

Super Necromancer System #Chapter 109: Portal Girl - Read Super Necromancer System Chapter 109: Portal Girl

Chapter 109: Portal Girl

"I see. Hm." Aldrich put a hand to his chin as he looked down at Portal Girl's body. "Do you have any idea of how she might be able to use her energy? Her powers?"

"No. I am too unfamiliar with the humans and monsters of this world to determine their strengths and weaknesses to such degree of accuracy. All I can perceive so far is total strength, not the details of that strength," said Volantis.

"You can use [Consumption], can you not? That might let you figure things out better," said Aldrich. As a Living Armor, Volantis possessed a racial skill called [Consumption] that allowed him to open up and devour a creature. It also allowed him to steal their soul if they did not have a high vitality stat.

By [Consuming] a creature, Volantis could gain knowledge of them and restore his health.

It was this ability that he used to steal the soul of Velus and kill the Alter. On that note, it was a shame that Velus could not be raised as his body and soul were both thoroughly eviscerated. His barrier-based power seemed particularly powerful.

It also seemed that Volantis needed to consume more than just Velus to get a good grasp of how Alter powers worked. But even by absorbing just one Alter, he knew how to identify Alter energy signatures with incredible tracking accuracy.

"..." Volantis remained silent for an uncharacteristic moment, and Aldrich felt discontent from him in the same way that Volantis could sense Aldrich's own emotions.

"What's wrong?" said Aldrich.

"My [Consumption] is granted only to those with bones worthy enough to devour. It is my principle to not stain my stomach with those whose who do not pass a certain threshold of strength," said Volantis.

"I see," said Aldrich. "You've been more than useful enough for me so far. I can respect that wish."

"Many thanks," stated Volantis.

"And by the end of this night, I can assure you we will find a suitable foe for you to devour," said Aldrich.

"Devouring that one, the one at the center of this human settlement whose energy swirls and swells like a pillar of might would be a feast I would relish supremely," said Volantis. "But I sense that you do intend to add that one to your army."

"Yeah," said Aldrich. No doubt, Volantis was talking about the variant at the center of this attack. The immensely powerful variant that Valera had said was too strong even for Aldrich as he was now to put down.

With a monster like that in Aldrich's control, he would be nigh unstoppable. It was utterly imperative that he did so, and he had a strategy in mind to take it down while cultivating as much support as possible from the public.

It would be flashy. Climactic. And, in the end, the final catalyst to raise Aldrich from a nameless nobody to one of the premiere forces in this entire country.

But that was for later. For now, Aldrich looked down at the girl and decided to raise her. She was not fully dead yet, so Aldrich pushed his clawed fingers into her chest, piercing her heart with one quick and clean stab.

The girl's soul materialized above her corpse in a flickering green, wispy orb.

Aldrich flicked blood off his hand and then waved it up. "Serve."

The soul fed back into the girl's body in wispy streams while curls of green energy from Aldrich's necromancy traveled all around her body. She shivered for a moment before her eyes flew open. She gasped in a deep breath and sat up, immediately placing a hand on her bleeding chest.

"W-what happened?" said the girl, completely panicked. "Where am I?"

"Panopticon bunker. This should help-" said Aldrich.

He waved his hand towards the girl's head.

The girl's eyes glowed green for a moment as he influenced her mind, instilling calm and willing her to retrieve her memories.

By default, it seemed that risen undead had their memories wiped, retaining only their core personality traits. Of course, Aldrich could allow his undead to retrieve their memories, though there seemed to be differences in how effectively they could recall them.

Fler'Gan, for example, could recall all of his memories with expert accuracy.

Stella, on the other hand, struggled a little, feeling as if she had to try and remember a long-forgotten dream to get her memories back.

Aldrich had an idea of why this occurred. In Elden World lore, it was stated that the less experienced a Necromancer was, the harder it was for them to have arisen undead retain their old memories. Because Aldrich had resurrected Stella when he was comparatively at a lower level, she had more issues fishing for her memories than Fler'Gan did.

But now as a Lich and at a far higher level, Aldrich did not expect to face any difficulties in terms of memory retrieval. In the future, if lore related tales about Liches were true, he could even expect to start directly manipulating the memories of those he raised, allowing him to craft them into perfect followers if, say, they disagreed too strongly for his own liking.

"Sir," The girl nodded to Aldrich in recognition even if she had never seen him before. All arisen undead, regardless of whether they retained their memories or not, viewed Aldrich as their 'master' and someone they were deeply familiar with. "Thank you for saving me."

"Sir, is it?" Aldrich figured that the girl addressed Aldrich like that because that was the term she was used to calling figures of authority with. Made sense, considering she was a hero academy trainee. "What's your name?"

"The name's Eileen Vex. Hero name Portal Girl," said Eileen. "Thank you for saving me." She turned to the other hero's corpse and then shook her head. She stepped to his corpse, knelt by it, and took his hand. A few tears welled up from her eyes as she looked at the corpse's half blown apart face.

"Was he close to you?" said Aldrich.

"I interned under him in my second year," said Eileen. "Sparkwire was his name. A good hero. One of the few out there that knew what it meant to be one." She sucked in a deep breath, calming herself. She wiped her tears and stood up, resolute determination on her face.

In just a manner of a few seconds, she had completely squashed her emotions and made herself ready to fight and protect. Her force of will was strong, especially considering her age. "But we've still got a city left to save."

"Yes, that we do," said Aldrich. "The fighting above is still going strong, but it's about time someone put an end to it. When all is said and done, I will make sure Sparkwire is buried properly and that people remember him as one of the few heroes that did not abandon this city."

Aldrich did not intend to raise Sparkwire. He had heard of Sparkwire, and his powers were solidly in the techno realm, focused on interfacing with and creating technology. Without a soul to raise Sparkwire with his mind intact, his powers were useless.

He would just be an ordinary zombie.

Not worth it.

"His family will appreciate it," said Eileen.

Aldrich nodded, letting Eileen have a moment of silence with Sparkwire, but then went back to combat details. "Tell me, what are your powers?"

"I can create portals from my current location to another as long as I have a clear memory of it. My range has about a two-hundred-meter radius, though..." Eileen looked at her pink gloved hands. They crackled with arcs of faint energy. "I feel much stronger. I think, maybe, I could even do a kilometer right now."

"I see." Aldrich noted that Portal Girl's powers had increased significantly upon becoming an undead.

Very likely, her power had some limitations based on the stamina of her body and mind, and as an undead with an infinite resource of both types of stamina, she had vastly improved herself.

A power like that had incredible tactical potential for Aldrich. One of the biggest weaknesses he had was that he could not easily move mass amounts of his units around without much notice. But Portal Girl could negate that.

Aldrich then received a signal from his mobile storm. From a high vantage point, his storm of jellyfish could look across the city and keep tabs on the battle happening at the city center. And there, the storm reported that the forcefield was dangerously close to falling.

There were siege type aquatic variants that acted like cannons, being rooted sea anemone that fired beams of powerful hydro-plasma highly effective at burning out the forcefield, and their last volley had gotten the forcefield flickering close to failure.

When the forcefield fell, Aldrich had to be there.

It was time to move.

Onwards to the finale to save this city.

"I was going to have you stay here, but you're far too useful for that. You're coming with me."

"Understood!" said Eileen.

Chapter 110: The Final Plan

"Portal yourself above ground," said Aldrich to Portal Girl. "I'm going to bring the people in the hangar back in here where it's safer. I don't want them to have any questions when they see you alive again.

They along with the rest of the world will come to know my power in time, but for now, I don't want to deal with questions."

Eileen nodded. She took in a breath, clasped her hands together, and then separated them. A dark purple line drew itself in the form of a circle in front of her. The circle filled in with distorted purple space that rippled like waves radiating out from a pond once a stone was thrown in it.

She stepped back, surprised.

"Hm?" said Aldrich.

"My portals, usually, they're pink. The color isn't like this," said Eileen.

"Do you sense that the portal is any different than what you're used to?" said Aldrich.

"No, I guess the color changed when my powers improved," said Eileen. "I guess I'll have to recolor my costume now. Pink to purple - I guess I don't dislike it."

No, it was a massive improvement, thought Aldrich. It would have been somewhat ridiculous for him, a specter of death, to land on a battlefield through bright pink portals. He did not voice this thought out loud though.

Instead, all he said was, "I'll see you aboveground."

Eileen nodded before she leaped into the portal. It closed behind her, zipping off into nothingness.

Aldrich walked over to the hangar as he put two fingers on his helmet, contacting Valera this time.

'Valera, it's time,' said Aldrich.

'Truly!?' Valera's voice radiated with pure excitement and bloodthirst. 'Are we to finally slay that beast? Ah, to triumph over it with my dear master, to rip off its head and hold it high for you, I have looked forward to nothing else this entire night!'

