same once." Aldrich had to acknowledge that one of his weaknesses was that he could not bring back corpses that had been utterly destroyed. At that point, both their souls and their bodies faded away.

It was a primary way to balance necromancers in Elden World. By having hard timers on what they could raise, it prevented them from scavenging corpses too freely.

But Aldrich's Boundary broke through that. It was, after all, an ability unique to him, unbound by any game mechanics.

"But now I know what I can do."

Aldrich chanted words he had never said before but knew. Deep down, words he knew at the core of his being, in the center of his soul. "[Horizon East]."

The long point of the shield above Aldrich turned eastwards. The light-infused within the spiral patterning the ground grew much brighter. Particles suffused out of the pattern like a storm of snowflakes. They swirled about, landing on the corpses - or what was left of them - in the area.

All the flesh parts dissolved, joining the rest of the particles before gathering into several dozen clumps.

The clumps expanded, forming humanoid silhouettes. Then, the silhouettes filled in, forming into a team of lab-coated men and women. They stared down at their hands in sheer wonder.

Machine Mind, too, had resurrected, though he stared down at the floor in mute surprise.

"Well, I'll be damned." Clint blinked, mouth slightly agape. "Ya even brought back their clothes."

"I see..." Aldrich glanced up at the shield. It fragmented, a deep crack weaving across its surface. The shield shattered into several gleaming pieces before those faded away.

Aldrich breathed out deeply, feeling lightheaded. The sheer mana cost of unsealing and keeping his Boundary active was tremendous, more than likely because it was his very first time using it.

Normally, in Elden World lore, liches needed decades to develop and unseal their boundaries. Aldrich probably needed even more time because his soul was merged with Chrysa, and since she was a different being, they needed to synchronize their souls fully before they could form and unleash their Boundary.

But Chrysa had severed with Aldrich, and in her place, the power from his other self had taken root. Since it was himself, the compatibility was high, letting him unseal his Boundary immediately.

It was a fortunate twist of events where Aldrich's prison had turned into a key to unlock his Boundary.



But Aldrich still needed practice with his Boundary. And more understanding of it. From what he could feel, his Boundary, called [Cycle of Life and Death], had four forms.

The first was its default, called [Zenith]. It created an area where nothing could die aside from targets that Aldrich was touching.

[Horizon East] allowed Aldrich to restore anyone that had died in the area, even if their bodies were completely disintegrated. However, this did have a time limit. If the dead beings had been dead for too long - a time that Aldrich did not know exactly yet - he could not raise them.

He also knew that his Boundary had two other forms. Presumably, one that represented the other two cardinal directions: west and south. But he did not know what they did, nor did he feel like he could access them.

Those would come in time. The Death Lord's guidance would help him with that.

Thinking of her made him remember her condition. At how much it had seemingly deteriorated. He touched the left side of his head where he now sprouted one emerald-green horn. A horn that had once been hers.

She was funneling her power into him bit by bit, and the more she gave, the less of her there was.

Inevitably, there would come a time when there was nothing left of her.

Still a time that was quite a bit away, though. Before then, he hoped she would give him some answers.

For now, though, he had more pressing matters to deal with.

"All of you-," Aldrich waved his hand over the scientists. "Have lost your lab, your research, and your lives. But I have given you your lives back. And in return, all I ask is that you continue your work.

Not for the Trident.

But for me."

## **Chapter 425: Swords**

"Working for you?" A scientist stared up at Aldrich. Outside of her hazmat suit, her features were clearly visible. She had shoulder-length purple-tinted hair and gleaming lavender eyes. A young girl, around Aldrich's own age.

Though, not that surprising. With Alters popping up with superhuman intelligence, it was less and less surprising to see young people in higher and higher research-related positions.

The scientist pointed to the rubble around her. The remnants of the enormous underground lab that once was.

"But our whole lab's trashed. Everything we've worked for is all gone."

"Be quiet!" another scientist patted her shoulder. "He saved us! Be grateful and keep your head down for now!"

"No." The girl shook the other scientist off of her. "We were so close! So close to finding out everything! The secret to energy beyond possibility! Beyond the chains of Alter powers! And now-now it's all gone!"

Without the ring, there IS no research!"

"Listen to him." Machine Mind spoke for the first time. They all turned their heads to listen to him, showing the deference that had been drilled into them from years of working together in the past. "I say this now as your team leader and an affiliate of the Trident. All of you are compromised. We were made targets the moment we came back under Thanatos's power."

"What do you mean?" said the girl. She stared barely concealed daggers at Machine Mind. "You know, you're the reason this all happened in the first place. I don't know why that guy was after you, but if you hadn't done whatever you'd done, this would've never happened."

"No. But what is done is done," said Machine Mind. "All that remains now is what will be. If you value your research, you will continue on with this man."

"He's right," said Aldrich. "If your research is most important to you, then I am the only chance you all have got. And make no mistake, though I am generous enough to give you a second chance, I will not hesitate to take it away if my hand is forced."

And besides, you have not lost everything."

Aldrich raised his hand and showed the scientists the back of his palm. The blue branch shone brightly against the black of his gauntlet.

"The ring's energy signature...but how?" began the girl.

"I trust that this is proof enough that your research is salvageable. We will speak on this matter more later."

The way Aldrich ended his words made it very clear that he would not tolerate more talking back. Not really because of a lack of patience but more because there was a more pressing matter at hand.

'Enemies inbound' stated Volantis telepathically. Three energy signatures. However, all of these three are formidable. Among the most powerful of foes you have faced so far.'

'Understood. Keep their energy signatures tracked on my minimap,' said Aldrich.

At the corner of Aldrich's vision, a rough map formed of his surroundings, and there, in the air, several blinking red dots started to creep forwards.

"Clint, any way you can take these people back to the group?" said Aldrich.

"Yeah, just give me a few secs to adapt. My evolutions ain't instant," said Clint. "But ya sure you'll be fine up there? Cause I'm sensin' some tough as-nails guys comin' down on us."

"I will handle it." Aldrich would have transported them all using Chrysa, but unfortunately, she was still resting back in the Necropolis. She had not woken up from returning to this reality, and the Death Lord had advised Aldrich to keep her there for her to recover.

Valera had also chosen to stay behind to take care of Chrysa. And also to find a new suit of armor from the Death Lord's armory after getting her hound set scrapped up by the other dimension.

Aldrich unfurled draconic wings from his back. They flapped once, powerfully, surging him upwards into the air, past the crumbling ceiling of the bunker.

He was still deep underground, at the very base of the bunker, and Ace's rampage had thoroughly messed up any proper exit out to the surface. He thus channeled his [Anti-Life Beam] like a drill, disintegrating the rubble ahead of him until he popped out to the surface.

There, on the surface, sunlight shone down on him. He basked in its light as he flew higher, hovering a dozen meters above the barren, rocky orange ground.

The crackling arcs of energy characteristic of geo-storm trails were gone from the environment. And with that, the countless backed-up distress signals from the lab had finally gone through.

And now, within minutes, reinforcements had arrived.

"Shit, finally back, huh." Stella squinted her eyes, shielding them from the bright sun as she took a look at her absent boss. "Been gone like an hour or something, but it feels like a million years."

"Apologies for the inconvenience," said Aldrich. "Something came up. I'll explain in detail later."

He looked at the rest of the group, checking if they were alright. Tox, Alexis, and Ace were fine with the two girls standing beside Ace in the midst of comforting him.

The newbies - Falco and Alan - were fine, if just a bit battle worn. Especially visible on Alan were burn marks on the dermal plating of his arm and chest from explosives, both from enemies and from the internal combustion of his own weaponry.

Diamondback stared up at Aldrich with crossed arms, as serious as ever. Beside him was Kris who stared through Aldrich with his goggles whirring and zooming in.

"My daughter! Where the hell is she!?" roared a tall, lavender-eyed man. His unruly, lengthy amethyst hair made him look as wild as a man could be, like a mountaintop caveman.

"Your daughter?" said Aldrich.

"That's right, you corpse-loving muck!" said the man. "She was part of the labs! Where is she!?"

Aldrich sensed that this man had a formidable energy level as well, but his power was being contained by a pair of null cuffs.

"This screaming lunatic here is Shuten Doji. Fifth Sword," said Stella.

"I see." Aldrich nodded. He had gotten here in a bit of a rush, so he was not entirely abreast of the situation. He did know, however, that it was entirely unexpected that a Sword would be here.

If he knew a Sword was here, he would have sent a stronger force out here.

But he could deduce that it made sense for a Sword to be here if his daughter was here.

It was obvious who his daughter was too. The lab girl from before. Aside from the purple eyes, their attitudes matched too.

"She's fine and currently under Clint's protection," said Aldrich. The fifth Sword's expression softened. "But make sure to keep this in mind: she's alive because I resurrected her."

I hope I don't have to explain the implications of what that means."

The fifth sword looked stunned, then grimaced. He did not say anything back because he already knew. Aldrich had full control over whether his daughter lived or not.

"Your absence? Can you explain it?" said Diamondback.

"Well, doesn't look like we're gonna be getting time for a nice coffee chit-chat anytime soon." Stella's eyes flashed bright orange as she spied the skies.

Aldrich looked back where he saw the three energy signatures Volantis pointed out from before.

"Shit....," said Kris, focusing fully on his goggles now. "Those are the first, second, and third Swords."

## Chapter 426: The Monk

Aldrich looked up. Hidden under the sun's shining form were three individuals. The three swords.

'Adjusting vision to compensate for blinding,' stated Volantis, and Aldrich's red tinted helm sight darkened, filtering out the sunlight to make the three swords clearer than just blurry sun-speckled dots.

One was a huge brute of a man, bigger even than Shuten Doji. His size was enough to make it hard to tell if he was a Mutant or not, right at the cusp between having an Alter power made to make you big or just having Alter cell blessed height genetics. He showed off his building lifting physique with a tight fitting white tanktop and black military trousers, though both were probably Alterweave clothes specifically fitted to his powers and durability.

There was a bit of a wild mountain lion style about him with a mane of ragged black hair that reached down to his mid-back in a clumpy, untamed curtain. He looked human aside from his eyes which were just two shining white points, eerie in their lack of pupil-formed expression.

Another was a woman who radiated an aura of ice both literally and stylistically. Her skin was porcelain pale, covered in a white haori slightly tinged with frosty blue.

The loose fitting, robe-like fabric swayed like they were being carried by a gentle breeze, though there was no breeze to talk about in this arid desert biome. Her hair was snow white and side swept, falling below her shoulders like a curtain of fallen winter. Her pupils flashed a crystalline blue in the shape of snowflakes.

She wielded a naginata made of what looked like pure ice, beautiful in its artistry like a sculpture. A sculpture-esque beauty that embodied her, too.

Between them was a much more unassuming figure. A short man with a back slightly hunched by age. It was hard to tell his build as he was garbed in what looked like a Buddhist monk's robes, though instead of the traditional orange and red it was black and white.

No matter what, though, he could not have been a physical specimen like the bulked up shirtless sword next to him. A necklace of wooden beads lay wreathed around his neck, granting him an air of ancient wisdom accentuated by the fact that he kept his face hidden under a red mask depicting an expressive, angry demon with a long, red nose - a tengu.

Two black cybernetic wings jutted out from his shoulders, letting him hover with what was probably anti-gravity technology.

Aldrich could identify each of them. Everyone in the Underworld worth their weight knew. The old man was Monk, the First Sword. The giant was Otakemaru, second sword. And finally, the woman was Yuki, the third sword.

Together, they formed the triple core of the Seven Swords. Legends whose names were whispered in fear and awe. Mercenaries that not even the average S ranker would want to mess around with.

"They're alone," noted Aldrich. He scrutinized them further and understood. "I see. There's small spatial distortions behind them. They warped in here. And judging by the looks of it, they've decided all they needed was themselves."

"Why are they here?" Stella shoved her elbow against Shuten Doji's chest. She barely reached up to his collarbone, so he looked down at her with a dismissive stare.

"Why not? We Swords have honor. We never leave any of us behind. Of course they would come for me," said Shuten Doji.

"Are you here for a fight?" Aldrich said, his voice projecting outwards in powerful peals. He did not have his army of undead with him, but he did have his bell. In there, there were still five hundred souls he could materialize as temporary undead.

The three swords hovered down, stopping when they were level with Aldrich.

"So you are the shinigami," said Monk, looking Aldrich up and down. His voice was filtered through his mask with a mechanical rasp, but it was still easy to tell it belonged to an old man.

From what Aldrich knew with his limited research, Monk was also one of the very few Alters that had been active all the way from the Altering. A man over a hundred and twenty years old who had survived through multiple world changing catastrophes.

"Answer my question." Aldrich did not look at either Yuki or Otakemaru. He kept his dot eye fixed on Monk. Monk was the leader. And, despite having a lower total energy level than the second and third swords due to his age, he still radiated the most dangerous aura.

"You have destroyed the laboratory. There was much research in there of great worth."

"The Trident has put a multi-million credit bounty on one of my most trusted partners. I took that as a casus belli severe enough to warrant a response."

"That is reasonable." Monk nodded stiffly. "And we care little of these labs. They are the Italian Prong's property. What we care for is him"

Monk pointed at Shuten Doji. His hand unfurled from his lengthy sleeve, showing that it was entirely cybernetic, all metal and wiring.

"My prisoner." Aldrich emphasized the word 'my'.

"Your prisoner," repeated Monk, calm. Unperturbed.

Like Z, 22, and Emrys, Monk was one of few individuals that Aldrich could read little to nothing about from their mannerisms. Monk's face was covered, but his body language and voice were also controlled to give away nothing, honed to a stillness reminiscent of a great mountain that withstood eons of pressure from winds and waves.

