

BIOLOGICAL 721

Chapter 721: Last day

Four months had passed since Erik's encounter with the Terrapedes and the Galewings.

The egg he made did hatch, and a young clone he named June birthed. The creature was like all the other ones. Elongated body belonging to a human with dark grey skin, but worm-like head with human features. Of course, June, as any other kid, showed great curiosity about its surroundings.

Like all of Erik's clones, it had the memories and half the abilities of its creator, making it exceptionally intelligent compared to other species on the planet. However, that did not fully satisfy its curiosity about the world and the nature of life.

To him, the memories resembled pictures he saw on TV. Their usefulness was limited to understanding the world around them, engaging in conversation, and learning proper behavior, but he remained childlike.

Erik wasted no time in introducing June to the Galewing's blood, triggering a rapid transformation. With June's new form, they hunted Thaid's by the thousands.

The hunts were fruitful. Erik gained a multitude of neural links that increased his strength.

His greatest achievement, however, was reaching level 130 and raising his brain crystal to the B rank on the Ferebitz scale.

While this level of mana alone wasn't sufficient to face some opponents on equal terms, it was a significant improvement.

It allowed Erik to fight for longer periods, and it gave him a stronger foundation for his brain crystal powers.

Besides these achievements, Erik also merged a lot of his brain crystal powers. He sacrificed Telepathy, Solidifying Slime, Aerokinesis, Ice Sword, Target Lock, Bestial Roar, Poisonous Astral Wolf Bite, and Poisonous Mana Darts. In return, he gained Solid Frostwind, Instability, and Astral Wolf.

Solid Frostwind was an amalgamation of three distinct powers: Aerokinesis, Ice Sword, and Solidifying Slime. This blend gave Erik the ability to forge weapons from a hardened slime, each infused with the chilling essence of frost and the dynamic force of wind.

The frost component not only added a substantial boost to the weapon's lethality, but also introduced a slowing effect to its attacks.

These frost-laden, wind-empowered weapons even allowed Erik to attack from a distance.

The Poisonous Astral Wolf Bite represented a different approach. It created the complete form of a Leylahad, and it resulted from merging Logan's Venomous Mana Darts and the Astral Wolf Bite.

This spectral creature bore the same multifaceted effects as Logan's and The Venomous Astral Wolf Bite's original power, but with an added dimension of physicality.

The Astral Wolf, in its complete form, was not just a visual manifestation, but a living entity depending on Erik's mana. It was capable of executing complex maneuvers and follow orders.

Erik assumed the system took the ability from both powers to materialize something out of mana to make the wolf. That was why the Astral wolf was a complete being, and not just a head, as in the previous version.

Each time the Astral Wolf bared its fangs, it was not just physical damage it inflicted. The venom carried multiple effects, mirroring the complexity and versatility of Logan's abilities. It could induce paralysis, sap strength, or even distort the victim's perception of reality, making it lethal even when the wolf couldn't kill its prey.

During these months, the Astral Wolf had proven to be an invaluable ally in battle, complementing Erik's own abilities and strategies. It fought alongside him and June whenever there was a land fight to make that couldn't be solved by flying.

Their coordinated attacks proved very efficient, leaving their enemies unable to fight back against the three titans.

Instability, among Erik's newly gained powers, was perhaps the most useful in battle. Particularly against humans.

It was a power that delved into the realm of the mind, probing emotions and thoughts. It was not a physical force like Solid Frostwind or the Astral Wolf, but its impact was just as potent, if not more so.

This power granted Erik, among the other things, the ability to manipulate the emotional states of those around him.

He could incite fear in the bravest of warriors, sow doubt in the most confident of minds, or induce false courage that led enemies into reckless actions.

Erik used it to prevent monsters from attacking him when he couldn't immediately deal with them. He used it to push ambushing monsters from coming out of their hiding spots for an easier hunt.

Erik could even sense when a creature was nearby given their feelings, instincts, primal thoughts.

Reading minds was another facet of instability. It was not just about knowing what his enemies were thinking; it was about understanding their strategies, their fears, their strengths, and their weaknesses.

This insight allowed Erik to anticipate attacks, to be always one step ahead, turning his enemies' plans against them.

But perhaps the most effective use of Instability was its ability to instill paralyzing fear in his enemies.

Fear could make even the most formidable foe hesitate, could cloud judgment and slow reactions.

By instilling this fear, Erik could prevent his enemies from attacking at all, giving him the upper hand in any confrontation.

These new powers simplified his hunts by a great deal. With Solid Frostwind, he could take down his prey from a distance or engage them in close combat with his frost-imbued weapons.

The Astral Wolf was an excellent distraction and could deal significant damage on its own. And with Instability, he could control the flow of the battle, manipulating his enemies' emotions and reading their intentions.

Four months of relentless hunting had brought about many changes in Erik. He was stronger now, more capable.

His powers were more refined, and their applications more varied. He had come a long way since his encounter with the Galewings, and he was eager to see how much further he could go.

Erik's endeavors over these months extended beyond his pursuit of power. He dedicated a lot of effort to track down the Thaid responsible for destroying the cargo plane some months prior.

Despite his search throughout the White Desert, the creature remained a ghost, leaving no trace behind.

The chances of its migration to the mountains surfaced in Erik's mind. However, such terrain was the domain of wyverns, and the Thaid's presence there would likely spark a brutal confrontation that would end up changing the landscape. Yet, there were no signs of any recent large-scale battles in the mountainous regions.

The White Desert wasn't small by any means. Sure, the monster could have left for other areas, but it would have been hard not having been spotted by anyone, or no sign of it were left by simply hunting.

This led him to consider a more unsettling theory: the creature's origin might be from the Mur continent.

Known for its dense Thaid population, Mur was separated from their land by a vast ocean, with only Hin's nation acting as a geographical bridge still blocked by water.

The idea of such a gigantic bird crossing over cities unnoticed was perplexing. Hin, though not extensive, was big and populated enough to spot such an anomaly.

Damn, if it wasn't for the Blackguards' presence, that place would have been long destroyed.

<Well. It looks like I will have to visit the Mur continent sooner or later. But for now, let's not be arrogant. No one knows what kind of Thaid's are there, and if even Solomon Judd died there, I may risk dying all the same. >

Having no other lead, Erik abandoned the search.

It was Erik's last day in the White Desert. The sun was waning. The vast expanse of white sand, his hunting ground for the past Four months, was bathed in the soft hues of twilight. He stood alone, his gaze sweeping over the familiar terrain one last time.

The White Desert had been a challenging yet rewarding training ground.

Yet, as much as he had grown, the young man knew he couldn't afford to remain there any longer.

The Thaid's he had been hunting were strong, but there were deadlier adversaries out there, and the system started needing absurd amounts of mana to level up. To get stronger, he needed to continue pushing his boundaries and search for stronger Thaid's.

His gaze turned towards the distant mountains. Their jagged peaks stood silhouetted against the darkening sky. That was his next destination. He knew that stronger Thaid's lived there, creatures that would test his new powers and demand even more from him. However, he planned on passing by a city nestled there near the wyverns' nests, Caelora City.

He took one last look at the White Desert, etching its image into his memory. Then, with a resolute expression, he turned towards the tree that served as his house during the past months.

He prepared for the journey, picking everything he deemed useful for the journey. Pots, pans, plants, weapons. Most of that was going to be carried by June.

As night fell, Erik set off, leaving the White Desert behind.

Erik's Status:1

[Host Information]

NAME: Erik Romano

AGE:18

POWER LEVEL: 507

SYSTEM LEVEL: 130

EXPERIENCE: 12000/657383.9

DNA POINTS: 25250

HEALTH:11840/11840

MANA:11770/11770

{Attributes}

STRENGTH: 190

INTELLIGENCE: 232

DEXTERITY: 170

ENERGY: 587

Available Attributes points: 0

{Powers}

[Biological Super Computer Powers]

-Brain Crystal Manipulation

Brain Crystal Power Extraction

(Allows the absorption of the brain crystal, making the host able to gain the power contained within. Notice: the DNA must be changed in order to allow the body to use the power. See DNA extraction.)

Brain Crystal power Merging

(Allows to merge two powers birthing a new one. It requires the merging of the DNA to work.)

Brain Crystal Power Analysis

(Allows to analyse the target brain crystal without the need to know the creature.)

- (LOCKED)

- Brain Crystal Power Strengthening

(Allows the gaining of the energy attribute points)

-(LOCKED)

-DNA Manipulation

DNA Extraction

(Allows the absorption of foreign DNA, making the host able to replicate it inside his own body. Notice: Changing the DNA is a slow process, and it is required to use new brain crystal powers.)

DNA Merging

(Allows to merge two DNAs, birthing a new one. Required to accommodate merged powers.)

DNA Analysis

(Allows to analyse the enemy DNA from the distance for a better understanding of the target's stats.)

- (LOCKED)

DNA Strengthening

(Allows the gaining of the Strength, Intelligence, and Dexterity attribute points)

-(LOCKED)

- Analysis

(Gives the host information about his surroundings, plants, creatures, and ores.)

-Brain Information Injector

(It allows the injection of information directly to the brain. Based on touch)

-Device Manipulation

(Allows the Host to manipulate electrical and mana-driven devices. Based on touch.)

[Host's Powers]

FORCE MANIPULATION: Bv1B-RANKED

(Manipulate a mana-driven force to produce powerful shockwaves that can change in intensity, radius, speed, and power. It is also possible to use the power differently as to generate force shields.)

PARALLEL WILLS: Bv1C-RANKED

(Allows the user to passively increase intelligence based on the number of neural links. It also allows the construction of a mana brain that allows independent thoughts and can be used for multiple purposes.)

STRENGTH ENHANCER: Bp2D-RANKED

(Depending on the amount of mana used, the amount of strength increases)

PLANT MASTER: Bπ1B-RANKED

(Allows to grow and control plant based organism. The usage depends on the plant and the user's will.)

CHAMELEON VEIL: Bπ2C-RANKED

(Allows to turn totally transparent and to project what is behind you, making it almost impossible to be seen. The user can move while using this Brain Crystal power. However, notice that the ripples in light the power creates while moving decrease the power's hiding abilities, increasing the chance of being seen.)

