

Descent 401

Chapter 401

Miles stood atop the Royal Blue Fort walls, taking a deep breath. To him, the air felt fresher than it had in a long time.

Though he was a youth used to warm weather, there was something about this heavy snow that made him smile.

At that moment, Miles suddenly felt a cold shiver tremble his heart. His eyes snapped in a certain direction, only to find a blue-eyed Variant looking toward him, a quirky smile curving its lips. The look in combination with its inhumanly white skin and hair made Miles' gaze narrowed.

This Invalid was teasing him?

All this time, the Variant Invalid had never made a move to attack personally. It stood at the back of the army casually observing everything from afar.

Of course, this wasn't for lack of attempts by the Fort. However, any targeted assault toward the Variant Invalid seemed to always lead in failure. It simply had too many guards around it.

The most powerful warriors of this Invalid army were all definitely concentrated around this white-skinned Invalid.

"Begin the bombardment sequence." Miles maintained eye contact with the Invalid as he barked out this order coldly.

In truth, he wasn't the commander of this mission, but he took charge. The general that was meant to act the head and the soldiers beneath him wouldn't dare to ignore his commands regardless. Since that was the case, he exuded an air of superiority, speaking with an undeniable air of leadership.
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The canons whirred to life. Due to the situation, they had deployed the Force Disruption Towers in the outer city as well. Compared to the past, their weaponry couldn't even be compared as night and day.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

A volley soared through the air, leaving a trail of black smoke and burning winds in its wake.

Thousands of Invalids were taken out with every shot. It would have been a massacre that chilled the hearts had it not been for the fact these mindless beasts didn't even seem to register the fall of their comrades. They only continued to listen to the orders of their leader, charging forward without thought of fatigue, pain or unwillingness.

However, the point of this volley wasn't to wipe them all out to begin with.

"Open the gates."

Miles issued his second command seeing that they had cleared out enough space.

Beneath the city wall, a troop of soldiers stood with hardened faces. This was the first time a legion was being sent out to deal with the Invalids directly, how could they not be serious? PANDA NOVEL

Among this troop, there were a few familiar faces, though.

Within the vanguard, there was a large man with sharp features. Despite his large belly, his body exuded a solid and powerful feeling. He was the kind of man who rippled with muscles despite the fat that covered most of his body.

This man was Milan, Leonel's Center. Anyone who understood the rules of ancient game of American Football knew how close the relationship between a quarterback and his center was. However, it had already been almost a year since the last time Leonel had seen the big guy.

In a distant corner of the city, Yuri watched all of this in silence. No one had time to bother with a teenage girl after Aina and Leonel disappeared. In fact, she remained in the same home within the core city she had once shared with Aina. It was as though everyone had forgotten about her.

She waited patiently, seemingly knowing that Aina would be back to get her eventually.

BANG!

The Gates suddenly stopped moving.

“CHARGE!”

Milan’s voice billowed, his belly rumbling with an inconceivable strength as he projected an air of confidence.

The troops of about a hundred shot out like an iron ball out a barrel.

Joel lowered his halberd to the ground, pulling out a handgun from his waist he fired. His gaze tinged a slight red as he mowed down Invalids with a cold efficiency.

If a football fan saw him in his current state, they’d roar out that Headhunter Joel had returned.

Every one of his bullets travelled through an Invalid’s head, his speed causing one’s heart to tremble.

Milan stood at the helm of the troops, his chest and belly flaring outward. A towering energy shield appeared before their vanguard, protecting them from all sorts of long-range ability Invalids.

A third of Leonel’s teammates stepped forward. He was a man even larger than Milan. He stood a full head taller, but his body didn’t ripple with muscle like the latter’s. In fact, any ripple it had could only be described as undulating fat, waving about his body like a tsunami.

This teammate had brown skin and a red line down his forehead. He was the left tackle of the Royal Blue football team, the protector of Leonel's blindside, Raj.

He stamped down a foot hard causing the ground to undulate. At that moment, the thick sheets of ice shattered, clearing the path of slippery death traps and causing several Invalids to lose their footing.

"Forward!" Milan roared.

From the top of the city walls, Miles watched all of this with narrowed eyes. The truth was that he didn't even know who these men were. In his mind, he was only thinking about how to bring such a powerful squad under his control, having no idea why such a squad was formed in the first place' ;

Miles placed this thought to the back of his mind. It was time for him to act.

"First phase is complete. Commence with the second!"

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Miles stepped to the edge of the walls, taking a deep breath. A strong surge of Force whipped around him, forming rainbow-colored clouds around his body.

The rainbow clouds continued to grow in size, blanketing the area around Miles at ever-increasing speeds.

As the battle below raged on, it was hard for anyone to take notice of such a phenomenon. Many weren't qualified to do so. Though rainbow clouds should have been something that captured the awe of all, the truth was that most didn't have the affinity necessary to sense them because...

They were formed of Dream Force.

By this point, it couldn't be more obvious why it was that Miles' ability was useless against Leonel. The former had an ability reliant on a Force that practically bowed down to the latter.

The clouds eventually grew from covering just a few tens of meters to over several hundred. Very quickly, it covered over a kilometer.

Miles had been able to cast an illusion over tens of kilometers worth of city. This much was most definitely possible for him. The only question was whether or not he would have the time he needed to do it. PANDA-NOVEL.COM

But, there were two things working in his favor. The first was the Invalids were too far from him and most of them likely weren't even aware of what he was doing. And, the second reason was as the Descent of the Fourth Dimension accelerated toward completion, Miles could slowly feel his ability strengthening and growing.

Now, whereas it would have taken him several hours to reach this level in the past, it only took him a little over half an hour to reach this point.

Miles' gaze flashed open, the troops below were still battling, but they had fallen into a stalemate. But, this was perfect, this was exactly the situation they wanted.

The reason they were in a stalemate wasn't because their momentum had stalled, but rather because they were pacing themselves to maintain their stamina for a final push.

Within the vanguard, Milan, Joel and Raj manned the core. Joel became their main source of attack, Milan was their defense, and Raj was their crowd control. They worked together seamlessly, waiting for the perfect opportunity to lash out.

On the football field, and in any sport, for that matter, momentum was an important but abstract concept. Yet, as a team that rarely if ever lost, the Royal Blue squad had a perfect grasp of it. When it was time... they would be ready. PANDA NOVEL

The rainbow clouds blanketed the battlefield at that very moment. For the first time, the troops could see them clearly.

