

BIOLOGICAL 1111

Chapter 1111: Levium (28)

As the battle between his clones and the remaining troops near Uncle Benjamin raged on around him, Erik descended towards the man's lifeless body.

The chaos of the fight seemed to fade into the background when he set his eyes on the older man's lifeless face from a distance, replaced by a hollow silence.

In truth, it wasn't silent at all; it was just that Erik was overtaken by feelings and thoughts.

After years of being hunted by the blackguards and organizations associated with them, he finally got rid of the root cause of all those problems—the same person who started it all by saying to the blackguards he likely had the biological supercomputer.

However, this proxy, Levium... Benjamin Kaminski, wasn't by any means less responsible than the entire organization. On the contrary, he was responsible for his father's capture; he was the one responsible for his imprisonment at the hands of Sinisa Volkov, which ultimately led to his death.

"There is still a lot to do."

Notifications of mana absorption and level-ups flashed across his vision.

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

But Erik barely registered the notifications.

His feet touched the ground, kicking up a small cloud of dust. Uncle Benjamin lay there, a gaping hole in his chest where Emily's shot had found its mark.

The man who had once loomed so large in Erik's life now looked small and fragile.

Erik kneeled beside the body. There would be no last-minute interrogation, no chance to extract information about the blackguards' plans or the secrets of Maynard Island from him. That opportunity had died with the man known as Levium.

But it didn't matter. The attack on Sleeb Harbor told Erik everything he needed to know. The blackguards had come for him, which meant they knew he was here. And if they knew that, then they would have started preparing for an assault on Maynard Island months ago.

This meant that time was of the essence.

Erik reached for Uncle Benjamin's head. He hesitated for a moment, his hand hovering over the man's rapidly cooling skin.

A flood of memories washed over him. Uncle Benjamin had been many things to Erik: a support, a friend, and family.

<No... He doesn't deserve this. My affection...>

Erik shook his head, pushing the thoughts aside. With grim resolve, he extracted the brain crystal from Uncle Benjamin's skull. The small object pulsed as Erik stored it away.

Next, he turned his attention to collecting blood samples, but he felt uneasy. It was one thing to get the two materials from thaids and nameless corpses, even from those he knew but that he hated. But this... this was different.

The man lying before him had raised Erik for a long time. For better or worse, he had been a constant in Erik's life for years. And now, here he was, treating the man's remains like just another resource to be exploited.

Erik's hands trembled slightly as he finished collecting the samples. He stood up, looking down at Uncle Benjamin's body one last time.

The man's face was relaxed in death, free from the tension that had defined him in life, but a complicated tangle of emotions came with Uncle Benjamin's death.

Erik suppressed his feelings, locking them away in a corner of his mind, and tried to make determination surge. There were many blackguards around, and he had to free Sleb Harbour before leaving for Maynard Island.

As he prepared to take flight again, Erik's communication device crackled to life.

"Erik? Are you alright? We're heading your way," Emily was on the other side.

The man hesitated before responding. "Stay where you are," he said. "This isn't over yet. There are still enemies here, and many more within the rest of the city."

Amber chipped in. "Yes, but—"

Erik cut the connection before Amber could say anything else.

<They have a great deal of explanation to do later...>

Right now, he needed to focus on the next steps.

Erik took to the air once more, surveying the battlefield below. His clones were making short work of the remaining blackguards, their superior abilities turning the tide of the fight. With each enemy that fell, Erik felt a surge of power as he absorbed their mana.

[LEVEL UP]

[LEVEL UP]

[LEVEL UP]

The notifications kept coming. Erik's power was growing even more than it already had, but he knew it wouldn't be enough. Not for what lay ahead.

Erik needed something more powerful if he wanted to fight the blackguards. Elemental powers were strong, but Levium just showed him they paled compared to weird brain crystal powers out there.

If any vindicator was as strong as Uncle Benjamin, Erik would have huge trouble on Maynard Island.

<They aren't even the strongest among the blackguards... I wonder how strong their leader will be...>

But then... it came the time.

<System.>

<Hey ho!>

<I'm in no mood for this... Listen,> Erik said. <Uncle Benjamin had two brain Crystal powers...>

The system cut Erik off. <Do you want to know if you would get both by absorbing his brain crystal?>

<Exactly... It would be a great boon. If I could use Telekinesis like he used it against me, with all the other brain crystal powers I have, I might reduce the risks when facing the other blackguards...>

The system, though, didn't immediately reply. It was making its calculation, trying to predict the outcome of Erik's absorbing this modified brain crystal.

<I... I don't know what would happen if you absorbed Levium's brain crystal,> the biological supercomputer said. This time, its tone was uncharacteristically hesitant.

<What do you mean you don't know?> This was new, even for it.

<This is a new situation, even for me,> the system said. <You might get both powers, but there's also a possibility you could end up with none. More concerning is the risk of unpredictable damage to your neural links or to your brain crystal itself. Whatever Doran did by creating this, we don't

have information about. He might have had to mess up how brain crystal works in order to give people more powers.>

Erik frowned. <So, you don't know what will happen...>

<Correct. You've never absorbed a brain crystal from a dual or triple wielder before. Its uncharted territory.> The system paused.

<I can only say I've run many computations to estimate the potential outcomes, but the possibilities are too varied and unpredictable to provide a definitive answer.>

Erik thought hard about what to do. Getting more power could really help him face the tough challenges coming up. But there was also a chance it could hurt him. It was a tricky decision to make.

Chapter 1112: Telekinesis (1)

Erik stopped to think.

<How many DNA points would it take to counter every potential aftereffect this brain crystal might give me?>

Erik's voice shook slightly as he spoke. He knew this was a big decision. The choice he was about to make could have serious effects, and he felt the pressure of that.

The system gave him a cautious response. <I would recommend a careful approach. It would be wise to use a good portion of DNA points to analyze the brain crystal after ingestion but before absorption. This would allow us to expel it, or at least be prepared if something goes awry. However, depending on what happens, we might need to use all your DNA points, and even then, it might not be enough.>

Erik's brow furrowed. <How many DNA points do I actually have?>

<You currently possess 1,655,916 DNA points,> the system said. <However, I think using at least 500,000 points to analyze the brain crystal would be wise. We will also be able to find out how to avoid unpleasant situations if you absorb new brain crystals like this one, or if it is possible altogether.>

Erik took a deep breath. Weighing the risks against the potential rewards, it was clear the risks were much higher than the rewards.

The problem was that he found himself in a tough situation. Without a power like that of Uncle Benjamin, he doubted he could take on the blackguards on Maynard Island.

<Well... maybe I can; it's just that I would like to have more cards in my hands.>

The place was bound to have many Vindicators and higher-ranked individuals, and for sure, they would not be easy to fight.

But then he decided. <Let's do this,> he said.

<Are you sure about this? We might waste a lot of DNA points for nothing...>

<Yeah... If things go bad, we will search for good powers among the dead and merge them to get something useful.>

Erik swallowed the brain crystal, followed by the blood.

[Benjamin Kaminski's DNA gained. Initiating analysis...]

[Benjamin Kaminski's Brain Crystal gained. Initiating analysis...]

[500,000 DNA points are required to analyze the brain crystal and the DNA. Do you want to proceed?]

