

Super Necromancer System #Chapter 139: Beatdown - Read Super Necromancer System Chapter 139: Beatdown

Chapter 139: Beatdown

Aldrich watched from high above from his position high above like a domineering lord as his units attacked Shrimp one by one, spacing out their attacks so that Shrimp never had a single moment of rest in his pit of quicksand.

The Antlion could not actually deal damage to Shrimp with its jaws, but its sand and anti-flight field were extremely useful in grounding Shrimp's mobility, leaving him an open target for Aldrich's units to strategically pick apart.

The Deathwheel would roll in, forcing Shrimp to block, but before Shrimp could smash the Deathwheel with his prodigious strength, Valera would come in from the back with a blow.

Shrimp would have to block that attack, but as he did so, the Deathwheel would be ready to attack again, rolling towards Shrimp's exposed back, taking a free hit.

After two of these exchanges where Shrimp ate one of Valera's punches to his stomach and another high impact grinding wheel spin from the Deathwheel at his back, the Locus adapted.

"ORA!" Valera sprinted at blinding speed towards Shrimp and unleashed an intense flurry of punches. Her dozens of punches visually blurred together in a wall of fists converging down on Shrimp.

This was [Hundredfold Flurry], a powerful fist based skill that unleashed a mass barrage of punches all at the same time on a single target for massive burst damage.

Meanwhile, the Deathwheel circled towards Shrimp's back, ready to swoop in if Shrimp dodged or blocked.

Shrimp used his high speed energy fueled movement, which Aldrich dubbed as Burst. A bright crackling aura of blue-green formed around his body.

Valera's black and red eyes narrowed as she readied to strike behind her at any moment, for that was where Shrimp could go to break himself out of this tight position between Valera and the Deathwheel where he always faced an attack from his blindside.

Instead, Shrimp used Burst to dodge Valera's countless blows. He moved in extreme speed in flashes of bright light.

Afterimages illuminated from the light of his aura tracked his movements, and they formed a dizzying pattern of complex weaves and bobs and dodges as he dodged all of Valera's high speed punch flurry.

At Valera's very last punch, Shrimp evaded very narrowly off to the side. Valera's gauntleted fist scraped by Shrimp's head, screeching out sparks with how close the impact was.

This was intentional.

Aldrich saw what was going to happen and clapped his hands, commanding his next contingency to come in.

By dodging Valera's attacks at the very last moment, Shrimp prevented the Deathwheel from rolling in lest it interfere with Valera or, worse, get hit by her. But this was far easier theorized than done.

To actually get the timing of Valera's incredibly powerful and fast punches, a massive flurry of them, no less, down to such expert timing required absurd reflexes that Shrimp had not possessed before.

Aldrich hypothesized that Shrimp's Burst affected not only his physical movements, but also his brain processes and reflexes.

This let Shrimp dash to the side, past Valera, in the last remaining tick of his Burst without getting assaulted by the Deathwheel.

His energy aura faded down as the ground beneath his feet smoked from his high-speed movement, but even with his Burst gone, he had achieved what he had wanted: getting behind past both Valera and the Deathwheel so that they could not gang up on him.

But if there was anyone else in this battle that knew anything about perfect timings, then it was Aldrich.

No sooner had Shrimp managed to get out than did his antennae twitch as he looked up in the air.

Before Shrimp could even think about moving to run away to get some distance, a red flash crashed in from above.

Shrimp raised his arms up, blocking the Crimson Knight Chiros from cutting down at Shrimp's neck with his Bloodstone Saber.

"More?" Shrimp said, annoyance palpable in his eerily human voice.

"Is that disappointment I hear?" said Chiros as he pushed down on his saber, using it to vault over Shrimp's head and stand behind the sea variant. "Then I simply must put on a better performance, for I am never known to disappoint!"

Chiros put on a flashy smile, his red eyes glowing under his visor-helmet. He had been thrown here by the Zombie Giant, for the giant was too large and slow to be a good asset in a fight like this.

Instead, the giant acted like a mobile form of unit transportation, tossing key units over when Aldrich commanded it to.

Chiros dashed in and unleashed a series of three spinning slashes while two handed his saber, giving himself maximal rotational power meant for breaking through tough, armored enemies.

This was [Blade Waltz: Step 3], an incredibly powerful and fast attack meant to both break through tough enemy defense or force enemies backwards.

The Blade Dancer combat art that Chiros specialized in was, as the name suggest, much more of a dance.

It had set, pre-choreographed forms that, in exchange for being predictable, were quite fast and deadly, and higher leveled Blade Dancers could change different steps and forms together to create devastating combo attacks and less predictable switchups.

Shrimp blocked Chiros's first two heavy slashes with the thick plating around his arms and then ducked under the third slash before unleashing a quick, normal punch into Chiros's chest.

A boom of impact echoed as Chiros flew backwards from the blow, but he flipped in the air and righted himself on his feet. Blood pooled from his mouth as he took in a deep breath.

"My, you are quite a powerful one, yes. No wonder even the Exile struggled with your ilk," said Chiros.

Shrimp's antennae twitched as it whirled around again just in time to meet Valera's punch aimed at his head.

Shrimp caught the punch in his own hand, but before he could return a punch of his own, Chiros was at Shrimp's back.

Chiros flipped in the air before unleashing a strong downward slash with both hands. His Bloodstone Saber rippled and glowed with blood harvested from the countless corpses on this battlefield, extending the range, sharpness, and strength of the blade considerably.

The blade dug into Shrimp's neck, noticeably where a crack was, and he managed to ever so slightly cut the flesh beneath.

Little splotches of flower-patterned purple began to spread around the flesh, shining visibly through Shrimp's shell.

Chiros's signature racial vampiric skill, one unique only to his bloodline, the [Crystal Blood Venom], had now infiltrated Shrimp's flesh. If enough of that built up, Chiros could instantly kill Shrimp like he had done with Shark, but he could not cut nearly deep enough to apply much venom.

"So...many," Shrimp grunted in exertion as he tried to block Valera's punches while Chiros continued to try and saw his way through Shrimp's shell with the whirling blood layer surrounding his saber.

Shrimp whirled powerfully around all of a sudden, trying to swipe at Chiros, but Chiros flipped back and evaded the attack. In that instant, Valera smashed down at Shrimp's head with a double hammer fist, immediately nailing Shrimp down into the ground with a cratering impact.

Shrimp pancaked into the earth with deep cracks in the back of his head.

Valera raised her foot up to stomp it down on Shrimp, but Shrimp rolled over rapidly, causing her to miss and instead cause cracks to rumble across the ground around her foot.

"Get away...need to get away," said Shrimp as he looked up with blue blood pooling down his shell helmet, only to see the Deathwheel ramming into his face, sending him flying backwards where Valera punched him again with a full force lariat, causing Shrimp to pancake down into the earth again.

"Get off!" Shrimp roared as he surged up with bestial strength with his fists out to his side, his Burst coming back online as his energy aura flashed explosively around him, blasting and melting the rock in his vicinity.

Valera and Chiros were both pushed back by the sudden energy influx, but this was temporary.

Almost as soon as that energy burst flashed out, it died down - Shrimp had used his Burst too soon after his last one, giving him too little time to build up energy.

Now with his energy levels subsiding, the aura around him fading, Shrimp was helpless to another onslaught.

Valera punched him, and Shrimp put up a guard to absorb the blow. However, her punch was so strong that Shrimp skidded backwards, and from behind, Chiros swept his blade under Shrimp's foot, sending him back on the ground again.

The Deathwheel rolled over Shrimp to give time for Valera to close the distance and start stomping like mad down on Shrimp body.

Meanwhile, Chiros slashed down in between Valera's attacks.

All Shrimp could do at this point was put his shelled arms around his head and curl up in a ball as he got relentlessly beatdown.

This looked straight out of a scene from a street fight where an unlucky victim just got stomped and trampled over by multiple people helplessly, and just like in those situations, it was only a matter of time before Shrimp cracked and this fight was over.

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Chapter 140: Quest?

"Looks like my micro is as sharp as it ever was," said Aldrich as he looked down at the battle, or, rather, one sided beatdown occurring between Shrimp against Valera, the Deathwheel, Chiros, the Antlion, and, occasionally, when Shrimp wanted to ever jump out of the way and into the sky, Ace.

No matter where Shrimp went, no matter who he attacked, no matter how he guarded - he ate hit after hit after hit. Cracks now lined the entirety of his rainbow shelled body.

Chiros's Crystal Blood Venom had spread to a larger extent through Shrimp's body, imprinting its purple floral pattern little patches around the variant's neck, arms, legs and chest - wherever Chiros managed to slash.

However, it was easy to tell that this was not going to be a fight where an easy instant kill would work. Chiros's Crystal Blood Venom spread slower the higher the vitality of the affected unit, and Shrimp was essentially at the pinnacle of vitality out of all the units Aldrich had seen so far.

Aldrich had to commend Shrimp for his sheer durability. He was taking continued blows left, right, and above, but he still managed to hold on.

As if reading Aldrich's mind, Seismic commented. "Locs that possess the Antaeic Factor are harder to put down. Something about that energy makes them tougher. Makes strong bastards into even worse problems."

