

## BIOLOGICAL 1251

### Chapter 1251: Rescue trip (7)

The biological supercomputer kept checking everything in detail—looking at fallen pieces of building, checking for signs that someone had been there recently, and searching for any marks showing a fight.

<We should go check the upper floors,> Erik said.

[We should. The lobby looks clear to me, and aside from the exits, we checked most of the rooms on this floor already.]

With the system's blessing, Erik walked toward the staircase. The steps faded into darkness above like the maw of some ancient beast waiting to swallow him whole.

[Stay close to the wall,] the system said. [It will give you better cover, and the steps might be more stable there.]

He followed the suggestion, pressing his shoulder against the cold surface as he began his ascent. Halfway up, a distant crash echoed through the building. Erik froze, his breath catching in his throat.

[Upper floors, northwest corner,] the system said after a moment. [Likely structural settling, but stay alert.]

Erik resumed his climb, even more cautious than before.

The stairs curved around, leading to a landing that opened onto the second floor. Debris and fallen ceiling panels created an obstacle course whose shadows could conceal a threat.

Erik paused at the top of the stairs, crouching low to reduce the ease with which a potential predator might see him. In front of him was the second floor. At first glance, it seemed a maze of corridors and doorways, but even from his position, Erik could tell there were some large rooms and what appeared to be a central gathering area.

These areas were dangerous. The central space was too exposed, making anyone crossing it vulnerable from multiple angles. The large rooms could hide threats or contain structural hazards.

The visibility wasn't the best either. The sunlight was filtered by the still-standing windows, creating a dark atmosphere inside. The problem, though, was the many holes in the walls and ceilings that made strong rays cut the darkness inside.

They illuminated the surroundings but also made it hard to see what lay beyond that, given how strong the lights were. Besides, the lights created deceptive patterns on the ground, making it so that Erik had to shift his attention to every single shadow.

The poor lighting and multiple entrances made these places perfect for ambushes, and the gathering area's size increased exposure time.

Erik looked at the second floor with growing unease. The narrow hallways and multiple doorways created perfect ambush points—a thaid could spring from any darkened room without warning. The layout would also force him to pass close to each doorway.

[This floor plan is problematic,] the biological computer said.

<Yeah, this is not exactly the ideal place to be in.>

[There are limited escape routes and too many blind spots.]

<We also need to consider that if the blackguards used this place, they might have left surprises behind,> Erik said. His eyes traced the floor and walls for signs of traps. If this place had been used as a military outpost, there could be forgotten explosives or trigger mechanisms hidden beneath the debris.

[True. The blackguards are known for their ruthlessness on Mannard. Imagine what they would do here where there aren't humans for thousands of kilometers.]

The traps were obviously meant for the thaids. The blackguards knew Erik was bound to come to Mur but could not know he would come here.

<The Instability crystal isn't picking up anything,> Erik said. <I don't think someone is here...>

[That's both good and bad news,] the system said. [Good because it means there's no immediate threat. Bad because... Well, Amber and the others are not here.]

<So? What do we do?>

[I still think it's worth checking if the others had been here in the past. If they were, they might have left clues about where they went later.]

The system warned Erik of the potential dangers of this place but also of what they had to do and what their advantages were.

[There's a main hallway down the middle with rooms on both sides,] the system said. [We have places to hide, but we could also be seen from many directions. Let's move carefully.]

Erik nodded, and he ventured deeper into the upper level of the hotel.

—\*\*\*—

Unseen by Erik or the biological computer, they approached the first floor entrance and headed to the stairs. Its movements were more than silent. They were basically non-existent.

Every step Erik made, no matter how carefully, sent vibrations through the building, which the thaid detected through its specialized sensory organs, giving it a map of its prey's location.

However, unlike most thaids, this one had learned the value of patience and stealth over raw power.

The beast suppressed its mana flow—an unusual behavior for any living creature except humans, and even they struggled to do it.

That simple choice made it undetectable to the biological supercomputer. Most thaids channeled their power through their neural links before attacking, or even just to prepare for it, making them easy to spot by the mana-attuned AI, but this one had evolved beyond such basic instincts.

It understood that survival meant adaptation, and in these ruins, stealth proved more valuable than strength.

The thaid moved silently, creeping forward through the alleys, getting over fallen debris and clinging to the shadows. It followed its hunting instincts and, driven by them, chased those vibrations that were slowly bringing it to Erik.

Its weight was distributed across its body, which meant an even distribution across the floor. Not a single point of contact with the ground was bearing enough pressure to crack the debris underfoot or to make noise.

There were no squeaks, no crunching of debris, and no sounds at all as the thaid moved.

Whenever it heard Erik's footsteps, the creature would quickly hide, becoming perfectly still and blending into the dark corners created by broken doorways and fallen ceiling pieces.

The creature was hungry, but it knew better than to rush. After years of hunting, it had learned to be patient. Then it finally found him.

A weird bipedal creature that looked oddly small and vulnerable. It was moving cautiously, but not enough to prevent vibrations from being produced. It was easy to track.

The creature observed its prey, not knowing what it was, but it honestly didn't care. Erik was currently moving through the corridor, unaware there was something stalking him.

The thaid remained still, observing its prey.

Each time Erik paused to check a room, the creature slithered forward, reducing the distance between them by three to four meters.

It timed its advances well, moving only when Erik's attention was focused on searching the rooms and freezing still whenever he turned around.

\_\_\_\*\*\*\_\_\_

Erik sighed as he finished checking another empty room. Nothing but debris was there, with no signs of recent human presence.

<Nothing again,> he said to the system. <Maybe we were wrong about this place. The others might not have been here at all.>

[Don't lose hope yet,] the biological computer said. [We've only covered two floors out of 10. Your friends would likely have chosen higher levels for better visibility and defense. We just need to check the upper floors.]

<Still...>

Erik's thoughts trailed off as he peered into yet another abandoned room. The space was empty except for a broken desk in one corner and shattered glass across the floor.

He checked every corner, behind the desk, and even the closet, but found nothing useful. No sleeping bags, no remnants of cooking fires, not even a single discarded wrapper or empty can. The complete absence of human activity made him feel worse.

[Patience,] the system said. [Being thorough—]

The thought was cut off abruptly as a warning flashed in Erik's vision.

[Warning. Hostile Detected.]

Erik's heart skipped a beat at the notification. He hadn't seen that particular warning since before coming to Mur—it only appeared when a thaid was powerful enough to pose a serious threat.

That meant a truly powerful monster was there. Here in Mur, though, where everything had evolved to survive in this harsh environment, it wasn't surprising. Every creature here was strong enough to kill him.

Still, knowing that didn't stop the cold fear from creeping up his spine, especially because it was clear what this notification meant. There was something, yes, but this something was going to attack, and it was going to do so in a moment.

Erik spun around, his body tensing, his mana channeled. There, filling the corridor behind him, coiled a massive snake.

Its scales had the color and texture of weathered concrete, which made it hard to see it inside the building, especially because of the darkness, but the color certainly helped. Predatory eyes, gleaming with cold intelligence, fixed on him as its head rose to strike's height.

<What the fu...?>

The creature's jaws parted, revealing fangs longer than Erik's forearm, venom, or whatever it was, dripping onto the cracked floor below. It had stalked him undetected until this last moment, when its killing intent and the mana in its body stirred and triggered the warning.

Chapter 1252: Rescue trip (8)

The serpent struck with terrifying speed. Erik threw himself to the side, feeling the rush of air as massive jaws snapped shut where he stood a moment before.

The momentum sent him crashing hard into the concrete wall, his shoulder taking the brunt of the impact. He barely had time to register the pain before he rolled sideways, narrowly avoiding a second lightning-fast strike.

[Why didn't you warn me earlier?!] Erik asked the biological supercomputer. That was all he could think about while dodging another attack that splintered the concrete where his head had been.

[I can only detect them when they channel mana!] the system said as Erik backpedaled down the corridor.

[All creatures leak mana when attacking with their brain crystals. This one consciously controlled its flow to stay hidden. It understood how to counter detection. It deliberately suppressed its mana until the moment it attacked. By then, it was already within striking distance!]

Erik shivered. This creature wasn't just a thaid from Mur, with all its strength implications. Its attacks and mana suppression showed an unsettling level of intelligence.

Whether that was because of evolution, adaptation, or brain crystal powers, it had developed specialized hunting tactics that made it a perfect predator in these concrete ruins. It wasn't just a mindless monster.

The creature's head weaved back and forth, its eyes tracking Erik's movements. Venom dripped from its fangs, sizzling where it hit the floor. Unlike the mindless aggression Erik expected from thaids, this predator didn't look mindless.

Erik's blood ran cold at this realization. He wasn't facing some mere beast—this was an evolved predator that had learned to hunt in these ruins.

What was worse was that the creature didn't waste energy on wild lunges or frustrated thrashing when its strikes missed. Instead, it held its ground, blocking Erik's escape while pressing him with fast attacks he had trouble avoiding.

[This thing is smart!]

The corridor suddenly felt much narrower, and the shadows much deeper. How many others had this creature hunted through these halls? How many had it followed, undetected even to this beast?

