

Super Necromancer

#Chapter 69: {Unending Misery} - Read Super Necromancer System Chapter 69: {Unending Misery}

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"H-help!" A C-rank villain used his arms to crawl his way across burnt stone, his fingertips melting and sizzling on charred black stone as he tried to drag his legless body towards Seth Solar. A trail of blood and entrails painted the dull grey stone beneath in bright red.

Behind him lay the torn apart corpses of the low-ranking villains invited to the Red Cricle. He was the last among them, the highest ranked at C, but even that was not enough to survive.

All around him were scattered countless bones accompanied by racks of fallen over armor and medieval weaponry. These bones would shiver and rattle before floating and attaching together into the form of a large, imposing skeletal figure. Armor and weapons would gravitate towards the skeletons, arming them.

Skeletal Knights.

One of these knights tread over to the villain, raising a longsword in the air and staring down at him with a cold, unfeeling green glint in its empty eye sockets.

The longsword sank into the villain's chest, and the skeletal knight twisted the blade, ending the villain in one clean execution.

"Tsk. Fucking weaklings, all of them," said Simon Wells as he looked briefly back, his red visor magnifying the scene of the villain's death. "Sh*t!"

Simon jerked around in pure fear as he heard whistling near his head.

A large arrow, big enough to skewer through a cow clean through, stopped mere inches away from his head. Seth Solar grabbed the arrow in mid-air.

"Stop fucking around!" Seth growled as he tossed the arrow back to a Skeletal Archer Knight, making sure to throw it so that the wider surface area of the shaft smashed into the bone creature with immense impact, blowing the skeleton apart.

Archers sitting on ramparts circling pillars rained down giant arrows.

"Alexis, shield and support!" roared Seth, his voice booming and commanding.

Alexis, rank 8 in Blackwater's A class nodded. She gulped in a breath, and as she held her breath, her pale blue eyes turned completely white. Winds started to howl and whirl around her, picking up bones and debris, and in an instant, wind currents formed into a rapidly circulating barrier all around Blackwater's A-class.

Any arrows that touched this barrier blew backwards. Bolts of lightning also crackled from the barrier, hitting skeletal knights and blasting them back.

"Zayn!" Seth Solar hovered in the air, drawing arrow fire. Arrows bounced off of his skin, dealing no damage.

Zayn flew up by Seth's side, his black feathered arms now morphed into full wings. His head had shifted into an aquiline, beaked form, turning him into a humanoid eagle mutant. He sped through the ramparts with acrobatic agility, throwing out volleys of large, blade like feathers.

The feathers were aimed specifically to sever the skeleton's arms, making them drop their bows.

This left Seth Solar for cleanup. He hovered from rampart to rampart, unleashing his solar beam in flashes of brilliant gold. The beams turned the skeletons into dust, preventing them from ever piecing back together.

"Quite excellent," said Valus as he hovered behind them, observing. "You Blackwater students will indeed make fine additions to the Dark Six. I will ensure that once we are out of this mess, the Trident will hear all about your fine talents.

But still, to think we are nine floors through this strange place without a single exit in sight."

"Smash, take bones!" The Butcher bellowed from below. He was no in the protection of Alexis's barrier, but he was invulnerable to conventional damage like this anyway. A dozen arrows stuck out of his body as did swords and bones from destroyed skeletons, but instead of drawing blood, they just jutted into his body like he was made of flesh colored dough.

The Butcher slammed grabbed a skeletal knight and smashed it against the floor, blowing it apart into pieces. Any leftover pieces assimilated into the Butcher's flesh, turning into raw biomass for him to continually regenerate.

With the Butcher on the ground, any skeleton knights that threatened the A class were of no threat. The Butcher was practically made to fight large groups of weaker enemies with his power that let him absorb organic and some inorganic matter and pad it to his own body mass. It also allowed him to link with the nervous system of those he swallowed, letting him control and amplify their pain.

Alexis exhaled as she took down her barrier of wind.

"We've been trapped in a pocket dimension," said Evan. He was useless here without his drones, and ordinarily, he would have been left behind to die. But as a member of Seth's gang, he was spared the fate of the rest of the technos who had no technology to work with. "No net signal anywhere, no GPS - this is the only explanation."

"Then we just have to wait this out, right?" said Simon. "A power like this that can keep fifty Alters trapped is no joke. It must have an insane energy upkeep. What was that law again?"

"The Tartarus Effect," said Evan. "Powers that can move objects into another dimension or pocket of space tend to be unable to trap Alters, and when they do, they cost massive amounts of energy. The more Alters or Variants it traps, the higher the cost gets."

"We've been here for over half an hour!" shouted Seth Solar. "I can't smash through the walls and we don't have anyone to scan for exits! All we can do is just take stair after stair after fucking stair!"

"Stay calm, boy," said Valus as he came to Seth's side.

Seth whirled around aggressively with his fist cocked back.

"You throw that punch at me, and your arm turns into dust," said Valus.

"Not before I cave your skull in," said Seth with venom oozing in his voice.

"You heard what your techno said. There is a limit to his trick," said Valus. "The known record for dimensional entrapment barely exceeds a single hour. And even that was achieved only through the S class hero Superspace sacrificing his life in the Sinking of Neo-Moscow.

Say that Bruce Vane, who wants us dead for some quaint reason, hired some unknown, one in a million talent who could trap us here.

Do you truly think he could keep us here for over an hour? Over what a S class hero could do?"

"So then what? We just sit on our asses and wait here?" said Seth Solar.

"Yes, that is exactly what I am proposing," said Valus. "The higher we go in this dimension, the more troublesome these enemies become. Why bother? Simply stay here until it is done."

The Blackwater students nodded and agreed among themselves. Their expressions started to brighten, and a few of them started to sigh in relief. They had gotten so tense and worked up from being ported to this strange space that they had not considered that they could just wait it all out.

But now, the answer just seemed so easy: all they had to do was wait.

"So then what? We just sit on our asses and wait here?" said Seth Solar.

"Yes. That's exactly what I'm proposing," said Valus.

"...Fine. We'll do it your way," said Seth Solar.

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Thirty more minutes passed.

Thirty minutes turned into an hour.

An hour bled into an hour and a half.

And that finally reached two hours.

Seth finished lasering a new batch of infinitely respawning skeleton knights. Thankfully, they only reanimated in intervals of ten minutes, making them easy to deal with in waves. But that wasn't the issue here.

The issue was that everyone had wasted time and precious energy sitting in one spot accomplishing exactly nothing.

"You fucker! Keeping us here - you're working for him, aren't you? That cocksucker Bruce Vane? Making us waste our energy, huh!?" Seth Solar aimed his glowing golden eyes at Valus.

"N-no, that is not true!" Valus's calm and composed exterior now began to break apart as his confidence in believing he would survive, that he would get out of this just by waiting, began to fade. "I-I don't know. This...this is entirely unprecedented."

"Me getting tired of breaking bones!" complained the Butcher as he finished tearing apart a few more skeleton knights.

Chapter 70: {One By One}

When Seth Solar passed through the foggy green portal into the tenth floor, he snarled almost animalistically as he stared with gleaming gold eyes at yet another host of enemies.

There were no skeletons here.

Instead, a legion of large, bulky knights wearing spiked black armor with faces of dried, pale flesh and sunken in, gleaming green eyes stood at guard with halberds and shields.

Behind this legion of twenty knights, one knight in crimson red armor and pale white, unblemished skin stood tall and proud.

"Strike them down!" said the crimson knight.

"You can talk!?" Seth smiled. "Good. I'll beat some answers out of you!"

Seth flew forwards at such velocity that he pierced through the line of shield bearing knights with utter ease, generating a shockwave of force that blew them backwards. He slammed into the crimson knight and drove the knight into the ground, dragging the knight several dozen meters.

Metal screamed and sparks flew as the knight's back armor scraped against the rocky floor.

"Tell me how to get out of here!" roared Seth as he held down the crimson knight with one hand while cocking back the other in a ready fist to smash through the knight's face.

The knight's eyes gleamed red as he gave out a command that echoed through the dull grey hallway.

"Do not care for me, my knights! Defeat the rest of the intruders!"

"Wrong. Answer." Seth slammed his hand around the crimson knight's helmet and applied crushing force. His insane strength let his fingers dent into the helmet, and he ripped it off, revealing a pale face with red eyes and large, bloodsucking fangs.

"Some kind of fucking vampire...?" said Seth in wonder. So far, everything he and the villains had seen so far in this place had been out of some kind of horror movie. Zombies and skeletons and now vampires?

What was this?

The only explanation he could think of was that this was an Alter power that could manipulate and warp reality to create what the user's mind wanted.

The vampire knight hissed as he swiped with his gauntlets, throwing out a scything blade of crimson energy from his fingertips.

Seth took the hit straight in his chest and flew back a few meters from the force of impact. A clean cut stretched across the chest of his green suit, but the invincible skin underneath was utterly unharmed. His eyes glowed gold as he shot down a beam of solar energy, aiming it at the vampire's legs.

The vampire screamed in agony as the sunlight turned his legs into dust.

"Weak to sunlight just like the movies. Doesn't that make this easy?" said Seth. He floated down and planted a triumphant foot on the vampire's chest. "Now, tell me how to get out of here, or else the rest of you crumbles to dust."

"Y-you intruders will find no answer from me. For there is no escape," said the knight, smiling. "There is no glorious victory for you. All of you...all of you are destined to die. To be sacrifices in the Ritual of Eternity."

"No escape? Ritual? Stop bullsh*tting me and give me real answers." Seth applied pressure on the vampire knight's breastplate with his foot, caving it in slowly and painfully.

The vampire knight only smiled as his ribs and spine shattered.

Seth stomped his foot straight through the vampire knight's chest. He knew that the vampire had no intention of telling him anything. It was in the knight's eyes. Resolute, almost fanatic determination. For good measure, he lasered the vampire into dust before flying back.

When Seth turned around to see the rest of the A class still fighting the knights, he muttered to himself. "Weaklings..."

He flew back, showering solar beams on knights, disintegrating them near instantly. With precision shots, he eliminated the knights with quick efficiency.

"Seth! Here!" called out Simon.

Seth floated down by Simon where their gang gathered around Evan Harker's limp body. Several gaping halberd wounds in his stomach showed the cause of obvious death.

"Alexis! Where was your barrier!?" snarled Seth.

Alexis turned pale as she stepped back. "I-I tried, but their weapons had this dark energy around them, it made them phase right through!"

"It's true," said Simon. "Just sh*t luck that Evan happened to be the slowest out of us to dodge it."

"He was dead weight anyway," said Zayn. "Without his drones, he would have dragged us down at some point."

Seth looked down at Evan's lifeless, bleeding body, and he just shrugged. "Zayn's right. He was going to be useless at some point here." He turned to Valus and the Butcher angrily. "You two, you're Trident, right? If you aren't working for Bruce Vane, then tell me, shouldn't the Trident be storming the Red Circle by now?"

