

## **BIOLOGICAL 901**

### Chapter 901: Self-healing thaïd (3)

The creature almost had the same physical stats as him.

In a sense, it meant that Erik had a strength equivalent to that of something having 57 neural links, but on the other hand, it meant that fighting without mana against this thing was going to be dangerous.

As he thought about all of this, the Hevadrin's brain crystal power finished healing its wounds.

The beast stepped closer, eyeing its attacker as if the pain it was feeling was nothing.

With a grunt of effort, Erik ran toward a nearby tree.

He gripped his slime flyssa tightly, fingers aching around the hilt.

He hid behind the tree, but the Hevadrin crashed into it, destroying it.

Erik barely avoided the ram and landed a few more hits as it turned toward the creature.

The Hevadrin tensed, ready to charge again while his wounds healed on the naked eye. Erik steeled himself, then exploded into motion.

He drew on every ounce of speed his body provided and more, circling around the beast in a blur.

The Hevadrin snarled and spun, unsure where the next attacks would come from, and they came.

Erik struck the flyssa, biting deep before the creature could react. Blood spilled from the wound, but it was already closing.

The two exchanged several attacks, which ended with Erik landing many, and the Hevadrin landing none, but the human had a lot of trouble avoiding them. His stats were barely enough to allow him to do so.

"I can't go on like this... If I take too many hits, that thing would kill me!"

Erik placed his hand on his ribs. Only one attack landed on him, and it had been enough for the creature to almost shatter them, despite Erik's powerful physique.

Undeterred, Erik continued his onslaught, attacking from all angles in a whirlwind.

He wasn't using frost and wind; he didn't have the mana. For a second, Erik contemplated doing it.

If he used it, maybe he would injure the beast enough to gain an opening to finish it, but the slime weapon would cease to exist sooner, leaving Erik without weapons and without protection if he failed to deliver a killing blow.

The Hevadrin tried to avoid the blows, but it soon became covered in wounds. They took little to heal, of course.

Between attacks, Erik gauged the damage. The creature bled profusely due to all those attacks, yet its healing remained undiminished.

It glared hatred at Erik, unafraid despite its injuries.

Erik's limbs ached as he continued his onslaught, the slime flyssa slicing through flesh and fur time and time again.

With each blow, the Hevadrin bled more, yet still, its wounds sealed shut almost as quickly as they were made.

Erik was tiring. This battle had gone on too long already, and his mana reserves were low to begin with. But he couldn't.

If the creature fled, it would inevitably end up at Liberty Watch.

He couldn't even ask the clones to help, since they would just die a useless death, decreasing the already small number of troops Erik could count on if the Blackguards attacked.

Erik could muster up maybe one frost or wind attack, maybe two if he absolutely had to, but then he would be left defenseless. He wouldn't have enough mana to materialize the flyssa.

But if he had little mana to spend, and his only advantage was in his higher stats, instead, the creature had plenty of mana to use.

Even if Erik caused a lot of wounds, the beast had too much mana. 900 energy points were not a few.

Erik dodged another kick from the beast's massive hind legs, feeling them slice through the air next to his head. The attack was so fast he was certain this kick wasn't only able to shatter bone, but even cutting flesh like a knife.

Erik spun low and swept the flyssa in a wide arc aimed at the creature's legs.

It connected, spurting blood, and with a surprised yelp, the Hevadrin stumbled.

Erik just detached a leg from the creature's body.

That must have hurt a lot, because the creature trashed, but as he did, Erik saw another limb take the old one's place.

The Hevadrin didn't stay on the ground even for 2 seconds, which Erik could have used to kill the beast.

"Just die, you motherfucker!"

The Hevadrin met his eyes, and for a moment they stared one another down. There was hatred in the beast's eyes, but there was something else too... It was just that Erik couldn't understand what it was.

<That move must have depleted a huge chunk of its mana. I refuse to think that this Thaid's brain crystal power allows it to regrow limbs easily! >

Erik had to end this, and end it now, before the creature landed another hit on him, or worse, fled.

But at the same time, he was having trouble due to his wound. It was painful.

His ribs ached where the creature had struck earlier.

<Either I must deplete its mana reserves or I must deliver a lethal blow. The first is not possible, and I'm at a disadvantage at that... but the second? >

Maybe he could do that, but he had to end up in a situation and a position that would allow him to do so, and that wasn't something easy to achieve.

Gripping the flyssa hilt until his knuckles turned white, Erik steeled himself. The creature tensed and then moved.

Erik spun and rolled, avoiding the Hevadrin's assaults. These were charges and kicks most of the times, but they were fast and lethal.

The beast attacked with ferocity, pushing Erik to his limits while evading its rams.

Though tired and without mana, adrenaline fueled Erik's rapid steps.

As the Hevadrin charged once more, Erik dropped and slid beneath it at the last moment.

The creature crashed into a thick tree with a roar and staggered for a second.

Erik acted right at that moment. Still sliding across the forest floor, he swung his flyssa upward with all his strength.

The blade sliced through skin, fur, and flesh unhindered.

A spray of scarlet stained the air as the Hevadrin reeled back from the tree, severed artery pumping.

It staggered and fell, its massive form crashing onto the blood-soaked earth.

But then the wound healed itself. Erik then noticed something. The beast was not perfectly fine. Its movements seemed slower.

<Hey...> A thought swirled inside Erik's mind. Could it be that the creature's power didn't refill its blood?

No one really killed a Hevadrin, or fought it for all that mattered, so there wasn't a lot of information about how its power worked.

<But if that's true, then my attack for sure had a huge effect. >

Chapter 902: Self-healing thaïd (4)

The Hevadrin's power sustained its injuries, not its life essence.

As long as mana still flowed within it, the creature would continue regenerating, but not the blood.

If that ended, there was nothing the Hevadrin could do.

The creature rose, eyeing Erik with pure hatred. It had regained its footing but moved sluggishly, losing blood had taken its toll on it.

But the sluggishness and tiredness weren't enough to stop the creature from killing Erik.

When it charged again, Erik held his ground, waiting until the last moment to dodge.

The flyssa parted fur and flesh along its flank as it passed.

Scarlet spray followed, soaking the earth deeper.

The Hevadrin staggered in its steps but came at him once more, driven by primal instincts while its wounds healed.

Erik evaded again, opening another wound along its back leg. Erik tried cutting it again, but he wasn't able to. That had been a lucky blow.

By now, the forest floor resembled an abattoir. Blood pooled where the creature was when it got slashed, its movements becoming irregular.

Erik pressed his attack, knowing this battle was nearing its end, but still not lowering his focus since the Hevadrin was still dangerous.

The creature charged once more, lowering its enormous shoulders as it aimed for Erik.

The young man tried to dart aside but was a split second too slow.

Pain exploded through his body as the Hevadrin's head swung around mid-charge and slammed into his chest. A sickening crack was made.

Erik was thrown through the air, branches tearing at his flesh, before he crashed to the ground several meters away.

He lay there gasping, his ribs screaming in protest with each ragged breath.