'This true sight of mine sees that this energy, this 'Antaeic Factor' that this mortal speaks of, is of an origin separate from the creature,' said Volantis. 'Yet the nature of its

origins, I cannot fathom. Even this honed, crafted sight that I hold proud cannot trace the flow of this energy to its beginnings.'

"Hm. How much do you know about this 'Antaeic Factor?'" said Aldrich to Seismic. "Anything that can change the tides of this fight? Because the way I see it going, eventually, the Locus will die."

Seismic shook his head. "If you want details about theories on the origin of the factor. Where the energy comes from. How it is made.

I don't know.

I never paid attention to research. I only know that this factor and energy does in terms of how it can change a fight, nothing more.

But even knowing just that, I can tell that this fight will be over. It is only a matter of time.

Your allies fight with remarkable coordination. It matches or even outclasses the first-rate hero teams.

A single variant, especially a humanoid type like that, stands no chance against an onslaught like this. Especially not when its large-scale attacks need time to wind up.

Time it isn't getting."

"Time it will never get," corrected Aldrich. He nodded in satisfaction at the way this fight was going.

Even an A ranker like Seismic could recognize that the coordination that Aldrich's unit had was utterly top class.

Aldrich's micro was good, excellent, even, but that was not all of it.

This was not just the game where his units were just, well, units. They had their own minds and ways of doing things.

And his units did not know each other. They had not trained together. They had not taken the time to learn each other's attack patterns and timings.

Normally, this would be a hindrance. But Aldrich used this to his strengths.

Aldrich could act as a middleman to make all of the coordination happen, the equivalent of years and years of training for a regular hero team, with just his mind.

At the speed of thought, he could input soft commands to his units.

These did not completely override their free will and turn them into robots that performed his order, but rather, once he inputted his command, his units used all their free will, all their combat experience and technique and everything that made them individuals in their own right, to perform his command to the absolute best of their own unique ways.

Like this, Aldrich could control many units at a much higher efficiency rate than he did in the game, as in a way, it was like he was controlling an army of units with advanced A.I.s.

Once he gave the command, his units could adjust and adapt on the fly to make his orders happen.

It made Aldrich far more versatile and granted him much more safety, as if he made a mistake with his commands, his units could adjust for it on their own.

Seismic leered down at Shrimp. "I would've liked to crush that thing myself. But if you don't need me, then I'm fine standing watch. As a contingency. That is what I am, aren't I?"

"Yes," said Aldrich. "But I wouldn't take that as an insult. The only thing more important than a well thought out plan is a well-placed contingency. That is what you are."

"No offense taken," said Seismic. "Just a little odd. I've never been in a backup role. My powers make me a siege breaker. Not the type that waits for the end."

"Consider it a well-deserved rest for everything else you did tonight, old man," said Aldrich.

"...I'm not that old," grumbled Seismic as he focused on the fight again.

Aldrich was amused at Seismic's reaction. He had thought the man the perfect example of stoicism, but it looked like even the seasoned and serious Seismic had a soft spot after all. But then again, at the end of the day, he was human.

Or rather, had been.

That was when Aldrich felt a strange sensation of lightness well up within him, deep inside his core. It was not from the Chrystalis - that was still incubating inside of him, still feeding on his energy - but it came from a similar place within his soul.

Crackles of green energy began to surge out of Aldrich's body, but he did not keep his attention on his units away even with this strange new development, constantly giving them soft commands when he could so that their coordination did not break down.

[New Quest: Fell the Great Enemy obtained]

Aldrich saw text pop up in the periphery of his vision. Text in glowing green font. This was not the usual text of his system. He immediately opened the quest details. When he opened the quest and read its details, he heard a voice ringing through his head.

A familiar voice. A dignified and refined voice that held a strangely sultry, nearly seductive undertone to it.

The voice of the Death Lord. It read out the text of the quest.

[Quest: Fell the Great Enemy

Testing...testing...yes, if you are hearing this, then then Ritual of Transferral has begun.

My power shall soon be yours.

That is, if you are capable of taking it. Excuse my dramatics, of course you are capable. You need only to grow your strength.

And this awful system of yours, using incomplete shades of that filthy goddess Amara and her little blacksmith pet? I cannot have my protégé associate with women like that who hold innocent smiles that hide dark hearts.

No, that simply cannot be.

Plus, who has ever heard of a Lich that served the goddess Amara? The Lifelight who recoils at the very sight of undead?

Whom only begrudgingly accepted the aid of you mortal necromancers when she saw my own dark power rising with no idea how to seal it?

Too much bad taste to stomach, even for one such as myself who lurks in the shadows of rot, cold, and bone.

So, I have taken the liberty to take this incomplete system of yours and fashion it into something worthy of you.

Worthy of our Ritual of Transferral.

I have very much made improvements to it that far suit your being as a Lich. Return to the Nexus again, and you will come to know the full extent of them.

For now, here is my first quest to you.

If you are hearing this, then it is likely that you have encountered a Great Enemy.

Fell it, and these rewards shall be yours to claim:

-1x Trove of Dark Wisdom (30 Levels)

Description:

Through Dark Wisdom, a Lich may ascend the undead underneath them into greater heights of strength.

By granting Dark Wisdom to your undead, you may grant them additional levels, though there is a limit to the levels you can grant your undead, and none of your undead may exceed your own strength aside from your Chosen.

The traditional process to obtain Dark Wisdom is one that is long and tedious, requiring arcane insight, the crystallization of extracted essence, ensuring its compatibility with others, and so on and so forth.

All too boring and time consuming. So, I have streamlined the process.

Simply complete my quests, and you shall receive Dark Wisdom.

With that wisdom, ascend your Legion. Nurture it. Let it become as great and feared as my hundred Immortalis Legions. No, let it become greater even than that.

1x Frosthallowed War Scythe

Description:

An old war piece of mine. One that served me loyally by my side through my early days as the First Lich, when I still clung to my frost dragon magics. Before they began to call me the Old Abomination, the Origin of Sin, the Dark Winter, whatever it is that the followers of the Lifelight called me.

I treasured it dearly, but it has spent centuries gathering dust, and I cannot bear that its ever hungry reaping blade no longer feeds upon lives.

Thus, I shall entrust it to you, my dearest Usurper.

Treat it well, and your enemies shall know how truly cold the touch of death can be.]

Aldrich registered the details of the quest and accepted it. Before he could, a warning message popped up in front of him, and the Death Lord's voice echoed in his mind again.

[Warning: You must be the one to land the killing blow on the Great Enemy. Will you still take this quest, Necromancer, no, Lich of the Legion?]

'I was always going to kill Shrimp with my own two hands,' thought Aldrich as he accepted the quest. Optimally, Aldrich wanted to be the one to end Shrimp's life personally. That way, he could have the lion's share of glory for this battle, not Seismic.

And that glory, he would need as leverage after this battle done.

[Quest Accepted. Though, I assume, knowing how you are, you always did want to kill the Great Enemy yourself, heh. I shall see you soon, Usurper.]

With that, the quest messages faded away and automatically closed.

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Chapter 141: Contingency

Aldrich closed the quest tab and pondered the rewards.

Dark Wisdom was something Aldrich had heard about in the lore but had no real idea how it worked as no player character could really access it in the game.

It was supposed to be a crystallized fragment of a lich's essence that they granted to noteworthy undead beneath them, raising their levels.

This was how Liches could constantly increase the strength of their strongest undead. By having access to this, Aldrich no longer had to deal with many of his units, especially Alters with unique powers, getting phased out because their physical stats could no longer keep up.

He had no idea how levels would affect Alter powers themselves, but at the very least, he knew that the levels would strengthen their stats.

But the greatest reward here would be the Frosthallowed War Scythe. It was both a Catalyst, an item used for channeling magic, and a melee weapon, making it perfect for Aldrich's use. It was normally not an item that player characters could obtain, and as such, it possessed effects and abilities that were much better than regular gear.

At the very least, it was an item that was far better than anything Aldrich could obtain in his ordinary Trial Quests for his current level if, indeed, his Trial Quests were even the same now that the Death Lord had seemingly altered his system.

For now, though, there was no point about pondering this.

Aldrich had to focus on the immediate quest given to him. And to that end, he needed to be topped up on health.

Ever since he had become a Lich, the [Restorative Flask] no longer worked on him, for it was divine water of life from Amara whose very existence opposed undead like Aldrich.

(AN: This was something I was supposed to add but forgot in the chapter he became a lich, my bad)

Aldrich whistled, and Crow moved according to his will, towards the thick of the battlefield. All the while, though, he remotely oversaw the fight against Shrimp via the Grave Ward's vision.

"What is it?" said Seismic.

"A quick pit stop," said Aldrich. He briefly glanced at the rest of the battle zones and saw that the fishmen and crabmen had almost been completely pushed back.

The larger and slower units that Aldrich had such as the zombie giant, Crab, and the Bloodspitter Lizard were left behind on the battle zone to fight as they were too slow to contend with Shrimp.

By now, Crab had grown back to around ten meters, and he was utterly devastating the crabmen formerly under him.

On top of this, the Panopticon's Bugs mowed down the fodder fishmen who had no anti-air, making this fight a complete one sided slaughter at this point.

