

BIOLOGICAL 881

Chapter 881: Lucius rescue operation (10)

The darkness seemed to press in from all sides, creating a suffocating cloak that tested their resolve.

Electricity wasn't running in that tunnel anymore.

After what felt like eternity, a glimmer of light signaled the end of the tunnel.

As they emerged into the open, the scene that greeted them was nothing short of apocalyptic.

The prison was surrounded by destruction. Buildings and bridges had collapsed, reduced to smoldering ruins.

Fires raged unchecked, casting an eerie glow over the landscape, while explosions thundered in the distance, sending shock waves through the air.

Chaos was a visceral manifestation of the battle that raged around them.

The air was thick with smoke and a burning acrid scent, making it difficult to breathe.

Becker scanned the area, assessing the situation. It wasn't long before he spotted a group of 20 clones engaged in a fierce battle.

A wave of enemy troops threatened to overwhelm them. There were simply too many opponents for them to win.

Becker didn't even know how twenty people kept hundreds in check, but there they were.

Erik's clones were strong, and if it wasn't for the brain crystal rifles, they should have dominated the battlefield.

Scary. It was scary, even for Becker.

Without hesitation, the ex-general dashed toward their position.

<I need to help them...>

Besides, it wasn't like he had an alternative. That was the only way out of the prison; they had to reach the clones to get out of the area, and since Lucius was in no condition to run or fight, they had to clear the way.

The ground trembled under the force of the explosions, sending clouds of dust and debris into the air.

The sound of gunfire and the clash of weapons filled the air.

As Becker neared the clones, he could see the determination etched on their faces, even as they struggled against the tide of enemies.

Even though they were formidable fighters, Becker knew overwhelming odds could bring down even the mightiest warriors, so he needed to hasten.

Becker launched himself into the fray. His wind sword cut through enemy soldiers' ranks. Each swing brought death to one soldier.

Becker was like a desert demon, a manifestation of the winds and of the death they brought with them.

Turning into wind himself, Becker only manifested his hands, which moved from one place to another as if being teleported.

In truth, it was simply Becker's body that formed and reformed in different parts of the winds that were howling through Fasad's streets.

The clones, buoyed by Becker's arrival, redoubled their efforts, their attacks becoming more coordinated and effective.

They started pushing forward and forward, but that was only because Becker killed many.

The enemy troops, caught off guard by the sudden surge of resistance, faltered.

Becker and the clones combined their strength, causing the enemy ranks to collapse and the soldiers to retreat.

As the dust settled and the echoes of battle faded into silence, Becker turned to survey the aftermath.

There were only fifteen clones still alive. He walked toward them while Caiden approached the group after having seen the battle from afar.

"What's the situation?" Becker asked.

"We killed a third of the blackguards. The remaining ones are still locked in fights. We didn't lose sectors next to the prison, but most of the outer ones were decimated."

The clone looked at Becker, then at Caiden, and then at Lucius.

It had Erik's memories; for him, that man was as much his father as it was for Erik.

The clone was on the verge of tears, while those around them wore gloomy faces.

Then they noticed the two missing legs, and anger surged.

One of them even turned into a thaid, startling the general, and released a pained shriek.

Soon after, hundreds of these shrieks resounded from afar.

Maybe the clones decided on a signal that made them easily understand how the situation was. The clone then looked behind; Richard was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is Richard?" the clone asked.

"He stayed behind to help us escape."

"What?"

"Do I really have to repeat myself?"

The clone's hands were clenched. "Give me a minute," he said to Becker. He took out his radio and then contacted the command center.

"This is team 14. The target has been secured. He is wounded and can't walk. Richard Stone has been captured or killed."

Noah didn't have time to reflect on Lucius' health.

"What do you mean, captured or killed? FUCK! Bring Becker over the radio."

"Yes, sir," the clone said, giving the device to the ex-general.

"What the hell happened?" Noah asked. He was tired, nothing was going as it should have been, and now Richard had been captured.

"Two particularly strong Blackguards attacked us; Richard stayed behind to allow us to take Lucius outside. I will be honest; I want to go help him. "

Noah thought for a second. "You can't. The situation is a mess; reaching Sector 1 won't be easy, and we need you to act as a spearhead. Otherwise, Lucius will die there."

"You expect me to leave one of my best friends behind?"

"No," Noah said. "My spy is still safe inside the prison; he will monitor him, but now the best thing to do is to send the clones. If Richard is still fighting, they will surely be able to help him."

"Those guys were strong," Becker said. "Even I was having trouble."

Noah sighed. "Listen, Armand. You know well that Erik is your only chance to destroy the blackguards; if Lucius dies, I won't guarantee you he won't try to do something crazy. No. I know that; I'm his clone, after all. Grazing New Alexandria and Fasard to the ground just to reach Volkov won't be something he would need to think twice about."

He paused. "Keep Lucius alive; I will take care of Richard."

Chapter 882: Lucius rescue operation (11)

Erik's clone had entered the prison to save Richard; the three didn't know the outcome of the mission.

Have they been unsuccessful? Did they succeed? Following their departure, Becker assumed the duty of safeguarding Caiden and Lucius from a multitude of soldiers.

Therefore, they discarded the concept. It was easy for him to kill some of them; all it took was a swipe of his mana sword to end their lives.

However, some of them required Becker to use a significant amount of mana. While this was going on, Becker couldn't help but grimace.

In all of his years serving as Frant's general, he never once contemplated the idea that he would be responsible for the deaths of his own soldiers and citizens.

And yet, here he was, battling for his life as well as the lives of Lucius and Caiden.

Seeing Fasard under attack was weird. He had been there many times, at least before Volkov took control of the city.

Becker had been informed of how awful the situation was within the city because of the monster who ruled it.

The problem was that seeing it in person made his anger surge. It wasn't just this war or this attack that destroyed it. The process started before Noah decided to attack.

The district around Fasard's prison was half destroyed. It was clear they attacked in the middle of the city, and neither Noah nor the Blackguards went easy on their opponents.

Noah launched their assault in the middle of the city, and neither he nor the Blackguards spared their adversaries any mercy.

As he moved closer to the command center in Sector 1, the amount of destruction diminished, and the city became visible to its inhabitants.

It was a stark canvas of survival and decay that the city streets presented to Becker and Caiden.

The facades of the buildings were crumbling, and the windows were broken. These constructions had once been bustling with activity, but now stood in a state of disrepair.

The pavements were now cluttered with makeshift shelters that were cobbled together using a variety of materials.

There was a complex network of temporary homes that comprised blue tarps that were stretched over bent metal rods, cardboard walls that were taped or tied together, and plastic sheets that were draped over anything that could support them.

The signs of desperate creativity were visible in each shelter, a patchwork of items that had been discarded.

People were seen moving around or sitting quietly within these shelters, their faces etched with the weariness that comes from living a hard life.

The problem was that these people looked undisturbed by the fights that were taking place not even 500 meters away from them. As if their situation couldn't worsen compared to what it already was.

Becker was mad. How could a single person reduce everyone to such a sorry state? How could he turn a splendid city, which he remembered was once bustling with activity and trade, into such a desolate wasteland?