The creature didn't crack his bones earlier, but for sure it did now.

Erik remained on the ground for a fraction of a second before he heard the beast's thunderous hooves shake the earth as it turned toward him, charging.

"Fuck..."

Somehow, Erik found the strength to roll away as the Hevadrin bore down on his position.

Its head and massive shoulders splintered the tree behind where he had fallen.

Erik struggled to get on his feet through the haze of pain, but he managed.

The creature charged, seeing its enemy weaken.

At the last moment, Erik jumped to cling to its massive shoulders.

Not even he knew how he did that, but there he was, on top of a thaid that was trying to kill him.

His ribs threatened to puncture his lungs from the effort, but he held tight.

He raised his flyssa, and with a raw shout of exertion, he drove the blade down between thick plates of fur and muscles.

Blood flooded Erik's vision as the Hevadrin threw back its head and bellowed in fury and pain.

Its knees buckled, sending them both crashing to the forest floor. Erik rolled free. Coughing up red flecks, he raised his head.

The beast was on the ground, the wound already closing, but Erik couldn't allow the beast to complete the process. With a lot of effort, he got on his two feet again and ran toward the creature.

The forest was silent but for Erik's labored breathing and the beast's pained cries.

The man got in front of it, and three swift cuts later, the Hevadrin was no longer able to stand as Erik cut three of its legs, which, of course, were already regrowing.

But the process was slower compared to before. The beast didn't likely have that much blood, but Erik couldn't say the same was true for its mana.

Though the lack of blood in its brain was making the entire healing process and brain crystal power use incomparably harder for the beast.

Erik got in front of it. The Hevadrin fixed its baleful eyes upon Erik, breath coming in ragged gasps.

Erik raised the flyssa high, meeting the beast's gaze. This monster was going to die by his hands.

With a last burst of strength, Erik brought the blade down in a two-handed stroke upon the Hevadrin's neck, severing the spine from the body in one clean cut.

[HEVADRIN 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. 20692.3 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST. 206.93 DNA POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

The light fled the Hevadrin's eyes, and at last the creature stilled.

Erik held himself steady until it ceased all movement, then allowed himself a long exhale.

The forest grew hushed around him as dusk deepened into night. His task here was complete.

But then he fell to the ground.

"JUNE!"

Erik's shout rang through the forest. He struggled to draw another ragged breath against the searing pain in his ribs.

His cry had barely enough strength, but it carried a desperation he'd never known before.

June arrived soon after; he wasn't far. He was still in his human form, among the destruction Erik and the Hevadrin unleashed.

Upon seeing Erik's broken form in front of the Hevadrin's corpse, the clone gasped. "Master!"



He hurried to his creator's side, horror and fear rising as Erik curled upon himself, coughing up blood.

This was beyond anything June had seen before. Erik, who faced down foes' others feared, now lay injured beyond belief.

His normally keen eyes were glazed with agony.

"What happened, Master?" June asked. There was a huge dark spot on Erik's entire chest, and there was blood on the side of his lips. It was a wonder how Erik still clung to consciousness.

"That thing... like a wyvern. Almost... had me." His words dissolved into a grimace.

June gave a glance at the massive Thaid, a beast he'd heard tales of but never seen in person.

To have reduced Erik to this state... If it weren't for the fact that it was already dead, June would have been glad to die just to have a chance at wounding that thing.

June morphed into a galewing again and placed Erik between his massive talons. Erik groaned, his features draining of what little color remained.

"Liberty Watch," Erik said. But the clone was already moving. "Please..." His eyes fluttered closed as darkness claimed him at last.

June took wing immediately, flying swiftly and sure despite his precious burden. Erik's life hung by a thread.

Chapter 903: The hospital (1)

Agony assaulted him with every beat of June's mighty wings, yet some small mercy kept the pain at bay. It was darkness.

Through cracked lids, when Erik's consciousness returned, he saw the forest pass in a green-black blur.

He tried to lose himself in pondering the battle he just fought, analyzing each of his mistakes in tactics and ability.

Anything to keep from dwelling on the shattered mess of his body and the long road to recovery.

But even his mind could only focus through so much pain. Darkness beckoned once more, and this time he welcomed its haven.

June's arrived at Liberty Watch's secret entrance. The high hill was looming above them like a silent giant, which did nothing but increase June's fears.

The clone's hands, slick with Erik's blood, beat a frenzied rhythm against the cold metal door.

"Please open the door!" June's voice cracked with dread; all pretense of control was lost.

At that point, the clone was panicking. June's fists hammered against the door, but no response came from the other side, increasing his anxiety with every passing second.

His breathing grew heavier, and his chest heaved as panic set in.

He turned to look at his unconscious master on the ground, and that only made things worse.

His eyes darted around, considering his options, and his hands clenched into fists.

The clone was getting angry, even if he knew that there weren't many people left in Liberty Watch to monitor the entrance. But it was stupid.

Either they wanted to avoid for thaid's sniffing or hearing them, preventing them from attacking the city, or they were simply stupid.

At that point, he didn't know, nor could he think calmly, to find an answer.

The door itself seemed to mock his desperation. As his worry morphed into anger even more, the idea of smashing through it grew alluring.

But as he was on the cusp of throwing a kick at the door, June stopped, tilting his head as if listening. He strained to hear—were those footsteps?

A grinding echoed as bolts slid open. The door creaked wide to reveal Ethan and two more people.

Their eyes were widening at the scene before them.

"God," he said, taking in Erik's unconscious and bloodied body. "Bring him inside quickly now."

June moved without hesitating, cradling Erik through the entrance.

The door closed behind them, shutting out the forest as warmth engulfed them.

Ethan led the way. Even the clone understood he was worried. "What happened out there?"

June recounted their encounter with the Hevadrin, struggling to keep his voice steady.

Ethan frowned. "I don't know what that is..."

But from Erik's injuries, he understood the beast must have been dangerous.

Erik was powerful, very much so, to the point that not even Amos and Samuel, the village's elders, could contend with him.

And yet, he was in a sorry state, one Ethan had never seen his friend in.

The group reached the other side of the tunnel and soon entered the underground city.

Ethan gave some orders to the two people accompanying them, who left, maybe to tell Noah, Samuel, and Amos about the situation.

They kept running toward the hospital.

"What wounds does he have, exactly?"

Erik had nothing explicitly sticking out, but there was a large, dark hematoma swelled on his side, the skin mottled with shades of purple and black.

Above his left eyebrow, a deep gash oozed blood, mixing with sweat and dirt on his forehead.

His breathing was shallow and labored, hinting at more severe internal injuries.

"I think he has broken ribs, and those punctured his lungs," the clone said.

He could tell that since each breath his master made was a rasping, painful effort. The three almost arrived at the hospital's door.

Just then, Amber and Mira arrived, eyes wide at the sight of Erik's injured body.

"What happened?!" Mira's eyes were trembling. She saw Erik fight untold monsters, but never got him in that state.

"A Hevadrin."

Both Mira's and Amber's eyes widened upon hearing what reduced Erik to such a state.