Within the hour, no, even less time than that, the variant army would get shoved back to the coastline.

All that remained was taking care of Shrimp.

Aldrich had Crow quickly fly by down a mass of corpses, and he raised his hand and cast [Mass Grave Consumption].

From all the corpses, the floating green graves marking them shattered, and streams of wispy red flowed into Aldrich, nourishing his health to full.

With that, Aldrich commanded Crow to get back over to the Shrimp fight. He wondered, though, as he stared down at the fight, whether he even needed all that extra health.

Maybe, at the start of this night, this would have been a challenging quest.

But, as Aldrich continued to watch and micro the fight unfolding beneath him, it was looking increasingly like that would not be all too challenging of a quest.

Shrimp still had not recovered from the onslaught of attacks from Valera, Chiros, the Deathwheel, and the Antlion's strong grounding effect. The Locus was still on the permanent defensive, unable to get in an attack or react to an attacker before getting hit in his blindside.

Valera's attacks, especially, were brutal. All of her punches were strong enough imprint deep cracks into Shrimp's body, and the deeper the cracks were and the more damage he sustained, the sooner Chiros could use his [Expose Veins] which required a unit to be below a certain health threshold.

[Expose Veins] would then show Shrimp's vitals, and these, Valera could target with her [Slayer] buff to instantly demolish body parts or even kill Shrimp outright.

In fact, as Valera kept throwing out punch and kick and blow with a manic grin on her face, Aldrich figured the greatest threat to his quest's completion was Valera's bloodlust.

Aldrich put a hand to his head. 'Valera, make sure you try to keep that thing alive. Alive enough for me to land the final hit, but I'm fine with you breaking it to any point before that.'

'Of course, master! The glory of this kill shall be yours!' Valera yelled gleefully in Aldrich's mind as she used an opening made by Chiros to land a triple punch combo starting at Shrimp's stomach, moving on to his sternum, and then shattering his jaw entirely with a solid uppercut.

Because of the Antlion's anti-flight field that grounded everyone, the uppercut did not send Shrimp flying, and instead amplified that energy into devastating effect into Shrimp's head.

Aldrich did not know if Shrimp had a humanoid nervous system, but if he did, that hit would have definitely rattled his brain or pulped it outright with the concentrated shockwave of the punch.

Shrimp held on, however, even as his broken jaw hung loose from his mouth, pooling blue blood from it liberally.

The Locus shoved Valera backwards desperately only to meet the Deathwheel crashing into his side, driving him into Chiros who unleashed a [Scarlet Dance: Earth Sundering].

This consisted of Chiros momentarily explosively igniting his blood, causing it to sputter out of his body in petal shaped patterns that burnt up rapidly in the air.

This gave the Crimson Knight a huge boost of strength and speed in exchange for a sizable health cost to unleash a powerful overhead swing that slammed Shrimp into the ground in a shower of shattered earth.

The small crater around Shrimp then quickly turned into quicksand as the Antlion adjusted its position to continue trapping Shrimp.

'Maybe I should go in now,' thought Aldrich, thinking that Shrimp was on his last legs.

The Locus's shell armor had thoroughly been cracked, with good chunks completely broken off to reveal teal green and blue flesh beneath that bled from tears and cuts and swelled with bruises.

Shrimp looked utterly and thoroughly broken. Jaw shattered. One eye still missing. Bleeding everywhere. Bruises everywhere. He even stood shakily, wobbling as the accumulated damage likely tore muscles and broke bones and perhaps even damaged his head, stopping him from functioning properly.

It was as if at any given moment, Shrimp could take one unlucky hit and die right then and there.

But just as Aldrich thought this, the situation changed.

Valera rushed in to kick Shrimp's side while he laid down, but at that moment, a flash of white burst around Shrimp from the ravaged ground, pooling upwards through the cracks like a geyser. He immediately stood up with a speed and energy he had only exhibited at the start of this fight, before he had taken all this damage, and instantly clicked back his piston fist.

The blue and green energy stripes around his fist lit up halfway, like energy bars filling, but stopped at that halfway point. He then unleashed his energy punch right into Valera.

Valera, caught by surprise, guarded the hit with her arms, but she was still sent flying far back with an explosive burst of bright blue, ocean wave patterned energy.

That energy wave, despite being much smaller than Shrimp's full power one, still carried enough power and weight behind it that Valera had to keep guarding against it while she was pushed back, taking her out of the fight for some time.

"Another change," said Seismic, his voice urgent now. He uncrossed his arms and clenched his fists, the veins in his arms starting to show as he channeled his own power.

"It's learned how to use its energy punches faster, and on top of that, it's been healed," said Aldrich as he saw that when the white aura of energy faded, showing that Shrimp had healed almost half of his total injuries. "I thought you said the Antaeic Factor didn't work so long as they were kept under pressure."

"..." Seismic's jaw set. "Normally. Yes. I don't know what's going on now. This hasn't happened before."

With Valera, the main tank and heavy hitter, pushed away, Shrimp used a renewed charge of its Burst to immediately dash towards the Deathwheel and grab it before smashing it in half over his knee. He then tossed the wheel halves far away.

Chiros readied to rush in as well, and from the skies, Ace readied to fly down to try and salvage the situation, but Aldrich commanded both of them to stop.

'Do NOT panic attack!' said Aldrich firmly. 'Hold your positions.'

This fight was starting to feel increasingly like Aldrich was the villain fighting a protagonist who pulled out random powerup after powerup.

But Aldrich remained calm. In the face of constant change, the worst thing to do was get dragged into its pace. This, he had learned through the game when fighting bosses with second or even third phases, in dungeons or areas with traps and sudden ambushes.

Against change, the greatest weapon one could wield was not a powerful weapon or sturdy armor, but the steadiness of calm.

Chiros and Ace stopped, and Shrimp, seeing them not moving, aimed its gaze downwards, towards the quicksand, where underneath, the Antlion was trapping it. It began to raise its fist into the air.

"I'm going," said Seismic.

"No, I have another contingency," said Aldrich.

Seismic gazed at Aldrich with a questioning look. "I thought I was the contingency. What else do you have?"

"Me..." Aldrich said simply as he leaped down from Crow's back.

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Chapter 142: All Out

As Aldrich fell through the air, the winds whistling past him, he clasped his hands together with a metallic clang. Coils of ghostly green energy formed between them, and when he separated his hands, twin [Death Bolts] were formed and ready to go, swirling in spherical orbs in his palms.

About halfway before Aldrich hit the ground, high up enough in the air where Shrimp looked like he could hit in Aldrich's palm, he fired off his two [Death Bolts] one after the other.

Twin helical bolts of green death energy spiraled out from Aldrich like cannonballs, rapidly descending down to smash into Shrimp's back before the Locus could punch down and destroy the Antlion with a shockwave.

An explosion of green energy erupted around Shrimp, and Shrimp staggered forwards before whirling around to face Aldrich, his antennae twitching as he glared at Aldrich with his two radiant, iridescent rainbow eyes.

As expected, [Death Bolt] was little more than a spammable projectile attack against strong units like Shrimp, especially considering his enormous durability counted as vitality that made the instant death effect of [Death Bolt] useless.

Still, the concussive force that the explosive [Death Bolts] possessed was easily on par with artillery shots.

But artillery shots were not going to cut it here. If Valera's punches, blows that could match Aldrich's [Death Bolt] at their weakest, had difficulty smashing through Shrimp's shell, then Aldrich's [Death Bolts] had no hope of landing a decisive final blow, especially if Shrimp could spontaneously heal again.

What they were useful for, however, was keeping Shrimp busy.

Shrimp saw Aldrich and instantly began to charge towards him with pure hatred seething in his eyes. "You-must kill you!"

Aldrich immediately noted that Shrimp's bloodlust against Aldrich was incredibly targeted, far moreso than it had been against anyone else, indicating that for some reason, Aldrich drew Shrimp's aggro much better than anyone else.

Any ordinary person seeing Shrimp, the Locus of an entire variant army, a monster capable of leveling an entire city if left alone, charging towards them in sheer hatred, shrugging off a barrage of explosions like they were just a rough breeze, would have cowered in fear.

But all Aldrich could think about was how good this situation was. This aggro meant that Shrimp would not think about escaping so long as Aldrich was here as bait.

And that meant Aldrich did not have to worry as much about having to weave in Chiro, Ace, and other units with his attacks.

Very simply put - Aldrich had free reign to go all out for once. He smiled under his helmet, feeling a thrill rush through him as he anticipated using all the new powers he had under him.

Though, of course, he made sure his units would still stay in position to prevent Shrimp's escape if it ever came down to it.

Aldrich used a free hand to fire [Death Bolts] at Shrimp one by one while moving backwards. He paced his bolts so that they hit one after the other, maximizing the time Shrimp needed to take to deal with them.

On top of this, every single one of Aldrich's attacks were deliberately aimed.

Every time a [Death Bolt] hit Shrimp, the Locus had to pause briefly to raise up his shelled forearms over his eyes or block against an exposed chunk of already broken shell.

This was kiting.

A game mechanic in which a character, often a ranged one, danced around the edge of a shorter enemy's range chasing them, leading them on like a kite on a string. All the while, projectiles rained down on the chaser.

