

Super Necromancer System

#Chapter 99: Resolve - Read Super Necromancer System Chapter 99: Resolve

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Six green scaled fishmen each manned two Vent Worms, holding their large black shells in place so that the worms within could direct their heat waves right into the metal vault doors below.

The Vent Worms were spaced just a short distance from each other so that their melting zones overlapped, creating one large spot of glowing white molten metal that would soon burn through the doors.

And then, it was open season to hunt the tasty and helpless humans down below.

Over a hundred fishmen gathered in a ring around the vault doors, licking their lips eagerly for their long awaited feast. A little ways from the main crowd their leader, the hulking, muscled, armor scaled shark variant, watched, overseeing this operation with gleaming yellow eyes.

The two squadrons of green scaled fishmen operating the worms cocked their heads as they felt an odd sensation weigh on their scales. An invisible weight that settled through their whole bodies. They looked around, swiveling their heads from side to side, wondering what was going on.

"Skraa! Skraa!" One of the fishmen on the outer ring pointed above wildly, but too late.

Minuteman emerged from a portal several dozens of meters in the air, away from sight, and hurtled straight down. He fell headfirst with his right arm stretched out, his round shield poised to take the impact of the fall.

He crash landed solidly behind the two green scaled fishman groups, and his silver shield took the energy of the fall and flashed blue before it reflected the force of the fall outwards in the form of a kinetic energy shockwave.

The shockwave knocked the green fishmen on their backs and toppled the Vent Worms over.

Outside of the water, Vent Worms had no way of moving around.

They relied on fishmen to carry them, and so they rolled on the backs of their shells helplessly.

Without a moment's hesitation, Minuteman clenched the fist of his shield arm and then twisted it, triggering a razor thin vibrocutting plasma layer to rapidly whirl around his solid silver shield in a ring of glowing pale blue, almost white light.

Shaped plasma in the form of rapidly rotating micro saw teeth lined the shield, and armed with this deadly cutting edge, Minuteman threw his shield like a frisbee.

The shield shot forward like an arcing buzzsaw and sliced through both Vent Worm's shells like a hot knife through butter, killing them before continuing its path of destruction, whirring into the crowd of green fishmen and severing their bodies in halves.

After making a full round trip, the shield returned to Minuteman's forearm where it latched onto his red gauntlet with a mechanical click. The solidified plasma layer around the shield dimmed down, going on a short recharge period.

"Sorry, but if you want to get down there, you'll have to get through me," said Minuteman as he watched the countless hostile, gleaming yellow fish eyes stare at him from every direction. He faced those strange eyes and fanged snarls with a grin. "And trust me, you won't be getting through me."

Several blue scaled fishmen pointed their four arms at Minuteman. Water seeped out through their scales and gathered around their webbed palms, swirling into spheres that then pulsated, shooting out pellets of highly pressurized water like shotgun shells.

Minuteman put his shield in front of his face to stop his eyes from getting gouged out as he sprinted forwards. His shield was not big enough to cover more than half his body, and water bullets pelted his legs and back.

However, Minuteman's enhanced physique meant that firepower like this equivalent to small arms gunfire barely only stung him. He took the most damage at his exposed back, with hundreds of water bullets crashing against him, but so long as he kept his eyes safe, he could weather this storm of projectiles practically forever.

Minuteman leaped into the air when he got near enough to the blue fishmen, and before he landed, he threw his shield. It zipped forward, bouncing between four different fishmen and cracking their skulls before landing on the dirt.

This left Minuteman with both his hands free to fight with.

There were still dozens more fishmen to deal with ahead of Minuteman, so he shuffled among them, making sure that wherever he maneuvered, there was a fishman behind him to take the water bullets meant for his back.

All the while, Minuteman laid a beatdown on any fishmen near him. He used thoroughly trained mixed martial arts augmented with his superhuman stats.

Jabs, kicks, locks, throws - he used it all, dancing around the alarmed fishmen and tearing through their ranks.

Blue scaled fishmen were frailer in exchange for their ranged water bullets, so Minuteman could put them down with singular well-placed blows.

Red scaled fishmen had sharp blades on their fins and respectable land-based agility, but not fast enough to outmaneuver Minuteman. They were just as easy to put down as their blue scaled brethren.

Green fishmen were the toughest with stronger builds, durable scales, and a minor healing factor, and these, Minuteman beat by gouging out their eyes and ripping out their gills to secure a kill.

All the while, Minuteman kept his peripheral vision tracked on the shark variant. The shark variant seemed to just be watching for now, letting Minuteman make a mess of his subordinates.

Good, thought Minuteman. The more time he got, the more time he bought for Miles to open the hangar and jumpstart the carrier.

Once the hangar was open, it exposed the bunker. But once the carrier left, the only people left behind for the fishmen to try and hunt were trained C class heroes that would back Minuteman up.

Thirty minutes.

That was how much time Miles had estimated it would take to get all this ready.

Minuteman could easily hold up for that long. Provided he only fought fishmen.

A sizable fishman, much larger than its brethren, growled as it trudged forwards, swiping away other smaller fishmen in its way as it sprinted towards Minuteman to try and tackle him.

Minuteman ducked under the clumsy swipe of the large but slow fishman before he closed his right fist. His red gauntlet-glove flickered with light, and his shield sped back towards him, latching back onto his forearm. He uppercut the green fishman with his circular shield, breaking the creature's jaw.

While the larger fishman reeled from the blow, Minuteman spun as he tossed his shield forwards.

The shield acted like a metal catapult ball, smashing into the fishman's knee and shattering the bone. This time, Minuteman instantly recalled his shield, catching it in

midair before spinning again, giving more momentum to a second throw that shattered the fishman's other kneecap.

The fishman grunted in pain as it fell face forwards, at which point Minuteman rushed forwards, jammed his hands into the creature's gills, then tore them out with a roar of exertion.

Blood sputtered from the fishman's gills as it screamed in agony before slumping to the ground, the holes on its neck convulsing as they gasped for breath.

Minuteman dropped the fleshy gill matter from his hands and flicked blood off his arms. The smaller fishmen around Minuteman shrieked in fear as they stumbled backwards.

That was the thing with fishmen. They were social creatures that moved in groups, but inherently, they avoided conflict and were quite cowardly. There were a lot of them in the world's oceans, but they were like cockroaches, numerous and able to populate anywhere, but weak.

The fact that they managed to gather in such a large scale like this, under other aquatic variants that were not even the same species of them, was impossible.

The shark variant loosed a guttural grunt that echoed through the air, and the fishmen all backed away, clearing the vault door as a makeshift arena. The shark variant stepped forwards, its sharp toothed gaze ever smiling as its beady yellow eyes gazed hungrily at Minuteman.

"Round 2, huh? Sorry to say, though, but this'll end up exactly like last time." Minuteman clenched his right fist and twisted it, activating his shield's plasma sawblades while simultaneously tossing it, giving the shark variant as little time as possible to register the attack.

Even if the shark variant had adapted to blunt force blows with its thicker scales, solidified plasma like this, especially rotating at vibrocutting speeds, would still pass through it with no issue.

The shark variant's three fins twitched, sensing motion in the air, and it swiveled around, lashing out with its lengthy tail. Its tail hit the shield in mid-air, forcefully pinging its trajectory far up. The shield whizzed by the shark variant, instead continuing forwards and mowing down several more fishmen behind it.

Minuteman exhaled. This thing's reactions, speed, and strength had all gotten considerably better since last time. There was no question about it: the monster was superior to Minuteman now. On top of this, Minuteman only had one more charge of plasma left in his shield.

Thankfully, the shark variant seemed to hold some sort of tribal, martial pride, preventing any of the other fishmen from intervening, but when Minuteman stared at that shark variant, at its powerfully muscled body, its force absorbing scales, its fins that registered attacks at lightning quick speed, and its many rows of jagged teeth, he knew he was staring into the face of death.

Minuteman smiled and stayed strong as he clenched his right fist, recalling his shield back to his forearm. Looking at his smile, a bystander would have thought Minuteman was just moments away from securing a win for himself.

Be strong.

Strong even when you are weak. Strong even when you are losing.

Because the moment you look weak isn't just the moment you lose for real, it's also the moment when everyone standing behind you, everyone watching you, everyone relying on you, loses as well.

"Sorry for the sneak attack," said Minuteman. "Now let's beat each other bloody the old-fashioned way... Me with my fists, you with your claws and jaws."

Chapter 100: Knightly Intervention

After thirty minutes -

Minuteman looked up at the sky, feeling wet mud underneath him. His body raged with pain that wracked him like hot fire, but the rain and the mud was oddly comforting in its coolness. He felt that if he closed his eyes for just a few more seconds, he would drift away, forever away into a sleep from which he was never waking.

But he could not do that.

Not now.

Not ever.

Minuteman grit his teeth, tasting iron, his own blood, in his mouth, and put power into his body. He leaped back onto his feet with surprising agility as he sucked in breaths. He put a hand over his stomach where large claw gashes threatened to widen with every one of his movements and spill out his guts. His right shoulder had been torn into with a massive bite, shearing off a big chunk of his developed deltoid muscle.

In front of him, the shark variant showed its ever present, many toothed grinned at him. Its right arm was twisted backwards at the joint, dislocated from a well-executed lock.

The armor plating like grey scales around its neck and chest were bashed in, lined with countless cracks of impact from Minuteman's shield. Several large gashes and tears in its flesh indicated where Minuteman had thrown his shield and drawn blood. Three of its fins were reduced to small nubs smoking with seared flesh - the result of Minuteman's last plasma charge in his shield.

"Not looking too good, are we?" said Minuteman. He looked down at a puddle of rainwater and his own blood. He saw his own bruised, bloodied, battered body. "But guess I'm even worse off."