Amber rushed to his side, taking his hand in hers.

"How is he?" she asked, brushing a lock of hair from his face as they ran.

"Not good, but he'll pull through; as soon as he wakes up, he will get the Hevadrin's brain crystal power and heal."

"He killed that thing?" Mira asked in shock. Being a mercenary, she knew such beasts were strong.

"He did, of course."

The group entered the hospital, and they left Erik in a nurse's care.

The medical team put Erik on a stretcher, securing his battered body to prevent any further injury.

As they wheeled him down the bustling corridor, Amber, Ethan, Mira, and June followed until a nurse stopped them.

"Please, you'll need to wait here. We're taking him to the intensive care unit, and only medical staff are allowed beyond this point."

Everyone wondered what medical stuff this woman was talking about since they weren't to the point of being that advanced in Liberty Watch yet. They remained silent.

The stretcher disappeared around a corner, leaving everyone in a state of anxious helplessness.

The hallway seemed to stretch longer with each second as they watched him being taken away, unable to follow further or see what was happening.

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Erik blinked his eyes open, groaning at the sharp pain that shot through his body.

He turned his head and saw June sitting by his bedside in front of a window from which Liberty Watch's artificial lights could be seen.

"You're awake, master."

Erik swallowed with difficulty. "What... happened?"

June recounted bringing Erik back to Liberty Watch after his battle against the Hevadrin.

"You fought against the Hevadrin, but it did a number on you. I retrieved its brain crystal and blood, as I thought that may help with your healing. I also have the Skraylash's brain crystal and blood."

He pointed at the two beads and two vials of blood on the bedside.

Erik remembered the fight. It had been hard. The thaid's brain crystal power was really dreadful.

No wonder it fought toe to toe with him. Of course, Erik had little mana; otherwise, things would have been simpler, to some degree.

"Thanks," he said. Every muscle ached. Slight movements sent spikes of agony through his torso.

Chapter 904: The hospital (2)

Even that slight movement sent spasms of pain through his body.

June had placed the brain crystals and vials of blood there, cleaned and prepared to be absorbed.

Erik took a deep, steady breath through his teeth. With shaking hands, he picked up the first brain crystal—the Skraylash's.

Without pausing to think further, Erik tossed it into his mouth and swallowed hard.

[SKRAYLASH'S BRAIN CRYSTAL ACQUIRED. STARTING THE ANALYSIS.]

[ANALYSIS COMPLETE.]

[100 DNA POINTS ARE REQUIRED TO EXTRACT THE POWER. 500 TO GET IT WITHOUT INCURRING PAIN AND LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS.]

[6659 DNA POINTS DETECTED. EXTRACTION IS NOT ADVISED; THE HOST HAS INCOMPATIBLE DNA.]

[EXTRACTION ABORTED]

The taste was beyond awful. His throat convulsed, trying to reject the vile thing, but he forced it down.

Grabbing the Hevadrin's brain crystal, he gagged it down as well.

The residual aches throughout his body suddenly spiked as his injuries reacted to the simple motion of swallowing.

[HEVADRIN'S BRAIN CRYSTAL ACQUIRED. STARTING THE ANALYSIS.]

[ANALYSIS COMPLETE.]

[500 DNA POINTS ARE REQUIRED TO EXTRACT THE POWER. 1000 TO GET IT WITHOUT INCURRING PAIN AND LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS.]

[6659 DNA POINTS DETECTED. EXTRACTION IS NOT ADVISED; THE HOST HAS INCOMPATIBLE DNA.]

[EXTRACTION ABORTED]

Hands slick with sweat, Erik fumbled for the vials. The blood sloshed within.

One went down, then the next, coating his throat in a nauseating sludge.

Erik's stomach stirred in protest, and he squeezed his eyes shut against the wave of dizziness and pain that washed over him.

From the notifications he got by absorbing the blood and brain crystals, Erik could infer that, while useful, the Skraylash's brain crystal power was low-ranked, but it was the opposite for the Hevadrin's one.

"System, absorb them instantly."

<All right. > The process ended as fast as it started, and Erik found himself with two more brain crystal powers, one he had to give to his clones, and one...

He was not so sure about that, but learning that Thaid's as powerful as him were appearing on the Mannard continent prompted him to have such a means of defense.

The power of self-healing—not the one that humans already had, but one so powerful to make a zombie out of him.

Then he channeled mana into the Hevadrin's brain crystal power; he didn't even check what it exactly did or its rank.

Erik lay still, concentrating solely on channeling mana.

His wounds started closing. Gradually, but not slowly, the agony subsided to a dull throb until it was no more.

His thoughts grew clearer, but despite feeling better, he also felt slightly weak.

When Erik opened his eyes once more, June was watching him with concern.

"How do you feel?" the clone asked.

Erik took stock. His wounds disappeared. A grim smile touched his lips.

"Much better."

"You scared me there, master. No more solo hunting."



"Right..."

Erik couldn't say that June wasn't right. The monsters around these parts shouldn't have been this strong.

"Master, what happened? How could a Hevadrin reduce you to such a state?"

At that question, Erik's face turned serious.

Erik relayed to June the events of the battle.

"It's really simple... That beast was strong—much stronger than I assumed. I grew too complacent, thinking that very few things could reach the same level of strength I have. I was mistaken."

"Ok. I understand the creature must have had a nasty brain crystal power, but you should have been stronger on paper."

"That's the problem, June. That thing had... It had 57 neural links. Fifty-seven, June. "

June stared at him with wide eyes. "That can't be possible," he said.

"The most neural links recorded for any creature is fifty-four. And that's only in legends."

Erik nodded. "I analyzed it with the biological supercomputer. Fifty-seven came up clear as day."

He shook his head, still unable to believe it himself.

"It was nearly my match in combat stats. If I hadn't drained it of blood slowly over the battle, and if I didn't have that slight advantage over it in terms of stats, I'd be dead now."

A heavy silence fell over the room. It was already hard for humans to top out at 21 neural links, with most thaids hanging around the same level.

Neither of them had ever heard of anything with more than fifty-four, and that was stretching what was deemed plausible by all current knowledge.

A Hevadrin with fifty-seven neural links was astonishing on its own, but the clone made an insightful observation.

"Well, this means that the description the biological supercomputer gave about your Chimaeric demons has a new meaning. It said that their number of neural links per brain crystal power could exceed fifty-four as well, but then this means that the supposed limit has no real meaning."

"This also means something else," Erik said. "We know Hevadrins are weaker than wyverns. And by a lot at that. This means that even wyverns have more than 54 neural links."

All their knowledge about neural links' limits seemed wrong.

It all made sense. The clones could get infinite neural links; a Hevadrin with more than 54 appeared; and wyverns were stronger than Hevadrins.

If that was true, it meant that Erik and June played with fire, quite literally, when they found the wyvern and the cerulean bird fighting.

If they had fought them, they would have died. They would have also died if the creatures had spotted them. So harrowing was their power.

Erik focused so much on increasing his stats that he'd almost stopped trying to get more neural links.