Ace and Stella flew up, standing behind Aldrich on either side of him. Ace faced Otakemaru. Stella faced Yuki.

Yuki narrowed her eyes at Stella before tilting her head away, as if to say that Stella was not worth her time.

Otakemaru looked at Ace with his dead white eyes, breathing deep with a bestial rumble that sounded like a powerful engine. There did not seem to be much thought in the man. He looked and felt more like a leashed beast than a thinking man.

"It is our principle to never leave a Sword behind," said Monk, breaking the tense silence. "Whether that principle will lead to violence is a decision that is yours to make, Shinigami."

Shinigami. Was that what the people in Japan were calling Aldrich? A reaper of souls. It was fitting, at least.

"But does your Sword want to leave?" said Aldrich. He projected his voice downwards, toward Shuten Doji. "Your Swords have come for you. Honorably. But are you willing to leave something of yours behind for your freedom?"

"I will stay," said Shuten Doji with zero hesitation. With that, Aldrich knew that Shuten Doji's daughter meant the world to him. She could be used as leverage.

"No, you will not," said Monk. "You will come with us. That much is decided."

"They have my daughter!" shouted Shuten Doji. "I must stay to protect her!"

"You will come with us," repeated Monk, and that was all he said.

"Or else. I see. It looks like conflict will be inevitable." Aldrich materialized his [Frosthallowed War Scythe], holding it one of his hands. Yuki raised a brow at his scythe in interest.

"Not inevitable. Never inevitable." Monk motioned to Shuten Doji. "We will take him. That act does not have to include violence."

"You're asking us to just give him up for free?" said Stella. "One of your best damn soldiers?"

"I am asking you to consider your options carefully."

"What will we get in return?" said Aldrich.

"My goodwill," said Monk.

"And is that worth anything?"

"More than you believe."

## **Chapter 427: Split**

'More than I think?' Aldrich rolled Monk's cryptic words over in his head. At face value, they offered nothing. Promise never backed gratitude. It was the character of the man behind the gratitude that backed it.

The only issue here was that he knew very little about Monk's character. It was the level of secrecy that the Seven Swords operated on. They, unlike most mercenary groups, basically only did jobs for the Trident, limiting the amount of information available on their exploits. On top of that, they personally took very few jobs, moving only when they needed to.



And when they moved, they made sure there were no survivors. Their operations were tight. Clean. Efficient. Deadly.

At least it looked like they operated on some form of honor with how Shuten Doji was absolutely confident that the rest of the swords would never give up on him.

"You!" A deep voice echoed across the barren, sun-scorched plains.

Clint's voice.

Aldrich turned his head to see Clint hovering in the air, holding a giant cube construct of red energy atop his palm. Inside, Volantis projected the outlines of several humanoids. The lab team. Clint had successfully retrieved them by adapting some form of energy constructability.

Clint's eyes, normally dull red, now flashed with barely concealed anger. Anger directed not at the second or third swords, but straight at Monk, the first sword.

Right. There was a history between Clint and the swords. Deep, painful history. History that had gotten Clint's wife and infant son killed. History that had gotten two out of seven swords killed. A wife and a child for two swords – an equivalent exchange forged in blood.

The details, Aldrich had never probed. Nor would he have wanted to. It was Clint's personal history and he respected that.

"You're showin' yer face!? When ya know I'm here!? Forgot about me already!?" Clint roared. Rage flared against his usual calm, his usual levity. It was a stark contrast that Stella, Ace, and the rest of Aldrich's group were stunned to silence.

Clint's arm moved back a little, readying to toss the cube containing the lab members straight down. He was still high in the air, high enough that the drop would not be pleasant, to say the very least. They would not die considering they were undead, but there would be more than a few broken bones and crushed organs.

"No! Emil!" Shuten Doji shouted, his arms straining against his restraints. It was a testament to the fifth sword's natural strength that the null shackles actually creaked and cracked.

Diamondback immediately held a crystal-bladed arm to Shuten Doji's neck, stopping him. Alexis and Tox stood at attention. Alan aimed an arm rocket launcher at the sword. Falco blinked for a few seconds before stumbling into action to aim his laser gun.

Clint glanced at Shuten Doji, his eyes reflecting white for a moment as he read the fifth sword's mind. Memories of the man's daughter. He growled before hovering downwards to gently lay the cube onto the ground.

"You have learned respect, I see," Monk said, watching Clint's display of kindness.

That lit a fuse in Clint. That barely held-back anger â€" anger locked down by years of meditation and reflection â€" broke out like an unchained beast. He immediately adapted thrusters on his draconic wings that sputtered trails of blue flame exhaust, shooting him right at Monk like a human missile.

And a human missile he was. Clint had his fist outstretched, and it was encased in a bright red and orange glow charged with explosive energy.

Clint moved so fast that Aldrich had trouble reacting. Aldrich instinctively flew backward using his cloak. Ace did too, but Stella was a little slower in reacting, so Aldrich grabbed her by the shoulder to pull her back, out of harm's way.

By the time Aldrich was a few meters away from Monk, he noticed something. Yuki and Otakemaru did not react at all. Not because they could not â€" no, he could see in their eyes that they knew what was coming.

Whether they could fend against this attack or not was up in the air, but the fact that they did not move meant they were absolutely confident in their positions.

Aldrich saw what happened next. It was a slight, almost imperceptible movement on Monk's part. The old man simply straightened a palm in a half prayer. A small, almost invisible ripple distorted space around the Monk's cybernetic, metal hand.

In the next moment, Clint was split in half, vertically down from his collarbone to his navel. He seemed to expect this, though. His expression did not change, staying serious, staying angry even as one half of his body â€" the one with his head still on it â€" reached out to grab his other half and attached it back to himself.

The blood-tinged red line that separated Clint faded away as his body became whole again.

"Holy shit," Stella whispered under her breath. "Clint got gut like a fish. Just like that."

"...Should I try to call it back? That power?" said Ace as he clenched his fists, no doubt thinking back to the power of the blue ring. His fists began to shake in exertion. Being undead gave him infinite stamina, but that only extended to his physical abilities.

Just like how being undead did not stop Aldrich from running out of mana, it also did not stop undead Alters from running out of energy to fuel their abilities.

"Hold." Aldrich raised a hand when he saw that Clint had stopped, evidently taking getting split in half as a good enough deterrent to stay put for a bit. Monk and the other two swords did not make a move either, indicating that they did not want to engage in any wanton aggression.

"You seek vengeance, Clint?" said Monk.

"The hell do ya think?" Clint replied with venom. Tough, skin-colored plates began to cover him like armor, but the way he had been cut down - instantly, with no resistance - made it very clear that hard skin alone would not do the trick against Monk's power.

"I understand." Monk's accepting answer made Clint raise his head for a questioning moment. "You slew two of my swords, my children. I took two close to you. But the score, as you here say it, is not settled.

Two for two. No winner.

Now, after many years, you seek to win. To hold a point over me in this game. To that end, you have allied yourself with the shinigami. You seek to attack Blackwater where you will force us to its defense."

Clint glared at Monk. "So what?"

Monk nodded slowly. "Tell me, Clint, would you be satisfied killing me? Would that let you 'win?'"

Clint also nodded slowly. "Yeah, yeah I would be."

"As I thought." Monk put his hands together in a praying motion. For a tense moment, Aldrich prepared to defend himself, suspecting an attack. But it was just a motion, a solemn gesture. "Then hear me, Thanatos, Clint. Release my child, and I will ensure that none of my others will be at Blackwater."

"And you?" said Aldrich.

Monk held his prayer-touched hands out to Clint. He bowed his head. "Honor dictates that the swords defend those who draw us. Honor dictates that I and that man see this game of swapped lives end between us.

So, I alone shall be there."

## **Chapter 428: Sheathed**

Aldrich assessed the situation. There were two ways to approach this. First was direct conflict. Take out three swords here and now. No, four counting Shuten Doji. The second was to accept the first sword's offer.

The first choice was tempting in its own right. It would heavily cripple the swords if, of course, Aldrich and his current group managed to beat them. That alone was a massive

if. He had too little information on the battle capabilities of the three swords, and they were the strongest out of the seven.

The first sword's display of power was a deterrent enough. He had instantly sliced Clint in half with little to no effort. Clint, a man so tough that he was called the Unbreakable. That was offensive power that Aldrich had never encountered before.

The attack was lightning fast, too, extremely difficult to react to even for Aldrich. Had Volantis not been amplifying Aldrich's reaction time, even he would have not been able to deal with it. Granted, slicing attacks were not that effective against undead. But it was impossible to tell whether the first hand had more powers or not.

Eliminating the swords here also meant more trouble later on. It would weaken them, but it would not destroy them given the swords' reputations for being diehard fighters with a battle forged code of honor. It was very likely the remaining swords would fight harder than ever before, and all of them were capable threats, even the remaining fourth, six, and seventh swords.

Technically speaking, if Aldrich wanted the path of least resistance, then fighting one sword was better than three enraged ones, even if said sword was the first and strongest. The best way to defeat an experienced and aged Alter was to run them out of energy, and that was done better in a sustained siege.

The second option meant that in exchange for Shuten Doji, Aldrich would only face the first hand at Blackwater. By now, it was fairly obvious what Aldrich, or rather Thanatos, was after: the Machineheart.

It was a three-way war between Aldrich, A.I.I., and the Italian and Japanese Prongs entrenched in Blackwater. Both enemy forces were extremely formidable. One was a deranged demon merged with a fragment of the greatest cyberspace entity in existence. The other was arguably the most well-resourced criminal syndicate in the world, and defenders always had the homefield advantage.

Weakening any of these forces was a tremendous advantage. Aldrich had no way to take A.I.I. out – the demon maintained far too much secrecy for that. But if Aldrich took the swords out of the equation, then he estimated he would easily take out a huge chunk of Blackwater defenses, especially with the Kryptic warding off Solomon Solar.

That just left mercenaries and Italian Prong forces to deal with, and Aldrich had a plan to thin out both of them before the fight already.

The decision was fairly obvious in Aldrich's mind. What mattered was if he trusted the first sword's words, and that, he had no real answer to. However, there was someone here who knew the first sword better than he did.

"Clint," said Aldrich. Clint perked his head up. "Do you think the first sword here will keep his word? You know him better than I do. Better than all of us do."

"You would dare to question grandfather's honor!?" said Yuki. She clutched her naginata tight in her porcelain white hands. The temperature of the hot Wastelands air turned into a chilling freeze in an instant.

Monk raised his hand to stop her. "Stop, my child."

"Old shit's a cruel fucker. But he don't lie. I'll give him that," said Clint.

"And you, Clint, are you fine with setting your fight aside for now?" asked Aldrich.

"I'd love to smash his masked head in now, but I can hold off. I don't got as much a quarrel with the rest of em'."

"Then it's done. I will allow this exchange to happen." Aldrich motioned down at Shuten Doji, sending a mental command to bring him up. Alexis did so, grabbing the large man by the shoulder and heaving him up with her flight.

"My child. I am glad to see you are unharmed." Monk held prayered hands toward Shuten Doji.

"Seen better days." Shuten Doji grunted, bruises marking his body from the fight he had taken before with Clint.

"I give you your fifth sword, and you'll come alone," said Aldrich.

"That is the terms of our negotiation," said Monk. "But I do have one more request."

"Somethin' else? Don't be adding on anymore to our fight, Monk," said Clint.

"Not like that. I have resolved myself and only myself to the fight." Monk pointed at Shuten Doji. "I merely request that my child's daughter is held to safety. That no harm fall upon her until the time of my passing."

Whether that be soon-, "Monk glanced at Clint. "Or far in the future."

"I'll agree to that," said Aldrich. He looked to Clint to see if he was fine with this, and Clint nodded slightly. "But only if you can promise that there will be no retribution from your other children afterwards."

Clint had vengeance in his mind, but he was not and never had been a cruel man. Aldrich could tell there was a part of Clint that could empathize with Shuten Doji's bond with his daughter.

"Of course." Monk nodded.

Aldrich waved at Alexis, and she shoved Shuten Doji forward. Before the big man could fall, Otakemaru reached out and grabbed him with one brawny hand.

"With this, the exchange is completed. You have your child. I'll see you and only you at Blackwater," said Aldrich.

"I will see you too, Shinigami. I have always wondered what it was like to see the face of death," said Monk.

"And? How is it?" said Aldrich.

Monk let loose a single, curt laugh. "Cold," was all he said.

Otakemaru curled his fingers, and from them, bright white claws grew out, savage and feral like that of a wild beast's. He swiped at the space behind him, ripping seams in the space. Through these, the swords disappeared.

## **Chapter 429: Blackwater Plans**

40th Floor of Haven Control Tower, Main Meeting Room

Aldrich sat at a round table in his Materius human form with his soulwoven suit on. The fortieth floor of Haven Control Tower was normally his office space, but in times of need, the office could undergo a 'Priority Meeting Mode' that sent alerts to any important personnel in the tower. It also folded his desk underneath the floor and raised up a large round table of segmented metal.

Valera stood beside Aldrich with her arms crossed. She was now outfitted with a new armor set from the Death Lord's personal collection after her original hound set had been destroyed by what Aldrich called the 'other dimension'.

Her new armor was wildly different in style. And wild was a good way to put it. Instead of the heavysuit full plate that covered her completely from head to toe, she had on a strip of black-scaled leather that mostly just covered her chest, leaving her muscled stomach bare. It attached to a single shoulder strap on her right shoulder, and that formed the beginning of a series of rocky armor plating that stretched down to her fingers as if her whole arm was encased in form-fitting, craggy stone.

