

BIOLOGICAL 1121

Chapter 1121: Preparations for War (2)

"Are you sure about this, Monica?"

Monica's eyes narrowed, her jaw clenching slightly as she responded. It wasn't like she had many alternatives, at least in her opinion.

"I am," the woman said. Her voice carried a steel edge that brooked no argument.

Monica was currently in touch with the second division commander. Many kilometers and a stretch of ocean separated them. She was on Maynard Island, while Bill, the second division commander, was at the Law Gate, on the western side of Hin.

"Time is a luxury we can't afford, Bill," Monica stated, her voice devoid of emotion. "Our progress is at a critical point, and Romano's interference could jeopardize everything we've worked for."

"That's if we fail to capture the boy," Bill said. The project their research team was working on was meant to substitute the research they wanted to do on the biological supercomputer. They knew already they couldn't make a new biological supercomputer yet, but at least they could get to something close.

Everything would have been much simpler if they got their hands on the biological supercomputer, but Erik Romano proved too hard to catch.

Bill remained silent. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, something Monica couldn't see—the wooden chair creaking beneath him.

"We need to give Vania enough time for her and Dr. Lena to complete their research. If they do, even Erik Romano won't be able to stop us anymore. If we do, getting our hands on the biological supercomputer will be a joke. You've seen it yourself. The amount of physical enhancements we get from the new powers is higher than what he can get."

"That's if he doesn't defeat us first."

Monica's expression darkened. Bill had faith in her, who decided to stay on Maynard Island to try to defeat him, or at least to give Dr. Lena time to complete her research, but it was also true there was a slight tint of skepticism in his own words.

"Levium... He was powerful," Bill said.

"You know that. All of this is making me think. Romano might be more powerful than we assumed, or he is simply growing so strong that whatever we achieve is not enough to offset the power imbalance. If even Levium's plan didn't work, I don't know. Maybe he can really kill us three."

Bill struggled to admit this.

"It depends," Monica said. "Our troops on Mur are stronger than those on Mannard or on Maynard Island, at least on average. They might be able to do something, even stall Erik enough for Dr. Lena to do her job."

"I know that... But it's not like they are strong as us; they are at best strong as Vex."

"Vex is not weak," Monica said. "He is a Vindicator. The only reason he is not on Mur right now, and he is not focusing on his training, is because of his loyalty towards me."

The division commanders, the only three Justicars, were the strongest fighters within the most powerful organization in the world.

Even if no one knew about them, it was still true they knew they were stronger, even more than the Fierce Lioness, when she was considered the most powerful human on the planet.

Bill's eyebrows went up in surprise at the woman's words, but he quickly hid his reaction.

"You are too confident, Monica."

Monica gave a small, bitter smile in response.

"Why wouldn't I? Erik Romano focuses too much on his physical prowess. It's true it served him well until now, but there are ways to offset that advantage without having multiple brain crystal powers. Levium died; that's true, but he showed us the way."

They both fell silent for a moment. Neither spoke. The room seemed filled with the soft buzzing of machines.

Bill broke the silence with a question. "I don't get it. How did Romano become so strong?"

Monica frowned as she thought about how to answer. She was trying to make sense of the situation, too. The biological supercomputer turned Erik Romano into a monster, into a demon.

While that thought was frightening, since they were fighting against such a demon, it also made their greed for power surge. If they could get their hands on the biological supercomputer and study it, they might be able to replicate it.

"Erik Romano..." The third division commander said, her voice taking on a contemplative tone. "It's actually not that powerful. He is, if we talk about physical terms only, as I said, but someone with four brain crystal powers might reach his strength easily with time. Think about it. He showed more than four of them, yet he was not significantly stronger than Levium. The biological supercomputer, despite how overpowered it might look, doesn't power up its host in the same way our techniques do."

They knew it gave power, and they wanted it badly. But they still didn't understand what it could do in its entirety. The biological supercomputer was a mystery to them. That was true, yet certain things could still be inferred.

"Maybe there is a reason for that," the second division commander said.

"Maybe, but we will never know unless we get our hands on it."

"Shit..." The second commander sighed, a note of regret coloring his tone. "If only Doctor Hayes didn't die back then..."

The mention of the late doctor seemed to cast a pall over the room.

"It was unfortunate. With her, we lost most of our research, and no one had been able to do again what she did. She was a genius, and the fact she didn't even have our same level of technology and knowledge. Yet she still created the biological supercomputer."

"There is no point in thinking about stuff that happened centuries ago," Monica said. "We weren't even born back then."

"Yeah..."

There was a pause then. "Well, if you are so hell-bent on staying there and trying to defeat Lucius' son, then be my guest. You might actually succeed," he said. "How are the preparations going?" He asked.

"I'm almost done. I just need to inject some more mana, and I will be able to use it. Erik Romano is going to arrive soon, but Vex and the others told me they will give me as much time as they can."

"Are you sure you don't want to come here? I still think the Law Gate is the best place to make a stand against him. I doubt Romano will be able to fight against two of us together."

Monica shook her head.

"Maybe," the woman said. "But if he can, we will die together, meaning we will lose precious time. If I get defeated, he will have to reach the Law Gate to go to Mur, meaning he would have to go through you, and you can try to prevent that. If nothing, at least I will reduce the number of troops under his command. He would certainly need time to find new people. "

Monica's plan made sense, but it was obvious she didn't like the idea of losing. She didn't want to think about Bill losing either. As the leader of the blackguards, someone who made herself, someone who stood on the top of the most powerful organization in the world, and as a very confident person, she struggled to imagine being defeated. It was humiliating.

"How long until he arrives?"

Bill nodded. "Then go back there and prepare a welcome for him."

"I will. Who do you think you are talking to?" Both grinned, and after a brief pause, it looked like Monica dissipated the last of the doubts she had but didn't voice.

"All right... I will prepare for his arrival, then."

Monica leaned forward, her voice dropping to a near whisper. She looked at the holographic image of Bill.

"Make sure to stir trouble with the thaids near the coast and tell Vania to do the same. I don't know what Romano wants to do, but he would have to take a plane if he wants to get to Mur safely. Keep this option away from him, destroy the planes, and make the journey to Mur impossible to be taken."

"That's a good idea... But I don't know how well it will work. He still has the shapeshifters," Bill said.

"The shapeshifters can at best stay in the flying thaids' living area. They can't go higher than that, contrary to planes. It means that to reach Mur, they will have to fight their way through Mur's flying thaids," Monica said.

"Yeah... I will start working on it soon, then."

A moment of understanding passed between them.

"Then hope to see you again, Bill."

"Try not to get yourself killed, Monica."

Their words sounded like a goodbye. Both commanders knew this might be their last talk.

Monica turned off her computer. The call ended, and she ended up alone in the dark room. It was quiet, but the silence felt heavy.

"Now... Erik Romano... Let's see if you can even fight against 'that'..."

Chapter 1122: Trust and Tension

"I See the Island."

It was nothing more than a small dot in the distance what they were seeing, but it was, without a doubt, Maynard Island.

Erik looked at Mira, Amber, June, and Emily, feeling nervous. The chances of surviving a battle here were few, even for the Chimaeric Demons, and he didn't know if the four would be able to do it.

They were strong, that was true, but they were not at the level of those they were going to fight against. If they wanted to survive, they had to play it safe, and if they wanted to be useful, they had to play it smart. Even he felt rather unprepared for the upcoming battle.

