

BIOLOGICAL 1151

Chapter 1151: Merging Powers (3)

<Well... that's certainly better.>

The new powers worked just as Erik hoped, plus, The Chimaeric Demons had got Monica's power, though it would take a while before the first batch of clones with this ability matured. After all, he still needed time to make their eggs.

The old "Plant Master" brain crystal power turned into one called "Verdant Architect" by the system. It was similar, in essence, to the old brain crystal power, but with a new ability: now, Erik could transform plants into any material he wanted.

That wasn't all, because everything the plants under his control touched could be altered as well. Unlike Restro, who needed physical contact with Terra to change his powers' material, Erik had limitless flexibility. It was like he'd gained an endless set of hands, each capable of creating and transforming materials without restraint.

His Self-Healing and Healing Touch abilities merged, forming a new version of Healing Touch, but not something completely unheard of. A healing power, in fact, was meant to do that, heal, so the power didn't get something that made him do something completely unrelated to this.

However, compared to the previous two abilities, now not only could he heal directly, like Healing Touch was allowed to do, but he also had a passive healing effect that came from Self-Healing, but that got some characteristics from Healing Touch itself.

Force Bastion and Aegis Morph, instead, were merged to form Tower Bastion. This upgraded version kept its core defensive strength but added a new twist: Erik could change the armor's material on the fly, an ability gained from merging Restro's original brain crystal power with Force Bastion.

All of that made his defenses better, but even more adaptable.

Then came Elemental Lord—a fusion of his many elemental powers. This brain crystal power combined every element but kept a feature from his old slime-generating power: the ability to create constructs.

Now, instead of building them with hardened slime, Erik could shape the elements themselves into solid forms. Fire, water, earth, air.

The number of brain crystal powers Erik got was significantly less now. He kept only those that were too unique to merge or already powerful enough on their own.

Yet he couldn't help but question his choices.

For instance, he considered giving the Time Freeze or Warp brain crystal powers to the clones. Each would give them a huge tactical edge, allowing them to manipulate the flow of battle in ways few could counter.

Ultimately, he chose restraint. He'd already given them the third division commander's brain crystal power, which allowed them to gain more brain crystal powers by controlling thaidis and people.

There was no reason to give them too much stuff, as they couldn't even handle it. Then Erik finally decided it was time. There was something he hadn't talked to Mira, Amber, and Emily yet, but that was very important.

"Now I think it is time to have THAT conversation with Mira, Amber, and Emily."

Erik left the tent feeling nervous. The cool air outside hit him, but did nothing to stop him from overthinking.

He had to talk to Mira, Amber, and Emily about his ability to give them new powers, which would change their lives and help with their plans for the island.

Taking a deep breath, he started walking towards them. Each step he took brought him closer to a conversation that would shape all of their futures, and that would for sure simplify things for him on Mur. At least to some degrees.

Erik wanted to give them a new power, or two at best. The problem was, should he give them his own powers, which were already good, or should he make them think about something they might really need or want and provide it to them?

Invisibility, for example, could be an extremely useful power for Emily. Erik was already imagining her blending into the landscape behind her shooting spot, the only trace of her presence being the crack of her rifle—then, nothing.

She'd vanish like mist, leaving her enemies bewildered, scanning the horizon for a phantom they couldn't see, but that was there, stalking them.

A spectral killer. This power would transform her into a living nightmare—a terror for anyone foolish enough to enter her scope.

Erik's hesitation still remained. The problem would be the already present over-reliance on her rifle, which might make Emily rather predictable, trapping her in patterns he wanted her to abandon.

What if, instead of depending on a single weapon, she could wield lightning?

A shot of energy from her fingertips, unstoppable, faster than a blink—no dodge or countermeasure could save her targets.

Either way, she could become the perfect weapon in Erik's arsenal, but which choice would take advantage of her true potential?

These two powers worked well for Mira too, since she was a sort of ranged assassin, but knowing her, he was unsure she would accept them.

<Telekinesis is also a power she might want to get.> It worked similarly to her existing brain crystal power, but would make her able to use everything as a weapon and would allow her to protect herself, like Uncle Benjamin did.

<The power would be much better with a parallel will brain crystal power, and I don't know if giving her three abilities would be safe.>

Amber had many options when it came to choosing her powers, but something about healing always felt right for her and her personality. Erik wasn't sure what to suggest to her, though.

Amber already had a powerful brain crystal. One that could cause a lot of destruction, but it offered nothing beyond that.

If Amber chose the power of Rejuvenating Touch, it would give her new strengths. She could heal herself and others, helping her friends and teammates get out of tough situations and more.

This ability would be a big change from her current situation, one that would complement well with her need to avoid useless death.

<Yes, but I still think she needs something that allows her to channel all that destructive power and give her more control of it. Especially considering what we are going to do next and where we are heading.>

Mur, and before that, the Law Gate.

Erik hadn't realized, taken as he was by his own thoughts, but he walked a good distance.

"Master!"

Erik didn't notice the clone watching him with a puzzled expression since his attention was lost somewhere else.

In truth, the surrounding area buzzed with activity; clones swarmed every which way, clearing out the wreckage left by the battle that took place on the island.

They were all strong enough to handle the cleanup without heavy equipment, though it would've saved them a lot of time if they had.

Instead, they were stuck lifting everything by hand, piece by piece. The rubble wasn't even the worst part—they could handle rocks and broken structures on their shoulders. But the earth and sand? That was another story entirely, one resembling a nightmare, more than a chore.

To get through that, the clones had to form a sort of human wave. They dug, hands clawing at the ground like dogs.

Earth and sand flew behind them, landing in heaps for the next row of Chimaeric Demons to do the same, and then the next row.

They worked their way down until finally they broke through to the sandy beach. It was a grueling process, a relentless push, but they got the job done.

As unconventional as it was, it was pretty effective.

But the cleanup wasn't the only thing happening around Erik. The Blackguards, being a military organization, had a lot more things the Chimaeric Demons had to manage.

They'd brought weapons and armor of every sort, along with supplies, water, and other essentials. The whole setup was built to support a smaller force, but now, with so many people, or better clones, Maynard Island was practically bursting at the seams.

To keep things under control, the clones had taken over the existing buildings as makeshift storage areas, stashing the gear and supplies there and storing even the one they brought here from Sleeb Harbor and the new batches of supplies coming from Frant.

They pitched the tents already on the island to set up camp, avoiding the need for anything more elaborate. Erik was too busy to plan out proper accommodations and had built nothing himself.

Not yet, anyway, but it was for sure on his list.

The only reason things were moving so quickly was because of the sheer number of clones. But with that many hands at work, the camp was noisy: shouted orders, the hum and crackle of brain crystal powers in use, and the clatter of gear and supplies being hauled or dropped.

Even with all the surrounding chaos, Erik heard nothing, to the point that he almost reached his own private tent without realizing.

Well, private might've been a stretch—it was also where the three women were staying, and Erik didn't want them to sleep on the ground, so he actually built something for them.

Chapter 1152: A gift (1)

Erik's tent was... Well, for starters, calling it a tent wasn't accurate. It was basically a home he made. In truth, he created it for the three women, to give them the most comfortable space possible and one where they could safely make neural links, on which they were currently focusing.

It was just that the three insisted for Erik to stay there. For obvious reasons... Not that one could blame them...

Erik had built only one structure. It wasn't very big, but it was strong and well-made. The most important aspect of it was that the building was sturdy and comfortable. It could easily stand up to bad weather and keep the people inside cozy in the meantime. The house had roots, and it would be hard for storms to destroy it.

Erik used his Plant Master brain crystal power to make the vegetation grow into the shape of a house. He guided trees and vines to form the walls and roof.

