

Super Necromancer System #Chapter 129: Valeras Merits: Youll Also Like - Read Super Necromancer System Chapter 129: Valeras Merits: Youll Also Like

Chapter 129: Valera's Merits

"Gorok-Kant (What do you wish from me?)" stated Merman as he put three of his hands to his chest to gesture to himself.

"What you've been doing all night," said Aldrich. He pointed to the seven sea anemone variants. Without the water of the mermen to nourish them on land, they had lost their usual brilliant purple shine. Before, they had looked like living gems with their strong glimmer radiating throughout their bodies, but now they were shriveling up, deflating like balloons as their tentacled tops started to thin and wilt.

"Power those again," said Aldrich.

"Hiras (I fall under the tide's will)" said Merman as clasped his three pairs of arms together. When he did so, the blue crystalline organ at his chest started to shine strongly. Blue light glinted between his palms, and when he separated them, water flowed between them.

Merman cast his many arms forward, and from his hands, the water flowed out like snaking tethers, attaching to each of the seven sea anemones. The water infused into the anemones and rapidly reversed their shriveling, giving them back their bright purple shine.

Merman then placed his hands on his chest organ, attaching all his water tethers to it.

"I see," said Aldrich as he put a hand to his chin, analyzing Merman's powers. Unlike with Elden World summons, he could not just look into a direct status sheet, but he could more or less get an instinctive 'feel' for how variant or alter undead powers worked.

This 'feel' was not nearly as accurate as an actual status screen, but it was good enough to get a strong sense of what the undead were capable of. "You can generate and crystallize water like the rest of your kind, though at a much higher scale.

On top of that, you can store specific 'techniques' using your water manipulation in that organ of yours which also acts as an amplifier, giving you several trump card moves to use. One of them being this tethering ability, though considering you could not counter my lightning, you are limited to having just one technique active at a time."

"Kal (Correct)" said Merman. "Khos-Gent (The Ocean King is perceptive, as expected)."

"I like to know what my subordinates can do. Now then, ready those to fire," said Aldrich. "Their cooldown should be refreshed by now. Let's see if they'll be just as devastating to the variants as they were to the humans."

"Hiras (I fall under the tide's will)" Merman raised his hands into the air, and the tethers of water attached to his crystal organ began to shine.

The sea anemones started to power up, their top tentacles crackling and glowing bright blue as they channeled up hydroplasma through their bodies.

"Khos-Kath (Ready to strike at the will of the Ocean King)" said Merman.

"Hold," said Aldrich. He put a finger to the side of his helm, wanting to check up on Valera to see whether she had dealt with Crab or needed some assistance. If she did need help, Aldrich would aim the sea anemone cannons at Crab, if not, he would direct it to clearing out the variants.

Aldrich focused, closing his eyes and linking with Valera's sight. He wondered what plans she had made to take down Crab or whether she needed his help. He would not mind either way.

This was more a test for him to gauge how self-sufficient and capable Valera was as his second in command because in the game, he had no real way to interact with her.

Yes, there were dialogue options that gave insight into her lore and background, but of this truly affected combat.

During combat gameplay, Aldrich controlled everything she did or he relied on her A.I. when he micromanaged other units.

As for what her game lore knew from her lore that she came from a long military background, but she had been trained as a Shielder, a guardian knight that protected others, specifically single targets, though later in her life she had also become a Berserker.

Regardless, both combat art types were not suited for commanding masses of troops.

So far, Valera had proven herself quite capable in defending the Red Circle and mobilizing Aldrich's units, but that was while Aldrich was away. He had yet to see in person her capabilities.

Yet, when Aldrich fully linked with Valera's sight, he could not help but smile.

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"I will rid the master of this shelled brute!" shouted Valera as she stared at the center of the battlefield. There, the huge, shelled monstrosity had pushed back the zombie giant with a mighty swipe of its claws aimed at the giant's head.

The blow had blown off a chunk of the giant's skull, collapsing him to one knee, but the master's Mist gradually began to heal the wound up.

"Yeah? I'd like to see you try!" Stella landed beside Valera from the air, throwing out an explosive punch that shot forth a cone of ignited air that blew apart several approaching fishmen. "By the way, that's like, my ten thousandth kill, y'know?"

"Ten thousand!? You think you can lie to me so easily!?" Valera let a large green fishman tackle into her, and the fishman staggered backwards with a solid impact while Valera did not even budge a single inch. It was like the fishman had ran full force into an immovable wall.

In response, Valera stepped forwards and punched the fishman's chest. The force of her blow was so extreme that it caused the fishman's chest not only to cave in, but to literally explode from the force shockwave, its spine and internal organs blowing out through its back in a shower of blood.

"Okay, I might have been exaggerating a little." Stella stared at Valera in awe, witnessing Valera one punch her way through the variants. "Damn, how tough are you? You have a good amount of muscle on your build, but under all that armor, you must feel like a literal rock!"

"Q-quiet!" said Valera. "I can be soft and ladylike when I wish to be!"

"Heh, I'm not insulting you." Stella smiled at Valera before swiping forward at the air rapidly, throwing out clouds of her explosive blood. The condensed droplets shone bright orange as they gathered around a group of incoming fishmen before detonating like countless little grenades. "And honestly, you should be proud of how tough you are. It's totally badass. And I hear guys like girls that fight!"

"Really?" said Valera timidly as she absent-mindedly grabbed a crabman's head and crushed it to a pulp between her hands.

"Yeah. Or at least, I sure as hell wouldn't be into a guy that didn't know how to kick ass," said Stella.

"Do you think that...maybe the master prefers strong women too? I-I have to confess, I have very little experience in the ways of men..." said Valera. She looked at Stella hopefully while casually holding back a crowd of ten fishmen trying to overpower her with one arm.

"Him? I dunno. He's a mystery. But what I do know is that he appreciates you as you are now. And in the end, that matters a hell of a lot more than how much of a 'lady' you are, doesn't it?" said Stella. "There's a saying around this world: if it ain't broke, don't fix it. Think that applies to you."

"Hmm..." Valera unleashed a powerful right hook into the crowd of fishmen struggling against her. Her fist this time was wreathed in a spiral pattern of blood, and when her fist impacted, it created a shockwave of bloody force that broke apart the variants into chunks.

Appreciation for who she was. That brought her to memories of faraway times, before meeting her current master. A lifetime of betrayal and hurt and abandonment -

"Anyways, what was your plan to take down that big ass crab?" said Stella as she squinted her eyes, staring several hundreds of meters ahead at the giant crab variant.

"Right," said Valera. She shook her head, returning to the present. She looked towards Crab as it started to enclose its huge pincers around the zombie giant's neck. In response, the zombie giant grabbed Crab's pincers and exerted force trying to stop them from getting too close. "Stella, take me into the air!"

"Got you-," Stella grabbed Valera under her arm before lifting off with a continued explosion under her feet, basically creating miniature thrusters to generate lift. Hordes of fishmen rushed into the empty spot where the two had been, looking up at them as they flew in the air.

A few of the blue fishmen fired pressurized water, but all of it deflected off of Valera's blood barrier.

In this high vantage point, Valera closed her eyes and started to channel a mental link with the appropriate undead she needed. She used as few undead as possible, recognizing that she could not divert too many forces and potentially allow the fishmen to swarm through the sinkhole.

Valera was not an incredible expert at war games or commanding armies. When she still lived in a palace and had a tutor, she learned a few things here and there, but all that had been taken from her far before she could become a master in anything.

All she relied on was her basic combat instincts and experience with fighting - two things she had in vast spades - to guide her thinking.

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Chapter 130: Valera's Merits 2

Valera remembered a specific hunt. From before her time with Aldrich when she was a young trainee within the Nightshield Order that trained knights from the Midnight-Alliance consisting of vampires, certain demon tribes, and some night-dwelling demihumans.

There had been a time when Valera and her class had been sent into dark mountains to hunt an enormous rampaging boar. There, her instructor had drilled into her the fundamentals for taking down a beast with enough size and strength that no single knight could reliably deal with.

First, isolate the beast. The larger a monster was, the harder it was to deal with lesser enemies distracting you.

Then, if possible, disable the beast. Limit its mobility. Its sheer size would prevent it from easily dealing with attacks from multiple angles once it lost its movement.

Finally, execute.

Once disabled, attempt to dispatch the beast as quickly as possible, for the longer a battle went with larger monsters, the easier it was for an accident to occur and for a team member to perish under trampling hooves.

Valera was not as forward thinking of a planner as her master was, especially in things that did not involve battle, but here, in war, these things, these procedures, were engraved into her very being. It made her who she was.

She immediately thought about how to execute this plan against the crab monster.

Isolating the beast would be easy. Its battle with the zombie giant caused enough collateral damage that there were no lesser forces to deal with, and even if there were, the zombie giant could use its roar again to scatter the weaklings.

