

Super Necromancer System #Chapter 149: Survival - Read Super Necromancer System Chapter 149: Survival

Chapter 149: Survival

As Aldrich heard the voice ringing through his head, he suppressed the urge to ask questions. There was no doubt in his mind that this being was the 'Voice' that had driven Shrimp to fight Aldrich with such intense drive.

But even if he had many questions about who this entity was, what its objectives were, what it meant by kindred, what it meant by the enemy, what was important above all was securing his own safety.

'The energy of that corpse swells to astronomical levels unbound by any semblance of order,' said Volantis. 'It is reminiscent of a-,'

'An explosion,' finished Aldrich. He instantly geared back into action. This 'Voice' was trying to wipe him out by luring him in with Shrimp's corpse and detonating it.

A thoroughly petty and underhanded trick, but then again, who was Aldrich to complain about such a thing?

No, he was the type of person to expect his enemy to play dirty because that was exactly how he operated.

Aldrich had been ready from the start to expect that something out of his expectation might happen to threaten him. And because he had been mentally prepared, he could react faster than if he had gone in expecting to raise Shrimp's corpse without any repercussions.

Aldrich instantly jumped backwards, mentally willing all of his units to escape from the area as quickly as possible.

The corpse was due to detonate incredibly soon, and Volantis flooded Aldrich's mind with danger warnings that even if he sprinted backwards at full speed, he would get caught by the explosion based on how much energy had built up.

In response, Aldrich casted [Wall of Bone] while leaping away. Volantis reacted, changing his stitching from the bloodflame dragon's head into the stonedrake scales, judging that if Aldrich would get clipped by the explosion, it was better to weather the damage as effectively possible than to try and manifest wings to get away.

The ground before the corpse broke apart as a thick mound of bones rose up near instantly, forming into a powerful reinforced wall of clobbered together bones, some

small, some giant, some human, some monstrous, that looked sturdy enough to withstand a full barrage even from someone like Valera.

[Wall of Bone] was an incredibly useful defensive tool not just for the strength of the wall, but because of the speed of its responsiveness. Its manifestation was essentially instant, allowing competent casters to block incoming attacks as soon as they reacted to them.

On top of this, Valera automatically got to work defending Aldrich. She, as a expert warrior, knew without Aldrich telling her anything that this situation needed her defense now more so than ever.

Valera stood behind the wall of skeletal mass and slammed her shield down, casting her strongest area of effect defensive skill called [Third Gate of Noktis]. The shield turned completely black, so dark and devoid of light that it stood out almost like a tear in reality. From there, shadows poured out, flickering as they shaped themselves into an enormous castle gate over a dozen meters tall.

The [Third Gate of Noktis] was a part of a series of spells unique only to knights of the Midnight Order, an alliance of night dwelling demihumans in Elden World.

Noktis was the living shadow city upon which the Midnight Order's knights were trained, and it was said that all anointed knights of the order drank in a shard of the city itself, harnessing its power.

In the Elden World game, Noktis had not been breached for five thousand years, with its walls only crumbling at the very end of the game when a trio of immensely powerful dark angels dropped an enormous meteorite capable of razing an entire country on the fortress.

Valera, however, could only shape one gate of the fortress at her current level. And that also took time to fully setup. The shadowy mass emanating from her shield took the vague form of a gate surrounded by segments of wall, but it needed more time to stabilize into a proper, solid structure.

Before that happened, Shrimp's corpse detonated when its rapidly oscillating, energy building claws snapped together.

A bright, blinding white and orange wave of energy strands blasted out from Shrimp's corpse like a solar flare.

No, it literally was exactly like a solar flare.

Anyone staring at this that did not have augmented eyes would have been instantly blinded. The ground beneath Shrimp's corpse instantly liquefied molten, then evaporated into bubbles.

When the solar wave crashed into Aldrich's bone wall, it completely melted through the wall without facing any resistance. Valera stood firm against this wave of incoming devastation with her shield firmly poised in front of her, willing to give her all and everything to defend Aldrich.

Aldrich worried briefly about Valera's safety. She could not tank that hit. It was as if the sun itself, the celestial body that could power nearly all life on the planet with just a fraction of its luminescence - had its life-giving warmth inverted and turned into a devastating weapon of scorching incineration.

But Aldrich trusted Valera. He knew that she would give her eternal life for him, but he also knew that she would not throw away her life either. If she felt like she was going to die from this attack, she would have told him.

The fact that she stood there silently and firmly meant that she was confident she could stand against the solar storm.

Still, an attack of this caliber was far beyond what Shrimp should have been able to output - this was the power of the entity known as the Voice.

No, that was not entirely accurate.

Aldrich noticed this even in this tense situation.

Shrimp's corpse remained stable even as it thrust out these solar waves. It did not break apart.

On the contrary, it seemed that these solar waves actually came from Shrimp - a glance at the energy signatures from Volantis confirmed that the Locus created this attack.

It was an energy signature very similar to Shrimp's Burst.

What had happened was that the Voice did not put out its own attack. Rather, it had forcibly massively accelerated Shrimp's evolution, turning the Burst power into something much, much stronger.

At the back of Aldrich's mind, even in a dangerous situation like this, he felt...eager.

Eager because he knew that Shrimp's corpse was not gone. And the more the Voice evolved and strengthened Shrimp's body, the more effective it would be as a tool for Aldrich to wield in his Legion.

All Aldrich had to do was hold on and survive this one attack.

Then, he would end this once and for all.

Right before the sun waves reached Valera and her manifested gate of shadow, an explosion boomed from Shrimp's corpse, perhaps from the air superheating so quickly.

A huge omnidirectional orange blast radiated outwards.

The explosion was massive, instantly engulfing Valera in light and very quickly reaching Aldrich like an all-devouring beast. This explosion was not nearly as deadly as the actual solar waves themselves. Those, hopefully, Valera had blocked.

Aldrich braced for impact, his [Death Essence] barrier glowing bright around him in a shell of fortified energy while the gem crusted scales around his body hardened with the sound of cracking rock.

All he saw was blinding bright light as the explosion hit him.

From above, atop Crow's back, Seismic watched the intensely bright light of the Locus corpse shine outwards, and he snapped from his trance and shouted down to the oversized bird beneath him. "Up! Get out of here!"

Crow flapped his wings with a grumble, not liking to take orders from anyone other than Aldrich, but knew that this was a good idea.

Seismic had almost been in a trance watching the armored man fight. He, in his decades as a hero, had quite literally never seen anything like it. The armored man could raise the dead, but that was not his only power.

Through that strange black armor of his, armor that looked almost alive, Seismic had seen the man manifest all manner of abilities that he had no idea what to think about. There had even been a dragon's head, for christ's sake.

How did this power work? Could the man harvest corpses and make them his own? Were those parts then those of other Alters? Perhaps variants?

It was not often that Seismic was shaken up, and though he did not show it in his face or stiff body language, he was shaken to the core right now.

This man was fast, strong, gifted in the martial arts, incredible tactically aware, and, to top it all off, possessed enough team members of strange yet powerful beings easily akin to the scale and strength of a small army.

There was no doubt about this. Every generation, there were a handful of rising talents that dominated the Alter scene.

They were called Stars, but this man was a Star among Stars.

After this incident, no matter what he did, that man would impact the world. If he decided to become a hero, he would take the Alter scene by storm. Provided his image was presentable, every single mega corporation would scramble to make him their own.

If he decided to go a different path, then there would be untold amounts of chaos as the world decided whether to label him as ally or enemy.

But beyond all that, deep within Seismic's gut, in his instinct that he had learned to hone and trust, he felt it: this man...was going to change the world.

Seismic had not ever felt this way.

Throughout his years, he had witnessed many young, promising Alters with incredible powers and drive, many of them dubbed by the media to be able to 'change the world'.

But none of them were like Vanguard. None of them could truly shake up the foundations of the world.

All of them eventually funneled into becoming heroes backed by sponsors, complacent in swimming through fame and riches. Seismic knew that feeling of complacency well - he himself had been a victim of it for many years.

Those that did not fit into the framework of heroes became villains, but in the end, they still sought the same material comfort of their heroic counterparts.

No matter how many bright Stars shone, none of them shone bright enough to change anything.

This man was different. Not only did his power only grow stronger over time, but his mindset, too, Seismic could tell was fundamentally different from those of other heroes and even villains.

There was a drive to him, an ambition, that made him stand out.

With both combined, Seismic could not even begin to fathom how the man would impact the world.

But all this was relevant only if he survived tonight.

Enhance your reading experience by removing ads for as low as **\$1!**

Chapter 150: Seismic

"..." Seismic grimaced as he watched the explosion from below, a sphere of such radiant orange that it looked like a miniature sun, bloom outwards, engulfing everything in its hungry approach. He could instinctively sense that the explosion, despite having a

large area of effect, was not nearly as devastating as the initial heat strands that the Locus threw out to start this explosion.

Those strands seemed absolutely devastating. Seismic's instinct had always been strong, almost beast like in their perceptiveness to the point where they could be considered a power on their own, and he could feel strongly that even touching those strands would lead to instant death, even for him.

Seismic were sure that the armored man had dodged, even if Seismic had not been able to tell exactly had happened from how blindingly bright this attack was. It seemed almost impossible that that man could have been taken by surprise from this, but then again, Seismic had seen heroes both veterans and rising stars taken out by one single mistake before.

Because unlike the moves and comics and telescreen shows, often times, that was all it took to take someone down. One single mistake. Didn't matter how many fans you had. Only meant you had more people to mourn your loss for a week before moving onto the next shiny hero to fawn over.