The walls were made of twisted branches and thick vines, which made them strong but also looked natural. Leaves and small branches filled the gaps, keeping the inside warm and dry. The roof was made of tightly woven leaves that sloped down, so rain would easily run off.

Windows were just openings in the walls where Erik let fewer plants grow, albeit making vines dangle through it, so that if the three wanted some fresh air, they could still get it.

Erik grew the furniture right out of the structure itself. He made beds from woven branches, shelves from curved tree limbs, and even a table that grew up from the ground with a flat top.

<I'm here...>

Erik entered. There he found the three women meditating, trying to make more neural links. It was just that, with that many, it wasn't simple anymore.

"HMHMH..."

Erik cleared his throat, drawing the attention of the three breathtakingly beautiful women who had been deep in meditation. As if awakening from a trance, their eyes fluttered open. They turned their gazes towards Erik.

"Did something happen?" Mira asked. That was the first thing she always asked, courtesy of her many years as a mercenary.

"No... Well, yes, actually. The Chimaeric Demons found their servers."

"Great!" Emily said. "Finally, we might be able to see what these guys were up to!"

"Yes," Erik said. Mira observed him more. "Something is telling me you didn't come here for that."

<Damn, she misses nothing.>

Erik coughed. "Well, in truth, I don't. The reason I came here is that I have something to say to you, and only you. At least for now."

His face turned serious. "But know this: what I am about to tell you could turn rather problematic if someone finds out about it."

"You mean, to the point, someone would come and kill us all?"

Erik sighed. He was already picturing the situation.

"No, to the point that I will find millions of people under my window asking for a chance to speak to me."

Amber smiled.

"Doesn't this happen already?" Amber asked. "After all, you are pretty famous, and many people consider you the strongest human being alive."

"Not in history?" Mira teasingly said.

"I think we can safely say that is not true at all... Anyway, this time, things will be... worse. You see, during the last battle, I unlocked the system's last two powers, and... Well, they allow me to give brain crystal powers to others..."

The three women gaped at Erik, stunned into silence. Their eyes widened and jaws slackened as they struggled to process his words. They could do nothing but sit motionless in silence, trying to understand if Erik was pulling a prank on them.

However, all three of them were hoping what Erik said was true, all for the same reason. Amber didn't like to kill and always wanted something that would make her able to not do that.

Emily could see the future, but these visions were often unreliable and had to be interpreted most of the time, and the power itself didn't have many combat-oriented usages. Even using it in a fight was insanely hard, to the point of being impossible.

Mira, instead, had a weak brain crystal power, and getting something on par with Amber and Emily was the bare minimum to stay with Erik or go to Mur. In truth, her condition often made her feel inadequate. If what Erik said was true and not a joke, she might be able to finally get out of that situation.

For different reasons, everyone wanted a new power, especially knowing they might have better chances on Mur, which were slim at the moment.

Mira was the first to break the stunned silence. "You can... share brain crystal powers?"

"Yeah..." Erik nodded.

Emily and Amber exchanged quick glances, their expressions a mirror of shock and excitement. Mira was unable to talk, but just for a moment.

"Well, now I get why you said things would turn ugly." Mira already saw herself going to take a shower, only for someone to be peeping through the window for a chance to see Erik.

"That would be horrifying."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"So..." Amber said. "You came here because you want to give us some new powers?"

Erik nodded.

"I thought about what to give you on my way here and if you even wanted them. You want new powers, right?"

If they got something new, they might be able to go in a new direction.

"First of all, I should tell you how it works," Erik said.

"I can only give you a power that I already have, and when that happens, I lose it. I guess the biological supercomputer sends you the DNA information from my body to yours and fixes you in such a way to accommodate the brain crystal power."

The three women nodded. They didn't understand how all of that worked—the technical part at least—but Erik's words were clear.

"Second, the new power will be parallel with your existing one, but they will share the same mana pool, your brain crystal."

Chapter 1153: A gift (2)

Erik paused. He wished it could work like for the Chimaeric Demons' brain crystal powers, but that was a perk they got because their brain crystal was a peculiar one. It was most likely impossible for humans to replicate that.

Of course, that came with its downsides, because while they could use powers more, if they didn't sufficiently train them, they would end mana quickly, and having that many powers meant it was hard to bring them all to a good number of neural links.

"Third, you can strengthen your bodies by making new neural links, but you know this already."

The three women listened with a mix of excitement and worry on their faces. Mira's eyes got big when Erik talked about DNA changes. Emily thought about how this might affect her ability to fight. Amber observed Erik, interested in the idea of getting new powers.

"The initial ones will be easy to do as always, meaning you might have a way to get strong enough to not be devoured by any random insect thaid on Mur. However, rapid and extensive DNA changes from creating new neural links could transform you into something monstrous. That's why the

biological supercomputer severely limited my ability to grow stronger through them. You should allow time for your DNA to stabilize before making new ones."

He paused.

"Fourth, and last. I can give you some powerful abilities of mine. They are all highly ranked, but if you want something specific I do not have, you can just tell me."

"What powers can you share with us?" Amber asked. Her eyes were full of interest. After all, it wasn't common to pick a new brain crystal power and have rather powerful and high-levelled ones as starting ones. She knew how powerful Erik was, and it was all thanks to those powers.

"Can you tell us about the abilities you might give us?" She leaned closer.

"Sure."

Erik took a deep breath. "First off, there's Chimaeric Demon. You know this already: I can create clones of myself—permanent, with the same memories, skills, and abilities as me at the time I made them. They come from eggs, and while they take weeks to hatch and mature, once they're fully grown, they're my equal in every way. They're... well, they're invaluable."

He glanced at the three women. "Then there's Instability. This lets me mess with creatures' emotions—make them feel whatever I want them to, or even read their thoughts. Subtle, but when used right, it can dismantle someone's mental defenses before they even realize it, and it's great to get information from people, willing or not."

He held up his hand, conjuring a small vine that twisted around his fingers. "This is Verdant Architect, a new acquisition of mine I got from my birth brain crystal power after some mergings. It gives me complete control over plants. I can grow, shape, and even strengthen them to withstand the toughest forces. Thanks to Restro's brain crystal power, I can now alter their molecular structure—make them as hard as metal or as flexible as water. I can create botanical defenses, weapons, and even blend plants with elemental forces. It's versatile, and, in the right hands... deadly."

Erik paused, his gaze sharpening. "Will of the Hydra. This one I got it from Uncle Benjamin. This ability's more mental than physical. I can split my mind and create parallel consciousnesses. Every time I 'grow a new head,' I get faster, sharper, and more perceptive. But there's a risk; lose control, and I could lose myself in the split. Still, it gives me a cognitive edge."

He began listing off his remaining powers with a hint of reluctance. "Phantom Veil—I can make myself invisible and create illusions, even mimic the surrounding environment, and confuse anyone nearby. Telekinesis lets me lift, throw, or shield myself with anything I can see, though heavier and faster objects drain more mana. With Beastwalker, I can shapeshift into any animal I choose, which has its own advantages."

He smirked slightly. "Then there's Time Freeze. It lets me slow down or even stop time for a short while, though the mana cost is astronomical. Warp lets me alter distances or shift objects and even myself and other people, depending on the mana I put in. It's a great way to get out—or into—danger fast, and it has a lot of fighting potential."

Erik's voice grew more intense. "Then something I got from Monica, Rejuvenating Touch. It allows me to heal any injury and even regenerate limbs if I have the time and mana. And Tower Bastion—an armor I can summon that adapts to threats, bolstering my strength and agility, even shielding me with force fields. It also comes with the ability to create energy shields and create concussive shocks I can use to hit harder or move faster."

"This looks similar too."