Disabling the monster would be done with the Antlion entrapping the creature's footing.

Then, that left the execution.

That was the most difficult part.

The monster had to die quickly, beyond what it could regenerate.

Or, if that was impossible, its brain had to be targeted to shut down its ability to function. But the monster's shell was tough and, even more annoyingly, it possessed the capacity to sense any movement nearing it within a sizable radius through the twitching of its antennae.

On top of that, the beast could direct some of the red spots of energy it gathered around its shell and detonate them, generating concussive shockwaves of force that blew back anyone that tried to sneak attack it.

The shockwaves were not accurate, but they made it difficult for anyone to sneak attack the creature.

Already, the Deathwheel and Ace, one of the strong humans known as 'Alters' who possessed flight and great strength had fallen victim to these shockwaves.

If the monster was to be felled, it needed to be done so with a tremendous amount of power applied before it could even react.

The only that possessed that level of raw strength here other than the zombie giant was Valera.

"Drop me towards those humans," said Valera as she pointed to the black uniformed strong humans. "You, distract the beast with your explosions, but do not near it lest you risk attack from its shockwaves."

"I get to see some big boy action? Hell yeah!" Stella sped forward, and after several seconds, dropped Valera down to Damien's green floating platform where the black uniformed strong humans regrouped to take breaks away from the chaos of fishmen below.

Alexis floated at the top of the green ring, creating her storm barrier around it to prevent blue fishmen from targeting it with their pressurized water bolts. Meanwhile, bolts of lightning rocked out from the storm shield, frying groups of fishmen.

When Valera landed inside of the storm shield, the Alters nodded to her respectfully in recognition of their second in command.

"Need something, miss?" said Damien as he flashed Valera a confident, pearly white smile. He flipped back his curly, lengthy hair with a poise that made it very evident that he had often rehearsed this hair flip to try and appeal to women so much that it had become a habitual part of him.

Valera almost cringed in disgust but held it down. "Bring me, what was his name, yes, Gerald."

Valera did not have all the names of these strong humans known as Alters down in her memory, but she did keep in mind the notably useful or strong ones.

The most powerful among them was a man called Ace who possessed great strength, durability, and flight. A man that the Alters had called their rank three and treated with respect.

But Valera did not need someone like that. If she wanted pure brute force damage, then she was superior.

"One Gerald coming right up~" said Damien as he spun his finger around, creating a green ring that he flicked to the ground. There, a larger, pudgier boy leaped on. His skin was entirely a shade of dark pink and rubbery in texture.

Valera had a rough idea of what these strong humans could do. She was still getting used to how their many unique powers worked, but she basically found it easy to understand when she treated them all as being humans that could use a single spell or set of spells.

In the case of Gerald, his body was incredibly unique. Its texture and physical traits mimicked that of rubber and on top of this, could absorb and store mass amounts of force, particularly the force of physical blows. This force could then be unleashed all at once later, making Gerald a nightmare for brute force brawlers to fight.

The stronger the force that hit him, the more power he had to return later.

"Look, Gerald, someone important actually wants to see you," said Damien.

Gerald rolled his eyes at Damien before addressing Valera.

"What can I do?" said Gerald, rank 14 among the Blackwater students, as he saluted Valera. He gave her an eager smile, ready to impress. He had always been one of the harder workers with a people pleasing personality and a happy go lucky attitude that truly did not suit the rest of Blackwater's criminal background or family students.

"I'm going to hit you now," said Valera flatly as she cocked back her fist.

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Chapter 131: Valera's Merits 3

At the center of the battlefield -

The zombie giant growled as it continued to struggle against Crab's pincers from closing around its neck. The struggle between the two huge entities shattered the ground underneath them as their legs drove into it, creating large pits of upturned and broken earth.

Crab could not vocalize by virtue of not having any real vocal chords, but that made it even more menacing as it continued to press its strength forward, its body trembling in exertion as it shoved its huge, open pincer claws ever forwards against the giant in silent determination.

That was when Crab's antennae twitched, sensing a flying presence nearing it. It prepared a response, diverting some stored energy in its shell to release as a shockwave.

Stella floated above Crab and did not get into range of its shockwave. Instead, she followed Valera's orders, and stayed up there, just eyeing Crab, waiting for the right moment even as her hands twitched in eagerness to unleash an explosion.

Crab saw that Stella did not make a move and focused its energy back onto trying to kill the giant. At that moment, the ground underneath it broke apart, instantly crumbling into a raging whirlpool of sand and crushing gravitational force.

Crab's balance immediately broke as its many giant legs sunk into sand, losing grip of what was once solid ground. In that moment, the zombie giant grunted and regained an advantage, swatting away Crab's pincers before going for a massive punch that connected with Crab's head.

The sound of the blow was akin to a missile exploding in sheer volume, and Crab's head jerked back from the attack, cracks spreading from its shell.

However, the shell very quickly patched back up, and it adjusted to the shifting sands beneath it by digging its huge legs in deep, even deeper than the sand pit, anchoring itself into firm ground far below.

But that meant that despite being able to continue fighting on solid footing, Crab was still immobilized.

At the same time, the zombie giant roared as it aimed to slam its fists down on Crab's head, trying to bash its brains out.

Crab's antennae twitched and it immediately responded, guarding the giant's double hammer fist blow by using its two wide pincers as shields.

"Got you right where we want you!" shouted Stella as she took this chance to unleash her Bunker Buster down on Crab. She did it from a distance, away from shockwave retaliation range.

She put her hands out, and they glowed bright white, all the veins in them pumping a mass amount of explosive blood.

Her Bunker Buster detonated outwards in a building sized cone of fiery orange, easily engulfing most of Crab's body. Shockwaves of force rippled through the titanic variant's body, sending out cracks here and there, but overall, it did not deal too much damage.

Stella, despite the flashiness of her explosions, had a relatively short effective range for maximal damage. Her explosive blood could only travel so far before automatically detonating, making her more of a mid-range fighter.

At a distance like this, her explosions had less impact because they lost energy as they traveled. But her aim was not to deal damage.

What the Bunker Buster did accomplish was to disorientate Crab's vibration sensitive antennae with shockwaves and heat.

Meanwhile, the zombie giant kept it distracted from the front by continuing to force Crab to use its pincers to guard its head.

In that very split second, with the zombie giant taking up Crab's attention from ahead, with the variant's senses momentarily disoriented, with its movements grounded by the Antlion, a black blur shot across the battlefield.

It traveled faster than any bullet, moving so quickly that it was imperceptible to practically everyone.

Valera flew forwards like a living missile, her fist stuck in front of her as she aimed right at the Crab's head, right where there were still faint cracks from the zombie giant's last punch.

The many segments of her black armor were filled in with bloody red, a sign that she had filled the [Slayer] gauge. Every single time she killed a unit, she received a small bonus to her stats and damage resistance.

This could stack up to a hundred times, and when maxed at 100, she gained an active buff known as the [Slayer] which allowed her to execute any units by brutally tearing them apart when they reached low enough health.

The weaker a unit was, the higher this execution threshold was. If she managed to get a hold of a Vital Point, this threshold increased even further.

For basic creatures like fishmen, she could literally execute them from full health.

However, for a mighty enemy like this Crab, she had to both reduce its health and get a hold of a Vital Point.

She had no idea where the vital points of a creature like this, a beast she had never known before, were, but she figured that it was in its head,

Regardless, the most important thing right now was to deal as much damage to the monster from within. That way, it would stop fighting even if she could not directly execute it.

And dealing damage, well, besides protecting the master, that was her greatest passion.

A split moment before Valera's fist reached the Crab's head, her lips twisted into a savagely wide grin, her cheeks literally tearing to bare the entire set of her sharp, bloodied fangs.

Valera pierced right through Crab's shell and into its head.

She had punched Gerald over a dozen times - up to the maximum amount of energy he could hold and even more, even until his body started to break apart.

She had then jumped off of Gerald while he returned that energy to her with the flexible nature of his rubber body, essentially becoming a trampoline from which Valera sprung off at with insane speed.

With all that force behind her, Valera smashed through Crab's head.

Inside, she found herself in a red cavity packed with slimy grey goo and white flesh. Along this flesh were large red nerves that looked like chords of rope.

"DIE! DIE! DIE! I WILL HAVE YOUR SPINE FOR MY MASTER! FOR MY DEAREST WHO HAS NEVER ABANDONED ME!"

Valera ripped and tore with reckless abandon. Anything she saw, she savagely destroyed.

She clawed at and tore apart flesh, she used blood shockwave attacks to completely scatter the grey goo that acted like connective tissue. She took the large nerve chords and snapped them before tearing them to shreds.