CHIMERIC BIOMETAL SOLDIER: Bo2A-RANKED

(This power allows the user to create a human-worms hybrid with 50% of the user's physical stats. The clones are permanent, but to make them, a lot of mana is necessary; they can't use brain crystal powers. The clone is born from an egg, and it takes a month for them to reach maturity after having hatched two weeks after the eggs were made.

Before that, their physical stats are lower than 50% of the original's body. The clones are half as intelligent as the main body, but know everything the main body knows when he created them. They also have several biological abilities.)

EXOSHIELD: Bσ1C-RANKED

(Allow creating a mana exoskeleton.)

SOLID FROSTWIND: Bσ1A-RANKED

(Allow to imbue an item with wind and frost elements. The Wind element is stronger than the frost one and allows control over the element itself. The power allows to create solidified slime weapons.)

INSTABILITY: Bσ1A-RANKED

(Allows to perceive, understand and mess with the emotions of the surrounding targets and to read their minds.)

ASTRAL WOLF: Bσ1B-RANKED

(Create A full-bodied mana wolf with venomous fangs [the venom has various effects.])

{Skills}

Kyokar hand-to-hand style (ADVANCED)

(A military fighting style developed in Frant)

Crypt of the Desert Style (ADVANCED)

(Flyssa fighting style developed by Master Nieminen)

Etrium's sword style (INTERMEDIATE)

(Basic Sword Style developed in Etrium.)

Chapter 722: To Caelora City

Erik soared high above the shimmering dunes of the White Desert atop June. His loyal clone morphed into a Galewing's form.

The blistering sands stretched to the horizon in all directions beneath them. But ahead, Erik could see the desert beginning to yield to a vast forest blanketing the land.

Erik perched to survey the forest below as it basked in the full bloom of spring. From this high vantage point, the forest was a tapestry of vibrant greens, the leaves of the towering trees swayed in the breeze.

Sunlight filtered through the canopy, creating a dynamic mosaic of light and shadow that danced across the treetops.

Erik could sense the forest awakening from its winter slumber thanks to his plant master brain crystal power. It was a weird feeling. He always had a connection with the flora, but ever since he got the plant master's power, this became stronger.

But he knew that the forest, which appeared empty, harbored dangers unseen from his aerial view.

"So... this is what the Flying Thaid's experience every day, uh? I get why being in a forest is the safest place to be to avoid being seen by them. I can't see anything under the trees."

Erik didn't travel so far with June until now, so he had never seen the forest from this height in the past months. He got close to it on some occasions, but never enough for him to say it was impossible to see everything below.

Past the endless sea of green, Erik could just make out the snow-capped peaks of the Wyvern Mountains piercing the clouds. The snow was still heavy, the effects of winter on them still present, yet it was clear the surface snow, to what it was possible at such altitudes, was starting to melt.

However, seeing the mountains in the distance was weird for many reasons. On one hand, it was underwhelming. The distance made it appear tiny, and it was weird to think wyverns lived there.

Erik was very far from them, and if he could see them from his position meant the mountains were walloping, conflicting with his earlier thought.

That would be their eventual destination if everything remained as it was. But going there was still something he planned on doing at some point down the road.

The mountains marked the territorial border of the Wyverns' flocks, and only a fool would attempt to fly straight through it.

Erik called down to June, informing him of their path ahead. The clone nodded, having already been informed of Erik's decision.

June was bound to obey Erik's commands without question. No, better, he wasn't bound. He wanted to obey his orders.

It was a sort of primal instinct for him, a result of Erik's brain crystal power, the same that birthed him.

The winds picked up, rousing Erik from the introspection he was having at that moment. He patted June's neck in signal.

"Take us down. I want to avoid getting unnecessary attention." June banked his mighty wings and began their descent toward the trees. Erik took one last long look at the mountains in the distance. That hallowed ground called to him, but it had to wait a while longer.

As Erik and June descended towards the forest, a glint in the distance caught Erik's eye. The young man peered closer, and he made out a city nestled at the base of the mountains, still some time ahead of them.

[Wait, June!] Erik telepathically said.

[What Master?]

[I can see the city from here.]

To see the city took some effort due to the distance. But the city was placed in a peculiar location that made it possible to notice something, even from this distance.

The very base of the Caelora mountain range, in a spot devoid of trees likely used by the citizens to build houses or fortifications.

This location was nestled in a treeless area at the mountain's foot. The absence of foliage was not a natural occurrence, but rather the result of deliberate human intervention.

Maybe the citizens had cleared this tract of land to construct buildings and fortifications.

This distinctive choice of location, devoid of the typical forest cover, rendered the city noticeable against the backdrop of the wooded mountain range.

That was Caelora City, or better, not that there were many choices among the cities nestled at the base of a deadly mountain range.

Erik could see the shimmering dome of energy encasing the city, glinting in the sunlight, but wasn't able to see much else.

Erik knew something about the place. The architecture was like those of other places in Etrium, but had some peculiarities because of the climate and its close location to the Caelora mountain range.

Caelora City was one of the toughest settlements in Etrium. Its proximity to the Caelora Mountains meant a constant threat from the Thaid packs that roamed there. Only a heavily fortified city could survive in such a location.

As Erik looked at the city from the distance, he wondered why the citizens persisted in staying in such a dangerous location.

Not only was the Thaid population abundant, but the monsters' strength exceeded the norm.

The sole city comparable to Caelora was Testrovsc's Rest. Situated as a border city near the mountain range dividing Frant from Etrium, which also witnessed a significant Thaid presence near its walls.

However, Testrovsc's Rest was not nestled at the base of the mountain range, meaning the number of attacks was lower than in Caelora City.

Thaids that would overwhelm any other settlement were common there. It seemed risky to erect a city in such a dangerous place.

Yet the more Erik considered it, the more he realized the profits and advantages the city had by hunting there.

By building near the mountains, the city's mercenaries and hunters had easy access to Thaid corpses.

The creatures' armored hides, bones, and crystals could all be harvested for crafting powerful weapons, armor, and artifacts - valuable commodities across the world.

The constant threat kept the city's guards, mercenaries, and adventurers on high alert.

Since they regularly faced Thaid attacks meant they grew stronger and more battle-hardened than any city deep in Etrium's safe interior.

This made Caelora City home to some of the nation's mightiest warriors, their skills honed by constant conflict.

The city's scholars and researchers could study live the Thaids living nearby, learning about their abilities and weaknesses, hunting strategies, and coming up with ways to kill them in safety.

Such knowledge allowed them to develop more effective tactics, training regimes, and weapons to counter the Thaid menace.

Erik realized that while risky, Caelora City's location provided unique advantages that made it a pillar of Etrium's strength.

The monsters were a threat, but also a valuable resource. With cleverness and resolve, the city had transformed danger into opportunity.

Erik admired their stoic philosophy, not unlike his own. Perhaps he could benefit from their wisdom as well.

However, the situation also meant that Caelora City was rather isolated from the other cities. But Erik considered it could still offer resources and information found nowhere else.

Despite this situation, he knew the frontier town of Testrovsc's Rest, where Erik had based his activities, was provincial in comparison.

[June, that's the city I was talking about. We are going to proceed on foot to head there.]

[I need to go there and contact Noah. We also need to buy supplies. I'm sick of eating bug meat.]

[Why? I found it very good.] June replied.

[That's because you only remember the taste of other dishes but had never tried one before. Believe me, there is nothing like a well-cooked lasagna or a pizza in the world.]

[I'm still unconvinced, Master. I get it, you might not be on board, but in my opinion, bug meat's kinda fancy. The texture's a real trip. It's this weird combo of soft and crunchy, like a playful game for your taste buds. And when you cook it just perfect, the outer part goes all crispy and golden, and inside, it's surprisingly juicy.]

June's voice resonated through Erik's mind with an unexpected enthusiasm as he described the taste of giant bugs' meat such as Terrapedes to Erik. However, the young man had a disgusted look.

It wasn't like, if cooked, the meat was unacceptable. After all, most of the times the bugs, or better, the Thaides from which the meat came, were enormous, so it wasn't like they were eating the viscera and anything that might be disgusting for the masses.

The problem was that without proper seasoning; it had a very mushy and earthy taste. If he would have at least got more types of spices, he could have covered that taste with it.

[Are you out of your mind?] Erik was shocked. [How can you compare it to a Carbonara?]

[It's just my taste, Master.]

[Then I will have to change your ways and make you a true believer!]

[If you say so, Master... I will do my best to please you.]

[You don't have to please me. I know what I'm saying.] said Erik. [I will bring you to eat a pizza. You won't be disappointed,] Erik paused.

[Well, that is, if they are able to make a decent one... You know what? The first thing we will do once there is go to eat some pizza, but we will have to go hunting for the right place. Damn, we won't even go search for a place to sleep before you eat a pizza!]

[I can't wait, Master.] If June could smile in his Galewing form, he would have. Erik was usually cold and composed.

He knew that was because of the life he lived until now, but sometimes there were some twinkles of fervor in him that hinted at how young he still was and elicited feelings of warmth in the clone.

Erik nodded. With a thought, June adjusted their course toward Caelora City, glimmering in the distance.

Chapter 723: Annoying delay (1)

As Erik and June were soaring through the clouds toward Caelora City, Erik felt something.

While reaching out with his mind through Instability brain crystal power, he detected a mass of primal urges and voracious hunger. It was clear it was a bunch of Thaid's, yet, based on the altitude, it must have been a group of flying ones.

Their crude thoughts came through as a jumble of disjointed emotions and flashes of imagery, like a fragmented mosaic. But the overall impression was clear - these Thaid were driven solely by their basest instincts to hunt, feed, and kill any who dared invade their territory, and they sensed them.

Erik had encountered such primal urges before among the lesser Thaid breeds. Their underdeveloped brains lacked higher cognition, dominated almost entirely by fight-or-flight impulses. Only the oldest and most cunning Thaid developed true intelligence and forethought, but he had yet to find one.

Still, a flock of instinct-driven flying Thaid could be dangerous. Erik opened his mind and increased his mana output further, concentrating on filtering details from the mental noise.

He determined their approximate distance and direction, and estimated they were no more than a dozen individuals. At least based on the intensity of their thoughts.

Based on the area, they had to either be Galewings that were originally going toward the desert, or Zephyrwings, that contrary to the other race usually inhabited around forests.

