

BIOLOGICAL 1211

Chapter 1211: Fragments of Truth (2)

"So, if you still are searching the Lorogia region for the labs, it means you didn't find the documents?" He asked, leaning forward to study the prisoner's face. His tone was calm but firm, making it clear he expected an answer.

The blackguard did his best to suppress his surprise, but he couldn't. Only a few knew what exactly the blackguards were searching for, and he wasn't among them. Yet Erik talked as if he was sure about that.

The first division's task was to scour the Mur continent in search of an unknown object. The blackguards on Mannard didn't know what the First Division was searching for, but they knew it was in the Lorogia region since they knew that the First Division was focusing their research there.

Yet the man in front of him spoke with such certainty that it made the prisoner think this outsider knew even more than he, a blackguard, did.

Yet he started thinking about the situation. It made sense; Erik Romano was the son of Lucius Romano, and while not everyone knew what he did in the Lorogia Region, whatever he did or learned was bound to be known by his son, the man standing in front of him.

A lab made a lot of sense now that the prisoner thought about it, especially considering the many research projects their colleagues did, and that gave all of them the ability to wield multiple brain crystals.

The order to capture Lucius Romano and the words his son just said confirmed that Lucius succeeded where his colleagues had failed. He found whatever they were searching for, and Erik Romano was here to stop them.

"I'm not going to talk," he said. Though he kept a poker face, Erik knew what was going on in the prisoner's mind. He knew nothing, but he wasn't the only one.

In truth, none of the prisoners he had interrogated revealed anything substantial. Most of them didn't know what was happening on the Mur continent, even less where the blackguards were. They knew, more or less, what happened in the past, but after Erik's appearance,

information regarding Mur was kept a secret, even from them.

What they knew was quite related to the past: the locations and layouts of their previous military bases across the continent, the patrol routes their units followed, and detailed reports about the creatures inhabiting different regions-information shared by their fellow soldiers stationed there.

They were also well aware that Lucius Romano had found something of great importance during his stay on the Mur continent, which was now in Erik's possession. They knew that was likely the cause of Erik's great power, but didn't know what it was in detail. Only the other division commanders, some select few members, and the Vindicators had more information. Still, the question alone had caused thoughts to surface in the man's mind.

Erik almost laughed when he read the man's mind, because he had information the others didn't, something that no official channels talked about.

One of his friends on Mur told him that after Lucius stole whatever he stole, the blackguards found some information that rekindled their hope.

The man's friend told him that there was an underground base in which they found some leads but couldn't say anything more, and he now understood the reason.

A lot of time passed, and given what the prisoner knew about the Lorogia Region and what his friend told him about the base, knowing the protocol, the prisoner was sure they were currently using the facility as their base.

There was nothing certain about it, but he was confident about his reasoning.

"I won't tell you anything," the man said. "You're wasting your time."

Erik leaned forward.

His eyes lit up as he thought about the information. The man's unguarded thoughts had revealed far more than his words ever would.

Erik remained motionless for several seconds, battling the urge to laugh and organizing each new piece of information in his mind.

"The underground facility. Tell me about it."

The man's eyes widened in shock, his face draining of color as he realized he had confirmed something he was supposed to keep secret. His fingers gripped the edge of his chair, betraying his anxiety.

"How did you-" He caught himself, but it was too late.

"So there really is a hidden facility," Erik said, his voice dropping to a whisper. His eyes locked onto the prisoner's, a cold smile playing across his face. "I need you to tell me exactly where this underground base is."

"I don't know," the man said, and this time he was telling the truth. However, something far scarier than Erik knowing about the facility took most of his mind. The conversation was too weird, and Erik acted as if he was reading his mind.

<It can't really be like this, right? Mind-reading powers are unheard of...>

Yet that was exactly the truth. The blackguard didn't know if he could resist him, if he could avoid giving him information, but he still tried and started making mana circulate through his body. This way, he might be able to resist the foreign mana he knew would enter his body. That was how brain crystal powers worked after all, and all the blackguards were trained to resist other's attacks. Otherwise, they wouldn't survive a single battle.

Yet, the man didn't know how much mana Erik had and how useless his attempt was going to be.

As for Erik, instead, he was thinking about what he found on Maynard Island. The blackguards made sure to delete all information about their operations on Mur. What remained was just information about the continent itself, although Erik didn't know why they didn't delete that,

too.

Since Erik had studied the geography of Mur from the data he got from Maynard, he had a vague idea of where this place might have been in the Lorogia region.

The most likely spots were near the major geological formations in Lorogia - the mountain ranges, deep valleys, and areas with stable bedrock.

[This makes sense,] the biological supercomputer said. [Your father said the blackguards took the mountains to reach the Lorogia region, instead of the coast, meaning that they were searching for something there. The mountain routes would have given them access to geological formations that might hide underground structures. The geological data from the documents we got on Maynard Island were pretty clear about that. There are extensive cave systems throughout the Lorogia mountain range. Perfect for hiding a research facility. And remember what your father mentioned about the original expedition-they specifically targeted the mountain passes.]

<I'm not sure,> Erik said. <They might have gone through that route because the mountains hid them from flying Thaid. An army marching along the coast would stand out against the shoreline, making them easy targets. Besides, those same documents you are referring to show ancient ruins scattered across the region. The blackguards could have been targeting

them. >

[True, but consider the resources required to establish and maintain mountain supply lines. The cost and effort must have outweighed the tactical advantages of a coastal route. They chose the harder path for a reason. Besides, while flying, thaid stay away from there; assuming there are wyverns, the situation wouldn't be better.]

<Flying thaid are basically as strong as wyverns on Mur, with the difference that there are many more. Besides, you're assuming they had a choice. The coastal regions might have been too dangerous. We've seen how powerful the thaid are around here- the ones on Mur could

be even worse.>

They both paused, considering the possibilities. Erik let out a heavy sigh, rubbing his temples out of frustration. The biological supercomputer's own sigh just echoed in Erik's mind. [Look, I know everything is possible, but think about it,] the system said. [The underground facility's location is the key. Natural caverns would have reduced construction costs and time while providing ready-made defensive positions to every single Silver Line Corporation lab. They were not trying to make a new phone; they were creating something that affected life on the planet at all levels. They knew that if such creatures fled; they were bound to create problems. Cave systems would help defend from the monsters, hide their labs, and trap the creatures if they escaped. This means the structures must be around the mountain range. Given what the blackguards are doing, it is clear they went to the mountain range because they were searching the caves.]

<All right then,> Erik said. <The pre-thaid maps might show settlements or installations that were abandoned during the initial invasions. Make research and cross-reference them with the information we got from Maynard Island.>

After the last interrogation, Erik ordered the prisoners' executions. These blackguards had served their purpose, revealing what little they knew about Mur. It wasn't much, but it gave him a starting point—the Lorigia region, and most importantly, a target, the underground base. He wasn't going to let them live, but he gave them a merciful death.

Chapter 1212: The Weight of Leadership

"Are you ok?"

Mira gave Erik a worried look. Erik was currently lying on a bed. He wasn't there because he was injured, but because his mind was so full of thoughts and anxiety that he needed to sleep just to reset the worry and ease his brain a little.

Mira was standing next to the bed, and she arrived as soon as she saw Erik heading for the bedroom.

"Yeah... I'm just tired. You know... After yesterday's events, I have a lot to think about and not much time to rest."

Only one day passed since the invasion and conquest of the Law Gate, and the interrogation lasted for a bit, and that resulted in Erik having little time to sleep. The Chimaeric Demons could take care of things alone, but there were things that needed his say and some others that needed his help.

"What you've been through hasn't been easy, Erik. First, you had to sneak into the most fortified base in the world. Then you had to fight a two-front battle—facing multiple Vindicators and a division commander while protecting a plane from destruction."

Mira sighed.

"After that, you were forced to fight a monster capable of destroying the entire Law Gate with a single flap of its wings—and heaven knows why it didn't. Then you joined the Chimaeric Demons in purging the blackguards and led the interrogations. I'd say you have plenty of reasons to be tired and even more reasons to want to stay in bed."

This was not, by far, Erik's simplest Friday, and he had a lot of complicated ones in his life.

Mira gently patted his head and then started caressing it. "You should get some proper rest today; you have done enough already. Leave the rest to all of us."

Erik nodded, but that wasn't enough to ease Erik's worries, and Mira still saw it in his eyes. Mira knew Erik was feeling burdened. Today many of the Chimaeric Demons died, and while Erik didn't show mercy to the blackguards, it was also true he led many people to their death that day. Coupled with those he killed on Maynard Island, the kill count was starting to weigh on his conscience, even if the blackguards deserved it.

"Are you still worried?" She asked, despite knowing the answer already. "Yeah... Saying to leave the rest to you guys is enough to ease my worries. But I appreciate you saying it."

Mira chuckled. "Fair, but I was honest. You should trust us a little more and leave some of the worries for us, too."

For a moment, Erik didn't know either what to do or what to say, nor if to say it. Erik was afraid that if he did it, Mira and the others might decide to leave him.