Squelching flesh erupted all around her rampage, completely soaking her in viscous, transparent liquid that acted as the crab's blood.

On the outside, Crab twitched and frozen as its head turned into a mushy, brutalized mess. But it did not stop fighting.

Instead, it seemed to struggle even more, unleashing wild blows everywhere. The zombie giant was pushed back, as was everyone else when Crab started to unleash shockwaves from all around its shell with little regards to accuracy.

At first, this seemed like the variant's death throes, but after an entire minute of struggling, it became very evident that Crab could still fight.

Valera by now had torn everything she could see to shreds, and yet, even as she did so, the beast was still moving.

Was this not where its Vital Point was? She snarled, trying to think of an alternative.

That was when she heard a voice ringing through her head. A smooth, elegant voice with highly proper inflections. She did not like this voice. It reminded her of vampiric nobility.

'Your killing methods strain my aesthetic sensibilities. Such brutish violence directed every which way with no focus,' came Chiros's voice. 'So, allow me to guide you, O Exile.'

From outside, Chiros stood just outside the sandpit where Crab was grounded. He pointed his gleaming crimson saber at Crab and chanted, "[Expose Veins]".

This was a racial skill of his that allowed him to mark the Vital Points of enemies. A large red dot started to glow not from the variant's head, but in its lower body, right above its legs and within its lower stomach.

'So you are the Adal noble. And I don't like that title,' said Valera with a grimace. 'But your aid is appreciated.'

Her frown then turned upside down as she cracked her neck in anticipation of the carnage she was to inflict.

"ORA! ORA! ORA!" Valera began to pummel the fleshy ground beneath her in a flurry of punches that only grew faster and stronger over time. She utterly decimated any flesh she came into contact with, rapidly drilling down through Crab's body until finally, she reached its main Vital Point.

It was a large spherical red bundle of coiled nerves that functioned as its true brain.

With one final yell, Valera punched the nerve bundle and utterly blasted it apart.

With that, Crab froze up and collapsed like a puppet that had its strings cut. It crashed into the ground with a heavy thud, unleashing a cloud of dust from its sheer mass.

The red light within its shell died down, all the stored energy fading away, and its body rapidly began to turn brown and grey as it started to slowly shrink down to its original size.

From Crab's back, Valera burst out, her fist punching through shell before she pulled herself up. She was soaked in Crab's blood and chunks of its flesh and organs. She shook off the gore while the clear blood drained into her.

"Victory is ours!" shouted Valera as she raised her fist in the air.

She regulated her voice from wild, violence addled rage from back when she was tearing apart the Crab and where nobody could hear her to a more dignified tone now.

Valera was about to speak again, but as she looked into the sky, she noticed something coming.

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Chapter 132: Restoring Seismic

Aldrich smiled as he watched Valera stand over the corpse of Crab triumphantly. He was proud of her.

Proud of what she could do and how well she could handle herself. Seeing it firsthand made him even more sure that he could trust her with controlling his forces.

Valera was a veteran through and through in terms of battle. And it made sense given her lore background.

She was a vampire noble born from a forbidden union between her vampire count father and a Dullahan warrior of an opposing faction.

Her lineage made her forever accursed in the eyes of her vampiric peers, and though her father's doting nature had given her an early life of royalty, once her father was killed through internal political strife, she had been sent off to the Nightshield Order.

Most third or fourth children of vampiric nobility were sent to the Nightshields for they were too far down in the line of succession to claim their bloodline's title, and there, they served as distinguished warriors or, in Valera's case, as a Guardian Knight to protect a proper vampire count or countess.

After completing her training, Valera had served a countess for a solid decade before the countess was assassinated and Valera was framed for the murder.

After that point in time, she lost any semblance of what she could call an ally and gained a fierce reputation for killing anyone that was sent to apprehend her.

All that had given Valera an instinctive understanding of how to fight and how to apply her combat knowledge.

As long as it was in matters of warfare, Aldrich was fully confident in leaving his forces with Valera now.

That would become quite important in the future as Aldrich would have to deal with the politics of the Alterhuman Agency and Panopticon.

He had already sowed seeds for his success by saving Minuteman, having the hero owe him a favor, and projecting himself as a savior for Haven, but it would always be good to have someone he could delegate the war side of things to when needed.

'Valera-', projected Aldrich telepathically as he put a finger to the side of his head. He was about to praise her and tell her to start routing the last of the variants, but something immediately stopped him. It was his heavily enhanced Perception stat that sensed it.

A sort of preternatural danger avoidance instinct that immediately made Aldrich look up. In the distance, across the horizon, he could see with his night vision an enormous black cloud of metal moving his way.

Countless little red dots blinked around in this black cloud, granting it an ominous appearance like a plague of death.

A loud buzzing hum droned through the air - the unmistakable sound of a Class 5 Panopticon drone fleet.

Or, as they were nicknamed, Bugs for their vaguely insectoid outlines and the way their rotors and engines hummed together in a cacophony that mimicked the buzzing of flies.

Bugs did not just come from the distance; they came from above as well. They started to swarm around Aldrich's Storm, and as they approached, it became very evident that they were a hostile force.

Barrels of guns were drawn out, as were the heads of missiles in racks ready to shoot outward.

The Panopticon drones were operating purely in an automated fashion, and it was evident that they would not recognize Aldrich's undead variants as friends.

"No, you don't," proclaimed Aldrich as he crushed his hand into a fist, commanding the Storm to unleash its technology disrupting field.

A wave of blue energy pulsated outwards from the centered Anglerfish, traveling past jellyfish, growing thicker and brighter until it cascaded past the storm's perimeter in a resonating wave that washed over hundreds of Bugs.

The Bugs sputtered and crackled with electricity as the Storm disrupted them, and they fell to the ground in disabled droves.

The Bugs then started to move away from the Storm, recognizing its disruption field threat, and instead ignored the Storm and started to head towards Aldrich.

The Bugs were individually rather weak drones, but their strength lay in their continuous learning network that allowed their many losses to continuously calibrate into battle data.

In this way, Bugs were a self-learning force. Though each one was individually weak, they could transmit battle data about their deaths and observations to all in their network, increasing their capabilities over time.

However, they, like all artificial intelligence operated drones, were not fully self-sufficient as per the Galatea Edict.

The edict forbade all creation of A.I. that was or had the potential to become independent and sentient, for the world had already been threatened once by a techno's mad creation during the early days of the Altering.

Countless Bugs were probably already around the battlefield at this point, having swarmed in from other angles.

'Master!' Valera's voice resonated through Aldrich's mind. 'These human contraptions are striking us, targeting the native beasts of this world under your command. Despicable humans, for them to dare to even lay a single metal finger upon my master's undead - shall we lay waste to them all?'

'Destroy the ones that pose an immediate threat,' said Aldrich. 'But try to limit how many you take down. Focus instead on evacuating all variant undead to portal range so that Portal Girl can take them under the Deildegast line.'

'Understood, master!' With that, Valera's voice disconnected from Aldrich's mind.

"Tch. Now this is an annoying situation," Aldrich said under his breath. From what Valera said and from what he could observe, the Bugs only targeted variants. It appeared that Elden World monsters and entities escaped target.

Even now, though, Aldrich thought about how he could abuse this situation. The fact that the Panopticon had not adjusted their Bugs to avoid targeting Aldrich's forces meant that they were too busy to pay attention to what was going on here.

The fact that the Bugs attacked Aldrich's units meant that he could use that as additional leverage against the Panopticon after this battle.

Yes, thought Aldrich. This would only serve to cement his position further as long as he played his cards right.

There would be little to no cost either. Once Aldrich's variants were under the Deildegast barriers, they were invulnerable to drone interference due to the nature of the tech disrupting smoke that the [Spirit Boundaries] projected.

With the Storm above projecting its disruption field as well, no Bugs could target Merman and the anemones so long as they stayed under the protective, tech disrupting range.

But the biggest issue would arise when Shrimp recovered. Even now, the variant army still fought, meaning that Shrimp, the Locus, was still alive, and Aldrich could confirm that from Shrimp's energy signature still embedded deep in the earth.

When Shrimp surfaced, Aldrich could not risk having Bugs annoy him and get in his way by targeting units he needed to use freely.

Aldrich needed a way to have the Bugs stand down without destroying too many of them, for the more he kept intact, the better his position looked as a victim of the Panopticon's incompetence. He looked over to his side at Seismic's blank expression.

There was an easy way to settle this.

Aldrich whistled, and his voice projected strongly outwards, reaching Crow.

Crow flew down from his position near the Storm, away from Bugs, and landed by Aldrich's side. Aldrich hopped on Crow's back, and he waved Seismic forward.

The giant of a hero jumped on as well.