"Grah," said the shark variant. It pointed at Minuteman, then at its own stomach, mimicking where Minuteman's stomach gashes were.

"Yeah, you got me, so what about it?" said Minuteman.

The shark variant turned to one of the fishmen and waved it forward. When the fishmen neared, the shark variant reached out and viciously bit the fishman's head off. Then, it dug its claws into the fishman's hide and ripped off a great strip of its flexible skin and scales. It then tossed the skin towards Minuteman's feet.

"Grah. Grah." The shark variant motioned to its stomach.

"You want me to wrap my injuries up? So you can fight more?" Minuteman looked at the bloody strip of red scaled skin. He reached down and picked it up before tying it around his stomach, wrapping it tight to seal his injuries shut and prevent his intestines from pouring it.

"So much intelligence..." Minuteman was astounded. Variants that communicated like this to people were extremely rare, limited mostly to cases of parasitic variants that took over human minds. That a variant had independently evolved to be able to communicate like this was unheard of.

What was going on in the world?

Why were the variants evolving so much?

And was this related to why they were attacking so often?

The ground rumbled as the vault doors oscillated.

"Thanks," said Minuteman as he smiled. "But time's up. I've won."

The shark variant cocked its head as it stared at the ground, wondering what was going on. Some distance away from the bunker vault doors, a circular hangar door opened up in the ground with the groaning of heavy metal working for the first time in decades.

Then, Minuteman heard the whir of an electro-etherite engine starting up. Miles had gotten the carrier to work, too. Now it was just a matter of getting the civilians inside out.

"Rah!" The shark variant thrust its clawed hand out, motioning its fishmen subordinates to investigate the sound, and hordes of fishmen ran towards the hangar. Too late, though.

With a booming whir, the large carrier plane emerged from the ground, its huge bulk likely packed to the brim with civilians. White lights shone out from its dual electro-etherite engines embedded in either of its wings. The cylindrical structure of the engines spun rapidly, processing power with crackling electricity.

Minuteman let the fishman crowd pass by him as he knew they could not get there in time. Before they were even halfway there, the carrier was high up in the air, and with a burst of power, speeding away. The skies had cleared up, too. Halfway through Minuteman's fight, the huge storm above had miraculously broken apart, and that guaranteed the carrier's safety.

The fishmen kept running, though, towards the open hangar, but inside, they would only face heroes to rebuff them and reinforce Minuteman.

Or that was what Minuteman thought. Instead, he heard a medley of screams fill the air. Screams of desperation and terror and pain.

"Civilians!?" Minuteman immediately whirled around and started to sprint towards the hangar.

"Fuck those idiot heroes!" roared Minuteman as he grimaced in pain, feeling with every step his injuries cry out in agony. He knew what had happened -

The heroes had left behind all the civilians just to evacuate themselves. That massive carrier could carry two hundred people inside of it, enough for all the civilians but not enough for the heroes. So instead, the twenty or so heroes had decided to take the plane for themselves and leave two hundred lives to die.

They could not afford to save even a single person once they committed to this plan because if they did, they took with them a survivor to report on their behavior later.

They did not want any witnesses.

Minuteman heard the shark variant roar in anger as it sprinted towards him, wanting to continue their duel. From the frequency of the shark variant's heavy and mighty footsteps, he could tell it was going to gain on him way before he could make it to the hangar.

Minuteman ran as much as possible before he felt the shark variant right behind him. Then, he turned around and used his Minute of Justice. His body lit up with a brilliant blue aura as his blonde hair spiked up and started to float in the air. His power was called Force of Will, and it converted willpower into physical strength.

In particularly desperate situations, Minuteman could concentrate all his will into a state called the 'Minute of Justice' that made him faster, stronger, and, more importantly, invulnerable to damage for one single minute.

The shark variant lunged at Minuteman with its two clawed hands. The shark variant's claws ran down Minuteman's chest, but they scraped up sparks as they skidded down across his skin, unable to pierce through it.

"I don't have time for you anymore!" shouted Minuteman as he kneed the shark variant in the stomach before throwing it away as far as possible, sending its huge, heavy body skidding across the mud like a steppingstone thrown across the surface of a lake.

With that, Minuteman turned back to the people that really mattered: the civilians. Any fishman he ran into, he beat shoved away or beat down with single strikes. He tried his best not to slow himself down because he needed to get there, to the hangar, where all those defenseless, innocent lives were -

But Minuteman was not going to make it. Already dozens of fishmen were there, at the edge of the hangar doors, ready to jump in below and massacre those inside. He desperately reached out, his blood soaked red gloves grasping forwards, towards those lives that needed, that had trusted and relied on him -

Minuteman blinked in utter surprise. His hand was still outstretched towards the fishmen, but instead of seeing fishmen framed between his fingers, he saw...a wheel?

Something Minuteman had never before seen in his life.

A sizable, five-meter-wide wheel made of what looked like stitched together corpses and bones. Its wheel structure consisted of spines tethered together with vertebrae jutting out like spikes. The bones were wreathed in green flames, and those flames spread out all around the hangar doors where the bone wheel moved, lighting up a wall of green fire that did not burn down the fishmen within, but still killed them near instantly.

The fishmen roared and flailed in pain before they fell the ground, their corpses withering as if the flames were draining their very life force away. The flame wall also stopped fishmen from advancing into the hangar.

"What...?" Minuteman was astounded at this otherworldly sight, but he quickly regained his wits. He needed to figure out if this was a threat, some kind of strange new variant that posed a danger to those within.

At the same time, he had to deal with the masses of fishmen still charging forwards from behind him.

Minuteman looked ahead at the bone wheel, then back at the crowd of charging fishmen. Worst case scenario, he was stuck in a pincer attack.

His fears faded and his confusion only grew when he saw what looked like black armored knights fall from the sky. They landed among the advancing fishmen, and as they did, they swung blades and halberds of cold blue metal decorated with bones at their guards and handles.

The knights utterly butchered the fishmen, moving across them like specters of death, their dark green, tattered cloaks rippling behind them, their each and every swings slicing and dicing fishmen in halves.

The fishmen hissed and shrieked in pain as their body parts were lopped off before their lives ended in swift, merciless blade swings.

Were these...heroes?

They must have been human, judging by their builds and how they moved, but beneath their dark helms, Minuteman could not tell.

Was this a hero team themed as knights?

He knew of one called the Neo-Templars, but they armored themselves in cyber-armor, whereas these knights seemed to just be wearing regular metal with no hints of technology added in.

Minuteman was torn from his thoughts when he saw the shark variant approaching, seeing new enemies and grinning with eager desire to fight.

"Wait! Be careful, that one's much stronger!" said Minuteman, hoping to be helpful. He started to move forward to try and aid the knights, but a red armored knight appeared in front of him.

"Stop right there," said the knight with a threatening edge in his voice. His face was also covered under his helm, but beneath the visor gaps, Minuteman could see that the knight's eyes glowed with crimson light.

The knight looked at him with long, crimson saber in hand, and then nodded. His voice softened. "You are not one of our targets, and you are quite injured. With that trained body of yours, no doubt, you are a warrior of some sort, and you have fought long and well. Take a well-deserved rest, fellow warrior, and let us fend this advance off.

You shall see how battle is truly done.

Elegantly.

And without mercy."

The red knight then dashed forwards, leaving behind a streak of red in all of his movements as he slashed from side to side, carving up fishmen in his way. His skill with the blade was masterful, each slice lopping off fishmen heads.

The blood the fishmen spilled from their neck stumps funneled into the red knight's saber, elongating the blade with solidified, glowing blood.

The red knight neared the shark variant, confidently surging forwards to engage in battle.

"Am I...dreaming?" said Minuteman, wondering what the hell was happening.

Chapter 101: Art Of Battle

Minuteman shook his head and sucked in a breath. This was no dream. This was real, and reality called for him to be strong. He looked around to see where he could be useful and found a swarm of fishmen surrounding a black armored knight.

After all, there were only fifteen black knights and hundreds of fishmen. Even if they were individually strong, the sheer number of fishmen was an issue.

The knight hunkered down behind his greatshield of spiked black metal and decorative bone, and though the fishmen were not strong enough to claw or chew their way through his armor, their swarming had rendered the knight immobile, especially because his choice of halberd as a weapon made it less wieldy in close quarters.

"I've got you!" Minuteman sprinted towards the knight and then leaped into the air. He twisted in the air, putting momentum into a throw as he sent his shield spinning forwards.

The shield flashed blue, indicating that it had stored kinetic energy to release, and when it hit the swarm of fishmen, the energy exploded outwards, knocking the fishmen back in a concussive blast.

The knight reacted immediately with his newfound freedom. He bashed his shield forwards, knocking back the fishmen in front of him while swinging his halberd around him in an arc that trailed with cold blue light, slicing several fishmen in halves.

Minuteman clenched his right fist, recalling his shield, and came to the knight's side.

"Are you with the guy in red armor?" said Minuteman.

The black knight stared at Minuteman, and Minuteman looked closely at the knight's face, looking behind the gaps in his visor.

Minuteman stepped back in shock when he realized the knight had no eyes.

The face beneath the helmet had gaunt, thinly stretched and rotted pale skin while the eyes were absent, baring only black sockets.

The knight nodded in appreciation at Minuteman before moving away, on to slaughtering the next group of fishmen it saw.

"Ah, this one truly is strong"

Minuteman turned to see the red armored knight in battle with the shark variant.

The red knight's armor was sleeker and more form fitting, showcasing a build far leaner than Minuteman's. The knight did not rely on brute physical strength, but superior agility to fight, and he moved with an elegant grace that looked like a dance. He side stepped claw swipes from the shark variant and twirled to unleash counter slashes with his crimson saber.

The knight's ivory white, red trimmed cape fluttered behind his movements, marking them with an elegance that seemed to elevate the brutality of battle into something artistic, something performative.