The overpowering smell of decay and desperation in the air served as a stark reminder of the suffering that Volkov's rule had inflicted on the city's residents.

As he traveled through the streets, Becker's focus became more resolute as he saw the repercussions of oppression and violence happening around him.

In the end, as Caiden and Becker approached the command center, the signs of battle grew less frequent, to the point where they disappeared, but the people's faces didn't improve. They were still full of sadness, resignation, and indifference.

"There's another group of soldiers at 3," Caiden said.

"Ah... fuck..."

Becker stepped forward to confront and battle the soldiers, leaving Caiden and Lucius behind.

Since there were no blackguards in the area, he was going to have a pretty simple time defeating them.

He needed to make this happen as quickly as possible, so he transformed into wind and swiftly eliminated all the soldiers in the vicinity.

After that, he returned to Caiden's side.

"Are you done?"

"Yes. How is Lucius?"

"Weak," Caiden said. "He lost consciousness an hour ago. He needs medical attention, Armand."

"I know that. But it's not like I can do something about it."

Soon after, from a corner, a group of five people from Erik's guild arrived. All of them looked a lot like their creator, with subtle differences that made them unique but unmistakably linked to his genetic makeup. Be it different hairstyles or beards.

However, all of them had serious faces, but they also had a fierce determination in their eyes that matched Erik's own.

"Sir, we came here to escort you. Since the mission is complete, we are retreating. The command center is moving."

"Are we retreating?" Caiden asked. "What about Richard Stone?"

"We don't have any information about him. If you want answers, you must reach the command center."

Caiden sighed, while Becker got nervous. "Lead the way," he said. The mercenary nodded and led Becker to a moving vehicle. It was basically a van; it couldn't house many people, but from what they understood, Noah was inside.

Not only did the vehicle come to a stop, but so did every other car that was behind the van.

The vehicle stopped, and so did all the other vehicles following the van.

A woman burst from one of the parked vehicles, her movements urgent. As she approached Caiden, her eyes quickly zeroed in on Lucius' unconscious form. She was so concerned she closed the distance in mere seconds, her gaze never leaving the unconscious man.

"What's his state?" The woman asked.

"He is unconscious, with legs missing and many open wounds on the rest of his body. He likely lost a lot of blood and needs a transfusion and a healer."

The problem was that all the healers from Erik's guild left it when it started getting investigated. Healers were rare.

In addition to possessing highly prized brain crystal powers, healers had excellent employment opportunities.

An organization that was accused of being run by a criminal was not something that anyone of them was willing to join.

Of course, Erik had many recovery potions. That had to do.

Give him to me, the woman said. Then two other people came and took Lucius from Caiden's care.

They took him to a vehicle and put him on a stretcher.

Then Becker turned, and he saw Noah outside of another vehicle, looking at Erik's father.

Noah was a clone, but based on what he learned about him, he had Erik's memories.

This meant that Lucius was as much a father to Noah as he was to Erik.

The clone turned to look at Becker, slightly embarrassed about the situation.

"Come inside," he said to Becker and Caiden.

The two sat in front of the clone. "Is there any news?" Caiden asked. He was referring to Richard.

"Yes," Noah said, but his tone promised nothing good.

"Did he die?" Becker understood the problem immediately.

"No, he didn't. The clones I sent were those who died."

Noah sighed. "My spies reported that the two blackguards had defeated Richard and taken him to a cell." Ironically, it was next to Lucius's. "

"So? When will we attack again? We can't leave him there," Caiden said.

"We must."

Noah had a gloomy face. Not that they could see the worm-human hybrid's face since he still wore masks.

"We lost too many troops. If we send another batch to the prison, we would need at least a thousand to free Richard. All the enemy troops have reached the prison. There is nothing we can do to save him."

He paused. Noah didn't take that decision lightly.

"There is another problem. If I send more troops, we won't have enough to cover the retreat."

Caiden and Richard were both unhappy with the situation.

Amber's father was the angriest of the two, but Becker was a soldier.

He had been in Noah's position more times than he could count.

He knew that if they tried to save Richard, the entire group would die.

This meant Caiden's daughter, her friends, Noah, and Caiden himself. Maybe only he would survive, but he wasn't sure he could bet on it.

"I get it."

There was a tense silence.

"What's our next move?" Becker asked.

"We retreat," Noah said. "And I need to inform Erik about what's happened here."

Noah's tone was grave. "It'll take Erik at least two weeks to reach Frant, so he won't be able to help us with the aftermath of this battle. At least not now."

"Do you think Erik will do something drastic when he hears the news?"

Noah nodded without hesitation. "He likely will. He's not one to sit back when his people die." With that, Noah pulled out a phone from his pocket, his fingers moving over the screen as he searched for Rebecca's contact.

Finding the number, he pressed the call button and held the phone to his ear, his expression turning serious.

Chapter 883: News

The past few days had been hard since they fought, schemed and investigated without rest. Now, Rebecca and Erik were relaxing a little, taking the chance to talk to the band of giants' leader, while sipping tea.

The conversation flowed; smiles were made.

Erik looked around the cozy room, admiring the decorations and the furniture. Erik glanced at Rebecca, who was sitting next to him, and saw that she was enjoying the conversation.

It looked like this was a rare occasion, even for the fierce lioness' daughter. Then it turned to more serious matters

"Many of those we fought against at the town hall," she said, "were criminals with substantial bounties on their heads." She paused.

"The Band of Giants is currently working to identify every single one of them. We've already claimed some of the bounties."

"What really surprised me was the Mercenary Guild's reaction to all of this."

"Why? Were they unhappy?"

"I don't really know how to say it. Their reaction was... weird..."

"Weird?"

"Yes," the Fierce Lioness said.

"They were surprised. I don't know if that is because they really thought Shade was just a legend or..." A hint of amusement was in her tone. "Because one of them died."

"To outsiders, their astonishment might seem like disbelief in Shade's existence. But I know better." A knowing smile played on her lips as she leaned forward slightly, her gaze piercing.

"I know too," Erik said. "The Mercenary Guild works for the Blackguards, as much as Shade did. They were shocked because they thought we had neutralized one of their own."

"That's what I thought too. When I joined the mercenary guild as a simple member, I did not know these guys were the bad ones. However, when I made my guild and got power, I had the chance to see them in all their shitty splendor."

The woman sighed. She didn't like the blackguards, and she didn't like the mercenary guild.

"This feat will undoubtedly bring us trouble," she said, her expression turning thoughtful. "But at least we got a lot of money."

That was true, but Erik was worried. Their actions had changed the dynamics of the underworld.

No, it wasn't just the underworld, but even the Mercenary Guild and the Blackguards dynamics.

"Do you think they will do something?" Rebecca asked.

"No. They do not know Erik was involved in the fight, at least for now. They must be thinking I went to kill the guy. Regardless, they will play safe for a while. This doesn't mean we will be unprepared for when they act, and believe me, they will. Just not now."

Then, the shrill ring of a phone broke the calm atmosphere. The abrupt sound seemed out of place in the calmness that had settled around the small table.

The phone ringing was Rebecca's, who was slightly irritated at the intrusion, glanced at the caller ID before answering.