"Tch. So that's how it is," muttered Seismic as he shook his head.

Almost as soon as the enormous orange explosion had bloomed outwards, it sunk back in, collapsing upon itself and drawing in a loud surge of wind with it. Standing alone among a sea of molten, bubbling rock, was the Locus.

The Locus's normally brilliant rainbow shell was now completely white, and its eyes shone a dark black.

The armored man was nowhere to be found. The shield bearing woman was gone, too.

Seismic could not be sure that man had died just yet. All of his controlled corpses seemed to still be operating. Or perhaps his control extended after death. There were plenty of Alter powers that could do that.

But whether or not that man was alive or dead, what mattered now was that the Locus was still standing, and it was standing alone, unattended. It could escape now if it wished to.

Seismic clenched his fists, the veins in his arms bulging as he put strength into them. He would not let that happen.

"Kindred...that was disappointing. Was that all it took to take you down?" said the Voice as it piloted the Locus's body. Although it did speak, its voice could only be heard by the Kindred, though it did not know where the Kindred was.

The Voice stared out ahead, looking out across a swathe of scorched, smoking earth as it tried to locate the Kindred it sought to destroy.

When it could not find him, the Voice stared down at its shelled hands, its antennae twitching. "Kindred are hidden from my life sense, but surely, this cannot be it." The Voice closed its hands and opened them again, as if testing out the feeling of its body. "But this child of mine is strong, there is no doubt about it.

Perhaps he was too strong for you, as a neonate Kindred yet to develop your strength. It is a good thing I culled you here, before you grew stronger."

The Voice's antennae twitched then, and it stepped backwards in an instant as Seismic landed in front of it with a diving kick, splashing away all the molten rock.

"Another one..." said the Voice, and this time, its words were audible to all. It stared at Seismic's muscular body, at the aura of power that emanated from the man's steely grey eyes. "But evolution has treated you well. Your essence will be worth harvesting."

Seismic did not respond and rushed forward with a punch encapsulated in a large sphere of white energy. He was not holding back. He was aiming for the kill here, as the contingency meant to take this monster down.

In response, the Voice cocked back its fist, locked it in fully, and met Seismic's fist in a direct clash.

When the two fists, one of flesh and bone, one of shell, clashed together, it was as if a high yield bomb had been detonated between the two mighty entities. The ground in a huge area around them instantly shattered, blowing apart like tiles on a roof peeling off from a hurricane. The earth rumbled as Seismic's quakes rocked through the Voice's new body.

Seismic grit his teeth and roared as he maximized the output of power in his quake punch. The sphere around his fist was still stable. He did not want to shatter it yet because if he did, the seismic waves contained in it would fan out, losing focus.

And he needed focus right now. The powerful energy wave that usually came from the Locus's full power punch did not stream outwards and wash over Seismic. Instead, its flow was split down the middle and directed around Seismic through the quake sphere.

With the ocean wave pattern of the blue energy wave, it looked like Seismic was literally parting the sea. The twin streams of energy crashed behind Seismic, obliterating everything it hit with thunderous rumbles.

But so long as Seismic kept his quake bubble intact, he could use it as a sort of barrier to split the energy wave. On top of this, the longer the Locus kept its fist in contact with

Seismic's, the longer it felt shockwaves running internally through its entire body, ravaging it from the inside out.

It was hard for anyone to trade melee blows with Seismic because even if you guarded his attacks, the shockwaves still permeated through. No, it was almost impossible for anyone to beat Seismic in a straight up brawl because of this reason unless there was a way to avoid the internal damage.

But the Locus was not avoiding the damage.

All throughout its body, Locus's shell cracked and spurted blood again and again, but with every injury, began to regenerate, white particles emerging from the ground and patching up any damage almost as soon as it happened.

Antaeic Factor. Much stronger than before, too. Capable of healing near fatal internal injuries in moments.

And in the middle of a fight, no less.

The healing factor was strong enough to keep the Locus continually pushing against Seismic's fist despite the life-threatening injuries it suffered to its internal organs over and over again.

There was zero doubt about this now. This Locus beforehand was an A ranked Disaster. But now it was S ranked.

And as the Locus continued to stand, continued to push against Seismic, Seismic's quake bubble grew smaller and smaller, losing its energy over time.

In an extended clash of pure power like this, Seismic was at a disadvantage. His power lasted in short bursts, now more than ever due to the effects of age and Crystallization.

Seismic buckled down to one knee as his quake sphere reached half its size. And as the quake sphere shrank, so did its damage reducing capabilities.

He felt the bones in his knuckles shatter. His forearm bone splintered.

But he kept struggling, because by now, there was nothing left but to struggle.

He could have left at any time this night.

Ran to see his son again. Ran to enjoy his credits for another day like Hat Trick had done.

But that was not his way now.

He never thought he was the type to champion heroic ideals. He still did not think that. He did not care about having a 'heroic' image, and most of the public still remembered him as a menace who destroyed more than he saved.

He had no idea how the golden age heroes juggled so many ideas of morality and good and perseverance and selflessness without breaking under the weight of it all.

Eventually, though, he came to the realization: they did not.

They were all human at heart, and nobody was perfect enough to handle all of that all the time. No, what they did was keep things simple.

Once you commit, you go all in. Never back down. Never back out. Shut everything else out. And it gets easy to fight.

Those were not Seismic's words. They were Vanguard's. But they were the words that resonated with him. And following those words were enough to be a 'hero' most of the time.

So he did not back down now.

Just as Seismic thought this, as if to mock him, his Crystallization flared. He felt the organ at the base of his spine spike in pain as black crystal protrusions grew outwards from his Alter Organ, ripping visibly through his flesh.

His quake bubble began to crack, unable to sustain itself at full power for this long.

"You have fought enough. Cease your struggles," said the Voice. "And return your essence to the Primordial Womb."

'That's right.' Seismic's eyes widened as he heard that man's voice ring through his head. 'You have done enough. So take a break and rest that back before it breaks. Take that hit and let it carry you.'

Any injuries you get, I can heal.

I'm going to end this now.'

Enhance your reading experience by removing ads for as low as **\$1!**

Chapter 151: Tag Out

Seismic heard the man's voice in his head and felt one thing from it: confidence.

Confidence in spite of how horribly things seemed to be going.

At face value, this situation seemed to be the worst there could be. If there could ever be a rock bottom to how things had turned out, Seismic imagined this was getting pretty damn close.

Not only had the Locus, a being of undeniably troublesome might, been revived from near death, it had been revived with even more strength than before.

Now, the Locus had access to all its evolved powers on top of the cold hard fact that it could also rapidly heal itself without any of the supposed limitations known from the Antaeic Factor.

That was not even to mention whatever entity had suddenly hijacked its mind. This, Seismic had no idea what to think about.

This entity seemed to be linked to the Antaeic Factor, and he had heard vague theories about some mastermind entity creating Loci and being the source of the Factor, but as a fighter, he never really read into the research of the variants he hunted down.

He just hunted.

And while he hunted, he relied on his instincts more than any research or field report to survive.

Right now, Seismic's instincts screamed at him that the Locus was far, far more dangerous than it had been before.

When the Locus still spoke with words of curiosity, Seismic's instincts had felt the Locus was a threat, but one without much control over its own power. Like facing a child wielding power it had no idea how to use.

A being like that, Seismic could outmaneuver with greater experience. That was what he had tried to do beforehand by smashing it through a sinkhole by surprise. If Seismic's Crystallization had not flared up then, he might have even won.

How simple it would have been if Seismic had just won right then and there.

Now, though, when Seismic heard that strange, ringing voice emanating from the Locus, he could tell that this was a voice of both intelligence and killing intent that would utilize every tool at its disposal to eliminate its enemies.

That simple difference in mindset and mental capability made the Locus now infinitely more dangerous than it already had been before.

But even considering all of this, the armored man was dead set confident that he could end this fight here and now.

Seismic trusted the man. He did not know exactly why. His instincts usually never told him to trust anyone; a byproduct of walking the edge of life and death from intense fighting, often fighting alone, for decades.

But he did so now.

Seismic figured it was a side effect of resurrecting under the man's control, as he doubted that a careful man like that would raise someone as strong as Seismic without some way to control how he thought and acted.

Regardless of the technicalities, the fact of the matter was that Seismic would get overpowered soon enough if he kept struggling against the Locus's fist.

Seismic had come down, fought, and would soon lose. He had no choice left but to leave this to that man.

Knowing this, Seismic resolved to get out of this situation intact and alive. That man claimed he could heal Seismic's injuries, but nevertheless, Seismic did not want to take the risk suffering too much damage, not when he had been given a second lease on life, regardless of the conditions placed on it.

No matter what, Seismic would see his son again now that he knew someone else could handle this situation.

Seismic roared as he clenched the fist struggling against the Locus even harder, and the already broken knuckles within shattered with a grinding sound. The shrinking quake bubble around his fist detonated, shattering and releasing a burst of seismic waves that acted like a miniature explosion.

The earth rumbled and shook.

Unleashed seismic waves traveled across Seismic's arm, completely shattering all the bones within it into little fragments. Some of his bones splintered out of his arm, protruding in bloodied white chunks.

The same happened with the Locus as a burst of seismic waves shattered the white shell around its arms, causing blue blood to spurt out.

Then, right afterwards, Seismic and the Locus both flew backwards as the detonated seismic waves pushed them back.