<We are in trouble!>

However, the thaid suddenly pulled back, as if something happened or the creature had an idea of the sort. Its large body sliding away in a matter of seconds. Erik blinked in surprise—retreat wasn't typical thaid behavior, not when it had the upper hand.

"What the—"

[Don't let it get away!] Erik didn't make the biological supercomputer repeat itself twice and started chasing the monster.

The problem was that he was playing in the creature's home, and having knowledge of the place, of all its nooks and crannies, it meant it gained distance with each second. Not only that, but the creature moved with incredible agility, its long body flowing around corners and through doorways like liquid water.

[This thing moves like it's got a GPS map of the building installed in its brain. I'd be impressed if I wasn't so concerned.]

<Yeah, it most likely lived here for years!>

[Which raises an unsettling question. Since the way it moves suggests knowledge of every turn, every corridor, could it be that...?]

What the system implied was that this thing might have killed and eaten Erik's friends. But in truth, that was unlikely. A Chimaeric Demon might have been killed from it, but there was no way that a bunch of them, even five of them, failed to find and kill it.

<Let's not think about it... What do we do?>

[We kill it.]

The serpent's tail vanished around another corner, but Erik quickly took it.

Erik was struck by how fast the creature moved. During their fight, its strikes had been precise but slower than this. As if it had been holding back until now.

The contrast was jarring enough to make Erik hesitate for a split second. Was this a strategy? Was the creature trying to lure him deeper into the ruins where it might have an even greater advantage? Or did striking with those massive fangs simply require more control, limiting its speed during attacks?

The fact that the thaid was apparently planning its moves sent chills down Erik's spine. Thaides were supposed to be instinct-driven beasts, not tactical minds.

If thaides on Mur were not only stronger than those on Mannard but were even evolving to become smarter, it would make them incomparably dangerous.

A thaid that could plan ambushes, set traps, and adapt its hunting strategies was a terrifying prospect that could reshape the entire power dynamic of this world.



Erik gritted his teeth. It didn't matter—he couldn't let this thing survive. Whatever its limitations or strategies, he had to end this thing. Even if it meant following it into what could very well be a trap. Yet Erik was losing ground.

[The creature is escaping!]

<I know that, there is no need to remind me!>

Erik pushed himself to run faster, but the beast's serpentine form gave it a tremendous advantage in the confined space. Where Erik had to dodge debris and navigate tight turns, the creature simply flowed through openings like water.

[Looks like we have gotten ourselves into quite a HISS-y situation!]

"Are you seriously making jokes right now?!" Erik snapped, struggling to keep the creature's tail in sight as it disappeared around another corner.

[Sorry, couldn't resist.]

<If you have the itch, analyze that thing as soon as it is in range!>

[Will do!]

By the time Erik reached the next intersection, the creature had disappeared. Only small marks in the dust showed where its scales had scraped the floor.

"FUCK!"

<Where did it go?> Erik scanned the corridors, the alcoves, the surrounding rooms, and even the shadows, but the creature disappeared, and its concrete-colored scales made it nearly impossible to spot at a distance. Besides, Erik didn't know what brain crystal power that thing had.

Based on what Erik saw, it had some kind of venomous ability, and maybe a camouflaging one that allowed it to blend into the surroundings. Maybe the concrete color of its skin resulted from such a power. But Erik couldn't know for certain, and he wasn't even sure his logic was right.

<Something was wrong with this beast.>

[You don't say? Duh. Anyway, I'm not detecting any mana signatures,] the system said. [It's suppressing its power again.]

<Motherfucker...>

The system wouldn't be certain Erik was referring to the thaid or to itself if it wasn't for its ability to read its mind, telling it he was actually referring to the AI.

[Am I this insufferable to you?]

<You are a fucking idiot!>

Erik cursed more and more. Not only because of the biological supercomputer but also because the beast had turned this hunt around completely from predator to prey and back again, moving through its territory with the confidence of a longtime resident.

<Can you give me a hand? Don't you have some kind of function that would help us find the thing?  
> Erik asked, keeping his voice low as he scanned the shadows. Instability should have worked, but for some reason, the creature wasn't even thinking. It was like it shut off its thoughts and stopped even being conscious to reach a perfect hiding state.

Erik had many alternatives to turn that situation, but most of them would involve bombing this place. The problem was that Erik had to be careful about using his powers inside the building, and he knew it.

Bombing the place would mean weakening the building more, with the risk that it could collapse on top of him. Sure, he could survive thanks to Telekinesis or Absolute Wall, but if he destroyed the place just to kill a thaid, he wouldn't know if his friends passed from here. He would lose all his clues.

"Damn..."

He actually had some ideas on what to do and searched for the biological supercomputer's confirmation.

[We should find a defensible position and use Phantom Veil,] the system said. [The illusions might draw it out, and invisibility will give us an advantage. But...]

<But?> Erik hoped it wasn't going to say what he feared.

[This creature has already shown unusual hunting capabilities. It might have multiple ways to track prey—vibrations, heat, and scent. We can't assume invisibility alone will protect us.]

Both the system and Erik didn't know how close they were to the truth.

<Shit...> That was exactly what Erik was thinking.

Erik considered using his offensive powers. <What if I just blast this whole section with wind blades? Do you think the building would stand?>

[Unlikely, besides, even if it would have resisted, you would have just risked it,] the system said. [Even a single millimeter away from the right point to strike, and the entire building might collapse. Besides, if the others are somewhere in this building, you could bring the whole structure down on them. That kind of destruction would likely attract every predator within kilometers.]

The system paused. [Take also into account that if you leave this place, the creature won't chase you. This building is clearly its hunting ground. If we leave the building, it will simply stay here. These specialized predators rarely abandon their territory, especially when that territory gives them such advantages.]

Erik weighed their options. Staying meant facing an intelligent predator in its own domain, but leaving meant abandoning the search for his companions. Neither choice felt right.

Chapter 1253: Rescue trip (9)

Erik squared his shoulders and made his decision. Running wasn't an option. There were many reasons for that: the first was that he wanted to kill the creature, as simple as that. The second was that the creature was likely not going to leave him alone when he searched the building, which meant forcing him to fight. The third was that he needed to check the building for signs of his friends' presence, as old as it could have been.

Erik didn't want much; he just wanted some signs that his friends were alive, and hopefully, that could lead to their current position. If he didn't kill the creature, he could do nothing of that.

Erik channeled mana through his neural links, activating Absolute Castle. Light rippled across his skin as the power manifested, hardening into armor.

This power had resisted the Three-headed Void Ravagers and, to some extent, even the Cerulean Bird. Whatever this creature was, there was no way it could damage him.

[Smart move,] the system said. [At least it won't be able to bite through that.]

And yet.

<We don't know for sure, but at least it's something. Remember to analyze it as soon as you spot it.>

[Yeah, there is no reason to remind me of it. Who did you take me for?]

<Then why didn't you do it before? As for the question, I'm clearly talking to an idiot.>

[Ouch! That stings!]

Erik moved through the corridors. Absolute castle was going to protect him, but he didn't know what the beast was capable of, and that put him on edge.

[So, what's your game plan for taking down this bad boy?] Of course, the biological supercomputer was reading Erik's thoughts, but for some reason, it liked explanations.

<Nothing too complicated,> Erik said. <Since it's very fast, the best thing I can do is to lure it where I can kill it.>

From the beast's earlier escape, Erik knew it was clearly faster than him. Whether this speed came from its strength, physical makeup, or familiarity with the area didn't matter. Erik wasn't going to risk finding out the hard way.

He needed to create a situation, an opportunity, where its superior speed would be rendered useless. And that would only happen if he could lure it into a position of his choosing and ambush it.

The mana he channeled went into some precise neural links: Phantom Veil. He did two things: the first was to turn invisible. In fact, not even 2 seconds after he started channeling mana, he vanished from sight completely.

At the same time, he was going to create illusory copies of himself. The illusions would spread out, mimicking his own gait, and would search and lure the monster. That was exactly what they did. Without Erik having to give them orders, the illusions left and scattered through the building.

<Let's hope it's not smart enough to understand the ruse.> Then he turned inward to the system.

<Have you found a suitable place for the ambush?>

[Yes,] the system said. [There is a room beyond that window that offers clear sight down multiple corridors. You can hide behind some fallen support beams or behind the door's wall.]

Erik nodded and slipped inside the room whose mental image the system showed him, placing himself where he could watch the hallways.

[This really is a good spot,] the system said, doing the equivalent of a grin since it was the biological supercomputer that suggested Erik the place.

Erik nodded, knowing the system was right since the place allowed him to look at the hallways without problem. [The beast won't be able to approach without crossing our field of view.]

<Yeah, but I need to hide if I want to kill it without being seen, meaning I won't know when it's here. Remember? That thing made no noise.>

Erik planned to lure the beast through the doorway where he could decapitate it. However, his hiding spot was problematic—he wouldn't be able to see the monster until it had already crossed the threshold, and he wasn't keen on risking it with invisibility alone.