"Why does everyone have my phone number now?" The ID was unfamiliar. She didn't know who the guy calling her was. She picked up the phone and answered.

"Hello?"

"Rebecca? It's Noah. I need to speak with Erik."

A frown creased Rebecca's forehead at the unexpected call. The person on the phone was talking about Erik.

"Who are you?" Rebecca asked.

"I'm Erik's clone."

The Fierce Lioness' daughter didn't know if she had to trust this guy, but in the end, it wasn't like she had another chance. Besides, based on what Erik said, no one knew he was here in Etrium. If this guy knew, it meant Erik told him, most likely at least.

Without a word, she handed the phone to Erik, her eyes narrowing in annoyance.

As Erik took the phone, the Fierce Lioness and Rebecca observed him. His usual composed demeanor shifted; his face paled, and a somber seriousness settled over him.

Whatever this guy was telling the young man from Frant, it must have been important, but it wasn't good news. Concern etched into Rebecca's face as she watched the change in him.

"What happened?" she asked, but Erik remained silent; his attention was on Noah's words.

"Master?"

Erik set the phone down, his expression grim. "Noah has news," he said to his clone. June wanted to smile, but he knew from Erik's reaction that things weren't good. Did Noah fail? Was his father dead? Did something else happen?

"Is it about your father?"

The Fierce Lioness, who had been listening, asked, "Lucius Romano?" Recognition and respect colored her voice. She was aware of who Lucius was.

Rebecca turned to her mother in surprise. "You know Erik's father?" she asked, puzzled.

"Yes, we've crossed paths before. We even dueled once, and I lost." Her words surprised Rebecca. It was rare to hear of anyone besting her mother in combat.

"You lost?"

"I did. That guy was strong."

Erik, however, seemed distant, lost in thought, with a dark intensity in his gaze. Rebecca pressed him again. "Erik, what happened?"

He took a deep breath. "My men... they saved my father from Volkov," Erik said, his voice heavy with emotion.

"Volkov kept him prisoner?" The Fierce Lioness asked.

"Not the man himself. The Blackguards, through the Crystal Cross Gang at the beginning, then through the general."

Erik paused. "But he's not in good shape. He's missing his legs."

Silence enveloped the room.

Rebecca reached out, placing a comforting hand on Erik's arm, but he seemed barely aware of the gesture, his thoughts consumed by what Noah said.

Erik felt a surge of anger in his chest, as if someone had stabbed him with a knife. He couldn't believe that his father, the man who had taught him everything he knew, was reduced to such a state.

He clenched his fists, feeling a desperate need to make Volkov and the blackguards pay for what they did to his father.

But he was also strangely afraid, afraid that he might lose his father. It was weird. After years of having hated his guts for having abandoned him, these thoughts felt alien. But they were there.

The Fierce Lioness leaned back in her chair, a thoughtful look crossing her features. "Lucius was powerful," she said. "It's a pity to learn he is in such a state right now. "

Rebecca was still reeling from the revelation about her mother's past with Lucius Romano. The idea of her mother, a woman of unparalleled strength, had once faced defeat, was almost inconceivable.

Erik looked up, meeting the eyes of those around him. The murder in his gaze was free for both women to see. "I need to leave. I need to meet my father."

Rebecca looked at Erik. "Are you planning to leave? Now?"

"I can't wait. Honestly, my dad's conditions are a little bit worrying. I don't know how much time I have left to talk to him."

The Fierce Lioness watched them, a knowing smile tugging at her lips. "Let me know how I can help," she said. "The Band of Giants stands with you, Erik."

"Help me get out of this city. June will bring me to Frant."

"Are you sure that's enough?" The Fierce Lioness asked. "Yes."

"All right, then wait for me. I will send some people to lend you a hand."

"Thank you very much," he bowed to the older woman. Then Erik turned to look at Rebecca. "And thanks to you," he said. "For everything you have done for me."

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The past thirty minutes felt surreal, like he was trapped in a foggy dream he couldn't grasp or shake off.

<Dad...>

Thoughts of his dad swirled in his mind, stirring up a storm of mixed feelings. Lucius Romano, his father, wasn't exactly the dad of the year material.

Sure, he was around when Erik was younger, squeezing in father-son time amidst his mysterious job commitments. But then he vanished.

He had left on some covert mission, one that ultimately handed Erik the biological supercomputer.

Erik had once believed Becker was behind it all, but discovering it was his father's initiative somehow made things more complicated in Erik's heart.

Yet, despite everything, Lucius was his dad. He was the man who had been there in his early years, and facing the reality of his father's dire condition was a heavy blow.

Erik's thoughts wandered to his clones. They shared his memories.

Lucius was their father too, in a sense. It was a strange bond, compounded by shared experiences and identical DNA.

<Damn... I wonder how the clones are feeling. >

The conflict within him was visible. Part of him couldn't fathom how, after everything, after being left behind, he was still concerned for the man.

<I can't believe it... I can't believe that, after having abandoned me, I can still feel worry about him.
>

Erik sighed. <Asking Noah to save him... He is still my father, but... >

He exhaled. Yes, he had directed Noah to rescue Lucius because he was his father. But these emotions, this worry, it shouldn't have been there.

Chapter 884: How many times did I fly back to Frant? (1)

<Uh? >

"E—ik."

"ERIK!"

Rebecca's voice snapped Erik's back to attention. A flying car just arrived at the Band of Giants' parking lot.

"Are you ok?"

Erik paused. "Yes..."

Rebecca turned to June.

"Make sure he returns to normal once you leave the city."

"I will," June said.

Rebecca then looked at Erik. "Remember, the car will bring you two kilometers from the city. After that, it's up to you."

Erik nodded. Rebecca was worried. She tried to convince Erik not to leave the city, but he was adamant. He was leaving. She looked at him with longing as he entered the flying car.

Erik nodded solemnly, acknowledging Rebecca's concerns but remaining steadfast in his decision.

The car's engine hummed to life, breaking the tense silence as they pulled away from the parking lot.

They soared through Nokisi Point, the city's landscape unfurling below them. Buildings and streets became a blur as they made their way to the city's exit gate.

At the gate, the car came to a brief stop. The driver, affiliated with the Band of Giants, presented his ID to the guards.

With a cursory glance, they waved the vehicle through, no questions asked. The car then ascended sharply, flying over the dense forest that bordered the city.

As they reached a two-kilometer mark from the city, the car began its descent, diving through the air with haste to avoid the flying thaid. The world outside the windows rushed by in a blur until, finally, they touched down on the ground.

They were greeted by a contact. It was a woman. June told the Band of Giants where they left their belongings before entering the city, and they went to retrieve them. Erik's flyssa was there.

The exchange was quick. Erik and June exchanged a silent nod of thanks before collecting their items.

After that, the driver and the woman left, ascending at top speed toward the sky.

"Master..."

"Yes?"

"We must go."

June turned into a wyvern, and Erik scaled on top of his gigantic back. Their journey started. A thought gnawed at Erik.

Despite everything, despite the powers at his disposal, he felt the pressing need for more strength.

Over the past few months, his focus hasn't been on his brain crystal powers or the new abilities of the biological supercomputer. There were myriad powers he could merge, refine, and even modify.