The Invalids began to act erratically, their senses being completely cut off.

Miles' ability had many different uses. Just like Simeon, he was able to slowly learn about it over time and refine it.

Though he could weave intricate illusions, doing so used too much of his stamina and took even more time. However, if he broke down the illusions into their individual parts, he was able to gain sometimes even better results for a smaller sacrifice.

For example, it was possible for him to target particular senses.

In order for an illusion to work, Miles had to ensure that all five senses were accounted for. Whether it was touch, smell, sight... it all had to be perfect or else the illusion could collapse. p??J??????

But, likewise, this meant that Miles could hone in on specific parameters and tweak them to his liking,

He could target touch and make the same amount of pain feel ten times worse. He could target scent and force even the most veteran of hunting dogs into a corner. He could target sight and make a person feel as though they had been blinded, never to see anything ever again...

This was what abilities could do. The possibilities were endless as long as one had the creativity and talent to accomplish it.

When Miles experiments were taken to their logical extreme, he created an entirely new technique. And he called it...

“Sensory Domain.”

Miles' gaze blazed.

Within his Sensory Domain, everyone was under his control. He could strip a person of all their feeling. Their sense of touch, sight, hearing, smell and even taste, he could snatch them all.

And that was exactly what he did.

In that instant, the Invalids became a complete mess. They couldn't see what enemies they were targeting, they couldn't hear where they were coming from, either. Only those who had relatively sharp senses could use their sense of Force to make out where the troops were and target a general direction, but even then, there were too few of them.

'If I could cut off proprioception and the ability to sense Force, I would be undefeatable...'

[Author's Note: Proprioception is the ability of a person to tell where their body parts are in relation to one another. If someone lost this ability, even walking would be impossible. Doing practically anything would be impossible, actually. Well, not impossible, just very, very, very difficult]

Miles' ambition seemed endless. Even with such a powerful ability, he wasn't satisfied. However, he had done his part.

"Commence Phase Three!"

Miles barked out order after order. Everything was going smoothly. In fact, any dissatisfaction the Commander had had after having his post stolen was wiped away. Miles' commands were perfect and well timed.

It was clear that there were no pushovers among noble Heirs...

The Fort gates opened once again. But, this time, a worker's crew of engineers shot out instead of a group of warriors. They all hung on to the sides of trucks packed to the brim with several steel cases.

The trucks came to a stop quickly and the engineers all rushed out, opening box after box.

Very soon, it became obvious what they were doing. They were building something.

Those with the knowledge could tell exactly what these 'somethings' were as well...

Force Disruption Towers!

If the Third Phase succeeded, the Invalid army would be finished. Having to face the brunt of human technology without Force only led toward one path...

Death.

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The engineers got to work with an avid quickness. Though they were assured that everything was under control, these men and women were ultimately used to lives spent in labs and private work stations. Something like a battlefield was completely foreign to them.

Though they had had some run-ins with danger on their way to the Fort, it had already been over a year since then. They had gotten used to their lives of comfort and leisure again.

Many of them weren't even willing to be here. But, they had lost the luck of the draw, so this was their only remaining option.

It was no surprise, then, that many of them would be shaking and quaking as they worked. But, luckily, there was the vanguard of troops protecting them from all sides. As they noticed they weren't in any danger, they were able to work faster and faster.

...

In the distance, Leonel and Aina watched all of this in silence. It had already been a few days since they began to monitor the Fort, so they were quite used to the flow of things. However, this plan the Fort sprung was completely out of their expectations as well.

Aina seemed to still be mad at Leonel and spent all her time cuddling with Little Blackstar. As though that wasn't bad enough, even Little Tolly betrayed him as well.

Usually, Little Tolly could only interact with Leonel due to the hazard it presented. But, who knew when the little guy got intelligent enough to steal Leonel's Force Crafter Gloves and pass them over toward Aina. PANDA-NOVEL.COM

Somehow, both his partners favored Aina more than him.

Though Aina was still mad at him, Leonel couldn't help but chuckle at this.

Didn't this just mean he had excellent taste? Of course his woman would be beloved by all.

"Ah..."

Leonel's breath hitched when Aina turned back to glare at him. It couldn't be that she heard his thoughts, right? Her gaze seemed to spit fire as though saying 'who's your woman'?

Leonel's father had always warned him that a woman's intuition was scary, but he never really believed it. Back then, Leonel thought his mother had ditched them so he never trusted his father when it came to advice about women. What would an old man who couldn't even keep his own wife know about that topic?

Now that Leonel thought about it, his old man had told him a long time ago to stop confessing to Aina and that she probably thought he was annoying. Eventually, he just started making fun of him for all his failures. PANDA NOVEL

'... Damned old man.' Leonel thought to himself while smiling innocently toward Aina.

Suddenly, Leonel frowned.

'Milan... Joel... Raj...'

Leonel's jaw turned steely.

Aina seemed to sense the change in Leonel's demeanor and looked toward the battlefield. At that moment, the Gate was opening and a few familiar faces charged out.

In the past, Aina had only ever gone to a single one of Leonel's games. And, even if she had gone to more, everyone on the team wore helmets most of the time. So, she didn't recognize most of them. However, Milan and Joel had been with them on their trip toward the Fort.

Seeing them, she immediately knew what Leonel was thinking. Did Miles force them to do this?

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Leonel's expression became cold. His gaze locked onto the battlefield, not moving a single inch away. Even the smallest detail didn't escape his sights.

A pressure slowly built around his body, but he didn't make a move. What if Miles acted like he had before and forgot everything for the sake of killing him? Even if Leonel himself might be able to survive the bombardment now, that didn't mean that he would always be able to. In addition, what about the others?

So, Leonel waited.

When he saw the engineers come out and begin to build the Force Disrupting Towers, he took note of it all.

To his side, Aina rose from her squat near the ground. On her back, the massive curved box that carried her ax was there. But, in her hands, a great sword took the stage as her main weapon. Something told her she would have to move soon.

...

On the ground the battle had fallen into a state of one sided dominance. However, Milan controlled the pace of the vanguard, not allowing them to rush forward without reason. Their main priority was to protect the engineers. Once the towers were complete, they'd be able to drown these Invalids in bullets of the highest quality.