The visage of a fiercely open-mouthed dragon with a wide, snapping turtle-like jaw and a single stalagmite-like horn fashioned from stone formed a shoulder plate atop the strap. That was a Mountain Dragon — a formidable draconic creature that did not take

to the skies but instead slept under mountains, claiming entire ranges of them as territory.

It was said that where winged dragons breathed elemental force, mountain dragons roved under the earth, their breath sundering earth into great caverns and tunnels.

A war skirt of similarly scaled material draped down from her waist to just below her knees, exposing her shins before meeting greaves made of what looked like blackened, jagged stone. The armor set as a whole was reminiscent of gladiatorial armor, fierce in its simple hardness.

This was the Mountain Breaker Set. One that dramatically improved strength and, in spite of its revealing appearance, defense as well. The perks of having magical armor â€" you could show off skin and still be protected at the same time. It had a powerful passive called 'Ancient Stoneskin' that reduced the damage of sufficiently weak attacks to zero.

More powerful attacks had their damage reduced by up to 50%, though the stronger an attack was, the less effective the damage resistance was. Melee attacks made on the wearer also reflected some damage and stun back as well.

For a tank, it was one of the best sets out there, and a tank Valera most definitely was.

On top of that, the stony scale-covered arm could store mitigated damage, empowering its strength through mighty punches that could shatter the earth. In the lore, the Earth Shaping that Volantis and other strong orcs could use was derived from Mountain Dragons that shared their power with the orcs long ago.

'There is nothing more arousing than blood stained upon the bare skin of a fierce lover,' the Death Lord had said when she gifted Valera the armor. 'I wore this armor when I decided to amuse myself a little in the Battle Ring of Kazir. Hundreds, no, thousands fell in love with my blood-drenched ferocity and, of course, my killer figure. It shall be the same now for you.'

Valera had protested of course, but Aldrich was not about to let her pass up a perfectly good armor set just like that, and so she had ended up having to wear it. She had misinterpreted that as him wanting to see her in it, but because she thought that, she now wore the armor without complaints.

A win-win situation. And Aldrich did not mind seeing her in that either, admittedly.

The others around the table were Fler'Gan, the Geist, V, and Feather.

"Looks like we're all here," said Aldrich. He glanced behind himself. The glass wall started to blacken as metal covering slid over it, fortifying the already heavily fortified bulletproof, explosive-proof glass. As sunlight shut out and the room began to darken,



the round table lit up with holographic blue, projecting a rotating hourglass â€" a symbol for it waiting to be programmed into something else.

"First off, I've got to say-," said V. She put her feet up on the table and shot a scrutinizing look at Valera. "I love the new outfit. It's got a fantasy barbarian class type look to it. Kind of suits you. In a good way."

"Our leader likes it too. And so long as he does, I do as well," said Valera.

"Do you? That's your type? Warrior woman style?" V raised a curious brow at Aldrich.

"Let's move on from this topic." Aldrich waved his hand. He nodded over to Fler'Gan. "First off, how is she doing?"

"She?" Fler'Gan cocked his head.

"The shark-girl."

"Ah, that one. She has fully recovered and suffers no ill effects from becoming undead. It is quite fortunate that the mechanism that aided her breathing had its own power supply. A supply that lasted long enough for your return."

"Yes." Aldrich had turned Hammerhead's daughter the moment he had returned from the Necropolis. He had spawned back in at Hammerhead's mansion approximately five hours later, and perhaps due to its remote wilderness location, perhaps because of Hammerhead's fondness for discreet isolation for his daughter's safety, there was still nobody there.

He found Hammerhead's daughter on her last breaths. Her condition was bad enough that there was no way to keep her alive long enough to get her back to Haven. So, he had killed her and raised her as an undead.

The process had, with his healing mist, restored her brain back to its state before her lung and gill-related accident had asphyxiated it. It also allowed her to breathe freely, though technically it was because as an undead, she did not need any form of oxygen to function.

"She is in healthy condition and housed in a residential room," said Fler'Gan. "However, though her physical condition does seem to be whole, I sense waves of disruption emanating from her mind. Emotions of anguish and despondence â€" thoroughly bitter emotions to taste for a Mind Eater such as myself.

She above all seeks to be alone for the time being."



"Let's give her the time she needs. The shock of waking up after years of dreaming must have taken its toll on her. As did waking up to everything she knew dead and gone."

"That does interest me, O Elder. Your disappearance that you say was caused by being submerged in a realm far separated from our axis â€" I do wish to investigate it further."

"Do not speak more of it," said Valera. "You know not what our leader has lost and suffered through it."

Aldrich shook his head. "It's fine. One of the perks of being undead: you move on easily. But you don't forget the lessons you learned, and in the end, that's all that matters."

Let's move on to our plans for Blackwater."

## **Chapter 430: Blackwater Plans 2**

### Chapter 430 Blackwater Plans 2

"Before we delve into specific strategies, I would like to ask something regarding the goal for our campaign on Blackwater," said Valera.

"Our goal has and always been the Machineheart," said Aldrich. "Once we have that, we have enough leverage to become a global superpower."

"I understand, but what of the revelation that the scholars we captured spoke of?"

"The Blue Ring?" Aldrich contemplated this for a moment. He had taken the Meteor Labs team and was housing them in the tower. At the moment, he did not have the resources to get them back to work. Aarav needed to ship a whole laboratory over before any real work could happen.

But he had grilled Machinemind and the team about the strange artifact they called the 'Blue Ring'. According to them, the ring manifested on the planet seventeen years ago when the passive barrier around the earth unraveled for a moment and other alien artifacts and influences managed to slip into earth.

Among the myriad of exotic objects the Severing brought to earth, the ring was arguably the most important as it had the remarkable ability to control matter. Ace had exhibited some level of the ring's power, merging it with his tactile telekinesis to unravel objects at the atomic level. Coincidentally, it apparently was how Superforce, the current rank 1 hero after Vanguard's disappearance, received his powers.

Before the Trident took the ring, it was under lock and key by the U.S. government. Superforce was a researcher under them, but an errant experiment had caused the ring to generate an explosive wave that razed the entire facility that housed it, killing all but Superforce who rose again with unfathomable powers.

The ring was seemingly lost, but after a few years, re-emerged in the deep east coast Wastelands where the Trident was the first to grab it. The issue, however, was that the ring was fickle. If it was not 'stable' enough, it entered a dormant state where it refused to emit any energy as if it had an independent will.

To try and attract the best of the best to reveal the ring's secrets, the Trident had branded the ring as a way to generate not only infinite energy, but give mankind control over the fundamental forces of creation. Lured by such a grand vision, many esteemed scientists flocked to the labs even though they knew it was funded by less than ethical means.

Progress working on the ring, however, was painfully slow. Even after nine years, the ring refused to share any of its secrets. That is, to everyone except Machine Mind.

To Machine Mind and to him only did it whisper its powers, telling him, apparently, to create a perfect being worthy of being blessed by the 'Outer'. Hence his cloning experiments using the illicitly taken DNA of Superforce - the only human who had ever merged with the blue ring's power and lived.

Which meant that Ace was in reality a clone of the current top hero in the U.S.

When Aldrich tried to press Machine Mind further about the Outer, the scientist could do little more than babble cryptic incoherencies. When Aldrich tried to forcibly invade the man's mind using his authority as his lich, he faced an odd mental block. Or rather, he hit just blank space, as if these words and memories were not Machine Mind's but someone else's, someone who Aldrich had no authority over.

"Machine Mind's told me all there is about what he knows is holed up in Blackwater," said Aldrich. "And there's nothing related to unlocking the secrets of the ring. If there was, the Trident would've used it years ago.

As it stands now, the ring's been in their study for almost a decade with near zero results."

"What of Ace? The boy uses the ring's power, supposedly," said Valera.

"He is under my current study," said Fler'Gan. "I am utilizing alchemy and scrying in an attempt to understand the nature of the power imbued in his body. As of now, I cannot yield any results."

"Regardless, the ring is something we can sit on and crack open later. Especially since it's currently now within me." Aldrich raised his hand. On the back of it, a blue branch glowed.

He could not actually use the ring's power. It seemed that the tree symbol on his hand was more like storage that kept the ring contained rather than something that channeled it into a useful form. But he could remove the ring and have it be under study again when he felt like it.

For now, though, with no equipment available, he felt it best to keep it on his person for safety's sake.

"The Machineheart is the only real objective we have here," finished Aldrich. He nodded to V.

V's eyes flashed blue as she changed the table hologram again. This time, it showed a diagram of the Machineheart. It was a cube shaped piece of metal approximately the size of a basketball. Red lines criss-crossed over its surface, gleaming and dimming in a rhythmic, heartbeat-like pattern.

"The Machineheart. Ancient artifact way back from the Altering. It's theorized to be the 'heart' of the Omega Mind that went full Terminator on earth in 2030. It's the form it chose to show people whenever it interacted with them. Just a floating, ominous cube," said V. "It's said to be the most data-energy dense construct that has and will ever exist on this planet."

"Can you merge with it?" asked Aldrich.

"I'll be honest here: I'm not too sure," said V. She licked her lips in equal parts nervousness and excitement. "But I gotta say, thinking of all that data, all that energy just coursing through me, in me, on my fingertips - man, I'd atleast like to try."

Aldrich raised a brow. "That's not entirely reassuring."

"Relax, boss. The Italian Prong wanted to get Mad Jack to fuse with it. If he can do it, I can do it. I'm not entirely at his level, but I'm close enough where I'm relatively confident I can do it. Even if I can't, we can just take the cube and keep it with us, right?"

"Yes." Aldrich nodded. "And about Mad Jack: any information about his location?"

V shook her head. "Nada. Crazy bastard's been offline for a while now. Kinda scared. Either he's cooking something insane up or he's dead. But I highly doubt he's going to be against us.

Internal data from Feather's shown that the Italian Prong doesn't know where Mad Jack is either. Apparently they parted on less than good terms. It's part of the reason why

A.I.I. managed to wreak havoc on dozens of Italian Prong operations across Europe and North America."

"And A.I.I.? Any notice about his movements?"

V waved her hand, putting the holographic cube to the side and bringing up a map of the east coast of the U.S. She highlighted several blue dots above where Blackwater was, a few hundred miles out.

"A.I.I.'s been moving his bots down slowly but steadily from north to south, wiping out any Trident outposts he finds in his way. By the time we start our operation on Sunday, A.I.I. will be in position outside Blackwater."

"What of this creature's battle capabilities?" said Valera. "Have you learned anything?"

"All his bots are like ghosts. They phase in, wreck face, then phase out," said V. "The aftermath of the attacks on the Trident suggest cryo-weapons and top-notch stealth tech which, now I know, is partly magic based."

"Ah, it will be glorious to secure samples of these mechanical specimen," said Fler'Gan, rubbing his lavender hands together. "I have yet to break the merger between technology and magic. But with their samples, that breakthrough is one reverse-engineering away."

"It'll be high on our priority list," said Aldrich.

"Concerning." Valera frowned. "The frost bolts and invisibility we already know of. Surely an enemy of this caliber has more. Might we not strike now? Before these golems can set perimeter around Blackwater?"

"Then we have to run into Solomon Solar. He stays in Blackwater 24/7 with his mistress, the headmaster of the academy. The only time he'll be gone is Sunday, and that's when we can make our attack," said Aldrich.

"But the Kryptic we took should eliminate this foe, no?"

"We need to apply it first, and if Solomon is on guard from an attack he knows is coming, that gets very, very difficult. I have a plan to cripple him when he goes to his mandatory meeting with the AA, when he's all alone."

"And what of Fafnir? The dragon-shifter that, from what I know, is quite a fiercesome beast."

"Yeah. He along with Monk and some Sword Capos are the strongest threats. But it's a good thing we're going to be getting rid of two out of those three threats."

Valera smiled in glee. "Ah, I knew you had something in store, my dear. Does this involve gratuitous amounts of violence, preferably inflicted by us?"

Aldrich nodded. "It does."

Valera's fangs gleamed. "Excellent."

"Who are you guys thinking of whacking?" said Feather, interested, slight grin on his face. "Hopefully the Sword Capos. Most of them are arrogant bastards. Idiot jocks, the whole bunch of em'."

"The Sword Capos and Fafnir," said Aldrich. "Courtesy of your assistance, Feather."

Feather blinked. "Huh, me? How?"

Aldrich nodded to Fler'Gan, and Fler'Gan sensed Aldrich's intentions, his three red eyes shining with anticipation. "To begin with, we'll have to cut you into pieces."

## **Chapter 431: Blackwater Plans 3**

### Chapter 431 Blackwater Plans 3

"Interesting – wait, what?" Feather's eyes blinked several times. "You don't mean that, do you?"

He looked at Aldrich's stare, a look that had no room for a joke behind it, and then at Fler'Gan's highly inquisitive, highly ready to cut into flesh gaze and knew that Aldrich meant everything he said.

"Yes," confirmed Aldrich. "Fler'Gan's done some tests on you while you were telepathically sedated. It's given me some good insight into the full extent of your powers, and to be honest, I'm rather impressed. You can regenerate from even a drop of blood as long as some part of you remains."

"Wait, you've been doing what to me now while I was asleep?" Feather stared at Fler'Gan as if he had shoved a knife in his back and indeed, the Mind Eater had. And much more.

"Necessary experimentations," said Fler'Gan, waving away Feather's look. "You are an infinitely renewable source of Alter biomass. Your Alter Organ, in particular, provided me exceptional insight into its structure through repeated dissections and-,"

"Alright, alright, I'm about to vomit over here, so let's cut this out," said Feather. He shrugged, accepting his fate. "Least I was knocked out for all of it. Anyways, what do you need my little bits for?"