"Its scales are too thick!" called out Minuteman as he saw the red knight's many swift slashes crashing upon the shark variant but skidding off in showers of sparks, deflected by its hardened, plate like scales.

By now, Minuteman's Minute of Justice had worn off, and this rendered him even weaker than he was in his base form, drained of much of his stamina and strength.

"Focus on the cracks I've already beaten into the armor!"

"Graaah!" The shark variant roared into the air, and waves of sound echoed from its maw, pulsating over the battlefield. As these sound waves traveled, they triggered the fishmen, causing them to go berserk and start to focus on aiding the shark variant.

The fishmen dropped fighting the black knights and sprinted instead towards the red knight.

The shark variant then slammed both its fists down towards the red knight. The red knight performed a backflip, dodging the double fist strike with ease. The shark variant's blows drilled two craters into the dirt and mud with a resounding crack and splash.

The red knight looked around at the masses of fishmen approaching and sighed.

"I would much rather prefer to deal with this brute myself," said the knight as he too looked up. "Do me a favor and take care of these rude hecklers."

With that, a medley of attacks came down from the sky. A bright blue beam of energy streamed down, crashing into fishmen and blowing their bodies apart with concentrated heat and kinetic energy. Purple spiral shaped beams shot down, hitting fishmen and crushing them into pressurized puddles under immense gravity. Bolts of lightning rained down, frying a dozen fishmen at once.

Minuteman looked up to see Alters. Fifteen Alters, to be exact, soaring down from the sky. Not all of them were likely flight capable, so it was probably that one of them maintained flight for all of them.

"Are you heroes!?" shouted Minuteman. He squinted his blue eyes, trying to see if they wore any identifying symbol, but no, they just wore the tattered remnants of dresses and suits over black bodysuits.

"Heroes?" A silver haired, dark-skinned girl, the one that fired the lightning, addressed Minuteman. "No. But we ARE here to deal with this pest problem."

"I hate fish. They creep me out," said a young man wearing a visor over his eyes as he fired more bursts of kinetic energy beams. "Fucking die!"

The fifteen Alters landed in a wide perimeter around the red knight and shark variant, joining in with the black knights to block out any fishmen from intervening.

The huge wheel of bone also aided this effort, loosing loud rattling sounds as it sped around the battlefield, turning fishmen into roadkill while leaving behind a trail of lethal green flames.

"Behold this performance, warrior," said the red knight, his voice echoing to Minuteman. He pointed his red saber to the shark variant. "Your way of fighting is respectable in its own way, but all that smashing and destroying - there is hardly any art to it. Hardly anything resembling elegance.

As a fellow warrior, I shall teach you how beautiful battle can truly be-,"

The shark variant roared as it charged.

"[Expose Veins]," said the red knight. His eyes flashed red under his visor. Right before the shark variant swiped his face off, the knight seemingly...phased through the attack, leaving behind a trail of afterimages.

Now behind the shark variant, the red knight performed three twirling slices, gouging out cuts in the three nubs where Minuteman had severed the shark variant's fins. Something about these three slashes was different.

They were executed faster and stronger than the knight's normal attacks, as if enhanced by some additional force.

Wherever the red knight's saber cut, a dark purple, violet shaped pattern bloomed around the flesh.

Even with the enhanced strength, though the red knight could not cut deeply into the shark variant's scales.

"You can't cut the flesh like that, you'll need a stronger weapon. Something blunt that can break through the scales. Here, my shield!" Minuteman pulled back his shield arm, ready to throw it towards the knight, but the knight wagged his finger at Minuteman.

"No, no, just sit tight and enjoy the performance. Free of charge." The red knight stepped back and stood still, raising his blade up cautiously.

The shark variant growled but did not take much damage from such shallow cuts. Confident that the knight could not damage it, the variant grew ever more feral, and leaped towards the knight with a mighty swipe of its claws.

"Parry-," The red knight angled his saber so that its flat acted like a shield. The shark variant's strike skidded down the length of the saber, angled perfectly to diffuse as much force as possible.

Minuteman knew heroes that used swords, and even if he himself did not know much about sword combat, he could tell that this red knight was an expert.

"And [Riposte: Returning Step]" The red knight used the force of the shark variant's blow to spin around rapidly and then unleashed a swift horizontal slash across the shark variant's neck, where the armor had been cracked from Minuteman's blows.

The shark variant stepped back before it placed both hands around its neck. A glint of red light flashed around where it had been slashed before the slash spontaneously appeared on its neck, carving through its scales and into its flesh.

Profuse amounts of blood poured out from its exposed throat.

The shark variant collapsed to a knee.

"With brutish foes like this that rely merely on their ugly muscle, it is best to parry and riposte, using their own unsightly strength against them," said the red knight and he turned around dismissively, as if he had already won.

"Wait-!" began Minuteman as he saw the shark variant grit its jaws, forcing the muscles around its exposed throat to flex and clench the deadly wound shut. But where the slash wound shut, violet floral patterns grew instead.

"And now, the finale." The red knight bowed deeply with an arm over his chest, dodging one last swipe surprise swipe from the shark variant without even looking.

The knight snapped his fingers with a metallic click and chanted, "[Crystal Blood Venom: Expunge]"

With that, the shark variant seized up, stiffening in its movements like a statue before it could unleash another attack. The flower patterns around its wounds shone brightly before detonating.

The flesh rippled and exploded as blood poured out of the horrible wounds like water draining from a popped water balloon.

As soon as the blood exploded out, it crystallized, entrapping the shark variant's half destroyed corpse in a casing of its own hardened life essence... The blood shone with a faint violet hue, glimmering with a jewel like, hauntingly beautiful incandescence.

Chapter 102: Incident Of A Certain Flight

Above Haven City, at the edge of its Eastside district border -

"All this space, and to think that crazy musclehead was going to pack it full of Duds!" Rockshaper motioned around to the vast innards of the carrier plane around him.

There were three rows of seats stretching out seemingly endlessly across the flanks of the sixty-meter-long super craft.

Even if this Carrier was an older model from five decades ago, by virtue of being military grade during the peak of the Monstering, it still had everything needed to function in tense combat situations.

Between the rows of seats were storage compartments for holding medical supplies, rations, and weapons. There were even mobile med-pods capable of housing people in intensive care and, in cases where their injuries were so severe they needed to be preserved until they reached a proper hospital, life support stasis capability.

Rockshaper's mask was off at this point, baring a sweaty, grimy chiseled face with set in brown eyes and short cropped black hair and messy stubble. He unwrapped a chocolate flavored omnibar, a MRE snack packed with two thousand calories, and chewed into it.

"And we got grub, too. Damn, even this brick tastes fucking incredible after all the sh*t I had to put up with Minuteman. Hope that fucker dies," said Rockshaper.

"We should have at least saved some of them," said a cowboy themed hero leaning forward in a char who, in a stroke of original brilliance, had a hero name of 'Cowboy.'

Incidentally, he was one of four Sentries stationed in Southside, sentries being heroes at least C rank that oversaw the security of several neighborhoods in a city.

Underneath them were lower ranked patrol heroes that roamed around individual neighborhoods, but most of them, at least in Southside's chronically underfunded and under-defended confines, were dead.

The only ones alive were the higher-ranking Sentries and some C rankers from other parts of the city.

"Funny to hear that coming from you, Cowboy. You have a reputation of being a sh*t Sentry, after all," said Rockshaper.

"Yeah, can't deny that," said Cowboy. "I just couldn't be assed to do much with how little I was getting paid. Plus, they were mostly Duds. But that don't mean we had to leave all of em'. The kids, maybe, we could've gotten em' on here."

"We bring back even one of them, and they're a potential witness to what we did, and we won't just be losing our hero licenses, we'll be rotting in villain jail for the rest of our lives if we don't get flat out executed first," said Rockshaper. "Am I sensing...hesitation here, Cowboy?"

Among us all, you're the weakest. It wouldn't be too hard to get rid of you like we did with Portal Girl and Sparkwire," said Rockshaper as he stepped in front of Cowboy threateningly.

Cowboy put his leather gloved hands up in the air. "No, no, don't got no problem with this."

"How about that? I guess it's true that it only takes a little pressure to get the right answer out of people," said Rockshaper with a smug smile. He strolled over to the cockpit where Computation, one of the C rankers, was operating the plane.

Sparkwire, or known as Miles as a civilian, had refused to pilot the plane and leave behind Minuteman, but thankfully, with Computation around and Minuteman gone, there was no need to keep Miles.

It was a shame Portal Girl had to go, thought Rockshaper. She was a young one, so much potential, plus, she looked amazing in that pink skintight costume. Such a waste to let pretty ones like that go.

But she had opposed Rockshaper, and that was it.

There was an ever-dying breed of heroes nicknamed 'Goldies' that tried to represent the idealism and pure morality of the first wave of heroes that had risen up during the supposed 'Golden age' of heroes, when Alters first donned costumes in light of Pre-Altering comic books and movies and media to fight villains not for themselves, but to try and make the chaotic world around them right.

As far as Rockshaper cared, they were all idiots.

There was a reason they were dying out.

Vanguard was probably the last big Goldie with Valkyrie's retirement, and he had disappeared almost twenty years ago, probably swallowed up in a Titan's nest somewhere.

When survival was on the line, morals did not matter. The Goldies did not understand this, and so many of them died sacrificing themselves.

Case in point: Minuteman.

Honestly, Rockshaper had no idea how these people fostered enough delusion within themselves to put down their own lives for others, but whatever. At the end of the day, Minuteman, that tiny brained idiot that thought he was so much better than Rockshaper just because he was B class, was dead, and Rockshaper was alive, ready to rise through the ranks.

"Computation, what's the ETA on us getting out of this watery sh*thole?" said Rockshaper as he sat in the co-pilot seat beside Computation.