That was when Aldrich snapped his fingers, granting Seismic's will back. He had not wanted to do this until after Shrimp was dealt with as he did not want to risk Seismic, his greatest arisen undead asset so far, to be confused or disoriented during the fight.

But this situation forced Aldrich's hand early.

"Where...where am I?" said Seismic as he rubbed his head, blinking rapidly as light and focus returned to his eyes.

"I'll keep the explanation short. You died fighting the Locus. I resurrected you with my powers. Now, I need you here with me to fight against the rest of the fishmen and the Locus when it returns," said Aldrich.

"I'm...alive again?" Seismic looked down at his hands and closed them into fists. He took in a deep breath, and when he exhaled, his expression turned deadly, focused serious. "I get it. I'll fight with you."

"No questions?" said Aldrich. "About who I am? What I'm doing?"

"You already said it. You are fighting the variants. That's enough for me. And it feels like I can trust you," said Seismic simply. "All I want to know is how we're doing out there."

Aldrich nodded. He liked Seismic already. The man was no nonsense and all business. No panic. No questions. Just doing what he needed to do.

"Good," said Aldrich. "The defenders have held the line, and ever since I arrived with my Legion, they haven't given ground. I've taken out the anemones and the two variant leaders, leaving the fishmen for cleanup.

All that's left is the Locus, and it's still remaining stationary underground."

"I'll be ready when the Locus makes a move," said Seismic. He looked down to his stomach where his costume had been torn in a circle where before he had been punched straight through. He scowled as he balled his hand into a tight fist... "This time, I'll be the one to put a fist through it."

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Chapter 133: The Connector

Aldrich noted that though Seismic was largely a stoic man, there was something in the way that he so very violently balled up his fist as he talked about punching a hole through Shrimp that made it very clear that within Seismic, there were violent tendencies unbefitting of a 'proper' hero.

But then again, as Aldrich deeply knew, there were so very few proper heroes out there anyway.

"Good to see you all ready to fight, but before that, I need you to tell the Panopticon drone fleet to stand down," said Aldrich. A good chunk of my forces are variants I've placed under my control, and the Bugs are targeting them.

A rank heroes can directly order around Panopticon responses all the way up to class 2, can't they?" said Aldrich.

Seismic nodded. "Not exactly. But I can force the drones to link me with a Connector. There, I should have enough authority to submit direct requests."

Aldrich nodded.

"Then we'll do that. Up," he said, directing Crow to move.

Crow's six eyes blinked in recognition before he flapped his huge wings, sending Aldrich and Seismic hurtling far up. They reached the skies over the battlefield in seconds, and there, Aldrich got a glimpse of the Class 5 drone response.

Thousands of Bugs were around the battle zone, firing their weapons and raining down their explosives on fishmen. They slaughtered the fishmen in droves, but the only

reason these drones could do so much in the first place was because Aldrich had carved the way for them.

Aldrich had taken out the storm.

He had taken out all the air troops.

He had disabled the sea anemones and wiped out the mermen.

That left only the blue fishmen on the ground capable of hitting airborne targets, and they were a pitiful anti air measure compared to the flying fish, manta rays, mermen, and the living storm.

If the entire variant army had been left alone, this drone response would have been crushed in half an hour at most. No, they would have gotten shut down by the storm once it started to focus its EMP emissions.

This, Aldrich kept in mind. He could not let the Panopticon take any real credit for this battle.

As Aldrich thought this, several dozen drones surrounded Crow as Aldrich commanded him to hover in a stationary position. The drones pointed their red dot eyes towards Aldrich, their weapons bared out in menacing fashion.

"Stop," said Seismic, his voice resonating with authority.

"Identifying...", A cold, deep, mechanical voice emerged from a drone as it went up to Seismic, and its red eye projected out a scanning beam that washed over Seismic's face. "A- class hero Seismic identified.

Grade 1 clearance registered.

Disengaging weapons systems."

"Get me to a Connector. Now." Said Seismic.

"Your request is approved. Linking to source Connector...", began the drone as its red eye turned green and started to blink rapidly, establishing a connection.

Connectors, as far as Aldrich was aware, were higher up Panopticon members that could direct and, if needed, manually operate drone responses.

They operated in giant floating mechanical structures known as Pillars that acted as mobile factories and hubs from which Panopticon drones were stored and sent out.

"Connector #443 linked. Now transferring communications," said the drone. After a few seconds, its green glowing eye turned blue, indicating that a Connector had taken manual control over it.

"Connector #443 here," came a tired woman's voice. "Normally, I would listen to your request, A class hero Seismic, but I want to preface this by saying that we have no reinforcements to send.

For now, this is as much you're going to get, and if you want me to manually control anything, I'm afraid I'm already multi-tasking my attention with cleanup on the Neo-York attack.

I'm sorry, but if you want a higher fleet response-,"

"I don't care about reinforcements," said Seismic.

"Oh, I see." The Connector's voice remained tired. "I'm assuming Haven's been overrun already, then. Do you need me to withdraw this response?"

"No. Do your job and take a look at what's happening," said Seismic.

The Connector sighed. "Fine. I do have to listen to you A rankers anyhow. Let's see...

...

...

WHAT!?"

The Connector's voice grew from tired to surprised in a single instant.

"What are those things? And...and are those variants fighting against the fishmen? That giant thing, are those, like...knights? They look straight out of a game! And what's that black smoke?

And hold up, the storm...you guys have disabled the storm on your end? Wait, wait, wait, I don't understand any of this!"

"You don't have to," said Seismic. His tone was serious. Curt. He did not ever say any more than what he needed to. "All you need to do is what I say. I'm fighting with an ally that can control those variants.

Have your Bugs stand down."

"What? An ally?" The drone turned to see Aldrich. It projected out a scanning beam that washed over his form of bone and metal and blood from head to toe. "This guy isn't in

the WWA (Worldwide Alter) database! No, scratch that, I can't even get a proper read on him to begin with!

It's like he's a Dud or something - he's obviously concealing his powers. As per Panopticon Procedural #44A, I can't authorize-,"

"Are we really going to be debating procedure?" said Seismic. "Do you have that much time and that many lives to waste?"

"..." A pause from the Connector. Then a sigh. "Okay, I understand. I'll go ahead and authorize your request, but the thing is, now that I'm manually checking on the C5 drones and seeing through them, I can't tell that there's anything different between the ones he controls and the fishmen.

There's no Alter energy signature like the kind you'd expect to see from Variants under Alter control."

"Then you'd better go ahead and keep an eye on your drones, shouldn't you? To make sure they don't hit your allies?" said Aldrich in a warning voice.

"..." The Connector sighed again. Though her face was not visible, just the tiredness in her voice and her sighs made it very clear that she was probably having quite the sleepless night. "Okay, yeah, I can do that.

I'll just make them not attack anything with, let's see, uh, a green aura thing. That might leave the greenscale fishmen alive, is that alright?"

"We can handle those. I appreciate the cooperation," said Aldrich.

"Then I'm going to close this channel. You better explain all this in your report, Seismic," said the Connector has her voice cut off with a crackle.

The drone projecting her voice turned its eye back to its usual red color before it flew away, back to the battlefield.

"Now then, it's about time we head back to what's important," said Aldrich as he stared towards the battle site.

"Yes," said Seismic simply.

"Land us down there," said Aldrich as he stared at Crab's giant corpse. Though by now, Crab had receded from its peak size of ten meters all the way down now to five. Atop Crab's back was Valera as she waved her hands towards Aldrich happily.

Crow shot downwards in a swooping arc, and at the bottom of it, Aldrich and Seismic both got off, landing atop Crab's corpse.

"Master! You're safe!" said Valera as she bowed to Aldrich.

"Of course, I am," said Aldrich. "Oh, and I was about to say this before these bots rudely cute me off, but good job, Valera. You're proving to me just how capable you are."

Valera squirmed in happiness under her brutal armor of red and spiked black metal. "It was a little new to be commanding forces, but I feel like I have the hang of it."

"As long as it involves fighting, it seems like you have a talent for it," said Aldrich. "How's the rest of the fight going? I imagine with Crab gone, the rest of this variant army should have no chance."

"Indeed. These monsters are on their last legs. All the ground they had covered at the start of this night is gone. No, they are now on the very cusp of defeat," said Valera as she motioned around her.

Aldrich's undead forces were fully pushing back the variants now, especially with the Panopticon's Bugs swarming and destroying the fodder, equalizing the numbers difference between his Legion and the variant army somewhat.

Under a hailstorm of gunfire, missile fire, slashing swords, giant blows, explosions, toxic gas, acid, and countless other manner of attacks, the variants had no chance, not with their leaders killed.

"I must say, these 'mechs' are quite capable. Worth the annoyance that they initially were then they dawned upon this site of our battle," said Valera. "But I worry about that one. The strong one. It is yet alive, no?"