"V, pull up a map of Blackwater and its surroundings," said Aldrich.

"Here we go." V's eyes flashed blue and in an instant, the holotable projected a large map showing Blackwater as a walled compound surrounded by large stretches of forest with a massive lake nestled beside it. There's going to be a dropoff of ARMA, Imugi, and Aztech weaponry, drones, and droids. Top shelf stuff."

"Yeah. Italian Trident is pulling out all the stops on this. Emptying the coffers, ya know?" said Feather. "Dropoff will be done through the air."

"Air? The Panopticon won't be keeping an eye on this? It is their job to manage airspace after all," said Aldrich.

Feather scoffed. "You and I and everyone else whose seen the streets knows that rules only matter to some. Shit don't matter to the megacorps, I'll tell you that."

Aldrich nodded. Perhaps it was his time in the other utopian world that had made him gloss over the harsh reality that this one had corruption leeches into every little crevice of its broken edges.

It was a world he was very close to changing. Once he got the Machineheart, it would bend under his will.

Then, he could unite mankind.

Then, he could send them away from earth and the Voice, to the faraway stars full of infinite possibility and hope.

"Italians managed to get stuff from the best of the best like this?" said V. "Surprising. They're criminal bigshots, but even the biggest of the baddies are a grade below the megacorps. Megs would hesitate sending anything easily, but this is a huge shipment.

A whole fleet of Jaguars, Cyclops, and even a freaking Stalker."

As V spoke, diagrams of the bots she mentioned popped up. The bulky, tank-like design of the Cyclops, the four legged feline forms of the Jaguars, and the black visored, katana wielding figure of the Stalker all rotated around slowly.

V listed off the names of battle droids - humanoid mechs hand crafted by multiple engineering Alters to be avatars of war capable of standing toe to toe with even the toughest heroes.

The Cyclops from ARMA were the weakest of the bunch but the most mass-producible. These, Aldrich did not foresee issues dealing with.

But the Jaguars from Aztech were a grade above that with their four-legged agility and state of the art vibblade claws capable of splitting matter at the atomic level.

The Stalkers from Imugi were a notch above even that. They were deadly ninja robots with speed, strength, stealth, power, and a host of versatile weaponry said to even be able to take on a S class hero.

"The megacorp fatcats don't know about the Machineheart. If they did, they'd be sending a hell of a lot more. Probably their own armies to boot," said Feather. "They still think it's just a civil war gona outta control between Trident prongs, so they're only dipping their toes into the fight.

Italian prong's convinced them that if the corps back them, once they win, they'll be in massive debt to the corps, and you know how the corps are. Sharks, the whole lot of em'. Smell blood and they're on your ass faster than a broke hooker."

"But once the Italian prong secures the Machineheart, they'll turn on the megacorps," noted Aldrich. "Take over their infrastructure. Their tech."

Feather nodded gruffly. "Naturally."

"Still, this is quite interesting." Aldrich put a hand to his chin. "I thought they'd be avoiding mechanical war power with the whole stint that A.I.I. pulled off in the Judicata."

"I figure it means they've found a suitable replacement for Mad Jack," said V. "Happen to know anything about that, mob man?"

She tilted her head towards Feather.

Feather scratched his scruffy beard. "Well, see about that, I was supposed to be filled in on stuff like that in my next capo meeting. Which was going to be at the convoy when it stops for a refuel in the Wastelands."

"Excellent. That brings me naturally to our plan: you'll attend that meeting," said Aldrich. "You don't happen to have any of them suspecting you, do you?"

"Nah," replied Feather. "They just think I'm being extra safe holed up in a bunker somewhere. Which is precisely what I'd be doing if it wasn't for our whole, er, kerfuffle."

"Well, 'kerfuffles' aside," said Aldrich. "If nobody is suspecting you, then this should work. You're going to that meeting when it lands."



"Oh, are you gonna put that crystal ball in me again? Look, I have nothing against going 'balls deep' - it's 2117 for christ's sake - but it'd be nice to do something a little more, uh, gentle."

"So many complaints. Typical of you weaker willed humans," sighed Valera.

"Hey, you try having that guy's ball inside of you and tell me how it feels," said Feather, but once he saw Valera's face light up, he just said, "Nevermind."

"I won't be risking my phylactery again, especially not in the presence of that much firepower," said Aldrich.

Feather nodded. "Whew, always knew you were the most reasonable one here."

"What I am going to do is strap a bomb to you."

## **Chapter 432: The Convoy**

432 The Convoy Feather rubbed a palm against his face. When his hand dropped, he looked thoroughly tired. That was a step up from being surprised, though - at least the man started to understand how useful he was as a suicide bomber with that regeneration of his.

"A bomb? Security on this convoy is going to be more tight-lipped than a nun," said Feather.

"You'll have one of these with you." Aldrich pointed up and an Evileye unstealthed itself, its three fused eyes becoming rapidly visible in increments like someone was adjusting its opacity in a photo editor. "It's normally quite slow moving, but it can stay tethered to any unit. Plus, it's entirely undetectable using any form of technology that I know of.

Once I do this-," He patted the back of one of the Evileye's eyeballs, transferring the [Corpse Nova] mark on it. It was now a blazing red triangular sigil, infused with more power now that Aldrich had attained significantly more power from merging with his other life. "This becomes a living bomb ready to combust at my whim."

By hitting level 70, Aldrich hit a point where some of his spells attained their 'true forms' and increased in power. [Corpse Nova], for example, could now be added on to up to five targets or stacked on one. It was far more explosive in raw power and it also had an additional effect of melting the flesh of those affected by its blast radius.

In terms of sheer destructiveness, it always had been and now more than ever was one of his most prominent spells.



The Evileye floated over to Feather and latched one of its tendrils on the base of Feather's neck.

"Guess I'm used to slimy crap all over me at this point." Feather shrugged in defeat.

"The Evileye also grants you Truesight, which will be particularly useful considering A.I.I.'s magic based stealth," continued Aldrich. "It is also a teleportation point for my [Mist Phase] so I can easily reach you when needed or, in this case, prep an ambush."

Feather raised a brow. "You're coming?"

"Yeah." Aldrich cracked his knuckles. "You could say I've received quite a bit of a power boost. I fully intend on testing it out."

"You sure? Shit could get real dangerous real quick," said Feather. "Shield Capos like me are more business minds but there are two Sword Capos on there. They're tough as tempered nails. One of em' has killed three A-rankers already."

"Even better. Valera and I will both get to flex our strengths and take out a sizable portion of the enemy's attack force. I in particular need a test run for my new powers before I get serious on Sunday."

"Excellent." Valera grinned. "I will enjoy ripping and tearing flesh by your side once more."

"That's all nice and cool but you guys do understand that once I do this, I'm outta the mob, yeah?" said Feather. "Screw breaking omerta, this goes beyond that, this is straight up bombing my goombahs.

I'll lose all my standing. They'll be after me, every single one of em'."

"What use is there for your standing? Who is going after you? After we're done, there won't be an Italian Prong anymore," said Aldrich coolly. "There won't be a Trident, even. Everything will be under me. In which case, your standing will be better off than before."

"Fair point." Feather perked up as the phone in the breast pocket of his tacky white and purple suit jacket started to vibrate. He slipped the phone out and tapped the screen.

He let out a breath through his teeth as he scrolled through the screen. "Damn. Looks like the convoy's making its way ahead of schedule. They're telling me to haul ass to the drop point now."

Aldrich stood up, straightening his suit jacket. "Then let's get to it, shall we?"

In the Northeastern United States Wasteland Quadrant, known for colloquially as the 'Greenpatch' for its lush forest environments -

"Convoy inbound in thirty minutes, sir." A man decked out from head to toe in combat armor gleaming with charged red energy between its mechanical seams and joints stood at stiff postured attention.

The suit was ARMA Red-Grade. Top shelf stuff. Integrated energized etherite hydraulics and synth-muscle mesh to make even the weakest pissant a multi-tonner capable of tossing boulders like baseballs. Not to mention the omni-spectrum visual scanning, smartlink aim assistance and combat maneuvering that could turn a jackbooted mafia thug into a sharpshooter and martial artist mashed into one.

But even wrapped up in that grade of gear, the Italian Prong soldier could only shiver at the sight before him.

There was a dead grandtusk lying in a clearing in the forest. A clearing that had been forcibly made as evidenced by the dozens of shattered tree trunks and stumps lying about. The grandtusk was a boar-like creature as big as a full-grown bull elephant with powers that included shockwave-inducing charges and tusks encased in sawblade-like energy that ground anything it contacted down into dust.

It was a B-ranked threat that could easily kill even an A-rank hero if they were caught off guard. Even with the Red-Grade suit, the soldier knew that if he tried to tousele with a grandtusk, there wouldn't even be anything left of him to bury.

"Good," said a man sitting atop the giant grandtusk corpse. He had on a garish red suit jacket with black undershirt and dress pants. His face was lean and mean with salt and pepper hair slicked elegantly to the side in a professional side part. He looked like he should have been enjoying a martini at a members-only bar, not sitting atop a dangerous variant corpse.

"I've also received report that Feather is en route to the base," said the soldier, looking first at the corpse, then at Nico, one of three Sword Capos that stood at the very top of the combatants in the Italian Prong.

The soldier shuddered internally in fear. Nico was not known as a nice man. None of the Sword Capos were. Niceness did not get them to the top - it was brutality.

"Feather? That little coward?" Nico frowned like he had seen a smear of shit on the street. "He and the other Shield Capos get to hide away while we do the real mens' work.

We're fighting the real war, don't you think, soldier?"

"Uhm, yes sir," said the soldier, hesitant.

"The soldiers are the spine of this Prong. Yet, we always get the shit end of the deal, don't we? Fighting and bleeding while the others get to hide away. Isn't there something wrong with that? Don't you think the Don is wrong?"

But you know what, once this is over, how about we talk to the Don? Make him understand how useful we are? And if he doesn't, well, with a new world order, we'll need new leaders, won't we?"

The soldier did not know what to say. Nico was speaking of treason against the Don - the head of the Prong. The very thought was unspeakable.

"Soldier. Why so quiet?" said Nico, leering at the soldier. Against that stare, the soldier involuntarily stepped back, his instincts telling him danger was imminent. "Do you...disagree with me?"

"N-no, sir. I-I agree," said the soldier.

"Good." Nico reached into his breast pocket and took out a single golden coin. It was not money - coin-based currencies had long since been phased out by the credit system - but more of an art piece, its face engraved lengthwise with a sword with its circumference decorated with daggers stacked atop each other.

The soldier saw the coin flash gold and held up a panicked hand, but before he could say anything, Nico flicked the coin. It sped forward with speed far surpassing a bullet, so fast that there was no sound at all before a coin-sized hole sizzled in the soldier's head.

As the soldier dropped back, dead, Nico sighed. "I fucking hate traitors." He looked up to the skies. "And that includes you, Feather."

## **Chapter 433: Infiltration**

### **433 Infiltration**

Feather stepped out of his Raven, a small, personal hover tech vehicle reminiscent of a helicopter. Most of the capos owned something like this - an aerial mode of transportation that they could use to get around the world with more efficiency.

Ravens were not made by any official corporation but rather by underworld mechanics and technos, designed solely for the purpose of evading governmental and AA airspace tracking. In a world where variant evolution was a constant threat, commercial flying vehicles were incredibly rare, and what the black market could cough up they had to build small and stealthy to dodge watchful global security eyes.

He adjusted his grey suit jacket, smoothing out any wrinkles. It was fine Italian Altieri fabric, the kind of ware that would take the average wage slave half a year's worth of their salary to afford, but it did not make him feel any better about what he was doing. He glanced up, seeing the Evileye's trio of eyeballs staring down at him with an expressionless gaze.

'Fucking creepy,' he thought before he shook his head. The Evileye might have been disconcerting, but what was even worse was meeting the other capos. Specifically the sword capos Nico and Adriana. They were both from the Aquaslums of Neo-Venice, and it showed in their tough-as-titanium attitude.

With extreme weather events and environmental changes from the Altering, Venice sunk underwater. Neo-Venice was built atop the ruins of its old corpse. But over time, variant corals known as Breathbones created large air bubbles throughout the sunken city.

There, the filth of society, the hunted, the wanted, the unforgiven - they all moved in. They started a dark society of their own, one that existed in a symbiotic relationship with Neo-Venice.

As it was, the sunken city grew another type of coral called Cryo-Coral. These produced cryogen, an ultra-rare energy source that made high-cooling technology viable, powering everything from freeze rays to cryogenic stasis.

The Aquaslums quickly assumed a monopoly over cryogen and, over time, organized and took upon the image of the mob of pre-Altering antiquity. That way, they salvaged together some culture. Some refinement.

Escaped criminals became soldiers and capos.

The Slumlord became a Don.

Neo-Venice created an unofficial peace with the Aquaslums in exchange for doing business together.

That was how the Italian Prong actually started. But no matter how they liked to dress themselves up, the Aquaslums never changed in how dangerous they were.

Bubble-Zones could pop at a moment's notice, flooding and killing anyone within them. The main way to earn your keep down there was to be a cryogen miner, worming down into vast coral entanglements that acted like cave networks.

Being a miner was like taking extreme caving to another level and then smashing it through the ceiling. You had to snake your way in through the tiniest of gaps on limited oxygen supply and zero visibility.

All the while, you ran the risk of aquatic variants gobbling you up for lunch, and energy signatures from the corals disrupted quite a bit of technology, making drones difficult to use.