Computation's glowing blue-light mask flashed as he spoke, his voice going through a synth filter. "Fifteen minutes, probably. We're almost out of Westside." He looked at a monitor showcasing blurry images of the cityscape below.

With the tech disrupting storm cleared away, satellite imagery could show what was going down on the ground, but it would still take a solid half hour before it managed to show anything crisp quality as the Panopticon's satellite array recalibrated.

But even with blurry images, it was possible to see that the Westside was just completely flooded, its usual colorful neon lights drowned out.

"What a damned shame. So much new tech in Westside just gone like that. In some ways, especially forgery, it was almost on par with tier 1 cities when I worked in the black market," said Computation flatly.

"Yeah, getting a fake I.D. for my mercenary gig was a breeze out there," said Rockshaper.

It was not a big secret that a surprisingly sizable number of heroes dealt with under the table jobs and activities to pad their incomes.

The hero industry was heavily top concentrated, with those in the Superboard Top 100 almost making more than all the other several million heroes in the United States combined.

Until a hero made it to the C rank at least, they got zero exposure from sponsorships or social media, not to mention it was hard to get into established teams or secure good missions to farm AP without either strong media presence or proven strength.

And once a hero got into the C rank, it still required careful maintenance of one's personal brand to keep ranking up, not to mention tons of hero teams were predatory in their contracts and, despite giving a more stable place for heroes to secure missions, often made sure that most of the rewards and social media exposure went to just a privileged few on the team.

The end result was that most heroes that were relatively talented and trained hard enough made it to the C rank but found themselves hard stuck there.

Maybe they were strong enough to go to the B rank but lacked the social media finesse to go higher, or maybe they were popular with the masses but flat out too weak to qualify for higher ranks - in some way, they were lacking.

Only a precious talented few were strong enough to just blitz through the rankings with incredible power that was undeniable, and most of them ended up in the A- rank.

To get from there to the A rank, they again needed a solid brand image.

The A+ and S ranks were a whole different breed altogether, where heroes were so strong that they were national security assets where their image mattered far less.

But trying to go up there was a pipe dream for basically anyone.

For the vast majority of heroes, getting into the B rank and above was good enough to live a comfortable life, but the cutoff between C and B was just too large for most to make that leap.

Hence, there was also quite some built up resentment between C rankers and B rankers they were envious of.

There was no doubt this envy had contributed towards Rockshaper and the rest of the C rankers rebelling against Minuteman, but the biggest thing at the end of the day that had turned them was the utterly repulsive idea of risking their lives for Duds.

"Still, poor Minuteman. Imagine dying for Duds," said Computation. "I couldn't think of a worse way to go."

"Thing about Goldies like him, though, is that they're perfectly happy to die like that," said Rockshaper as he shrugged. "If you ask me, I think we did him a favor, letting him die as a proper golden age hero like that."

"That's harsh, man, but I do know where you're coming from. When I see Goldies these days, it feels like I'm looking at a walking, talking fossil. Something that just doesn't belong in the modern age, you know?" said Computation.

"Then the Goldies and the Duds have something in common," laughed Rockshaper. "No wonder Minuteman wanted to die for them."

That was when the plane thudded, shaking violently and jerking downwards from an impact from above.

Rockshaper stumbled forwards in his seat, stopping himself from face planting in the controls in front of him. "The hell was that!?"

"Put on your seatbelt, dude," muttered Computation before he flipped a few switches, getting the Carrier's Threat Detection System to activate. There, localized high accuracy radar mapped out threats within the aircraft's vicinity, and the monitor drew out an approximate image of what had crashed atop the plane -

"A...person? No, wait, I'm not sure...", said Computation, utterly bewildered. The radar imagery did not give a perfect image, just a silhouette, but the projected silhouette, though humanoid, also seemed monstrously inhuman with spiked protrusions emanating from its shoulders, head, back, arms and legs.

"Whatever it is, shake it off!" shouted Rockshaper.

Chapter 103: Incident Of A Certain Flight 2

"Have you seen how massive this carrier is? Shake it off? You think I can start doing flips in the air? This thing isn't built to move like that, you idiot!" said Computation, his synth infused voice radiating outwards with high pitched notes of desperation as he saw the outline of the strange humanoid being raise a fist in the air, as if to punch down and smash through the plane.

"You, any of you, can you fly!?" asked Rockshaper to the fourteen C rank heroes he had taken aboard the carrier.

None of them said anything.

Flight was a relatively rare power as far as Alter abilities went, and it was a general but not absolute rule that flying Alters that did not have flight as the main function of their power tended to be stronger.

Among the most average of C rankers, flight was a precious ability unless it was their main power, but here, nobody had any such capability, not even as their main ability.

"It's-it's gone!" said Computation.

"What!?" Rockshaper whipped around, bewildered. If the thing was a variant, then it would have smashed through the plane without any hesitation.

"It pulled back its punch, and then it just...faded away," said Computation, relief leeching into his voice.

"Don't ease up yet, that thing is still out there. Keep a close eye on the threat scans," said Rockshaper. He turned to the rest of the heroes. "And all of you, get ready to fight.

Put your costumes back on, get your weapons ready. We did NOT make it this far just to die up here!"

"Unfortunately, this is as far as you go." A faint voice echoed throughout the confines of the plane.

All the heroes looked around, tensed up, trying to track where that voice came from, but because of its echoing nature, it was hard to pinpoint an exact location. It felt like it came from everywhere, ringing through every inch of the metal, echoing into their very beings themselves, under their flesh, rattling into their very bones.

They all shivered in unison, feeling a distinct chill crawling up their spines. Their guts dropped in mounting dread they could not help but feel, and a few of them began to feel numb at their extremities.

"Wh-what is that?" One of the heroes, a man called Cyber-Knight, gripped his chainsaw broadsword tight with fear in his grey gauntleted hands.

"Variants can't talk!" shouted Rockshaper. "Stop sh*tting your pants! It's just an Alter!"

In the depths of the carrier, green mist started to pool outwards. The mist shone with a strange, unearthly glow, and though green was usually a color associated with life and nature, the shade of this green was best described as...diseased.

Sickly. Toxic. The kind of green irrevocably associated with decay. With dying.

The mist wafted outwards, its cloudy tendrils stretching through the plane, moving hungrily towards the heroes.

"That might be toxic gas!" said Rockshaper. "All of you have masks! If you have filtration built into them, use them now!"

"Hm. Toxic gas, is it? I suppose that's a natural response to seeing my Mist. I'll have to see if I can abuse that response later, with opponents that are more worth my time," came the voice again.

It was a deeply calm voice, and yet, it was not calming.

There was something about the calmness that felt so very...empty.

So very cold.

There was something fundamentally inhuman about it that intensified the shivers running through the bodies of all the heroes.

Even though that voice addressed the heroes, it was obvious from its calm emptiness that it did not address them as people, as humans, but as things.

"Who are you!?" said Rockshaper. He squinted his eyes through his stone plate shaped mask. "Show yourself!"

The only response was the strange green mist accelerating forwards, engulfing the heroes in one fell wave.

"I-I feel weak," said Cyber Knight as he shivered, the strength draining from his arms. He was near the head of the group, most exposed the mist, likely confident in his helmet's filtration system. He dropped his sword, and it clattered on the floor heavily. The muscled hero then dropped down to his knees and wrapped his arms around himself like a lost child. He shivered uncontrollably. "I-I feel...scared?"

"Fear, yes," came the voice, but this time, the heroes could attach a location to it. Footsteps echoed toward them. Heavy, metallic footsteps. "The closer you are to my Mist, the greater your life force drains, and the worse the constant debuffs for fear become."

"W-what's going on!? You, there! I see you!" Cowboy unholstered his twin pistols. His eyes were wide, almost bulging, and his expression was horribly panicked. "Eat lead, fucker!"

Cowboy aimed his twin revolvers and emptied their chambers. Cyber Knight fell forwards, dead from smoking bullet holes gouged out into the back of his armor already broken from fighting variants.

"What the fuck are you doing!?" shouted Rockshaper. "Look where you're shooting!"

"H-huh...?" Cowboy looked at his guns, then down at Cyber Knight's gurgling corpse. "What...?"

"And the more the fear stacks, the easier it is to turn into insanity," said the voice, ever calm, as it neared and neared.

"G-get back! Away from the gas! Masks don't work on it!" Rockshaper trembled as he stepped backwards, away from the heroes he was supposed to lead, inching back as far as possible from the approach of that horrible Mist.

The heroes followed suite, shuddering as they crammed themselves further back and back.

"No, stay away! Fight! Drive it back! If the gas hits me, I won't be able to pilot this plane, and then we're all done for!" shouted Computation.

Sooner or later, the heroes would crowd in the cockpit, the furthest point away from the approaching mist, and once that happened, once the Mist reached there and infected Computation, the plane would just crash.

"S-someone, any one of you useless idiots, go out there and fight!" yelled Rockshaper as he gestured wildly towards the approaching mist.

"You do it, you selfish fuck!" came a quick response response.

"We can't just sit here!" said Slammer, a former entertainment gear-wrestler - wrestling enhanced with cybernetics - turned hero. "This guy, this gas he's making is insanely strong! That means he's some kind of Creator. It's not likely he's as tough as he makes himself out to be in a close-up fight!

If an Augmenter like me catches him, I reckon I could break his back real easy!

I'll clear the mist, any other Augmenters out there, follow my lead!" Slammer ran forwards, bravely into the mist, and slammed his giant gauntleted hands together.

Gears and hydraulics clicked as his gauntlets crashed together in a clap, and a shockwave boomed forwards in a cone, scrunching up the surface of the metal floor and breaking apart chairs like twigs.

Unfortunately, the shockwave did nothing against the mist itself.

