

Super Necromancer System

#Chapter 59: An Experiment 2 - Read Super Necromancer System Chapter 59: An Experiment 2

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"Where the fuck is this guy?" said Jack as he tentatively moved past a thicket of trees. It was dark. As dark as it got. His ski-mask might have looked like a cheap Halloween dollar store piece of garbage, but it was not a shabby piece of tech.

It had night vision, infrared, and some low-level AC scanning inlaid within its white, ballistic duraplastic surface. A lower caliber bullet would bounce right off the thing.

Meanwhile, when Jack glanced at the Lasher and his normal leather gimp mask, he wondered if the guy could even see more than a few steps ahead.

Jack's suspicions were confirmed when the Lasher walked face first into a tree trunk. The Lasher stepped back, utterly unfazed, his expression unchanging.

"Your costume seriously has nothing special about it?" whispered Jack. "How the fuck are you not in a jail yet? Or better yet, a mental asylum? Ark Asylum up in Neo-York ought to have a nice spot for you."

"I do not need protection, for pain is a blessing. Pain is the only thing that is real in this world," said the Lasher.

"Alright, whatever." Jack checked his Eye-Phone, tracking his location via GPS mapping. "We've been walking for ten minutes now. The guy should be here. Sh*t, I better get paid for this if he bails on us, or if we have sh*t luck, a variant attacks us."

All of a sudden, Jack's phone screen crackled, the graphics distorting before shutting off. "Huh?"

Jack smacked his phone to try and get it to work. "The hell? Your phone working, Lasher? Wait, do you even have a phone?"

The Lasher took out an Eye-phone that looked entirely out of place with his getup. "My phone has lost its life."

"Something's wrong-," began Jack before he saw a massive, bright green flash barrel towards him through his night vision. "Sh*t! Get away!"

Jack stepped back as a massive, muscled arm smashed into the Lasher's side, launching him into a nearby tree with a solid, cracking impact.

"Who are you!?" said Jack as he manifested his power. His arms solidified into metal before shaping into two large, serrated blades in a shower of sparks. The sparks lit up a huge, ugly brute of a man. Or...was it a man?

The guy might have been ten feet tall (3 meters) with ugly tumors and growths all around his grey skinned face and bare upper body. Large tusks jutted out from his jaw as he stared down at Jack with beady white eyes.

Jack almost gagged as a disgusting rotting stench wafted out from the guy.

"The fuck...?" Jack felt pricks of pain all around his body that grew numb. Was he getting poisoned? No, he looked down at the bare skin of his shoulders. There were black, rotting patches.

The giant man growled like an animal and took a heavy step towards Jack.

"You better not mess with me, fucker," said Jack. "You don't know who I am. Who I'm associated with."

The giant ignored Jack and charged forwards, raising both his arms up in the air to hammer down on Jack's head.

Jack swerved to the side as the giant smashed dirt. He sliced his blade arms across the giant Alter's stomach, aiming to gut him. He felt flesh yield and cut, and he smiled under his mask. His favorite feeling in the world was flesh slicing and tearing.

However, the wide cut he made healed up in an instant.

Before he could register surprise, Jack reacted to a punch from the giant by crossing his blade arms in front of him in a guard.

Jack grunted as he was sent flying backwards, the punch cracking the dark grey metal of his knife arms. As soon as he hit the ground, he leaped back up, ready to fight. This fucker was strong.

At the very least, a D-ranked threat, same as Jack.

An Augmenter, probably, judging from his brawn and regenerative ability.

Jack was also an Augmenter, and in an Augmenter vs. Augmenter fight, the better technical fighter tended to win. In this case, Jack was outmatched physically, but with his blade arms and skill, he could make up the deficit.

Jack was not trained all fancy and intense like Supers or some of the better mercenaries and villains, but he had gotten into plenty of street scraps. He had learned from bloody experience, and he could tell this Alter was a total amateur.

The giant growled and punched at Jack's head. Jack ducked and stabbed into the giant's throat and then circled around to try and decapitate the giant while he was disabled trying to regenerate a throat torn to shreds.

The giant however, landed a solid punch on Jack's chest, launching him back into a tree.

Jack braced for impact, but even then, the giant Alter's strength was just too much. He almost snapped the tree he hit in half as the wind knocked out of him. He dropped to one knee and sucked in breath as he shakily looked up at the giant.

How the hell did this guy not react at all to his throat getting shredded? Yeah, he could regenerate, but even regenerating Alters got disabled until their vital organs healed up.

But this thing treated the hole in its throat as if it was just a minor bug bite.

Jack looked around to see where the Lasher was, but the man was gone. Had his body been taken?

"That's enough, troll chieftain." A voice came out of nowhere.

Jack froze, trying to locate the voice. He did not have to try long. The source of the voice jumped down from a treetop and landed in front of Jack. Seemed to be some ordinary dude - Jack's mask scanner registered him at 0 AC count. Really pale skin and white hair with green glowing eyes.

He was dressed in a black bodysuit with a strange purple orb embedded in his chest.

"Who-who the fuck are you?" wheezed out Jack.

"How rude. Is that how you talk to your clients?"

"Y-you?" Jack slumped back, sitting down and leaning against the tree he had hit. He breathed heavily, looking moments away from death. In reality, he was now nearly fully recovered. His knife arms might have only affected his arms, but his Alter Cell count was good enough that he had superhuman physicals.

Not enough to level a building with a single punch or anything like that, but still easily more than enough to rip a normal man, a normal man like this idiot with a 0 AC count according to his mask's scanner, in half.

"Yes. I'll have you and your friend assist me in a few experiments," said the man as he walked over to Jack.

When the man got close enough, Jack lunged suddenly like a wild cat, thrusting forwards with his blade arm, aiming to carve straight through this idiot from the shoulders up.

"Woah now." The man casually spoke as he held Jack's blade down between his palms. It felt like Jack's blade was stuck between a hydraulic press, just completely and utterly stuck.

"W-what the fuck?" Jack growled as he pushed forward, but this man, this guy with a 0 AC count, was much, much stronger than him. He noticed a strange green outline shining around the guy forming into a hexagonal pattern around his limbs, chest, legs - everywhere he exerted muscular energy, as if the pattern was reinforcing his power.

"So, [Negative Surge] lets me keep up quite easily with a D-rank villain. Good to know."

"Shut up!" Jack used his other free arm to swipe at the cocky fucker's head.

The man let go of Jack's blade arm and then rushed in close, too close for Jack's long blades to reach properly.

Jack felt...a sense of déjà vu. This exact sequence had happened before, the first time Jack had gone to jail. A Super known by the name of Diamond Fist had out-manuevered Jack's wild slashes with this very same counter.

It showed Jack the massive difference between someone that knew how to use their powers with training and, well, someone like Jack who just used it wildly.

This guy...this guy was trained. Trained properly. Way beyond what a street thug like Jack could compete against.

In the next instant, Jack nearly vomited as the man launched a powerful elbow right into his gut, this time properly crushing the air out of him.

Jack collapsed to his knees, spit drooling from his gaping mouth as he trembled in pain and shock. All he could do was look up at the man weakly with shaky vision as he waited for a death blow. No such execution came, however.

Instead, the man looked off to the side. "Fler'Gan, I have your second sample here."

Jack felt slimy tendrils crawl up his neck and around his face, and in the next instant, his world went black.

Chapter 60: The Final Phase

Aldrich stood over the unconscious body of, what was his name again? He checked his Eye-phone at the villain profiles that Casimir had sent over. Ah, right, Slasher. An incredibly unoriginal name, especially considering his ski mask getup.

"Make this guy wake up," said Aldrich to Fler'Gan.

The Mind Eater was over one of his alchemical tables, specifically the dissection table where the other villain known as the Lasher was tied down to. The Lasher's brain was thoroughly turned to mush from Fler'Gan's [Brainwash] racial skill.

The Slasher, though, Aldrich had told Fler'Gan to keep relatively sane. Still numb below the head, though, to make sure he did not try anything stupid like running.

Fler'Gan slithered over to Aldrich and waved his purple fingers over the Slasher's face. A faint mauve light cast over the Slasher, and he forcibly awakened.

"Hello again," said Aldrich. "You can go now, Fler'Gan."

Fler'Gan nodded and slithered away.

"You-you again!?" said Slasher. "How did you beat me? Without any powers? Did you use some kind of tech?"

"Is that really the first thing that should be on your mind right now?" said Aldrich. He looked down at his phone and read out multiple 'accolades' about the Slasher on his profile.

"The Slasher. D-rank villain. Eight confirmed kills, mostly prostitutes that nobody would care if they went missing. One confirmed cop kill. Spent ten years in Metro-City class 5 jail before escaping through a prison break. Now a low-ranking villain doing odd jobs," said Aldrich.

"Yeah, that's me, the fuck you want, huh?" said Slasher.

"You are a stain on society. But even you can be useful. Useful to me," said Aldrich. He materialized the Death Lord's green Sign Stone in his palm and held it towards Slasher's face. Slasher stared at the diadem shaped green stone.

"The hell is that?" said Slasher warily.

"Nothing that will hurt you." Once Aldrich made sure the light from the stone cast over Slasher, he asked, "Do you want to join my party?"

In response to Aldrich's words, he saw a screen manifest in his vision.

[Quest party count: 0]

"What the fuck do you mean?" said Slasher, thoroughly confused.

Aldrich called out to Fler'Gan. "Make him say yes."

Fler'Gan waved his hand, and Slasher's eyes glazed over as he fell under Fler'Gan's control. "I will join your party"

Aldrich waited for the quest party counter to go up from 0 to 1. In the game, getting NPCs to join a quest to form a party involved talking with them, getting in their good graces through missions or favors, and then throwing out the question: Do you want to join my party?

Aldrich assumed the same would hold here.

But the party counter did not go up.

"I see. Looks like an answer made under mind control doesn't count," said Aldrich. "That'll be it, Fler'Gan. I won't bother your dissection any longer. I just want you to make sure this guy can still feel everything."

"His sensations are untouched," said Fler'Gan as he deftly wielded a small, sharp blade and started to carefully dig it into the Lasher's head, incising around his protruding head spikes.

"Good, good." Aldrich saw Slasher's eyes regain color and control. "Now, I want you to say yes. Do you want to join my party?"

"Fuck you," said Slasher.

"Wrong answer." Aldrich clapped his hands, and Valera came to his side in her full black and grey armor. The spikes, bones, and skulls on her armor made it very obvious that she was no paladin of justice. "It looks like he need some convincing done."

Valera smiled under her helmet and licked her lips, hungering for pain. She stomped on Slasher's hand, grinding the bones and flesh under her greaves. Bones crunched and cracked as a bloody puddle of torn flesh, muscle, and bone shards formed under her foot.

Slasher screamed, but the moment he did, Aldrich gagged him with a balled-up piece of ragtag cloth.

Slasher's chest heaved up and down as he convulsed in pain. Once he settled down a little, Aldrich took the gag out. "Now, answer my question properly. Do you want to join my party?"

"F-f-fuck!" said Slasher.

"Is that the only thing you know how to say?" Aldrich shook his head and gagged Slasher again. "Valera, you said you knew how to make people hurt. Care to give me a demonstration?"

"Of course, master~" Valera hovered her hand over Slasher's face. Her gauntlet glowed in an outline of red. Aldrich recognized this as the [Blood Hold] skill that involved channeling a root against another unit by controlling their blood. In exchange, the caster was rooted too.

"A root? I'm curious what this does for pain," said Aldrich.

"Oh, on a moving, resisting target, it is merely a hold, yes," said Valera. "But on an unresisting piece of meat like this? I can control the flow of blood I am holding." She hovered her glowing red hand over Slasher's face as his eyes grew wide in abject fear. "In humans, I remember there is a nerve behind their eyes and nose. Hm, it was...right around here."

Valera clenched her fist, and Slasher immediately started to convulse and scream against his gag, spittle foaming at his mouth as his eyes bulged in pain. His skin grew pale as sweat poured from his forehead, intense pain assaulting him.

"Ah, I remember now," said Aldrich. "The trigeminal nerve. It's said that pressure against that nerve is known as one of the most painful sensations a human can ever experience."

"See? Look how he flails," said Valera as she kept up pressure and pain against the nerve.

Slasher started to choke against his gag as his eyes turned bloodshot, tears drooling from them. The smell of ammonia filled the air as he wet his pants.

"That's enough, Valera. We can't kill him yet. You did very well."

"Ehehe. Thank you, master." Valera bowed her head and withdrew.