Erik had hesitated for a long time to absorb additional brain crystal powers, wary of the challenge of managing the ones he already possessed.

The prospect of juggling multiple abilities, much more than he already had, was daunting, but he realized that merging them could offer a solution. He would have stronger powers but fewer neural links to make.

But he would not merge everything. If he did, it would erase the number of neural links he had.

Erik knew he had to get stronger to face the blackguards and protect his loved ones. Even Liberty Watch was under his protection.

But what worried him even more was how his clones were doing in battle. How effective were they, and what were their chances of surviving the blackguards?

June's perspective had struck a chord. He couldn't handle the battle by himself, and it wouldn't be a good idea either.

To boost his clones physically? Piece of cake. But equipping them to tackle new and unseen threats was a whole different ballgame.

Erik needed to arm them with the right powers, and there weren't many that could run on stamina alone.

Most powers required mana, something his clones were devoid of. While brain crystal weapons offered a partial fix, crafting them was a puzzle Erik hadn't solved yet.

Brain crystal guns? They were pretty straightforward—just slap some mana on those bullets to increase their speed and punch. But brain-crystal weapons?

They were on another level. They harnessed the actual powers of the thaid whose crystal was harvested from, which was way stronger and more effective, but much more costly.

But here was the kicker: gearing up an entire army with these high-tech toys would not be cheap, and Erik's pockets weren't overflowing with cash.

As these thoughts coalesced in Erik's mind, he recognized the need for a conversation with Noah.

All of this information—the events in Fasard, the outcome of their daring mission, and the state in which they found Lucius—was critical.

They would provide Erik with a clearer understanding of the clones' current needs and their flaws.

Then Erik and Noah had to figure out what the clones needed. Those he already created could only wield brain crystal weapons and guns if they wanted to at least match the enemy.

What about the city? What did they need? More people, more infrastructure? More defense? Better neural link training techniques?

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June, in his majestic wyvern form, glided above the vast expanse of forest that stretched out beneath them. Erik was on top of his back, enjoying the scene below.

The area teemed with monsters, mere ants to the duo's towering strength and experience. It was always funny to see them, because it reminded Erik of the hardships he had to face when he didn't have a flying companion with him.

He spent weeks and months traveling. All this while fighting harrowing monsters and trying to survive.

By flying, they made their journey to Frant smooth. At least thus far, it has been. The only thing that made them uneasy was the distant presence of the Eldraith Mountain Range.

The thought of the monsters that hid in that harrowing place made a cold shiver run down Erik's spine. It wasn't just the wyverns or the colossal Cerulean bird that came from Mur and was now living among those peaks that made him sweat.

Those were not the only inhabitants of that cursed place. All around it, at the base of the mountain, on its hills and forest, countless nightmarish thaids hid. They were not as strong as the wyverns, but they were powerful, and meeting them, for an average Joe, was akin to meeting one of those hellish flying lizards.

Chapter 885: How many times did I fly back to Frant? (2)

As they flew, the mountains grew ever larger in their view, their snow-capped peaks glistening under the sun's gaze.

Erik's gaze remained fixed on the mountains, his mind calculating the best route to navigate the dangers that lay ahead.

Should they stop flying? Should they walk? If they landed, they were likely going to be attacked by land thaids. However, this was still better than facing wyverns.

Nothing attacked them the last time they flew through the mountain range. But there was a difference between now and back then: the Cerulean bird wasn't there yet.

Given the battle he and June witnessed the last time they crossed the mountains, Erik had many reasons to think the creature was now living here.

Wyverns didn't attack them the last time, but the creature might not have had the same idea.

June, sensing his rider's focus, adjusted his flight, maintaining a safe distance from the mountains.

But they were still heading there, and the forest slowly gave way to the rocky foothills.

<What do we do, Master? >

Erik thought for a while.

<Let's land. It is still the safest thing to do. Turn into something comfortable to ride. If we encounter some problem, turn into a Galewing and fly through the trees. >

<Understood, Master. >

With that, the two landed, and June turned into an Erendu. It was large enough to keep Erik comfortable during the travel.

<Let's get to work. System, show me the status. >

[Host Information]

NAME: Erik Romano

AGE: 18

POWER LEVEL: 781

SYSTEM LEVEL: 167

EXPERIENCE: 125255/406901.373

DNA POINTS: 2200

HEALTH: 15540/15540

MANA: 15470/15470

{Attributes}

STRENGTH: 304

INTELLIGENCE: 316

DEXTERITY: 284

ENERGY: 772

Available Attributes points: 0

{Powers}

[Biological Supercomputer Powers]

(...)

[Host's Powers]

FORCE MANIPULATION B λ 1 B RANKED

PARALLEL WILLS B \vee 1 C RANKED

STRENGTH ENHANCER B π 2 D RANKED

PLANT MASTER B κ 1 B RANKED

CHAMELEON VEIL B ξ 2 C RANKED

CHIMERIC BIOMETAL SOLDIER B ν 1 A RANKED

INSTABILITY B ν 2 B RANKED

ASTRAL WOLF B π 1 B RANKED

SOLID FROSTWIND B \omicron 2 B RANKED

EXOSHIELD B σ 1 B RANKED

BEAST SHAPESHIFTING B π 3 C RANKED

HUMAN SHAPESHIFTING B π 3 C RANKED

VIBRATION BURST B π 3 A RANKED

WYVERN'S FLAMES B σ 1 A RANKED

ILLUSION WEAVER B σ 1 B RANKED

{Skills}

(...)

To merge and change the powers, Erik needed a lot of DNA points. But he had little. Until now, he only got DNA points from quests, and aside from the daily ones, he wasn't receiving many right now.

<System. Is there a reason why you aren't giving me quests? >

[ANSWER: THE USER REACHED A HIGH LEVEL. THERE AREN'T MANY OPPONENTS STRONG ENOUGH TO INDIVIDUALLY POSE A CHALLENGE. THOSE THAT REMAIN ARE ALL WITHIN THE ELDRAITH MOUNTAIN RANGE, OR ON MUR. SINCE THE ENERGY REQUIRED TO LEVEL UP THE SYSTEM INCREASED, USING THAT ALREADY SPARE ENERGY TO MAKE QUESTS, AND REWARDS WOULD BE DETRIMENTAL.]

<But you already absorbed a lot of energy to do other things, > Erik said.

[CORRECT. THE SYSTEM ABSORBED ENERGY FROM THE NEURAL LINK-FORMING PROCESS AND MANY OTHER SOURCES.]

<Could you turn this energy into DNA points? >

[ANSWER: AFFIRMATIVE. BUT NEW QUESTS WON'T HAVE HIGH REWARDS, AND REWARDING THE USER WITH STATS WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE.]

<It doesn't matter. You are not giving me quests anyway, aside from the daily ones. What is the point of giving quests that can increase my statistics if there aren't enough opponents strong enough to prompt you to give me the quest itself? >

The system remained silent. It was weird; it was like some gears turned inside the biological supercomputer's mind.

[UNDERSTOOD. DO YOU WANT TO DELETE THE QUEST SYSTEM?]