"Ah, that is interesting to note," said the voice in the mist. "Shockwave forces can blow apart the outer edges of my mist, but what I generate close to my body is immune to physical force. Thank you for your contribution to testing my abilities-,"

A red dot flashed in the mist, right to the side of Slammer, at his blind spot.

"Slammer, watch out!" said Rockshaper.

"H-huh?" Slammer looked around, but far too late.

Suddenly, an enormous, black metaled, bone spiked figure, one that had enough sheer mass that it was obvious that it was no mere weakling in close combat, lunged out of the thick of the mist. Its arm thrust forwards, a clawed hand wrapped tightly around Slammer's head. The edges of the black metal claws dug into Slammer's skin, piercing and drawing blood.

The metal monstrosity lifted Slammer's massively muscled wrestler's body up like he was a little toddler.

Now that it had attacked, the figure the voice belonged to became fully visible. It was a sight that made all the heroes pause in complete bewilderment. It was about two meters tall, far taller than any normal human, and looked like an eerie mix between a suit of armor and a living being.

The figure's body was largely comprised of black metal, but its metal body fused seamlessly with protrusions of bone, pockets of red, glowing red and raw flesh, and streaks of pulsating crimson red that looked like veins.

"In appreciation, I will give you a very quick death," said the monstrosity.

Slammer wrapped his huge, gauntleted hands around the figure's arm and yelled as he put in as much crushing force as possible, trying to tear free. His grip strength was quite notable, easily capable of pulverizing concrete, but it did nothing against the being of metal and flesh.

Instead, it looked like Slammer was trying to crush a flickering green forcefield wrapped skintight around the strange, terrible being's arm. All the damage he was doing was transferring to the forcefield, not at all reaching the actual metal and flesh itself.

"H-huh?" Slammer's arms fell loose to his sides as green light enveloped his head. Glowing green cracks began to form from his head down to his torso, and then, his body exploded in a nova of flashing light and bloody chunks of meat and entrails and white flecks of bone.

All the heroes stared at Slammer's remaining lower half of a body as it plopped down on the floor, staining the dull grey metal red.

Chapter 104: Incident Of A Certain Flight 3

"Fire! Fight! Do anything!" roared Rockshaper as he pointed his arm at the monstrosity. Jagged spheres of rock formed in front of his palm and fired off with the velocity of bullets.

Cowboy finally shot at the right place this time, unloading as many bullets as he could.

Another hero fired blasts of blue energy, another spears of water, another unloaded a clip from a handheld minigun, and so on and so forth.

A hailstorm of diverse projectiles rained against the being, but they all clattered off the entity's green forcefield. Some of these projectiles missed and smashed into the walls of the plane, gouging out holes that grew dangerously close to breaching the walls.

"How many powers does he have!?" shouted a hero. "This gas, that shield, not to mention how strong he is and that blasting attack! This-this doesn't make any sense!"

"He must have a weakness!" said Rockshaper. "Something for all this power he has. A time limit, maybe-,"

"The only time limit I have is that I do not want to waste too much of my time on the likes of you." The figure stood there, letting attacks ping off of its ultra durable forcefield, before it put a clawed hand to its pointed chin in contemplation. "Judging by how weak your attacks are, it does not seem like any of you have much potential.

But maybe some of you are like Dynamite Girl, capable of massively accelerating your growth with undeath and further training."

"That is not so," came another voice. One that seemed to resonate from the chest of the being.

"Who...who was that?" said Rockshaper.

"Oh, you can sense their potential, Volantis?" said the being.

"I am an apt judge of warriors, especially in determining the peak of their ability to hone their bodies physically and in capacity to channel raw energy." This voice was deeper in timber and smoother in its delivery, yet, it was equally as cold. "I may not understand fully the energy that the humans of this realm harness, but in its purest essence, it flows similarly to mana.

Thus, I can roughly determine their potential, and those standing before you are already at their peaks.

Both physically and in terms of harnessing energy, they are at their primes, and no matter how their bodies change, how much they labor and toil, they will not grow much stronger."

"Thank you for your insight, Volantis." The being drew its gaze up from its chest back to the heroes. "Then that means I have no more reason to waste time scoping out your powers to see if you would make good undead.

You all truly are worthless after all."

With that, the red dot serving as the being's eye in its helm-mask of black metal glowed brightly, and all the heroes froze in place, stopping their attacks. They felt an intense sense of dread grip them, holding them like firm anchors.

The entity swiped its clawed hands forward twice, firing off two swirling, helical patterned bolts of green. They each hit a hero, and when they did, the blasts acted like targeted explosives, blowing apart bodies with gruesome force.

The heroes closest to those that blasted apart were showered in the blood and guts of their fellow C rankers, and they blinked as they looked down at their blood drenched hands before they dropped any pretense of fighting back.

They screamed in sheer terror as they sprinted back.

"Run! Get out of here!"

"We-we can't fight that thing!"

"I can't stand the way you all run. It reminds me far too much of cockroaches scattering under light. Disgusting." The being fired blast after blast of those strange green bolts that promised instant death to anything it hit, and they landed with pinpoint accuracy on those that ran first.

Hero after hero exploded into showers of blood and disintegrated flesh.

First, it was the heroes that ran, then it was the heroes closest to the approaching entity. Everyone died one after the other in such quick succession that within just thirty seconds, there were only two survivors.

Rockshaper and Computation. The two heroes that were the farthest away, occupying the cockpit.

The entity went right up to the two heroes and towered over them with its horrible bulk of spiked metal, bone, and live, pulsating, strange flesh.

Rockshaper fell to his knees, shivering uncontrollably as he knelt in the presence of this terrible, terrible being. This manifestation of death from which there was no escape.

"Why are you trembling like this? I've turned off the life drain and debuffs on my mist. There shouldn't be a reason to be this afraid. Or maybe I've simply lost what it feels like to be afraid as a simple man," said the entity.

All Rockshaper could do was kneel there silently, his face staring down at the dull grey metal floor as sweat poured from his forehead. His heart beat rapidly, and his tongue felt heavy, like lead. He felt frozen in both terror and acceptance, knowing that no matter what he did, before this thing, he was just prey.

Was this how it felt to face certain death?

It was such an awful feeling. It felt like every single inch of his being was about to be devoured, at the precipice of a massive cliff where with just a light breeze, he would fall into enormous jaws waiting to snuff out his insignificant little life.

How had Minuteman faced certain death with such courage? With a smile on his face?

"You kill me, and there's nobody left to pilot the plane!" shouted Computation in sheer desperation. "The plane will crash!"

"Oh, I did not care much about saving this plane in the first place. It is Panopticon property, after all. I cannot just take it." To end his sentence, the entity thrust his clawed hand out and sliced it straight through Computation's head.

Computation's glowing blue mask sparked and sputtered before glitching out, blood pooling from the cracked glass surrounding the claws drilled through his head.

The entity withdrew his claws with a gruesome squelch, and Computation fell forwards, his face planted into controls that covered under a veil of his blood.

"Hm. It seems that autopilot has engaged," said the entity as it stared at the control screens. "Lying about the plane crashing with your death - an interesting gambit to save your life. But a crash from this plane would not have even come close to killing me in any case."

The entity moved back from the controls and then stopped as it stared down at Rockshaper's frozen, kneeling body. Rockshaper's breath caught in his throat and his eyes widened in terror as he felt the entity's gaze burn into his back.

"I almost forgot about you, the way you were so still," said the entity.

"Why...", whispered out Rockshaper, barely getting out words through his throat made tight with fear.

"Hm?"

"Why did you kill us? Why!? When we were all heroes!?" said Rockshaper. His words came out freer now, maybe it was because his body had instinctively accepted its death, and thus, was free to say whatever it wanted before its inevitable end.

"Why? You say you are a hero as if it means something, as if it means it makes your life valuable enough to spare.

Then let me turn that question around on you. What is a hero?"

"What...?"

"What is the purpose of a hero? Is it not to hunt variants and save lives?"

Rockshaper looked up at the unblinking red dot looming over him, confused.

"But look at you. Look at those around you-," The entity motioned with its spiked, clawed arm behind it, at the medley of corpses it was responsible for. "You abandoned the lives you were meant to save. And you run from the variants you are meant to hunt.

Does that not mean you have no more purpose?

And without purpose, why do you deserve to live? What is the point of your meaningless existences?"

The entity raised its clawed hand up, and Rockshaper put his arms over his head and shook like a child in the dark. Seeing that arm raised up, those claws splayed out, he felt a renewed burst of desperation. "Please! Please! I-I'll be a proper hero! I'll save as many people as I can! I'll hunt down all the variants! Just-just give me another chance! I have credits, too! Anything you want, I can give you!"

"Anything I want, is it?" said the entity as its clawed hand froze in the air.

"Anything!" shouted Rockshaper. He was crying now, snot drizzling from his nose as he felt his life truly wavering on the tightrope of death.

"Then I will add you among my experimental subjects. Fler'Gan will be pleased."

"H-huh?" Rockshaper looked up in confusion, not understanding, but the entity's hand chopped down at him. Yet, the entity did not slash down with its sharp and lethal claws... Instead, the being slammed the flat of its palm into the base of Rockshaper's neck, knocking the consciousness out of him.

Chapter 105: Theory Of A Soul

Aldrich watched as Rockshaper slumped down to the floor. The hero's face planted against the metal floor with a thud as he unceremoniously sprawled out, drool pooling from his slack jawed mouth.

Aldrich first raised his hand up, absorbing all the souls from the deceased heroes. They were all of middling rarity, quickly filling up his max inventory of 20 with garbage. Though he could allot people and physical items into his Chrysalis, souls, he had to rely on with his inventory, and 20 was not much space at all.

That said, Aldrich was more than willing to get rid of these lower level souls for other ones if needed be later.