<Yes.>

[Procedure Started.]

As soon as the crystal passed his lips, Erik felt a strange feeling wash over him. Something was definitely off about Uncle Benjamin's brain crystal.

<Fuck...>

The biological supercomputer began its work, allocating the agreed-upon DNA points to analyze Uncle Benjamin's brain crystal.

10 minutes passed, in which Erik felt weirder and weirder by the second. Then he was suddenly overwhelmed by an explosion of pain.

It felt as if every nerve in his body was on fire. It was different from when he absorbed new powers with few DNA points.

Erik doubled over, gasping for breath. "What's happening?" he choked out.

<As I suspected, the blackguards' modifications to the brain crystal have caused complications.>

The system paused. <What a crude work...>

<Do you think it is the right moment to ponder what Doran did in his research?>

<Yeah... Sorry... He actually nailed the process on how to accommodate more powers into one single brain crystal; the problem is that it is reliant on external factors. To achieve the effect of granting two brain crystal powers to Levium, he fundamentally altered the crystal's structure by using chemicals. I might have an idea about what he used...>

Erik gritted his teeth against the pain. <Is this the reason for this pain despite not having even absorbed the powers?>

<Yes. The blackguards injected another chemical into Levium's brain that helped stabilize the mana flows from both powers within the brain crystal. Without this stabilizing agent, the two mana flows are clashing violently within you. That's why you feel pain.>

Erik tried to process this information through the haze of pain. <Can you fix it?>

<Yes, I can,> the system said. <And luckily for you, it won't require all of your DNA points to do so and absorb the powers. However, the process will be intense.>

<Powers?>

<Yes. You will get both of them...>

<At least some good news. Very well; do it and do not waste time.>

<Let me finish this first.>

Ten more minutes passed until the biological supercomputer completed the analysis process.

[Analysis complete.]

[Analysis complete.]

[600,000 DNA points are required to fix the brain crystal and absorb its powers. Do you want to proceed?]

<YES, YOU MOTHER FUCKER!>

<There is no need to be so edgy!>

[Blood absorbed. DNA-storing procedure initiated. Please wait.]

[Brain crystal absorbed. Brain crystal power absorption process initiated. Please wait.]

The biological supercomputer sprang into action, redirecting vast amounts of DNA points towards stabilizing the chaotic mana flows within Erik's body and fixing whatever was needed to be fixed.

The young man didn't actually know what the system did. It said something about the fact Doran actually nailed the procedure to a certain extent.

It was actually a scary thought, because with a few more years, millions of people with multiple brain crystal powers might roam the planet, and if their powers were going to work like Erik's biological supercomputer or like Doran's research, who needed brain crystal from other individuals, Erik didn't see the world going toward a good future.

Erik suddenly felt a powerful burst of energy flow through his body. This was just as intense as the terrible pain he was feeling.

It was like two powerful forces were fighting inside him. The energy and the pain battled against each other, making Erik's body feel like a war zone.

Erik felt stuck between feeling great and excruciatingly bad. Both sensations were trying to take control of his body at the same time.

For what felt like an eternity, Erik's body became a battleground. The clashing mana flows from the two brain crystal powers raged against each other while the system worked to bring them into harmony. Erik's vision blurred at that point, his consciousness flickering as the conflict within him reached its peak.

Just when Erik thought he couldn't take it anymore, something changed. The pain went away. Something else replaced it—a weird tingling feeling that spread from his head to the rest of his body, all the way to his fingers and toes. Erik took a deep breath, then another one. He was slowly getting used to this. Then everything turned normal.

Chapter 1113: Telekinesis (2)

<Are you done?>

[PROCEDURE COMPLETE.]

[PROCEDURE COMPLETE.]

<Is this enough of a response to you?>

<You prick...>

There was nothing more Erik wanted right now than to punch the biological supercomputer.

<The two mana flows have been integrated with the other ones. You now possess both Telekinesis and Levium's Parallel Will brain crystal powers... Well, it is not exactly right to call it a Parallel Will brain crystal power.>

<What do you mean?> Erik asked. The last thing he wanted was for another nasty surprise to come up.

<See it for yourself.> Then the system made Erik's status interface appear.

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[Host Information]

NAME: Erik Romano

Age: 18

Power level: 1,346

System level: 276

Experience: 9,243,007

DNA points: 544,916

Health: 22,640 / 22,640

Mana: 22,570 / 22,570

{Attributes}

Strength: 542

Intelligence: 474

Dexterity: 522

Energy: 1127

Available attribute points: 190

{Powers}

[Biological Super Computer Powers]

Brain Crystal Manipulation Brain Crystal Power Extraction Brain Crystal Power Merging Brain
Crystal Power Editing Brain Crystal Power Strengthening (LOCKED) DNA Manipulation DNA
Extraction DNA Merging DNA Analysis DNA Editing DNA Strengthening (LOCKED) Analysis
Brain Information Injector Device Manipulation

[Host's Powers]

Plant Master: A₁3B-RANKED

Chimaeric Demon: A α 3X-RANKED

Self Healing: A₁2A-RANKED

Instability: A λ 2B-RANKED

Phantom Veil: A₀2A-RANKED

Frostwind Fire tempest: A η 3A-RANKED

Force Bastion: A_v1B-RANKED Lightning Lord: A η 3A-RANKED

Beast Walker: A01B-RANKED

Telekinesis: A01A-RANKED (The user can lift objects into the air, using them both for attack and defense purposes. The greater the object's weight, the greater the speed at which it can move, and the greater the mana consumption.)

Will of the Hydra: A01X-RANKED

(The hydra gets a new head every time one is cut, and its mind splits, becoming more powerful. As you focus your will, you can split your consciousness, creating new cognitive centers that function in parallel. With each division, your mental prowess grows exponentially, enhancing your ability to perceive, analyze, and manipulate the world around you. Be mindful, because too many heads might lead to the loss of oneself. Each mind thinks independently, as if they are multiple personalities. The power increases the ability to think. The more brains the user has, the greater the ability is.)

{Skills}

Kyokar hand-to-hand style (MASTER)

Etrium's sword style (ADVANCED)

Crypt of the Desert Style (MASTER)

Alchemy (Intermediate)

Architecture (Beginner)

Thaid Expertise (Advanced)

Flora Expertise (Master)

Tactical Expertise (Advanced)

Management Proficiency (Intermediate)

Stealth Proficiency (Intermediate)

—

"What the fuck?!"

Erik's eyes went on the two new powers. The first one was Telekinesis, which was the one he actually wanted to get, despite knowing he wouldn't have been able to control it with the same proficiency Uncle Benjamin used it.

The second one, which should have been a parallel will brain crystal power, was actually something more powerful.

"An X-ranked brain crystal power?" Erik said aloud.

<Indeed,> the system said. <Most likely, not even Levium knew how powerful this was... After all, they can't analyze a power like I do.> Erik could swear the system had a smug look on its face, if it had one, of course.

<Most likely, they assumed it was an A-ranked brain crystal power, but in truth, it is much more.>

<The problem is,> Erik interrupted the biological supercomputer. <Where the fuck did they get this?>

The system paused. <We both know the answer to this question.>

From Mur. That was the undeniable conclusion. An X-ranked power was an extreme rarity, virtually unheard of among the creatures living in the Mannard Continent.