'Yes,' said Aldrich. 'But don't get too excited just yet. You're one of my heavy hitters. I'm putting you in reserve until the time is right. But everyone else though, get them ready. All the undead in that mega complex aside from Fler'Gan should be ready to fight.

Oh, and tell Fler'Gan to get the statue ready.'

'All these lesser undead will fight with my master before I do!' pouted Valera. 'But alright, my dear master. I will have them organized and ready to fight. What are your battle plans for this exciting night, master?'

'From what I can see from an aerial view, there's a massive army of fishmen gathered outside the forcefield. There are two 'leader' type variants that are noticeably larger and stronger leading the army. The commander, the one you warned me about, is located farther back in the army, near the rear.

The composition of the army is tougher. It isn't just generic fodder fishmen. There are shelled crab types that act like tanks and warriors and slithering mermaid types that function like mages with pretty advanced water control.

The mermaid types also operate their siege units, the sea anemones that fire hydroplasma. They create intense water shielding around the anemones to guard them against fire from within the forcefield, and if those anemone cannons are left to their own devices, I have no doubt that they can do solid damage to me provided my Death Essence barrier falls.

The layout of the army is a bit of an issue to deal with.

The commander, I'll dub it as 'Shrimp', sits far back, behind the main army. The two leaders that I'll refer to as 'Crab' and 'Mermaid' are the ones spearheading the actual siege and the army at the front.'

'Ah, your naming sense is still the same as ever, I see, my master,' said Valera, teasing Aldrich. 'Do you remember when you named your greatest mount, your risen frost dragon mighty enough to freeze entire armies with a single chill breath, as 'Ice?'

Getting his naming sense called out like this, Aldrich felt minor embarrassment. 'And here I thought you were on my side.'

'Oh, I like it, master. It is endearing, and it shows who you are. Straight to the point. Open. All qualities I admire about you,' said Valera.

'Okay, I promise that once I take down Shrimp and raise him, I'll have a better name for him,' said Aldrich. He sighed before he got serious again. 'Shrimp's position is quite far back, and he's shielded inside what seems to be a particularly strong water barrier.

Meaning he isn't in a position to fight and protect the main body of his army.'

'Shall we strike the rear, then? Where the commander of this army is exposed and isolated?' said Valera.

'I've thought about that, and it is tempting. A sudden rear flank to take out the commander just like that, said Aldrich. 'But no.

A rear flank will leave the inner district open to attack once the forcefield falls. And if Shrimp is as strong as you say, even if we break down that shielding, dealing with him will be an incredibly difficult task.

The anemone cannons at the front of the army will be the biggest issue at that point. Without taking them out, each of their shots will annihilate large chunks of my undead instantly while dealing with Shrimp.

It is better to raise a frontal attack, seize the anemone cannons, take out the two leaders, and massacre the brunt of the army.

That will force Shrimp out to fight, but without artillery support and, hopefully, his leaders raised and turned against him.'

Aldrich clenched his fists, readying his mind for the battle to come. A battle of incredibly large scale where death would hang in every inch of the air.

'The advantage of being a Necromancer, especially a Legion Necromancer, is that battlefields are where we thrive.

And a battlefield where two armies simply charge against each other, slamming the weight of their numbers and power against each other head on, that is where the presence of death lies thickest.

And death is my tool. It is mine to control, mine to use.

The more units there are, the more death there is, the more chaos there is - the stronger I get.

For every single enemy troop that dies, I add to my own.

For every grave that floats in a battlefield, regardless of whether it came from the lowliest footsoldier or the mightiest leader, is another chance for me to feast and replenish my health and essence barrier.

There is no better place for me to show the full extent of my power than in the carnage of a battlefield.'

'Master, if you speak of carnage and battle like this in front of me, with oh such vivid language, I will get all too much excited,' said Valera lustfully. 'And what of the commander? When it decides to act?'

'That's the largest uncertainty in this because all I know is that it is incredibly fast, strong, and durable, but I don't have a good idea of its other powers,' said Aldrich. 'That's another reason for a frontal assault.'

Once I draw Shrimp out, I can stall it out with troops I've raised. That way, I can get a better sense of what it can do and then formulate the best way to take it down on the go.

Otherwise, in a rear flank where I would be fighting Shrimp first, I'd be going in blind, and that's a risk I'm unwilling to take with what's very likely an A ranked disaster."

'Then I will prepare our troops for your battle, my dear master,' said Valera, satisfied with Aldrich's plan. He appreciated her suggestion of a flank, and he knew that if she thought any part of his plan was not workable, she would have objected.

'Oh, right, and as for how our troops will make their entrance, well, I originally wanted them to swarm in through the sides where they would be unnoticed, but I have a much better option,' said Aldrich. 'One that will guarantee a far more dramatic, grander entrance. One that will make an impression.'

'Oh?' questioned Valera.

'I've raised another Alter. She can create portals that will give us much more flexibility in moving our forces. I'm going to send her to your location, so coordinate with her,' said Aldrich.

'She, is it...?' Valera paused for a moment of jealousy before returning to seriousness. 'Of course. I will test this woman and see if she is truly up to the task.'

'Good. As always, I'm always grateful that I can rely on you, Valera,' said Aldrich... He then cut off the communication as he passed through the tunnel leading back out to the hangar.

Chapter 111: Leaving Minuteman

Aldrich walked past the last sliding metal door in the tunnel, his each and every step echoing with the sound of clacking metal. When he entered the hangar again, the crowd stopped what they were doing to stare at him in awe. All of them, well, those of them that had phones, had them in their hands, but they were turned off and by their sides, but it was obvious they had been using them just moments before.

They were watching something. Meant Net connectivity was back up. The signal towers in Haven probably had finished auto-maintenance and rebooted after the storm shut them down.

Even more of a tell-tale sign that the crowd had been watching something was that someone had brought a mobile holo-projector and projected a large screen showcasing

a low-resolution video stream. The man owning the projector immediately scrambled to turn it off as Aldrich entered.

It was as if Aldrich was an incredibly well-respected professor who had just made his entrance to his classroom, making all the students scramble to put away everything so they could give their full and undivided attention.

Aldrich paused.

"Turn that back on," said Aldrich.

"H-huh?" said the man as he looked up at Aldrich.

"Turn it back on. It was a stream showing what was happening outside, wasn't it? I want to see," said Aldrich.

"Y-yeah, sure," said the man nervously, intimidated under Aldrich's presence. He turned the projector, a sphere-shaped metal ball on three legs that could retract or stiffen like a tripod, on by tapping a circular button.

A glowing blue dot centered in the projector lit up, and from it, the holographic screen projected outwards again. From the layout of the website hosting the stream, Aldrich could determine that it was from Sharespace, the largest social media website in the world headed under Mediacorp, a tech giant social media and news megacorp.

The stream's screen was black, a rotating circle at its center indicating that connectivity was slow. It looked to be a personal stream, and when the stream connected, Aldrich could see that it was being recorded through a commercial drone.

It showed a ground shot of the mass of thronging fishmen, crab variants, and mermaid variants all staring ahead, towards the towering walls of Haven's central district. The forcefield covering it flickered, its one proud blue color now growing weak, almost translucent.

They moved about impatiently, their fangs bared and their claws snapping as they waited for the precious moment where the forcefield would go down and they could have their feast of prey.

"Net connectivity is back up!" shouted the stream's recorder. "I'm showing you what it looks like in Haven right now from my drone. The heroes say that they've got this under control, but, but I don't think that's true. Just look at how many variants there are! And, and, look at the forcefield, it's...it's almost going down!"

Just as the recorder finished that sentence, a large rumble and flash of blue light burst down. The drone captured a dozen pillars of spiraling plasma energy shooting from the

ground in novas of bright light. From the high vantage point of the drone, the beams looked small, but in reality, each one was large enough to easily engulf a house.

The destructive force behind them must have been phenomenal.

The beams smashed into the forcefield in one final volley, and where they contacted, they superheated the forcefield, turning its pale blue color white hot. And with that, the forcefield flickered for one last time. It broke apart under the final artillery volley from the sea anemone variants, breaking apart from where the beams struck it.

"No, no, no!" shouted the streamer, his voice drenched in desperation. "Anyone, anybody out there, if you see this, please, send some help!"

"What's the AA doing!?" shouted a man.

"Where's the Panopticon!?" A woman joined in on the protest.

"You know already that they are not here to defend them," said Aldrich. "But I am."

"Wh-what!? You're going to leave us here!?" said a woman. "If you know how much we go through, how much we've been abandoned, don't be another one to leave us!"

"Don't go!" her child shouted with her.