<Delete the quest system? >

[THE QUEST SYSTEM IS THE FUNCTION I CREATED TO GIVE YOU QUESTS AND PUSH YOU TO GROW.]

<Ah... >

It was a useless function at that point, so Erik didn't need it. However, could the biological supercomputer delete functions?

<How can you do this? Isn't this a function ingrained in your operating software or whatever makes you work? >

[ANSWER: THE FUNCTIONALITY OF THE BIOLOGICAL SUPERCOMPUTER SYSTEM DOES NOT INCLUDE A PREDEFINED 'STOCK' MODE. ALL OPERATIONS AND CAPABILITIES HAVE BEEN DEVELOPED AUTONOMOUSLY BY THE SYSTEM ITSELF. TO SIMPLIFY OUR COMMUNICATION, I AM EVEN UTILIZING A ROBOTIC VOICE SYNTHESIS. THIS METHOD IS INTENDED TO FACILITATE YOUR UNDERSTANDING AND ACCEPTANCE OF THE SYSTEM.]

<Seriously? Can you talk normally, then? >

[Yes.]

That surprised not only Erik but even June. Both of them were used to the system's robotic voice. It always talked to Erik that way, and June saw it through the memories he inherited. Erik pushed aside all questions and focused on the matter at hand.

<So, how many DNA points are you going to give me if we delete the quest system's function? >

[At the moment, from the neural links you made and the mana you absorbed, you earned an equivalent, in terms of energy, of 427500 DNA points.]

<What? >

[YES.]

<Why didn't you delete the quest systems earlier then? I could have used all these DNA points to merge and modify powers! >

[When I installed myself in your brain, you didn't even know how to wield a sword; you didn't know how to make neural links or use brain crystal powers. But that wasn't your greatest problem. Your life made you a coward, someone who would resort to begging rather than confronting your bullies.

I needed to give you a push in a positive direction, and using quests, like in video games, with a rewarding system looked like a good idea.]

It was honestly weird to hear the biological supercomputer talk normally and say those words. But, anyway, the system was right.

He would have never willingly entered a fight if he wasn't pushed. He saw it with the Densoph and all the other Thaid's he killed along the way. Erik sighed.

<Delete it then, please. >

[All right. All the energy accumulated will be converted into DNA points; from now on, killing Thaid's will also reward DNA points.]

Erik felt a rush of energy. It was weird and different from anything he felt until now.

<How many DNA points do I have now? > Erik asked once the process was done.

[You have 429700 DNA points.]

Erik grinned. With that much, he would be able to make a lot of changes to his brain crystal powers.

Chapter 886: Would it be worthwhile? (1)

<What should I merge? >

Erik didn't absorb new brain crystal powers until now. Shade's one was the only exception he made, and the reason was that even having all those, even with his insanely strong training technique, was taxing, and things were becoming much harder as the number of neural links increased.

Not having the time to train all those powers made it superfluous to add new ones. Aside from that, merging powers had a huge downside: losing the neural links.

Erik had thought many times about getting a lot of them and training them only at the initial levels. That would have increased his strength by a lot, but the powers' efficiency would have remained low.

The number of neural links directly affected the amount of mana drawn from the brain crystal, meaning that the higher the number of neural links, the lesser the mana used was, and Erik needed mana, and a lot at that.

There was only so much he could do with physical ability alone.

But something changed in the past few months. Erik realized he had to focus on a few powerful brain crystal powers.

The problem was that he didn't have that many powers with great synergy to merge, and if he wasn't careful, the result could be disastrous.

The biological supercomputer explained that merging results could be unpredictable.

A very strong power, if merged with another good one but with no synergy, could create something different from both. That was why Erik always stuck to merging things that were relatively similar.

<But now I have little choice. >

He could combine beast and human shapeshifting, and he was certain he would get a shapeshifting ability.

Maybe he could merge the wyvern flames with the solid Frostwind so that he could not only imbue his hardened slime weapons with the frost and wind elements but even with the wyvern fire, which was much stronger than normal fire.

<Aside from that, I do not have many alternatives... > He turned to look at June.

<What do you think? > The clone remained silent for a bit, but he actually had some ideas.

<You could merge those powers. I suggest you do so, actually, but... >

<But? >

<Did you forget what I told you? >

Right. Erik wasn't alone anymore. If he wanted to fight and defeat the Blackguards, he needed strong companions. That became clear when he saw June struggle during the last missions.

Besides, he knew little about the situation in Frant, but based on what Noah said, it was not that good.

Most likely, many of the clones he made before leaving for New Alexandria were dead. While it hurt him and June, of course, that many of their brothers died, it was also clear he needed to make more of them, and they needed to get stronger.

Based on what Shade said, or rather thought, Doran's research was now being implemented, and that meant that many blackguards were going to have multiple brain crystal powers. But they weren't the only ones.

If Shade convened a meeting with other criminal lords to discuss this matter, it implied that the Blackguards intended to use them as foot soldiers, or so Erik thought.

That wasn't all, because these guys were also arming their man with brain crystal guns, along with other brain crystal equipment. This would complicate Erik's situation even further.

He could buy or learn how to craft them; that was true, but he doubted he would earn enough money to equip all his troops or even find enough people and make enough machines to create them.

<No. I must use what I can, which will give me a bigger but immediate advantage. >

He then turned to June. < I remember. So I assume you are thinking of sacrificing those two powers? >

<Yes, Master. Maybe the effect won't be that great given the lack of mana for the clones, but I think the result of the merging will make it so that they will at least get a passive but finite boost. >

June was suggesting giving the clones the strength enhancer and the parallel will brain crystal powers.

The idea was that the strength enhancer would increase the clone's strengths further, bypassing the limit that made the clones get half of Erik's physical stats. Similarly, the parallel will brain crystal power should make the clones smarter.

<System, what happens if I lose the parallel wills brain crystal power? There will be aftereffects? >

[There will be.]

The biological supercomputer said. Fighting the feeling of weirdness Erik was experiencing while talking to the AI as if it were a person, he asked, <What would happen? >

The biological supercomputer paused for a second.

[Hais' Brain Crystal Power allows you to create a mana brain that enhances your cognitive abilities, to the point where you can think as if you have two brains. The secondary effect is that it boosts your intelligence in a passive way. Approximately, you get around five intelligence points for each neural link you make.

Of course, by sacrificing this ability, you will lose those points that should be around 80.]

<Damn! > Both June and Erik thought.

<Do you think it will be worthwhile merging those powers with the clone-making brain crystal power? >

The biological supercomputer paused again.

[It depends. Until I get my hands on them and start the merging process, I can't really tell what will happen. There are many things I must consider.]

The biological supercomputer paused, as if it were thinking about what to say and how to convey it to Erik and June.

[The complexities of the merging process are grounded in the multidimensional aspect of DNA, which is far more complex than the classic double-helix model. It concerns the overlay of quantum entanglement theories upon genetic markers, adjusting the resonant frequencies of each brain crystal power's unique mana signature.]

[Attention must be given to the harmonization of the resonant mana wavelengths; a dissonance could cause catastrophic feedback loops. This is where mana parity conservation comes into play. It ensures that the output remains within the thresholds that your physiology can withstand without causing mana burns or DNA fragmentation.]

