

Super Necromancer System

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Chapter 79: {the Ocean's Call 2}

"Beats me. I just kind of wanted to go out there and flex my muscles a little. I don't hide the fact that I love to crush the weak, whether they're whimpering variant beasts or weakling Alters.

But yeah, seems like this isn't worth it.

Not like stopping this fight is going to net us any real AP. Might as well wait for them to get civilians in the crossfire to up any AP gains, but even then, villains are real careful these days to keep their fights all self-contained, so meh." Hat Trick yawned as he realized his chances of going out and beating up villains diminished by the moment.

But honestly, as he noted, it was not really worth it either.

Heroes received AP (achievement points) based on successful missions that determined their placement in rankings and potential for promotion.

But variant attacks provided the most AP while apprehending villains provided far less.

As a result, most low tier heroes who were not strong enough to go out and fight variants and instead had to help dealing with street level crime in neighborhood patrols or whatnot faced plenty of ridicule.

They were dubbed 'Janitors' that swept the streets of petty crime instead of being strong enough to defend humanity against variant attacks.

The real heroes were those who could stand up to flashy giant monster attacks and save countless lives.

This lenient attitude towards villains, especially compared to during the Age of Villains where they were feared as tyrant overlords, occurred due to reforms that occurred after the Monstering where a huge move for a unified humanity against variants started.

And, at the end of the day, villains were still humans.

Many villains joined heroes and sacrificed their lives to fight against the extinction level threats of the Titans at the start of the Monstering. This gave villains far more leeway to pursue their way of life.

So long as villains did not threaten society as a whole or directly injure large quantities of human life, heroes generally did not engage with them significantly.

Plus, it was logistically difficult.

There were still obscenely powerful villains from during the Monstering who became founders or higher ups within the largest villain organizations, so trying to wage a war against them was just a waste of resources when variants continuously threatened humanity as a whole.

Public and social media were also heavily engineered and regulated by the Panopticon so that they glamorized heroes beating variants but largely downplayed villain organization activities unless they became far too obvious and harmful.

Like this, there was a sort of unspoken 'truce' between villains and heroes that existed so long as the threat of the sleeping Titans remained.

Not to say that there was never conflict between heroes and villains - there was plenty- but on a macro scale, variants were the real threat.

"Police should be dealing with this," said Seismic.

"Hah! That's a good one, Seismic," laughed Hat Trick. "I'll bet fifty thousand credits right now that the police commissioner here makes triple his sh*tty public salary from villain 'donations'."

"I pity the idiot who would ever call that bet," said Seismic. He sighed. "But still, I can't help worrying about the villains. What if they are planning something in the shadows? Using their diplomatic immunity from the Monstering for something big?"

"The years have turned you into a conspiracy theorist," said Hat Trick. "If the villains ever step out of line, the AA and Panopticon turns against them and then they just get sh*t on. Panopticon starts to actively find their assets, freeze them, and shut down their businesses.

And then the AA fights the villains, and I can guarantee you that we have way more heavy hitters than they do. AA has been recruiting the strongest Alters actively and globally for over fifty years.

You can't walk more than two street blocks without seeing an ad for joining the AA and becoming a hero. Heroes are the faces of advertising and corporate deals everywhere. They're the ones people look up to and love.

Villains, in the meanwhile, still have to move in secrecy, and that's just bad business for attracting new talent."

"True, true," said Seismic. "Maybe the years have made me paranoid."

"You've gotta learn to live a little, Seismic," said Hat Trick. "This is why I don't believe in having kids or a wife. All that commitment and responsibility, it starts to drag you down and make you worry about the future. It stops you from really living in the present, you know what I mean?"

"I do," said Seismic. "But there's something about worrying for people you're committed to that makes life worth living. It beats out the aimless addiction to destruction I had when I was young."

"Well, that sounds like a you problem. I got no problem having twenty different girls on call and bathing in credits and cheers," said Hat Trick. He perked up as he watched the telescreen. "Oh sh*t! Look! They managed to pull off a warping maneuver!"

"Good tactics," said Seismic with a nod. "Using a mass amount of drones to generate enough interference to tune out any scanning - I would never have thought of that. I suppose that's the difference between villains and heroes. They're used to fighting Alters and we're used to fighting variants."

"Damn! Look at that guy die! The guy with the shades!" said Hat Trick, leaning forward like he was watching his favorite football team score a goal. He narrowed his eyes. "Who killed him, though? I only see blurs." Hat Trick talked into his earpiece mic. "Hey Nav, try and get your drone to zoom in a little more."

The drone's camera tried to zoom in, but then a cover of strange, dark smoke washed over everything, completely removing any visibility.

"Nav, this is just smoke, right? Scan past it or something! I'm missing out, man!" said Hat Trick.

The drone camera tried to switch to various sight modes. AC scanning, thermal, radar - nothing really worked.

"The hell? Is this some kind of Alter power?" remarked Hat Trick.

"Fairly high end, too," said Seismic. "Your Nav, what's his support ranking?"

"A solid B," said Hat Trick.

In the AA, heroes that did not directly fight went into the support department that focused on surveillance and reconnaissance, and they had their own ranking system determined from metrics that did not revolve around combat capability.

"Then this is pretty high-end concealment," said Seismic. "It reminds me of Void Walker."

Void Walker was a famous hero turned vigilante who could generate fields of shadowy darkness that completely shut down any form of surveillance.

"You really are old, huh," said Hat Trick. "Void Walker went MIA fifteen years ago. Anyways-,"

Hat Trick stood up, stretching his arms.

"Hm? What are you doing?" said Seismic.

"I'm going out there. I'm a little curious about what's going on now," said Seismic. He balled his gloved hands into tight fists. Golden studs at the knuckles flashed as he cracked his neck. "You coming, old man?"

Seismic put a hand on his salt and pepper colored goatee. The wrinkles around his brown eyes deepened as he thought about what to do. "I don't know. We'd be going into unknown territory-,"

Hat Trick face palmed. "Seismic, we're A class. A. Class. We would wipe the floor with anybody here. Hell, you could probably drum up an earthquake and shove this entire place inside a sinkhole and be done with it. What do we have to worry about?"

"I guess I can give you some cover," said Seismic. As he stood up, he immediately froze as he looked at his AA issued Alert Watch. The watch embedded in his costume blared orange, indicating a possible threat that required immediate investigation.

Hat Trick also stared at his glowing orange watch. A holographic projection of a status report emitted from the watch. From the holograph, a video also played showing an enormous blue pillar of energy rising from the ocean surface and into the clouds approximately fifteen kilometers from Haven's coastline.

The pillar of energy faded away after a few seconds, but when it did, it caused the clear night sky to suddenly throng with dark, rumbling storm clouds. A mass torrential downpour, winds, and rising tides formed.

"What is this? Some kind of Terra-Storm?" said Hat Trick.

Terra Storms were a fairly common phenomenon in the world's unstable climate. The rise of Altering powers had affected the planet itself, causing Ether to infuse into the earth itself. Some scientists even hypothesized that enormous amounts of Ether gathered into the earth's core, causing it to spread outwards into the planet's magnetic field.

Sometimes, ether surges in some areas of earth's magnetic field caused Terra Storms.

Terra Storms generated sudden meteorological phenomenon like storms and even natural disasters. They were generally predictable by studying and keeping track of fluxes in the earth's magnetic field and atmosphere, but sometimes, there were sudden Terra Storms that escaped all notice.

"No, doesn't seem like it," said Seismic. "Even rogue Terra Storms have some windup. Usually, there's a huge buildup of Ether for at least an hour."

"You think something made this storm?" said Hat Trick.

Seismic nodded. "I think so. Probably variant activity."

Hat Trick grinned wildly. "Good. Then we'll finally get to see some action."

"Stay careful, Hat Trick," said Seismic. "Any variant that can generate a storm like this is probably a B rank disaster threat at minimum."

"Good thing we're A rank then, right?" Hat Trick unclasped a black bowler hat from his utility belt and put it atop his wild, neck length dark red hair. As he did so, a band around the bowler hat glowed blue. "Good, I got my Laser Form on the first try. I'll race you to the coastline, old man."

"Wait, we should plan-," began to Seismic, but Hat Trick's body turned bright blue before shooting out of an open window in the form of a laser beam.

Seismic sighed as he squeezed out of the window clumsily, trying to fit his huge body through the comparatively smaller frame. He broke the window with his huge strength, and he made a mental reminder to pay for damages. He then leaped out and flew by generating shockwaves on his feet, hopping through the air.

Chapter 80: The Finale Of Vengeance

Within the 15th floor of the Necropolis--

"How are you alive?" began Seth as he stood up, flicking Zayn's blood off his arms. His face set as he glared at Aldrich with pure, unadulterated, focused hate. "No, the how and why doesn't matter.

All that matters is that you're standing here in front of me.

You're responsible for all this, aren't you?"

"Aren't you clever," said Aldrich. "Go on. I'll answer any last questions you have before I kill you."

"The Kryptic - how did you manage it?" said Seth.

"It needed deep connections through the criminal underworld and a fortune. Luckily, I made a friend who had both," said Aldrich. "Casimir was with me this entire time. I made sure that the Boost you wanted was spiked with a little present of my own."

"And how much is in here? Enough to kill me?" said Seth as he looked at his hands, his eyes tracing the black veins starting to show through his skin - the telltale sign of Kryptic poisoning him.

In ordinary individuals, Kryptic had no signs for poisoning, but with the Solar family or in those with particularly powerful bodies, it manifested through the blackening of blood vessels.

"No. I couldn't get that much," said Aldrich. "You should know your own body the best, no? This amount of Kryptic just keeps your powers down, even with a double dose. I bet after a week of sunbathing; you could clear it out of your system."

But that's besides the point.

I didn't want you to die of Kryptic.

Too painless. Too easy.

I needed to kill you personally."

"Yeah? How do you think you'll go about doing that?" said Seth. He clenched his fists. They made squelching sounds as his grip squeezed his blood slicked hands. "I still have some power. Enough to break a Dud's spine with my bare hands."

Enough to kill YOU at the very least.

You'll regret showing your face to me here."