"Your safety will be guaranteed," said Aldrich. "The variants are concentrated around the city center, so you are not under any immediate threat. Even then, there may be a few stragglers here and there, so stay here where it is safe. I will have some of my forces guard you.

If you do as I say, I can guarantee that of you will lose your lives.

In exchange, I want you to keep this stream open. I want you to watch." Aldrich began to step away from the crowd. His helmet reappeared in strands of black metal covering his face, combining together to form his spiked helm.

Draconic dark wings sprouted from Aldrich's back, unfurling majestically. "I want you to bear witness. Witness me as I save your city."

Aldrich crouched down before jumping, soaring into the air. His draconic wings flapped down, giving him lift as he shot through the open ceiling of the hangar. He landed in front of Minuteman. Portal Girl was not there, for Aldrich had given her a further mental command to warp away as far as possible to prevent Minuteman from seeing her.

"How are you holding up?" said Aldrich.

Minuteman sat on the mud and looked down at his shoulder and stomach. The wounds had patched over with an amorphous, blobby layer of raw, pink skin. "I feel better, but these things are taking longer to adapt to my body than I thought."

"Working with Augmenters like you is the worst," groaned Eric as he knelt by Minuteman, overseeing his healing powers to make sure his growth pods did not suddenly turn into explosively growing tumors. "It takes ages for my growth pods to adapt to tougher, stronger cells like yours, but all things considered, you're recovering pretty fast."

"Good," said Aldrich. "You should be back in action again soon enough then."

Minuteman nodded. "Yeah." He looked up at Aldrich, staring at his helmet. "You know, with how you look, I almost a hundred percent expected you to be a villain. The black and blood red with all those spikes, you know."

"And you look exactly like what you are: a hero," said Aldrich.

Minuteman paused for a moment of surprise before smiling. "Thanks. But a hero? No, that might be what my job is, but that's not what I am. A hero saves the day all the time. I try to do what's right. Sometimes I succeed, sometimes I fail." Minuteman shook his head. "I'm far from being a real hero. Like Vanguard."

"There is a difference between being a hero and being perfect," said Aldrich. "You aren't ready to fight yet, but soon, you'll be healed enough to defend the people here."

"And where are you headed?" said Minuteman.

"To the city center. I'm going to end this," said Aldrich. "I'm leaving four of my troops here, including Eric who needs to stay to make sure nothing goes wrong with the recovery process.

Everyone else, I'm taking with me."

"I promise you-," Minuteman stood up.

"Hey, I know you're a tough guy, but you shouldn't be standing like this-," began Eric.

"I have to stand for this," said Minuteman.

Eric sighed. "Augmenters. All of you are so hardheaded and impulsive."

"I promise you that everyone down there will be safe." Minuteman put a fist over his heart. "I'll fight down to the very last fiber of my being to make sure that they'll get to see the sun rise tonight. It's the least I can do for you."

And I owe you one. Anytime you need a favor down the road, as long as it's within my power, I'll try and get it done."

"A favor, is it? I may be calling on you very soon, then," said Aldrich.

"Just make sure you get through this alive, or else I'll be left hanging." Minuteman smiled and nodded to Aldrich.

Aldrich nodded in turn before he addressed his troops. "It's time for us to move. Chiros, gather your men. Have them carry your art piece back too. Alexis, choose four among your class to leave here. When you're done, follow me back to the mega-complex."

"Your will shall be carried out!" said Chiros. He turned to his death knights and pointed at the crystallized shark variant. "Carry that out! But make sure it is not damaged!"

"Roger" said Alexis as she looked to the Blackwater A class students, choosing who to leave behind.

Aldrich unfurled his wings again, preparing to fly, but before he did, Minuteman spoke once more.

"Sorry to catch you right before you get out of this depressing spot, but I never did catch your name. I'm assuming you got a sign to go by, right?" said Minuteman.

"A sign, is it?" Aldrich paused for a moment.

A sign was a codename. Something you went by as a hero or villain or mercenary or vigilante to avoid revealing your real name. It was something that Aldrich knew he had to make for himself sometime sooner or later, but things had developed so suddenly.

Right after the Red Circle event, Aldrich was thrust into this mass scale variant invasion. He had not had time yet to plan anything. What he did have, however, was a username. A name from the same game that had started this entire journey.

"Thanatos," said Aldrich simply... He then jumped into the air with a heavy metallic click before his wings flapped, sending him soaring high into the night sky.

Chapter 112: To Battle

Aldrich did not fly long. He moved about a kilometer away before landing in a flooded alleyway between a few crumbling southside buildings. There, Portal Girl stood on one of the roofs of the buildings, waving her arms towards Aldrich as he descended.

"How was Minuteman?" said Portal Girl.

"He'll be fine," said Aldrich as he landed beside her. "You were correct in judging how much your power improved. Exactly one kilometer of range. You've got a good grasp of your powers."

"Considering how much I've trained with them, it would be a shame if I didn't," said Portal Girl. She looked not towards the city center where occasional explosions and bursts of light flashed, but towards the dark Southside, where Minuteman was. "But if it hadn't been for men and women like Minuteman, people that you can really look up to, I don't think I would have ever made it here. I just wish I could have thanked him and Miles for saving me."

"I see." Aldrich looked up at the night sky, remembering the faces of his parents. People he had looked up to.

He remembered when he was a kid, he would have his parents make heroic poses in front of him, and he would smile and laugh and promise to be like them.

That had obviously not worked out. But he still remembered what it felt like back then. To hope and to look up. It was a good feeling, and he did not begrudge anyone from having it just because he could not.

"When all is said and done, when I've made my position in this world, people will know my powers. Or at the least, a general idea of them. At that point, you'll have your chance to thank Minuteman. Until then, though, we need to fight," said Aldrich.

"Fight." Portal Girl nodded more to herself, taking in a breath to psych herself up. She looked at her hand. It trembled. She balled it up.

"Are you nervous?" said Aldrich.

"Yes. I always am, especially before a fight," said Portal Girl. "But during the fight, it all goes away. I get swept up by what I need to do, the lives I need to save, the people I need to watch out for, and then it's all strangely calm."

"You have a natural talent for fighting, then. For war," said Aldrich. "There are plenty who never get past that initial nervousness. It simply isn't in their nature. But it is for you. Now, let's see how far we can cultivate this talent of yours."

Aldrich grasped Portal Girl around the waist and then flapped his wings, soaring into the air while carrying her.

"I-um, so, where are we going again?" stammered Portal Girl as she looked away from Aldrich, down to the cityscape below to hide a faint blush.

"Mega-complex nearby. Most of my forces are there. Once we get there and regroup, we will mobilize out, and there, you will play a key role in moving my legion," said Aldrich.

"A key role? You trust me with that much?" said Portal Girl. "I-I don't have an issue with it, it's just, since I literally just graduated from being a trainee, I've never really been in a big operation-,"

"There is no better teacher than pressure. And I can sense that you are the type that performs best under it," said Aldrich. He flew through the skies until he spotted the looming structure of the mega complex.

"Christ..." said Portal Girl as she looked down at the courtyard. There, the massive bone stakes from Aldrich's first entry remained, several fishmen impaled upon them.

"Does that sight bother you?" said Aldrich.

"I think it would have, before I changed. But now, no, I don't feel much if anything at all," said Portal Girl.

"Good. Because where we are headed, you will see far more of that." Aldrich noted that it seemed that all humans that became undead became far more resistant to the sight of gore and death.

It was very probable that they, like Aldrich and Valera, also began to see human lives as less significant, but he wondered whether that would change for people that valued lives strongly before turning into undead.

It was an experiment he would conduct at a later time.

Aldrich swooped into the balcony of the mega complex's top floor. There, his wing retracted into his armor as he landed. Valera and Casimir were at the balcony, and they moved aside to make way for his landing.

Aldrich put Portal Girl down.

"Ah, so this is the new addition you spoke of, hm?" said Valera as she eyed Portal Girl up and down, her slit pupiled red and black eyes narrowed in pure judgement. "She seems too fragile. Liable to snap in half under a strong breeze."

"We aren't using her for her physical strength. It's her utility with her portal powers," said Aldrich.

"A Flux Alter? Now that is a rarity indeed!" said Casimir. "It took me several long years to find Cubehead, a potent Flux Alter in his own right, and enter him into my service. No doubt, your talents will be very much appreciated here."

Casimir reached a gloved hand out. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Casimir."

"Eileen," nodded Portal Girl as she shook Casimir's hand. She reached out her hand to Valera with a smile.

Valera crossed her arms and stared at Portal Girl with an intimidating expression that made her nearly flinch. "Portal creation is nothing too special. There are plenty of halfwit mages that can do it."

"...Mages?" A look of confusion struck on Portal Girl's face.