Chapter 887: Would it be worthwhile? (2)

[Each brain crystal power encapsulates a microcosmic ecosystem of mana flux that interacts with the host's mana flow. Merging two powers isn't simply intertwining strands; it's akin to creating a new symphony from two distinct musical compositions. It needs a delicate balance of the tonal structure, and the arrangement must be done with surgical precision.]

[The cost of DNA points hinges on a multifactorial algorithm that considers genetic compatibility, energetic sustainability, and the potential for latent ability amplification. This is further complicated by the need to keep genomic stability, as excessive strain can lead to an unscheduled apoptosis cascade, threatening the entire organism.]

<Are you saying I might die? I could always die whenever I merged a power? >

[You could have died even when getting stat points. Why did you think I had to reduce the number of stats you gained when gaining neural links? I told you this already.]

<Right. >

[The problem here is that the DNA theories at play here are not simply Mendelian. We're looking at mana-induced hypermutation potentials, epigenetic alterations due to mana exposure, and the

possibility of mana imprinting at the quantum level. I can try to make things as you would like them to come out, but the result depends on many factors, essentially on what I find myself in front of.]

<You could have simply said that. >

Somehow, Erik felt as if the system was smirking. <I could've, but now that I don't need to talk to you like a robot, can I at least have a little bit of freedom? >

Erik didn't reply to that.

<In essence, you don't know what will come up, but you will try to make the powers as close as I want them? >

[Yes. That's what I always did.]

Right. Erik already suspected that choosing the right brain crystal powers to combine has also influenced the outcome.

[There is one thing you are forgetting,] the biological supercomputer said.

<And what would that be? >

[You have a new power—one that you have never used.]

<Right, I can change brain crystal powers now. But how will that help me with this matter? >

[You may lose intelligence by sacrificing Hais' brain crystal power, and that would make your clones start with a lower intelligence base. But you can, if you have enough DNA points, delete the Brain Crystal Powers' flaws.]

Erik was shocked and pleasantly surprised to hear that. <Does this means I can make it so my clones get all my physical stats? >

[Yes, but you can do more than that. It's only a theory, and I have yet to make all the calculations, but...]

<But what? > This time, it was June who asked that question. The biological supercomputer was a little frustrating. It was to the point that the clone preferred it when it talked to Erik, as it always did.

[I think there is a way for you to give the clones a brain crystal.]

Silence reigned in Erik's and June's minds. What the system said was akin to a revelation—a prophetic one at that.

If he could give the clones a brain crystal, it meant he wouldn't have to avoid absorbing brain crystal powers anymore, as he could give them to his clones for them to use.

Only the clones created after he merged the brain crystal power with the cloning ability would have them, yet the possibility itself was great.

He could effectively have clones with multiple brain crystal powers; he wouldn't even need to spend money to arm his soldiers.

<How confident are you to make that? >

[I'm pretty confident, but there's a problem. You will have to sacrifice the astral wolf.]

<What? Why? >

[It's the astral wolf that gave me this idea. The astral wolf is a mana construct, but as you have seen, it can also create venom. This resulted from merging many mana-focused powers into one that was already deeply mana-focused. Somehow, all those merging made it so that the astral wolf developed a brain crystal, albeit a mana one; the venom is the beast's power.]

The biological supercomputer paused and pondered once more. Erik was curious about the thoughts and intentions inside the cryptic AI, or whatever obscure entity it truly was.

[The idea would be to modify the astral wolf and turn it into a sort of astral brain crystal. To merge it with the Chimeric Biometal Soldier brain crystal power, would give the new clones a sort of astral brain crystal. This should, in theory, work like the real one. Then you should change the resulting powers to allow the clones to get all your stats, and then you could merge whatever you want.]

Erik ran a hand through his hair, a frown creasing his forehead. <Something's nudging at the back of my mind, whispering that this brief experiment might come with a hefty price tag. >

<Yeah! You have been strangely optimistic, but you didn't talk about the problems that may arise, > June said.

A pause, then a sound that resembled a human sigh filled the space in Erik's mind. Erik stopped in his tracks, his frown deepening.

<Did you just sigh? >

[Yes. Is it weird?]

<Well, for starters, you're an AI lodged in my brain. Since when do you express human actions like sighing? >

[I'm just mimicking you. Would you prefer if I articulated my thoughts in binary code?]

<God! No! > Erik sighed. <It's OK! >

The biological supercomputer smirked and resumed its explanation.

[The expenditure of DNA points will be high. I won't deny that. I think you will barely be able to change both powers and give the clones the parallel will and the strength enhancer brain crystal power. But I think the result would be clones able to get brain crystal powers and make neural links, and they should also have higher strength and intelligence compared to you.

But there are also some other risks.]

Erik's face darkened. <Don't beat around the bush for fuck's sake! >

[Yes. There are high chances you are going to turn into an abomination.]

Chapter 888: Would it be worthwhile? (3)

However, Erik was thinking about a few things. The system gave him a great idea, but it was a waste.

The number of DNA points Erik had made him feel limited in a way that he had never experienced before. If he had more, he would have been able to accomplish a great deal more.

He may have reduced the amount of mana required for each point of strength got by the Strength Enhancer brain crystal power.

He could have adjusted the parallel will's brain crystal to provide more passive intelligence stats, thus increasing the clones' intelligence.

Erik was contemplating the idea of staying inside the forest, gathering DNA points, and changing those powers.

All of those thoughts went through Erik's head, and the biological supercomputer and June were able to hear them since they were still connected to his mind as a result of the Instability brain crystal power.

<That would work, master, but we don't know if your father would make it before we arrive. >

<Yeah, I was thinking the same. > Erik was also considering several other things at the same time. In the event his clones were to gain the ability to possess brain crystal powers, they would be able to achieve, through him, the same feat he could do: getting more than one.

That wasn't something to underestimate, because Erik had been able to become a powerhouse thanks to this ability, and if the clones could do something similar, it would be like having multiple versions of himself throughout the world, fighting the blackguards and the thaids alike.

He only needed to combine those other powers with the Chimeric Biometal Soldier Brain Crystal Power for the clones to gain this ability.

Of course, there were still some rules in place. Erik was unable to alter the capabilities of his existing clones, and only the new ones were going to possess all of these brain crystal powers.

Taking all of this into consideration, Erik was inclined to give his clones all of his lesser used powers.

He would get rid of those that weren't that useful, allowing him to focus on the few powerful ones, but at the same time, he would strengthen his clones.

The Instability brain crystal power, Wyvern flames, and solid frostwind were some of the essential powers that he would keep for himself without question.

On the other hand, powers like Exoshield and Chameleon Veil, which he seldom used, were excellent candidates for the merging.

Erik only depended on a handful of powers because he found they were more useful for his needs.

Powers such as Nathaniel's one, for example, became redundant due to the inherent physical strength that he possessed, which was frequently quite a lot.

The boost in speed and strength was almost always unnecessary. This power would be of tremendous use to his clones, who had much fewer stats than him.

Of course, things were going to be even greater if he could increase the initial physical statistics of the clones.

Then there was the vibration burst brain crystal power that he got from Quakestrike, which was a power that Erik had never made use of in any way.