Breaking quake bubbles early like this meant that Seismic had little control over the seismic waves that burst out from them. Normally, he had to focus to prevent his quakes from affecting himself by directing them away from himself as he actually did not have immunity to his own powers.

But in a situation like this where Seismic needed to make distance more than anything, he was fine eating his quakes and sacrificing an arm to get out of harm's way to clear the stage for that man to show up.

No, not just an arm.

As Seismic flew backwards from his own shockwaves, he coughed up blood from internal organs that suffered from the quakes that passed through him. Yet, perhaps because he was under that man's control, Seismic did not feel much pain at all from this.

What Seismic did feel pain from was his Crystallization. Nothing seemed to stop that. That pain still forced him to grit his teeth, feeling like a searing hot brand had been pressed deep into his lower back.

In comparison, when Seismic looked ahead to see how his foe was doing, he saw the Locus only drive backwards a little distance, skidding to a halt as the creature rapidly regenerated the damage done to its arm.

Seismic felt his body crash against soft feathers before lifting him up. The giant black feathered avian variant had swooped down to stop Seismic from hurtling back any further. Seemed that the avian variant could change the physical properties of its feathers from stiff and sturdy like metal to soft and impact cushioning.

The avian variant tossed Seismic onto its back with its beak before flying up in the air, rapidly getting him out of harm's way.

Seismic crawled up the bird's body to look down as he coughed up more blood, squinting his eyes as he tried to get a close look at how that man would handle this Locus situation.

The Voice stood tall as it stretched out its arms, showing off the cracked and damaged shell all around its body and how in just a few moments, white particles gathered around them, healing all the wounds into perfection.

It was an obvious power move. A way to assert that no matter what was thrown against it, it could always come back. That no matter how much anyone struggled, that struggle was utterly meaningless.

"Kindred, your champions fall to this one's child so easily," said the Voice. "First, that odd girl whose life also escaped this one's sense. Then, this human whom you have decided to take as your own. All others that you bear under you - they are not even worth mentioning.

Knowing this, will you not this one now?

Or perhaps you have already perished, and the last of your children now cast away their lives for your sake.

But no matter. This one will erase all trace of your aberrant existence, for you do not belong upon this world."

That was when the Voice's antennae twitched, sensing movement suddenly manifesting right within its vicinity. The Voice instantly reacted and turned around to its blind side, reaching out an arm and grabbing an invisible humanoid form by the head.

Dark wispy shadow clouds parted from whatever it was that the Voice grasped, revealing the appearance of a purple robed skeleton wielding a serrated dirk. The skeleton thrust the dirk into the Voice's head, very narrowly missing the eye due to the Voice's quick reaction.

The end result was that the blade simply shattered against the Voice's durable head shell, shards of broken black metal falling around the Voice like metal rain.

'Where did this creature come from?' thought the Voice as it briefly analyzed the moving skeleton in its arm with surprise. 'The antennae gifted unto this child can sense all manner of movement from great distance.

How could this creature conceal itself? And this one, too, like many of the Kindred's children, escape my life sense.

Are all these creatures not of this world?

No matter. If this level of creature is the best that the Kindred can now muster now that his greatest champions are gone, then there is nothing to fear.'

As the Voice thought this, right before it decided to crush the skeleton's skull to dust inside of its hand, the skeleton began to glow with a bright green light.

The Voice's eyes, gifted with the capacity to read all spectra of light and glimpse the flow of energy to remarkably clear levels, witnessed a rapid mass buildup of sheer, raw energy in the skeleton.

The tell-tale signs of an explosion.

The Voice's explosive entrance had been mirrored and used directly against it, almost as if to mock it.

Enhance your reading experience by removing ads for as low as **\$1!**

Chapter 152: Game Over

The Voice saw the energy buildup in the skeleton, effusing into a bright green light, and determined that it had slightly less than a single second to deal with the incoming explosion.

Yet, even as the Voice saw this development, it could not help but feel disappointed. Yes, the Kindred had been surprised, but was this truly it?

Because even from a cursory glance, the Voice could tell that though the incoming explosion would be damaging, it would not be enough to completely destroy this fine vessel, and nothing less than absolute destruction was needed to sever the Voice's connection to it.

Was this truly all a Kindred could do? A Kindred that could harness the powers of the Outer to a far greater degree than the Voice itself?

No, the Voice realized. This was more than to be expected in the first place from a neonate Kindred who had barely stepped into understanding the powers they wielded.

It was a good thing that this Kindred would fall here now. Before they came to understand their true nature.

The Voice instantly tossed the skeleton far into the sky with a charge of energy crackling across its body accelerating the movement immensely.

The high-speed throw instantly sent the skeleton away, and even in just one second, the skeleton was far enough up in the air where its explosion would not reach the Voice.

A gleaming red sigil on the skeleton's skull shone before the skeleton detonated, disintegrating in a nova of explosive energy that did not even touch the Voice.

"Is this it, Kindred?" wondered the Voice as it raised its arms up to guard from the explosion's shockwave. "Is this truly-,"

The Voice stopped and froze as its vision instantly blurred in a flash of static. Its connection to its vessel was severing. It looked down at its stomach and saw a fist of bloody red, gleaming flesh lined with curved spikes had bored through it, completely pushing past the durable shell and flesh with complete and utter ease.

When the Voice traced the arm, it saw that the limb came from...underground?

"For a mysterious entity, you do talk a lot," said Aldrich as he emerged from the ground, breaking through rock. "But this-,"

As he stood up, chunks of earth scattering around him, he raised Shrimp up by the stomach wound into the air like a piece of skewered meat. "Is game over."

Aldrich felt intense burning around his right arm, right below his forearm where the armor had been replaced by the stitching [Hand of the Blood God].

"[Exsanguis]" chanted Aldrich, and the [Hand of the Blood God] fully activated.

Shrimp's body convulsed before dozens of spikes of his own blood ruptured out from within, forming into solidified, fleshy blue masses that beat like living hearts.

This was the strongest stitching that Volantis possessed, hewn from a literal god of blood whose touch was said to be able to kill anything of flesh and blood by not simply destroying their innards, but by conceptually severing the soul from its physical shell.

Aldrich had not wanted to use this stitching tonight, but he had been left with no choice. Seeing Shrimp regenerate over and over again with the aid of this new entity, he knew that to end this fight, he needed more than just damage.

He needed a guaranteed instant kill effect that would take effect in a single moment.

And there was nothing better for that than the [Hand of the Blood God], an attack of the 11th Circle tier, which, along with the 12th tier, were considered in lore to be spells and skills in the realm of the divine, capable of completely restructuring landscapes or enacting devastating single target effects like this.

At the same time, there were definite costs to using this stitching.

Aldrich took severe damage totaling up to over 30% of his maximum health just to activate this ability, and he could not keep the arm up for long. Red cracks emerged from the blood red arm all through Aldrich's body, visually showcasing this damage.

Even Volantis could not handle the strain well, let alone while being attached to Aldrich.

This truly was an all or nothing attack with a cost fitting for its power.

"...How?" muttered out the Voice. Though a spike of blue blood protruded from Shrimp's mouth, the voice rang out supernaturally.

How, was it? It was not that complicated. All of his units had been blasted away by Shrimp's sudden explosion. All except the Antlion who retreated deep underground, and, with the aid of rock above it acting like a bunker, had survived the blast.

From there, Seismic had stepped in to distract the Voice. Aldrich had manually controlled the Antlion to maneuver beneath the Voice while Seismic fought it, and when the Antlion was in position, Aldrich had signaled for Seismic to leave the scene.

Aldrich had then used [Mist Phase] to move underground, warping to the Antlion's location.

Shrimp's antennae sensed vibrations in the air to accurately map out its surroundings, but attacks from underground did not register so easily. But even then, Aldrich could not risk having his one good surprise attack go to fail, so he had sent his [Corpse Nova] marked Skeleton Assassin to attack the Voice.

[Corpse Nova] had a one second delay until detonation, so Aldrich did not expect it to actually hit the Voice. No, what the Skeleton Assassin did was serve as an extremely shiny, explosive distraction for the moment when Aldrich emerged from underground to unleash this ending blow.

Yet none of this would have been possible without Valera.

Valera's [Third Gate of Nokros] had absorbed a large chunk of the solar strands that the Voice threw out, preventing, neutralizing a good chunk of the following explosion too. Had the explosion been large enough, there was a possibility it would have bored deep enough into the ground to outrace the Antlion and disintegrate it.

"Does it matter how? All that matters is that you lost. This is just a hunch, but I doubt severing you from this puppet will put you down," said Aldrich coldly to the Voice. He did not want the Voice to gain insight on Aldrich's powers and tactics if it was going to be a reoccurring boss encounter.

Aldrich withdrew his arm from Shrimp's stomach, and Shrimp's impaled body fell to the ground. The [Hand of the Blood God] faded from Aldrich's arm, the bloody red, glowing flesh receding back into armor of black and bone.

The bright white energy that turned the Locus's shell white started to fade away, returning back to its iridescent rainbow shade.

"We will meet again, Kindred," said the Voice. Its voice grew fainter and fainter, as if it was traveling farther and farther away. "And when we reunite, this one hopes you will know the true enemy. That the parasites that you defend now are nothing more than slaves to its will."

"Enemy?" said Aldrich. "You never explained anything to me, and yet you expect me to side with you? Who? Where?"

The Voice used Shrimp's arm for one last time, pointing with a trembling finger up to the star speckled night sky. "...There."

Shrimp's arm fell loose to his side, and the black light in his eyes faded away, indicating that the Voice had disappeared fully from Shrimp's body.