Whether limitless progression was possible, having multiple brain crystal powers meant infinite strength, but it also meant multiplying manyfold the effort put into making more neural links, and that was not easy to begin with.

"We need to study this further. I should leave hunting and brain crystal retrieval to the clones at this point. I must focus on making neural links because..."

"Because?"

Erik's face turned somber. "Because if that is possible and the cerulean bird is stronger than that black wyvern, it means that even stronger monsters could be present on Mur. Flying Thaid's are at the top at the food chain, but they are not the kings. What if there is a wyvern in Mur that's even more harrowing than the Cerulean bird?"

"But there is also another problem, Master."

"What?"

"Our people's strength is already insufficient as it is now. If there are really these powerful monsters, it means that you must share your technique with everyone. If the Blackguards are stirring the hornet's nest on the Mur continent, Amber, Mira, and your father. No, everyone will end up dead."

Chapter 905: Goodbye (1)

"I wonder..."

"I wonder what, Master?"

"I wonder how, dad, the blackguards... How did they travel through the Mur continent if this is the situation?"

Erik leaned back in his chair, contemplating what his father had said. "The Blackguards survived in Mur, yet a single Hevadrin nearly killed me."

June's brow furrowed. "It is curious. The creatures there are immensely powerful, according to what we know. I can't imagine how even the Blackguards got through such a place. Maybe there aren't only monsters as strong as wyverns or the Hevadrin you faced, but the strength of the stragglers that arrived on Mannard was high."

"Something isn't adding up." Erik rose and began pacing the room.

"Dad said he followed the Blackguards and saw how even they struggled. They are extraordinary individuals, yet their strength pales compared to the Hevadrin's, much like a wyvern's does to the

Cerulean bird. Things must have been worse than Dad said. There must be more to this." A thought struck him.

"I need to speak to him again and ask him directly how they survived. He had been rather vague the last time. "

Lucius had more pressing matters to tell Erik the other day, so it was clear he didn't talk about the situation in Mur from the Thaid front. He likely thought Erik would be able to take care of it.

This situation was both peculiar and relatable at the same time. Erik was immensely powerful—maybe the strongest person on the planet, considering an individual level—but the monsters there had to be strong, even stronger than him.

"Should we go ask him?" Erik asked.

"It's three in the morning, master. Your father is likely resting."

"Right."

"Aside from that, we should bring him to a healer or get healing powers. We need to fix his legs and his general condition. If we don't move now, your father will die."

"I wonder why the healing potions didn't work..." Erik said. But the truth was that what was ailing his father was not something a simple healing potion could fix.

"We can't bring a healer here, and I don't know how to bring him to a city. Let's assume we do; maybe he won't survive the journey. Assume he does; we still need to bring him inside, but with the Blackguards and Volkov's people around, it won't be easy."

"This only leaves..."

"Yes. We must kill a healer."

June stopped to pause. "It will take a week to reach New Alexandria by flying at full speed. Do you think...?"

"We can only hope he survives until we are back."

A soft knock came at Erik's bedroom door.

"Come in," Erik said.

Noah entered, his mask ever present. "I apologize for disturbing you. I didn't know if you were awake yet, master."

Erik offered a wan smile. "Yeah, I feel better already."

"I can see that, Master. I'm very happy to see you well now. You scared us all."

"I'm sorry." Erik looked at his first clone and asked, "Is there a reason why you are here this late?"

"Yes... I came here to talk to June; of course, I thought you were still unconscious. But since you are awake, I think I should inform you."

His tone remained somber. Erik's senses prickled with alarm. "You don't sound joyful. What's wrong?"

Noah hesitated, then sighed. "It's your father, master. Despite the doctors' best efforts, his condition has taken a turn for the worse. I'm afraid Lucius will not last much longer."

A stunned silence filled the room. Erik had hoped—foolishly, it seemed—that with rest and potions, his father might pull through until he healed him. But now Noah was telling him otherwise.

"Tell me exactly what happened." Erik's voice quivered.

"It happened this evening when you left. The nurses informed me that your father began thrashing in his sleep, gripping the sheets as if in pain. Nothing we did could wake or calm him. His breathing grew labored and shallow."

Noah paused, thinking of the scene with clear distress.

"The doctors were called. They said his infections had worsened, ravaging his body with a fever. Without the right potions, machines, or healers, they could not break it."

Erik felt cold, imagining his father's suffering without him there. If only he didn't go hunting...

"I must see him," Erik said, throwing back the blankets.

He was full of vigor, which surprised even his first clone. June told him he got the Hevadrin's brain crystal power and was aware that he was going to absorb it as soon as he woke up. But Noah didn't think the effect would be this good. It was astounding.

Erik followed Noah down the hall, with June at his heels. As they approached Lucius's room, Erik saw his clones gathered outside the door with mournful expressions.

The sterile white walls seemed to close in on Erik as he took in the downcast faces of his clones.

Even the usually cheerful June appeared sullen and distraught, his usual smile replaced with a mournful frown. Erik felt a sense of dread settle in his chest, wondering what state his father awaited him beyond the closed door.

The clones parted to let Erik through. He entered. His father was barely conscious beneath the sheets, his skin ashen and his face covered in a sheen of sweat.

Much more than the last time he saw him. Lucius's breathing was shallow and ragged.

At the sound of Erik's approach, Lucius opened his eyes with visible effort. A hint of relief came over his face at the sight of his son.

"Erik...you're awake..." Lucius said. "I thought..."

"I'm here, dad. Try not to talk."

Lucius coughed weakly. "How... are you... What happened outside the forest?"

"Nothing to worry about, dad. It was just a thaid. There is nothing you haven't seen on the Mur continent."

"That's exactly... the reason I was worried..."

"It doesn't matter anymore... I'm ok. You see?"

"Yes... yes... thanks god."

Chapter 906: Goodbye (2)

Erik clasped his father's hand tighter to hiding his escalating worry, forcing a smile to provide some semblance of reassurance.

"How did you heal that fast?" Lucius asked.

"I got the beast's power. It was a Hevadrin."

"Ah... I see..."

His father's condition was far worse than yesterday.

Lucius reached up slowly to cup Erik's cheek with a trembling hand. His skin was feverishly hot. "My son... so like your mother... so strong. I'm...

so proud... and... happy."

"Dad, hear me out; you are going to survive. I will go to New Alexandria, bring a healer here, and fix you up." To see his father this way was unbearable. "You're going to be alright. Just hold on a little longer."

"We both know the truth..." Lucius inhaled, coughing. A spray of blood flecked his lips. His breathing hitched and grew more labored.

"You won't ever make it in time... I don't feel right."

Erik felt numb, helpless to do anything but watch his father suffer. At the same time, there were many things he wanted to ask.

Erik gripped his father's weakening hand tighter. He didn't really want to, but he had to ask; he needed to know, and maybe that was the only chance he had to do it.

"Dad, please tell me how you survived on the Mur Continent. How did you resist those powerful thaids?"