"It is," said Aldrich. "And we need to start preparing for it. For now-," Aldrich made sure to check again that Shrimp's energy signature still remained underground. There it was: a large orb of white tracked in Aldrich's vision by Volantis's keen energy sensing. "We clean up the variants as much as we can while I get ready."

First thing's first-,"

Aldrich knelt down and put a hand on Crab's cracked, dulled, lifeless shell... "Serve."

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Chapter 134: Danger

Aldrich watched as twin strands of green and red energy flowed out from his hand as both his health and mana drained in raising Crab.

Evidently, Crab, unlike Merman, counted as a 'boss' type unit that needed Aldrich to channel his [Raise Undead].

However, Aldrich did not have to spend nearly as much health and mana to raise Crab as he did with Seismic.

By the end of it, he was down to half of his health and nearly emptied of his mana. He was in desperate need of a resource recharge, but he did not want to use charges of his [Restorative Flask] just yet. Not when he had so many graves around him to replenish himself.

Crab's corpse shook as it began to move again.

Aldrich, Valera, and Seismic all jumped down from Crab's book as the huge variant rose again, a green glow flashing through its eye stalks.

[Inner Circle: 44/49] 45/49]

"Raising the dead. An interesting power," said Seismic as he crossed his arms and stared at Crab's reanimated, green shrouded body. "I fought a villain that could do that in Africa. Nzambi. An A-lister. Took out her army. But she could resurrect from any one of her zombies, no matter where it was.

Hard to kill like a cockroach."

"I knew of her," said Aldrich. Nzambi was the leader of a massive group of Nomads in Africa who had created a modern-day raiding army, going from city to city to take resources from with her Nomads and, when they died, their zombie forms.

She was a worldwide wanted terrorist and in her fifth year of abusing her powers, she received an Elimination Order from the AA, a designation granted to Alters who threatened the stability of society and were thus to have their lives deemed worth no more than a variant, stripping them of all access to banks, city access, and no consequences for anyone that killed or neutralized them.

Eventually, Nzambi was taken out by Solomon Solar with the aid of Psiforce, one of the strongest Psychic type Psionic Alters in the world, to freeze her mind inside her current body so that she could not infinitely revive herself.

Nzambi was one of the most notable Alters that could 'raise the dead', but she was not unique.

Powers that affected corpses were not unknown. They were just taboo among the AA and its heroes because very few heroes overcame the bad PR that using corpses or zombies generated.

As a result, most Alters that could do anything resembling necromancy usually became mercenaries or villains.

"But my powers operate quite differently from hers," continued Aldrich. "If you want to use her power as a benchmark to figure out what I can do, I'll tell you right now that it's pointless."

"I figured," said Seismic. "All I want you to tell me is this: do I have control over myself? My own free will?"

"Depends on how cooperative you are," said Aldrich flatly.

"Hm. So that's how it is." Seismic's expression did not change. It remained the same serious face as always.

"Consider it the price for coming back from the dead. Nothing is free in this world, after all," said Aldrich.

"A fair price to pay," said Seismic simply.

"I'm glad you understand," said Aldrich genuinely. He truly appreciated how quick Seismic was to accept and understand the way things were. It showed how quickly he could adapt to new situations.

Aldrich turned to Valera. "Valera, use your shield again. Protect me while I recharge. And Seismic, you can wait here until the Locus comes. I'll regroup with you soon, and together, we can take out the Locus if it hasn't moved yet."

"Gladly," said Seismic.

"Understood, master!" Valera manifested her cross shield of metal and bone and stood by Aldrich's side.

Aldrich then leaped into the air with Valera mimicking his movements. Together, they landed in a thick trove of slaughtered fishmen and crabmen. Above their corpses, countless grave markers floated.

Aldrich raised his hand and chanted, "[Mass Grave Consumption]".

With that, over fifty graves floated into Aldrich, replenishing his mana from nearly empty to completely full in a single instant. A blue aura flickered around him, signifying the restoration.

[Mana: 471/471]

Yes, thought Aldrich with a satisfactory nod.

This was how Legion Necromancers should have been.

A master of the dark arts who thrived in the chaos of the battlefield where all others choked under the bodies and death.

Aldrich looked down at his pale hands, seeing the bony fingers of his true form flash underneath. Were he not a Lich either, he would not nearly have been this strong either.

Because his game character necromancer was fundamentally a game character. It was limited by game balancing such as the fact that it could not only have around 100 undead at max with the most optimized equipment and at level 100.

As a Lich, even barely past level 40, Aldrich far surpassed that level of unit control. This was the power of a racial transformation that he could never have obtained in the game. One that would have been game breaking in its sheer power.

As a Lich, unbound by the limits of the game, Aldrich truly was a nigh unstoppable force in a large scale fight like this.

Though, of course, he had to consider his weaknesses still.

A mass [Grave Consumption] like this had a much longer cooldown at a whopping thirty seconds, and he could choose either to restore his health or his mana, not both. Strong individual enemies could abuse this cooldown period to target him down, and eventually, if he was forced to keep using his mana to defend himself, his [Grave Consumption] would not keep him alive.

But that was why Valera was here. She covered all his weaknesses. She complemented his playstyle perfectly.

"I enjoyed the thrill of letting loose and ripping apart our enemies," said Valera as she looked at the armor around her arms and body like she was looking at a new dress. "This armor, especially, it suits me so very much."

Valera drew close to Aldrich, almost seductively drawing the touch of her hand across his shoulders. Most likely, this gesture was just instinctive for vampires were seductive by nature. At the same time, it made Aldrich smile, because he knew in lore that vampires showed seductive tendencies to those they wished to seduce to hunt or those they fully trusted.

"But what I missed even more was being by your side with my shield raised to defend you, my master."

"There's nobody else I would trust to defend me like this, let alone someone as capable as you," said Aldrich. He scanned around for more graves. Thousands more littered the battlefield all around him. When the cooldown for his [Grave Consumption] reset, he would restore himself to full health.

"Your praise is too much for a humble guardian like myself," said Valera as he lowered her head, though she noticeably trembled in happiness. "I-,"

Valera paused, and for a single instant, Aldrich felt like the world had slowed down. His enhanced Perception was screaming at him that he was in danger.

Grave danger.

This was a sensation that Aldrich had never felt before since he had become an undead, when he had managed his forces and himself carefully so that he was never in risk.

Every fiber of his being told him that his eternal end would come if he did not react. However, he was too slow to react to the threat physically. His reflexes and instincts told him something was coming, but even with his supernatural strength, he could not react in time.

'Valera!' Aldrich immediately commanded Valera mentally, faster than how much his body could move.

Valera, much stronger and faster than Aldrich, immediately dashed behind Aldrich with her shield raised up. She had sensed the threat before Aldrich had due to her higher physicals and perception, and she knew exactly where it came from.

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Chapter 135: Sudden Attack

Aldrich had barely a moment to turn around and perceive the towering wall of green and blue light of some sort of force wave. It had wavy patterns within it, making it seem like an ethereal tidal wave of raw energy that threatened to completely crash over and drown Aldrich and Valera.

Valera had her shield slammed down, ready to defend Aldrich at all costs. She did not give a single care about her own safety - she stood against that tide of energy with unbreakable determination.

A metallic white glimmer sparkled around her, indicating that she had buffed herself with the skill [Body of Steel] that allowed her to massively reduce the incoming damage of a single attack.

However, just from a simple glance, it was easy to tell that the sheer amount of power in that wave of energy was devastating.

So devastating that Aldrich realized that Valera might not be able to block all of it herself.

Knowing this, his [Death Essence Barrier] automatically triggered, shining visibly green around him.

Even then, it might not be enough.

This was bad. Perhaps the worst situation that Aldrich had been in so far.

Had he been careless? No, he did not think so. He had covered all his bases for this fight to make sure he was never under threat, or that if he was, he could always react to it.

He was realistic in his planning. He knew that he could never foresee every possibility ahead of him. There was no such thing as a perfect plan, after all.

But the point of planning was to give him room to react to sudden changes. So that even if he was taken off guard, he could always recover.

The largest threat he could think of was Shrimp.

Even now, in this brief moment of slowed perception, he could register that Shrimp's energy signature was static, still embedded deep underground.

If this was an attack, then it was from something he could not have reliably foreseen no matter what.

But that did not matter.

What mattered was whether he would survive this attack.

Valera could block a majority of the incoming damage, but if enough of it spilled through and broke through Aldrich's barrier, he only had 50% of his maximum health to tank the blow.

And judging from the staggering amount of power in this attack, that was a non-zero possibility.

For the very first time since his undeath, Aldrich recognized that his life was in palpable danger.

Valera, with all her battle experience, knew even better than Aldrich the strength of this attack. She knew that there was a chance she could not fend him fully, and she did not want to take that chance at all.