The Zephyrwings were the most likely, since this was their natural territory. But without a visual feedback, Erik could not determine what species it was. Erik would have to wait until they crested the horizon to identify his attackers.

[June, a flock approaches. I can feel their thoughts, crude as they are,] Erik warned telepathically.

[I expected we might encounter some. But I don't think we will have problems. We have bested their kind many times.]

Erik nodded, but remained wary. A flock could still overwhelm them if he didn't play his cards right, despite June's reassurances.

Together they had battled flying Thaid across the White Desert, but not in vast groups and never this far north. Different species could mean different strategies to fight them.

Erik wasn't that worried about himself. These beasts couldn't kill him now, even if they tried. His powers were enough to make it so he could come out unscathed. June was the problem.

As if reading Erik's thoughts, June intervened to reassure him.

[My Biomantic Armor remains strong, Master. Do not worry about me.]

[I know I shouldn't but last time you got really close to get permanently injured.]

[I know, Master. That was an unlucky event. I didn't see the tenth attack coming and didn't harden enough to protect me.]

[If you say so. Just be careful, I doubt we'll come out unharmed if we fall from this eight.]

With that, June's feathers hardened and became as durable as metal as he summoned the biological power granted by Erik's Biological Supercomputer's merging.

It coated his body in natural armor. Hardened spines jutted out along his spine for extra protection.

While glancing back, Erik used the Solid Frostwind Brain Crystal power to conjure a hardened slime Flyssa, ready to use it in an instant.

His Instability power hummed as he prepared to disrupt the flock's coordination when they neared. This would not be an easy fight, but he had faith in June's abilities to avoid their attacks.

That was when the first winged shapes appeared on the horizon. Erik counted around twelve thaids, how his instability power suggested, and analyzed them one by one.

They were not that strong. On the ground, he would decimate them using no power, but underestimating them in an aerial battle was foolish.

To battle against flying thaids, despite being simpler now thanks to June, was still harder than Erik assumed before getting June's help.

As Erik observed them better, it became clear these beasts were Zephyrwings.

They were a peculiar race. There were many theories about their evolution, but no one was able to pinpoint from what animal they stemmed from.

Though they had very similar powers to Galewings, as they could control the wind, but it was to a lesser extent compared to the stronger Desertic beasts.

However, despite having a weaker brain crystal and power and fewer mana reserves, they were stronger, physically, and slightly more intelligent. The latter was the biggest problem. Though it was weird, they had some primal thoughts, despite being praised to be smart beasts.

<Should I get their brain crystals? >

However, since theirs was a nerfed version of the Galewings' power, it would be useless, and opted not to collect their brain crystals.

The flock of Zephyrwings closed the distance, their wings beating furiously to gain speed.

[Are you ready, June?]

[As always, Master. Let's cut these mongrels to pieces!]

Erik gripped his conjured Frostwind Flyssa tightly as the first of the creatures entered his range.

By reaching inward, Erik channeled mana into the glowing blue and green blade. He could feel the raw energy coursing from his brain crystal and down his arms through his neural links. Then Erik swung his sword.

Three pale blue wind blades streaked from the tip, swirling with the misty white aura resulting from the infusion of frost element into the attack.

The wind blade screeched like banshees as they tore the air, leaving a chilling aura in the surroundings.

The very atmosphere seemed to freeze in their wake, and the scent of frost hung heavy.

Erik could see the creatures' yellow eyes go wide in an instant as they recognized how threatening that attack was.

For flying thajids, kings and queens in the sky, something like that was unprecedented, with only the Wyverns being stronger than them, and to a large margin at that.

Most of the flock dove up or to the sides. However, a slow and unlucky member fell because of a wind blade.

The wind made weapon sliced through its hardened chest feathers like paper.

They cut deep into the Zephyrwing's flesh, releasing sprays of dark red blood from the gashes.

The frost attribute coating the wind blades sapped away all heat upon contact, and within a matter of seconds, it froze the blood that had gushed from the wound, creating a gruesome spectacle of frozen sculptures. Though the blades bisected the creature.

[ZEPHYRWING KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 5917 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

<The experience is not bad...>

The bisected Zephyrwing couldn't even shriek as its mutilated body began separating. Its wings spasmed and lost lift, sending the creature into an uncontrolled downward spiral. It plummeted, finally disappearing below the cloud cover far below.

The two wind blades, slicing through the air, maintained their course. They carved clear paths through the sky. The clouds fragmented. Where the blades passed, they left behind trails, disrupting the cloud formations and creating distinct lines against the blue backdrop.

Seeing their brethren dispatched, the remaining Zephyrwings scattered in all directions to prevent Erik killing them on clusters and maybe give an advantage to the not targeted monsters.

But Erik slashed repeatedly, his dexterity allowing him to keep track of the beasts as they moved and circled the young man and his mount.

These Thaid's natural aerial agility allowed all to stay clear of the attacks, but they were in clear disadvantage.

The frigid wind attribute left behind by Erik's blades persisted even after they passed, continuing to sap strength and body heat from the Zephyrwings and making difficult for them to flap their wings.

Erik's focus wasn't only on the monsters. He strategically targeted specific areas around him, intending to create a chilling, frost-laden space.

This tactic was forced on him by the fact the power he merged with the Aerokinesis ability and that allowed him to use the frost element was a lesser one Erik had gained long ago.

However, the power's inherent weakness limited its scope. It wasn't strong enough to make extensive frost domes on its own, not even after the merging.

To make that situation, Erik spent significant amounts of mana to manifest the frosty environment he desired.

This expenditure was necessary to enhance the effectiveness of his strategy, though it demanded more from his mana reserves than he preferred.

Already, some were slowing and struggling to beat their wings with enough power to stay aloft. Their reactions were dulled by the insidious cold seeping into their very bones, and simultaneously, Erik was using his instability power to mess with their emotions, making them more scared than what they should be.

However, Zephyrwings were cunning creatures. Even as Erik culled their numbers from a distance and messed with their brains, these Thaid's adapted to counter his ruthless assaults.

The survivors learned to anticipate the trajectory of each wind blade, adjusting their flight to keep barely clear of the attacks, and tried to stay out of the frost aura.

A few of the hardier Zephyrwings even powered through the frigid auras, fighting through the pain to stay airborne.

Erik observed their changing tactics, impressed by their tenacity, and understood why they were deemed smarter than most Thaid's. However, his instability power told him they were still a far cry from really being smart.

Despite the situation, Erik did not allow himself to grow impatient. He had bested even more formidable Thaid breeds in the past through his skill and bravery. These beasts may prove clever, but he would show them what a true master of the arcane could do.

The remaining Zephyrwings regrouped, flying in tight formation as they circled around Erik and June. Though they lacked the raw power of Galewings, these cunning Thaid's still possessed some command over the winds.

Erik could sense the air currents shifting and could feel the Zephyrwings channeling their mana.

While releasing piercing screeches that seemed to be made out of rage, the Thaid's flapped their wings in unison, generating slicing gusts that coalesced into pale white blades of wind.

However, these wind blades were comparable to those made by Erik. The reason was that, albeit their brain crystal power wasn't comparable to his, they still had almost double the amount of mana Erik possessed.

The wind blades screeched like banshees as they tore the air, the sound a haunting echo of their deadly purpose.

This eerie screech was born from the sheer force with which they were sent through the atmosphere.

The problem lay in the sheer numbers. Each of the 11 surviving Zephyrwings made a minimum of 10 wind blades. As a result, a relentless barrage of hundreds of these deadly tear splitting slices hurtled toward their position, leaving them in a dire situation.

"Stop!"

Erik yanked June's feathers. They banked hard in opposite directions as five wind blades sliced through the space they were going to occupy. The blades dissipated into wisps moments later - the Zephyrwings could not maintain them for long.

Erik, perched atop his colossal bird companion, June, faced a daunting aerial onslaught. He gripped June's feathers tightly, his eyes scanning the chaos unfolding around them. Hundreds of wind blades, conjured by the Zephyrwings, hurtled through the air with deadly intent.

As the wind blades screeched and whirled, Erik and June moved in perfect harmony, evading the deadly projectiles with an unmatched grace.

Erik's skilled command over June allowed them to weave and dip through the storm of blades like a well-rehearsed dance.

He leaned low over June's back, their movements synchronized as they banked left and right, dodging the relentless onslaught.

The wind howled in protest as Erik and June maneuvered among them, avoiding the blades that sliced through the surrounding air. Erik's heart pounded in his chest.

He knew these were strong enough to bisect both him and June, and he didn't know if his clone was fast enough to avoid them all.

June's massive wings beat, propelling them higher into the sky and out of harm's way.

Erik could feel the power in June's sinewy muscles as he flapped them. However, the Zephyrwings did the same and gained altitude.

Erik's eyes remained locked on the battlefield above, searching for every inch available to avoid the blades.

Through their deft maneuvers, Erik and June evaded the deadly barrage of wind blades.

"MOVE!"

But more wind blades were already forming above and below. June pumped his wings, increasing his speed. Two blades crossed scant inches from Erik's head, ruffling his hair. A third grazed June's talons as he evaded upward.

"We need to get out the encirclement! The frost area is doing nothing!"

June then started flying forward, but the Zephyrwings gave chase, trying to box in the pair with crisscrossing wind blades.

Erik and June performed an aerial dance, reaching the point where they had to dive or spin abruptly on themselves to avoid the attacks.

Erik's Instability powers buzzed warnings whenever a thaïd was making an attack and he alerted June to air currents that signaled attacks.

They stayed alive, but the endless evasion left no chance for Erik to counterattack.

Another pale, almost transparent blade sheared off a few of June's armored feathers as it narrowly missed. They could not keep this up forever.

Erik focused his mana into his slime sword, channeling frost energy along the blade's edge. As June leveled out from a steep dive, Erik slashed the air, launching a crescent wave of frigid wind mana.

The freezing blast created a vast dome of frosty air. Erik made the move in a brief lull moment. The wind acted like a gigantic wall, and hit two Zephyrwings, encrusting their wings with ice. Their frozen bodies dropped away, crashing far below.

[ZEPHYRWINGS KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 11833 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

The flock scattered from the deadly frost-wind mana, breaking their formation.