<System, show me the status.>

—Status—

[Host Information]

NAME: Erik Romano

AGE: 18

POWER LEVEL: 1,420

SYSTEM LEVEL: 298

EXPERIENCE: 22,440,024/27,115,216

DNA POINTS: 4,244,916

HEALTH: 28,540/28,540

MANA: 28,470/28,470

{Attributes}

STRENGTH: 542

INTELLIGENCE: 474

DEXTERITY: 522

ENERGY: 1422

Available attribute points: 5

{Powers}

[Biological Super Computer Powers]

Brain Crystal Manipulation

Brain Crystal Power Extraction

Brain Crystal Power Merging

Brain Crystal Power Analysis

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_α3X-RANKED

SELF HEALING: A₁2A-RANKED

INSTABILITY: A_λ2B-RANKED

Phantom Veil: A₀2A-RANKED

Frostwind Fire tempest: A_η3A-RANKED

Force Bastion: A_v1B-RANKED

Lightning Lord: Aη3A-RANKED

Beastwalker: Aθ1B-RANKED

Telekinesis: Aσ1A-RANKED

Will of the Hydra: Aσ1X-RANKED

{Skills}

Kyokar hand-to-hand style (MASTER)

Etrium's sword style (ADVANCED)

Crypt of the Desert Style (MASTER)

Alchemy (Intermediate)

Architecture (Beginner)

Thaid Expertise Proficiency (Advanced)

Flora Expertise (Master)

Tactical Expertise (Advanced)

Management Proficiency (Intermediate)

Stealth Proficiency (Intermediate)

—END—

Erik observed his status. Will of the Hydra and Telekinesis were there, Levium's powers, but he still made no Neural links in them as he didn't have the time.

<I doubt I will be able to use them effectively in battle.>

Erik couldn't even make more heads for his Will of the Hydra brain crystal power. He didn't have the time, busy as he had been for having to get rid of the blackguards in Sleeb Harbor.

All in all, he was worried about his and the fours' chances of survival.

<Guys. I'm going to assign you to a small group of Chimaeric Demons. They will protect you at all times. I know you won't really like this, but I would like for you to stay at the edge of the battlefield.>

<What?> Mira didn't like that at all.

<Why should we avoid the battle while you and the clones do it?>

<She is right, Erik,> Amber said. <We might not be that powerful compared to those we are going to fight, but we can hold ourselves.>

<I know you can,> Erik said. <But I still feel uneasy. If there are more people like Levium, I don't know what will happen.>

<If we have to talk about destructiveness,> Amber said. <I think I have the greatest destructive power of you all here.>

It was indeed true. Fighting a gas was impossible. Unless you stayed away from it, there was nothing to dodge. The gas would inevitably melt whoever Amber wanted to melt. Kill whoever the woman wanted to kill.

He paused, gathering his thoughts before continuing, <Look, I understand your desire to fight alongside us. But it would give me peace of mind knowing you help from a safe location.>

<The Chimaeric Demons I'm assigning to you are skilled fighters. They'll keep you safe while allowing you to observe and potentially assist from a distance. This way, if things go south, you can be our backup plan.>

<All right,> Mira said. <We will stay outside from the core of the fight, but in exchange, we have free reins on what to do.> The woman smirked.

<What do you have in mind?> Erik asked.

<It's none of your business...>

Erik sighed, realizing how futile his attempts to keep the girls out of harm's way would be.

Mira's words clarified they were going to do some stupid shit on a battlefield they shouldn't even have been to begin with.

But it wasn't like they were useless. Erik knew that. The stunt Emily pulled on Levium was... unexpected, yes, but a positive surprise.

Even if they would be wiped out in a melee fight, if they kept distant, they could actually deal a lot of damage.

Mira and Emily could take care of enemy defenses, while Amber could kill enemy bulks if needed.

<Listen, Erik,> Amber said. <I know you are worried about us, and you want to protect us, but we are not damsels in distress that need the white prince to rescue us. We can do that ourselves. Did you forget who taught you to fight?>

That was true. Amber did that. In terms of pure martial skills and weapon usage, she was still much better than him. The problem was that the blackguards weren't any worse, and they weren't two or three people.

Reluctantly, Erik accepted he couldn't control their actions. He would have to trust in their capabilities and hope that the protection he provided would be enough.

<Okay... then.>

Mira had an idea, in truth, to really do something significant to help Erik. It was just that; she needed his permission to act. Erik still commanded the Chimaeric Demons, and if he told them to bring the four back to Sleeb Harbor, they wouldn't hesitate.

<Keep an eye on them, June.>

<Of course, Master.>

As the island got closer, Erik thought about all the things that could go wrong. He looked at his lovers, seeing both bravery and fear in their faces. He wondered if they would all make it through the fight alive and told all the Chimaeric Demons to ensure they would.

As night fell, the island's features emerged from the darkness, illuminated by an array of lights, most of them coming from the artificial lights installed here and there. The blackguards were at a disadvantage as much as Erik was in the night's darkness. They needed to see well. That was why they used the lights.

Though not expansive, the island was large enough to house several structures, and not one of them was small.

Training areas and what he assumed were sparring grounds were visible, scattered among what appeared to be barracks.

It was just that they looked rather luxurious, fitting for the status the blackguards had.

They were adorned with polished marble facades, large windows, and intricate metalwork.

Surrounded by weirdly manicured gardens and pathways that in truth interlaced the area like a spiderweb and showed the blackguards' special status and endless resources.

Erik looked at the fancy buildings and gardens with disgust.

<This is ridiculous. They're just showing off how rich and powerful they are. To whom, I wonder...>

He shook his head. <All this fancy stuff won't help them when we attack.>

However, while beautiful and ostentatious these buildings were, they were nothing much compared to the island's most likely important building: a massive structure of metal and glass.

This stood out not just for its size but for its appearance. Despite being constructed largely of glass and the shine reflected from the lights illuminating the area, it was pitch black.

Erik's eyes narrowed as he studied the structure.

<That must be the main building... Whoever controls the blackguards is most likely there unless they fled.>

But there was no doubt in Erik's mind that the blackguards' leader would never flee, especially when he, their main target, was there.

<The blackguards must have known I was coming by now.>

But while Erik observed the surroundings, he noticed them. The base defenses.

The island's perimeter was filled with artillery weapons. Erik had no doubt these were powered by brain crystals.

<I would expect no less from these pricks.>

Along with the fixed defenses, there were groups of blackguards controlling large mechas. These machines, like the stationary weapons, were probably powered by brain crystal technology.

They weren't few, but they were less than Erik expected.

<This is weird.>

Indeed, it was. The blackguards most likely expected such an attack to happen since they learned he left for Hin, and especially after they learned about him defeating Levium.

It was impossible for them not to know that. They had spies everywhere, and even if they didn't, knowing what Levium's mission was, even a day without replying to their calls or making a report, was enough to make them understand what destiny befell on him.

They had a lot of time to prepare, and yet the defenses were underwhelming compared to what he expected.

This was further confirmed when Erik saw the various troops on the ground. Some wielded weapons that crackled with barely contained power, while others seemed poised to unleash abilities that defied easy categorization, and all of them were blackguards. The problem was...

<They are too few...>

There were no more than 20 thousand of them, which was weird considering where this place was, what it represented for the blackguards, and who their attacker was. In truth, there was a reason for that.

Chapter 1123: The landing

Erik couldn't make a count for them all, but it was clear they were less than the Chimaeric Demons.

<The blackguards have the defense advantage, but it's impossible for them to think they can win against the Chimaeric Demons with just this...>

Well, unless these guys were as powerful as his clones, which he doubted, or if they had a secret weapon of the sort.

Suddenly, the night sky lit up as the first volley of fire erupted from the island. Beams of energy and projectiles of unidentifiable composition streaked towards Erik's army.

<Evasive maneuvers!> Erik said, his voice carried to the Chimaeric Demons through their mental link.

The clones scattered, but not all of them did so in time because of the cramped space. Then it happened.

Erik saw several of his clones being struck by a multitude of attacks. Some of the weapons were so destructive that his clones disintegrated in mid-air.

[ALLIED CHIMAERIC DEMON KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ALLIED CHIMAERIC DEMON KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ALLIED CHIMAERIC DEMON KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ALLIED CHIMAERIC DEMON KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

<Master, we're taking heavy losses.>

Erik gritted his teeth. <Keep moving. We need to close the distance, and don't forget to counterattack. We might be able to destroy some of their attacks with the starlight fireballs. It is night; they are at their strongest.>

<Yes, master.>

The intensity of the enemy barrage increased. The blackguards' mechs added to their firepower, making the mix deadlier than it already was. The sky became a maze of energy beams from different kinds of sources. The explosions they generated lit the sky like a chaotic firework display gone terribly wrong.

