

BIOLOGICAL 1171

Chapter 1171: A Plan in Ruins

Erik leaned over the holographic display. "The generators are located deep within the city," he said. "There are four targets, each powering a different section of the barrier. The blackguards have decided to use that as the barrier's primary source and then reinforce it with the barrier masters, but don't be fooled; the barrier won't come down unless we take care of them both."

Mira frowned, studying the layout. "How are they protected? I'm assuming the blackguards didn't leave them out in the open."

"You're right," Erik nodded. "The generators are kept inside a large building. We are not exactly sure of the number of guards there, but we expect them to be in great numbers. The walls are reinforced, but we hadn't been able to say with what material. There are multiple security checkpoints leading to them."

"What's our priority, then?" June asked. "The generators or the barrier masters?"

Erik's gaze went over the team. "We need to neutralize the barrier masters first. They are humans; they can be much more problematic than a piece of machinery."

Emily nodded. "So we—"

A massive explosion shattered the calm, its roar echoing through the underground complex of tunnels the Chimaeric demons made.

The walls trembled, sending dust and dirt falling from the ceiling. Though distant, the blast's power rattled through the tunnels like a giant's footstep.

Erik and the others stood around the holographic display, their battle plans forgotten.

"What was that?" Emily's hand moved instinctively to her rifle, her fingers curling around the grip as dust filtered down from the ceiling.

"It looked like an explosion..." Mira's voice was tense as she scanned the holographic display for any signs of a breach in their perimeter. Luckily, there was none.

"An explosion? It doesn't look like it was close..."

Before anyone could respond, a Chimaeric Demon burst into the room, his boots scraping against the floor as he skidded to a halt. His face was full of worry, sweat beading on his pale skin, his normally pristine uniform covered in a fine layer of concrete dust.

"Master!" The clone's voice made everyone's spine stiffen.

"What?!"

There was a pause. The clone looked, unable to find the words to say what had just happened.

"The blackguards have destroyed the aircraft hangar!"

Erik's expression darkened. The planes were the main reason for them attacking the Law Gate, that and Erik's grievances.

Without them, reaching Mur would become much more difficult. Deadly.

The blackguards understood this and chose to destroy their own resources rather than risk them falling into Erik's hands.

"How many of our forces are battle ready?" Erik asked.

"Nearly all the undead are, Master," the Chimaeric Demon said, shifting nervously from foot to foot. The clone hesitated. "But we still need time to properly arrange the defensive formations and ___"

"It doesn't matter now," Erik cut the clone off. The distant rumble of another explosion emphasized his words. "We don't have the luxury of perfect preparation."

"Start the attack. We can't give them time to destroy anything else." He turned to the surrounding clones. "Start raising the forces we have. Position the tanks at the front and the ranged fighters

behind them. Move immediately. Every second we waste is another chance for them to destroy more planes."

The clones nodded in unison. The change of plan was going to be a problem, but since the main strategy revolved around Erik and his team, maybe they would still be able to make this.

Soon, they began conveying orders to their brothers throughout the tunnel complex.

Erik's mind raced through alternatives and solutions for the problem the blackguards just created. The hangar required immediate attention—if any plane remained salvageable; they needed to secure them. But that meant splitting their forces differently than planned.

He turned to Amber, who stood studying the updated tactical display showing the explosion's location. The holographic map flickered with red warning indicators where the hangar had been hit. "Can you bring more people in with your warping ability? We'll need the extra firepower."

"You want me to bring the Chimaeric Demons?" Amber asked. Erik nodded.

"I can manage three more besides our original group, but that's my limit if you want me combat-ready," she said. "Any more would drain too much of my mana reserves."

"Three will do," Erik said. "They'll help you handle the barrier masters and generators while I deal with the hangar situation." He paused, studying the holographic display.

But something was troubling Erik. The timing of the destruction seemed too precise, too calculated. Was this all a coincidence?

The blackguards had these planes for months, showing no sign of wanting to destroy them. Yet now, just as Erik's forces prepared their attack, they chose to blast the hangar.

Did they somehow know about the attack? Intelligence leaks were unlikely—Erik's Chimaeric Demons were unfailingly loyal, and the undead couldn't speak.

Perhaps they found the tunnel network, or maybe their patrols had spotted unusual movement around.

Either way, the sudden urgency to destroy the planes suggested the blackguards were acting on more than mere suspicion.

In truth, while the second division commander expected an attack to come, he didn't know it was going to happen that day. His intelligence reports had suggested Erik's forces were still gathering strength, perhaps weeks away from being ready.

The commander had been preparing defenses and reinforcing key positions, but the explosions were not a result of that. Destroying the plane at that time was indeed a coincidence.

"The place will be littered with blackguards."

June stepped forward, his face showing the same determination as his creator. "Master, perhaps I should accompany you—"

"No," Erik cut him off. "Stay with them. They'll need every advantage they can get while I take care of the plane. Besides, what if they end up meeting Vindicators, or worse, the division commander?"

Mira's eyes narrowed, her fingers tightening around the handle of her bow. "This is an immense problem. Without you, we might not be able to make it. The barrier masters are one thing, but if we find someone else..." She left the thought unfinished.

"There will be less room for error," Emily said, adjusting the scope on her rifle with practiced precision. "But I think we can still do this. The Chimaeric Demons should give us enough firepower to compensate, at least partially." She glanced at the others.

Erik nodded, his face betraying a hint of worry before he masked it with his usual confidence.

"Yeah, and that is exactly why I asked Amber to bring three Chimaeric Demons. They will take my place."

In truth, Erik didn't want to bring June in. He was too weak for this kind of battlefield. Yet, the clone insisted he wanted to help during the journey, and besides, he was experienced. If things got messy, June would know what to do. Erik gave up, in the end, but on the condition that the clone

would stay out of the fight and play a scouting and guarding role. Erik wanted him to focus on keeping Emily's surroundings under observation while she took care of the enemy.

The chamber filled with the sounds of preparation as more Chimaeric Demons arrived. Through the tunnel network, they could hear the first undead beginning to stir.

"Ok, then..." Amber said. "Three Chimaeric Demons plus our team should be enough to handle the barrier masters." She turned to Erik. "But you do your best to save the planes, at least."

"I'll see what I can do." Erik's lips curved into a smile.

He paused.

"Well, at least with me appearing there, they'll be so busy trying to stop me, they won't realize you're inside their barrier," Erik said with a smile. "I'll make sure to create enough chaos to keep their attention focused on me." He faced the group, his expression hardening into the serious mask they knew all too well.

"The plan remains the same, with the difference that the Chimaeric Demons will act as my substitute. Find the barrier masters first—they'll be wearing distinctive red and gold uniforms. Eliminate them quickly. Then move on to the generators—remember, they're marked with blue energy signatures on your tactical displays. Finally, deal with any Vindicators you find, but try to avoid prolonged engagement; they might send reinforcements. I'll salvage what I can from the hangar, then join you as soon as I can."

The three women and June exchanged glances. The sudden change in plans added considerable risk to an already dangerous mission—splitting their already small team and losing their stronger fighter meant more chances to die because of the greater potential for things to go wrong. But they understood the situation.

"We can handle it," Mira said, speaking for all of them as she checked her weapons. The others nodded in agreement.

Another explosion thundered in the distance, the sound rolling through the tunnels like angry thunder.

"Let's go," Erik said. "Time's running out."

The Chimaeric Demons left to reach their positions. Throughout the vast underground network, thousands of undead began to move, their footsteps creating a rhythmic rumble.

Chapter 1172: Unseen Forces

The tunnels beneath the Law Gate trembled as thousands of undead Thaidi emerged from them.

In lockstep formation, the creatures marched forward under strict control. At the front, enormous bear-shaped monstrosities stomped ahead, their bodies full of sharp crystal growths piercing through their dead flesh.

Behind them came the aerial units, flying Thaidi. Their tattered wings spread wide, membrane still intact enough for flight. There were many species of them, which the Chimaeric Demons hunted in the months prior to the attack.

Wolf-like Thaidi moved soon after in packs so big as to make every single soul who saw them shiver in dread.

These kinds of thaidi were dangerous, not because of their overwhelming strength, but because of their hunting tactics.

Of course, the Chimaeric Demons were currently controlling them, which made the monsters even more terrifying than they would have been in the absence of their control.

But this was true even for all the other thaidi. The undead weren't only scary because of their inability to feel pain or their endless stamina. It was because of the fact someone controlled them. A single mind telling them what to do, when to do it, turned these vile creatures into something far more harrowing.

However, here was what was different compared to when the third division commander controlled them. In this case, there were many minds behind them, each one more ruthless, merciless, and, most importantly, deceptively smarter than Monica's.

More and more undead kept pouring out of the tunnels. Each type of thaidi took its place in the group.

Their footsteps sent tremors through the earth. Agile, smaller creatures darted between the colossal legs of their larger counterparts.

As the undead army assembled, they received orders from the Chimaeric Demons. They had to start attacking in earnest.

High in the Law Gate's command center, the Vindicators watched the display with narrowed eyes. The security feeds showed angles of the thaid army, but the darkness didn't make it easier for them to see the creatures, who remained partially obscured.

"What the fuck is happening here?"

The other Vindicator accompanying him remained silent. They looked at each other.

"Should I give the order to engage?" he asked, his hand hovering over the communication panel. Beside him stood another Vindicator. The man studied the displays. Something was weird.