"Now then." Aldrich ripped away the gag from Slasher's mouth. "Will you join my party?"

"Yes! Yes! I'll join your party!" shouted Slasher, his voice utterly wracked with desperation.

"Good," said Aldrich. He watched as the sign stone glowed brighter. A small green sigil in the shape of a hand formed on Slasher's wrist

[Quest party members: 0] 1]

[Party Cap: NONE]

"Isn't this a pleasant surprise..." Aldrich noted that unlike in the game, there was no limit on the amount of party members he could add.

The Death Lord had been very, very generous.

Or perhaps, come to think of it, maybe she had expected Aldrich to think of this.

In the end, it did not really matter.

Aldrich spoke to Fisk who gamed at the other edge of the clearing. Adam and Elaine looked at Fisk gaming. "Fisk! Tell Casimir I want to talk to him about setting up a closed invitation event this Saturday. Try to get him on call, if you can."

"C-Casimir!? He set us up!?" said Slasher in utter shock.

"Oh, right, you're still alive. Unfortunately, you're simply too weak to reanimate. About level 12, perhaps?" said Aldrich. "At my current level, a simple created undead is probably about as strong as you are."

"H-huh? What are you talking about!?"

Aldrich ignored the desperate man and called out to Fler'Gan. "Fler'Gan, do you need him alive?"

"Preferably, O Elder," said Fler'Gan. The Mind-Eater had carefully incised out several head spikes from the Lasher, placing them in a metal vat, and now moved on to creating an incision down into his stomach.

"Do you need him conscious? I'd rather not hear screams and whimpers. They annoy me, especially when they come from trash like him. The type who always enjoys the cries of others but end up crying the hardest when their turn comes around."

"No, I will heavily sedate him until he is fully dissected and analyzed," said Fler'Gan.

"Good." Aldrich nodded.

"Wait! Wait! Dissection!? What are going to do to me-," began Slasher before his eyes became blank and lifeless as Fler'Gan put him under a brainwashed coma.

Aldrich heaved up Slasher's corpse and carried it over to Fler'Gan.

"Over there, O Elder." Fler'Gan pointed with a long, spindly finger to the side of the table. "Prop that specimen against the dissection table. I can only fit one sample at a time."

Aldrich did as the Mind Eater asked and then asked, "So, what are you doing here?"

"You have stated before that the base body of these 'Alterhumans' are indistinguishable from that of a normal human.

Yet, through 'Alter Organs' and 'Alter Cells', they may manifest mutations.

By severing mutations such as these ossified head protrusions, analyzing them, and comparing them to knowledge I have of the base human body, I am better able to understand the method by which these mutations occur.

This is also why I did not favor experimenting with variant subjects. I have no knowledge of a base creature that matches them as well as humans to Alterhumans.

In addition, I will attempt extraction of the Alter Organ to investigate it directly, though I have been made aware by you and Stella that Alter Organs, when excised from the body, suffer from rapid deterioration.

Thus, I will do my utmost best to keep the subjects alive until then."

"And what would your final goals be?" said Aldrich.

"I cannot say for certain. I set my expectations accordingly with the results of my investigations. But optimally, the replication and modification of Alter Organs, allowing for not only the introduction of magic in these specimens, but also the creation alchemical solutions that may freely suppress, change, or enhance powers," said Fler'Gan.

"That does sound incredibly useful. I will leave you to your work, then," said Aldrich.

"Again, O Elder, these are optimal goals. It may be that I cannot reach them."

"I understand, and don't worry about any expectations on my end. Anything you produce, even if it isn't useful per say, I'll appreciate and try to use to the best of my ability," said Aldrich. "Work freely. Let your innovation and knowledge flow without restriction."

"Much appreciation, Elder," said Fler'Gan.

Aldrich left Fler'Gan and went back to Fisk.

"It's time to finalize my plan," said Aldrich as he sat down by the fallen tree trunk that Fisk used to game on.

Fisk immediately tabbed out of an anime scene he was watching where a woman's clothes were torn by an attack.

"I swear, scenes like this are the only ones that pop up when other people come to watch," said Fisk. "Would you believe me if I told you that was like, a normal action show?"

"Yeah, a lot of action," said Aldrich sarcastically. He noted that Adam and Elaine were behind Fisk, watching. Adam was nodding while Elaine shoved Adam lightly. He smiled. They would have interacted just like that had they been alive.

Aldrich closed his eyes, letting the dark calm him, to take him away from how Adam and Elaine had been, and then geared back into business.

"In any case, I need you to get to work," said Aldrich.

"I'm on it, boss," said Fisk as he jacked into the via cable to the side of his head.

"Is Casimir ready for the call?"

"Yeah, he's up and ready and waiting. It's gonna take me a couple minutes to establish a secure line on the Darknet, especially with a smaller rig like this, but I'm on it."

Aldrich waited for a few minutes as Fisk worked his tech magic. Aldrich himself could actually navigate the Darknet with a fairly strong level of tech-savviness, but he fell far short of Elaine and far, far shorter than technos like Fisk who could literally navigate technology with their minds.

After thirty minutes, Fisk turned his laptop screen to Aldrich as it connected to a video chat with Casimir.

"Mr. Vane! A pleasure to see you again so soon!" said Casimir.

"It's four in the morning, Casimir. I thought you'd be asleep by now," said Aldrich.

"Ah, my line of business operates most at night, so I am quite used to this." Casimir seemed to be in his office, seated in a plush, luxurious velvet chair as he leaned forwards on his desk in welcoming poise. "How were the two villains I sent you?"

"They are not the cream of the crop, certainly, but I hope they did not inconvenience you any."

"They're doing just fine," said Aldrich. "Look, Casimir, sorry to do this on short notice, but I want you to set up a special event on Saturday.

Could you rent out the entire first floor of the Red Circle for an invitation only dance?

Make it as appealing as you can with the finest alcohol, foods, and service you can muster up."

Casimir thought about his for a moment. "Hm, that could be arranged. I only had a normal opening scheduled for that night, but I have all the supplies and logistics set to whip up quite the impressive dance in short order.

I must say, Mr. Vane, that though setting up this dance is possible, establishing an extensive guest list with a mere three days of advance notice may be difficult," said Casimir.

"What kind of crowd do you think you can draw?" said Aldrich. "Provided the invites you sent out were primarily for villains?"

"It will be difficult for the villains of the higher organizations to make time for this. Their schedules are often busy and inflexible.

However, if I have my team focus on marketing and invitations on the lower and middle tier organizations, I believe I could conjure up a solid crowd between forty and seventy," said Casimir. "Some of these lower-class villains would absolutely die for the chance to make themselves known in the Red Circle."

"Then let's go with that," said Aldrich. "I want to emphasize, though, that I truly want to hold this event mostly for the Butcher and Seth Solar."

"Done and done," said Casimir. "The Butcher has already agreed to meet you, and it will not be too difficult to have this meeting occur at this event.

As for Seth Solar, that fine, promising student, well, he has been a devout weekly regular, and he is due to urgently meet me that day for an early access sample of Boost.

Knowing him, I doubt he and his friends will bypass a chance to join an exclusive event, especially when fine alcohol is involved."

"Good, good," said Aldrich. He took a deep breath, feeling excitement growing within his heart.

He was now in the final phase of his quest for vengeance.

"Mr. Vane, I do have to inquire," said Casimir.

"What is it?"

"What is the ultimate goal of this dance? Is it a meet and greet among villains? Or perhaps a means to advertise your own name?"

"Advertise my own name? You could say that." Aldrich smiled ever so slightly. "Market it as a meet and greet or whatever brings out the most numbers. And you don't have to worry about the purpose behind it.

Just set it up, and I can guarantee you, Casimir, that even if you lose your current connections, you will not regret having me backing you."

"Mystery, is it? I do like that. Well, Mr. Vane, it is not my style to pry into my clients' intentions, especially with a high profile one such as yourself. I will arrange this dance shortly and according to your specifications," said Casimir. "And I will be in touch with your assistant about any further details."

"Wonderful. I look forward to seeing your handiwork, Casimir," said Aldrich.

"It is always my pleasure." Casimir bowed in his seat before his video feed blinked off.

Chapter 61: Disaster

Aldrich planned on lying low until Saturday night, staying in the forest while corresponding with Casimir via Darknet texts about specifications on his event. He kept his undead from hunting further so as to absolutely minimize attention. He did not want to compromise any chance of his plan working when he was so close now.

Throughout the entire day of Thursday, Aldrich commanded his variants to lay low. The variants mostly rested or played or mock fought among themselves in the perimeter they patrolled.

Valera, Stella, and the Geist trained together.

More specifically, the Geist trained itself under Valera and Stella. The Geist had never actually trained before, so all of its powers were undeveloped. Plus, it had no martial training to use its brawn.

Valera taught the Geist hand to hand combat while Stella taught it how to train its powers.

Training Alter powers was like training muscles. Just like how muscles grew stronger from wear and tear, Alter powers grew from constant exertion and recovery. There was also training to increase fine control over one's power for innovative new attacks or to cover for weaknesses.

The Geist was an exceptionally quick learner. Within twelve hours, it mastered basic footwork and stance work. This gave Aldrich the idea to give the Geist the [Cursed Rock Axe] that the troll chieftain once used.

As for its powers, the Geist learned how to apply its super regeneration to temporarily increase its body mass like a balloon, giving it greater surface area to protect others as a living shield.

It learned how to use its incredibly powerful muscles to flex them in specific spots, creating durable body parts to guard against attacks with. It also learned greater control in emitting its neurotoxins, specifically in targeting the gas so that it minimized collateral damage.

Stella trained in her own way by rapidly flowing blood around her body. She would try to keep this accelerated flow up for as much as possible until she reached nearly to heart failure. By doing this, she gained greater control and output on her explosions.

[Geist Level 17] 18]

[Dynamite Girl Level 14] 15]

While everyone trained, Aldrich accompanied Fler'Gan in his experimentations, curious of the Mind-Eater's results. He watched as Fler'Gan went about performing ghastly experiments that most humans would be horrified at.

He removed all of the Lasher's head spikes, leaving the top of the villain's skull completely flayed and raw. The spikes, Fler'Gan put into a vat heated by magical blue flame. He poured in a dissolving solution that slowly turned the spikes into liquid mush.

Then, Fler'Gan hooked up the Lasher to a series of large flasks, inserting barbed needles attached to transparent, plastic-like chords that funneled blood into the flasks.

Fler'Gan dissected the Lasher further, taking basically one of everything. One eye, one arm, one leg, one ear, and even parts of internal organs. Fler'Gan incised into the Lasher's skull, taking out pieces of the brain that the villain did not need to stay alive. He also took out a kidney and scraped flesh samples off of other organs.

All throughout, Fler'Gan kept the Lasher alive through pastes and sprays that prevented excessive bleeding.

As for the Slasher, Fler'Gan severed one of his arms for testing purposes.

All the dismembered body parts were either broken down into liquid form or suspended off of spikes where Fler'Gan would do further delicate dissections, analyzing individual muscle fibers, vein structures, bone placement, and so on.

It was interesting to see Fler'Gan work. Aldrich did not feel anything from seeing these men broken down into component pieces. He only admired Fler'Gan's swift, precise skill in disassembling the human body, like admiring an artist in their craft.

"Any results?" Aldrich said at the end of the day approaching midnight. Fler'Gan had worked constantly for nearly twenty hours now.

"Not as much as I would have hoped," said Fler'Gan. He used a self-cleaning magical rag to wipe large stains of blood off his body.

By now, the two villains were nearly unrecognizable. They were reduced to flayed torsos with their internal organs exposed by a cut down their middle. Not a single patch of skin remained on them, and indeed, patches of muscle had been cut out too for analysis.

Miraculously, they were still alive, their exposed lungs still drawing air. The tubes that Fler'Gan hooked them up to not only drew their blood but could also transfuse them with a healing agent that kept their bodies functioning.

The presence of a minor barrier around the laboratory also kept the work station sterile and clean to prevent infections.

"I have made great breakthroughs in understanding the Alterhuman body," said Fler'Gan. "The placement of these seed shaped growths known as Alter Organs seem to differ from human to human. In this one that could transmute his arms into blades, the organ is nestled at the base of his spine. In this one that can manifest chains from his arms, it is located behind the eye.

From these growths, alter cells manifested and circulate through the body.

This, I am sure you already know.

But what I have discerned is that the energy signature that this organ and its cells produce is not significantly distinct from that of mana."

"Is that so?" Aldrich perked up, highly interested.