Erik developed an irrational fear of the Mur continent. Yet logically, if the blackguards had survived there without the boost from their second brain crystal power, Erik and the Chimaeric Demons should have even welled chances of survival. They were overall stronger than the blackguards now, so they should manage.

Yet the blackguards went on Mur in millions and started to really settle there now that they got a hold on their research.

Erik didn't want the three girls to come with him on Mur, but after all that happened, his fear of the place was so high that he needed some sort of emotional support.

Yet, deep down, he knew that would be for the best—at least he wouldn't have to worry constantly about her dying there. Maybe they were even the source of his fear. Maybe he wasn't scared about him dying, but about Mira, Emily, and Amber.

He didn't know his own feelings anymore, as his mind was overwhelmed with competing worries.

His worries piled up like heavy stones—the safety of the clones, the unknown threats of Mur, and the risk to his partners. These thoughts weighed on him, clouding his judgment and making him unable to say what was really the worst of the problems.

Mira was the one who understood Erik better than the others, so she knew what was going on in his mind.

Maybe it was her experience, maybe it was because of the harsh life she lived, maybe it was because of how her parents raised her, but she always knew what to say.

She sat on the edge of the bed and took Erik's hand in hers, giving it a gentle squeeze. Her touch was warm and reassuring. The familiar comfort of her presence helped ease some of the tension in Erik's chest. It was enough to make him want to share what was really troubling him.

In the end, he couldn't stop himself.

"I'm worried about the plane," he finally said. "This is what is keeping me sleepless, at least." He paused. "Without it, reaching Mur will be... complicated. The Chimaeric Demons would have to sacrifice their lives just to get us there. I feel bad about asking them that... I don't know if I should..."

He paused, his voice growing heavier. "They're not just soldiers to me, Mira. They're family. And the thought of sending them to certain death just so I can get my revenge... it's tearing me apart. Maybe I should just forget about everything and go live in the woods."

Erik shut his eyes, feeling exhausted from the responsibility of leadership. "And the worst part is, I know they would do it without hesitation if I asked. Their loyalty... it makes this decision even harder."

While many concerns weighed on Erik's mind, the plane situation was the most urgent issue weighing on his mind.

Mira didn't know how deep the connection between him and the Chimaeric Demons was. Yet she might be able to at least glimpse partially at it. After all, the clones were still part of him.

The woman understood what Erik was going through because they were important to him as much as they were for her and everyone else who loved Erik.

After all, they were his clones, and watching them die meant watching Erik die. Speaking with them was like talking to Erik, though each had developed their own unique quirks.

That meant thinking about them dying was like thinking about her lover dying. This was not a straightforward decision, and if Erik decided to go through with it, it meant knowing he led to their deaths.

She understood his dread, and while she had grown somewhat used to seeing the clones dying, the deep bond between Erik and his creations made it impossible for him to do the same.

"Erik, I've been by your side since before you started this journey of revenge against the blackguards. I've seen everything you've sacrificed to get here, all the effort you've put in, how hard you've worked for this."

"So many people have died fighting these monsters—and not just clones. If we stop now, we'd be dishonoring the memory of everyone who gave their lives to end the blackguards' control over the world."

"We can't give up, not when we're this close to our goal."

Mira's eyes softened. "You know what amazes me about the Chimaeric Demons? They are your clones, but each of them has grown into their own person, with their own dreams and hopes. They're fighting for those dreams now, not just following orders."

"When I first met them, I thought they were just copies of you. But slowly, I found out they are so much more. They've built lives, formed relationships."

She paused.

"The Chimaeric Demons aren't just following your orders. They want to defeat the blackguards just as much as you do. When your father died, you saw him as only your father, but he was their father, too. When the blackguards hunted you, when they forced the Crystal Cross Gang to pursue you—even though the clones weren't physically present, they experienced all of it through you. Don't underestimate their determination to see this through to the end."

She paused, her expression becoming more determined. "Besides, we've faced worse odds before."

"I'm not so sure about that, Mira." Erik thought back at the Leviathan Serpent, he thought back at the Cerulean Bird, at the black wyvern it killed, or the one Monica brought back to life.

"Everything is telling me survival on Mur will be impossible. Maybe it is just me fearing meeting those monsters again, but we don't have time, and I can't prepare accordingly for the journey. We will also have to cross the sea, instead of flying to Mur." He sighed.

"Even if we make it to Mur safely, I'm not sure the Chimaeric Demons will be strong enough to help us there. As I said, we don't have the luxury of time—I can't spend months creating new batches, either here or there. If we want to stop the blackguards' plans, we need to move within the week."

Mira then stopped. Erik was too fixated on the lack of time. She could understand why, but he was bringing it to another level. It was a little too much.

"What do you think the blackguards are doing on Mur?"

Chapter 1213: Journey to Mur (1)

From his position on the Law Gate's tallest building, Erik surveyed the vast army spread across the plains below.

Daylight revealed the massive army spread below the fortress-city walls. Row after row of undead creatures stood motionless. The Chimaeric Demons patrolled between the ranks and prepared to leave.

Only fifty thousand clones would join the expedition to Mur, along with every flying thaid they turned into undead.

A contingent would stay at Law Gate to protect it and aid ongoing operations in Mannard.

The undead would be the cannon fodders, the scouts, and the lures.

The undead soldiers would play an important role during the sea journey. They would scout ahead to spot dangers that could attack from the ocean or the sky. This way, the main army could prepare for or avoid any threats they might face.

Supply carts rolled through the streets below, their wheels clattering against the pavement. The clones had spent the past days gathering provisions, knowing that an army of this size required extensive logistical support.

Erik's gaze drifted to the building he appointed as incubation chambers where new clone eggs were developing. In the three days since the battle for Law Gate ended, he had only created 1,500 new Chimaeric Demons.

The number seemed small compared to the forces assembled below, but these newest clones were going to be stronger than their predecessors, and each one had the barrier masters' powers, meaning that Erik was going to have an easier time.

"Master, all preparations are complete. The provisions have been distributed, and everyone is in position. We are waiting for your command."

Erik nodded. His throat was tight with unspoken concerns, and his mind filled with concerns he had no way to dismiss, and that were common among those that were going to head to Mur with him.

<Here we are,> Erik said to himself.

Crossing the ocean to Mur would be more than dangerous—it was practically suicidal. The memories of the Cerulean bird's casual display of power and the memories of the Leviathan Serpent generating tsunamis by moving haunted his thoughts, hunted his thoughts, and only intensified his dread.

"Start the shapeshifting," Erik said. The clone nodded, and after having relayed the order, a scene straight out of an apocalypse movie took place.

Fifty thousand bodies started transforming like the best, or worst, of the horror movies.

The sound of cracking bones echoed across the plain like breaking timber, as limbs elongated and spines twisted into new configurations. Human forms warped and expanded, flesh rippling as internal structures reorganized themselves.

Black scales burst through skin in waves, spreading like oil across water until they covered massive, lizard-like bodies.

They were sharp enough to slice through everything and were powerful enough to defend from the most dreadful but known attacks.

Wings exploded from shoulders in sprays of blood that evaporated before touching the ground, membranes stretching between elongated fingers until each span reached twenty meters or more.

Where his army had stood, now rose a sea of black wyverns. The clones had to start flying because their shapeshifted body was so huge, it quickly took most of the land below.

Faces contorted as jaws extended, teeth lengthening into fangs while eyes shifted from rounded to slitted.

Sharp claws grew from their hands and feet, cutting deep marks into the stone ground as they tried to keep their balance during the transformation.

The beasts' bodies were so massive that the ground could no longer contain them all. So, whenever a clone shapeshifted, he grabbed the crates assigned to him, filled with equipment and provisions, and took to the sky.

Their powerful muscles moved under their armored skin as they adjusted to their new bodies. Their long necks swayed back and forth, while their tails whipped through the air to help them stay balanced.

The sight was terrifying. While Erik remained unfazed, anyone witnessing this scene would have been paralyzed with fear.

Thousands upon thousands of the most feared predators in the world packed wing to wing across the Law Gate.

Luckily for everyone, only Erik, Mira, Amber, Emily, and the clones were there, so no one saw the apocalyptic image.

The more the clones took to the sky, the more their massive forms blocked out the sun, casting the entire area into darkness and bathing the sky in the same color. Black.

The sound of fifty thousand pairs of wings beating at once made a deafening roar that echoed across the land.

A single wyvern was enough to terrorize entire regions—an army of them would feature in nightmares for generations. Yet this wasn't a display of power. There was no one there seeing what was happening.

The best that could be seen was a dark cloud in the distance. Erik had no doubt Hin had looked over what happened to the Law Gate, but with the Chimaeric Demons infiltrating their government and blocking reinforcements, there was nothing anyone on the Blackguards' side could do.

Besides, now that they had been eradicated from Mannard, all the countries on the human-controlled continent were left without the organization's support.

There were sure some of them infiltrated in the various organizations, but they were bound to be few and could be easily found. In Erik's opinion, most of them likely hid.

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The destruction of the Law Gate also had other effects. As soon as words of Erik destroying this place spread, all the armies in Frant started retreating.