Tearing that fucking place down brick by brick?"

"Yes," said Valus. "The Trident does not take attacks on them lightly, and they would have noticed my disappearance. An attack on a Connector, the diplomat and news bearer of the criminal underworld, is a serious offense met only with force.

We do not have the strongest presence in Haven, but over two hours have passed. By now, Trident forces from surrounding cities and bases should have reduced the entire place to rubble."

"Yeah?" Seth Solar's eyes glowed as he stared menacingly at Valus. "Then why haven't they caught the guy generating this dimension, huh? Why are we still here?"

"I told you, I do not know!" said Valus, panicked. His Dematerialization Field could most forms of solid matter into dust, but it could not deal with pure energy attacks like Seth's heat beams.

"I say we kill him and move on," said Zayn.

"Yeah," said Seth Solar.

"If you kill me, the Butcher will go on a rampage, and by now, he has feasted on so many corpses that even you will not put him down lightly!" said Valus as he hid behind the Butcher's enormous, stitch-covered bulk.

"Don't hurt him!" said the Butcher.

"And think about this, why would we risk our lives for this!? We were set up, I'm telling you, set up just like all of you!" continued Valus.

"Won't do good to waste energy fighting among ourselves," agreed Simon. "And they can still be useful."

"Then you two, stay in front. Any threat we face from now on, you two take first," said Seth. His eyes flashed with threat. "Otherwise, both of you die. You think I can't kill this

fat fuck on my own? I have more than enough solar energy left in me to turn him into a pile of ash. Think he can regenerate from that?"

"We will do as you say!" said Valus. He tapped the Butcher, and together, they moved at the head of the group.

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Eleventh floor:

The eleventh floor comprised of a narrow labyrinth of traps and puzzles. If a step was made on the wrong trigger plate, flaming arrows would fire or perhaps a boulder would roll down to crush individuals or a trapdoor would open to reveal hideous tentacled monstrosities. If a puzzle at certain indestructible doors was not solved properly, then more traps like toxic gas or spikes or animated golems of flesh and bone would emerge.

"Fuck!" Seth Solar smashed his fist into another indestructible puzzle door after he failed yet again to solve it. It involved answering a riddle. "Fuck that Evan! He knew all this puzzle and riddle bullsh*t! He was our brains! Our analyst! He would have solved all this so easily! And he had to die like that on us!"

"He died because you left us to fend for ourselves back there," said a Blackwater A-class student. Some kid called Jonas. Rank 14. Could fire rays of adjustable gravity from his hands.

Seth Solar whirled around and lasered Jonas in the face, melting his head away into molten, gooey flesh. His decapitated body knelt on the ground, limp and lifeless.

"Anyone else want to question me?" said Seth as he looked out at the terrified A class. Only Zayn remained unfazed, staying at Seth's side with confidence.

"That's what I thought," said Seth.

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Aldrich trailed Seth's group from two floors behind, constantly keeping watch. He watched as their numbers thinned floor by floor. On the twelfth floor, they had to face a zombie giant who smashed Alexis's barrier with a skill called [Bastion Break] meant for breaking through shields, flattening several Blackwater A class students who thought they were safe under it.

This also killed Simon Wells, one of Seth Solar's gang. Now there were just two left.

Seth Solar and Zayn Soldata. The two strongest of them all.

The Butcher also survived due to the nature of his ability granting him exceptional resilience and regenerative power. Valus also managed to hold onto his life with his disintegrating barrier and the Butcher's protection.

But slowly, floor by floor, their numbers were thinning out.

One by one, Aldrich saw the lives of those who had wronged him snuff out under undead might, and he felt nothing but satisfaction. The only way he could have made this better was if he had been there to personally kill them, but in life, there was always compromise.

So long as he got to kill the Butcher and Seth Solar personally, he had no qualms about how things had gone, especially according to his original expectations.

He had expected his 'party' to reach the fifteenth floor, but not without significant losses.

It seemed that the enemies of the floors from 1-10 were all around the same level threshold of 1-10 with some strong individual units nearing level 20, but after floor 10, almost all the enemies leveled up to the 20-30 range.

At the level 20-30 range, death knights could reliably beat D class villains and fight evenly with C class villains.

The majority of Blackwater's A class had the potential to be high B or A rank villains based on Alter Cell count alone, but the key word was potential.

They were still young and untrained, not to mention the fact that their Alter powers had not matured with age. Alter Cell count only showed a rough estimate of an Alter's max potential. Actually training the body and powers to reach that potential took years and years of biological growth and personal effort.

Overall, most of the Blackwater A class were at the mid to high C rank level in terms of combat prowess. As a result, Aldrich fully expected most of the A class to lose their lives from floors 10 onwards unless Seth Solar, who was most definitely an A ranked threat, helped them out generously.

Granted, Seth had surprised Aldrich by being considerably more tactical than expected, rallying the A class and having them protect each other with tactical defenses and offenses, but Seth's selfish nature showed itself as he increasingly began to leave behind his fellow A class students when they became more and more of a drag.

By the time they reached the fifteenth floor, the group had been culled down only to a few remaining powerhouses that stood head and shoulder above the rest.

Valus, the Butcher, Seth Solar, and Zayn Soldata.

Zayn was interesting. It seemed he had been hiding his power in Blackwater, sandbagging at rank 8 when in reality he could sacrifice more and more of his human form to become increasingly monstrous and stronger until it was clear that he could keep up with even Seth Solar.

And now, as Aldrich saw them pass through the portal to the fifteenth floor, the floor requirement for Aldrich to complete his Ritual of Eternity, he could see everything he wanted, his vengeance, his power, so close to him, close enough to seize and make his own if he waited just a little bit longer.

Yet when the group of villains entered the fifteenth floor, Aldrich felt distinct surprise -

Chapter 71: {Volantis, the Tyrant of Bone}

When Seth Solar reached the fifteenth floor, he found the entire place covered in pitch black darkness. He started to emit some solar energy from himself, lighting up the area to reveal a narrow hallway. The hallway's walls were decorated with stone carved into the shape of countless bones.

Skulls, ribs, femurs - any type of bone from the human body on top of bones from strange creatures Seth had no idea about.

He saw ahead that Valus and the Butcher had stopped in front of a large door comprised of thick white fog, forming a nearly solid veil which they were hesitant to pass through.

"Go!" shouted Seth. "You're our scouts, aren't you?"

"I do not have the greatest feeling about what lies past this wall," said Valus.

"Dangerous," agreed the Butcher.

"Yeah?" Seth's eyes shone. "Is It going to be any worse than me? Either you go through it, or you die."

Seth was almost bluffing at this point. His version of the Sunlight Overdrive power was less efficient than his father's. Where his father could famously fight for three days without rest and without even losing strength, Seth could only fight at high strength for six hours.

It had not been six hours yet, but solar beams drained the most energy, and he had to use them liberally because most of the monstrosities here did not stay down from powerful punches. They needed to burn to fully stay dead.

Seth had enough energy in him for a few more strong fights, but he could not afford to waste power burning down the Butcher.

Thankfully, Valus submitted to Seth and waved the Butcher forward.

"Come on, Butcher, show us the way," said Valus.

"Don't want to," said the Butcher.

"You must," said Valus.

Butcher shook his head.

"Here, how about this, you go ahead, and I'll give you as many people to carve up as you want," said Valus. "As many as you want!"

"Really? As many as I want?" said the Butcher as he smiled gleefully and hopped in delight, his rolls of stitched fat and flesh jiggling as he did so.

"Yes, as many as you want," said Valus.

"Ok then, I go!" The Butcher immediately powered his way through the door of white fog.

"If I get out of this alive," said Valus. "The Trident will hear of your mistreatment against me as well."

"Shut up and go," said Seth.

Valus sighed and moved forward, fading into the fog.

"My instincts are...telling me...not...to go," said Zayn. By now, he had morphed into the size of a large car, his arms completely morphed into giant, bushy feathered black wings. His eyes gleamed red while he tried his hardest to utter out words from his distorted vocal chords through this beak.

"Yeah, but what choice do we have? You of all people should know this," said Seth. He patted Zayn's back. If there was anyone in this world that Seth respected or even remotely cared about, it was Zayn. They were both born and bred for lives they had no choice to live.

Where Seth was born to be a villain, Zayn was genetically engineered to be a monstrosity, an obscene hidden corporate experiment in the middle east where Alterhuman wombs were inseminated with Variant seed. Zayn would have been bred to be a half human, half variant monster used like an attack dog, but he had escaped, becoming a mercenary from the age of ten to survive.

"True...", Zayn moved forwards, fading into the fog.

Seth followed shortly behind.

Beyond the fog gate was a circular space two hundred meters in radius and fifty meters high. The ceiling was domed and decorated with lines of spines and ribcages leading into a central point. Each of these spines ended with a huge lizard-like skull.

A total of twelve skulls stared at the center of the dome where a crimson red orb glowed.

The walls of this place were decorated with bone as well, and at the center, a towering throne composed of bones meshed together stood tall. Seated atop the throne was an enormous, armored man with his clawed gauntlets drawn together.

It was hard to tell whether the thing was actually a man or not. It sat so perfectly still that it was debatable whether it just a piece of armor.

The armor was obsidian black and practically oozed threat. The armor jutted and curved into rough spikes around the shoulders and arms. Around the breastplate down to the torso, the metal seemed to be hewn into the shape of rough, jagged scales.

Dull white, almost gold bone outlined the armor's spikes and edges, padding particularly heavily around the gauntlet areas to form enormous, bladed spikes lined with glowing, fleshy crimson red that seemed almost alive in a raw, primal way.

The helmet of the armor curved up into three large horns, the middle of which formed the visage of a bone capped, bladed crown. There was no gap in the helmet to show any flesh or eyes beneath, there was only a single glowing red orb at the center of the helm.

"Stop looking and go!" said Seth after he stood in awe for a few seconds at the armor. A sense of dreadful power emanated from the obsidian construct that made it hard for anyone to approach.

Valus and the Butcher inched forwards, and when they got within thirty meters of the armor, an echoing voice projected from it. It was deep and guttural, utterly inhuman and sinister in its tenor.

"Where among you is the Necromancer that wishes to fulfill the Ritual of Eternity? I, Volantis, the Tyrant of Bone, seventh among the Deathguard, shall test you. Fell my health below half, and the Obelisk that you seek shall be yours."

Volantis stared at Valus and the Butcher with the glowing red eye in his helmet. Then he stared at Seth Solar and Zayn. "The Necromancer is not here. I see. He brings forth his

minions to do his bidding. Such is the way of those that follow the Occultation of Legion."

Volantis stood up, the metal of his armor groaning threateningly, and he utterly towered over Velus and even the butcher, standing at four meters tall. Bloody crimson strands of energy started to emanate from edges and gaps in his armor.