Invisibility made him impossible to see, but that didn't mean he was completely undetectable. The creature might have other ways of sensing prey—through smell, heat, or even those vibrations he suspected it used. Hiding behind solid cover was still the safest option, even if it meant sacrificing his line of sight.

[Why did you agree to come here if you were going to do this? Any room would have been good.]

<Oh, you mean besides the fact that every other room looks like a demolition company had a wild party in there? At least this one has a window. You know, so I can actually see the fucker trying to kill me instead of tripping over concrete chunks in the dark.>

[Your survival instincts are truly inspiring,] the system replied dryly.

<Hey, if I'm going to die, I'd rather not do it because I stubbed my toe on fallen debris while playing hide and seek with a thaid.>

The illusion continued their patrol, searching rooms and checking corners exactly as Erik had done earlier.

It was all a ruse, of course. They were actually trying to make the monster notice them so that it would chase them.

The problem was that Erik had no idea if the monster took the bait, and the illusions didn't give him any kind of feedback about it. They were incapable of it.

The most Erik could do was to control them, and they did what he wanted. That was it. Besides, if the creature relied on vibrations to track its prey, as he was inclined to think, the illusions wouldn't fool it—but their movement might draw its attention long enough for Erik to at least spot it, and if they were fast enough, they might lure it all the same.

Minutes stretched by as Erik waited. Dust motes danced in shafts of sunlight, stirred by air currents he couldn't feel because of the armor.

[Stay focused,] the system said. [This thing is patient. It might wait hours for the perfect moment to strike.]

<Ah... shit...>

Erik nodded, though no one could see the gesture. He settled into a readier position, prepared for a long wait.

—\*\*\*—

The thaid was coiled beneath a pile of broken ceiling tiles, its body allowed to be used as a hiding place. In truth, Erik went past its hiding point, but its scales made the creature impossible to be seen by the naked eye, and its ability to suppress its mana flow made it invisible even to the biological supercomputer.

The creature was waiting, feeling every movement around it through its body. Like a living radar, it could sense footsteps and falling debris, creating a map of everything nearby in its mind thanks to the sensory organs that allowed it to perceive even the slightest vibration.

Yet something puzzled the thaid. Its eyes tracked movement inside the corridor. Something went past its hiding place. There was a creature running around, but it was not making a single vibration. There were no footfalls, no disturbance on the dust-covered floor. It was weird.

The beast's primitive mind struggled to understand what was happening, so it failed to understand the trap the illusions were.

The creature remained motionless, only its eyes following the figure. Years of hunting in these ruins had taught it caution.

All prey made vibrations—from the smallest rodents to the largest thaid. Even humans, though the creature didn't understand what they were, sent tremors through the building's structure with their careful steps.

Indeed, there had been humans in this building once; unfortunately, they had been blackguards. That happened when humans were nothing more than bugs compared to thaid.

Not that it changed much during these five years since Erik appeared, but for sure, they closed the gap a lot.

Yet, even with all their preparations, even with all their weapons, the humans had been killed by the snake-like thaid, and so had all the other creatures that stumbled upon this building, and they weren't few.

The serpent's forked tongue flicked out, tasting the air. There was no scent, either. The creature's primitive brain churned.

Its instincts were in turmoil because they urged it to make it chase and attack whatever that thing was.

The figure looked like prey, moved like prey, but triggered none of the other hunting signals the creature relied on.

Its little brain had cautioned to stay where it was, and it did, for some time. The beast remained frozen in place, unsure of what to do. Never in all its time hunting in these halls had it seen anything this strange.

The beast's instincts tingled as it watched the figure pass by again. Its concrete-colored scales shifted slightly, adjusting their pattern to better match the surrounding debris.

Then, soon after the human passed, it came again, but not from the direction it went, but from the one it came from the first time. The predator's tongue flicked rapidly, trying to make sense of the situation.

The only problem was that it was still a beast, and soon, its instinct prevailed over the little intelligence it had. That happened when hunger became rampant in its body. It started chasing one of the illusions.

#### Chapter 1254: Rescue trip (10)

Erik's illusions kept searching through the area to lure the creature. They searched rooms and checked corners, or better, they went there, apparently to check around, but the truth was they didn't care, not only because they just were illusions and didn't think, but because Erik himself didn't. Their paths inevitably spiraled inward, drawing closer to the room where Erik was waiting in ambush.

What Erik didn't know, though, was that the snake-like thaid was already stalking one. The monster was following after one illusion, slithering over broken tiles and fallen debris to avoid making noise and alerting the illusion.



Even if it didn't, the illusion would have noticed nothing, because they didn't have senses. No sight, no sense of smell, no hearing. They were just images Erik made.

The creature kept its distance, unwilling to strike at prey that triggered none of its usual hunting instincts. It needed to study it more to understand what was going on.

So, it kept the right distance from whatever that creature was. Ten or so steps behind the illusions.

At the same time, the illusion kept a gait that made the creature interested but frustrated because the prey wasn't giving it the chance to strike. Its forked tongue flicked, seeking a scent that didn't exist.

Erik waited. The room he'd chosen had once been some kind of office, with large windows now partially blocked by collapsed ceiling panels.

<A lot of time went on already. Where the fuck is this thing?>

<Patience,> the system's voice echoed in his mind. <The creature's behavior matches known predatory patterns, all in all. It will probably strike soon. You just need to keep still.>

Erik's muscles protested after staying motionless for such a long time. His neck stiffened, his back tensed, and a dull ache spread through his shoulders and thighs. Each passing minute made the discomfort worse, but he had to endure it.

He wanted to move to ease the pain, but he remained still, knowing that any movement would reveal where he was hiding.

Then one of the illusions arrived, just as all the others did before it multiple times. It moved with purposeful steps under Erik's orders and went near the window.

It paused there, as if searching the corners. The illusion's level of detail was astonishing, and Erik left nothing to chance. The illusion remained there for some seconds. So that the creature would think that was the right moment to strike, and doing so, it would reveal its presence to Erik.

The thaid lurked outside the room, hesitating. Though it could have rushed in to attack its prey, instinct warned that something was amiss.

Its primitive yet sophisticated brain struggled between instinct and suspicion—wrestling with both the strange behavior of its recent prey and the urge to kill.

Then it decided on another kind of attack, one that would keep it safe, but also one that would reduce the amount of meat it was going to eat.

Suddenly, almost too fast to follow, the creature's jaws snapped open. Instead of lunging forward, it released a spray of greenish liquid.

Erik's eyes widened as he observed the liquid spray. The liquid had a high concentration of mana, and it was clearly the result of the creature's brain crystal power, rather than a natural secretion.

The spray was also clearly some kind of venom or corrosive substance. Erik hadn't expected this at all. Given how hard it was for him and the biological supercomputer to detect the creature, Erik thought its brain crystal power had to do with hiding, or at worst, with tracking.

But this completely changed things, because it meant that the Thaid's hiding and tracking abilities were purely on its own and didn't depend on chance.

The deadly green liquid cut through the air where his illusion stood, passing harmlessly through the intangible lump of light and mana.

Erik's heart skipped a beat as he realized how close he had been to death and how narrowly he escaped it. The creature had snuck up on him with ease, and if it had chosen to use its acid spray instead of a physical attack, he would have been dead.

At the same time, the creature entered the system's range, and as soon as it activated its power and circled mana through its neural links, the system detected its presence. Without a visual aid, the system could only determine the creature's position thanks to mana.

However, the beast didn't use it earlier. Now it was different. Not only could the system see where the beast was, but it could also use its analysis power.

—[Analysis]—

-Name: Naxoris

-Physical Description: Snake-like thaid, approximately 4 meters long. Body covered in smooth scales with a concrete-like gray coloration. Like most snakes, it has a forked tongue, fangs capable of spraying corrosive acid produced by its brain crystal power, and heat and vibration-sensing pits. It has a muscular body optimized for silent movement and constriction.

-Brain Crystal Powers: Acid Spray (C96C): The brain crystal power allows the creature to create a highly corrosive venom that can be sprayed as a pressurized stream. The acid rapidly dissolves both organic and inorganic materials on contact. It needs particular body adaptations to be sprayed. In this case, the canals connect the sack in which the acid is stored and that connect it to the fangs and the powerful muscles needed to pump the liquid at high speed.

Thermal Strike (C66C): Launches concentrated heat bursts that can stun and disorient prey. More effective against warm-blooded targets.

{Attributes}

-STRENGTH: 656

-INTELLIGENCE: 17

-DEXTERITY: 452

-ENERGY: 367

{Others}

-Power Level: 1185

-Estimated Experience per kill: 2,107,212,049.90

—[End]—

At that point, Erik understood and confirmed many things. First, the snake coloration wasn't due to a brain crystal power, exactly as he assumed, but depended on evolution.

This species must have been hunting in human ruins for generations, long enough to evolve a cement-like coloration that helps them blend into their surroundings and improve their hunting success.

Its powers were actually two. One was that it made it produce the acid, and one that the beast hadn't used yet.