"A topic for later," said Aldrich. "For now, we need to get moving. The forcefield is already down: every second counts from now on. Casimir, I'm leaving behind Fler'Gan and your reanimated Red Circle staff. I'll be taking the rest of the forces stationed here, if you do not mind."

"With this rather macabre sight you've laid down there-," Casimir pointed to the staked up fishmen. "None of our fishy friends have dared to step foot in here. So, do not worry much for my safety. Carry on doing the big flashy explosive things you always do."

"You said everyone, right. So that means I'm going, yeah?" called out Fisk from inside the room.

"Do you want to face an army of variants that want to eat you limb from limb?" sad Aldrich.

"I'm fine right here, actually. Have a bit of back pain, I just remembered," said Fisk immediately.

"You won't be sitting here idle either. Fisk, you and Spybird have Net connectivity now. Spybird still has several of his drones here. Get them ready and set to broadcast. You two will be my media coverage," said Aldrich.

"Got it, boss!" said Fisk.

"See you soon on telescreen." Spybird raised his canteen of liquor up to Aldrich in a cheers before getting to work in front of a laptop screen.

"Our troops are ready to mobilize. At your command, they will move to the edges of the designated battlefield where they will lie in hiding. There, they will wait until your signal. At which point-," Valera turned to Portal Girl and leered at her. "You will use your powers to move our troops into the battlefield in one grand entrance.

I will say this now as the one closest to the master: I do not tolerate any amount of failure."

"I-I promise I won't fail! I'll try my best!" said Portal Girl with pep.

"Hmph. I do admire that will of yours. See to it that it is not empty bluster. Go downstairs and join the troops," said Valera.

"Roger that," Portal Girl nodded to Valera as she ran out the room.

"I could have flown her down," said Aldrich. "I doubt the elevator works anymore."

"Ah, but master, you will be busy flying me!" said Valera.

"Hm? I thought you were going to take Crow down to the battlefield," said Aldrich. "That way, I can make a solo entrance in front of the central district's walls."

"You can just take me halfway there," said Valera shyly. "...I must save my stamina, you see! Plus, why does that little girl get to fly with you and not me?"

"I understand," said Aldrich. He boldly held Valera tight around her waist, and she looked up at him with a blush that stood out strongly against her pale skin. He looked down at her. "Feel comfortable?"

"Y-yes," Valera squeaked out.

"Then we're going now." Aldrich flew into the air with Valera held to his side, his draconic wings stretched out as they carried him to the center of the city.

Where the final battle would be.

"Ah, to fly with my master, there is nothing better in the world!" said Valera as she happily swayed her head from side to side while holding onto Aldrich with both her arms.

"Technically, it is I who am flying you," stated Volantis in a completely matter of fact voice.

"Quiet, scrap!" pouted Valera. "You are ruining the moment!"

Aldrich smiled beneath his helm at the argument between the two... It was a brief but appreciated moment of levity before the raging storm of the fight soon to come.

Chapter 113: {Holding The Wall}

Haven City Center, at the top of the walls -

Most walls around cities followed the Panopticon's anti-variant wall design consisting of hundreds of segments of reinforced neosteel plating. Each of these segments could easily be detached and reattached for ease of repair, allowing the Panopticon to maintain walls throughout the world with incredible efficiency.

When the walls needed to stand strong, tethering bolts and a powerful magnetic attachment system between each segment kept them tightly welded together, granting it a flashy, futuristic blue glow between its many parts.

The top layer of each wall consisted of segments that were relatively hollow inside, allowing for the movement of people throughout the walls. These hollow segments fed out into control towers perched atop the walls which monitored and maintained the wall's structural integrity. The towers also connected to the wall's many defense and surveillance systems.

Inside control tower 12, the largest one perched atop the main gate leading into and out of the inner district, a massive crowd of heroes gathered together, packing together to watch a movie screen sized monitor projecting what lay outside the walls.

A seemingly unending army of fishmen and aquatic variants. And a distinct lack of a forcefield.

The fishmen had charged forwards with feral fury, clawing and banging at the exposed walls. However, their claws were too weak to pierce through several layers of neosteel plating. Even the larger crabmen with their sizable bulk, enhanced might, and bludgeoning claws, could barely even dent the walls.

"As long as those walls hold up, we can still hold out," said Mothman, who, as his hero name would suggest, was a mutant with moth traits. As far as mutants went, though, his mutations were not that severe. He was mostly man, just with chitin plated white skin, antennae, large spotted moth wings, and mandibles.

He was a C+ rank hero, on his way to being promoted to the B rank.

That is, if he survived the night.

"No. This won't last." Seismic set his square jaw as he looked at the monitor from the very front, his tree trunk like arms crossed together. Even though the heroes packed together through the rest of the room, they kept the space around Seismic empty, respecting his A rank authority and the sheer aura of strength he gave out. "Not when they have those."

The monitor showed ten domes of swirling water glowing bright blue as a dozen mermen raised their long, slimy and scaled arms up into the air. They moved their lipless mouths in unison as they chanted. From their bony fingertips, streaks of energy fed into the water dome, powering it.

From within, the dark outline of tank sized Plasma Anemone variants shuddered before unleashing massive pillars of bright blue hydroplasma. The plasma beams that shut down the forcefield now crashed full force against the particularly thickly plated front gate of the walls.

Superheated explosions that glowed first blue then super-hot white sprawled out from the point of impact, leaving behind a gaping crater of glowing white metal that dripped liquid neosteel and crumbled heat absorbent ceramic-scale plating meant to absorb heat, but there was a limit to it.

But ten plasma beams, each of which was capable of turning a heavy battle tank into smoking scrap, was way beyond its capabilities. Another volley or two from that, and the front gate would be down.

"Y'all see that sh*t! We gotta haul ass out of here like now!" said Racefiend, a C class hero known for trying to obnoxiously advertise his horrible sneaker line whenever he got the chance.

"Genius idea," said Mothman with pure sarcasm leeching into his voice. "All flying craft were used for evacuation. The roads are still flooded, and the gates aren't opening from system failures with the storm. So where the hell do you plan on going, huh?"

You might as well throw yourself off this wall."

"Any flyers out here, I'll pay you fifty K credits to get me out of here!" said Racefiend, ignoring Mothman.

"Yeah, I'll do it!" said a mutant hero with avian wings.

"What!? I'll pay seventy K. Sh*t, I'll wire you my life savings. Can't spend jacksh*t if I'm dead!"

"No, let me go first!"

The room of heroes descended into utter chaos as they forgot about holding out and argued among themselves as to who left while the flyers tried to see if they could make a quick buck while running.

"Shut up!" roared Seismic, and his voice bellowed out in waves so powerful they almost ruptured the eardrums of those closest to him. His outburst silenced the room, and after waiting a few seconds, he spoke again. "Rocket Man's contacted the Panopticon the moment the storm lifted. A class 5 drone response should be here within the next forty minutes."

"Class 5? You must be out of your mind if you think that's going to be saving us, old man!" said a hero. "I could scrap five of those bots myself, and you think that they're going to save the day!?"

"Why aren't you fighting, Seismic!" shouted another hero. "You're supposed to be an A ranker! Show us how great you are, you fucking coward! I thought you were different from Hat Trick, that slimy sh*t that ran the moment something went wrong, but in the end, you're just as much of a fraud as he is!"

Seismic cracked his neck, his enormous trapezius muscles flexing, his expression turning murderously fierce, and that simple gesture silenced the room again.

"The point of a class 5 response isn't in how strong each drone is. It's in their sheer numbers. A thousand will swarm the variants down there, giving us breathing room to fight without drowning in a horde of scaly bodies," said Seismic. His murderous expression faded in an instant as he became calm again. "But we need to wait until it comes.

The Plasma Anemones fire in intervals of ten minutes, and it'll take two volleys to melt down the front gate completely.

When the front gate goes down, we go down there. We hold out for twenty minutes.

Twenty minutes. That's all you need to do. Then the drones get here, and that'll give me enough room to kill the leaders of this army.

All the rest of you have to do is to hold the line.

Make sure the one hundred and fifty thousand plus civilians holed up behind these walls don't get ripped apart piece by piece.

Is that so fucking hard?"

There was a moment of tense silence as the crowd of heroes remained still, still unconvinced.

"There are a few thousand HCPD still here as well. They live here. This is their home. Their girlfriends, wives, parents, kids - everything they've built up with their lives is here. Many of them will fight, I know it. Because there's no greater motivation to fight than to know the life of your child depends on your fists." Seismic scanned the room of heroes. "That leaves most of you. Three hundred men and women that went through four years of training and two years of apprenticeship to call yourselves heroes.

About half of you live in Haven."