Erik realized that fortuitous chance had given them an opportunity which he had no intention of letting pass.

While hurtling more freezing waves from his sword, he intercepted two more thaids. It wasn't hard since they were getting distance from Erik's previous attack, and by predicting their trajectory, he released the attack that landed on them like a homing missile.

There were only 7 remaining Zephyrwings, and the battle dropped its difficulty by several degrees.

But the survivors got far enough from the attacks and the subsequent frost area quicker than Erik expected, resuming their wind blade assaults within moments.

June's reflexes were pushed to their limit as he snapped into aerial rolls and last-second dodges, but it was easier than before now that there were at least 40 less wind blades around. Though, an errant blade grazed his back, drawing a pained screech.

<AAAAAAAAAAAAH! >

"June! Are you ok?!"

"Not that much, Master! It hurts!"

"Keep focusing. If we do not pay attention, we will die! I know it's hard, but you have to make it!"

While Erik fought, he was constantly using his instability power. He was using it to predict when and where the creatures were going to attack, and at the start of the battle, he also used it to destabilize the monsters.

However, he realized that wasn't enough. He needed to destabilize them more if they wanted to win, but that power required a lot of mana.

Though there wasn't much he could do, he had to push all the mana he had available and close the game quickly.

At the same time, seeing their opponent injured, the Zephyrwings circled like sharks, preparing for their next coordinated attack.

"They seek to finish us, Master," June said, panting from exertion. "And my stamina wanes."

"Stay focused, June. I have an idea." Erik said. "We've weathered worse storms. This won't be the one to take us down!"

Through it all, June wove around Erik, guarding his back from the frenzied attackers. His armored hide protected him from some of the attacks, but he still got injured a little.

It was at that moment that Erik pumped a massive amount of mana into his instability brain crystal power.

With that, he created a massive wave of fear into the Zephyrwings, but that was enough to kill only 4 of them. The remaining three had to be killed without Erik's help.

The problem was that the Zephyrwings' massive amount of mana naturally contrasted Erik's from entering their system. The instability brain crystal power was hard to detect, but required a lot of mana to push through the minds.

"Focus on those two!" Erik said. June did as instructed and lashed out, hammering the two Zephyrwings with physical blows. Two more plummeted away as Erik's clone twisted their heads off mid flight.

"Two more down! Only five remaining!"

Three Zephyrwings rallied as Erik focused on the last two Zephyrwings he could target. They regrouped for a coordinated dive.

The thaid folded their wings and hurtled down in a v formation, talons aimed at Erik and June. As he sensed the intent through his instability power, Erik prepared. He kept channeling mana into his instability power, but dissolved the slime sword and picked up his Flyssa.

"Break left!" he shouted.

June executed a sharp bank in mid-air, allowing Erik to leap from the giant bird's back.

As he moved, Erik's blade flashed like lightning, severing the head of the first Zephyrwing he landed upon. The creature crumpled beneath him, lifeless.

In a fraction of seconds, Erik bounded forward, landing on the back of the next Zephyrwing. In one fluid motion, he repeated the sequence, beheading the second monster with a precise strike.

However, as Erik dispatched the two, he made a pivotal decision. He stopped channeling mana into his instability power.

In the blink of an eye, he conjured another wind blade, and with a single, masterful swing, he cleaved the remaining thaid into two separate, lifeless halves.

The Zephyrwings fell from the sky, defeated and vanquished. June scrambled to pick Erik up and stop his free fall.

But the remaining two Zephyrwings he had stopped with the instability power attacked June with a tangle of wings, claws and beaks.

June screeched, smashing his talons into one attacker. But the other clawed viciously, shredding wings and drawing blood. Erik kept free falling, waiting for June to help.

"Master!"

With a move, June disengaged from the Zephyrwings that kept chasing the gigantic bird.

It took little for June to reach Erik, and once he gripped his feathers and jumped on his back, he shouted.

"STOP!"

June furled his wings as Erik raised his sword overhead, channeling a huge amount of mana into his Frostwind blade. The air crackled as icy winds coalesced along the blade.

The remaining Zephyrwings arrived at the speed of a torpedo.

With a mighty slash, Erik unleashed the freezing mana-powered attack. A very large sharp wind blade with chilling energy exploded outward, peppering the two last Zephyrwings. Their bodies seized up as the frost instantly penetrated flesh and feathers. The frozen Thaid's spun out, trailing frozen mist as they tumbled away.

[ZEPHYRWINGS KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 11833 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

<Incredible, Master! > June exclaimed as the frozen Zephyrwings dropped from the sky.

Erik breathed, drained from channeling so much mana. <We made it, my friend. Your aerial skill saved us from their blades. >

June preened at the praise. <I live to serve, Master. Though next time, perhaps we can take some steps to avoid being surrounded by a frenzied flock of Thaid's. >

<It's not like it's my fault. I told you they were coming! >

Erik chuckled weakly. <But yes, let's avoid that if we can. > He leaned forward, resting his head against June's feathered neck as they glided clear of the dissipating icy shards.

Erik and June hovered alone in the clearing skies, the air chill with lingering frost energy. Though exhausted, Erik still clutched his sword tightly, wary of any last attackers.

While looking downward, Erik saw the broken bodies of Zephyrwings littering the landscape far below. Caelora City still shone ahead, beckoning them onward.

Erik sheathed his blade. <Let's go on foot for the remaining time. Shall we? >

<Yes, Master. It's a great idea. >

Chapter 725: Spotting the city

As the two flew, Erik let out a weary sigh. He was thinking back to the fight they just had.

He couldn't believe that a flock of Zephyrwings would make so many problems and almost kill them.

<I think we should increase the number of clones. >

June clicked his beak in agreement, his large avian eyes blinking in a gesture of solemn understanding. <I agree Master. We are getting a point in power where human capacities simply cannot cope with Thaid's. The only advantage humans have is thanks to their intelligence and group fighting tactics. We should take advantage of that. >

<Indeed. I was thinking of stopping to Caelora city for a while, just to have enough time to make more clones mature, > Erik said. He was tired, yet his face showed a firm determination.

<Yes, Master, > June said, puffing out his feathered chest. <We won't even slow down our travelling speed if we give them some of the Galewing blood we have stored.

<But to be honest, I have a question, Master. > June cocked his head in an inquisitive way, his pupils dilating with curiosity.

<Tell me. >

<You said you wanted to make more clones. However, based on what you did in the past, I bet you were thinking about 5-6 clones, right? >

<Yes, why? > Erik asked.

<Because I was thinking it would be better to make more eggs to prepare an army. Killing everything here should become pretty easy. > June's beak clacking excitedly at the prospect.

<I thought about that. > Erik shook his head ruefully, then he reached out to stroke June's neck feathers. <But I couldn't do it back in the city, since I had a lot of things to do, and your brothers were full already by managing the guild. >

Erik turned to look forward. <At the beginning, I didn't even have the space to let them be, nor did I know if they could turn into humans. If they found out I had some weird monsters working for me, it would have created problems. >

June let out a trilling chirp of understanding, his feathers rustling.

<As for why I didn't do it back in the White Desert, that was because I couldn't take care of all the hatchlings by myself while hunting. To find the time to feed 30-40 younglings multiple times a day would have taken me most of the day. >

June's pupils narrowed as he considered this, letting out a low rumble from his throat.

<I could have done it, Master. >

<Yes, but that would have meant you couldn't help me hunt, and my progress would at least be less than half of what I achieved in the past months. >

June bobbed his head up and down, comprehension dawning in his raptor's gaze. He nudged Erik's shoulder affectionately with his curved beak.

Erik turned to look forward and noticed a huge cluster of clouds approaching in their direction.

The sky was clear on their position, but was now threatened to be overshadowed by the swirling mass.

The clouds were dark and seemed to roll towards them with a menacing intent. The air was already growing chillier from their distance, and the first signs of distant thunder rumbled.

<There is going to be a storm over Caelora city soon. >

While glancing down, Erik saw the walls and skyscrapers of Caelora City drawing near, perched under the snow-capped Caelora Mountains.

The towering mountain city beckoned from behind its shimmering barrier, but Erik knew the surrounding skies would be well guarded by sentries.

<We're close now, June, > Erik said. But the howling winds made it difficult, so he had to shout.

<Let's avoid more fights. We have covered enough way. Let's land on the ground. We'll walk for the rest of the way. The last thing I want is for the city guards and mercenary groups to think you are a Thaid. >

June banked into a glide toward the dense pine forest below, but the winds buffeted his enormous frame, making a controlled descent difficult.

The swaying treetops loomed closer as June struggled to fold his wings and angle his body between the tightly packed trees.

Branches scraped against his feathers as he crashed through the needled canopy.

June let out a distressed caw as he became entangled in the pine boughs, his bulk too large for the limited space.

He flapped violently to slow his speed as Erik clung to his back plumage.

In the end, June's clawed feet punched through to the forest floor, sending pine needles flying as he landed amidst the trees.

The impact shuddered through his massive body. Erik dismounted, his boots sinking into the damp soil. It looked like around this part of the forest there had been a recent rainfall.

<Are you all right? > Erik asked, concerned about June's rough landing.

The clone's large bird-like body was pinned by thick branches and pine trunks. It was a funny sight, to be honest, one that made Erik's mood increase a little.

June's wings flexed and strained against the woody prison. His body was too large for the forest space.

<Yes, Master. I just had a rough landing. >

<I saw that...> Erik thought with a smirk.

June let out a weary sigh, then concentrated on morphing into human form, the only shape compact enough to maneuver below the dense trees.

His Feathers softened and blended into skin, much like snowflakes dissolving into a stream.

The magnificent wings melted away into the contours of human arms. His sharp, predatory claws receded, transforming into human nails, as innocuous as pebbles on a beach.

Before long, there stood June, now in human form, his appearance disheveled but his body unscathed save for some small wounds he got from the fight against the Zephyr wings.

His transformation was as complete as a caterpillar's metamorphosis into a butterfly, yet it left him looking ordinary, a stark contrast to the majestic creature he had been moments before.

<My apologies, Master. > June extricated himself from the last clinging branches.

<These woods are not suited to that size. > He attempted to brush the pine needles from his hair.