"No matter. I will sunder your flesh and take your bones into my collection. I will show the Legion the might of the Shattered Bone."

Volantis took a step forward, and as he left his throne, it faded and disappeared.

Velus immediately shrieked.

"Butcher! Kill him!" said Velus as he floated backwards.

"Go away, monster!" said the Butcher as he shoulder charged into Volantis.

Volantis clenched his clawed gauntlets into a fist and cocked it back. The large spikes on his forearms, constructs of metal, crimson flesh, and bone, glowed with bloody power, and he slammed his fist into the Butcher's shoulder.

The punch generated a shockwave of staggering force that made Volantis skid back while sending the Butcher, his entire near one ton of weight, hurtling through the air.

"Respectable power for one who seemingly holds no magic within them," said Volantis as he stared at his fist. "But I was warned by the Lord that there are those that need not devote themselves to the mystic arts to gain strength. Curious. This will make your bones ever the more worth harvesting."

Seth Solar flew in the air and launched twin solar beams while Zayn circled above, unleashing volleys of giant bladed feathers at speeds easily outstripping the speed of sound.

"Hmph." Volantis raised his arm up, and walls of bone emerged all around him, blocking the heat beams and mass volley of feathers. "So all of you possess powers that do not depend upon the Swirl of Mana."

Volantis smashed his fist into the ground, causing the bone wall to blast apart omnidirectionally.

The Butcher took the attack head on, the huge bone shards gouging into his flesh like oversized buckshot.

Velus blocked the bones with his disintegration field.

Zayn let the attacks hit him, but they bounced off his thick coat of durable feathers that formed a powerful armor.

Seth Solar guarded his face as the bones shattered against his invincible flesh, though this time, he felt cuts and nicks where the bones smashed against him.

This thing was strong.

Way stronger than any of the other odd creatures that Seth had seen so far in this dimension. If he had to put a variant ranking to this, it would be a B ranked disaster variant at the minimum.

"[Bone Lance Volley]!" shouted Volantis as he pointed his claws at Seth Solar. A red magic circle formed in front of his hand and from it, a mass number of giant ribs shot forth like spears.

Seth maneuvered around the bones. Meanwhile, the Butcher charged again on the ground.

"[Giant's Bone Hold]" Volantis slammed his spiked, greaved foot into the ground.

Two enormous skeletal hands erupted from beneath the Butcher, grasping him completely in a tight hold.

A volley of black feathers crashed into Volantis's back, etching out sparks and clangs of impact. The feathers jutted out of gaps in the armor, but seemingly did no real damage.

"Hmph. This type of damage is nigh meaningless against me," said Volantis as he crouched, generating power before shooting up like a meteor towards Zayn.

Seth Solar zipped in front of Zayn and blocked Volantis's giant fist with his own. Another shockwave of impact permeated outwards.

"Impressive," said Volantis.

"Fuck off!" Seth Solar fired a beam of solar energy that smashed directly into Volantis's face. The beam of gold instantly drove Volantis down in diagonal descent into the ground, smashing out a sizable crater on impact.

"Hmph." Volantis knelt as he put his hand out, blocking the beam. Heat waves shimmered around his gauntlets as the black metal turned red hot, then white hot. "This is considerable damage, yes. But I will not stand here and take it."

Volantis opened his other hand, and a chakram of linked and sharpened bones formed. He tossed the chakram towards Seth Solar, away from the beam of solar energy, and it curved its trajectory to meet Seth Solar's head.

An expertly aimed feather struck the chakram and sent it off course, evading Seth's head by a hair.

"Good teamwork. Commendable." Volantis rolled to the side, causing Seth's beam to strike ground. He then stood up and chanted. "[Morph: Boneguard Asura]"

Six large skeletal arms spread out from Volantis's back, and in each of them, bone chakrams formed. He began to throw out these chakrams at supersonic velocity, replacing them as soon as they were sent out. Within ten seconds, there were over fifty chakrams flying all across the circular arena, pinging off the walls and each other to create a mass game of pinball where evading hits became a nigh impossibility.

Seth Solar and Zayn dodged like mad, but even then, they suffered attacks here and there. Seth looked down at Velus who cowered in the back, completely fine because his disintegration field destroyed the chakrams as soon as they came in range.

"Velus! You useless fuck! Go up there and touch him! Disintegrate him!" said Seth. "While he's throwing these boomerangs around, he can't move!"

Chapter 72: {volantis, The Tyrant Of Bone 2}

Velus floated towards Volantis's imposing, giant metal form as his total of eight arms moved rapidly, manifesting and throwing out bone chakrams at such speed that they became blurs.

The closer Velus got to Volantis, the thicker this storm of chakrams became, but because they were solid matter, Velus's disintegration field broke the endless flurry of bladed projectiles before they could shred Velus into pieces.

Velus trembled as he hovered forwards. The only thing he could hear was the intense cacophony of bone smashing against rock and the only thing he could see amid this storm of white bone was Volantis's gleaming red, orb like eye.

That eye stared directly at Velus.

"How amusing. You would challenge me straight on though your bones are frail. Then come! Show me you deserve the flesh that hides away your bones!" roared Volantis.

Velus took in a deep breath and landed on his feet, staring at that terrible red eye that flashed with eager anticipation. He was not a fighter, he never really had been. As a Connector that functioned like a diplomat in the criminal world, he never saw fighting as he was forbidden to attack others and others were forbidden to attack him. But he knew that it was now or never.

Velus closed his eyes and sprinted with his arms outstretched, trying to disintegrate Volantis.

"W-what?" Velus opened his eyes as he felt himself pass through Volantis. He looked back and saw that he had passed right through the giant creature, disintegrating out a man-sized hole inside the armor.

Volantis stopped moving as the red light in his helmet eye dimmed down. His skeleton arms turned into dust while his regular arms fell to his sides. He slouched over, limp. The giant skeletal hands trapping the Butcher broke apart, revealing the B rank villain no worse off for wear.

Seth Solar and Zayn tanked and dodged through the last volley of chakrams with several bleeding cuts but no severe injuries. They hovered in the air as they looked down at Volantis.

"I've killed it!" said Velus triumphantly. "Where all you so called soldiers could do nothing but fear, I managed to kill it!"

"The fuck...?" Seth looked into the hole in Volantis's armor and saw that there was no flesh inside it. Just a sort of shadow darkness that flickered like miasma.

Volantis had no physical body within.

"Commendable, human." Volantis's voice echoed out as he suddenly moved, the red light in his eye glowing again. He reached out and placed his hands on either side of Velus.

Velus flinched, but Volantis did not touch Velus.

"You have managed to completely break down this proud armor of mine, but I am no being of flesh and blood. I am Living Armor, and disintegration alone shall not end me unless it is absolute." Red swirls of energy formed around Volantis's black gauntlet claws, and these struck Velus from either side, encasing him in an aura of red.

Volantis raised Velus in the air using this crimson energy tether. "And as Living Armor, I am also Demon.

And as Demon, your soul is mine to feast upon."

Volantis made a tearing motion with his claws, and Velus screamed before a faint red silhouette of himself emerged from his body, funneling into Volantis's red eye orb.

Volantis dropped Velus's limp, dead body. "Your defense, this barrier that breaks down all manner of construct, was worthy of praise. But with flesh as frail as yours, your soul becomes far too easy to take."

"No! Snack Man!" The Butcher roared as he barreled towards Volantis after seeing his handler and caretaker die. He slammed two giant fists down into Volantis's shoulders.

Volantis took the attack head on, and the force of it shattered the stone beneath his greaves. The disintegrated parts of his armor started to patch back, regenerating as if new.

"And you, your flesh is sturdy, too strong to sever your soul from, but you wield the strength of this flesh with the poise of a simple-minded fool." Volantis's bone and black metal armor glowed before covering itself with raw red muscle fibers that threaded out from its gaps and seams.

Volantis landed a clean left and right punch combo on the Butcher's head, disorienting the mad man and driving him a few steps back.

The Butcher snarled and swung his tree trunk of an arm wildly, trying to club Volantis away.

Volantis parried the swing with an elbow strike to divert the blow away before landing a powerful punch to the Butcher's portly stomach. While the Butcher keeled over, Volantis followed that up with an uppercut that sent the madman flying backwards with several seconds of airtime.

"That is how you properly wield strength," said Volantis in a lecturing tone as the Butcher crashed into the ground heavily, groaning in pain.

Volantis then grunted as a laser beam blasted into his body, driving him into the ground in a crater. All the muscle fibers the laser beam hit sizzled and melted away.

"[Organ Stitching: Pyro Glands]" Volantis used Shattered Bone necromancy to channel the flesh, organs, and bones of creatures he had assimilated into himself.

Previously he had been using the spell [Organ Stitching: Giant Muscles] to cover himself with the muscle fibers of a giant. Now, he turned his metallic, bony armor dark brown, changing its hard exterior into a rubberier form.

This was flesh from the flame generating organs of dragons. Highly resistant to fire damage.

Volantis stood up, easily withstanding the solar beams now. However, volleys of giant black feathers pierced through his softened armor, piercing right through him. But since he was a Living Armor that had no vital organs to really pierce through, piercing damage like this did almost nothing to him.

"[Part Stitching: Drake Wings]" Volantis's armor body shuddered as two large draconic, black scaled wings sprouted from his back. He leaped into the air while accelerating

himself with his wings. The sudden speed let him catch Zayn by surprise, and he landed a powerful punch that sent Zayn crashing into the ceiling like a pinball.

Seth Solar retaliated with a punch that Volantis blocked with a guard, but it was heavy enough to drive him back dozens of meters in the air before he stopped himself with a flap of his wings.

"Your raw might is exceptional. It outstrips even mine. I would require muscle stitching merely to keep up with it," said Volantis. "You alone may reduce me to half my health. Yet without your Necromancer to appear before me, I cannot recognize this trial.

That is, unless you kill me fully. Then, I will have no choice but to cede the Obelisk.

"Yeah? You're still not even down to 'half health', whatever the fuck that means, after all that?" said Seth Solar.

"Did you think defeating one of the five Deathguard would be a mere simple task?" scoffed Volantis.

"Alright. Alright then." Seth Solar glared at Volantis as Zayn flew to his side.

"Zayn, stand back. I'm taking care of this," said Seth. "I'm going to kill this fucker. If I kill him, this whole thing ends."

Zayn understood what Seth wanted to do and nodded his eagle head, flying away.

"A duel? I will gladly take one," said Volantis. "There is no better way to take the bones from flesh than in a proper duel where what is desired is taken rightfully."

Seth reached into his tattered coat's pocket where he withdrew his cases of Boost. He snapped open the black case, took out a vial of azure blue liquid, and uncorked it, drinking the liquid down.