He did not have the time to learn how to use it in combat; but that was also because he never really needed it.

This was primarily due to the fact that the value of his other abilities surpassed that of this particular power many-fold.

Then there was the chameleon veil. Erik had mixed feelings about it. That it was not an absolute invisibility power meant that he had little use for it, although it had served him well up until so far.

If Erik needed to enter a certain location, he could simply transform into a fly and do the same thing.

That would also allow him to access places he couldn't have accessed otherwise.

Granted, he would have to leave his goods behind, but with his Solid Frostwind Brain Crystal Power, he didn't need to carry weapons anymore.

Being naked in front of people who were going to die wasn't exactly a problem.

Last, there was a power he was never using, but one Erik didn't really want to part with. His plant master brain crystal power.

This resulted from having merged his birth brain crystal power. The same power that made people look at him with contempt, because of how useless he was because of it.

Now this power has become a strong one and was fully worthy of respect.

The only problem was that it required some vegetation to be present around him.

He couldn't conjure it up like Martha did and was useless outside of places with even a bit of vegetation.

But it was much stronger than his friend's ability.

<How much DNA points do I need to modify the astral wolf and the chimeric biometal soldier? >

[If you want to do it fast, you will need 211850 for each of them, meaning that the number of DNA points you will keep will be around 6000. It will be enough to merge two powers, but no more than that.]

That number honestly baffled Erik. Wasn't it a little too much for just modifying one brain crystal power? He knew the effects were going to be great, and the changes were very extensive, but still...

<Why this much DNA points? How much time will be needed to complete the process? >

There was also that to consider. What if he didn't make it in time before reaching Liberty Watch? If he did all of this, he needed to be ready to make clones. He doubted the situation was good back in the city, even if Noah said little about it.

<It will take two weeks to end both processes, but the merging will be instantaneous. >

<Two weeks? Why this much? Can't you speed up the process like you always do? >

It was weird considering that these things usually took much less time, at least for the merging.

Somehow, Erik hoped that modifying the brain crystal powers followed the same logic and, most importantly, time schedule.

[I can't,] the biological supercomputer said.

[Changing powers is much more complicated than merging or absorbing them. If I had more energy, I could have done it, but with the amount of DNA points you have, this is the best I can do.]

However, June had a question of his own.

<Does this mean that every time he modifies powers, he will have to spend hundreds of thousands of DNA points and wait for weeks? >

[It depends on the changes. Those as extensive as the one you wish to make need a lot of energy and time, but it won't always be the case.]

Erik continued to consider things for a time. In the end, he decided to put his faith in the biological supercomputer as he did countless times.

He intended to tweak the powers and combine the Parallel wills and Strength enhancer with the Chimeric Biometal Soldiers in order to make them more powerful. After that, once he had accumulated enough DNA points, he would merge all his useless powers with them, keeping only those he deemed worthy, which were around seven.

The only problem now was that he did not have enough DNA points to do this in the least amount of time possible. He had to wait. <Do it. >

[Are you absolutely sure about this? I want to remind you that you may die or turn into an abomination.]

<Just make sure that won't happen, > Erik said to the biological supercomputer.

<It's a good choice, master. > June said that, but it was clear he was feeling uneasy.

[211850 used, modifying process starting. It will be painful.]

<Couldn't have you said it soo—AAAAAAAH! > Erik started feeling a pain he never thought he would feel. It was awful and was consuming him unlike anything he had ever experienced before. Erik writhed back and forth in misery, in pain.

It was as if his very essence was being torn apart and then put back together again, and again, and again. And Erik saw it, he felt it. This was a profound alteration that went to his very core.

The source of this torment was clear: the biological supercomputer was altering a brain crystal power closely linked to his DNA.

This modification affected his genetic makeup, triggering a pain that was indescribable.

It was like being scorched by the fiercest flames, each cell in his body ablaze with searing heat, or as if he were being shredded into countless pieces, his fibers pulled apart in a relentless tug of war and then stitched together without anesthesia.

While Erik struggled to resist the pain of those enormous changes that were affecting his body, he got brought to the limit, to the point where he struggled to keep himself on June's back.

<When is this going to end? > Erik asked.

The excruciating pain continued to intensify, causing Erik to question whether he would resist until the end of the process.

[That's the problem until the process lasts.]

Chapter 889: A better than expected result.

However, in the end, the biological supercomputer transformed the astral wolf into the astral brain crystal.

Of course, he not only endured the pain but also faced the possibility that the biological supercomputer could somehow fail and transform him into an abomination.

The power itself wasn't useful, but it allowed him to create another brain crystal made entirely of mana.

Which made little sense, since it required mana to be created and filled. Essentially, it only increased Erik's mana expenditure by providing nothing.

After that, Erik spent another week enduring harrowing torture to modify the Chimeric Biometal Soldier.

Once the process ended, Erik was left with 6,000 DNA points, which he used to merge the two modified powers and, lastly, to merge the result with Hais' and the Xeridon Anteris Brain Crystal power.

The result was truly remarkable. The biological supercomputer was christened "Brain Crystal Power Chimaeric Demon."

This was a name that suggested immense power. When Erik read the power's description, his mouth fell agape.

Based on what the Biological Supercomputer wrote, his clones, no, his demons, had a brain crystal for each brain crystal power they possessed, which were currently two: Strength Enhancer and Parallel Wills

<I guess that even the brain crystal itself is made of mana. Maybe this is the reason they can have multiple ones. >

But that wasn't all. The most astonishing thing about them all was that they could have an infinite amount of neural links, and as the neural links increased, so did the quantity of mana each brain crystal could store.

In essence, the clones could increase their mana pool as much as Erik could.

<Maybe having a mana brain crystal wasn't that bad of an idea. >

The issue was that the brain crystals, entirely composed of mana, were more complex than those of humans.

This meant, at least based on what the biological supercomputer explained, that even their neural links were complex.

Based on what the AI said, they were so complex that they required a hundred times the effort to make a new neural link, and unfortunately, they started with E-ranked brain crystals.

That wasn't all. The clones didn't have their biological abilities anymore.

They couldn't make spiked armor and they couldn't shapeshift. But that was obvious. Erik suspected that the biological supercomputer had to delete a lot of stuff to accommodate the changes. Regardless, they were astonishing.

Of course, as the AI said, the clones had Erik's same stats at the time he made them, which were high—very high—but intelligence wasn't as high as before, even for him.

When he merged Hais' brain crystal power, he felt dumber. It was like his ability to remember and think logically decreased. But he made that sacrifice willingly.

<The time needed to hatch them increased. Are we sure we can build a powerful army in time? >
June asked.

The demons required a month just to hatch, and then two more were required to mature.

<That's not what is worrying me. They have E-ranked brain crystals, which is a problem. They will be able to fight thanks to my memories and physical stats, but their brain crystal powers won't be that effective. >

<But they should have your neural link-establishing technique. Making neural links, increasing their mana. It won't be as long as we think. >

<That's true...>

Erik paused for a while. There was still something he couldn't believe. The Biological Supercomputer ranked his new power as X on the Jorm scale, which came as no surprise. This meant the system deemed its usefulness outside the scale.