The morale of the troops were exceptionally high. Their casualties were near zero and the engineers looked as though they might finish at any time. The longer they worked, the more comfortable they got and the faster they moved.

However, all this time, Milan felt an itchiness to the back of his neck. It was the same feeling he got when the opponent was coming with a sudden exotic blitz. As the center of a football team, it was his job to point out protections and adjust to the onslaught of the opponent. In some cases, his decision trumped even Leonel's.

They say that the quarterback was the most important position on the field, but the offensive line was the most important group on the field.

“Defensive positions!” Milan roared, his rounded gut becoming almost like a steel cap. It flexed with such power that it seemed he wanted to break through Miles' sensory block.

The head of the vanguard was mostly constructed of Leonel's teammates. Hearing such words, they didn't hesitate to move. Their influence caused others to listen as well. There were only very few who lagged behind. But, even they rushed over as they followed with the crowd.

Milan had been the ancor to their defenses all this time. There was no way they would snub his command without reason or cause.

At that moment, on the top of the walls, Miles, who had been quietly observing everything suddenly felt uncomfortable as well because...

The Variant Invalid's smile still hadn't faded. In fact, it continued to look at him from start to finish as though observing something that made it curious.

The white-skinned Invalids smile suddenly became a grin. Its handsome face distorted, revealing a jagged row of teeth.

It's mouth outgrew its body in the blink of an eye. Soon after, its entire body more, enlarging and sprouting what felt like mountains of white fur.

What once was a handsome young man became a towering wolf that was easily half the height of the tall steel walls of the Royal Blue Fort.

Its jagged teeth shone beneath the drifting snow.

“ROOOAAARRR!”

The snowy ground quaked and the snowfall became ten times heavier. Whipping cold winds tore through the surroundings, kicking up even the wet snow and sending it jetting outward.

It took just a single roar. And just like that, Miles' Sensory Domain collapsed.

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Milan's expression hardened.

The lost Invalids suddenly grew focused once more. Whereas they hadn't had any direction in the past, they could now see their targets.

Miles hadn't expected such a thing to happen. He had thought that his ability was infallible. He had considered the possibility that his ability could be ignored by some powerful existences with stronger minds. But, he hadn't ever thought that it would be possible to dispel its effects on others in this fashion.

In truth, this lack of preparation could only be blamed on Miles himself. Ultimately, any Force based ability was reliant on Force to manifest itself “ obviously. In such a case, this meant that a greater Force could always force it to collapse.

One might think of how scared others were of the Dream Abode in Brave City and assume Dream Force to be infallible, but this couldn't have been further from the case.

The reason even Emperors without the appropriate affinity didn't dare to approach the Dream Abode wasn't because of the Dream Force alone, per se, but rather because of its sheer quantity.

The Abode represented a vast store of Dream Force. Even Leonel, with his talent, couldn't even begin to deplete it during his breakthrough, let alone someone without an affinity to speak of, or a person with a much weaker affinity like Miles.

However, if Leonel were to try to replicate the abilities of the Dream Abode himself "" without its support "" he would end up dying from exhaustion before he could cause the likes of Anared or Jilniya to feel threatened.
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And in such a case'! How could the stores and strength of a Variant Invalid not absolutely crush someone with a mere S-grade ability like Miles?

The white wolf stood at over five meters tall, its majestic coat and mane whipping about beneath its strength.

Its low growl crawled over the battlefield, sinking into the hearts of all those who heard it.

At that moment, the 12 guards around the Variant Invalid all shot forward at once. Their reserved auras surged out like a tidal wave, each and every one of them carrying an ice type ability. It was clear that the Variant Invalid had hand selected its guard and not a single one of them was below the SSS-grade.

'Shit.'

This was the only word Milan could think of. He could feel that the engineers had begun to panic. Any speed they had gained from growing comfortable plummeted. Whereas it might have only taken them 10 more minutes to finish before, now it wouldn't be surprising for it to take another half hour.

At such a pace, they were screwed. Even if it was just ten minutes left, they would be doubtful to finish.
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Miles watched all of this from the top of the city walls, his gaze turning steely. This was likely his final chance and he couldn't act rashly either.

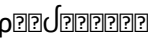
"Order the retreat." Miles said after some deliberation.

The Commander sighed a breath of relief. He had expected Miles to close the gates and leave them all out there to rot. This would have been very much in line with Miles' usual actions.

However, Miles knew that he was on a short leash. As much as he didn't want to risk the city by leaving the gates open for a second longer, if he abandoned them outside without even trying, any prestige he had managed to scrounge up would collapse once again.

"RETREAT!"

The scrambling engineers felt as though they had heard the most beautiful word to ever exist. They didn't hesitate to abandon their work. In fact, they didn't even bother to pack everything back up again.

They rushed to the sides of the trucks that brought them here, clamboring into the open trunks and hanging off the sides to the best of their ability. 

Many of them started screaming for the drivers to go before the rest of their colleagues even stepped forward. It was clear that in such a mind state, the 30 minute deadline was far too optimistic. They had already lost all will to fight.

At that moment, the 12 ice guards had reached Milan's vanguard. Having no choice but to protect the retreat of the engineers, they manned the rear.

Milan's large belly flexed once again, his strength pouring out and forming another shield of Force. Veins popped across his forehead as he layered the shield again and again. He knew that against such enemies, just one was far from enough.

His ability might have been similar to James', but James' ability was of the A-grade while his was C-grade. Though in the past year Milan managed to progress it to the B-grade', what was that in the face of so many SSS-grade threats?

BANG!

Milan's efforts were shattered in the blink of an eye.

Raj slammed his feet to the ground in an attempt to slow their approach, but the ice guards reacted even faster, a sharp Ice Elemental Force surging around them as the froze the ground beneath their feet solid.

No matter how hard Raj tried, he couldn't seem to cause another earthen wave. He could only raise his assault rifle and begin to fire madly, the recoil of the hefty gun causing his fat to undulate once again.

"We'll cover, retreat!" Milan roared.

He, Joel and Raj unloaded their clips.

They no longer cared about reserving supplies or their strength. Their only thoughts were of covering for their teammates. Among those who had been forced to join the army as a veil of protection from Miles, there were a few so young that Coach Owen hadn't even allowed them to see the field. Yet now, they were thrust into the middle of war.

