

BIOLOGICAL 871

Chapter 871: Burning fires, burning stones (2)

He channeled it through his neural links, and the Wyvern's flame brain crystal power activated.

Erik felt the energy surging through him. The gang members were awfully close to him.

There was no time, or space, to run anymore. Erik had to act now.

<Leave! > Erik ordered June.

The clone started flying. The wings carried his gigantic body up and up.

All bands of giant mercenaries fled the scene. They had to leave the bodies of their comrades there.

At best, they were going to retrieve them later.

The problem was, they were too close to Erik's radius. By the time they came back, there was nothing they could save, nothing they could collect.

What was going to remain were only ashes and death.

The wyvern's flame was a powerful brain crystal power.

Mana could change the flame intensity, radius, length. The problem was that it was really slow to channel mana through its neural links.

Erik didn't know why this power was so slow, but as much as it was, it was incredibly dangerous.

Erik didn't use it inside the town hall extensively because he was trapped inside the structure.

Besides, if he killed Shade, he wouldn't have gotten information from him. Worse, he would have missed out on the man's brain crystal power.

Erik looked up. The gang members were just a few meters from him. June was safe in the sky, circling around him. His beating wings created an air current in the area.

<Good, that will spread the flames. >

Erik grinned, and then he released all the mana he accumulated.

Immediately, a gigantic tongue of fire spread. Its center was a man holding a sword and wearing a grin.

The flames washed those in front of Erik. A sword strike almost hit him in the eye, but the sword melted, creating a red hot liquid that washed the ground like water.

The gang members were the next to perish. Their clothes got burned to ashes, their skin blistered, then turned red, then black, then ashen.

[MULTIPLE HUMANS 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. 5515000 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

...

[LEVEL UP.]

June observed the carnage from above. Erik was unleashing hell upon the gang members.

The fire was strong and wide, and it engulfed the town hall and the plaza surrounding it in a crimson light.

The problem was that it didn't go far, and there were many people still rushing toward the receding inferno in the distance.

Some people also had brain crystal powers related to water.

They were few, but still present. Erik wondered why elementalists were among the ranks of the underworld.

They created column of waters that attacked the fire, creating vast clouds of steaming hot vapor.

The attacks were efficient in stopping the fire from claiming more lives, but the vapor it released was as deadly as the fire they extinguished.

The fog came close to June, who was forced to move to avoid the deadly gas from enveloping his body and bringing him to death.

But as he moved, he saw it, even felt it. Erik was in a dangerous state. He used almost 40% of his whole mana at the same time.

Erik possessed nearly 700 energy points, and while the wyvern's fire was potent, it required a lot of mana to be sustained.

His master was spent, drenched in sweat, and was losing consciousness.

The flames were still raging, the surrounding buildings were on fire, a vast light spread across the land, illuminating the abandoned city, which appeared more and more like a lighthouse in the night sky.

As the flames dwindled further, the gang members pressed forward.

<June. >

Without wasting a second, the giant wyvern dove. The heat made from the fire was scorching.

June flapped his wings to abate the fire surrounding his master. He landed, the hot pavement burning beneath his lizard feet.

Erik barely reached June, stumbling down twice.

Though a satisfied smirk played on his lip. He gave enough time for the band of giants to leave.

There had been many deaths among their ranks, but what they did with his help... It wasn't possible to quantify it.

They destroyed the underworld, destroyed one of the most important pawns' the blackguards had.

But those weren't the only thing Erik and his comrades achieved. Most importantly, the guild master leveled up 14 times.

He was happy... but tired.

<Remind me to never do this shit ever again. >

<Don't worry, Master. I would have said it even if you didn't ask. Besides, I think it's time for you to start considering powering up the clones. I'm reaching the limit of battles I can fight. The powers I got, and the strength I inherited from you, is not enough anymore. >

<Why? Because you are not overwhelming anymore? Didn't you stop Shade from escaping pretty easily? >

Erik asked as they flew away from the abandoned city.

<Yes. But Shade was weak. The number of people we are fighting right now, it's too big. I can manage groups, as we did in Gabriel's villa, but...>

June's thoughts paused for a moment.

Back in the town hall, if he fought alone, he would have died. He survived only thanks to Erik.

<Master, I think it's time to find an appropriate helper. >

Erik didn't know how to take that request. He grew attached to June. The fella, the clone, was more than just that. He was a friend, a brother even.

However, Erik swore to never treat his clones as expendables, at least those he kept close.

He knew the ones he left with Noah were bound to fight a bloody battle against the Blackguards in Fasard. Casualties were bound to be present too.

This meant he didn't want to treat June like something he could leave behind.

<We will talk about this once we are home. >

<We will find no one, > June said. <By now, the rescue mission must be under full swing. Do you think they will be able to save ou—your father? >

Erik didn't miss the slip up. <Yes, Noah will rescue dad. Of that, I'm sure. >

Chapter 872: Lucius rescue operation (1)

The air was tense, since Noah's plan was going to be executed soon.

"Is everything clear?" The clone said.

For Becker, it was especially weird to be the one who received orders, but he couldn't deny it. Noah's plan was not bad, not bad at all.

"Yes," Richard said. "A team will help us reach the Prison tunnel stealthily and to enter. They will stay at the door to keep the escape clear. Once inside, is up to us."

"Yes, remember to make your way to the guard's command center on the third floor. That's where you'll find the location of Lucius's cell."

"I'm still unclear about how you got that information. Can the source be considered reliable?"

"The source is one of my agents. It took the place of a guard. It wasn't easy, as he had to study the guy for a long time, but he succeeded in his mission. When you enter, he will do what he can to open all the prison's doors. You should be able to go inside unhindered, but be careful. The Blackguards knew we were going to act.

They didn't know when."

"Me and Richard did these kinds of things a lot of times. We know what to do. Don't worry," Becker said.

Noah watched them, prepared for battle. Richard shouldered his massive war hammer, while Becker, a master of combat, required no weapon.

He could conjure various arms using his brain crystal power along the way. Caiden, on the other hand, wielded a simple sword.

The group left the meeting room; They had to move on foot.

Most of Noah's troops were already moving, killing the guards inside the prison, one after the other.

There wasn't much time, and they couldn't kill a lot of them, since a simple call could ruin everything.