"No. They are both pure and formless sources of energy. They have no discerned structure or behavior, instead, they mold themselves to fit their vessels," said Fler'Gan. "Take mana, for example. Mages across many different fields all utilize this very same energy.

Yet, when processed through different spells, mana takes upon wildly different forms.

Thus, mana can be used to fuel a vast variety of effects ranging from a fireball to a lightning strike or dark magic to raise the dead.

The energy that these Alter organs produce - Ether as you call it - is extremely similar. It changes to suit its vessel, hence why Stella is capable of using this energy to infuse her

blood with explosive properties while these two can generate spontaneous growths of metal."

"If they are similar, then merging mana and Ether should be possible, no?" said Aldrich.

"That is the difficulty," said Fler'Gan. "In our world, mages enter into a specific path of magic, a 'class' as some call it, through a Mystic Baptism.

By undergoing the baptism, a mage fundamentally alters how they process mana. They commit to specializing their mana towards the specific spells in the field they are baptized in.

I am baptized in Pyromancy, and you in the Dark Arts.

Certainly, we can shape our mana into spells from other fields, but we will be far less efficient than those properly baptized in said classes.

There is something in this world that takes the place of these baptisms.

These organs seem to be akin to a baptism. They direct how Ether produced in Alterhuman bodies are shaped, manifesting into unique powers.

But it seems that these organs are 'locked in' to processing Ether only a single way. And they are only capable of processing Ether.

When I attempted to introduce mana into the organs, they rejected the energy source."

"How about the other way around? Can you use Ether?" said Aldrich.

"I have been able to absorb Ether into mana, though the rate at which I can do this is highly inefficient. I estimate I am losing 90% of the Ether's energy in the conversion, for though the two are similar in function, they are still different.

I believe over time, I can theoretically begin to produce efficient mana crystals using Ether," said Fler'Gan.

"Progress is progress," said Aldrich. "And how about changing or affecting Alter powers?"

"I believe it is certainly possible. However, it is difficult to analyze Alter organs and cells for they reject any magical attempt to analyze them thoroughly.

All blood divinations or alchemical analyses return with no information," said Fler'Gan. "There is something within these organs and cells that rejects foreign attempts to pry into them.

For comparison's sake, it is as if I am some common rogue attempting to pick the lock of a royal dwarven vault.

I lack the experience and tools to 'unlock' access to the organs."

"I see." Aldrich put a hand to his chin before he waved forward an idea. "There are Alters whose powers fall under the category of 'Editors'. They can manipulate or change the powers of others in some way. Would a sample-,"

"Yes! Yes! That would most certainly work!" said Fler'Gan excitedly. "That would be what I require to breakthrough this hurdle. You must obtain this sample for me!" Fler'Gan calmed down. "Or, ehem, I request such a sample, O Elder."

"I'll have one to you in two days, if things go right," said Aldrich.

"Hey boss, you might want to see this!" shouted Fisk from the other end of the clearing. There was distinct urgency in his voice.

Aldrich gave Fler'Gan an appreciative nod before he rushed over to Fisk.

"What is it?" said Fisk.

"Look at this." Fisk turned his laptop screen to Aldrich and showcased panicked live news broadcasts. A variant was attacking Haven city.

It appeared to be an enormous manta ray that flied in the air, casting a bright blue gleam from spines across its back and tail that rained down bolts of destructive lightning that reduced buildings to smoldering rubble.

Two heroes fought the manta in the air. One dressed like a Roman gladiator that flew about and slashed with a gladius. The other hero flied around with a bulky mechsuit that fired barrages of explosive missiles.

Despite the two heroes' best efforts, the manta shrugged them off.

In the midst of this carnage was a panicked reporter on the ground that spoke into his headset while an antenna atop his head sensed danger, letting him dodge rubble.

"Reporting to you live from Haven city where a B disaster variant has struck! AA authorities report that the monster came westward from the Atlantic Ocean, evading Panopticon detection nets with some form of concealment!

Haven's walls have further been disabled by a powerful electromagnetic pulse, leaving the city reliant on its heroes!

On the ground, we have heroes helping in evacuation and as Haven's two favorite heroes, the B-rankers Gladiator and Rocket Man, hold it back. But it isn't looking good! But once Haven's heroes finish evacuating, they should be able to help the fight-,"

The reporter's antenna twitched.

The manta let loose a ghostly, shrill, siren-like scream that mixed with the already blaring disaster sirens that signaled everyone to evacuate.

From its huge gills, large gooey droplets fell, and when they hit the ground, they morphed into living masses of acidic goo that attacked humans indiscriminately.

The lower ranked C, D, and E heroes that evacuated people from broken down buildings and helped with evacuation now found themselves completely occupied fighting an ever-growing, continuously self-multiplying legion of slimes.

"W-what!?" The reporter ran into an alleyway as he avoided several slimes from reaching out and sucking him into their acidic bodies. "Incoming report - the variant's threat ranking has gone up to A-.

The AA will be sending in additional reinforcements and the Panopticon has deployed a class 5 drone response-,"

At that moment, the reporter's antenna twitched again before his eyes widened. The screen turned blue - the same color of the manta's spawned slimes - before the feed cut off.

A B class disaster variant.

A minus when considering that it could spawn self-replicating slimes for larger scale destruction.

Disaster Variants still fell into Natural or Geist categories, but the difference was that they were strong enough that they required entire groups of heroes to defeat.

Generally, a disaster variant required at the minimum ten heroes of its own threat ranking to reliably take down.

They were essentially what raid bosses were in MMOs.

If Aldrich remembered correctly, in Haven there were 255 heroes ranked E to D, 50 C rank heroes, and just 2 B rank heroes. There was a huge difference between the C and B rank to the point where one B rank hero was probably worth more than ten C rankers.

And this variant needed ten B rankers to beat reliably.

Haven was entirely unequipped to deal with a B ranked disaster variant. If the manta did not create slimes, then the combined population of C ranked heroes with its two B rankers could easily beat the variant, but the slimes would keep all the lower ranked heroes busy to minimize population casualties.

Aldrich could not do nothing.

If Haven suffered any more damage than it did now, then the Red Circle event this Saturday would be impossible to set up.

It would take about one hour for AA reinforcements to arrive unless one of the S-rankers decided to be generous and help.

Thirty minutes for a Panopticon drone fleet to arrive, but a class 5 drone fleet would take quite some time to kill a variant of this size and scale.

It would also take Aldrich thirty to forty minutes to fly out on his eagle.

Too late.

And he did not want to reveal himself to the public.

Not yet.

But in just thirty minutes, that variant could do massive amounts of damage, and if it reached the Red Circle, Aldrich's plans were all over or at the very least severely delayed.

Aldrich formulated an idea on how to approach this.

"Get Casimir on the line," said Aldrich.

"Got it, boss."

Casimir responded almost instantly.

"Mr. Vane! How do you do?" said Casimir casually as sirens blared in the background. "I am quite sorry for the noise, there is-,"

"A variant attack. I know."

"Ah, of course. Do not mind my safety for the Red Circle is quite well guarded and nestled deep in the Southside, quite far from the eastside harbor districts that are taking the brunt of this untimely attack." Casimir shook his head. "I must say, what truly is the Alterhuman Agency and Panopticon doing?"

A creature of this size escapes all detection? And an entire hour for reinforcements to arrive? Are these heroes on sabbatical? Utter nonsense."

Casimir sighed. "Mr. Vane, I am quite disappointed to say this, but I may have to cancel this Saturday dance-,"

"Not happening," said Aldrich. "Call up Seth Solar. Tell him unless he gets his ass out there to take care of that thing, he isn't getting any Boost..."

"An excellent solution, Mr. Vane, " said Casimir. "I will do exactly as you say."

Chapter 62: {Seth Solar}

Seth Solar watched with arms crossed at a wide telescreen broadcast showing a B class disaster variant wreaking Havoc on Haven's streets. He watched with his gang of A-class fellow students in their barracks rec room where previously, they had been reviewing combat footage from their training sessions.

"Don't some of us have to go out there and help? We're technically hero trainees, right?" said Simon Wells, rank 10 A-class student. He was leanly built with a gleaming red visor around his eyes to help channel his ability to generate kinetic beams.

"No. We're bottom of the rankings, remember? Heh." said Zayn, rank 8 A-class student and closest to Seth Solar now that Ghost was found dead. Zayn shrugged, the black feather wings on his arms ruffling. "They'll never call on a bottom feeder school like us.

Plus, Haven Supers Academy is right there."

There was distinct sarcasm in Zayn's voice, and for good reason. Haven Supers Academy was a mediocre super academy, almost at the bottom where Blackwater sat. There was no way any of their trainees could handle a disaster of this caliber.

Most likely, they were cowering in their academy walls or, at best, assisting in evacuation.

Blackwater, on the other hand, sat at the bottom so as not to attract any attention, not because they were weak.

In terms of pure combat, its students were all quite capable, and the A-rank likely matched the trainees from the top 50 academies. Of course, in other aspects like civilian evacuation, the students were woefully undertrained by design, because what did future villains and mercenaries need to know about saving civilians?

But if the entire A-class were unleashed on this variant, then they could destroy it in half an hour, tops. Seth Solar alone could probably kill it, but then again, his power was exponentially higher than anyone else's in his class.

The current rank 1 Mel Morales only beat him due to the nature of her force reflecting barriers that used his own power against him.

In raw destructive capability, she fell far, far below him.

"Yeah, Haven Supers, hah! What a stupid joke," said Evan Harker, rank 15 A-class student and the last of Seth Solar's gang. Evan laughed as he fiddled with parts for his wolf shaped battle drones. "I bet one of my dogs could fuck their top students up."

"Woah, look at Gladiator and Rocket Man go," said Zayn as his avian pupils narrowed down to slits.

On the telescreen, Gladiator landed on the giant manta's back and stabbed his blade in before flying back, carving out a long scar.

Unfortunately, said scar healed near instantly, and a bolt of targeted lightning struck Gladiator from the manta's spines, sending him hurtling down to the ground below.

In retaliation, Rocket Man jetted above the manta before firing down a volley of heat seeking missiles. A cloud of smoke erupted from the ensuing explosion, and out of it, another bolt struck Rocket Man head on. This shorted out Rocket Man's mechsuit, causing him to fall down like a rock.

"Dumbass didn't even have EMP protection," said Evan. "Look, now he's going to fall to his death. I don't get these heroes, honestly. Why go into a fight you know you're at a disadvantage with? Pointless, if you ask me."

Before Rocket Man hit the ground at terminal velocity, Gladiator emerged from a pile of rubble and saved his fellow B-rank hero.

"Aww, would've been cool to see Rocket Man get crushed in his tin can suit," said Evan.

"Kinda sweet, though, the way he saved him," said Simon. He sneered. "I bet you they're fucking each other on the down low."

"Shut up." Seth Solar crossed his arms as he watched the screen intently. He grit his teeth, knowing that if the damage from his manta got any worse, it might hit the Red Circle where his precious Boost was.

But Seth could not intervene. He could never, ever show himself in public as that would reveal that Blackwater, a supposedly bottom tier school, had a top class Alter in their ranks.

Not only this, but if word ever got out about his Solar blood, then it would cause a sh*tstorm of bad PR for both the main Solar bloodline and Seth.

The Solar family was a billion credit dynasty propped up largely by the biggest villain organizations.

Many of the disasters that Solomon Solar, the shining patriarch, triumphed over were set up by these villain syndicates.

Caged variants that just happened to escape in populated city centers where Solomon patrolled.

High profile villains that Solomon Solar kept beating over and over again after they always mysteriously escaped from jail, often with tips from Solomon Solar himself.

Everything was a setup to maximize Solomon Solar's power and position.

In return, Solomon Solar was the highest ranked plant in the AA and gave the Dark Six, the most powerful criminal organizations in the world today, inside information about the AA and Panopticon.

Even Seth Solar, in the end, was just a PR tool.

Once he graduated from Blackwater and worked a few years as a high-profile villain, he was supposed to come out the shadows as Solomon Solar's kidnapped, estranged son who had fallen to villain corruption.

Then, after a lengthy fight, Solomon Solar would show the world his resolve and lock up his own son, at which point, Seth Solar would enter into Solomon Solar's revolving rogue gallery.

Seth Solar's entire life was essentially a marketing scheme for Solomon Solar.

But fuck that.

Seth would obey his evil wretch of a mother, the current headmaster of Blackwater and the one who controlled his entire life, for just a few more years. He would do the villain work and build up his reputation, but when it came time for him to fight Solomon Solar, that heartless, cruel fuck that had forced Seth into this sham of a life, Seth would not hold back.