Caiden delivered the news that morning. While it was certainly good, whether things would actually improve remained uncertain—Erik had no information to judge either way.

Criminal activity remained widespread. Though Shade's death initially caused chaos, the blackguards had a lot of time to install new leadership across their criminal organizations before retreating to Mur.

Yet their disappearance from Mannard meant most of their support disappeared, and that was another problem in itself, since it left everything unchecked. The governments had been in collusion with most of these organizations under the blackguards' banners, and those ties were bound to be present and maybe strengthened now that the organization left for Mur.

Erik had no doubt his clones would be able to find and root them out, especially considering how weak they were compared to his clones, but it would still require time. Honestly, Erik was unsure if he had to meddle like that in these people's affairs.

Not only did he not know them, but he didn't even care that much. He was contemplating intervening just because of his own moral rules, but nothing forced him. Besides, he was tired of the Mannard continent; no, he was tired of the people inhabiting it.

Aside from criminal activities, there were also diplomatic problems. Many countries attacked Frant and the only thing that prevented them from continuing their attack was Erik's presence, who had been a huge deterrent even with the blackguards present.

But now he was going to Mur. Sure, leaving the Chimaeric Demons behind, but that might not have been enough, and the clones he sent to the other countries didn't completely take over their government, so controlling them was still not going to be easy.

Anyway, the wyverns were going to be seen by all those interested in what Erik did.

The decision to use the forms hadn't been made just for the sake of carrying more provisions to Mur, but also to show everyone his power.

Beyond intimidation, Erik had another reason: he hoped their presence would deter the flying thaids that hunted along the ocean passage between Hin and Mur from approaching them.

Even the most aggressive predators had to think twice before attacking what appeared to be the largest gathering of apex predators in history. Of course, that was if they were the apex predator on Mur. He did not have enough information and was sure they would be attacked regardless of what Erik did.

But the choice went beyond intimidation. Each clone's body could carry significantly more provisions than they would have if they took a Galewing's form.

Extra space meant extra supplies, and on Mur, every bit of food could mean the difference between survival and starvation.

Erik still carried many kinds of seeds with him, so that, if anything happened, he would still be able to survive.

The problem was that the seeds would just be a pitiful insurance policy.

Yet Erik's hand instinctively tightened around the pouch containing various seeds—fruit trees, vegetables, and grains.

<This is it... We are going to take the biggest step we had ever taken.>

The undead thaids continued their circular flight pattern, and so did the Chimaeric Demons. Together, they represented Erik's full military might, yet after witnessing the Cerulean bird's power, he knew it wasn't going to be enough.

Erik took one last look at the Law Gate, the fortress that had represented the pinnacle of blackguard power on this continent, then jumped on a black wyvern.

A salty breeze blew in from the ocean. While looking at it, everyone tried to imagine the horrors hidden beneath that blue and black surface.

The crossing of the sea would need several days, and they'd be open to attacks from both sea creatures below and sky monsters above.

Based on his estimation, assuming everything went bad, he would get to Mur just with a couple of hundred clones.

"Get in Delta Formation. And let's hope luck is on our side."

Chapter 1214: Journey to Mur (2)

The vast expanse of ocean stretched endlessly beneath the army of black wyverns, its dark waters concealing untold horrors in their depths, which Erik absolutely had no wish to meet.

Two hours had passed since Erik and the army left the Law Gate, and the mainland was now just a hazy line on the horizon.

Erik was at the helm of the formation, scanning both sea and sky in search of Thaids that escaped the undead's notice.

Even with the undead scouts patrolling ahead and around them, the ocean's depths made their surveillance far from perfect. The waters were simply too deep, and a thaïd could easily lurk hundreds of meters below, completely undetected.

Or worse, these monsters could simply swim into the area after the undead had already passed through, rendering their scouting efforts useless.

Erik couldn't keep the undead scouts closer to the formation. Despite the risks of missing threats beneath the waves, they needed the undead to patrol far ahead and around them. Without proper scouting, they'd be blind to any flying thaïds in their path—a potentially fatal oversight given how dangerous aerial encounters could be over open water.

The formation kept a careful distance from the water below. Erik ordered them to maintain this height—not so high as to strain the clones because of the lack of oxygen, but high enough that only the most titanic creatures, like the Leviathan Serpent, could pose an immediate threat.

Still, despite this precaution and their overwhelming numbers, Erik couldn't shake the feeling that they were merely prey waiting to be hunted.

His fears weren't unfounded paranoia but wisdom born from experience. The ocean had already shown him its terrors. Now those memories painted every shadow beneath the waves as a potential threat.

Experience had taught Erik that thaïds could materialize from any direction without warning, and sea thaïds had an even greater advantage from their land counterparts. They could burst from the waves like living geysers. Their bodies were usually so big that by simply moving, they could displace enough water to create whirlpools.

Flying thaïds could use the clouds as a hiding place. There was no way to know they were attacking unless one was lucky enough to see them before they did, as their shadows would appear only seconds before impact.

With the Mannard continent now a distant memory, every cubic meter of space around them—from the depths below to the clouds above—could hide monsters beyond counting. The endless blue horizon offered no comfort, only the certainty that they were surrounded by threats.

The ocean's vastness amplified both the danger and Erik's sense of vulnerability. Each ripple in the waters below could be the signal of an approaching predator.

Every shadow passing beneath their formation might be the last thing they see before an attack. Unlike terrain on land, where mountains, forests, and valleys provided hiding spots and defensive positions, the open ocean was a featureless, killing ground.

There were no bottlenecks to funnel enemies, no high ground to occupy, and no cover to duck behind. The sky offered equally little protection-clouds could hide threats just as easily as the waves concealed dangers below.

The most terrifying part was that a single massive thaid, lurking beneath the surface, could be so big as to make it able to annihilate half their army in one simple movement of their jaws.

These giant sea monsters were so large they didn't even need brain crystal powers to cause destruction. Their massive size alone made them deadly.

Erik had seen them in action. His wasn't just paranoia.

Clouds gathered above them, dark and brooding, matching the color of the wyverns' scales. The undead thaids circled the main force in wide arcs, acting as the first line of defense to decrease the number of Chimaeric Demons' casualties if they got attacked.

Every few minutes, ripples would disturb the ocean's surface, too large to be caused by normal marine life.

The clones noticed these disturbances too, and their anxiety surged-a slight tightening of wing muscles, a brief break in formation before correcting the occasional nervous glance downward.

"Master," one of the nearby clones said, "It looks like the water depth has increased. We should be over the deep-sea trenches."

Erik nodded. They all knew what that meant. The deep trenches were hunting grounds for the largest and most dangerous sea thaids, so Erik's earlier fears could now happen.

The Leviathan Serpent they'd encountered in the past was just one example of what lurked in these waters.

Erik had researched the thaids living in the waters between Mur and Hin. Information was scarce since few who encountered these creatures survived to tell the tale.

Yet, despite Erik being unable to fight them, he at least needed to know what might attack them to come up with plans to at least escape the monsters.

The undead scouts helped to ease his worries, but their presence offered little comfort. Against the titans of the deep, they would be little more than an inconvenience.

Even the mighty wyvern forms the clones had taken might prove not enough against what awaited them. In truth, that wasn't so weird.

Their increased size did little to enhance their strength. The larger form merely allowed them to carry more provisions.

Below, a shadow passed beneath the waves-massive, silent, and gone in an instant. The entire formation shifted slightly higher in response, though no order had been given.

Erik tightened his grip on the wyvern's scales. The ocean between Mannard and Mur had remained unexplored for good reason.

Now they were crossing it with an army, presenting themselves as a feast to whatever monstrosities called these waters home.

The Blackguards avoided these dangers by using suborbital travel, reaching the safety of space. Erik, however, lacked an aircraft capable of such flight.

Then an indistinct sound reached them-something between a whale's song and a rumble of thunder. The noise seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once, reverberating through their bones. The wyverns' wings faltered for just a moment before resuming their

beat.

The waiting was perhaps the worst part. Erik knew something would happen-it was inevitable. The only questions were when it would occur and whether they would survive. [You're being paranoid again,] the biological supercomputer said. [The chances of us encountering something dangerous are low in such a great space. The ocean is massive, and most creatures, even thaids, prefer to conserve energy rather than attack something as large

as our formation.]

That was the reason Erik wanted his army to take the shapes of wyverns to begin with. Everything would have to think twice before attacking.

<You've seen what's down there. Size means nothing to these monsters.>

[True, but think about it logically. Any hunter has to think about whether an attack is worth the energy it would spend, and this is true for Thaids, too. We look like an enormous group of wyverns- that's a lot of work for any predator, and they can't be sure they'd even succeed.]

<Since when did you become an expert in thaid hunting behavior?>

[Since you downloaded all those research papers about them, especially during the past days. I may be artificial, but I know how to read. Besides, if something tries to eat us, we can always throw some clones at it and run away. It's not like we're short on disposable troops.] <That's... You know how I feel about the clones... Why are you even suggesting such a cold- blooded turn?>

[Because I'm only concerned about our survival, Erik. The clones are part of your power. To me, they do not differ from the ice lance or fireballs you make. And speaking of cold-blooded, did you know that most large marine predators are warm-blooded? It helps them hunt in deeper waters. Fascinating stuff, really. Would you like me to explain the thermodynamics

involved?]