Lucius laughed, though it turned to a cough. His eyes shone with memory.

"That's something good to talk about before dying... Recounting the tales of when I survived... the Mur continent. It was glorious." Lucius smiled.

"I would like to tell you not to fight the blackguards, but I'm not such a hypocrite. You will do as much as I did. As for your question, the truth is that it wasn't easy. The thaids there, they could kill thousands of men in minutes."

"Yes, I know that. The Hevadrin, the wyverns... they were proof of that."

"Things are much worse there than Hevadrins and Wyverns, Erik."

Lucius burst into a fit of cough. "My—COUGH—My brain crystal power... That helped, but it wasn't enough. I would have starved or been preyed on without the blackguards."

Lucius didn't meet Erik's eyes as he spoke. "I stole what I needed to survive—food from their stores and supplies from their camps. If I hadn't, I would be long dead."

Erik wondered about his father's words. If the blackguards did everything to survive, how did they do it? What did the blackguards do to last in the harsh wilds of the Mur continent? And in what numbers did they go there?

Were their numbers enough to face the thaids that plagued the area?



"But how did the blackguards survive then, if even you struggled?"

Lucius took a shuddering breath. His chest heaved, ribs visible beneath the thin fabric of his shirt.

"The blackguards had... numbers. Hundreds of thousands roamed Mur." Erik's eyes widened. As it meant things were going to be hard for him too, but they would also be easier compared to them, thanks to the clones. However, he did not know whether that was going to be enough.

"Through complex scouting systems, they watched each other's backs. If anything approached that one group couldn't handle, orders went out, and soldiers gathered from across the land." Lucius coughed; his body was wracked with pain.

"Dividing their forces allowed them to live off the land without depleting resources. Scouts always looked ahead, alert for danger, and when threats were sighted, soldiers fell back or flanked in formations. The scouts died most of the times." His voice grew faint.

"Any foe they could not face head-on, they avoided through misdirection and retreat. Working as one massive organism. This let them survive where individuals would perish. Numbers and organization kept them alive."

Lucius' eyes drifted closed as his strength failed. Erik gripped his hand tighter, hanging onto every word, gazing at his fading father.

It was then that Lucius started coughing violently.

"DAD!"

But Lucius coughed more. Erik watched as his father grew worse before his eyes.

Lucius's once-strong frame now lay even more pallid and frail. His skin had turned ashen.

Each ragged breath Lucius took seemed to scrape against his chest, leaving trails of crimson on his lips and smearing the room with it.

"Dad! DAD!!!" Lucius could only gasp in response, his eyes glassy with pain and fever.

Erik's heart clenched in his chest. Erik shot to his feet and shoved open the door, nearly tearing it off its hinges.

"You there!" Erik said at the nearest clone guarding the hall. "Fetch a doctor or a nurse at once!"

The clone started at Erik's outburst, then bowed. "Right away, sir." He darted off down the corridor, shouting for help.

Erik turned back to Lucius, straining to project calm, though inside he raged against his own helplessness.

"Hold on, Dad. Help is coming."

Please, let there be a way to save him. Erik couldn't bear to lose the one real family he had left in this world.

He had only just regained Lucius's affection; he wasn't ready to let go.

Not like this. Not when there might still be hope.

Lucius's grip weakened, his fingers slipping from Erik's. His eyelids fluttered, and Erik watched as consciousness ebbed.

"FUCK! DAD!"

The room's door swung open. Erik watched as the doctors swarmed around his father, lifting him with care onto a stretcher.

Their quick, terse conversations washed over Erik—words like "infection," "fever," and "organ failure."

He and the clones followed the medical team from the room, down the long corridor, towards the infirmary.

Erik strode alongside, gripping his father's limp hand.

In the infirmary ward, nurses bustled to prepare examination tables and medicine cabinets.

The doctors began their work efficiently, removing Lucius' soiled bedclothes to examine his flesh. Their mouths contorted grimly upon discovering what lay beneath.

Erik hovered at the periphery, blocked from the flurry of activity by clones holding him back, no matter how much he struggled.

He kept hearing what the doctors talked about, words that spelled out nothing except Lucius' imminent death.

Rationally, Erik knew there was nothing more he could do here—no skills or powers that mattered against such internal ravages of the body.

But logic held no sway over the panic rising like bile in his throat, the hot prickling behind his eyes he refused to acknowledge.

June and Noah got behind him. They put a hand on his shoulders. "Let's go, Master."

Chapter 907: Demon's rage

Erik stared at the floor, his mind shutting down. His mother was dead; his father just went to her.

Around him, friends bowed their heads in shared grief. Their presence offered little comfort—no solace could fill the hole now torn in Erik's soul.

<I don't understand...>

A hand squeezed his shoulder.

<I hated him for years. But why? Why can't I hate him now? It would be so simple... >

Through the haze of grief, Erik caught sight of June's mournful expression.

His clone shared Erik's sense of loss, having experienced Lucius' love through Erik's memories.

"Master..." June's voice was heavy with sorrow, while his eyes were filled with pain.

Erik glanced up at June, his clone's face crumpling with grief.

June's usually mischievous eyes were dull and filled with tears, his lips pressed together to contain his emotions.

Erik understood his clone was experiencing as much anguish as he was.

The difference was that June had not spoken with Lucius. However, this also saved him from the heartache of witnessing his father in such a dire state.

The sight of June's sorrow, though, increased Erik's own pain; he knew his clone felt Lucius' loss as deeply as him.

He wasn't the only one. All of his clones were in a similar situation.

Lucius' death left an emptiness within them that no words could ever fill.

Erik nodded at June's words, but they were just that, words, and they changed nothing. Lucius was gone, dead, because of what Volkov did to him.

<If only I got it. If only I had killed. I would have had it...>

Erik killed, mutilated, and lied. Yet, he couldn't kill innocent people. He could not kill healers to steal their powers.

He was never able to force himself to take that step or jump that cliff, even though he was still full of wrath and loathed everyone in New Alexandria. Erik never managed to.

<But I should've. I should've been more selfish. I should've been more focused. >

And yet he didn't. His very few morals prevented him from doing so, and his focus shifted to his enemies.

Caiden let out a long sigh across the room. He'd known Lucius for a long time. To see his old friend now gone wasn't easy for him, either.

Amber and Gwen were looking at Erik with sorrow and worry.

The group had already experienced this after Anderson's death, when Nathaniel's father killed many parents and family members of theirs.

For a long moment, all was still. Each soul present accepted the loss's finality.

Then they quietly dispersed, leaving Erik to grieve alone as night fell once more.

...

...

...

Erik returned to his quarters in a daze. Grief still clutched at his heart, yet underneath smoldered a growing fury.

His father was gone, and he could do nothing to prevent it.

So little time passed since he arrived at Liberty Watch. Erik didn't have time to find a healer, steal a power, or make a potion that could save him. Nothing.

Cruel fate stole away the only family he had left in the world. Anger swelled to fill the void of loss. Only his clones remained now.

June and Noah followed in silence, exchanging anxious glances with one another.