Aldrich looked up at the sky, pondering the statement, but his attention was drawn once more by the light of the grave marker and soul icons.

Thankfully, likely due to the Voice hijacking Shrimp's body, both its corpse and soul had been preserved.

Good.

"Serve," said Aldrich again as drone cameras flitted above him, returning back from the explosion. He noted that among them, there were several that were from official news media outlets too.

Strands of green energy flowed from Aldrich down to Shrimp, and this time, he did not need to sacrifice his health and mana to resurrect Shrimp, even though it was a boss level creature.

Odd. Very odd.

This only happened in rare cases when Necromancers took undead from other Necromancers.

Most of the mana or health cost for binding a corpse to a Necromancer's will was to establish control over it by basically implanting a 'seed' of control.

But if another Necromancer had already implanted that seed, then all there needed to be done was to just take over that seed to establish control. Using that method also largely eliminated any costs associated with raising the undead normally.

Aldrich was almost certain that this entity, this 'Voice', was no Necromancer. It did not use mana, spells, or skills.

But regardless of the implications, there was one undeniable, physical truth standing before Aldrich.

The proof of his victory.

The Locus corpse stood up, the blood stakes riddling his form liquefying and receding back into his body. The holes patched up as Aldrich's Mist healed it, recognizing it as an ally.

The Locus stared up at Aldrich for a brief and tense moment, and all those watching wondered if Aldrich had truly tamed it.

Then, the Locus fell down to a knee and bowed his head before Aldrich.

"Master..." declared the Locus.

Chapter 153: Aftermath

Aldrich stood over Shrimp's kneeling figure, and like this, they looked like the perfect image of a loyal knight bowing down before his lord.

Raising Shrimp had been a resounding success. A heavily delayed success fraught with setbacks and sudden difficulties, but a success nonetheless.

Aldrich nodded to Shrimp. With the Locus under his very own control, he had a fighting force so powerful that he could command respect and attention from any major organization in the world.

Because no matter how fancy city skylines became, no matter how sleek and fast new supercars became, no matter many rules humanity dressed itself up with in the name of civilization and advancement, it still acted based off of very simple guiding principles.

Principles based on instinct. And the instinct to respect power was something that basically everyone understood.

Aldrich had enough power on his side that his power alone could force an audience with world organizations to try and vie for his allegiance because the alternative, that Aldrich could raise his power against them, was something they could not afford.

Especially not now in light of these variant attacks.

"A...name," said Shrimp.

"Hm?" Aldrich looked at Shrimp, and the creature looked up at Aldrich with expectant, glowing rainbow eyes.

"A name. Give me...a name. Mother died before she gave me one. I have none. But I want one. It feels important to have," said Shrimp.

"A name, is it?" Aldrich had actually thought about a name beforehand, and it was not going to be a bland one like 'Shrimp'. Valera had teased him about his bad naming sense already, and he was not about to let her down like that now, not after going through so much to raise Shrimp.

"Okeanos," said Aldrich. He was a sucker for old mythology because so many of his favorite games drew from them. Hence, his sign being 'Thanatos' for the Greek aspect of death.

So, it was only naturally fitting that Aldrich would name Shrimp 'Okeanos' for the primal titan of the oceans.

"Oke...anos," The Locus uttered this name out loud, breaking it up into two pieces to analyze it and commit it to his memory. He nodded. "Okeanos. My name. I like it. Thank you...master."

"If you want to thank me, show me your strength," said Aldrich. He linked his sight back with the Grave Ward floating above the battlefield where he saw the fishman army now in full retreat, fleeing back to the best of their abilities to the coastline.

The way back to the coastline, however, was long, just as long as the path of carnage they had carved out through the city. Long enough for Aldrich to farm most of them for experience in repayment for all the devastation they had caused.

"You want me to fight? Where?" said Okeanos.

"The rest of your kind are running, but I do believe that they aren't done paying back the damage they've caused," said Aldrich. "Get them to pay. Try not to leave a single one of them alive."

"I go now," said Okeanos with a nod.

In a burst of crackling green electricity, Okeanos disappeared, moving at high speed towards the battle site to join in on routing the fleeing fishmen.

As Aldrich saw Okeanos disappear into the distance, he saw messages pop in his vision.

increments, indicating that his army was slaughtering fishmen that provided little to no EXP. After about 30,000 fishmen kills, they would start giving out 1 EXP, and then at 50,000 kills, little to nothing.

[1x 'Crab' defeated]

[+8000 EXP]

[19,000x Fishmen defeated]

[+28,000 EXP]

[1x Boss: 'Shrimp' defeated]

[+100,000 EXP]

[EXP Bar: 0/55,000] 136,000/55,000]

[Level up!]

[Level 42] 43]

[EXP Bar: 81,000/60,000]

[Level up!]

[Level 43] 44]

[EXP Bar: 21,000/65,000]

[10 stat points available to distribute]

Aldrich noted the double level up. He had not expected Shrimp to give him so much experience. But it did make sense, considering how much stronger the variant had become over time. Two levels was also within his expectations for what he would earn in this fight. If he killed off all the retreating fishmen, he would get to the edge of reaching level 45, but not quite there.

The experience limiters would kick in and make the fishmen essentially worthless for EXP farming.

But still worth it to squeeze out the fishmen for every little last drop of experience.

What was much more valuable than just levels, though, was Aldrich's quest rewards.

[Quest: Fell the Great Enemy completed]

[1x Trove of Dark Wisdom (30 Levels) obtained]

[1x Frosthallowed War Scythe obtained]

Aldrich felt both the Dark Wisdom and the Frosthallowed War Scythe manifest in his nearly emptied out inventory. Now, he felt a little less naked after Volantis had gobbled up all the armor and weapon pieces in his inventory as a sacrifice to be raised.

Notably, the Frosthallowed War Scythe's text was highlighted in bold purple, indicating that it was of the 'Epic+' tier that ranged from levels 40 to 60. With the + modifier on its rank, it also meant that the weapon occupied the higher end of the level range for its rank, so Aldrich would have no issues using it all the way up to level 60, even a little beyond that.

Good. That meant that any armor or weapons Aldrich picked up in his Trial Quests, he could hand down to his other units. Provided his Trial Quests were still the same. He had no idea to what degree the Death Lord had influenced his system, but he actually preferred this over what he had in the past.

His system before had no answers and little predictability to it. It provided him power, but for what purpose? Why did it have the goddess Amara and the god Sindri in such an unfinished state? What did it want from Aldrich?

All these, Aldrich had no answers to. But at the least with the Death Lord, he knew her intentions; she wanted him to usurp the title of Death Lord from her. And because he knew what she wanted, that made her somewhat predictable.

Emphasis on 'somewhat'. But at the very least, she had Aldrich's continued growth and life in her best interests.

Aldrich whistled, and the sound projected through his helmet with Volantis's aid. Crow swooped down, and Aldrich leaped up, getting on the variant's back. He briefly looked around to see that the amount of news drones from various media outlets had grown exponentially, all of them paying attention to his each and every move.

Aldrich did not like that feeling of being watched and followed like a celebrity, but he had been ready to accept it as a consequence of revealing himself to the world. Regardless, he wanted to shake them off for now.

Crow flapped his enormous wings down with powerful force, shooting straight up into the sky in an instant, leaving the drones awkwardly turning around to try and figure out where Aldrich had gone.

While this happened, Aldrich put a hand to his head and relayed commands. 'To the rest of my Legion, continue killing as many fishmen as you can. Try to leave no survivors. When you are done, regroup back into the Deildeghast line.'

When Crow was high enough in the air, he flapped his wings again to direct Aldrich towards Haven's Southside.

"That was a good fight."

Aldrich turned to see Seismic. The older hero clutched onto Crow's back tight with one hand and used the other to grasp at his stomach where the flesh had blackened from Crystallization.

"It took too long. And it raises too many questions," said Aldrich as he thought about the Voice and all the implications of its mere existence.

"You couldn't have predicted the Locus evolving like that. And the world will have just as many questions as you about it. And questions about you as well," said Seismic.

"I know," said Aldrich.

"You're prepared?" said Seismic.

"As much as I can be," said Aldrich.

Seismic nodded simply and looked down, towards the broken and damaged city. "A lot to do. Repairs. Mourning losses. The times ahead will be just as hard."

Before Aldrich could reply, he heard a muffled woman's voice struggling from behind him. He looked to see Valera's disembodied head biting down on one of Crow's feathers to hold on. The base of her neck was shrouded in shadowy mist, obscuring the blood and bone that should have shown.

Despite Valera's strength, it seemed that with how fast Crow was going, she was struggling with holding on with just her teeth.

Aldrich smiled under his helm, feeling relief. He had always believed she had survived the solar flare attack, but it was still good to confirm she was alive. Evidently, she had used the Dullahan's special racial ability to survive a fatal blow by basically ejecting from their bodies with their heads. This weakened her enough where Aldrich could not directly sense her life force, but Crow had seen her and secured her.

Aldrich picked her up in his arms.

"Oh, thank you master!" said Valera. "It feels wonderful to be held in your arms."

"Valera, why didn't you just have Seismic hold you?" said Aldrich. "I mean, he is right there."

"I did offer, but-," began Seismic.

"Bah! That gorilla of a man? Who is also a stranger to me? When my head is the most precious part of me? No chance!" said Valera as she glanced at Seismic. "Though I do appreciate your service and strength."

"...Noted," said Seismic.

"And master, you should know by now - I will only ever allow myself to be held by you," said Valera. She looked down at Aldrich's armored arms and snuggled her cheek into them with a blush.