<Are you trying to distract me with science lectures?>

[Is it working? Because I have about six hours' worth of material on specific marine biology ready to go. Did you know that the square-cube law suggests that anything bigger than a blue whale should be impossible? Yet here we are, flying over an ocean full of things that ignore

physics.]

<What is a blue-whale?>

[Never mind. But at least stop imagining worst-case scenarios. Focus on something else instead of wondering what's going to eat us. You already did everything you could. If we are fated to die, it won't be because of lack of preparations.]

Then a mental message from one of his Chimaeric Demons broke through Erik's and the biological supercomputer's friendly banter. The clone's voice carried a grave note of concern

that put Erik on alert.

"Master, the undead scouts have spotted something approaching from the southeast. A large

flock of flying thaids is heading toward our position."

"Shit. I knew that would happen..."

[Nothing says they are coming to us. Don't be so negative...]

Erik's mind raced. He didn't want to fight flying thaids, not here, not above the ocean, and especially not if they came from Mur.

Chapter 1215: Journey to Mur (3)

"What kind are they?" Erik asked. "The more information I have, the more I can come up with a plan."

There was a pause before the clone gave his answer. "We don't know, Master. These were not on the documents you made us read. They're unlike any flying thaids we've ever seen or that should have

reasonably been over these waters. The only thing I can say with certainty is that they look extremely powerful."

Erik felt a chill run down his spine. His army was made of thousands of clones transformed into Black Wyverns, the most feared aerial predators known to exist. While this didn't make them stronger, the Thaid's shouldn't have been able to know that.

For a group of Thaid's, or for anyone looking at his army, these were just wyverns, meaning the most dangerous Thaid's on the planet, at least in theory.

That these Thaid's were approaching such a massive gathering of apex predators meant one of two things: either they hadn't noticed them yet and were going in their direction just because of chance, or worse, they were so powerful they didn't care about the wyverns.

Maybe Wyverns were not the most dangerous Thaid race at all. Who knew?

"How many?" Erik asked, dreading the answer the clone was going to give him.

"At least ten thousand, Master."

The Chimaeric Demon shuddered involuntarily as he reported the numbers-though in his current form, the tremor resembled a small earthquake.

Even in this powerful shape, the thought of such a vast number of unknown thaid's, and from the Mur continent, at that, made him shiver, and he wasn't the only one shivering. All those who heard him had the same reaction, including Erik, who could do nothing but grimace at the news.

Even with their superior numbers of fifty thousand against ten thousand, Erik's group couldn't afford to engage in a battle here, over open water, with unknown enemies. The lack of solid ground beneath them eliminated any tactical advantages they might normally have, and a fight would leave them vulnerable to both the mysterious thaid's and the dangerous waters below.

<What do we do?> Erik asked the biological supercomputer.

[Well, it's not like we have much choice, right?]

<Yeah...>

Erik turned to the Chimaeric Demon who had just given him the report.

"We are going to change course. Thirty degrees south. Maintain altitude and speed."

Erik's mental message soon reached all of his forces.

The massive formation of black-scaled bodies shifted like a cloud as thousands of wings adjusted their angle.

Like a wave, the army turned together-the front rows moved first, and the rest followed in perfect order.

Erik's strategy aimed to determine whether these thaids were simply passing through the area by coincidence or if they were deliberately targeting his army.

It was like two ships passing in the night-alter one ship's course, and they would miss each other entirely. If it was mere chance, changing direction would prevent their paths from intersecting.

But if these thaids had spotted his army and were chasing them on purpose, changing direction wouldn't help at all. They would simply adjust their own trajectory to match that of Erik's army, and in that case, a battle was assured.

The next few minutes would tell him which scenario they were dealing with, and that would tell him what to do, at least in theory.

The Chimaeric Demons not only adjusted their course, but they also changed that of the undead, most of which were called back near the bulk of the army, while some stragglers were kept in the distance to act as scouts.

Erik's hands went to his pouch. He grabbed it and felt the weight of the many seeds he was carrying. Somehow, he felt them heavier, especially considering his and the army's survival was going to depend on them.

He knew that if the flock was really going to attack them, he might quickly end up being the only person with a safe means to provide food.

Erik wasn't certain of his survival on this journey, though he should theoretically make it- after all, the Chimaeric Demons' main purpose was to make sure he got there safely.

They were most likely going to sacrifice their lives to protect him, Mira, Amber, Emily, and June, and by the clones' own suggestion, whenever a group of local thaids approached, part of the group would leave the main army to lure the others away if things went bad.

In truth, Erik wanted to avoid this, not only because he cared about the clones but also because it would create serious problems once they reached Mur-if they made it there at all. Erik had limited knowledge of the Thaids' average strength of Mur, with only two reference points: one sea thaid and one flying thaid. Using these as examples wasn't reliable since both types were naturally more powerful than the land-based thaids that dominated the continent. Now, of course, using the clones as cannon fodder to stall the enemy advance was going to be the last resort solution, and there was still a chance all of this was just a coincidence. Besides, the best thing would still be to fight like a cohesive unit. 50 thousand starlight fireballs every second were too many for every kind of enemy to avoid them. At least Erik hoped so.

Two or three Chimaeric Demons could rip to shreds an enemy, even if it meant their death. The problem was that if even that was not going to work, leaving some clones behind as a lure was the only thing Erik could do.

Erik hated the idea of sacrificing any of his forces. These weren't mindless creatures, but his clones. The thought of deliberately leaving some behind as decoys made his stomach churn.

But when they had discussed their options during the planning phase, both Erik and the clones had to face the hard truth.

Against overwhelming numbers or particularly powerful enemies, splitting up to ensure the mission's success was their best tactical option.

Still, knowing it was necessary didn't make it any easier to accept. Every time Erik thought about potentially having to give that order, he felt the weight of command pressing down on

him like a physical burden.

"Fuck... Let's just hope this is because of chance."

Barely a few hours into their journey, and they were already facing potential fights. The ocean beneath them suddenly seemed even more threatening, its dark waters stretching in every direction, offering no refuge if things went wrong.

[Erik, you need to calm down,] the biological supercomputer said. [Your anxiety is clouding your judgment. We need you to think clearly now more than ever. Panic is contagious. If you lose your composure, it will affect the clones. Take a deep breath and focus on what we know,

not what we fear.]

Erik nodded slowly, his jaw set with determination as he forced himself to steady his breathing and focus on the immediate situation.

Yet the situation wasn't going to allow him to relax, because as soon as the system gave him that message, Erik received a mental message. One that made his blood run cold. "Master," the Chimaeric Demon's voice echoed in his mind, filled with urgency.

"Unfortunately, the thaids changed their course. They're still coming toward us... and they're

moving incredibly fast!"

Erik's jaw clenched.

<What were you saying?>

[Erik, stay calm; panicking won't help anyone!]

Unfortunately, though, this situation was no chance-the thaids following them were

targeting them, and they were being hunted.

His hands gripped the wyvern's scales tighter as a wave of helplessness washed over him. On land, he could have prepared. He could have created barriers, dug trenches, and established defensive positions.

But here, suspended above the endless ocean, there was nowhere to hide, no terrain to use to their advantage. It would be pure strength against strength, with no tricks or tactics to fall

back on.

Here, they were exposed in a way they'd never been before.

But Erik wasn't stupid; neither were the Chimaeric Demons. They all knew that would have been the situation if a group of flying thaids had found them and decided to give chase.

"Everyone, increase the flying speed," Erik said. That made several nearby wyverns' wings

beat faster.

Even the undead seemed to move with urgency now, despite them not having a shred of fear in their beings. But it was clear that would happen. They were controlled by the Chimaeric Demons, and if they were nervous and restless, that would obviously reflect on the undead

under their control.

<We may not be able to avoid them entirely, but we can buy ourselves some time.>

[Use this time to calm down a little...]

Erik's heart was beating fast, and the biological supercomputer could see that easily.

The massive formation surged forward as one, their wingbeats growing more powerful. Erik knew all of this was futile. There was no way to avoid this fight, but at least he could make sure that, whatever happened, they were closer to land.

Chapter 1216: Journey to Mur (4)

The Chimaeric Demons were in a heated discussion, talking about battle formations and defense strategies through their communication systems.

Right at that moment, the clones kept a form between human and wyvern—a hybrid state that merged both aspects.

Their bodies mixed human and reptilian features in a practical way—black scales covered some areas while human skin remained in others. Their faces showed a blend of both forms, with reptilian eyes and forked tongues alongside human features and a mix of fangs and regular teeth.

This hybrid form let them speak normally instead of just using Erik's instability.

Yet despite all they had gone through, voices betrayed clear signs of worry.

"They're gaining on us," a clone said. "At their current speed, they'll reach the undead within minutes." Enjoy new chapters from My Virtual Library Empire

"We should prepare for combat," another said.

The clone said it with so much resignation that it felt as if every ounce of hope had been drained from their existence, leaving behind only a hollow echo of acceptance. The clone had already accepted the inevitability of the coming battle.