As much as he knew, but of course, he couldn't be certain, Erik and Emily were the only ones with one of them. Well, at least until now.

The only explanation for its existence here, at that point, was that it originated from a thaid native to Mur.

The implications of this were unsettling because they suggested that the creatures of Mur had brain crystal powers far beyond what was typically encountered on Mannard and raised questions about how Levium and the blackguards gained such a power.

The thaid having it must have been powerful, after all. How many people had to die to bring down a creature that had an X rank brain crystal power?

This also meant that the more time passed, the worse the blackguard situation would become for Erik.

They would not only get more neural links and become stronger, but they would also get more of such absurd powers. Erik had been lucky now, but nothing said he was going to be in the future.

<A hydra? What is it?>

<A mythological creature of some ancient books. According to the stories, every time a head was cut, a new one sprouted out of the stump. Of course, the beast was colossal and deadly. Since the power worked in a similar way, I thought it was a fitting name.>

It was Erik's time to have a smug look on his face. <This time you didn't mess up.>

<HEY!> The system said. <Are you still mad because of the Self-Healing thing?>

But Erik didn't reply. He was actually happy everything turned out well, but he couldn't be sure of that, of course.

<Are there any side effects or complications?> He asked, still wary.

<None detected. However, I think you should be careful as you use these new abilities. The Will of the Hydra is not really a simple power. You can basically create multiple parallel wills at the same

time. You can bring it to a level where what Uncle Benjamin did was child's play. The problem is that to make a new 'Head' requires a lot of mana... And...>

<And?>

The system paused. <They are permanent. You will basically have multiple versions of yourself inside your own head. If you are not careful, you might end up mad.>

Erik paused. <Nothing you might not be able to fix, though, right?>

<You want me to modify the power?> The biological supercomputer asked. <If I need it, yes. Why is there a problem?>

<Oh no.>

But Erik heard something in the computer's tone that made him think otherwise.

<Tell me the truth,> he said.

<Well... It is possible. It's just that it will require a fuckton of DNA points you might either get on Mur or in two years on Mannard...>

Chapter 1114: Telekinesis (3)

Erik nodded.

<Let's go back to the battle then...>

He took stock of his surroundings. The battlefield was different now. He didn't really know how much time had passed since the biological supercomputer started the absorption process.

The chaos of battle had subsided in Erik's immediate vicinity. Where moments ago the air had been filled with the sounds of clashing weapons and shouted orders, an eerie silence settled.

The smell of smoke still lingered, but the fires that had raged earlier were now reduced to smoldering embers.

<I wonder who put them out...>

Debris lay scattered across the ground. It really looked like Erik was in the middle of an apocalyptic movie.

In the distance, he could still hear the echoes of ongoing skirmishes, but here, in this small pocket of relative calm, he had a moment to gather his thoughts and try his new powers.

He reached out with his mind, lifting a small piece of debris. It rose from the ground, responding to his will as if it were an extension of his own body.

<It doesn't even consume that much mana...> But of course, that wasn't what Erik really wanted to check.

He started channeling mana through his Will of the Hydra's neural links. This power required much more mana than Erik expected. He pushed more and more of the substance until he heard something snap.

<I guess I just made a new head, like the system called it.>

The feelings Erik was having were similar but also different from the ones he had with Hais' brain crystal power.

<It's still good...>

However, there were differences between the two brain crystal powers. For starters, by checking his stats, Erik saw that his intelligence didn't increase.

<Martin's power increased it... Too bad this doesn't do it...>

Another difference was that the world was perceived slightly differently from how he perceived it with the investigator's brain crystal power.

It was still like slowing down, and he still could put more attention to the surroundings, but it looked like Hais' power put particular emphasis on these aspects.

<With only one head, it is like I have a tuned-down version of Hais' brain crystal power... But I guess the power's true strength comes from increasing the number of heads.>

Erik was happy with his new power, the Will of the Hydra. Even though it wasn't as strong as Hais' power at the beginning stages and didn't make him smarter, it was still very good. The best part was that it could get better as he added more "heads" to it. This meant Erik had a lot of room to grow it stronger.

Then Erik turned to the biological supercomputer.

<System... How many DNA points do I have left?>

<544,916. The process consumed a significant portion but left you with ample resources for future enhancements.>

The system said nothing else.

<Well... At least I'ven't been left with nothing.> Erik allowed himself a small smile. The gamble had paid off.

He now possessed two of the most powerful and versatile abilities he had ever encountered. With his already existing powers, he might be able to go to Maynard Island and not suffer as he did now.

<Damn... I basically won because of Emily. I should really reconsider how strong these girls became.>

But it wasn't just that. Getting a greater number of neural links, Emily's power started being less random and more precise. She could now glimpse into the future and get clearer pictures of her vision, but simultaneously, she could have visions whenever she wanted.

This wasn't really the greatest boon she got. By practicing, she got a sort of secondary power. Well, it wasn't really a new power, but a micro-usage of her existing one.

<An ability would be more appropriate to call it rather than a power.>

She could glimpse some seconds in the future without overloading her and without making her unable to move or interact with the environment. In short, she didn't lose consciousness anymore.

<That is probably how she planted that bullet so well.>

It was a scary ability, because with a proper brain crystal weapon, she could basically kill everyone and everything. She would never be ambushed; she would never be hurt. Of course, that ability was demanding. Not in terms of mana used, but in terms of mental load.

She had to see the future while being aware of what happened outside of the vision, and she needed the reflexes to capitalize on that future.

The shorter she glimpsed into it, the easier it was to use the power, but the higher the reaction speed she needed.

"We need to move," Erik said to himself. "The blackguards will be preparing for our assault on Maynard Island. We need to gather intelligence and make a plan."

Erik reached out to a Chimaeric Demon with his Instability brain crystal power.

<Is there any news about the team sent to replace Hin's president?>

The Chimaeric Demon got surprised a little. He was focused on something else, and hearing Erik's words in his mind all of a sudden scared him a little.

<Master?>

<Yes... Its me. Now, answer the question; we don't have that much time.>

The clone's face remained impassive, but Erik sensed a flicker of activity. <One moment, sir. I'll need to check.> The demon reached for its radio.

<Fuck... Too much time wasted...>

Erik waited. The Chimaeric Demon must have done a series of calls or had to wait to get news of the situation. In the end, he told Erik what he wanted to know.

<Sir, we've received confirmation. During the battle, our team infiltrated the president's hiding place. Salena Turke has been replaced, along with her entourage. However, my brothers are saying they will need some time to fully replace the government.>

<How much?>

<We would have already done it if we didn't have to fight this battle. Unfortunately, we didn't have clones to spare for this task, but now we do. We will find people as soon as possible and send them to replace key figures within the government in a week. Don't worry.>

<All right. What about the battle? There should have been a lot of enemy soldiers in the city. I'm sure I killed a couple of thousands, but many must still be there. How is the situation?>

The clone paused.

<We are still dealing with them. They are much more than we assumed, but we are still more than them. We should not have any problem dealing with them.>

<All right...>

A surge of satisfaction coursed through him. Finally, after all the planning and maneuvering, Hin was under his control.