Cryogen had to be hand-picked from the jaws of dark, murky, death-filled depths.

In the Aquaslum's lawless confines, child labor was the preferred method of getting this precious resource.

Nico and Adriana had both grown up as miners and, when they grew too big to reliably squeeze through coral gaps, became enforcers renowned for their strength and savagery.

Feather had personally killed maybe twenty people. He did not like getting his hands dirty. He was more a businessman than anything else, someone that could get almost anyone to open up to him over a round of drinks.

But Nico and Adriana were different. They probably had a kill count in the several hundreds. Hell, they had probably killed twenty people by the time they were fifteen years old.

Feather got his capo position because his father was a prior shield capo and had groomed Feather into the job. Feather had grown up in relative wealth and security.

In contrast, Nico and Adriana had clawed their way up to the top with every little ounce of strength they had, damned be whoever they stepped atop of to get there.

Feather and those two were cut from completely different cloths that did not mesh at all. He related more with the third sword capo Orlando who, like Feather, had been raised into his job as the personal bodyguard of the Don.

At least Orlando knew some goddamn manners and how to crack a joke or laugh at one. Feather did not even know if Nico and Adriana could physically even smile anymore or whether those muscles had atrophied from disuse.

"Sir." Two power-armored soldiers stood at attention in front of Feather.

Feather nervously glanced up at the Evileye, but the soldiers did not notice it at all.

"What the hell, where's Nico and Adriana?" said Feather. "Did they forget I'm a capo? No offense to you guys, I'm sure you two are great company, but it's custom for a capo to greet another capo."

"Adriana is busy securing the perimeter of the base from variant threats," said a soldier. "Nico is expecting you."

"Expecting me, huh? He doesn't want to greet me here, but he wants to see me? At least let a man stretch his legs out." Feather looked ahead. His Raven had landed on a small runway carved through the forest, and that runway attached to a large warehouse where the Trident stored shipments and supplies mostly for Blackwater.

Now, it was chock full of weaponry ready to hold Blackwater down to the end of time and more.

What worried Feather was why Nico wanted to meet him. Feather avoided Nico and Adriana and they tended to avoid him other than courtesy-based greetings, all of which had been curt.

The fact that Nico requested a direct meeting with him was suspicious as high hell.

"Follow us, sir." The two soldiers waited for Feather to start moving, their high-powered guns nestled alertly in their hands. It was obvious that they wanted Feather to move first to make sure he did not run anywhere.

"Sure. There better be a hot meal ready for me at the base. A good vintage wine, too," said Feather as he took a step forward, towards the warehouse in the distance.

"No, sir." The soldiers blocked Feather's path. They waved their guns off the side, towards the thick, untamed forest. "Nico has also been dealing with variants. He wants you to meet him at his current location."

Feather paused for a moment, his heart rate rising. He could not have brought his mercenaries here as there was a no-weapons policy. Plus they were undead so they could not pass through any bio scan for regular body temperatures and bodily functions. It was why he was not undead - to pass any checks to infiltrate this place.

He felt as naked and defenseless as a newborn baby.

'Hey, you watching this shit? This stinks of a whacking' Feather said mentally, hoping Aldrich would hear him.

'I'm watching closely.' Aldrich's voice came in a calm reply.

'Then what do you want me to do!?' complained Feather. 'Nico's gonna put me into the dirt! Shit, does he know something's off!?''

'He wouldn't. Unless you revealed anything, but Fler'Gan's mental conditioning has ensured that isn't a possibility. Which leads me to believe that, most likely, this is due to other reasons. Do you have a history of issues with Nico?'

'Well, maybe, I don't know. Never talked to the sword capos much. But I know they never liked me.'

'In any case, we'll see what's up. Follow the soldiers.'

'But what about me dying!?'

'We have a piece of you stored in Haven. If you get killed here, you'll just respawn back there anyway. As I said, you are the perfect suicide bomber. Just go. Otherwise, you'll draw too much attention.'

Feather groaned internally at the fate he had been reduced to. From high-standing capo who threw out credits by the thousands at fancy dinners and clubs to...a renewable suicide bomber.

Nevertheless, Feather had no choice but to follow.

"Take me to Nico," said Feather, putting on an air of confidence.

"Yes sir. Follow us." The soldiers marched ahead, and Feather followed behind.

## Chapter 434: Suspicion

434 Suspicion Feather trudged through the forests, grimacing as his fine Italian leather boots got wild muck all over them. The two soldiers leading him by implied gunpoint basically speed-walked their way into the forestlands, giving no time for poor old Feather to catch his breath.

Figures. The soldiers did not want to keep Nico waiting. Even if Feather was a capo, the soldiers only respected him. They feared Nico, and fear held a clutch over a man's heart far tighter than respect did most times.

"How long are we gonna walk? We're way past perimeter - there might be variants out right behind that tree trunk you're walking past," said Feather, pausing for a moment to rest.

He might have been classified as a B-rank combat threat, but that was almost entirely because he was so damn hard to kill, not because he was some marvelous physical specimen or murder-hardened fighter. If even a little smear of him was around, he would grow back. Even if said smear was, as was the case now, stored back in a vat in a creepy-ass laboratory in Haven.

It was why, he noted begrudgingly, he was such a useful mobile bomb.

"We're almost here, sir. Nico is waiting for you in the clearing up ahead," said a soldier.



"Don't worry about variants. Nico and Adriana have made sure that they've been cleared out or repelled significantly past perimeter boundaries," said the other.

The soldiers waved their guns, beckoning Feather to speed up.

"A capo forced to do shitty cardio, I'll be damned..." Feather muttered under his breath before he picked up his pace again, stepping past a tree and into a clearing. Before he could scan his surroundings, he stepped into something disgustingly squishy and reeled back.

"This is why I hate camping-," he began before his eyes widened, His boot had stepped into fresh, raw viscera that clung to his soles like bloody roadkill. "Damn!"

Feather hopped back, tapping his heel on the grass to kick off whatever it was that got stuck on his precious leather.

"Feather. Nice to see you're as shallow as you've always been. Always concerned about the credits over sweat. What is that, Brunello?" said Nico. His voice was curt, cutting in its critical intonation.

"Yeah, I missed you too," said Feather, sarcasm oozing out of him. "And Brunello? They've been out of vogue for a decade at least. Nowadays, American-made's the best for boots, and Stronghide's the best of the best. Of course, that's what I'm packing right now. Anyways- woah."

Feather stepped back, his neck craning up to see Nico sitting atop a pile of dead variants that reached over a dozen meters high.

"Enough chat about boots," said Nico.

"Hey, you're the one that brought it up," said Feather, recovering from his surprise quickly.

Nico's brow twitched. He pointed away and the two soldiers immediately left, very evidently not wanting to spend another second there. Feather could not blame them. He was putting up a confident act, something he had been trained to do, but in the end, it was still an act.

He could see the raw danger emanating off Nico like heat waves under a high noon sun. Maybe literally, too. There was a sort of golden aura about him that shimmered in waves that barely clung to his skin and clothes.

Feather did not actually know much about Nico's power. It was standard policy to keep the Sword Capos' combat capabilities under tight wraps to preserve their efficacy. Plus, Shield Capos planned business, not battle, so in the end, there was not too much overlap between the two anyway.



All Feather knew was that Nico was dangerous as hell. By reputation, he did not have as much infamy as the other two Sword Capos. Adriana was known as the Cape Ripper and the Mad Dog of the Trident for her ferocity and willingness to fight and kill the toughest of A-rank heroes. Orlando was the personal bodyguard of the Don and that alone made his strength indisputable.

But the fact that Nico could keep such a low profile in such a high position meant he probably liked to kill a little more discreetly. Before his victims even knew what hit them.

Nico dropped down from his throne of death, landing neatly with his hands in his coat pocket. He took a single step towards Feather, his eyes turning bright gold to match his aura, contrasting well with the silver of his hair.

Feather's neck tingled. Gooseflesh erupted on his limbs. His throat felt tight. His instincts told him danger was imminent. He briefly glanced up, making sure the Evileye was still there and that Nico did not spot it.

The Evileye looked straight at Nico with its lidless gaze.

"What? Did a bird catch your eye?" said Nico, immediately catching Feather's shift in stare.

"No. Just think it's too hot out to be working out like this, yeah? In a full suit, too." Feather nodded at Nico. Nico could not tell that the Evileye was there. Knowing that, he breathed an internal sigh of relief. "Alright, tell me what this is really about."

"I've been thinking about this whole civil war," said Nico. "About how quickly things went wrong. An entire criminal empire the likes of which is only rivaled by the Imperials in China, one that's withstood the test of time for over half a century, falling apart so quickly so soon."

"You know why. The Machineheart went active. Ivan saw a chance to take the world for himself, so he takes the Russian Prong and turns it against us. Speaking of, do we have a suitable replacement for Mad Jack to synch with the damn thing? Or is he still yelling nonsense in his cell?"

Feather thought about the current situation.

When the Machineheart went active a few weeks ago, it came as a surprise to everyone. It was collecting dust in a Trident vault as a cool cube-shaped antique from the Altering. Nobody thought it had any real value other than its age, so it was stored alongside paintings and jewelry, and other goods that accrued value over time and history.

The moment the Machineheart activated, though, red, blue, and green lights flowed through its seams like blood through veins, Trident technos could confirm it contained a tremendous amount of power within it.

Mad Jack confirmed its true identity as the Machineheart. But before the Trident could get Mad Jack, the only techno in its service capable of fusing with the artifact, he went mad.

Not his usual brand of mad, the kooky, quirky, high-functioning madness, but full-on ranting and raving insanity. About random numbers and visions and a 'games'.

Deemed a security threat, Mad Jack was thrown into a secret cell. Afterward, the Russian Prong, led under its head Ivan, withdrew from the Trident and waged war, aiming to snatch the Machineheart away.

Now, the Italian and Japanese Prongs gathered to keep the Machineheart safe until they could spit out a techno as capable as Mad Jack to synch with the damned thing.

I've been thinking," began Nico.

"Yeah, you already said that." Feather shrunk back when he saw Nico's expression darken. "Go on."

"Ivan and his new army of machines wouldn't have been able to do the damage they've done unless there was a traitor in our ranks. Knowing our supply lines, where our soldiers are stationed, etcetera. At first, I thought maybe our tech's not up to date. Maybe Ivan's siphoning data from us.

If Ivan could crack the Judicata, he could crack us, right?

But no. Mad Jack's defense network is still in our systems. And before he went even madder, uncooperative, he assured us it could stand against Ivan. Mad Jack might not have all the screws in his head fastened, but he never lied about what he could do."

Feather shrugged. "We've known this for a while, though. Isn't that also why we're gathering the capos? To set a trap for the rats to crawl into? If informants are what you're worried about, you should be more concerned with getting me meeting-ready for the other Shield Capos to arrive."

"You see, Feather, I heard something interesting the other day." Nico took out a coin from his pocket. It shone gold, infused with a light that could only be explained by his power. "Mad Jack isn't in his cell anymore."

"What the hell!?" said Feather. "He's not!? Did he escape?"

"No. Something broke him out. Something invisible that could evade all our sensors."

"Ivan's bots..."

"Yes. And you know the odd thing is, the only people who knew where Mad Jack's location was were the capos."

"The capos..." Feather stepped back, but Nico made a face that made it clear that if he took another back, another to retreat, to even think about escaping, he would sorely regret it. "You're accusing me of leaking Mad Jack's cell location!?"

That's fucking crazy!

You know that only one Sword Capo and one Shield Capo got to know, right!? Don made sure not even all of us knew. Just the ones he trusted. And I'll tell you right now that Shield Capo - it ain't me!"

Nico shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. What I do know is that you and the other Shield Capos are soft. Easily dazzled by luxury. None of you have shed blood for a cause. You've only made others bleed for you.

If a shiny enough offer was made, you would take it. All of you would.

So, all of you are a liability.

And that's why in this meeting, I'm going to be getting rid of every single one of you. Starting with you."

## **- Chapter 435: Intrusion |**

### **Chapter 435: Intrusion**

435 Intrusion "Are you crazy!?" Feather stammered out. He wanted to step back, but his body was just frozen as Nico stared him down with unbridled predatory intent. "ALL the Shield Capos? We run everything on the business side! The side that makes money!"

"There won't be a need for money and other shiny little baubles after we secure the Machineheart," said Nico. "We will build a new world. A world where soldiers, not cushioned paper pushers, rule."

"The Don! He wouldn't sanction this!"

"No, he wouldn't. But I'm sure he'll listen to reason. If he does not and he orders Orlando to slice my head off, then so be it. I do this for the good of this organization. This family." Nico held his fist out to Feather, the coin still covered under his other palm. "Choose. Heads or tails. If you win, I'll make sure your death will be painless.

If you lose, well, Adriana will deal with you."

Feather gulped. Adriana's sadism was not exactly a well-kept secret. She loved to tear apart her enemies limb by limb, bone by bone like a dog. She would treat Feather like an infinite happy meal, and as long as his brain was intact, he would not respawn back at Haven.

'Uh, Thanatos, hello? You seeing this? Now is a REAL good time to show up,' Feather positively shouted in his head. 'HELLO!?'

'Won't choose? Then I'll do it for you. Heads." Nico uncovered his palm. The coin showed a sword etched onto its surface. Feather's heart dropped. The other side of the coin showed a woman's face - that was heads.

He had lost the coin toss.

"Now hold on, I didn't get to choose-," began Feather, but Nico cut him off by flicking the coin with his thumb. The coin shot forward like a golden bullet, ready to gouge out Feather's heart.

Clang.