Soon, they reached the entrance of a tunnel. There was a team there already, with at least 10 guards dead on the floor.

"Is everything clear?"

"Yes," the clone said. Since he was Erik's clone, he didn't use a deferential tone with the older men.

"The tunnel is free. Our contact will open the door as soon as he sees you. He is in the control room, and he has access to almost all prison's doors."

"Good." Becker turned to Richard. "These guys know their stuff."

"Noah's plan surprised even me. It was well thought. I can't see us failing."

"Did you have to say it out loud?" Caiden asked.

With that, the group hurried into the tunnel and shortly thereafter; they found themselves before a door that opened automatically.

"We are on our own now."

Their part of the mission was simple, but dangerous. They had to reach the commanding room, retrieve the documents, and then head to the cell.

He couldn't open the cell itself, so that was their job to do.

Noah planned the attack to happen at a critical time. For some unknown reason, few blackguards were inside the prison, with most of them in the streets.

Approximately 300 of them were present, the others being soldiers from Frant and Fasard.

The problem was that these 300 blackguards were strong, most of Noah's forces had been concentrated to stall them as long as possible, and prevent them from reaching the prison.

The Blackguards didn't know who was going to attack, but it was safe for them to assume Erik was there.

Their job was to capture him, and so they were likely going to rush back to the prison to complete their job.

The group arrived in front of a door. There were no guards around. The door opened, but before entering, they peered from the other side.

The door led to a corridor. There were multiple rooms there, with some guards doing desk jobs.

"Should we kill them?" Caiden asked, looking at Becker.

The ex general was reluctant. These guys were doing their job. To claim their lives didn't sit well with him.

But, if he didn't, the three would only find more guards to fight later on.

They didn't know Lucius' current state, but judging from Volkov's habits, he shouldn't have been in a good state.

"Yes."

Here, the tactic they used was simple. Becker commanded the winds, the air, while Caiden had a power which was similar to his daughter's, but that instead of corroding, it paralyzed.

The idea was to use Becker's wind to spread the paralyzing fog faster, and so they did.

It took little for the guards to be unable to fight. Then, the grim task awaited the trio.

Richard crushed their heads with his war hammer. Caiden simply slashed at their throats with his sword, while Becker sent highly compressed air into their skulls.

The area was littered with dead bodies and the scent of blood not much time later.

With expressions filled with sorrow, the three individuals glanced at the lifeless bodies before them, feeling a sense of helplessness as they realized there was little they could do.

This was a war before being a rescue mission.

"Let's go."

The group kept moving stealthily through the building. They reached the first floor, and then the second.

They steered clear of areas heavily guarded, and although their prior tactic was effective, they knew it couldn't be overused.

To kill too many people was dangerous, so they had to resort to avoiding them whenever they could.

"How much till the third floor?" Becker asked.

"Based on what Noah said, there should be a pair of stairs nearby. The elevator is not safe, the stairs aren't either, but at least we can escape from there," Richard said.

With that, the trio reached the third floor. They didn't find a single cell, until now, but that's was because they had to reach a room on the other side of the complex.

The cells were on the eastern side, and likely, Lucius's cell was there, too.

"I hope Lucius is ok."

"You are not the only one."

"There is something else that scares me, though," Becker said.

"What?" Caiden asked.

Becker stopped to think for a second, then said: "What will his son do if he is dead?"

Chapter 873: Lucius rescue operation (2)

"This is going to be hard."

"Why?" Caiden asked.

"I bet the guys inside won't be weak."

"So what? We will paralyze them and it will be easy."

Becker was uneasy; everything had gone too smoothly for his liking, and he sensed that this usually preceded something significant.

What added to the oddity was the absence of any blackguards in the building, where they were expected to be.

Caiden unleashed his paralyzing mist, a delicate, nearly imperceptible haze that drifted through the crevices around the door, silently infiltrating the room beyond.

As the mist spread, it clung to the floor like a living entity, covering every inch of the surface in a blanket.

Inside the command room, unsuspecting guards and officers noticed the intrusion.

At first, there were confused glances exchanged as a strange, almost imperceptible scent filled the air. Then, the coughing started.

It was soft at first, a few sporadic hacks from around the room, but it escalated into a chorus of desperate coughs as the mist took hold.

They didn't even have time to react; the mist was simply that effective.

Men and women in uniforms clutched at their throats, their faces contorting in discomfort and panic as they struggled to draw breath.

Some of them started convulsing, their bodies wracked with uncontrollable spasms as the paralyzing agent took effect, rendering them helpless on the floor.

Amidst the chaos, a lone figure stood less affected.

A Blackguard, easily recognizable by his distinctive armor, also coughed and wheezed but maintained his composure. Unlike the others, he wasn't paralyzed, not completely at least.

His training, or perhaps some innate ability to circle mana through his body, allowed him to fight through the effects of the mist, albeit with visible effort.

While he, too, felt the mist's assault, he was the only one in the room who remained on his feet.

Despite his resilience, it was clear he was not immune, just better at resisting the mist's paralyzing effects than his comrades.

His gaze swept across the room, taking in the scene of disorder, his mind racing to find a way to counteract the situation before it was too late.

But indeed it was. The command room's door opened, and three people rushed in. The man recognized one.

"A—arm...and B—beck...er!"

The effort it took to speak those words seemed almost as strenuous as the physical exertion itself for the Blackguard.

The blackguard lunged towards Becker, his movements still swift, despite the partial paralysis, but hard to make.

Becker didn't stay idle. A weapon materialized from the ether, initially appearing as nothing more than a wisp of air.

Yet it swiftly underwent a transformation, progressing through various stages. From a gaseous form, it condensed into liquid, then thickened into a gel-like substance before solidifying into a solid and terrifyingly sharp state.

The last form was a weapon of pure condensed air, tangible and lethal in Becker's skilled and deadly hands.

Enveloping the weapon was a miniature tempest, a spectacle of swirling air currents that crackled with contained power.

It was as if Becker had harnessed the fury of a storm, wrapping it around his weapon to augment its lethality.

The Blackguard attacked by releasing a bolt of lightning. This mother fucker wasn't a random guy.

<Fuck. > The bolt got captured by Becker's sword's air current, and started circling inside of it as if it had been captured by a washing machine.

The Blackguard, wielding his heavy sword, moved with a certain desperation, each swing carrying the weight of his murderous will, but also the weight of Caiden's paralyzing mist.