<You did well. Let's continue on foot from here, > Erik said. He then took some clothes from his backpack and gave them to his clone. It didn't take time for him to put them all on, and they started their march.

However, even in human shape, June struggled to push through the dense underbrush since he didn't stay in that form for a lot of time.

He was having trouble walking. He was wobbly and had to ask Erik for help just to stay on his two feet a lot of times.

The forest floor was a chaotic tapestry of pine needles, fallen branches, and muddy patches that made every step treacherous.

June winced as the sharp thorns of the vines left a stinging sensation on his skin, while low-hanging boughs whipped across his face, drenching him in the refreshing mist of dew.

<Apologies, Master. I'm slowing down our march, > June said, ducking under a branch heavy with pine cones.

<Navigating this terrain on two legs is... challenging. > His boots slid over wet rocks and sunk into marshy soil. He grimaced.

Overhead, semi skeletal oaks and elms creaked in the wind, their naked branches clattering together like bones.

Winter was reluctantly receding as a damp chill permeated the air. Erik's smile brightened as he navigated the muddy inclines, his footsteps slipping every now and then.

<Stay close to me. Until you get the hang of it. >

Together, they pushed onward through the forest, traversing small streams still swollen with snowmelt.

With each step on the rocks, their ankles were submerged in the frigid water, causing an immediate numbing sensation. In the distance, past the swaying pines, the walls and buildings of Caelora City inched closer.

The weak March sunlight seeped through the needled branches, casting a chilly glow.

As the winds howled down from the snow-capped peaks, Erik pulled his fur-lined cloak tighter around him, feeling a shiver run down his spine.

Instead, June appeared disheveled, with mud caking his clothes and pine needles scattered in his disheveled hair, but he remained silent.

Finally, after some time, the density of the trees decreased, creating an opening that showcased the breathtaking panoramic views of the majestic mountains.

In front of them, surrounded by walls and watchtowers, lay Caelora City. Prior to this occasion, Erik had never witnessed the renowned city from such a proximity.

Upon closer inspection, the defenses and barrier of the structure appeared even more formidable than he had anticipated.

Erik placed a hand on June's shoulder while pausing at the tree line. <We've made it, my friend. Stay alert, but try not to draw attention. With luck, we can slip in quietly. >

June nodded, steeling himself. Walking side by side, both the man and his clone emerged from the dense forest and headed towards the massive gates of the city.

After having successfully overcome the trials of both the sky and the forest, they were relieved to leave them behind. Ahead lay Caelora City, their journey's end - or perhaps just the beginning.

Chapter 726: Battle at the foot of the mountain

After long hours trekking through the irradiated wastelands, Erik and June crested arrived close enough to see the upper part of the city's fortifications.

"So this is the great northern city." Erik and June gazed at the imposing sight, their mouth agape.

Caelora's outer walls loomed before them, ancient stone and metal rising like sheer cliffs to pierce the sky.

Colossal ramparts, wider than ten men, ringed the entire city, weathered by countless seasons yet still standing tall and strong.

Along the parapets, artillery emplacements jutted out like the spines of some great beast, each one manned by squads of vigilant mercenaries.

Erik noted the well-oiled gears and thick metal plating that shielded each emplacement, signs of readiness against attack. It looked like the metal used was Prenstal ore, weaker than Aclaitrium but stronger than Eshalt, but Erik wasn't really sure about that because of the paint.

However, it was clear the city was rich enough to be able to afford to reinforce its walls with such material. Normal ores like iron, steel or gold were not mana conductive, so the ore that had this property got sold for a lot of money.

Beyond the main walls, watchtowers and redoubts formed a sprawling network of defenses, guarding every approach and hill that might overlook the city.

Each tower was surrounded by rings of spiked barricades and trenches, forcing any attackers into deadly bottlenecks easy for defenders to control.

Erik and June could hardly believe the scale of the fortifications. Even New Alexandria, the capital of their homeland Frant, paled compared to Caelora's might.

"Look at the size of those walls," Erik said. "They make the ramparts of Alexandria seem like a child's toy."

June nodded, craning his neck to take in the towering heights. "I've never seen fortifications so vast. No wonder Caelora can be placed here at the base of the mountains."

The walls of Alexandria seemed so imposing to Erik and June. Yet these ramparts dwarfed even those grand barriers.

Now they understood how Caelora had endured every trial thrown against it and why the city was so famous. The sheer magnitude of its defenses was like nothing they had ever seen.

Though Erik knew true strength lay not just in the might of weapons and defenses, Caelora's fortifications left no doubt this city was prepared for any war.

Its walls and watchtowers stood vigilant, ready to weather another thousand years of battle.

Though, it was since they started seeing the city that they heard something. It was like a battle was going on, but they weren't close enough to see it.

As soon as they arrived in front of the clearing, despite being awed by the place, as Erik and June drew nearer to Caelora, they noticed the commotion in front of the city gates. A big horde of Thaid's swarmed the outer defenses, besieging the city.

Among the mercenaries, Erik spotted some marked by mismatched armor. These sell swords fought with reckless abandon, throwing themselves into the thickest parts of the Thaid horde.

A towering man swung a massive war hammer in great arcs, crushing beasts two at a time.

Nearby, a lithe swordswoman ducked and wove between the monsters, her blade flickering in elegant strokes that left dismembered Thaid's in her wake.

An armored man bellowed curses as he stomped and gored with a massive glaive.

Erik watched as the mercenaries carved their way through the horde. Their skill and ferocity was beyond anything he had witnessed before by the average Joe.

Each fought with the power of ten common men. Erik made a mental note to seek these veterans later - such warriors would be invaluable for his guild, but he doubted they would join.

There were many more people there, though, Caelora's mercenaries manned the ramparts, raining down mana powered arrows, brain crystals' attacks and artillery fire upon the twisted beasts.

However, that wasn't what really surprised both him and June, but the weapons some were using.

Rifles and cannons tearing through the Thaid ranks with uncanny accuracy. In his homeland of Frant, such ballistic weapons proved useless against the monsters' thick hides and swiftness.

Yet here, every thunderous volley found its mark. The beasts fell in droves under the withering hail of gunfire and laser.

"How is this possible? No simple firearm should wreak such havoc upon a Thaid."

June pointed to the cannons belching smoke along the parapets. "Look there - do you see the faint glow of mana within the barrels?"

Peering closer, Erik saw an unearthly azure radiance emanating from inside each cannon and rifle. Suddenly, realization dawned.

"Brain crystals!" he said. "They've somehow implemented Etrium's special technology into modern weapons to amplify their power!"

June nodded. "A ruthless innovation. Yet devastatingly effective. It would be wise to get our hands on this technology."

"Ye—"

A deafening roar drew their attention back to the unfolding battle. The Thaid's surged forward in a frenzy, clambering over mounds of their own dead to reach the walls.

Monstrous Thaid's battered the gates with colossal fists. Rhinoceros-like beasts charged the barricades with horns lowered. Overhead, flocks of winged monsters circled, strafing the defenders with sprays of acid.

The mercenaries of Caelora stood firm, disciplined volleys scything through the endless tides of beasts.

Artillery thundered, every shell infused with mana to maximize the damage inflicted. The Thaid's came on undaunted, insane with bloodlust.

A thunderous crack split the din of battle as one of the outer watchtowers shuddered and collapsed.

From the rubble, a monstrous Yevyagìt, rippling with muscle, appeared. The beast's roar was audible even over the raging battle.

Razor-sharp fangs jutted from the beast's mouth as it rampaged through the breached tower, swatting soldiers aside with massive fists.

Arrows and Brain Crystal attacks glanced off its thick hide. As it stomped toward the city gates, the defending troops fell back in dismay.

Suddenly, a band of mercenaries charged forth to intercept the beast. At their lead ran a fierce woman in spiked armor, hefting a double-bladed axe.

With a fearsome cry, she launched herself at the Yevyagìt, her axe carving a deep gash across its thigh. The monster stumbled, roaring in rage.

Exploiting the opening, a hulking mercenary with a great sword leaped onto the creature's back, hacking wildly at its shoulders even as the Yevyagìt thrashed about.

Meanwhile, two roguish mercenaries darted around the beast, slashing at its ankles and hamstrings.

Enraged, the wounded Yevyagìt swiped and bit at its tormentors. Yet the mercenaries were too quick, rolling clear of each attack before darting back in to strike.

Their coordinated assault left the mighty beast confused and bleeding, and Erik and June were in awe. The coordination they were showing was remarkable.

"Whoa. When New Alexandria was attacked by the same beast, they got a lot of problems repelling it."

"Yeah. I remember you reading about it. I wonder why New Alexandria, a capital city, was weaker than a place like this. It isn't normal."

"Corruption, June. The city is rotten to the core. The strongest people were employed by privates, and that weakened the city's defenses," Erik said.

In the meantime, with a final desperate bellow, the Yevyagìt charged straight for the gates, seeking escape.

But the ax-wielding woman stood firm, bracing herself for the impact. At the last second, she sprang aside, burying her axe deep into the monster's knee as it barreled past.

With a roar of agony that echoed through the place like thunder during a tempest, the mighty Yevyagìt toppled, its massive body crashing to the ground with a thud that shook the earth.

It skidded across the rugged terrain, carving a path through the underbrush, dark blood gushing from its wounds and pooling beneath its hulking form like a macabre painting.

The mercenaries, with eyes as cold as steel, wasted no time in descending upon their fallen foe.

Their blades rose and fell in a brutal rhythm. Each strike was precise and ruthless, a dance of death aimed to bring to death the monstrous beast in front of them.

They continued their grim task, unrelenting, until the once fearsome beast lay utterly still, its life extinguished.

Erik stood motionless, his gaze fixed on the scene before him. He watched as the mercenaries, their armor stained with the dark hues of battle and sweat, regrouped with an air of disciplined urgency. The battle was not done yet.

They exchanged brief, curt nods, their faces etched with determination and resolve. Without a moment's hesitation, they plunged back into the maelstrom of battle.

Swords and shields in hand, they moved as one, a seamless unit cutting through the chaos.

Truly, Caelora was blessed to have such warriors defending its walls.

"How much do you think we have to wait?" June asked.

"Half an hour at best before they kill the last monster, then we have to wait for them to resume allowing people in. I would say an hour."

"Understood. Should we eat something while waiting?"