In the mere fraction of an instant before the energy wave crashed upon them, she reached her free arm through Aldrich's barrier and shoved him into the air with a powerful push, knocking him out of the way.

Time flowed normally again.

High up in the air, Aldrich righted himself with his draconic wings as he saw the tidal wave of energy crash over Valera, surging past her in a narrow wave that stretched out across a vast swathe of the entire battle site itself.

A roaring, crashing sound reminiscent of tides crashing against rock raged through the air as the energy wave flowed forward.

Anything caught in that wave of blinding bright green and blue instantly broke apart.

Thankfully, because the energy wave was relatively thin, it did not manage to target fully erase any of Aldrich's troops. It caught the Zombie Giant and Crab by surprise, blasting a hole straight through their legs, but beyond this, there were no casualties on Aldrich's side.

The fishmen, however, were not so lucky.

They were utterly eviscerated under the energy wave, and when it faded away, it revealed an enormous trail of molten, carved out earth from the sheer amount of heat energy stored within the attack.

And the one who had born the brunt of this attack -

"Valera!" said Aldrich as he looked down where she had been. A large smoke cloud of debris had dredged up from the attack, but Aldrich could sense that she was still alive.

"I'm alright, master!" shouted Valera as she swung her shield to the side, blowing away the dust clouds to make her and the aggressor of this all visible.

Valera's cross shield glowed red and white hot, and several molten white scorch marks lined her armor. The armor around her legs and shield glowed completely white hot, and the flesh underneath was horribly burned and damaged.

"...What?" Aldrich narrowed his eyes under his helm as he trained his sight on the aggressor.

It was Shrimp.

Shrimp stood before Valera with his fist thrust out in front of him. His body had changed. It had grown slightly more muscular compared to its rail thin body before, though its overall appearance remained much the same.

The biggest difference was in its arm structure. It had changed, covered over with thicker iridescent, rainbow-colored shell plating.

Across the plating of its forearm, two bright lines of blue and green respectively shone down to its knuckles. Its elbow joint had changed into a sort of piston structure, and when Shrimp withdrew his arm to his side, his forearm clicked as it jerked upwards, locking into its upper arm.

It reminded Aldrich of Frame suits that had piston powered punches.

'Volantis, I thought you were keeping a track of him. What happened?' said Aldrich. His mental voice did not possess any hint of judgement to it, for he knew better than to let emotions cloud his judgement and analysis.

No, anything that happened, anything that slipped by him, anything that he needed to react to out of the blue - he would deal with using calm analysis as he had always done.

'Forgive me, but my sight has been upon that beast, and I have not allowed myself to let it escape from my perception,' said Volantis.

Aldrich checked the corner of his vision. The white spot where Shrimp was supposed to be was still glowing.

"..." Aldrich observed Shrimp for another second, and based off of context clues, could rapidly piece together what had happened.

"I see." Aldrich could see that there were dull white chunks of shell falling from Shrimp's body. And those matched the energy signature deep within the earth.

Shrimp had molted while under the ground, and from that molting process, had emerged ever stronger. On top of that, the molted shell acted as a sort of energy insulator, hiding Shrimp's changing body and energy beneath it.

"That creature now possesses an energy aura far separated from that which it bore before. Almost as if it was an entirely new being," said Volantis. "Yet, it is unfathomable that it could have escaped my sight.

Its energy aura is still colossal - easily enough for me to track had it moved at any pace of speed, no matter how fast.

The only option I could conceive of is that it managed to cover great distances within a single instant.

In other words, teleportation."

"That's the conclusion I came to as well," said Aldrich. He took in a breath. He had not expected Shrimp to just spontaneously evolve new powers like that in the middle of combat.

No, if it was just developing an extra power, Aldrich would have understood.

There were cases of variants attacking with a set of powers, escaping, and then years later attacking again with an extra or changed power.

There were even some Alters that had developed additional powers through either genetic luck or a rarer process called Metamorphosis.

What was even more unpredictable, something so out of Aldrich's knowledge scope that he could not have foreseen it, was that Shrimp had developed a teleportation-based power.

Flux powers that manipulated space and time were thought to be entirely in the realm of Alters.

There had never once been a case of variants that could affect the fabric of space-time.

It was one of the reasons why Flux Alters were so valued: they were not only highly valuable for their utility, but they also represented power that belonged solely to the realm of humanity.

They were considered like the stars of mankind. Possessing powers of the cosmos far beyond, where only humans had ever touched, while the variants they fought were creatures that never left the boundaries of the earth.

The only possible exception were Chrysalis that could create their personal spaces, but these were considered less living variants and more mobile environments.

Yet, it looked like humanity had now lost that privilege.

On top of this, Aldrich's understanding of variants was limited to the bootleg research he could get on them as he was locked out from accessing the AA's proper variant database.

All this would change soon, however. He would make sure he had access to everything.

Every tool and privilege he could use to further his power and position, all that had been denied to him before because he was nothing but a lowly Dud - he would take now.

All he had to do was turn Shrimp into a corpse.

Specifically, his corpse.

Chapter 136: The Counter

Aldrich looked down at Shrimp and observed as the variant cocked his head and stared at Valera with curiosity. The very same type of curiosity it had afforded Blackwater's rank 1 Mel Morales.

An innocent curiosity that felt sinister in that it came from a monstrosity with enough power to wipe out the lives of an entire city.

"You...very strong. Do not break," said Shrimp as he stared at Valera with wide open, shining rainbow eyes. "But still hurt. Will die soon."

Shrimp's eyes gazed at the white hot parts of Valera's armor, at the smoke of the seared flesh wisping out from beneath the metal.

Aldrich closed his fist, and his [Mist of Undeath] welled up underneath Valera. The green mist immediately restored her health to full, completely healing her burns. The cold nature of his mist also soothed the armor, rapidly cooling it down to its black shade.

"Oh, am I hurt now?" said Valera as she smiled widely, her large vampiric fangs bared. "You should take more care of yourself!"

Valera shoved a foot in front of her, and the ground shattered under her as she exerted mighty power into a [Shield Bash], thrusting her giant shield forward like a battering ram.

Shrimp did not dodge this attack like he had done to the heroes' attacks before his molting.

Instead, Shrimp put out his arms and clashed against the shield bash. A loud shockwave of pure physical force boomed out as Valera pushed against her shield and Shrimp shoved back against it.

Between the two physical powerhouses, the ground started to crack and fissure in a solid line separating them.

A hundred or so Bugs started to hover around the area, raining down gunfire against Shrimp, even targeting Valera on accident, but their bullets and even small missiles did literally nothing against either fighter.

Noting this, the Bugs moved away, programmed to avoid battles between beings of sufficiently high power levels for they would only end up getting in the way.

Shrimp trembled in exertion against Valera.

But soon, he slowly began to give ground.

Aldrich took this moment of Valera distracting Shrimp and used it to multi-task.

First, he analyzed Shrimp's capabilities.

Judging by the struggle between Shrimp and Valera, Aldrich could determine that Shrimp's top physical strength was around Valera's level, if not slightly below it.

But it could generate sudden explosive bursts of energy that dealt devastating amounts of damage, very likely from its piston powered fists.

Second, Aldrich secured his own safety.

Aldrich whistled, and Crow instantly rushed to his side. He hopped on Crow's back and withdrew his wings.

'Volantis give me your strongest defensive stitching' commanded Aldrich, for he could not afford to get blindsided by Shrimp's newfound teleportation with no real defense, especially considering Shrimp could instantly reposition himself.

'[Organ Stitching: Mountain Drake Scales]' said Volantis, causing thick grey, earthen scales resembling the hide of a pangolin to emerge all around his armor. The scales glinted with tiny gem-like sparkles.

'Excellent choice,' said Aldrich.

'There is not a single set within my bone collection that is of no use,' said Volantis, pride tinged his regal voice.

Mountain Drakes were flightless monsters that lived deep within the largest of mystical mountains, and over centuries and millennia sleeping in beds of precious ores, their scales not only hardened with age, but also fused with the minerals around them, becoming unfathomably hard.

In terms of pure physical resistance, Mountain Drakes were nearly at the top.

Mountain Drake scales to pad Aldrich's physical resistance. The [Death Essence Barrier] to cover his energy resistance. Like this, at the cost of offensive capability, Aldrich was almost as resilient as a proper tank class character.

Then third - the army.

'My Legion, scatter. Get back to the Deildeghast line and make sure no fishmen cross it. Only the strongest few will remain for this fight,' said Aldrich, knowing full well that in this fight, anything less than his strongest units, most of them in the range of level 30, would die from collateral damage.

Aldrich did this all with lightning quick efficiency in the span of just two to three seconds. He was used to micromanaging units in Elden World, and he applied that talent now. He gave a broad mental command for all the units he did not need to retreat, then took all those that he foresaw could be useful and had them begin moving to aid Aldrich.