The sword sliced through the air, aiming to overpower Becker with brute force.

However, the ex general, with his air-solidified weapon, met each of the Blackguard's attacks with precise parries.

The clash of their weapons produced a sharp, metallic ring that echoed through the room. Becker remained composed.

The Blackguard's attacks, though heavy, betrayed a hint of exhaustion.

His swings slackened and became less precise as the battle wore on.

This allowed Becker to anticipate and counter better the opponent, though he remained vigilant, knowing that even a single slip could turn the tide despite the man's state. He was a blackguard, after all.

Sparks flew as their weapons collided, illuminating their faces with each strike. Becker's eyes were focused, calculating, always looking for an opening, while the Blackguard's expression was one of fierce determination.

Though Becker wasn't alone. Richard dashed to the side and released a devastating blow with his war hammer on the man's side.

The Blackguards tried to parry it with his sword, but the blow was too crushing.

He got sent flying, but that's when the last of the trio acted.

Before the man could even react, or land on the solid ground, Caiden plunged his sword into his chest.

Blood seeped out of the wound like a fountain, and the color got drained from the Blackguard's face.

Of course, they couldn't tell, since the man, like any other Blackguard, was masked.

Though he fell, and soon after, all the others did too. Not only they conquered the room, but they also did something important.

This was the center of the prison, the place from which the guards were coordinated.

It was clear there were other blackguards here, and that if they got found out, reinforcements would soon arrive to the prison, but at least communications were going to be hindered.

No more than ten minutes passed since they entered the prison, and they already got that far.

Now, the most time-consuming task was going to take place.

Searching for the documents saying where Lucius Romano, their friend, was held prisoner.

The group opened drawers left and right. In the end, they found what they were searching for.

"Last floor, east wing, cell 1."

"Are we sure?"

"No, but we have to trust Noah and his information network."

Becker sighed. "Let's go."

Chapter 874: Lucius rescue operation (3)

Blackguards accompanied some of them, resulting in an unavoidable conflict.

These guys were simply... too much. Too strong, too fast, too cunning. Richard and Caiden were having a lot of problems following Becker, who was the only one who was having a relatively easy time.

Becker was strong, much stronger than most people, to the point he was considered the second strongest person on the planet before the Fierce Lioness.

Though he knew he was the third now. Erik Romano, the son of a trusted friend, took his spot, and likely even the Fierce Lioness'.

His strength was too much. He was cunning to an almost devious level, but that wasn't all.

The ability to make powerful, but most importantly, smart clones, was too strong of an ability to go unnoticed.

If Erik Romano had enough time, he could flood any country and kill any thaid.

Damn, even freeing the Mur continent didn't look like a dream anymore. And yet, the changes time brought affected not only his allies.

People were getting stronger, and technology was spreading and advancing.

Brain Crystal guns were leveling the playing field among fighters. Strength would no longer be used to determine one's social status, but rather riches and technological prowess, much as it was before mana arrived on the planet.

Becker was living through an age of deep changes. But were these going to bring a better future to humanity or not?

"We are here." The group arrived inside the east wing. There were many cells there, with people almost to the other side of the Acheron River. Becker could even see Charon bringing them to the other side.

They missed limbs, fingers, ears, and eyes. Their bodies were bloodied; signs of torture were unequivocal on them.

Becker didn't know them, and neither did Caiden and Richard, but they were sorry for them. Though their state meant Lucius was likely in the same situation.

For how long had he endured torture? How much blood did he lose? Could he make it to the exit? Could he fight?

"We can't waste any more time."

The group's search finally led them to Lucius's cell, a grim and dimly lit chamber that felt more like a tomb than a place for the living.

The heavy iron bars and the thick mana-reinforced walls were cold to the touch, emanating an aura of despair that seemed to seep into their very bones.

Inside, Lucius Romano was almost unrecognizable. He had once been an energetic and powerful man, but now he looked like a shell of his former self.

His hair had turned white, hanging limply around his gaunt face.

His eyes seemed distant and unfocused as if they were gazing at something far beyond the confines of his cell.

Lucius's physical condition was even more alarming. He was missing both legs, the aftermath of unknown tortures or battles, leaving him a broken figure on the cold floor.

His skin was pallid, almost translucent, and stretched tight over his bones. The sight was chilling.

"Lucius!" Becker said. Caiden and Richard were looking at him with horrified faces.

He looked up at the group with a vacant stare, his once commanding presence reduced to a feeble whisper.

A flicker of recognition appeared in the man's eyes. Even if he was battered and tired, there was still someone behind those eyes.

"Armand? Richard? What...? What are you doing here?"

"We came to rescue you, buddy!" Becker said.

"What? Why? How? It's dangerous here... the b—Blackguards are..."

"Don't worry about them," Caiden said. "We took care of some of them on the way, while our comrades are taking care of the others."

Lucius' eyes regained some energy. There was hope in them. "How did you get here?"

"Your son's men."

"My... son's?" But then something in his mind lit. He understood.

"He broke it..."

"Broke what?" Becker asked. Maybe this was the only chance to ask him questions. What did he learn on the Mur continent so that the Blackguards wanted to capture him? What did he find?

"The container with..."

As he was uttering those words. A voice suddenly jolted them out of their reverie.

"HEY! HALT!"

The three turned. There was a guard behind them, a radio in his hands.

"Here is Guard Kellan, identification number 5742," the guard said into his radio, his voice tense with the weight of the situation. "We have intruders in the prison attempting to free the prisoner under Code XJ-09."

There was a brief pause, a moment that felt like an eternity before the voice on the radio crackled back to life with a sharp, authoritative tone.

"Understood, Guard Kellan. Reinforcements are already dispatched and will arrive at your location shortly. Secure the perimeter and detain any suspects. We cannot allow the prisoner to be extracted. The Blackguards have been notified and are mobilizing."

However, Caiden immediately arrived in front of the man, and with a swing of his sword, he decapitated the poor man.

"There's not much time, Lucius. We need to get out."

Lucius nodded. There wasn't much he could do. The cell's bars were thick and sturdy, made of Aclaitrium. Becker was strong, much more than June, and after a couple of tries, he broke the bars, which fell to the ground with a loud noise and awoke the other prisoners.