"Dammit, rookie! If I can see your face instead of you hauling ass within the next second I'm gonna put a bullet in your kneecap!" Milan roared.

"Forget a kneecap, I'll lodge one in your ass if you don't make it to the gate in under five!" Joel barked right after.

They might haze these rookies and give them a hard time, but when it came down to it, it was their role as seniors to protect.

They could sense the hesitation of their teammates, but not everyone could stay behind. What would be the point of their decision then?

The three shooed them away, their roars being half drowned out by their rain of bullets. It didn't matter if they worked, all they cared about was slowing them down by an extra minute, an extra second, an extra step.

“Fuck, since you like the cold so much, go to hell!”

Raj ripped a grenade from his hip and bit the pin off. He threw it with all his might, watching as it rebounded off the iced ground and toward the ice guards.

“Raj, hell is hot.” Joel mumbled.

“Fuck, that just means these damned popsicles'll be melted into a puddle of their own piss!”

The three men laughed, their bullets never stopping.. In the back of their minds, they seemed aware it would be impossible to retreat with everyone else.

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BANG! BANG!

The grenade erupted, blasting bits and pieces of dirt, hot air and shrapnel in every direction.

A massive cloud of white shot up from the core of the explosion. But, before anyone could even sigh a breath of relief, an ice guard shot out from the dust cloud, gliding across ice of its own creation like a silent assassin.

'Shit.'

Joel brandished his halberd, the trigger of his rifle echoing a hollow click.

He tossed the useless gun to the side, gathering his courage as his hands gripped his weapon's polearm.

Milan pulled a heavy shield from his back, slamming it hard against the iced grounds and standing shoulder to shoulder to Raj.

Raj moved to bite off another grenade's pin, only to see the remaining 11 ice guards shoot out from the cloud of smoke. What was the point? The grenades were useless anyway' |

"ROOOOOOARRR!!" PANDA-NOVEL.COM

Another roar shook the battlefield.

The Variant Invalid stalked forward. By this point, the engineers had only just reached the gate once again. As for the troops who could only move on foot, they were still over 50 meters away. Unfortunately, in these conditions, many of them were having trouble finding stable ground to stand on.

The white wolf crouched, its powerful limbs shattering the ice beneath its feet.

BANG!

In this new world order, there were many sights the common people could have never dreamed of seeing in the past that they could experience now. Watching as a five meter tall and almost ten meter long wolf cross hundreds of meters in the blink of an eye' | was definitely one of those things.

A massive shadow seemed to swallow the sun.

Joel looked at the halberd in his hands while Milan and Raj looked toward their shields. Then, they looked toward one another, bitter smiles on their faces.

Miles watched everything from above, his jaw clenched.

“Close the gates!”

The harsh words grated on the ears, but it was clear by now that Miles had shown enough mercy. Even if his enemies wanted to use this to point out his weaknesses, he had plenty of evidence on his side.

This was all he cared about. As long as the optics were in his favor, that was all that mattered.

By now, the trucks had already crossed through the Gates. The only ones lagging behind were the running soldiers who had had to retreat by foot.

As they watched the Gate slowly close, those too far away felt a bout of despair while those who felt they still had a chance pushed their bodies to the limits, driving themselves forward as fast they could.

Unfortunately, the ground was in terrible condition. Where there was no snow was too easy for even the most coordinated of men to slip and fall. And, where there was snow weighed down the legs of those trying to escape, easily halving their speed.

BANG!

The Gates slammed shut. By now, only half the hundred troops that had come managed to make it back. As for those who were close, they banged on the steely gates with despair ringing from their voices.

Their efforts resounded like dull thuds. The Gates were too thick and too solid. Even if one stood on the opposite side, it would have been impossible to hear a thing.

All this time, the white wolf watched without even attempting to stop them. It raised its head haughtily, emitting the air of a King of Beasts.

“Concentrate your fire!” Miles barked out an order.

The bombardment of artillery shells had maybe been the only reason the tactical unit hadn't been completely surrounded and wiped out by Invalids. But now that Miles had ordered for them to concentrate their fire onto the white wolf, what chance did they stand anymore?

At that moment, a rookie helped Milan to stand while a few others helped Joel and Raj.

Milan opened his mouth to yell at the rookie once more, but the breaks to his ribs caused him to wince. In the end, he sighed. Was there a point in yelling anymore?

“Damned kid, we already told you not to join the army, but you didn't listen. Now you don't even listen to my orders. Why you all do such stupid things is beyond me.”

Milan shook his head. Though the white wolf was ignoring them now, that wasn't out of mercy. Would you care much about an ant you could crush any time you wanted?

While Milan was lost in his thoughts, though, he didn't expect the rookie who helped him up to actually respond to his words.

Looking forward seriously, the scrawny little guy in an oversized military uniform and helmet stood straight with his underdeveloped chest sticking out as far as he could force it to.

“Respect the game. Persist to the end!”

Milan was stunned out of his thoughts. For a moment, he could sense a sliver of Leonel's overbearing aura.

A sudden laughter rocked the battlefield. Whether it was Joel, Raj or Milan, their gazes went red without even having to look in the direction it came from.

“Well said, rookie!”

It was only then that Milan realized it wasn't an illusion.. He really had sensed it.

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Leonel suddenly manifested from thin air, his appearance causing no small number of people a great deal of shock.

A wide grin spread across his face as he looked toward his teammates. Any rage he had been feeling vanished, replaced by a gratification he had yet to feel in his life before.

“Captain!”

They didn't have time to think about how Leonel had suddenly appeared here, or how he was somehow already blocking the path between them and the white wolf.

After registering that Leonel was actually here, the faces of his teammates changed wildly.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Are you trying to die?!”

The whirring of the canons atop the walls never stopped. The truth was that from the vantage of those up above, it was impossible to hear even their screams, let alone noticing the sudden appearance of a single person on such a large battlefield.

Even now, no one but those on the ground had noticed the addition of Leonel. Of course, among those that noticed included the Variant Invalid and its ice guards. However, surprisingly, from start to finish, Leonel's back faced them.PANDA-NOVEL.COM

It was as though he was showing the same disregard for the white wolf that it had shown to his teammates.

Who cared about when you stomped an ant as long as it was done?

This sort of air of confidence was something the white wolf hadn't sensed from an enemy during this war. Such a feeling caused its toothy grin to become more sinister, carrying a more bloodthirsty air to it.