"To Nathaniel's powers... Yes, because it was a power resulting from merging his power with others."

"Right... I forgot you killed him," Amber said.

"In self-defense, there are differences between killing in self-defense and murder."

"Yes."

Erik sighed. "The last one is Elemental Lord, which lets me control fire, water, earth, air, and lightning. I can even blend elements to create weapons or change the temperature to an extreme. It's... powerful."

He crossed his arms, a flash of defiance in his gaze. "But as powerful as all of these are, I'm not giving up Chimaeric Demon, Instability, Verdant Architect, or Will of the Hydra. They're not just brain crystal powers—they're part of who I am. The rest... they're strong, but they're... I wouldn't

say secondary, but it won't pain me to give them up as much as those I listed. These four, I can't give them to you."

There was silence.

"I want you to consider your options carefully. We could always ask the Chimaeric Demons to search for powers that might better suit your needs, but that would take time. In alternative, you can choose one of mine, which I strongly recommend. The choice is yours, but think it through."

Chapter 1154: A gift (3)

In the end, the three women decided they needed some time to think about it.

Choosing a new brain crystal power was far from simple, not only for the three women, but for everyone. So, they decided the best thing would be to think about what to do.

They found themselves with many considerations to do, and none of them were insignificant.

One of their main problems was whether to select a power that complemented their existing abilities or to get something completely new that could extend their range of capabilities.

Choosing a power that synergized with their current skills could make them stronger than they already were, creating a combination that could have effects greater than the sum of the two powers.

Choosing a completely new power could give them more options and would help them handle different situations better.

There was more, because each one of the three women had a problem. Mira's power, while useful, lacked combat might on its own. Even if Erik gave her something to make it more lethal, the underlying limitation of her ability would remain.

Emily, instead, could see the future, but that wasn't exactly a battle-oriented power. She relied on her rifle to fight.

Her visions were often unreliable and blurry. Although she improved them as the number of her neural links increased, seeing the future must have been difficult even for "mana" to accomplish.

The inner workings of mana remained a mystery to everyone, but its power was clear. Yet messing up with time must not have been easy, even for the ethereal substance, given the effects on Emily's power.

As for Amber, things were different. A good elemental power might work for her, especially one that allowed her to channel the corrosive gas like she wanted. However, she lacked something that allowed her to fight against a single opponent, making her rely on her dagger skills to fight. It wasn't exactly ideal.

With the two brain crystal weapons she got, this got solved, but only to a certain extent. Brain crystal weapons didn't have the same amount of mana an individual had, meaning their effects would end up way before a human emptied his or her mana reserves.

Brain crystal weapons' powers weren't even as great as when they were used by the thaid from which it was harvested. Their death affecting their overall power, for whatever reason.

In truth, Erik didn't care about it.

They also had to consider the long-term implications of their choice. Would a particular power prove better in their future fights?

Would it enhance their chances of survival for Mur? How would it shape their roles within the team and influence their individual growth paths? The shadow of unforeseen consequences loomed in their thoughts. They could make a wrong choice.

Sure, Erik might give them other powers to fix the problem, but training them would require time, and they would still be stuck with a power they would not be able to use how they wanted.

In Erik's and the three women's logic, the power they got had to solve a problem, and one who couldn't was basically useless.

They needed to assess how a new power might impact the group dynamics. Would it create an imbalance in their abilities? How would it affect their teamwork and strategies in the field?

Should they prioritize powers that enhanced their individual strengths or ones that improved the team's ones?

Mira, Emily, and Amber knew they couldn't join Erik's battles, at least for now. So, the team was going to be composed of the three women, and maybe June.

These were crucial factors that couldn't be overlooked, especially considering a good choice might make them be able to fight shoulder to shoulder with Erik, which was the goal.

Since this was a choice that required careful thought, thorough discussion, and deep introspection, they decided to discuss it for some time.

<Well, at least they won't make a bad choice.> Of that, Erik was sure.

<I hope at least.>

Maybe not so sure. With that done, Erik left the building.

There was just one thing he had to do now, and that required the Biological Supercomputer's help again.

<System.>

<Yo!>

He sighed.

<Let's be honest here: as we stand now, given the numbers we have, we will be dead meat on Mur.>

The biological supercomputer mentally nodded. Much to Erik's dismay.

<I know. Based on the blackguards' growth curve, they are getting stronger at a faster rate than you and your forces.>

The biological supercomputer paused.

<It is thanks to their research and the Thaid's on Mur providing them good brain crystals and even better brain crystal powers, but I do not exclude the possibility they might have understood how to make new neural link training techniques based on the changes I made on the old one from Liberty Watch.>

If that was true, it would be a tremendous problem.

Erik realized the seriousness of this situation. New training methods for the blackguards could mean faster power growth and a bigger threat to him and his lovers.

They might kill stronger thaid's and, in turn, get better brain crystal powers.

Even weaker blackguards could become dangerous, increasing the number of threats he was facing, and they were not few by any means.

<They can catch up to me...> Erik paused. <You think that is possible?> he asked the system.

Erik didn't know how hard it was to make a new technique. He hadn't tried it himself, as he left everything to the biological supercomputer, and the thing made it look relatively simple, at least compared to the editing powers.

This was uncharted territory for Erik. However, if the biological supercomputer had done it, it was certainly possible. And if it was possible, there was a chance the blackguards had already improved their own technique.

<Let's hope not,> Erik said.

<I think it is likely. The blackguards had a lot of time to see Liberty Watch Village's improved technique. Comparing the differences with their old technique, they might have done something already. However, what made Levium, Terra, Monica, Restro, and Vex as strong as they were was just time.>

The computer paused. <As I've said already, the blackguards have a strict hierarchical structure, with the leaders delegating tasks to their underlings. I won't be surprised with Monica having told the four Vindicators to focus on making neural links to increase the chances of killing you, and if

she did that, she might have tried to do the same. Basically, you won just because of the advantage you already had.>

<Killing me, uh? You know, I'm starting to consider that isn't their goal anymore.>

It was true. At the beginning, the blackguards sent fighters that were, in theory, much more skilled and powerful than Erik.

Luckily, he hid his cards well for a long time, so they were not as prepared as they had to be when they attacked him in Caelora City.

Later, after a period of hiding, they attacked him again. Having learned that they lacked the power to defeat him with smaller teams, they sent their best fighters at the time, devised intricate traps, and sent overwhelming numbers to him.

Yet it wasn't enough, and that was because, in between those moments, Erik grew. The problem was that they were growing, too. While they didn't have a biological supercomputer, they had many scientists on their side, which leveled the field, at least partially.

<This has turned into a race against time.>

Erik couldn't help feeling partly responsible for their power growth. Had his technique not been shared among his guild members, the blackguards would never have gotten their hands on it.

Even with more powers at their disposal, they wouldn't have become as strong as they were now.

But at the time, his goal was to establish a foothold in Etrium, where he thought he could finally restart his life. Have a better one. For a while, it even worked; it was just that everything he did brought him closer to the blackguards and their machinations.

<If what you say is true, then what I am about to ask you gets another level of importance.>

<What do you need?> The biological supercomputer could read his mind, so it knew what Erik wanted, but asked not to annoy him. Though it was tempted to do so, just for fun.

<Take a guess...>

<Ah,> the AI said. <You want a new training technique focusing on the Chimaeric Demons' peculiar brain crystal, right?>

That would be the key. If not in the short time, at least in the long one. If the difference between him and the Blackguards' growth rate was the time spent on training, Erik was at a disadvantage because he didn't have it.

Monica did, and the strength she got in just two years was proof of that. Erik couldn't spend that much time training for many reasons, but the most important one was that he didn't have clones strong enough to fight against the division commanders. That burden fell on him, and that was exactly what he wanted to do.