Caiden lifted Lucius, while Becker and Richard stood guard. Caiden also held a radio in his hands.

"Noah, we have a code red situation! We have been found out. Give the order for your men to open all the doors. We won't take much before leaving the area."

"Understood, Caiden. Bring Lucius safe and sound outside. My squads will open a way for you once you get out."

They couldn't see it, but Noah was worried. There were too many guards around.

His clone's squads were ready to attack, but it was going to be hard to kill the Blackguards, and in turn, it was going to be hard to kill those accompanying them.

Chapter 875: Lucius rescue operation (4)

Plumes of smoke billowed into the sky, making the sky blacker than it already was. The stars were covered, and citizens were fleeing.

Noah's assault squads, composed entirely of Erik's clones, maneuvered with lethal efficiency.

Without the aid of brain crystal powers, they relied on their enhanced physical abilities.

Each clone was supernaturally strong and resilient, making them hard to kill.

Thanks to the Nexthorn Vanguard's guild's crafting department, they were armed with brain crystal guns, and they were a threat even to the dreaded Blackguards.

But they weren't the only ones with those weapons, and certainly having to fight a myriad of brain crystal powers with nothing but their bodies and some guns wasn't simple.

The clones darted in and out of cover and engaged the Blackguards in close-quarters combat while the support teams gunned the Blackguards soldiers.

Ambushes were made, but it wasn't simple to keep those guys out of prison.

Noah did everything he could to prevent that from happening. They encircled the prison, but they had to keep an area clear to allow the retreat.

This area was in the prison's south, while in the northwest, the Blackguards were advancing.

Not even 10 minutes had passed, and the city was in chaos already.

Despite the intensity of the major assault, another battle raged on the outskirts of the prison.

Amber led a squad tasked with distraction, a role that, while not central to the mission's success, was crucial in its own right.

Erik's friends were doing everything they could, but it wasn't easy.

They got strong enough in the past years, to the point they could contend against people with thirty years of experience and training, but there were limits.

The group was just now drawing attention away from one of the main assault squads on the southwest sector and sowing confusion among the enemy ranks. There wasn't the only squad around.

"Retreat!"

Amber gave the order, and her friends dashed behind her.

Floyd used his brain crystal power to form a shield around the retreating members, preventing them from being wounded.

But his mana was being consumed. Bullets and rifle laser beams were pelting them constantly.

Amber was currently hidden, and that was her intention. She was channeling mana, ready to release it soon.

As mana flooded her neural links, a dense, swirling mist spread from her position, enveloping the surroundings.

Within moments, the area was shrouded in a thick cloud, visibility reduced to mere meters, and the atmosphere turned eerily silent, save for the sound of the mist hissing as it devoured everything in its path.

The spreading corrosive fog caused flames to ignite, illuminating the area with lights.

A group of enemy troops approached the mist. They received orders to attack a group of soldiers on the prison's northern bridge. They had to get past this area to arrive there.

"Check it out," the commanding officer said.

Ten soldiers entered the mist, disappearing into the thick fog.

The others held back, waiting for a signal that never came. Instead, a series of agonized screams pierced the night.

The corrosive fog clung to their armor and skin, eating away at the metal and flesh with ruthless efficiency.

Amber caught their words. She was not at all fond of the circumstances. Despite knowing she had no choice, taking lives was the farthest thing from her desires.

There was no talking she could make with these people. No amount of reasoning would make them stop fighting. These men and women were going to die at her hands.

"Are you in position?" Amber asked on her radio.

"Yes," Gwen said.

"Good. Take care of those outside the fog."

Then Gwen and the others appeared from behind the group of guards. They had to move around the fog, but Amber left a small tunnel to allow them safe travel. They got into a heightened position, and then they attacked.

The move was swift and silent; the soldiers didn't know what hit them. Soon after, the area was littered with bodies.

Benedict let out a sigh. He found all of this challenging. He enjoyed fighting as a sport and was skilled at it, but he did not like to kill.

Before the mission, everyone underwent extensive training. Their parents and the adults explained to them that what they were going to do would not be easy or pleasant, but they understood the situation.

By now, each of them had killed a dozen people, and although they knew what they were doing was wrong, they were still willing to do it.

What Becker, Erik, Noah and all the others told them about the Blackguards, about Volkov, about Erik's father, that was enough reason.

All of this was madness, but what their enemies were doing was even crazier.

"Here is team 4579. We completed our mission."

"Team 4579, this is command. Can you confirm mission completion?" The voice on the radio crackled with anticipation.

Amber, gripping the radio, responded with a mix of exhaustion and pride, "Confirmed, command. Mission accomplished. The bomb is planted, and the path for the main assault squad is clear."

There was a brief pause before the reply came through: "Well done, Captain. Excellent work. You're clear to evacuate the area. Be swift."

"We're moving out now," she said.

Amber gave a gesture to her group, showing that it was time to get out.

The ground shook beneath their feet as far-off, yet tremendous explosions confirmed the mission's success as they left.

Then another massive explosion rocked the area behind them, sending vibrations through the ground and a roaring sound that filled the air.

Martha, catching up to Amber, asked with concern, "Do you think that will give Team 2489 the chance they need to pull back?"

Amber, casting a glance back at the thick smoke rising behind them, said, "I hope so. We did what we could, but in the end, it is up to them to get out of there. Let's move fast and get out of here."

The team quickened their pace, leaving the chaos behind, with each step taking them further from the battlefield and closer to the safety of their own lines.

Chapter 876: Lucius rescue operation (5)

"Sir, team 563 completed their mission. They just neutralized their target."

"Sir, we lost contact with team 1389."

Noah was in the command center, encircled by maps, with radios buzzing with continuous updates, and soldiers hurrying back and forth, bringing in reports.

The atmosphere was tense. Becker got Lucius, but they still had to come out of prison yet.

In the meantime, he was doing his best to keep the Blackguards out of their way, but it wasn't easy.

Honestly speaking, despite having prepared a lot for this rescue mission, facing the Blackguards was too hard.

Many teams sent to kill the Blackguards failed, and Noah often had to send people just to prevent the enemy from reaching the prison.

Despite their initial success, Noah suffered significant losses among the small number of troops that Erik had assembled. Although he anticipated encountering strong opposition, Noah also anticipated a more favorable outcome.

"Sir, we've lost contact with team 1164."