"Do you really think so?" Aldrich manifested all of his [Grave Reaper] set and his [Lantern of the Accursed Eye]. He surged his magical energy as much as possible, to the point where the ground underneath him began to crack. "I have power, Seth. More than enough power to deal with the likes of you, especially with how weak you are now."

Aldrich aimed his free hand and fired volleys of [Chill Bolts]. He intentionally shot around Seth, causing countless blasts of frosty ice to scatter behind Seth. The machine gun fire of icy bolts smashed through rock, the freezing effect boring through solid stone.

Seth could not react to the speed of the bolts with how weakened he was, and all he could do was turn his head around and watch the icy explosions smash rock instead of what would have been his body.

Aldrich then grabbed the chain of his lantern in both hands, swung it, then smashed it into the ground while boosting himself with [Negative Surge], shattering stone.

That could have easily caved in Seth Solar's skull or crushed his organs with how frail he had become.

All this as a display of power.

To let Seth Solar know that he had utterly zero chance to survive here.

"So, you wanted to show off all this new power before you killed me? Do you feel better now that you aren't a useless fucking Dud?" said Seth. He spat on the ground. He did not despair, he just stared at Aldrich with the same hateful gaze he always had.

Unlike Ghost, Seth did not beg or plead for his life. If he was going to face death, he faced it standing. "If you're going to do it, then get on with it."

Aldrich scoffed. "I just wanted to make sure you felt powerless. I wanted you to know you never had a chance to begin with. Just as my friends did when you killed them.

But killing you with my magic is a little too impersonal for my taste, and instant death is too quick.

Aldrich dematerialized all his equipment and his lantern. "But that's not how I want to kill you. I'm going to be generous here, Seth. I'm going to give you a chance."

Aldrich stepped forwards; his fists clenched. "I'm going to beat you to death.

No powers, no magic, just my own two hands.

If you can beat me, well then, hats off to you. Maybe scum like you does deserve to live."

Seth nodded slowly, meeting Aldrich's cold, green eyes. He clenched his own fists as he stepped forward. "A chance? Don't get cocky, Dud. I've run my fist through your heart once. I'll do it again."

"You're welcome to try," said Aldrich.

The two men stared at each other one final time.

Both from wildly different walks of life.

One born powerless.

The other born with overwhelming might.

One raised with love.

The other raised as a tool.

And yet, there was one thing that tethered both men.

Choice. Or rather, the lack of it.

And without choice, both men grew hatred that festered deep within their beings, hatred that lashed out at the world around them through a desire for vengeance.

In this final juncture, Aldrich and Seth shared a wordless moment not of disagreement, but of understanding.

When they looked into the other's eyes and saw the very same type of hate they harbored reflected back at them, the very same fire of vengeance that fueled them, they knew at that moment that they were twin sides of one coin.

And because they knew this, because they knew themselves better than anyone else, they knew this was the end.

The opposite sides of a coin could never meet together. They were part of the same plane and yet they were fundamentally opposed.

Where Seth Solar's hate channeled into vengeance that sought to see the unjust world burn in chaos, Aldrich forged his vengeance into a tool that aimed to bring this world under order, no matter the cost.

There would be no middle ground here.

No compromise.

Only a victor.

Seth Solar roared as he flew forwards with his fist cocked back, though because of how energy depleted he was, he did not really fly, he just boosted his own jumping strength.

Aldrich raised his arms up in a guard. Seth's fist slammed into Aldrich's arms and drove him back several feet. Aldrich grunted as he felt damage register on his arms. The bone of his forearm actually cracked under Seth Solar's punch, though simply broken bones did nothing to stop Aldrich's undead body.

Despite Seth Solar going through two rounds of Kryptic poisoning and severe depletion of his energy reserves that disabled his solar beams, the Alter's base strength had been so high that even now, he was still superhuman.

Each of Seth's punches could shatter the skull of a normal human and he could still out sprint any pre-Altering professional runner.

That meant roughly speaking, Aldrich and Seth were evenly matched in pure physical stats provided Aldrich did not enhance himself with magic.

No, Seth had a moderate advantage, even, in terms of raw punching power and durability.

Good.

Aldrich wanted this fight to be even. To be as personal as possible.

Seth sprinted to Aldrich with another punch.

Aldrich narrowed his eyes, focusing. Seth's punch zoomed towards Aldrich's head, and he weaved it to the side, narrowly evading the blow. Aldrich then grabbed Seth's arm and spun around, slamming Seth into the ground using an over the shoulder throw.

Seth broke his fall at the last moment, holding out an arm to stop the impact from hitting directly into his back and disabling him by knocking the breath out. The Alter had some martial arts training, it was evident, though not nearly on the level of Aldrich.

Seth grimaced and immediately rolled backwards, getting back on his feet only to meet a flying double kick from Aldrich.

Seth blocked the first kick, but the second kick hit him square in the face, sending him falling flat on his back against the cold hard stone. He got up on a knee, holding a hand over his broken, crooked nose. He grabbed his nose between his fingers and forcibly set it back into place before exhaling out a glob of blood.

Aldrich let Seth take his breather before diving into an offense... Aldrich threw out jabs as he circled around Seth, gauging their distance.

Chapter 81: The Finale Of Vengeance 2

Seth put up his own guard, blocking Aldrich's light jabs as he counter circled against Aldrich in a carefully calculated dance, each man trying to gauge when to strike.

Seth was a few inches taller than Aldrich, giving him extra reach. He tried to abuse this by keeping his distance, throwing out punches at the limits of his arm span.

Aldrich countered by weaving between one of Seth's punches and getting right inside Seth's range.

Here, in an in-fight, Aldrich made it very, very clear who among the two was the better martial artist. Who among the two had dedicated their entire life to training just to match up the superpowered bodies around them.

Aldrich feinted a head blow, making Seth raise his guard high, but then immediately adjusted into a quick low punch to Seth's gut, doubling him over and breaking his guard, before following up with a solid uppercut that sent Seth flying backwards with the resonating crack of impact.

Seth grunted as he stopped his fall by floating in the air, landing on his feet gently. His breathing wheezed as he wiped blood from a burst lip. Very likely, his jaw had fractured too.

He spat out two teeth knocked loose from Aldrich's uppercut.

"Look at you," said Aldrich. "Without all that power, you're nothing. You don't know what it's like to train every single day of your life to measure up to even one tenth of the weakest Alter around you, and it shows."

"Shut up!" Seth yelled as he charged Aldrich, this time holding his arms out to try and tackle and grapple Aldrich down.

Aldrich knew how to defend against a takedown. There were three real options here. One was to strike the opponent when he got into range. The second was to dodge. The third was to meet the takedown head on.

Aldrich took the third option. He lowered his center of gravity and met the tackle with firmly rooted stance, preventing Seth from knocking Aldrich down to the ground immediately. Aldrich's plan was to elbow down on Seth's exposed neck while he stayed at Aldrich's hip level.

However, the takedown was a feint. It was mostly meant for Seth to get a firm grip on Aldrich's waist, preventing him from moving away.

The reason for this became immediately clear -

Seth's right eye started to glow a bright gold as he channeled up a solar beam. Because of how little energy he had left, he could only manage to charge up a beam from one eye, but he aimed this now at Aldrich's face.

Aldrich reacted swiftly and mercilessly. He grabbed Seth's head with his hands, holding it firmly in place, before jamming his thumb into Seth's right eye with all his might.

Seth roared in agony as Aldrich dug deep into the eye, completely crushing it to a pulp and disabling it entirely. He shoved Aldrich away and put his hands over his face as the built-up solar energy detonated inside of his crushed eye, completely disintegrating it and scorching out an empty socket in flash of light.

This, however, though a grotesque wound, did not kill Seth.

The wound had cauterized on its own, preventing bleeding, and it had not burned into the brain itself.

Coupled with Seth's own stubborn will and superhuman body, and he remained conscious and capable of fighting.

But Aldrich did not stop there. He rushed towards Seth from his new blind side, and when Seth heard Aldrich near, he roared and swung wildly with a right hook.

Aldrich easily maneuvered past the punch and rotated behind Seth, meanwhile taking Seth's arm in a lock. Aldrich then pulled the Alter's arm back painfully behind his back, disabling the arm and exposing Seth's face.

With Aldrich's free arm, he wailed down punches against Seth's defenseless head.

Seth raised his one good arm to try and guard, but there was only so much one arm could do, and Aldrich easily maneuvered past that half guard to land his strikes.

Punch after punch after punch.

The sound of enhanced flesh cracking against enhanced flesh resonated through the arena.

Seth's face bloodied incomprehensibly as cuts and bruises began to litter it, swelling his facial muscles and his eyes.

Aldrich then let Seth go, tossing him away.

Seth stumbled and fell to the ground before weakly raising himself up, shaking his face of blood, sweat, and the tremors of impact. He stared at Aldrich in confusion, wondering why Aldrich had just let him go.

"I told you. I was going to make this slow. And painful. I'm going to break you down bit by bit. Piece by piece." Aldrich ripped off the bloodied, tattered remains of his suit jacket and dress shirt. "Until there's nothing left of you."

"Come on then...", said Seth weakly.

Aldrich ran into Seth's range. Seth clumsily shot out a punch at Aldrich's face. By now, the fight was over. Seth had taken too much damage, and that affected his coordination, and against a master martial artist like Aldrich, even just a tiny little lapse in ability was a fatal flaw.

Aldrich ducked beneath Seth's strike and landed an elbow right into Seth's stomach, doubling the Alter over in pain and cracking ribs.

Aldrich then hooked his arm around one of Seth's and used Seth's arm as a lever to throw the Alter onto the ground again.

With Seth on the ground and still reeling from the gut shot, Aldrich took this opportunity and went down on the ground himself, wrapping his legs around Seth's arm in a firm armbar before applying pressure, completely dislocating the elbow joint in a painful, popping snap.

Seth roared in pain as he writhed on the ground like a worm. Aldrich then got off of Seth and rolled away, leaving Seth foaming at the mouth with spit and blood as he processed the pain.

Aldrich watched Seth struggle for a few seconds before his brow twitched in anger.

"Get up," said Aldrich as he stood and watched Seth convulsing in pain on the ground. He saw Seth's struggling, suffering wracked form, and all he felt was rage at this pathetic sight. "Get up! All the pain you've caused, all the lives you've taken, and THIS is what you have to show for it!? Pathetic!"