In truth, he wasn't wrong about feeling that way. The unknown flying thaids chased them for at least one hour. Erik tried to stay at a distance, but these things were much faster than he and the Chimaeric Demons were.

However, Erik decided against sending a group of clones to intercept them. The thaids were complete unknowns—their strength levels, abilities, and combat capabilities were all mysteries. Sending clones would not only waste valuable forces, but could also weaken their defensive might. With no tactical advantage to gain, splitting his forces now would just be an error.

Erik felt the ripple of emotions going on among the clones, and even himself, through instability, of course.

They felt determination, fear, rage, but also desperation. Everyone's thoughts switched between staying strong and worrying about what could happen. Yet, despite the fear gnawing at them, there was also a stubborn refusal to give up, a silent promise to fight until their last breath.

[At least tell me you have a plan,] the biological supercomputer said. It knew what Erik was thinking, but they got into the habit of talking as if they didn't.

<I'm working on it,> Erik said, watching the undead scouts' formations through the eyes of his clones' memories grow more scattered as the pursuing thaids gained ground. <I don't think we will be able to avoid them for long.>

[Well, that's a cheerful assessment. Any other good news you'd like to share?]

<Not helping.>

[Sorry. But seriously, we need options. You are right—combat is inevitable at this point. The question is whether we face them on our terms or theirs.]

<What would our terms be? We are sitting ducks.> Erik considered their situation. <If we turn and fight, we risk everything without knowing what we're up against. If we keep running, we'll eventually tire and be forced to fight anyway, probably in worse conditions. There's also the small matter of what's below us. The longer we stay over these waters, the more likely something decides to join the party from underneath.>

Erik paused. <I know what you are thinking. It would be best if we sent some clones to intercept the creatures and stall them for a while. But splitting our forces now would be suicide. We need every clone if we're going to survive whatever's chasing us, and we don't even know if this strategy will work. The clones might get there just to be wiped in minutes, and we would only be weakened.>

"I see them!" another clone said, breaking Erik's and the system's flow of conversation.

As one, the Chimaeric Demons turned their heads back. Even Erik did. The difference was that his neck wasn't exactly made to turn like the clones did. In the distance, he saw the dark mass of creatures following them appear.

Like a swarm of locusts devouring everything in their path, the flock of flying thaids filled the horizon and made the water below churn because of the beat of their wings.

"Shit..."

[You know, if you keep staring at them like that, they won't magically disappear,] the biological supercomputer said, trying to lighten the mood.

<This isn't the time for jokes.>

[Actually, it's exactly the time for jokes. Your stress is affecting the clones through instability. They can feel your fear, and it's making them more anxious.]

Erik forced himself to look away from the approaching swarm. <How can you be so calm about this?>

[Because panic never solved anything, and you've faced worse odds before.]

<Those were different situations.>

[Were they? Each time you were outnumbered, outgunned, and facing unknown enemies. Yet here you are, still alive and significantly stronger.]

Erik remained silent, thinking about the system's words.

[Besides,] the system said, [we have fifty thousand Chimaeric Demons, each with multiple brain crystal powers. They aren't just clones—they're your creations, warriors who've survived battles that would have broken lesser beings.]

<I don't think we are strong enough...>

[You have to be strong now. Your clones are capable fighters—they'll show what they can do when backed into a corner. Remember how you've handled tough spots before—you adapt, you find ways through; you overcome. The clones are not so different from you.]

The system's practical words cut through Erik's anxiety. Though the swarm of enemies still dominated the horizon, his mind shifted from fear to strategic planning.

"Erik, let me take a look," Emily said, adjusting her scope.

Through the optics, the creatures came into horrifying focus. Each beast was enormous, easily twice the size of a bull, with leathery wings that stretched wider than a cargo truck.

Their bodies were covered in overlapping plates of chitinous armor, midnight black with an oily sheen that seemed to absorb the sunlight. Multiple rows of spines ran down their elongated backs, vibrating with each powerful wingbeat.

What made Emily's breath catch was their heads—each creature had three of them on serpentine necks, weaving and twisting independently like snakes.

Each head had six glowing orange eyes. When the creatures opened their mouths, Emily saw countless sharp teeth curved backward—perfect for snagging apart their victims.

"Oh, my god..." Emily said. Those monsters were enough to make her tremble.

"What?"

"If..." Emily swallowed hard. "If they're half as strong as they are terrifying, we're done for."

Erik tried to keep his composure. The system did its best to cheer him up, and now Emily was ruining it. But he couldn't blame her. After all, he was feeling as scared as she was.

"What do we do, master?" A clone asked.

Erik weighed their options. At that point, there wasn't much they could do but do as the system suggested until that point. The first was to send the undead ahead as a delaying force. This would give his main group more time to escape, but ultimately wouldn't prevent the flying creatures from catching up, since Mur was still several hours away. Besides, splitting his forces would weaken their overall defensive capability.

An alternative would be keeping the undead close as shields. The Chimaeric Demons could then strike from behind them while the undead took the hits.

The creatures let out a terrifying mix of sounds—a metallic screech combined with a deep roar. All the other creatures joined in, creating an awful shriek that was so scary it made everyone break into a cold sweat.

Erik looked below.

The ocean stretched endlessly, its dark surface most likely full of deadly creatures. There was nowhere to hide, nowhere to take cover.

<We can only go forward,> he said, watching as the distance between them and their pursuers decreased. Erik could not be indecisive.

"Move the undead to the rear," Erik said. "Prepare for combat."

The Chimaeric Demons moved the rotting creatures into a defensive screen behind the main formation.

It didn't take much for the monsters to reach them, and Erik's breath caught in his throat. Emily was right. Those things were ugly.

Erik knew he had to act now, before the battle started. Going into a fight without intelligence was the gravest mistake one could make. He needed to understand these monsters—their nature, their strength, and the extent of their brain crystal powers.

Erik's analysis interface activated. Numbers, measurements, and detailed readings began streaming across his view as the system gathered data about the creatures.

—[Analysis]—

-Name: Three-Headed Void Ravager

-Physical Description: Massive flying predator, approximately 4 meters long with a 12-meter wingspan. Body covered in overlapping chitinous plates with midnight black coloration and oily

sheen. Three serpentine heads on independent necks, each featuring six amber-glowing eyes and multiple rows of backward-curving teeth. Prominent spinal ridges running the length of the body.

- Brain Crystal Powers:

Draining Field (A96B): Projects an energy-draining field that weakens nearby opponents, reducing their physical capabilities and mana reserves. Effect strengthens with proximity.

Void Breath (A66B): Releases concentrated dark matter that corrodes both organic and inorganic materials. Multiple heads can coordinate attacks for devastating effect.

{Attributes}

-STRENGTH: 808

-INTELLIGENCE: 20

-DEXTERITY: 630

-ENERGY: 1767

{Others}

-Power Level: 1736

- Estimated Experience per kill: 464,800,445.02

—[End]—

"Fuck..."

The statistics were terrifying. These creatures were much stronger than any single Chimaeric Demon—even stronger than Erik. Just looking at how much experience points they'd give if killed showed how incredibly powerful they were.

But killing them was going to be almost impossible, especially considering that with their draining field, the creatures were going to weaken Erik and the rest of the Chimaeric Demons.

That wasn't the only problem. The creatures had two brain crystal powers, and all of them had more than 54 neural links.

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Their brain crystal could be measured, but there wasn't a metric to rank them. The biological supercomputer gave a rank to powers because it was using the customs humans used, based on the information it got from Erik when it parasitized him.

But the measure of a power's might, of their efficiency, rested only on the number of neural links, meaning that ranks were just something the humans used to classify their enemies.

This classification system, although arbitrary, helped humans understand and prepare for threats. By having a standardized way to measure power levels, they could better strategize, allocate resources, and assess risks in combat situations. Even if the system wasn't perfect, it provided a framework for tactical decisions and threat assessment.

Erik knew they needed to change how they rated their enemies' strength based on the situation on the Mur continent. Here, thaids were too powerful—they had more than 54 neural links, at least based on what he was seeing, which was way beyond their normal rating system.

They needed a better way to measure their strength. Of course, he wasn't going to do something like this first because he wasn't interested, and second because he had the system telling him the number of neural links thaids had, and these guys had a lot.

Erik's main problem now was that the data confirmed his fears: these monsters far outmatched his army in power. Though they were fewer than the Chimaeric Demons, their overwhelming power turned that numerical advantage into nothing.

Yet it wasn't their stats worrying about Erik, but their brain crystal powers. Based on what the system said, Draining Field was a power that weakened the three-headed void ravagers' prey, meaning that whatever strength Erik's army had, it would be nullified.

<Are we sure these are their brain crystal powers?> Erik asked the system.

[Have I ever been wrong?]

<No, but I was hoping this time you were.>

[Unfortunately not,] the system said.

<Do you know how much they can weaken their opponents?>

[I think it depends on the amount of mana they use. The more it is, the stronger the effects. The problem is that I don't know if it stacks. Maybe one ravager can affect the opponent only up to a certain point, but if the effect stacks, then these things might bring our attributes to zero.]