Most notable of these units was the Storm.

The green clouds in the distance began to shine and rumble as they floated closer. Meanwhile, in the distance, far from the current site where Shrimp and Valera was, Merman began to channel the sea anemones active.

While this happened, Aldrich noticed Valera starting to go on the offensive as she saw herself slowly but surely overpowering Shrimp in raw physical strength.

"ORA!" Valera kept her shoulder against her shield to push it forward but used her opposite fist to punch it.

This was a much higher level Shielder skill called [Guardian's Reckoning] that amplified the damage of a punch through a shield, magically using the shield as a strong force amplifier. The blow that passed through the shield amped with strong scaling based off of the defensive stats of both the one throwing the blow and the shield itself.

Valera's shield loudly clanged and vibrated, and a concussive shockwave shot forth from it like a cannonball, and this time, Shrimp was blasted far back, gouging out several craters as he skipped across solid earth like a stone thrown across a pond.

Shrimp stopped himself from hurtling too far back by digging his hands into the earth, skidding as he anchored himself down to a halt.

But before Shrimp could get up, Seismic fell from the sky and smashed Shrimp's head under his foot with a mighty impact that cratered the ground under Shrimp's head with a loud bang.

A white orb covered Seismic's boot, and beneath it, Shrimp's head started to distort against the orb.

Shrimp's face sank into the ground against Seismic's shockwave orb. Cracks lined Shrimp's shell helmet, spurting with blue blood. One of his rainbow-colored eyes bulged before it popped out of its socket entirely from the intense amount of pressure it was subject to.

"I...fight...I...fight!" Shrimp shouted with a single bloody eye. Even against Seismic's tremendous force, Shrimp began to slowly but surely resist, positioning his four arms to push himself up.

Seismic's face warped into an expression of pure concentrated savagery as he loosed a deafening roar, the huge muscles around his legs bulging as he input as much power as he could. The orb shattered, and with that, all hell broke loose as his charged earthquake fully unleashed itself.

Enormous, visible tremors of force radiated out from Seismic's boot, shattering ground everywhere it touched.

The earth rumbled as Seismic generated another earthquake.

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Chapter 137: The Final Fight

Aldrich watched from above as the earth sundered apart from Seismic's force. Every single time that Seismic let loose his full strength, he literally reshaped the entire landscape around him.

This was power. The power of the strongest heroes just below the hallowed S class with might so unparalleled that they were considered equivalent to entire sovereign nations in terms of sheer military might and the influence that came with it.

Nevertheless, even if Seismic was not S class, he definitely was near the top of A for his raw power.

It was truly awing to watch Seismic go at it with all his might. About two decades ago, during Seismic's prime, he had been a devastating menace that always let his power loose at max throttle without much care for collateral damage.

No, back then, he had been a bloodthirsty warmonger that toed the line between hero and murderous villain, and the worst case was when he completely broke apart the city sized flying base of Iron Lord, a S ranked villain back in the day.

The huge metal chunks of that base had showered all over a city, causing hundreds of civilian deaths and millions in property damage.

Seismic's wanton tendency for absolute carnage and the sheer destructiveness of his power made him be both feared and revered as a natural disaster, a powerful force that could not be predicted, only worked around.

But even that was not enough.

Amid a sea of crumbling, upturned rock chunks, some as large as entire apartment buildings, Seismic shot up rapidly into the sky through a cloud of dust and debris. He was high up enough that he was nearly level in altitude to Aldrich.

Seismic had his arms crossed in front of him in a guard, but his forearms were badly scorched, the flesh blackened and falling off in charred strips.

"Over here!" said Aldrich as he swooped in with Crow.

Seismic noticed Aldrich and lightly hopped on a tiny quake bubble, land on Crow's back.

"I'll take care of your injuries," said Aldrich.

Green mist emerged from underneath Seismic's feet and curled towards his blackened arms, completely restoring the burned flesh back to sculpted muscle.

"Now, this is useful," said Seismic as he looked at his newly healed arms. He cracked his back, feeling his newly healed spine. However, he grimaced when he felt the same old stiffness where his Alter Organ had started to Crystallize.

Whatever this healing was that came from this mysterious man, it could not undo Crystallization. Which made sense. There was not a single Alter power or piece of technology in the world that could counter Crystallization.

"I can't do it infinitely, though," said Aldrich. "So don't take too many hits, especially ones that can take you out entirely - I can't bring you back from that."

Seismic nodded.

'Master! Shall I strike now!?' Valera's voice rang through Aldrich's mind, and he sensed that she was in front of the upturned earth spikes from Seismic's kick. 'While the monster is weakened?'

'Hold off on that,' said Aldrich. 'It's too risky to go in solo against a tough unit like that blindly.'

"What's the situation look like?" asked Aldrich to Seismic. He deferred to the veteran hero's judgement on whether to press the attack or hold back.

"The Locus is tough. It took a full force hit from my Quake and still survived. I almost killed it with that hit, I could feel it. But it still has more than enough power to fight back. I would advise holding back and confirming its injuries," said Seismic. "Not a good idea to rush into A rank Locuses like this."

I would wait until we can secure a visual."

'The creature's new energy aura has been committed to this true sight of mine,' came Volantis's voice in Aldrich's mind. 'It shall never leave my perception, and I am prepared to track it through even warping.'

"I have a visual," said Aldrich... He looked down to see that under all the giant earth spikes, rock chunks, and huge cloud of dust, there was a brightly glowing green circle that signified Shrimp's presence.

Shrimp remained stationary at the epicenter of all that upturned rock and dust. But Aldrich remained infinitely on guard, knowing how this had played out last time with Shrimp molting and teleporting. He kept his altitude with Crow, and he made sure that Seismic was right beside him, not to mention his ironclad defense with Volantis's organ stitching.

On top of Volantis's energy tracking, Aldrich doubled down on his security and commanded his [Grave Ward] to position high in the sky but directly focused toward Shrimp.

Like a miniature satellite, the [Grave Ward] would feed Aldrich a visual of Shrimp was much as possible, and its sight pierced through the dust clouds, making Shrimp's appearance clearer than a blob of marked green energy.

Shrimp was standing there in the midst of all that shattered earth with its hands on its head, blue blood pooling from between its fingers.

There were cracks all over its rainbow shell with a white glow shining through the damaged lines. It appeared that from this white energy, Shrimp began to regenerate its injuries. The white energy concentrated strongest beneath its feet, traveling from the ground up over the variant's body.

"It's not moving," said Aldrich. "And it looks like it's taking the time to regenerate."

"Is there a white glow around its injuries?" said Seismic.

"Hm? You know something about that?" said Aldrich. He figured that Seismic had knowledge about strong variants like this that was classified to heroes of his caliber.

Seismic nodded. "Few heroes know this because they are so rare. But strong enough variant Loci have a healing factor that works so long as they are making contact with the ground.

It's called the Antaeic Factor.

Often times, it requires standing still as well.

I suspected that a Locus as strong as this had it."

Seismic grimaced. "That makes this many times harder. For Loci with Antaeic Factors, we cannot ever let it out of our sights unless we risk it recovering itself.

And it has teleportation to make holding it in place even harder. But it can't use its teleportation freely."

"How did you come to that conclusion?" asked Aldrich. He had his own ideas about the teleportation's weaknesses, but he wanted to test Seismic's perceptiveness as well.

"It if could use its teleportation freely, it would have already by now. Especially when I had struck it.

If it cost too much energy, it wouldn't have been strong enough to counter me like this.

Most likely, it needs time free from interferences to use it," said Seismic calmly. "But while its healing with the Antaeic Factor, it shouldn't be able to use its other powers.

If we want to strike, the best opportunity would be now."

"I figured the same," said Aldrich. He was impressed with Seismic's quick analytical skill capable of deducing the likely weaknesses of Shrimp's powers with such confidence.

Aldrich immediately pieced together a plan to take Shrimp down.

"Sustained pressure. That's what will take this thing down, just like you said" said Aldrich. "We can't leave it alone to let it heal or teleport away. We need to keep whittling it down.

That means you need to limit your area of effect shockwaves."

"My bracers are broken," said Seismic. "I can't focus my quakes. It will be hard. But I'll try. I can't go all out, though. If I hit with my full force, it would have to be for the final, decisive strike."

"I know," said Aldrich. "And I'll set that opportunity up for you. To start off with, I'll flush it out while it's still standing stationary.

I'll hit it hard and fast to break it out of its little healing break, and right afterwards, he lay down the pressure. We never let it take a single break."

"Approaching it will raise its alarm," said Seismic as he narrowed his eyes and put a hand to his sharp beard. "If you want to flush it out, you would have to do it by range."