<Form up into arrow formations,> Erik said. <Each arrow led by those focusing on defensive powers. Rotate positions to share the burden of shielding.>

The Chimaeric Demons followed Erik's orders. They changed their formation into arrow shapes. The toughest and newest clones led each arrow.

Everyone used their powers to stop attacks from reaching them, but again, it didn't always work.

He turned to the Chimaeric Demons, carrying Mira, June, Emily, and Amber. The situation was becoming a little too dangerous for the army. Not that he expected something different from happening by attacking the blackguards.

<Bring them to the rear!> He said to the clones. Of course, he wanted Mira, Amber, June, and Emily to get safe.

The girls heard that.

<Wait, Erik!> Mira said.

<What?>

[ALLIED CHIMAERIC DEMON KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ALLIED CHIMAERIC DEMON KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ALLIED CHIMAERIC DEMON KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ALLIED CHIMAERIC DEMON KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

<Me and Emily can do something about this situation!>

<I KNOW!>

But Erik was reluctant to put the four in danger.

<Erik,> Amber said. <You must trust us.>

The woman looked at him in the eyes. There was some distance between them, but to Erik, Amber's eyes appeared as clear as water. The young man battled with the urge to take the three girls and bring them back to Hin. They were some of the few people he really cared about. Those he considered his family.

<Erik...>

Not without difficulties, Erik relented.

<All right! Do what you must...>

With that, the three, followed by June, went close to the head of the formation.

<Can you see them?> Amber asked both Mira and Emily.

They had discussed this already, while Erik was focused on ensuring his clones reached Maynard Island's shores. Emily and Mira were in range to destroy the artillery units and most of the defense on the island's beach.

<I can,> Emily said.

<Me too, more or less.> Mira was already taking aim.

<Bring them down then!>

Emily set his scope on an artillery unit in the back. She was the only one who could reach it with her sniper rifle right now.

It didn't matter if it had protection, or if it was powered by brain crystals, or if it was made from the most resilient of the ores. Her rifle allowed her to destroy it.

As Emily took aim, Mira nocked an arrow to her bow. She drew back the string, her eyes narrowing as she focused on some shore defenses.

"I see you," she said. The bow, while not mechanically as powerful as the rifle, could do the same job.

The Chimaeric Demons had their hands full. They were already busy trying to protect themselves and their brethren from the enemy's attacks.

They couldn't focus on destroying the artillery, and even if they wanted, their powers didn't have that reach.

Because of this, Mira and Amber were the only ones who could destroy them. The problem was that there were many artillery units to deal with.

Exhaling and sharpening her focus, Mira released the arrow. It streaked through the air and pierced the metal casing of the artillery unit she was targeting, finding its mark on the pilot within. Mira didn't need to destroy the weapon; she only needed to know where the pilot was.

The massive weapon fell silent, its operator killed.

Mira allowed herself a small smile of satisfaction before reaching for another arrow. There were many more targets to eliminate.

Emily did the same. After having locked on her target, she pulled the trigger. It was just that her weapon allowed her to use her mana differently from how she was used, this time not to glimpse into the future but to do damage in a more direct way. The mana bullet ended up making the machine explode.

Despite this, they were still losing Chimaeric Demons at an alarming rate.

<We need to bring more down!>

<I know!> Emily said.

They redoubled their efforts, and as the women worked, gaps appeared in the defensive fire, allowing more of Erik's forces to slip through unscathed.

But the blackguards were quick to adapt. They deployed barrier masters in front of the artillery units, preventing a lot of them from being destroyed. Not always Mira and Emily pierced the barriers, but that didn't mean they never did.

Slowly, as the vast flock of clones got closer to the shores, the number of problematic defensive stations decreased.

<Master, we're within range for a landing attempt,> a Chimaeric Demon said.

Erik surveyed the sky. They had lost almost a third of their forces, but the rest were still combat-effective. It was now or never.

<All units, prepare for landing. Those focusing on defensive brain crystal powers must take the charge; those focusing on ranged powers must take the rear. Keep your brothers healed and patched up, but try to conserve your mana. This will not be a sprint, but a marathon.>

Erik then turned to Amber. <Amber, I need you to clear us a landing zone before the Chimaeric Demons set foot.>

Amber nodded.

<I will need some help to make the gas reach the shores.>

<I've got this,> Erik said.

As they approached the shoreline, she started channeling mana into her neural links, and then her corrosive gas came out of her body. Erik, using his brain crystal powers, generated a strong wind that brought the gas to the shoreline without scattering it.

The cloud descended, engulfing a section of the blackguards' front line.

Agonized screams pierced the air as Amber's corrosive gas engulfed the front line.

The screams of those on the shores echoed across the area. They sounded like a symphony of tortured violins.

The cries got louder and softer, like a terrible song, as the gas continued to hurt them. The gas burned their skin, then melted it, and when it couldn't find it anymore, it devoured the flesh. When nothing more than a pile of bones remained, it consumed even that.

As the soldiers writhed and fell, a significant gap materialized in the defenses.

<That's the spot!>

The opening widened as more blackguards died, presenting Erik with the opportunity he had been waiting for. It was the perfect moment to strike.

<Now!>

The Chimaeric Demons dove towards it, shifting form as they descended. Those tasked with primary defense hit the ground as massive creatures to shield their brothers. They immediately engaged the nearest blackguards in close combat.

Erik landed amid the chaos, his feet touching the sand as explosions and energy beams continued to light up the night sky around him. He immediately assessed the situation, noting the positions of his forces and the remaining enemy defenses.

<Spread out and secure a perimeter,> Erik said. <June, you and the others keep the girls safe.>

Then Erik erected a huge ice wall around the landing Chimaeric Demons, keeping the sides and a narrow area in the front open to allow the clones to fight and push deeper into the enemy lines.

<We are finally on this fucking island...> Erik said.

They had made it there, but at a terrible cost, and the real fight had yet to begin.

Erik's gaze fell on the black structure at the island's center. Somewhere in there were the answers he sought and the blackguards' leader, whoever he was.

Chapter 1124: The battle for Maynard Island (1)

Then the mechs started reaching the shores, their weapons laying down suppressing fire while squads of blackguards moved to flank Erik's forces.

The man reached out with his newly gained telekinetic powers, lifting a damaged mech and hurling it into an advancing squad of blackguards.

There was an explosion, which affected at least a thousand of the enemy soldiers.

[LEVEL UP.]

The impact scattered the enemy troops, creating another opening into their defensive line. "Push through there!"

The Chimaeric Demons did. As if taken by a frenzy, they pushed toward the opening.

But Erik lost interest in the opening relatively soon because he locked eyes on the black glass building at the center of the island, the blackguards' headquarters.

That was the place where the blackguards' leader would be, and that was where he needed to go. But the sea of enemies between him and his target prevented him from doing that.

<Form a wedge!> Erik telepathically said to the clones. They reshaped their formation, creating a V-shaped offensive line with Erik at its point.

Erik had to take advantage of the small corridor that the explosion created.

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

The blackguards concentrated their fire on the advancing wedge. Not all the Chimaeric Demons got on the other side of Erik's shield wall, but many already did. Most of them were in melee skirmishes, already decimating the enemy as if they were the scythe of death.

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

At the same time, part of the Chimaeric Demons used their Starlight Fireball brain crystal power to attack from a distance.

They shot bright, burning balls of light into the night sky. The fireballs rained down on the enemy troops, killing many.

The Chimaeric Demons in melee range saw their load reduced, and that allowed them to double their lethality.

However, the blackguards prepared and did it well. The number of troops was not high, maybe because the blackguards had to do something more urgent on Mur, although Erik couldn't understand what there could be more urgent than them getting their hands on the biological supercomputer.