With this done, Erik had just cut off the blackguards from their main allies and gained a good place from which he could start his invasion of Mur. But he knew better than to celebrate too early. There was still much work to be done, and destroying Maynard Island would not be a simple affair.

Chapter 1115: A short talk

Erik's communication device suddenly came to life, breaking the silence that nestled in his surroundings after the fight.

Emily's voice came through, sounding worried.

"Erik? Are you there? What are you doing?"

Erik took a deep breath. <Damn... I'm tired...>

"I'm here."

Mira's voice then came through the device.

"That guy was kicking your ass!" She laughed, irking him a little.

"What?! No! He wasn't! "

Mira laughed. "He was! I've never seen you in so much trouble in all the time I've known you!"

"Damn! I almost got killed, and you are mocking me?!" He remained silent a little.

"Besides, even if he was, there was no helping it. Haven't you seen him literally throwing me skyscrapers?"

"We saw it," Amber said. There was a brief pause then. "I guess you've gotten his power?"

"I did," Erik said. "In truth, I got two."

"Two?"

"Yes. Levium would have never been this powerful if it wasn't for a power that allowed him to control many things simultaneously and split his consciousness. He had a second power, one that gave him a sort of parallel thinking. The system called it 'Will of the Hydra'. It is an X-ranked brain crystal power."

"X rank—" Mira couldn't believe Erik's words.

"Are you shitting me right now? This is basically unheard of!"

But then she turned to look at Emily, who had a similarly ranked power.

"What do you think the Chimaeric Demons' brain crystal power rank is?" Erik said. "This is just another X-ranked ability for me."

He got a smug look on his face, but only until he thought about Mira's shocked face. Those thoughts were quickly replaced by worry.

"I get why you're surprised, and it makes sense," he said. "But there is something else we should be surprised."

"And what would that be?"

"Where Levium got this power... We know he gained it thanks to Doran's research, but this doesn't tell us the original source, a thaïd. The only way they could have gotten a brain crystal with such a powerful ability is from a Thaïd they killed in Mur."

"Yeah... This is rather problematic," Amber said.

"Why?" Emily wasn't understanding.

"Because it means Thaïds on Mur are far more enigmatic and unpredictable than we initially anticipated," Mira said. "Their brain crystal powers might deviate significantly from our preconceived notions. They might have stuff we have never seen."

"She is right," Erik nodded. "Thaïds on Mannard all follow some logic in the powers they have; mainly, they are the powering of abilities they had when they were still animals... Thaïds looking like cats mostly have powers that make their claws deadlier; Thaïds looking like bulls are either armored or stronger than their bodies' show. Of course, there are some exceptions, like thaïds using venoms while their animal counterpart didn't, but they are rare."

"A thaid with a parallel will brain crystal power," Mira said. "It goes outside of this logic. Thaid's are not smart; to begin with, they might be powerful; that is true, but in essence, they are just animals..."

"I assumed that they would have some resemblance to the Thaid's on Mannard," Erik said. "Albeit with greater physical strength, and most likely bigger than them. But now, I'm starting to think that my assumptions may have been off base."

Erik paused. "It's likely that the Thaid's on Mur are not only exponentially stronger but also far more problematic to deal with than anything we've encountered before, and that just because of the powers they might have."

"We will think about it once we are there," Mira said. "There is no point in stressing over this, since we can't actually do much about it."

"Right..."

There was a slight pause. "Listen... Given the attack, I decided to head to Maynard Island soon."

"What?" Mira said. "Erik, the Chimaeric Demons need to rest. We can't just rush into another battle so soon."

"I know," Erik said, "But we can't afford to wait too much. The longer we delay, the more prepared our enemies will become, and I bet they already are."

Mira sighed. "I get it, but pushing them too hard could be dangerous. They need time to recover and regain their strength."

"How long do you think they need?" Erik asked.

"At least a couple of days," Mira said. "And that is if we kill all those blackguards, motherfucker, that are still in Sleeb Harbor."

Mira had a point, but he knew they needed to act quickly. "You're right, Mira. I'll go help them clear out Sleeb Harbor and make some shifts to make sure everyone can rest, while the others take care of the blackguards."

"Try not to destroy the city this time."

He nodded.

Erik had two main reasons for joining the fight. First, he wanted to help his clones clear the city of enemies. This was important because he was planning to ask them to attack Maynard Island soon after, and this way, he would make things easier for them.

Second, Erik needed more mana. Leveling up was the only way to get it and to grow stronger, to make surviving easier, and to make winning possible.

"Alright. We'll coordinate our efforts and clear out the remaining threats in Sleeb Harbor as quickly as possible. We three will help with this, too."

"Good," Erik nodded, even though they couldn't see him.

Erik turned to Emily and Amber. "Amber, I want you to coordinate with the Chimaeric Demons. See if they need you for something specific, all right?"

"Yes."

Then Erik turned his attention to Emily. "It was you who killed him, wasn't it? Uncle Benjamin. The shot from the rooftop," he said. "Only you could have done that."

Emily didn't reply. Maybe because she thought Erik might have seen what she did as an intrusion.

"Thank you," he said. "You saved my life, Emily. Uncle Benjamin was more powerful than I thought. If you hadn't taken that shot when you did, things might have turned out very differently."

Emily nodded. "How do you feel about it?" she asked. "He was your 'uncle', after all. Even if he was our enemy." Erik was silent for a moment.

<How do I feel?>

The complicated tangle of emotions he'd suppressed earlier threatened to resurface.

"I don't know... Part of me knows it was necessary. He was too dangerous to be left alive. But another part... I can't simply forget what he did for me, even if he had ulterior motives and wasn't genuine."

He trailed off, unable to put into words the conflicting emotions swirling inside him.

"It's okay to feel conflicted," Emily said.

Erik nodded. "Yeah..."

Chapter 1116: The flock (1)

Two days passed in a flash. During this time, Erik and the Chimaeric Demons spent most of the time immersed in combat.

They had to rid Sleeb Harbor of the remaining blackguards and their allies before leaving for Maynard Island, and that was what they focused on. Erik threw himself into every battle, driven by a hunger for experience points and power.

The Chimaeric Demons did the same, but starting from the second day, whenever Erik took charge of a sector, most of the Chimaeric Demons went to rest or to help their brothers elsewhere.

This way, Erik ensured not only that their fights got shorter but that they progressively had more time to rest.

The fighting was widespread, affecting every single area of the city, even outside the walls and under the city.

By reading the enemies' minds, Erik found out how the blackguards came into the city. The same way he did, from holes in the walls, connected to underground tunnels and facilities.

How they did so without the Chimaeric Demons being unable to find that out was beyond him, but there was no time to cry over spilled milk.

The battle took the lives of many people; those who lost their lives outside the walls were left there, to be eaten by thaid.

It might have been considered ruthless, but Erik had no troops to spare to clean the battlefield.

As the city smelled more and more of smoke and blood and more people died around him, Erik gained experience points. The fights, as demanding as they were, made Erik get stronger, but left Erik with little time to rest. He didn't care, of course, because the numbers in his status interface grew fast.

By the end of those two days, Erik had gained 21 system levels.

He felt a strange euphoria overtake him.

The prospect of hitting level 300 consumed his thoughts these days, driving him to seek more conflicts and more opportunities to grow stronger.