"Fuck... Contact team 4682. Tell them to assist Team 1165. The target must be neutralized."

"Yes, sir."

Noah's eyes scanned the screens and documents before him.

His hands moved over the maps, marking positions and calculating routes of attack and retreat with precision.

The command center, though organized, was a whirlwind of activity.

"Get me a status update on all squads," Noah said. "And prepare to send reinforcements to sector seven. We can't afford any more losses."

"Yes, sir. We lost roughly 150 teams; the remaining are still operating. We killed around 50 targets and wiped out at least 2000 enemy soldiers."

"That is great news, but why are we losing?"

The soldier kept a stoic face; it was one of Erik's clones, after all.

"The primary issue, sir, is the enemy's numbers. Our forces, although on average superior in physical strength and speed, are at a significant disadvantage against those numbers," the soldier said.

"Furthermore, the enemy has powerful members on their side, and they are destroying our fortified positions. The Blackguards, sir. Their combat prowess is simply too great."

As the conversation between Noah and the soldier wrapped up, another figure hurried into the command center.

This new soldier, breathless from his rush to deliver news, bore a look of clear agitation on his face.

His uniform was disheveled, and beads of sweat dotted his forehead.

His eyes darted around the room, seeking Noah. His information must have been of critical importance.

"Sir! Sector seven had been wiped out!"

"What? What happened?"

"A Blackguard. The last report talked about a blackguard."

"Shit," Noah thought for a second. He knew what he had to do, but was unwilling.

The only alternative for them now was to send the support squads to Sector 7. The problem was that among them was Amber's team.

<What to do? She was the one who asked to join the rescue mission, and so did the others. Should I move her away from sector 7 or send her there? >

However, it was clear that right now, Noah couldn't give her preferential treatment. Most of the troops were Erik's clones, but there weren't only them. Among the soldiers were members of the Nexthorn Vanguard's guild.

"Tell all the supporting squads in the area to take a position on sector 7. If they breach through sector 6, Becker will be trapped."

"But, sir, among them is team 4579." All of Erik's clones weren't keen on putting his friends in danger.

"We can't spare anyone. Floyd's and Amber's powers will be useful. Do as I say."

"Yes, sir."

"They are trying to flank us!"

"Benedict! Take care of those two! We must disengage!"

Amber gave her orders. The situation was slowly spiraling out of control.

Every thought of avoiding kills was slipping away. They couldn't afford to leave enemy soldiers alive, because they wouldn't do the same for them despite their young age.

But they weren't the only young people on the battlefield. All Erik's clones were of the same age as him; as for the enemy, most of them were older, but there were even young ones among their ranks.

Amber and the others knew what they were going to do, and despite this, they joined.

The situation was too different from when they saved the parents kidnapped by Nathaniel's father, because the scale of things was much greater than before.

Benedict surged forward. His halberd sliced through the air, producing a whistling sound that looked like the scream of a banshee.

Each swing was measured, each step calculated, and each attack deadly.

Benedict was turning into a monster as grim as a graveyard wraith, his movements as silent and deadly as the whispers of the damned.

The enemy soldiers, caught in the whirlwind of his assault, found themselves overwhelmed.

It wasn't immediate, but Benedict killed the two soldiers, though.

To Amber, the sight was chilling. She knew Benedict—knew his kind heart and spirited nature, the way he laughed and joked, the compassion he held for others.

Yet, here, on the battlefield, he transformed. The good-natured friend became a veritable demon whose sole purpose was to kill and rip to shreds.

The group disengaged.

"Shit! That was hard!" Floyd said.

"I thought I was going to die," Gwen said.

The group left the area with hurried steps, putting distance between themselves and the battlefield.

It was then that Amber's radio crackled to life. The voice on the other end was terse, the message brief, but the weight of the words hung heavy.

Amber's face paled, the color draining as she listened to the news. The ashen look in her eyes told the others that, whatever the command center said, the news had not been good.

"Understood. We will move," she said.

She turned to face her friends, the resolve in her gaze belying the tremor in her voice.

"We have a new mission," she said, her words cutting through the silence that had settled over the group.

Chapter 877: Lucius rescue operation (6)

Amber's crew made it here in no time, but the situation in Sector Seven was... dramatic. No, that was an understatement.

Flames engulfed the area, with the sounds of explosions and gunfire piercing through the air.

Smoke billowed from several points, clouding the sky and casting a heavy pall over the environment.

Buildings bore the scars of battle. Some buildings had partially collapsed. The ground was littered with debris, making navigation treacherous and slow, and a building bore what appeared to be a giant blade scar.

"Blackguards."

"Yeah..." Amber had a somber look in her eyes. Whatever happened here had been big.

Based on what she got told by the command center. She learned from the command center that almost all the squads in Sector 7 had been killed.

Noah must have thought that the best thing to do was to send the support squads to close the breach through their lines.

The issue was that whoever caused so much destruction was likely present in the area, and if even Erik's clones couldn't stop them, it was doubtful they could do so either.

"I don't want to fight a blackguard," Floyd said.

"Neither do I," Amber said.

The air around Amber's group was thick with tension, every breath heavy with the weight of danger.

Shadows seemed to stretch longer with each passing moment, casting a pall over the group.

The mere mention of the Blackguard had set their nerves on edge, knowing that a confrontation could erupt into violence at any turn.

Eyes darted, hands rested on weapon hilts.

"What do we do?" Mikey asked.

"Our orders are to reinforce the sector."

"But there is no one here." The place was devoid of people, or better, of living ones.

Martha looked around. There were bodies everywhere. Under the rubble, pierced by brain crystal rifle bullets.

Most were Erik's clones. To see people who so closely resembled their friend, dead on the ground, was unsettling.

However, Erik created them to save his father, and, albeit cruel, death was almost given to them.

The problem was that, among the clones, there were people from the Nexthorn Vanguard guild. Erik's men and women.

These people were trained. They knew what they were doing; they got paid.

Their ability in combat was honed by years of hunting thaids. These guys weren't weak.

"Do you think sector six will—"

The sound of an explosion echoed from sector six, jarring the relative calm.

This particular area served as a crucial link, connecting a secondary entrance of the prison to the city.

They made Sector 7 to prevent the blackguards from reaching it. It was a shield, but that shield got destroyed.

The Blackguards attacked sector seven, and consequentially sector six, to reach this entrance.