The problem was that these troops here were rather powerful. It was like the blackguards had sent only the weakest member on Frant, some slightly more powerful, to attack Erik and kept the strongest here on Maynard Island.

<I bet those on Mur are even stronger...>

It didn't help that their brain crystal equipment and machinery were rapidly closing the power gap. The blackguards were catching up to the Chimaeric Demons, and even to Erik himself, in terms of might.

Those in Mur might even be stronger.

<Yet, this opens questions. If they really are stronger than me, which is reasonable to assume since Mur's thaids are strong, why didn't they just send them?>

Energy beams and explosive projectiles rained down, but the Chimaeric Demons at the front used their Metal Fur brain crystal power to create a shield wall using their bodies. They were focusing the entirety of their mana on that.

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

At the same time, more and more clones turned invisible, but not everyone could do that. These proved to be the most lethal among the clones of them all because they couldn't be targeted. This didn't mean they couldn't be killed, though; stray attacks were a problem for everyone.

<How is the situation?> Erik asked.

<Sir, we can manage, but honestly, we are pretty tired. We flew for a straight day,> a Chimaeric Demon said.

They didn't even have that much mana to begin with, so they had to use it sparingly. That was also the reason they didn't turn invisible before the battle. If they did, they could have reached the island unseen. A group of clones might have destroyed the defensive positions so that more clones would have reached the shores.

The problem was that shapeshifting required mana too, and if the Chimaeric Demons, after a day spent in Thaid form, did that, they would be left without mana later.

Besides, not everyone focused their training on Invisibility, only those focusing on covert operations did.

Erik helped however he could. He didn't spare his mana from being used, but he still needed to be careful because he didn't want to end up without it when he fought against the blackguards' leader.

Though he unleashed his Frostwind Fire Tempest brain crystal power. Icy wind blades sliced through the air, cutting down the defenders.

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

Following up, he sent a wave of fire, forcing the blackguards to scatter and creating momentary gaps in their defense.

The Chimaeric Demons seized this opportunity, some transforming into large beasts while others maintained their humanoid form. Yet all of them surged forward, engaging the enemy in close combat.

Erik turned to one of the nearby Chimaeric Demons. "How are Mira, Amber, June, and Emily doing?"

Despite his best efforts to stay focused on the battle, Erik couldn't help but worry about the safety of his companions.

"They're still behind the ice wall, sir. But they're making significant progress against the fixed artillery. They've destroyed a lot of them already, and they've also taken out many of the mechs."

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

Erik nodded. "Good."

On the flanks, he used his Plant Master brain crystal power, causing the manicured gardens to come alive with thrashing vines and thorny branches.

This caught many blackguards off guard, entangling them and disrupting their formations. He even used them to create some sort of barrier the clone could use to protect themselves or to hide. Not that they were going to last long, but at least they would be able to repel a couple of attacks, and it was going to make the terrain harder to pass through for the enemy.

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[CONGRATULATIONS, YOU HAVE UNLOCKED TWO SYSTEM'S FUNCTION: DNA SHARING, AND BRAIN CRYSTAL POWER SHARING.]

<I DID WHAT?!>

But Erik had no time to dwell on that. Though he wondered when the system would have unlocked the last two functions. It looked like that happened as soon as he reached level 300.

Erik noticed a group of blackguards setting up what looked like a heavy artillery piece Mira and Emily hadn't taken care of yet. "Take out that artillery before it can fire!"

But he didn't even have to give that order because the two, helped by June and Amber, took care of it.

Mira and Emily, perched on flying Chimaeric Demons, took aim. Emily's high-powered rifle cracked, the bullet finding its mark on the mechanisms of the weapon.

At the same time, Mira's arrow struck the ammunition cache. The resulting explosion cleared a portion of the enemy forces surrounding the artillery.

However, the blackguards were far from defeated. A squad of mechs marched toward the vanguard. Their weapons systems were humming with energy.

They formed a barrier between Erik's forces and the central building, laying down a devastating barrage of fire.

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

This wasn't ordinary fire. It appeared the blackguards not only powered the mechs with brain crystals but also equipped their weapons with this technology.

What came to Erik's, and his clones, were severely enhanced mana bullets. They tore through the front Chimaeric Demons like they were made of butter, and despite the Metal Fur brain crystal power.

The clone needed to train before heading to Mur. The Metal Fur was not sufficiently powered up by mana for them to resist the onslaught. They needed to increase their reserves.

[ALLIED CHIMAERIC DEMON KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ALLIED CHIMAERIC DEMON KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ALLIED CHIMAERIC DEMON KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[LEVEL UP.]

"Shit!"

Erik was unwillingly absorbing the mana from his Chimaeric Demons. He couldn't even stop that because the biological supercomputer did that automatically.

He gritted his teeth. <June, take a group and flank them from the left.>

Reluctantly, Erik turned to the three women. <Amber, create a smokescreen on the right and make it impossible for them to go anywhere but the center. I take care of the mechs from there.>

<Are you sure?>

<No. But it's not like I can spare any soldier from fighting, can I? And I can't leave the clone being killed. What else can I do if I don't trust you won't get yourself killed? Just make the corrosive fog.>

<Don't worry. I will give you a hand.>

Amber didn't take much before arriving in the designated position. She released her fog, which started stinging the clones' skin. Then Erik used his power to create a wind that propelled the fog towards the enemy.

When it was completely out of the Chimaeric Demons' range, Amber increased its corrosiveness.

Chaos engulfed the battlefield. Pain-filled screams pierced the air as Amber's corrosive fog burned the blackguards.

Machines whirred and clanked amidst operator cries. Chimaeric Demons roared in triumph and agony.

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

June led a detachment of Chimaeric Demons to the left. The mechs' pilots were still alive, but their visibility severely reduced, and the corrosiveness of Amber's fog destroying their armor fired wildly.

Erik seized on this moment of confusion. Using his newly gained Telekinesis, he lifted several damaged vehicles and hurled them at the mech squad. The impacts were devastating, creating gaps in their line.

"Now!"

Chapter 1125: The battle for Maynard Island (2)

The Chimaeric Demons surged forward; they started unleashing Starlight Fireballs. The balls of fire did not do much in terms of damage, at least not against the remaining mechs, but they set Amber's corrosive gas on fire, and that dealt a lot of damage.

The achieved effect was also an enormous wall of fire, bigger than Erik ever made. It wasn't as powerful, but that didn't mean it wasn't at all.

The fire spread, surrounding everything nearby. The mechs, already damaged by the corrosive gas, were now trapped in an intense fire.

The heat increased to unbearable levels; it was so strong the metal the mechas were made from started bending under the machine's weight, and the electrical parts, not already destroyed, started malfunctioning until they broke.

The blackguards around, caught in this fire, had no way to escape. Their screams started strong until they stopped having the strength even to do that.

As the fire kept burning, it changed the surrounding weather. Strong winds blew around the edges, feeding the fire with fresh air and making it spread further. The sky turned a deep orange-red color, making the battlefield look like a scene from the end of the world.

And yet.

[ALLIED CHIMAERIC DEMON KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ALLIED CHIMAERIC DEMON KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ALLIED CHIMAERIC DEMON KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

"SHIT!"

Erik turned to a nearby clone, his face grim. "How many have we lost?"

The clone's eyes were filled with sorrow as he replied, "We've lost over seven thousand in total, Master. The enemy's defenses are stronger than we anticipated."

Erik clenched his fists. "Damn it. How many enemies died?"

The clone took a deep breath.

"Around 5000, sir."

"This is not good."

Erik and his men were still winning. There were far fewer enemies than allies, but the rate at which they were losing troops was higher.

The blackguards were around 15000 strong, the Chimaeric Demons around 28000.

It was obvious; the blackguards had many defenses, artillery units, many mechs, even more brain crystal weapons, and plenty of double users.

They prepared thoroughly for the incoming attack, but the Chimaeric Demons were stronger than their opponents. The two things had to balance each other out, yet they didn't.