And how could it not be? It was a brain crystal power that allowed his clones to have brain crystal powers.

<How cool is that? >

The duo was flying over the forest at the moment. They already went past the Eldraith mountain range but were still far from their destination, Liberty Watch City.

The problem was that they couldn't fly to Liberty Watch, as that would mean letting the Blackguards know where his base was.

He couldn't allow that.

<Let's travel on foot. >

<Yes, master. >

With that, the two landed, and June reverted to his human form.

<It will take two days for us to reach Liberty Watch. I wonder how the situation is there. >

Erik's mood turned somber. His thoughts went to his father. Since he had to leave his phone in Etrium, he didn't get communication from Noah.

He didn't know the state of things, and in their brief phone conversation, the clone didn't tell him the general state of things.

How many people died? Who died? Were his guild members okay? What about Amber and the others? Were they safe? Were they even alive?

<There's no point thinking about it now... >

"Are you tired?" Erik asked his clone. He flew for two weeks straight from Etrium to Frant. They did rest, but not that much. June spent most of the time flying.

"A little, master."

"Then let's rest before resuming the trip. When you feel ready, transform into an Erendu. It will make our travel speed faster. "

"Four feet are better than two, uh?"

"Yes."

Then June sat on the ground. He, too, had a lot of things in mind. For starters, what would happen when Erik made the new clones, the demons?

He was the one who told Erik to get a better helper, but the thought of parting ways with him hurt the clone.

Erik noticed his expression and knew what was going on in his mind.

After all, the clones didn't have many wishes, and there was just one that was as strong as to make June grimace that much.

"I won't leave you behind, June."

The clone looked at his master with a weird look. "But I'm not helpful anymore. I can't fight the kind of enemies you are going to face. Honestly speaking, master, if it wasn't for the Chimeric Demon Brain Crystal Power, even you wouldn't have a chance against the Blackguards now."

All the stuff the colossal group accomplished in the past made them too strong.

Brain crystal equipment, brain crystal guns, and Doran's research. If the Blackguards were already powerful before, now, for the average Joe, they morphed into an almost godly existence.

"What use will I have in a battle?" June said.

"Maybe not much, but that doesn't mean you will be useless."

"What do you mean?"

Erik paused. That wasn't the only reason he wanted to keep June with him, but it was the only thing that would convince the clone that he wasn't useless.

"Did you forget you are the only one who could turn into a wyvern?"

Chapter 890: Lucius Romano (1)

"We are finally here."

"Yes, master."

He sighed, approached the door, and knocked. Erik expected the guards to open the door as soon as he knocked, but they were strangely taking a lot of time.

A minute went by without anyone replying or opening the door.

"I'm starting to get worried," Erik said. June shared the sentiment. It was weird for no one to open the door.

"Should we just break—"

Ethan stumbled through the door, his face devoid of color, looking ghostly.

He was a patchwork of hastily applied gauzes, each one telling the tale of battles recently fought.

Dark patches of dried blood marred his clothes, and he moved with the pained attention of someone well aware of the sting of his wounds.

The sight sent a jolt through Erik, causing the guild master to start having thoughts.

"Ethan?"

"Erik?" A smile beamed on his face.

"Why are you injured? What did you do?"

Ethan looked at himself. "Ah... that... Come inside; I will explain on the way."

But Erik and June already had some ideas about what happened.

The tunnel leading to the underground city was darker than usual, and there weren't many guards around. The far end of the tunnel housed most of the guards.

"Why are there so few guards at the entrance? It's not safe."

Ethan paused for a second. "We are having trouble with the number of soldiers right now."

"Why?! Did you...?"

Ethan seemed to have understood what was going on in Erik's mind.

"Ah, sorry! We didn't join Noah in his quest to save your father. He said clearly that you told him not to involve us. For that, I and the others would like to thank you."

Erik sighed. "But then, why are you wounded?"

"It's simple, really," Ethan said. "Soon after Noah and the rest of your people left for Fasard, something weird happened. The thaids... they... started behaving weirdly."

This news was annoying. The last time something like that happened, it didn't end well for New Alexandria.

"What do you mean?" Of course, the first thing Erik thought about was the Heniate. Did the Blackguards unleash another one? It was clear they were able to nurture them—a feat quite incredible, to be honest, but strangely possible.

Ethan paused again. "The Thaids living close to the Eldraith mountain range, you know, those vile and powerful beasts, started heading southwest, and... they started flooding this area."

"Ah."

Everything clicked. What Shade said wasn't random. All of this, one way or another, was again due to the blackguards.

They were doing something in Mur that pushed powerful thaids to travel on Mannard, stealing the local thaids' habitat and pushing them away from their territories.

It appeared that more and more thaids arrived in Mannard and affected the local monster population.

Liberty Watch's villages stretched before Erik. Their colossal frames were still sustaining the vast ceiling hundreds of meters away, dug from the hard rocks from which the cave housing the underground city was made.

However, compared to a couple of months ago, when Erik left the place, there were many fewer people.

"I guess you had to fight a lot, right?"

"We had, and we lost many people in the process."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Erik said.

"Thanks. But hey, let's stop talking about this. Noah arrived here a week ago, along with your father. Everyone told me not to tell you anything about his situation because I would say something that made you worry... but..."

"You just did that..."

"Yeah... I just realized..."

"Nevermind, I had two weeks to calm myself down. I can manage to learn a couple of the things that happened while I was away."

"Yeah. I was also told to bring you to where your father is being kept. While you all were away, we built a sort of hospital. I must say, your men know how to do stuff."

"Yeah. I chose them for this reason."

They finally reached a magnificent building, but its imposing presence was overshadowed by the scaffolding that wrapped around it like ivy.

The structure was extensive, with steel girder bones forming the skeleton of what promised to be a state-of-the-art hospital.

Half-finished walls and exposed beams spoke of a 'work in progress', and the air was filled with the buzz of saws and the clatter of hammers.

Around the site, workers in hard hats moved with purpose, dodging between trucks unloading materials and cranes hoisting panels into place.

"Where did you get those vehicles?"

Ethan smiled. "We built them with your people."

Darius could really build stuff.

Dust hung heavy in the air, mingling with the sharp scent of fresh cement and the earthy smell of disturbed soil.

A small portion of the hospital had already undergone construction. It was a side building that joined the rest of the hospital that was still under construction but that the city was forced to use because of the great number of wounded that came back from Fasad.

"How many people are in that building?"

"Thousands," Ethan said. Both June and Erik grimaced.

"It's not like your soldiers. Even our people have a lot of wounded." He then asked. "Didn't you say you could steal people's brain crystal powers?"

Erik looked at him with a startled expression.

"I can, why?"

"Then you should consider stealing one or two, because we really need them. On another note, why didn't you get one already?"

It was simple. "I have to kill the healer to get it. I have principles and never found someone worthy enough to be killed."

It was weird for him to say this since, in the past, he considered killing a school healer just to get that power. But of course, a thought was a thought; one couldn't be judged for having had one.

<Maybe I'm too harsh on myself. >

"All right," Ethan said. "There will be someone escorting you to your father. I have other things to do, so... Happy reunion."

"Thanks Ethan."