Leonel patted the rookie's shoulder. "What's your name?"

As part of the hazing ritual of their football team, every rookie was only known by exactly that title. They didn't have the right to have their own names until they passed through a year of initiation. It was only after this that they were allowed to have their own identities once again.

So, when the rookie heard Leonel ask such a question, he immediately went teary eyed.

Technically, he should have already passed through initiation a long time ago. But, due to the various circumstances surrounding the Metamorphosis, he had been stuck in his role as a rookie for over double the time he should have been.

However, somehow hearing Leonel's words made it all worth it. PANDA NOVEL

"My name is Drake, Captain!"

Leonel smiled. "You did a good job, Drake. Supporting your brothers is exactly what a man should do. But, remember in the future to only do things within your means, do you understand?"

Drake stared blankly at Leonel before lowering his head like a wronged child.

Leonel shook his head and patted Drake's shoulder again.

"Though things worked out this time, you also have to realize that your seniors wanted to sacrifice themselves for your benefit. If your life wasn't saved in the end, then wouldn't their sacrifice have been for nothing?"

Drake's gaze lit up with understanding. But, because he was looking at the ground, no one noticed.

Still, Leonel felt that he had said enough. Anymore would just be beating a dead horse.

Leonel looked up and toward the rest. Though some of the faces weren't from the Royal Blue football team, he smiled toward them nonetheless. For a moment, everyone seemed to forget that they were on a battlefield. Whatever pressure had been coming from the Invalids all around them, or the white wolf just 20 or so meters from them had all of a sudden vanished. ρ??∪???????

“Fire!”

Finally, the canons had been aimed and were all fired at once.

Leonel's gaze sharpened. Though this wasn't as bad as what Miles had done before, they were clearly still within the range of being struck. A 20 meter buffer was nothing to such high-tech bombs.

The white wolf's gaze didn't seem to want to leave Leonel, but Leonel also seemed to have no intention of paying any mind to the white wolf.

“All of you, let's go.”

“Ah...”

Everyone was shocked by Leonel's words. What did he mean let's go? Didn't he see that they were in the middle of a battlefield? Also, hadn't a volley of bombs just been launched, maybe in as soon as another second, they would all be dead.

However, Leonel only smiled and winked.

Force surged around him, lighting up a pattern on the ground that had been invisible to this point.

The truth was that Leonel hadn't appeared randomly and out of thin air, nor did he try to appear at the last moment on purpose. He had been trying to find a method of getting everyone out of here in one piece.

The reason he appeared abruptly was because before then, he had been using [Light Refraction] to appear invisible. In the time, he managed to draw a teleportation Art on the ground that he was now currently activating.

Though Leonel wasn't necessarily afraid of the white wolf Variant Invalid, he knew that he wouldn't have been able to accomplish this while its sights were locked onto him.

Luckily, Leonel's Soul Force had entered the Fourth Dimension. One had to remember that in order to practice in Force, Internal Sight was needed. Without it, sensing and controlling Force was impossible. By this logic, the stronger one's Internal Sight, the greater control of Force one had.

With Leonel's level of control, he was able to draw such a large array without the horde of Invalids around him even sensing any leakage.

Just as the bombs fell, Leonel's teleportation Art activated, taking him and everyone else along.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

The white wolf who had been observing Leonel all this time was slightly caught off guard. It wasn't that it didn't expect such a bombardment to happen, but rather that it had stopped paying attention to anything but Leonel.

On the walls, Miles sighed a breath of relief. His greatest worry was that with the white wolf's speed, they wouldn't be able to hit it in the first place. Now, he could put his heart at rest.

Of course... Miles had no idea that the only reason he ever hit the white wolf in the first place was because of the man he hated most in the world.

However, Miles wouldn't have time to think about this at all, because as the smoke slowly cleared, a familiar billowing coat of white fur appeared. Not only was it pristine, it was just as spotless as it had been before the bombardment.

The white wolf took its attention away from the sudden disappearance of the object of its interest, its pearly blue eyes turning somewhat demonic.

A low growl slowly overtook the waning sounds of artillery, the ground cracking once again as the white wolf's limbs flexed.

BANG!

A familiar shadow appeared in the skies.. But this time... it was above the walls of Royal Blue Fort.

Chapter 407

The soldiers manning the Fort walls were completely caught off guard. None of them seemed to have proper measures to react. Before anyone could even begin thinking of counters, the white wolf had already landed atop the walls.

A strong paw swept across, taking a troops of over dozen out in a single attack.

Blood and screams of agony rained. Some fell from the walls, but even those who were lucky enough to land upon it felt as though every bone in their bodies had been broken.

Just like that, the proudest feature of the Fort was conquered. What was such protection worth if took just a single leap to circumvent?

"Give me a damned gun." Miles barked, snatching the Commander's rifle.

Miles' gaze shone with a vicious light. The situation seemed bad, but it also represented an opportunity. This stupid beast didn't realize that the moment it jumped to the walls of the Fort, it had entered the range of the Force Disruption Towers they had already set up.

This ultimately meant that not only was it mostly restricted to only using its physical strength, but it also meant that true 25th century technology could be rolled out.

"Execute Plan B! Bring out the weapons!" PANDA-NOVEL.COM

The Commander regained his bearing beneath Miles' orders. Though he was a military official, the truth was that due to Royal Blue Province's special locale, most of its military personnel were admirals. Their experience with ground combat was limited.

However, as an Heir to a Governor Duke family, Miles had been trained in all sorts of matters since his youth. Regardless of the situation, he would be ready.

Beneath Miles' orders, everyone quickly regrouped.

Down below, the army of Invalids, led by the 12 ice guards, began to launch an assault against the Fort walls. But, Miles focused on the situation at hand.

At the rate they were going, it would take them several hours to breach the walls. But, the white wolf Invalid was an immediate problem.

Miles knew that his ability was useless against the white wolf. Plus, beneath the influence of Force Disruption Towers, his ability was also far more difficult to deploy. Since that was the case, he would rely on modern technology.

This was the advantage Earth had in comparison to other worlds. The number of geniuses born to this world allowed them to reach a level of strength that should have been impossible for a Third Dimensional world. Even as an infantile planet, they weren't pushovers. PANDA NOVEL

A tide of black uniformed tactical units surrounded the white wolf from all sides, a rain of bullets falling upon its pristine white coat.