Seismic looked around and pointed at a young hero wearing an ice themed blue costume. "You, I remember reading your file. You live here, don't you?"

"Y-yes. You...actually read my file?" said Icicle, the hero in question. A C- ranker who would have never expected an A- ranker like Seismic to give him the time of day.

"I had Rocket Man compile your files when we holed up behind the walls. So I would know the men and women I was going to fight with," said Seismic. "So, tell me, young man, who do you have here?"

"A wife. And a son," said Icicle.

"And you're going to leave them just like that? Even if you run, is that what you want to show your kid? Your back as you run away? Not as you fight?" said Seismic.

Icicle shook his head.

"About half of you have planted your roots down in this city," said Seismic. "You are the trunk of support for your loved ones. Do you want to leave now? Do you want to let these variants tear those roots you've worked so hard to plant?"

"I'm...I'm scared, but I won't let my dad's last moments be in fear and pain," said a hero, a woman serpentine facial feature. "He's suffered enough already with mutant cancer. I'll fight with you, Seismic."

"I'll go too," said Mothman. "Don't have anyone I love here, but I'm not about to run either."

"Yeah, if it'll give my girl a chance, then I'll do anything I can!" chimed in another hero.

Like this, Seismic saw many of the heroes resolve themselves to joining him. Most of them were those that, as he had pointed out, lived in Haven. However, half of the heroes were rotating transplants that went from city to city based on where the AA assigned them.

"Yeah, screw that, I'm outta here," said Racefield, one such transplant. "Don't have anyone I care about in this sh*tty little city, and my sneaker sales have been dogsh*t down here because of you know what art looks like."

Racefield started to walk out of the control room, and as he did so, he gave many likeminded heroes the courage to file out behind him.

Chapter 114: {Culling The Weak}

Wait, stop!" said Mothman. "Fucking yellow bellied cowards. Net connection's up now - we'll get Rocket Man to broadcast that all of you are leaving. You think the people and police still here will take kindly to that? They'll tear you to pieces before the variants get to you!"

Racefiend paused before he spoke up. "Any flyers here, if you want a fat bonus to your cred account, then come with me. If you got family here or want to just die, then that's cool, that's all on you.

But all of you that don't to suicide yourselves down there, I'm up to pay you out."

Rocket Man, a short, balding man with square glasses that looked like he belonged at a basic office desk, and indeed, he was seated at the front by the controls, turned in his swiveling chair and pointed a stubby, accusing finger towards the leavers.

"I have this recorded! You'll never be able to work as a hero again with what you've said here!" said Rocket Man. "And neither will anyone that flies you out!"

Racefiend shrugged. "Yeah, dunno, man. This sh*t ain't it for me if I have to throw away my life like that. Liked the fame and the perks, but this, nah, it's not worth. Plus the merc market's pretty big, don't think I'll be lacking for job opportunities down the road.

Flyers too, they're always in demand. No reason to die here. It's just business."

"Let them go," said Seismic. "We don't need people that have no will to fight here. It'll just drag us down."

"Glad we have an understanding," said Racefiend with a smug smile behind his yellow thunderbolt themed visor. He turned back to the door only to find that his way was blocked by a girl.

A masked girl that reached up to around his shoulders. Not tall. A little on the shorter side. But her gear made it very apparent that she was a pretty big deal. Her mask acted as a hi-tech helm, sleek in its design with some ornamental curved edges around the forehead and a glowing v-shaped line that encompassed her eyes.

She wore a white biker jacket stained in mud and blood, form fitting black leggings made of arachno hex-weave, and low-heeled greaves that glowed with pockets of yellow energy. Around her waist were two utility belts with various pockets likely holding a wide range of gadgets and attached to that was a sheath of segmented white metal for a katana.

"Huh? You want to join us?" said Racefiend. "Can you fly?"

"All of you are fine not being heroes?" said the woman. Her voice filtered out through a modulator that distorted it slightly.

"Like I said, merc market's thriving these days. And with the AA sh*tting the bed like this, it'll only get better," said Racefiend. "So nah, I'm not a hero anymore."

"Good. I don't like killing heroes." The woman unsheathed her blade, and it unclicked with a crackle and flash of golden energy. In the next instant, her blade of crystalline gold swung out in a clean arc that traveled from Racefiend's waist through his shoulder.

"Wh-," Racefiend managed out one last utterance before his body split at the cut, his two chunks falling onto the clean floor in a pile of blood and bared organs.

The flyers and heroes that tagged along with Racefiend shrieked in fear and stumbled backwards. The heroes went up in immediate alarm, pointing their weapons and powers at the woman.

"Go ahead," said the woman. Her body started to shimmer, as if wrapped up in heat waves made of faint, transparent gold. "But you'll never get through my barriers. And you'll only be tiring yourselves out when the real enemy is there." She pointed her blade towards the monitor that still projected the armies of fishmen surrounding the walls.

"Who are you?" Seismic's deep voice echoed out.

"I have no Sign," said the woman. "But you can consider me a vigilante. I will be on your side against the variants."

"On our side!? You just killed one of us!" shouted a hero.

"One of you? He admitted himself he wasn't a hero. At this point, he was just an unnecessary variable. And to solve an equation this complex, it's always best to cull the variables that get in your way," said the woman flatly. "For all of you heroes that run, I will remember you. And believe me, I never forget.

I will track you down and I will find you.

No matter where you go, where you hide, I will kill you, because there are no rules or laws that hold me back.

And because out of all the filth I see in this world, the type I despise the most are those that leave others behind."

"Vigilante freak! We'll arrest you right here and now!" said another hero.

"Stop," said Seismic. "We have no energy to be fighting like this. Get out of my sight, vig, unless you want to fight me."

The woman paused for a moment, staring at Seismic's towering figure, and saw no real hostility in his dark brown eyes. She nodded at him.

"I'll be out of sight, then," said the woman as she turned and stepped to the exit door. It opened up when it registered her presence, indicating that she had a fake CID on her that allowed her to masquerade as a hero or had stolen one from a hero, as only heroes could move through city walls. "Until I see you outside the gates, yeah?"

Seismic did not respond, but his silence was an answer in of itself. He could not admit outright he wanted to enlist the aid of a vigilante that had murdered a registered hero right in front of his eyes. He could have cared less about Racefiend dying, and honestly, he would have more than wanted a capable fighter like the vigilante to fight with him.

But the optics were too bad to voice his thoughts out loud. So an accepting silence was all he offered.

"Understood," said the woman as she left, the doors closing behind her.

This left the crowd of heroes in dumfounded silence, staring at Racefiend's body.

"Stop staring at a dead man. It won't bring him back to life," said Seismic as he locked in the massive, plated bracers around his forearms. "Rocket Man, inform the police forces that any of them that want to fight should join me, but make sure they have access to at the minimum a Frame or heavy vehicle.

Keep at least half in the city to defend the civilians."

Chapter 115: Undead Assemble

Aldrich spotted the designated halfway point to the battlefield from the air.

This was a large park called Flowerfield, the largest park in Haven located a little bit away from the city center. Far enough away that one could hear the rumble of countless fishmen moving by the center district walls, but not close enough to actually see any of it.

The park was a central linking point that connected all four districts of Haven, and throughout the week, it usually bustled with people on morning or evening walks.

The park was perhaps the most universal spot in the city. Because it lay outside of the central district's walls and was open to everyone, all walks of life enjoyed it whether they were rich or poor, privileged or down on their luck, young or old.

Now, though, it was completely empty.

The rolling hills of grassy green were drenched with flood level water, reducing them to soggy mud.

The pretty engineered flowers that bloomed all year round were wilted under water or crushed underfoot by variants or fleeing humans.

On top of this, there was the ghastly sight of countless bodies littering the park.

Mostly of civilians and policemen that had been caught in the initial variant attack. Their bodies were torn apart, many of them missing limbs or heads, and in comparison, there were only a precious few variant corpses to pay for it.

This attack had truly taken Haven by complete and utter surprise.

Even then, a vast majority of Haven's five million citizens had either escaped, been evacuated, or killed. Despite how bad this looked, the Panopticon did have tested and practiced evacuation methods that worked.

That left the poorest few farthest from the city center where most transport was. These poor few survived slogging through armies of variant fishmen to seek refuge behind the central district's walls after finding that all evac and transport was gone.

Aldrich had no clear estimate on how many people were left and how many people had died.

However, he would not be surprised to hear that over a million people had died.

Before the Altering, that death count would have been unfathomable to developed society, but nowadays, when variant threats loomed and, before the Monsterring, power added villains-initiated wars and crises globally, a million dead was bad, horrible even, but not out of expectations.

"Hm, impressive. So that girl does have some use, after all," said Valera as she hugged Aldrich's waist. Her armor was not yet on, baring her face. Her jet black hair fluttered behind her head as the wind passed, baring an expression of pure focus as she looked down.