"Wait," he said with a troubled expression. "Something's wrong here. Thaid's don't organize like this. Look at their formation—it's too perfect. Besides, I'm pretty sure we killed every single one of these fuckers in a 100-kilometer radius. "

The air outside the barrier was cold, like a frigid wind. It was just that the coldness was not due to the temperatures outside but because of the ruthless and murderous look in the eyes of the Chimaeric Demons hidden around.

Thousands of brain crystal powers activated.

Beams of frigid ice, arcing bolts of lightning, and pulsating waves of raw energy erupted from the horde, striking the shimmering barrier with unrelenting fury.

The attack was an incredible sight for whoever saw it at a distance and was not the target of such devastating rain. It was also one that would have instilled fear in the hearts of everyone watching it.

It was just that both the blackguards and the Chimaeric Demons had seen worse, and that was something they saw every Monday. The blackguards were sure the barriers were going to resist.

There was one thing the humans had been good enough to do, and which ensured their survival, and that was creating ferocious defenses. The barrier masters, instead, were simply naturally powerful. They lacked basic attack means, but their defense was absolute. Sure, it all depended on their mana, but even with a scant amount, barriers were hard to break.

It was as if a god had been merciful and had given humanity a means to protect themselves. Of course, a powerful enough attack would have shattered whatever barrier the human put up, but there were not powerful enough thaids to do that, at least not on Mannard.

As predicted, despite the ferocity of the attack, the barrier held. It wasn't a surprise, and the clones didn't make the undead attack it for that reason.

The barrier shook. It soaked up the energy and spread it out. Lines of power moved across its surface. The air shook.

The first Vindicator frowned at the screens. The creatures maintained precise positions. That was true. Their attacks were also strangely coordinated. "You think they're being controlled?"

"Has to be," the man paused. "This isn't random. Someone's directing them." The Vindicator moved to another display, checking the defensive systems. "We should use the fixed defenses first. No need to risk our troops."

The man pointed at one of the screens. It was telling in real time where the attacks landed.

"Look at their attacks." He paused. "They do not look that random to me. It's more like they are probing our defenses, testing it for weaknesses."

"Who could it be?"

"Erik Romano?" The second Vindicator said. "I don't see anyone else having the gall, nor the strength, to do something like this. We must tell the first division commander."

"But that power... Haven't you seen it somewhere?"

"I did. That is..."

"No way..."

There was a pause.

"If Erik Romano got the third division's commander's brain crystal power... This is probably just the beginning."

"Wasn't he able to control Thaid's? Maybe these are regular ones," the first Vindicator said, his brow furrowed.

"No," the Vindicator said. "There's something unusual about these thaid's. Their movements, their coordination—it's all too precise for them. And let's not forget what we learned during the battle at Sleeb Harbor. The thaid's that the guy seemed to be controlling were, in truth, his soldiers. They have powerful shapeshifting abilities. Even the black wyvern in New Alexandria was most likely one of them."

"I remember; it's just that I find it impossible for so many shapeshifters to have appeared all of a sudden."

The two Vindicators saw another wave of attacks splash against their barrier. "All defense stations!" His voice carried through the communication network. "Activate all automated systems."

Throughout the Law Gate's outer walls, weapon emplacements powered up. Brain crystal-enhanced turrets swiveled toward their targets, their cores humming to life and pumping mana. Missile batteries emerged from hidden compartments, their targeting systems locking onto the largest threats.

The automated defenses unleashed a devastating barrage upon the undead horde. The night sky lit up with explosions, turning night into day.

Yet where living creatures would have scattered in panic, these undead monstrosities pressed forward with nothing but death in mind.

For the first time, the blackguards were on the other side of the third commander's power.

"Alert all internal security teams," the second Vindicator said. "If Romano's behind this, we need to prepare for anything. This frontal assault could be a distraction for all we know."

His friend nodded, sending the orders and trying to contact the second division commander. Below them, the battle intensified as more undead emerged from hidden tunnels, their numbers seemingly endless.

It didn't take much for the two Vindicators to receive words from Bill.

The order was to kill or, rather, destroy. The second division commander was all but stupid. Once he learned there was an army of Thaid's, he immediately understood it was because of Monica's powers. These were undead, and he understood the creatures were there for a reason.

Yes, to attack and bring down the Law Gate, but it wasn't all. Erik's and the Chimaeric Demons' plan wasn't bad. Attack the place to distract the blackguards from the real enemy, an infiltrating team.

Bill understood there was no other reason for the Chimaeric Demons to do an attack like this, blindly charging at the barrier, but to protect someone that was already inside the base, or that was going to enter.

What was more unsettling, though, was that he could do nothing about it, because if his enemy chose to employ such a tactic, it meant he could not stop them.

There was also another problem. The blackguards clashed with Erik's army many times at this point. Yet there wasn't a single trace of the white-masked monsters comprising his army. That meant there were two things to do.

The first was to send the Vindicators to search for such a team. The second was to kill as many undead as possible.

If, as Bill thought, Erik was inside the Law Gate already, they were going to target the barrier masters and the generators. Once that happened, the undead would rush in, and Erik's real army would then join. This meant the best thing was to reduce the enemy numbers.

There was only one problem. There were few Vindicators inside. Two were patrolling around, which were those he was going to send searching for the group. Two other ones were at the generators, meaning they couldn't move unless something big happened. The last two were at the walls, coordinating the defense.

Only he could move, but not before he was sure the planes were destroyed.

Chapter 1173: The Undead Siege

The Law Gate's defenses roared to life. Automated turrets unleashed streams of concentrated energy, the brain crystals powering them, turning their already powerful attacks into

something that could fry a Thaid in mere seconds.

Each blast tore through the ranks of the undead Thaid controlled by the Chimaeric Demons, ripping apart decaying flesh, boiling blood, and shattering bones.

Yet not a single Chimaeric Demon died, at least, and that was because they weren't directly joining the fight, at least for the time being.

Erik's orders had been clear. They had to attack only when the barrier was taken down or if the undead got decimated.

But even that was most likely not going to be enough for them to join the fight, and the reason was simple.

As soon as they entered the city, they would bring forth new undead, those made from the bodies of the blackguards defending this place, or so everyone hoped.

Erik needed all the troops he could bring to Mur, and creating battle-ready Chimaeric Demons was not a fast affair.

Besides, given the utterly massive number of dead monsters, it was unlikely they would join the fight in a short time.

Blackguard soldiers lined the walls of the fortress city like sentinels carved from living stone directly from the walls. They were unmoving, only focusing on killing the abominations their enemies unleashed on them. An unbreakable chain of defenders whose unwavering vigilance mirrored the eternal seas that had consumed the shores of this place since the beginning of life.

Their own brain crystal powers joining the barrage and making bodies pile up on the ground, this time dead.

Many kinds of energy, stemming from mana, flew toward the undead. Ice-based attacks froze entire sections of the advancing horde, turning rotting flesh brittle enough to shatter.

Fire-based attacks incinerated wave after wave of undead, turning their bodies to ash that got scattered by the winds or the blasts of other powers.

There were many more, of course, but the spectrum of powers outside there wasn't easy to quantify.

The only problem with all of this was that whatever the blackguards did, it wasn't enough. The undead responded with equal fury. Bear-like Thaid's absorbed direct hits from the turrets. They were powerful enough to withstand most of the attacks.

Flying units swooped through the storms, some torn apart by defensive fire, but there were simply too many for that to be meaningful.

Besides, the undead were nothing more than mere distractions, puppets used to make the blackguards focus on a battlefield they couldn't possibly ignore while Erik and his team advanced toward the barrier masters and the generators, unseen.

Missile batteries launched salvos, their warheads designed to counter Thaid's. Explosions rippled across the battlefield, sending body parts in all directions. Yet the horde pressed forward, their dead eyes glowing with the power they borrowed from their Chimaeric Demons' masters.

"They're not stopping," a blackguard said over the communication network. His squad unleashed another volley of attacks that scattered dozens of smaller Thaid's.

Another blackguard's voice crackled through the communication network. "Multiple casualties in Sector Eight! We need reinforcements!"

"Redirect fire to support Sector Eight," came the Vindicator's response. "Focus on the larger threats first."

The defensive line trembled as another wave of undead crashed against the barrier. Energy weapons carved through the ranks of shambling corpses.

Energy weapons screeched through the air as undead bodies slammed against the massive defense. Explosions boomed while brain crystal weapons fired.

Each impact made the ground shake violently. The undead wailed as they died again, while turrets swiveled and tracked targets. Energy blasts turned flesh to vapor with a sizzle.

The barrier maintained its steady drone, pulsing with power as it absorbed each hit like the massive shield it was.

"Sir!" Another voice cut through the chaos. "We're detecting unusual energy signatures beneath the eastern wall. Could be tunnel activity!"

The Vindicator paused a second to think. "Get me a detailed scan of the subterranean levels. If they're trying to breach from below, I want to know about it."

The armored quadrupeds at the rear of the army began their own assault, too. Their brain crystals flared as they launched devastating attacks at the barrier.

The undead creatures at the back of the army launched powerful attacks at the protective barrier. Each hit was so strong it made the entire Law Gate shake. However, the barrier remained just as strong as before, withstanding all these attacks without weakening.

Waves of undead creatures crashed against the barrier in an endless assault. The protective field flashed with each impact as it absorbed and deflected the attacks.