Maybe because the blackguards were stronger than usual, maybe because they were doing something Erik hadn't seen or realized yet.

However, he couldn't control the whole battlefield alone. He needed to leave things to the Chimaeric Demons, and trust them.

<We are still winning at least...> Yet, not by much.

As they pushed deeper into enemy territory, Erik could see the black glass building growing closer. But the resistance was intensifying. Elite blackguard units moved to intercept.

Some created energy shields and flew on wind gusts. Others rode stone waves and threw sharp ice lances.

On the left, a group mixed water and fire powers. This made hot steam that spread across the field. The steam blocked vision and injured any Chimaeric Demon it touched.

On the right, another team controlled earth and metal. They gathered battlefield debris and made it orbit around them as weapons. However, their skill wasn't as good as Levium's.

"Double users incoming!"

"Form defensive circles!"

The Chimaeric Demons reorganized, recognizing the threat these guys posed and creating multiple circular formations.

They offered protection from all angles, and they knew they needed it. The clones would also be able to communicate and support one another in case they somehow got problems, and in case one of their brethren died, they could simply shrink the circle, remaining as tight and protected as before, or at least almost.

Those in the front, facing the dual wielders, used their metal fur brain crystal power to withstand whatever attack these guys were going to throw at them. Those in the rear, instead, got ready to make fire rain on them.

Erik created ice walls on the army's sides so that the pressure on them decreased, allowing them to focus on the enemy on the front.

"Incoming!"

"Incoming!"

Erik stood at the center of the main circle and used his Will of the Hydra to split his consciousness once more.

He felt weird, but at least he got a better hold over the battlefield. His senses were enhanced; everything started slowing down more than it already was, like when he had Hais' brain crystal power, but to a much more tuned-down level since he had few heads.

But Erik didn't want to risk making more.

"They are here!"

"Prepare ranged attacks!"

The clash started.

The dual wielders attacked first, attacking hard, but the Chimaeric Demons resisted the powerful attacks.

"The metal furs are resisting!"

"Yeah, but we need to counterattack!"

"I'm waiting for it!"

"Ranged units, are you ready?"

"YES!"

"Unleash hell to these monsters in human skin!"

The Chimaeric Demons released volley after volley, but there was a significant difference in power output. They didn't have much mana yet, meaning the Starlight Fireballs had to be used sparingly, but most importantly, in a smart way.

However, the sheer number of clones made it so that a rain of fire fell on the battlefield. That forced the enemies to move apart.

But even the blackguards retaliated, combining their powers to create attacks of devastating effect, whose power and destructiveness were higher than the sum of the initial powers.

The fight got more intense. In the meantime, Erik took care of the rest of the battlefield, observing and making it so that the Chimaeric Demons never had more than they could handle.

A part of Erik's mind directed an enemy group using Plant Master to create barriers of dense, thorny vegetation.

Forcing them to funnel toward a free group of Chimaeric Demons.

He did the same all over the battlefield, trying to decrease his troops' losses as best as he could and maximize their effectiveness in combat.

For Erik, the battlefield transformed into a multidimensional chess match, with rapid-fire moves and countermoves unfolding at breakneck speed.

Yet, despite Erik's improved mental capabilities, which allowed him to analyze and counter threats with superhuman swiftness, the blackguards were adapting.

<There must be one or more people with similar powers among their ranks...>

They began targeting the Chimaeric Demons that were clearly serving as relay points for Erik's commands or sent surges of blackguards towards the groups barely resisting their onslaught, making it so they would finally fall.

<Fuck...>

Erik had to shift his command structure often because of this, moving key units to keep the enemy guessing and more often than not resorting to the Instability brain crystal power to do the job.

<This is taking up a lot of mana...>

As they inched closer to the central building, the resistance grew fiercer. The blackguards were throwing everything they had at Erik's forces.

Energy beams crisscrossed the night sky, and explosions rocked the ground. It was night, but there wasn't a single inch on the ground covered by darkness.

<We are taking heavy losses, Master!>

<I know!>

For every blackguard they took down, it seemed two of the clones died. The number of enemies was beginning to become problematic. They were slowly erasing Erik's advantage.

"We need to break through their lines!" Erik said. "Concentrate all firepower on a single point! I will take care of the rest."

Maybe some kind of shock was what they needed to win. The problem was, what would happen when the enemy's strongest troop appeared? Erik would find himself with less mana, without a way to know when he would level up.

<I have to risk it...>

The Chimaeric Demons responded. Those who could focused their ranged abilities on a spot Erik designated, just left of the main entrance to the black glass building.

The only problem was that it wasn't enough.

Erik channeled a huge chunk of his mana.

<Let's hope this works...>

Then the wind stirred under the young man's control. Erik was making a wind blade, the biggest and most powerful one he had ever conjured up.

But someone else noticed it.

Erik released the wind blade. It traveled through the air at incredible speed. The first line of enemy soldiers was bisected, then the second.

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[LEVEL UP.]

But at the third, a huge earth wall appeared, stopping Erik's deadly attack and dissipating the winds it generated. It was massive, as big as Erik's ice wall, and for sure as sturdy. Somehow, Erik understood who made this huge earth wall.

"The Vindicators are here!"

Erik wasn't the only one who realized that, because the blackguards didn't even wait a second before they charged as if in a frenzy.

"Wedge formation, now! I'm going to take care of whoever is coming!"

The Chimaeric Demons reformed into a wedge, with Erik at its tip, charging at the enemy.

<June.>

<Yes, Master?>

<Take care of them...>

Erik saw a new threat emerging from the blackguards' main building. A group of individuals, their uniforms marking them as high-ranking officers, Vindicators. There were three of them.

<Less than I expected. Good...>

But that could be because they thought they were enough to face Erik.

They stepped out of the building, releasing a huge amount of mana. Vindicator Vex was among them, but Erik didn't know that.

Each of them radiated power on par with Levium, but if their skills were at that level or if their might was greater, Erik couldn't know.

<One should be able to use earth. An Earth Elementalist is rather problematic right now. But what about the other two?>

He mentally turned to his clones.

<Prepare for heavy resistance!> Erik warned his soldiers. <These are their strongest fighters, aside from their leader.>

Chapter 1126: The battle for Maynard Island (3)

Erik knew he had to fight against the three Vindicators if he wanted to win the war. The problem was the battle against Uncle Benjamin made him aware of how daunting the task ahead was.

As for the situation at hand, Erik only knew what one of them could do—control the earth. Not knowing what the other guys could do worried him.

<That, and the fact it is a clear tactical disadvantage.>

But he was going to take care of that now.

<I doubt the blackguards gave these guys useless secondary brain crystal powers, and I'm sure they didn't waste resources in getting the best of the best for them.>

He thought. It was a long pause for him, as powered as he was by the Hydra's heads, but in reality, his long thoughts happened in a fraction of a second.

<In the end, I have no choices... I can't risk these guys killing the Chimaeric Demons...>

They had to focus on the other blackguards. Erik's first move was to activate Analysis.

—

-Name: Unknown.

Physical Description: A tall, broad-shouldered man, most likely in his mid-forties, with a sturdy build. He has short, graying, brown hair. The mask doesn't allow to see the facial features. Approximately standing at 188 cm.

Brain Crystal Powers:

Earth Manipulation (Aα2A): The user can create, shape, and manipulate earth and stone. He can raise walls, create earthquakes, and launch projectiles. At his level, he can affect large areas and manipulate complex structures with precision.

Water Manipulation (Aη2B): Enables control over water in all its forms. The user can also create ice barriers, manipulate moisture in the air, and generate powerful water-based attacks. This complements his earth manipulation, allowing for mud and quicksand tactics.

{Attributes}

STRENGTH: 382

INTELLIGENCE: 103

DEXTERITY: 325

ENERGY: 1156

{Others}

Power Level: 766

Brain Crystal Rank (Earth Manipulation): Aα2A

Brain Crystal Rank (Water Manipulation): Aη2B

Estimated experience by killing him: 950,859

—

Name: Unknown

Physical Description: The man is lean and athletic, standing at approximately 175 cm tall. He has short, dark hair styled in a military cut, visible above the mask that conceals his facial features. He wears practical, dark combat gear.