Portals were opening all around the park.

They emerged from distorting ripples of space like blooming flowers, and their purple light replaced the color the dead flowers once provided the park.

Seven portals in total opened, each of them around eight meters in diameter.

From these portals, all of Aldrich's undead emerged.

All of the variants that had bestial forms emerged, including both his undead variants and those he had raised from the game world.

The Mudcrabs, the Alpha Striker, the Alloywing Eagle, the Big-arm Grizzly, the Bloodspitter Lizard, the Antlion - all of them jumped out the portals, making their way around the park. The troll chieftain followed behind them, scratching his back lazily as he did so.

Then came Aldrich's higher personnel.

The Geist, this time carrying the cursed rock axe the troll chieftain once wielded. Stella wrapped up in a new costume to make up for her utterly torn apart last one. Her new costume was a basic bodysuit of black and gold that Casimir had on hand from the Red Circle.

It had no real special effects other than strong heat resistance and good durability for its light weight, but that was all she really needed.

From another portal emerged ten of Blackwater's A class. Alexis led them, and they streamed out with confident poise, all of them ready to fight.

Aldrich's Zombie Giant emerged from an entire portal by itself, rolling out and sprawling out across the soggy grass because its twelve-meter bulk had needed to really hunker down to pass through the portal.

Chiros leaped through a portal and landed with a twirl of style, though he did grimace at the dirty mud beneath his red greaves. His fifteen death knights streamed out in marching formation, two of them carrying the crystallized shark variant on their shoulders.

The Deathwheel rolled out behind them, its wheel of fused spines clicking and clattering as the many skulls at its center chattered in readiness for war.

Crow also took up an entire portal by himself, hopping through one carefully to make sure he did not clip the edges with his massive wingspan.

The rest of Aldrich's Outer Circle undead streamed out last, taking several portals on their own. This first consisted of 50 fishmen that Aldrich had raised.

The fishmen were generally a low tier fighting force that was more a distraction. On average, they ranged from levels 7 to 10, with slightly stronger ones at the 10-14 threshold.

50 did not seem like a large number of fishmen to have considering their individual weakness, but it was a number that would infinitely replenish on the battlefield, making it seem far larger than it actually was once Aldrich started to spam [Mass Raise Undead].

Aldrich also had 20 Red Circle staff zombies, but he had left them with Casimir at the megacomplex.

Casimir's stronger staff like Walters, Smoke, and Hironnelle were also there to guard him.

The biggest change to Aldrich's Outer Circle was that as part of his preparation, he had cleaned out and reorganized the undead within it. He used [Create Greater Undead (1st Ring)] to replace his skeletons and lower leveled undead from his [Create Undead (1st Ring)] spell with Zombeasts and Deildeghasts.

In total, Aldrich prepped 3 Zombeasts and 4 Deildeghasts, all of them level 15.

The Zombeasts leaped out of the portals on all fours. They were huge creatures, easily the size of an armored car, and looked to be strange stitched together Frankensteinian fusions of various animals.

They were all four legged with body parts from larger animals like lions, crocodiles, hippos, and so on.

The Deildeghast spirits followed behind, smoky darkness trailing behind their wispy forms of rusted armor and bare skulls.

They carried greatswords in their hands, and though their offensive power was far weaker than what their huge swords might have suggested, they could thrust their great blades down to create [Spirit Boundaries] that would give Aldrich a huge large scale advantage throughout the battlefield.

Just four Deildeghasts were enough to give most of Aldrich's army coverage if placed evenly apart, and the obscuring smoke from these fields would also wreak confusing havoc among the fishmen ranks.

The only issue was that the Deildeghasts potentially stopped tech on the side of the heroes, but Aldrich figured he would be doing most of the heavy lifting here anyway.

On top of this, Aldrich eliminated his Evil Eyes and replaced them with two Grave Wards. One Grave Ward was on its way to monitor Blackwater for the future, while another Graveward now floated towards the battlefield to survey it closely.

This was because Aldrich had hidden his storm high up in the sky, behind natural cloud cover. He had also made the jellyfish dim down their natural bioluminescence, minimizing their presence. This had the downside of making it so that Aldrich did not have a close view of the battlefield yet, but he would get that with the Grave Ward.

What took up most of Aldrich's Outer Circle spots was this very storm; the mass network of jellyfish still floating in the sky. They numbered up a total of 150 jellyfish with the level 30 Anglerfish at their center, but it had already paid for far how many unit spots it took.

The storm alone had completely neutered the aerial forces the variants fielded, not only hamstringing the variant army but also ensuring that it had no reliable way to deal with the storm positioned so high up.

To the fishmen, it would have seemed that their storm had suddenly short circuited, blowing up in an accident to destroy their air forces before dissolving.

In reality, it was no accident, and now, the storm lay very much intentionally in position above cloud cover, ready to float down and surprise the variants to unleash heavenly devastation upon Aldrich's signal.

The storm was slow moving, however. It would take five minutes for it to get down in range to strike the ground with reliable accuracy.

Aldrich would have to time its appearance well.

With this, Aldrich's army was complete. He saw as his forces gathered fully in the park, Portal Girl appearing last out of one of her portals. The portals closed behind her, and the purple light illuminating the park faded.

Instead, the wispy smoke from the Deildeghasts now filled the air in ominous curls like the smoke before a raging fire's start. And in this case, that would be the flames of war.

"Isn't it beautiful, master?" said Valera as she hugged around Aldrich's neck, her fangs baring in excitement. "How much you have accomplished in such a short time? How many that are now within your Legion?"

"How much WE have accomplished," corrected Aldrich. "All of us. From the lowliest of skeleton to you, my most valued companion."

"Valued companion?" said Valera. "Oh, I do love hearing your praises, master." Her voice grew lower, almost a whisper. "Though I wish I was more...."

She blushed as she put a hand on Aldrich's helmeted face.

"Do not touch me so casually, woman," said Volantis, utterly destroying the moment with zero sense of self awareness.

"Okay, now you've done it! When this is over, I'm going to be fighting you, you hear me?" said Valera as her brow twitched and a wrinkle of stress formed on her usually perfectly smooth forehead.

"I welcome the challenge," said Volantis... "There is nothing better than to feel the might of those with strong bones crashing against my steel."

Chapter 116: Camaraderie

Aldrich shook his head, though he did very slightly smile behind his helmet. "Cut it out, you two. It's time we get serious."

"There is never a moment I take lightly," stated Volantis.

"And the same is true for me!" said Valera as he turned her face up, not wanting to be outdone. "Whenever my master needs me to fight or to lead, I will always be ready to serve!"

"Look at that, something you two have in common," said Aldrich. He flapped his draconic wings and landed at the center of his undead. Valera detached from him and stood beside him. Her armor materialized, and this time, it was different.

She did not wear her usual heavy set of black armor and thick bone plates with its massive shoulder pauldrons and bulky bucket-like helmet. Instead, she wore a sleeker armor. Still a thorough full body armor, but one that clung tighter to her body, showing the outline of her curves.

This armor set completely abandoned the image of a sturdy and knightly defender that her previous set bore.

The metal work of this new set was crude and brutal, with warped spikes jutting from the many black metal segments that built it up. A tattered dark red cloak extended behind her back - the cloak of a knight who had long since abandoned any pretense of keeping up a pristine image, descending into feral hunger where all that mattered was the fight.

Valera's helmet grew around her, emerging from metal segments around her neck that clicked as they formed over her face. The segments combined together to create the visage of a savage wolf with bloody red eye slits and an open mouth studded with glowing red spikes that acted as teeth.

This was the [Mark of the Beast (Hound) Set].

[Mark of the Beast] armor sets were said to be crafted by a legendary demon blacksmith who reveled in madness of all kinds. He was one of the favored smiths of Carnassus, the demon god of war, and his sets reflected the pure savage brutality that the war god loved.

Each of the sets were formed in the image of fierce animals, and all of them were utterly suited towards melee fighters who focused on raw, bloody offense.

In particular, Berserkers like Valera held top compatibility with these armors. Out there, in a warzone free for all, she could make the best use of her monstrous physical stats as a bloody fighter, not as a defender.

"You look good," said Aldrich. "I look forward to seeing you fight in that."

"Oh, if you look at my body like that, master, I do not know what I will do..." Valera licked her lips under her helmet. "I promise you, master, I will bring you no less than a hundred spines as a token of my appreciation for you."

"...I appreciate the thought but hold off on the spines for a bit. It doesn't look great on camera to be waving them around," said Aldrich. Spines were not the first thing that popped into his head when he thought about a gift, but if that was what got Valera going, then all the power to her.