More defensive systems activated from the blackguards' side. Hidden panels in the walls opened to reveal laser turrets. They released waves of pure energy that rippled across the battlefield and turned the undead into ashes.

The night sky got flooded with lights.

Inside the Law Gate's command center, reports flooded the communication channels. Operators shouted updates across the room.

There was chaos there. The blackguards didn't exactly expect the attack of a massive horde of thaids. At that point, it became clear that was Erik Romano's attack. It was just that everyone knew where this power came from, and that unsettled everyone.

"Sector Seven reporting massive Thaid presence! They're coming up from underground positions!"

"More flying units spotted in Sector Three!" another voice cut through the chaos. "Flying thaid, at least 5 thousand of them are approaching!"

Commands echoed through the fortress as officers rallied their troops. "Don't let them gather! Keep firing! Show these undead bastards what the blackguards can do!"

The defensive turrets adjusted their firing patterns, spreading to cover more ground and address the new threats.

It was just that the monsters seemed never-ending. At that point, the already obscured sky was filled with creatures. The rays of the fading moon completely covered by the flock.

Explosions lit up different sections near the walls as the battle expanded. Squad leaders shouted encouragement to their soldiers, urging them to keep their positions.

Until the barrier held, there was no way they would lose. They were raining down death, the true one, on the undead creature, and it was just a matter of time before they killed them all. Inside the command center, the blackguards maintained their composure through sheer discipline and training, but an undercurrent of tension ran through every operator. Their voices remained steady, yet beads of sweat formed on their foreheads as they processed the endless stream of threat reports.

"Eastern quadrant under heavy assault!" The radio crackled. "Bear-type Thaids breaking through our line of fire!"

"Redirect power to Sectors Four through Six!" an Enforcer ordered. "We can't let them concentrate their forces!"

They had trained for attacks such as this one, practiced countless defensive scenarios, but nothing had prepared them for the scale of the assault, not for the kind of monsters they were

facing.

The sheer number of undead creatures testing their barriers challenged not just their tactical abilities but also their psychological strength.

More undead emerged from the dark tunnels, but they couldn't see from where they were

coming from exactly.

"Where are the tunnel exits?"

"Doesn't matter! Just keep firing! The barrier holds-that's all that matters!"

The barrier and defensive systems gave them confidence. The automated defense systems

operated at their absolute limits. The mechanism fired the brain crystal itself, now devoid of mana, discharging it on the side and releasing steam.

A blackguard then opened the fiery hot housing and placed a new brain crystal inside the machine. Similar scenes were playing everywhere.

"Sir! New contacts detected in Sector Nine! Multiple signatures approaching from the

northwest quadrant!"

"I want eyes on every side now! These undead have to be coming from somewhere. Find their source, and we might prevent them from spawning!"

While the chaos unfolded above, Erik led his small team through the winding tunnels beneath the Law Gate.

June walked close behind him, while Amber, Mira, and Emily followed behind. Three Chimaeric Demons brought up the rear, protecting the three women from attacks. They knew nothing could happen inside the tunnels, but once they teleported, it would have been better to already be in position rather than to waste time, possibly under attack.

"We're getting close."

June nodded. "The diversion above works perfectly, master."

If one could call that a diversion. With over 60 thousand undead Thaid's assaulting the walls, thousands of flying creatures darkening the skies, and massive bear-like monstrosities pounding against the barriers, this was more of a full-scale invasion.

Every attack was meant to exhaust the blackguards, strain their defensive systems, and keep their attention fixed on the chaos above ground.

"We still need to bring down that barrier," a Chimaeric Demon said.

Amber and Emily exchanged glances.

Erik turned to look at Amber. She was going to warp them soon. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes."

Then the barrier came into view, its shimmering surface extending even this far beneath the surface. The shield stretched through the rocky earth, penetrating deep underground where their tunnel had brought them, forming a dome that protected the Law Gate both above and

below ground. Not for long, though.

Chapter 1174: Infiltrating the Fortress

Erik and his team were standing in front of the shimmering barrier. Unsurprisingly, the energy field stretched from the depths of the earth to the sky above, an impenetrable wall of pure mana, which was reinforcing one of whatever kind of energy the generators were making, and that was, though, at least as strong as mana.

Erik was still surprised by humanity's ability to create barrier generators. The technology had proven to be their salvation, the one innovation that had allowed human civilization to endure the endless waves of monsters and world-ending threats. Humanity would have perished centuries ago without these barriers.

Yet when he first learned about them, he had doubted humans could achieve such a technological marvel.

"Now, Amber," Erik said.

The woman closed her eyes, drawing mana from her brain crystal and sending it flowing through her neural links and then to the rest of her body.

The surrounding space distorted and twisted as her power worked. In a flash, the group materialized in a narrow alley between two towering buildings.

The Law Gate, the fortress-like city, spread before them.

"We are in."

The place differed from what they expected. It was a city, but it was just one for the blackguards. Most of the buildings had a militaristic architecture. Metal dominated the landscape. Tall guard towers stood against the sky, spaced throughout the city. Various types of defensive equipment covered these towers.

There were also many kinds of protections on the ground. Barricades, automated turrets, and reinforced checkpoints dotted the streets.

"This will make the invasion harder," Mira said.

These were the same defenses placed on the walls, meaning the blackguards were ready for an eventual enemy flood.

They made it easier for soldiers to defend the city with elevated firing positions, pre-sighted kill zones, and interlocking fields of fire that would force attackers to funnel through deadly chokepoints while under concentrated defensive fire.

"Smart," a clone said.

"What did you expect?" Erik said. "The blackguards are ruthless tyrants, and to get to this position, it means they are smart..."

Everyone nodded.

Countless soldiers ran in the distance and were coming to their position. Erik and the others hid until they got past their position.

"They must be headed for the walls," Emily said.

Mira nodded. "Yeah, I was thinking the same."

They crouched in silence for several minutes, watching groups of soldiers rush past their hiding spot.

"They are not even looking here." Emily said, peering around the corner.

"They're too distracted by the battle," Mira said. "You know... explosions, energy discharges..."

A bloodcurdling screech pierced the air.

"And the lovely sound of undead Thaid's," she grinned.

However, despite Mira's antics lightening the mood for the others, Erik kept a focused face.

"I need to reach the hangar. There might still be aircraft we can salvage."

The others nodded, but it was clear they didn't like that idea for many reasons. For starters, they felt much safer with Erik around, and while the Chimaeric Demons were as physically strong as him, they didn't have his mana.

The Chimaeric Demons had different mana pools for each of their powers, which meant they could fight for a while. The problem was that their mana pool depended on the neural links they made for each power, and since they still had few of them, they couldn't exactly unleash a lot of might.

Erik turned to June and the three Chimaeric Demons. "Keep them safe at all costs."

"We will, master."

The clones were fully committed, but whether they could actually do that remained uncertain. There was a pause. Erik had a lot on his mind, too. He was leaving Mira, Amber, and Emily in his and the Chimaeric Demons' hands, but he was also worried about his clones.

June was a concern, and he couldn't help but look at him with worry. Even though June looked strong, Erik knew what he could and couldn't do, and joining this battle was the last of the things he had to do.

<Fuck...>

Using the Instability brain crystal power, Erik said something to the clone.

<Stay out of sight. Just watch and tell us what you see. Don't fight anyone. Is this clear?>

June nodded, but it was clear he wasn't taking that really well, and Erik knew since he could read his mind. Two years earlier, he was fighting shoulder to shoulder with him, his creator, but now, he was basically useless.

It was a shame, really. June was experienced. He knew how to hunt, and, most importantly, he knew how to be helpful. Things progressed too quickly in the last years, and June felt excluded due to the blackguards' increasing strength and speed.

Yet Erik knew he was going to use his talents to be useful to the others. If he couldn't fight, he would at least serve as a sentinel. His role was going to be crucial.

"Move out," Erik said, then turned into a fly and melted into the shadows between buildings.

Amber took charge the moment Erik left. "Mira, we need eyes above. Something small but fast-find those barrier masters."

She nodded.

Mira's form shifted, her body shrinking, feathers sprouting from her skin as she took the shape of a common city bird. With a flutter of wings, she rose into the air, indistinguishable from the other birds scattered by the battle.

The Chimaeric Demons could do the same, but they had another role to play.

"Emily," Amber turned to her friend. "We need to get you to your position."

She nodded. "That should be the place," Emily pointed at one of the tower-like structures nearby.

"Hm. Take June and head there. I and the Chimaeric Demons will start searching around."

In the meantime, the river of soldiers still rushed toward the wall. Sirens wailed across the Law Gate, but the blaring sounds actually worked in their favor, masking their steps.

Emily checked her weapon one last time.

"I'm ready," Emily said.

She turned to look at June. The two nodded at each other, and the clone then shapeshifted into

a bird to scout ahead. However, he was going to stay close to Emily so that he could help her in case something terrible happened.

"Stay safe, Amber!"

Then they left.

Amber watched Emily and June leave. She knew the risks they faced, particularly given June's capabilities.

Emily could slow time enough to run away, but it was still true she was going with June. For a lot of time, the clone had been much more powerful than them. He always won in the many sparrings they did, yet now things were the opposite.

June was severely underpowered for this situation. Amber still didn't understand why Erik allowed him to join. It wasn't that she didn't want him there, but like everyone else, she was worried about him.