But even if he suddenly decided to just train, that could be done at best until he was on Hin. Once on Mur, things would be quite different. Erik didn't know how much or how harder things would get, but for sure, they were going to turn hectic.

<Yes,> Erik said to the biological supercomputer.

Chapter 1155: The Research Race

The Chimaeric Demons got their brain crystals when Erik modified the Astral Wolf and merged it with the brain crystal power.

Instead of creating the giant mana wolf, Erik asked the biological supercomputer to make a mana brain crystal.

It wasn't anything physical; it was something that couldn't be found in their brains. It was just a lump of mana that worked exactly like the real deal, but with some differences.

The problem was that to maintain and use all that mana was not as straightforward as for humans. Mana was not a simple substance. It was intangible, impossible to see.

It behaved like a gas, like a liquid, even like a solid. The first time it appeared, people had no idea what it was, and they only learned of their presence after the first brain-crystal-equipped human appeared, and that only by feelings.

It took a while for people to understand, more or less, what they were dealing with.

The Astral brain crystal wasn't optimized to make the same substance composing it flow because the thing itself wasn't exactly a brain crystal.

The neural links themselves were not as stable as those inside a person's brain. It was like building an unstable bridge over unstable land. All of this made making new ones extremely hard and slow for the Chimaeric Demons.

That was why Erik needed a new technique. The one they got from Erik was fast and powerful, but it was still too slow for the clones, especially considering how strong the enemy was growing. Since the clones had to work, had to fight, had to explore, and had to spy, the time needed for them to train was too little.

<Well, I mean, we talked about this like three or four months ago. What did I say back then?>

<Is this a real question?> Erik asked. The biological supercomputer had a perfect memory. It knew what it said.

<It is.>

Erik sighed. <You said: INSUFFICIENT DNA POINTS.> Erik said, mimicking the biological supercomputer AI voice.

<Hilarious...>

<Yes, but I also said that unless you had 100 million DNA points, I wouldn't have the required energy to do fast research.>

<An instantaneous one, you said.> The difference was important. If the biological supercomputer could make an instantaneous research, he would solve the problem right now, and the New Chimaeric Demons would be able to get the technique. Of course, he could still teach the old ones.

If there was no way for him to get the technique, if one could even be made, a fast one was still going to be better than nothing.

<Yes.>

There was a brief pause. <So, I have 77,369,671 DNA points. Even if I can't ask you to make an instantaneous research, a short one should still be possible.>

The biological supercomputer's imaginary face got a blank look. Then it turned embarrassed.

<Well... Yes but...>

The system paused again. It was almost as if it was trying to avoid answering Erik.

<System, you are strangely avoiding answering me... Just tell me what the problem is.>

The system mentally sighed. In truth, it wasn't trying to avoid answering, but it was for sure hard.

<Well, the research would still take three months at a minimum. The Chimaeric Demons' brain crystals are something never seen, something we created and about which we ourselves have basically no information. The research would involve not only finding a wonderful technique but even trying to understand the astral brain crystals themselves. Even at that, we won't be able to know everything about it or make the best technique possible, as it is for human brain crystals. We would need several years to do that and hundreds of billions of DNA points.>

"Fuck..."

A Chimaeric Demon halted mid-step, his head tilting as he turned to watch Erik. Confusion radiated from the face behind the mask. Erik's movement was odd—meandering, uncharacteristic. He wasn't striding with the earlier purpose but was instead wandering without direction.

Erik walked, his head bowed, the edges of his cloak trailing along the uneven terrain. His thoughts were elsewhere, buried deep in some labyrinth that none of his clones could penetrate. He was silent.

Yet none of the clones dared break the silence or approach him despite them having things to discuss and countless issues to resolve: orders to clarify, strategies to execute.

<So, this means we won't be able to prepare before Mur.>

<Yeah,> the biological supercomputer said. <Maybe if we bunker down somewhere there, we might be able to prepare, but this would give the Blackguards a lot of time to do the same, if not worse.>

Erik's shoulders slumped, his face etched with a blend of dismay and vexation. A flicker of fatigue crossed his eyes as he mulled over the obstacles he had to face.

<What do you suggest, then?>

In truth, the biological supercomputer wasn't sure how to proceed. For all its capabilities, there were too many variables and too many unknowns affecting its calculations.

The AI wasn't omnipotent. Despite those not having to deal with it, Erik might believe. It couldn't peer into the future; it couldn't divine the outcomes of every choice.

It wasn't even particularly "intelligent," at least not in the way most would imagine. The supercomputer was basically a person. Sure, not a dumb one, but instead a brilliant mind. But that wasn't enough.

What it had, instead, was raw computational power—a capacity to process data at speeds and depths that could turn centuries of problem-solving into mere moments of work.

The biological supercomputer was something with a lot of computational power that allowed it to do the things that others would have made in years, centuries, or millennia, which required energy.

The DNA points gave the system the energy, the capacity, to analyze different data at a fast time. Fractions of seconds.

But that, too, had its limits. It could analyze countless scenarios, but it couldn't do so forever. There were constraints and bottlenecks. And what use was boundless power when the data itself was incomplete? No amount of processing could fill in the blanks where variables were missing or riddled with uncertainty. Unless it focused on finding those data.

When that energy wasn't supplied, its mightiness was severely lowered. However, it got an opinion on the things to do, like everyone.

<I will work on the technique. Even if we might end up completing everything late, we would still gain something. I will spend 70 million DNA points. It is more than I would have asked for a quick search, but I will take some more to speed things up. Aside from that, there are three things I suggest you do.>

The system paused. <First, is doing as many Chimaeric Demons as you can; make those born from the eggs focus on Monica's power. This way, you might be able to build your army much faster on Mur, and you won't go there without enough forces. Keep in mind you will still lose a lot of clones there, at least until the clones themselves conquer some of the Thaid's on Mur.>

<I know,> Erik said. <That was exactly my plan...>

There was a short pause.

<Second, start preparing to give Mira, Amber, and Emily their powers. I left you with enough DNA points to merge how many powers you want and to edit them as needed. Just keep in mind that sharing the powers will require at least 500 thousand DNA points for each of the girls.>

<Yeah, I will ask the Chimaeric Demons to send as many blood samples and brain crystals as possible here, just to prepare for their choice. I will also tell them about the new possible choices. Maybe having a list of potential brain crystal powers will help them with their choices.>

Erik was already thinking about the conversation he planned to have with Noah. There were many brain crystal powers he could gain from the Thaid's in Frant—abilities that he knew were powerful, despite having a low rank, and that he knew he could merge to get something even more powerful.

But Frant wasn't the only source from which he could do that. Hin had its own collection of rare and powerful abilities.

The other countries were more problematic. Erik wasn't sure if he could safely get anything from them. Even Etrium had brain crystal powers that caught his interest.

Besides, unlike Frant or Hin, Etrium's treasures were straightforward to get. Erik could always ask the Chimaeric Demons to get those things, but if he wanted to, he could hire mercenaries to retrieve the brain crystals he needed.

They were expendable, efficient, and unlikely to ask too many questions—a perfect solution for someone who valued discretion as much as he did.

If mercenaries weren't the right choice, there were always the black markets to consider. It wouldn't take much effort to track down a seller and make the exchange.

Last, Erik valued Noah's input. His firstborn's ideas and unique perspective often provided fresh angles, especially in rather complex situations such as this. He showed it when planning Erik's father's rescue operation.

The biological supercomputer mentally nodded. <Excellent. As for the last suggestion, this is it: Ask Emily to check the future.>

Chapter 1156: Surviving Data (1)

Erik stood in the server room, watching as the technicians fixed whatever was needed to be fixed and doing the last tweaks.