A metallic ring resonated throughout the forest clearing. A sound that should not have belonged to Feather's heart rupturing from antique money.

Feather had instinctively cringed and closed his eyes, but when he heard that sound, he tentatively opened one of them.

"Sh-shit, you came!" muttered Feather. "Thought you'd forgotten all about me."

Aldrich stood in front of Feather, his black-armored palm held out. The coin had stopped against his palm, sizzling with friction-induced heat. Green mist floated all around him, quickly swirling out and covering the clearing, dropping the temperature to a chill.

Nico raised a brow, but he did not show surprise at this sudden development.

'Did he expect me?' thought Aldrich. He met Nico's gaze. It was stern. Focused. Combat ready. 'No. He's just trained to maintain his composure no matter what. A real veteran.

Good. This will be a nice warm up for me to get used to my new powers.'

"You...you're Thanatos, aren't you? The new bigshot that everyone's talking about," said Nico.

"Very observant," said Aldrich sarcastically. There were not many two-and-a-half-meter tall men in blood-tinged, bone-spiked black armor walking around in the modern world, that was for sure.

Though right now, Volantis was currently in a heavily depowered state from being almost destroyed by being sucked into the other dimension. He could barely armor Aldrich as it was. Stitching was an impossibility, though basic functions like energy readings and mapping were still a go.

"You sound like Feather. No wonder you two are working together." Nico jerked his head up and the coin embedded in Aldrich's gauntlet palm whipped back to its owner.

"Feather doesn't have a monopoly over sarcasm. And that's about as much small talk I'm giving you. I've heard enough from you two." Aldrich had waited until the very last moment for Feather to squeeze information out of Nico.

From the conversation between the two capos, he could tell now that they did not suspect that Feather was working with Aldrich. In addition, they were not expecting him at all.

Meaning this ambush was perfect.

'Volantis, gage this guy's strength,' said Aldrich.

A red circle appeared around Feather in Aldrich's vision. It rotated for a second as Volantis carefully analyzed Feather's total energy level.

'A to A+ rank in raw energy. A formidable foe' stated Volantis.

A combat-based Alter that stood in the A to A+ rank range was a foe that Aldrich would not have taken on alone in the past. But now, with additional levels and powers, the playing field was far more level.

Whether it was slanted towards Aldrich was something he wanted to figure out now. But first.

Aldrich raised his hand, pointing to the sky.

'Vexa. Cast [Kaleidoscope Cage]'.

'As you wish, my lord.' Vexa's cool, calm voice flowed into Aldrich's ear. He had not heard it for quite some time as she had been busy over in India preparing for the untimely demise of Aarav's father.

A plan which, according to her, was now very soon to mobilize with little to no hitches in sight. She was still in India but one of the most useful parts of her kit was that she could cast magic remotely using her butterflies.

Spectral butterflies of ghostly blue and lavender began to flock around the sky in a great big swarm that almost darkened the afternoon sun.

They were normally invisible, but if Vexa wanted to cast magic using them as a medium, she had to reveal them. They fluttered over the clearing, casting a giant shadow over it like a plague of locusts as they moved on over to the warehouse.

Soon, they would set into formation, creating a spherical barrier that would disable any teleportation within its boundary. An observer outside the barrier trying to look in would only see a lattice-shaped wall of dazzling colors much like a kaleidoscope, obscuring any vision looking in or out of the barrier.

It could also allow Vexa herself to use her Entomancy abilities to summon a variety of insectoid monsters within the barrier, and soon, the warehouse would come under attack from a literal swarm of freakish crawling critters.

They would be a competent distraction until Aldrich was done here.

"Interesting." Nico looked up at the skies grimly. "I know that can't be good. You're always full of tricks, Thanatos. Tricks that the rest of the world can't seem to decipher. But I won't get distracted."

He raised his hand towards Aldrich, coin lodged between his index finger and thumb, ready to flick it with deadly speeds again. "Because it doesn't matter how many pieces there are on the board.

Once I checkmate the king, the game ends."

## **Chapter 436: Necromancer Vs. Capo**

436 Necromancer Vs. Capo "A game of chess, is it?" said Aldrich. "You don't see pawns taking kings very often."

Nico's eyes glowered. "Consider this an exception."

Aldrich addressed Feather but did not turn his back on Nico. The Sword Capo was too dangerous to do that to.

"Feather, leave this area. Vexa will guide you to safety," said Aldrich.

"Already on it!" Feather sprinted away, his footsteps heavy and crunching as they sloppily meandered over the forest floor.

"No minions?" Nico's golden eyes flickered about, scanning Aldrich's surroundings. "Every battle report done on you indicates you fight with a variety of soldiers. A lonesome king is rather defenseless, wouldn't you say?"

"You don't have to worry. My soldiers are everywhere," said Aldrich. He began to raise his hands into the air. Green necromantic energy flickered about his fingers. His mist cloyed and settled on the many corpses littering the large clearing - the corpses of variants that Nico had slaughtered. "[Serve]."

Aldrich cast [Mass Raise Undead]. The corpses began to twitch, strewn apart body parts moving on their own to reanimate back together.

In response, Nico predictably flicked his coin at Aldrich.

Aldrich expected this. He was ready to tank that hit. When he had first manifested here using his [Mist Phase], his [Death Essence Barrier] was not up.

Now, it was. Granted, the barrier was more specialized for absorbing energy-type damage. Physical attacks phased through the barrier, but even then, they suffered a debuff that reduced their damage based.

It was enough to make the average bullet about as lethal as a pitcher's fastball. A decent bruise for the normal human, but to Aldrich who was definitively superhuman in every stat, it was nothing.

Aldrich knew from blocking Nico's initial toss at Feather that it was not that much stronger than a bullet. He could easily block it again.

He was, however, wrong.

A coin-sized hole sizzled in Aldrich's head, the rim glowing red hot. The coin had punched right through not only Volantis, but also Aldrich's rather hardened skull.

Aldrich faltered and fell down to his knees, listlessly looking down. The reanimating variant stopped moving.

"And that's checkmate," Nico said casually. A massive golden aura surged all around him, far stronger and brighter than before. He put his hands in his pocket and strolled up to Aldrich, close enough to reach out and touch him. He looked down at Aldrich's cored head and scoffed. "One move. That was all it took to get rid of you, hm? Looks like you weren't as big a player as you thought."

Nico turned around. The moment he did, he saw a large shadow cast over him. Instinctively, he turned around, but it was too late.

Aldrich grabbed Nico by the back of his head and slammed the Alter into the ground. A hexagonal pattern of green energy formed around his arm, massively improving his strength with [Death Surge].

The forest floor shook as if a bomb had detonated, soil rising up in a small geyser from Nico's head making fresh contact with fresh dirt.

"I see. You were holding back," said Aldrich. Magic surged as he channeled it into the arm pinning Nico down. He knew that it would take far more than a single surprise shot to kill the capo. He prepared to cast [Anti-Life Beam].

Purple light began to crackle around Aldrich's palm.

'Incoming' Volantis's voice rang urgently in Aldrich's head.

In response, Aldrich let go of Nico and shifted to the side, his cloak allowing him to seamlessly fly through the air.

The coin zipped back to where Aldrich was. This time, when it landed, it created a sizable golden explosion.

Nico had learned in just one small exchange that explosive attacks fared much better than piercing ones against Aldrich who could stand up with a hole in his head with zero issues.

Aldrich had used Nico's attack as a chance to trick him by playing dead. But that would not work again.

"You're not dead? With a damned hole in your head?" Nico's silhouette stood up in the waning cloud of his coin-induced explosion. The shine of his coin glimmered in his gloved hand. His normally gel-slicked-back hair was now messy, framing his golden eyes with strands of silver. His lip was cut, blood dribbling down to his chin.

"You'll find me harder to kill than most." The hole in Aldrich's head reformed as mist condensed into it.

'Apologies,' said Volantis. 'My structure is not as strong as it once was. I could not fend against that attack, nor could I even sense it - such was its speed.'

'It's alright. I'll handle the brunt of this fight. Just keep your sensors sharp.'

'Understood, warfather.'



"Doesn't matter. I've dealt with regenerating types like you before," growled Nico. He held his coin up. The surging golden aura around his body dimmed, thinning as it seemingly transferred over to the coin, making it brighter than ever.

Aldrich held up his own hand in response. On it was a beating, red, healthy heart.

Nico's brow rose in confusion, then further in alarm.

21:15

From Fler'Gan's experimentations, Aldrich had learned that Alters, though they could not really analyze magic as they lacked spell-scriving capabilities, still possessed a level of supernatural instinct that let them know whether a spell was dangerous or not.

Back when Aldrich pulled off his fake death, he did not use his moment of surprise just to knock Nico's face into the dirt. He had mainly used it to get off his [Heart Hold] curse - a spell that was normally incredibly difficult to get off because it required making direct contact with a physical attack significantly slower than normal.

Nico's brow rose in confusion, then further in alarm.

From Fler'Gan's experimentations, Aldrich had learned that Alters, though they could not really analyze magic as they lacked spell-scriving capabilities, still possessed a level of supernatural instinct that let them know whether a spell was dangerous or not.

Even if the spell was something less tangible than a fireball like, say, a curse, if the Alter managed to see it, they could still sense danger from it.

The stronger an Alter, the sharper their instincts were. Nico might not have understood how a heart was on Aldrich's hand, but an Alter of his caliber knew that his life was in imminent danger.

"Checkmate," said Aldrich. He crushed the heart in his hand. The very moment before he did so, Nico threw his coin. Not at Aldrich, but...behind him?

The coin sailed into the air far, far away.

The heart burst as Aldrich closed his metal-covered fingers around it. Blood spilled down his hand before it along with the remnants of the heart faded away into black particles. That was the sign that the curse had now taken effect.

Nico's heart was now mush.

Nico coughed heavily and went down to a knee, blood spitting out of his mouth.

Aldrich took a step forward, ready to speed up the process of Nico's death. The man was going to die soon anyway, but Aldrich did not want to wait before inducting such a strong unit into his legion.

'Wait. That warrior's vitals...they are still stable. Including his heartbeat,' said Volantis.

'What?' Aldrich saw as Volantis saw through Nico, showing that, indeed, his heart was still intact.

Nico stood up and exhaled deeply. He turned to Aldrich, blood smeared all over the lower half of his face. His golden aura raged around him bright, almost blindingly so.

"Check. But not mate," said Nico.

## **Chapter 437: Necromancer Vs. Capo 2**

### 437 Necromancer Vs. Capo 2

'What a nuisance,' thought Aldrich, sizing Nico up. Volantis outlined a see-through view of the capo's body, highlighting in faint red the heart and the tissue surrounding it. Nico had taken damage to his heart, but it had not been crushed.

At best, it caused some internal damage which, though it must have been excruciatingly painful, and indeed, more than enough to knock out the ordinary man, did not put down a superhuman Alter of Nico's caliber.

'That curse was infallible,' said Volantis. 'And it succeeded. I sense its dark energies had held a tight grasp around this warrior's heart.'

'I felt the spell go through as well.' Aldrich felt his mana dip down a bit. In gaining so many levels, he had distributed his stats heavily towards magic, giving him a much, much larger mana pool. Even then, [Heart Hold] was a considerably costly spell whose cost actually scaled with how strong the unit afflicted by it was.

For an A-rank Alter like Nico, it ate up around 20% of Aldrich's total mana.

Mana, though, was not too much of an issue here. He had a myriad of ways to recover it on the go. The biggest problem to tackle was Nico's supposed resistance to [Heart Hold].

It must have been a function of Nico's power. At first glance, it seemed like an Augmenter main, Object secondary type power. Alters under this power classification could infuse external objects with additional powers, and in Nico's case, that seemed

like extreme acceleration, durability boosting to keep the coin from destroying itself, and explosive energy output.

But there was something else to Nico's power that had allowed him to survive [Heart Hold].

"No sarcastic response this time?" said Nico. "Good. I hate sarcasm." He rushed ahead, clenching his gloved fists tight.

'Damn, he's fast. Way faster than before.' Aldrich saw Nico charge in as a golden blur. The way the capo moved with his shoulder squared and his fists out in tight, compact guard made it obvious that he was a seasoned martial artist.

Aldrich pushed backward, his cloak of souls wailing as he flew into the air to make vertical distance.

Nico skidded to a halt where Aldrich was, his boots sizzling hot as they scorched the forest floor with sheer friction. He craned his neck up, flashy silver eyes narrowing in analysis.

"Serve." Aldrich raised his hands, and his mist finished restoring a dozen variants in the area. One of them, a massive Grandtusk the size of a heavy tank, squealed with newly infused, green-eyed rage.

Others included sloth-like creatures three meters tall with scythe-shaped claws called Ripper Sloths, Brute Strikers that took the average wolf-like Striker and juiced them up to the size of cars, and huge snakes capable of swallowing a man whole.

They all converged around Nico.

"Trash." Nico grunted as he snapped his fingers. He side-stepped a goring charge from the Grandtusk, dodging narrowly so as to use the beast's huge mass as cover against the rest of the variant swarm.

A whining whir echoed from the horizon for a brief moment before Nico's golden coin flashed into view, smashing through trees as if they were not even there. It splattered through several variants as it landed in Nico's palm again.

With one swift motion, Nico threw the coin again, this time with a twisting motion of the arm. That imparted spin to the coin, and it whirled around him like a defensive saw-blade, rotation after rotation creating a tight orbit that ripped the variants swarming him into shreds.

In just a few concise seconds, Nico had annihilated the whole horde.

'A fierce some foe,' remarked Volantis. 'Commendable in his strength.'