But time was something he didn't have anymore. He needed to leave Sleeb Harbor and head toward Maynard Island and get rid of the blackguards once and for all.

While focused on getting levels and killing blackguards, Mira, Amber, Emily, June, and the other Chimaeric Demons, not busy with the purge, took care of the preparations for the journey to Maynard Island.

Since the battle against Levium, Erik made it clear there was no more time to find planes to reach Maynard Island.

The clone who took Salena Turke's place could do nothing either, because most of those vehicles had been repurposed for the war, and there were not enough planes to bring all the clones there.

However, the Chimaeric Demon was working on recalling Hin's troops back to the island so that Frant would have a little respite from the war.

The clone twisted what happened in Sleeb Harbor, making it look like the blackguards attacked. There was no mention of Erik, and he would let no one find out.

There was only one way for Erik to reach Maynard Island, and that was by asking the clone to shapeshift.

This posed a great logistic problem, which Mira, Emily, June, and Amber had to solve.

After gathering the provisions and tools for the flight. They had to decide on what was really essential to bring.

They not only had to fly across the sea, avoid thaids, and reach the island, but they also had to fight. This meant they needed stuff to settle on Maynard Island after they conquered it. Of course, if they conquered it.

Being weighed down by excessive supplies, given the clones had to bring the supplies, was going to be problematic and would decrease the clone battle efficiency. But it wasn't like they could risk running short of food during their travel.

As for when they were on the island. Erik was going to make sure a farm was big enough to sustain everyone so everyone would be ready. He would make fruit trees, crops of many kinds, so they wouldn't starve. They would need to head to Hin again after they were done, after all, and just a small contingent of Chimaeric Demons would stay there after they returned.

The journey to the smaller island would not last for long. If they left Sleeb Harbor in the morning, they would arrive on Maynard Island during the night.

The Chimaeric Demons had powerful bodies. When transformed into flying thaids, a single stroke of their wings could make them travel vast distances at incredible speeds.

The only problem was that Emily, June, Mira, and Amber were not strong enough to stay safely on top of the clones. So, they couldn't go that fast, or the four would be thrown off by the intense speed and raging winds.

The second problem they tried to solve was what to do as soon as they got to the island.

Upon reaching the island's airspace, the army would likely be thrust into immediate combat. The blackguards were for sure expecting them.

After such a battle and an enormous group of soldiers attacking him in Hin's capital, it was unlikely the blackguards didn't prepare for an invasion.

The night before their departure, Erik stood on top of a partially destroyed building, looking out over the battered cityscape of Sleb Harbor. The signs of battles were everywhere—crumbling structures, scorched earth, and the eerie silence that followed in the wake of a fight.

This city had suffered a lot because of him, because of the war he was waging against the blackguards. But he pushed the feeling aside. There would be time for reflection and rebuilding later. For now, he had to focus on the task ahead.

...

...

...

Dawn broke, and Erik made his way to the takeoff area, where thousands upon thousands of Chimaeric Demons were already gathered.

The takeoff area was busy. Some clones loaded food and supplies onto the backs of their transformed friends, tying them with ropes and various fastening methods.

Others handed out weapons and gear, courtesy of the blackguards they killed in these past two days, making sure each clone was ready to fight. A group of clones looked at maps together, planning how to fly fast and stay safe during the trip.

Thaids could still attack them, and these might even come from Mur. However, 35 thousand Chimaeric Demons could, in theory, kill everything in sight, at least if the Mur's thaids weren't all strong like the Leviathan Serpent.

The problem was that the clones didn't have that many neural links. Their brain crystal powers consumed a lot of mana and weren't even that powerful.

The air was tense. Everyone was doing last checks on supplies, double-checking their gear, and making last-minute changes. It was impressive to see how well the Chimaeric Demons organized such a big trip.

Erik approached one of the clones. "Are we ready to leave?"

The Chimaeric Demon nodded. "Yes, Master. All 35,000 clones are ready for the journey."

Erik nodded. Thirty-five thousand Chimaeric Demons—it was an impressive force, but he couldn't help but wonder if it would be enough.

He had to leave a significant number behind in Sleeb Harbor and throughout Hin to protect the group posing as the president and her entourage and to keep a hold of the country. It was a necessary precaution, but one that inevitably weakened their assault force, and the blackguards were playing the defense game here.

<A lot of the clones will die...>

Without knowing how strong the blackguards on Maynard were, Erik couldn't be certain if their numbers would be sufficient. However, he had to trust in the strength and abilities of his clones and in the preparations the others made.

"Very well," Erik said, pushing his doubts aside. "Let's begin."

Chapter 1117: The flock (2)

As Erik gave the order, the Chimaeric Demons started shapeshifting. One by one, they turned into Galewings, their bodies elongating and growing bigger, wings unfurling, and feathers sprouting like leaves from a tree branch.

One by one, the clones took to the sky. With crates secured to their talons, they ascended in a massive swarm. Soon, the sky was filled to the brim with their colossal forms, their wings casting vast shadows on the ground below. The air thrummed with the powerful beats of countless wings.

Erik turned to look at Mira, Amber, June, and Emily approaching. Each of them had a look of pure focus.

They knew what they were going to do could be the last; they didn't know what they would find on Maynard Island, but for sure it was going to be hostile, and hell-bent on killing them.

Despite the determination, Emily was a little apprehensive, which worried Erik a lot. Emily, after all, could see the future.

Though she said nothing.

"What's the matter?" Erik asked the girl.

"Nothing..."

"Did you see something?" he asked. Emily's look was too troubling.

"Well... I did, but it wasn't clear. It wasn't even about the battle on Maynard Island, or so I think... I'm not sure..."

"Ok... Do you have something about that?"

"Well," the young woman said. "I can only tell you we won't have problems reaching Maynard Island, but after that, I couldn't see much... The battle will be huge, but everything is foggy and unclear. I can't really tell much..."

Erik sighed. If Emily hadn't been able to see anything useful, there was no point asking. "Just tell me if you see something important, all right?"

"Yes. Don't worry." She smiled.

Erik finished talking with Emily and looked at the rest of the group. They had been patiently waiting for their conversation to end.

"Are you all ready?" Erik asked.

They nodded.

"Yeah..."

Without another word, they each moved towards one of the Chimaeric Demons. Some had been chosen to carry Erik and the others and had been given some harnessed saddles through which they could ride more comfortably and even rest if they were too tired.

Erik turned to his companions. "Listen up, everyone. This isn't like riding an Erendu. We're dealing with giant flying creatures here, so safety is paramount. The journey will be long, so here are some tips."

He gestured to the harnesses. "First, always keep at least one hand on the harness. The air currents can be unpredictable, and we don't want anyone falling off. There is also the matter of thaid attacks. The Chimaeric Demons have received orders to place you as far away from monsters, but I can't ensure you won't be chased. In that case, the situation might turn ugly, so pay attention."

"Second," Erik said, "lean into the turns. When the Chimaeric Demon banks left or right, shift your weight accordingly. It'll help with balance and make the flight smoother."

"Third, if we encounter any turbulence, hug the neck of your mount while holding the harness well. It'll provide more stability and reduce the risk of being thrown off."

Erik's gaze swept over the group. "Last, trust your mount. The Chimaeric Demons will do their best to keep you safe. If you feel unsure, you can just tell them. Any questions?"