"I appreciate this gesture, but you and I are not at this level of intimacy, woman," said Volantis.

"You...what did I say about ruining moments?" Valera's eyebrow twitched in visible anger.

"This body of honed metal and collected bone of mine does seem to be unfeeling, but I have boundaries too, woman," said Volantis.

Valera just sighed at this point, defeated. "Just let me enjoy this, okay?"

"...I shall allow it... For the strength you have observed in tonight's battle," said Volantis as he grew quiet.

Enhance your reading experience by removing ads for as low as **\$1!**

Chapter 154: Sponsor

Valera sighed at Volantis's response. "Strength that I observed? What strength? Look at this sorry state I am in now, reduced to nothing but my head." She blushed deeply, rosy red filling into her pale cheeks. "Were I not comfortably nestled within my master's arms, I would fear dying of embarrassment.

For a Dullahan to lose their heads - that is the greatest disgrace they can suffer as warriors of death. I must wait an entire day before I can restore my body, and until then, I cannot even fulfill the basic duty of a Guardian Knight to defend my master."

"That's the wrong way to think about this," said Aldrich. "A warrior's job is to fight and to win their fights. You used every tool you had in your arsenal to help me win. You fulfilled your duty - where is the disgrace in that?"

"Oh, master, you have such a way with words. All your praise is never meaningless. It is always given when it is deserved. I very, very much like that about you," said Valera as she looked at up at Aldrich with gleaming red, hungry eyes.

"I am detecting elevated levels of desire from her," said Volantis. "Desire originating from vampiric tendencies is dangerous in nature. Shall I make defensive preparations, Armored?"

"You...!" Valera had enough and bared her fangs before angrily biting down on a protruding bone spike on Volantis's arm. She took care not to bite anywhere that could damage Aldrich or really, anywhere that damaged Volantis much.

The bone spikes were easily regenerated and mostly ornamental. She just wanted to vent her frustration.

"Registering damage. This woman has gone feral for reasons I cannot fathom. Preparing countermeasures-," began Volantis, his voice rising in alarm.

Aldrich smiled and shook his head at their antics. "Knock it off, you two. And Volantis, I thought I was socially stunted. Are you that dense that you have zero idea why she might be upset?"

"I am Living Armor. Form and function were the principles that guided the hands that wrought me from hellscape ore. I suffer touch to my form, and I must object. I register damage, and I must retaliate," said Volantis.

"But you do have a soul, right? A soul harvested from some mortal person who must have had their own memories and personality," said Aldrich, somewhat curious.

If he recalled correctly, Living Armor were forged by demons when they harvested the souls of powerful, battle hardened and experienced fighters. They used those souls as a 'core' over which they forged an armor around.

Of course, like how Necromancers could wipe the memories clean of arisen undead, demon smiths more often than not wiped out the memories of the souls they harvested for living armor to prevent any potential conflicts.

After all, it would not do well to have the unwillingly harvested soul of a warrior killed by demons to eternally serve demons.

Still, though, like arisen undead, Volantis should still have a core personality unique to his soul that no amount of wiping could scrub clean.

"I do," said Volantis. "And there are times I remember vagaries of the mortal flesh and blood shell that once housed this soul of mine."

"I assume you've always been a serious person, then, considering your personality now," said Aldrich.

"Indeed. But that is all I carry over, and all I wish to carry over. What little this armor of mine feels of its past flesh shell past is nothing but suffering. Pain. Then, the struggle. Endless struggle that drowned out the pain and everything else, leaving nothing but commitment to duty. To form and function," said Volantis solemnly.

Hearing this, Valera stopped biting Volantis and cast her eyes downward, likely remembering her own past.

Aldrich understood that as castaways of the dark, hunted and reviled by all, the lives and pasts of undead were mostly filled with tragedy and struggle. That was one of the reasons why he himself gravitated so much towards the Necromancer class and its lore. He saw himself in their backstories despite their struggles being rooted in a world of fantasy and his in a world of skyscrapers and telescreens.

Because pain was pain: it was universal.

Aldrich looked down at the broken streets below as Crow soared across the night sky.

Thankfully, though, there were no longer any fishmen roving about in hungry groups across these streets. Not that it made the destruction any better to see. The cars and bodies of both fishmen and humans floating in the flooded streets attested to that.

Seismic was right. The effort to rebuild Haven was going to be just as hard, if not harder, than the fight itself. The battle had taken up the span of just one night. Rebuilding would take years in an ordinary timescale. If Aldrich could secure the help of a construction mega-corp or the Panopticon and their fleets of construction drones, that time could be drastically cut.

But for that, Aldrich needed influence.

"Southside Haven. Why are we here?" said Seismic as he too looked down.

"To ask for a favor that I'm owed," said Aldrich as he steered Crow towards the Panopticon bunker where he had left the Duds and Minuteman. He glanced towards Seismic's focused face. "You aren't confused by our conversations? Mentions of demons and dullahans and the like?"

"Yes," said Seismic. "But no point in questioning it. Wastes time. I just work with what I see. And what I see is strength."

"Serious and to the point. Good," said Aldrich. "You'll work with me well. That is, if you want to."

"You would let me go if I refused?" said Seismic.

"No," said Aldrich. "This new lease on life you have is still signed under me. If you went against me, I would render you mindless so that you wouldn't have to think about what you were doing."

"Make no mistake, though, I want your mind to be whole, and I want you to follow me of your own will."

"Better optics that way?" said Seismic.

"Better optics," confirmed Aldrich. "And also because I prefer having other voices and opinions around me. It would be a waste to throw away all that knowledge and experience you have."

Aldrich liked being a solo player, yes, and he knew the value of being independently strong. But he also knew that capable leaders had capable people around them as no one person could be perfect in every area. And even if he had always been a solo player in the game, he was no stranger to working with others - he still always relied on the strengths of others as a Legion Necromancer to compensate for his weaknesses.

"...", Seismic paused for a moment. "Will I get to see my son again?"

For the briefest of moments, Seismic's rocky, cold exterior cracked, and emotion leeches into his voice.

"Yes," said Aldrich. He looked away from Seismic, away from that voice, because it brought up bad memories of his own father that had left him far too early. "Yes, you will. If everything goes right, just consider yourself a hero under my employ.

When you have downtime, you can visit your son."

Seismic nodded. "It will be hard. I'm still sponsored and contracted by Hammerhead Industries."

Hammerhead Industries. A juggernaut in the construction industry and a subsidiary under the mega corporation known as triple H (HHH). In all of north America, Hammerhead Industries was perhaps the biggest player for heavy duty construction and manufacturing.

Taking it on would be a challenge, but one that Aldrich would gladly take to keep Seismic. But this was all for another time. After he established himself in a strong position in the world.

"That, we can worry about later," said Aldrich. He looked down to see the Panopticon bunker and directed Crow towards it.

When Crow neared the ground Aldrich put Valera gently down on Crow's back.

"Hover in the air gently. Try to keep her comfortable," said Aldrich to Crow.

Crow grunted in affirmation, blinking his six yellow eyes.

"Master...I can't come with you?" said Valera as she looked up at Aldrich with large, puppy dog pleading eyes.

"I'd like to take you, but, well-," began Aldrich.

"Carrying a ghastly, severed head such as the form you hold now will only elevate the stress and fear levels in the mortals the Armored is to meet," said Volantis simply.

"Ghastly?" Valera made an offended face before she sighed again. "I understand. I will be waiting for you, master."

Aldrich nodded to her before he jumped down. Seismic jumped down with him. They fell down a dozen meters and landed with two heavy crashes against the metal of the Panopticon bunker's vault doors.

There, Minuteman stood at attention, waving towards Aldrich. The hero's wounds had all been perfectly healed by now, and the Blackwater students that had stayed with Minuteman patrolled around the edges of the bunker doors where over a hundred fishmen and crabmen corpses lay scattered.

"Good to see you again!" said Minuteman as he wiped some fishman blood off his forehead. "I know you asked me for a favor, but I doubt I'll be of much help to you anymore. You already routed those fishmen, sent them back crawling where they came from - I saw it all on screen.

You saved this entire city."

Minuteman nodded to Aldrich. "Thank you."

"I'm here for that favor," said Aldrich.

"Oh? Already?" said Minuteman. "Is there another fight I need to get to that the news missed? If that's the case, I'm always ready."

Minuteman locked his shield in place against his forearm gauntlet as he put on a strong, confident smile.

"No," said Aldrich. "The fighting's over... What I need from you is simple: I need you to be my sponsor."

Enhance your reading experience by removing ads for as low as **\$1!**

Chapter 155: A Deal

"...A sponsor?" Minuteman raised a brow as he looked at Aldrich questioningly. "Let me hear that again, you want me to be your sponsor?"

"Yes," said Aldrich.

"I would be more than happy to sponsor you, considering the pure color of your willpower and how much good you've done tonight, but I have to ask: what for?" said Minuteman. "If it's for a Hero Consideration Hearing, I don't think that's going to be necessary for someone like you.

As long as you have a relatively crime free record on your CID, hell, even if you haven't exactly been on the straight and narrow path, so many corps are going to see what you did and try to snap you up.

And they've got a lot more power than me to fast track you to top hero status in the AA.

All the powers you've used today probably exceed any power regulation license you have, but the corps and their lawyers will get that cleared from you in a flash.

Once that's done, you can submit an application to the AA with a corporate backer and then it's smooth sailing from there.

You'll start out in the B class at the minimum with a strong and well funded backer like a Corp.