This was a mechanic Aldrich was intimately familiar with, for Legion Necromancers, unlike Shattered Bone Necromancers, had no strong means to secure themselves in close combat.

Keeping distance was key.

Aldrich bought himself time with his kiting, during which, he had his Zombie Giant begin throwing key units Aldrich's way. He also used [Create Greater Undead (1st Ring)] to summon a Skeleton Assassin.

Aldrich put a hand on the purple hooded skeleton's skull and said simply, "Go."

The Skeleton Assassin nodded at Aldrich before fading away into shadows that quickly turned invisible.

"You keep running..." Shrimp shrugged off one more [Death Bolt] before its entire body covered in a bright green aura of crackling arcs. "I catch you now!"

Shrimp was about to use Burst to instantly close the distance to Aldrich.

Aldrich was prepared for this. He stomped his foot into the ground just as Shrimp appeared right in front of him in a flash of green energy arcs and sparks.

Shrimp's fist was cocked back, ready to punch right into Aldrich's stomach, but at that moment, the ground shuddered.

Huge stakes of bone erupted all around Aldrich, breaking apart the ground in loud cracks.

Several bone stakes slammed into Shrimp's body from below. The impaling bone stakes mostly scraped by Shrimp's shell, scratching out sparks and shallow cuts, but the intention was never to skewer through the Locus.

The sudden force from which the bone stakes had emerged sent Shrimp flying upwards, generating even more distance.

Aldrich did not know where exactly Shrimp would Burst dash to, whether it would be in front of Aldrich or behind him or to the side, so he eliminated all these possibilities by just casting [Call of the Impaler] which worked in an omni-directional area of effect.

Now that Aldrich had used [Call of the Impaler], he waved his hand and casted [Bone Missile Array]. The huge bone stakes broke apart into shards that formed a large rotating circle, almost like a halo, above Aldrich's head.

Shrimp would have broken the bone stakes apart with brute force anyway or simply charged through them. Like this, though, Aldrich could make use of the bones far better.

Shrimp fell back down on the ground, but his Burst aura had not faded yet. With the last remnants of it, the Locus rushed towards Aldrich with teleportation level speeds.

'Change stitching to giant muscles' commanded Aldrich.

'Your will is mine,' said Volantis.

It was time to test out whether Aldrich could fight in melee range at a high level.

Aldrich's Stonedrake Scales faded away, replacing instead with coils of grooved muscles covering his limbs and stretches of his chest. On top of this, he boosted himself with [Negative Surge], hopping up his stats as much as possible.

Hexagonal green patterns appeared around his body, reinforcing his stats.

Shrimp appeared behind Aldrich, and he registered this immediately with Volantis providing him a full range of vision around himself. The Locus began to cock back his fist, activating a half charge of its devastating energy punch.

Even though the half charge blow was much faster than its full attack, it still had a delay, and Shrimp probably thought it had free reign to charge the attack from Aldrich's blindside.

Aldrich immediately countered this by swiveling around and throwing out a powerful kick to Shrimp's side.

Shrimp's eyes widened in surprise as Aldrich's muscle padded, armored leg cracked shell before sending Shrimp flying to the side like a pinball.

However, Shrimp did not get completely knocked down, pancaked to the ground like what a full force hit from Valera could do. The Locus managed to break his fall by falling to a knee and skidded to a halt some distance away from Aldrich.

Aldrich immediately followed up by sprinting towards Shrimp, not giving the creature a single moment to rest.

Shards of bone around Aldrich's huge skeletal halo fired out like bullets, crashing and shattering against Shrimp's head. The Locus closed his eyes and hunkered his head down to try and prevent his eyes from getting skewered out.

'Fast...and strong!?' was all Shrimp managed to think in utter surprise before Aldrich planted a solid punch into Shrimp's jaw.

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Chapter 143: Bear Witness

Aldrich felt solid impact from his punch against Shrimp's jaw. Shrimp's jaw had healed, but not entirely, and there were still fault line cracks around the powerful shell armor from Valera's previous uppercut.

Once more, the shell plating shattered as the force of Aldrich's punch sent the Locus's head whipping to the side in a gust of wind. He did not, however, manage to fully break the variant's jaw with that hit, giving Aldrich an gauge on how strong he was at his peak.

With giant muscles stitched on and [Negative Surge], Aldrich estimated he reached the low to mid end of Valera's monstrous strength.

Not too bad considering Aldrich was speed almost entirely as a mage.

Shrimp's eyes widened from the impact as he spat out blood from his beneath his helmet of shell. His arms hung low at his sides, indicating that the hit had temporarily staggered the monster.

With Shrimp momentarily stunned, Aldrich took this opportunity to grab the creature's arm, turned around, and then performed an over the shoulder throw that slammed Shrimp down with a cratering impact.

A sound like an explosion cracked through the air from the full force throw.

"Gah!" Shrimp let out in pain as the air knocked out of his back in a spatter of blood surrounded by driven up rock chunks.

Aldrich did not let Shrimp recover at all. He kept a hold on Shrimp's arm and then used his foot to stomp on the creature's free hand, pinning both the Locus's limbs from

guarding his face. Simultaneously, he fired spikes of bone from his skeletal halo, aiming to pierce straight through Shrimp's eyes and into his brain.

Aldrich did not know if Shrimp had a normal humanoid brain, but the fact that jaw strikes and head trauma rattled the being indicated that at the very least, some form of motor control lay in the head.

Now, like a surgeon on an operating table, Aldrich would excise it.

The bone shards, each individually almost half a meter long, flew down into Shrimp's eyes and skewered right through them. The disgusting squelching sound of soft, squishy ocular material shredding apart filled the air as bloody streams spurted out from two huge bone spikes embedded through Shrimp's eye sockets.

Shrimp loosed a bestial scream of pain as he writhed around with all his might, but Aldrich held on to the creature's arms firmly, all the while willing his bone spikes to drive in further and further, aiming to pierce out right through the other end of the beast's head.

Shrimp's scream, however, shook the ground with supernatural force, and all of a sudden, huge amounts of energy began to build up around Shrimp, forming into his signature bright green Burst aura.

There was something different about this energy buildup. The way it suddenly flared up, the chaotic patterns of the raging, crackling energy - it all signaled danger to Aldrich. Trusting his instincts, he immediately jumped away, and not a moment later, an enormous explosion of green energy rocked outwards.

Aldrich was barely caught at the end of the energy nova, and his [Death Essence Barrier] tanked all the damage. The shockwave, however, did send him flying backwards at high speeds. He flipped in the air to get back onto his feet and planted them into the ground, driving up rock as he skidded himself to a halt, smoky trails of high friction rising from under his black and red greaves.

Immediately, Volantis outlined Shrimp's presence underneath the smoke cloud generated from Shrimp's energy outburst.

Shrimp had evolved another power. No, to be more accurate, the Locus had learned how to use its Burst energy buildup and detonate it instead of simply using it to enhance its physical stats.

"Hurts...hurts...it hurts so much...", Shrimp muttered as he reached into his bloody blue eye sockets and took out the two bone spikes lodged in them.

"Pain should be the least of your worries," said Aldrich as he aimed his right hand towards Shrimp. "Volantis. It's time to test you out. Show me your worth."

'Understood. [Organ Stitching: Banshee's Scream]'

Aldrich right hand glowed purple before flesh emerged from it in rippling, pulsating grey polyps that morphed into the shape of an oversized owl's skull with distinctively black beak. In the place of feathers, there was a long, ragged mess of wiry white and grey hair, flowing down from the skull's head that looked like it belonged to an elderly woman.

Twin points of spectral purple light shone deep within the large voids of the owl skull's sockets.

Aldrich thrust the skull out towards Shrimp, and the skull's beak opened up and unleashed a shrill, haunting scream that pierced through the night. Waves of blurry sonic force radiated out from the open beak as a beam of sound energy shot outwards, crashing right into Shrimp.

Sound waves rippled by Shrimp, and as they did, they cracked and chipped at the creature's armor. The ground behind Shrimp, where the sound waves also struck, broke apart as if someone had taken a high-powered mech drill to it.

This was the [Banshee's Scream]. A powerful ranged attack that instantly killed weak units. However, even if it did not immediately cull a life, it was incredibly strong on its own merit to the point where the instant death effect was simply the cherry on top of a long list of perks.

The sonic beam, as long as it was channeled, stunned any unit that it hit, ensuring they took the full brunt of the attack. This also rapidly built up the [Curse] status effect that, when fully stacked, caused the afflicted unit to continually suffer damage over time as long as they kept taking damage.

Granted, [Curse] was far better suited to damage over time builds where Aldrich was mostly focused on burst, but he could work with it.

At this point, Valera jumped down by Chiros's side, having recovered from getting blown back by Shrimp's energy punch.

"Oh, my master! Look at how masterfully he fights! Look at how he dismantles this poor little creature!" Valera shuddered in equal parts pride and pleasure as she put her hands on her helmet with manic energy.

"We should assist him in this endeavor," said Chiros as he stepped forwards, saber gleaming with red energy beside him. "While the beast is stunned."

"Stop. Leave this fight be." Valera put a firm hand on Chiros's shoulder, stopping the crimson knight.