Everything else belonged to the beast's body, hunting tactics, and intelligence. Looking at the attributes, Erik also understood why the creature had been so problematic earlier.

That thing was slightly stronger than him. Not enough to be impossible to hunt, but enough for it to escape from him easily, thanks to its knowledge of the building.

It also explained why Erik hadn't been overwhelmed by the beast during its previous attack. However, Erik noticed the two main problems this beast had.

The first was that its brain crystal powers were relatively basic and common. The acid spray, while dangerous, was a common ability found in many thaids- in some cases it required a lot of biological adaptations, while it didn't in some others. In either case, it provided limited tactical advantage.

The thermal strike ability was essentially just a short-range heat burst that could temporarily stun prey, but wasn't particularly powerful or unique. It was another power whose usage depended on circumstances.

However, Erik felt it was still outside of character for a beast like this to have this kind of power. It was specialized in avoiding its mana flow being detected to maximize its striking chances.

Yes, it would be able to use the power and attack from a distance with an ability that was a sure way to kill the target, but it still made mana detection possible. A creature like that was more suited to have a brain crystal power that allowed it to escape.

That would happen when things went bad, when the opponent was too strong and had already found it, maybe battled it for some time.

This ability, instead, was a sort of opener, unsuited for such a beast. Of course, this was Erik's opinion. One the system didn't agree on at all.

The beast's second problem was that it had very low mana. That explained why it didn't use this power earlier.

Sure, it might have been because of hunting tactics, but now there was an additional explanation. This thing had so little mana that it couldn't waste it.

Most likely, it used it when an ambush failed, when a predator found it, or when something was not going according to its bestial mind. Maybe this was the case, too.

<Maybe it found out the illusion was a fake...>

The attack might have come because something was weird, even for it.

That got further confirmed to the thaid when the acid passed straight through the illusion, splattering against the far wall and floor. Where it hit, concrete bubbled and dissolved, releasing clouds of noxious vapor.

The acrid fumes burned Erik's nose and throat. He fought against the reflex to cough, knowing the slightest sound would reveal his presence.

Tears welled in his eyes as the caustic fog spread through the room. The acid had eaten deep pits on the floor, still bubbling and smoking.

Through watering eyes, Erik watched the illusion maintain its pose, completely unaffected by the attack that had just passed through it.

However, while Erik struggled to breathe, the beast did something else. It left.

[It's trying to escape! It must have understood this was a trap!]

## Chapter 1255: Rescue trip (11)

Erik burst into action. A fit of coughing from the acrid gas that filled the room gave him a slower start, but he started channeling his healing powers to fix any damage the creature's brain crystal power created.

[Are you alright?] the system asked. It knew his lungs were burning and that his eyes were watering, but the system also knew Erik was channeling mana as it was asking.

<Yeah, but that thing did a number on my lungs. Still having trouble getting a clean breath.>

[You should activate your healing power. Your respiratory system is damaged.]

<I'm already doing that.> Erik kept channeling mana through his neural links, focusing his brain crystal power on his lungs and eyes.

The soothing energy spread through his chest, repairing the burns left by the beast's corrosive gas. After a few seconds, his breathing returned to normal.

[How do you feel now?] The system asked.

<Much better.>

Erik then focused his attention back on the snake-like thaid.

<That thing is insanely fast.>

[I don't doubt you will still catch it.]

Yet, even though Erik healed himself, he still couldn't catch up to the monster, which smoothly slid its huge body through the building and got farther and farther from him.

Erik was losing it again, so he started channeling mana through his neural links as he prepared to unleash a wind blade.

It was a risky move that could damage the building's structure and potentially trap them inside, but with the creature getting away and no other options available, Erik felt he had to try something drastic.

[Wait!] The system stopped him before he could unleash his powers. [The building's structural integrity is already compromised as it is. A wind blade could bring the whole place down on us!]

Erik gritted his teeth, forcing the gathered mana to dissipate. The snake-like thaid was widening the gap between them.

<Fine. Let's try something else then.>

Erik channeled mana through his Absolute Castle neural links, but instead of forming armor, he concentrated on the power beneath his feet. That was the best part of Nathaniel's power.

Each step released a small concussive burst, propelling him forward and making him cover more ground.

Erik didn't try this earlier because he needed to assess the beast's capabilities first. He knew from experience that rushing in without knowing an opponent's strength could be fatal.

The creature might have hidden abilities or defenses that could catch him off guard. By observing its movements and attacks, he could come up with a strategy rather than risk everything on raw power alone.

The force waves cracked the floor tiles behind him, but the controlled bursts weren't strong enough to threaten the building's stability.

[Much better. The concussive bursts are giving you the speed you need without risking structural damage. Keep it up!]

<Thanks Captain Obvious!>

However, Erik didn't just do this. He also started channeling mana through Telekinesis's neural links. The force wrapped around the thaid's body, trying to slow it down.

The creature's muscles tensed against the psychic grip, its scales rippling as it fought the restraining power.

The thaid was massive and too strong, which made it harder for Erik to keep it closer to him. Besides, telekinesis depended on visual clues, so every time he lost sight of the creature, his grip on it disappeared.

While Erik's telekinesis tugged at its tail section, disrupting its movement, the creature's strength was enough to power through the tug. Yet the beast noticed what was happening and turned.

It didn't understand how the human was able to do all of that, but it didn't care. Its head whipped around, its jaws snapped open, releasing another spray of acid that cut through the air toward Erik's chest.

<Fuck!>

The acidic liquid splashed harmlessly against a shimmering barrier of mana that Erik created the instant he noticed the beast's head turning.

The barrier materialized just in time, positioned perfectly to intercept the spray of corrosive fluid before it could reach him.

The liquid was unable to penetrate the barrier generated by Absolute Wall.

Thick white steam rose from the barrier where the acid made contact, hissing and curling upward in clouds of gas.

Erik's defenses held firm, and with the acid neutralized, he pushed forward through his barrier while creating a new one as he advanced.

That moment of counterattack cost the beast precious seconds, and it gave Erik the opening he needed and closed the remaining distance between them. The thaid realized its mistake too late, its body already coiling to resume its escape.



Erik channeled mana into his palm, condensing it into a blade of pure energy, a flyssa. That was one of the advantages of his Elemental Lord brain crystal power. It could not only control the elements, but also condense them into creating physical constructs. That resulted from the slime-making brain crystal power; he merged with all the brain crystal powers that concurred to create Elemental Lord. Of course, Erik had other options in case that wouldn't work.

Erik didn't waste a second and swung the blade mercilessly.

The mana blade got minimal resistance as it passed through the creature's neck. For a moment, nothing seemed to happen, but then the thaid's head toppled forward, separated from its body.

The snake thrashed for a second before going still, its concrete-colored scales already beginning to dull as life faded from the monster.

[Hostile creature killed: Mana absorbing process starting.]

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

[Mana successfully absorbed, starting conversion procedure.]

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

[Mana successfully absorbed into experience. 2,107,212,049.90 experience points and 21,072,120.50 DNA points were awarded to the host.]

Erik felt the surge of energy stream through his body, reaching the neural links, and last, his brain crystal.

However, he stepped back from the body, both because he didn't want to risk more surprises and also because he needed a little space to breathe.

[Damn, that thing was fast!] The system said.

<Yeah! I didn't realize!>

The system didn't miss Erik's sarcasm.

[Hey, at least we are done now. Hopefully, there won't be other monsters in this building. That thing was strong, so I guess anything that stumbled here must have died.]

Erik shivered because most of the time someone said words like that, the opposite happened. It was good for his friends, but that also meant there was potentially something else in that damn building.

Erik sighed.

<Well, the analysis said it. I wasn't going to get a lot of experience given the low energy points this thing had.>

[Two billion experience points and you're disappointed? Sometimes I wonder if anything makes you happy,] the system said.

<It's not that much considering how troublesome that thing was and how high its stats were. Well, aside from its energy attribute...>

The system did the equivalent of rolling its eyes. It was just that it didn't have eyes to begin with.

[Let me get this straight—you just took down a creature with strength and dexterity stats that would terrify most people, and that was on par with you, the strongest human being in the world, and you did it without breaking that much of a sweat.]

Erik tried to argue, but the system continued.

[You countered its ambush tactics, using one of your own to get the change to study its weakness, and defeated it using powers mostly used for their utility, rather than their might. No massive energy attacks, no desperate measures. Just smart combat application of your abilities, and you are complaining about the amount of experience it gave?]

Erik would have been able to hunt it earlier if he had used all his powers. However, since he started his journey through Mur, he preferred being cautious. Thaidis here were not only stronger but also smarter, and this thing just gave him proof of that.

Before attacking it as he did now, it was better to read its status, which neither Erik nor the system had time to do earlier. Someone might have said that Erik's approach was too cautious, but he begged to differ.

Erik paused, considering the system's words. He had to admit; the fight had gone surprisingly well once he'd figured out the creature's strength, or better, when he realized he didn't actually need to be that cautious against it.

Fear was what prevented Erik from killing it earlier.

Getting stronger wasn't just a matter of experience points and mana, but also of battle experience and tactics.