If explosions were occurring there, it implied that sector six was on the verge of being overrun.

"The Blackguards are pushing hard."

"Yeah."

The explosion wasn't just a random act. Noah likely ordered it to prevent access to the prison's secondary entry.

The entrance connected Fasard to the prison by a bridge, one so long as to prevent prisoners from escaping. There was a black chasm under the bridge.

Amber and the others didn't know how Noah planted bombs there.

It was weird, honestly. Noah planted spies and troops around the prison without a single enemy soldier noticing it.

They were attacking, but at the same time defending, and while that was weird and surprising, the most surprising thing of it all was how Noah did all of this.

The whole point of this operation was to prevent the outside guards from reaching the prison.

Noah isolated it, but the situation was dealt with by the enemy guards.

The bridge's collapse sent a simple message to both sides.

For Noah and his troops, it was a bitter but strategic retreat.

The Blackguards saw it as a clear sign their enemies would do anything to stop them from reaching the prison.

<This should make the Blackguards think Erik is inside. >

While the prison was inaccessible from sectors six and seven, that didn't mean there weren't other places from which to enter.

Aaron got cold shivers run down his spine. "If the bridge on sector six has been destroyed, it means those in sectors 5 and 4 are still up."

"Yeah," Amber said.

Here was the problem: to access those areas, the Blackguard had to come back to Sector 7.

"We must leave."

"Yes. Move!"

The group retreated. Sectors four and five were still guarded, so the best thing to do was to reach that area and help fortify it.

Amber and her team navigated the ruins of the battlefield.

There were no more troops there, those that were aiding the Blackguards were rerouted to sectors four and five, while Erik's troop had been decimated, and those who survived retreated to the same sector.

They circumvented sector 7, which had become a no-man's-land, and focused on sectors four and five, where the defenses were still holding strong.

In the end, they arrived behind a battlefield. Most of the soldiers were using brain crystal rifles to fight.

It seemed absurd that brain crystal powers had dominated the human world for centuries, yet the advent of technological development rendered years of training obsolete.

They positioned themselves in an elevated area, taking advantage of a crumbling building's second floor.

This vantage point gave them a clear view of the battlefield below, where soldiers exchanged fire using the brain crystal rifles.

The team was well-hidden among the debris and shadows, making their presence unnoticed by the enemy forces engaged in the firefight below.

"What do we do?" Mikey asked.

Amber observed the area.

"Open a path and take position," Amber said.

Her team nodded in understanding, spreading out to execute her command.

Amber could see Erik's clones defending position, but the number of enemy soldiers was overwhelming.

"Are you sure we can get past that sea of people?"

"We should," Amber said.

"All but Floyd, Gwen and Benedict have powers that are effective against multiple people. We must wreak as much havoc as we can."

"What if the blackguard arrives?" Aaron asked.

"That's why we need to breach the enemy's line. If we stay here any longer, the blackguard will arrive from behind. The soldiers and the blackguards will encircle us."

Aaron sighed. "Let's go," Amber said. The group started channeling mana. They didn't have enough to kill everyone, but they could for sure unleash carnage in a small section.

Amber released her fog. She kept it high so that Martha, Aaron's, and Mikey's brain crystal powers could be used. Martha used her vines to ensnare her opponents.

Of course, she killed many, but not as much as Mikey and Amber. Mikey's bugs devoured the soldiers alive, mostly from down the waist, while Amber corroded them from the waist up.

Chapter 878: Lucius rescue operation (7)

"AAAAAAAH, KEEP THEM OFF ME! KEEP THEM OFF!"

A grotesque mass of flesh-devouring bugs surged through the streets, unleashing a living nightmare upon the soldiers.

These insects, swarming with voracious hunger, formed a dense, writhing cloud of terror, buzzing like a sinister herald of doom.

As they descended upon the unsuspecting men, chaos erupted. Screams of horror and pain filled the air, almost drowned out by the relentless drone of countless wings.

Soldiers flailed helplessly, their weapons useless against the swarm. The bugs, insatiable and relentless, crawled over their victims, biting and consuming flesh with ruthless efficiency.

The street became a scene of horror as the swarm moved on, leaving behind a grisly tableau of devastation.

That wasn't the only horror on that battlefield.

Massive, thorny vines wreaked havoc on the battlefield, almost as if they were under the control of a malevolent force.

These living tendrils burst from the ground with unnatural speed, ensnaring soldiers in their iron grip.

The air was filled with the sound of snapping bones and desperate cries as the vines tightened, impaling flesh with their sharp thorns.

Like the arms of a vengeful deity, they thrashed and flailed, dragging screaming men into the earth, leaving behind a trail of blood and torn uniforms.

The once-ordered ranks of soldiers were thrown into disarray as fear took hold, and the fight turned into a struggle for survival.

The battlefield, littered with fallen bodies, bore witness to the vines' relentless assault. In their path, nothing was spared, turning the once-contested ground into a gruesome garden of horrors where the vines reigned supreme.

Those unfortunate individuals who had survived the two remaining disasters eventually died as a result of the corrosive fog.

Amber's, Martha's, and Mikey's powers, while harrowing, were turning the tide of the battle, instilling fear in the hearts of their enemies.

Soldiers caught in the middle of this chaos had little chance of escape. A swarm of ravenous insects besieged those not ensnared by the vines or corroded by the fog, leaving a battlefield strewn with the horror of their aftermath.

The combined assault they launched was a stark reminder of how much power individuals had in this war-torn world.

In spite of the dread that they instilled, there were still an excessive number of enemy forces in the area.

Amber turned to look at Floyd. "If we go, would you be able to protect us?"

Floyd thought about it for a while. He didn't have that much mana remaining, and if a powerful attack arrived, there wasn't much he could do to stop it.

"If we move fast and our comrades cover our retreat, then maybe..." She thought for a second, then took her radio and contacted the HQ.

Amber held the radio close. "This is team 4579. We need help to ensure a safe retreat. We're positioned near sector five. I'm sending you our coordinates now."

There was a brief pause before the radio crackled to life with a response. "Understood, team 4579. We'll coordinate with the squads in Sector 5 to cover your retreat. Hold your position and prepare to move."

Amber nodded to her team, signaling them to get ready. "We've got backup on the way. Let's make sure we're ready to move the moment they signal us."