Seth grit his teeth and got on a knee, his left arm hanging limp and useless from his shoulder.

"Good, good," whispered Aldrich.

Seth breathed deeply before yelling and flying towards Aldrich in a surprising final burst of power dredged up from the depths of his will to survive.

Aldrich reacted by jumping in the air and locking Seth's one good arm in a flying armbar. In midair, Aldrich twisted and applied cranking pressure, dislocating the elbow joint yet again.

Seth roared in agony as he began to fall straight back to the ground. Aldrich got leverage over Seth and twisted atop his back. Like riding atop a wild bull, Aldrich grabbed the back of Seth's head and used it to steer Seth's flight straight down into the rocky ground face first.

Aldrich was not done. While Seth groaned in pain from the impact, Aldrich immediately went to Seth's left leg.

Aldrich wrapped his legs tight around Seth's knee and then grabbed his left heel with iron grip before twisting it, breaking the ankle.

Seth loosed a muffled roar of agony into the stony floor.

"I told you. I would break you down. Piece-," Aldrich detached from Seth's left leg before hooking around his right heel. He yanked again, breaking the right ankle this time. "By piece!"

Another yell of agony from Seth.

Aldrich locked around Seth's left knee next before twisting, dislocating it. "Bit!" He then repeated the same process with Seth's right knee, dislocating both knees and rendering both his legs utterly useless. "By bit!"

Another scream of pain that rang through the arena, though in here, in this realm of cold, empty death, there was nobody to hear it except Aldrich himself.

Aldrich got off of Seth and then put a foot on his upper back, pinning him head down into the cratered rock below as he reached down and grabbed Seth's left arm before yanking violently back, hyper extending the arm and dislocating the shoulder.

Aldrich reached out to Seth's right shoulder and pulled that back too, dislocating it.

Seth's yells of pain grew quieter and quieter after each dislocation as the pain became too intense to bear, dangerously getting him close to fading out of consciousness.

But Seth's enhanced durability worked against him here, keeping him in that sweet goldilocks zone of suffering where he held onto a strand of consciousness despite the inhuman amounts of suffering he faced.

Now, Seth was completely immobile, all of the major joints in his arms and legs dislocated. He did not have the energy to fire beams or fly.

"I-I can't die," muttered Seth as blood pooled from under his split lips and bloody mouth.

"Hm?" Aldrich stood up and kicked Seth over on his back, baring his face - beaten and disfigured beyond any human comprehension.

"I...can't die. I'll show...I'll show this world what a real villain is...what to fear...I'll burn it all down," continued Seth. He was half delirious now, muttering out the burning hate that kept him alive this long.

The hate that had given him purpose.

Aldrich stood over Seth, his pale skin drenched in swathes of bright red blood. He looked down at Seth's eyes welded nearly shut from bruising. Seth's one good eye still stared ahead with pure hate.

But it did not stare at Aldrich. In Seth's delirium, looked past Aldrich, towards the abstract idea of the world that had wronged him.

Looking down at Seth like this, utterly defeated, utterly broken, Aldrich felt nothing but immense satisfaction.

Contrary to what many said, there was nothing that felt better than quenching a thirst for vengeance.

But at the same time, looking into Seth's distant eyes, Aldrich, too, was forced to see ahead, into the future beyond all of this. All of this personal vengeance.

Seth Solar was not unique. He was a mere by product of this twisted world that churned out broken monsters like him.

And, Aldrich did not hesitate to admit it, broken monsters like himself as well.

"I understand how you feel," said Aldrich quietly. "But this world doesn't need people like you anymore. People that see how wrong it is and think that it's better off burning down into chaos.

No, what this world needs is order.

My order."

Aldrich tapped his Phylactery, and a small dark portal opened. From within, two pairs of rotted arms drew out. Adam and Elaine funneled onto the stone floor, and as soon as they smelled weak, vulnerable flesh, they groaned in desire.

They loomed over Seth's body, their jaws open and ready to feast.

Seth's pupil dilated as he drifted back from delirium, recognizing Adam and Elaine for a few brief final moments.

"This is my final gift to you, Adam. Elaine. With this, I've made things right to you. Enjoy your feast." Aldrich closed his eyes as he heard Adam and Elaine tear into Seth's body, ripping off chunks of his helpless, immobilized flesh. He heard their growls punctuated by Seth's screams of suffering and pain, and he felt...alive.

More alive than ever. Huge surges of negative energy generated by the suffering of Seth Solar and the rest of his deceased friends funneled into him, setting his green aura alight in purple.

His body of flesh and blood...felt heavy. Like a prison. He could feel his heart, his soul, ready to leave its confines, to become something more.

Something transcendent.

Something beyond.

Chapter 82: {Dance Of Duels}

At the Red Circle --

"What the-," The elite beside Joe, his personal bodyguard, watched Joe fall to the ground with the dirk jutting sticking out of his heart.

Where had this attack come from? There were recon drones everywhere to make sure nothing surprised the Elites, not to mention the environmental scanning systems programmed into their helmets. A stab to the back like this would not make it past the tight perimeter the Elite squadrons had drawn up.

The only explanation was an Alter with a concealment based power sufficiently advanced enough to avoid even higher end AC scanning.

The elite's training instincts kicked in and he adapted, suppressing his immediate worry. He stepped away from Joe's body and aimed his gun at where the knife wielder would be.

"Assuming command!" the Elite shouted into his helmet as he raised his gun. He could see that the knife was being wielded by some strange mass of hazy darkness that now started to solidify into...the shape of a skeleton?

"Mutant class Alter. Skeletal appearance. Concealment capacity level 4. Deploy counter measures. Engaging target!" The Elite leader fired at the skeleton, setting his Hydra rifle to assault mode.

The skeleton darted away with expert agility, backflipping and somersaulting to avoid the bullets. But though the skeleton was fast, the Hydra's auto aim system was even faster. The Elite leader tracked the skeleton's graceful movements, unloading a full clip into the skeleton, shattering its legs to disable its mobility.

The skeleton fell onto the ground as the rest of the Elites stood in trios where they were back-to-back from each other, covering all angles of approach against targets that had concealment beyond their scanning.

"Who are you!?" said the leader as he stepped forwards at the legless, purple cloaked skeleton. With a swift flicking motion of its arms, the skeleton tossed its serrated dirk right at the leader's head.

The leader managed to react by swerving his head to the side. With Joe dead, his potent stim boost would fade over time, but as of now, it was still nearly in full force, massively accelerating the leader's reactions and physicals.

The leader quickly reloaded and shot into the skeleton's head, boring a multitude of holes into it. The skeleton, however, was unfazed by its half blown off skull and leaped into the air by pushing off the ground with its hands.

With a swat of his gun, the leader managed to knock the skeleton back down. He calmly analyzed the situation. The skeleton was very likely some kind of mutant class Alter who had a concealment-based power. His unique physiology made it so that the body was just pure bone and hollow within, and in these cases, the best solution was absolute destruction of the main body.

"Switch to incendiary!" shouted the leader as he willed his weapon to change. The smartlink cable running from his gun to the back of his helmet linked with a neurochip that allowed his thoughts to control the gun.

A red light shone at the gun's barrel before he fired again, and this time, the bullets exploded into wreaths of flame upon contact with the skeleton. The skeleton writhed forwards before growing still, its dry bones breaking apart under the flames.

"Ahh!"

"Man down! Man down!"

The leader immediately whirled around, checking the rest of his squad. Two more men had fallen, their hearts gouged out with dirks wielded again by skeletons.

"Where did they come from!?" said the leader.

"No idea! They just...they just appeared!"

"Gun them down! Before they disappear!"

In an instant, several Hydra rifle barrels lit up as they unleashed incendiary rounds, thoroughly blowing apart and burning the skeletons.

"What are these things!? They slipped through all our scans, and even when they're dead, they don't register any cell count!" said an Elite, confusion and fear starting to crack through their training as they faced the unknown, enemies they had never, ever seen that seemed to ignore any of the rules they knew.

'I wish I fucking knew,' thought the leader as he thought about what to do. He committed to a decision quickly.

"Retreat! We don't know sh*t about these things! Report back to HQ!" said the leader.

"I'm afraid that won't be happening." A woman's voice pierced through the air, and all the Elites immediately raised their guns and pointed towards the entrance of the Red Circle.

There, a hauntingly beautiful woman stepped out, her deathly pale skin contrasting with the midnight black lace and cloth of her dress. Her eyes gleamed bloody red, tinting her fanged white smile in a hint of crimson.

"AC count zero!" said an Elite.

A civilian? Out here? What? The leader paused for a brief moment before waiving his concerns away. There was no time for hesitation here.

"Gun her down!" said the leader with no remorse.

Several Hydra rifles clattered as they fired their rounds.

In an instant, the woman put her arm out in front of her and manifested...a giant shield? A cross shaped shield of black metal and bone. She stood behind this shield, and all the bullets pattered against the shield like raindrops on a car window.

Smoke then emerged from behind her, surging forwards in a tidal wave of darkness that quickly covered everyone. The smoke was not ordinary, it was more accurately described as a cloud of pure darkness.

Within this inky cover of dark, visibility was limited to just a few feet ahead.

The leader tapped angrily at his helmet, trying to scan past the smoke, but nothing worked. In fact, everything seemed to be short circuiting. His helmet's UI started to crackle and distort as it shut off.

"Argh!" Sparks sputtered from the back of all the Elites' helmets as their smartlink to their weapons was forcibly severed. They immediately unplugged the smartlink cables to their guns, completely stranding them from their technology.

All those thousands upon thousands of credits spent on Imugi combat suits with their world-renowned auto aiming and scanning and smart link compatibility - all gone just like that.

This left the Elites stranded with just their own bodies and minds to work with. They were even cut off from communications as they relied on built in comm links in their helmets.

In this modern age where everyone was always linked in somewhere, through their phones, their computers, or even through their weapons, this complete blackout of technology was deeply unsettling, like they had lost a fundamental part of themselves.

"Get out! Get out!" The leader could not see anything that was going on, but he knew that now more than ever, he needed to get his men out.