Compared to the past, the pain the Variant Invalid felt couldn't be considered on the same level. Without the restrictions placed on technology, its tough coat was being continuously pierced.

“ROOOOAAARR!!”

The Variant Invalid tried to call upon the elements to strengthen itself once again. But, it found that the amount it could call upon had reduced by more than half.

In response, it rumbled a low growl, sweeping out a paw with the strength it did manage to gather.

“SHIELD!”

A captain roared out. ρ??∫???????

The tactical units moved forward like a well oiled machine.

Holding out black, hexagonal shields, the kneeled down shoulder to shoulder and slammed them into the ground. A fluctuating electricity soon followed soon, covering the surroundings in a pale blue shield that quaked beneath the strike of the white wolf.

“50% depletion!” A frontline soldier roared.

“Swap!” The captain replied instantaneously. “Fire!”

The operation seemed seamless. A cycle of defense, offense, and recharging. Shield units swapped out their energy cells. Attack units continuously reloaded. Their various captains handed down orders in a practiced and timely manner.

It was clear that these tactical units were far better than the seamen had been.

The white fur of the Variant Invalid finally began to be covered in patches of red, its blue eyes flickering with fury.

It wanted to jump down the walls and toward the city below, but it found that the restrictions on its ability were even more severe in that direction. At the same time, its pride didn't allow it to retreat.

...

Leonel reappeared on the same collapsed building he had been on before. But, this time, there were dozens of new faces around him.

However, none of them spoke.

Though Leonel had saved them, they all still had family within those walls. Leonel knew he couldn't very well leave things be. Even if his teammates didn't have anyone else to care for, Leonel couldn't very well allow so many innocents to die just because he hated the actions of a few.

This Fort represented all the remaining human population of Royal Blue Province. If this Fort fell, it would mean the end of anything that once represented this prosperous place. Leonel couldn't allow that to happen.

However, what Leonel hadn't expected was for the Fort to perform so well

After a while, he realized that he had really overthought things. This was ultimately The Empire they were talking about. The fact the Province was still in this state even after a year wasn't because they were weak, but rather because they had put all their effort toward building the Capital Province back up.

In addition, all Variants had been recalled to the Capital as well. If it wasn't for what happened, he and Aina would have been sent to the Capital as well.

It could be said that Leonel had yet to meet the true powerhouses of Earth when things are framed in this manner... Not that he would have to fear them, regardless, though.

‘Fine, I’ll let them repel this Variant Invalid first, then go to reclaim the interest I’m owed.’

What Leonel didn’t know at this point was that these matters wouldn’t end so simply. Miles might have been setting up his own plans, but there were other intelligent minds at work as well.

Variant Invalids weren’t so simple as they seemed. But this was only one aspect of the puzzle.. Maybe, just maybe, the Variant Invalid wasn’t the main villain of this story.

Chapter 408

“Are you sure you want to do this now, Joseph?”

At that moment, Leonel wasn’t the only one observing the situation. It was impossible that he would be.

To put matters into perspective, there were only eight other Forts of this kind on the whole of Earth. For it to be continuously assaulted by such a large army of Invalids, it was impossible for not only The Empire to be unaware, but for all the other hidden powers of Earth to be in the dark as well.

However, what was particularly interesting about this crew of observers was the fact that maybe had it not been for Leonel’s actions, they wouldn’t have been aware of these changes at all, at least not so soon.

The reason for this became obvious after remembering just who this Joseph was.

This was Joseph Warner, brother to Damian Warner and the very same man who led the first group of the Slayer Legion Leonel ever met.

Months ago, the three men “ Joseph, Damian and Leonel “ had come to an agreement to take down Royal Blue Fort. Such a large task would have come with unimaginable rewards.PANDA-NOVEL.COM

In order to prepare for this, the two brothers had no choice but to bring Leonel in to get registered. Had they simply left such a large contributor to their mission as an unknown, they could very well be the subject of investigation. Such a thing would have been too suspicious and they could have become marked as traitors.

Only by following all the red tape could they benefit from this potential boon. But, they had never expected to meet Hacker Hutch and had been even more caught off guard by the fact Hacker Hutch actually all but kidnapped Leonel.

It had already been months since then without a single word from Leonel.

However, in order to be ready, they had continued to monitor the situation of the Fort. They managed to gather information on everything from the patrol units to the tactical units and even to the zone clearing units.

When they learned of the situation between Leonel and the Slayer Legion though, they came to accept the fact that they had wasted their time' | Not only had they wasted it, but they had paid a dear price for it.

Both brothers had been demoted for their involvement in bringing Leonel to the Slayer Legion. Since their involvement was minimal, they only lost a single rank. However, it was still a devastating loss to them. PANDA NOVEL

Joseph had been so close to being promoted to a true Commander from Vice Commander, yet now he wasn't even in line for promotion any longer.

It was practically an unspoken rule within the Slayer Legion. A demotion was almost always the end of someone's career.

Ironically, this made the fervor the two brothers had for conquering the Fort all the stronger. This would be the only chance they had to truly reclaim any semblance of a career they once had.

But, now that an opportunity had really presented itself, Damian began to hesitate.

Joseph clenched his jaw. "This is the only option we brothers have left. If we don't, we'll remain as middling captains for the rest of our life."

Damian sighed. "I heard that they promoted that Sela woman again. To think we originally wanted to use her as a cover for Leonel, now she's riding above our heads." ρ??∪???????

Joseph's gaze hardened. But, in the end, he didn't say the words he thought.

"Gather up catwoman and the others. When this Variant falls, we move."

"Shouldn't we tell Cap "" Commander Sela?" Damian asked.

Joseph sneered. "What are the odds she'll be at headquarters where she's meant to be?"

Damian heard these words and didn't say anything more.

He was the one who brought Leonel to his brother back then. Though he knew his brother only blamed Leonel, Damian couldn't help but feel one part guilty.

Seeing Sela sit in a position he felt she didn't deserve ate Joseph's insides with a level of rage and jealousy he had never felt in his life before. Despite the fact she had taken the position that should have been his, she didn't even seem to treasure it. But, how could she?