They had been efficient; the damaged servers were now hummed with renewed life, though whether any useful data remained was uncertain.

One of the technicians approached Erik.

"Good morning, sir."

"Good morning. Is everything complete?" Erik asked.

"Yes, sir."

The technician stood at attention, hands behind his back, showing respect. His eyes met Erik's with a mix of awe and slight nervousness.

The technician understood how important it was to speak to Erik Romano.

"We've repaired everything we could. The physical damage has also been addressed, and everything had been properly set up, but I can't guarantee the integrity of any data that might be stored within."

The technician's face fell, his brow furrowing. He looked disappointed, as if he wished he could have done more. But Erik didn't care for the man and his feelings. He had many things to deal with, and this guy's personal feelings were not on his list.

"What issues did you find?"

"The structural damage was extensive, sir. When the building collapsed, the servers were nearly crushed. We had to substitute a lot of the components; otherwise, we wouldn't have taken two weeks for the fix."

In truth, it would have been better to simply buy new stuff and recycle these servers. Of course, the man knew the point of repairing all of this was to get the data stored on it, but in a different situation, he would have suggested otherwise.

Erik nodded.

"That wasn't the only problem, sir. Somehow, the server got infiltrated by water, electrical surges from damaged power systems, and physical impact damage from falling debris. The cooling systems were completely destroyed."

<Thanks for that, Terra, Monica.> Erik sighed.

The man moved to one of the server racks, pointing out the new components. "We've replaced roughly sixty percent of the hardware. The power distribution units were beyond repair, so we installed new ones. The data storage drives were our primary concern; we used specialized equipment to recover what we could from the damaged units."

The man's fingers traced the new cooling lines running along the walls. "The entire cooling infrastructure had to be rebuilt from scratch. We've installed a redundant system to prevent overheating, though we had to modify the room's layout to accommodate it."

"What about the data integrity?" Erik asked. That was his main concern, of course.

The technician's expression twisted with hesitation, his brow furrowed and lips pressed thin, as if searching for the right words to deliver unwelcome news.

"That's... harder to say, sir." He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "We've restored the physical systems to operational condition, but... data corruption is highly likely."

He paused; his gaze went to the servers. "And the blackguards may have implemented deletion protocols before your arrival on the island. Just to make sure you wouldn't end up with important information in case you won. Honestly, sir, they could have purged the critical data before you even left for Hin."

The technician's shoulders sagged. He let out a sigh. "We've done everything we can to repair the hardware, but whatever remains on it... It's out of my hands now, sir."

Erik looked around the fixed server room in silence. There was nothing he could do about the data if they were not there.

<Well, at least I have a new server room.>

The technicians had done a great job. New power lines were on the stronger ceiling. The cooling systems worked well and quietly. They had also added emergency stop buttons and backup power.

Erik didn't actually need a server room, but he was thinking of making Maynard Island the Chimaeric Demons' base of operation, so having one was bound to be useful.

"You've done well," Erik said. "Clear the room—all of you. I need to examine this myself."

"Of course, sir."

The technician gave a quick nod. "Of course, sir," he said. He turned, gathering a few tools from the nearest workstation, careful not to make any unnecessary noise, and left, avoiding meeting Erik's eyes, as if he could only feel shame.

It was true that Erik Romano was a force of his own and that he didn't work for him. But he was from Frant. Actually, he was Frant's only awakener. Well, not that there weren't many in these days. Yes, but not from Frant.

It looked like their enemies had plenty of them now, making him wonder why Frant was the only country without them.

With one last glance back—more out of duty than curiosity—he closed the door behind him, leaving Erik alone in the low hum of the server room.

Erik took a last look at their work.

The question he was eager to find answers to was whether they'd been thorough enough in erasing their secrets before their defeat or not. Erik was about to find out.

He approached the main console. Erik put his hand on the server rack. That was needed by the biological supercomputer.

<System, is there anything on these servers?> Erik asked.

The system paused.

[Yes.] The biological supercomputer said while scanning the device.

[There is data there, some partial, some corrupted, but there is also a lot of free space on the device, meaning that the blackguards were in the process of deleting everything or deemed what remained here of no importance. However, I can tell you that the most critical information seems to have been erased, likely a contingency measure in case of defeat.]

Erik clenched his fist. <What kind of information survived?>

[There are multiple categories. There's a substantial file on you, which they apparently didn't consider sensitive enough to delete. Well, I mean, it is a file about you. Why would they hide it from you? Some of the remaining data is about the extensive mapping data of Maynard Island and the facility layouts. Additionally...]

The system paused, as if organizing its findings.

<Go on.>

[Well... While they erased their plans and current operations on Mur, they left behind geographical surveys about the place. There are photos and detailed mapping of valleys, waterways, and mountain ranges. There are also records of discovered ruins—former human settlements.]

"Not ideal, but better than nothing," Erik said.

That wasn't exactly what Erik was hoping to find. He wanted answers about what the blackguards were doing and why; he wanted to know what the biological supercomputer exactly was and why it had been created. Besides, Erik wanted answers about the sinister cold.

The blackguards were bound to know something about it, but there was no trace of the information he sought. Instead, he got something not related to it—information about himself and on Mur.

Yet, at least this last data was going to help them a lot on Mur, at least to know what to expect and where to head first. He might be able to understand where the blackguards went and their goals based on the information he had.

Maybe he would be forced to make conjectures and reason a lot, but there still was a chance. Of course, it depended on the data itself.

"Inject the data."

[Initiating data transfer.]

Information flooded Erik's mind. The geographic data formed first—detailed topographical maps, environmental surveys, wildlife migration patterns. But then unexpected data streams surfaced.

Personnel files started flowing in countless profiles of blackguard operatives. Most were likely on Mur now, their identities considered either irrelevant enough to leave behind or referring to dead individuals.

<Well, this is a lucky find.>

Then came something that made Erik pause. It was a file about Benjamin Kaminski.

Based on the documents, the blackguards listed him as missing in action since they didn't exactly know what happened to him, given that the Chimaeric Demons purged them from the city. Not having access to his body, not having someone make reports—that was the only thing they could do. Of course, while they weren't officially certain of his death, they knew he had died by Erik's hands.

<To Emily's...>

Based on the file, Uncle Benjamin was an orphan. Apparently, he showed a brilliant mind since a young age and had been marked early by the blackguards for recruitment.

Images of a younger Benjamin went through Erik's mind—a student at Thornton High School, crossing paths with Lucius Romano, Erik's father. Neither aware of the other's significance to the blackguards.

<They likely became friends at that time...>

Their paths took separate ways at the military recruitment. Back then, it wasn't mandatory, as Becker was still trying to carve a space in Frant's complicated political landscape. At that time, both Erik's father and Uncle Benjamin received an offer to join the blackguards. Lucius rejected it, but Benjamin didn't.

The file then detailed Benjamin's rising influence: his oversight of the Crystal Cross Gang, his role in Doran's research program, the countless abductions he ensured the Crystal Cross Gang did, and his role in keeping an eye on him.

<He was their eyes and ears in Frant all along.>

But Erik knew that already. However, he forced himself to push past the thoughts about the man since there were more pressing matters.

Chapter 1157: Surviving Data (2)

What Erik needed right now was to analyze the information about the Blackguards' command structure. Based on what he learned until that point, there were at least three divisions, meaning three leaders.

But were there more? He had to find out, because that would change his targets, his strategy, and his approach.

He kept searching.

While the files were frustratingly sparse, one crucial detail emerged: there were only three divisions.

<At least some good news...>

It meant there were only two more commanders to eliminate, and the blackguards' leadership would be dismantled.