Although Erik had shown rage bursts for years, this primal wrath appeared to be new; it was like a dark beast had been unleashed within him.

The door was slammed shut behind them, and Erik paced around the cramped area like a confined animal.

His eyes flared with unrestrained emotion as he gazed at nothing, his fists gripping at his sides with white-knuckled clenching.

"Master..." June began.

"Don't." Erik's voice was chilling in its flatness. No one talked for some time, but then Noah took a cautious step forward.

"We grieve with you. But anger helps no one; it will only destroy you."

Erik spun to face them, his eyes blazing. "No, Noah. Anger is the only thing I have."

Suddenly, the plants in Erik's room grew wildly. Unbeknownst to him, he was using his powers—not the Solid Frostwind or the Wyvern Flames he often relied on, but the Plant Master brain crystal power.

This was a power he had gained by merging his birth power with another, and now it manifested without his deliberate control, causing the greenery to spread across the room, intertwining and expanding with a life of its own.

Noah and June watched as thick vines emerged from the floorboards and coiled up the walls, dotted with wide leaves of vivid green.

Moss crept over every surface of the room, turning the small space into a maze of plants.

Erik didn't seem to realize what he was doing. He was looking at June and Noah in the eyes, as if nothing but those two existed.

"Master... You are... You are losing control."

But Erik wasn't listening.

"Nothing I do is enough. No power, no skill—in the end, it amounts to nothing. My father is dead, and I could not stop it!"

The two clones exchanged another look, their concern for their creator overshadowing all else.

Erik was unraveling before their eyes, and when he tore loose, there was no knowing the wrath unchecked fury might inspire.

Erik's voice was a low growl, filled with a cold, unyielding detachment.

"The Blackguards, Volkov... They must pay. I won't rest until I tear their heads off their bodies. They must die."

Erik's face twisted into a vengeful sneer as he spoke those last words.

His brow furrowed, and his eyes narrowed to slits, gleaming with an icy hatred.

His lips curled back in a snarl, baring his teeth. Every muscle in his body tensed with barely contained rage, hands curled into tight fists, knuckles whitening.

A cold, mirthless chuckle eluded him then, devoid of warmth or joy, sounding more like a predator's growl.

June and Noah saw the twisted expression on their creator's face and heard that chilling laugh so unlike the Erik they knew.

Fear crept into their hearts. This was not like Erik's usual bursts of anger.

This felt deeper and darker—an unquenchable bloodlust that threatened to consume him.

"They must die," Erik said through clenched teeth.

A mad light entered his eyes then, shining with the cold fanaticism of a zealot on a holy mission.

His hands trembled, fingers twitching as if already around his enemies' throats.

Yet underneath the rage, there remained a thread of sadness.

His father's death had awakened something primal within Erik—a need for vengeance that now overshadowed all else.

But the loss of his only remaining family also carved a hollow, aching void deep within his soul that no amount of vengeance would ever fill.

That void threatened to swallow Erik whole if left unchecked, drawing him inevitably into its bleak, hopeless depths.

"Master..." June said, filled with empathy for Erik's suffering even as he feared his creator's unrestrained wrath.

Behind the rage, June recognized the grief of a son who had just lost his father, and that grief, if nurtured, might yet call Erik back from the darkness.

But Erik did not seem to hear.

"They will die, Master," he said with a nod. "We have the Chimaeric Demons now... With them, we should be able to get our revenge against them."

"It will take too much time to make an army," Erik said.

The creeping plants had encased the room in a green and deadly embrace.



Noah and June watched as the plants continued to spread and coil around the room.

To see their master's power manifest out of control filled them with dread, but Erik seemed unable to rein it in.

The vines thickened, now as large around as Erik's wrist, twining up the walls and across the ceiling.

Large trumpet-shaped flowers burst forth, filling the air with a heady perfume.

It was weird how something that manifested from rage could have such a beautiful effect.

Moss crept across the floor in ever-widening patches of vivid green. Leaves unfurled to reveal vibrant veins of red and yellow.

Erik's anger still simmered within, a hot coal ignored amidst the frigid aftermath of the loss.

June and Noah eyed Erik with even more concern, uncertain how best to proceed. A single misspoken word risked fueling Erik's rage.

Yet silence brought its own dangers. Something had to be done before Erik's power consumed the room—and himself.

"The clones will need a lot to grow stronger. I need to do this now, and I need to do this fast. Volkov will be the first, and the blackguards the second. I'm not only going to destroy them in Hin, but I'm also going to do so even in Mur. Thaid's, dangers—I'll disregard them all. A slaughter is coming for all.

I swear, I'll do it. I will steal as many brain crystal powers as I need, give them to the clone, and make an army that will erase the world. I will reshape the world hierarchy."

Turning abruptly, Erik faced Noah, who had been observing the exchange.

"Call Becker and the others," he said. His voice echoed in the plant-filled room like the growl of a beast. "There is much to discuss."

#### Chapter 908: Strategic meeting (1)

"Thank you all for coming on such short notice," Erik said in clipped tones. "I'm sure you can guess why I've called this meeting."

An uneasy silence settled over the group. They all knew about Lucius's death, and the weight of Erik's loss could be seen in his cold, calculating eyes.

Amber glanced toward Gwen with concern in her eyes while Benedict studied the floor, his brow furrowed.

Most of the others did the same thing, but for Becker and Caiden.

They were older, but most importantly, more experienced.

They lost many friends, comrades, and subordinates during the years, and even if Lucius' death hit them strong, they knew they had to keep their composure.

"I won't beat around the bush. Soon, I will attack New Alexandria. I've decided to leave Liberty Watch and head there. I will make an army of clones from within the city and kill everyone. We had to go rescue Richard, regardless; the sooner we move, the better it will be."

He leaned forward, bracing his hands on the table.

"Which is why I would like to ask you to focus your efforts on killing the Thaid's around Liberty Watch. You must know I had to fight against a Hevadrin yesterday; this means you understand the kind of Thaid's roaming the forest."

Aaron exchanged an alarmed look with Mikey. "That's extremely premature," he said. "Are you sure you really want to do this now?"

"We don't have time," Erik insisted. "With every day we delay, Richard might meet the same fate as my father. I also need to collect information on Richard's location, and naturally, on Volkov as well."

Becker looked Erik in the eyes, and the younger man did the same.

"Are you really going to do this?" The ex-general asked. He didn't like the words he used: 'kill everyone'.

"I am. Volkov must pay; Richard must be rescued."

Floyd shifted in discomfort. "You say we should stay here and focus on the thaids around, but how do you think we can do this if even you had trouble? We do not have the biological supercomputer like you do."

Erik opened his mouth to respond, but Noah broke in. "We can use the clones and the guild members, but this will slow down production. If it slows down too much, we won't be able to create enough defenses to resist the Blackguards if they find us. So we must be careful and plan things with care."

For a long moment, Erik glared at the table, his chest heaving. Then his shoulders slumped as anger bled from his features, leaving only fatigue and sadness in their wake.