Plus, in the end, Aldrich appreciated the thought behind it.

"As for the rest of you, my Legion-," began Aldrich. "Thank you for gathering here."

All of his undead showed their respects to him. The humanoid undead bowed their heads. The knights and Chiros knelt down. The four legged monsters like the natural variants and the Zombeasts laid down low and growled or grunted in recognition. The Deathwheel tilted and chattered its teeth.

"Geh! Geh! (So many new friends!)" said the Geist as it hopped up and down, waving its huge club of cursed black rock like a toy.

"Don't get too attached to em," said Stella as she stood beside the Geist with arms crossed. "Large scale battle like this, you have no idea who lives and who dies."

"She's right," said Aldrich. He looked around to all his undead. Countless incredibly different pairs of eyes stared at him. Some were human. Some were slit pupiled. Some were blank. Some were red, some yellow, some green. "Out there, in that chaos, there is no guarantee I can protect all of you."

"Geh..." said the Geist sadly.

"That said, so long as of you are completely destroyed, I can regenerate you with my [Mist of Undeath]," said Aldrich. "And all of you are no longer weak mortals of flesh and blood where a lost organ or limb holds you back.

No, you are Undead.

You will never tire.

You will never fear.

So fight. Fight knowing that no longer are you restrained by your mortal coils."

A rousing energy spread throughout the legion as Aldrich's words reached them.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" Eileen said suddenly. Her sudden outburst made all of the undead turn to her, growing quiet as they waited to see what she had to say.

"Wh-what?" said Eileen shyly as she saw so many eyes on her. "Did I do something wrong...?"

"No, go ahead," said Aldrich. "What did you need to say?"

Aldrich's words gave her confidence, and Eileen said, "I almost forgot to bring these over. The technos said they would take a bit of time to get ready, but I figure they're done now."

She clapped her hands together, and another portal formed in front of her. A smaller one, this time, half the size of her usual.

From there, several dozen drones zipped out one by one like a flock of mechanical birds, hovering in the air in a V-formation above the legion.

None of the drones were outfitted with weapons. No, instead, they bore large camera lenses. In a way, perhaps that was a weapon far greater than any gun. The weapon of image. Especially in this day and age where news cycles and social media dominated what everyone saw.

The drones were roughly covered in metal plating - the handiwork of Spybird doing modifications within the hour. The work seemed amateurish with large bolts screwing down roughly hammered-into-shape metal plates, but somehow, it just worked.

"Excellent work, Portal Girl," said Aldrich as he stared up at the fleet of drones. Each was about the size of a motorcycle, and a fleet of them could get decent coverage over the battlefield. "You've done great so far."

"Th-thanks...", said Eileen shyly.

"Your duty is not done yet," said Valera as she crossed her arms. "To warp all of us in the master at the battlefield itself, at the very right moment: now that is your greatest task. I will be looking carefully to see whether you are capable of pulling your weight within this legion."

"I won't disappoint!" Eileen said with pep, putting a fist over her chest.

"Hm. It seems you do have potential after all," said Valera as she turned away from her. "I can admire it."

Eileen watched Valera's back, disappointed she could barely impress the knightly woman. Stella came up to Eileen and playfully punched the younger woman's shoulder.

"Don't take anything she does too personally," said Stella. "She's just strict. And real jealous. But deep down, she does care about you. About all of us."

"Jealous...?" Portal Girl stared at Valera, then at Aldrich, then back at Valera. She saw Valera's eyes flash with pure passion and desire behind the jaws of her helmet. Meanwhile, Aldrich stared out at his undead, oblivious or perhaps not giving much thought to it for now. "O-oh, right, how could I have not seen it!"

"You're that dense?" Stella raised a brow and shrugged. "Guess you're still young. But yeah, that's how it is."

"Are they, uh, official?" said Portal Girl.

"Dunno. But they might as well be," said Stella. She looked down to see Portal Girl's hand trembling. "But that's not all that important right now." Stella patted Portal Girl's shoulder comfortingly. "C'mon, you're nervous. I'll tell you about one thing that really calms me down in situations like this."

"Thanks," said Portal Girl. "I've never been in a really big battle before...so any tips you can give, I'd appreciate."

"Yeah? Then here's this. When you step out there, just focus on the big freaking explosions. Those are sure to keep you excited. Just the way they crash and light up and roast everything around em'..." Stella continued, smiling near manically as she absorbed herself into thinking about the explosions she would make.

All the while, Portal Girl just nodded uncomfortably at Stella, wondering whether everyone in this Legion had a screw loose in them.

Chapter 117: Formations

Aldrich watched as one of the newly arrived recording drones hovered in front of his face. He stared into its large camera lenses. In a sort of way, they looked like giant metal bugs with compound eyes made of lenses. "Spybird, Fisk, are you all set up?"

"Da. Ready to go. Though my grasp over controls a little shaky-" The drone shuddered from side to side for a bit. "A little much to drink."

"Then you shouldn't be doing this. Hand it over to Fisk," said Aldrich flatly.

"Bah. Was joke. You're too serious," said Spybird. The drone started to hover properly again.

"I would take a joke if there wasn't more probable cause for you being too drunk," said Aldrich. "In any case, it's good to hear that everything's in place. Cover as much of the battlefield as you can. Stay out of danger. And when I give Fisk telepathic signals, he'll inform you of spots to avoid when I call down my own air support."

"Got it," said Spybird. "From refugee to black market drone maker to documentary filmer. How my life changes."

With that, the drone fleet flew high in the air, ready to survey the battlefield.

That was when Aldrich heard the eerie sound of the anemone variants firing again. Their combined volley unleashed a strange sound reminiscent of a whale's high pitched, ghostly wail, except with far more concussive force.

"Checking the battlefield," said Aldrich as he put two fingers to the side of his helmet, linking with the Grave Ward. The Grave Ward had been portaled over near the battlefield before any other unit, and it was now in position to survey the fight.

"I follow in your lead, my master." Valera put a finger to the side of her helm as well, linking with the Grave Ward. Among all the undead, she alone was Aldrich's Chosen was capable of linking with other undead: a phenomenon that made her the most suitable to be a subcommander.

Together, Aldrich and Valera watched the battlefield from a high vantage point. Several dozens of meters in the air, far enough to be away from stray attacks, but close enough to make out practically everything important.

The anemone variants had fired into the front gates again. When the static filled cloud of faint blue mist conjured up from the explosion of beams parted, it revealed now a deep molten hole at over ten meters deep.

If Aldrich recalled correctly, standard Panopticon defensive anti-variant walls were fifteen meters thick and fifty meters tall, meaning that just one extra volley would completely blow open the gates. That gave the defenders inside of the walls at the maximum ten minutes to prepare.

"How will the mortals fend for themselves, I do wonder," said Valera. "Most of them seem so weak and fragile. And they lack any form of magic. It is hard to see how they will ever stave off that tide of sea monsters."

"This world and its humans are scrappier than you think. They've learned and adapted, and you shouldn't underestimate modern technology," said Aldrich. "They've ran out of ammunition for all the wall turrets and cannons, but Haven's Center District has the enough resources and military tech to put up a fight."

The evac probably took all the aircraft, and those would have given them the biggest advantage here, but they still have most of their higher end police equipment. Medium class battle tanks, various models of frames, and a few mechs."

In the past, before the Altering, it would have been unfathomable for police forces to have firepower on the order of tanks, but with the rise of variant threats and threatened humanity as a whole, humanity managed to, for once in its history, set aside its differences and band together.

Conflict between countries became obsolete in the face of existential variant crises. Under the guidance of the Panopticon, countries rerouted the vast majority of their military resources in joining the United Front (U.F.), a worldwide alliance of countries against variants.

The military forces that did not go into the U.F. were then broken up and diverted into their police forces, turning ordinary police into a force capable of not only ensuring order in communities, but also fending against variants when the time came.

"Mechs? Like those clumsy dwarven contraptions?" said Valera.

Right. Aldrich recalled that in Elden World, the dwarven race could create mechs. They were more steampunk themed, though, running off of magic crystal steam engines with large, clunky looking metal bodies whereas modern tech was sleeker and far more versatile.

"Similar. But better," said Aldrich. "The biggest issue is numbers.

The humans are at a massive disadvantage on that front. Even with a few tanks and mechs, it still isn't enough to hold the line against that many variants. There must be over a hundred thousand of them and I doubt the humans can cough up more than a thousand heroes and police to fight with.

Not to mention that no ordinary tank or mech is ever going to deal with the stronger variants in that army.

Or the leader."

"Ah, that one," said Valera. She clenched her fist. A metal creak sounded with the sheer pressure of her grip. "How I would love to offer that one's spine to you, but I am not confident I can defeat it."