<Damn. What about mana and brain crystal powers?>

Even if the enemies drained their attributes, Erik's army wouldn't be helpless—they could still rely on their brain crystal powers.

[That I don't know too. I can infer what a power does, but I'm not omniscient. To see what this thing does, we have to see it firsthand. However, based on what I know about how a brain crystal power works, I don't think it will affect both mana and attributes. A power affecting attributes is already powerful as it is. If they could also prevent you from using brain crystal powers, it would be a broken ability, and broken abilities do not exist. There is a limit to what their DNA can allow them to do.]

<Yeah... If they could really do something like that, the three-headed void ravagers would have conquered the planet. This means other Thaid's can fight against them, and they usually win.>

The system wanted to tell Erik that he and his clones were not Thaid's from Mur and that they had far less mana than their opponents, taken overall, yet it refrained, knowing that would only make Erik feel more cornered.

Then the creatures got close enough for Erik to feel the effects of their brain crystal powers.

It was a subtle drain that made his muscles feel heavier, as if gravity itself had intensified, and that increased as time went on. And they got closer to the three-headed monsters.

Through the Instability brain crystal power, Erik felt his clones experiencing the same effect, and that wasn't good at all.

"It's starting."

Erik opened his status, and the interface showed a gradual but persistent decrease in his attribute points the closer he got to the enemy.

What had begun as a bare drain was quickly becoming more pronounced with each passing second, like a rising tide slowly but inexorably swallowing a beach.

The undead thaids at the rear of the formation were affected too, but it didn't matter. Their role wasn't to fight, especially considering how useless they would be. Yet the weaker they were, the worse the situation would turn out for the army as a whole.

"We need to keep moving," Erik said to the radio. "Maintain the formation and continue the retreat. The closer we are to Mur, the better it is."

"Master, they're gaining on us," a clone said. "We can't outrun them forever."

"I know. That's why we're going to hit them with everything we have once they're in range, but this doesn't mean we should engage them."

He paused. "I will be honest. I don't think many of us will be able to survive them, so, in case we manage to escape, the closer we are to Mur, the closer we are to salvation."

Those words made the clones remain silent. It wasn't easy to accept that many of them would die, and knowing that their master might not survive too made them feel even worse.

"However, when they get in range, use every power and ability at your disposal. Do not engage in close combat unless absolutely forced to, and maintain maximum distance at all times. Their powers will drain us until we're as weak as a Densoph."

Learning from Erik about the thaids' brain crystal powers only made the clones' unease worse.

"I want waves of power—staggered, continuous. Don't give them a chance to get closer to us and keep moving. If we stop, we're dead."

"What about the undead, master?" the clone asked. "Can't we send them to stall them?"

Erik nodded.

"That's exactly what I wanted to do, but not now. If we send them now that they are still this far, we won't get much. If we do it later, we would gain some precious moments with the beasts in range of our attacks. We will be able to decrease their numbers, or so I hope."

Erik didn't know if his clones' mana was enough to deal damage to the creatures. These things were not as powerful as the Cerulean Bird, but they were strong nonetheless. There was a high chance that their attacks would tickle them exactly as they did with the harrowing blue bird.

"As soon as the thaids get closer, send them to prevent them from coming even closer. Is it clear?."

The clone nodded and closed the radio, most likely to relay the orders. Then finally it happened.

As they kept retreating, the three-headed void ravagers moved faster than Erik's army. No matter how hard they tried to stay away, the enemy creatures were getting dangerously close. Erik realized they had no choice but to send the undead, knowing that while they headed to the three-headed monsters, they would also get in range.

"Send them."

The clones gave the orders, and the undead obeyed like the puppets they were. The undead surged toward the approaching thaids. Like a wave of decay meeting a wall of darkness, they crashed into the front lines of the three-headed beasts.

While they went, the thaids entered the Chimaeric Demons' range. Then the creatures clashed with the thaids.

The fight became brutal quickly. The void breath from the creatures tore through the undead ranks like paper, disintegrating entire squads in seconds.

Yet the undead served their purpose.

"Now!"

Fifty thousand starlight fireballs erupted from the Chimaeric Demons' maws, filling the sky with searing white light. The barrage struck the front ranks of the pursuing monsters, but the results were far from what they'd hoped. Erik saw only minimal damage on the creatures' bodies as they got hit by the many attacks.

The Chimaeric Demons were too weak, but, of course, Erik said something else.

"They are too strong..." The last thing he needed was to say something that would make the Chimaeric Demons think he was blaming them.

Based on the waves below, some of the monsters had been killed, but few—a dozen at best. Erik could do nothing more but observe to understand if the attacks were actually going to work.

He focused on a creature and saw that it needed around fifty hits from the starlight fireball to be killed.

The creature fell from the sky after such a number of hits landed on it.

<This is not good...>

Yet there wasn't much else they could do.

"Keep firing! Don't let them get closer!"

The Chimaeric Demons launched wave after wave of attacks, their power lighting up the sky in a continuous stream of destruction and fire.

Chapter 1218: Journey to Mur (6)

But the monsters pressed forward through the barrage, and the undead got reduced in numbers so much as to not be able to serve their purpose anymore.

The creatures inevitably got closer, and as they did, Erik felt his strength continuing to drain. Everybody else was in the same situation, which made their mood even worse and their concentration falter.

The last of the undead forces met their end in gruesome ways. Some were ripped limb from limb by razor-sharp claws, others were devoured whole by gaping maws, and the remaining ones crumbled into dust as the monsters' powers got unleashed.

Without that buffer represented by the undead, the three-headed beasts sped up toward Erik's army.

"Don't stop attacking!"

Another monster fell to the assault of starlight fireballs, then another—but it wasn't enough.

For every creature they brought down, thousands more pressed forward, and the Chimaeric Demons were being affected by the enemy brain crystal power—their wings beating slower, their movements becoming sluggish, and their muscles trembling.

Yet not everything went bad. Based on this preliminary encounter, something became clear.

"Their ability doesn't work on brain crystal powers!" Erik said.

[We had been lucky.]

<Damn...>

Then a clone called for him.

"Master, our speed is dropping fast. The attribute drain is affecting our movement, and at this rate, we can't keep the distance for long."

Erik watched in growing horror as the gap between his forces and the pursuing monsters continued to shrink, despite everything they threw at them.

The ocean stretched endlessly ahead, offering no salvation, while behind them, death approached on leathery wings.

"Shit..." There was only one thing Erik had to do at that point. He ordered the Chimaeric Demon he was riding to go to the rear of the formation.

Something he had the duty to do as the leader of the army. He didn't know if it was going to work, but he had to try, regardless.

Erik reached the rear of the formation. Based on what he saw, he would need to use a lot of mana to kill the creatures, but he didn't know exactly how much.

He fired wind blades from his hands, one after another. They cut through the air with a whistling sound, leaving streaks behind them as the clouds parted. But when they hit the monsters, the blades only made small marks on their tough bodies, as it looked like the scales of the three-headed void ravagers were made of some kind of metal.

"I need more power," Erik said, doubling the mana input.

The next wave of wind blades cut deeper into the creatures' skin, leaving foot-long gashes that oozed dark fluids, but even these attacks weren't enough to bring the massive beasts down, and they continued advancing as if they only had that to do.

"Fuck!"

He increased the mana output by 50% with each change, monitoring his system interface as the consumption rate climbed. The numbers flashed in warning red as his reserves began depleting at an alarming pace.

With another change to his power output, Erik's wind blade—now many times stronger than the initial ones—sliced through one of the three-headed beasts. The monster crashed into the ocean below, but Erik couldn't waste time thinking about this success.

<Are they into the Chimaeric Demons range?> Erik asked the biological computer.

[You want them to turn into undead?]

<Isn't it obvious?>

The system sighed.

[No. They are too far for the Chimaeric Demons' brain crystal power to reach them, and even if they weren't, I doubt our army has enough mana to turn such powerful creatures into undead.]

"Shit!" Another of Erik's ideas crumbled.

The monsters kept moving forward without stopping. Their power was draining everyone's strength, making Erik's army weaker by the second and making it harder for him to move his arms.

The monsters kept coming, even though Erik's wind blades left deep cuts in their bodies. They were aggressive to a scary degree, but one much worse than anything Erik had seen before.

Erik kept sending blade after blade, which now consumed an enormous amount of mana, but he couldn't afford to reduce the power—anything less would just waste energy against their armored hides.

The problem was also that the creatures were much farther than his absorbing range. He wasn't absorbing mana, which meant he couldn't level up and had no way to regain mana.

He would be able to absorb mana once the creatures came within his absorption range, but by that point, their attribute-draining powers would have reduced everyone's strength to dangerous levels.

His army's speed and strength would be so severely diminished that mounting an effective defense would become impossible. Even standing upright on their mounts would become a struggle, and that was if the clones had enough strength to sustain their weight in the air.

Through the mental network, Erik sensed his clones' growing fatigue. Still, they kept their barrage up, because there wasn't much of a choice if they wanted to survive.

Then it happened.