What had started out as an enforcing mission to execute the upstart Red Circle was quickly devolving into a nightmare of unforeseen consequences.

Screams filled the air as the silhouette of strange monstrosities revealed by brief glimmers of gunfire showcased...variants.

Variants had been unleashed upon the Elites.

How had they been controlled? Where had they been caged?

The leader asked these questions but knew he could not find answers. He looked around frantically, sweat pouring down his forehead as he felt his breathing accelerate in panic. Everytime he heard gunfire, he turned around to see what was happening, and there, illuminated by the gunfire, he saw his fellow Elites get torn apart one by one.

An Alpha Striker leaped atop an Elite from the smoky darkness, savaging his throat apart. It smelled the air and then growled, signaling to other variants the locations of the rest of the soldiers. A Big-arm Grizzly roared as it tackled down an Elite and savagely crushed his skull.

One Elite screamed as he melted down from the highly acidic blood spray of a Bloodspitter Lizard.

Gunfire echoed chaotically, but without auto-aiming and in this low visibility environment, it was a long shot for any of the Elites to now hit their targets.

There were creatures the Elites had no idea about as well. A giant, hulking muscled man with tumorous growths all over his body and protruding tusks that wielded a giant club of fused metal, swinging it from side to side, breaking Elite ribcages and spines with each blow.

More living skeletons.

The leader abandoned all pretense of trying to save his men at this point and ran. He sprinted away as fast as he could, the screams of his dying men serving as motivation

for him to run faster. He had no idea where he was going in this smoke, but he knew if he moved back far enough, he would reach the convoys, and there, he could make his escape -

"Gah!" the leader fell backwards as he slammed into something hard. He raised his gun up instinctively, trying to see what had hit him.

"Put that thing down. It's quite rude to point a weapon at a lady, you know?" The woman from before stepped forwards, becoming visible as she neared the leader.

Before the leader could pull the trigger, the woman had moved so quickly it seemed like she teleported, wrapping her hand around the barrel of the Hydra rifle and yanking it away from the leader's grip. She was strong, impossibly strong, and she easily overpowered the leader.

"I don't like these things," said the woman as she looked down at the gun, her eyes shining red. "They're so...impersonal? That is how I would put it. You look through a sight, press a button, and then kill. But where is the fun in that? You lose out on ripping and tearing your foes using your own bare strength. Isn't that so boring?"

The leader switched to his secondary pistol and fired shots at the woman. He managed to get out two shots that scraped across her skin before the woman grabbed his arms together in her hands, applying crushing force that very quickly shattered his forearms.

A scream escaped the leader's lips. He began to beg. "Let me go! J-Joe's dead, that's all that matters to you, isn't it!? I'm just a footsoldier!"

"Yes, and are not soldiers supposed to be ready to lay down their lives? It comes with the job, does it not?" The woman smiled as she let go of the leader's arms before slashing forward with long, clawed black nails.

"Gh-guh" The leader tried to speak but could only gurgle as blood splattered from his torn open throat. He put a hand over his gaping neck before he fell over, blood pooling from beneath him.

"Kill them all," said Valera to the undead left to her control from her dear master. "No survivors... But leave their corpses intact." She then put a hand to her forehead, checking up on the others -

Chapter 83: {Dance Of Duels 2}

In Haven's sewage network, 150 meters away from the Red Circle -

Darius Fletcher grimaced as he squinted his eyes at his new and dark surroundings. He could not see in the dark, but he could generate enough light from his body to understand that he was somewhere underground.

Specifically, he was inside a huge rectangular pit of some sorts, deep enough that the edges of the pit were several meters taller than he was.

The ceiling above was made of stained reinforced concrete and decorated with a network of pipes. Several large pipes yawned open towards the pit.

The conflicting dual smells of rank human feces and strong antiseptic chemicals filled his nostrils.

Darius knew where he was. The sewers.

"Ah, so you have made it here, as was previously planned," came a smooth, deep and neutral voice. A small aquatic echo rang underneath the voice, as if some part of it was uttered from under the sea.

Darius immediately looked at the end of the pit to see...to see...

What the fuck was that?

It was a tall, lanky, humanoid figure, maybe about six foot four (193 cm) with slimy mauve skin wrapped up in eerie black robes. Its fingers were long and prehensile like little tendrils, and its face was reminiscent of an octopus with a large, bulbous, nerve wreathed head, three beady red, square pupiled eyes, and a mouth that ended in several curled tentacles.

"A mutant class are you?" said Darius. "You some kind of mercenary Casimir dredged up from god knows where to to fight me?"

"Fight you? Dear me, no, I am not too fond of risking my body for violence. And I am no mercenary, such an occupation is far too brutish for my tastes," said the octopus man. "And a fight? You are sorely misguided, my friend. This is no fight. This is an execution, and I am merely here to bear witness."

"Execution? Big fucking words. Let's see if you live up to them!" Darius slammed his hands together and fired a combined stream of magma at the mutant.

The octopus mutant stood calmly with his hands behind his back, his tendril fingers interlocked together, as the magma splattered against a bright orange-red barrier that became visible only when the magma made contact.

The magma hissed as it spilled over the barrier, unable to penetrate it.

"Curious," said the mutant as he looked at the magma, then at Darius. "You are capable of transmuting your body into an entirely different element.

Functionally, you are quite similar to the Elementals I am familiar with, especially Magma Elementals, but unlike them, you are not a form of spirit, you are purely physical.

Thoroughly human, too. This defies the Theory of Elemental Spirituality that Archmage Velenthel wrote of..."

"Forcefield?" Darius droned out the octopus mutant's rambling and immediately analyzed the mutant, trying to find out what tech he was using, but the mutant did not seem to be wearing anything remotely resembling technology. Just robes that looked like they belonged to a medieval reenactment fair.

That meant that most likely, the mutant's power was linked to the forcefield.

Darius, however, did not want to waste too much time here. If this mutant was not going to fight him, then he would just melt his way up to the surface. He looked up and jumped, but as soon as he tried to leave the filth caked floor of the pit, he felt himself dragged right back down to it, anchored to the surface by some invisible force.

"I told you, did I not, this is an execution," said the octopus mutant. "The noose is already tied to your neck. There is no stepping away from the gallows at this point, I am afraid."

"Yeah? You just gonna sit there and talk me to death?" said Darius. He looked down to see what was holding him but could not find any discernable hints. What he did notice with a fair amount of surprise was that the floor beneath him did not melt even in contact with his superheated magma body.

Instead, a flickering orange barrier seemed to be wrapped around all the points of contact between Darius and the ground, preventing it from melting.

"This your power!?" said Darius.

"Power? I suppose you could say that, yes," said the mutant. "I shall go into specifics, for as a dead man, you will not spread my knowledge. This is a spell called [Flame Ward] that allows me to imbue objects with high fire damage resistance.

In this case, it prevents you from boring your way down to escape while the strange specimen known as the 'Antlion' beneath prevents you from reaching upwards."

"Antlion!?" Darius had no idea what the mutant talked about with spells, but he did know what an Antlion was.

With its extremely powerful anti-flight gravitational field, it prevented anyone from leaving a pit it nested within. And because the entire pit here was reinforced with the mutant's barrier, Darius could not melt his way down to kill the Antlion either.

"So what!?" Darius shouted. "You've trapped me here, but what else can you do?"

Darius had a better understanding of where he was in Haven's sewage system now that he had time to process things. Specifically, he was inside a large treatment vat where sewage would get purified and transported to be reused for fertilizer or biomass.

A horrible location for Darius as his only real weakness was getting submerged in liquid.

But Cubehead's power had limits to its transportation effect.

First, the effective range for its warp was within two hundred meters. In addition, he had to warp people into an open location. Hence, he could not just warp enemies inside walls and kill them. Not only that, but the location that anyone was warped into had to be capable of housing an empty cube ten meters by ten meters in dimensions, so it was impossible to just dump someone into a tub of acid.

At the very least, by virtue of Cubehead's known restrictions, there was no water in the immediate vicinity.

"Crabs, do me a great favor and lend me your assistance," said the mutant.

All of a sudden, water began to pour out from the large pipes above, slowly filling the pit.

Darius immediately fired globs of magma at the pipes, trying to cover them in molten rock, but they were covered with the orange barrier too. The magma just bounced off the barriers, landing back into the pit below.

"Sh*t!" Darius readjusted his aim, instead trying to shove magma up into the pipes themselves to clog them.

"That simply will not do," said the mutant as he pointed at Darius's arms.

Darius saw a sudden combustion explosion burst in his arms, exploding outwards and stopping his attack.

"Antlion, you must try harder than this to earn your place in the Elder's circle of trust," said the mutant.

Darius buckled down to a knee as he felt the gravitational pressure intensify. Every movement felt five or six times harder to make. Any projectile he tried to fire at this level of intensified gravity would just come straight back down.

His feet sizzled as the water reached them. The water roared violently as it instantly evaporated against Darius's intense heat output. So long as he could instantly evaporate the water as soon as it made contact with the vat, he could prevent the water level from building up.

"Crabs, enhance that water flow with your skills," said the mutant. "You used them so freely against me, why hold back now?"

All of a sudden, the flow of water coming down from the pipes grew tremendously, roaring downwards like violent waterfalls. The vat quickly began to fill up with water, and within seconds, Darius found the water level reaching up to his ankles.

His white core intensified in brightness as he generated as much heat as he could, spreading out his magma in a pool beneath him. The water bubbled, hissed, steamed and roared, but the water level still built up.

This was no ordinary water, either. It had a slight murky tinge to it and its evaporation point seemed dramatically higher than normal, preventing Darius from flash steaming it easily.

"That is water from the murky Swamps of Nilgath said to be tainted by the mud of a Clay Demon, and, unfortunately, most demons have some resistance to fire from their infernal native homes," said the mutant, spouting more nonsense.

Darius ignored the mutant and quickly strategized. He could last at least a minute under this flow of water, and while the water level built up, he would continually layer magma beneath his foot, eventually creating a solidified platform of rock which he could use to gain elevation and escape the gravitational field.

"Excellent strategy," said the mutant. "Were I blind, yes, but unfortunately, my friend, I possess three eyes."