'Indeed. But not enough.' Aldrich held out his empty left hand. He cast a new spell he had picked up from leveling up. "[Deathground Standard]."

A teal-green battle standard materialized in his hand, a flag showcasing a spiral-twisted spine shining bone-white at its center.

Nico looked up, saw what Aldrich was doing, and responded by throwing his coin like a baseball pitch. When Aldrich saw the capo windup, he immediately activated his cloak's [Hallowed Ground]. The cloak's souls whirled around him, creating a spherical boundary where anything within was absolutely immune to any damage from anything outside

The coin blasted past Aldrich, phasing through him due to the [Hallowed Ground].

Aldrich threw the [Deathground Standard] at Nico. The flag's bottom was pointed like a spear, making it easily capable of being a thrown weapon akin to a javelin.

The standard, if intercepted, exploded and dealt a considerable amount of damage and inflicted a nasty damage over time debuff.

However, if it was not tanked, it anchored to the ground and created a [Death Zone] that buffed the stats of all undead within. The zone also automatically spawned skeletons and zombies, though these were mostly minor distractions.

The strongest part of the spell was that it created spectral walls that prevented those within from leaving its boundary for a solid twenty seconds.

Nico's golden aura rose around him, empowering him. He kicked back, dodging the standard as it slammed into the dirt. He kept backward until he hit the ghostly green walls.

Notably, he did not snap his fingers to recall his coin at this moment. Instead, he seemed to be taking a tentative, investigative approach, elbowing the wall hard to test its durability, grimacing to find that it did not yield a single bit to his strength.

From the way Nico decided to clear out the variants before instead of chasing Aldrich, he determined that Nico could not fly, giving Aldrich a significant battlefield advantage. Most of the time, Nico probably dealt with flying threats just by tossing his coin at them, but the [Hallowed Ground] obviously made that simple solution untenable.

Granted, Aldrich could not keep [Hallowed Ground] active forever. It was an extremely powerful active coming from a Divine-class artifact. Even at level 70, it ripped through his mana bar like fire on gasoline.

But Nico did not know that. He would be focused on threats in front of him, assuming the worst that Aldrich could keep this up infinitely.

"[Mass Create Undead: 2nd Ring]" chanted Aldrich.

In response, ten Ivory Knights - the upgraded version of Skeletal Warriors - materialized on the ground. Like how Aldrich's [Corpse Nova] had upgraded itself from him reaching level 70, so too did his [Create Undead].

Skeletal Warriors maxed out at level 20, but Ivory Knights maxed out at 40. They were, as their names suggested, regal knights clad from head to toe in thick plate armor of ivory bone. They were each just as big as Aldrich and wielded heavy black greatswords as long as they were tall.

"Tch." Nico clicked in annoyance as he snapped his fingers, recalling his coin. On top of these sudden knights, he noted that the variants he had shredded to fine pieces were reforming too, this strange green mist, a mist that seemed to drain away at his very life seemingly giving them what it was taking from him.

As if that was not bad enough, the flag seemed to produce foul night creatures of its own, raising skeletons and zombies nearby.

"[Rite of Adamantine Bone]," chanted Aldrich.

A steely grey flash flickered over the Ivory Knights and variants, indicating that they had been buffed, their bones turning into powerful, metallic bone that was a direct upgrade from the [Rite of Bone Binding] Aldrich used before.

And now, instead of [Burning Agony], he chanted, "[Immolation Deathcharge]".

The knights and variants all lit on bloody red flames, the same as it had been with [Burning Agony]. But now, when they moved, jet propulsion-like flaming bursts rippled behind them, causing them to surge forward much, much faster in a targeted charge against Nico.

Nico's coin knelt down, placing his palm face-up on the forest floor. The half-formed variants, their exposed muscles and organs lit up in flames, and the flame-wreathed Ivory Knights all crashed against Nico, clawing and slamming down with their weapons.

Bloody red flames roared all around Nico from the immolating undead, but even then, he just sat there, unfazed.

'Interesting'. The attacks hit Nico but did no damage, bouncing off his skin, no, his golden aura. It was as if he was literally invincible.

The coin then returned to Nico's waiting palm, this time landing with a mighty golden explosion that sent pieces of variants and chunks of burning armor from the knights flying.

It was as if the coin had turned into a miniature meteorite. The explosion was sizable enough to cover the entirety of the [Death Zone], probably affecting every single unit within.

The [Death Zone's] walls kept things in, but they did not keep things out. A weakness that Aldrich waited to see if it would cost him.

## Chapter 438: Necromancer Vs. Capo 3

### 438 Necromancer Vs. Capo 3

Golden smoke from the blast died down, revealing Nico standing alone in a smoking black crater, the coin shining bright in his hand. The variants had all been annihilated wholesale by the explosion, preventing Mist from reforming them.

The Ivory Knights, however, still had armor pieces and bone fragments strewn about.

These started to quiver and reform as tendrils of condensed mist gathered around them. In a few mere seconds, they had completely regenerated, their enormous dark greatswords held heavy in their bone-gauntleted hands.

The ten Ivory Knights, wreathed in auras of blood-tinged flame, resumed their charge, surging forward with heavy, armor-clanking steps like humanoid tanks. They roared, too, and their bellows were just as deep and thunderous and threatening as that of a lion's.

Nico deftly maneuvered his coin through his fingers, eyes flitting from side to side as he analyzed the threats.

'He isn't regenerating the variants. He must have a limit to his energy,' thought Nico. Currently, analysis from various private war corps, the AA, and the Trident showed a sparse amount of information regarding Thanatos's powers.

The closest anyone got to Thanatos was Nzambe, a zombie-horde controlling villain of the first Corpowar who, along with the Junker, managed to take down not one, but two Council of Fortune corporations. There were also striking similarities to Archmage, the S-class hero in Korea who could summon fantastical creatures like elementals and dragons while shooting out bolts of magic he called 'spells'.

But details about Thanatos were still sparse.

Alters with powers specialized for investigating others could not find anything about Thanatos, indicating that most likely he had a high-tier Alter concealing his ability to be read.

Nobody could even get an AC count read on Thanatos or his minions where both Nzambe and Archmage had distinct readings on file.

However, careful analysis of the footage showcased hints of Thanatos's limits.

First, even though Thanatos had a seemingly impossible variety of powers, he had to wait in time intervals between using them, sometimes not using them at all after single usages.

All this indicated that Thanatos used energy, or at the very least something like it as a resource.

Meaning his abilities had a finite end to them. And internal recharge periods as well.

Generally speaking, Alter powers that affected other bodies or created autonomous, complex objects consumed the most energy. If Thanatos followed these rules, he must have been burning through energy faster than even S-class heroes.

'My energy usage is efficient. The longer I weather this onslaught, the better of a chance I have,' thought Nico. 'He's not coming down from there, meaning more than likely he's not confident in fighting me up close. He's hiding behind that barrier of his. But if I wear him out, I'll force him to come down or retreat.

Either way, I win.'

'...Is what you're probably thinking,' thought Aldrich, watching as Nico moved around expertly, sidestepping earth-shattering sword slams while countering with explosive coin tosses.

Each toss, infused with explosive golden energy, was aimed accurately at the knights' center of mass, right at their chest. That way, the coin blew the knight's limbs apart, halting its combat capability entirely.

A quick adaptation. Ordinarily, Nico would have tossed that coin at heads, but he had already seen Aldrich fight headless and assumed that his undead could too.

Every time a knight sundered apart, Aldrich's Mist repaired them.

Undead Mist naturally regenerated undead at a slow rate, but if he focused, he could rapidly restore them at a high mana cost.

The stronger the unit, the higher the cost to manually restore them. At level 40, the Ivory Knights necessitated a hefty cost.

To curb this, Aldrich stopped regenerating the variants.



They were fodder right now anyhow. The Ivory Knights were significantly stronger and more familiar as units to control, being from the game and all. He would use them to test Nico more, to find a way through his seeming invulnerability.

Right now, after what felt like just a minute of mist-regenerating his undead back up, his mana was going down near to half. Of course, the [Heart Hold] took up a lion's share of that cost but still, this was pretty expected.

The Legion Necromancer's playstyle revolved around massive, sustained mana and health costs leveled off by tactical consumptions of undead and the occasional chug of the divine flask.

So far, Aldrich had not been pressed enough to really have to break down his precious Legion. Nor would he have to. He had made sure of that when he had exchanged his divine flask with the Death Lord.

'Unfortunately for you, capo, I won't be running out of mana anytime soon.' Aldrich materialized his [Soul Bell]. He held its silver and green carved handle and gently rang it. A crystal-clear, sonorous ring chimed out. Its sound waves took the form of slow-moving blue waves that washed over Aldrich, restoring his mana to full.

[Soul Bell Charges: 8 > 7]

'What the hell!?' Nico's eyes shot up, not missing what had occurred. Thanatos had rung a small bell.

In high-level combat, every small action had significance. What did that bell do?

"This restores my energy," said Thanatos, as if he had read Nico's mind. "You won't be outlasting me."

Nico scowled. Did Thanatos have a mind reader? Or...was he just that much more ahead of him?

"We'll see about that," said Nico. He rolled, dodging two greatsword strikes before lining up a shot and blasting through the two knights with a single coin toss.

His golden aura flared around his body the moment the coin left his hand. At that moment, another knight rushed in from his blindside, landing a ramming thrust to his back.

This, the capo simply tanked. The blade, large enough to cleave a small car in half, just skidded across Nico's back like running a nail across solid concrete.

Nico raised his lip in a slight snarl of frustration; that hit had come to him as a surprise. Inevitable, though.



Ten targets, all approximately at the level of low to mid B rank Augmenters swarming, and there was bound to be a miscalculation somewhere.

Whirling around, he shot a spinning kick at the knight's side, sending the heavily armored undead flying and hitting the Spectral Wall like it was styrofoam.

"I see. I'm starting to understand now," said Aldrich, carefully inspecting the interaction.

## Chapter 439: Necromancer Vs. Capo 4

### 439 Necromancer Vs. Capo 4

Volantis's energy readings showed that Nico's golden aura did not remain constant.

It ebbed and flowed chaotically. Though, Aldrich now realized, not as chaotically as he had assumed before. The flow of Nico's aura was contingent on whether he had that coin on him or not.

When Nico had the coin, his aura dimmed down. When he threw it and it was away from him, it rose back up. And when the aura was high around him, he had effective damage immunity on top of enhanced stats.

[Heart Hold] was not true Instant Death that killed no matter what. Very few spells were.

Rather, it was what Aldrich dubbed 'effective instant death'. It worked by dealing 100% of the target's maximum health in damage.

But if said target had a way to become completely immune to damage, revive, or have some form of stored health, then they could survive it.

It was why Nico had thrown his coin away from him when he saw Aldrich's [Heart Hold] ring in his danger instinct. He knew a life-threatening attack was coming, so he tossed his coin to make sure his aura was present around him.

This interaction with the Ivory Knight solidified Aldrich's analysis even more. Nico dodged attacks when he had the coin on him, but when he tossed it, he got laxer, and less jumpy.

Which meant that Aldrich had to kill Nico when his coin was on his body.

"[Invoke Deathborn: Pursuer]" chanted Aldrich, raising his right fist like a falconer. Smoky black claws ripped through space above his hand, and from that dimensional scar, the Pursuer crawled out.

It was a spectral creature made of half-necrotic flesh rippling with convulsing veins and half-dark, willowy smoke. Its limbs were long and gangly, ending in claws that reached out eagerly.

With a malformed featureless face showing nothing but an open maw of spiked red teeth, the Pursuer screeched as it perched atop Aldrich's hand, the end of its body forming into a serpentine mass of flesh and smoke that curled gently about Aldrich's arm.

"Take these." Aldrich cast [Heart Hold] and [Skeleteer's Mark], the Ascended version of [Bonebearing Curse] which forced units with bones under Aldrich's temporary command.

A wreathing of black and red tendril-like energy coated his hand.

The Pursuer eagerly grasped at it with its claws, absorbing the curse into itself. "And hand them down to our friend over there."

Nico looked at this development. A chill ran down his spine as he saw the distorted, horrible visage of the Pursuer. He knew not what that was, but his instincts told him that it was dangerous.

That it was life-threatening.

Aldrich sent the Pursuer down by lightly nudging his hand towards Nico. The Pursuer's descent, however, was anything but light. With a piercing scream, it sped down rapidly, flying through the air with a trail of cloying black smoke trailing behind it like a comet of destined death.

Nico, in response, threw his coin out in between dodging greatsword slashes. The coin shattered a blade in its way into pieces as it hurtled right at the Pursuer.

The Pursuer did not dodge the coin, nor could it have. The coin was too fast. But physical attacks did not work on it. Only energy-based or magical ones did.

Which meant that Nico was helpless against it.

The Pursuer slammed into Nico, sinking its claws deep into his being. The claws did not pierce the capo's invulnerable, gold-coated skin, but instead sunk through it like it was water, breaching into his very soul to infect him with the duo of curses.

Ordinarily, units could only suffer one curse at a time. With the Pursuer, however, any number of curses could be stacked atop each other.

Nico grunted in severe pain, kneeling down. The pain did not come from tearing flesh or breaking bones or anything of that sort, but instead, from within him, within his being, in some deep, primordial part of him that he had not felt before.

Physical pain, the battle-hardened capo was used to. But spiritual? He had no experience with.

The Pursuer stayed latched onto Nico's body, its spectral serpentine tail curled around his body as it sunk its red teeth into his shoulder, imparting continual spiritual pain.

When Nico moved, he was sluggish, much slower. It was as if every single inch of his body was tied down with weights.