"You do not wish to aid your master, Exile?" said Chiros as he looked back at Valera. There was some hint of suspicion in his voice.

"Quiet, newcomer. I alone have been with my master from the very beginning and will continue to be with him until the very end," said Valera. "I know what he is feeling now.

Despite how calm he usually is, there is a side to him that craves the fight, the challenge. And I can see that very feeling painted all over his smile now.

Do not disturb him."

"Smile? I cannot see anything beneath that helm," said Chiros.

"You do not understand," said Valera. "I do not see his smile, his desires. I FEEL them. That is the difference between you and I, newcomer."

"Hm. You are right," said Chiros. He gave Valera a polite head bow. "And you are my senior, too. I should be deferring to your will. My apologies."

"You can take correction quite well for a noble," said Valera. "I would have thought you far more stuck up than this, especially with my reputation as the 'Exile'.

Now then, stand here and bear witness.

Witness to our master's true strength."

Valera's eyes gleamed bright bloody red under her canine helm, and though her smile did not show, it was wide, as wide as it usually was when she herself gorged in the carnage and blood of battle.

Because seeing her master shine got her just as excited as ripping and tearing with her own two hands. That was how very much she valued her master.

"Because he is just getting started."

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Chapter 144: Observation

In an unknown location in Earth's upper atmosphere -

A powerfully built man who looked like he could have been a bodybuilder stood tall with his hands clasped behind his back. Despite looking like he could break a bear's neck with one hand, he dressed with reverence to the word 'elegant' in a black suit and tie outfit.

Creases and wrinkles of age were set throughout his face, making him straddle the line between middle aged and elderly, though with his shoulder length white hair and bushy beard and moustache, he tended towards the 'elderly' side of the scale.

Most notable about his appearance, however, were his eyes. They were like two black voids completely lacking pupils, filled in with solid darkness.

These strange eyes gazed forward at several large holographic screens all showing scenes of carnage wrought by variant attacks across the entire world.

Hell, there had even been an attack on the U.F. (United Front) Arctic Base.

A variant threat of this scale had not been seen since the Monsterring, when the Titans still made their horrifying presences known in the world.

Humanity, after decades of safety from Vanguard and the sealing of the Titans, had grown complacent. And the price of this complacency was clear in the millions of lives lost throughout the world.

As the man stared at these screens, a younger woman's voice echoed from his side, emanating from a floating spherical grey ball with a blue dot glowing at its center.

"Regardless of the initial damages, I have assessed that the situations in most major countries have largely stabilized. Worldwide stability will return in approximately sixty-six hours.

The emergency mobilization of S class heroes under the 'Superior Defense Matrix' protocol has proved highly successful. However, it is likely that the S class will ask for even greater influence following this usage of their powers," said the sphere. "How do you intend to approach this problem?"

Emrys, the current president of the Alterhuman Agency, a man of mystery who almost never showed himself in the eye of the public, responded coolly. "Let them make their demands. I'll entertain them."

"The Fortune Council and the United Front will request your presence as well," said the sphere, its tone neutral and yet leached with a slight hint of interrogation. "Both will place pressure upon your agency on top of requests for additional security.

It is well known that before the Superior Defense Matrix's mobilization, many heroes did not stand to the call of duty, abandoning their posts in a mass amount of recorded instances too numerous for Netwatch programs to censor.

Public support for the AA will take a dramatic 34% drop utilizing conservative number estimates.

World leaders in the United Front and Mega-Corporation executives in the Fortune Council alike will request significant reforms within the AA.

How do you intend to approach this problem?"

"By making reforms," said Emrys simply. His words seemed like he was mocking the sphere, but the firmness behind them made it very clear that he was dead serious.

It was high time for a change in the AA. The amount of corruption and incompetence that had slowly festered within the AA after entering an age of peace and hyper commercialism needed to get rooted out.

Especially now. When the future was so uncertain. When disaster could rain down from the heavens with the unexpected snap of a finger.

But with these recent variant attacks to use as an excuse, there was nothing that could stop Emrys from cleaning the AA up if he played his cards right, and he had spent years making sure that his card hand was unbeatable.

"...Very well. There are other matters that require my attention. My communication with you will now end," said the sphere. "As always, the Panopticon will support your endeavors within reason, for the safety and stability of this world is both within our prime interests."

"I know."

"Then this channel will terminate. For Order."

"For Order," said Emrys, and the sphere's blue light blinked off, leaving him in pure silence as he watched the screens in front of him.

Among the screens, there were playbacks of the S class heroes like Solomon Solar, Valkyrie, Qinglong, Lightspeed, Star Spartan, Dracul, Wave Master, and so on and so forth all swooping down and single handedly saving the day in tier 1 cities.

The B and A class heroes struggled to stand against Loci with their incredible power and newfound power and intelligence. But the S class heroes were on a different league of power. It did not matter whether the Loci and their variant armies were land based, sea based, or subterranean - the S class triumphed over them.

Of course, there were a precious few S class heroes in the world. 44 S class heroes with only 25 of them having powers focused solely on strength. Not enough of them to save every city in the world.

Just the important ones. The tier 1 cities.

As such, most of the broadcasts Emrys saw now were from tier 1 cities.

These screens, however, Emrys did not really pay attention to.

What he paid attention to was a smaller screen he had personally brought up of a stream broadcasting an aerial view from Haven, a no name tier 3 walled city and unlucky victim of a Locus attack.

By all logical metrics, Haven should have fallen. But against reason, it stood strong.

There, it was not a S class hero that saved the day, but a stranger. An unknown variable nobody, not even the Panopticon, could have predicted.

A man in dark armor wielding fantastical powers that seemed to defy every single known rule.

So far, because there was so much chaos across the world in bigger cities, the stream had not gained much traction, drowned out by streams and news broadcasts from tier 1 cities and shiny and famous S class heroes across the world.

Even afterwards, it was very likely that few people would believe everything recorded on that stream.

It was simply too ridiculous.

A man raising the dead, controlling variants, leading a personal army on par with large scale hero teams, and holding considerable personal power on top of all that - nobody would believe it, even with video evidence.

But Emrys believed it.

And he paid attention.

He paid very, very close attention.

Because, as Emrys stared at that man in black armor, at the red dot gleaming on that terrible helm of spikes and blood and darkness, he saw in his mind the vast emptiness of an infinite void.

This was something he had not felt since laying his eyes on Vanguard, before the great hero disappeared.

A Black Spot indicating something that was not of this world.

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Chapter 145: In The Zone

Aldrich watched as the sonic beam from the banshee head on his arm continued to bear down on Shrimp. Remarkably, Shrimp withstood this attack and ever so slowly stepped against the force of the soundwaves, moving forwards almost like he was in slow motion.

There were cracks all over the Locus's shell armor, but none too deep. The injuries came from Shrimp's orifices. His gouged-out eyes squirted blood, as did his nose and his open cuts where the sonic waves hit the hardest.

And yet despite all that, Shrimp continued not backwards, not sideways to try and evade the beam, but forwards.

Forwards to try and hunt down Aldrich.

In response to this aggression from the strongest foe that Aldrich had ever faced, all Aldrich did was...smile.

Aldrich smiled under his helm of dark metal and bone and blood, so nobody could see that uncharacteristic expression. He was never an expressive person, but whenever he got into what he called the 'zone', he could not help but feel pure thrill.

Any hardcore gamer knew what this feeling was. They felt it during those moments where it was now or never. Do or die. Win or lose.

That special zone of what felt like contradictions. Of both intensity and calm. Focus and excitement.

Where your eyes were glued to the screen in unblinking vigil while your heart raced a million miles a minute. Where your hands could shake at the controls but still perform at their absolute best.

What often pushed Aldrich into the zone were intense fights, usually boss fights. Not the clean fights where he could plan everything out beforehand with research and dismantle the enemy with easy precision.

That had its own satisfaction to it, granted, but often times, there was not enough of a challenge there to really move Aldrich into the zone.

No, what pushed Aldrich into the zone was unpredictability.

Chaos.

Because as much as Aldrich hated chaos, he felt no greater rush than to triumph over it.

And here, standing against a boss level monster with an unpredictable moveset, with the goal of landing a killing blow on it himself, Aldrich stepped into that special zone for the first time.

Shrimp stopped abruptly as spat out a burst of blood from its mouth as the Curse status effect manifested on it. He dropped to a knee weakly as the sonic scream started to taper off, the banshee head reaching the end of its channeling time.

A spiked black debuff circle appeared around Shrimp followed by eerie dark flames that danced all around its body, dealing damage directly to its life force. As long as Aldrich kept putting direct damage on Shrimp, the flames would continue burning.

It would have been nice for Aldrich's [Mist of Undeath] to proc Curse as well, but unfortunately, only direct damage counted for the flames. And on top of that, his [Mist of Undeath] only worked to a 60% health max health threshold for strong enemies.

"Volantis, switch stitchings," said Aldrich. "Switch to your strongest. And don't hold back."

"Shall I switch to the Profane Hand?" said Volantis.

The Hand of the Blood God. Volantis's strongest stitching that guaranteed insane damage or a flat out instant kill if it made contact. Aldrich, however, did not want to use that now. He wanted to save a few trump cards for later, and the Hand of the Blood God was one of them.