If Emily faced an attack, June had limited options for protecting her. At most, he could change shape and try to get her away from danger. But if something could threaten Emily, who could slow down time, June would probably just get in the way.

"That's what I should tell you..." Amber said to herself, actually, since Emily was now far.

Though concerned, she kept her thoughts to herself, maintaining her focus on their mission as they moved out of sight.

"Move out. Keep formation."

The clones obeyed and began their advance through the Law Gate's streets, using the chaos of the faraway battle as cover.

Mira flew between the buildings, unseen. She knew that the Veritas Lenses could make her disguise be useless, and that was why she kept as high in the sky as she could. The Veritas Lenses had a short detection range, and they weren't omnipotent, so she could still be in the open with no one finding out the bird flying above them was, in truth, a person.

<Where are you...?>

Mira had already searched a vast area, but there was no sight of the guys keeping the barrier up. It wasn't difficult to recognize them.

Barrier masters usually had specific uniforms. Theirs was considered the most powerful brain crystal power in existence. Not because it allowed them to do a lot of damage. Quite the opposite; it was because their defense was absolute if their power was used right. Besides, someone channeling mana in the middle of the city would be strange. If not on the

walls, why there?

<Ugh, the problem is that they can be inside some building.>

If that was the case, then finding them would be like searching for a needle in a haystack.

She flew around the edge of the city, then back and forth across the middle.

<Maybe they are underground.>

She flew around the area several times yet found nothing. She landed on the ground. <Maybe I should use some other form.>

Then she turned into a dog. She decided the best thing to do would be to use her sense of

smell and hearing. There were going to be many humans around, so a dog's sense of smell would not help, but hearing. That was going to be useful.

Chapter 1175: Silent Shots

Mira ran without rest, without stopping. The sounds of the fight helped hide her as she did, but she still had to pay attention since a dog inside the Law Gat was unusual.

With her senses now severely enhanced, she could smell the gunpowder, the metal, and the unique scent of piss at every corner.

<I don't see animals around... The blackguards must not be toilet fans.>

However, a new scent caught her attention. She came across it many times when she trained with Amber or when she sparred with the Chimaeric Demons. It clearly was human sweat, and it came from a nearby building.

She changed shape once more, turning into a bird. Feathers grew where fur had been. She then flew up to the window from where the scent came, staying close to the building to avoid being

seen.

The room was empty. Chairs were scattered around a table, which suggested recent

occupation. However, she wasn't sure the barrier masters had been there, and even if they had, they must have moved, given the attack.

The problem was that the barrier masters weren't the only ones around. The places were full of humans; it was just that they didn't stay around for long, as focused as they were to reach the walls. This still created a problem.

There were too many scents to follow. Luckily, what Mira needed was to find some scents coming from the building, because only the barrier masters and some important people among the blackguards would stay out of the wall fight. Whoever was in the middle of the city might have been them.

<Damn...>

There was no trace of the barrier masters there.

Mira continued her search, alternating between forms. As a dog, she tracked scents and followed the trail leading to buildings.

As a bird, she checked each location her nose pointed her to. Building after building revealed nothing. At least not until that point.

The scents led her deeper into the Law Gate. She approached another structure, this one heavily guarded at ground level.

<Maybe it's this one...> But she had no way to know, unless she went to check herself.

The heavy guard's presence was a good sign, though. While most blackguards were busy defending the walls, only high-value targets would warrant a dedicated security detail in the city center. The barrier masters were crucial to maintaining the Law Gate's defenses.

<If anything needed protection right now, it would be them.>

And unlike regular patrol units that moved around, these guards held fixed positions. They were clearly protecting something, or someone, important inside.

Rising to its upper floors, Mira spotted movement through a window. Inside, six figures in distinctive Blackguards' barrier master uniforms stood unmoving.

They were in a circle with closed eyes. Their expressions were full of intense focus.

<They are likely powering the barrier.>

A grin mentally spread across Mira's face. She was a bird. After all, she didn't have lips. <Bingo...>

She flew to another building and then partially turned into a human. She got hands and arms, and her beak turned into a human mouth.

Everyone seeing it would find whatever that thing was a monstrosity, but Amber, Emily, and especially the Chimaeric Demons, of course, got used to it by now.

She pressed her radio transmitter. "Amber, I found them. Central district, building with the red metal entrance. Tenth floor, eastern side. Six targets, all actively maintaining the barrier." The radio crackled. "Copy that. Hold position and monitor. We're moving to your location."

Mira landed on a nearby ledge. She was in her bird form, which made her hard to spot. From there, she could see the barrier masters.

<Phew...>> She sighed. <I can't wait for all of this to end. I've got enough money to retire and live a lavish lifestyle...>

The radio crackled to life in Amber's ear. "Central district, building with the red metal entrance. Tenth floor, eastern side. Six targets, all actively maintaining the barrier."

Finally, Mira found the targets, and she didn't waste a second before telling the others. As soon as she and Amber were done with their communication, Amber told the news.

"Mira found them," Amber told the Chimaeric Demons. "Central district, building with a red metal entrance. The barrier masters are on the tenth floor, eastern side."

"How many?" one of them asked.

"Six. They're maintaining the barrier right now. This is our chance."

"Understood," another Chimaeric Demon nodded. "We'll follow your lead."

She then signaled to the three accompanying her. They started moving. However, it was important to let Emily know. Amber took her radio.

"Emily, June. Mira found them. What's your position?"

"Already in place," Emily's voice came back. "June is currently making sure I don't get attacked."

"Good. I want you to lead us to the target area. Can you do it?"

"Yes. I've got clear sight lines on the streets in your vicinity. I'm also currently very close to the target's position."

"Good."

Through her scope, Emily saw the streets below. Her position gave her perfect coverage of the routes leading to the barrier masters' location.

The sniper rifle rested against her shoulder.

Through her scope, Emily watched the streets fill with activity. Blackguard units marched in formation toward the walls, their footsteps echoing off buildings. Supply trucks and armored vehicles cut through the crowd, engines humming as they delivered resources to the front. Officers stood at intersections, directing troops and equipment.

Time slowed as Emily activated her power. The world around her moved like thick syrup, giving her many seconds to line up each shot. Albeit talking about second was not exactly the right thing to do.

Amber was currently heading east. Emily saw a patrol of blackguards rounding the corner, moving toward her.

"Time to do some summer cleaning," Emily said to herself with a smirk. "Though I don't think their mothers would approve of my cleaning methods."

She pulled the trigger. She did it when another sound from outside the city came, preventing anyone from hearing the multiple shots she fired at the patrol.

The first blackguard dropped, followed by his companions in rapid succession. To any observer, the entire squad appeared to collapse simultaneously, but in truth, Emily shot

multiple times.

"Threat neutralized," Emily said.

Amber nodded. Emily really was lethal with a sniper rifle. Whenever she had one in her hands, she stopped being the sweet girl everyone knew.

Amber led her group through the streets, moving from cover to cover. They passed the bodies of Emily's victims-clean kills, each one.

"I can't believe our sweet Emily did this," Amber said. "Sometimes I forget she's the same girl who bakes cookies for everyone."

There were no signs of struggle or resistance-each target had been killed with a single precise headshot before they could react, draw weapons, or trigger their communication devices to alert others.

They moved the bodies into an alley, hidden by trash cans and tarps. Then the Chimaeric Demons spread out in a protective formation around Amber.

More blackguards appeared in Emily's scope. She slowed down time again. Three more shots, three more bodies. The streets leading to the barrier masters were cleared.

"Four more at your two o'clock," June said through the radio. He circled above as a small bird, spotting incoming patrols.

Emily shifted her aim. Time crawled to a near stop. The four blackguards moved in slow motion; their movements telegraphed like actors in a play. Her bullets found their marks.

Amber's group encountered another cluster of bodies. The fallen blackguards showed no signs of trauma-Emily's shots left a single wound on the targets' heads. However, to the onlookers, they seemed to have stopped living between one second and the next.

Luckily, Emily wasn't so bad as to leave witnesses.

"Two hundred meters to target," one of the Chimaeric Demons said. The red-faced building was now in front of them. Still distant. However, the place was large enough for anyone seeing it from afar.

Amber saw Mira among the flashes, perched on top of a building nearby.

Emily's voice came through the radio again. "Route is clear. I count twelve guards at the entrance. Want me to handle them?"

"No," Amber said. "Save your energy for now. I'll warp everyone in. With Mira, we are five. We should be able to kill most of them in a matter of minutes after our warp."

That was the idea, at least. The problem with barrier masters was that if Amber gave them enough time, they could create an absolute defense to which they could do nothing. Luckily for them, to make such a barrier wasn't that simple, and it still required some time. Not much, but if Amber and the others played it well, they might prevent them from channeling mana altogether.

But the barrier masters weren't going to be defenseless. Like every other blackguard, they were going to be highly trained and skilled, and they might be even able to make smaller barriers. Not as absolute as those protecting the walls, but still durable. Acting within minutes was imperative if they wanted to accomplish their goal.

Chapter 1176: The Last Plane

"Why not? I can easily kill them," Emily said. "I just need a well-planted shot."

"There is no need. The missing patrols will already raise some alarms. If we also kill the barrier masters' guards, things will become messier. Let's give them the illusion the barrier masters are safe..."