He would kill his 'father'.

Then, he would show this disgusting world what a true villain was. He would make them feel true fear and suffering.

For that, he needed Boost.

As a Starter Child, Seth reached close to his full potential power from a young age, but in exchange, his power ceiling was not as high as it could be. Unlike, say, current rank 1 Class A student Mel, Seth could not dramatically improve with training either.

In a fight with Solomon Solar who had honed his powers for over fifty years, Seth would always lose regardless of whether it was staged or not.

Seth needed Boost to make up the difference. Then, he needed to find a way to counter his Kryptic weakness so that the higher criminal organizations did not have a way to instantly kill him when he got out of control.

"Something wrong, Seth?" said Evan. "Still in a bad mood about Ghost kicking the bucket?"

"Fuck that junkie," said Zayn. "He wasn't fit to be with us. All those times he jittered - all because he couldn't control himself. Pathetic."

Simon took a sip from a can of Coola. "Agreed."

"No. I could care less about Ghost," said Seth. What he really cared about was the Boost.

All of a sudden, Seth received a phone call, his Eye-Phone buzzing in the pocket of his uniform. He took the call.

"Seth, my golden boy, how do you do?" said Casimir.

"Casimir? You better not tell me my order's canceled this Saturday," said Seth. "You don't know how fucking long I've been waiting for it. And how much I've paid you."

"Aha, as lady luck would have decreed, I was calling you about that. You see, Seth, I believe you need to step in here. Why not flex those muscles of yours and drive this creature back?" said Casimir.

"What? Are you joking, Casimir?"

"I do make quips here and there, but no, my boy, this is no jest."

"AA reinforcements and Panopticon drones are coming in a half hour, maybe an hour," said Seth. "You can't hold out that long? What are all those villains there for? Show? They can't handle a couple of slime minions on the streets?"

It was not that Seth did not want to rip this variant apart to make sure the Red Circle was safe. He could not.

Revealing his face and powers to the public at this stage was far too early. And he was supposed to be a villain. Saving the city would make him too sympathetic for his later staged conflict with his father.

If Seth disobeyed these orders, there was no guarantee that the high ranking criminal organizations that worked with his father would not send assassins with Kryptic against him.

"I cannot have this beast make a mess of the city before my grand event on Saturday," said Casimir. "I understand your position, but could you do me a favor? I will be generous enough to add in additional samples of Boost to your order as well as fine liquors on tap this Saturday."

Seth paused for a moment. "Fine. But ten minutes. Ten minutes is all I'm spending fighting this thing."

He flipped his phone shut and walked out the room.

"Where you going, Seth? This sh*t's just getting good!" said Evan.

Seth did not spare a glance back before he shut the rec room door behind him. "Shut the fuck up and wait here until I get back."

Chapter 63: {Seth Solar 2}

Seth wore a generic, monochrome black villain mask to conceal his identity as he flew straight to Haven.

At top speed, he could make it to Haven from Blackwater in just five minutes.

He pierced through the night sky clouds as he shot forward at sub-sonic speeds.

Seth slowed down once he got near the site of destruction. He looked down from cloud level to see the giant manta letting loose ghostly wails as it rained down another volley of lightning bolts, destroying a dozen more buildings.

The manta had just passed Haven's Eastside harbors, destroying boats, warehouses, apartments, and the general livelihoods of countless dock workers. It now ate away at Eastside's residential district as sirens blared.

Up this high, Seth could make out crowds of tiny little people and cars and heroes all panicked and running away. Lots of corpses buried under bloodied rubble.

He could care less about them.

What he did worry about was where the manta would go from here,

Once the variant reached the city center, it would probably slow down its warpath significantly.

The city center where the wealthiest of Haven lived had EMP-protected walls with enough firepower and mercenaries hired by rich folk to easily stall out the thirty or so minutes it took for AA and Panopticon reinforcements to arrive.

The issue was once the manta found the walls too difficult to breach, it would find somewhere else to go, and then it was a 50/50 chance whether it would go to Northside's manufacturing districts or Southside where, most importantly, the Red Circle was.

Seth was not about to wait and find out. He took aim at the manta and then flew straight down with his fists planted in front of him. In seconds, he smashed through the manta's back, tearing through the flesh like a living missile before ripping through to the other side.

The manta wailed in pain as it started to lose altitude from the lethal wound.

Just like that, Seth ended the threat instantly.

After all, he was the son of the S-rank hero Solomon Solar.

A B-rank threat was nothing to him, even if it was a disaster level variant.

Seth landed on solid ground and shook off the disgusting, fishy mess of entrails and blood on his plain black bodysuit. This suit was a covert operation one that lacked any insignia that tied it to Blackwater.

In an instant, Seth found annoying lights from news drones shining down at him. Did the media never give up? There were countless news drones fried from EMP exposure scattered all across the ground, and yet they kept sending these drones and field reporters to die.

Fucking waste of resources.

Seth could not use his solar powered eye beams here to gun down the drones. It would make it far too obvious to draw a connection to the Solar bloodline.

"You, hero, what's your name!" Gladiator shouted as he hobbled up to Seth. His legionnaire armor was chipped. A burnt red cape trailed behind him. His gladius sword was snapped in half.

"Fuck off before you get hurt," said Seth as he hovered in the air, ready to leave now that his job was done.

"Wait! The variant has regeneration! You need to destroy its head!" said Gladiator.

Seth growled in annoyance. He looked up at the manta as it regenerated the hole in its spine and floated in the air. It wailed before raining down a volley of lightning bolts at Seth.

Over twenty bolts surged down at Seth and exploded in a brilliant blue blast wave that decimated everything in a forty-meter radius, frying news drones, smashing buildings, and sending Gladiator flying from the impact.

Seth took in a deep breath as he stood in the mist of a smoking black crater, practically unharmed. Only a few hairs on his head were singed. He bent his knees, took aim at the manta's head, and then shot upwards.

Instead of smashing through the variant's head as Seth expected, he instead felt massive impact against him as he shot straight back down like a pinball, digging out a deep crater in a concrete sidewalk. This time, he felt solid pain,

Bruises around his fists and rattling in the bones of his arms. His attack's force had been reflected against him.

Seth immediately flew out of his crater, his expression twisted in rage behind the mask. He saw a translucent blue, crackling barrier around the manta now. The barrier was generated by threads of blue energy generated by its spines, and notably, while it maintained this barrier, it did not rain down lightning bolts.

"Fucking barriers! I hate this sh*t!" said Seth as he had immediate flashbacks of punching himself with his own tremendous strength against Mel's golden barriers. He watched as the manta wailed again and started to fly away, down south, wanting to avoid Seth.

Down where the Red Circle was.

Seth grimaced as he thought about what to do.

That was when he heard a familiar voice call out to him.

"Throw me up there, Seth."

"Who the fuck-," Seth started in alarm as someone identified him. He turned to see a young woman with long, golden hair tied into a ponytail and golden eyes that shone through a mask fashioned into the shape of a horned demon.

She wore a grey-white motorcycle jacket and form fitting pant leggings that tapered down into mechanical greaves.

She held a mid-length sword with a pure golden blade in her right hand.

"Mel? The fuck you doing here?" said Seth.

"Same as you. Saving the city. Now throw me up there."

"I'm not saving sh*t," began Seth, but then he stopped. Mel could punch through that barrier. Her own barrier power directed vector forces, and if she contacted the manta's barrier with her own, she could break down the manta's barrier by scattering the flow of energy that comprised it.

She would do all the hard work for him. "Whatever."

Seth held out his arm, and Mel gracefully jumped on his hand before crouching into a compacted ball. He briefly considered trying to kill her right then and there, but he held back his jealousy and cocked his arm back before throwing her with immense force.

She shot straight up, spinning in the air as a golden barrier clung around her skin.

Her golden blade shone even brighter, almost appearing to be made with pure energy.

Right when she contacted the manta's blue shield, she struck with her barrier coated sword. At first, her strike did nothing, but in the next instant, the manta's barrier started to break apart from the point of impact against Mel's sword, creating a gap through which she could move through.

Mel's greaves then released thrusters that shot her forward as she sliced into the manta's brain from below using a flurry of expertly trained slices, using accelerated force vectors on the barrier coating her blade to make it impossibly sharp.

Seth watched and scoffed at this gesture of heroism. Once, there was a time when he also wanted to be a hero like that. When he was young enough that he thought his life was his own to live.

But that sh*t was for idiots who didn't know how the world really was.

For carefree fucks that actually had a choice.

Seth lingered, watching Mel kill the manta, but all of a sudden, the manta faded away. Its body started to spatially collapse into itself, as if it was being sucked into a black hole. Mel, in surprise backed off, using the thrusters on her greaves to stop herself from free falling.

In the next instant, the manta just disappeared. It had teleported. Seth checked his Eye-Phone where the AA kept a map with live satellite tracking on the manta. It did not pop up anywhere in Haven.

It had completely fled.

Good. Then his job was done here.

Plus, Mel could handle this on her own. And he did not want to waste time so that news drones could capture more video of him.

Seth floated for a moment, then sped off in, disappearing into the sky as he turned into a speeding black blur shooting through the clouds.

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"How interesting," said Aldrich as he watched the entire battle through the eyes of his [Grave Ward]. He had only ever heard of Seth Solar's power, but now, he had seen it himself.

The rumors were true. Seth Solar truly was an immense threat. Overwhelming strength that could instantly punch through the hide of a B-class disaster variant. Not to mention that he had not even used his solar beams.

Aldrich noted curiously that his active quest for vengeance changed upon these observations.

[RECALCULATING REWARDS FOR QUEST [VENGEANCE] BASED ON HOST EXPERIENCES...]

[Death of Seth Solar: 1000 EXP, 800 Coin] 20,000 EXP, 15,000 Coin]

"Defeating that human will be...difficult," said Valera. "I have not seen strength of that magnitude in quite some time. It rivals that of top class warriors from our old world."

"Yes," said Aldrich. "But don't worry, Valera. I'll be dealing with him quite soon. And all the rewards and satisfaction his death will offer will soon be mine. Hm."

Aldrich noted the presence of Mel Morales, current rank 1 A-class student. She had no incentive to be at the attack site, and yet, she was there to fight the manta. Not only that, but she now worked at ground level, guiding civilians to evacuation zones while cutting down leftover slimes.

Soon, though, once authorities and heroes caught up to the scene, she would probably leave.

He wondered about her. Her motives. Her purpose.

Perhaps, in the future, when it came to destroying Blackwater, she could be an ally of some sorts.

Chapter 64: Calm Before the Emerald Storm

Aldrich hovered in the air on his alloywing eagle with Valera behind him. One of his Ghosts was tethered to him, preventing anyone from capturing footage or photos of him.

Valera tentatively wrapped her arms around his waist and nodded her head from side to side in happiness. Meanwhile, he looked down to witness the chaos below.

There were thin, packed streets lined with hastily built shacks, shops, and stalls littered with fire, smoke, rubble, and roving slime creatures. Here, people whimpered and screamed as they ran away from slimes or cowered in homes that were broken down from disrepair far before this recent disaster variant attack.

These were the Projects. Ghettos where Dud populations were corralled to live in under government subsidy. Here, they suffered from neglect across all sectors of society.

At the top, the city governments barely provided for them. They had a few city and nationwide government programs that subsidized Alters, and the most visible of these programs were the housing projects where the city built mega-apartments for Duds to live in at for highly subsidized or even free rent.

This sounded good in practice, but because these mega-apartments had no real long term profit potential, the manufacturing companies that sucked up contracting money to build them abandoned them once they were done.

Not to mention that these apartments were built with zero care. Their rooms were impossibly cramped, stacked tightly together to try and shove in as many Duds in as small an area as possible.

Each building had no thought for decoration; they were just concrete and steel, dull grey, featureless spires that looked like prisons villains would get locked up in.

Over the years, these mega-apartments, already built with less than stellar standards, fell to increasing amounts of disrepair.

On top of this, Duds in the Projects faced high crime rates from low life Alters who wanted to steal what little powerless Duds already had. To put insult to injury, Project neighborhoods also faced discrimination from city police forces that did little to nothing to help Duds.

The only people that helped keep these neighborhoods even remotely safe were assigned supers, but for Project neighborhoods, the patrol pay, and subsequently the quality of the supers patrolling, was low.

Most of these supers were either highly idealistic first timers fresh out of some mid to low tier academy who needed a safe job to start out with or disgruntled older supers that cared less and less about protecting the neighborhood as the years passed.