This was not to mention that the Hand of the Blood God was a risky move in of itself. Volantis normally had it when he was level 80, not level 40 like now. There was no telling how severe the drawbacks would be for using such a powerful stitching.

"No. Just a step below that," said Aldrich.

"Your will is mine, yet I must tell you that I cannot switch immediately," said Volantis. "Not after wielding a stitching of high caliber like the head of the banshee."

"I know your cooldowns. Just be prepared," said Aldrich as he kept his eyes focused on Shrimp. Volantis meanwhile continued feeding Aldrich information about Shrimp via his helmet.

In his vision, he could see fluctuations of energy that Volantis marked around Shrimp that could give Aldrich a heads up whenever the creature built up power for one of its abilities. Not to mention that Volantis also had full vision around himself and a capable mind of his own: the feeling was very much like wearing a combat suit with a high class A.I.

"What of the beast now?" questioned Volantis. You are stuck with this banshee's head until I am ready to switch this form of mine, and with its scream used, it is little more than excess weight.

If the creature seeks to strike now, you will lack the sturdiness and might to repel it."

As if to prove Volantis's point, Shrimp immediately started to recover from the sonic beating he had suffered. He got up from its knee and shakily stood up, his twin glowing antennae twitching as they located Aldrich as the creature's eyes were completely obliterated at this point.

"There you are - this time, I'll win. Hunt you down like the Voice wants me to. Make you hurt for hurting me!" Shrimp began to make a mad dash towards Aldrich only to be thwarted by five enormous bodies suddenly crashing into it.

"Right on time," said Aldrich. He had commanded the zombie giant to toss his Zombeasts over around the end of the channel time for his [Banshee's Scream], seamlessly transitioning the stun from the scream into extra distractions.

The Zombeasts, huge monstrosities that could easily rip a man in half with their jaws, began to savagely roar and growl as they used all their chimeric body parts to maul Shrimp. A shark's jaw bit down on Shrimp's arm. A scorpion's stinger beat against his neck, trying to pierce through the shell. Thick serpentine coils rolled around Shrimp's torso, trying to crush it with force. Lion claws screeched against the Locus's face.

It was as if the entire animal kingdom had risen up against Shrimp.

But what use were mere beasts against a monster?

"...Weak," said Shrimp as he flexed his arms out, immediately breaking out of the python hold while flinging the shark headed zombest away from his arm.

To be expected. The zombeasts were level 15, and Shrimp could go toe to toe with a level 45 Valera in brute force. The beasts stood no chance here.

"Then how about this?" Aldrich snapped his fingers and chanted. "[Burning Agony]."

The zombeasts all spontaneously combusted into flame as their blood forcibly ripped out their bodies into clouds that ignited. They howled, roared, growled, and clicked mandibles in sheer aggression as they redoubled their efforts to attack Shrimp.

This time, they were much, much stronger.

The shark-headed, lion bodied zombest swiped at Shrimp, and this time, the blow was heavy enough to send Shrimp skidding backwards in surprise. A bear bodied, scorpion

headed and tailed zombeast slammed its blood flame wrapped stinger onto Shrimp's head like a wrecking ball.

Shrimp put his arms up and caught the stinger.

"Gh! How...how do you all get stronger? I can't see how. I can't see the energy; the flow I see with everyone else-," began Shrimp before the snake bodied and headed zombeast with insectoid legs surged forward with a hiss, aiming to clamp down its massive, fanged jaws.

Flames from ignited blood wrapped around Shrimp from the stinger, and those interacted with the Curse flames to keep damaging him.

"Hurts!" yelled Shrimp. "But still too weak! Out of my way!"

Shrimp pushed upwards strongly, sending the stinger flying with the zombeast wielding it. He then grabbed the incoming snake zombeast's jaws with his hands, preventing the beast from closing its maw.

It was here that Shrimp showed just how insanely strong he was.

Shrimp ripped apart the snake zombeast from the jaws like tearing a piece of paper in half. Red blood poured out, drenching Shrimp's green and blue hues in fresh red. The shark headed zombeast roared as it tried to bite down on the Locus with the remaining two other zombeasts.

Shrimp cocked back his fist, the twin energy bars of blue and green on its forearms charging halfway before it unleashed an energy punch that blew apart the three zombeasts like a bomb, scattering their blood, bone, and flesh outwards in a rain of miscellaneous body parts.

"Now for you!" Shrimp roared as he turned towards Aldrich, his antennae twitching as they located him.

"Thank you for your service, my zombeasts," said Aldrich. "You've bought me enough time to test this out. And this is one thing that I have been very excited to see in action."

"Indeed, it is among the finest in my collection," said Volantis with pride. "It is heartening to know that my Armored is one that holds such refined tastes as myself."

This time, when Aldrich pointed his arm towards Shrimp, there was not the head of an owl wrapped around it, but the majestic, red-scaled, horned head of a dragon.

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Chapter 146: Draconic Might

Aldrich aimed his dragon head hand right towards Shrimp. The mouth of the majestic dragon was wide open, baring rows of bloody red, crystalline teeth.

But though dragons certainly had a fiercesome bite, that was not what they were known for.

No, what made them beasts of legend, what made them living calamities, was their famed and feared breath.

And this dragon was a Bloodblaze Dragon, a vampiric type with a particularly nasty breath that created torrents of crimson flame that not only burned, but also rapidly built up the [Bleed] status effect. This effect was so potent that in the lore, it was said that whenever a Bloodblaze Dragon went on a rampage, the rivers would run red with the blood it spilled.

"What is that? So many powers. Not like the other humans. How?" said Shrimp as its antennae twitched, trying to get a read on what Aldrich was doing.

In all of Shrimp's short life, he had not felt fear. He knew the destiny he was born to. Both his mother and the Voice had told him to wipe out the humans. And he knew that as King, it was his given duty to do so.

For that purpose, Shrimp had suffered and struggled, facing pain and strong enemy after enemy. But never had he felt fear.

That was, not until now. Because even though every instinct inside Shrimp was screaming at him to wipe out the being standing in front of him, when he focused on that thing, all he could see was...nothing.

Emptiness.

And that made him scared. Like he was a child staring into a deep, dark shadow ready to swallow him without a chance of ever escaping.

"What is this, you say? Well, this is another experiment: let's see if you can last through it, my valued test subject," declared Aldrich as he willed the dragon to fire its [Bloodfire Breath].

The dragon's red eyes glowed strongly as red sparks flickered between its jaws, igniting a wave of bright red fire that shot forth with a crackling roar. The night sky lit up in a shade of sinister red as the bloodletting session began.

"Gah!" Shrimp yelled out in agony as the red fire washed over him. The flames quickly melted the rock around his feet, but the heat was not the issue here, no, if it was just heat, Shrimp was fine. His shell was heavily resistant to it.

It was the bleeding.

As the raged over Shrimp's body, parts inside of it just broke apart. Blue blood spurted from ruptured veins. Internal bleeding ripped through his body, and he dropped down to one knee yet again as he desperately put his arms against the flames to no avail.

With a sickening sound, Shrimp vomited out a chunk of blood from both his mouth and his eye sockets that rapidly evaporated in the heat of the fire. This compounded on top of the Cursed flames that continually sapped Shrimp's life force.

"Is this it?" muttered Aldrich, feeling a minor sense of disappointment. No, it was remarkable that Shrimp had been able to fight this long against an entire army by himself in the first place, even if that had required constant evolutions and sudden powerups.

Aldrich was just feeling disappointed because things would end like this when he had just started to get into the zone, when he had just gotten the chance to really go all out with all his new powers.

In response to Aldrich, Shrimp tried to move to the side, but his other leg collapsed, causing him to fall down on both knees as blood continued to spurt from every open wound in his body.

Shrimp's energy surged around it in a Burst again, shimmering in a bright green aura, but the aura chaotically broke apart when another round of bleeding forced Shrimp to cough out a chunk of blood.

Even if Shrimp had successfully used Burst, Aldrich was ready for it. But with that Burst getting disrupted, with all that built up energy fading away, Shrimp was done for, doomed to perish in an inferno kindled by his very own blood and life force.

Shrimp weakly waved his hands towards Aldrich, even though the Locus was so far away. This was not a real attempt to attack Aldrich. It was a final, desperate attempt to reach out born from the imminent approach of death.

Shrimp managed to slowly crawl towards Aldrich for a few seconds, blood spurting from all of his wounds, but after those seconds, it was obvious the end was in sight.

And while Aldrich focused on Shrimp's end, there were others that focused on him.

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Within Haven's-

Heroes, police, and civilians alike all crowded together on whatever devices and screens they could, watching the fight between their black armored savior and the Locus with bated breath and wide eyes. Technos had rigged a massive advertising holo-board at the city center square to link with the stream that showed the fight, and here, the biggest crowd of people thronged together to watch.

Beforehand, everyone had locked themselves in apartments or in shelters, but now people were starting to find the courage to move out, to stand together in solidarity to watch their savior that they had entrusted their hopes and dreams and lives to fight.

When they saw Shrimp finally collapse under red and black flames, cries of celebration began to ring out from everywhere. Before there had only been the tense silence of desperation.

Now -

"He's got him! He's got him!"