Probably A class honestly speaking, considering you took down that monster of a Locus.

But with someone like me, well, I'll vouch for you, but my voice alone isn't going to match the strength of a multi-billion-credit company, and there's no telling what'll happen at a hearing."

"That won't work for me. I need the hearing." Aldrich understood where Minuteman was coming from.

But the process that Minuteman outlined, getting a corp to sponsor him, submitting an application normally, that was not for him.

Generally speaking, it would be much better for Aldrich to just sign with a corporation and have them back him.

Like Minuteman said, as long as Aldrich's past wasn't completely horrible, the corp would fast track him into hero status and probably bump him into high ranks with their money and influence.

Hero Consideration Hearings were another way for Alters not affiliated by the Alterhuman Agency to enter the supers industry, particularly after incidents where they used their powers in a way beyond what they were licensed to do for the sake of public safety.

However, where Minuteman's confusion arose was in the fact that Hero Consideration Hearings were used mostly for villains, mercenaries, and other criminal entities that had less than favorable pasts or, in the case of Nomads that did not live in any governed walled city, no traceable past at all.

The hearings were meant for people like these, people that lived in the dirt and shadows, to have a chance to step into the light, have their criminal records wiped clean, and enter the supers industry with a fresh new start.

That was why for these hearings, established heroes needed to sponsor an Alter for a hearing after determining their character and strength to be solid.

In the hearing, a panel of higher ups in the AA, government employees, and Panopticon members would judge whether the Alter in question could actually fit in the supers industry complex. If not, then depending on how bad the Alter's past was, they could get arrested right then and there to answer for their past crimes.

With a lightened sentence, of course, but no self-serving Alter mercenary or villain would want to risk going to jail just for the chance to be a hero when in all likelihood they had just as good if not better lives using their services for the criminal underworld.

In that sense, Hero Consideration Hearings were basically like court trials. You win the trial, and you're allowed to put on a cape and join the AA. If you don't, you get arrested and one more potential menace to society is out of the streets.

That was why Hero Consideration Hearings practically never happened.

On top of that, it was difficult to get one authorized in the first place. Heroes of all ranks could sponsor others, but only a sponsorship from a hero B ranked and above meant anything because it guaranteed a hearing.

"...So you are a criminal. Or a villain," said Minuteman. He did not have any real judgement in his voice. Just some minor surprise that his suspicions had been confirmed.

"A villain? No, not exactly," said Aldrich. "I have no real traceable criminal record. You won't see my threat ranking listed anywhere. Nobody knows who I am or where I came from. And I want it to stay that way."

Technically, Aldrich was dead. And he wanted the anonymity that death provided. That gave him far more secrecy and safety. Afterwards, if things went right, then he would also wipe any records of him in Blackwater, rendering him completely invisible.

The less information there was around him, the better.

"I'm still not sure this is a good idea," said Minuteman, concerned mostly about Aldrich's wellbeing despite knowing for sure now that Aldrich was in all likelihood not someone with a clean past. He truly was a good man. "Once you step into that hearing, your identity, or lack of one, will be made known anyway."

They'll force you to reveal everything about yourself. Your powers, your past, your team - all of that's going to come under scrutiny."

"There's always room for negotiation, no?" said Aldrich. "Don't you remember the case with Dracul?"

"..." Minuteman paused for a moment.

Dracul had been an A ranked villain based in Eastern Europe who had been the leader of an infamous mercenary group known as the Night Raiders widely known for their brutality and efficiency, wiping out their targets stealthily in the cover of night, hence their name.

Dracul and his team had wiped out dozens of well-loved heroes personally for the sake of the Dark Six.

However, Dracul had a change of heart one day when the Echelon, one of the Dark Six organizations at the time, betrayed him, killing his team, his family, and his dog.

Since then, Dracul single-handedly broke down Echelon, eradicating one of the six strongest criminal organizations in the world, and also played an instrumental role in fighting against variants alongside heroes during the Sinking of Moscow that Spybird survived.

Dracul since then was considered like a heroic national icon of the Russian people, and all of that contributed to Dracul going into a hero consideration hearing with the upper hand.

Dracul could negotiate with the AA on his terms, granting himself much more freedom and status in the AA to do what he wanted.

"That could work," said Minuteman. "Your situation is a little similar. But it's no guarantee even then. The AA and the Panop might be on high alert in light of these attacks. They might be a lot stricter on you. Or they might not be. It's just unpredictable.

On top of that, you've got Seismic here working with you, don't you? His sponsorship will mean more than mine."

"An argument could be made that Seismic has been compromised," said Aldrich. "Considering the nature of my powers."

Minuteman glanced at Seismic.

"If you think I'm being controlled, then no," said Seismic said simply.

"I just want to make absolutely sure I get this hearing, that nobody can question my valid claim to it," said Aldrich. "And for that, I need someone 'clean' like you. I understand you might not want to be associated sponsoring me, especially with that neat image of yours-,"

"It's not that," said Minuteman as he shook his head. "My image is something I don't care about. I've never micromanaged it to tailor it into something that I'm not, and I would sponsor you in a heartbeat. I just don't want to see you locked up in response to all the good you've done.

They'll be afraid of you, I'm sure of it. Your power to control corpses is something that's never been seen before. Making a few zombies here and there, that's been done, but this, controlling an entire Locus, this is something far beyond anything anyone's seen.

To be honest, when I saw your power on screen, I felt a chill run down my spine. Not because I was afraid of you, but because I knew just how much your power could change, well, everything.

And everyone in that hearing will be feeling the exact same way I did. They'll fear your power, your potential. And if they don't think they can control you, I'm afraid they'll try and destroy you."

"I appreciate your concern for me," said Aldrich genuinely as his voice lightened. "But trust me, just give me this hearing, and you won't have to worry about anything. I'm quite confident in my ability to be persuasive."

"And if that isn't enough? What if they try to round you and your team up?" said Minuteman.

"Then that's my problem to deal with, isn't it?" said Aldrich.

Minuteman nodded. "You're right. It's not my place to be worrying about this for you. Sorry about that. It just always hurts me to know that there's the potential for someone's good deeds to go punished."

He smiled and reached out a red gloved hand. Aldrich shook it.

"Alright then, we've got a deal," said Minuteman with a smile. "In exchange for saving my sorry ass, I'll be your sponsor... And if those bureaucratic AA sons of bitches try to mess with you, I'll do my best to vouch for you."

Enhance your reading experience by removing ads for as low as **\$1!**

Chapter 156: Sentinel

"I appreciate the thought, but when the hearing comes around, I want to handle it alone," said Aldrich. He did not want Minuteman to testify in the hearing on his behalf because depending on how things went, there was a distinctive possibility that Aldrich was going to use some, well, less than savory means to obtain the control he needed.

Aldrich did not want Minuteman to get caught in the crossfire. Because, honestly speaking, Aldrich did not particularly think that testimony from Minuteman to vouch for Aldrich would do much. It was as Minuteman said, Aldrich had power with unfathomable potential for growth, and that would make people, people used to maintaining the status quo, afraid.

They would want to control Aldrich.

Well let them try, thought Aldrich. By the end of this all, Aldrich would be the one in control.

"Got it," said Minuteman. "Well, at the very least, let me submit recorded testimony on behalf of your character and what you did today. I don't know how much that will help, but it should be better than nothing.

There's nothing worse in this world than good deeds going punished. If possible, I'd like that not to happen to you."

Aldrich nodded to Minuteman before gesturing towards the bunker vault doors. "Do you have an idea about what's going to happen to them?"

Minuteman sighed. "Times will be tough, that's for sure. Most of their homes were washed away or flat out destroyed. The homeless shelters are also flooded, so they won't have anywhere to stay. And as powerless people, I doubt they have the means to piece their lives back together.

And it's not just Southside either that's suffering. The rest of Haven's also in shambles. A lot of folk are probably going to think about moving out or maybe taking up Nomad cloaks."

"The Panopticon won't help?" said Aldrich. "What about the Reconstruction Initiative?"

The reconstruction initiative was a combined effort between the Panopticon and manufacturing companies to work together so as to rebuild cities after variant attacks. Most city walls and structures were built with pre-determined templates so as to make rebuilding as quick and efficient as possible.

The Panopticon had ownership rights over the templates of city walls and fortifications while private companies had ownership over templates of civilian infrastructure like housing or office buildings.

Through the Reconstruction Initiative, even massive cities like Neo-York could repair severe damage to itself over the course of weeks to months.

"It's sad to say, but tier 3 cities like this are pretty replaceable," said Minuteman. He shook his head. "Like everything in the world these days, it's a matter of economics. Tier 2 and 1 cities have enough money to easily cash out high paying construction contracts to rebuild themselves faster.

But unless a tier 3 city holds something important like, say, etherite deposits, they get left to rot after big attacks like this. There's just not enough money in rebuilding these cities."

"He's right," said Seismic. "With the amount of damage Haven's suffered, you'd be hard pressed to find a construction company willing to shell out resources at a loss to fix it. There's just not anything worth rebuilding for."

"I'll be changing that," said Aldrich.

Minuteman raised a brow. "How? You don't mean that you'll sign a contract with a construction company, will you? Having a corporate backer is fine, but that will limit your freedom even more."

"Maybe. Maybe not," said Aldrich. "Nothing is set in stone yet. But at the very least, I can guarantee that this city won't get ignored. I spent the effort to save it, I sure as hell am not going to just watch it wither away."

"I respect your commitment," said Minuteman with a firm nod. "You never do forget the little guys, huh."