Either way, any heroes patrolling here were weak. E rank, mostly, D rank at best.

More screams littered the air as a gathering of slimes surrounded a small ramen shack, inching close to a family of elderly husband, wife, and grandchild.

Aldrich shook his head. Since the manta disappeared, the slimes it produced stopped self-replicating, meaning that the many E/D/C heroes left could start rapidly clearing their numbers out with the aid of armed police.

But of course, nobody gave a sh*t about the Projects. Here, slimes still ran rampant.

"Get me down there," said Aldrich.

The eagle flapped its wings and dove down. When Aldrich was two dozen meters above the ramen shack, he jumped off with Valera. He landed on solid, cracked concrete sidewalk with a roll to disperse impact while Valera aimed her fall so that she landed with a solid downward punch on a slime, completely splattering it apart and smashing the concrete below.

Eight blue slimes started to extend tendrils towards Aldrich and Valera.

Aldrich casted eight [Chill Bolts] in rapid fire succession from both his hands. In just one second, all of the eight slimes were completely frozen over, suspended in icy still motion.

[-32 Mana]

[Mana: 183/183] 151/183]

[8x Manta Slimes defeated]

[+40 EXP]

[EXP Bar: 400/2000] 440/2000]

'Not a bad rate of EXP gain,' thought Aldrich as he looked at his status screen. But regardless, he was not here to efficiently farm. He was here to meet Casimir, and while

at it, have Valera clear this neighborhood out of slimes with the Ghast attached to prevent surveillance.

The owner of the ramen shop, a slight, middle-aged man with far too many wrinkles on his face for someone of his age, came out and bowed his head several times. "Thank you! Thank you so much, hero!"

Aldrich stared at him through his [Phantasmal Mask]. The man's wife, a woman of similar age and similar stress induced wrinkling, thanked him too while making their child, a little boy of about five, bow.

"Monster!" shrieked the child as he looked at Aldrich's mask and equipment.

The mother covered her child's mouth in panic, not wanting to offend Aldrich. Aldrich was not offended, but Valera -

"You would dare to insult him as a monster!? After he has saved your short and unworthy lives!?" began Valera.

"It's alright," said Aldrich. "He's a child, and he's scared."

Valera calmed at Aldrich's voice and stood her killing intent down. He had forgotten the lack of value she placed on human lives. She was freely willing to unleash bloodlust against humans as she considered them lesser beings.

"You must be refugees from the Fukushima Attack. Life must have been hard," said Aldrich, trying to diffuse the trembling fear that Valera had instilled in the family.

Five years ago, a S-ranked Disaster Variant struck Fukushima, Japan, drawn in by the city's nuclear energy. The ensuing destruction it caused made Fukushima uninhabitable, causing a mass influx of refugees.

"Yes, very, very hard, but that doesn't mean we have nothing," said the man. He rifled through his pockets, scrapping up a few credit chips. "Here, this isn't much, but this should be good-,"

Aldrich shook his head. "No. I'm going to clear this street of slimes, and because they aren't replicating anymore, it should be safe. Stay in here. AA reinforcements and Panop drones should be coming. Where's the hero that's supposed to be patrolling the Projects?"

"Cowboy?" The man spat in the ground. "He does nothing for us. Probably already ran away!"

"I see. Stay safe." Aldrich nodded and made a mental note to address this 'Cowboy' later.

He sympathized with the plight of the innocent. Especially the Duds that had suffered just like him. He knew he had to place his own safety and survival above all else, but that did not mean he could use his power to alleviate some of their suffering.

At the very least, it was what Adam and Elaine would have wanted.

Aldrich left with Valera. He headed north, towards the Red Circle. He hovered above at a casual pace on his alloywing eagle and gave Valera a single command.

"Destroy the slimes you see. Make it quick."

"My pleasure," said Valera. She then turned into a blur as she sped forwards.

Whenever Valera encountered a slime, she would annihilate them. She coated her hands in a bright red aura of blood that imparted explosive effects to her punches, and these destroyed the gooey bodies of the slimes instantly.

Aldrich did not try extensively to clear the entirety of the projects.

Only the few neighborhoods he walked through.

These ones were the most exposed as they housed the Duds that were too poor even to live in mega-complexes, needing to live in rough shacks exposed to monster attacks.

The slimes could not get through mega-complexes once their doors were blocked and barred, rendering those within relatively safe.

Plus, there were not that many slimes. Almost all of them were concentrated in the Eastside.

The ones this far south in Haven were stragglers dropped by odd chance.

For the next twenty minutes, Aldrich hovered in the air on his eagle as he watched Valera blitz through the neighborhoods at super speed. She zipped from one shack to the other, splattering slimes that harassed them, leaving civilian Duds confused at how they had been saved.

By the end of this, Valera had killed a total of seventy slimes.

[70 Manta Slimes defeated!]

[+350 EXP]

[EXP Bar: 440/2000] 790/2000]

Of course, the blocks around the Red Circle were completely clear of slimes as the nightclub was basically a military compound guarded with 'valets' that acted as sentry towers with a small army of villains and mercenaries to boot.

Near the Red Circle, Aldrich had the eagle fly off while he changed into his suit while Valera dematerialized her armor and into her dress set.

The Ghast, too, he sent away, tethering to the eagle to keep the undead variant a secret.

Aldrich passed by the valet guard with no issue for they recognized him now. At the entrance of the Red Circle, he met a familiar face.

"Welcome back, Mr. Vane," said Hironnelle, her violet eyes gleaming as she smiled and bowed.

"Business meeting," said Aldrich.

"Already so soon? Casimir must take quite a liking to you. I have never seen him meet so much with the same client," said Hironnelle.

"Maybe I'm just a people person," said Aldrich.

"Right this way." Hironnelle led Aldrich and Valera through with a small escort of staff.

Some of them brought refreshments like towels, water, and fruits, but Aldrich and Valera ignored these and headed straight to Casimir's office.

There, Aldrich passed two guards, one of which was Walters, the giant waiter, flanking the office door.

"Mr. Vane! Here to finalize the details of our event, I presume?" said Casimir. He was turned away, watching a news broadcast from a deluxe widescreen wall mounted telescreen.

There, the news reported that the manta had been beaten back by two mysterious vigilantes, showcasing zoomed in video footage of Mel and a few still pictures of Seth Solar.

It also reported that the Panopticon's VSSA (Variant Sensor Satellite Array) could not track down the disaster variant, determining that because it could not detect any Ether signature, that the variant had died, its natural regeneration unable to keep up with its wounds.

"You presume correctly," said Aldrich. He and Valera sat in plush velvet chairs in front of Casimir's desk.

Aldrich stared at a tall, blonde haired woman by Casimir's side. By the way she held a laptop at her side like it was a part of her, he could tell she was his secretary. He gave her a look, and Casimir understood immediately.

"Blanca, my dear, can you leave the room for some time? Those invitation cards you drew up look marvelous. Go ahead and send them out," said Casimir.

Blanca nodded and left, but not before giving Aldrich and Valera an emotionless, analyzing look.

"Your secretary, yes?" said Aldrich.

"For ten years now," said Casimir. "A most wonderful woman who I would consider more precious than my very own hands."

"Ten years? That's quite some time."

"A business venture such as the Red Circle takes years and luck to build, Mr. Vane, though I am sure you of all people know that." Casimir's emotive face smiled. "But what all these successful entrepreneurs, these men and women who are the face of their mega corporations or rising ventures, do not like to mention is that their success was not carved out alone, no matter how much they wish to claim so.

Always, always, there is someone behind them, someone that gave them the inspiration, the funds, the opportunities, the support-," Casimir paused. "The comfort.

Nobody can stand at the top without first having others raise them on their shoulders first."

Valera nodded happily, thoroughly agreeing with Casimir.

"That's a surprising level of humility. I hope you do not take offense to this, but I did not expect that from you," said Aldrich.

"I came from nothing, scrounging about on the streets of Haven, begging and stealing to see another day," said Casimir wistfully. He then looked down at his dazzling rings, gold watch, and bracelets. "And because I came from nothing, I understand truly how to appreciate everything.

But enough about my biography, I am not important enough for that. Business, business, that is what we are here for, no?

Now, Mr. Vane, what did you want from me?"

"Nothing much," said Aldrich. "It seems like you've been handling everything excellently. The event is still on for this Saturday, yes?"

"Indeed," said Casimir. "The turnout was smaller than I hoped, perhaps about forty villains, and unfortunately, the Butcher will be the only one to come from a high-ranking organization."

"The Butcher is all I need," said Aldrich. "And Seth Solar? What has he said since beating back that variant?"

"Ah, Seth, that hot headed boy? He is still quite willing to come. In fact, he has been hounding me on the phone about offering not just five, but ten samples of Boost. This on top of a requested VIP table at your event."

"Give him whatever he wants. So long as it gets him and his friends to come," said Aldrich. This would be Seth Solar's last few pleasures in life. Akin to a final meal served to a death row prisoner prior to execution.

"At this point, you should have no worries about Seth," said Casimir. "In fact, I have managed to woo a good majority of the A-class in Blackwater."

"Good," said Aldrich. "Once again, incredible work, Casimir. You've managed to do all this in what, a span of a day?"

"Efficiency is king in today's fast paced world, Mr. Vane," said Casimir.

Aldrich materialized the Death Lord's Sign Stone. The glowing green, diadem shaped rock shone from his palm.

"My, my, what is that?" said Casimir as he leaned in, his emote face turning into one of scrutiny with a raised brow.

"To start off the event, I'll be making a short speech on the performance stage at the head of the dance floor. I want this projected for all to see on the performance stage screen," said Aldrich. "Consider this a business card of sorts. Something I would give to people when I bid them a proper goodbye."

"Of course, Mr. Vane. Ah, I will tailor the entire event to be...hm, in the theme of emeralds, yes," said Casimir. "To match this wonderful, lustrous glimmer of green."

"I'll trust your marketing sense on that," said Aldrich. "I wanted to request that my wife and I stay here until the event. I want to be there in person before it all begins, ready to make my speech."

I also want to address a few more matters of business, specifically in seeing whether I can become a partner in this business venture of yours."

Becoming a partner meant Aldrich would effectively be the face of this organization along with Casimir. This way, he would not only get a huge split of the Red Circle's profits, but it would also put him on the face of the organization.

Or, more accurately, his Bruce Vane alter ego.

Aldrich had taken a liking to Casimir and the man's quick wits and efficiency. He wanted to preserve Casimir for after this Saturday, where, if everything went well, the Red Circle would be no more, its connections to all villain organizations severed.

However, there was nothing stopping Casimir from rebranding and rebuilding the Red Circle with Aldrich's support.

Aldrich knew there were many like him.

Vigilantes who did not fit with either supers or villains. Those that wanted to do right outside the scope of the law. He would in time, with Casimir's help, create a space for them to find purpose.

Not to mention that with Casimir heading a business/organization under Aldrich, his issue with raising credits for his supposedly wealthy Bruce Vane alter ego would completely disappear.

Aldrich waited for Casimir's answer to this partnership.

With Casimir under Fler'Gan's powerful mental suggestion, he would be positively inclined to anything Aldrich said.

However, this did not mean Casimir was utterly brainwashed.

Casimir would take the vast majority of Aldrich's suggestions and follow them, but if something was too risky for both himself and Aldrich, then he could oppose the decision.

Like this, Aldrich allowed Casimir to exercise his high level of judgement for Aldrich knew he did not know everything. An opposing opinion, especially one from someone capable like Casimir, was always valuable.

"A partner?" Casimir tossed and turned this suggestion in his mind for several seconds. "That could be arranged. However, Mr. Vane, your investments are still in the shadows.

Any liability that occurs from mismanagement in the Red Circle falls solely upon my shoulders to blame.

If you establish yourself as my partner, however, there will be many prying syndicate eyes upon your back."

"That's fine, Casimir," said Aldrich. "After this event on Saturday, everything will change. When that happens, you won't be worrying about my safety. No, you'll be thankful for yourself that you have a position as my protected partner."

Casimir drew his hands together, and his voice grew lower, more serious. "I am not saying anything, Mr. Vane, but if something...extreme happens this Saturday, then I cannot guarantee that you will not become a target."

"I see. So you already know what I'm planning," said Aldrich.

He had intentionally left out that he planned on wiping out everyone on Saturday to try and keep Casimir working for him without complaints.

But it seemed like Casimir knew what was up. Not only that, but Casimir was willing to see it through with Aldrich.