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[0%...1%...5%...30%...70%...100%]

[Mana successfully absorbed, starting converting procedure.]

[3...2...1...0]

[Mana successfully absorbed into experience points. 464800445.021101 experience points awarded to the host.]

"FINALLY!"

The first few kills came—one beast, then another, then three more in rapid succession as he found his rhythm. The monsters were now close enough so that their deaths released mana he could absorb, each one adding to his power.

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[0%...1%...5%...30%...70%...100%]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

Erik's interface flashed with level-up notifications as he cut down more of the creatures. He reached the one hundred mark, but that wasn't enough.

The monsters weren't many compared to his army; the difference was like comparing a swarm of wasps to an army of ants.

The clones had around 600 strength points, but the three-headed void ravagers had 808. It might have looked like a small difference, but it was not, and the more the creatures got closer, the more the difference got severe.

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

Besides, his level-ups were getting increasingly harder to achieve—each new level needed tons of experience points compared to the previous one, making the progression harder and longer despite the massive amount of mana he was absorbing from the dying creatures.

He killed creatures who gave him hundreds of millions of experience points, yet all he got from them were three level-ups.

Realizing that made Erik turn around to see if the others were ok.

Emily was firing with her sniper rifle almost mechanically. She had to pump a lot of mana into the weapon for it to be effective, but even so, she got some kills. Yet the monsters kept advancing.

Mira and Amber went into the rear of the formation, too. Mira could take advantage of her shapeshifting power by turning her arms' muscles into that of an Erendu. That thing must have evolved from a sort of bull-like animal; Erik knew about it from photos and knew those things had a great muscle mass.

If it weren't for mana, Erendus would be among the thaids with the greater muscle mass out of the thaids, at least among those small-sized.

She used all that muscle mass to draw arrows into her bow, which also increased her strength, making the effect overlap.

The weapon increased the might between each arrow, but she wasn't strong enough to kill. The disparity in mana and strength was too great, and there was only so much she could do.

As for Amber, she made sure the clones were as far away from her as possible, and she released her poisonous gas.

That seemed to have worked better than most of the attacks launched from Erik's side, but even that wasn't enough.

The creatures' skin bubbled and blistered where the mist made contact, forming dark purple welts across their thick hides. However, the dense layer of mana surrounding their bodies, their natural mana armor, deflected most of Amber's corrosive attack.

The gas simply rolled off the magical barrier, dissipating into the air before it could penetrate deep enough to cause serious damage.

Yet, the creatures' movement slowed significantly as Amber's toxic mist enveloped them. The dense purple fog reduced their visibility to mere feet, but since they were all in the sky, even if they couldn't see their opponents, Erik's army's position was still easily deduced.

However, this slowed them down, but they kept coming forward without stopping.

"I can't do much more!" Amber said. To do all that damage, she had to use almost all her mana.

At the same time, the monsters' brain crystal power affected everyone more and more. Mira's attacks became increasingly weaker, and she was forced to pump her birth brain crystal power more to make the arrows faster and more accurate.

The problem was that her birth brain crystal power was simply too weak to fight against the draining effects of the three-headed void ravagers.

Their field drained attributes at a huge rate, while Mira's birth brain crystal could only increase the strength of her arrows so much.

"I don't feel well," Mira gasped.

Amber remained silent, using every bit of strength just to stay mounted as the draining field sapped her strength. The Chimaeric Demons weakened severely.

Chapter 1219: Journey to Mur (7)

At that point, there wasn't much else Erik could do to keep the monsters away, and nothing he was actually doing worked. Those things were simply too powerful, and their brain crystal powers too harrowing, despite their simplicity.

<What should we do?> Erik asked the biological computer, desperation seeping into his thoughts.

[Try creating barriers. Multiple layers of them. The attribute drain doesn't affect brain crystal powers, remember? The barriers might buy us time.]

<Great, and then?!>

[Then you pray for the Chimaeric Demons to kill more of these fuckers!]

Erik didn't have neural links in the absolute wall brain crystal power. He didn't have the time, nor the will, to make more, since he had to prepare for the journey to Mur, yet he still got a lot of mana, so he was bound to be useful to a certain point. The problem was that he was the only one with the power, and to protect the entire army alone, he was bound to have a massive mana drain.

Unfortunately, unless he postponed the journey to after a new batch of clones with the power was born, that was a situation he knew was going to happen.

However, despite the situation, if the clones killed enough of the creatures, he would level up, and with each level up, he would be able to refill his mana reserves, meaning he would be able to keep the barrier up for longer periods. Rinse and repeat.

However, that depended on how much mana Erik had to spend to make a barrier strong enough to resist the enemy's assault. Barrier masters' powers were strong and very efficient, the strongest of the defensive powers out there, but they were usually made by multiple barrier masters, who also had many more neural links than Erik did.

That wasn't the only problem, because the power behind each blow done by thaids on Mannard was significantly lower than that which the three-headed void ravagers could make, meaning that on Mur, barrier masters were significantly weaker.

Erik was likely going to be forced to use more mana to repair the inevitable cracks the thaids would create, and if the Chimaeric Demons didn't help him replenish mana, the barrier would crumble.

[It's not just that,] the system said. [The killing speed of the Chimaeric Demons is crucial here. If the level-ups get too close to each other, you will get your mana replenished without the time to use it. If they are too slow, you will end up without enough mana to maintain the barrier or repair it.]

<In the end we are fucked.>

[Most likely, but this doesn't mean you can do nothing or that no one will survive.]

Erik pondered the hopelessness of their situation. His army was vast but vulnerable, and these void ravagers were unlike anything they'd faced before.

The sheer number of variables—the mana drain, the timing of kills, the structural integrity of the barrier—all had to align perfectly for them to have even a chance of survival.

Erik sighed deeply as the weight of command pressed down on him. He knew that thousands of lives depended on what he did next. One wrong move, and everyone could die.

Erik channeled mana and formed the barrier. It grew as Erik was aiming at covering the entire army in a sphere. They were in the sky, and protecting only the rear wouldn't help at all.

Unlike on land, where he could use the terrain to his advantage, here there were many spots from which the thaids could attack.

The barrier grew larger and larger as it stretched to encompass his entire army, but as he did, he quickly realized how mana draining doing that was.

"Shit..."

Erik was doing what barrier masters did in groups.

Besides, the constant movement of fifty thousand flying forms required the barrier to remain flexible and, most importantly, movable.

Every change to the barrier drained more mana, forcing Erik to constantly fine-tune how much power he used.

The dome expanded to its maximum size, encompassing his entire army—but this meant the barrier stretched dangerously thin. Though Erik possessed great power, there was only so much he could do against so many powerful opponents.

A void ravager crashed into the barrier at full speed, its three heads slamming against the energy field at the same time.

The impact sent visible ripples through the barrier and created a thunderous boom that echoed across the sky.

Yet despite the monster's strength and mass, the barrier held firm—the drain on Erik's mana reserves was significant, but still manageable at this point.

Then more monsters reached the barrier, and there, things became more complicated. Their combined assault made the entire energy field fluctuate and pulse, threatening to tear apart under the pressure, and the amount of mana used by Erik increased even more.

It was then that the hydra's head came into play. While two focused on keeping the barrier up, two focused on killing the thaids.

Erik never stopped channeling mana, his hands never stopped moving, sending wind blades toward the monsters.

For every monster he killed, some more reached the barrier.

"Shit."

Yet the sweet notifications poured.

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[0%...1%...5%...30%...70%...100%]

[Mana successfully absorbed, starting converting procedure.]

[3...2...1...0]

[Mana successfully absorbed into experience points. 464800445.021101 experience points awarded to the host.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[0%...1%...5%...30%...70%...100%]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

Though he gained experience from destroying the monsters, he had only gotten 4 level-ups so far. Meanwhile, his mana drained at an increasingly rapid rate as more monsters collided with the barrier, and as they got closer, the stronger the effects of the three-headed void ravagers' brain crystal powers increased.

Erik glanced below, where countless dead monsters floated in the ocean. The sea thaids noticed the amount of corpses and started swarming the area to feast on the bodies of the dead monsters.

"Fuck! Now we can't even dive!"

Not that Erik wanted to. He wasn't so reckless, but having the alternative open was still better than not having it.

"They're too close!" a clone's warning cut through his concentration. The draining field had grown so strong that Erik could barely stand on his own two legs. His arms felt like lead weights, and each wind blade required more conscious effort to form.

The monsters closed in within a hundred meters of Erik's forces. Close enough so that he could see every detail of their nightmare-inducing monsters.

They were not the scariest or ugliest Erik had ever seen, but knowing their stats, that sea of thaids gave him a scare almost as big as that of the Leviathan Serpent, and that thing was not only powerful but also massive.

There was something primal about size that triggered deep-seated fears in any sentient being. A creature's raw physical mass had a way of making observers feel insignificant, triggering instinctive fight-or-flight responses that bypassed rational thought.

Fighting something of similar size was scary enough—the mind could process and adapt to such threats. But facing a gigantic creature that could crush its victims without noticing awakened a deep, primal fear that left people frozen in place, completely helpless.