A Chimaeric Demon nodded. "They will realize only after we destroy the barriers' generators."

That was what Amber was thinking. If they killed the guards, they would need to hide them, which meant increasing the chances they could be found out. There were already too many bodies around left by Emily. Adding some more would just be detrimental.

Besides, each person they killed was a person less that answered to the radio.

The group pressed forward until they arrived a couple of buildings from the target. More bodies marked their path, which they then hid. However, Amber's unease increased. "In position," she said.

The Chimaeric Demons turned into mosquitoes and went to the window. Aside from the barrier masters, there was no one in the room, which was quite strange considering how important these six guys were.

Then they circled around the building, trying to find entry points. The last thing they needed was to find themselves trapped there, with blackguards chasing them, and without knowing from where the reinforcements might come.

In truth, aside from the service doors, there were also maintenance hatches and ventilation systems- the structure offered multiple options for those who knew where to look.

"Maybe we can avoid using warp," a Chimaeric Demon said.

"Maybe, but since I can't shapeshift, I have no way to enter unseen. The best thing would be to simply teleport. We go in, kill, and go out."

Amber didn't like how it sounded. The plan made them seem like cold-blooded murderers. Yes, they killed people, but only because they were fighting a war-one where their country, their lives, and their families faced annihilation.

June kept looking around. A glorified lookout, but a lookout nonetheless.

"Em," he said. "There is a patrol heading here. You might want to take care of them."

She turned and saw five people coming toward her building.

"I definitely want."

Contrary to Amber, Emily had fewer reservations about killing people, especially because, as a sniper, she wasn't forced to get close to the brutality of the fight.

That was also one of the reasons that brought her to ask Erik to get the time-controlling brain crystal power he got from Vex. It wasn't only to get stronger, but also to avoid the ugly side of fighting.

It didn't take much before she really took care of the newcomers. The sounds of the battle near the walls covered that of her rifle, but if one was close, they might have heard her. Five new bodies were littering the ground. It was just that there would be no one to hide them from sight.

"June, can you take care of it?"

"Yes." The clone flew, unaware that someone else was getting to Emily's position.

Erik raced through the Law Gate's streets, his Phantom Veil brain crystal power keeping him hidden. He made little more than a disturbance in the air, and even that could not be noticed easily.

The closer he got to the hangar, the denser the military presence became. Soldiers ran towards it, not because of the hangar itself, which certainly grabbed everyone's attention, but even because the hangar was close to the walls, where the real battle, from their point of view, was happening.

<The Chimaeric Demons must be making a show.>

The sounds of battle grew louder, meaning both that he was getting closer to the walls and that the fight was getting heated. Luckily for the Chimaeric Demons, Erik gave them Monica's power; otherwise, it would have been them on the other side of those brain crystal-powered

cannons.

<Anyway, what's important is that the sounds of the battle are covering my steps.>

Guards stood watch at regular intervals-two at each intersection, three at each building entrance, and small patrols of four moving between checkpoints. They formed a tight security grid across the area.

Despite the tight security grid, most of the soldiers were still rushing towards the walls, drawn by the sounds of explosions and battle cries. The diversion created by the Chimaeric Demons was working perfectly. They believed the real threat was at the walls, not inside their perimeter.

<The internal defense is as bad as that on the walls.>

Of course, it was bad for Erik. For everyone else, walking through these streets without being spotted would have been impossible.

The blackguards kept monitoring the area.

<This makes me wonder if they are expecting me...>

At that point, it was the most reasonable assumption. The blackguards would not have left the fortress-like city without protections, but something so big was weird. The only explanation was that they expected him to infiltrate the place.

After all, it was clear he was behind this attack, and the only way for him to turn this into a success was to neutralize the barrier. Yet they didn't know Erik was already inside.

<For sure they acted quickly...>

Erik entered the city less than 10 minutes earlier, after all.

In the distance, there was an orange light brightening the night sky. Smoke rose, smelling of burning fuel and metal. It was the glow of the burning hangar.

<Shit...>

The fire was enormous, and that prompted Erik to move faster.

When Erik got to the hangar, he almost screamed. The building was already half destroyed by the fire. The fire was ravaging the insides, destroying the planes.

Around the burning building, the Blackguards stood in a line. Some looking at the hangar, some looking at the surroundings.

Through the massive holes in the walls and ceiling, Erik surveyed the hangar's interior. Planes littered the floor-some reduced to fragments, others consumed by flames.

But as he looked through the fire and smoke, he noticed one plane was still mostly undamaged. However, the flames were getting closer to it.

"Damn it."

The enemy soldiers had done a good job by destroying their own planes to stop Erik from using them. But Erik was not going to let the last remaining aircraft be destroyed. Drawing on his Elemental Lord brain crystal power, Erik gathered moisture from the air. The surrounding temperature plummeted as he pulled water from the atmosphere, condensing it into a massive wave. He directed the water toward the burning hangar.

The wave crashed through the building's entrance, flooding the interior. Steam hissed and roared as water met fire, creating a thick fog that filled the space, mingling with the smoke.

There was simply too much water, and the flames died under the deluge, leaving behind smoking ruins and one salvageable aircraft.

Erik knew that would become the blackguards' next target soon after. At least if he did nothing to prevent that.

Erik's use of powers raised shouts of alarm.

"Intruder!"

Their formations tightened.

"That had to be the work of Erik Romano! Find him!"

The soldiers spread out to cover the hangar. Their brain crystal powers were ready to be used.

Then a man stepped forward from the ranks.

<That's him.>

That was the Second Division Commander. The insignias said it clearly, and the way everyone

stood at attention as he went to a less crowded area, and the soldiers parted around him,

further enhanced Erik's assumption.

"Erik Romano, I know you're here. Why hide? Face me." Then he made subtle gestures, as if

he was talking to someone.

Erik kept his invisibility up and started reading the commander's thoughts.

<The fucker is trying to gain time. He just said to his men to destroy the last plane.>

The commander raised his voice. "Are you afraid? The stories paint you as a warrior, yet you

skulk about like a thief."

Behind him, soldiers began moving toward the partially flooded hangar.

Erik had no alternatives. If he attacked the others, the Second Division commander would protect his soldiers.

He had to fight him, knowing that he would try to give soldiers time to destroy the plane, their best way to reach Mur.

But letting the soldiers get to the plane first meant losing their goal completely. Erik had to kill everyone while fighting against the commander; otherwise, this whole attack would have been pointless.

The commander took another step forward, his stance casual but ready. "Come now, Erik. We both know how this ends. Face me honorably."

<Mother fucker...>

More troops reached the hangar, drawn by the commotion.

<This is not good...>

More soldiers joined the blackguards. The commander's idea was clever he was making Erik choose between saving the plane and fighting him directly. Of course, Erik had an idea on how to address all of that.

As the steam cleared, the young man saw inside the hangar better. The last plane was now visible. Water around its wheels kept it safe from the water and the remaining fire, for now, but it couldn't protect the plane from soldiers trying to destroy it.

Chapter 1177: From Hell

"Such confidence," Erik said. He stopped pumping mana into his Phantom Veil brain crystal power's neural links and turned visible, revealing himself to the others.

He was near the hangar's entrance, looking at the second division commander with a confident but also cold look. "But who says I can't handle both tasks at once?"

Small seeds fell from his hand, unseen by everyone, rolling across the wet ground. The Second Division Commander's eyes failed to track the movement, and that was his mistake.

"Overconfidence killed many skilled warriors before you," the man said, his lips curving into a cold smile. "Though I must admit, I was surprised you defeated Monica."

While they spoke, Erik channeled mana into the seeds, making it spread from his feet. Deep beneath the surface, roots spread, growing toward the aircraft with unnatural speed.

"Monica? The third division commander?" Erik laughed. "She was nothing much. Just a scared cat who could do nothing but hide behind a fake wyvern."

Erik hated the blackguards and taunted the man to incite a reaction, but he didn't relish speaking ill of the dead, and it was something he shirked. Of course, that didn't mean he never did. When the others found out about his killing of Nathaniel, he had to give an explanation. Clearly, telling them about the bad deeds the man did, or how he tried to kill him, was just the truth.

But among those explanations, bad comments fell. It was human nature to criticize what they didn't like.

The commander's smile didn't waver. "Bold words from someone who spent his time running from us while being invisible."

He gestured toward his men. "At least we face our enemies directly."

"Face them directly?" Erik raised an eyebrow. "Are you shitting me? Don't act like I don't know what you are trying to do, Bill."

The man scowled. How did he know his name? That was one of the blackguards' most guarded secrets. His, Monica's, and Vania's names were a mystery to anyone in the world, and those who knew it thought they were dead.

"You are just trying to gain time."

This revelation shook Bill to his core. He couldn't be certain, but either Erik was perceptive enough to notice his every subtle move, or he had mind-reading abilities. Though his orders to his men might have revealed his stalling tactics, there was simply no other way Erik could have learned his name.

Underground, the tendrils continued their advance, spreading beneath the feet of the unsuspecting blackguards. The commander's men moved closer to the aircraft. Thinking Erik had not seen them. He did.

"Clever observation," the commander said. "But it's not like you can do anything about it." "Are you sure?"

The man's expression hardened. "Confidence is admirable, Erik Romano, but it can be misplaced. You might want to reconsider your position."

He gave a look at his men; they were already pointing their weapons at the aircraft.