Of course, if Casimir complained too much, he would have had Fler'Gan fully mind control the man. Aldrich might have been willing to compromise and discuss at length about other issues with Casimir, but this Saturday night of vengeance was one thing he would never compromise on.

But it was good that Casimir was willing to work with Aldrich even now.

"You hide it very, very well, Mr. Vane, but I know the gleam of vengeance when I see it. You can always see it in the eyes," said Casimir. His emote face smiled. "It is a sight with which I am intimately acquainted with."

Again, I do not mind aiding your vengeance, especially if you promise me protection. So long as I am alive, I can re-allocate my assets and enter into different business ventures. I was thinking of retiring with my fortune in a few years with Blanca in any case - she deserves the rest and peace.

But your safety-,"

"You have no need to worry about that, Casimir, and remember, this is a partnership. You have more years left in that capable head of yours."

Years working with me," said Aldrich. He reached out a hand, and Casimir took it in a tight handshake. "And together, I guarantee we can make sure that those of us who came from the streets, those of us who were beaten and spat on, have a chance to see some of the good we enjoy now."

Chapter 65: {A Certain Report}

Friday, November 5, 2117, 1 P.M.

Alter Agency Outpost in Haven City Center

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Brent McAllister, current director of the AA's Haven outpost, sat in a sterile white conference room with a group of high-level personnel, or the highest level it could get in a tier 3 city like Haven. They sat about in sleek black chairs that screamed corporate aesthetic as they watched a Panopticon researcher present his findings.

"As you all know, the Panopticon's variant detection network is thorough, but not perfect, especially when it comes to the ocean or subterranean threats.

Even before the Altering, humanity had yet to discover even 5% of the earth's vast oceans, and that problem is still the same now.

Ocean exploration may even be more difficult in this modern era considering the powerful variants that tend to lurk there," said the researcher with a droning voice.

He had on a distinctive white lab-coat emblazoned with an insignia showcasing a black pyramid with an eye encased inside - the logo of the Panopticon.

"Skip with this introductory bullsh*t," said Brent as he waved his steaming coffee mug impatiently. "And tell me how the Panopticon fucked us over. You do know that the AA has to pay for this disaster, right? We might be the only multinational organization out there subsidized by every country, but our funds aren't unlimited, and we rely on the goodwill of the people for donations and support.

Sh*t like this does NOT send a show of confidence to our investors."

"I must inform you that the Panopticon also shoulders some costs-," began the researcher.

"I must inform you" Brent mocked the researcher soft spoken tone before returning to his loud and brash mode of speaking. "You know damn well that the Panopticon doesn't need to pay sh*t.

It's got leverage over everyone and anything, Skyfields and tech and all."

One phenomenon noted among variants was that there were precious few that flew above a certain atmospheric range, making them entirely rooted to the earth.

The only exception was when variants were attacked from near orbit or orbit, at which point they would start to adapt high flight capabilities in response to the severity of the attack they received.

This meant that orbital bombardments were highly risky because it initiated an arms race where variants would evolve orbit capable flight, and humanity was far less equipped to deal with orbit based attacks than variants and their more expendable numbers.

This variant adaptiveness to attack was also why the AA and Panopticon used nuclear weaponry extremely sparingly.

Anytime a nuke was thrown out, a variant would spawn, often from the radioactive energy of the fallout zone, that was even harder to deal with than what the nuke wiped out in the first place.

This meant that Panopticon run Skyfields - massive, controlled dome environments where large tracts of food were grown in the high atmosphere where variants did not conventionally reach - could make up for food shortages from large swathes of destroyed farmland across the world.

Skyfields made the Panopticon untouchable because no country in the world would ever risk alienating the Panopticon and their food supplies, not to mention their monopoly over variant surveillance and large-scale drone mobilization against variant attacks.

The Alter Agency, on the other hand, had to deal with daily protests over some hero doing some stupid thing here, some failed rescue there, some villain this and some variant that.

And now more than ever, in the post-Vanguard era of heroes, things were getting worse and worse.

More villains, not just thugs using their powers for stupid, selfish needs, but legitimately organized and powerful organizations, rose in strength.

More and more variant attacks, many of which were becoming ever more dangerous.

The ant colony attack on South Korea that killed hundreds of thousands a couple of years ago was just one of a dozen such incidents throughout the world in just the past twenty years alone.

The worst thing about all this was the pay cuts Brent had taken.

Over the years, he had had to downgrade his fleet of ten high end sportscars down all the way to two.

"I feel for your struggles, Mr. McAllister, I truly do," said the researcher as he maintained neutral professionalism in his voice. "But you must understand that the Panopticon and AA are under a partnership.

Accountability goes both ways.

If you had not ignored early warning signs, then you would have already had a class 5 drone response within city boundaries by the time of the B-class disaster variant's attack.

Granted, a class 5 drone attack cannot halt a B class disaster variant by itself, but it would have eliminated the threat of its amorphous liquid ground army."

Brent opened his mouth to talk back, but the researcher raised a firm hand to stop him.

"I must continue this report," said the researcher, his steely grey eyes turning surprisingly cold, oozing power and threat that made Brent stay quiet and listen. He pointed with a metallic arm at a map of Haven. "As you know, Haven is a port city that borders the Atlantic Ocean, making it high risk for aquatic variant attacks.

Aquatic variants are especially difficult to trace for our satellite arrays cannot detect under the ocean.

However, our coast detection nets should, in theory, should sense the approach of variants from within a fifty-mile radius stretching out from the coastline.

This specific variant managed to clear a straight path through several underwater sensor towers, utilizing a unique electromagnetic pulse that bypassed prior EMP shielding.

By the time the variant reached shallow enough waters for our satellite arrays to pick up on, it could utilize a form of spatial warp to reach Haven before an apt response could be formulated.

Now, Mr. McAllister, the Panopticon will ignore the fact that your outpost received report of downed sensor towers and ignored requests for hero investigations a full two hours before the attack began."

"You can't blame us on that! We've been cutting costs! Do you know how hard it is to cough up heroes at a moment's notice like that? The logistics involved in it?" protested Brent.

The researcher raised a hand again, silencing Brent. "Of course. What's past is past, and the point of this report is not to place blame. As you all know, two vigilantes halted the attack when B rank heroes Gladiator and Rocket Man were incapacitated."

"Vigilantes," scoffed one of the executives. "They ought to be round up and rotting in prison. Without regulation, they're just as good as villains. Plus they don't make us any money."

"The B class disaster variant which we have coded in our system as the Shock Manta was not confirmed killed," continued the researcher, ignoring the executive. "However, its energy signature has faded away entirely, indicating that it is very likely dead or, at the worst, recovering from injuries.

As you know, there is a high chance that a variant attack of this scale generates an Aftershock Effect, drawing variants for often second or even third attacks.

In the case that the Shock Manta itself recovers or there is an Aftershock, the Panopticon and the Central AA Headquarters has determined it fit to station 2 A- class heroes and a class 3 drone fleet in Haven for the next week."

Brent smiled widely. "Now, that's more like it. Finally ensuring the safety of the people."

He said this, but his mind wasn't on the people, it was on his next fat paycheck.

A class heroes were extremely expensive to field. The gap between a C and B class hero was already sizable, but the gap between a B and A class was liable to be akin to an entire canyon.

An A class hero could destroy a B class disaster variant solo.

In fact, beating a B class disaster variant solo was one of the main ways to become an A class hero.

Haven's city government would no doubt have to shell out massive amounts of credits on the order of millions to hire 2 A- heroes on contract, and some of that money would trickle down to Brent and his execs.

"The people are always our main objective," said the researcher. "But I believe you are misunderstanding this situation somewhat. For your incompetence in dealing with the Shock Manta attack, you will not receive any bonus for the heroes.

The cost of their contracts will be entirely subsidized by the Panopticon, for Haven has suffered enough.

Rather, central AA HQ has determined another pay cut for you. Details about this will be sent to you through an AA representative. Now, if you will excuse me-,"

Chapter 66: The Party Begins

11 P.M., Saturday, November 6, 2117

Red Circle Nightclub

Usually, the entrance to the Red Circle was marked, by, well, a red circle. Specifically, a glowing red neon circle emblazoned with bright confidence above its wide, tinted glass doorway.

Whenever this circle lit red in the weekends, it promised a good time whether through night life partying or under the table illegal business deals.

Tonight, though, the red circle was lit wholly green. Even the red carpet leading into the nightclub had been replaced with an emerald green, gold tasseled carpet. A line of diverse people funneled out from the doors, waiting to step inside.

From an immediate glance, anyone could tell that everyone waiting in this line had blood on their hands. Many of them were dressed up in emerald themed suits and dresses, but beyond that finery, it was easy to tell from sharp, predatory gazes, visible scars, calloused hands, and weaponized cybernetics that everyone here knew what combat looked like.

Villains.

On special occasions, the Red Circle held special events where it closed itself off from the general clubbing crowd and allowed invited members only to sit in and enjoy the finest foods, drinks, and company that Haven could offer.

This was the first special event in three months, and the villains here were eager and impatient to get in. For lower ranking villains that occupied the E, D, and C rank totem pole, the Red Circle was perhaps one of the best ways to get connected to better paying jobs and, potentially, work up to the B rank.

Just like how there was a massive difference between C rank heroes and B rank heroes, the same was true for villains. The amount of money and job security a B ranked villain received was incomparable to lesser ranked villains that often had to routinely risk their lives and freedom just to get by.

"What's taking so damn long?" said a Mutant category alter whose mutation had made him grow porcupine like quills instead of hair. He impatiently watched as people at the front of the line filed in one by one.

Almost immediately, a Red Circle staff member approached with a pleasant smile. Her eyes shone a striking violet as she reached a platter out with a full glass of champagne. "My deepest apologies, sir. As you are aware, tonight's event is in held of a new partner and investor who values security and privacy greatly. Security screenings are a little more thorough than they usually are."

The porcupine villain took the champagne glass and downed it in one shot with zero class. He heavily placed the glass back on the platter. "Well, hope this big shot investor

believes in some good old trickle-down economics, cause' I'm itching for a new security job."

"Hah, like he'd hire you, Porcupine, you almost beat your last employer half to death!" said another villain.

"Shut up! The bastard decided he wouldn't pay me after I saved his ass! I gotta' feed myself too!"

"I do wish you the greatest of luck in that regard," said the staff member as she bowed and tended to other disgruntled villains.

At the head of the line, a tall, pale skinned, dark haired, black and red eyed woman smiled as she manned the front door with several Red Circle staff. Her prettiness was such that it was almost charming, and any man or even woman who gazed into those crimson eyes of hers long enough felt quite incentivized to do as she asked.

What she asked was very simple.

"Do you want to join this party?"

And of course, everyone would say yes, because why wouldn't they? This was what they were here for.

Each time a villain said yes, a staff member would wrap a green wristband around their wrists which would then manifest a shiny green sigil.

By midnight, forty-five villains had entered the Red Circle and bustled about on the dance floor. Inside, the lighting was again green. Dim enough to set a partying mood but bright enough for people to see each other and make conversation.

Glasses of wine, liquor, and champagne flowed like water as Red Circle servers worked efficiently and properly.

Music played in the background. Elegant instrumental and orchestral music that set quite the sophisticated tone.

This tone made the usually rough and rowdy crowd of villains behave at their utmost best, keeping from shouting or cursing or fighting.

The invitation they received said that a certain Mr. Bruce Vane, an incredibly wealthy man, had become a partner in the Red Circle and wanted to host a party not only to celebrate his partnership, but also to find talent to add to his security team.

Working as security for a rich man was an incredible opportunity for all the villains within. No longer would they have to risk their lives doing odd jobs and heists. Now, if

they got lucky and made a good impression on Mr. Vane, they could sit back in a mansion while they guarded a rich man who paid them well.

On the second floor, VIP tables were set up on balconies overlooking the dance floor. In one of these tables sat a duo of men dressed in white and red suits. One of these men barely fit in his suit, his portly belly practically bulging out of his dress shirt buttons, but his incredibly muscled arms made it clear that his bulk was not all fat. His face was pudgy and disfigured with scars, his mouth torn to show off sharp, animal-like teeth.

This was the B rank villain known as the Butcher. Famous for the brutality of his kills and his expertise in torture. One of the Trident's most trusted associates in getting those unwilling to talk to talk.

Beside him sat a more presentable, normal looking man with a goatee, gel-spiked hair, and squinty red eyes that made it seem like he was suspicious of anything he looked at. This was the Butcher's Connector, basically his handler who waited impatiently to sign off on a few contracts for Butcher's service.

