

BIOLOGICAL 41

Chapter 41: New Power (2)

Erik furrowed his brow at the status screen. "Another E-ranked power," he noted, a hint of disappointment threading his voice. "Looks like I can conjure poisonous mana quills—just like the Bush Hedgehog." He leaned back, a wry smile playing on his lips. "Of all the things I've pictured for myself, transforming into Sonac the Bush Hedgehog was never one."

Just like the last time, Erik grappled with his new power, sensing an internal shift yet grasping for control. He felt an urge, a nascent feeling within. An idea, or an inkling, but that was it.

Erik chased the elusive sensation, funneling mana from his brain crystal like a stream flowing through a network of underground caves, directing it towards his back. With each mana pulse, the tingling swelled, resembling the way a beacon grows brighter, guiding him to its source.

"Yeah, it makes sense that thaïd was a sort of hedgehog after all."

Within moments, Erik's back sprouted quills, ethereal as morning glories made of mist. He couldn't see them, yet their presence was undeniable. He moved to a mirror and there, his reflection, revealed a sight akin to a hedge sculpted not in green but in blue, with quills edged in verdant hues—a natural armor uniquely his own.

"I'm the spitting image of a punk kid," Erik muttered, laced with a hint of sarcasm. His newfound power lacked elegance, challenging to wield, purely defensive, like the quills of a hedgehog. Each second siphoned more mana than the Sharpening brain crystal power. It was a voracious drain. He felt it deep in his bones.

Erik's mind raced as he considered his precarious new ability. "Great, I'm a walking mana vacuum," he scoffed inwardly. "This is surely for emergency use only, unless I fancy becoming a magical prune."

Erik cut straight to his training, intent on strengthening his neural connections. The latest power granted him another link, a fresh edge in his arsenal. Though there was a problem.

Erik paused, the revelation dawning on him. He tapped his chin thoughtfully, eyes narrowing as he scrutinized the status screen. "No boost in stats," he murmured. A slow nod followed as he pieced it together. "So, the initial neural link from a new power doesn't up the numbers." His fingers drummed a silent rhythm on his arm, punctuating his newfound understanding.

He sat again on the couch and started focusing on the mana inside his brain crystal, and started training.

Dawn's bright fingers roused Erik, sunlight bathing his face in warmth.

"Ugh... Shit..."

Erik stood from the bed, and with half-closed eyes, went to wash his face. As he was done, though, a surprise waited for him. When he opened the system interface to accept the usual daily quests, he found something that wasn't there the last time.

{Weekly Quest: Conquer the Training Gauntlet}

-Completion Rewards: 1 Strength Stat Point.

-Failure Penalty: Missed Opportunity for Growth.

-Goal: Complete Daily training quests for a week.

-Description: Commit to daily quests for a full week. Prove your dedication and resilience. Success grants you increased strength, a testament to your unwavering discipline.

Erik's eyes widened as he absorbed the details of the weekly quest. His jaw slackened slightly, a mix of disbelief and awe etched across his features.

For a moment, he stood motionless, the weight of what success could bring—a point in strength — anchoring him to the spot. A silent gasp escaped him; this was the challenge he had been waiting for, a true test of his commitment.

After regaining his composure, he quickly accepted his daily quests. Breakfast followed, marking the completion of his first task with satisfaction.

Suitably dressed, backpack slung over one shoulder, he stepped outside. The cityscape basked in a soft red hue, buildings aglow under the sun's tender caress—beauty marred only by the temperament of Frant's residents.

Erik's journey to school unfolded with the usual monotony. The streets teemed with passersby lost in their own worlds, indifferent to his presence. Every corner seemed to host its own petty crime, drug deals slipping into the fabric of the eastern district's daily life.

While Erik held no regard for the citizens of Frant, the threat of abduction in such a place gnawed at him.

The young man arrived at school as usual, and Amber, Floyd and Gwen were waiting for him at the main gate. On the one hand, it was good to have people getting interested in him, but on the other, he was a little uncomfortable. While he was walking toward them. The three were engaged in conversation.

Gwen furrowed her brow, her confusion clear. "Amber, this doesn't add up. You've never gone out of your way for anyone, not even me."

Amber's gaze softened, her shoulders slumped as she looked down the hall where Erik stood alone. "He seems so... lost. It's hard to watch him drift through days without a friend."

Floyd leaned against the locker, his eyes narrowed in thought. "People might get the wrong idea, you know."

Amber's chin lifted, a defiant glint in her eye. "Let them. It's not like I care about their opinion."

Gwen let out a weary exhale, her concern etched on the lines of her forehead.

Amber's hands cut through the air, beckoning Erik. Heads turned, eyes latched onto him.

"Damn..." Erik winced, the corners of his mouth betraying a strained smile. "Hey, everyone."

Floyd leaned back, an eyebrow raised. "Took a scenic route today?"

Erik shuffled his feet, self-conscious. "Yeah, the train's a drag."

To put Amber at ease, Gwen and Floyd kept the conversation light, bouncing from the weekend's football game to the latest school gossip.

"So, what was everyone up to yesterday?" Floyd's question hung in the air.

Amber's response was quick and cheerful. "Just hung out with my brother."

Gwen chimed in from her spot against the locker. "I got lost in a book."

Erik looked up, his voice steady but quiet. "I did some training."

Floyd's response came with a hint of surprise. "Training, huh?"

"Yeah, I got nothing to do, so I trained..."

"I didn't think you were such a diligent student," Gwen said.