"Range? How convenient. It's basically giving us one free hit, right? One free hit in exchange for recovering itself to full health. That's the gamble it's willing to take. Let's see if it's gambling on the right side." said Aldrich.

He raised his hand into the air, and the Storm gathered above him, coalescing its ghostly green clouds together.

The jellyfish and anglerfish glowed brightly as they channeled waves of energy in deep, resonating echoes of bass.

They channeled prodigious amounts of energy, but not as much as they did with Merman as there was not enough time before Shrimp would make a full recovery and become mobile again.

Yet even this buildup of energy was easily enough to be devastating. Aldrich could feel the very air itself grow heavy around him, emanating an ominous, tense stillness that stifled any breezes - the calm before the storm.

Aldrich put down his hand towards Shrimp's location, and the storm exploded in bright green as it unleashed a lightningbolt with a bright nova of light and a booming clap.

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Chapter 138: Attack, Attack, Attack

The green lightning bolt from the storm struck right at Shrimp's still form. It crashed through the sea of upturned rocks from Seismic's attack, and any chunks of earth that the bolt came into contact with, it blasted apart with all the ease and force of a sledgehammer bearing down on glass.

When the bolt hit Shrimp, it exploded into a nova of bright green energy that lit up the night sky with a crackling roar. All the rock and debris that surrounded Shrimp was blasted away from the shockwave of the bolt.

"Tch." Aldrich looked down at Shrimp.

Shrimp still stood tall. Green arcs of electricity coursed across his body, and his body stuttered, his muscles affected temporarily by paralysis. The ground beneath shrimp had been reduced to a molten red puddle, casting an angry red shadow over Shrimp's iridescent rainbow shell.

Cracks and scorch marks lined Shrimp's body, but he had not taken nearly as much damage as Aldrich had wanted. Instead, his antennae were glowing brightly, and quickly, the green electricity arcing around Shrimp absorbed into his antennae, transferring into a faint blue aura around him.

"He has some level of energy absorption, too," said Seismic. "Explains why he could take a full force Quake."

"The absorption wasn't as effective against your Quakes," said Aldrich. "It looks to be more effective at absorbing heat energy. It looks like the best way to get through that thing is with physical force."

Valera!"

"Yes, master!" Valera stood atop a rock pillar, looking down at Shrimp with a wide, fanged smile and gleaming red and black eyes.

"Put your shield away. Go on offense. Go all out," declared Aldrich.

"It would be my pleasure." Valera licked her lips before dropping her greatshield. Before it fell to the ground, it faded away into a shower of black and white particles. She clenched her fists tight, and a bloody, rippling red aura surged around her.

Valera drove off from the rock pillar at intense speeds, shattering the stone she jumped from. She flew downwards like a speeding bullet, a punch cocked back.

Shrimp was still paralyzed, still processing the electrical energy running havoc throughout his body, and he took the hit straight to his face. A bloody shockwave erupted from Valera's punch, exploding like a bomb that slammed Shrimp straight towards the ground.

Shrimp gouged out a sizable crater from the impact as his head whipped back from the blow, the shell around his cheeks cracking and crumbling and leaking blue blood.

"Don't let up!" said Aldrich. "Keep the pressure on!"

Crow growled as he swung his huge dark wings forward one by one, and with each swipe, a rain of giant black, metallic feathers shot down like a volley of spears.

Shrimp saw the attack coming and leaped onto his feet and put his four arms over his face. The feathers smashed against him, scraping against his shell in a shower of sparks and a clang of metal as impossibly hard feathers struck by impossibly hard shell.

The feathers cut sizable scratches into Shrimp's shell but all skidded off, embedding deep into the shattered ground around Shrimp.

Shrimp peered up at Aldrich, gazing at him with narrowed rainbow-colored eyes.

"You...must kill you," said Shrimp as he slightly crouched down, putting power into his feet.

"No you don't!" Valera used an upgraded version of [Dash] called [Bloodmist Approach]. It was a powerful, higher level vampiric racial ability that abused the vampiric ability to turn their body into red mist.

Valera broke down into crimson mist, and in her mist state, sped forwards at incredibly high speeds akin to teleportation. She instantly manifested into her physical form above Shrimp and flipped before crashing down an axe kick onto Shrimp's head.

Shrimp blocked this attack with a guard.

Another booming shockwave echoed through the air as Valera's armored heel crashed into Shrimp's thick forearm shell. The ground beneath Shrimp cratered as he dug into the earth from the sheer downward force of Valera's strike, but Shrimp's guard did not break.

Instead, crackling arcs of green and blue energy surged around Shrimp's body before he faded away in an instant, appearing right behind Valera in a shower of rainbow colored sparks.

This was the same high speed movement that Shrimp used to dodge strikes from Mel Morales and Seismic beforehand.

Notably, Aldrich determined that Shrimp could only use the high speed movement for short distances, otherwise it would have used it to escape by now.

Shrimp cocked back a fist, and the green and blue stripes running down his forearm started to glow brightly as he charged his incredibly powerful punch.

At this rate, Valera was going to get hit. Shrimp had taken her blindside in a single instant, and in the time it would take her to turn around, he would unleash his blow.

That is, if Aldrich had not been micromanaging his units this entire time.

The Deathwheel emerged from over a fallen rock chunk, using it as a ramp to soar into the air before ramming right into Shrimp's back. The Deathwheel ran Shrimp into the ground, causing the variant to faceplant into the earth with a heavy crash that split the already broken ground.

The column of fused spines that lined the Deathwheel's body rotated rapidly like a buzzsaw, screaming out sparks as they grinded against Shrimp's back shell. The skulls gathered around the sides of the Deathwheel all chattered in a skeletal war cry as it exerted its maximal strength and velocity against Shrimp.

"Gh..." Shrimp loosed a grunt of exertion as he lashed out his tail. It curled up flexibly and quickly, slamming against the Deathwheel and knocking it forwards, right into Valera.

Good positional awareness, Aldrich noted.

At first, he had thought that Shrimp fought like a complete amateur, taking unnecessary hits, not knowing how to use his powers effectively, and moving rather clumsily despite his incredible speed and strength, but it seemed that Shrimp was learning how to fight.

And learning fast, too.

Shrimp had seemed like a child in its curiosity, and that also showed in its experience with its powers. But it was learning more control over its strength and abilities by the second.

This fight needed to end sooner rather than later.

'We won't weaken it quickly enough' said Seismic, thinking the exact same thing as Aldrich as he stared down at Shrimp with crossed arms and a scowl. 'Not before it adapts to us. Especially not if we can't use our strongest attacks for fear of giving it cover.'

'Adapt? Trust me, adapting to my control and attack patterns is something that I'm confident almost nobody can do,' said Aldrich. 'You stay focused on landing a final blow. Signal me before you do.'

'Got it,' said Seismic.

The two of them watched the battle resume below.

Valera swatted the Deathwheel thrown her way to the side to prevent it from knocking her down, but in that moment of distraction, Shrimp had cocked back his fist again, ready to unleash a mighty energy wave to engulf both Valera and the Deathwheel.

Aldrich snapped his fingers.

The ground beneath Shrimp broke apart near instantly into sand, tumbling Shrimp back and causing him to lose focus on his punch. His forearm clicked back out of his upper arm, the piston system disengaging and the glowing blue and green energy strips fading in color.

That was another thing Aldrich had noticed. Shrimp needed complete concentration to unleash his devastating punch attacks. On top of that, they had a short windup time where he had to engage the piston structure of his arm.

All things Aldrich could easily abuse with his superior micro.

Against Aldrich, who was used to accurately and effectively manning multiple units to the absolute maximal effectiveness, any attack that needed a channel time like that energy punch was something that would never see the light of day.

Shrimp fell down into the quicksand pit, and very quickly, the sand covered over his shins. He tried to jump up, but the Antlion's anti-flight field was strong enough to keep even Shrimp grounded.

Instead, Shrimp used its energy fueled high speed movement to rush out of the range of the sand pit before it could grow large enough to make it impossible to effectively

escape. On solid ground, away from Valera and the Deathwheel, Shrimp jumped in the air, trying to get out of range of all the units harassing him down below.

Shrimp aimed right towards Aldrich and jumped.

The moment Shrimp jumped, something slammed into Shrimp, sending him crashing back down into the sandpit.

It was Ace, Blackwater's rank 3 student. He flew in the air with a powerfully built body, his eyes glowing a bright white as he stared down at Shrimp.

"You're not getting out," said Ace. He cracked his neck as he gestured with his chin casually up to Aldrich, his expression stern. "And while I'm in the air, you're never going to get to him either."

Aldrich smiled beneath his metal helm.

Like this, Shrimp would face attack after attack after attack again and again, leaving him without a single moment to rest.

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