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Erik had faced many terrifying foes, but there was a unique horror to truly massive creatures that even the deadliest normal-sized enemies couldn't match.

The psychological impact of being reduced to an ant in comparison was the worst of it all, of having your entire existence diminished by sheer scale.

The Leviathan Serpent showed just how terrifying a giant creature could be. Just looking at its massive size was enough to make even the bravest warriors stand frozen in fear, unable to believe what they were seeing.

The problem was that the three-headed void ravagers gave Erik a similar feeling.

The Chimaeric Demons continued attacking. The Starlight fireballs went through the barrier and hit the monsters, but they were still not that effective. The sky lit up with explosions as they fought to keep the monsters at bay.

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[0%...1%...5%...30%...70%...100%]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

Some more three-headed void ravagers slammed against the barrier with devastating force. The impact sent ripples through the entire barrier, forcing Erik to redirect more mana to reinforce that section and less toward his wind blades, which in turn decreased the amount of deaths fueling his experience bar.

<Master,> a clone's thought reached him, <we can't keep this speed much longer. The drain is too severe—some clones have had to drop their provisions just to stay airborne!>

<The barrier's weakening on the eastern side!> another clone said through the mental link. Erik diverted more power there, but doing so left his attacks even weaker.

"FUCK! FUCK! FUUUUCK!"

More void ravagers reached the shield, and Erik could do nothing to stop them.

Chapter 1220: Journey to Mur (8)

"Amber, Mira, June, Emily. Take ten thousand Chimaeric Demons and leave."

"What about you?" Amber asked.

"I'll try to stall them as much as I can. We killed around a thousand of them. Is not enough to make them stop attacking, but at least is something. I will use the main force to keep them at bay. Reach Mur, establish a base. I will reach you soon."

Yet, the three women didn't believe him. These thaids were too strong, and their powers countered Erik's and all of those around him. There was basically nothing he could do to salvage the situation.

The three women began protesting, but the Chimaeric Demons followed their creator's command without hesitation.

Ten thousand clones gathered around Amber, Mira, June, Emily and their mounts, forming a protective formation before leaving the battlefield.

They sped up as they could, but it wasn't easy considering the draining effects of the three-headed void ravagers' brain crystal powers. Yet, as they increased their distance from the thaids, the draining field's effect decreased, allowing them to speed up more and more, to the point they were able to reach their full speed.

The three-headed void ravagers tried to follow them, but between Erik's barrier and the remaining Chimaeric Demons attacking them relentlessly, they failed to take chase.

At the same time, some of the thaids focused on the barrier and unleashed their breath, which started eating at the barrier, creating dark spots that required constant mana to repair.

It wasn't easy to resist these many attacks. Those producing them were harrowing monsters with so much mana that they seemed like living batteries. The problem was that there were thousands of these horrifying monsters, and Erik had no idea how to prevent them from attacking.

"Keep dealing damage!"

Erik's reserves dwindled more and more quickly as the barrier got attacked. He tried to keep the barrier up while at the same time bringing the pace of his kills up. Yet, each new impact forced him to choose between attack and defense more and more, with him focusing on the second. The problem was that neither choice seemed enough to save them.

Moreover, with fewer Chimaeric Demons around, the killing ratio decreased again.

Then the barrier fractured.

Spiderweb-like fissures spread across its entire surface. The mana-powered structure, weakened by constant attacks, could no longer withstand the assault of the void ravagers' breath, as Erik's mana hit rock bottom.

The barrier shattered like glass, raining ethereal shards that dissolved into nothingness before reaching the ocean below.

The void ravagers poured through the broken barrier like a dark tide, their massive three-headed bodies crashing into the ranks of the Chimaeric Demon army. Then their draining field reached its peak intensity at the heart of Erik's formation.

The waves it radiated sapped strength, speed, and even intelligence from the clones.

Their muscles and limbs felt impossibly heavy, as if weighed down by tons of iron. Every movement required immense effort, with even the simple act of flapping their wings becoming a struggle.

The clones instinctively activated the Xeridon Anteris brain crystal powers. The enhancement surged through their bodies, reinforcing muscles and sharpening reflexes that would have otherwise failed.

The enemy's ability sapped them of strength, but it didn't work on mana and other brain crystal powers. Though, it was usually enough to kill other thaids.

However, the Chimaeric Demons weren't thaids - they were highly intelligent creatures with multiple abilities at their disposal. Even with their physical strength diminished, they could still use their brain crystal powers, shape-shifting abilities, and coordinated tactics to fight back.

The problem was that even with the Xeridon Anteris brain crystal power enhancing their bodies, the Chimaeric Demons struggled against the weakness induced by the enemy's draining field.

The clones fought on through sheer determination, but the void ravagers' gained significant advantages each meter as they got closer to the clones. Their draining field was too strong, too concentrated.

The Chimaeric Demons usually used the Xeridon Anteris brain crystal power to overwhelm their enemies with their speed. Strength wasn't even important, since they were usually much stronger than everything else.

However, now what should have given them a significant advantage was reduced to a mere lifeline, barely enough to keep the clones in the fight.

The first clash was devastating. With the three-headed void ravagers crashing into the clones, while all three sets of jaws clamped down on the unfortunate soul.

The clones thrashed wildly because of pain, and even more because they were quickly realizing there really was nothing they could do to save themselves as the void ravagers' teeth shredded through scales and flesh alike.

Blood sprayed across the sky as the beasts' razor-sharp teeth and claws tore through the clones' bodies. Severed limbs and mangled corpses fell through the air, leaving trails of crimson that scattered in the wind.

[Ally creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Ally creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Ally creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Ally creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Ally creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Ally creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Ally creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Ally creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Ally creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

"Fall back! Fall back now!" Erik screamed, launching a barrage of wind blades. The blades cut deep gashes into the void ravagers' hides, drawing blood, but even these powerful attacks couldn't kill

the three-headed monsters quickly enough to stop their advance and save the clones. He watched as more clones fell to the creatures' maws and talons.

The sky turned into a grotesque show of dismembered bodies, scales, and viscera. The sky was filled with the sound of hundreds of wings beating and the screams of dying clones. Their cries echoed across the ocean as the void ravagers tore through them.

The waters below churned as thousands of sea thaids gathered, their shapes visible just beneath the surface, and most of the time, what Erik saw were simply the thaids monstrously big maws opening to swallow his clones, who now offered much more flesh than their human form.

When clones fell into the water, if the larger thaids didn't claim the body for themselves, packs of sea monsters would immediately attack, ripping apart both dead and living clones within seconds. It was just that this was an excruciating death.

A void ravager wrapped its three serpentine necks around a clone, constricting until the wyvern bones cracked. The monster's void breath dissolved the clone's flesh even as its teeth tore through armor-like scales.

The Chimaeric Demons fought back. Starlight fireballs illuminated the bloody scene in harsh flashes, but their weakened state made their attacks barely effective.

They partially turned into the Luminous Leviathan so that they could use the bioluminescent surge and blind the opponents.

It worked, and only the clones communicating prevented massive blind soldiers on Erik's side, like in their opponents' case.

Yet with their reduced strength, even if the clones blinded the ravagers, they were still unable to deal significant damage fast enough.

Defeating even a single one of these monsters required coordinated teamwork. Three or four clones had to combine their efforts just to bring down one ravager, but that was just a drop in the ocean, as there were many thaids attacking.

They had to time their attacks—while some clones kept the monsters' heads busy, others would attack weak spots like their throats or chests. Without working together like this, their attacks could barely hurt the monsters' tough skin.

The clones tried everything at their disposal. Groups focused on using Vibration Burst. The combined attacks sent waves of deadly vibrations through the monsters' bodies, making them writhe in agony.

Their tough scales offered no protection as the vibrations tore through muscle and bone. Blood vessels burst beneath armored hides, creating dark patches that spread across the thaids' skin.

The beasts' three heads thrashed wildly, jaws snapping at empty air as internal hemorrhaging turned their organs to pulp.

Horrible gurgling sounds escaped their throats as blood filled their lungs. Within minutes, the monsters' movements became erratic, their wings beating out of sync as their nervous systems failed.

Finally, their eyes rolled back, and they plummeted from the sky, their massive forms splashing into the ocean, where hungry sea thaids quickly dragged them under.

[Hostile creature killed: Mana absorbing process starting.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana absorbing process starting.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana absorbing process starting.]

The enemies died relatively quickly compared to the previous attempts the clones made and much faster than with their other attacks.

They could exploit this.

But there was a big problem—using this power drained their energy reserves. Since most of the clones hadn't practiced this particular power much, they couldn't use it efficiently or for very long.

Besides, even if Vibration Burst quickened the killings, it was still not enough. The three-headed void ravagers were basically tearing the clones down.

Only Erik was able to increase the kill rate, and that was because, with each of his clones dying, he was getting more and more experience points. Each level up was coming fast, meaning Erik could use a ton of mana to kill the opponents.

[Ally creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Ally creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Ally creature killed: Mana-absorbing process starting.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana absorbing process starting.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana absorbing process starting.]

[Hostile creature killed: Mana absorbing process starting.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

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[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]