"Reconsider?" Erik's voice carried mock surprise.

"Let me get this straight. Put case you destroy the plane. That means I simply have nothing holding me back. I could slaughter all of you with peace of mind."

That made the blackguards jump and shiver. After all, Erik Romano just made a threat, and that threat was made against them.

"Are you really sure you want to destroy that plane?"

Bill paused.

"Besides, I thought this was supposed to be about facing enemies directly. Yet here you are, still trying to buy time."

The roots reached their target. With no one expecting something like that to happen, they sprout out of the ground, coiling around the aircraft from the other side. The blackguards didn't notice. The vines got in such a position that made them ready to kill and protect the aircraft at a moment's notice.

Erik kept his focus on the commander, making sure the man's attention remained on their verbal sparring, and the threat also steered the blackguards to him, and not on the plane.

"Time?" The second division commander paused. "Yes, time..."

Then he realized something was wrong. If Erik wanted to protect the plane, he should have acted already. His soldiers were actively working to destroy it, yet Erik remained passive. Then it clicked.

<He must be stalling for time too...>

The moment the Second Division Commander realized Erik's intention, thick tendrils erupted from the ground. They were not the same on the planes; those fully coated the plane in a protective embrace.

The wet soil split apart as vine-like appendages, each as thick as a man's arm, shot upward with explosive force.

The nearest blackguard screamed as one of the tendrils wrapped around his waist. The plant's sprouted thorns that pierced through his armor like needles through paper. Blood sprayed in an arc as the thorns expanded inside his body, shredding his internal organs and then the external ones.

In a matter of seconds, a man, a powerful one, got killed. No. Talking about destruction was more appropriate. What was scary was that Erik killed him in the most gruesome and painful way possible, and for a good reason.

He didn't even have time to try to save himself or to resist, because the tendrils were too fast, too strong.

Erik had to instill such a sense of fear in his enemies because they needed to fear getting close to the plane. If they fought him, they might just end up blasted. A quick death, but if they tried to destroy the plane, Erik would make sure they would die painfully. The man from Frant had not only the will, the coldness, and the determination, but even the power.

The ground exploded in a nightmarish display of writhing tendrils, resembling the tentacles of a hellish octopus bursting forth from hell.

This wasn't a nightmare you could forget by drowning yourself in alcohol. This was brutally, horrifyingly real.

Not dozens, but hundreds of these monstrous growths erupted simultaneously, each as thick as a man's torso and adorned with barbs that gleamed like freshly whetted knives.

They moved with an unnatural intelligence, twisting and coiling through the air like living things possessed by malevolent intent.

It was that kind of view that would make one sweat just thinking about it, one of those that would make people shiver in fear for years.

A horror that would haunt them even in sleep-if they could sleep at all. The reason for that was because those standing in front of those tendrils were the target, and they knew, instinctively, they had no way to fight against those things.

Under Erik's control, these abominations sought the soldiers-probing armor joints, seeking exposed flesh, and finding every weak point with horrifying accuracy.

The tendrils struck like serpents, each hit calculated not just to kill but to inflict maximum agony. The very air seemed to grow thick with the promise of inevitable death, and as the tendrils started killing, the metallic scent of blood started filling the air like the gas of a stove

left open.

Two blackguards raised energy shields, but the plants erupted from the ground beneath their feet, coiling around their legs and crushing bone.

"What is th—" a soldier cried out before a tendril speared through his chest. The plant expanded inside his ribcage, branches spreading outward and tearing through flesh and armor. His body went limp as the demonic plants lifted him high into the air, and blood fell to the ground like a waterfall.

He wasn't the only one sharing that fate, and his wasn't the only blood tinting red the ground.

Everyone turned red.

<Maximum theatricality...>

The soldiers near the aircraft found themselves surrounded. Like trees, the tendrils' tips split into multiple branches that lashed out with whip-like speed. Faster than a serpent. Heads separated from bodies as the razor-sharp edges sliced through their necks. Blood painted the hangar, mixing with the standing water to create crimson pools.

A blackguard unleashed a fire-based brain crystal power, trying to burn the plants, but Erik simply changed the tendrils to liquid metal.

The plants wrapped around his arms, immobilizing him before additional metal tendrils solidified and pierced his body from multiple angles.

His scream got cut short as thorny branches erupted from his mouth.

Someone else, instead, got the liquid metal inside their mouths, noses, and ears. They got drowned.

"WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT?!"

No one was able to understand what was happening, nor how Erik could do that, but it was clear it was thanks to one of his many brain crystal powers.

The Second Division Commander watched in horror as his men died around him. Each death was more gruesome than the last as Erik's power turned nature itself into a weapon of war.

Throughout the carnage, Erik maintained eye contact with the Second Division Commander, a cold smile playing across his face.

"YOU IDIOTS! HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN ABOUT HIS ABILITY TO MANIPULATE PLANTS?!" The second division commander said.

But even that didn't explain why the plants changed shape and material. He didn't even know if he could call them plants anymore.

His eyes darted between his fallen soldiers and the nightmarish vegetation that erupted from the ground and that was rapidly transforming the battlefield into a grotesque garden of death.

Fleeing soldiers found their escape blocked by sudden plant growth. The merciless vegetation impaled some and tore others apart.

The soldiers tried to resist the onslaught, but it was impossible. They were strong, but not enough to fight against Erik, not in that way.

"Kill him!" Someone shouted, as the most logical thing seemed to be killing the one controlling the plants, but it was too late. The vines had created a complete perimeter around

Erik and the first division commander and left the remaining soldiers in a deadly garden of writhing tendrils outside.

They tried to survive, but at the same time, to free their division commander. Attacks bombarding the walls Erik raised, who turned into ever-shifting metals.

Dozens of bodies lay scattered across the floor, their armor split open like fruit rinds, internal organs exposed to the night air. The tendrils swayed gently, ready for their master's next command.

"Now then," Erik said, "shall we continue our discussion about facing enemies directly?"

Chapter 1178: Hands of Destruction

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

Bill placed his palm against Erik's tendrils. They began dissolving, breaking down into nothingness where his hands made contact. The process spread, converting solid matter into a void with terrifying speed.

Calling it a void wasn't accurate. When Bill's power made contact, the matter broke down into fine particles that sparkled briefly before vanishing completely into the air, like microscopic dust being scattered by an invisible wind.

<Fuck... This is not good.>

Indeed, it wasn't, because it meant he could not touch him in any way; besides, he didn't know if that ability worked on things like the elements. In that case, there was not going to be a single attack that could reach him.

Of course, like all brain crystal powers, they weren't absolute, meaning there still were ways to inflict damage. The problem was that Erik had not had enough information about it. He saw too little.

<The second division commander used his hands to destroy the plants. Maybe he needs to physically touch things to use his powers?>

If that was true, that was a severe flaw in his abilities, like a powerful tank with a glaring weak spot in its armor. The limitation would severely restrict his attack range and tactical options.

However, there was no way the blackguards left the man without a way to use his powers more effectively. If that really was the only flaw in the second division commander's brain crystal power, they would have given him one or two powers that went past that limitation. The problem was what?

<Well, it's not like I don't have a way to get an answer to this question. System, analyze him.>

Name: Bill Asfligate

Physical Description: Physical Description: Bill is a tall man, about 6 feet 2 inches (188 cm) tall, with a slim but muscular build. He has burn scars on the left side of his face, covered by a short black beard with some gray in it. He's wearing the standard fighting outfit of the Second Division, complete with their badge.

Brain Crystal Powers:Matter Disruption (Aa3A): Allows the user to break down physical matter at a molecular level through direct contact with his hands. The disintegration effect spreads rapidly from the point of contact. While powerful, this ability requires physical contact through hands.

Speed Burst (Aa3B): Enables the user to move at incredible speeds for brief periods. The speed and acceleration depend on mana input.

Hands of the Martyr (Av3B): Creates multiple invisible hands that function as extensions of the user's own arms. The size, speed, and power of these scales with mana usage. The hands can channel the user's Matter Disruption ability, removing the primary weakness of requiring physical contact.

{Attributes}

STRENGTH: 489

INTELLIGENCE: 200

DEXTERITY: 463

ENERGY: 1450

{Others}

Power Level: 1330

Brain Crystal Rank (Matter Disruption): Aa3A

Brain Crystal Rank (Speed Burst): Aα3B

Brain Crystal Rank (Hands of the Martyr): Av3B

Estimated experience by killing him: 10,743,596.44

As the screen appeared, Erik could do nothing but curse. He was indeed right about the fact that his power required physical contact. What he didn't know was that it could only be used through his hands. However, the blackguards found a way to circumvent the problem, as he assumed.

That came with his third power, Hands of the Martyr. It was simple, really; it allowed him to create invisible hands, which meant Bill could use his powers with dozens, if not thousands, of hands.

The problem was that a power like this, like all brain crystal powers, was as strong as the mana employed to use it. This could affect it in many ways. In this case, it could make the

hands longer, meaning Bill would also gain reach.

The last problem was something else, though.

<Three brain crystal powers... Mother fucker>

The power made Bill fast. There was no doubt the idea for giving him this power was to make him able to keep up with Erik's speed, but that was not the most insidious aspect of the power. It was that Bill could get thrice the amount of attributes. Bill could have easily reached the 700 strength points, which was higher than Erik's, and with the Speed Burst brain crystal power, Erik would find himself at a disadvantage.