"Zayn!" Seth tossed the rest of the case down and Zayn caught it gently in his beak.

Seth took in a deep breath as his body started to glow brightly, shining like the sun, illuminating the dark and grey depths of the arena as if a miniature sun had set been set alight within it. His clothes burned away entirely as his body became completely dressed in a sheen of bright gold with his eyes a bright shade of pure white.

Waves of heat rippled all around him as did strands of bright orange energy reminiscent of the solar flares and explosions that scorched the surface of the sun.

"It's about time I ended this," said Seth Solar.

"Oppose me if you can, mortal," said Volantis... "I welcome the challenge."

Chapter 73: Loot And Summons And More

Aldrich witnessed the villains start the fight against Volantis the Bone Tyrant and watched only for a brief few minutes before his invisible Grave Ward was destroyed by collateral damage from Volantis's area of effect bone attacks.

That Volantis would appear here was a massive surprise. He was a level 40 boss character and the weakest among five Deathguard that formed the inner circle of powerful troops that served the Death Lord.

But even then, he usually guarded the 30th floor of the Necropolis, so to see him so early down in the 15th meant that the Death Lord fully intended on not allowing Aldrich to pass the 15th floor.

At the same time, Volantis only needed the villains to reduce him to half health and from an initial survey of his moves, it did not seem like he was using the full extent of his move set. This way, the encounter was 'balanced' enough that Aldrich could handle it provided he was around level 30.

Of course, Aldrich was not even close to level 30. He had gotten around that level requirement by abusing the party system to its maximum extent.

Aldrich estimated that Seth Solar by himself could take down Volantis to half health if Volantis continued to handicap himself, at which point, this quest would just end.

Volantis might have been planted in the 15th floor to limit how much experience and loot Aldrich could obtain to just what he could scour from the first 14 floors, but even that was enough to boost Aldrich up massively.

Aldrich did not know exactly how much experience he had accumulated because he did not receive it until the end of the quest, and all the items he picked up - mostly suits of armor and weapons - did not go into his inventory but a separate space where like his experience, he would be granted everything at the end of this quest.

So far, the best pieces of loot that Aldrich had found were several grades of Reinforcement Shards that were necessary to upgrade or merge equipment into higher ranks. He also found a [Tome of Skeletal Mastery] and [Tome of Necrotic Carnage] specialized in bone-based spells and high damage necromancy spells respectively.

These tomes were too high level for Aldrich to use right now, but after this quest, they were all fair game. Even with conservative estimates, Aldrich figured he could reach level 30.

The only thing that disappointed Aldrich was that all the equipment here was for knights and warrior types, not spellcasters like him. He would have to find better necromancer sets from the trial quests he could unlock from gaining levels here and use reinforcing shards to upgrade his lantern to a higher rank as trial quest weapons did not get that much better than the lantern until past level 50 or 60.

Aldrich spawned another Grave Ward and sent it ahead of himself as he entered the tenth floor.

In his first attempt, this had been the furthest he could go with his own power before it became too difficult to continue. This floor was essentially a mini boss floor with its legion of death knights and its captain vampire knight.

But the villains had cleared it quite reliably with Seth Solar easily smashing his way through it. Here, Aldrich witnessed the carnage that Seth Solar had wrought. Countless burnt black craters on the ground stacked with the melted corpses of death knights all spoke of Seth Solar's overwhelming might.

Among these corpses was one that interested Aldrich. Evan Harker's corpse.

One of Aldrich's tormentors now reduced to a lifeless body lying still in a pile of blood pooling from several deep gashes in his stomach.

Aldrich put a finger on the back of Evan's head, and a green sigil formed on it. This marked Evan to be raised for later.

The Death Lord had promised that any units that Aldrich wanted to raise here, he could keep. His current units controlled limit was maxed out, but for this quest only, he could mark corpses to be raised for later.

After this quest when he gained more levels and attunement points to increase his unit count, he could sort through the list of units he marked for later and keep those best for himself.

Aldrich marked as many death knight corpses as he could for himself, and this totaled up to 15 knights. He also marked the Crimson Knight captain's headless corpse.

With that done, Aldrich moved on.

The eleventh floor consisted of puzzles that the villains had already solved or brute forced their way through. Any traps they did not deal with, Aldrich was smart enough to solve anyway. Here, the undead were not that strong, it was the traps that made this floor difficult.

Any A class Blackwater student corpses that Aldrich saw, however, he marked to raise.

The twelfth floor was also a mini boss room of sorts, comprising solely of a fight against a zombie giant. Here, the zombie giant had been felled by a laser beam to his head that completely bore through his brain.

Aldrich marked the zombie for raising. He also marked Blackwater students that died for raising as well. This included Alexis, the storm generator, and Simon Wells, another of Seth Solar's gang.

Aldrich repeated this process throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth floors, marking most of the Blackwater A class to raise for himself. The only ones he could not raise were those that had been utterly destroyed or their bodies lost to traps.

This raising spree also included the strongest monsters on the thirteenth and fourteenth floors.

The thirteenth floor consisted of tunnels where Bonewheels, masses of skeletons attached in wheel like configurations, rolled around at high speeds. Here, Aldrich raised a Deathwheel, the largest and strongest of them.

The fourteenth floor was a small forest of vampiric plants, and this place had been thoroughly burned down by Seth Solar's solar beams. Through the flames, Aldrich could not raise anything, but he did manage to salvage several seeds of vampiric plant monsters.

Past the fourteenth floor, Aldrich entered the hallway that connected to Volantis's boss room. Here, he sent the Grave Ward ahead to check how Seth Solar and the rest of the villains were doing. He saw Volantis still fighting, though his health was halfway down to the 50% threshold.

From there, Aldrich continued to watch the fight, replacing the Grave Ward several times when it got destroyed by area of effect abilities. At one point, he witnessed a development that made his mind race with possibility.

Volantis stated that so long as the Necromancer himself, in this case Aldrich, did not enter the boss room, the trial would not be counted.

That is, unless the villains actually managed to kill Volantis.

At which point, Seth Solar decided to use the Boost that Aldrich had intentionally let him bring in an all out battle to kill Volantis and end the trial.

That made Aldrich wonder about this fight. In all likelihood, with Boost powering him, Seth Solar could actually defeat Volantis, even if Volantis went into his full strength as he had already allowed the villains to reduce him nearly to half health.

This was perfect.

Aldrich had been mildly disappointed so far that the only items he had found were armor and weapons for warriors.

But if Seth Solar managed to kill Volantis, then would Aldrich not have access to perhaps one of the best armor sets in the entire game? The armor set that could be crafted from Volantis's dropped boss soul was immensely useful and perhaps the absolute best for a Necromancer that valued survivability and durability.

Yet beyond this, Aldrich could now raise the Living Armor Demon for unlike in the game, he had the ability to raise boss level monsters.

In the game, the player character could wear Volantis's armor set simply as just that, a piece of armor. Volantis himself was dead and could not cast any of his Shattered Bone necromancy spells.

What about now, though? If Aldrich raised Volantis fully, then did that not mean he could wear the living armor in its fullest power? With Volantis alive and casting his own abilities? Effectively doubling Aldrich's strength?

Volantis might even have the possibility to level up as by the end of the game, when the player character and a massive party of fellow heroes assaulted the Necropolis, Volantis had raised himself from level 40 in the first mid game encounter to level 80 as a mini end game boss fight prior to reaching the Death Lord.

The possibility of all this power coming to Aldrich rested, however, squarely on Seth Solar's shoulders. Would he defeat Volantis? Especially before the little surprise that Aldrich had put into Seth's Boost kicked in?

It was difficult to tell.

All Aldrich could do was wait and hope.

And observe.

He did not just observe Seth Solar's fight, he also kept a keen eye on his controlled units status tab.

He could not link his sight to anyone from the real world from a different realm, but what he could do was keep track of his list of current undead, seeing their health, mana, and status and noting whether their health went down or up or their skills went on cooldown or so on and so forth.

Like this, he tried to stay on top of how the battle in the real world was going -

Chapter 74: {red Circle Defense 1}

The Red Circle -

A convoy of three sleek grey armored cars stopped in front of the Red Circle's first line of defense: the guard tower occupied by 'valets' with a boom barrier that now glowed with energy, ready to release a repelling shockwave anytime a car tried to ram into it.

In the guard tower, red coated valets looked down with laser sighted assault rifles. Sentry turrets at the top of the tower joined in on this vigil, aiming their barrels at a convoy of three grey, sleekly armored cars.

The cars stopped in front of the tower, and from the third car, the passenger door slid open as a white and red suited man with golden shades stepped out while adjusting his collar and gel-spiked hair.

A guard accompanied the man, and it was obvious that this guard was no joke. He was armored from head to toe in high end combat armor.

A miniaturized Etherite reactor created a glowing red circle at his chest, and from there, lines of bright red energy spread throughout like circuitry, powering various add-ons like wrist mounted guns, forearm projected plasmoid blades, personal shielding, and kinetic energy absorption fiber matrices.

In the guard's hands was a black assault rifle emblazoned with a blue logo consisting of a three headed dragon: the symbol of Imugi War Arts, the highest end weapons developer in the entire world.

This gun in particular was called the Hydra for it had multiple modes it could enter with experimental nanotechnology molding.

A smart link cable ran from the rifle's butt and attached to the back of the guard's helmet, linking the firearm to a variety of scanning functions and Imugi's famous Sure Kill auto aiming system that drew from an advanced localized artificial intelligence that ensured accuracy that exceeded human comprehension.

"Get Casimir down here!" said the man wearing shades to the valets in the guard tower. He eyed down the barrels of their guns with cool annoyance.

From an intercom system in the boom barrier, Casimir's voice projected outwards.

"I am right here, Mr. Peperelli. How can I be of assistance today?" said Casimir coyly.

"You know damn well what you did. There are rules in our line of work, Casimir, rules that I thought you of all people knew. Like not attacking a Connector, let alone abducting villains from across ten different organizations.

Release everyone you've taken hostage or suffer a sh*tstorm of consequence that will level this little club of yours down to smoking ashes," said Joe Peperelli, the manager of the Trident's small base in Haven.

"Ah, so you knew. Were you doing a little spying in my own club?" said Casimir.

"The Trident doesn't fuck around with new villain recruits. They're all micro-chipped for vitals and location. And now, they're all gone, warped to god knows where, and that includes Velus, our Connector, and the Butcher, one of our more important assets.

Not to mention the Blackwater A class. Do you know how many golden eggs you've taken with you? How many of those students that already had contracts to work with us or the rest of the Dark Six once they graduated?"

"I am fully aware, Mr. Peperelli. I brokered most of those deals, did I not?"

"Then what the fuck is this!?" Joe shrugged indignantly. "Ten years. Ten. Fucking. Years that you spent working with everyone, and this is what you pull? For what? For credits? Bruce Vane pay you more than what we were already funneling into you?"