"Yeah. Take a little of the meat in my backpack. All this trekking made me hungry."

Chapter 727: Treacherous plans

June rummaged through Erik's backpack with nimble fingers. His eyes lit up, much like a child discovering a hidden treasure, as he pulled out a bundle of wrapped meat.

"Ah, this'll do just fine."

Erik watched June's eager look with a mix of annoyance and amusement. That was the last meat he wanted to eat. June had chosen THAT.

The clone, with the skill of a seasoned adventurer, started a fire. He skewered the meat and held it over the fire; the aroma wafting through the air and mingling with the earthy scent of the forest.

As the meat sizzled and cooked, Erik's nose wrinkled slightly. He wasn't fond of the bug meat's smell, and the thought of eating it didn't sit well with him.

However, he knew the importance of a good meal after a long day of travel.

June was in his element. His eyes sparkled with delight as he watched the meat roast, turning it occasionally to ensure it cooked evenly.

Once it was done, he gobbled a big bite, his face lighting up with sheer joy.

"I love it—"

The meat's juices poured out the clone's mouth. To Erik, June looked like a kid.

"Don't talk with your mouth full."

"Sovvy mastvvh,"

Erik smiled and despite not being fond of it, he picked up a piece and tentatively took a bite. The meat was tough, and the flavor was too wild for his liking.

As they ate, the battle went forward, but was quickly ending up in favor of the humans. As the last of the Thaid's retreated, Erik turned to June. "Those mercenaries are really good. It looks like what was said about this city was true."

June nodded, catching his breath after having stuffed himself with meat. "Yes, they looked very trained. Such coordination comes only from true veterans."

They watched as the mercenaries regrouped below the shattered tower. Despite the gore covering their armor, they seemed in high spirits, clapping each other on the back.

Their leader, the fierce ax-woman, was busy shouting orders and directing the mercenaries to critical areas along the breached defenses.

With astonishing speed, the mercenaries set to work repairing the damage. Some hauled heavy timbers and wagons of stone to rebuild the collapsed tower.

Others scrambled over the ramparts, fixing gaps in the parapets and replacing fallen artillery.

Within minutes, the mercenaries had cleared away rubble and filled the largest breaches.

The ax-woman took up a spear and planted a crimson banner atop the ruined tower, signaling it was secure again.

All around, the mercenaries toiled, their skill at repairs matching their prowess in battle.

"Ah... I want them to join our guild so bad..." These guys were so good, Erik almost felt physical pain to resist the urge to go there and offer them millions.

June agreed. "We should seek them out after." He patted Erik's shoulder.

Erik cast a final glance back at the mercenaries before shifting his focus to the city. Caelora stood strong thanks to the strength and dedication of its defenders.

The duo then approached Caelora's towering gates, the stone ramparts now secured after the recent battle. As they drew near, a guard in gleaming armor barred their way with a laser rifle.

"Halt! State your names and business," he asked.

Erik stepped forward. "I am Erik Kay, leader of the Nexthorn Vanguard mercenary guild in Testrovc's Rest. My companion is June. We came here to rest."

The guard looked at Erik, his eyes narrowing as they traced over the intricate mask covering Erik's face. The man's gaze lingered on the mask's angular cheek guards and the twin eye slits that revealed only darkness within.

After a long, suspicious pause, the guard turned and called out to another soldier standing at attention nearby.

"You there! Collins!"

The young mercenary, lithe and wiry, stood at rigid attention before the guard. His sharp eyes, a piercing blue, scanned the two travelers.

A mop of unruly, dark hair fell over his forehead, and his well-worn armor hugged his lean frame. He then stood to attention.

"Sir?"

"Escort this man and his companion to the waiting area for processing. Remain with them until they are cleared for entry," the guard said.

Collins nodded and gave a crisp salute. "Yes, sir!"

The guard fixed Erik with a final wary look. "I have other matters to attend to. Collins will see to your provisional admission."

With that, the guard pivoted on his heel and strode away toward a door leading deeper into the gatehouse fortifications. Erik watched him go, but he felt uneasy. The guard's reaction was weird.

The second guard beckoned Erik and June to follow. "Right this way. We'll need to verify your identities before allowing entry into Caelora."

Erik nodded, and he and June both followed the young man toward the entrance.

Beyond the gates sprawled a vast military complex connecting to the city's outer defenses.

The space bustled with feverish activity as platoons of soldiers and battle-hardened mercenaries transported heavy crates of supplies and gleaming armaments to and from the front.

Erik spotted an entire row of bulky armored vehicles, bristling with gun turrets and extended barrels, parked and awaiting deployment.

Sleek aircraft sat on runways, their swept-back wings and aerodynamic frames exuding an aura of speed and power.

Nearby, long batteries of imposing artillery pieces sat primed, their massive barrels angled upward, ready to rain down devastation upon any enemy.

It dawned on Erik that if Etrium unlocked the secrets of utilizing Thaid brain crystals to enhance these weapons, they would usher in a new era of warfare.

A single crystal, properly integrated, could unleash more raw power than any conventional weapon ever seen.

Swords and shields would become useless. Etrium's military would become nigh unstoppable, able to overwhelm any foe through sheer technological dominance.

The balance of power across the continent would be shifted. Etrium would stand unchallenged as the greatest military force the world had ever seen.

Any nation that dared oppose them would face obliteration by advanced crystal-enhanced weapons unlike anything yet devised.

Erik pondered the immense implications as they made their way through the complex. However, he started having some thoughts. The weapons used by the mercenaries today were too strong.

<Maybe they already did it...>

As he thought about this, squads of mechanics swarmed over the machinery, fine-tuning the instruments of warfare with practiced efficiency.

The cacophony of clanking treads, roaring engines, and barking officers' orders lent an energetic din to the complex.

This was a military installation built for large-scale conflict, disciplined and well-equipped to defend Caelora by any means necessary.

Erik could feel the undercurrent of martial discipline that permeated the space as they made their way through. The mercenaries here looked more like Frant's soldiers.

Their guide led them through the organized chaos to a guarded checkpoint at the far end. There, Erik and June were asked to relinquish their weapons.

"Standard procedure," the guard said. "Once your credentials are confirmed, you'll be escorted into the city."

They entered a sparse waiting area with rows of dingy, faded chairs and harsh fluorescent lights that flickered erratically overhead.

A security camera with a blinking red light was mounted high on one corner of the grimy ceiling, its lens pointed at the chairs.

As they sat, Erik felt a creeping unease in his gut. He tapped into his Instability Brain Crystal power, feeling its energy spread through his mind and unlock his psychic skills.

Erik closed his eyes for a moment. He took a deep breath, and like a silent wave, his mental awareness expanded beyond the confines of his own mind.

It moved outward, seeking, probing. In an instant, the world inside his head transformed.

The thoughts and emotions of the guards stationed around the area bloomed like flowers in Erik's mind.

He navigated this maze of minds with a practiced ease, his focus sharp as a blade.

He zeroed in on the nearest two guards. Their minds were open books to him, pages fluttering in the wind of their thoughts.

He sifted through their surface impressions, their memories flickering like shadows on a wall.

The mental images were vivid, almost tangible. He saw himself and June, their faces etched in the guards' recollections.

In these memories, a surge of intent to apprehend them pulsed with urgency. It was clear.

The guards were determined to capture them, their resolve as firm as the ground they stood on.

Yet beneath this layer of determination, Erik sensed something else. A current of fear ran through their thoughts, subtle but present.

It was the fear of what Erik could do if they didn't plan this properly. Erik opened his eyes, his mind retreating into the shell of his own consciousness.

The world around him snapped back into focus. The guards never planned to let them into the city - this had been an ambush from the start.

Probing the thoughts of the guards nearby, Erik sensed deception. They had no intention of letting Erik and June into the city. This was a trap.

<I shouldn't be so trusting... Fuck. >

"They plan to apprehend us," Erik said. "We need to get out."

June tensed, his eyes darting around the room. "What? Why?"

"I don't know, but we must get the hell out of here now."

Chapter 728: Getting out (1)

June leaned in close, speaking barely above a whisper. "What do you want to do? This city is on high alert after that attack."

Erik considered for a moment. "I still need to enter Caelora. I'm certain if these mercenaries are after us, something must have happened to Noah and the others. We should try to make contact."

June looked shocked. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"I'm sure," Erik said. "The only hard part will be to get out of this building."

June didn't like the idea, but he trusted Erik's judgment. "Alright, if you think we can do this, then I'm on board. But how do we get out of here unnoticed?"

Erik weighed their options. His Instability brain crystal power afforded him certain advantages, just as June's ability to shapeshift offered its own set of tactical benefits.

Yet, the reality of their situation was undeniable. They were likely under close surveillance in this place.

Resorting to their powers openly would attract unwanted attention, a risk they couldn't afford.

The uncertainty of their predicament intensified the challenge—not fully understanding the what was happening was a significant handicap.

Erik's gaze swept the room, resting on the security camera nestled in the corner. Its unblinking red light unsettled the young man.

Erik reached out with his biological supercomputer, seeing two guards observing them through a monitor elsewhere in the building.

"They're watching us," Erik said, raising his voice to only a whisper. "We can't use our powers."

June nodded. "So? What do we do?"

"It depends on the situation, but you should know the first thing I will do." June knew Erik well. He wanted to use the biological supercomputer.

"Ah, yes," June said.

Erik reached inward for the biological supercomputer.

<System, can you interface with the surveillance network here? > Erik asked.

<We need to know what we're up against. >

[YES. SEARCHING FOR DEVICES. DEVICES FOUND. ESTABLISHING CONNECTION TO LOCAL SECURITY NETWORK. COMPLETED.]

Erik felt a spike of hope. <How is the situation? > Erik asked.

[ANALYZING LIVE FEEDS. TWO ARMED GUARDS ARE CURRENTLY STATIONED DIRECTLY OUTSIDE THE DOOR TO THIS ROOM. BOTH ARE HEAVILY ARMED WITH PLASMA RIFLES AND SHOCK GRENADES POWERED BY BRAIN CRYSTALS.]

Erik's heart sank. Those plasma rifles could punch right through the toughest thaid. He had seen it firsthand outside the city.

<Can you show me a visual? > he asked.