"You're right," he said at last. "That's why I'm going to leave the following week, after I make some more clones."

"At this point, I don't think that more clones are going to be enough," Gwen said.

"They are strong, that is true, but the Blackguards, the thaids, are stronger. The only way for you to make this situation manageable is to make thousands of clones, and I doubt you can do it in a week."

Gwen was not wrong, but there was something she wasn't aware of: the Chimaeric Demons.

Erik didn't have a chance to talk about this new power of his with anyone.

Only June knew it. The first thing he did when he arrived at Liberty Watch was to go to his father, then he went to talk to Noah, to whom he, of course, had to listen to learn what happened in Fasard.

Then he went to find his friends, and after all of this, he made the clones and went hunting. The rest of the time was spent unconscious in a hospital bed.

"Don't take me for a fool, Gwen, because I'm not." Gwen looked at Erik with a slightly offended look; she didn't like his tone.

The two always had a rocky relationship, and if in the past Erik had to hide secrets and couldn't afford to go against her, now there was a limit to what he was willing to ignore.

"I've got a new brain crystal power," Erik said. Of course, that made everyone focus on him intently.

"To be honest, this is not a new one; rather, it is a modified old one."

At those words, everyone had confused faces. Erik sighed. "The biological supercomputer has more than one power. It can not only let me get new ones, but even merge and modify them. That's what I did. I modified the clone-making power with other ones, made some other tweaks, and ended up with something the biological supercomputer called Chimaeric Demons."

Everyone was surprised to hear this, especially Noah, who was a little hurt since Erik told him nothing about this power. Erik turned to him with a slightly apologetic look.

"How will these new clones help us in this situation? Even if you make more clones, I doubt they will be enough to kill something as strong as a Hevadrin if it starts roaming around these parts." Becker, of course, was already analyzing the situation.

"The Chimaeric Demons are stronger than the clones. They lost all the abilities they had in the past, such as making the biomantic armor or shapeshifting. Currently, only the old clones can use such abilities. That's why I want them to change their main purpose and train in espionage rather than fighting. Regardless, the new clones lost those abilities, but they earned a powerful one.

My clones now have brain crystals; hence, they can have brain crystal powers, and currently, they have two."

Erik's clone's flaw was known to everyone.

They were strong, trained, and smart, but they couldn't contend with people at a certain level because the absence of brain crystal powers put them at a disadvantage.

But now... Now Erik said not only he solved this problem, but he also gave them two brain crystal powers? It was hard to believe it, yet, for Erik it was possible.

Becker started thinking that, with all this much power, if Erik went crazy, nothing could stop him from conquering the world.

Chapter 909: Strategic meeting (2)

"Exactly what I'm saying. I can give them more brain crystal powers; hence, the best thing to do would be to collect as many brain crystals and thaid's blood as you can and store them so that I can then give them to the clones."

"That's a lot of work to do," Benedict said. "But regardless, can you explain how this works? I can understand the brain crystal, but why the blood?"

They were all curious to learn about this. Erik never shared the details of how the biological supercomputer worked, and they were curious.

"I need to eat the brain crystal and drink the blood because otherwise I can't get the power. The biological supercomputer analyzes the DNA through the blood, and the power through the brain crystal. That's putting it simply. Regardless, after i get all those powers, I need to merge the Chimaeric Demon brain crystal power with those new ones, and they will have those powers."

"Drink the blood?" Floyd said. "I'm not even a little bit envious." He had a disgusted face.

"Yeah," Erik said. "But I've grown used to it; don't worry."

"I still find it disgusting."

"That's all good and well," Caiden said.

"But if the Chimaeric Demons can use brain crystal powers, assuming they work like in humans' cases, it means they will start having few neural links. How will they be useful to us?"

Erik looked at Caiden, Amber's father. The man was smart; there was no doubt about it, as he inferred that the only weakness his new type of clones had was that they started having few neural links. That, and that their mana pool was low.

"That is true, but the new clones will have the same physical characteristics I had when I made them. This means they will be at least as strong as me. They will still have all my memories, so they will know how to fight. I can make 30 of such clones a day, but this means that in a week you will have 210 new powerful soldiers among your rank."

"You are forgetting the thirty you already made, Master."

"You made some already?" Mikey asked.

"I did."

"Besides, there is something else I didn't tell you." Again, everyone focused on Erik intently.

He already said he just got the power to make an army of monsters; what was more to say? How many secrets and how many powers did Erik have?

"Whether you joined my guild, all of you got a neural link training technique that was more efficient than that used in Frant, right?"

Everyone nodded. "My men must have told you I was the one who developed it. That is, in fact, not correct. That is the technique that was used by Liberty Watch's people, but I asked the system to improve and modify it."

"Are you saying...?"

"I'm exactly saying that," Erik sighed.

"I may have asked the biological supercomputer to make other techniques, and well. The one I'm currently using is much, much more powerful than the one you are using. I don't know how good sharing this technique will be. In the wrong hands, it could create psychopaths, but... The situation is worsening, and I decided to share the technique with you all."

In a month, my first batch of Chimaeric Demons will hatch. They won't already be at their full potential, but they will be able to teach each of you the technique."

"Why now? Why not months ago?" Becker asked.

"Because the situation is worsening..." Erik said. "The reason there is another mass migration within Frant is because the Blackguards are doing something in Mur that is pushing the thaids there from moving here on the Mannard continent. One particularly powerful flying thaid started living in the Eldraith mountain range; I saw it with my own eyes while it killed a black wyvern."

Erik watched as shock and worry crossed his friends' faces at the revelation. They all knew what kind of powerful creatures lurked near the Eldraith Mountains.

"Are we in danger?" Floyd asked. "Can this beast make its way here?"

Erik shook his head. "It can, but I doubt it will. It needs a massive amount of food to sustain its gigantic body; only the Eldraith Mountain range has it. But many thaids at the lower levels who lived in those areas are migrating west now. Liberty Watch is along their path."

Murmurs arose as the group processed this new threat.

"All right then..." Caiden said.

"If weaker thaids pass through, take them out before they become an issue. But focus our strengths on defense until my clones are ready to handle the most powerful ones."

The plan made sense.

Noah nodded in agreement.

"For now, daily patrols should stem smaller threats. If we organize well with Liberty Watch's citizens, this might be possible. "

"There is one last thing I must tell you all," Erik said.

"Is this bad or good news?" Floyd asked.

"Does it matter?"

"It does."

"It's good, but it's also bad. I will let you decided what it is."

Erik sighed. Floyd didn't change a little since they went to school. "The Hevadrin I fought," the Nexthorn Vanguard's guild master said. "That thing had 57 neural links."

"It had what?"

"You heard that right. 57 neural links."

"How do you know that?" Becker asked. "It's another perk of the biological supercomputer," June said. "Just trust him on this."

"Are you sure about this?" Caiden asked.

"I am. And here is the point: the description the biological supercomputer gave about the Chimaeric Demon brain crystal power is that they can get an infinite amount of neural links. But I started thinking after learning about the number of neural links held by the Hevadrin. What if 54 neural links had never been a limit?