Before Aldrich could respond, a voice crackled in his earpiece. It was Fisk.

"Uh, boss, you might want to get back to the city center," said Fisk.

"Hm? What is it?" said Aldrich.

"Remember that A class guy that was stationed in Have? Alongside grumpy old Seismic? He's back," said Fisk. "And...I'm not sure what he's trying to do, but it looks like he's trying to claim credit for what you did. Going on about holding the line up the front and making sure everyone had time to evacuate and whatnot."

Buuut I'm pretty sure he just got scared and ran with his tail between his legs. Makes me sick, honestly, watching this."

"I have to go," said Aldrich to Minuteman. "Watch over everyone here until they get sent off to safety. And again, I appreciate your willingness to sponsor me."

"Heh, that's nothing. A tiny sponsorship in exchange for my life? Now that's a deal I'd take in a heartbeat," said Minuteman. "Good luck with whatever it is you need to deal with."

Aldrich nodded before he got back on Crow. He had the Blackwater students that remained with Minuteman hop on as well. He willed Crow to move, and Crow loosed a guttural grumble as he flapped his wings, soaring into the sky with explosive force.

Aldrich scooped up Valera's head in his arm, and she looked up at him. "So how was it, master? Did you obtain what you needed?"

"Yes," said Aldrich. "But this is just the beginning."

"Oh, a plan is it?" Valera smiled at Aldrich. "I do love those wondrous plans of yours. They keep me alive so I can unleash as much destruction as I want."

"Not battle plans this time," said Aldrich.

"Oh," said Valera with a sigh. She might have been surprisingly tactical on the battlefield, but that was because she loved fighting in its entirety. Outside of it, she had little interest in boring pen and paper affairs that Aldrich would now be getting into.

"I have an idea of what you want to do," said Seismic.

"Hm?"

"You want to be a Sentinel," said Seismic as he crossed his arms and stared at Aldrich with his sharp gaze.

A Sentinel.

It was an old title from near the beginning of Alter powers, back during the Age of Villains when there was no Alterhuman Agency and Panopticon to keep a semblance of world order. During this era, when modern governments collapsed under the weight of unregulated Alter conflict, people reverted back to older governmental systems.

Amid the chaos of conflict, certain powerful Alters emerged as the defenders of their homes, essentially ruling their cities like feudal lords. These Alters were dubbed many titles ranging from defender to protector to, eventually, officially known as Sentinels.

Sentinels basically controlled an entire city as their base of operations, giving them unprecedented amounts of power. The Sentinel title remained in use throughout the Age of Villains and even through the first half of the Monstering.

However, once the Titans were defeated and humanity sought to rebuild, Sentinels were gradually phased out. There was no place in a world governed by the order of large organizations for single individuals with too much power like the Sentinels.

Aided by the threat of Vanguard, most Sentinels willingly gave up their titles and folded into the AA/Panopticon complex. A few actually fought back, unwilling to give up their lord-like power. Even fewer actually maintained their Sentinel status for they were simply too popular in their home cities with a good track record of fair governance.

To this day, there were a few Sentinels here and there, but they were basically ancient relics. It had been nearly a century since a new Sentinel title had been given out.

"Sentinel? My, that title does have a nice ring of power befitting my dear master," said Valera.

"Don't get your hopes up," said Seismic. "It'll be impossible to get a Sentinel position. They are already afraid of you. Why would they give you even more power?"

"That's the point of the hearing, isn't it? To negotiate my terms?" said Aldrich.

"And if they don't listen?" said Seismic.

"Like I said, I can be quite persuasive when I need to be," said Aldrich.

"You're planning on doing something, aren't you? Something that won't exactly fit under the umbrella of the law," said Seismic. There was no sense of judgment in the hero's voice, more a sense of simple understanding.

"And if I am? Are you going to stand against me?" said Aldrich.

Seismic shook his head. "No. Laws aren't perfect. They're guidelines. I should know. I never had much respect for them in the first place. I'm just curious how you'll do. How far you'll go."

"I aim to go far. And if possible, I want you to walk that path with me," said Aldrich. After Aldrich said that, Crow quickly neared Haven's city center. There, in the central square where people had been watching Aldrich's fight all night, there was Hat Trick.

Hat Trick and several other people... All women dressed up in revealing magician's assistant costumes with top hats, very likely members of Hat Trick's team.

Enhance your reading experience by removing ads for as low as **\$1!**

Chapter 157: Hat Trick

Aldrich remained high in the air as he observed Hat Trick. He wanted to get a read on the situation first before he went down and engaged with the A class hero.

"Do you know what happened with Hat Trick?" Aldrich asked Seismic.

"He ran when the Locus was detected," said Seismic. That was all he said, but that was enough for Aldrich to immediately have negative levels of respect for the hero.

Aldrich had a decent amount of knowledge of all the A and S class heroes because information about most of them was widely publicly available. Hat Trick, too, he knew. He was an up-and-coming young A ranker with a stellar amount of promise who, with a couple more years of building up his rep, would probably easily make it into the A or even A+ rank.

The S class, though, Hat Trick probably never would break into. Hat Trick simply did not possess enough raw power.

From what Aldrich could recall, Hat Trick had a fairly good public image. He marketed himself as a roguish playboy but balanced that out with supposedly a strong sense of heroism. Cool on the outside, warm in the inside; an image that was probably straight up copy pasted from countless romance novels fantasizing about getting it on and breaking into the warm hearts of supposedly cold CEOs or whatever.

"As far as I know," said Aldrich. "His public record is clean with a solid track record of beating tough variants and a few humanitarian relief cases here and there."

"It is. His marketing team has been good about that," said Seismic. "But this - this is his first mistake. Maybe his last."

"Explain," said Aldrich.

"Hat Trick ran because he thought Haven would fall," said Seismic. "He helped with initial evac. Got the important people out. Afterwards, when he thought his life was in danger, he fled."

"I see what you're getting at," said Aldrich. "It makes sense to stay for evac, especially since it prioritizes important and wealthier people that'll contribute more to his payroll."

But when all the evac vehicles ran out and there were still thousands left behind, he figured it was safe to just run because he assumed they would all die.

And dead people tell no tales.

Or, if they were heroes that ran, well, they couldn't speak out against Hat Trick when they had committed the same act of cowardice.

With the storm cutting out any form of recording, it would have been the perfect opportunity to just run without consequences."

Seismic nodded his head. "That's right. He tried to convince me to leave, too. If I stayed and beat the Locus, then that would expose him as well."

"But you didn't leave."

"No."

"I see," said Aldrich. "Considering the fact that Hat Trick knew you would stay and still fled, then that means he bet on you dying and the city falling."

"Yes." Seismic cracked his neck as he stared downwards towards where Hat Trick was. "He would have won that bet, too. But you showed up."

"And now that he's lost that bet, he needs to do damage control," said Aldrich. He clenched his hand into a fist, feeling the same sense of disgust well up in him when he had destroyed that ship full of fleeing heroes from the panopticon bunker.

What sickened Aldrich was not the fact that heroes did not always save every life. No, he understood that. He even understood that sometimes, it was better to sacrifice lives to achieve a long-term goal so long as in the end, more lives were saved.

In a hypothetical tough fight, if Aldrich had to make a tactical retreat at the cost of a thousand lives, he would take that retreat so long as it gave him a chance to win later to save a hundred thousand more lives.

There was no glory in self sacrifice that led to long term suffering. There were plenty of cases of heroes, especially those from the Golden Age, sacrificing themselves only to rob their communities of a protector that they needed long term.

But where Aldrich drew the line was with individuals that sacrificed others solely for their own sakes. For nothing more than a paycheck and a handshake with grubby corporate moguls. These were people that proudly proclaimed something they were not. Snakes masquerading under capes and costumes.

"Are the defenders of this era so cowardly?" muttered Valera. "It seems that these mortals known as 'heroes' are this era's chosen warriors, and yet, so very few of them possess the mettle of a true warrior."

"I can take care of him," said Seismic. "If you care about your image. Would be less risky for you if I went down."

"There's no reason that this can't benefit me," said Aldrich. "Plus, this feels a little personal. I'll handle this with you."

He willed Crow to move down.

As Crow approached the crowd below, Aldrich took in and analyzed the surroundings. There was a crowd of hundreds gathered before a massive adscreen that, normally, would have projected a giant in exchange for an exorbitant price.

The screen had been hijacked by technos to showcase the battle sites, and there, they showed Okeanos blitzing his way through the remainder of the aquatic variant army, utterly annihilating them in droves, completely proving that Aldrich had full control over the Locus.

However, most notably, the audio had been cut off from the broadcast, giving full reign for Hat Trick to hover in the air and talk to everyone below. Hat Trick had a suave smile on his face while his entourage of female team members behind him just acted like pretty props, just smiling and nodding along.

But Aldrich could immediately tell there was nervousness etched into Hat Trick's face. And the people around Hat Trick stared up at him not with adoration or relief or anything remotely resembling something positive, but bare hate at worst and visible disbelief at best.

Good. This was an easy situation for Aldrich to use.

Aldrich laid Valera down on Crow's back.

"Not again," complained Valera. She glared down towards Hat Trick. "That fool better make your time worthwhile for making you leave me, master."

"Oh, he will," said Aldrich as he jumped down. Seismic quickly followed.

Together, they landed on an empty spot away from the crowds. Aldrich broke his fall with draconic wings while Seismic used a tiny quake to offset his impact.