When they met Sela, she was a fool who couldn't even see through Leonel's talent and instead chose to push him away. The only reason they promoted her was to continue breathing fire to the lie that they were enemies with Leonel and had taken him prisoner. This was all so that it would be easier to catch the Fort off guard with their assault' ;

Yet, she somehow managed to ride the momentum of that one chance to her current point. How could Joseph not be enraged?

But in the end, this all pointed back to one person. Though it couldn't be said that he was at the point of becoming irreconcilable enemies with Leonel, he likely wasn't very far.

‘

The situation was quite an interesting one. Leonel had no idea that Joseph and Damian were eyeing the Fort, while the two had no idea that Leonel was already on the scene as well.

But, neither group was aware that there was yet another party watching this silently.

Captain Sela, or rather, Commander Sela now, observed Joseph and Damian from afar with a smile on her face. But, rather than being on the scene like the two groups, she was using a special treasure in order to do so.

Interestingly enough, Commander Sela wasn't aware of Leonel's appearance near the Fort either. However, it was unclear if she would react much even if she did know.

Despite watching the movements of both Damian and Joseph and also being aware of their goals, she made no attempts to stop them. In fact, she didn't even rise from her comfortable seating arrangements.

She reclined in a cushy chair, her meaty hands resting over her belly with a content smile on her face.

As for what her plans were, maybe only she was truly aware.

Chapter 409

“Cap, who's this?”

Seeing that the situation was much better than they originally thought it would be, the guys somewhat relaxed. Now that their faculties were somewhat freer to think of other things, they finally noticed a silent figure sitting on the snowy roof of the collapsed building.

It was quite obvious that she was a woman. However, from the glimpses of her face they had seen, they didn't recognize her. Even if they ignored the scars, they didn't remember ever seeing such a woman before.

Compared to the past, the inflammation of Aina's scars had lessened by a large margin. So, while they still felt that this figure they didn't recognize wasn't very attractive and was quite pitiable, they didn't feel the same deep revulsion the people of Terrain had felt.

Still, many of them were still inwardly sighing a breath of relief. Did this mean that their Captain had finally moved on from Aina?

They had already lost count of how many times they'd tried to convince Leonel to consider other women. For a Five Star Quarterback to finish high school as a virgin! it was a waste of nature's gifts. They had shed no small amount of tears.

So, even if this woman wasn't up to the standards they believed their captain deserved, at the very least, she was a step in the right direction.

Unfortunately!

Leonel grinned. "You all don't recognize your own sister-in-law?"

Milan's eyes widened along with the other guys. PANDA-NOVEL.COM

"Aina?" Milan's face flashed with confusion.

Unlike Leonel who seemed capable of recognizing Aina regardless of the situation or apparently no matter how she looked, it was clear that the others didn't have this ability at all. The face Aina displayed now was completely unlike the one she had used at Royal Blue Academy.

Aina smiled lightly in greeting before glaring at Leonel.

Sister-in-law? It seemed that this Leonel was getting a bit too courageous. He still hadn't learned his lesson after she spent this time ignoring him?

However, Aina didn't react as violently as she usually did. Maybe she gave Leonel a slight bit of face due to the fact his friends were here. Or ' maybe she couldn't help but internally smile when Milan immediately knew who Leonel meant by sister-in-law' '.

Still, she took a mental note of this event and continued to play with the little mink and Tolliver.

"Oh, right."

Leonel changed the subject and put his hands on Milan and Raj's shoulders. A surge of Light Elemental Force sprung to life as Leonel cast [Grand Heal] on them.

Since the two were still within the Third Dimension, he had no need to use his improved version of the Art like he had done with Zilar. So, the process ended in just the blink of an eye. PANDA NOVEL

Milan forgot his shock about Aina and aimed it all toward the changes in his body. All the aching in his ribs suddenly vanished. In fact, he felt better than he had in years.

As an offensive lineman, Milan spent his life in perpetual injury. He had long since gotten used to playing through the hurt. This was maybe the first time in a long time that ' he was actually completely healthy?

"Cap!" Raj's mouth widened in surprise. "I thought you awakened a sensory ability? Did you awaken a second ability?"

Leonel's teammates looked toward him in shock, especially the rookie, Drake. It was as though they were looking at a god in the flesh.

Though they had heard a lot about powerful abilities through rumors, they had never once heard of a person awakening more than one ability.

Leonel chuckled and shook his head.

Though Earth was quite advanced in many things, when it came to understanding of this new world order, they were still quite lacking. There were many times in the past where others mistook Leonel's Snowy Star Owl Lineage Factor as his ability.

This only made sense, though. Earth had yet to begin creating its own magic systems. Even Terrain, which was considered to be near the bottom of the barrel in terms of worlds, had begun to refine their own.

Jilniya's Falls Style was exactly this. Terrain focused heavily on Styles and the boost it could give to their overall combat prowess. $\rho \int \sqrt{\frac{1}{2} \frac{d^2 x}{dt^2}}$

But Earth's? It had yet to find itself.

Thinking of this, Leonel looked up into the sky, trying to find their second moon and the location of Camelot. Unfortunately, the heavy snow guaranteed that that sky would be covered in a dense swath of clouds. Even if Camelot was right about him, Leonel wouldn't be able to see it.

Leonel couldn't help but wonder how the saga between Earth and Camelot would end. Maybe Camelot would be the trigger Earth needed to begin building its own magic system.

With Earth's ingenuity, Leonel had no doubt that they would soon forge a path of their own.

Just think about it, even with a magic system to speak of, even without Force, Leonel was now watching what was effectively an army of mortals slaughter a Variant Invalid with strength almost comparable to an entity of the Fourth Dimension.

That was unimaginable for the vast majority of worlds. In fact, Earth might be the only place capable of achieving such a thing.

Leonel smiled and shook his head.

“With me here, you all don’t have anything to worry about. I won’t let what happened last time happen again.”

Leonel looked back toward his teammates, a stern determination on his face.

A group of over a dozen men looked back toward him, not an ounce of doubt in their gazes. It seemed that long ago, Leonel had become far more than their quarterback.

Aina peeked back toward this scene, her eyes hiding a swirl of emotion.

The sight of Leonel leading a group of men and earning their respect and devotion’

” He looks most attractive like this.’

Aina’s eyes widened at her own thoughts, a furious blush lighting her features as she looked away. Unfortunately, no one would see this sight.

“Cap! That white wolf is done!” Drake suddenly called out.