"I trust your judgement, Valera, but how did you come to this conclusion? You only briefly saw it, right?" said Aldrich. "From your memories, all I could see were glimpses of its appearance."

As Aldrich's Chosen Undead, Valera's close mental tie with Aldrich meant he could also see her memories.

"Yes, from a great distance away," said Valera. "When I punched that shark brute out of our base, I tried to check for its corpse. Around where the shark creature should have landed, I saw the general of these monsters in the distance, surveying the area, perhaps.

It did not seem hostile. Curious, mostly.

I did not see it fight, but what alarmed me was its presence. Its mere appearance caused my survival instincts to flare.

I must admit, I cannot accurately sense the power of the creatures or mortals here, but with that creature, it was my primal instincts as a warrior that told me that facing it alone would not guarantee my survival."

"Good thing you aren't alone anymore," said Aldrich as he nodded to Valera, and she clasped her hands together shyly at his words.

"But it is true I still need more information about the general. I'm not going to rush in like an idiot and take on Shrimp without knowing at the least a little about its capabilities," said Aldrich.

"I agree, master," said Valera.

"That being said, I will now relay our plans to the Legion fully," said Aldrich. He turned to his legion and motioned to them with his clawed hand. "Here is how we will fight tonight.

I will make an entrance by myself at the right time, after the mortals emerge from their walls. When I do so, all of you will shortly follow using Portal Girl's powers. At that point, it will be all out war.

Fight and kill as much as you please. When you sense large amounts of danger, always signal to me and Valera. But do not expect me to always be able to come to your aid. No, instead, fight as if I had already fallen and you were avenging me, my Legion.

Fight with that level of ferocity."

The troll chieftain growled and grunted, beating his chest in agreement, and the animal type variants and undead all joined in with a symphony of growls and howls.

Chapter 118: The Humans Strike Back

"That said, I cannot be everywhere at once, and that is where the Deildegahsts come in," proclaimed Aldrich.

In response, the Deildegahsts chattered through their skeletal teeth a proud echo as they raised their smoky greatswords above their heads.

"They will be positioned right behind the attacking force, creating a defensive line that will not only protect you, but blind the enemies positioned at the front. Whenever you sustain too much damage or need cover, retreat behind their [Spirit Boundaries] to recover.

Though your healing is greatest within my [Mist of Regeneration], even outside of it, you will have some minor regenerative power.

As you advance forward, the Deildegahst line will advance as well.

If you encounter any enemies that are strong enough to warrant my attention, immediately alert me. Either I or my Inner Circle will deal with it. If you encounter a swarm of enemies too thick to deal with, then alert me. My storm will provide air support.

Your objective is to unleash as much carnage as you can with the end goal being the capture of the anemone type variants. Once we have them captured, the battlefield should be ours, at which point, the general of their army will be forced to show his hand.

When he appears, those among you in my Outer Circle must go out and fight him. I need information about his capabilities before I can engage him.

I will warn you that to fight the general is to face near certain death but know that I will remember your sacrifice.

Once I understand the general's abilities, I will devise a strategy to take him down, and then this fight is ours.

Then, victory is as good as ours."

A wave of understanding went around the Legion. Now there was merely the final step of executing this plan.

"Geh? (Could you repeat all that?)" The Geist raised its hand like a confused schoolkid.

That was when another ghostly boom echoed through the air - the sound of the sea anemone variants firing yet again.

"Hm?" Aldrich immediately put a finger to the side of his helm, as did Valera.

This third volley was several minutes earlier than expected.

Aldrich saw through the Grave Ward floating over the battlefield that Merman, the merman variant leader, had personally fired off a beam of hydroplasma from his four arms, boring through the final layer of the frontgate ahead of schedule.

This left the front gate completely melted down.

Not only that, but it also meant that the sea anemone variants would be charged up and ready to fire an immediate volley against any of the first wave of defenders coming from behind the gates.

The crab variants stood in formations around the water shield covered sea anemones, guarding the merman variants that channeled the barriers.

Again, Aldrich felt surprise at this level of strategy from variants. He knew that there were some more intelligent variants that lived in tribal communities, but their strategies usually did not go beyond small inter-tribal squabbles.

This level of wide scale troop mobilization and the brains to use them was something usually far beyond them unless they belonged to a literal hivemind. That was why ant and insect type variants were usually so dangerous, because once they managed to build up a large enough hivemind, it became intelligent enough to enact large scale and thought out attacks against civilization.

But if all variants were starting to evolve this level of strategy at a basic level, then humanity was in for a time of struggle unknown since the beginning of the Monstering itself.

At the forefront of this struggle, though, there would be Aldrich.

Thanatos, the god of death turned from reaper of souls into defender of lives.

"The battle has begun!" shouted Aldrich. "Follow me on my signal!"

Aldrich unfurled his black and red scaled draconic wings and leaped into the air, soaring into the sky and leaving his Legion.

When Aldrich disappeared into the sky, the Geist scratched its smooth white head. "Geh...? (I still don't get it...)"

"Just follow me, and you'll figure it out," said Stella as she crossed her arms and looked into the night sky, at Aldrich's receding figure. The fleet of drones followed behind him, ready to put the world's spotlight right on him. "Damn, didn't know he was the type to show off like this."

"I don't know...it's kind of cool, honestly," said Portal Girl as she looked up.

"Hm, yeah. Just make sure ya don't say that around ms. Bucket helmet over there." Stella motioned her chin over to where Valera was, but saw that Valera had disappeared from that spot. Stella blinked in surprise before Valera's gauntleted hand appeared behind her, closing around her shoulder.

"And what gossip are you two spreading...?" said Valera as she smiled widely underneath her helm, though anyone could tell that smile was anything but warm and welcoming. On the contrary, it managed to ooze a horrifying amount of bloodlust.

"N-nothing!" said Portal Girl nervously.

"Heh, you wanna fight again while I'm all riled up ready to watch something explode?" said Stella as she smiled back at Valera, unfazed.

"Admirable willpower. It reminds me why we get along," said Valera. She then joined the two women looking up into the sky, and by now, Aldrich had completely disappeared, likely in the skies watching the battlefield, waiting for the perfect moment to swoop down.

"I am eager to start tearing apart our enemies," said Valera with a fanged smile. "I can feel that this armor screams for blood, and blood, I shall give it, for it is my master's precious gift to me."

"And I'm ready to blow some variants up to high heaven and beyond," said Stella. She bore a manic grin. "Or blow em' down to the depths of hell, if that's what they prefer."

Portal Girl nervously looked at the two women before trying to weakly join in on their insane energy. "And...and I'm ready to help!"

Stella looked at Portal Girl curiously, then laughed. She reached out and pinched Portal Girl's cheek playfully. "You're such an innocent cinnamon bun. It's endearing, really."

"Am I...?" said Portal Girl as she rubbed her cheek.

"Yeah, don't you agree, Val?" said Stella.

"Hm. Perhaps," said Valera. "I do like your attitude. But you will prove yourself even more if you bring to me the spines of our enemies. That will show to me more than anything that you have spirit, little girl."

"S-spines!?" said Portal Girl with panicked voice. "Do I, um, have to take them out of their backs? Does it have to be with my own hands? What if I'm not strong enough?"

"That was a jest," said Valera.

"You know, I'm no comedian, but I don't think you're the best at telling jokes," said Stella.

"I do have share that trait with my master," said Valera. She cracked her knuckles as she looked towards the site of battle, fierce desire in her eyes. "And soon I will also share this victory with him as well."

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Aldrich floated in the air, above the clouds. His arms were crossed as his wings stretched out to his sides, keeping him hovering in the air, completely still. Draconic wings did not function like ordinary wings that needed to make the appropriate biomechanical motions like flapping to generate force for movement.

They were purely magical in nature, emitting a personal flight field. Granted, dragons could flap their wings to manipulate this flight field, granting themselves acceleration or changing their direction, but the way they flew did not obey any conventional laws of physics, which was how some dragons that did not have any wings at all could just float through the air.

As such, Aldrich could just stay in the air without any need to move his wings so long as he stretched them out like this.

All around Aldrich was just empty night sky. Beneath him, below the cover of clouds, was the battle. Aldrich had made sure to move above the cover of clouds, ensuring that nobody saw him before he made his entrance.

And that was the most important part about all of this: the right entrance.

Right beneath the clouds below Aldrich was the site of battle, and he closed his eyes as he focused intently, meshing his sight with the Grave Ward's to survey everything that happened. He, along with the masses of variants below, stared intently at the front gate, watching for a response to it falling.

With the front gate of Haven's center district blasted down, how would the humans within fight back? Against those overwhelming numbers? Against those claws and jaws that wanted nothing more than their deaths?

The answer took Aldrich by surprise.