There wasn't actual data on who these people were. Obviously, they made it, so every piece of data about them had been erased.

Something that was also missing was everything related to Doran's research. That would have been a great boon, because he might have shared this information with Becker. If he wanted to use it, to fight the blackguards or do something else, even better.

<But he could have also bared his fangs against me.>

Erik didn't really care. He was planning on disappearing once and for all, once all of this ended. Humans had been a disappointment for Erik throughout his life, and a minute more spent among them was too much.

<Go somewhere isolated, have only the Chimaeric Demons for company, and have my own little and self-sustainable farm. I don't think I will have problems.>

Then a funny thought crossed his mind.

<It would be cool to live in a giant tree like I did in the White Desert. I would have an enormous place for me and the Chimaeric Demons, a stunning view of the surroundings, and fruits as big as watermelons... Yeah, it is actually not a bad plan.>

Something else caught his attention then. Hidden among the standard operational data were personal records—journals, letters, internal communications.

Most were the usual sterile official reports that an organization like this did, but some—more than a few, actually—were intimate glimpses into the organization's inner workings. The blackguards' thoughts.

—Journal Entry—

Entry 1: I heard the others are having trouble on the Mur continent. I'm actually worried about Phill. He said they got some bases operational, but based on what Black Skull said, those didn't last for long. Damn Thaidis. (...)

(...)

(...)

(...)

(...)

Entry 212: The higher-ups said the research is progressing well. Based on the schedule, I should receive my second brain crystal power in two months. I wonder what they will give me.

(...)

(...)

(...)

—END—

<Interesting,> Erik thought. <They left behind their personal correspondence?>

[It was most likely overlooked during the data purge,] the system said. [Such personal communications often contain valuable insights despite their informal nature.]

<Yeah, I see what you mean...>

There was a good deal of information. From there, Erik pieced together a timeline of key events.

For instance, he learned that Doran's research had been completed shortly after Erik inadvertently revealed his location to the Blackguards.

What surprised the man the most, though, was that the guy had later been killed, and his research was taken over by a woman only going by the name of Dr. Lena. She had a brilliant mind, based on what the blackguards said about her, and she not only took over Doran's research, but it also improved it.

She was the one who made it possible to give three brain crystal powers. However, based on what these guys were saying, that wasn't something they often did, but there were no specifics about that. No reason explained.

One thing Erik failed to find were mentions about mutations.

[Apparently, they didn't have mutants rampaging their bases yet.]

<Yeah, they have been lucky...>

Erik dug deeper into the messages and notes left behind. These showed what the blackguards did every day, how they dealt with each other, and what they worried about or hoped for.

However, this was limited to personal matters. After Erik's appearance, the Blackguards altered their information-sharing protocols. Members were now only privy to details directly relevant to their individual tasks.

Yet, despite Erik not finding exactly what he wanted, these personal writings helped him understand how the blackguards ran things, who had power, and what they argued about. They revealed the human side of the organization, showing that the blackguards weren't just cold-hearted agents but people with their own thoughts and feelings. Albeit very hidden ones.

That was what surprised Erik the most.

[Well, they don't act like humans, if I have to say.]

The communications revealed the hierarchy's dynamics, but also some power struggles between divisions and members. The first division was on the Mur continent because they thought that was the place where they could gain the power they sought. Nothing much was said about their goals, because few knew the real reason they were doing what they did.

All the agents said it was just for humanity's good, but Erik wasn't sure about that. If that was the case, they wouldn't have kidnapped people. Did the goal really justify the mean in this case? Maybe, but even if it did, Erik didn't like it.

<This looks like the main reason for them to act. Gain power and control.>

[It wouldn't be surprising.]

<Yeah... but I actually expected more, to be honest.>

[Some people are just greedy, Erik.]

The other two divisions decided to stay on Mannard, but the reason was unclear. For sure, Erik's presence there was a huge contribution to that choice.

<It almost looks like...>

[Like the first division commander abandoned the idea of getting me from you,] the biological supercomputer said.

<Right, while Monica and the other guy didn't.>

[It might also be because they thought they could give time to the guy on Mur to do something.]

<Or to find something...> Erik said. <Based on what dad said, you have been created there, so maybe the crafting process might still be there.>

[It is a possibility, but after centuries, I think not much remains.]

<Even if there is not much, a little is still good. They might be able to understand the procedure with a little information. Add that to the information they already have about brain crystals, thanks to Doran's research. Maybe they can make something even better than you.>

There was a pause.

<Analyze these communications,> Erik said. <Look for patterns, recurring themes, anything that might hint at their current operations on Mur. It is now clear what these guys are doing there; I want to know where they are, though. >

He paused. <I don't want to scour an entire continent for them. I need at least a general idea of where they are.>

[All right, but it will require time.]

[Injection complete.]

Erik removed his hand from the server. The room seemed different now, as if it were filled with the echoes of countless private conversations, secret doubts, and hidden ambitions.

He gave a look at his watch. <5 seconds passed.>

He thought about what he had gained.

<The best informations are about the geographical data. That will come in handy.>

The geographic data would help him navigate Mur. It would tell him what to search for and what to avoid.

Despite everything, he got what he needed—not everything he'd hoped for, but enough to begin planning his next moves.

Chapter 1158: Mastering New Abilities (1)

Three months passed. They had been three busy months, and Erik didn't like all that time passing a bit. Though it wasn't like he had a choice about it.

The main reason Erik had to wait was because he needed to reform his army. As usual, in these three months, he had been able to create around 45,000 new Chimaeric Demons. Some of these came with the new technique the biological supercomputer created, the one that would allow them to make new neural links faster. All of them, instead, had Monica's brain crystal power, so they were bound to be strong.

Using 70 million DNA points came with its perk, and despite everything, the biological supercomputer came up with something that allowed them to increase their training speed a lot.

During this period, his old technique had also been shared with Becker and the others. While they didn't have multiple brain crystal powers, those from Frant, whom Becker and the others deemed trustworthy enough to get it, focused on making neural links, and many reached the 54 Neural links mark during this period.

That eased the pressure on Frant, who suddenly turned stronger than their enemies. The blackguards weren't on Mannard anymore, so only their proxies remained, such as Etrium's mercenaries.

At that point, Hin and the blackguards had completely abandoned their campaign there.

Hin abandoned the campaign due to events in the country, while the blackguards were migrating to Mur.

Erik tried to prevent that as best as he could. Many were the ships he destroyed, but the planes. He could not do much about them since Hin's remaining planes were protected at the Law Gate, and without planes, Erik could not reach those bringing the blackguards to Mur.

The Chimaeric Demons, like every creature, still needed oxygen to get up there and also needed protection from those extremely low temperatures, something Erik didn't have.

As for the Law Gate, the place was too fortified for Erik to attack with the few troops he had available over the past months.

So, Erik prepared during this period. To attack the law gate, to steal the planes needed for reaching Mur, and to kill the division commander stationed there.

However, many questions swirled in Erik's mind. For example, why did the division commander at the Law Gate didn't leave Hin?

<I guess I will only know this once I get there.>

The preparations to attack the Law Gate stopped not only in making new clones. Erik also sent clones there, and during these months they prepared the terrain.

Erik would be at a disadvantage again there because the blackguards were going to be the defenders, and he was the attacker.

However, contrary to the attack on Maynard Island, here Erik could shape the surroundings to his advantage, and this was what he did.

He made the clones create tunnels and prepare the terrain so that he could use it to his advantage. He did everything that came to mind, tactically speaking, to make that place fall, but kept in mind the chance he might be forced to retreat.

Erik was heading to his home, his tent, or whatever the clones called it, while observing the surroundings. Maynard Island transformed completely. Since Erik planned on making the place the Chimaeric Demons' base of operation on Mannard, he created a lot of buildings.