Brain Crystal Powers:

Time Freeze (Ay2A): Allows the user to slow time around him, and the user is not affected. This ability consumes a lot of mana. Time can also be frozen, but the amount of mana required is too high. At best, the user can freeze it for five seconds total before completely draining his or her mana, and that is considering a brain crystal filled with it.

Spatial Manipulation (Aδ2A): Enables the user to alter distances, warp objects, or shift locations within a limited range. This power is not as mana demanding as the Time Freeze ability, but it is still mana hungry.

{Attributes}

STRENGTH: 382

INTELLIGENCE: 114

DEXTERITY: 359

ENERGY: 1178

{Others}

Power Level: 806

Brain Crystal Rank (Time Freeze): Aγ2A

Brain Crystal Rank (Spatial Manipulation): Aδ2A

Estimated experience by killing him: 1,003,871

—

Name: Unknown

Physical Description: A man of average height (178 cm), most likely in his early forties with a lean build. He has short-cropped blond hair. The mask does not allow to see the facial features.

Brain Crystal Powers:

Molecular Restructuring (Ay2A): Allows the user to alter the molecular structure of non-living matter, changing its properties. At his level, he can affect larger objects and make more drastic changes, such as turning metal to rubber or stone to sand. The power can be used to make a material weaker or stronger.

Aegis Morph (Ay2A): Enables the user to generate and manipulate adaptive armor directly on his body. The armor can change form and material to respond to different threats, providing both offensive and defensive capabilities.

{Attributes}

STRENGTH: 332

INTELLIGENCE: 161

DEXTERITY: 389

ENERGY: 1167

{Others}

Power Level: 829

Brain Crystal Rank (Molecular Restructuring): Ay2A

Brain Crystal Rank (Aegis Morph): Ay2A

Estimated experience by killing him: 1,035,989

—

"Shit!"

The information flooded Erik's mind, and they brought bad news.

"These guys are almost as powerful as me!"

They were even worse than Levium in terms of physical stats alone, but that was, of course, because they got more neural links. The only difference between them and Levium was that the guy had a power that allowed him to fly and to launch whatever he wanted at Erik.

"Well, at least they can't fly. This means I should be able to take advantage of my physical presence."

Though their brain crystal powers worried him. The first guy, the earth user, also had water manipulation ability.

"Double Elementalist."

This made him a tough enemy. He could defend himself and attack at the same time. His control over earth and water gave him an advantage in both close fights and long-range attacks.

He could do many things with these powers, like creating mudslides or building complex structures out of stone. But Erik wasn't helpless. He was an Elementalist too, and on top of that, he had more than just two brain crystal powers.

<But this also means the guy will be able to counter my attacks to some degrees...>

The third one had the ability to conjure up an armor, which he could power up thanks to his first power. Potentially, this guy was unkillable, and that was simply because of his mana.

Armor-generating powers weren't exactly that rare, but they weren't even that common. Most of the powers out there allowed the user, or the thaïd, to create plates that they then used in such a way as to protect their bodies. The Chimaeric Demons were an example of that.

Armor-generating powers, while not exceedingly rare, were far from commonplace in the world of brain crystal abilities. Most of the defensive-like powers allowed their users or thaïds to manifest protective plates, which they then used to create some sort of armor to shield their bodies from harm.

The effectiveness of these powers depended on the user's skill, the power's rank, and the amount of mana invested in their creation.

Chapter 1127: The battle for Maynard Island (4)

This was what the Chimaeric Demons' Metal Fur brain crystal power did, albeit it didn't create plaques. The ability depended on hairs, but the base capabilities relied on such a mechanism.

However, Brain Crystal's powers conjuring armor up were more rare than that. This guy's, Gwen's, and Erik's own Force Bastion were examples of that.

<The difference is that Force Bastion was born because of the mergings I did, and it is not even a power focused on defense; it's more of a hybrid. This guy's power, instead, must be fully defensive, meaning the effectiveness at which his mana strengthens his armor must be higher than mine.>

This didn't mean they were impossible to kill. Sure, wounding them with conventional means might be hard., but there were other ways. For example, unless their armor had some kind of environmental resistance, they could still be drowned.

<Or burned... Well, more than burn him, I might be able to give him a heat stroke. Damn... I never thought I would kill someone by making him sweat to death.>

The most problematic of them was the second dude.

"Spatial and time manipulation. Luckily, it is not too overpowered... "

Erik had never seen or even heard about powers like this. The second time manipulation must have been this dude's birth brain crystal power. The simple idea that a thaid must have possessed something like that was scary.

The Spatial manipulation must have been the second one.

<The first ability makes him slow down time, pretty standard. He can also freeze it, but the mana demand is damn high.>

Time manipulation was a complex affair, of that Erik was sure. This guy, based on what the system said, could manipulate it for brief bursts.

<But that can still be deadly, or at least unreasonably hard to deal with.>

<The second should, in theory, be a power that makes him teleport himself and his allies. He can prevent me from reaching him or his companions, or he could teleport right in front of me, and that without even using the time manipulation ability.>

These were powers difficult to fight against, but Erik had a way to do it. "Phantom Veil, Instability, and Telekinesis could do the job."

The idea was simple. He might create illusions to make it harder for him to target his real self; he could use invisibility to prevent him from targeting him specifically; or he could use telekinesis to move him the fuck away.

<Without the ability to fly, he shouldn't be able to resist me in the air.>

He thought back to his fight with Levium. If Erik couldn't shapeshift into animals and make wings sprout out of his back, he wasn't certain he might have won against Uncle Benjamin.

Maybe he would not be dead, but the chances of that happening might have been greater. The problem with Uncle Benjamin wasn't telekinesis itself, but the Will of the Hydra. A parallel will brain crystal power was as powerful as it was common.

<Maybe not by itself, like in Martin's case. The pure dude had just that, after all. But coupled with another power, especially one as dangerous as Telekinesis, it makes everything about the opponent worse.>

Erik tried many things when the Chimaeric Demons weren't there yet. He tried to sneak with Invisibility, but somehow Uncle Benjamin had been able to see the ripple of lights in the air change and pinpoint his location.

He tried doing the same with the illusions, but he found out what were and were not fakes in instants. He tried sneaking his way in by shapeshifting in something small, but in an open space, noticing him with such a powerful ability was easy, especially considering the man had surely more than the two heads Erik made.

Erik had been able to win that fight because of the chaos the clones created, because of the chaos he and Levium made, and because Emily was simply a godlike sniper.

<And yet I can't do what Levium did yet. Telekinesis and Will of the Hydra basically have 0 neural links...>

That meant that while he could really use Levium's same tactic, done that by Erik, it would just be a mild inconvenience to them.

Their powerful bodies, combined with Erik's lack of neural links in Telekinesis and Will of the Hydra, made that strategy unsustainable. In a battle where mana was everything, he'd quickly deplete his reserves—a virtual death sentence.

<I should stick to my usual powers, unless I'm forced to...>

Besides, with the single head created by the Will of the Hydra enhancing his mental capabilities, Erik was sure he could fight against them at the same time.

The young man opened his status screen. There were still 80 available attribute points. For him, the choice was obvious.

"System, dump them all into energy."

"Sure thing, boss," the AI quipped. "You will end up with 1502 energy points and 30,140 mana points. You should pack a punch!"

"Shut up."

Erik felt a surge of energy course through him as the points were allocated, but this boost alone wouldn't make the impending battle easier.

He turned to a nearby Chimaeric Demon.

"I'm going to fight them alone."

The clone got serious.

"Are you sure, Master? These guys are three Vindicators..."

"Do I have another alternative?"

The clone sighed. "Be careful, then, Master."