Most importantly, in Erik's case, it was all about getting past the fear of the creatures here on Mur. Inside the forest close to the shores, where he had made his base, thaids were weaker than this.

Not that much, considering they all had around 450-590 strength points, and massive amounts of mana, but it was still lower than the amount of strength this creature had.

<I guess you have a point. I'm getting better at reading these situations.>

[Exactly. And more importantly, you're learning how to gauge the power scale here on Mur. That creature might have seemed weak compared to some of what we'll face, but it wasn't, and you handled it well. That's progress; that's learning.]

Chapter 1256: Rescue trip (12)

Erik sighed again. He didn't really need to learn how to fight thaids. It was just those in Mur that needed special care.

<You're right. I should be grateful I survived.>

[Indeed, you should.]

He turned back to examine the dead thaid one last time.

Its concrete-colored scales had fully dulled now, and a huge pool of blood gathered below its severed neck.

<Anyway, how did the snake's attributes compare to the other thaids we've encountered so far?>

[Actually, this one had relatively high ones compared to those we fought in the forest until now, aside from its energy attribute. Yet, while its strength was high, its brain crystal powers were basic. Most creatures on Mur have evolved more sophisticated abilities.]

<So, should I stay away from its brain crystal?>

Erik stared at the corpse. This thing had been smart enough to prevent a crippling weakness from becoming crippling and turned out to be a very troublesome opponent.

If this was a creature with weak brain crystal power, he didn't want to imagine how powerful it would be if it just had another ability or more mana. He and the system would have had their work cut out for them.

The beast had nearly killed him with its stealth and acid spray—and that was with relatively simple powers. Even if the system said those words, Erik didn't want to treat the dead beast with contempt. On the contrary, if this thing did all of this with those handicaps, he could only respect it.

[Yeah. It won't help you in any way. It will just be a new thing to train.] The system paused. [We should move. The blood might attract other predators. And there's still the matter of finding your friends.]

[So,] the system said. [Are you going to harvest the brain crystal?]

Though it already knew the answer.

<No point. As you said, its powers were too basic to be worth the effort.> Erik stepped over the creature's tail, heading for the stairwell. <Better to focus on finding better brain crystal powers, and even in that case, I'm not sure it would be useful to get more. >

[The best thing would be to make more neural links. You have the advantage, over the competition, that you are not forced to get past the 54 neural links mark to get stronger.]

Since Erik could get as many powers as he wanted, the simplest strategy was to get new ones and create neural links for them up to the 54 mark.

Powers with fewer neural links were easier to develop, allowing Erik to exploit this to grow stronger than the blackguards more quickly.

Erik hadn't done that simply because he didn't have the time. Taking care of the blackguards, of Frant, of Liberty Watch, took away a huge chunk of time. That was why Erik had been slow in his growth. The fact he also had many powers to improve and that he also merged them to get something stronger didn't help.

<Too bad I only get three attribute points from each neural link.> If that wasn't the case, Erik would have been much stronger than he was now, but if the system deemed this dangerous, there must have been good reasons for it to cap the attribute gain to just three.

[Hey, don't give me that look.] Of course, it was a purely mental look. [It's not my fault if you would turn into a monster if you get too many attribute points!]

Erik rolled his eyes so hard he could almost hear them scraping against his skull. His jaw clenched, and he had to consciously stop himself from grinding his teeth.

<Right... I got over hundreds of attribute points last month when I got all those level-ups at once, and nothing happened to me when I increased my stats. No monster transformation, no side effects, nothing. I'm honestly starting to think there is another reason for your limitations.>

[Of course there is!] The system said. [Do you understand how many functions I have? Do you understand how much energy I need to use them? The energy you get is stored and used when needed.]

<This means you stole from me...>

[Stole? Are you serious? We are together in this if I really was stealing from you. I could have taken all your energy when you got new neural links.]

<It doesn't change the fact that I should get more attributes with new neural links.>

[The only difference compared to the others is just that you grow slowly. You can still grow as long as you get new powers, with the difference that the others can't get too many brain crystal powers. You can get as much as you want.]

The system paused.

[Besides, did you forget about the attribute points? You wouldn't be so powerful as you are now if it wasn't for that.]

<If you give me attribute points, wouldn't it be simpler to just make me keep all the attribute points I get with each neural link?>

[No,] the system said. [The attribute points I give you are not the same as you get from the neural links. The latter results from the energy bursts you get when making a new link and are strictly linked to your genetics, while the attribute points I give you when you level up are artificial. They can't literally produce mutations. They are safer and can also be used on energy.]

But this didn't change the fundamental issue - Erik was still getting fewer attribute points than he believed he should, and the system's explanations, while logical, didn't make him feel better. Besides, there was a point he wanted to address.

<Then why didn't you simply convert the attribute points from neural links into the same type I get from levelling up? You could have suppressed the neural link bonuses and given me level-up attribute points instead.>

[Because limiting the number of attribute points you get at each new neural link is different from completely suppressing them. I literally can't do it unless I want to kill you. The energy you get with each new neural link can be absorbed, but part of it must still be used to adapt your body to the new neural link.]

But that meant...

<So, it's theoretically possible.>

[It is, but only if you have a way to adapt your body artificially. Otherwise, you would simply get a power that can't get new neural links. Do you wish for that?]

<Damn...>

[Hmph,] the system said, satisfied that Erik had finally stopped arguing. [Now, can you stop worrying about useless stuff and focus on the task? Or do you want to stay in this building for a couple of days? If we keep chatting here, we might as well order takeout and set up a camping spot. I hear concrete floors are great for your back,] the system said.

<Yeah, yeah... But I still don't get why you are so mad. It was a reasonable question.>

...

Erik looked up at the stairwell. The steps were old and damaged, with chips and cracks spreading everywhere.

There was something on the walls that looked like emergency lights, but they weren't working anymore, leaving darkness to creep into every corner.

The handrails were covered in dust, and pieces of fallen plaster were scattered on the steps. Erik paused at the bottom, staring into above.

<Before we head up there, can you do a mana scan? I'd rather not walk into another ambush.>

[Already checking. Though I must say, your new caution is refreshing. Are you finally learning from your mistakes?]

<Very funny. I just don't want to end up as some thaid's dinner because we rushed in blindly. Besides, checking this would allow us to know if there is someone on the upper floor.>

[Fair enough. Though technically, that snake would have dissolved you with acid first, then eaten you...]

Erik facepalmed.

<Please, stop it. This is not helping.>

The system went quiet while checking the upper floor for any signs of creatures using its mana detection.

Erik waited, forcing himself to remain patient. His encounter with the snake had taught him that rushing could be deadly. It was better to endure a few minutes of waiting than hours of fighting for his life.

[Nothing on the upper floor.]

<Just the upper floor though, right? Couldn't you scan the others?>

[It would have taken more time. We will check the other floors as we go.]

Erik doubted other creatures made their home in this building. The snake-like thaid he killed was clearly territorial.

Any other predators would have been killed and devoured long ago. If something defeated the snake, then Erik would have faced that winner, not the snake.

Still, the thaid's ability to mask its presence even at the system's sense bothered him. If a thaid developed such an ability, others might have developed similar ones.

<Try not to miss anything... We might not be as alone up there as we hope.>

[Don't worry.]

## Chapter 1257: Stronger, But Not Strong Enough (1)

There was a look of utter focus on Gwen. Her armor was taking many hits, but she ignored them since they were not enough to pose a problem, but she still had to pay attention given who she was facing.

The armor plates moved and shifted around her muscular body. Her long brown hair was visible under her helmet, making her look like an ancient knight with a long mane in her helmet.



"It won't work! I'm still going to hand you your shiny butt!" Floyd grinned. Though tall himself, he still had to look slightly up at Gwen's armored body, but that didn't intimidate him one bit.

"Take this seriously for once." Gwen charged forward. Her steps would have left small craters on the ground if it weren't because of the materials used to build the Red Palace. They were too resistant even for her to break them.

During all this time, she and the others had kept training, and since they were among the strongest in their generation, they did so under the guidance of the best teachers Frant could offer, including General Becker.

Gwen became much better than Amber in hand-to-hand combat, but that was expected, since Amber was more often than not on the battlefield with Erik.

The armor might have looked like something that would have made her movements clumsy, but she didn't look bothered by it a little. In fact, her movements were rather precise despite the bulk and utterly lethal.

Floyd prepared for her charge. "You know, you remind me of my refrigerator—big, shiny, and makes funny noises."

Gwen's armored fist shot out with devastating force, her technique perfect, but Floyd raised his hand almost lazily.

The moment her punch connected with his palm, all its tremendous energy... vanished. The impact that should have sent him flying didn't even ruffle his blonde hair.

Gwen was stronger than Floyd, at least in terms of physical attributes, but she was not as swift as him. The difference in muscle mass was too much. Gwen was basically an armored tank, while Floyd was much leaner, despite him having muscles of his own.

Besides, Gwen had at least 100 energy points more than Floyd. The problem was that his power was simply too strong.