The others shook their heads.

Erik took a deep breath. With a nod to his companions, he mounted his own clone.

"Let's go," Erik said.

The Chimaeric Demons unfurled their massive wings in unison, creating a thunderous sound that echoed throughout the city. The deafening roar of thousands of wings beating the air was impossible to ignore, likely heard by every citizen in Hin.

It was like a thunder just rolled across the sky. With powerful downstrokes, they lifted off, thousands of massive bodies rising into the air.

<I wonder what the civilians are thinking...>

<I don't think there are many of them at this point, master...>

Erik sighed. <Yeah...>

The clones remaining at Sleeb Harbor watched in anxiety as the massive army soared across the sky.

As for the ones leaving, the ground fell away beneath them, the city shrinking to a patchwork of streets and debris. Higher and higher they climbed until they broke through the low-hanging clouds.

As they flew, Mira got closer to Erik. "What defenses do you think we'll find at Maynard Island?"

Erik's brow furrowed. "It's hard to say for certain. The blackguards had time to prepare. Most likely, they started months ago with their preparations. We should expect anything from barriers masters, brain crystal artillery, various kinds of ranged fighters, and many melee ones."

"The most pressing question is: will our force be enough to overcome whatever they throw at us?" Amber asked.

35,000 Chimaeric Demons were a lot, but if the blackguards had months to prepare, maybe they had thrice their numbers; besides, that wasn't the main problem.

"That's not really what worries me."

"Are you worried about the Vindicators?"

Mira, Amber, and Emily saw how powerful Levium was and how he fought toe-to-toe with Erik, whom they deemed unbeatable. If ten, or even hundred Vindicators fought against him at the same time, they didn't know if they could win.

"Yes, but that's not the only thing. I'm actually more worried about their leader. They might even be more than one. I don't really know what is going to happen if they join the fight. Besides, what if they have hundreds of Vindicators? If fighting against Uncle Benjamin had been so hard, I can't fathom what will happen if there are too many."

There was a brief pause. "Didn't you say you got a lot of mana during these days?" Emily asked.

"Yes, but I don't think it will be enough against too many Vindicators. I might have easily won three years ago if I had been as strong as now. The problem is, they got more powerful too. At this point, the blackguards made it clear they know I'm not actually better than them in terms of power, considering brain crystal powers only, and that I'm in an advantage only on the ground, meaning they will do whatever they can to prevent me from taking advantage of that."

Chapter 1118: The flock (3)

"Well, it depends. If you fly, you can basically turn as deadly as a flying thaid," Amber said.

"Yes, but if they have someone able to neutralize that advantage, nothing will change. The blackguards had recruited talented fighters and rare brain crystal powers for decades. They are bound to have the weirdest and most powerful brain crystal powers."

"Whatever," Mira said. "Without knowing what we are going to find, it is useless to think about it."

"I don't think so," Emily said. "Isn't it better to be prepared?"

"True, but preparation is only useful if we can predict outcomes or anticipate what we'll encounter. Given our current situation, we could find almost anything on Maynard Island. It's simply not possible to prepare for every scenario."

The conversation went on for a while.

"Regardless, I will ask the Chimaeric's Demon's help if things push to shove. They might not have powerful brain crystal powers yet, but their bodies are as powerful as mine, so they will at least create some trouble. You might be needed to do the same. If Emily had been able to kill Uncle Benjamin, I bet she should be able to take care of the others while I keep them distracted."

"That's if the clones, or us, will be able to help," Mira said, her voice tinged with skepticism. "We can't assume our ability to do so will remain unaffected."

"Did you really have to be so negative, Mira?" Emily said. "We need to maintain some optimism."

"Negativity made me survive until now," Mira said. "It's not pessimism; it's pragmatism. Besides, I'm actually doing what you say. Consider all possibilities, even the unpleasant ones."

Amber looked at Erik, her expression thoughtful, but whatever was on her mind, it was serious.

"Say. If we really find dozens of Vindicators, what should you be able to do?" She asked Erik.

"If the clones help me, I should be able to stall them. Maybe kill a few if the clones help, but I don't think I will be able to do more than that if they are as powerful as Levium."

He paused.

"I got 21 levels. I used all the attribute points to pump up my energy stat. I got almost at 1500 energy points... It should help somehow."

"Meaning?"

"It means I have more mana, and more mana means more raw power and more battle time. The most important thing, though, is to kill the foot soldiers. If during the fight this happens, I should be able to make the fight last longer by replenishing my mana."

"Let's hope they won't be, then." Amber said.

Erik's gaze swept over his companions, resolve in his eyes. "That's what we're about to find out."

Hours passed as they soared over the vast expanse of ocean separating Hin from Maynard Island. The monotony of the flight was broken by occasional adjustments to their formation and brief communication checks between Erik and the Chimaeric Demons.

But the journey lasted for a while. Maynard Island was closer than Mur, but it wasn't that close. This wasn't just a couple of hours' journey, and the thaids' presence made the time needed to reach

the island stretch. In fact, attacks hadn't been infrequent. Various races of Thaid's were along the way, each more bizarre than the last, but all hell-bent on killing Erik and the rest of the group.

Besides, they weren't experts about sea thaid's or any of the creatures that usually flew over and lived near the vast stretch of blue water, especially not those in this part of the world.

Some of these thaid's were completely new to them, and they didn't even know their names or abilities.

It was even possible no one had ever seen or studied these creatures before. The ocean was vast and mysterious, hiding all sorts of unknown life forms beneath its waves and in the skies above it.

As they flew, Erik and his companions encountered many thaid's. Some resembled flying serpents, while others looked like floating jellyfish. Some thaid's even had camouflage abilities.

Then there were the Aeropelicans, as the system called them, some of these strange thaid's. They had huge wings that stretched out wide, making them look huge in the sky.

Their beaks were long and pointy, filled with lots of sharp teeth that could easily tear through flesh.

They flew in groups, making loud screeching noises that echoed across the ocean. The system said it was more likely a way for them to communicate and to keep rival thaid races away from them. The screeches were awful, after all, resembling a screaming woman. It even gave Erik the chills.

Despite this, Erik and the clones were too strong for them, and they got killed quickly.

These weren't the only thaid's they encountered. There were also swarms of Chiropterayfish, creatures with the body of what the system called manta rays and the echolocation abilities of bats. Despite being like sea thaid's, they were flying ones.

It was weird seeing them in the sky, but Erik knew too little about thaid's around these parts that he didn't think about it much.

One thing was clear, though: based on what humanity knew, thaid's resulted from the evolution of ancient animals, but the system just gave him enough information to think some might have also been the result of different species crossbreeding.

The biological supercomputer got a database of them. That was why it talked about the ancient animals when describing the creatures to Erik in its analysis of power.

Not that it mattered.

Luckily, no thaid from Mur approached them. At that point, considering his usual awful luck, Erik wondered why.

<I expected the devil himself coming at me... Somehow I've been lucky enough for something I couldn't manage finding me.>

But that was most likely going to happen at the end of the day, or so Erik thought, because Maynard Island housed something scarier than any thaid in the world: humans.

<How long until we arrive?> Erik asked a Chimaeric Demon.

Many hours had already passed, and the sky was starting to fall below the horizon.