"Let's call this a grand retirement party for my exit from the criminal underground."

"Oh, retirement, is it?" Joe laughed. "You think you're retiring, are you? You think you'll leave this place in more than one piece? You truly must have lost your mind. Alright, I have your answer.

You're going down, Casimir. If not today, then tomorrow, or the day after - you won't have a single day's worth of peace, I can guarantee you this. And that secretary of yours, I hope you enjoy seeing her in pieces-,"

"Please, Mr. Peperelli, you and I are both far too experienced in this line of work to know that you do not have to utter these threats. They are already implied," said Casimir. "Yet from what I can see, your base in Haven is small, as are the bases of the other Dark Six, if indeed they even have one.

All of you relied on my Red Circle to host you, and now, because you have such little presence here, you have very few forces. How are you proposing you break down our defenses with three cars worth of men?"

"Like I said, it doesn't have to be today. We can wait for reinforcements to come in. Where are yours? Who do you have? Who will back you now?" said Joe.

"You may be surprised by the answer to that question, Mr. Peperelli," said Casimir.

Joe scoffed. "Yeah, let's see. Enjoy your night, Casimir. Let's see if you get to live through it. Shame, too, because I really liked the drinks in this place."

Joe walked away, and immediately, when his back turned, the valets at the guard tower opened fire with their assault rifles.

Joe's guard raised a right hand and generated a field of rippling magnetic distortions that suspended the bullets in the air.

"Alright, Elites, let's get to work." Joe clapped his hands, and immediately, the three armored cars opened their doors. Several combat armored men streamed out with synchronized efficiency, forming an ever-moving wave of crimson faced specters of death.

Elites.

Within the Trident, combat personnel that did not have the best combat Alter powers became Footsoldiers that used their powers for utility while relying on armor, technology, and countless hours of training to refine their deadliness.

Among Footsoldiers, the highest class of them were the Elites. Squadrons of deadly veterans who had proven themselves across countless firefights and operations of high intensity. Many were veterans of the Corporate Wars of 2080 and 2090 when mega corporations and their hired or in house armies clashed.

Before the valets in the guard tower could adjust their aim, a trio of Elite soldiers gunned them down with perfect headshots. Another Elite held his secondary arm out like his forearm was a shield, and from it, a red forcefield riot shield emerged, blocking sentry turret shots.

Then, an Elite behind the shield generator transformed his assault rifle. Parts of the gun shimmered before breaking down into a cloud of nano-particles that then reformed into the bulkier barrel of a grenade launcher. He immediately reached into his utility belt, withdrew a trio of miniaturized grenade shells, loaded the gun, and fired.

The grenades, or rather more like explosive rounds, blew apart the sentry guns, reducing them to smoking, fiery scrap.

"Boys, the Red Circle is no joke, and though you might be over qualified to deal with their sh*tty in house villains and mercenaries, their actual staff is a serious threat. You'll need my help." Joe took down his shades, revealing grey eyes marked with cross shaped black pupils. "Stim up!"

As Joe's voice projected outwards, the twenty Elites shuddered violently as Joe's power, Stim Sound, affected their brains and bodies, causing them to massively overload in adrenaline and other fight or flight bodily processes.

They processed time slower with massively heightened reactions from their brains overclocking. They no longer felt pain. They became monstrously aggressive, and yet still in control of their training. Their strength and speed improved.

And on top of this, all the Elites pressed a button on the necks of their helmets. This caused their suits to introduce into their bodies a bonus stim cocktail of incredibly potent performance enhancing chemicals, swelling up their muscles.

Most of these Elites were technos with unenhanced physical bodies. However, they used their ability to interface with their combat technology, making up for this deficit, and with Joe's power, their stim cocktail, and high end cybernetic enhancements such as dermal plating, duraplastic laced bones, organ add-ons and organ failure safeties, they became a terrifying fighting force.

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Joe watched as his Elites made their way deeper and deeper towards the Red Circle. The valet tower was only the outer edge of the Red Circle's territory. The night club itself was still several blocks further in.

Yet, all the resistance he faced right now was pitiful.

There were a few mercenaries hiding behind cars, some E and D ranker villains, and air support from drones that fired down explosive charges or rained down gunfire.

The Elites carved a path of carnage through all of them. They released their own reconnaissance drones that mapped out any threat ahead of them, linking to their top of the line environmental awareness and threat detection scanning in their helmets.

Any combat drones they saw, they shot down with extreme accuracy, even though most of these drones zipped around on their rotor blades with the annoying agility of flies. Any mercenaries that threw grenades had their explosives shot down in literal mid air or even in the very instant their hands blinked out of whatever cover they hid behind.

The moment a mercenary popped out his head to try and fire back, he was head shot by an Elite whose infinitely faster reactions and better technology gave them every single edge possible.

The occasional Augmenter or mutant class villain would come charging by with armored skin or regenerative powers.

Hardened skin was dealt with through explosive ammunition or armor piercing rounds through soft spots such as the eye utilizing the Hydra's sniper form.

Mutants with regeneration were disabled with rounds to the brain before blown apart with planted plastic charges in their center, destroying too much of their bodies for them to regenerate.

There was no mercy.

Only clean, efficient execution.

Chapter 75: {red Circle Defense 2}

When the Red Circle was visible, that was when things became more difficult.

Actual Red Circle staff, noted by their white bulletproof suits - though not nearly protective enough to fend against Imugi-class firearms and ammunition - contended against the Elites.

Yet of these low-level staff could beat the Elites either. In terms of sheer training, the Red Circle staff were on par with the Elites, but the Elites outgunned and outarmored them too severely.

In exchanges of gunfire, explosives, and the occasional usage of Alter powers, the Elites came out on top.

Joe lost two Elites total while Casimir lost twelve of his personal staff, forcing them to retreat back behind the Red Circle's forcefield. The moment the staff was in protective range, raining down suppressive fire so that Joe and his Elites could not advance easily, the forcefield came up.

Joe lit up a cigar as he watched from far behind through a pair of binoculars.

His Elites were stationed behind whatever cover they could find in this urban jungle. Mostly cars and the walls of buildings. Some headed to the top of buildings to take up sniping spots, using activated kinesis fields on the soles of their boots to scale up vertical walls.

Once in defensive, entrenched position, all of them eyed the forcefield warily.

The Red Circle was ready for a siege. Its entrances and walls were shingled with neosteel plating, completely replacing the fancy façade with cold, hard, grey steel. But beyond this, the Red Circle's forcefield made it nigh impenetrable.

The most conventional way to deal with a forcefield generated with ether was to use an energy weapon, but this forcefield was strong enough that the plasma coil weapon forms on the Elites' Hydras would not punch through this.

For all intents and purposes, this was a deadlock.

And yet, Joe could not help but feel uneasy. None of the elite staff of the Red Circle had shown up.

Walters, Hirondele, Cubehead, Smoke, and Spybird.

Each of these aside from Cubehead were strong and trained enough that conventional gun and armor soldiers could not easily deal with them.

Yet, Joe had prepared counter measures.

Hirondele's Violet Swallow form consisted of pure energy that made her immune to almost any form of gunfire or explosive, but Joe had prepared powerful Kinesis Generators that placed artificial gravity fields which could hold her in place, and then it was simply a matter of changing the force vectors in the fields to tear her apart.

Walters was fast, strong, and had high regeneration, but the Elites all had in reserve on their belts a special type of corrosive ammunition chemically tailored specifically to negate his healing.

Cubehead could generate warp traps from cube shaped constructs, but these had a specific energy signature that the Elites' scanning systems had in their database, preventing them from ever letting it catch them by surprise.

Smoke was a melee fighter who could phase into smoke form, and she could reform from being dispersed. Yet, she was still just smoke. Flash freezing charges could completely entrap her.

Spybird was the Red Circle's head of technological operations. He had little combat power by himself, but his strongest drone, the Albatross, was a mechanical menace that had enough firepower to wipe out the Elites wholesale, not to mention it had powerful EMP shielding.

But Joe had prepped techno Elites among his crew with viruses developed by a high-end Trident techno specifically to render the Albatross unusable.

It was a shame that Joe's preparation, preparation he had made from the tiniest suspicion he got years ago that the Red Circle might one day turn rogue, did not see the light of day.

Not yet, at least.

It was obvious Casimir was holding out under his forcefield.

This was an idiotic maneuver because, as Joe had made clear, Casimir had no more help.

No reinforcements.

Meanwhile, Joe had already called the Trident's main body and the rest of the Dark Six. They would send in their higher-class villains, and then the Red Circle was over.

Granted, this might take days, but it would still happen.

And what did Casimir have to counter that? His finite, ever dwindling staff numbers and a forcefield that could stay up for what?

Three more hours? Four?

Casimir was done. He might even fall tonight.

Joe received a call. He flipped out his phone and answered it. "Yeah? About damn time."

He smiled. Talk about reinforcements, huh.

Within minutes, three individuals came to Joe's position.

One was a large, hulking mechanical humanoid with huge red shoulder pauldrons, red plated armor, and a spherical head glowing with a horizontal blue line that stood in for eyes.

His each and every moment was heavy, clanking and whirring with hydraulic pressure. On his shoulder was a menacing mounted cannon large enough that it looked like it could bust a bunker.

The other two were more normal looking individuals, a man and a woman respectively.

The man was tall, heavily built, and had on a perpetual angry scowl. His hair was cut in a military buzzcut and his stern square jaw made it obvious that he never enjoyed anything in life. Overall, he was relatively simple in appearance, just muscle and plain black bodysuit.

The woman was far more elaborate in aesthetic. She was also tall, taller even than the man, standing in easily at six foot three (1.9 meters) with a slim but strong, athletic build that showed the curvature of her muscles through skintight body armor that had a regal gold, blue and white color scheme.

Her face had fine, refined features marked noticeably by a diagonal scar that ran from the top of her right eye down to her chin. Blue hair tied up in a ponytail trailed behind her.

On her shoulders were small golden pauldrons tapered out into golden feathers.

Two large strands of blue feather-shaped flexi-steel streamed from her back, flowing with her each and every movement gracefully. In her hand was a white metal rapier handle that hummed with a blue miniature etherite reactor embedded in its crossguard.

From the handle, a thin blade of bright blue plasmoid energy flickered.

"Good to see Blackwater cares about their assets," said Joe as he spat out his cigar and ground it under his foot. "Nice to see you. Clank, Darius, and Colette."

Blackwater's three combat instructors gave Joe a curt nod, but they mostly looked ahead, ahead with firm resolution to the Red Circle that had taken their students.

With the students gone, Blackwater would fall under large scale investigation. There was only so much the Dark Six could do to shield Blackwater from the government. The mass disappearance of fifteen students was beyond what the Dark Six could do.

And under investigation, Blackwater would have no choice but to dissolve and fade away into the shadows.