"You should have chosen to die. It would have been far, far easier for you," said Aldrich as he crouched down and grabbed Rockshaper's head in his hand. The hero's head felt small in Aldrich's palm, showcasing just how much he had grown physically with his lich transformation.

Aldrich shoved Rockshaper's head towards his chest, and the metal around it opened up in strands of black. Beneath the metal strands were fibers of red musculature that snapped off of Aldrich's pale skin.

The purple phylactery shone with a dull vigor from Aldrich's exposed chest, but as Rockshaper's flesh neared, the phylactery reacted, oscillating rapidly.

A small distortion in space tore across the spherical surface of the phylactery, and from it, several grasping tentacles of shadow burst outwards. The end of each tentacle ended hooked claws that ripped into Rockshaper's body, digging into his flesh before sucking him in hungrily.

Rockshaper's body spatially distorted, funneling into the comparatively tiny space of the phylactery like he was being drained into a black hole, and within a second, he was gone.

"Hm. Odd." Aldrich looked down to observe a few purple tinted cracks lining the flesh surrounding the Phylactery. He registered minor damage from them.

The Chrysalis had been unable to use its spatial powers properly this time, creating a portal that had damaged Aldrich.

Aldrich waved a hand over his chest, and the uncovered metal strips exposing his phylactery sealed shut again, fusing together seamlessly back into his armored chest plate.

Though the Chrysalis inside the Phylactery had obeyed Aldrich's command to open up a portal, the way it had done so felt...sloppy. Or rather, unfocused. The Chrysalis had been unable to stably control the dimensional powers it should have been familiar with.

Aldrich reached out to the Chrysalis via his link as its master, but he encountered some difficulty.

Trying to communicate with the Chrysalis mentally hit a foggy psychic barrier of sorts, as if the Chrysalis was in a state of constant hazy unconsciousness.

Aldrich would have liked to see the Chrysalis evolve and grow much stronger. Especially considering the massive amount of power it absorbed from Aldrich moving his soul into the Phylactery.

But for now, it seemed that the Chrysalis had gone largely dormant, capable only of basic portal openings; the same kind it could perform before.

Aldrich did not want to disturb the Chrysalis too deeply, for he could feel that the creature was in a semi-dormant state from processing his power.

If Aldrich had to give an image as an example, he likened the Chrysalis right now to be sleeping dormant in a cocoon of Aldrich's power, feeding off of it until it was ready to burst out and hatch.

There was the potential that by forcibly pulling it out of its cocoon early, Aldrich could cause irrevocable damage not only to the Chrysalis, but to his soul hosted inside the Phylactery.

Thankfully, Aldrich had an expert on all matters magical on hand. He put two fingers to his temple and reached out to Fler'Gan.

So long as an undead was in Aldrich's Inner Circle, he could establish a strong mental link to them with no issue. He had yet to test long distance communication, though, for in game lore, there were instances of undead being so far away from their masters that they reverted to being mindless monsters.

'Yes, O Elder?' said Fler'Gan.

'I will have a few more test subjects for you soon,' said Aldrich.

'Ah, wonderful!' said Fler'Gan in glee. 'Once this awful, loud, and all too destructive battle is done with, I may finally return to my experiments. With that 'Editor' sample you spoke of and further more of these Alters, I fully believe I may be on the brink of a great breakthrough.'

'That's excellent to hear,' said Aldrich. 'I need your expertise on something.'

'Oh? What is it, O Elder?'

'The Chrysalis - you've seen it and you have an idea of what it is. It's housed inside the Phylactery you personally built. And you know well how the entire process of tethering a soul into a Phylactery goes. So there's nobody better to ask you this question: the Chrysalis has entered a dormant state after I moved my soul into the Phylactery,' said Aldrich. 'I can understand it having difficulty processing the influx of power, but it feels different too. Trying to reach out to it is difficult, as if I need to pass by some kind of mental block.'

'Has it now? Let me wrack my brains...' After several seconds, Fler'Gan spoke again. 'It is difficult to offer accurate diagnoses for the Chrysalis is a creature not native to our realm, but I can offer some hypotheses.'

'Any insight from you would be valuable,' said Aldrich.

'This Chrysalis, from my limited experience with it, seemed to be a creature optimized for adapting to and taking the characteristics of the energy it absorbed,' said Fler'Gan. 'Hence, it could perform the marvelous feat of adapting itself to make it compatible with mana.'

'Logically speaking, then, it should be able to adapt itself to the energy of my newly empowered soul,' said Aldrich.

'Ah, but there is a distinct difference.

Mana is colorless. Pure energy. And, most importantly, physical in its essence. In our realm, it permeated the air we breathed and the dirt we tread upon. Similar to the 'Ether' permeating this world.

Thus, anyone native to our realm could utilize mana simply by having a physical body.

However, a soul is vastly different.

In its basic form, a soul is a nugget of energy, yes, but it is spiritual in its essence, lacking any physical form to interact with.

To harvest energy from souls requires having an anchor not in the physical world, but in the spiritual plane.

Thus, drawing energy from a soul requires that one possess a soul, for without one, there is no tie to the spiritual plane where souls reside.

As a result, you will never see a Necromancer calling upon the dead without a soul. Or a Shaman that communes with the dead without a soul. To use souls requires having a soul, and a strong one, at that.

All too often, there are tales of errant Necromancers or Shamans that channel the might of far too many souls and overwhelm themselves, their own souls shattering as their bodies become hosts to a chaotic mess of foreign spirits.'

'I see...', said Aldrich. He did remember lore tidbits about magic interacting with souls needing mages with strong souls themselves. This, of course, included the field of Necromancy. But this was not the main point.

Fler'Gan's voice had grown more and more excited as he kept speaking, hinting at some other groundbreaking revelation. 'So, what are you hinting at, Fler'Gan?'

'That creature, that 'Chrysalis', lacks a soul, no? Thus, it should be impossible for it to harness the power given by your own soul, no?' said Fler'Gan.

'Well, if what you say is correct, then yes,' said Aldrich. He paused for a moment, thinking about this, and then the realization hit him.

The Chrysalis was a changing, adapting creature. It latched onto energy and then changed everything about it to effectively harness the energy it absorbed. It could change its physical structure greatly, creating environments that matched the landscape around it. It could alter its very own spatial dimensions.

So, if the Chrysalis changed itself to harness the energy given to it, and if the energy of Aldrich's soul required a soul to harness, then that left only one strong conclusion: the Chrysalis was trying to form its very own soul.

Chapter 106: Meeting Minuteman

'I sense that you have reached the very same conclusion I have,' said Fler'Gan.

'The Chrysalis is growing a soul? Is that even possible?' said Aldrich. He scraped his memory for all the lore he knew in Elden World and found he could not think of a single instance where a creature spontaneously just made a soul for themselves. "The closest I can think of are golems implanted with pure souls.

Souls emptied of any memories or individuality from their past owner that could 'color' them. But that isn't making a new soul, that's just recycling an old one.

This also isn't like that. My soul is not 'pure' in that way. It has all my memories. It has all of who I am.'

'Indeed. I have also thus ruled out that possibility,' said Fler'Gan. 'But there is one additional way in which a soul may be created, and that is through the birth of new life.

Through reproduction. That way, even beings with fully unique souls may produce an entirely new soul.'

'Hold up, are you suggesting that somehow, this Chrysalis is...birthing itself?' said Aldrich.

'Indeed. My current hypothesis is that it is incubating itself within your soul, utilizing it as a template to create its own much like a child's soul may take some aspects of the personality from their parents,' said Fler'Gan. 'I am wondrously excited for the birth of this Chrysalis.

By possessing a soul and taking in your magical energy, it will be a perfect example of a creature that has managed to merge both mana and ether. That is not even beginning to mention the vast increase of its current powers.'

'That's mildly disturbing, even as a Lich,' said Aldrich. It reminded him of a movie called Xeno involving aliens that used humans as incubators, throwing out face hugging spider like creatures that planted eggs into human bodies. 'But so long as there is not a risk to me, it should not be an issue.'

'My Phylactery possesses multiple failsafe mechanism to protect against damage to your soul. It is one of the most basic components of creating a Phylactery.

After all, if it was possible to detect and destroy a Lich by simply exorcising their soul through their Phylactery, they would be far less of a threat,' said Fler'Gan. 'The moment an anomaly is detected within the Phylactery, it would destroy the Chrysalis.

Not to mention that as its master, you hold more than enough sway to prevent it from ever harming you.'

'True. I am probably being overly cautious,' said Aldrich.

'There is never such a thing as being too careful,' said Fler'Gan.

'Also true. I'll leave you to your defense, then, Fler'Gan. Make sure Stella doesn't blow something up,' said Aldrich.

'Ah, that may be a feat far too difficult for me,' sighed Fler'Gan. 'This generation of young ones, especially in this world, is far too rowdy for the likes of my aged tendrils to deal with. Good luck, Elder. May this tumultuous night of battle see its end under your might.'

With that, Fler'Gan's connection cut off, leaving Aldrich in the quiet hum of the carrier plane as it auto piloted out of Haven.

"Where shall we head to next?" said Volantis. "The center of this city where energy signatures gather the greatest? Where the stench and sight of death and battle emanates the strongest?"

"Soon. I can see through the storm I've taken over that the forcefield still hasn't fallen. I have enough time to touch base with the troops I put over Southside," said Aldrich. "I have a corpse there to raise and a person of interest to meet."

Aldrich thought about Minuteman. He had seen Minuteman fight all against the horde of variants via the eyes of his undead, and he had also witnessed how the man was willing to lay down his life to save the Duds in the bunker.

That was a rare quality of character that Aldrich respected. It reminded him greatly of his parents. Of heroes that were, well, heroes. He had heard of Minuteman before, actually, as by being a B ranker, Minuteman was fairly famous himself.