<Four hours at least...> The clone said.

<Let's see if we can find a place to rest for a couple of hours. I don't want for you to fight after almost 12 hours of flight.>

<Yes, sir.>

Chapter 1119: The flock (4)

For a while, Erik looked below the cloud curtain, as if something was worrying him. Amber noticed that but said nothing, and the same did Erik.

After many hours of traveling, the number of things in his mind only increased. More and more worries accumulated inside of him, but the most pressing one was about his clones.

Since the journey had been long, fatigue was settling into his companions and the Chimaeric Demons. Even he wasn't in top shape anymore, and that just sitting on top of the clones. He couldn't imagine what they were feeling after so much time spent in the air.

Luckily, they didn't need to rest yet, or so they said, but Erik wished to find a place where they could.

With Maynard Island getting closer, everyone needed it, especially considering they might never be able to do that again.

<We need to find a place to land,> Erik said. <A couple hours of rest will do us good before we make our final approach.>

<What do you want us to do?> a Chimaeric Demon asked.

<Find an island, some rocks, I don't know, anything where we could rest a little. I want at least ten groups doing that.>

In truth, the Chimaeric Demons found it futile. There had been zero sightings of such places along the way, and he doubted they would find some now. Yet it was his master's wish, and he would not refuse to obey.

<As you wish, master.>

Some of the clones dipped lower and separated from the main army, searching the endless blue for any sign of shelter.

Hours passed as the scouting party zigzagged across the ocean's surface. They returned periodically, each time with disappointing news.

<Master,> one of the scouts said, <we've found several small atolls, but they're barely above water level. The tides would swamp us within hours, and they are not big enough to make everyone rest.>

Another Chimaeric Demon made his report some time later.

<There is a larger island about fifty miles east, but it's crawling with thaids. We'd spend more energy clearing it than we'd gain from resting there.>

There was no advantage in going there. It was true the Chimaeric Demons could dispatch them easily, based on the report, but what the clone said was true. They would lose time doing so and spend energy.

<The seafloor drops off sharply in this region. There are no shallows or sandbars where we could safely land such a large force,> another said.

Erik listened to each report with growing frustration. He hoped to find at least some small piece of land, some rocky outcropping where they could catch their breath before the final push. But it seemed the ocean was determined to deny them even this small comfort.

As the last of the scouts returned with similarly bleak news, Erik could do nothing but accept how things were.

<We push through then,> he said to his army. <Maynard Island isn't far, anyway. We'll have to make do without rest. I'm sorry, guys. I really wanted to make you rest.>

<It's not a problem, master.>

<Yeah, thanks for having thought about us, though. That's enough already for us.>

If it wasn't because their faces were that of birds now, they would be smiling at their creator.

Yet a ripple of concern passed through the Chimaeric Demons, but they didn't voice the thoughts going through their minds.

They trusted Erik's judgment implicitly, and here there was nothing they could have done regardless to solve the situation. They were going to Maynard Island, and there they will have to fight for their lives.

However, Mira spoke up. Erik talked into her and the others' minds, too. "Erik, why don't we have the Chimaeric Demons transform into sea thajids? They could rest in the water before we reach Maynard Island."

Erik's expression darkened, and from that, Mira understood something was wrong.

"What's the matter?" Amber asked. She noticed Erik earlier, and now that his expression darkened, she couldn't stop asking. It looked like something didn't make this possible, but what?

"We can't... I... I sense something in the water," he said, his voice low... worried, even. "My Instability brain crystal power is picking up on it. Something vast... I would even say ancient, and as intelligent as the many years this thing has."

Mira's eyes widened. "What do you mean? What is it?" But it was clear it must have been something like the Leviathan Serpent if Erik was that worried.

"It is nothing more than a mind to me... A collection of thoughts I don't exactly know how to decipher. I don't know what it exactly is, but I don't want to find out," Erik said.

Amber leaned forward. "Do you think it is another deep-sea thaid from Mur?" She basically voiced what everyone was thinking.

Erik nodded. "Most likely. By staying in the air, we're out of its range. But if we enter the water... Well, you get it. We won't come out of there."

A shudder passed through the group.

"I understand the concern, but couldn't we rest once we're out of its territory? Surely it can't control the entire ocean between here and Maynard Island."

Erik's frown deepened. "That's the problem, Emily."

The young man's voice dropped lower, almost to a whisper. His eyes narrowed and his jaw tightened. The others could feel the tension coming out of him as he spoke and as he glanced at the water below.

It was scary because Erik himself was scared. That much was clear.

"This... thing has been following us for the past five hours. Its territory must be large, covering, if not all, at least a huge part of the entire stretch of sea between Maynard Island and Hin."

If a single thaid could claim such an enormous territory, its power must have been beyond anything they had encountered before.

"How is that even possible?" Amber asked. "No single creature should be able to exert influence over such a large area. Even the Leviathan Serpent couldn't."

Erik shook his head. "I don't know. But it says a lot about the level of the thaids we will face on Mur. Honestly, I don't know if we will be able to go there. If creatures like this exist in the oceans between the continents, imagine what might be waiting for us on land."

"But it could be only sea thaids are this strong," Mira said. "Without other information, it is still better not to make bold assumptions."

"Yeah," Amber said. "Maybe we should send the Chimaeric Demons there before going ourselves."

At those words, the clones shivered.

"So what do we do? We can't keep flying there without resting. We might lose because of being tired."

Erik nodded. He closed his eyes, trying to think about a solution to the problem, but there was none. The Chimaeric Demons shared the same sentiment and told him.

After a long moment, he opened his eyes. "We continue on," he said. "We don't have a choice."

The others nodded, but Amber moved her Chimaeric Demon closer to her lover. "Erik, what aren't you telling us? I can see it in your eyes. There's something more about this... this thing in the water."

Amber was incredibly good at understanding Erik's feelings and thoughts better than anyone else he knew. She could easily spot even the smallest changes in his mood.

Erik knew this well and was aware he couldn't hide his worries from her. They were very close, and Amber could tell what Erik was thinking just by looking at him.

She could sense the concerns he wasn't saying out loud. Knowing it was pointless to keep things from her, Erik took a deep breath.

"It's not just following us," he said. "It's... studying us. I can feel its curiosity, its intelligence. This isn't some mindless beast acting on instinct. It's analyzing our movements and our patterns. This might explain why the blackguards or anyone else, if that matters, go to Maynard with planes rather than boats."

"This would be unprecedented for a thaids to be this smart."

Then she asked the question everyone wanted answers to but couldn't find.

"What the hell is on Mur that made thaids this strong?"

"The question is, what is on Mur that made thaids at all? Remember? They first appeared there..."

"Well... If our speculations are right, and they really are a by-product of the Silver Line Corporation making the biological supercomputer, maybe whatever caused animals to mutate and turn into thaids might still be there."

"This means, also, that the blackguards are those who made the thaids... God... It's something I would expect from them, but I really hope it's not true. Can you imagine it? We humans are responsible for us being almost wiped out from the planet..."

"People made books and movies about this for a reason. We showed how much we can be stupid as a race many times," Amber said.

Erik agreed.

Chapter 1120: Preparations for War (1)

Vindicator Vex stood at the observation deck of Maynard Island's central command, his eyes scanning the multiple screens in front of him.