Luckily, the man hadn't gotten all 54 neural links for the three powers.

<Yet he got them for two of them. Based on the technique the blackguards have, it means Bill had the powers for a long time. The technique isn't so powerful as to allow him to get many neural links in a short time.>

There was no doubt about one thing, though: each of these brain crystal powers had been chosen with a clear purpose. To kill him.

The commander's body blurred. Erik's tracked him down, but it wasn't easy because the man was apparently using dozens of hands to move. He was fast, really fast. Bill pivoted in a weird way, and, like light, he reappeared behind him, invisible hands already reaching for Erik.

The younger man twisted away, but he felt the air displacement where Bill's invisible hands passed.

"They prepared you well," Erik said, creating distance between them.

"From your words, I assume you know what my brain crystal powers are."

"Maybe."

Bill's eyes focused on him. The blackguards did not know of Erik being able to learn about his opponents' brain crystal powers. Bill wasn't even sure he had it. Regardless, Erik understood his ability, because otherwise, he would already be dead.

Fighting invisible hands wasn't easy. Of course, Erik could have some other brain crystal power that allowed him to see invisible things or that allowed him to see the future.

Everything was possible if the biological supercomputer was involved.

"The blackguards don't leave things to chance," Bill said. He tried to scare Erik. What he didn't know was that he could read his mind.

<But even he doesn't.>

His stance shifted, hands raised in a combat position. "Though I must admit, your reputation barely scratches the surface of what you are really capable of."

"Should I take this as a compliment?" Erik asked. There was a hint of sarcasm in his voice as

he kept his defensive stance.

"No."

The space around Bill distorted as multiple invisible hands extended outward. Erik also sensed their presence through subtle changes in air pressure and mana flow, but it was because of the Instability brain crystal power that he knew they were coming.

<I need to stay away from them.>

Each spectral hand could deliver Bill's destructive touch. He would die if that happened. Erik

used telekinesis to fly into the air.

"Tell me," Erik said. "Did they give you Speed Burst just so you could keep up with me?"

"Among the reasons, yes." Bill's eyes tracked Erik's movement. "Though I suspect you've already deduced most of them."

"Yeah..."

The commander launched another assault, his invisible hands stretched, reaching Erik in the distant sky, and attacking from multiple angles.

<At least this way I should be able to increase the amount of mana he uses.>

Erik evaded them. The problem was that there were at least a thousand of such hands in the sky. It wasn't possible to see them.

Like a blind man using echolocation, he pieced together their position from the three different sensory inputs, creating a mental map of the deadly invisible threats surrounding

him.

But despite that, at best, he could retreat and maintain distance, since any direct contact with those invisible hands would mean instant death through molecular disintegration. Even with his enhanced senses and combat experience, Erik could only focus on evasive tactics. Water from Erik's earlier attack still covered the hangar floor, reflecting the remaining fires ravaging the hangar. At least, though, the fire was far from the plane.

In the meantime, Erik kept killing the blackguards. Bodies kept piling up. "Your Matter Disruption is fascinating," Erik said as he dodged another series of strikes. "Complete molecular breakdown on contact. But it must be exhausting to do." Bill, the second division commander, then got out of Erik's traps.

His expression remained neutral. "Personal costs are irrelevant when defending the Law Gate." He paused. "Though I wonder what you're buying time for. Since you know my powers,

there is no reason for you to not attack."

Erik was just keeping his distance until that point. He smiled coldly.

They each recognized the other's strategy-neither fully committing to the fight in order to gauge each other's strength.

At the same time, Erik was protecting the remaining aircraft while Bill was likely waiting for reinforcements to come. Even if he lost the battle, the plan had to be destroyed, because if he did, even Erik Romano would not be able to kill Vania, then. The blackguards weren't going to

waste the time Bill was tasked with providing. Vania had plans.

"An interesting standoff," Erik said.

"Indeed." Bill's hands glowed as he channeled more mana into his powers. "Though standoffs eventually end."

The commander's next attack came from multiple directions. At the same time, his body

blurred as Speed Burst worked. He pumped up the speed of his invisible hands and attacked

Erik from angles.

<Fuck.>

Erik was truly in danger now.

Chapter 1179: Shadows in the Steel Room

"Three," Amber said into the radio, gripping her two daggers. One blade shimmered with frost, the other had flames enveloping it.

"Two." The Chimaeric Demons tensed.

"One." Mira prepared to shapeshift.

Space warped around them. The world blurred and reformed as Amber's brain crystal power transported them into the barrier masters' room.

They appeared in a semicircle surrounding their targets.

The group glimpsed at the room before the mayhem started. It was spacious but austere- mana-powered, metal-reinforced walls surrounded them, and scattered furniture was pushed to the sides. There were six targets inside that room.

Before the group warped in, they were all channeling mana to power up the barrier.

Amber and the others acted before the barrier masters could understand what was happening. The attack was going to leave them shocked and surprised, and hopefully, this would give them another advantage.

Or at least, that was their hope-though they knew well that even the element of surprise wouldn't guarantee an easy victory against these highly trained soldiers. They were still blackguards, after all.

Barrier masters had maybe the most powerful defensive brain crystal power on the planet. This didn't allow just creating a gigantic and almost indestructible barrier, but even smaller ones.

That was something Amber and the others had to consider-these barrier masters could create shields of any size in an instant, from tiny personal barriers to massive walls of force, making them unpredictable and dangerous opponents even in close combat.

A Chimaeric Demon plunged a mana flyssa through the first barrier master's chest, as if the bone underneath the flesh and the armor covering them were just a piece of paper. Like that, the first of the targets died before he could lower his arms. Blood sprayed in an arc as the clone withdrew his blade, already pivoting toward his next target.

But their opponents weren't weak, nor stupid. They had been trained since young and knew how to react when they got a surprise attack.

Two of them reacted, energy barriers springing to life in front of them. It wasn't going to be easy for them, though. They couldn't stop pumping mana into the Law Gate barrier, meaning that the smaller ones they just created weren't going to be very strong.

Yet it would still be much better than any other defensive power they faced until that point, meaning it wouldn't make a difference for Amber and her team. They were not going to shatter them.

The Barrier Masters pulled out their brain crystal-powered swords from their sheaths.

"We're under attack!" one of the barrier masters shouted, his voice echoing off the reinforced walls.

Amber vanished and reappeared behind one, her ice dagger aiming at his spine. The man spun, a small barrier appearing behind him, the strike blocked.

His sword moved soon after, traveling through the gap the man left open to attack, but Amber had already warped to another position.

Mira engaged a third barrier master. She kept changing her body between insect and human amidst the attacks, and that to evade and attack.

When she was in her human form, she shapeshifted again, creating natural armor and deadly claws, able to rip someone to shreds easily.

Whenever the Barrier Master was going to hit her, she shrank to insect size, slipping through his guard, avoiding sword strikes, before shifting again to deliver bone-crushing blows. There were more people in that room, though. Another barrier master raised multiple layers of defensive barriers and tried to head for the alarm. If he did so, they would receive reinforcements.

There were only three ways for someone to destroy a barrier. One was to use an overwhelming amount of mana, which wasn't even Erik's case.

The second was to act before the barrier fully formed, which was exactly what the Chimaeric Demons were trying to do.

The third was to kill the barrier master, which was also Amber's and her team's goal.

One of the clones acted. Before the barriers could form, he rushed at their creator. The barrier master slashed at him, but the clone was too fast, and his fingers reached the man's throat.

The man's eyes widened in shock as the clone's iron grip crushed his windpipe. Blood vessels burst in his eyes from the pressure. His fingernails scraped desperately against the Chimaeric Demon's forearm, leaving red welts but failing to break the skin. His legs kicked uselessly in the air, finding no purchase.

The man then raised his free hand with desperate urgency, channeling mana to form a barrier between himself and his attacker.

He hoped to create at least enough space to break free. That worked, because if the clone didn't want his arm to be severed in half, he had to avoid being hit.

In those free moments, the barrier master grabbed his blade again and thrust toward the Chimaeric Demon.

The clone avoided the strike, used his starlight fireball brain crystal power, which failed to break the shield. However, that wasn't the reason he used it for. No.

The clone understood that while the fireball attack itself would be ineffective against the barrier, it would serve another purpose: the bright flash of light from the flames would temporarily blind and disorient his opponent.

As soon as the man was unable to see, the clone ran behind him. The clone got exactly where he wanted to be. Without wasting time, he created a mana blade and plunged it into the man's

nape.

The man's face contorted in pain, his skin flushing a deep crimson. It didn't last long, because then he paled to an ashen gray.

His eyes lost focus and turned glassy. Blood drained from his face as his body shook with violent spasms. His muscles twitched and jerked as they ran out of oxygen. With a final weak

gasp, he went completely still.

"Amber!"

She was still fighting against her opponent. She was not a Chimaeric Demon, and the Barrier master in front of him was well trained. The man pressed hard, knowing that as far as experience went, he had more than the woman in front of him. He slashed and hacked, and whenever he left an open spot, he conjured mana barriers to prevent Amber's lethal attacks from reaching him.

To Amber, the man's barriers appeared with perfect timing, forcing her to constantly warp to new places if she wanted to avoid getting killed.

Whenever she had a chance, she struck with both daggers.