Erik nodded. "Oh... Tell the others to keep themselves at a distance. The last thing I want is for more of you to die. Focus on killing as many blackguards as you can. Take advantage of your bodies; focus less on your brain crystal powers. You do not have enough neural links yet."

That was something Erik had to address soon.

"It will be done, Master."

Erik then made six insect-like wings sprout from his back, iridescent and semitransparent. They allowed to see what was behind him; they were even hard to notice because of that.

They were there though, because you could see the small vein-like line crossing them like a grid. Erik flew towards the three Vindicators.

Chapter 1128: The battle for Maynard Island (5)

"You've come alone. This means you must be Erik Romano," one of them said once Erik was close enough. He was the one in the front, so Erik assumed he was the leader of the group.

"That's right." He paused. "And you are?"

"You can call me Vex."

"So, tell me, Vex. What do you want to do?"

Erik hoped these guys would back away, even though he realistically knew that would not happen. Yet, if he could avoid such a complex fight, he would have done so blindly.

The Vindicators' postures stiffened. "We want to bring you to justice for your crimes," one of them said.

"And you are?" Erik was visibly annoyed by the guy's stupid phrase.

"Terra."

Erik couldn't help but laugh, though. "Anyway, Terra, what justice are we exactly talking about? Hopefully not yours. Do I have to remind you of the atrocities you committed every day for years? You talk about justice, yet I fail to see what justice you are exactly bringing to the world. There's no justice in what you Blackguards do."

"There is no need for you to understand what we do or the intentions behind it, and I won't waste my breath trying to make you understand, since I already know you wouldn't. Now, it is me who must ask something, Erik Romano. What do you want to do?"

Erik looked at them.

"Easy. Kill you three and blow up the building behind you." He didn't even hesitate.

The three Vindicators glanced at each other. Their expressions tightened, a flicker of concern passing between them behind their masks.

Without hesitation, Erik unleashed a massive barrage of wind blades toward his opponents. The air shimmered as the razor-sharp gusts hurtled toward the Vindicators.

Terra acted quickly, raising a wall of stone and earth to protect himself and his friends. The wind blades hit the wall, breaking off pieces of rock but failing to penetrate deep into it. The Vindicators behind the wall were spared from a gruesome destiny.

Vex acted quickly, too. As the dust cleared, he used his time-controlling brain crystal power, and everything went in slow motion. Most of the people were basically still, but for Erik. When Vex landed his eyes on him, he saw the man moving, almost as if he were just a normal man running and an athlete at that.

That speed was inhuman, and Vex knew that if he didn't protect his comrades, they would be killed.

<It's like time didn't even slow down for him!>

Erik didn't notice what Vex was doing, but regardless, he saw Vex looking at him without problems. It was then he understood.

<The dude must have activated his power.>

Erik ran behind the third guy.

"You didn't say your name."

"Restro."

His fist, charged with his Force Bastion-affected mana, created a wave that killed everyone standing in front of Erik's wave and behind the Vindicator.

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

But not the target himself.

The man had conjured up his Aegis Morph brain crystal power; a medieval-looking armor encased him.

<That thing isn't even made of mana...>

The armor hardened just as Erik's punch connected. The impact sent Restro skidding across the ground, but the armor absorbed most, if not all, of the power and mana behind it.

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[LEVEL UP.]

The blow ended up killing some bystanders. Vex and Terra didn't stay idle when they saw Erik target Restro. Terra manipulated the earth beneath Erik's feet. Spikes of rock erupted from the ground, forcing him to take to the air once more.

As he ascended, he unleashed a torrent of lightning from his fingertips, the bolts arcing towards all three Vindicators.

Vex used his spatial manipulation to warp the surrounding space and jumped, getting out of harm's way.

The lightning bolts curved unnaturally where he had just been a second before and missed their targets entirely.

Terra must have protected himself by creating a dome of stone, because there was a partially melting one where he had last seen him.

The man was currently running towards him. He sent some high-pressurized water jets toward Erik, who was still flying in the air.

Erik barely avoided the powerful streams of water, trying not to show any emotion that might make the enemy think it was the right time to strike.

However, his face slightly changed for a second when, not even a moment after he dodged the strike, the water exploded. He wasn't expecting it at all, because it didn't follow the logic the biological supercomputer had attributed to that power.

"What the fuck?"

The water exploded, but it wasn't water that came out of it, but flames. Erik got far from the incinerating flames and glanced at Terra, seeing Restro placing his armored hand on his comrade's arm. The water coming out of Terra turned into a raging fire.

<He can even do this, uh?>

Erik, undeterred by the surprising but clever tactic, dove towards the two. He appeared as no more than a streak in the sky, yet the three Vindicators seemed able to see him, albeit barely.

Terra raised his hands, and a wave of earth rose to meet Erik's charge, but before the wall could be raised in full, Erik had already gotten past it.

Before he could punch Terra or Retro in the face, killing them, Vex appeared in front of him. He grabbed the two comrades and teleported somewhere.

<This is as annoying as I predicted...>

Erik's fist connected with the empty air, but the sheer force of his punch was enough to shatter the protective dome Terra hastily constructed around himself.

The impact sent shockwaves rippling through the ground, causing cracks to spider-web across the surface of the earthen barrier, shattering it.

Erik jumped out of it, and he was right to do so. Moments later, sharp stone spikes burst out from the crumbling earth dome, shooting out all toward the center of the dome, where Erik should have been standing moments before, like the quills of a giant porcupine that failed to pierce their target.

However, before getting out, he activated his Phantom Veil, becoming invisible.

Chapter 1129: The battle for Maynard Island (6)

"Where the fuck is he?"

"I don't know! I can't see him!"

"Vex, can you do something?"

But Vex couldn't, though; he wasn't stupid, and even if he directly couldn't, there was still something he could do: think. In fact, he had an idea.

"Terra, flood the area; we will use the water as—"

But Vex stopped mid-sentence because he saw it—a small cloud of dust heading in their direction.

"Shit."

He bent the space, and the three appeared on another part of the battlefield, safe from harm, at least for now.

"Why did you teleport us?"

"He was almost on us," Vex said.

Terra's eyes widened.

"Shit... If he is invisible, how the fuck can we fight him?"

"I told you already, use the water. We can fight only using the steps on water as a clue to his position. We did this many times already."

They could; they did it already. It was hard, but not impossible. Besides, it wasn't like when Erik moved they could see him clearly anyway, so the situation wasn't that different from before.

Terra could use area attacks, and while Restro could not actually fight head-on against Erik, he could still help Terra by changing the substance of the earth or water he conjured.

"Do it fast!"

The blackguard didn't waste time.

Terra's eyes glowed bright blue as he used his power. The surrounding air became misty as water appeared. Soon, water flowed from his hands in a powerful stream. It quickly spread across the ground, making a thin, shiny layer.

The water was shallow—barely ankle-deep—but enough to help them locate Erik. Its calm surface rippled, clearly affected by the ongoing battle around them, but differently from how it would ripple if Erik was there.

Vex watched for signs of movement. "There!" he said, pointing to a spot where the water was being particularly disturbed despite no one being there.

<Shit, that motherfucker is already here!>

In truth, Vex teleported everything very far. Not outside the battlefield, of course, but enough for Erik to take at least a couple of minutes before he could find them. Yet he already did.

<Maybe it's because of the flood Terra made.>

He turned his head, realizing his friends were doing the same in Erik's direction, but slowly. Vex forgot he was keeping his brain crystal power up. <I'm the only one who realized it.>

Despite this, Terra and Restro reacted.

Restro transformed his armor to create offensive spikes. Terra created another earth wall that Restro then turned into a strong metal alloy, but Erik had already moved.

He reappeared behind Restro and unleashed a point-blank blast of icy wind. Since he couldn't kill the man unless he used a massive amount of mana, the best thing for him was to target the weak ring of the chain, Terra.

He quickly went in front of the elemental, who still had to register what was happening. No one could see Erik. The only way for them to fight was by using the steps he made on the water's surface.