The team, already battle-worn and tense, found a new resolve in Amber's words. They checked their weapons, took deep breaths, and prepared for the next phase of their mission.

"Team 4579, this is HQ. We have briefed the squads in Sector 5, and they are moving to assist. Proceed with your retreat as planned. We've got your back."

With the assurance from HQ, Amber's team knew it was time. "Alright, everyone, let's move out. Stay focused and together. Our comrades are covering us."

In front of them, the combat was still going on, and the brain-crystal powers of the team were doing devastation.

They entered the tunnel that they had built to pass the sea of enemy soldiers.

Even though most of the fog had gone, what remained continued to linger around, making visibility almost unattainable.

There was complete and utter destruction at the scene. Martha's remaining vines were still impaling the bodies of the enemy soldiers.

Some were still alive, and Martha put an end to their suffering.

However, attacks were raining down on the fleeing group. Floyd was able to prevent a bullet from penetrating Amber's head by utilizing his strength.

"Fuck! That was close!"

"Keep focusing," Gwen said.

If Floyd lost concentration, one of them could die. Another attack arrived. This time, it was explosive. Martha's vines were still there. She created a huge one before the bomb exploded.

"Take cover!"

The order echoed through the air, and in a fluid, synchronized movement, the entire group darted behind the massive thorny vines, bending and weaving to form a protective barrier around the group.

The explosion wasn't just loud; it was cataclysmic. It sent shockwaves ripping through the ground, obliterating a nearby building.

It was like a house of cards that was caught in a storm; the framework fell apart.

Debris flew, a hail of shattered glass and splintered wood that was lethal, and a cloud of dust and smoke billowed higher, coloring the sky with the ash of the destruction that had occurred.

The plants were able to absorb most of the energy that was produced by the explosion, and despite the impact of the explosion, they remained sturdy.

It was an unreal sight to behold. Amid the onslaught of violence that consumed them, there was a brief pause in which everything appeared to come to a complete and total halt.

"GO!"

The group moved again; they ran and ran, but the attacks kept raining down on them. A rain made of mana-powered bullets.

Floyd was sweating. His face was pale due to the exertion. "I—I can't..." "Floyd!"

However, right at that moment, there was a lull in the enemy barrage of attacks. Explosions and gunshots echoed through the streets.

"Backup arrived!"

It was clear the pressure on Amber's team was decreasing at a fast pace.

"We are almost there, guys! Keep running!"

Chapter 879: Lucius rescue operation (8)

The group hurried through the prison's mazelike corridors. The echo of their footsteps seemed to bounce off the walls, but that wasn't the only sound around.

While Caiden brought Lucius onto his back, Richard and Becker were wreaking havoc. There were many enemies, but the two were powerful and killed most of them before they attacked.

But they weren't omnipotent. They couldn't be everywhere. Here and there, a soldier slipped by their defenses and tried attacking Caiden and Lucius.

Richard or Becker took care of them, but Lucius came out unscathed only because Caiden had quick reflexes.

A group of guards arrived. "On our left!" Becker said. He dashed, his air sword ever present; moving with the agility of a cat and a sword in his hands, he was like the scythe of death, as that was exactly what it unleashed.

Becker bisected four people with a single move. If Richard and Caiden didn't know him, they would be surprised or scared. They didn't know exactly what they were feeling, aside from fear and apprehension.

The group's mana was dwindling. Richard belonged to the Stone family. The Stone family wasn't called like that for no reason. They could shape stones with mana. The problem was that there were very few stones around.

That meant Richard had to create stone with his own mana, and that consumed a lot. More often than not, he created corridors to funnel the enemy or blocked the path for the enemy, often preventing Lucius from being injured further.

"You know, I never told you that your brain crystal power is very fitting for you!" Caiden said.

"How come your daughter can see the future?"

"Are you asking me this? I am the one who would like to have an answer to that."

Becker turned to his friend and asked, "Did your daughter see something about this situation?"

"Emily? No! I told you, she only saw the attack on the prison!"

"Damn it!" Becker swore. "If only she could learn how to control those visions!"

"She is working on that!"

In the meantime, more guards arrived. There were two this time, but they were powerful.

One wielded a sword, while the other brandished a brain-crystal rifle.

Becker stepped forward to confront the swordsman, his own weapon materializing from the air.

The swordsman parried Becker's attack and made one of his own.

Meanwhile, Richard faced the other one. The guard with the brain-crystal rifle unleashed a barrage of bullets, forcing Richard to conjure shields of solid stone from thin air.

Each shot that struck the barrier chipped away at its integrity and Richard's mana reserves. Converting mana into solid matter wasn't easy.

He advanced slowly. The heavy war hammer in Richard's hands, imbued with the man's own mana, was a formidable tool, but against a ranged foe, it put him at a disadvantage.

Richard's struggle was clear.

"Can you paralyze him?" Richard asked to Caiden.

"Retreat, and I can try!"

"Armand?"

The man didn't reply. He and the other swordsmen moved elsewhere.

Richard turned to look at Caiden. "Don't spread it too much!" Richard said.

But Caiden had to put Lucius down before using his brain crystal power, or it would affect the wounded man. "Lucius! Stay there, don't move!"

Caiden kneeled, laying Lucius down with care. He then closed his eyes, focusing as he drew upon his reserve of mana.

A slight shimmer in the air heralded the activation of his brain crystal power. Wisps of fog emanated from Caiden's body.

Slowly, the mist expanded, slinking over the ground and curling around the barriers Richard had erected with his own mana.

As the fog penetrated through the smallest gaps in the stone walls, it grew denser on the other side, where their opponent awaited. The guard coughed, and his body was wracked with uncontrollable convulsions.

His movements grew erratic, spasms seizing him as the paralyzing properties of Caiden's fog took effect. The once steady grip on his weapon loosened, and it clattered to the ground, forgotten as he struggled to maintain his balance.

His eyes, wide with confusion and pain, darted about as he tried to understand what invisible force had assailed him.

The sight was grim—a powerful man reduced to a trembling heap, unable to command his own limbs.

Despite Caiden's fog's effectiveness, it was not satisfying to see a foe fall by such means. But it was a necessary tactic.

Caiden watched with a steady gaze, ensuring the fog did its job thoroughly before dissipating. He remained vigilant.