"Just a little more! Take that shrimp faced bastard down!"

"Please win, after all we've been through, please, please win!"

Yet, amidst all these cries of hope, there was one person who stayed silent. She watched from her phone secluded from everyone else, hidden away in a dark alleyway by an open manhole cover. Blackwater's rank 1 Mel Morales.

"So it's like that, huh." Mel looked at the battle with gleaming golden eyes. She zoomed in on the imposing black armored figure and tapped at it with a finger. She whispered under her breath. "Guess I'll be seeing you soon."

With that, Mel slipped into the manhole cover, fading away into the Haven sewage system.

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Neo-York, within the hero team Protectorate's headquarters-

Two people watched the mysterious defender of Haven near the killing blow on the Locus attacking Haven from a huge holoscreen projection. The room they watched from was a recreational in headquarters movie theater. The place was spacious, and the two used that space as much as possible, standing quite a distance away from each other.

One of these people was a tall, built man with a gold and black bodysuit with flowing blue that radiated the image of the typical action hero. He had pearly white, perfect

teeth, a square jaw, slicked back blonde hair, and shining eyes gold like the rays of the sun.

This was Solomon Solar, S rank hero and rank 1 in the Superboard top 100, making him the most popular and beloved hero in all of America. "Would you look at that! Another new S ranker to join in our crusade for justice, maybe?"

"...Maybe. I haven't seen anything like it. All those powers and that suit of his - he's a wild card that I can't believe has stayed hidden all this time.

Even so, from what he's shown so far, he doesn't measure up to us. But he could still be hiding his strengths, not to mention that army of his," responded an equally tall woman, though as a woman, her height made her stand out even more than Solomon Solar.

Her silvery hair was done up in a ponytail as her bright green eyes stared at the screen with sheer focus. She emanated a kind of beauty that could only be described as 'cold' with sparse expressions and stiff body language that oozed seriousness.

Her costume comprised of a black bodysuit topped with armor plated gold breastplate, skirt, greaves, and gauntlets. Verdant green vine patterns were embossed in the plating, and overall, her getup seemed strangely archaic, hearkening back to an age of armor and swords.

This was Valkyrie, or, as the public nicknamed her, the Queen of Thorns.

She was a S rank hero and rank 10 in the Superboard top 100.

The Superboard top 100 was mostly a popularity contest, so the fact that she, as someone that never cared about popularity or social media or pandering to corporate sponsors, could manage such a high rank was a testament to her overwhelming strength that had a magnetic charm of its own.

"Either way, he's going to shake the hero scene if he joins to decide the AA. Or even if he doesn't; that's a big decision in of itself," said Valkyrie.

"That's great! Then maybe we can give him a seat in the Protectorate where he can put his powers for good!" said Solomon Solar enthusiastically with a wide, cheery smile.

"...I doubt it. He has his own team, looks like. But no matter what, he's going to make things interesting," said Valkyrie. She paused before staring at Solomon Solar. "And do you have to put up that happy go lucky Mr. justice bullsh*t act even in private?"

After all the years we've spent working together?"

"What do you mean, Valkyrie?" said Solomon with a confused brow raise and concerned voice. "Are you alright?"

Valkyrie sighed. "Nevermind. I was just wondering why you were even tuned into this stream in the first place. I imagined Haven would be the least of your worries, considering its low tier status and how much cleanup we have to deal with here in Neo-York.

My intuition is telling me you were looking for something in Haven. Something you don't want to freely tell others." Valkyrie shrugged with nonchalant energy. "But that's just my intuition."

"..." Solomon Solar paused for a moment before responding. "The tier of a city doesn't matter - I check up on all of them to see where I'm needed!"

"Then fly over there or over to Europe or Africa or wherever they still need help instead of wasting time here," said Valkyrie curtly as she turned and left the theater room.

When Valkyrie left, Solomon Solar's smile warped into a twisted frown that nobody in the public could have ever imagined him making as he stared at the screen with a twitching brow of barely suppressed rage.

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Chapter 147: A Bloody End

Aldrich watched Shrimp inch towards him with arms trembling as they grasped forwards against a torrent of raging red blood fire. Blood streamed from every cut and open wound in spurts and squelches as the blood fire's devastating bleed effect and the cursed black flames ravaged it.

"What keeps you moving forward, I wonder?" said Aldrich as he casually kept his dragon head arm in front of him. Not that he had any other option. The biggest weakness of using the stitching of the [Bloodflame Dragon] was that once Aldrich used the dragon's breath fully, he had to remain nearly stationary. He could turn around and adjust his aim, but he was rooted in spot like a cannon.

However, in exchange, as shown from Shrimp's devastated body, the draconic breath had enormous offensive power that more than made up for the mobility loss.

"I thought variants were creatures that stayed true to their instincts," continued Aldrich. "If that were true, you would have known to choose flight instead of fight a while ago. Not that I would have let you, but still.

What is it that keeps you crawling towards me, towards your inevitable death?"

"The...the Voice," said Shrimp weakly, managing to hear Aldrich even with blood pouring out of its ears.

"The Voice?" Aldrich was surprised the creature spoke back to him. And what the Locus said was something he had no idea about. There were no accounts of a 'voice' driving variants to hunt humans.

Maybe it was like the instinct that Geist type variants harbored that made them target humans, but no, this was different than that.

Shrimp did not really show any real bloodlust to the average human, as evidenced by how nonchalant or even curious it was about Seismic and Mel, choosing to dodge their attacks and observe them instead of rushing at them from the very beginning.

It was only against Aldrich specifically that Shrimp's aggressiveness flared up to an unnaturally high degree, as if Aldrich's entire existence was something that the Locus needed to wipe out.

But why? Aldrich and Shrimp had no connection. And the rest of the fishmen, regardless of what type of variant they were, whether they were crab or merman, had no such strong drive to attack Aldrich.

Was it because Shrimp sensed Aldrich's threat level?

Maybe. But in that case, it should have been equally wary of Seismic and Valera, but against them, the Locus had fought but did not show reckless bloodlust.

Was it the nature of Aldrich's powers? Could it sense that Aldrich's powers were different in some capacity?

Highly unlikely. Aldrich's powers were not something that Shrimp or any Alter could make sense of. But there was the likelihood of exceptions, and it was not like Aldrich himself had a complete understanding of how his own powers came to be.

And the Voice, was it simple primal instinct? Or, perhaps, was it an entirely separate entity? Maybe the source of the separate energy signature that seemed to heal Shrimp during this fight and aid in its evolution?

The ramifications of an entity controlling Shrimp, perhaps even being the source of the Antaeic Factor that seemed to power other strong Loci, would send deep waves throughout the AA, completely shaking up fields of variant research.

At the end of the day, though, there were no clear answers.

Aldrich briefly pondered whether to entertain talking to Shrimp to get more insight. But he was in no mood to interrogate it. Shrimp was far too dangerous for that, and at any given moment, it might receive another powerboost and extend this fight.

It was far safer to end this fight and get answers from Shrimp when the creature became a loyal part of his Legion.

"Whatever it is that's making you step forward against me," said Aldrich. "It doesn't matter."

Aldrich placed his other hand on the base of the dragon head like he was stabilizing the recoil of a cannon shot.

"Volantis, it's time to end this," said Aldrich.

"I am in agreement, Armored. Let us free the precious bones from this creature's pained flesh prison," said Volantis.

With that, Aldrich and Volantis both pumped in a chunk of magical energy into the dragon head. Twin auras of green and red raged around Aldrich like fire, and debris around him scattered away from the pressure of his power.

In response, the dragon head's red eyes gleamed brighter and it loosed a deep roar, causing the its bloodfire breath wave to intensify and grow even larger and brighter red.

As Shrimp saw the next wave of even more devastating bloodletting flames approach him, he stopped reaching out for Aldrich and instead trembled as he his put bloody, broken arms over his eyes like a scared and lost child.

"M-mother..." Shrimp said. "I'm sorry."

With a crackling roar, the final torrent of flames washed over Shrimp, swirling and collecting into a pillar of blood red that surged upwards, lighting the night sky an ominous shade of crimson.

Aldrich raised his dragon head arm up, stopping the fire flow, and the dragon head shuddered before sinking into Volantis's armor. He watched as the bloodfire flames subsided around Shrimp, revealing the creature still kneeling on the ground, surrounded by red fire.

It did not appear dead, but another round of [Bleed] would kick in again, and with how grievous its injuries already were, this fight was finally over.

"You've struggled enough," said Aldrich solemnly. "Rest now."

With a final squelch, the largest veins in Shrimp's body, in its neck and its heart, all burst. Large cuts ripped apart its back and chest and neck as big chunks of its shell shattered and broke apart. From the cuts, torrents of blue blood exploded out in a final mass hemorrhage like a water balloon popping.

Shrimp fell flat onto the broken ground, splashing into a puddle of his own life blood as a rain of blue pattered against his lifeless body.

Aldrich maintained his distance from Shrimp's corpse. After all the sudden power ups on Shrimp's part, he did not want to drop his guard. The zombie giant from afar could still send out units towards Aldrich, and he still had more contingencies.