Gwen's brain crystal power was rather simple. It allowed her to create an armor, which was, though, slightly skewed on offense rather than defense. Floyd, instead, could negate any kind of energy, of course, with limitations, but that included kinetic energy, thermal energy, electrical energy, and even the potential energy stored in objects.

However, his power also enabled him to disrupt mana flow into objects and living beings, effectively turning brain crystal powers into nothing.

However, that didn't just have defensive purposes, because Floyd could even stop the electrical and kinetic energy in a person's heart, though he rarely used this aspect of his power due to its lethal nature, unless he was on the battlefield himself.

While Amber was always with Erik, Gwen, and Floyd had been on Frant's battlefield. It was less dangerous than those their friends joined in with Erik, but it wasn't less hard for them.

Especially now that the gap between them and Amber widened because Erik gave her a new brain crystal power. The difference in strength pushed the two to train non-stop after they got decommissioned. That, though, had a reason. Becker recalled them and all Erik's friends to learn a new Neural link training technique that made them grow stronger at an incredible pace.

They knew it came from Erik, so that might have meant Becker chose them because they were his friends, or because Erik asked, but their skills were undeniable, so, even if that was the case, Becker didn't lose on the deal. He still got the technique and powerful fighters.

Both Gwen and Floyd grew stronger since they reached the 55 neural links mark. Thanks to Erik's training technique, they improved by leaps and bounds despite not that much time having passed.

It had been six months since they last saw their friends who went to Mur, and even longer—about a year—since they had a chance to compare their combat abilities.

Gwen and Floyd knew that during this time, the power gap between them had likely grown, especially considering Erik's group was constantly getting in more dangerous fights than them.

After mastering Erik's technique, they trained alongside a select group of people Becker selected. These people got so strong, thanks to Erik's technique, that they could be said to be compared to Becker before he got it himself.

Even Becker learned the technique, and his progress was remarkable. Unlike Gwen and Floyd, who were still in their fifties, Becker surpassed the 70 neural links mark within months of starting.

While Gwen and Floyd didn't mind this gap—they knew Becker's decades of experience and talent put him in a different league altogether. Becker turned into more of a monster than anyone had ever been. Well, aside from Erik. If Becker was a beast, Erik was simply a mythical monster.

However, they trained as much as they could. In truth, their growth rate had been even faster than Becker's, who had many more neural links than them to begin with.

One also had to consider that there was a war in Frant. They trained and fought until they couldn't stand anymore, but the war still forced them to stop when required.

There was a reason Gwen and Floyd were sparring. As soon as Frant's army kicked out the enemy troops from their territories, barely a week before, they started pressing Becker to send them to Mur with the others.

"That tickled," Floyd said, ducking under her follow-up strike. "Come on, Gwen, you're usually more creative than this. Is the armor affecting your brain? It's looking a bit tight around the head."

Frustrated, Gwen activated her armor's energy pulse, sending a shockwave through the ground. That was a new ability of her brain crystal power, one that she got once she made the 54th neural link.

It worked similarly to Vibration Burst, generating energy waves that could penetrate through armor and flesh, disrupting the target's internal organs and cellular structures. However, it was useless against Floyd.

The leaner man jumped, his power neutralizing the wave's energy where it touched him. He landed in a theatrical bow.

"And for my next trick..." He rushed forward, moving inside her guard. Floyd placed his palm against her breastplate and smiled. "Energy negation includes the bonds holding your armor together. Neat, huh?"

The plates nearest his touch lost their cohesion, crumbling like sand as the mana composing them got dissipated. What was worse was that Gwen couldn't get him off her.

Even Floyd gained a sort of secondary ability once he reached the 54th neural link mark, and that was the ability to negate two kinds of energies at the same time.

Previously it was blocked at once, but without this limit, Floyd became much stronger. It wasn't a new ability in itself, like in Gwen's case, but it was much better given how strong his brain crystal power was.

Floyd still remembered when he was only the seventh strongest kid in high school, and throughout his career at the Red Palace, he hadn't been the best either.

However, now he could stop even Anderson if he had been alive. Not only because of their obvious difference in neural links and strength, but also because of his brain crystal power.

Anderson's power created gigantic explosions. Floyd could have dissipated the heat or the mana, but not both.

The explosions would have had their effects reduced by whatever Floyd did, but he still couldn't stop the other effects his powers produced. Now he could.

Of course, if Anderson had been alive, no one would have said how strong he would have been or what ability he would have gained if he reached the 54th neural link mark.

Yet, knowing he was now better than him filled him with pride.

Gwen quickly backed away, but the damage was done—a significant portion of her chest protection was gone. Luckily, she was wearing a bra, or the two would have had an embarrassing situation at hand.

"That's cheating," she said, trying to regenerate the armor, but Floyd didn't give her the chance.

"And Allan won't like it!" The lightning spear user was now her boyfriend.

"Tell him I'm sorry!" He darted in again, touching different sections of her armor, disrupting the energy that held it together while Gwen tried to wrestle out of his control. However, Floyd just

needed to touch her to affect her power, and stopping someone from touching you was everything but easy.

"And by the way, it's called strategy, my dear walking tank," he laughed, moving away from her desperate swings. "Besides, I thought you wanted me to take this seriously?"

Floyd could now wipe the floor with Gwen. Besides, Mur wasn't going to be so forgiving as he was. He needed to make Gwen understand how desperate a situation could be there.

Within minutes, Gwen's once-magnificent armor disappeared as if it had never existed. She stood in her training clothes, her muscular frame now visible, glaring at Floyd, who was smiling like an idiot, satisfied with his strength.

"Next time," she said, brushing sparkles from her hair, "I'll kick your ass."

"Weren't I the one joking too much?" Floyd grinned from ear to ear.

Chapter 1258: Stronger, But Not Strong Enough (2)

The bickering went on for some time.

"At least buy me dinner first before stripping me like that," Gwen said, picking up her gym bag.

Floyd chuckled. "Sorry, wasn't Allan the only one allowed to do that?"

"You're impossible." Gwen shook her head, but a slight smile crossed her face. "See you in thirty."

After taking quick showers in the Red Palace's locker rooms and changing into their standard-issue uniforms, Gwen and Floyd made their way through the bustling streets toward Frant's center of power, the Koma.

The flying car journey took them 15 minutes. Years ago, before the parasite attacks, the same trip would have taken at least an hour due to heavy aerial traffic. But New Alexandria's population had dwindled after everything they'd endured, leaving its skies nearly empty of both vehicles and people.

The Koma towered like a fortress of glass and steel against the afternoon sky, its windows ablaze with the setting sun. Giving it the appearance of a giant tower made of light.

The ten-story building featured a unique spiral design of offset hexagonal sections. Smart-glass walls regulated temperature, while granite pillars supported the base. Three spires crowned the top, reaching skyward.

But that wasn't the best part about it.

Situated in New Alexandria's western district, the building rested on deep bedrock foundations. Its perimeter windows offered panoramic city views, while marble floors adorned the interior.

The top floor had a large meeting room where the government leaders met. This made the Koma both a beautiful building and an essential part of New Alexandria's center of power.

The security personnel nodded as the two, Gwen and Floyd, passed. Everyone knew who they were—they were war heroes, but most people associated them with Erik, who was... a demon, at least for the citizens, and a weapon of mass destruction for everyone else aside from a few.

Since no one in Frant wanted to antagonize Erik, people treated his friends, including Gwen and Floyd, with the utmost respect. The elevator took them to the upper floor, where familiar faces waited for them.

"Look who finally showed up!" Mikey said.

Ben and Martha sat at the briefing table, their heads close together as they reviewed something on a tablet. Aaron leaned against the wall. However, there was an addition to the group, Allan.

Gwen smiled when she saw Allan. He got up from his chair and walked over to her. They shared a quick kiss, both looking happy to see each other.

"How was training?"

"Floyd cheated like usual."

"I didn't!" Floyd said, albeit he knew he went too far, ruining the purpose of the spar. "Energy negation is a perfectly valid strategy."

"Valid or not, you're supposed to be training, not showing off," Martha said, not bothering to look up from her tablet.

"Says the one who wants to train inside forests and gardens where the advantage is greater. The gardeners have to clean your messes for weeks each time you train," Mikey said.

"That is different," Martha said, finally looking up. "I—"

"Yeah, yeah," Allan said. "You were simply training, right? You already said that."

"Many times at that."

Floyd's grin was a mischievous one, the kind that always made people wonder what kind of trouble he was planning.

The joking stopped when Ben cleared his throat. They had won the war, but now they faced a new problem.

Erik and his team had gone dark some days before, the clones' last transmission cutting off mid-sentence.

The signal traced to somewhere in the sea, but knowing Erik and the Chimaeric Demons, they didn't believe he was dead—just that he needed their help.

Everyone decided to go, but the point was, would their help really achieve something? Or would they just die a useless death?

"General Becker approved the mission," Ben said. "We're the only ones with the neural link count to stand a chance out there."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that."

In truth, it wasn't just them who got Erik's training technique. The problem was that none of the others had the grace to offer themselves for the mission, and Becker couldn't send many people to begin with. The war ended, but this didn't mean the danger did. If Frant didn't fortify its borders, new attacks might come.