"Take care of him, Richard!" Caiden said as he put Lucius on his back again.

Becker was gaining the upper hand against his opponent. With a flurry of movements, he forced the swordsman into a defensive posture, exploiting openings. Despite his skill, the guard was unprepared for Becker's fighting skills and faltered.

"Surrender, young man," Becker said to the soldier. The man didn't reply, but it was clear he didn't like this situation. But the fear he had of the Blackguards and of Volkov was too much.

"You leave me no choice, then."

Becker unleashed a wind blade. It was strong enough not to destroy the surroundings but capable of cutting the man like butter.

The soldier was taken aback when the attack materialized, leaving him with no time to react. The wind blade struck with such force and precision that it passed through him seamlessly, as if he were no more substantial than a curtain of mist.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still, with the soldier's upper body suspended in an eerie pause before gravity took its merciless toll.

A gruesome sight unfolded as the two halves of his body separated. In a ghastly spectacle, blood erupted from the wound, painting the drab walls of the prison corridor with a vivid splash of red.

The sound of the body parts hitting the ground echoed through the hallway.

While showing no emotion, Becker witnessed the abrupt end of the soldier's life. The wind blade dissipated into the air, leaving no trace of its existence, save for the carnage it had wrought.

"Let's go; we are almost out!"

Chapter 880: Lucius rescue operation (9)

The lights above flickered, transforming their urgent flight into a strobe-like nightmare.

As they ran, the cacophony of orders shouted by unseen guards blended with the sound of their pursuers' footsteps.

The prison's maze-like structure seemed to conspire against them, with each hallway mirroring the last and each choice fraught with the risk of meeting blackguards.

With Lucius safely on his back, Caiden moved with desperation-fueled determination.

His mind trailed behind, but his gaze remained fixed ahead.

He was using all his mana to leave a trail of paralyzing mist behind so that, at least for the time being, they wouldn't be attacked. However, he was concerned about the front.

Becker and Richard were fighting many people along the way; some were strong, some were not, but regardless, all those fights were starting to take a toll on them and their mana reserves.

Besides, Lucius barely clung to consciousness, and Caiden didn't know how much he would endure during this ordeal. He was resting in the cell, if that could be defined as resting, but the escape was hard even for him, who was being carried by Caiden.

Richard and Becker flanked the two, their eyes sharp and their senses on high alert. Becker's hands remained poised for combat. Richard was alert while Caiden was in contact with the spy Noah planted inside the prison.

"Couldn't Noah have implanted more spies?" Between huffs and puffs, Caiden asked.

"It was too dangerous... and hard." Richard said.

"Whatever. The next time, we will do this with more people."

"I hope there won't be a next time!" Caiden said.

The path to freedom was a gauntlet; every step forward was bought with waning strength and dwindling mana.

"Left, then straight to the exit!" Becker said. The ex-general received nods of understanding in response. There was no room for doubt or hesitation.

Their pace quickened. The exit was now within their grasp, but the prison had not yet finished with them.

The sound of the enemy approaching their position intensified with every passing second.

Adrenaline surged as they neared the threshold of freedom, the outside world a mere sprint away.

"That's the door!"

However, in the side corridors, a nasty surprise awaited the three. There were two blackguards.

"Shit. Richard!"

"Yeah, there's no need to remind me!"

Again, Richard headed toward one of the Blackguards, while Becker did the same with the other.

The Stone Family's leader attacked the man with his war hammer, but the opponent threw something that looked like a dart at him.

Richard avoided the attack, but soon after, a tremendous explosion blasted the corridor from which the group just came. Richard shivered, but he couldn't turn.

<This bastard can make explosive mana? >

Richard's pace increased once he realized this. He had to stay close to the blackguard to prevent him from using his dreadful brain crystal power.

The problem was that the blackguard could aim at Lucius and Caiden. He had to prevent it.

Richard rotated his war hammer; the Blackguard was strong and avoided the attack, which ended up hitting the nearby wall and shattering into countless pieces.

However, the man didn't stay idle; he counterattacked, almost ripping Richard's throat in the process.

In the meantime, Becker was fighting against the other blackguard.

The man had a spear that cracked with electricity. It was already the second time they had found people with elemental powers.

Shouldn't they have been rare? Apparently, it wasn't that rare for the Blackguards, or maybe they were the reason they were so rare to begin with.

Becker was experiencing difficulties due to the severe constraints he faced in this location.

He couldn't unleash his powers because the building could collapse on them.

If he wasn't careful, he could end up destroying the bridges connecting the prison to the outside.

The best he could do was keep his weapons on and turn himself into wind whenever a dangerous attack threatened his life.

The blackguard's electric spear went past Becker's body.

It passed through him, as if Becker were an illusion. But he wasn't. He was the wind.

The ex-general counterattacked with a slash of his own, but the man parried the blow.

A serpent of electricity coiled around Becker's sword, striking forth like lightning toward the man.

Becker was already incorporeal, and that gave him a couple of seconds to look at the situation.

Caiden left Lucius on the ground and was now helping Richard fight the blackguard. That guy was powerful, while the one he was facing wasn't as strong.

<If only there wasn't this fucking prison around...>

But it wasn't only that. If Becker had been alone, he could have won and escaped this situation, but with Lucius and the others here, he couldn't do much.

Caiden and Richard were having trouble; not even in two, they brought the man down.

Things were going south in front of the fucking exit. Richard briefly turned to look at Becker; it was a fleeting moment, really, but he understood what Richard's glance meant.

Becker nodded. Caiden must have sensed something, as he abruptly left the fight to pick up Lucius.

When he was ready, Becker partially turned into wind. He was corporeal, but only from the waist up.

He gained an untold amount of speed and slashed at the blackguard, who barely parried the attack. Though that wasn't what Becker was aiming at, it was the door.

The attack he unleashed produced a sort of pressure cannon that destroyed the door. Caiden walked through the door, and Becker did the same.

When the Blackguard started following the group, an enormous stone wall appeared in front of the door, blocking the exit.

"Don't you dare think about it! "

Richard decided to sacrifice himself. For many, that would have been stupid.

What would they gain by rescuing someone just to lose someone else? That was true, but he still had a chance to escape, while Lucius didn't.

He endured too much; he didn't have the strength, but most importantly, he knew something; otherwise, the Blackguards wouldn't have captured him.