The vast, circular command center housed many floating screens displaying any kind of data. The room's round shape made it easy to see all the screens from anywhere the Vindicator stood.

There were multiple stations there, and each boasted a state-of-the-art holographic computer manned by an expert operator.

There was a hum echoing the room from the advanced machines and worried whispers from the various people present. Everyone in that room knew something big was going to happen. They were sure of it.

Vex's post stood at the heart of this controlled chaos. An unobstructed view of the entire room gave him perfect control of the operation.

"Any sign of them?" he asked at the nearby technician.

"We have nothing concrete yet, sir. But our long-range sensors are picking up unusual energy signatures approaching from the south. We sent some drones to find out what these are, but there is no doubt Erik Romano is coming, bringing an army with him."

Vex nodded. It was finally starting.

Two days earlier, they had lost all communication with Levium. This silence meant only one thing—the man had been killed.

Erik Romano could now advance towards them unhindered. It wasn't that Levium was there to stop him, anyway.

Levium had been sent by the third division commander to catch Erik. Had he been successful, this attack wouldn't happen. But they hadn't been lucky. Levium's failure meant more people were going to die.

Erik Romano's attack on Maynard Island was inevitable. <Let's just hope the third division's commander's idea works...>

There was no doubt in Vex's mind about Erik's intentions. He came all his way to this remote corner of the world just for war.

<Why else would he come to Hin if not to strike at Maynard Island?>

Under his mask, Vex was sweating. Even he didn't know the exact reason, but he could do nothing but wrinkle his forehead and focus his eyes while thinking.

<But you won't have it your way, Erik Romano. Not with the third division commander here...>

But Levium was a powerful blackguard. One of the best among the Vindicators, almost to the point he was on par with the Justicars.

Losing Levium was a severe blow and said a lot about Erik's might.

It was then that images from the drones arrived.

The drone images were worrying. The night vision cameras showed a vast flock of Galewings heading towards the island.

They looked like a dark cloud in the night sky. They were getting close to Maynard Island's shore, and there were so many that they blocked out the stars.

Vex's eyes got wide when he saw this. <Shit... I was right, then...>

"Relay these orders to all units. I want every Veritas Lens operational and every soldier at their stations. Erik Romano is almost there, and we cannot allow them to gain a foothold on this island. Prepare all defenses. Every soldier must be ready to fight. Don't leave an inch of the beach free."

As the technician hurried to relay the orders, Vex's mind raced through their preparations. All units had to be operational.

<We also need to do some stockpiling, but will it be enough?>

The war could end up being long. That would play to their advantage because the Third Division Commander knew what to do to defeat Erik, but it required time. She was already working on it, though.

Vex thought back about the reports from Sleeb Harbor. The devastation that resulted from Erik's and Levium's fight was huge, even for them. It was... unprecedented.

Unable to keep his composure anymore, since the various radars showed nothing yet close to the island, the man left the room. There was still time to prepare.

Vex made his way to the war room, where holographic displays showed the island's defensive grid. Turrets, energy shields, and patrolling squads of elite blackguards fortified every conceivable approach.

"Vindicator!" someone said. Dr. Lena, who led the research team, ran into the room. Her lab coat flapped behind her as she hurried in.

"I've just received orders from the first division commander."

Vex raised an eyebrow. "Speak freely, Doctor."

The First Division commander's direct orders were something he couldn't ignore. The woman then entered the room, but she had an uncomfortable look on her face.

"I didn't want to bother you, Vindicator Vex, not with all that's happening."

"If the first division commander told you something, it is only right for you to report it to me."

The woman grimaced. "Yes, sir. I've received urgent orders from the first division commander. He has specifically requested my immediate presence in Mur."

The commander's frown deepened.

"You want to go to Mur? But it's very dangerous there," Vex said with concern. "The weather is harsh. Monsters might attack without notice. It's hard for our most skilled soldiers to survive there. Are you sure you're ready for this?"

"Yes... I know, sir, but with 'Project Octavia' reaching its final stage, he doesn't want to risk Erik Romano sending everything to hell."

Vindicator Vex looked at the woman with a frown. "There are not suitable structures on Mur to continue our research, from what I know... Not unless the First Division Commander made one, which I doubt given how many thaids are there. How do you think you can keep the research on there?"

Dr. Lena shook her head. "The first division commander said they created a bunker in the Lorogia Region. There he set up a suitable place."

"Right... So, what is that you are asking me, Doctor?"

Dr. Lena paused, feeling conflicted. She knew she was asking for safety while her coworkers faced danger.

She felt guilty about leaving as Erik Romano's forces approached. Her request for protection was selfish, but she couldn't ignore how important her research was for their future.

"I need your help with travel plans and protection for my team," Dr. Lena said. "We need a plane that can fly long distances. We also need skilled blackguards to keep us safe during the trip and when we arrive."

"A plane and bodyguards? I get the plane, but the bodyguards are a little bit problematic." Vindicator Vex didn't really like that. With Romano approaching the island, they needed all the soldiers they could get.

"These are orders, Vindicator Vex. I don't like it as much as you do. But I don't think I need to tell you what will mean losing our research data. We would have to start from scratch. Of course, it will be impossible if Erik Romano kills me..."

Vindicator Vex stood silently for a moment, his mind racing. The timing couldn't have been worse. Erik Romano's imminent approach was going to put a stop, or at least severely slow down their research.

Safeguarding the research was crucial, and with the first division commander deeming Dr. Lena's team's journey to Mur paramount, Vex had no choice but to comply.

After a tense minute, Vex's expression hardened. Turning, he beckoned to a nearby soldier.

"Warden," Vex said. "Prepare a team of 30 of our best Enforcers and ready our fastest aircraft. Dr. Lena and her staff need to be escorted to Mur immediately. Make sure their safe passage goes without a problem."

The Warden snapped to attention. "Yes, sir! Right away, Vindicator Vex."

As the Warden hurried off to carry out the Vindicator's orders, Vex turned to Dr. Lena. "Is the third division commander aware of this?"

"She is..."

They both fell silent. Vex and Dr. Lena looked at each other with worry. They knew things were serious.

They didn't speak, but they were both thinking about what could go wrong and what might happen if things didn't go their way.

Vindicator Vex turned to Dr. Lena. "I feel I must explain the situation to Mur."

"I know how the situation on Mur is, Vindicator Vex. I've spent so much time here on Maynard Island to say I'm the most knowledgeable of us all here."

"Maybe, but since you are going there, it might be good to remember a couple of things."

The man paused again.

"Thanks to your research, based on Doctor Stedman's work, we've made significant strides in improving our strength. As a result of the double brain crystal powers, we also made Mur safer to be traveled by our forces. However, that doesn't mean the dangers there have been eliminated."

He paused, his voice taking on a grave tone. "The Lorogia Region, where you're headed, is particularly treacherous. It's next to the Lorogia Mountains, and I'm sure you can imagine what that means. There are still thajds there that could wipe out an entire army in seconds."

"I understand the risks, Vindicator. But I'm willing to face even Mur's wyverns if it means completing my research. Do you truly understand what this could mean for humanity and for us?"

She leaned forward. "If I succeed, we'll be fulfilling the founders' wishes. We would have a better grasp at what mana is... The implications are... monumental."