[DISPLAYING LIVE SECURITY FEED.]

A crystal clear image bloomed in Erik's mind - a video view from the hallway outside.

The two guards stood at attention, plasma rifles held at the ready across their chests.

Erik spotted grenades clipped to their belts and combat knives and pistols holstered at their thighs. Their body armor and helmets marked them as elite fighters.

This was a full armed response squad, prepared to use lethal force. And if even one shot from those brain crystal rifles hit Erik, it could punch a smoldering hole straight through his chest or remove a limb.

<Fuck those anti-Thaid weapons. We can't afford to take any hits from those. >

[AGREED. CAUTION IS HIGHLY ADVISED WHEN ENGAGING THESE FORCES DIRECTLY. BUT THE PROBABILITY OF FATAL INJURIES IS MEDIUM LOW GIVEN YOUR STATISTICS.]

<I thought it would be more. >

The system then displayed additional live feeds, revealing a surge of guards hastening into the building from the outside.

Each one was equipped with the same gear. It became clear that the mercenary guild was intent on apprehending Erik.

This raised a pressing question in his mind: why? What happened at Testrovsc's Rest to lead them to believe he was involved?

With each minute that ticked by, the number of guards within the corridors swelled. They positioned themselves as to prevent anyone from reaching the building's many exits.

A full frontal confrontation was inevitable. However, there wasn't a reason they had to face the denser clusters of guards.

<Keep monitoring those guards, > Erik said to the supercomputer. <Alert me if any more shows up.
>

[ACKNOWLEDGED. CONTINUOUSLY TRACKING SECURITY FEEDS. ADDITIONAL FORCES DETECTED AT THIS TIME.]

Erik opened his eyes, the video feed vanishing from his mind. June was watching him.

"Well?" June asked. "What did you see?"

"Two guards outside the door, armed with brain crystal rifles and shock grenades," Erik said. "You won't survive a direct fight."

June's expression darkened. "Then we'll have to slip away, avoid detection."

"We can try, but even if we do, there are many guards around. They are bound to find us."

"So, are we trapped here?"

"No," Erik said. "We can avoid them for a bit, but as soon as we get spotted by people, we must fight."

With the biological supercomputer feeding him real-time enemy locations and movements, they could evade their pursuers in this sprawling complex for the time being.

That was the best thing they could do since they couldn't use their powers at the moment.

Erik again reached inward, channeling power from his instability brain crystal. He could feel its energy thrumming through his veins, heightening his senses. He would need every advantage to get them through this.

<Are you going to hack the surveillance system? > June asked telepathically, his thoughts tinged with unease.

<No, > Erik replied. <I don't aspire to be linked to this ability. If I need it in the future, it would be best people doesn't know I have it, so that they can't make countermeasures. >

<Then what do we do, Master? >

<We use the cameras and my Instability power to evade detection as we escape. We will avoid the guards as much as possible, but confrontation will be inevitable. If you stay behind me, you should be able to come out unharmed. >

<All right, Master. I will do as you say. >

<Stay close, > Erik said, <We move on my signal. >

June nodded, the shadows of his hood obscuring his expression. But Erik could sense his clone's tension and readiness through his posture.

Erik took a deep breath, reaching out with his mind to check the cameras again. The guards hadn't moved.

Erik focused, tapping into his instability brain crystal power. The young man and June approached the door, only to find it locked.

Erik reached out with his mind, sensing the two heavily armed guards still standing sentry right outside.

"We'll have to do this the hard way," Erik said. "Get ready."

June nodded, bracing himself.

Erik focused, channeling mana through both his instability and force-fist brain crystal power.

Raw power flooded his body, filling his muscles with supernatural strength. He reared back and punched, unleashing the energy in a devastating blast.

The door exploded into shards with an ear-splitting boom. The guards flew backward, smashed against the far wall by the force of the blow. They slumped to the floor, unconscious.

Erik and June rushed through the shattered doorway, shards of metal rained around them.

Erik snatched up one of the brain crystal rifles while June grabbed another one from the other guard.

They couldn't afford to leave such firepower in their enemies' hands and reverse engineering this rifle may be possible.

Alarms began blaring throughout the complex as the destruction triggered security alerts. Shouting echoed down the corridors as more guards rushed to investigate.

Alarms blared as Erik and June rushed through the complex. Erik reached inward for the biological supercomputer.

<Show me the building's layout and guards. Highlight the exits. >

A 3D map of the building appeared in his mind, sprinkled with glowing red dots representing armed soldiers. More converged on their position by the second.

Erik took the lead, navigating through side passages and maintenance routes to circumvent the main force.

Despite their cautious movements, it became clear that someone was monitoring them via the surveillance system and redirecting the squads.

This suspicion was confirmed as smaller squads repeatedly emerged to obstruct their path at various intervals.

The first group of guards rounded the corner up ahead. Erik gestured for June to take cover in a small maintenance room on the right side of the hall. The clone slipped inside while Erik prepared to confront the guards.

As the squad of six approached, Erik flexed his fists. Time seemed to slow as the young man saw the guards raise their brain crystal rifles toward him.

With lightning speed, Erik launched himself into their midst. He ducked under the first guard's rifle, delivering a powerful uppercut to his jaw that lifted him off his feet.

Before the man even hit the ground, Erik had already grabbed the next guard's gun and wrenched it from his grasp.

He spun and slammed the rifle stock into another guard's helmet with enough force to crack the visor.

The man fell to the ground without a sound. Erik dropped low to sweep-kick two more guards, sending them crashing down in a tangled heap.

The last guard fired off a wild shot. Erik twisted out of the way, the bolt of what appeared a sort of concentrated fire sizzling past his ear.

<Fuck! That was close! >

He retaliated with a devastating punch to the guard's chest that caved in his armor and knocked him unconscious.

Chapter 729: Getting Out (2)

In less than five seconds, all six guards lay beaten and unmoving on the floor. He let out a breath and dropped the cracked rifle stock from his hand.

"Phew..."

Erik glanced back at the maintenance room door. June peered out cautiously, giving an impressed nod at Erik's handiwork.

"Let's go," he said. June stepped out of the room and started following him.

"Why didn't you kill them?" he asked.

"I don't want to make our situation worse before learning what's going on. If there has been a sort of mistake, killing the guards may be detrimental." He stopped to think for a couple of seconds. It was clear Erik had other ideas about why all of this was happening.

"But if I have to be honest, I think this is someone's ploy."

Of course, June was surprised. Who in their right mind would antagonize Erik Kay?

"What makes you think so?"

"The attack is too sudden. Something coincidentally happened when we were not in Testrovsc's Rest. The timing is too weird."

Erik gestured for June to follow as they hurried through the sterile white corridors. He reached inward with his mind, linking to the biological supercomputer.

<Show me the fastest route out. >

A detailed 3D holographic map of the complex materialized on his peripherals.

The map was detailed, showcasing the structure's layout with crisp, clear lines and elevations.

Overlaying this virtual blueprint were glowing markers, each representing the current locations of patrolling guard squads.

These markers moved in real-time, their paths traced by faint lines that illuminated the routes taken by each squad.

Erik tracked their position as they neared an upcoming intersection. According to the map, going left would lead to a service elevator, their fastest way out. But as Erik observed the map, he sensed two guards approaching from that direction.

He considered taking a detour to the right instead. But as he focused his senses that way, his heart sank. Nearly ten heavily armed guards were converging from that side, responding to the alarm. It was going to be a bloodbath.

With no acceptable options, Erik decided to risk confronting the two guards head-on. He gestured for June to be ready as they reached the intersection.

The two guards came into view, rifles raised. Erik acted instantly, punching both of them in the face before they could react.

Their eyes became unfocused, a clear sign of their disorientation, as Erik subdued them with overpowering force.

Amidst the distinct sounds of scuffling and the dull thuds of effective blows, he and June disarmed the guards.

They rendered them unconscious with some hits on the back of the neck.

With the guards down, Erik and June raced on toward the service elevator as they needed to go down.

Erik's mind map guided them through the maze of identical corridors. More squads appeared on the map, but he steered them clear using side passages and maintenance routes.

However, as he moved, the guards changed their course, and it was clear he had to fight them sooner or later as they were blocking the various exits.

Though from the control room, the guards were left baffled and confused.

"Oh, can he know where to go?"

"Yeah, and he is also conveniently changing route whenever we send guards to his location. It almost as if..."

"As if he knows where the guards are, right?"

"Yes, but this makes little sense. He should be able to know something like this only if he hacked the security system or..."

The two guards looked at each other in the eyes, an icy glint appeared in them.

"As if someone is helping him..."

In a tense moment that seemed to stretch for an eternity, the hands of both guards inched towards their holsters with deliberate slowness.

As their fingers wrapped around the grips of their guns, a palpable sense of dread filled the space.

"Don't do this, Mark."

"Me? You are doing the same..."

"That's because you are forcing my hand by collaborating with Erik Kay."

"I'm not collaborating with anyone. If there is someone doing so, that is you."

"Enough with your lies."

With a sudden burst of movement, the guards drew their weapons. The sound of guns being upholstered was sharp in the control room. Almost in unison, they turned on each other, their training and instincts kicking in.

The first rounds were discharged with a resounding and disconcerting noise in the limited surroundings. To outmaneuver each other, the guards moved with precision.

Bullets whizzed through the air, missing their targets as the guards ducked and weaved.

The tension escalated with each passing second, the exchange of fire growing more frantic. Sparks flew as bullets ricocheted off metal surfaces, adding to the chaos.

[CONTROL ROOM WHAT IS HAPPENING?!!]

A voice on the room's speakers asked.

In the meantime, Erik and June reached the elevator. They didn't understand what happened, but at a certain point, most of the guards moved away and headed to the control room.

"Did something happen that we are not aware of?" June asked.

"Most likely, but I don't have the time to check. Let's just get the hell out of here."

Erik and his companion stepped into the elevator, the metallic doors sliding shut with a soft hiss.

As the elevator began its descent, Erik allowed himself a brief respite, a moment of respite.

Erik knew their challenges were far from over. He knew that the lower floor was heavily guarded, far more so than the one they had just left.

The biological supercomputer suggested that those orchestrating the defense were aware of Erik's deadly fighting prowess, hence the substantial increase in guard numbers.