The comfortably paid lives that Clank, Darius Fletcher, and Colette lived now would disappear just like that.

And they were not about to let their money vanish into the smoke like that.

"You see that forcefield? I'm not equipped to deal with it-," began Joe.

"I got it. Just tell your men to get the fuck back." Darius Fletcher stepped forwards, into the open, and his entire body lit up, turning a bright molten orange. Waves of heat shimmered all around him, and each step he took, the ground under his feet melted.

"Gun him down!" shouted a Red Circle staff from behind the forcefield. The forcefield was configured so that any matter from within could phase directly out of it without much issue.

Dozens of gun barrels flickered like little stars as bullets rained down on Darius.

Darius trudged forwards with zero hesitation. The bullets hit his body and either bounced off or melted into nothingness. An explosion rocked the side of Darius's head, blowing off a large chunk of his skull.

Several massive rounds from the cannons and larger turrets on the Red Circle gouged out chunks from Darius's body.

Darius paused for a second as his head and body regenerated from molten material. He then began a fast sprint towards the forcefield and slammed into it. He put both his glowing orange hands on the surface of the field, and as he did so, the normally

translucent forcefield flickered in varying shades of blue as it warped and twisted under the intense heat and energy.

Darius roared as a bright white sphere inside his stomach glowed visibly through his molten body. His heat output increased exponentially, and the forcefield began to slowly cave inwards like a piece of glass twisting under heat.

"Retreat inside! Back to the Red Circle!" Immediately, the Red Circle staff filed into the night club, opening up the fortified neosteel doors just long enough that the last man could retreat in before closing shut.

Not one second after the staff retreated within, the forcefield broke apart. Like a system short circuiting from one fried wire, it only took a small surface area of a forcefield to break for the entire thing to power down.

"Get in here, you maggots! I've only shorted the field out! It might come back up again!" shouted Darius as he waved everyone forwards.

His head blew apart into molten goo from another large caliber turret shot, and he angrily looked up and fired a pressurized blast of lava at the turret, melting it before encasing it in a tomb of cooling rock.

Chapter 76: {the Final Act}

Joe Peperelli considered himself a cautious man. As someone who needed others to work his powers through, he knew when to keep both friend and foe alike close.

That cautiousness bled into everything else he did, or else he would not have survived in the cutthroat world of the criminal underground.

"Wait!" Joe shouted to his Elites before they could get into range of Fletcher, and, consequently, the turret fire raining down on the combat instructor. "Elites, hold defensive entrenchment. Shield line formation delta!"

Several elites filed in front of each other and unlatched large metal discs with glowing red centers. They planted the discs at their feet and crouched down, pressing a few touchscreen buttons.

The discs crackled with red energy before opening up, exposing glowing red circuitry and moving mechanical parts.

Large front facing shields of energy formed from these discs, and behind them, groups of three Elites crouched for cover.

"What is it now!?" said Darius as he withstood more barrages of large caliber gunfire and energy blasts from the dozen or so turrets installed in the Red Circle's façade. Crawler drones skittered across the walls, firing volleys of seeker missiles and adding to this damage.

Darius, however, was practically invincible.

Like many Alters whose powers transmuted their bodies into specific elements or energies, he was invulnerable to conventional firearms and possessed no real vital organs to hit.

The only real weakness was the white core in his chest that functioned like an engine to boost his heat and lava output, but destroying that did not kill Darius, it just limited his magma output temporarily.

Unlike many other Alter powers that transmuted the body fully into a different form, he also did not need to eat, drink, or breathe while maintaining this state, essentially rendering his energy levels the only definite timer on his power.

The only way to beat Darius was by destroying every single part of his body in a single instant, preventing him from regenerating or dunking him in deep water where his lava form would solidify and entrap him.

Even so, it was annoying to deal with all the hits he was taking because he needed to expend energy to regenerate.

Darius shot forth globs of magma with expert accuracy at the turrets he found, disabling them one by one.

"None of the Red Circle higher ups are here. They may be planning an ambush within! And we need to remain careful, especially of Cubehead and his warp traps!

My Elites will provide suppressive fire and snipe any drones, but you three will have to deal with breaking through the main door!" Joe nodded to an Elite, and several of them reached into their combat packs and took out spinning disc shaped drones that cloaked shimmered, cloaking themselves.

These reconnaissance drones had no offensive power, but they had advanced scanning systems that had Cubehead's energy signatures locked into them.

"Fucking pansies, gonna sit behind those shields and hold onto your balls like that, huh? And Red Circle higher ups!?" Darius laughed derisively. "Don't get funny with me, Joe. You and your 'Elites' might be scared sh*tless of them, but each of us from Blackwater is worth three Red Circle sh*tstains!"

Darius, however, relented to Joe's plan. He looked back after he finished disabling the last of the turrets. "Clank!"

"Get your lil' pea shooters out of my face," said Clank to the Elites as he trudged forwards, all of his heavy metallic parts clanking and clicking, emitting the sound of hydraulic pressure hissing from pistons external and internal.

He looked like a living tank, awe inspiring in his bulk and sheer power. He knelt down, and his three large metal toes extended out before hooking into the asphalt below, cracking into the ground for a firm hold.

His enormous red shoulder cannon lowered, and the barrel began to light up orange and spin. Patterns of blue energy lit up all around the length of the red weapon of mass destruction. The cannon aimed square at the Red Circle's main door.

Where before the door was a discrete yet stylish double door of tinted glass decorated with golden floral patterns at its frame, it was now a fortified grey Neosteel frame at least half a meter thick.

No conventional firearm would ever get through that.

But Clank did not believe in conventional. No, he did not believe in anything that did not generate an explosion loud enough to rupture an eardrum. Go big or go home was his motto, and he lived by it.

A deafening, rumbling crack echoed through the air as Clank's giant body recoiled. The ground under his anchored feet shattered.

The sound of metal exploding, literally shattering into pieces under unfathomable impact, pierced through the air.

Neosteel was the most durable metal on the market that was not techno custom made. It involved a 'smart' atomic structure that incorporated nanotechnology to shape itself in the most efficient structure against any specific type of damage or impact.

It was flexible, durable, adaptable, and, in the Red Circle's case, upgraded even further so that it was also heat proof and shock absorbent, making it bomb proof.

But now, that magnificent neosteel door had been blown apart like glass, its broken pieces smoking and blackened from impact.

Clank opened his metal mouth, and steam and smoke hissed out as he exhaled and stood up, detaching from the floor. "Nothing beats the boom of a railgun, I tell you. Nothing."

"Scan the insides - we don't want to deal with any ambushes!" said Joe. The Elites moved quickly, using handheld controllers to sending out their recon drones into the broken main door to scan the insides for threats.

"All clear!" said an Elite.

"ALL clear? No hostiles, either?" Joe narrowed his eyes.

Not a single trap in sight and not even any personnel to try and defend? Something was off.

"Yes sir. All clear," repeated an Elite.

Joe worried for a moment before calming down. If it was just himself and his Elites, he would be hesitant to push through.

But he had three of Blackwater's combat instructors with him, and they gave him all the assurance he needed.

Clank and Fletcher were solid B rank villains. Colette at B+.

At the B rank, villains and heroes alike became legitimate, recognized threats.

The Red Circle's higher ups were strong, yes, but they were either at the highest end of C rank or on the low end of B.

There was just that much of a divide between the C and B ranks. The difference between those that were just strong and those that were exceptional.

Darius Fletcher was not exaggerating when he stated he could deal with three of the Red Circle's higher ups.

In a direct engagement, it was probably true.

Feeling more confident, Joe waved to his men.

"Squadrons 1 and 2, spread out and mobilize!" said Joe. "Flush anyone out with smoke and flashes. If you detect Cubehead's trap cubes, break them with sonic grenades."

Cubehead could create small black cubes of energy that he could remotely activate or have detonate in foreign presences, causing the cubes to expand and warp individuals to other locations.

However, these cubes were fragile like glass, and sonic suppressant grenades could release far reaching waves of force that could easily shatter them without the need to ever risk nearing them.

Ten of Joe's men moved forwards, sweeping the area around them with side to side scans of their Hydra assault rifles.

They moved quickly but carefully, and entered into the Red Circle bit by bit, allowing those ahead to cover for those behind, making it so that if there was an ambush, losses could be minimized.

Joe was careful enough to keep the rest of his eight men outside, just in case something happened here.

Darius watched the Elites file in. "So? Any threats?"

"Not yet," said Joe as he saw the last of the ten Elites from his two advance squadrons move in. "Dance floor is secure. Second floor is being secured as we speak."

"They must be concentrating their defenses on the third floor. Where Casimir is holed up like a rat." Darius spat a glob of magma on the ground. It melted and sizzled into the asphalt. "We'll tear him out of there soon enough."

"Hostiles! Above!" one of Joe's elites suddenly shouted.

Joe immediately whipped his head.

A veritable flock of drones buzzed above, descending towards everyone outside. Some of these drones were combat drones, but many were just utility or commercial grade.

"No explosives!" shouted an Elite, confirming that they were not suicide bomb drones. But then what the fuck was this? Without bombs strapped to these drones, the vast majority of them were just chunks of flying metal.

"Gun them down! Use your EMP charges! We take no risks here!" said Joe.

Joe's eight elites knelt down and rapidly gunned down the swarm of drones above with volleys of explosive rounds. They tossed up EMP charges in locations where the drone swarm was thickest, disabling large swatches of them.

"Casimir must be getting real fucking desperate if this is his idea of a distraction," laughed Darius as he crossed his arms and looked at the dense cloud of random drones above.

"Wait! Hostiles! Switching to anti-unit fire!" said an Elite.

Now that the cloud of drones had been thinned enough, it was possible to see that there were people hidden within. White suited men and women with some form of flight capability whether it was levitation or through wings.

"The Strike Squad!" shouted Joe. "Take them out before they reach us!"

The Red Circle's Strike Squad consisted of its airborne staff that functioned like cavalry, making quick strikes in and out with their mobility. Joe had been on guard against them. He knew that they would not fight in the insides of the Red Circle where their flight was restricted.

But throughout the night, the Strike Squad had never shown up.

Not until now, when Joe had allowed his confidence to lapse just a tiny bit, splitting his Elites up in half.

Joe's mind raced. The cloud of drones had also hidden the Strike Squad not only in a mass of metal, but there was enough interference generated from the mass of drones that it was impossible for the Elites to scan them out beforehand.

Yet the Strike squad was still high enough up that they would suffer horrible losses before getting close.

Already, Joe could see members of the Strike Squad grunting or yelping in pain as bullets struck them, many of these bullets going through their heads to instantly kill them. Several bodies dropped out of the air, crashing into the ground and bleeding out of holes punched into their brains.

Out of the twenty or so Strike Squad members, maybe only three or four would land on the ground without injuries, and then what?

Blackwater's faculty would just annihilate them.