At other tables sat Seth Solar, his crew, and several members of Blackwater's A-class.

Notably, Mel Morales, current rank 1, was not there.

Everyone made small talk, but what they were really interested in was this new investor, this Bruce Vane who had managed to become a partner in the Red Circle, one of the more well knowns villain connecting establishments throughout the United States.

How many millions upon millions of credits had it taken?

And who were the lucky few in this room who he was going to hire?

The green lights in the room dimmed and the music stopped, making everyone go quiet. The performance stage at the head of the dance floor elevated with a mechanical whir before projecting the image of a green diadem.

Casimir stepped out from the backstage curtains with a flourish. When he reached the front of the stage, he bowed, and as if on cue, a panel opened up before him that retracted out a mic.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to a night out in the Emerald City!" said Casimir. "Though unlike in Oz, the emeralds, the wealth you see, is very, very much real, no green goggles needed."

Casimir snapped his fingers into the mic, and several Red Circle servers dressed in green suits and dresses funneled into the dance floor, passing out expensive drinks and food platters.

A round of applause went around for Casimir as all the villains respected him. He had boosted many a villain from the lower ranks to high ranks, not to mention directly nurturing many hoodlums from the street into villains with enough professionalism to net clients regularly.

"But the fine spirits and aperitifs and hors d'oeuvres you enjoy now are not from me, no, they are served on order of my new partner, Mr. Bruce Vane. It is a funny thing, this partnership: I once thought I would never have one. Not that I was against the idea, mind you - I simply could not find a partner I could wholly trust in.

But Mr. Vane has met my expectations and much, much more. So without further ado, I will introduce you to the man of the hour: Bruce Vane!"

Casimir bowed out, and the performance stage dimmed.

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Aldrich watched through the backstage curtains as the stage dimmed, awaiting his expected presence. He did not wear any equipment. Instead, he was in his suit. He did not need anything more for tonight. He took in a deep breath to calm himself even though his undead heart did not truly beat.

This was it.

This was the moment he was waiting for.

Vengeance.

Judgement.

Justice.

Aldrich looked at a counter in his status screen.

[Party Members: 57]

They had all given their consent to join this 'party', and their wristbands gleamed with the sigil that marked them out as Aldrich's party members.

45 villains. 10 A class Blackwater students. And the Butcher and his handler.

Everyone he wanted dead in one room.

Aldrich touched chest, feeling the hard surface of the phylactery beneath his suit. The Chrysalis by now had merged enough with the Phylactery that its dimensional space

was the size of a small room. Easily enough to fit in Adam and Elaine for this final stretch.

It felt almost surreal. To have come this far in just one week. To have vengeance for the taking right before him.

He found himself second guessing. Had he planned everything out properly? Was this going to work?

He felt a hand squeeze his shoulder.

"Master," said Valera. She drew close to Aldrich, and in her glamorous black dress, she looked absolutely stunning. "Are you worried?"

"No. Just slightly overwhelmed. I always thought ahead, always planned, but I guess there was some part of me that never believed that I would make it this far," said Aldrich.

"Of course you would make it this far. You are my one and only master. The only man I have deemed worthy of serving for all eternity and beyond. If not you, then who else?"

At the very least, I believed in you from the start with all my heart," said Valera.

"I know," said Aldrich. He looked into Valera's black and red eyes. "And thank you. Without you backing me, protecting me, I wouldn't be here."

"You should not thank me for performing my sworn duty as a knight." Valera patted out creases in Aldrich's suit and smiled at him. "You look wonderful, master. I am eager to see you bathe in carnage tonight."

She then looked directly at Aldrich, and he looked directly at her. Because she was so busy fixing his clothes, she had not noticed how close their faces were, their cold breath intertwining together. Valera's eyes widened, her body stiff and tense, waiting -

"Not now," said Aldrich as he drew back. "I still have to finish what I started."

"Of course, my master. I understand," said Valera. She smiled coyly. "Not now, is it? Then later?"

"Later." Aldrich smiled back at her before his expression set into seriousness. He materialized his [Phantasmal Mask] and put it on. Then, he stepped out of the curtains, and as he did so, green spotlights hit him, lighting his each and every step to the microphone.

Applause spread throughout the room as the mystery investor finally showed himself.

Aldrich looked down at the crowd of villains before him, seeing the desire in their eyes, at how they wanted his supposed credits. He looked up at the Butcher who picked his teeth with a claw-like nail, ignoring everything below. He met a glance with Seth Solar before Seth looked away, more interested in drinking more liquor and eyeing the small case of boost vials on his table.

Aldrich raised his hand, and the applause died down.

"First off, I want to thank all of you for making it here. You have no idea how thankful I am to see all of you gathered here like this," said Aldrich, his voice projecting throughout the room.

A smaller voice modulating mic hidden beneath Aldrich's mask changed his normally neutral pitched voice into one far deeper. "I don't intend to take you away from this party of mine for long. I just wanted to give a quick foreword before we began."

Aldrich reached into his coat pocket and materialized the Death Lord's Sign Stone. He held it up in the air, and everyone stared at it, wondering what it was.

"This...is a precious possession of mine," said Aldrich. "To me, it represents my hopes and dreams. A symbol of a trial to overcome and reach greatness."

Aldrich paused, and then his voice grew even deeper, gaining a sharp, threatening edge to it that made everyone in the room shiver.

"But to you, it represents your death. Your judgement."

Before confusion could hit, Aldrich activated the Sign Stone, and the light from it burst out. The wristbands around each villain started to glow, reacting to the Sign Stone, and before anyone could think about running, the green light engulfed everyone, leaving the once bustling dance floor completely and utterly empty.

Chapter 67: A Night of Dying

A commotion rose through the emptied-out dance floor from the Red Circle's many servers. They were standing in the sidelines, in the shadows, waiting for Bruce Vane's speech to end, but now, everyone had disappeared.

Casimir took the steps up to the performance stage, getting back to the mic. Spotlights tracked his movements.

When he looked down, he saw not the faces of the villains he had served throughout the years, but his precious staff, all those he had taken from the streets, from brothels, from dens of addiction, from pits of debt, and given them training and purpose.

They looked up at him for answers, for to them, he was their guiding light in a criminal underworld where darkness snuffed out even the smallest flickers of hope.

"I regret deeply that I did not inform all of you of this turn of events beforehand," said Casimir. "It is not that I did not trust you all, my dear, most valued staff. I simply wished to keep all knowledge of this surprise to a minimum for assurance purposes."

"Was this the right choice, Casimir?" said Hironnelle. She unpinned mauve hair she usually kept up tied in a professional bun, letting long, curled locks spill down to her shoulders, framing her striking, glowing bright violet eyes. "With this, you have made yourself an enemy of every syndicate.

You will be a target - we will all be targets."

"I have always said I do not take risks. For the first time in my life, I have taken one.

I must say, it feels...thrilling.

I can understand why those I thought once as impulsive and foolish act the way they do, throwing themselves into the pit of risk for that precious glimmer of reward." Casimir's emotive face smiled. "But I understand not all of you are here to fall into these pits of risk with me. And that is why I am giving all of you the option to terminate your employment to me.

You will no longer be affiliated with the Red Circle and I shall see to it that your safety is guaranteed.

You need not walk through the valley of the shadow of death with me, for unlike an omnipotent deity, I cannot guarantee you will fear no evil."

"Casimir." Walter's stern, guttural voice rang through the floor, projecting with powerful lungs that made it seem as if he was on mic.

"Yes, dear Walters?" said Casimir.

"Are you making this decision with your own mind?" said Walters.

"Shall I be honest? At first, no."

A murmur ran through his staff.

"But I have warmed to Mr. Vane's new and radical ideas. His desire to bring opportunity to those who have none," said Casimir. "It touched upon what started me on this path.

I began the Red Circle first as a means of dragging myself out from the streets. And when I was uplifted, when I looked back to see how many like me were still mired in the

streets, waist deep in the mud of despair, poverty, and hopelessness, I reached out and pulled many out."

Casimir gestured towards all his servers. "And now, when I look upon what I have accomplished, I may see piles of credits and gold and jewels, but what shines to me brightest is all of you, my dears. My treasures. My flock of street crows turned to beautiful songbirds.

But there is a time to let caged birds fly. I am giving you that opportunity now.

Disassociate yourselves from me now, or I cannot guarantee it will be safe later."

"So long as you made this choice yourself, I will stand by you," said Walters.

"We are not caged birds, Casimir, we are free, freer than we ever have been," said Hironnelle. "And we choose to fly by your side."

All the servers of the Red Circle bowed their heads to Casimir, and a single tear trickled out from under Casimir's mask. "Wonderful, my dears," he said, his voice quivering.

Then, his voice immediately turned stern and serious. Almost militaristic in its efficiency. "And now, we must prepare for war. Until Mr. Vane emerges from wherever he has gone, we must fend against any potential retaliation.

Walters, engage Defense Alert Level 5."

"Understood." Walters talked into a hand radio. "Initiate DA5."

Almost immediately, the lights in the Red Circle turned red, not the festive, sultry shade of red that it shone during clubbing nights, but a bright, alarm-inducing red that incited not a dance, but a call to action.

The Red Circle shook as emergency generators booted up and powered a building wide forcefield.

In immediate and trained fashion, the staff of the Red Circle began to mobilize. Many of them rolled up their sleeves, revealing cybernetically implanted blades and firearms.

"Tech team, engage drones," said Walters. "Secure the perimeter."

Several fleets of drones from the club's tech team started to circle around the building, the barrels of energy weapons and guns gleaming and rotating about, finding potential targets.

"Strike squad, assist in securing the perimeter with aerial support."

"It will be my pleasure," said Hirondele. Her entire body glowed violet, changing her into pure purple energy and burning off her uniform. Her energy form then shaped into the form of a large, man-sized swallow made of pure glowing violet light.

In this form, her voice projected in echoing waves. "Strike squad, with me."

Several staff members morphed into flight capable forms, turning into mutants wholesale or growing wings. Some attached mechanical wings or thrusters to themselves. Others floated in the air with the power of their minds.

Hirondele flew out with the airborne strike squad.

"Elite security squads 1 and 2, with me. We protect the head. The rest of you, snipers, infantry, supply chain - take your trained positions. Any threats that approach, eliminate with extreme prejudice," said Walters. His appearance then began to morph as he tore through his suit, becoming a monstrous half man, half lizard creature with spined tail, curved white claws, and rocky green scales.

He made one giant leap to Casimir's side, and within a minute, twenty-four staff members formed a tight formation around Casimir. Some of them were armed with incredibly futuristic, glowing energy weapons and combat suits. Others crackled electricity from their hands, some fire, some swirls of water.

Valera appeared from backstage and stood with Casimir. "Mr. Vane has request I assist in your defense tonight."

"I am eternally grateful," said Casimir with a short bow.

"You have no powers," said Walters with a distorted, inhuman voice. He looked down at her with gleaming yellow reptilian eyes. "You'll slow us down."

"Punch me," said Valera.

"What?" A skin flap blinked over Walters' eyes in confusion.

"I said punch me. Was that so hard to understand?"

Walters grunted before throwing out a sudden, heavy and powerful punch at Valera.

Valera stopped Walters' enormous fist in her palm. The impact of the blow sounded like concrete shattering, but Valera stood there unfazed and smiling, holding back Walters' might.

"Need I say any more?" said Valera.

Walters withdrew his punch and nodded his lizard head. "No."

"To my office, then," said Casimir. He looked up at the blaring red alert lights above and smiled. "The night has just begun."

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"What the fuck!? Where are we!?"

"What is this place!?"

"I can't see sh*t here! Someone get a light!"

Angry and surprised shouts rang throughout the cold darkness in the crypts of the Necropolis. Several glasses and plates held in villain hands dropped in surprise and shattered on the floor.

Several villains that could generate some form of light lit up the space. The villains looked around to see themselves now in a cold, clammy underground space with a low ceiling of dull grey rock. Dust rose up with every step they took on the cold, cracked stone floor.

Everywhere they looked around, they simply saw a vast expanse of tombs and gravestones packed together like lost and forgotten things.

"Huh? What kind of joke is this?"

"Is this some VR sh*t? Is Bruce Vane showcasing some new tech to us?"

It was a testament to the wariness of even low tier villains that even though they did not fully know what was going on, they all universally geared up to fight. They had been stripped of their villain costumes and gear, but they still had their natural powers.