Minuteman had a wide reputation for being a man of equal and fair justice, but to see that it was not just a PR move and something that he actually believed in was heartening to see.

In this world full of greedy, devouring flames, it was good to see that there were a few fires that flickered to warm others, not just to burn and take.

"Then what of this air vessel?" said Volantis.

"There's no point keeping it," said Aldrich. "It isn't my property in the first place. And if it stays intact, the Panopticon might be able to scrounge data from it. Better to scrap it."

"Understood," said Volantis. "Shall I stitch something to allow for easier destruction of this vessel?"

"No need. I have more than enough firepower to deal with this," said Aldrich.

Aldrich knelt down and channeled his [Mist Phase]. Green mist welled up around him, surrounding his body as his body became increasingly transparent and obscured. He phased out of the plane, floating in the air using Volantis's stitched wings.

He saw the huge carrier fly away, shrinking rapidly in the distance. He looked away and clapped his hands before flying away, heading down towards the Panopticon bunker.

A booming rumble echoed above before an ear-splitting crack split the sky. A bright, blinding green light lit up the clouds as an enormous teal lightning bolt smashed into the carrier, blowing it apart in a brilliant nova of red and orange engine failure explosions, blue electrical energy shockwaves, and green energy arcs.

In a few minutes of soaring through the skies, Aldrich could spot the bunker. His draconic wings flapped downwards and folded as he dove down, rapidly approaching the ground. He could see the hundreds of fishmen corpses scattered across the bunker as proof of his victory.

The sparkling red and purple crystal sculpture that Chiros had crafted from the shark variant glinted with a pretty shimmer. Surrounding this crystallized corpse were all of his knights and the Blackwater A-class as they looked up.

Already, before Aldrich even reached the ground, the knights knelt down in reverent respect. As the knights knelt, it left one man standing, looking up right at Aldrich.

That man was Minuteman.

Aldrich landed on the ground with a solid crash, dirt, mud, and bloody fishmen parts flying back around him from the shockwave of his landing. He stood up, his draconic wings folding into his back before melding into his armor.

"My lord, how wonderful it is for you to grace us with your presence," said Chiros. He also remained standing, but he deeply bowed as he motioned to the shark variant, as if unveiling a brand new painting to him. "I have prepared for you a most elegant piece of art.

I daresay it has turned out quite well, in spite of the fact that I am working with material that is quite, well, unknown.

I have titled it [The Returning Tide]."

Aldrich stared at the crystallized shark variant, at how its blood had exploded outwards and turned solidified into a crystal prison that preserved the beast at the moment of its death. Notably, the ends of the crystallized blood were shaped into crests that mimicked waves.

As a vampire noble of the Adal bloodline, Chiros possessed a passive called [Crystal Blood Venom].

Any attack of his that drew blood inflicted stacks of the poison on an enemy, and if enough stacks built up across enough vital areas, then Chiros could use an active skill called [Expunge] to forcibly activate the venom, causing the blood of an enemy to spontaneously explode outwards and crystallize in an instant kill.

"It looks...good," said Aldrich somewhat awkwardly. He wanted to add something, but found he had no idea what to say. He was no art connoisseur. Never had been. But he felt bad not complimenting his subordinate, so he settled with a 'it was good'. "But I may have to break it down to raise the variant..."

"Ah." Chiros looked at the artwork he had created, realized it would soon be broken down, and slumped his shoulders. "It is of no matter, my lord. There is also a certain beauty in art that is meant to fade.

I shall rename this [The Moment of the Returning Tide], then, to symbolize that it is but a fleeting moment and to capture the force of the mighty blow I returned against this creature to fell it, like a tide that returns to the ocean."

"You-are you the leader of this team?" said Minuteman as he nodded at Aldrich. The makeshift bandaging around his torn stomach made from fishman skin had bled through. He held his right arm in pain as blood pooled from the massive bite wound on his right shoulder.

Chapter 107: Twin Wills

"I am the leader of this...team, you could call it that," said Aldrich.

He willed Volantis to uncover his armor, and the spiked black helm around his face receded into his armor's gorget with a series of clicks. This revealed the human looking face of his Materius, and Minuteman nodded, put at ease with Aldrich's appearance.

It was an instinctive drive for humans to feel comfort in seeing another human face, especially when surrounded by nothing but inhuman monstrosities.

Taking that into account, Aldrich bared his human looking face.

In response, Minuteman blinked in surprise.

"Is there something wrong?" said Aldrich.

"No, I just didn't expect you to be so...young," said Minuteman. "With your build, height, and the way you carried yourself, I would have expected a much older man. But, looking at you, the way your eyes are set, I can tell you're no boy.

You're a man that's been through more rough times than many."

"Hm. You could tell that just from my eyes?" said Aldrich.

"Despite how tough I look, people have always said I was a sensitive man. I could always tell what someone was going through from their eyes. And I could always feel their pain and their struggle as if it was my own," said Minuteman. "A side effect of my own power: I'm sensitive to the wills of others.

But enough about that - if you're here to save civilians, you're probably a hero.

Are you international? With a group as large as this, I would know if you operated in the States. In any case, I'd be more than happy to work with you and your men to get this nightmare of a situation under control."

Minuteman reached out his hand for a handshake, and Aldrich noticed it trembling in fatigue and pain.

Aldrich held off on shaking Minuteman's hand.

"A hero? No," said Aldrich. "I'm not affiliated with the AA or any of its international branches."

Minuteman looked utterly astounded. "What!? You mean to tell me with all these men and all this power, that you aren't affiliated with the AA? Are you government agents? A band of mercenaries?"

"No to all of that. If there is anyone I take orders from, well, it would only be myself," said Aldrich flatly.

Minuteman retracted his handshake and looked at Aldrich with a little more wariness. "Then who are you? I'm sorry, but tonight has worn on my trust. I'm a little more on edge than usual."

"Who am I?" Aldrich repeated Minuteman's question. "I'm someone that wants to save this city. Just like you."

I'm someone that wants to do what they believe is right. Just like you.

You can trust me or not, but regardless of how you feel, I will protect this city where the AA has failed.

Whether you want to help me, do nothing, or even oppose me - that's all your choice." This time, it was Aldrich that extended his hand out towards Minuteman for a handshake. "But I'll just say right now that it would be a horrible shame for me to miss out on working with someone I respect like you."

"No, you're right." Minuteman took Aldrich's hand in a firm, solid handshake. "I'm in no position to be suspecting you, not after you've chosen to save civilians that the ordinary hero would leave to die without a moment's notice. And especially not after you saved my own life."

"Just like that? You trust me?" said Aldrich. He wondered if Minuteman was fundamentally naïve, his heroic ideals perhaps influencing him too much to see the good in others even when it was not logically reasonable.

"You want an honest answer? No, not yet." Minuteman shrugged. "But like I said, I can tell the character of a person through their eyes. I can feel their willpower. And yours is strong and clean. It isn't the type I usually see with people that have bad intentions.

And as you said, we're pretty similar in that regard.

Plus, you haven't given me cause to doubt you yet.

Maybe I am dumb, but I always like to give others the benefit of the doubt, even when their wills are spotty, and sometimes I get burned for it, but the times I don't, that's when I appreciate just how much good there can be out there."

Aldrich nodded. Minuteman was too experienced as a fighter and hero to be ignorantly naïve. He knew how bad this world could get, but he willingly chose to ignore his suspicions to try and see it positively.

It was so similar to how his parents had seen the world that Aldrich fell into a deep silence for several seconds. He could almost see his father and mother, their very smiles, imprinted right in Minuteman.

It was an idealism that Aldrich knew was inefficient. Something that had eventually gotten his parents killed. And yet, it was something he could respect. If every single person in this world thought like that, then this world would have been a utopia.

But idealism like that was rare. Precious. And because it was so rare, it was all too easy for the much larger darkness in this world to swallow it up and snuff it out.

"Something up?" said Minuteman.

"No. Nothing." Aldrich pulled out of his thoughts and executed a plan he had constructed in the case that Minuteman was willing to work with him of his own volition. "I'm going to go down to the hangar and check up on the survivors."

"I'll go with you-," began Minuteman.

"No," said Aldrich. "Look at how injured you are. You need time to rest and to heal. Here- Eric!"

Aldrich shouted out for Eric Glass, one of the Blackwater A class students. He sprinted forwards in his black bodysuit. He was a short man with a build on the leaner side with long black hair swept to the side that curled over one of his bright purple eyes.

"You needed me?" said Eric.

"Patch Minuteman up," said Aldrich.

"On it," said Eric. He eyed Minuteman's wounds, his gaping stomach slashes, his half eaten right deltoid, and the several dozen other less deadly yet still visible cuts and scrapes and bruises littering his body. "Damn, man, you look like total sh*t. Here, I'll get you fixed up."

Eric Glass was the only Alter so far that Aldrich had encountered who had a power that could directly heal others. In terms of Alter power categories, he would be classified as a Creator with a subcategory as a Restorer that had the rare ability to heal others.

In Eric's case, his power was called Growth Pod.

Eric demonstrated it now. He held out his arm to the side, and through the skintight covering of his black bodysuit, fleshy stalks rose up. Spherical pods of pulsating flesh grew from these stalks, causing them to droop down under their weight.

Each pod was filled with veins and looked positively nasty. Like a series of large tumors.

Eric's face fat drained, turning his cheeks hollow as the stalks grew, his bodily nutrients sacrificed to create them. He detached a growth pod from his arm and held it out towards Minuteman's gnawed right shoulder.

"Among Restorer powers, this is probably one of the creepiest I've seen," said Minuteman.

"Not good practice to complain to your Restorer. Thought they taught that at fancy hero school," said Eric as he tentatively placed the baseball sized growth pod onto Minuteman's raw, exposed flesh. The growth pod latched onto the open wound and started to melt into it, turning into a fleshy goo that created tiny tendrils at its extremities that hooked into Minuteman's flesh.