Then, Aldrich activated the [Skeleteer's Mark]. A cross-shaped black mark appeared on Nico's forehead. A ghostly cross brace of ebony wood materialized above Nico, and from it, green strings latched at key points of his body like his head, chest, and limbs. Very much like he was a puppet.

Aldrich attempted to control Nico, but he was not able to. Nico was too strong. At best, he could stop Nico from moving.

Nico's slowed movements froze entirely.

The Ivory Knights, seeing their target stilled, battered him again and again with their greatswords but to no avail.

This situation was shitty, to say the very least. But there was a silver, or rather a golden lining: Nico had already thrown his coin away. He was, for all intents and purposes, invulnerable.

Not even the likes of Solomon Solar could dent him in this state.

All of a sudden, the knights stopped attacking, withdrawing and standing in ringed formation around Nico.

"Did you lose this?" Aldrich called out. He dispelled his [Hallowed Ground] and raised his hand, showcasing a shining golden finger in between his fingers.

"Wh-what!?" Nico stammered out. He could not move his face, but he could tilt his eyes up to see what was going on. He could have sworn he had thrown that coin far, far away when he shot it at the monstrosity that currently snaked around him.

At full force, too. With enough power to have sent it across the entire country.

"I knew you would throw this at my Pursuer. You react well to threats. So, I lined the Pursuer's descent up so that I was in the way behind it," said Aldrich. "Of course, you didn't assume I would catch it, did you? I will say, you've got quite the throwing arm."

Aldrich's armor was completely battered, large chunks of it twisted and torn back as if a massive shockwave had traveled through it. There were several strips of armor that had been completely eviscerated, revealing not human flesh underneath, but raw bone.

"What the hell...are you?" said Nico, eyes widening.

Aldrich flipped the coin with a resonating cling. It took an agonizingly slow arc down toward Nico's head. As it fell, he held his hand out. A beating red heart materialized in his palm.

"Death," said Aldrich. "To you. To your entire organization that tortured my parents to death. To the new world order you wanted. To everything you knew."

Nico's eyes were still wide when the coin landed on his forehead. The moment it did, his aura dimmed down, transferring to the coin instead.

Aldrich closed his fist, crushing the heart.

Nico managed a faint smile. A smile of acceptance. Of a fighter understanding he had been beaten. He closed his eyes as blood rippled out of his mouth, his heart stopping.

## **Chapter 440: Warehouse Raid**

440 Warehouse Raid Aldrich touched down on the forest floor, or what was left of it. The previously grassy clearing had been utterly trashed by Nico's coin-induced explosions, Aldrich's attacks, and the Ivory Knights crashing their greatswords down again and again.

"Excellent work, everyone," said Aldrich. He raised his fist, and in response, the ten Ivory Knights stood tall in trained formation, raising their huge blades in front of them with ease like they were toy props. They slammed their gauntleted fists into the blade as a synchronized warcry.

'Ah, it has been quite some time since I have suffered such damage,' said Volantis.

'Apologies.' Aldrich looked down at his thoroughly damaged armor hanging on to him in warped black strips and cracked bone spikes.

'No need, Warleader. To defend you is my purpose, and I do so with nothing but honor.'

'Appreciate it. As always.' Aldrich focused his Mist, restoring Volantis back to top form. Nico's coin toss at the end had been quite the impressive display, shot at a speed almost too fast for him to perceive.

It was only because Aldrich had predicted that Nico was going to throw the coin and the fact that he had lined himself up so that he was behind the Pursuer that he could get ready enough to catch the coin.

And to even take that coin, he had needed to cast [Ribs of the Fleshless One], encasing himself in the bone armor of one of the old Death Gods that the Death Lord defeated and absorbed into her new brand of necromancy.

[Ribs of the Fleshless One] was one of, if not the strongest defenses that Aldrich had in his arsenal. And Nico's shot had cracked right through it. It was an attack that not even the likes of Solomon Solar could match easily. Thankfully, the coin's momentum had halted just enough for him to manage to catch it instead of having it pass straight through him.

Now that would have been bad. Would have given Nico the opportunity to recall his coin and regain his invulnerability. If that had happened, the fight would have dragged on a lot, lot longer.

"Quite impressive on your end, too, capo." Aldrich stood in front of Nico's corpse. He had fallen forwards, blood trickling out of his mouth and sinking into the dirt.

The Pursuer had disappeared now that its target had been eliminated.

A ghostly green outline flickered around the Capo, indicating he was ready to be raised with his soul intact. "Hopefully, you'll continue to impress me.

Serve."

Aldrich raised his hand. Tendrils of necromantic energy surged out from his arm, latching onto Nico's body.

Nico's body twitched before he rose up, wiping blood from his chin using his sleeve. His normally silver eyes had turned slightly green like polished coins reflecting green light.

The capo's eyes were focused but not quite all there. Aldrich had not given him free will, after all, and he did not want to for now. Not until Fler'Gan had reconditioned the man. A powerful combatant like Nico probably had quite an impressive force of will, and Aldrich did not want to deal with it at the moment.

But Aldrich could still understand Nico's powers now that he was part of his Legion.

[Deathguard Name: Nico Accardo]

[Level: 63]

[Power: Golden Time]

[-The user can infuse an object they are close to with energy that allows them to manipulate some of the object's physical properties, granting it high-invulnerability, acceleration, and explosiveness. With training, the user is now able to enhance their own body instead of their chosen object. However, this can only occur when their chosen object is not in their possession.

In addition, the user can only enhance themselves with a few of the properties that they can enhance their chosen object with.]

'A mighty warrior indeed,' remarked Volantis.

"Yeah. He's just two levels below Seismic, and that's after my recent power boost spilled over and increased the overall level of my entire Legion," said Aldrich. "He's on the high end of the A-rank of Alters. With his combat experience, he could probably take on the lower end of the S-rank too, depending on power compatibility.

In any case, he'll make a fine collection to my Deathguard. Now, for other matters..."

Aldrich looked over towards the warehouse in the distance. Well, warehouse in name only. It was basically a military base with fortified sentry towers and compounds large enough to be seen over the tree line.

It was now on fire, swarmed with a throng of insect creatures as big as pickup trucks.

Aldrich put a hand to his head, contacting Valera. She had come with him here. Unlike regular undead, she could teleport with him as a Chosen. Which reminded him of Chrysa, the ordinary way he usually transported undead around.

He hoped she would awaken from her crystal-encased slumber.

The Death Lord had assured Aldrich that Chrysa would awaken once she adjusted to her new body, and that there were no risks. But still, he worried. It was just what parents did.

"..." Aldrich paused before he began to worry. Valera was not responding. He had sent her to the warehouse to take it over with Vexa's insect forces. It seemed the attack was going well, but the fact that Valera did not immediately pick up was troublesome.

He knew her. Even in the midst of deadly combat, she would always respond to him.

The only time she would not was if she was literally dead.

At Warehouse 42A, dubbed the 'Fortress' by the Italian Prong-

In the midst of a burning, crumbling vehicle facility where the corpses of melted armored cars lay strewn apart like litter, a hulking werebeast stood over a smoking crater.

The beast was easily three meters tall, standing on two sinewy, wolverine legs with a hunched back. Spines protruded from each of the creature's vertebrae, ripping painfully through skin and muscle. The bone was not white but instead glowed a bright, toxic green. Its fur was black and tinged with glowing tints of similar green.

Drizzle and spittle pooled down from the monster's wide maw crowded with glowing green, razor-sharp teeth. When the spit touched the fortified steel ground, it melted through the metal with all the ease of water eviscerating cotton candy.

At a closer look, the creature was grievously wounded, missing an arm with several large, gaping holes dotting its chest. In spite of these injuries, it stood unbothered, its horrendous injuries closing up.

"YOU WERE THE STRONGEST FROM THANATOS?" growled the creature. Its voice was garbled, monstrosity distorted, but it was still barely recognizable as belonging to a woman.

She stared down at a body lying in the center of the acid-pooled crater. The body was nothing but a torso at this point, arms and legs melted off, head so twisted from chemical scarring that it was unrecognizable. The only thing anyone could tell about the face was that its skin was pale.

Beautifully so.

The beast growled. "WEAK."

## Chapter 441: 80%

441 80%

When Aldrich did not receive any contact from Valera, he reached out to his other Chosen: Vexa. She responded immediately.

'What's going on?' said Aldrich, tone urgent.

'I am unsure, my lord,' said Vexa apologetically.

'With an entire network of butterfly eyes, you don't know?'

'The assault went well. Valera showed tremendous force, tearing apart men left and right. My brood performed adequately as well. More so than I thought in this strange new world.'

'But what went wrong?'

'Valera's show of force brought forth their champion. A warrior woman with the visage of a feral wolf-beast. Valera used her dueling taunt upon the beast-woman, and together, they crashed through a building to fight in isolation while my brood slaughtered the lesser soldiers.'

'Adriana. The other Sword Capo.' Unlike Nico, Adriana was less careful about concealing her powers, but even then, the Trident did well in covering up any information available about her on the Net.

He checked Valera's status, specifically her HP. It was low, flashing red low. And not regenerating.

'Vexa, redirect the majority of your forces to Valera's location,' demanded Aldrich.

'I am afraid it is not possible, my lord. I have tried. The wolf-woman has erected a barrier of poisons around the building that not even the hardest of my insect warriors can stomach before melting into nothingness, let alone my butterflies.

The only one that can intervene is-'

'Is me.' Aldrich grimaced, or he would have if his skull face could do so. With his [Death Essence Barrier] blocking out energy-type attacks which included environmental hazards like acidic air, he was the best candidate to help Valera.

Immediately, he began to channel [Mist Phase], kneeling down as his undead fog began to gather around him.

"All of you make your way towards the fight," said Aldrich to the Ivory Knights. They nodded and began a steady charge through the forest, bulldozing through trees standing in their way. "And you-,"

He addressed Nico. "Keep that coin ready. Fire on my mark."

Nico nodded.

As Aldrich's channeling continued, a channel whose each and every second felt agonizingly long, he wondered how Valera could have lost. He had done a battle assessment and seen her winning 9 times out of 10.



Adriana was a mutant that looked reasonably similar to a werewolf. Her sheer size indicated a considerable degree of superhuman physical stats. He also knew that she had killed no less than three A-rank heroes.

Inferno, a Blaster from the European Union who could whip up flaming tornadoes.

Multiman, an Augmenter from the United States who could create copies of himself.

And, most notably, Tianyong, an A+ rank hero from China who was considered an up-and-coming S ranker. He had it all. Came from a family of distinguished techno heroes. Graduated from Yumenguan, the top hero academy there. And after that, became a top disciple of Sifu, the hero with the greatest legacy in all of East Asia.

Tianyong could wield Qi excellently and seamlessly synchronize it with his transforming techno-weapon and battle armor. In terms of track record and combat capability, he was good enough to be fast-tracked to be an S-class hero.

Of course, until he met his untimely demise trying to stop a gang war between the Imperials, the largest criminal syndicate in China, and the Trident.

All three heroes showed signs of significant physical trauma along the lines of being savaged by a wild beast. Claw marks, bite marks, the whole macabre catalog. On top of that, large chunks of their bodies had been melted off with a caustic green substance. The radiation coming off their corpses was so intense that there was no dosimeter capable of easily reading it either.

Inferno and Multiman were both melted down without much of a fight, showing that more so than anything, their lungs had turned into goop. Tianyong's tech had fried against high radiation exposure.

Knowing this, Aldrich had sent Valera out to fight her. She had incredible regenerative ability and natural resistance to poisons which should have translated to radiation. On top of that, she herself was level 70, the same as Aldrich, and as a dedicated warrior, she could invest all her stats into physical ones.

In raw physicality, she was a whole league ahead of Inferno, Minuteman, and Tianyong after his mech suit fried. At the very least, unlike anything Adriana had faced.

He had expected a fight between Valera and Aldrich to be a challenge, but not a life-threatening one. Similar in vein to him and Nico.

But Adriana had turned out to be more trouble than he had bargained for. Maybe more trouble than she was worth. He would find out when he got there.

"YOU HEAL A LOT. I WILL MAKE SURE THERE IS NOTHING LEFT LIKE A GOOD GIRL DOES," said Adriana. She moved to take a step forward but stopped, the hairs on her hackles raising.

"Hahhh." A voice rasped out from the melting torso through scrambled vocal cords. The voice became clearer, chords tying together and growing back tougher, stronger. "I did not want to use this. I prefer to keep my head. But it looks like may have it before long."

A red aura roared around the torso, raging and coursing in bloody strands and pillars. They gathered into the shape of limbs made of pure, raw red - flesh and blood matter made whole.

On these, the torso stood. A red sheen washed over its scarred, distorted face and restored pale skin, elegant, sharp features, blazing red eyes, sharp, vampiric teeth.

Valera was back. "[Reversion: 80%]

In the next moment, her pretty face distorted again, but not because of acid melting her flesh, but because it was morphing into something else, something monstrous. Her eyes sealed shut, useless vestigial little things they were that True Vampires, the primordial night creatures that never knew light, never needed.

Her pointed ears became larger, her mouth ripping apart to make room for several more rows of large, sharp teeth. Cracks echoed out as her spine and bones shattered and restructured, hunching her, extending her limbs, making them larger, capable of carrying more muscle, pushing out of her elbows and knees and hands in spikes. Wings burst forth from her back. Red and black carapace covered her pale flesh, armoring her with flesh plate that could withstand strikes from the mightiest of paladins.

"YOU THINK YOURSELF A MONSTER...?" she said, her voice rattling, deeply guttural, on the way to becoming less and less capable of uttering human inflections. "YOU WILL SEE WHAT A TRUE MONSTER IS."