He used his Verdant Architect brain crystal power, and after having shaped the flora as he wanted, he turned the plants into steel, concrete, and bricks. It was just that Erik decided to give a touch of him to everything. Basically, every building was a rather tall tree, even reaching the 100-meter height. It maybe was overkill, but he didn't care.

Finally, he arrived at his own home. Erik expanded it, making two more floors and bringing stuff from Frant. Computers, TV, everything that came to mind. Erik also made a gym room, got a massive kitchen with all appliances, and many more.

It felt good having all of that, despite not being as luxurious as what he had in Etrium.

"Hey!" Emily saw Erik entering.

"Hey, where are the others?"

"They are upstairs training. I just finished and took a shower. Amber is teaching me dagger wielding."

"You decided to settle on that as your main melee skill?"

"Yes, with the Time Freeze you gave me, I think it would be the best."

Erik gave the three women their new powers, too. In the end, Emily decided to get the time freeze power.

She had a lot of mana, so having that would not be a waste. With that power, she could both fight in close quarters and from a distance.

Using her sniper rifle, she could take shots more easily, making her lethal, but if she got somehow forced to fight melee, she would see everything move in slow motion, and she would both be safer and deadlier.

She would also have more time to use her birth brain crystal power, meaning she would be basically undefeatable. Of course, that was considering normal fighters. He doubted she would be able to fight on equal ground against Vindicators. If not for their powers, at least for their experience.

Vindicators were strong, trained, and experienced, but they also had particularly powerful brain crystal powers and massive amounts of mana.

As for Amber, surprisingly, she didn't choose a healing power; rather, she asked Erik to give him his warp brain crystal power. That way, she could take on three roles.

One of support and utility, as she could teleport stuff here and there, even the entire group, cutting traveling time; second, she would be deadlier in a melee fight; and she could also teleport in the middle of the enemy clusters, unleash her birth brain crystal power, and flee.

Third, and most importantly, she would be able to help her comrades in case the situation needed it, bring them to the clones, and let them heal them.

Last there was Mira. She received the most unexpected power of all—one Erik didn't actually have himself but had to create by combining multiple brain crystal powers.

She wanted the replication brain crystal power the clones had. That was because Mira saw how effective that power was.

It would allow her to fly, to take other people's identities for stealth missions, and change her body totally or partially, taking advantage of the body parts of the thaids she got to fight.

Getting wings, powerful hind legs that would multiply her running speed. Get the armor of an Erendu and even turn into a wyvern.

While Emily didn't actually need to learn how to use her power, the other two women did. Mira knew how to wield a sword, but she needed to get more confidence about fighting melee, learning when to shapeshift, and what would be the most comfortable transformation she could use during a fight. That was why she was focusing on hand-to-hand combat.

Amber had a similar problem. Aside from warping to use her birth brain crystal power, she wanted to learn how to incorporate the warps into her melee fighting style. So, they spent a lot of time training.

"I'll go check on them."

"Uhm." Emily nodded.

Chapter 1159: Mastering New Abilities (2)

Erik entered the training room only to find Amber and Mira in combat. The spacious room he himself made was used for that, but Erik didn't plan it for high-intensity combat such as the one the two were having.

<I hope they break nothing...>

The room echoed with the sound of their movement and the clack of Amber's wooden daggers.

Amber blinked in and out of existence, her twin practice daggers seeking openings in Mira's defense. One moment she was in front of the woman; the next she had warped behind her, daggers descending in a swift arc.

Mira's legs shifted, taking on the powerful musculature of a Terragor. She leaped aside with explosive force, simultaneously transforming her arms into those of an Ursolith. As she spun to face Amber, her enhanced limbs gave her strikes of mild power.

They weren't training, putting enough strength to injure; of course, they needed at most to ingrain the fighting style into their memory and muscles, and trying to understand when and where to use the powers.

Amber warped again, appearing at Mira's flank, but the woman had anticipated this. Her eyes morphed into those of a Skraylash, the enhanced vision allowing her to track Amber's subsequent movements after she warped.

<I can't avoid that like this...>

Her body shrank to the size of a mouse. It was the best way she could actually avoid that attack. Mira learned, through their sparrings, that when she was unable to get out of harm's way, the best thing was to change the size of her body. That way, she would be able to prevent the attack from reaching her.

Amber's daggers sliced through empty air. Before she could recover, Mira had transformed back to human size, now sporting the quick reflexes of a Mistlynx—her brain altered to mimic the creature's neural pathways. She had already quick reflexes, but with a Mistlynx-altered brain, it was even faster.

She then swiped her arms, ending up in two normal human hands. She almost slapped Amber's shoulder, but the woman warped out of danger.

<Ah... Damn!>

That was a really incredible fight to see. Three months were not enough to allow the three women to completely ingrain their new powers into their combat style, but they made significant progress in doing that.

<I wonder what Emily is doing.>

It wasn't just that, but the three women focused day and night on making neural links, aside from training. Mira was actually the most desperate of them all, since she was the one with fewer energy stats.

Getting her powers to a point where they consumed as little mana as possible was paramount, and that could only be achieved by getting more neural links.

For Amber, it was similar. She didn't have Erik's or Emily's energy, but for sure, she had more than Mira. So, it wasn't like she was helpless or had to particularly conserve her strength. The problem was that Warp consumed a lot of mana.

The new neural links decreased that a lot, but it still was not just two or three mana points she used when warping.

When Amber warped above Mira, attempting a downward strike with her wooden daggers, Mira's form shimmered and blurred. In a split second, she transformed her entire body into that of a tiny flying insect, barely visible to the naked eye.

With agility, she darted through the air, evading Amber's attack as it sliced harmlessly through the space she had occupied mere moments ago.

In another feat of rapid transformation, Mira grew back to her human size, and she got behind the still-descending Amber.

She might have landed a winning blow if Amber hadn't warped away at the last moment. Any other enemy would have been defeated at that point.

Both women were breathing hard, but they kept moving, as if they really were in a deadly battle. Amber used her power to appear in different places around Mira. The latter defended herself by changing parts of her body. She used cat-like reflexes, special eyes that helped her to keep track of Amber, strong legs, and powerful arms. This made it very hard for Amber to hit her.

The two basically danced across the training room, their powers complementing their natural fighting abilities.

Amber's warping created a dizzying pattern of attacks from all angles, while Mira's fluid transformations made her an unpredictable target.

However, it was clear Mira wasn't used to fighting at close range as much as Amber was. Besides, the woman's training was many times better than that of Mira, who mostly learned on the field.

<It's done...>

The sparring match ended in a draw. It looked like Mira, while worse than Amber in melee fight, made up for the vast experience she had. With both acknowledging each other's skill with respectful nods.

But it was clear they wanted to go on.

With their impending journey to Mur looming, where power was never enough, they recognized the need to improve their skills to the limit. Survival hinged on becoming the absolute best they could be. But that required time and, as in this case, energies.

"Impressive," Erik said from the doorway. Both women turned, startled by his presence. They had been too focused on their fight to notice he had been there for a huge chunk of it.

"Wow, you've both gotten so much better," Erik was clearly impressed. "It's amazing how you're using your new powers in your fighting. Amber, your warping is smoother and harder to predict now. And Mira, you're using your shapeshifting in clever and useful ways. I think not even the Chimaeric Demons are as good as you."

"Thanks," Amber said, wiping sweat from her brow. "But we still only have 39 neural links in our new powers, and we haven't learned well enough how to use these to fight."

"39 neural links are not two. It is a lot, and judging by your stats, you are much more powerful than before. Almost twice as strong, if I have to say."