"The growths will dissolve and merge with your body in a few minutes. Until then, it's important that you don't move or strain yourself, or else you risk the growths breaking apart and leaving you worse off than you were," said Eric.

"Roger that," said Minuteman. He nodded to Aldrich. "Make sure they're alright."

"And if I do something to them?" said Aldrich.

"Then I'll be ready to fight you tooth and nail. Down to my last breath and bone," said Minuteman resolutely. "Doesn't matter how tough you are or how many guys you got."

"That's a good answer. I can respect it." Aldrich faintly smiled at Minuteman. Even against overwhelming odds, Minuteman was still willing to lay down his life and fight against Aldrich if he ended up being a threat to the Dud civilians.

That was true heroism. So rare. But admirable. "But you can ease up on the worrying. If there's anyone that comes close to caring about the people down there like you do, it would be me."

With that, Aldrich turned and walked towards the hangar. There, he would not only make sure everyone there was okay, but he would make his presence known. He would make sure the people there would spread what he did and make sure that the world knew of the AA's failure.

Then, he would replicate that same process with the Alter citizens holed up behind the city center's forcefield.

Like that, Aldrich would cultivate the support he would need after this incident was over. When he would have to face scrutiny under the public's eye.

When the Panopticon, the Alterhuman Agency, and the governments of the world would all scrutinize him.

Chapter 108: Into The Bunker

Aldrich stepped over to the hangar entrance. It consisted of two interlocking sliding metal panels that opened up to allow the carrier within out.

Because of the sheer size of the carrier, these doors were massive but thankfully just as armored as the proper doors of the bunker itself.

A green ring of fire from the Deathwheel flickered around the hole leading down into the hangar, and when Aldrich approached, he waved his hand, willing the flames to fade away.

As they dimmed down, the corpses of dozens of fishmen became visible.

Unlucky victims that the Deathwheel had either run over, completely splattering into roadkill mush, or those caught in the life draining flames, reduced into corpses so dried and drained of life that they disintegrated into dust when exposed to the night breeze.

Aldrich leaped into the hangar and fell several dozen meters before he landed on solid, tiled metal ground with a heavy thud. When he landed, he looked up to find a crowd of men, women, and children huddled away from him, shuddering in terror as they inched back to the walls.

"Stay calm." Aldrich projected his voice, and it echoed through the hangar. Upon hearing a human's voice, the energy of the crowd lost a bit of its tension, but not much -

after all, these people had been through so much this night. "I'm...human, and I'm here to save you."

"Save us!? You're just going to leave us like the other heroes!" shouted a man.

"You're just like the rest of them! You don't care about us Duds!"

"All of you heroes are useless!"

With that, the crowd gained a surge of confidence. All it took was one or two hecklers for them to feed off their energy and start to shout and rage towards Aldrich.

They broke out into a cacophony of angry shouts and yells that distorted into something unintelligible, a mess of projected frustration haphazardly thrown Aldrich's way.

When Aldrich looked at them, at their faces twisted in anger and fear, he could only shake his head.

They reminded him too much of himself. Or rather, how he had been. Before he had gotten this power.

It was pitiful.

Aldrich knew he should not have thought that way, especially against those that were Duds just like him, but becoming an undead, especially a Lich, had and was continuing to change his perception of humans.

Nevertheless, Aldrich still had enough humanity left in him to sympathize.

To know what words to say to reach their hearts.

"Be quiet." Aldrich projected his voice and the volume of his words resonated outwards in powerful peals that immediately silenced the crowd.

This was not because Aldrich's voice was threatening.

On the contrary, it was quite calm.

The crowd did not grow silent because they were intimidated, no, they sealed their lips because they knew a force of authority far greater than them was about to speak.

"I want to make one thing very clear: I am not a hero," said Aldrich as he eyed the crowd of Duds. "If I were, I very well may have left you all here to die. Or killed you for raising your voice against me.

After all, that's what so many heroes do now."

Aldrich planted first the seeds of doubt against the Alterhuman Agency and its heroes. Though, considering how much these people had gone through with betrayal after betrayal already, this would not be too hard.

"If your lives are not worth saving, if they don't give the heroes their Achievement Points or more clicks on their social media, then they would not hesitate to just let you die. You have seen that happen to you firsthand tonight.

That is what heroes are now.

That is what the Alterhuman Agency is.

But I am here to save you because your lives do matter to me. Your struggle matters to me." Aldrich paused.

"What do you know about our struggle!?" said someone from the crowd. "About what it's like to be one of us. Powerless and waiting for people like you to save us!"

"Oh, but I do know. I know all too well," said Aldrich. "I know what it's like to be afraid to show your CID (Citizen identification).

Because you know that when you show that card, when it gets scanned at the store, at the movies, at a restaurant - anywhere - it shows proof that you are inferior.

I know what it feels like to be powerless. To always have to look up to a cape for help, and when you do get it, to see that it is handed to you with disgust.

I know what it feels like to be hopeless. To know that no matter how hard you try, how hard you try to stand out, the only thing that will ever define your entire existence is that one label of 'Dud'.

I know what it feels like to hate yourself. To wish that you were not born. To feel that if you were dead, humanity would be better off, more evolved. To feel that if only you were different, you might have a better life outside ghettos."

Aldrich pointed up, towards the open doors of the hangar where the darkness of the night sky stood out strongly against the dim lights of the hangar. "But out there, no, up there, in those skies, do you think caped heroes know about your struggle?

Do you think they know what it means to be like you?

No. That's why they left you.

But I do. And that's why I've come here for you."

Aldrich gazed at the crowd and found them staring at him, quiet. He had reflected their suffering, their lifetime of facing discrimination as a Dud, through his words, showing that he was not only unlike a hero, but even an Alter - he was someone that could relate to them on a deeply fundamental level.

"Then who...who are you? If you're not a hero, if you know what it's like to be one of us," began someone.

"You'll come to know in time," said Aldrich. "Just remember this when the world asks you who saved you at your darkest hour of need. When they ask who lifted you up from the depths of despair.

That it was not a crowd of bright capes and masks.

It was me."

Aldrich then moved past the crowd of Duds. They shifted away from him, giving him a path through them, and stared at him in awe as he passed. There was an aura of strength about him that stopped them from speaking to them.

Good.

Aldrich had said what he had wanted to say. He wanted to hammer into the Duds that the AA and heroes had abandoned them and that the one who had saved the day was Aldrich himself.

With that, they would maintain positive PR for him and negative PR for the AA when the world started to investigate what happened here.

Past the hangar, through a series of sliding mechanical doors that led across a tunnel, Aldrich found himself in the bunker. He checked out the bunker just as a precaution to check how defensible it was as he soon had to leave and, more importantly, whether he could operate the control room to close the hangar doors.

A cursory glance at the bunker's ceiling indicated that it was still more than sturdy enough to weather an attack, especially with Aldrich's undead defending it.

As for the control room -

Aldrich paused outside of the room. His [Death Sense] was triggered, allowing him to see individuals in near death. He could perceive them through walls in a sort of X-ray vision, and right now, he could clearly see the faint green silhouette of a woman behind the control room doors.

Aldrich went to the double metal doors of the control room and found it was jammed, its motion sensors broken. He sunk his claws into the doors, easily shearing through the

metal, before pulling, ripping the heavy doors straight out. He flicked the two door halves away and watched as a young woman's body fell by his feet.

The woman was around Aldrich's age, her face showcasing the last remnants of her teenage youth through slightly round cheeks. Her hair sprawled out behind her in a mess of amber spattered in dried blood.

The woman was young, just as young as Aldrich, maybe even younger, but despite how young she was, she wore a full hero's costume.

A bodysuit comprised of a dark pink, almost purple leotard attached to black leggings lined with several grooves. The material looked thin, but the hexagonal patterning on it indicated that it was hex-weave: an ultra-durable fiber sourced from a spider type variant.

A patch on her shoulder shaped in the form of a dark blue wave crest indicated she was from Haven Supers Academy. It was the best academy in Haven, but that was not saying much.

Overall, its ranking was low, just moderately better than Blackwater, and Blackwater was made intentionally as low as possible to hide attention from it.

Aldrich spotted a hole gouged out in her stomach. A rock shaped projectile had roughly gored through her. But remarkably, even with the horrible wound, she was still alive. He noted that there were faint blue lines sparking around her face.

"The life force in her brain has been preserved," said Volantis. "Those lines possess an energy that circulates blood and activity within her brain."

"I see," said Aldrich. He looked into the control room to see another costumed hero. Guy dressed in blue and yellow with a red, blue and green wire motif running down his chest. Faint sparks sputtered from his body, but he was dead. A huge hole was gouged out in his head, not to mention deep slashes and bullet wounds littering the rest of his body.

"The energy signature preserving this woman matches that emitted from that human," said Volantis.

"Hm." Aldrich nodded. He could piece together what happened.

These two heroes were probably left behind because they disagreed with the rest that fled in the carrier. They were killed, but the male hero, in perhaps a last-ditch act of mercy, likely with a chunk in his head missing, had used the last dregs of energy of his power to try and save the girl.

But it was far too late. Aldrich could tell with how pale the girl was that the blood loss alone was enough to kill her soon, and he had no way to reverse that. But what that hero's last effort had done was ensure that this woman's soul would not expire.

Theoretically, Aldrich could raise this girl with her soul intact, but then he had to ask himself: was it worth it? Was she useful enough?

Reading Aldrich's thoughts, Volantis spoke.

"This woman, unlike those aboard that flying vessel, is not at the limits of her physical and energy harnessing capabilities... Rather, both qualities are highly unrefined, capable of enhancing greatly with time."