The blackguards had been eradicated from Mannard by Erik, but agents were still present, even if the clones were actively searching for them.

Aside from that, people and governments held grudges. No one could say they wouldn't try to attack again when they got their forces fully operational again.

Becker didn't know that, but Erik's clones were working to take over all the governments. In some countries it worked already, but not in Etrium, where the blackguards' presence had been massive. Hin fell to him just because he went there in person.

Aside from that, there was also the matter of reconstruction.

The war had left a lot of damage in multiple cities, which weren't many to begin with because of the thaids. There was destroyed infrastructure, collapsed buildings, damaged power grids, and barriers half functioning.

Especially, these needed urgent repairs. All of this meant resources were stretched thin between maintaining security and rebuilding the city's defenses. Many construction crews were already working around the clock to restore housing and facilities, but money and people were few.

So Erik's friends were the only ones Becker could spare for the mission. All of them focused on training since they got Erik's neural link training technique, and all of them reached the 54th neural link mark. However, they had no information about Mur.

They knew that if Erik lost communication with them, then the situation must have been more complex than they assumed, but not knowing the true extent of the situation Erik was in strengthened their resolve to go.

"Are we really, really sure we want to do this?"

Ben asked, drumming his fingers on the table. His usual eagerness for combat tuned down more than a couple of notches, despite Mur offering plenty of chances and strong opponents.



He was a battle freak, not a suicidal one.

"Erik always said the blackguards needed thousands of people at our level just to survive there," he added with a serious expression. "We are just seven."

"Well, maybe the thaids will die laughing at Floyd's jokes," Gwen said, giving his friend a dirty look.

Floyd grinned. "Hey, what are you implying? My jokes are fantastic." Yet, even he had a serious expression. "But seriously, if what Erik said about Mur is true, we might be in over our heads."

"Things would be simpler if Erik gave us more information."

"I think he did it on purpose," Mikey said. "He likely wanted us to stay away from there... Or he simply didn't think we would have been crazy enough to decide to go there."

"We've gotten stronger," Aaron said, leaning forward. "Erik's technique pushed us past what we thought was possible. I could take on twice the opponents I could before."

"But we don't know if that's enough. Erik made it clear Mur is much worse than what we assumed. Since there wasn't much information about the place to begin with, his situation only makes the place look more dangerous."

"And he wasn't likely exaggerating," Allan said. "I don't know Erik well—most of what I know comes from you guys—but I'm sure Erik wouldn't say something so specific and ominous without reason. You always say that when he considers something beneath him, he has a confident attitude. But if he said those words, it means he wasn't even confident about his own survival."

The room remained silent.

"But anyway," he added, "that's not the point for us going there. We're not going there to fight." Everyone turned to look at him. "Becker's providing us with a plane. The plan is simple—we fly over, locate Erik and his team, and provide the support he needs. There is no need to even touch the ground if Erik wants to leave."

"Unless something goes wrong, or he is already dead," Gwen said.

"Something always goes wrong," Floyd quipped, but his smile didn't reach his eyes.

"Look," Allan said, "we're not trying to conquer Mur. We're not even trying to fight. We're just going to find our friends and get them out of trouble."

Ben nodded. "A quick insertion and extraction. Our new strength should at least give us a fighting chance if things go south."

"If we even get the chance to fight back," Martha said.

Floyd opened his mouth, probably to crack another joke, but the door swung open. General Becker strode in, his presence demanding everyone's attention.

All of them gave him the salute.

The group had come a long way since their early days of training at school. They were much stronger now - stronger than their teachers had ever been.

But General Becker could see the doubt in their eyes. They were all wondering the same thing: would their strength be enough for this mission?

Chapter 1259: Stronger, But Not Strong Enough (3)

The group snapped to attention as General Becker entered. He was still the leader of the nation and someone who had been recognized as the second strongest person in the world, following the Fierce Lioness, for many years. Aside from that, he was also their master.

Allan had joined them recently, following the others' recommendations, but he was considered one of them, nonetheless.

"At ease," Becker said, his face creasing into a slight smile.

Becker's expression softened as he considered how much had changed. Thanks to Erik's contributions, Frant had experienced unprecedented growth.

The secret technique he had shared with the army, and his friends - the very people standing before Becker now - had transformed them into warriors more powerful than Becker himself had been just three years ago, and was making Frant's army stronger than any army on the planet.

Becker wasn't someone who had territorial expansion and world dominion in mind, but he couldn't deny the fact he was thinking about it.

"I understand you've been discussing the rescue mission."

"Yes, sir," Gwen said. "We're considering the risks involved."

Becker moved to the head of the table. "Before we proceed, are you absolutely sure you want to do this mission? Mur isn't like anything you've faced before."

"We need more information before deciding," Allan said. "But otherwise, yes, we would like to. What exactly is the plan you made for us?"

Becker nodded. There was a reason he agreed when Gwen and Floyd went to him to request help for a rescue mission. Erik couldn't die. Even if he wasn't completely on Frant's side and preferred to do things alone, he had been generous enough not only to share his resources and organization, but also to give them a technique that could change humanity's situation for good.

Erik must have had something else, something better. That, and the fact he could now give people brain crystal powers. At this point, Becker knew there would be no way for him to get stronger than Erik, but closing the gap was still better than nothing.

After many years, even Becker had found something that awakened his greed.

He activated the room's holographic display, bringing up a map of Mur; it wasn't that precise or detailed, but it had all the needed information for the mission.

"We'll use an aircraft capable of reaching the exosphere—beyond the reach of even the most powerful flying Thaid's can go to."

Of course, that was the bare minimum. There was no other way for them to reach Mur otherwise, not like Erik did.

The display showed the planned flight path, a curved line ascending far above the planet's surface.

"We will bring you to Mur's shores, the closest place on land where Erik was."

Becker already explained to them that the last communication Frant had from Erik and the clones was in the middle of the sea, so they were making a bold assumption that Erik was alive and that he reached the shore.

The mission's primary goal was to assist Erik, but first, they needed to confirm he was alive. If they discovered he wasn't, the group would be extracted and returned to Frant.

"We'll execute a high-altitude deployment," Becker said. "The drop will be too fast for most creatures to intercept. We'll give you suits that will make the descent possible, let you breathe, and protect you from the heat produced by the fall. We will also give you a pod of supplies."

The pods were another piece of technology made for missions that required landing in dangerous zones. That meant most places in the world, actually. There were few cities in the world; each country barely had 12, and they weren't even that large. That meant most of the world was wilderness because of the thaids. However, in Frant, things were going to change soon.

"The pods will carry supplies, weapons, emergency equipment, communication devices, and specialized gear for surviving Mur's environment. The provisions will last you for two weeks, so do not squander them, and try to hunt while you are there."

The other raised their eyebrows; hunting on Mur was suicidal. Martha leaned forward; she wanted to address the most important point of the mission.

"What if we do not find them, or worse, what if they are already dead?"

Becker sighed; it wasn't like he didn't think about this already. It was just that Becker had reasonable assumptions that at least Erik might be alive.

"The Chimaeric Demons are still alive," he said. "Though Erik never confirmed it directly, we believe the Chimaeric Demons remain alive only as long as Erik does."

Becker paused. "Since they haven't disappeared, it suggests he's still alive. However, these are just theories—we have no certainty, as Erik never explained this to us. You'll have two weeks of provisions to find him, not counting what you might hunt. If those two weeks pass without success, we'll either resupply or extract you, depending on the situation on Mur and your team's condition at that time."

Everyone nodded. "How do we tell you the situation? I remember someone said it wasn't possible to communicate from Frant to Mur because the signal didn't get there."

"You will use these..." Becker showed them some new communicators able to reach Mannard, or at least Frant's operatives on Hin. "You will have to let us know what is happening. If you find or do not find Erik, it will be on you to continue or come back."

"The new communicators are based on the same technology used by the blackguards," Becker said. "No one can spy on them or block their signals. While they only work over short distances, you'll be able to talk to each other safely during the mission."

Everyone went quiet. They all felt the pressure of what they were about to do. Going to Mur was scary—many people had died there before. They all knew this would be their most dangerous mission yet.

Floyd cleared his throat. "Sir, what about Erik's clones on Hin? From what Erik told us, they're currently his strongest subordinates. Shouldn't we at least inform them of our plans? They might help us."

"I've already contacted them," Becker said. "They'll send one hundred Chimaeric Demons to assist with the operation. Unfortunately, we can't bring more. Besides, Erik left them specific instructions, and I don't have additional aircraft to provide, even if they said they would send more people."

It was a bit weird. The Chimaeric Demons were known to have Erik's well-being at the top of their priorities. Honestly, Becker and the others expected they would rush to search for Erik the moment they lost contact with him. So why weren't they panicking?

In truth, they were. The problem was that they had no way to reach Mur if not shapeshifting, and to safely cross the sea, they would need to mobilize all their troops, which would simply ruin Erik's plans.