The mutant aimed a finger below Darius, and another targeted combustion explosion destroyed the cooled rock platform Darius was trying to build up, sinking him right down to the floor below. The water level now reached to his waist - fatally high.

"No!" roared Darius as the water reacted to his magma, super heating instantly into steam explosions that bubbled inside his magma body, breaking it apart from within. Large globular bubbles formed all throughout his molten legs, bursting apart and scattering his body as he tried his hardest to regenerate and form more magma to compensate.

By generating magma, he could also stave off solidifying himself into a coffin of rock.

But there was only so much magma he had.

Eventually, several minutes later, Darius was neck high in water, his body below that solidified into blackened rock scattered with giant round globs from the remnants of countless little steam explosions that had gone off within his body.

"This won't kill me!" roared Darius desperately as the water kept coming and coming, spelling his doom by encasing him in a coffin of his own molten design. If at any time he wanted to stop his molten form, then he would just get his unenhanced head blown off by this mutant. "You - I'll find a way out of this, I swear, and when I do-!"

"I wonder how many humans raved of vengeance before their nooses tightened at their execution? It is quite amusing how your fragile human minds operate exactly the same despite the wondrous powers you possess. I suppose human fragility is universal. But your monologue tires my ears."

With that, the mutant flourished his hand, and an explosion blew up in front of Darius's face, blowing off his face to stop him from speaking as the water engulfed him, solidifying him inside an eternal prison of rock from which there would not be escape.

Chapter 84: Final Duels And Ascension

In an abandoned subway station, 200 meters away from the Red Circle -

"Yeah, I've blown this fucker up," said Dynamite Girl as she exhaled deeply, her glowing orange blood vessels fading from her skin. She looked at the seared stump where her right arm had been.

Countless bullet holes riddled her chest and stomach, leaving her already tattered costume basically reduced to nothing now. "And I really, really need a new costume now unless I'm going to be flashing everyone in this whole damn city."

"Excellent work, Dynamite Girl," said Hironnelle as she perched over the melted, blackened, blown apart wreckage of Clank's giant metal body.

When Clank first ported here, by nature of the Cubehead's warp power requiring teleported units to be in an empty space, Clank could not immediately be ambushed.

But down here, in this abandoned subway line, Spybird's War Eagle, his strongest drone, had engaged Clank in a long-range battle of missiles and bullets.

Clank, a thorough maniac for gunfights, had obliged, distracting himself.

Clank eventually overpowered War Eagle, disabling it, but at that point, Dynamite Girl leaped down from a maintenance hole in the ceiling, using a Bunker Buster to open

Clank right open. Not before Clank's automated guns had made a whole wreck of Dynamite Girl, but her undead body let her shrug off the piercing damage.

Once Dynamite Girl had opened him up, Hironnelle, who was also hidden in the ceiling, had finished the job, reducing herself down into the size of a swallow before launching herself inside Clank, shooting from internal surface to surface at ultra-high speeds to wreak havoc.

There, Hironnelle eventually killed Clank. He had ended up being a Mechman, someone who integrated their bodies entirely into robotic shells.

Hironnelle pinged and ponged around the insides of Clank's fortified armor until she finally shot through the weak human body held deep within.

"Fucking Mechmen, they always freak me out," said Dynamite Girl. "Once you pry them outta' their shells, I hear they always look real nasty. Bald and skinny and pale like literal corpses. Moment you unplug em', they just shrivel up and die. Plus it's super illegal too."

Mechmen integrating with their machine bodies resulted in their physical bodies atrophying into frail biological husks kept entirely alive by their mechanical armor.

This was thoroughly illegal in most countries because it heavily increased the risk of Technomania, but among villains and others that took the law as more a suggestion and not a rule, it was not entirely uncommon.

There was even a massive terroristic cult called the New Machines that believed in discarding the weakness of flesh and becoming full mechanoids.

"You'll find that within this line of work, the word 'illegal' holds precious little meaning," said Hironnelle. "Still, I can respect heroes like yourselves that put your lives on the line against variants.

Though, maybe it wouldn't be too far off to call you a variant yourself now.

I thought you were dead to the Geist attack, but look at you, standing here alive and well. Slightly paler, perhaps, but not much worse for wear. And far, far stronger too."

"Yeah, it's a perk of working for Mr. Vane," said Dynamite Girl. "And huh, I didn't think you'd recognize me. I was just a random C class, after all."

"Of course I would," said Hironnelle. Her body of violet energy coursed like living fire while her eyes, twin bright dots of light purple, shone like bright embers. "I do not keep track of most heroes. I find the job thoroughly tacky and self-obsessed. But real heroes that put down their lives for others, now that, I can truly respect.

All those that died to the Geist attack that you fell to, I committed to my memory."

"Well, thanks, I guess," said Dynamite Girl, a little shy at the praise.

"At the same time, I do wonder how you can continue to work with that Variant after it bested you, let alone even fathom how Mr. Vane is capable of raising the dead and bending not only Natural Variants, but also Geist Variants to his will.

Nobody, not even the brightest minds in the entire world, has managed to subdue a Geist."

"I don't know the details, and I'm pretty sure I'm not allowed to share them yet, even if we're working together and all," said Dynamite Girl. "But the Geist? I don't have many hard feelings for it.

It was just an animal following its instincts. If it hadn't killed me, I would have killed it.

All there is to it, really.

Just how nature is."

"Nature, is it?" said Hironnelle.

"Yeah. Nature's all fucked up now with Variants evolving and whatever, but the basics of it all are still the same. Human or Variant - we all got base instincts we cater to, and the most basic of that is the instinct to survive." Dynamite Girl shrugged. "I grew up in deep variant countryside.

Wastelands, technically, though with a whole lot more green.

Living out there, that close to raw, wild nature, you start to learn that at the end of the day, everything's just trying to survive. You win, you live another day, you lose, you die and let something else live. There's nothing personal about it. Just the way it is."

She then put her hand to her temple, her expression growing serious. "Sh*t. Something's come up. We gotta' regroup now."

"What about the other target groups?" said Hironnelle, referencing the three groups meant to fight the Blackwater faculty after they were isolated.

The first group was Fler'Gan and a menagerie of stronger Variants to trap down Darius Fletcher in the sewers. The second was Hironnelle, Dynamite Girl, and Spybird's War Eagle against Clank here in this abandoned subway. The third was the Geist, Smoke, and Walters against Colette.

"Group 1 trapped Darius. We're good to go. Group 3 failed and Colette's escaped, but they're all alive and relatively unharmed. They're regrouping now," said Dynamite Girl.

"Then might I ask what the emergency is?" said Hironnelle.

"Large scale attack," said Dynamite Girl as she listened to Valera's mental communications. Just like Aldrich, Valera could also communicate to the undead, though that seemed limited only to Aldrich and his proper chosen undead. "Variants. Enough to threaten overrunning the entire city.

Red Circle's already under attack."

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In the Necropolis-

As Aldrich felt his body grow heavier, he closed his eyes. He heard the last remnants of Seth's agonizing cries of pain as Adam and Elaine finished devouring him. Then, those sounds faded away too. His entire body felt numb. Every physical sense he had started to flee him, and yet, the feeling was not alarming, no, it was...liberating.

When Aldrich opened his eyes, he found himself standing over his physical body. He hovered in the air as a ghostly green silhouette of himself, and when he looked at his body, he saw that it remained standing, but it stood frozen to still that it appeared almost like a mannequin.

The green glow in his body's eyes was gone now, returned back to the natural black that he had almost forgotten he had.

At his body's chest, the purple phylactery had turned completely dark, crackling as it seemed to yawn open, ready to receive an offering.

[Objective: Obtain the Obelisk completed]

Aldrich still saw status messages in his vision, and as soon as the message faded, a sphere of darkness roared in front of him, drawing him in. He reached out with his hand, and when he grasped it, he saw the darkness meld into him, sinking into his spiritual body, forming a webwork of black circuits that completely covered him from head to toe.

[1x Obelisk consumed]

A chilling energy spread throughout Aldrich, infusing into his very fundamental essence, and it felt invigorating, like feeling a cool breeze in a hot summer day.

"Congratulations, Death Walker," came a familiar voice.

The Death Lord materialized in front of Aldrich, and she too, was in a spiritual form. She did not wear her armor, simply her royal robes with a crown of glowing green shards hovering above her head.

"I've obtained your Obelisk. I've killed those I needed to kill. I've destroyed my attachments... I've Now, I'm here for my ascension," said Aldrich.

Chapter 85: Ascension 2

Before the Death Lord could respond, Aldrich confirmed to himself that his quest for vengeance had truly ended.

[Quest: VENGEANCE completed]

[Objective: Death of Evan Harker completed]

[+50 EXP, 50 Coin]

[Objective: Death of Simon Wells completed]

[+ 100 EXP, 100 Coin]

[Objective: Death of Zayn Soldata completed]

[+9000 EXP, 5000 Coin]

[Objective: Death of Seth Solar completed]

[+20,000 EXP, 15,000 Coin]

[Negative Energy bonuses: +2000 EXP]

Aldrich saw all the experience cramming into his experience bar, but he did not level up.

Reading Aldrich's concern, the Death Lord explained. "All the experience, items and summons that you gain here flows into you only upon completion of this attempt, if you so choose to make this your final attempt." She raised a brow as she put clawed finger to her chin, cocking her head at Aldrich curiously. "Though, you will take this attempt as your final attempt, yes?"

"That depends on whether you give me the power I was promised or not," said Aldrich, threat oozing in his voice.

The Death Lord smiled widely, showing several rows of sharp fangs, like the jaws of a shark, beneath her shapely dark red lips. "Now that's the spirit. I am beginning to like you more and more every time we meet."

She nodded to Aldrich as she swayed her green scaled, serpentine tail from side to side. "Unlike many of my kind, I am not a dragon that breaks promises.

It is simply a little policy of mine to personally visit all those that near the completion of the Ritual of Eternity, for to become a Lich is a celebrated event, especially when that Lich is one with true free will."

"Interesting. I would have thought you would prefer Shades," said Aldrich. In Elden World lore, a lich that failed to pass the trial the Death Lord placed on them became mindless undead called Shades that basically were eternal slaves.