Erik examined the holographic display in front of him, showing Amber's and Mira's stats. The floating data revealed their impressive progress over the past three months.

—Amber's Status—

Name: Amber Joyce

Brain Crystal Power:

Warp—Bζ1A: Enables the user to alter distances, warp objects, or shift locations within a limited range.

Gas Control — Bα3X: Amber's Gas Control ability lets her create and manipulate gasses, which she can also turn corrosive. She can shape it, move it, and use it for defensive purposes.

Physical Characteristics:

Amber is a stunning young woman, with fiery red hair cascading down her shoulders in waves. The glasses framing her piercing blue eyes enhance her intelligent and focused look. Her lips are a striking shade of pink. Years of rigorous training have given her a lean, athletic build, standing tall at 1.66 meters. She has a few freckles, most noticeable on her nose and cheekbones.

{Attributes}

STRENGTH: 357

INTELLIGENCE: 167

DEXTERITY: 313

ENERGY: 796

{Others}

Power Level: 883

Estimated Experience: Not Computed

Neural Links: 93

—Mira's Status—

Name: Mira Flynn

Brain Crystal Power:

Replication — Bζ1A: Allow Mira to completely shapeshift into animals, Thaidis, and other people. Can be used in different ways.

Currents manipulation—Bα3X: Mira possesses the ability to manipulate air currents in a small radius around her. This can alter the trajectory of her arrows, allowing her to make shots that might seem impossible under normal circumstances.

Physical Characteristics:

Mira is an athletic woman in her mid-twenties. A life as a mercenary in Etrium, paired with rigorous training, has given her a toned physique at 1.6 meters tall. Her skin is lightly tanned, and there are a few scars on her body. Mira's eyes are a striking emerald color, alert and observant. She has dark brown hair that she wears in a long braid.

{Attributes}

STRENGTH: 333

INTELLIGENCE: 151

DEXTERITY: 353

ENERGY: 578

{Others}

Power Level: 848

Estimated Experience: Not computed

Neural Links: 93

—END—

"Anyway, I need to talk to both of you and Emily downstairs. It's important, and we need to discuss it right away."

The women looked at each other with curious and worried expressions. They both nodded right away.

As they packed up their training things—Amber putting away her wooden daggers and Mira changing her body back to normal—the mood in the room changed.

"We'll be down soon," Mira grabbed a towel to dry off. She looked at Amber, who was already packing up. "We just need a few minutes to clean up and rest a bit. That was quite a workout, wasn't it?"

Mira and Amber exchanged tired but satisfied smiles.

Erik left the room, feeling happy about how well Amber and Mira were doing. He was pleased with the powers he had given them.

It didn't take long for both women to become proficient in using their new skills in combat. Erik had high hopes, but the reality surpassed even his expectations.

He felt proud and reassured, knowing their new skills would be enough to survive what was to come, at least in theory.

Chapter 1160: Planning the Assault (1)

Erik took his seat in the living room, gesturing for Amber, Mira, and Emily to join him on the nearby sofa. The three women quickly found their spots and understood that whatever Erik wanted to talk about was no simple matter.

Erik brought a computer with him, and he had already turned it on by the time the three women arrived.

In fact, Mira and Amber had taken quick showers before joining the group, while Emily had spent the time making neural links.

Holographic maps and tactical displays hovered above the wooden coffee table Erik made. There were also photos of the Law Gate the Chimaeric Demons made over the past three months.

Erik and the clones had already devised a strategy to tackle the Law Gate, and the clones started its preparations.

The battle there wasn't going to be the same as the one on Maynard Island, because this time Erik could prepare, and not just an army at that.

He sent the Chimaeric Demons to prepare the battle area, creating long tunnels going around the base and ready to be used to breach the Law Gate's walls when needed.

"I think we're ready to go to Mur," Erik said, activating a holographic display of the fortress. "But first, we need to deal with this."

The Law Gate materialized in glowing blue lines before them. A massive city-like fortification built close to Hin's western shores, its walls rising over 100 meters high.

Multiple defensive rings formed a layered security system. Not that anyone had ever needed to breach it. The Law Gate served only as a blackguard stronghold, and as far as Erik knew, its primary purpose was to provide access to Mur.

Few would be fool enough to launch an assault on such a fortress, and even fewer would have a reason to do so. Erik, however, was cut from a different cloth—the kind of man who'd saunter into a dragon's den armed with nothing more than a toothpick and a cocky grin. He was going to be that guy attacking such a place.

"The outer wall houses their anti-aircraft defenses," Erik said, highlighting sections of the structure. "Automated turrets, missile systems, and energy shields that can repel most attacks. The blackguards have enhanced these further since getting Etrium's technology."

"Who made this?" Mira asked, referring to the presentation Erik was using to explain the situation.

"I did, why?"

Mira remained silent, only a smirk appearing on her face.

"What about the tunnel network? Is it done already?" Amber asked, leaning forward to study the underground sections of the display. "These were the tunnels you sent the Chimaeric Demons to complete, right?"

Erik gestured, and the image shifted to show a complex maze of passages beneath the fortress. "Indeed. We've been working on this for three months. The Chimaeric Demons made three major tunnel systems." Red lines appeared, showing their diggings. "Each large enough to move substantial forces unseen."

"How haven't they noticed?"

"They have, partially," Erik said. "But they think they've found all our tunnels. What they don't know is that these obvious tunnels are just decoys. The real network..." He pressed a button, and dozens more passages appeared in green, "lies much deeper."

The women studied the underground system with growing appreciation. The tunnels created a web that would allow their forces to emerge anywhere within the fortress-like city, but most importantly, that would allow Erik's troops to reach the area safely.

If not for the barrier, at least.

The Chimaeric Demons were also secretly doing something else. They were eliminating all the thaids in the area surrounding the Law Gate to bolster their own forces.

Erik didn't want to lose more Chimaeric Demons, so he planned on using the undead thaids as cannon fodder, while the clones would take care of key targets.

"Each Chimaeric Demon will control their own undead force. When we strike, we'll have armies emerging from every level simultaneously."

"What about the division commander?" Mira asked. "After what happened here on Maynard Island, they'll be expecting something like this, knowing you can steal their powers."

Erik nodded, switching the display to show the fortress's central command structure. "That's where you three come in. "

"The division commander's chambers are most likely here," Erik pointed to a heavily fortified section near the top of a towering building. "We are not sure about that, but our scouts reported they have often seen the guy around that area. Unfortunately, they couldn't go too close, or they would be found by the Veritas Lenses. But everything suggests those are his private quarters."

He paused.

"But that's not where we'll likely find him when we attack. Intelligence suggests they've prepared multiple command centers throughout the facility, so the guy might be anywhere, really."

"Like a shell game," Emily noted.

"Exactly." Erik manipulated the display, creating a simulation of their planned assault. "What we are going to do is infiltrate the place using the tunnels. It will be the five of us going in."

"Are you sure you want to give this task to us? The Chimaeric Demons might be better suited for this."

"I know, but I want them on the main battlefield. What we are going to do is a covert operation. You will also have to tell us when the blackguards send something against us."

"Besides," Erik turned to her. "At this point, I can't keep you in the rear anymore. You might not be as powerful as the Chimaeric Demons in terms of physical might, but your mana is much higher than theirs, meaning you stand a better chance in a brain crystal powers' fight."

"We never said we weren't willing," Mira said.

There was a pause.

"Now." Erik highlighted multiple hangars around the fortress. "I told you where the Division Commander might be. As for our main target, the aircraft, they've concentrated on the remaining ones here. We need to keep them safe."

"What about their Vindicators? Based on what you said, you expect us to join in the fight, but what if those guys come?" Amber asked.