Mutant category Alters morphed into their mutant forms unless they had permanent mutations. Blaster type Alters prepared a buildup of energy to shoot out at any potential threats. Augmenters strengthened their bodies.

"Fuck! I don't have any of my drones! Goddamn security check!" said a techno Alter.

"Relax, we still don't know what's happening. Like someone else said, this might be a VR demo." The villain who said this shouted. "Hey! Mr. Vane! Your sh*t's real cool and realistic, but it's about time you stopped this!"

In response to this sudden noise, the tombstones began to tremble and shudder. They slid open. The graves parted. Rotted, dried corpses, almost skeletons, emerged, groaning in hunger for warm, living flesh.

"Damn, look at the textures and graphics on this zombie! This sh*t really is realistic," said a villain as he walked up to a crowd of zombies. One of the zombies lunged and bit him on his arm. He yelled in pain. "Sh*t!"

"Fucking dumbass." Another villain, his partner, presumably, pushed him aside and shot out a gust of slicing wind that severed the crowd of zombies in half. But these severed halves still kept crawling towards them.

"Look! Look at my arm!" The villain bit by the zombie showcased his arm where around indented teeth marks, the flesh turned black and rotted.

"You stupid sh*ts!" roared Seth Solar, still dressed in a green and gold suit. He floated forwards and fired a blast of solar energy from his eyes, completely engulfing over thirty zombies in blinding orange light, utterly reducing them to ash. Where his beams traveled, the ground smoldered, gleaming orange with molten heat.

But by now, there were zombies and skeletons emerging from everywhere, quickly growing into a mass of shambling walking corpses that which at first seemed like a joke was now starting to becoming a serious threat through sheer numbers alone.

"Technos! Stop sitting on your asses! You have cybernetics in your eyes to analyze tech! Is this VR or not!?" said Seth Solar.

"No tech," said Evan Harker as his mechanical green eye clicked. "Can't get any connection either. No GPS. We've been completely isolated. Seems like a Flux category power. One that warped us to a different location. Where, I have no idea."

"Hear that!? Now start fighting back, you stupid fucks!" Seth Solar waved his gang forward. He attempted to punch the ceiling of the crypt, trying to smash through it, but it was indestructible. He immediately adjusted his strategy. "A-class and anyone that wants to get out of this, stay with me!"

Any of you sh*tty D-listers fall behind even a single inch, and I am leaving your asses to rot.

If you hold me back, I swear I will laser your head off myself!"

Roused by Seth Solar's commanding presence, the crowd of villains started to fight against the zombies. Various elements shot out. Mutant Alters morphed into monstrous forms and started beating zombies with their claws and fangs.

"Wait, don't leave us!" shouted one of the villains as they saw Seth Solar and 10 members of the Blackwater A-class easily smash through the weak zombies at far greater speeds than them.

The A-class did not even spare the weaker villains a single sympathetic glance as they continued forwards.

"Hmm. Does Casimir truly think he can do this to us with impunity? Has he lost his mind? Tsk tsk," said Valus, the Butcher's handler and Connector. "Butcher, clear a path.

When we're done with this amateur attempt at eliminating us and reach an area with a signal, you'll be carving up both this idiotic Mr. Vane and Casimir."

"Kill! Carve! Tear!" Butcher roared in glee as he used his immense bulk to shoulder charge his way straight through a dense crowd of zombies, plowing through like a bowling ball smashing through pins. On his way forward, he trampled and killed a few villains as well.

Behind this cleared path, Valus flew forwards with his hands behind his back. Occasionally, when a zombie leaped up at him, they would disintegrate into piles of dust.

"A path! Quick!" Some of the lesser villains saw the path the Butcher and the Blackwater students made and followed through. These were the lucky ones. The path quickly sealed up as the number of zombies exponentially swelled as time passed.

This left approximately half the main crowd of villains, all of them comprising of the weakest E and D rankers, stranded and unable to break through a mass amount of ever growing zombies.

After all, the entire objective of the Necropolis crypt levels were to find the nearest exit, not to waste time fighting an infinite horde of undead.

But it was not like the villains knew this.

Aldrich observed everything that happened with his [Grave Ward] while hidden inside an underground tomb.

The moment he had materialized into the Necropolis, he had used his [Phantasmal Mask] to render himself invisible and phase below while everyone was distracted, keeping him from any harm or from anyone detecting him.

On top of this, he had made sure to have Casimir make sure that anyone that came to the Red Circle tonight did not have detection-based powers that could potentially scope him out.

Getting Casimir loyal to him was also not that difficult.

Aldrich had Fler'Gan look into Casimir's mind and find out what the man valued the most.

This way, Aldrich could map out a path to making Casimir devoted to Aldrich's cause with the least amount of mind control needed.

This involved tapping into Casimir's deep desire to see the world under a new order where people did not have to suffer like him.

Casimir thought that heroes and the government had done nothing for him, after all, they had left him to die on the streets as they did with many others.

Thus, he had joined the ranks of villainy where he had found far more success. And with the profits from his villainy, he tried to give back to those that had started out with nothing like him.

Aldrich saw that desire and played to it.

Now, Casimir was fully in Aldrich's hands.

As for what Aldrich needed to do now, well, he just had to do one thing -

Wait.

Wait until the time was right.

Chapter 68: Acquiring the Editor Sample

Aldrich waited for a solid thirty minutes in his underground grave.

This was an empty safe space he had memorized and marked out the first time he had ported into this quest exactly for this moment.

Here, no zombies or skeletons spawned, making it the perfect hiding spot. He had marked out similar safe spots like this across all the floors he had traveled through in his first attempt at this quest, giving him a way to hide while the villains ahead cleared everything for him.

Meanwhile, he kept a group of three Grave Wards prepared to track Seth Solar and the Blackwater A class, the Butcher, and the low tier villains. Only one of these Grave Wards was technically a new creation. The others were Evil Eyes that he had destroyed and replaced with their upgraded versions.

After thirty minutes, Aldrich saw an opportunity and re-activated his [Phantasmal Mask] to get out of his grave and shift through a massive crowd of zombies and skeletons.

He looked up to see a platform of ice hovering above the masses of growling and chattering undead, and on top of it, only ten villains remained, desperately crouching on this ice platform to avoid the infinite masses of undead below.

The original thirty or so villains left behind here had fought admirably, beating back undead from every direction with their powers, but eventually, they began to grow tired. Individually, all of them were considerably stronger than the average skeleton or zombie, but the numbers of the lesser undead were unending.

Where the undead never tired and never feared, the villains ran out of stamina, and as they felt their energy and powers slipping from them, they felt fear.

As soon as a few of them, especially the ones with area of effect abilities, fell to the undead horde, the entire group started to fall apart and get swarmed.

Now, the last ten were reduced to relying on a Creator class Alter that could form ice constructs. Normally, this individual could not generate ice constructs above their own body mass, but with the help of an Editor class alter that boosted his power, their floating ice platform managed to comfortably carry all ten remaining, beaten and battered villains over the undead below.

Of course, this did not guarantee their safety. The zombies and skeletons piled on top of each other, generating ramps of sheer packed bodies to reach the platform, but from a high vantage point, the villains could defend themselves against fewer targets more efficiently, staving off their inevitable doom for just a while longer.

Aldrich was after the Editor, the prime sample for Fler'Gan. He casted [Negative Surge] on himself, boosting his stats before jumping straight up, phasing through the ice platform.

[Mana: 183/183] 168/183]

Aldrich unphased and became visible as he landed on the ice platform. His suit was now gone, replaced with his freshly materialized Grave Reaper equipment.

"Hostile! Hostile!"

"Somebody fuck him up!"

Aldrich immediately heard cries of panic and calls for violence against him. In response, he activated his [Spinal Bracers of the Grave Reaper], crashing the spine shaped golden ornaments on his wrists together.

All around him, wailing, ghostly green skull spirits spread out in a circle. The villains cried out in surprise as the skulls crashed into them, sapping them of their life force and, for the extreme unlucky ones, instantly killing them.

The attack was not meant to kill them, it was mostly meant for Aldrich to make space while he handled the ice generating Alter and Editor at the center of the platform. Once those two were gone, the undead below would take care of everyone else.

Some of the villains, their nerves already on edge from facing a supernatural zombie and skeleton horde attack, screamed in terror at the approaching skulls, losing their balance and slipping off the ledge the ice platform, falling into their deaths below.

The other villains that managed to stay rooted to the platform focused entirely on dodging the threatening cursed skulls, their selfish, uncoordinated minds not at all primed to help the Creator that held up the very lifeboat of ice they relied upon.

This left Aldrich entirely alone with his designated targets.

The ice generator was preoccupied maintaining the platform, kneeling in the center of the platform with both his hands planted down, sweat dripping from his pale forehead. The Editor stood right behind the platform generator. A thread of red energy connected the ice alter's back to the Editor's fingertips.

Both of them stared at Aldrich helplessly as they saw that all of their supposed allied villains - the ones who could fight back - were either dead, too busy with Aldrich's skull attack, or simply too scared to approach.

Aldrich worked quickly and efficiently. Before the ice generator could divert his power from the platform to Aldrich, Aldrich rushed in with superhuman speed and landed a spinning heel kick right into the ice Alter's jaw, knocking him out and breaking his jaw.

The platform of ice remained intact for just a few more seconds after the Alter went unconscious, and Aldrich used this time to slam a punch into the Editor's stomach, keeling him over.

Then, Aldrich casted [Horror Warp], wrapping his hand in a malevolent aura of cloudy darkness dotted with gleaming red eyes. He smothered the Editor's face with the cloud of dark, immediately sinking him into a nightmare from which there was no easy or quick waking.

[-20 Mana]

[Mana: 148/183]

The Editor fell down face first, unconscious, and Aldrich grabbed him by his collar before tapping his Phylactery and calling out to his Chrysalis. The purple orb in his chest glowed and crackled before a tear of space appeared in front of it, forming into a vantablack orb from which several hooked tendrils of darkness burst out, abducting the Editor and sucking him into the dimension of the Chrysalis.

[Portal Usages: 3] 2]

So far, the Chrysalis could maintain about 3 portal openings into its dimension over the course of a single day before it had to enter a charging dormant period. This included portals for both taking things in and taking things out, so these were precious few charges to work with.

Hopefully, when Aldrich became a proper lich, this would change. Fler'Gan theorized that once Aldrich became a lich and fully placed his soul into the phylactery, the Chrysalis would react with it and become massively stronger, binding directly with Aldrich's soul to become a part of him.

Aldrich then jumped off the platform as it broke apart, leaving the rest of the villains to die against the swarm of undead below.

"No! No! No!"

"Stop! Help us!"

"M-mother!"

Screams of terror echoed for a brief few seconds before they were choked out by a tidal wave of hungry undead.

Aldrich survived by using his lantern's active skill, casting a disintegrating ray down at his landing zone that turned a small crowd of skeletons and zombies into dust. He then kept his lantern active as long as possible and ran straight forwards, not sparing even a single moment to stop as the moment he did, he would get swarmed

Granted, Aldrich could probably break free from a swarm through sheer physical stats alone, but he did not want to deal with the inconvenience.

When Aldrich's [Phantasmal Mask] came off cooldown the moment his lantern's active disintegrating ray faded away, he used the mask again, turning invisible and shifting through the enormous throng of walking corpses and bones.

From his first attempt at this quest, he had memorized exactly where to go to leave the crypt level, and with phasing, he could just move through terrain like pillars and walls.

The only things he could not phase through were ceilings and walls leading out of the Necropolis - these seemed to be indestructible and unpassable.

At the end of the crypt, Aldrich jumped atop a staircase leading straight up into a ghostly green fog door. Here, he sat on the stairs, watching as a crowd of zombies and skeletons started to growl and groan as they piled at the bottom.

They could not scale up the stairs. It was not in their 'coded' behavior.

Aldrich sat on a stair and put his lantern down by the side, lighting up the masses of undead trying to reach out to him from below. He looked at them but did not focus on them, his fingers interlocked together in calm thought as his sight instead focused on observing his targets.

He kept tabs on Seth Solar, Blackwater's A-class, and the Butcher in the meanwhile. The Grave Wards were far, far slower than them, but the villains reliably cleared out threats that could take out the Grave Wards.

And once Aldrich's targets reached higher floors, the villains would slow down their rate of progress tremendously as they started to fight stronger and stronger threats, at which point the Grave Wards could keep a much closer eye on them.

Aldrich would tail them from behind, and when their numbers grew small, when all that was left was the Butcher and Seth Solar - the two strongest of them all and the ones he needed alive the most - he would strike.