"Oh no, becoming a Shade is simply proof of weakness, and weakness, frankly, is boring," said the Death Lord. "But you, my Death Walker, are the exact opposite of boring."

"Good. Then you'll have no issue giving me what I need," said Aldrich.

"There. Like that. Power that you 'need', not power that you 'want.' A very key distinction between you and many Liches," said the Death Lord. "You believe you need this power for a higher cause, and that makes you fight, and that makes you succeed at any cost. It is an awfully admirable trait.

But yes, I will give you what you need. Yet are you certain you have completed ALL that you require for the Ritual of Eternity?"

"What do you mean?" Aldrich pulled up his quest tab to check his [Ritual of Eternity] quest.

[Objectives for quest: Ritual of Eternity]

[Obtain the Obelisk: Completed]

[Obtain a Phylactery: Completed]

[Sever all mortal bonds: INCOMPLETE]

"What...?" Aldrich narrowed his eyes. He had severed all strong mortal bonds, he was sure of it. He had the Butcher, the one who had personally tortured his parents, trapped in his Chrysalis. He had slaughtered those who had slaughtered him and his friends.

The Trident as an organization was something that Aldrich wanted to tear down, but he did not feel the same sense of burning, immediate vengeance against it as he did with the Butcher.

Whatever he had against the Trident was less personal and more a goal, a steppingstone on his conquest for power to bring this world into order.

The Death Lord moved close to Aldrich, and he immediately put up his guard, trying to manifest his weapons and magic. However, when he tried to reach out for his power, he felt it gone, like trying to reach into an unending well for the faraway submerged coins one knew would be at the bottom.

"You are unused to manifesting power in astral form, that much is to be expected. But I am not here to hurt you." The Death Lord put a pale, emerald scaled hand on Aldrich's arm, holding it close to her the same way a lady would hold her arm around a gentleman in a dance as she led him down to the ground.

Her expression lost her usual smiling coyness, replaced now with a solemnity that made it obvious she, behind her façade of casualness, had eons of life and undeath behind it. "Come. This is what you are missing."

The Death Lord led Aldrich in front of Adam and Elaine. Their zombie forms were covered in blood and entrails - all that remained now of Seth Solar. They stared blankly and dumbly at Aldrich's physical body, waiting his command, unable to see Aldrich's soul.

Seth Solar's soul floated into Aldrich. There was not enough of Seth Solar left to raise, so his soul automatically funneled into Aldrich unlike with Zayn who Aldrich marked to raise.

[1x Soul of Seth Solar obtained]

"You have not let go of them," said the Death Lord.

"What do you mean? I know they're gone. They're just empty shells of rotting flesh. I only kept them around for a symbolic sense of justice. To let them be a part of this vengeance even if it didn't mean anything," said Aldrich.

"Yes, that may be true, but deep down, you still hold out hope that you can bring them back, do you not? There are spells, mighty, higher circle spells, that can draw forth souls from the Soul Stream and bring them forth.

You know of them, and you know that if you amass enough power, enough levels, you might be able to learn such spells," said the Death Lord.

"..." Aldrich did not consciously think this, but he could tell that the Death Lord was right.

Some subconscious part of him pursued immense power not only to fulfill his goals, but because there were high level spells out there that could bring back the souls of even the long deceased, and that meant bringing Adam and Elaine back to live the lives that had been torn so cruelly from them.

It was not a goal he actively pursued because he knew it would tie him down to Adam and Elaine, but his bond with them was strong enough that it festered beneath his conscious thoughts anyway.

"I am here to tell you that it is impossible," said the Death Lord simply. "I have mastery of even the tenth circle spell [Astral Singularity] that can bring rip forth the souls of those deceased for eons, but magic that attempts to tap into the Soul Stream does not function in this reality, for it is not the Soul Stream of our own reality."

"...I see," said Aldrich.

"But there is one thing I can do for you. Though we cannot call upon souls of this reality, we can still create spiritual bodies with our magic.

That is how you may still cast magic that conjures up spirits that harm your foes.

Yet, in the end, these spirits we create are simply constructs destined to fade away, too unstable even to inhabit a flesh body."

The Death Lord inspected Adam and Elaine. She nodded to herself. "With my experience, I can likely construct temporary copies of their souls, but again, they cannot inhabit a flesh body, nor will they even be the real thing.

Their true souls are lost to the Soul Stream of this reality, and that is locked to even me, let alone you.

The only reason you would accept this offer would be to converse with your departed friends one last time. Their souls will even act as if they had been within these bodies the whole time, experiencing all that you have done.

Yet, it is merely that. An Act. An illusion.

They may not be real, but, if you so desire, it may be of some level of closure for you."

The Death Lord wrapped her arm around Aldrich's and squeezed it surprisingly comfortingly. "Consider this a gift from me, as one who knows what it is like to let go of true friendships.

Friendships that bind deep to the heart where their loss scars the very soul itself. Where their loss is a loss of a very part of yourself."

"..." Aldrich looked at Adam and Elaine. At their glazed over eyes, their rotted bodies, their bloodstained, horrible figures, and closed his eyes. Was this going to be his last memory of them?

He felt light, ever so light, but when he imagined them in his mind, he felt just one last tug of weight. "Do it. I'll talk to them again."

The Death Lord nodded and detached from Aldrich. Her own body was astral too, a silhouette of green, but unlike Aldrich, she could still generate magic from it. She stepped between Adam and Elaine and clasped her hands together. She closed her eyes. Her emerald green scales glowed as did her draconic horns.

A shimmering white light formed between her palms, and it burst outwards, engulfing herself, Adam, and Elaine... From this burst of bright white light, bright, warm light that seemed like the kind you would bathe in when the gates of heaven opened, two dark silhouettes, one of a man, one of a woman, stepped out.

Chapter 86: A Farewell

Aldrich paused, his spiritual body watching unblinkingly at the bright white light. That light, though warm, though so very welcoming, felt odd to him. It felt strangely...alien. The coldness of his own soul, of the deathly energies that he harnessed, felt much more at home with his heart than this.

But the repulsed sensation within Aldrich quickly dimmed away as his spiritual eyes beheld the forms of his friends once again. They were whole, too. No longer was their flesh rotted and bloodied, it was unwounded and whole and warm.

Their eyes looked at Aldrich with focus, not with bleary dead blankness.

They did not wear the tattered remnants of their Blackwater uniforms. Adam dressed simply in jeans and a plain white shirt while Elaine had on a plaid skirt and jacket combo she was fond of. These were the types of outfits they wore in the rare occasions they had free time to go out to Haven. Outfits they wore when they wanted to have fun instead of worrying about the countless problems life threw their way.

They did not even have the many old scars on their bodies and faces that stood as proof of their harsh lives.

This was what they would have looked like in an ideal world. When they could just live their lives the way they wanted to. And in the world that Aldrich envisioned, many like them, many like Aldrich himself, would get to live these lives out.

Adam and Elaine smiled at Aldrich, and when he saw those smiles, his visions of a future under his control, all those far off plans fled him as he was sucked into the present, the here and now where he had just one final more precious moment to spend with the only two people he had ever called friends.

"Man, did you get even edgier since school?" said Adam.

"And not even heaven can make you look good, huh," said Aldrich.

"Heh, always got something to say back to me, huh? Come here-," Adam opened his arms wide for a hug, patting Aldrich firmly on the back. "Thanks for looking out for us. Even when we turned into zombies. It must've been a burden-,"

"Not at all." Aldrich pulled back from Adam and then hugged Elaine.

Elaine smiled as she rested her chin on Adam's shoulder. "Just make sure to take a break once in a while."

"No need. With undeath, my stamina is infinite," said Aldrich as he pulled back from Elaine.

"Yeah, we know that," said Adam. "Don't take it so literally. What she means is that sometimes, you just have to slow down, even when you don't think you need to. Helps with clearing the head."

"You ought to know a lot about that, huh," said Aldrich.

Adam smiled and sighed. "Come on, cut a dead guy some slack."

"Yeah, I know." Aldrich paused for a bit, eyeing Adam and Elaine before speaking his mind. "You two...about what I've done, all the people I've killed, the people I've made suffer, I just wanted you to know that it isn't because I've gone insane.

This is how I just am. How I always was. I just never got to show it to you two fully.

But everything I've done is for a reason."

"Don't worry about it, Aldy," said Adam as he shook his head. "You don't have to explain anything to us. This is your life, or rather, unlife, I guess, that you get to live, and it isn't our right to force anything onto you or judge you for anything.

Whether you kill or torture or whatever, that's all you, and it would be wrong for us to try and change how you are."

"Are you sure, Adam? Didn't you want to be a hero?" said Aldrich. "The whole capes and saving lives thing I thought might have clashed with this a little more."

"I wanted to be a hero to make money and be famous, hah, not because I had any strong ideals or anything." Adam shrugged. "I mean, I guess I would've liked to save people too, yeah, and me personally, I could never imagine doing what you do.

But as someone from the Wastelands, I also know what the harsh reality of this world is like.

There are people like you and people like me and at the end of the day, we aren't any better than the other, just different."

"And Aldrich," said Elaine. "I want you to know that we've always known who you are. We know what you're capable of. We know what you've been through and how much that's changed you.

Plus, you never really kept it a secret. You always did tell us about how your biggest dream was to get out of Blackwater and hunt down the people responsible for killing your parents.

We accepted you for who you were then, and that doesn't change now."

"Yeah, I know." Aldrich nodded. "It's still good to hear it from you two one more time though."

"Just don't get too crazy, though," said Adam with a laugh. "What was that quote again? Staring too long into the abyss is bad for your eyes?"

"No, you doofus," sighed Elaine. "Gaze too long into the abyss, and the abyss also gazes into you. That's what it is."

"Yeah, whatever. That quote. Just make sure doing all this sh*t, you don't get messed up too bad," said Adam.

"A little late for that," said Aldrich. "I've always been like this. Ever since my parents died."

"I know," said Adam. "But there's a really big difference between how you are now with a focused goal and legitimately being messed up. Like, birds spinning above the head real batsh*t crazy kind of deal."

"You honestly think I would turn out like that? Like any of the raving lunatics in Ark Asylum?" said Aldrich.