What if that limit was just because we humans didn't have a good technique to make more of them?"

Chapter 910: Strategic meeting (3)

"I don't know that, but at least, with my technique, you can get to 54 sooner. That's the only certainty I have. My technique was made to allow me to train multiple brain crystal powers at the same time. I seldomly used it to only improve one brain crystal power, but when I did, the speed was swift. Maybe we will be able to push through the 54 neural links limit and reach something humans never did."



"When do we start, then?" Benedict asked with enthusiasm. He loved the feeling of pushing himself to the limit, and training allowed him to feel just that.

"He said when the new types of clones hatch. Damn, Ben, are you even listening?" Gwen was pissed.

But not everyone was so eager or fully believed what Erik said.

"You seem sure about this, yet it might be possible this won't happen," Becker said.

"I learned from seeing you that this biological supercomputer can do a lot of things. Yet I doubt it can do something that humans tried to do for centuries and failed."

"You will change your mind once you try Erik's technique," June said.

The clone couldn't use it since he didn't have a brain crystal, but from Erik's memories, he knew how strong it was.

Of course, June didn't know how the modified version of it was, but the old one was already powerful enough to let him say those words with confidence.

Erik understood Becker's skepticism. After all, pushing past perceived limits went against conventional wisdom. Still, conventional wisdom had its limits too, especially considering the biological supercomputer often shattered common sense.

Before three years ago, having multiple brain crystal powers was considered impossible, but now even the Blackguards could do this. Three years ago, people only theorized about brain crystal weapons, but now they are real.

"I know it seems impossible," Erik said in a calm tone. "Not long ago, even the idea of having multiple brain crystal powers looked like utter madness, and here I am. Besides, I think I'm not the only one who is going to have this ability for long."

"What do you mean?" Surprisingly, it was Mira who asked that question.

"Do you remember that time the Fierce Lioness' daughter came to Testrovsc's Rest?"

"I do. How could I forget that girl buzzing around you 24/7?" Mira said not without a look of annoyance. Amber looked at her and understood why she was pissed.

"Well, we got a private quest from the guild. They asked us to find someone. That person was a scientist, whom I learned worked for the blackguards but tried to flee. He was trying to make people have more brain-crystal powers. Somehow he achieved it."

"How can you be so sure about that?"

"I read the documents back then," Erik said. "He was very close back then, but for a while, all of this was suspended. For some time, I feared they would succeed, and Shade basically confirmed it."

It was Becker's turn to raise questions now.

"Shade? He was real?"

"Yes, very much. Are you aware that I destroyed the Crystal Cross Gang?" That surprised all but Noah, June, Becker, and Caiden.

"I do," Becker said.

"It looks like you got in contact with your men, then."

"I did."

"Well, their boss was a guy called Howell. He had some information about Shade since he worked for him. Shade was the link between the Crystal Cross Gang and the Blackguards. He was the lord of the underworld, and not just here in Frant, but even in Etrium, well, to be honest, from around the continent. But that is the weird part. Despite all that power, he was just a proxy for the blackguards.

I found him in Nokisi Point, with hundreds of other gang leaders from the continent, which I killed."

Erik watched Becker, wondering what thoughts were going through his head. Becker had always been harder to read than most. Now the red-haired man's eyes narrowed slightly as he took in Erik's words. Out of respect, he wasn't reading his thoughts.

"Shade was real then," Becker said. "I had my suspicions about his existence despite only hearing rumors, and of course I got no proof. It always seemed absurd that one man could control so much of the underworld without ties to someone more powerful."

He paused for a moment, his fingers tapping absently on the table as he thought. "So, he was working for the Blackguards all along, just as I thought. A puppet and a puppet master at the same time, with the Blackguards manipulating strings from the shadows. But why go to such lengths for them? What did Shade stand to gain?"

No one answered, for no one knew the answer to that question. Erik had never learned the details of Shade's past or his true motivations. In his death, Shade was as much an enigma as when he walked into the living world. There was only one thing Erik knew with certainty.

"Shade was from Frant, the brother of a very good private investigator I knew. I read in a journal from 47 years ago that he was thought to be dead. He was beaten up by bullies, and the police did nothing. Somehow, he didn't die. Maybe it was then that he decided to become a criminal."

Becker sighed, shaking his head slowly. He wasn't Frant's general back then, but he could easily imagine how awful things must have been back then, based on how bad they were when he was in power.

To Becker, all of this meant the Blackguards had their clutches on Frant even back then and that he must have been a thorn in their side.

"Well, it does not matter now. Shade is gone, by your hand, I suppose. One less player on the board makes the game easier to understand, if nothing else, and I bet the Blackguards lost a huge chunk of power."

He straightened, his eyes finding Erik's once more. "My thanks for confirming what I could only guess at before now and for having killed those fuckers I couldn't find for years. "

"Don't worry about that. Regardless, as I said, he confirmed the Blackguards used the scientist's technology. They are making an army. I don't know exactly what they want to do with it—maybe just to kill me, since I have what they want."

Becker, at that point, had a serious look.

The man's eyes narrowed as Erik said that. For years, they had searched for answers about what the Blackguards wanted, losing talented men in the process, and now he was finally close to learning what their enemies were desperately searching for. Lucius likely found that out and told Erik, and based on what the younger man just said, there could be very few things they wanted.

One came to Becker's mind faster than any other.

"They want the Biological Supercomputer," Becker said.

"They do." Erik's fingers tapped a rapid rhythm on the table.

"So all this time, it was that which drew their interest. Did Lucius tell you this?"

"Yes. He was also the one who gave me the biological supercomputer to begin with."

Lucius never said what he found out to the others, not even to Becker, knowing that he could put his son in danger.

Lucius came from the Mur continent only to be captured, so it was easy to guess he feared about his son's life since he knew little about his current state.

Even if he was told a lot of things by the others, it was still true that he could not trust them because all of this involved his son.

A flash of frustration crossed Becker's face, there and gone in an instant. He hoped Lucius might have told him about those things in person, but he could see why he had decided not to do it.

Though it was pretty obvious given how powerful the biological supercomputer was.

Then Erik said something else. "That, and the papers describing its creation. Having the biological supercomputer itself would be good, but the best thing would be to learn how to craft it, right? That's why they are on Mur."

Erik met Becker's gaze. "It seems the Blackguards have had their sights set on that technology for a long time."

Becker nodded slowly. So much had changed since his days leading Frant's armies, and now their long-standing foe had found a new purpose. "But who made it? And for what purpose?"

"From what I understand, the research was conducted by a company called Silver Line Corporation. But beyond that, I do not know more of its origins."

With a last thoughtful hum, Becker rose from his seat. "Well, this gives us more to work with, at least. I'll have my men dig into this Silver Line. Might be they left some tracks after all this time."

He clasped Erik's shoulder. "My thanks, as always, for the new insights. I'll do what you wish to do. For years, I tried to find and do all those things, failing. Yet, you got so far in only three years. I'll trust your judgment."