"Where's Hirondelle!?" said Joe. His eyes darted from side to side as he tried to find the leader of the Strike Squad. Without Hirondelle, this attack was meaningless.

She was the only one with enough power to put up a fight against Blackwater faculty, and yet, even she was hilariously outmatched against three faculty members.

"She's not there!" shouted an Elite.

"Cube energy signatures scanned!" said another Elite.

At the mention of cubes, Darius immediately perked his head up and grew serious, the laugh wiping off his face. He started to blast forth streams of magma up to try and thin out the Strike Squad.

Clank could not do anything. He was recharging from using his railgun.

Joe stared at Colette as she just stood there with a hand on her hip and bored expression on her face, looking at the mass of whining drones and flying Alters above.

"What?" said Colette in distinctive French accent. "I can't fly."

Joe turned away from Colette and to his men.

"Snipe those with cubes! Ignore all others! Squadrons 1 and 2, recall!" shouted Joe. He understood what was happening. The Strike Squad was essentially committing a suicide attack to try and throw down Cubehead's warp cubes to try and teleport everyone away.

Joe saw as his elites expertly began to snipe those holding the cubes, but Strike squad members without cubes acted like meat shields, soaking up bullets as long as they could.

Too late.

"Warp defense formation!" shouted Joe. The Elites gathered in groups of three as they continued to fire, making sure they would not be alone when warped away.

Yet those with the cubes did not focus on the Elites.

They made beelines towards Blackwater's three faculty. When they got close enough to the ground, the final three members of the Strike Squad tossed a cube at each of the three combat instructors.

"Fuck!" Darius tried to reach out and shoot magma at the cube in front of him.

"Welp." Clank saw the cube hover in front of his face.

Colette shrugged at the cube in front of her, knowing nothing she did right now mattered. At this range, destroying the cubes would still trigger its warp effect.

The cubes expanded and engulfed each combat instructor in a cube of inky black before vanishing away.

In exchange, the Elites immediately gunned down the last of the Strike Squad, killing them all.

Joe looked around at the battlefield.

Twenty white suited bodies were scattered all across the ground, some slung over streetlights, some crashed into cars, some splattered on the ground from freefall after getting shot in the head.

Fires from Darius and ammunition based explosions crackled and roared in the night breeze.

Countless broken drones sputtered all around, loosing an eerie mechanical elegy for the dead.

"All squadrons, return to me! Defensive entrenchment! Keep your Red Circle contingencies on hand!" said Joe. He adapted to this sudden turn of events. He did not panic. Time was still on his side.

Casimir had lost all of his Strike Squad to warp the Blackwater faculty away, and those were the strongest among his non higher ups. The rest were fodder that Joe's elites could gun down.

The only issue was the higher ups themselves.

Probably, Casimir thought that without the Blackwater faculty, Joe's Elites were defenseless against the Red Circle higher ups.

Joe smiled as he put on his shades again, his rapidly beating heart starting to calm again.

Little did Casimir know, Joe had prepared a contingency plan against all of the Red Circle's higher ups. The corrosive rounds for Walters, the kinesis fields for Hironnelle, and the viruses against Spybird's tech - all of this still gave Joe the upper hand.

Joe almost wanted Casimir to bring out his higher ups. He wanted to imagine how Casimir would despair when those he considered strongest and closest to himself were systematically and cleanly executed by Joe's Elites.

"Wha-?" Joe dropped his shades as he felt blood trickle from his mouth. He looked down and saw a serrated dirk of black metal made slick by...his blood? It jutted out of his chest, where his heart was.

Joe's knees failed and he fell on the ground... The force of the blade ripping out of him turned him around on his back, and he looked up to see the last thing before he died: the cold, inhuman stare of a fleshless bare skull.

Chapter 77: Dying Sun

Brilliant solar explosion after explosion rocked the insides of Volantis's boss arena, linking into a strangely beautiful chain of golden novas that formed a network of glimmering lights that looked like a constellation.

What drew this constellation was Seth Solar punching Volantis over and over and over and over again in hyperspeed. Each of his mighty punches loosed not only a shockwave of enormous kinetic force, but a burst of light as his solar energy reserves burst out of him.

Volantis shot around like a pinball, gouging out craters in the ground, walls, and ceiling as Seth Solar punched him, then flew to him at hyperspeed, punched him again, and repeated this process over a hundred times.

Volantis could do nothing but ball up and put his arms out in front of his head in a guard. He had used [Organ Stitching] to make himself as fire and physical damage resistant as possible, wrapping himself in thick coils of muscle, sturdy plate like scales, and layering himself on top of that with dragon flame sac lining.

But though Volantis could dramatically reduce the damage he took, he did not have the raw physical stats to keep up with Seth Solar.

Seth Solar was absurdly fast right now, faster than what the human eye could perceive, faster than a speeding bullet, and against his onslaught, all Volantis could do was weather the solar storm.

After another onslaught of punches, Seth Solar's aura of glowing orange and bright golden light started to dim over time. His breathing became heavier, his flight speed lagging and his blows weakening in their sheer destructive intensity.

Energy seemed to leak out of him, shooting out from his body in strands of orange that dissolved in the air, leaving in their wake a trail of glimmering gold sparkles. Like the remnants of a dying star going supernova.

"DIE!" Seth Solar unleashed one more solid punch against Volantis from above, shooting the living armor down into the scorched, cratered ground below. This blow embedded Volantis in the deepest crater made so far, the cracks of the environmental damage streaking out through nearly the entire arena.

Seth Solar breathed in and out with deep, gasping breaths, and each time he exhaled, a little more of his solar energy streamed out. He looked at the arena around him with glowing golden eyes that dimmed more and more by the second.

Zayn had balled up in a coat of defensive feathers, preventing himself from dying to collateral damage.

The Butcher, on the other hand, was not so lucky. The simple after shocks of solar energy gusts and force shockwaves from Seth Solar's intense barrage had torn the Butcher's body apart, leaving his bits scattered everywhere.

But due to the nature of the Butcher's ability, it was possible the villain was still alive.

Not that it mattered to Seth. In a battle of this scale, the Butcher was useless. He looked down at Volantis, wondering if the damned thing was dead.

Volantis was still in the middle of his smoking crater, all of his muscle and newly formed organs charred to a black crisp.

"F-fuck..." Seth felt more of his energy leave him in streaks, and he held off on his flying, slowly falling back down to the ground. "Something's... something's wrong."

He looked down at his hands. His energy was leaving him, his golden aura fading as it dissolved into little twinkling sparkles that faded into the darkness of the arena. He fully expected to lose a vast amount of stored solar energy, but that was because he knew he was going to use it all up. Right now, he was losing energy without even doing anything.

The color of his normal skin started to return as his shining gold aura faded, and that was when his eyes widened as he saw black streaks within his visible veins.

"Kryptic!?" The realization hit Seth as his vision blurred. He felt deeply sick to his core, his strength leaving him in waves.

"Impressive. Truly, truly commendable." Volantis emerged from his crater, piles of burnt rubble spilling from his huge frame. He moved shakily, and no longer did he regenerate damage to his armor, revealing a host of scorch marks and melted, warped holes. "Your flesh is strong. Very strong. I can hear your bones screaming under the oppression of that mighty flesh.

Thus, it is my burden to bear to free those bones of yours."

Volantis put his right hand over his left forearm. "I do not know if I can use this power, for my levels have been reduced considerably. But I no longer possess the strength to fight you otherwise."

With a solemn chat, Volantis uttered the words - "[Part Stitching: Arm of the Blood God]"

A massive surge of crimson energy burst out from Volantis as he emitted a war cry that thundered throughout the arena. The entire arena lit up a shade of threatening red as Volantis's burned metal body started to line with veiny streaks of brightly glowing red, forming a circulatory system that branched out from his left arm.

The left arm itself turned into a shade of pure red, almost like an energy construct.

Volantis trudged forwards, his steps shaky and weak while he supported his glowing red left arm up with his right hand, as if his left arm was an enormously heavy weapon.

Seth Solar fell to a knee as he watched Volantis slowly walk towards him, that red arm of his with its claws outstretched ready to make lethal contact. He grit his teeth as he tried to muster up power in his eyes to unleash a solar beam, but with the Boost wearing off and Kryptic circulating through his system, his eyes only managed to flash gold before crackling, unable to build up energy.

Seth grunted in pain as he rubbed his eyes, looking down, and that was when he saw a case land in front of him. The blue glow of a Boost vial emanated temptingly at him. Of the three vials he had come with, this was the only one left.

The other one -

A dark mass rushed over Seth's head with a squall of wind trailing behind it. Seth looked up to see Zayn colliding against Volantis. Zayn had Boosted himself, turning his humanoid form entirely into that of an avian variant.

He looked like an enormous crow-eagle hybrid covered in thick coatings of sharp, midnight black feathers. A whirlwind of feathers floated around him in a tornado of slashing blades.

"Gah!" Volantis skid backwards as he held out his Blood God arm against Zayn's supersonic approach. Volantis buckled down to one knee as the red sphere of light in his helmet started to dim, indicating near death.

But the Blood God's arm had enough strength to stop Zayn as Zayn loosed a bestial roar and bit down on Volantis's shoulder, tearing right into the sturdy metal with a sharp red beak. Six red eyes gleamed menacingly from Zayn's head, all of them directed in killing intent against Volantis.

Volantis knew that even a second more spent against this crow creature would lead to his own death. He activated the Blood God's arm.

The glowing red arm's claws sunk into Zayn's chest, easily tearing through the metallic feathers, and once they fit yielding, blood-filled flesh -

Zayn's body ruptured as stakes of hardened blood burst out of his body from within, completely skewering him from the inside out.

Zayn loosed a piercing cry of pain before his head hung limp, his stiffened feathers growing soft. The whirlwind of feathers raging around him stopped moving, softly falling to the ground.

Volantis shook Zayn's body off the side.

"Now, only you are left-," Volantis trudged forwards with hellbent determination. Bloody stakes started to rupture out from his own armor body. The side effects of drawing upon the power of a level 100 Blood God far beyond what his current form could withstand.

But even as the stakes emerged, ripping through his armor and ravaging his life force, he continued forwards, ever forwards, for at heart, long, long ago when he was still a man of flesh and blood over bone, he had been a noble warrior, and true warriors always saw their fights to the very bitter end.

No compromise. No surrender. No retreat.

Not when your comrades fall one after the other, leaving you alone in a sea of blood.

Not even when you are beaten, bloodied, and torn asunder.

Not even when your flesh is torn from your bones.

No, when there is nothing but bone left, that is when you are truly free.

This is what Volantis thought as he made his way to Seth Solar on the last dregs of his hit points.

Seth took the Boost vial before him, raised it over his open mouth, and snapped it in half. The liquid fed into him, and once again, a huge burst of solar energy radiated out from him. Boost was far less effective when used successively, not to mention the Kryptic poisoning, so Seth Solar could only generate a temporary chunk of energy that would fade away rapidly.