"Of course not. I don't know a single guy out there with a stronger will than you. I'm just saying, because of that strong will, you tend to really, really focus on something, and you don't let it go. It could take up too much of you." Adam patted Aldrich's shoulder. "What I'm saying is, when you're doing all this crazy stuff to try and change the world, make sure to take some time to breathe. To relax, you know."

"Relax?" questioned Aldrich. He shook his head. "My days of relaxing are over. They ended when you two died."

"That's just not true," said Adam. "You have a whole lot more people to live for now. You've even got someone that loves you out there, and it's hard to love someone back if you've got so many other things in your mind."

I guess if I try to boil down my rambling, it's this: if you start to look at the world too much as a problem to solve, I'm worried you'll start to only see what's wrong and not the good that's in it.

And believe me, I'm speaking from experience here, even though life can seem like a pile of steaming dog crap, you can always scoop out a nugget of good somehow."

"Did you seriously try to make a deep life quote using an analogy for picking apart dog poop? You really are a poet, aren't you," said Elaine.

"Hey now, you have to admit that it works, doesn't it?" said Adam.

"It does," said Aldrich. He looked at his friends and sighed. "I just wish...that maybe, somehow, I could bring you two back. I have so much that I need to do, so much I want to change now that I have power."

I took you two along as zombies because I wanted you two to see as much of what I did as possible, to try and make you two a part of that change I wanted to see-,"

"It's okay," said Elaine. "We had pretty awful deaths, but it doesn't change the fact that we're dead. Coming back, at least for me, isn't something that sounds too great. Plus, dying is, well, how to put it, strangely peaceful? It feels like a rest after a long day of work."

If...maybe, you weren't doing so well, if you didn't have anyone beside you, I think we might have had a stronger urge to come back, but all I can say is that I'm happy seeing how you are now."

"Yeah, have to agree with that," said Adam. "I don't feel too much like coming back, either, considering Mr. Edge over here has netted himself the hottest girl I've ever seen. Sorry, Aldy, but it looks like we're going to have to leave this whole changing the world thing to you."

"Lazy to the end, huh?" joked Aldrich.

"No, if there was ever anyone out there that I could trust to change this world, it would be you. All there is to it," said Adam.

Adam and Elaine's forms started to flicker, turning misty.

"Looks like our time is up," said Adam.

"There's just one more thing for me," said Elaine.

"What is it?" said Aldrich.

"My dad out in the Wastelands, I want you to give him some closure." Elaine looked down ruefully. "I was working on a project for him a while back. It isn't finished for obvious reasons, but it's something I wanted him to have before he passed away. If you log into my cloud, you'll find it pretty easily."

"I'll do my best to get it to him," said Aldrich. He knew Elaine's login information because the two routinely had collaborated in designing weapons, upgrades, and programs for the Frames back in Blackwater, though it was mostly Elaine doing the work and Aldrich providing user feedback.

"You better," said Adam.

"And you? You have any last requests?" said Aldrich.

"Yeah, I do. A pretty damn important one," said Adam seriously.

"What is it?" said Aldrich.

"For you to be happy, that's what," said Adam with a smile. "Me personally? Nothing. So quit wasting your time on dead spirits and get back out there."

"What he said," said Elaine.

"Thanks, you two," said Aldrich.

"And get rid of those zombies of us already. I look bad enough as is. Doesn't help when I'm a rotting corpse," complained Adam.

"Yeah, yeah, I will," said Aldrich. "Don't worry about that. Now that I've talked to you two again, I feel a lot better letting you two go."

"One last hug?" said Elaine.

"Of course! Bring it in, folks!" said Adam, and the three of them hugged together for a long, lingering moment.

Aldrich stayed in his friends' embrace until he felt their souls slowly fade away, their touch and warmth on his astral body growing colder and lighter until finally, it was all gone. The bright white light from their manifestation had disappeared, fading away into the gloomy dark and grey of the Necropolis.

Aldrich looked down at his open hand where a few faint sparkles of white light shimmered, though even those slowly flickered away.

[Objective: Sever all mortal bonds: COMPLETE]

"So? Did you find what you needed?" said the Death Lord. She breathed heavily though she hid it quite well behind a straight posture and calm smile. It was obvious that channeling the soul construction had taken a massive toll on her.

"Yeah. I got my closure," said Aldrich. He paused. "Thanks."

"My, it has been a very long time since anyone has thanked me for anything," said the Death Lord. Her smile then faded, her expression growing stern. "Now then, let us finalize the Ritual of Eternity."

"About time," said Aldrich.

Chapter 87: The Rise Of A Lich

"You, Death Walker, will now ascend to a plane of existence beyond any mortal, beyond any mere undead," said the Death Lord, without wasting any more time, beginning the end of the Ritual. She clasped her hands together and held them out towards Aldrich. As she did so, large swathes of crackling green energy surrounded his astral body in a spherical matrix.

The Death Lord's reptilian green eyes flashed brightly, and a chord of swirling green energy manifested between Aldrich's spiritual heart and the Phylactery in his physical body. The Phylactery's purple orb started to oscillate rapidly, baring countless glowing blue lines of magical inscription weaved into its surface.

One by one, these inscriptions faded away, breaking off into flecks of bright blue dots.

"As a mortal Necromancer, you merely walked through the currents of death. You waded waist deep in the infinitely vast stream of living and dying, afraid of sinking your head under for it was forbidden among mortals to do so," chanted the Death Lord, and as her words echoed through the Necropolis, more and more inscriptions faded from the Phylactery.

As the Phylactery lost its inscriptions, it began to open up physically, baring moving segmentations that clicked and clacked as they slowly slid open like pieces in a puzzle box.

"But now, you will now what it means to truly be a part of this stream. To not be afraid of what lies below, but to embrace it. To swim within the raging rivers of death without drowning, no, to breathe it in, to let it become a part of you.

To let it become your might.

You will know power. And you will know eternity."

The tether tying Aldrich's spirit form to the Phylactery intensified in its green glow, and that was when he felt himself slowly assimilating into the Phylactery. His spirit body began to grow ever more transparent as his essence funneled into the orb.

The Death Lord paused, waiting for Aldrich's spirit body to fade away entirely into the Phylactery. When it did, Aldrich found himself inside his own body again as his Phylactery started to close up, returning into its spherical shape.

The black circuit shaped streaks all around his pale body were still present, but he did not feel any stronger. Any better than before.

"So what, that's it?" said Aldrich. He held his hands near his face, seeing that his body was the same, as was his level of magical energy.

"No, not at all." The Death Lord smiled, baring her rows of threatening fangs. She put a hand on the hip of her silken green dress as she flitted out a forked tongue with strangely seductive air. "This is simply the process to tether your soul into your Phylactery. It is once you leave the Necropolis and return to your realm that you will truly ascend.

When all the power that you have amassed here descends upon you in one crashing tidal wave of strength.

Oh, how wonderful your strength will be, how terrible your aura will be, how much death you will spread - I truly, truly anticipate it with all my cold, undying heart."

"So that's it? You want me to kill for you? To spread death?" said Aldrich.

"What? You think me some mere hungry spirit? Of course not," said the Death Lord.

"No, my dear, what I want from you is merely for you to actualize your potential."

"What do you mean by that?" said Aldrich.

"All will be made clear in time," said the Death Lord mysteriously. She laughed. "I jest. It would be so easy to end this with a mysterious line like that, no? But in all honesty, I am simply bored. I am trapped here in my realm, severed in its own pocket of space time, and I cannot interact with anyone or anything else other than you.

You are my only and, thus, greatest source of entertainment. So do your best not to die and end this show early."

The Death Lord made a cutting motion with her hand, and a portal opened up behind Aldrich, leading out into the real world. He floated towards it, and even if he tried to stay, he would not be able to resist the pull of the portal.

"Wait, this power I'm about to receive, I don't fully know all about it-," began Aldrich. He knew what Liches could do in the game, but he did not know entirely if the game mechanics translated perfectly to real life.

"You will find out," said the Death Lord. "I am not sending you away so soon because I begrudge your company. Nay, as I have said before, I like it. But there are those that need you."

"Need me?"

"Yes. This arena blocks your connection to undead under you from outside its walls. But, let's see, you've received no less than eight distress signals that these arena walls have intercepted. I assume you are direly needed," said the Death Lord.

"What? An attack?" Aldrich immediately perked up in battle readiness as his mind raced to think about how this had happened. He had planned very thoroughly with Casimir about how to take down every conceivable threat that would come the Red Circle's way.

This involved creating unique teams to defeat Blackwater's combat instructors, the strongest threats on hand, and the Trident Elite squadron stationed in Haven. Other than them, there would be no significant threats until at least a day later when reinforcements came.

Had reinforcements arrived early?

How was everyone doing?

Was Valera alright?

"Your most recent distress call was a mere minute ago. Those that rely upon you should still be intact." The Death Lord waved Aldrich away. "Now go. Receive your strength. Test it upon those that dare to strike against you. And when the time is right, bear it down upon me."

She smiled eagerly at Aldrich in pure, battle-crazed desire. Her crown of glowing green shards flared. "Take this heavy crown of death from me. Make it yours."

Aldrich blinked, processing what she said, but before he could respond, the portal sucked him in with one last violent draw, and he saw nothing but darkness.

Then, as Aldrich perceived the real world, the beginnings of color and shape forming the walls of the Red Circle's dance floor, it hit him.

The power.

It washed over him like a tidal wave, and at first, he felt like he was going under, completely drowning, his consciousness and body buffeted and crashed every which way and that by power. His vision turned a bright green, and he felt almost like his entire existence was being pulled apart at the seams.

He felt as if at any given moment, if he lost control, if he let himself be pulled under this raging flood of strength, he might be scattered into atoms.

But, almost as soon as the power hit him so very violently, it stopped.

The blinding bright green around him faded into pure darkness. He felt weightless in this darkness, without any physical form, just his basic consciousness, but here, he saw the very familiar sight of letters typing across a status screen.

But where before the letters were white and gold and styled as if they belonged to a fantasy game, the letters were now a bright, eerie green, the font shaped like thin, bare bones scratch marks.

And there, he saw the rewards he had reaped pouring in -

[CALCULATING EXP GAIN...]