The strategy to employ an overwhelming number of guards was not their only obstacle. Erik saw from the map that their primary exit route would lead them straight into another military stronghold.

This building was teeming with mercenaries who had been battling outside and there were at least a thousand waiting.

Erik pondered the upcoming confrontation, not doubting his own capabilities but considering the difficulties it posed, especially for June. They needed to leave the place from a secondary exit, one not frequently used. Perhaps an emergency exit.

Then the soft ding of the elevator reaching its destination snapped him back to reality, marking the end of their brief respite and the beginning of a more daunting phase of their escape.

Soon after they went out of the elevator, Erik gave another look at the map.

According to it, they needed to take the next left turn.

"Follow me."

Without the coordination in the control room, the guards didn't know where Erik was. He and June took advantage of that and reached a door. However, it was blocked.

Erik smashed the keypad with a lightning-fast punch, shorting out the circuits, and the door slid open. Beyond was a narrow passage. The alarm klaxons were muffled here.

The young man led the way through the passage, their footsteps echoing on the grated metal floor. Up ahead, Erik could make out a larger corridor crossing perpendicular to their path.

He slowed, sensing activity ahead thanks to his instability power. In truth, he knew there were guards, but having to go out from this secondary exit, they were forced to fight.

Two more guards came around the corner up ahead, emerging from a side passage right in Erik and June's path. The guards reacted swiftly, raising their brain crystal rifles toward the fugitives.

But their reaction couldn't take Erik off guard. With lightning speed, he grabbed June and pushed him to the side.

Both of them avoided the strikes, but Erik had to move fast to ensure the two didn't kill his clone. In the instant the guards shifted their focus on June and took aim, Erik launched himself at the nearest guard.

He tackled the man with the force of a freight train, slamming him hard against the wall and knocking the wind from his lungs. The guard's helmet cracked under the impact and he slumped, stunned.

The second guard swung his rifle toward Erik, but June was already on him. He delivered a vicious kick to the back of his knee, buckling his leg.

As the guard staggered, June followed up with a rapid series of punches to precise nerve clusters that caused his body to go limp. He collapsed unconscious on his feet.

With the immediate threat neutralized, he and June raced onward. The confrontation had cost precious seconds, and Erik saw more squads closing in. Without the help of the control room, they could only rely on their hearing. They needed to get out fast.

With adrenaline coursing through their veins, Erik and June swiftly navigated the corridors. As they followed the directions on Erik's mind map, they realized that their escape was within reach.

Erik tracked the guards' locations with his mind. The west side was temporarily clear. "This way," he whispered.

At the end of the hall, they came across two additional guards, but they swiftly dealt with them.

Chapter 730: Getting Out (3)

"How much until we get out?!" June asked.

"We're almost there," Erik said as they raced through the corridors. It took little before they reached the exit, but the place was big, and both he and June had the perception this place had no exit at all.

Luckily, he still had the map in his peripheral. He reached inward for the biological supercomputer.

<Show me where we are. >

The 3D map appeared, overlaid with the exit location. Erik's heart sank as he observed a cluster of red dots converging from a nearby corridor to block their escape in front of the exit door.

<Fuck... If it wasn't for those brain crystal rifles, I would have dispatched them easily. >

He slowed and turned to June. "Bad news. There's a group of at least twenty mercenaries gathered by the exit."

June's eyes widened. "What do we do?"

"You mean what I do?"

June got almost offended by that remark. Not being able to serve his creator was worse than anything he could imagine. His peculiar birth and existence wired him like that. "We go together or not at all."

Erik shook his head. "It's too dangerous. I can evade those energy blasts, but even for me is not that simple. You stand no chance."

"I don't care," June said. "I can't allow you to fight alone. This is not your average situation, Master!"

"Listen." Erik paused. "I will make quick work of them and then we can escape. I do not plan on getting captured or killed here."

June's eyes flashed with defiance. "I still think it's too dangerous, Master!"

June protested, but Erik cut him off. "STOP IT, JUNE! It's too dangerous for you. I have over 200 points in strength - I'm physically stronger than any person I've even heard about. But Raw strength is not enough here. I need the instability brain crystal power just to understand when and where they are going to aim and act accordingly.

You don't have this ability."

June's expression faltered, a mix of frustration and disappointment clouding his features as Erik laid out the stark reality of the situation.

His shoulders slumped, the weight of Erik's words pressing down on him.

He understood the logic, the necessity of Erik's decision, but it didn't lessen the blow to his pride and eagerness to contribute.

His gaze dropped to the ground, a silent admission of his inability to match Erik's abilities.

Erik frowned, lost in thought, as they jogged onward. He had an ungodly, powerful body.

Yet those rifles had almost killed him with beams of searing energy powered by the mana contained by the brain crystals they attached to them. It was unsettling.

In just a few years, this revolutionary technology found its use in modern weaponry.

However, if before the best option was to use them on bows and crossbows, applying the technology to rifles had basically leveled the power field. This technology would make fighting thaids much simpler.

Of course, that was good until you were the one on the other side of the scope. That was precisely their situation.

Perhaps in this new age, physical power mattered less than the strange gifts granted by brain crystals.

They reached a corner, and Erik peered around. At the end of the long hall stood a set of double doors - the exit.

At the end of the long hall, Erik saw a set of double doors and noticed that two dozen heavily armed mercenaries stood in formation, their weapons trained on the doors, just as he had sensed.

Erik pulled back and turned to June. "Wait here. It won't take long."

"Good luck, Master."

Erik steeled himself and then strode out into the open. However, he channeled Nathaniel's brain crystal power.

He directed the energy to his feet, so that he could reach a speed no one could keep up with. If he avoided being under enemy aim, he would be able to knock them all unconscious.

The mercenaries reacted as soon as they saw him come out from the corner, swiveling their brain crystal rifles toward him. Erik broke into a sprint straight toward them, weaving back and forth at an impossible speed.

Searing energy bolts sizzled through the surrounding air, but Erik was too fast, zig-zagging, and jumping unto walls to avoid their bolts. The mercenaries shouted in surprise and frustration, struggling to track the blur of motion.

"Hold positions!" the squad leader said. The guards tightened their formation, rifles ready. But Erik was already upon them.

He ducked under an energy blast, feeling the heat singe his hair. With lightning reflexes, he delivered a vicious uppercut to the mercenary's jaw, lifting him off his feet to crash down unconscious.

Then he grabbed the falling mercenary's rifle and swung it like a club, smashing another across the helmet before he could react.

The mercenary's visor shattered, and he collapsed without a sound. The young man was doing all he could to not make his situation worse than it already was by avoiding killing these guys, but it wasn't simple.

"Open fire!"

A barrage of searing bolts filled the air. But Erik was no longer in his previous position.

He dropped into a slide, energy sizzling overhead as he swept the legs out from two more mercenaries. They fell hard, rifles skidding away.

"How is he so fast?" No one had ever seen that speed. Being from Etrium, those people believed Erik Kay was faster than the Fierce Lioness, and that was no easy feat by any means.

His speed was akin to a plasma bolt fired from a high-powered blaster, instantaneous, a force so fast and powerful that it seemed to bend the very fabric of time and space around him.

Just as a plasma bolt dominates the battlefield with its overwhelming speed and destructive capability, Erik's movements dominated the scene, leaving his spectators in a state of bewildered fear.

The young man didn't waste time. He was already on the guard, making him lose consciousness with a brutal elbow to the throat.

Then he weaved through the energy bolts and struck with ruthless efficiency. He targeted knees, throats, temples - points that would drop a man instantly.

The squad leader tried to fire at him point blank, but Erik sensed his intention, slipped aside, and crushed his wrist with a vice-like grip before he could fire. The leader's rifle clattered to the floor as he sank to his knees with a cry of pain.

Fear paralyzed the remaining mercenaries as Erik took down their squad mates with ease. Their hands trembled on their rifles, pulses hammering.

"A monster! This man is a monster!"

None of their training had prepared them for an opponent like this.

Erik moved with preternatural speed and precision, anticipating and evading their desperate shots. The energy bolts sizzled harmlessly past him, and he didn't waste time by striking with brutal efficiency.

One moment Erik was there, the next he was gone, leaving crumpled bodies in his wake. The mercenaries' eyes darted wildly, struggling to track him. Erik was untouchable, a ghost slipping through their ranks, untouched.

Some of the mercenaries screamed in frustration, firing wildly, only to have Erik materialize behind them and ruthlessly disarm them. Others shouted curses, backing away with rifles wavering. Their formation dissolved into chaos under Erik's relentless assault.

"KILL THE MONSTER!"

"STOP HIM!"

The guards exchanged fearful glances, rifles lowered in trembling hands. Erik could see the dawning horror in their eyes as he took care of their companions with ease.

Erik's breath remained steady, his muscles untiring. While the mercenaries grew frantic, Erik felt no fear or exhaustion, only an unstoppable determination.

The remaining mercenaries backed away in fear. In less than ten seconds, Erik had incapacitated more than half their squad. He paused, eyes blazing with adrenaline, ready to finish the fight.

"Surround him!"

The leader's yell reverberated through the corridor amidst the firing noise and the grunts of effort.

The mercenaries tried to encircle Erik. One let loose a wild shot. The young man twisted out of the path of the energy bolt, then kicked the rifle from the man's grasp.

No matter how they tried, the mercenaries could not touch him. One by one, the mercenaries fell, some unconscious, others moaning in pain, unable to move, helpless to stop the masked young man's merciless onslaught.

In less than a minute, Erik stood alone, surrounded by a dozen unconscious men and women. He turned, fists clenched, daring any to stand against him. None could even rise.

The fight had been short, but it hasn't been easy. There were sometimes in which the distance between him and the laser rifle was so short he barely evaded the shot's trajectory.

He almost died several times, too many in his opinion. However, he couldn't ask for June's help. If they targeted him, he would be dead by now.

Erik briefly thought about letting him use the rifles they took from the previous guards, but even that was dangerous, and he would have acted as a distraction at best.

Though he felt no strain or fatigue as he moved toward the exit, beckoning for June to follow. His body could handle far more thanks to his superhuman strength.

With June at his side, Erik strode toward the city, leaving the defeated mercenaries behind. This escape was far from over, but at least they weren't in that building anymore.