First, there was Shark's crystal corpse. If Shrimp moved forward, Aldrich would use a [Wall of Bone] and then have the giant toss the crystal corpse. It could be detonated to cause significant damage and infuse a deadly chunk of the Crystal Blood Venom from Chiros.

Second, Valera and Chiros himself were still on standby, watching to see if anything went wrong. Not to mention that Ace was still in the skies along with Seismic and Crow.

Third, Aldrich had the antlion now positioned beneath Shrimp's supposed corpse, ready to entrap it in the case that it suddenly gained renewed life and attempted to escape.

Aldrich had most of his bases covered. It was just a matter of whether Shrimp was dead or not. A tense silence hung in the air as Aldrich watched Shrimp's lifeless, blood drenched body.

In a few seconds, Aldrich sighed in relief. A floating green grave marker emerged above Shrimp's body, and beside that icon, there was a blue orb that indicated the creature's soul.

"Good work, Volantis," said Aldrich. "You're right. Your collection is something to be admired."

"To bond with an Armored that is as much a connoisseur of flesh and bone as I - it is my honor to serve," said Volantis.

"Master!" Valera appeared from above. She had leaped in the air to reach Aldrich. She jumped up with her arms spread out to hug Aldrich, but when she made eye contact with a camera drone above, she made an awkward roll in mid air and landed back on her feet in front of Aldrich because she realized she needed to be serious.

People were watching after all. She stood up, tried to pat dust off herself with a professional attitude, and coughed into her gauntleted fist before bowing to Aldrich. "That was excellent work, master. Your fight will surely inspire the rest of your Legion as it has inspired me."

"There's not much of a fight left to inspire. With the Locus gone, the variants are going to fall back to the ocean, if any of them even survive.

This battle is over.

Still, a part of me does think it was a shame it couldn't last longer," said Aldrich as he stared down at Shrimp's corpse, at the first being that had been able to really get Aldrich fighting and thinking in the 'zone'.

Then again, though, Aldrich knew that he would not lack for fights like this in the future. With this, he had revealed himself to the world, and he was prepared to accept the consequences for that. No, he thought, not consequences, but rewards.

Because if Aldrich played his hand right, he would gain all the power and influence he needed to establish himself. He knew that he would face questions and resistance, but he was prepared for it.

And speaking of rewards, the greatest one of them all was lying right before Aldrich.

Aldrich began to move towards Shrimp, ready to cast [Raise Undead].

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Chapter 148: The Voice

When Aldrich moved towards Shrimp to raise the Locus, those that watched him did so with bated breath.

The crowds in Haven that had cheered and cried out in relief and joy when they saw Shrimp fall now stood in silence, wondering what would happen. Would the terrifying Locus that once threatened their entire city come back to life as the many fishmen and variants had done?

Would the creature even be under their savior's control?

In Neo-York, Solomon Solar's twisted frown smoothed over for a moment as he also held his breath, his golden eyes glued to the large screen in front of him as he pondered the very same things the average citizen in Haven did.

Would this no name upstart in black armor actually tame a Locus under his control? Nobody had ever been able to achieve anything remotely close to that.

Much like the immensely powerful Titans of the Monsterring that almost ended the entire world, there was something about Loci that safeguarded them from a good number of powers.

Their minds were impenetrable to all but the mightiest of psychics, and even among them, none could control a Locus for very long.

Locus corpses also could not be controlled fully intact. This was a fact that Solomon Solar was privy to as a S rank hero who had insider information about the association and its more confidential research.

The Alterhuman Agency had captured strong Loci and kept their bodies in storage to perform experiments on. Among these experiments were those involving Alters who could control or animate corpses as this black armored upstart could, but all of them ended in failure.

At best, the AA knew how to harvest the genetic material of Loci, but any attempts at cloning also invariably failed or produced misshapen, uncontrollable monstrosities.

The greatest success that the AA produced was to fashion mechanical hybrids utilizing the corpses, but these fell short of the original's strength and required the specific employ of Fleshcrafter, an extremely powerful techno whose genius was plagued with bouts of mental instability common among the best Psionic type Alters.

If this upstart could fully raise a Locus and employ it as his own without compromising on the Locus's strength, then there was no doubt about it.

Whoever this man was, he was going to rise to be a superpower in the AA.

Solomon Solar set his jaw in irritation. If that happened, that meant he had even more competition to deal with. Just when he thought his night could not get any worse.

First, there had been the attack on Neo-York from an army of Geists headed by a Locus of definitive S ranked strength. That had taken much of the night to settle.

Then, when Solomon heard that Haven had been attacked, he had tried to contact Blackwater to make sure his asset Seth Solar had not been compromised.

If Seth had been killed tonight, then Solomon had lost an asset worth an invaluable number of credits.

But that and the competition that this upstart posed was actually the least of his worries.

It was the fact that this upstart controlled Blackwater students under him that deeply unsettled Solomon. That could only mean that Blackwater had been infiltrated and compromised somehow, the students either willingly following this man or killed and turned into puppets for him.

And if Blackwater was compromised, Solomon Solar's connection to it, to Selene, the headmaster and mother to Seth, was at risk. If that happened, it would take a massive amount of effort for Solomon to smooth over the damage to his image.

Granted, Solomon was funded extensively by the Dark Six, the largest criminal organizations in the world, and they could likely bury a reveal even of this scale to the public with their power and influence.

But it would cost Solomon. Pile atop his already near bottomless debt to them.

Solomon could not fly over there himself and see if things were fine. He was too public a figure to do that. That was why Selene, the headmaster and Seth's handler, was there in the first place. That was her goddamn job; to handle all the nasty criminal elements tied to Solomon so that there was no risk to him.

So why the hell was she not taking any of his calls?

Why were things going so wrong, so very quickly?

From his viewing room, Emrys stared at the unknown man raise his hand towards the corpse of the Locus. All other holographic screens that previously had shown world leaders or S and A class heroes fighting across the globe had been turned off, leaving just the screen showing the stream in Haven open.

This was how important this stream was to Emrys, president of the Alterhuman Agency. More important than any other conflict in the world. Than any world leader. Than any mega corporation CEO. Than any hero, regardless of how high their rank was.

What would happen, thought Emrys, if two Black Spots collided with each other?

Whose power would triumph over the other?

The only time a situation like this had ever occurred was in the beginning of the Altering. When Vanguard and Zahak stood against each other in a clash that had carved its marks into both the depths of the planet and the memories of mankind.

In the aftermath of that colossal conflict, it had been clear that the right one had won with Vanguard.

Vanguard had steered humanity towards its survival to the best of his extraordinary abilities, and the golden age he had started, though now faded into near death, had been the foundation for mankind to rally their strength around.

Had Zahak won, humanity collectively would have faced a fate worse than death.

But now?

The answer was not so clear.

If the armored one triumphed, then what did that mean?

Did the man stand for humanity? Or against?

Could Emrys be staring at the biggest hope that this planet could look towards to since Vanguard himself?

Or its greatest downfall? Something that Emrys would have to personally stamp out before it became too much to deal with?

All Emrys could do was to watch, wait, and observe.

Observe as he had done for over a century for the sake of Order.

Aldrich stepped up to Shrimp's corpse with his arm stretched out and palm open, ready to raise the strongest undead he had ever taken yet. Thankfully, both his health and mana were at relatively stable condition. His health was still topped off due to his conservative no hit playstyle, and his mana hovered at slightly below half.

Very likely, this would be enough for Aldrich to fully raise Shrimp even with the drain that boss level entities seemed to impose on him.

"Serve," announced Aldrich. From his black and bone gauntleted hand, a green silhouette of energy flashed.

But nothing happened.

"..." Aldrich paused for a few seconds, waiting to see if it just took some time for the spell to cast. He had used it, that was for sure, he had felt his mana go down.

Valera immediately picked up on this and stood right beside Aldrich, manifesting her huge cross shield in wariness.

That was when Shrimp's corpse turned bright white. It happened so quickly that he had almost no time to react. Two of Shrimp's arms, the ones that held claws instead of fists, began to vibrate rapidly, and all throughout Shrimp's body, a massive buildup of energy occurred.

The air around Shrimp began to distort heavily from this energy accumulation, concentrating particularly heavily around his claws.

Shrimp's body turned so brilliantly white that it blinded everyone in the vicinity, emitting so much light that for a moment, to anyone nearby, it looked like the night had turned into day, as if the sun itself had dawned on the desolate, dark warzone.

Aldrich made immediate move to evacuate from the vicinity. He had defensive maneuvers planned in the case that anything strange like this happened, and he

executed them now. But just before he could put his thoughts into actions, something he could not have foreseen occurred.

"This one is disappointed in you, Kindred." A voice echoed from Shrimp's corpse. It was not Shrimp's own voice.

No, it belonged to a woman's, though unlike any Aldrich had heard before. There was something about it that was distinctively inhuman in its tone and feeling.

The voice was directed straight towards Aldrich, ringing only in the confines of his head like the telepathic communication he had between his units.

When it spoke, its words took up only but a fraction of a moment, slowing down Aldrich's perception like time itself had slowed to a crawl. "To bear witness to a Kindred for the first time only to see that you raise your precious, Beyond given strength against your own is a disappointment.

But no matter.

If you do not know who the true enemy is, then you are an enemy of this one as well."

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