Leonel looked back to see that the rookie was correct. That white wolf was on its last legs.

‘Is this really all a Variant Invalid is capable of?’ Leonel couldn’t help but frown.

He had heard so much about their legend and even more about their intelligence. But, this one fell because it not only lacked strength, but also because its mind was lacking.

Leonel’s pupils suddenly constricted, his head snapping toward a certain direction. What he saw shocked him to no end.

Tanks. Dozens of them. Each fitted with a long barrel that swayed with their every movement.

“ ‘| The Slayer Legion?’”

Leonel looked back toward the collapsing white wolf.

‘They want to take advantage of this situation?’

But ‘| something felt off.

Sparks flew in Leonel’s Dreamscape. But, without enough information, no connections could be made. Let alone realizing what was wrong with this picture, Leonel didn’t realize there were sparks forming at all...

...

Chapter 410

Leonel’s frown deepened as he watched the Slayer Legion’s forces move in.

‘This is likely the best chance they have to take down this Fort. If I was making the decisions and was desperate enough, I might choose to attack now as well.’

If Leonel was participating in the operation, he would feel more confident in the success. But, the main problem was that he wasn’t and he also didn’t trust the Slayer Legion to protect the innocents that might get swept into this situation.

The fact that they chose to attack now instead of waiting until the Invalids below dispersed told Leonel one very obvious thing: They wanted to use the Invalids to their advantage.

If Leonel was leading this charge, he would wait until both the white wolf was killed and the Invalid army it had been driven away. Only then could he minimize any potential casualties. But, whoever was leading these troops obviously had no intention of doing this.

'These bastards...'

Leonel's expression flickered with rage.

...

On the Fort walls, Miles finally let go of a rock that had been weighing heavily on his chest. PANDA-NOVEL.COM

"Subdue it!" Miles commanded.

The Commander beside Miles looked toward him in shock, but eventually disseminated the orders. This was indeed a good opportunity.

The Capital had likely long since begun its research on Invalids. But, whether they had caught a Variant Invalid just yet was unknown. After all, they were rare creatures to begin with. The fact one appeared on Earth just went to show the level of talents that could be born here.

Whether they traded this Variant in for merit or if they kept it to get a leg up themselves, both were viable options. Most importantly, Miles believed that such an important piece would definitely cause his father to pause in his resoluteness to abandon his first Heir.

"Junior Governor Duke! We have enemies approaching!"

Miles froze, his heart plummeting once again.

They still hadn't dealt with the Invalid army below. The damage to their defenses by now was definitely not negligible. If they had to deal with more armies, there would most definitely be a major problem.

Was it more Invalids? A beast horde brought over by the explosions? Something worse? PANDA NOVEL

“Give me information! I need numbers and an estimate of their strength.” Miles relayed his orders. But, what he learned left him stunned on the spot.

Those charging toward them now weren’t Invalids or beasts at all, but rather humans. In fact, they seemed to have a prototype of a mobile Force Disruption Tower moving along with them.

From a quick analysis, the technology that this troop of humans was using fell into the 22nd and 23rd centuries. This could either be because this was their technological limitation, or, the more likely theory was that mobile Force Disruption Towers weren’t as potent as immobile ones.

Regardless, the threat they presented was not small, especially now after a battle.

Procuring military goods after the Metamorphosis was incredibly difficult. Things that were once simply like mining and synthesizing material became large mountains to climb. This didn’t even mention the most obvious fact that the population of Earth had been massacred by over 99%. They didn’t even have the numbers they needed to sustain mass production and the machines they once used that could cover this weakness had restrictions of their own.

After such a massive battle, the reserves of the Royal Blue Fort had been depleted by over 80%. And, as if that wasn’t enough, the remaining 20 or so percent they had left needed to be used to drive the Invalid horde below away.

At this point, of the 12 SSS-grade threats, only five of them had been dealt with. The current situation was terrible. They didn’t have the means to deal with another threat at this very moment.

... ρ??∫??????

Within the formation of tanks, Joseph watched on from a cockpit, a deadpan expression coloring his visage. He steeled his heart, his only thoughts being of success. He didn’t care what he had to do.

Damian watched on from the side, conflicting emotions swimming through his chest. But in the end, he too steeled his heart.

They knew of the events that happened months ago. This Fort was manned by a tyrant that bombed even his own people. Even if it meant sacrificing a bit more to save the majority, it would be worth it.

This Metamorphosis was the opportunity the Slayer Legion needed to finally overturn The Empire. They needed to take this chance.

Unfortunately, in all their thoughts of glory and patriotism, the two brothers forgot to think of one very important thing: How could they possibly be the only ones who thought of this?

The Slayer Legion seemed to be a massive power with immense strength behind it. Even if it couldn't compare to The Empire, not many things could to begin with.

So, if what the brothers thought was true... Why would the Slayer Legion leave it up to two demoted brothers to conquer a Fort when the opportunity was presented right before them?

...

“The Slayer Legion?! They actually dare to attack us?!”

Miles was thoroughly enraged when he learned of who he was facing.

To a noble like him, the Slayer Legion represented nothing but the dregs of society. He really couldn't fathom what reason a person could possibly have to risk their lives to join an organization with no future to speak of.

There was no worse feeling than when an ant could pose problems for you. Miles had gone from a young Heir, to a person ostracized by his own father, to clawing his way back up little by little, just for an insignificant bug to be blocking his way in the final moments.

How could he not be infuriated?

“Man the canons!” Miles roared.

Unfortunately, the Slayer Legion had moved first. Since they dared to act so brazenly, how could they not have their own plans?

“In position?” Joseph asked without turning to his younger brother.

“... Yes.” Damian spoke with a bit of strain.

“Do it.” Joseph said coldly.

If Miles knew about Damian’s ability... He would know that Leonel wasn’t the only one who could move through the ground.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

A swarm of Invalids crowding the bottom of the walls suddenly imploded. But, worst of all, a large chunk of the wall’s foundation went with it.

The steel alloy the walls were made of had been refined with hundreds of years of technology. Blasting through them with 22nd century tech was impossible. However, in their several months of observation, the Slayer Legion realized one thing: In the haste to build this wall as quickly as possible, its foundation was neglected.

If strategic points were targeted... it would collapse beneath its own weight... especially if it had already been damaged by a horde of Invalids first.