The blackguards, though, were proficient fighters, and the three Vindicators were even more than the average member of their organization.

Realizing Erik was going to kill Terra, Vex froze time again. However, the amount of mana he was using to save Terra was astronomical.

Within the frozen moment, he used his spatial manipulation brain crystal power to change both Terra's and Restro's positions.

As the time freeze ended, Erik found himself suddenly hitting the empty air.

<Fuck that guy!>

As difficult as the battle was for his opponent, it was for him. However, he also understood something: Levium was an exception.

If they had someone who could make them fly and keep their distance from him, maybe he would have already lost given the powers the three had, but since they were fighting on the ground, Erik could take full advantage of his colossal strength and speed, or the skies, if he needed.

It didn't matter that the three were fairly powerful, and their physical stats weren't so different from his. He was still stronger.

However, what they missed compared to Uncle Benjamin, they made up with team play. Vex basically saved Terra's and Restro's asses multiple times, while the two combined their powers to attack with not only powerful attacks but also insidious ones.

Erik didn't know where the two had been teleported, but he immediately got attacked.

<Shit!>

A stream of what looked like flowing stones flew toward him. Erik barely dodged the attack, which ended up hitting the ground and creating a sort of mass. From it, massive jagged spikes jutted out.

Erik spun, narrowly avoiding a spike aimed at his head.

<How the fuck do they know where I am and where to aim?>

In truth, it was thanks to the three incredible tactical abilities. Terra then used the tunnel-like structure created by the first attack to inject a powerful stream of water hurtling towards Erik.

The tunnel itself acted like a sort of cannon, multiplying the strength and speed of the attack to unprecedented levels.

Erik activated his Force Bastion; the force shield he created thanks to what remained of Nathaniel's power spared him from a gruesome death.

<There is no doubt I would be dead if I got it by that thing. Scary. These guys are scary.>

When they saw the water being deflected, Restro acted again and turned Terra's water into acid, while Terra himself decreased the jet's power.

The acid started being affected by gravity.

"Shit!"

Erik barely jumped back in time to avoid the corrosive effects of the acid. But Vex didn't stay idle. That was a tactic the three frequently used during their fights.

They attacked in such a way that the opponent could only jump back if he or she wanted to survive, and that was exactly where Vex appeared soon after.

The man wielded a sword. Though Erik was invisible, the splashes in the water and the location of his shield provided Vex with a general direction to aim.

The man slashed and hid Erik squarely on the shoulder.

"AAAAHGH!"

The Force Bastion held, but the blade still plunged into his shoulder.

Vex smirked behind the mask.

The two had different thoughts in their minds, but both were full of murderous ones.

Chapter 1130: The battle for Maynard Island (7)

Erik was surprised by how they made that attack work. However, it also worked only because of Vex's weapon.

That must have been a brain crystal sword, and Erik was pretty sure it had a power that allowed the sword to turn insanely sharp, to the point it could bypass his Force Bastion's armor.

At the same time, Vex thought they could really kill this monster. What he didn't know, though, was that Erik had a power no one knew about, simply because a lot of time passed since he was last injured, and even if he was, it wasn't usually easy to see its effects.

Since he was invisible, the three didn't notice that Erik's wound immediately closed itself. Though the younger man lost concentration for a second and his invisibility turned off.

Yet in his mind only retaliation thoughts swirled, and since he had the chance now, he would not let that slide. Erik supercharged his Lightning Lord brain crystal power.

As soon as Vex saw a small spark of electricity coalesce around his fingertips, he slowed time down.

<Shit...>

He leaped backward, but the lightning had already formed and was racing towards him. Electricity was fast, and even with his slowed down time, he was having trouble avoiding it.

The problem was that there wasn't much space between him and Erik, so Vex didn't have much space to move.

Though Terra and Restro must have anticipated that, and while everything happened really fast, they still had enough reaction time, or simply foresight, to do something.

A barrage of projectiles were hurtled towards Erik, and a wall sprouted between their leader and the arc of electricity the younger man released. His Force Bastion deflected most of the rocks, but he was forced to avoid the most dangerous ones and had to stop targeting Vex.

<These motherfuckers are smart!>

Erik was using his Hydra's head to keep up with the three, but it wasn't easy. The power didn't make him see at 360 degrees, so what he didn't see, he could at best predict.

But with fighters of that caliber and battle awareness, even that wasn't easy.

Vex got out of harm's way, but his mana was already spent. He almost had half his reserves completely consumed.

He didn't know how well his comrades were faring, but they must have been in a pretty similar situation.

Vex consumed mana to slow time enough for him to at least see Erik and to react to his attacks. Terra and Restro had to use a lot of it just to make the attacks fast and powerful enough to bypass the young man's armor, and even that wasn't enough.

The most puzzling question was: how much mana did Erik have?

The young man still had wings on and was currently hovering above ground, yet not anymore invisible. He used different elemental powers, and on top of that, his armor never left him. That must have meant he used a great deal of mana, especially considering how powerful his attacks had to be just to injure them, and that required mana.

Then he observed him thoroughly. There was no wound on his body.

<What? But I'm sure I hit him!>

Then a terrifying thought crossed Vex's mind.

<No way, the fucker can heal himself!>

Vex then teleported to both Restro and Terra. Before Erik could even start chasing them, he teleported himself and the other two away from him.

"What's the matter?"

"He can heal himself," Vex said.

At that, the other two remained silent.

"Even if he can, he must not have a lot of mana. Using all those powers with the same intensity as us must have consumed a huge chunk of it."

While Restro's words held some truth, the boy didn't look affected by the battle at all; it was like he had an infinite reserve of mana on his side.

"I have little left. We either close this quickly, or we are dead meat."

"What do you propose?" Terra asked.

Vex remained silent for a couple of seconds, in which he kept his eyes darting around to see if the monster found them.

"Terra, I need you to focus on defending. You must stay as far away as possible from Erik, manipulate the terrain, and try to block and slow him down. Restro, you will act as the tank and

main decoy; I will use my powers to deal damage to him, but if he can heal himself, the only thing I can do is just to find a moment to kill him with one blow."

"Are you sure you can do this?" Restro asked. "After all, it will be my ass on the line."

"Don't worry," Vex said. "If you are in a situation you can't come out of, I will teleport you away."

"You better keep your promise, dude. I don't want to die."

"Neither I want you to."

Then Erik found them. He wasn't keeping his invisibility up but was still hovering around, unable to deal with them from a distance because of Terra and his brain crystal powers.

"Let's go."

The three turned to face Erik. Vex teleported Terra on top of the blackguards' main building. If he kept himself well hidden, he would be able to affect the battle without Erik understanding where he was. Besides, the two didn't have any intention of letting him do that.

From there, the blackguard started reshaping the battleground. Vast walls and terrains of different heights sprouted like mushrooms. Terra changed the battlefield so much that even the rest of the blackguards were being affected, and with them the Chimaeric Demons.

They tried to get as far away as possible from the four titans' clash, but the battle was so big they weren't really able to.

Turrets got cut off from their allies and destroyed by the Chimaeric Demons. Some of the clones themselves ended up isolated and killed by groups of blackguards.

The result was a battlefield no longer the same as before. It was like the sandy beach turned into a rocky mountain. Only that things were strangely too geometric to have been natural.

<Now what?> Erik thought. It was clear this was something they did to prevent him from using his monstrous speed on the ground. Creating these many obstacles was clearly a way to weaken him.

<Should I just fly into the sky and attack from there?>

There were clear advantages to that. For starters, the three wouldn't be able to attack him as easily anymore, at least in Vex and Restro's case. The two were mainly melee fighters. The problem was that Vex would simply focus on teleporting the two away, Restro would turn Terra's attacks deadlier, and Terra himself would act as a ranged fighter and defender.

<Nothing would really change. Until now, I kept up with the three well by fighting on the ground.>

But the terrain was an obvious problem now.

<I need to find and kill Terra first...>

However, Erik had to make it look like he wasn't really trying to do that.