[...]

[...]

[EXP GAINS EXCEEDING NORMAL LIMIT...]

[LEVEL UP!]

[LEVEL UP!]

[LEVEL UP!]

[LEVEL UP!]

[LEVEL UP!]

[LEVEL UP!]

...

...

...

The level up messages continued on and on and on until finally -

[LEVEL UP!]

[Level 14] Level 40]

[New EXP Bar: 0/45,000]

[+130 Stat Points available to distribute]

[Race changed from Undead (Risen) to Lich]

[Passive: Inner Circle of the Lich obtained]

[Passive: Outer Circle of the Lich obtained]

[Spell: Death Bolt obtained]

[Anti Life Shell Rank 2 changed to Mist of Undeath]

[Lich stat bonuses obtained:

+20 Strength

+20 Agility

+40 Vitality

+40 Attunement

+20 Perception]

[Racial Passive: Undead Body changed to Racial Passive: Lich Aspect]

...

[1x Living Armor (Volantis) automatically equipped. Current armor set consumed.]

[50+ Miscellaneous Items (Weapons, Armor, Materials) obtained. Exceeds personal inventory limit. Surplus moved to available personal storage identified as the Chrysalis]

...

[Summons preserved in temporary storage:

[30 x Death Knight]

[1x Crimson Knight Captain]

[20 x Skeleton Knight Archers]

[1x Zombie Giant]

[1x Great Bonewheel]

[Miscellaneous raised mortal undead]

...

Aldrich saw all this power flowing into him through the void and did what he knew best: he built his character up. He distributed his stat points. And as he did so, as he organized himself, he did not just upgrade his character, he built his very existence back up.

His physical body, his old mortal shell, was gone now.

In this darkness, as he put in points into magic, into attunement, into vitality, as he gained a greater and greater grasp of what he could do, he could see his new body starting to form again, manifesting around his bare, floating consciousness.

Chapter 88: Return Of The Lich

26 level ups.

130 stat points to distribute -

With the racial bonuses from becoming a lich, Aldrich was satisfied with his physical stats for now. His strength was now at 40 and his agility at 35. That was more than enough to be thoroughly superhuman, and with Volantis's Shattered Bone necromancy aiding him, that would increase massively too when needed.

Thus, Aldrich focused on putting his stats into vitality, magic, attunement, and perception.

[+25 Vitality, increased to +50 with affinity bonuses]

[Vitality: 60] 110]

[Current HP: 330/330]

With that, the darkness around Aldrich faded away into bright, ghostly green as a tongue of green fire flickered and began to grow rapidly, raging into a pillar of waving green energy. The pillar then stabilized, condensing upon itself into a sphere-shaped aura of green energy that shimmered in hazy waves like thick mist or fog.

In the center of that aura of misty green energy, the Phylactery manifested, though now, its purple shade had turned completely emerald green like a beautiful, precious jewel, like the very same shade present in the Death Lord's draconic eyes.

[+55 Attunement, increased to +110 with affinity bonuses]

[Attunement: 91] 201]

With this, the beginnings of Aldrich's physical body then started to develop. A bare skeletal spine of steely dark grey shade, almost as if made of metal, emerged from the center of the green mist sphere, forming into the skeletal upper half of a human.

An enormous human, at that, standing nearly seven feet (2.1 meters) tall.

The ribcage formed around the Phylactery, the ribs curling around it in a defensive matrix. Strands of energy shot forth from his ribs and tethered to the Phylactery in a web of energy strands that kept it suspended in place and thoroughly protected.

When these strands attached to the Phylactery, Aldrich understood one thing -

The Phylactery had changed massively. By receiving Aldrich's soul and enormous quantities of energy, the Chrysalis within had merged with both. What exactly this entailed, he did not know yet. But he was eager to find out.

The lower half of Aldrich's skeletal body was not visible for it melded into his now permanent spherical aura of green energy.

For Liches were beings that were akin to Elementals. Spiritual entities with a physical anchor that represented a specific natural force.

In the case of a Lich, that element was the ever present, ever reaching flow of Death itself.

Spikes jutted out of his metallic dark grey bones, curving out from his shoulders, forearms, and in the form of horns around the crown of his skull.

[+26 Magic, increased to +52 with stat affinity bonuses]

[Magic: 71 + 52 = 123]

[New Current Mana: 369/369]

[+24 Perception]

[Perception: 50]

With the final distribution of these stat points, Aldrich's empty eye sockets glowed with bright green points of light that flickered like twin spots of flame, and with that, he felt his consciousness fully anchor into his newly developed physical form.

The darkness around him completely cast away as his new eyes saw the real world around him.

Aldrich found himself in the middle of the performance stage in the Red Circle's dance floor, exactly where he had previously been before he had warped all the villains to the Red Circle. However, what he saw all around him was a scene of carnage.

The dance floor was utterly thrashed. The ground was cratered with smoking explosions, fires, and cracks. Tables and booths were broken apart into splinters. The performance stage was broken apart, wires in the machinery within it sputtering crackling showers of sparks that furthered more fires.

Thankfully, the Red Circle was largely fireproofed, preventing the flames from spreading.

Dozens of corpses of Red Circle staff were scattered everywhere, and among them, the culprits showed themselves.

Variants.

Aquatic type variants, all of them. Most of them were quadrupedal, though, being almost like hideous mutations of man and fish with hunched backs, legs, finned tails, gills that breathed sucked in air through both land and sea, burly, clawed arms, and glowing yellow eyes.

A dozen of these variants stood still, stopping themselves feasting on human corpses as they paid attention to the performance stage, as if to lend their eyes and ears to a performance.

That performance being their death.

Aldrich mentally gained an immediate understanding of where his summons were. They were not here in the Red Circle. It seemed that, under Valera's command, they had rallied their forces and left when the Red Circle, its defenses already thoroughly damaged by villains, came under attack by variants.

They had retreated to the abandoned mega complex apartment that Aldrich initially stationed the Geist, Walters, and Smoke at to deal with the Blackwater instructor

Colette. They had fortified the complex as a sort of base, using its many floors as a natural tower full of choke points to defend against attacks.

Overall, though, Aldrich had suffered no major losses to his forces. A few skeletons had fallen, but that was about it.

That left Aldrich to clean up here and regroup with the others.

As soon as the variants made eye contact with Aldrich's giant, glowing form of energy and bone, they froze, awed.

"I hope you enjoyed your meals," said Aldrich. His voice rung out in echoing, thunderous peals that no longer sounded remotely human. It was deep, threatening, and chilling to the core to listen to that voice, a voice that promised nothing but impending death. "For they will be your last."

Aldrich thrust out a skeletal hand and cast [Death Bolt], a new cantrip spell he learned that all Liches knew. It was a 5th circle spell that cost 10 mana that specialized in heavy destructive power. For enemies weak enough, it was an instant death spell.

A helical strand of green, flaming energy shot forth from Aldrich's hand, whistling with a ghostly wail as it smashed into a variant. The variant did not just die, it blew apart as if a bomb had been detonated inside of it, utterly drenching its brethren behind it in its scales, blood, and entrails.

The variants shrieked in fear, but one of the variants, a larger, bulkier variant reminiscent of a swordfish, roared, forcing its brethren to stay and fight. It was evident that this creature was in command here. It was far larger than the others with a heavy build reminiscent of an armored car. Easily two meters tall and powerfully built, ready to charge and skewer anything with its long, blade like snout.

The swordfish variant charged, using a power that boosted its movement speed with jet bursts of pressurized air in various holes in its flesh. The variant sped forwards as fast as a speeding car, smashing into Aldrich.

The variant's snout blade, metallic in its tensile durability, shattered when it hit Aldrich's ribcage. Aldrich not even budge a single inch back.

The variant roared in pain as it stumbled backwards, utterly rebuffed.

Aldrich grabbed the swordfish variant's throat with one hand and held its several hundred-pound weight of muscle and scale up with utter ease. The variant flailed its finned arms and legs in a desperate struggle to survive, but there was no struggle here.

Only a massacre.

Aldrich used his other hand to grab a firm hold on the variant's head, his skeletal fingers piercing into the flesh and anchoring into the creature's skull. He then channeled another Death Bolt right into the creature's head, completely splattering it.

Blood spouted out from the variant's headless body like a fountain, and seeing this, all the other variants shrieked and fled as fast as they could.

"Weak. Very weak. And to think something like this might have even posed a challenge to me before," said Aldrich. The creature was level 15 maybe, in terms of raw stats, but Aldrich was far too strong now, especially in terms of durability. Even without any strength or speed augmentations, he was more than a match for it.

And this was even without him willing Volantis to manifest. As a Living Armor, Volantis now bound to Aldrich's very soul, being present within him even if not physically present.

Aldrich could feel the living armor's presence lying dormant inside, the heart of a fierce, powerful warrior ready to awaken and serve at a moment's notice.

But before Aldrich willed Volantis to awaken and manifest, he forged his Materius.

Aldrich's current form of energy and bone was his Aspect Base, his fundamental appearance as the Death Elemental known as a Lich.

On top of this, he could create what was known as a Materius, essentially a far more physical form that Liches used to appear similarly to other mortals and to reduce any weaknesses they had to attacks that targeted spirits.

The Materius also gave Aldrich much more maneuverability to move around in armor and wield weapons with a more familiar humanoid body. As a Lich, he received negatives to equipping regular warrior type armor, but with a Materius, he could subvert that.

The process to create one was simple.

It was simply a matter of enforcing his will for it was an innate racial ability of his. As natural as knowing how to breathe or knowing where one's limbs were even in the dark.

Strands of raw red flesh sprouted from Aldrich's dark bones. Organs, mostly decorative, serving no true functional purpose, grew within his skeletal frame. Over these, muscle fibers knitted around before growing deathly pale skin. His energy aura faded away as it covered up under his costume of flesh and blood, and within seconds, he looked as he had in his human form.

Though, with a few minor differences. Aldrich was now much, much taller, standing almost as tall as his lich Aspect form.

Now, it was time to don his new set of armor.

"Awaken, Volantis," said Aldrich as he looked down at his naked body, balling up his fists and breathing in, remembering how it felt to be in a body of flesh and blood.