Even if it pained them, there wasn't much they could do with their current means. They needed planes, but didn't have them. Only Becker was the only one with them willing to help, but planes had limited seats, hence why there were only 100 Chimaeric Demons going with them.

He paused, rubbing his temples. "Let me be clear—I'm not withholding aircraft for arbitrary reasons. When I say we don't have enough aircraft, I mean it. Most were destroyed, and the remaining ones are being used to provide aid and help reconstruct the cities that are still standing."

Becker paused. That wasn't, of course, the only reason he couldn't send more people. "Besides, even if the war almost ended, there are still Blackguards' loyalists. If they spot a fleet of aircraft, they'll try to destroy it before they can reach altitude. We have to keep this operation small and inconspicuous. If you need to get out, the Chimaeric Demons will help you leave. We will send the plane again, and you will board on the flight."

The Chimaeric Demons could fly, so it made sense.

Mikey frowned; he wasn't convinced, but having 100 Chimaeric demons put his worries at least partially at ease. "Won't more people just increase our chances of being detected?"

"The Chimaeric Demons can turn invisible and can shapeshift. They are the best scouts you can find and are much stronger than you."

Of course, they knew that already.

The team looked at each other. The plan seemed well organized and dealt with their main worries about getting in and out of the dangerous area of Mur safely.

Floyd tapped his fingers on the table. "This all sounds great in theory, but what happens if the blackguards find us?"

"That's on you. I know that helping Erik is the only way for us to defeat the blackguards, but he went there alone for a reason. If you decide to go, you will need to find a way to survive. We have no men to spare and even fewer planes."

The group fell silent.

"There's one more thing," Becker said. "We've made better equipment for you, using what Erik told us about the dangers on Mur. Each of you will get special gear we got from the Etrium soldiers that died in our land."

He showed them pictures of weapons and protective equipment. "These won't make you completely safe, but they'll help you fight better, along with your brain crystal powers. Our team in the aircraft will watch over you and warn you about areas to avoid."

The team exchanged glances with each other, understanding without words. While the plan had some weak points, it covered their main worries. Best of all, it gave them a real chance of success.

"I think we should do it," Ben said.

The others nodded in agreement.

"Very well," Becker said. "We'll begin final preparations. The aircraft will be ready in two weeks. Use that time to familiarize yourselves with the new equipment and study the operation protocols."

#### Chapter 1260: Rescue trip (13)

Erik walked up the old stairway, his footsteps bouncing off the walls. He checked each floor of the building carefully, but found nothing except empty rooms and fallen hallways. A layer of dust covered everything, floating up into the air as he walked and moving at his passage.

[Nothing on the mana scan either,] the system said as they reached the last floor. [The snake was the only thing here.]

Erik moved to a broken window, surveying the surrounding area. <We cleared another floor, but still no sign of the others.>

In truth, there were only signs of human presence on the ground level, nothing up here. But what did that mean? Had those people died, or had they simply left without checking the upper floors?

Maybe they were in a hurry or simply didn't care about what was here. Erik had no way to know, and he didn't care, since it was unlikely those traces had been left by his friends.

It wasn't all bad, since at least now he had a clear picture of the place. Unfortunately, there was no one here.

[We should find a safe place to rest for the night. The sun is setting; visibility is getting worse. ]

<Will you complain if we camp here?>

The system paused.

[No. It will still be dangerous, since we don't know if there's something on the upper floors, but the same can be said for the wilderness.]

Erik nodded. <You're right. Then let's rest and restart the search tomorrow. We will head to the other buildings and see if we can find something there.> As he went down the stairs, he started having a little hunger.

<No point searching on an empty stomach anyway.>

[Agreed. That snake meat might actually be useful.]

Erik stopped at the second floor. He quickly chose a room where to camp, one that had a window, since he needed to start a fire.

However, he created a small shelter inside the room with his Verdant Architect brain crystal power. Where the window was, he created a sort of chimney that went out of the window and then changed the material to something that wouldn't burn easily.

Then, he created some wood, which he then chopped down, and that he set ablaze with his Elemental Lord.

The flames licked at the wood, quickly growing into a robust fire. Within minutes, waves of warmth radiated through the room, pushing back against the winter-chilling temperatures.

As Erik sat by the fire, his thoughts drifted to Rick, the clone he had left behind at his shelter. He was worried. However, he quickly pushed those concerns aside.



The clone was far from helpless - he had all of his abilities and combat experience. Sure, he lacked his brain crystal powers, but it wasn't a problem, since he was still strong enough.

<Rick should be fine alone for a while longer.>

Erik returned to the dead snake on the first floor and cut off pieces of its meat. The meat looked good—it was thick and dark. He took it back to where he had made camp and put it over the fire to cook.

<At least we got something good out of this hunt. The snake meat is lean and tender. I also got a lot of usable meat.> Yet Erik only took around four pounds, which should last him for the next three days. Besides, if he wanted, Erik could even freeze it so he could get more.

[Indeed. Though I hope you're not planning to make a habit of hunting inside of ruins. The building's structural instability makes them dangerous, especially if you are forced to fight like you did earlier. You might end up destroying everything and burying yourself in.]

<It doesn't depend on me,> Erik said. <But anyway, I will try to avoid it if it worries you this much...>

...

...

...

Morning light filtered through the broken windows as Erik woke up, stretching his stiff muscles. He could do the best he could to make his stay here as comfortable as possible, but it was still true that sleeping on a real mattress was different from sleeping on something he made.

The fire had completely burned out overnight, leaving behind a scattered pile of gray ashes. Without the flames' warmth, the winter air had seeped into every corner of the room, making the temperature drop significantly, but not so much as to make Erik uncomfortable.

Besides, he woke up many times during the night to put more wood into the fire and then went back to sleep. This made it so Erik wasn't exactly well rested, but since he had a lot of time to sleep, he at least got a decent amount of hours.

<Damn... I miss the Chimaeric Demons. Everything was easier with them around.>

[I could make a clone joke, but it would just be a copy of another one.]

<What the...?>

Erik ignored the biological supercomputer and focused on his situation. He had gone through similar situations countless times, but after he got the clones, hunting and camping became much easier, since they took care of everything burdensome, and he just needed to rest or to train.

The clones could spread out to cover more ground while hunting, herding prey into optimal positions before slaughtering them. They also served as lookouts during camp, taking shifts to watch for threats while he rested.

Besides, he would get passive experience points. The system was on even when he slept, meaning that he still got experience points when they killed something and were close enough for the system to absorb the mana.

Gathering firewood—whether chopping down what he created or finding other resources—went much faster with multiple people working together. It also made carrying large game back to camp and preparing resting spots much easier.

Erik rose from his makeshift bed and stretched his limbs. After relieving himself in a corner of the room, he pulled out the leftover snake meat from his pack.

The meat was cold but still good—he finished it quickly, washing it down with water from his canteen. Once done with his morning routine, he gathered his belongings and prepared to head out for the higher floors.

[Don't forget your backpack,] the system said.

<Yeah, sorry, I'm still sleepy.>

Erik took the pack and headed out of the room. He spent the following hours searching the ruined city, checking every building still standing. This time he was much faster because he used Phantom Veil to lure everything that might have been inside.

Luckily, there were no creatures, or they were weak. There was no point in anything strong to hide indoors. The snake was strong but still hid since it had little mana, and that forced the beast to specialize in ambushes and stealth.

The ruins were small, with just a handful of buildings still standing. Most of the original structures had succumbed to vegetation; their remains were now buried beneath tangled mounds of vines, earth, and roots. But it was better that way.

According to the biological supercomputer, this wasn't really a city at all—just a small town from the start. Though Erik had been calling it "the city," nature had further diminished its already modest size, leaving only a fraction of the original settlement visible beneath the vegetation.

The decaying structures—empty offices, abandoned homes, and crumbling shops—told stories of the long-lost civilization of humans, of the people that came here hoping to survive, and of the blackguards, which had clearly been here. Yet they revealed no trace of his friends' passage.

<Are there more ruins nearby?> Erik asked as he finished checking the last building.

[According to my data, there are two more locations within walking distance we could investigate,] the system said. [Both places are towns smaller than the current one. The blackguards' reconnaissance data shows they're mostly ruins—mostly collapsed buildings and foundations. However, I've identified three buildings in the first location and two in the second that seem stable enough to investigate.]

Erik nodded, adjusting the straps of his pack. The odds weren't great, but he couldn't afford to skip any potential hiding spots. His friends could be injured, trapped, or worse—every minute counted.

<Even if the chances are slim, we have to check. I won't leave until I'm absolutely certain they're not around. We need to pick up the pace, though. Staying in one place too long is dangerous—especially in these ruins. We've already found that snake, and there could be worse predators nearby.>

[I agree. The nearest place we can check is about three hours away to the northwest, along the old highway. We can get there at that time if we keep moving and don't run into any dangerous thaid or other problems. Even though plants have grown over most of the path, we can still walk through it.]

Erik double-checked his gear one last time and began moving, picking his way through the debris to avoid alerting anything he couldn't fight. He kept close to the weathered walls of the ancient structures, using their shadows for cover as he navigated toward the north.