When they landed, the crowd turned around, and immediately, all the negativity they had shown Hat Trick melted away as their faces grew bright and hopeful seeing the two heroes that had actually saved them.

"They're here!"

"Seismic and that new guy, are they working together!? Maybe they're in a new team?"

"Seeing the guy in armor up close...wow, he really does leave a strong impression on you."

People started to snap pictures of Aldrich and Seismic en masse, and as the two walked forwards, several people from the crowd reached out to them.

"Thank you," said a woman in tears. "When they didn't let us board the last evac ship, I thought my whole family was doomed, but you've saved us all."

"I can see my daughter another day because of you two," said a man.

An older man, former policeman, it seemed, from the badges decorating his coat, nodded at Aldrich and Seismic. "When everyone else left, you stayed. I know none of us don't have much - there's a reason they left us while the folk with money got to leave - so we can't give big donations to you, but I hope that our thanks still means something."

"Your thanks has meaning. More meaning than a few credits," said Aldrich, and Seismic nodded.

"Ah, so you two have come back from the cleanup, eh!?" Hat Trick's voice resonated outwards, drowning everyone out. "And it's great to see you alive, Seismic. It would have crushed me to know a man as great as you had died out there."

"Cleanup?" said Aldrich. "You call that fight a cleanup? Where have you been?"

"Hah, what do you mean?" said Hat Trick. "I was out in the front lines, by the coast itself, fending off against waves of reinforcements from pouring in!"

Before Aldrich could respond, Hat Trick waved to Seismic. "Seismic! Can I have a moment with you? It's about something quite important, and classified information, I'm afraid."

Seismic paused, unsure of what to do. He glanced over at Aldrich.

Aldrich nodded towards Seismic. He was willing to see what Hat Trick wanted to do here.

"Alright," said Seismic.

"Good, I knew you would understand," said Hat Trick as he flew over to Seismic and took the older man aside, away from the crowd, speaking in hushed voice that nobody could make out.

Enhance your reading experience by removing ads for as low as **\$1!**

Chapter 158: Corruption

Aldrich paid very careful attention to the body language between Seismic and Hat Trick's hushed conversation. Seismic, as always, was like a rock. He stood tall, straight, and utterly stiff.

Among the many people that Aldrich had analyzed in his life, Seismic was among the very few that was nearly impossible to tell anything about based off his body language and facial expressions.

Hat Trick, however, was like an open book.

Hat Trick put his arm across Seismic's shoulder in a friendly gesture, but when Seismic stood coldly still, Hat Trick withdrew his arm awkwardly.

Hat Trick talked with expressive gestures and an ingratiating smile marked with nods punctuating every sentence as if he was saying "you understand why I did what I did, right?".

In response, Seismic just stood still, and that unnerved Hat Trick more and more.

As Aldrich watched, he noted from the periphery of his vision that many of the people in the crowd were behind him, keeping a wary distance from him. They recognized him as their savior, but at the same time, the aura of mystery around him, plus his menacing looking armor, made him less approachable.

Aldrich did not actually mind this. He did not care to be a shining smiling hero that tried to spread love and hope and warm goodness every chance he could. He did not want to be someone that promised many things but failed to deliver on them, because he knew that even if he fulfilled ninety nine out of a hundred grand promises, that single broken one would overshadow all the others he had upheld.

There was also the obvious problem that Aldrich's personality and way of thinking was just entirely unsuited to being a shining beacon of hope like Minuteman or Vanguard or any of the Golden Age heroes. What he did best was leading through cold hard results.

At the same time, Aldrich knew he could not just ignore these people either. They were his people after all. Or soon to be his people if his gambit to become a Sentinel paid off.

"What is it?" said Aldrich as gently as he could manage.

"Are they talking about anything important?" said a man, obviously worried. The man was costumed, though very plainly in what was basically standard issue body armor painted white.

He carried an arm in a sling and walked with a limp. He was probably a low ranking hero that had not been able to fight due to his injuries.

But still, because he was a hero, the people trusted him to act like a representative to talk to Aldrich. "Hat Trick mentioned classified information, and I'm way too small of a fish to know anything about what's going on.

I hear that there's been wide scale attacks everywhere but they're mostly all dealt with. But the people are still on edge, worried that there might be another attack."

"Another attack is unlikely," said Aldrich. "And whether what they're talking about is important or not is something we'll find out together soon enough."

"And...another thing. Something all of us have wanted to know for a while," continued the man.

"Hm?"

"What's your name? Your Sign? We've tried to search for you in the hero database or even whether you were a villain, but nobody's been able to find out anything. Or are you a shadow?"

A Shadow. Something that Aldrich briefly had considered being. These were entities that had no signs and acted in pure secrecy. They were mostly assassins who did not want the brand name recognition of being villains or mercenaries attached to them.

Being a shadow promised the greatest amount of secrecy, but Aldrich, though he valued secrecy, knew he could not hide in obscurity forever. He needed the influence and power that having his own name could bring out.

"Thanatos," said Aldrich.

"Thanatos..." repeated the hero, nodding to himself. He smiled at Aldrich. "Irony, isn't it? All of us getting saved from death by death itself?"

"Those who walk closest to death know the best ways to avoid it," said Aldrich, and at that moment, he watched as Hat Trick patted Seismic's back and flew back over to the crowd.

"Citizens of Haven, I'm sorry for the delay, but my business with Seismic over there is done," declared Hat Trick as he tipped his hat at everyone and assumed his position in front of the giant adboard. "Rest assured, you won't be under another attack.

My efforts, along with the valiant fighting of Seismic and the newcomer, and, of course, the noble sacrifice of the many heroes and policemen outside these walls, have let us see the light of a new day!"

"How do we know that's true?" said a man. Judging by the rectangular deep dive goggles on his face and the port on the side of his shaved head, he was a techno. "I've been managing and tuning into every broadcast I could find about this. And I've never seen you anywhere!"

Murmurs of agreement rustled through the crowd.

Hat Trick just smiled and put up a hand. "Of course, of course, that's understandable. I told you, though, I was at the coastline. Up there, with the crashing waves and even more waves of variants, it was impossible to set up a stream of my own. Not to mention the disruption field was impossibly strong there.

But you all know me. I might like to enjoy the good life-," Hat Trick flashed a smile to one of his all female team members, and she smiled coyly back at him. "But deep down, I fight to protect what matters. And that's all of you. I don't need the recognition, and honestly, I don't care that there's no evidence. What I care about is that tonight, here and now, all of you are safe, standing, and alive.

Now then, if any of you want to support me, you can talk to my assistants here for my Sharespace pages to drop likes and follows-

"Sounds like bullsh*t to me," said the techno, and the crowd nodded in agreement. "I've talked to some of the surviving heroes, too. They said you ran. And if that's the case, I wonder how you have the balls to even show up here again."

"Run? Me? Ridiculous," said Hat Trick. "Look at my past record! I've killed eleven B rank disasters and over a hundred C rank disasters. I've never run from a fight, and I've never stood down from protecting the people..."

While Hat Trick and the crowd argued, Aldrich telepathically tuned in with Seismic.

'So, what did he say?' said Aldrich.

Seismic looked towards Hat Trick with crossed arms and stern expression, but his mind communicated with Aldrich.

'The summary of it is simple. Hat Trick first gave me a bribe to keep me quiet. Decent amount of credits. Easily enough that it would put a big dent in his wallet,' said Seismic.

'So he's desperate,' said Aldrich. 'How's he going to handle the testimonies of all the other heroes?'

'They don't matter as much,' said Seismic. 'If I join Hat Trick's side, then the voices of two A rankers outweighs the voices of all the heroes here. It sounds unequal. But it's the way it is.'

'And about me? Does he think he can bribe me?' said Aldrich.

'Yes he does,' said Seismic. 'Credits are king. Now more so than ever among heroes. It's called an industry for a reason. He's willing to shell out just as many credits to you. He also expects you as a newbie to understand that heroes help each other out. They cover for each other's mistakes.'

'You mean they cover for each other's faults,' said Aldrich.

'There isn't much difference between the two. Not in this industry,' said Seismic. 'It's corruption, plain and simple. You help cover what he did up, and he'll help you cover something you do up in the future.'

Like I said, high ranking hero voices are resources on their own. We're celebrities. Idols. Our voices influence the public. What we say can shape how they think. How they make judgements.

And we have corps backing us. Corps willing to pay to take down news. Recordings. Silence voices.

This is how the B rankers and above keep their images clean.'

'Your image isn't clean, no?' said Aldrich.

'No,' said Seismic. 'Because I never cared. Not until recently. But by then, I had done too much damage. Too much to cover up. Search my name on the net, you'll find a hundred articles about how much damage I caused. People I've accidentally killed.

Only reason I even have a sponsor is because Hammerhead is one of the corps that don't care. They just value strength. And that, I have.'

'And I'm assuming Hat Trick's sponsors aren't like that,' said Aldrich.

'Elysium Entertainment is the exact opposite,' said Seismic. 'They sponsor heroes based entirely off image. Off of their looks. The characters they can put out. They basically sponsor actors. Hell, you'll see their heroes starring in their movies.

Hat Trick has a character he can't break. He's broken it today. Badly. Word gets out, he's done for. He's willing to do anything to patch this situation.

Getting himself in debt to a newcomer like you hurts his pride. Not to mention having to throw so much money at you. But he's willing to do it."

'Humor me, Seismic. How many credits is he willing to send my way?' said Aldrich.

'Ten million credits,' said Seismic... 'And fifteen million to me.'

Enhance your reading experience by removing ads for as low as **\$1!**