Erik's reply was tinged with a touch of resignation. "Well... you know... I'm a little behind compared to you all."

Gwen paused, her eyes locking with Erik's, conveying a mix of empathy and candor. "If I can be honest with you, Erik," she began, her hands clasped together as if to offer her words gently, "you don't have to try to reach our level."

She unfolded her hands, gesturing broadly to emphasize the time it took them. "It took many years for us to get here, and three months just isn't enough."

Leaning back slightly, she offered a supportive smile, trying to soften the blow. "If I were you, I'd aim for the average school level first," she advised, her gaze still fixed on him, ensuring her genuine advice sunk in.

Erik squared his shoulders, determination etched in his features. "Gwen, you've got a point, but I have to aim high."

His hands clenched at his sides. "Military school won't be kind if I'm not at my best."

Floyd leaned in, his brow creased in confusion. "Don't tell me you believed professor' McAllister's bullshit?"

Erik's gaze drifted off, a touch of uncertainty in his eyes. "I'm not sure myself," he admitted, his hands opening in a gesture of confusion.

He looked back at his friends, earnestness coming through. "What I know has been told to me by Professor McAllister," he said, tapping his temple as if to knock on the door of his own mind. "I think his words hold some truth in it. "

With a slight tilt of his head, Erik's expression hardened. "As an awakener, the military's expectations are sky high." His fists balled at his sides, embodying the pressure he felt.

He relaxed his hands, trying to convey the gravity of his situation. "If I cannot meet them," he continued, "they'll push me harder," his voice steady, despite the edge of frustration.

Erik's eyes narrowed, a flicker of defiance showing through. "And then there's everyone else," he said, a hand slicing through the air sharply, "ready to pounce at the first sign of weakness. What do you think they will do if an awakener shows himself weak?"

Amber, Floyd, and Gwen lived amidst abundance—embraced by loving families, graced with talent, cushioned by wealth, and gifted with looks.

Their lives, woven with privilege, left them blind or unconcerned by the harsher realities that Erik had faced.

They were, unknowingly, ensconced within the very system that had been indifferent to Erik's struggles, a system that had overlooked and undervalued him at every turn.

Their well-intentioned empathy could only graze the surface of Erik's lived experience, which was etched with challenges they had never known.

"Do you think they will start bullying you again?" Amber asked.

Erik's voice carried a bitter edge. "That's one of the reasons," he began, his hands unconsciously rubbing at an old bruise, a ghost of past pains.

He locked eyes with them, his gaze intense, unflinching. "You've never faced what I have," he said, a slight shake of his head emphasizing his point, "but take it from me—daily beatings are far from pleasant."

A rueful half-smile flickered on his lips as he continued. "At first, it was because of my F-ranked brain crystal," he explained.

His hand clenched into a fist, mirroring the tightness in his voice. "Now, with my E-ranked crystal as an awakener, I bet things would be at least the same."

"Bullshit," Floyd said. "Why should they harass you, Erik? There are many people with E-ranked crystals, and I don't see them bullied," he added.

"Sorry Floyd. But you are really blind then. Besides, they aren't awakeners," Erik pointed out. It was the truth, albeit a sad one.

Erik made his way to class, his new acquaintances at his side. From a distance, Conal, Orson, and Logan watched. Conal caught sight of Erik beside Amber, the school's idol. Doubt flickered across his face, yet the scene before him was unmistakably real.

Conal squinted across the courtyard, his brow furrowed in disbelief. "Am I seeing things?" His voice barely carried over the din of students milling about.

Orson turned, following Conal's stare. "What?"

"Erik Romano and Amber Joyce..." Conal's voice trailed off, his astonishment clear.

Orson's eyes lit up with recognition; a grin spread across his face. "That? It's the school's hot topic!"

Logan, who had been silent until now, leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. "What?" The name 'Amber' seemed to strike a chord, his jaw setting firm.

"That mother..." Disdain laced Logan's tone, his hands balled into fists at his sides, a clear sign of his simmering jealousy. Amber's allure had clearly ensnared him as it had many others.

He poured out his heart to her; she declined with grace. Amber, ever courteous, aimed to spare his feelings, yet this gentle refusal cut Logan deeper than any wound.

Now, witnessing Erik at Amber's side, betrayal surged through him, baseless but fierce. Strange notions took root as he watched them together, his gaze darkening.

"Logan!" Conal's voice cut through the tension.

"WHAT?!" Logan snapped back, his voice a sharp crack in the air.

"You alright?" Concern edged Conal's question.

"No, I'm not..." Logan's eyes burned into Erik's back, his hands curling into tight balls.

"That little... I've lost all my patience." Logan's words broke off as he swung around to face Conal.

"It means nothing, Logan!" Conal tried to reach him, his own voice rising in alarm at Logan's escalating fury.

"Yeah, she's probably just got him running errands," Orson chimed in, a smirk playing on his lips.

"I don't care..." Logan's voice was low, his eyes glinting with resentment. "He made fools of us, and now he's cozying up to Amber?"

"Don't you think you're exaggerating?" Conal's voice held a note of reason. "She's just a girl."

The slap came fast. Logan's face was a mask of unbridled anger. "Never say that again."

"Sorry, Logan..." Conal touched his stinging cheek, his words faltering, his eyes wide with shock.

Logan's gaze cut through the crowd to where Amber, Erik, Gwen, and Floyd disappeared into the building. "I think it's time to have a word with Erik..."