But this was all he needed.

"You're done," said Seth coldly as he concentrated the small burst of energy into his eyes, firing off twin mighty rays of searing golden heat that washed over Volantis.

Volantis's black silhouette crumbled away in that light, disintegrating into nothingness. When the light faded, all that remained of him was a small red orb, no larger than a tennis ball - the core of his being that had been in his helmet.

The orb glimmered red before dimming down into a mute grey, indicating Volantis's death.

Seth made his way over to Zayn's corpse. He knelt down by the giant crow and realized with some surprise that Zayn was still breathing. But death was inevitable.

The stakes that jutted out from all around his body meant that Zayn's internal organs were all shredded. It was by pure variant tenacity that he could even stay alive like this.

Not to mention the Kryptic poisoning left Zayn with zero chance of ever recovering even if he was rushed to the best hospital in the entire world at this very moment.

"Why the fuck did you do that, Zayn? You think I needed help?" Seth's voice lost its regular edge. He spoke softly, or as softly as he knew how to. "You and I, we were both supposed to live and be strong.

Strong enough that we could break free from the lives they forced on us.

I treated you and only you right because I thought you and I were the same. Because you understood me. We knew what it took to survive, how much we had to kill and take.

I thought we would both make it together. Stand at the top of this world no matter how many bodies we had to pile beneath us.

And now, look at you."

Seth shook his head at Zayn's fatal wounds. The last of his solar energy started to fade away, dissolving away his aura of gold fully to leave his bare skin and face. "We were supposed to show them we had a fucking choice.

That we were strong enough to tell this sick world to go fuck itself so that we could live our own lives with our own choices.

How the fuck are you going to do that when you're dead?"

Zayn breathed slowly, the air in his throat rattling, heralding his passing. His six red, black pupils landed on Seth. "I...did have...choice. I made...choice. Regret..."

Zayn's eyes closed, his consciousness fading as blood pooled out in huge quantities from his horrendous wounds.

Seth felt the blood warm under him as he saw Zayn suffering. He shook his head again and put his hand on Zayn's head before twisting his friend's neck, instantly killing him to end his suffering.

Seth stood up, breathing deeply as he looked at his blood-soaked, black veined body. He looked around at the arena, waiting for it to dissolve.

That was when he heard a faint rumbling from behind him, from the entrance of the arena. Footsteps echoed. He turned around, and then his eyes widened in impossible surprise.

"Y-you!" began Seth.

"How does it feel, Seth, to lose your friends one by one?" said Aldrich as he made his way towards Seth with his suit on.

Aldrich saw the Butcher's decapitated head and grabbed it, inspecting it like a piece of fine art. "Ah, you're still alive. Excellent."

He took the Butcher's head and shoved it into his chest where his Chrysalis generated a small black portal to absorb it.

He then reached Volantis's grey core and tapped it, emblazoning a green sigil on it to raise for later.

Finally, he stared at Zayn's corpse when he got close enough to Seth. "To be honest, I was even surprised you could even make a friend like this. That you even cared about someone. You didn't give a sh*t about the rest of your gang dying."

Aldrich stared down at Seth's bloodied body as he tore open the chest of his suit, revealing the phylactery that replaced his heart. The purple orb crackled with arcs of energy, reacting to the near completion of the [Ritual of Eternity].

"But the fact that I managed to rip something precious from your heart almost makes me feel like my own is whole again."

Chapter 78: {the Ocean's Call}

In the depths of the Atlantic Ocean, several kilometers away from Haven City -

Inside an enormous cavern, in water so deep that not a single ray of light dared to trespass, the mangled body of a giant manta ray curled up in a ball. It loosed a ghostly siren wail of pain that traveled through the dark waters, but found no call of pity to soothe it back.

For these waters were empty, the cavern itself located in what was known as a 'Null Zone' that generated black spots where no Ether based power could observe. The latent Ether in these areas also formed a naturally concealing barrier that prevented conventional surveillance from breaching.

In this cave of privacy, the manta shuddered as its form grew increasingly fragile and thin. Its spines, once large and fierce and capable of generating mass quantities of lightning, were now reduced down to nubs. The white and blue flesh of its majestic wingspan shriveled and dried into a dark husk.

The many wounds on its head had sealed over but now opened up again as the creature exerted itself.

Blood pooled out from deep scars that reached dangerously close to its brain.

But the manta did not care about its own health.

It cared only about one thing -

It curled itself up into a tighter ball, keeping its flesh wrapped over a rippling orb of grey slime.

In here, something terrible, something horrible, gestated.

The silhouette of an eerie infant form shuddered and convulsed as it grew and grew by the moment within this womb of slime and flesh.

Helical strands of eerie glowing blue fed into the infant from the manta, and as these strands streamed out, the manta grew thinner and thinner.

These were nutrients and genetic material from the many the manta had dissolved with its slimes and variants that she had devoured during her hunts over the past six months.

Cleanse the Rot.

This was the instinctive message drilled into the manta when she came into contact with the Voice.

But she had failed.

The Rot was too strong.

The Rot's carriers, the 'humans', were too much to overcome with their walls and mighty fighters, and now the manta accepted her impending death from her injuries.

But the manta entrusted that her precious child would succeed where she had fallen.

Cleanse the Rot, the manta whispered deep into the depths of her unborn child's psyche, deep into its genetic memory.

The manta grew thinner and thinner, until finally, it had been absorbed into the very womb of slime it had created, turned into the final burst of nutrients and energy needed for her child to be born.

The grey slime womb crystallized solid, turning many shades darker, almost into a black crystal suspended within these dark and lonely waters.

The infant within was nearly fully formed now, and surprisingly, it was far, far smaller than its mother.

Its silhouette was shaped like the carriers of the Rot, its body upright with two arms, and two legs, and it was not much larger than the carriers, those humans.

Yet, within that tiny body, there was undeniable power -

The crystal cocoon started to shatter as the silhouette's large, circular eyes glowed a distinct azure blue. Cracks wreathed all around the womb-prison, and light shone brightly out of it as contained, built up might struggled to spill out.

Then, the cocoon shattered, and a pillar of blue energy rumbled outwards, piercing through the ocean and into the skies, and thus, with the rumbling of thunder, the Call was sent out and the Herald born.

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Among districts in Haven, it was an indisputable fact that the highest concentration of suited up, heartless corporate workers with the fattest credit accounts lived in the Financial District.

Here, the corporate worker bees and their higher ups, all collectively called Suits, toiled endlessly for their mega-corporations, specifically for Hammerhead Industries that dominated the Haven's northern manufacturing district and Nautilus Moving that held a tight monopoly over Haven's shipping.

In Haven Center, the streets became cleaner. High end ARMA police rotated around in their cobalt blue combat suits, ensuring that no common street thug could even dream of stepping foot in these wealthy streets.

No, the only crime that they allowed was crime perpetuated by the Suits themselves, because at the end of the day, mega corporations were just glorified gangs pumped up to a multinational scale.

Their white collars were not above staining with blood, as evidenced by the three great Corpo-Wars of 2080, 2090, and 2100 that shed blood on the order of hundreds of thousands.

It was a common saying among regular folk that 'where there were Suits, there were walls', and this held no less true for Haven's city center. The Central District was defended by its own set of walls independent of the Panopticon and government funded walls of the city proper.

These walls were far higher tech, personally commissioned by the wealthy to protect them. Not to mention it kept out lower class citizens.

Within these walls, inside the penthouse suite of the White Rose, an internationally renowned five-star hotel, two men sat on a luxuriously cushioned couch as they

watched a wide telescreen projecting images of brutal, bloody battle that completely contrasted with the clean, cool white marbles and golds and floral patterns that decorated the walls of their room.

"So, what do you think? Wouldn't it be fun to just show up and screw with them?" said a red, blue, and gold costumed man as he bared an eager grin. His costume seemed almost elegant, its body armor and fabric designed to mimic a rather dapper overcoat and suit getup.

His eyes flashed with bright color, his white pupils lined with three rings of red, blue and gold matching his costume.

At the center of his costume that barely hid the curvature of his muscles was the roman numeral III.

This was Hat Trick. A- rank hero.

"What's the point? We would just be dealing with small fry," said a powerfully built giant of a man with a much plainer suit. It was brown with stony crack patterns like the earth with heavy mechanical bracers of white that made his arms look enormous like those of belonging to a gorilla.

This was Seismic. Also A- rank hero.

The two A rank heroes stationed in Haven in case there were further Variant attacks.

"True, true," said Hat Trick. "It's like I'm looking at a D list carnival. Weak ass villains just shooting each other up, hah! Doesn't it kinda make you want to just show up, you know, in the name of public safety and all, and just utterly stomp these fools? Just to show them that there's way, way bigger fish out there?"

"Not particularly," said Seismic. He shrugged his boulder-like shoulders.

"Oh come on, you like breaking things, don't you? Don't you want to just go out there and break these villains in half?" said Hat Trick with an eager smile, waiting for an excuse to leave.

"Yeah. But it's an unhealthy urge, and I don't like feeding into it. Messes with the whole hero job," said Seismic. "Plus I've been eight years free from any unnecessary breaking incidents. Don't want to lose that streak now."

"But these are villains, Seismic. They deserve to get broken." Hat Trick motioned to the screen where his Navigator, a techno specialized in providing surveillance and reconnaissance for heroes, transmitted video feed and images of the scuffle happening at the Red Circle.

"Yeah, probably. But you know the rules. If villains fight among each other, you leave them alone. Better to let them thin out their own numbers," said Seismic. "But I'll give you this: if they involve civilians somehow, I would be willing to go there with you."

"I didn't know you were this boring, Seismic," said Hat Trick with a roll of his strangely colored eyes.

"I'm fifty years old, Hat Trick, and I have a baby boy that watches the news to see how much of a hero his dad is. Breaking villain spines on live TV isn't exactly great for that," said Seismic. "Maybe even ten years ago, I would have gone, but now?"

No, not really."

Seismic struck a concerned look at Hat Trick. "You know, sometimes I worry that you have an even worse addiction for violence than me, and my addiction's medically diagnosed. A side effect of my power needing me to shatter things or something.

You should get yourself checked out."

Hat Trick scoffed. "I'm fine. I'm just bored as all hell waiting for something to happen in this sh*tty city. I don't see any variants attacking, and I'm not about to do some low level sh*t like stopping the local convenience store from getting robbed.

Figured this whole Red Circle thing was the next best thing to get myself moving."

"Still, I wonder about the consequences of this," said Seismic. He scratched his slicked back grey and black hair. "The Red Circle going rogue? The Trident mobilizing forces against them? And those three B ranker villains too, I thought they were MIA.

But they show up now all of a sudden?

Something big must have happened."