Ice and fire erupted from her daggers with each strike, sending waves of extreme temperature through the room. The frost blade left trails of crystalline ice while the flame dagger scorched the air, creating a mix of hot and cold currents that made it difficult for everyone to maintain their footing and breathing rhythm.

She also generated fog, which reduced the visibility of everyone inside that room. However, Mira and the Chimaeric Demons relied not only on sight to find their opponents, so they didn't have particular problems. The only ones having them were Amber and the barrier

masters.

Now two of their opponents lay dead on the ground. The numerical advantage shifted in Amber and her team's favor, and the battle turned from six against five to four against five. With fewer enemies, the Chimaeric Demons could concentrate on more enemies at the same time, meaning it was just a matter of time before they would be done here. Mira's shapeshifting abilities grew more erratic and effective as she adapted to combat. This fight marked her first real battle, where failure meant death. She refused to let that happen. Her training with the Chimaeric Demons had been intense but controlled, never fatal. Her power let her copy any creature's natural abilities she encountered, mirroring the Chimaeric Demons' replication power that Erik had carefully tried to make again.

One key limitation was her inability to enhance these forms with mana, leaving her vulnerable against opponents who could amplify their attacks through the ethereal substance, which were most of them all, albeit not the barrier masters' case. This weakness explained why

Chimaeric Demons rarely used shapeshifting in combat.

Taking on thaid characteristics forced close combat-a dangerous affair even for experienced fighters. Mira was learning this lesson the hard way, and in a lethal combat.

Yet she wasn't stupid. Even if there were demerits in the replication ability, there were also a

lot of positive aspects.

One arm stretched into a whip-like appendage while her legs changed into muscular, feline- like limbs that let her sprint at blinding speeds.

Her core took the form of some creature that could bend and twist easily. That way, she

avoided many hits without turning into a bug.

Her hands switched between deadly claws and rock-hard fists in an instant.

Though the barrier master held his ground, the fight was not easy at all. His problem was that

he struggled to predict where Mira would be from one second to the other or where to hit, given the woman's weird body. But whenever Mira got too close or landed an attack, his barrier protected him.

Chapter 1180: Radio Silence

The third barrier master died to coordinated attacks from two Chimaeric Demons. He tried to block an attack coming from a clone. The man knew if the Chimaeric Demon reached him, he would die. Unfortunately for him, he failed, not because of the clone, who was just a

distraction, but because of one of its brothers.

After having created a barrier strong enough to block a clone's attack, he got inevitably exposed to the other Chimaeric Demons.

One of them struck low, ending the fight after having chopped the man's legs.

As for the others, Amber broke through her opponent's defense. She warped, appearing in three places in rapid succession, but for the barrier master, it was like she was in three places at the same time.

The man tried to conjure multiple barriers around him, but that was what Amber wanted, because by doing that, the man basically trapped himself. It took just a few seconds before Amber warped in and decapitated the man.

Barrier masters were powerful; there was no doubt about that. Their barriers were almost indestructible; unless they received an overwhelming amount of attacks or a few powerful attacks, it was impossible to destroy them. However, there were ways to get past that overwhelming defense, and one of them was to directly kill the barrier master.

As for Mira, she also got past her target's defenses. She turned into a bug, gaining not only speed but also making it harder for the opponent to see her. Bugs were already fast as they were; one with Mira's attributes was basically a ghost. The Chimaeric Demons killed the remaining Barrier Masters.

Silence fell over the room, broken only by the soft thud of the last body hitting the ground. Six barrier masters lay motionless, their blood seeping into the floor.

The entire fight had lasted less than 30 seconds. Amber saw that as a sign of the fact they really had grown. However, it was possible to win the fight only because of the Chimaeric Demons. They were much faster and stronger than her or the Barrier Masters and had a lot of experience fighting, since Erik was always in the middle of a battle.

"Clear," Amber said. She tried to regulate her breathing, adrenaline still surging through her. "Did they hear us?"

"Apparently not," a Chimaeric Demon said.

The corridors remained as quiet as a graveyard, with no sign of enemy movement or approaching footsteps. Like a pond undisturbed by ripples, the stillness suggested they killed the barrier masters without alerting nearby guards.

The Chimaeric Demons checked each body to confirm the kills were clean. Mira transformed back to human.

"One of them shouted." Mira had a worried look. "It's impossible they didn't hear that." "Maybe Emily took care of them. If they are not here yet, it means they must have been dead."

"We would have heard the gunshots..."

"What do we d-"

Suddenly, the rapid thud of boots against stone echoed through the corridors. The sound multiplied and intensified with each passing second, coming from multiple directions at

once.

Heavy footfalls and the metallic clinking of weapons grew louder as they approached. The group froze in place, muscles tense, as they realized just how many enemies were converging on their position.

Amber and the other fought a fast battle. The blackguards actually heard the scream. It was just that they didn't have the time to help the barrier masters, because they were already dead by the time they got to the last floor.

"They've definitely heard us!" Amber said.

The footsteps came from every direction, and they were far more numerous than expected. There were at least fifty sets of boots, maybe more, which suggested at least three full squads of blackguards inside the building coming toward their position.

This was in addition to the regular patrol units stationed at the entrance. The Chimaeric Demons were strong, but the blackguards were closing the gap rapidly, and killing hundreds of blackguards was not workable anymore, even for them. Unless they did it slowly, which was not possible in their current situation, especially not if they also had to protect Mira and Amber.

"We need to move," Amber said. Then, she warped everyone out of there.

The five materialized on the flat rooftop of a three-story building directly across from their previous location, about forty feet away.

They immediately dropped low behind a stone parapet that ran along the roof's edge. From this vantage point, they had a clear view through the large window into the room they had just left. The lamp posts and the rising sun were casting enough light for them to see what was happening there.

A swarm of blackguards burst into the room. They were at least thirty. Their boots thundered against the stone floor as they fanned out in formation, weapons drawn.

Shouts of alarm and frustration echoed through the night as they found the bodies of their fallen comrades.

The death of the barrier masters was a terrible blow to the Law Gate defenses. The squad leaders barked orders to secure the perimeter while others radioed for backup.

It was clear that the Law Gate's security had been breached, and the entire compound would soon be on high alert.

"They know we're here now," Mira said. "Our element of surprise is gone."

"There is something wrong, though," a Chimaeric Demon said.

"What?"

"There shouldn't have been so many people. We checked the place before entering."

"Maybe we missed them." Amber said.

"No," the clone said. "I didn't hear anyone else inside, and Emily checked around. Even if we missed some, we would have heard them, but we didn't."

"Are you saying they knew we were coming?"

"Yeah," the Chimaeric Demon confirmed. "There is no other explanation."

"But they failed to protect the barrier masters," Mira said.

"That is because they didn't think we would be this fast." The Chimaeric Demon couldn't stop thinking about it, and the more he did, the more it made sense.

Amber could do nothing but grimace. "This complicates things. We need to find Emily and June fast." She took her radio.

"Emily, June, we are done. What's your status?"

Only static answered.

"Emily? June? Report."

More static. Worry crept into Amber and the others. Mira and June were not so irresponsible as to not keep their radio under range. If they weren't replying, it meant something bad happened.

Everyone was concerned, but the Chimaeric Demons were by far the most concerned of the group. Since they shared Erik's memories, instincts, and protective nature, they felt a deep

responsibility for the woman's safety.

"Something's wrong," Amber said.

"The Chimaeric Demons and I will search from above." Mira couldn't stay idle.

They all nodded and started shapeshifting, quickly taking the shape of small but fast birds.

"I'll take the ground and try to see if they are hiding somewhere."

Even the prospect of combing the area didn't make the Chimaeric Demons feel better. "This is bad...Emily is too expert. If she had gotten attacked, she would have never lost."

"Unless someone strong did."

A heavy silence settled.

She warped them all outside of the area, close to where Emily and June should have been, and

far enough from the site of the battle to avoid being seen by the blackguards inside the building. The clones then took flight.

Amber warped from rooftop to rooftop, her heart rate increasing for a different reason now. Emily and June's silence could mean many things-none of them good.

June landed on the ground, shifting into his human form. Though, he turned his hearing

system into that of a dog so that he would be able to find out people sneaking on him by their

footsteps.

<I still don't get how Emily can see them so easily.>

Though, with her powers, it wasn't that absurd. One by one, he hid them away-some behind dumpsters, others in narrow alleys. However, his ears twitched.

The clone had spent a while to move the corpses of those Emily killed.

<She is putting in a lot of effort, uh? I just hope nothing bad happened while I hid these guys...

>

While the area was not that bright since the sun was not completely up yet, the bodies could still be found, so the clone had to hide them well, and that made him lose time. June was

going to shapeshift again and leave when he heard something.

<What the...?> Rapid footsteps approaching. June froze, calculating the distance and doing his best to find

out where they were going. Closer, for sure, but exactly where?

"Shit." He understood. The footsteps headed straight for Emily.

He morphed into a sparrow, wings spreading as he took flight.

<They must have seen her...>

Two figures raced across the rooftops. The clone saw them, and he didn't like what he was seeing. They were the Vindicators patrolling this sector.

The Vindicators' reputation wasn't earned through mercy. Even with Emily's skills, she couldn't face two of them alone, and nothing much would change if he helped her.

Amber and the others just entered the building, and while he might ask them for help, doing

so could compromise the mission.

The clone pushed his wings harder. Emily needed to move now. The vindicators would reach her position in seconds.