

BIOLOGICAL 911

Chapter 911: Three stubborn helpers

He quickly crafted thirty eggs thanks to his abilities, adding them to the thirty he had made the day before.

Erik paused his work to oversee the hunting parties Noah had organized. Groups had formed under Aaron, Gwen, and all of Erik's old friends. Many from Liberty Watch, including Ethan, joined them. Even Samuel and Amos went hunting.

Samuel was to be expected. He was old outside but young inside, and he enjoyed being out and doing his thing.

As for Amos, that was a surprise, since he was Liberty Watch's leader and did mostly take care of bureaucracy and mental problems rather than physical ones.

Satisfied with their preparations, Erik returned to his work, though he took a moment to glance out at the forest trails, now busy with travelers heading into the thick trees.

With luck, they would return soon with brain crystals and blood, but most of all, they would have made Liberty Watch safer.

Erik wanted to join them, get experience and DNA points, and absorb more powers, but for now, his duty was to make eggs and, well, train.

The Nexthorn Vanguard guild's leader realized he needed to focus on his powers for now, and of course, starting from the previous night, he fully focused on making neural links for the Chimaeric Demon brain crystal power.

Right now, he didn't need personal power; he needed soldiers. The new clones would be the perfect ones.

Raising the number of neural links would make the clone start with better brain crystals, decrease the hatching and maturing time, and even decrease the amount of mana needed to make more clones.

Making neural links for that power was his best investment, but at the same time, Erik knew that once he merged the power with something else, the progress would be reset.

Another six days passed like that. In total, Erik created 210 Chimaeric Demons. Noah and the others would nurture and protect them until they were ready to defend Liberty Watch. Erik also got three neural links in his Chimaeric Demon brain crystal power.

* * *

Erik gazed out at the forests surrounding Liberty Watch, thinking of the amount of stuff he had to do. Beside him, Noah spoke.

"I know you're eager to face Volkov, but don't rush into things, Master." Noah said. "Our scouts reported large armies gathered under him; a lot of them are Blackguards. What if, as you stated, some of his men already have multiple brain crystal powers?"

Erik nodded. "Don't worry. To save Richard, I will need a lot of preparation, so I won't do anything to jeopardize the rescue. I'm not planning to kill only Volkov."

"Yes. It would be good for you to keep making more Chimaeric Demons. A few months won't change much at this point. You can spend your free time training and searching for Intel." Noah said.

"Yes..."

Erik knew his clone spoke wisdom, yet impatience lingered in his heart. To fall now would undo all they'd built, and for Richard to die.

"Keep this place safe," Erik said.

Noah bowed his head. "As you command, Master."

Erik watched him go, then gazed once more out over the forest. Soon the hunt would end, one way or another.

For now, he had clones to create and powers to enhance, but most importantly, a journey to make. Before June and Erik could step outside, though, three people approached, and he didn't like it.

* * *

Erik watched with a growing frown as Mira, Amber, and Emily marched towards him. Their determined strides ate up the distance, each girl becoming a wound coil of purpose.

He saw the glint of determination in their eyes, a mirror of his own most of the time. But the real giveaway was their attire.

Each one sported a backpack bulging with unknown contents, strapped firmly to their shoulders. Erik could see that they were carrying weapons.

An assortment of blades, hilts, and maybe even a rifle or two peeked out from under the worn canvas.

"Going somewhere?" Erik asked as they came to a stop in front of him.

"With you, of course," Amber said.

Erik sighed. "Amber, I asked you not to come. It's too dangerous."

"I don't care. You think I'm just going to wait around while you face who knows what or who out there?" She placed a hand on her hip. "I'm going, whether or not you like it."

Mira and Emily both offered nods of agreement, though their faces weren't quite as fiery as Amber's.

The past few weeks had been especially rough on Emily. Her father, Richard, was being held prisoner by Volkov, and the worry was etched deep in her expression.

Truth be told, Emily wasn't alone in her misery. Richard's wife was faring even worse.

Without her husband there to lead, the burden of caring for their people fell on her shoulders.

She ached to join any rescue attempt to free her husband, but her responsibilities chained her to Liberty Watch.

Amber stared at Erik, her eyes burning like flames. Erik's stomach clenched. He'd seen that fire in her gaze before. Once Amber decided on something, there was no turning back.

"The Blackguards have spies everywhere," Erik said, grasping for another argument.

"They will recognize you as soon as you step foot in the city. What if they capture one of you?" The thought made his chest tighten.

"Then you'll just have to come rescue us." Amber flashed a grin, sure of her strength and his. "We're not helpless, you know. We can keep up."

Emily turned to look at Erik, and he did the same. Her eyes were filled with determination.

"And you? What are you doing here?"

"I will not wait for you to save dad." Emily's voice hardened with a steely resolve. Her eyes narrowed with a determination that burned brighter than any fire. A deep furrow creased her brow, and her jaw clenched tight. She was dead serious about wanting to go with him to New Alexandria.

Erik understood the feeling, yet Emily was the one with the least fighting experience of them all. She trained, and that was true; she wasn't a poor fighter either, but she had no real fighting experience.

She never killed a thaid, let alone a human, because she lived a pampered life within Frant's richest family, the Stone family. The problem was that if she wanted to come; she had to make that step, and Erik wasn't sure Emily was ready.

"Emily, I cannot promise your safety," Erik said. "Besides, your appearance makes you stand out." Emily was easily the most beautiful woman, Erik... No, everyone had seen. That beauty made her famous, so it would be problematic for her to tag along.

"I don't care. I have to try."

Erik hesitated, his instinct to protect battling with empathy for her plight. Before he could say anything, Mira spoke.

"Let us come with you, Erik."

But Erik looked into Mira's eyes. "I'm disappointed. Shouldn't you be the responsible one among us?"

"What about my actions says I'm not? If I think we should come, then we should. Amber is strong; Emily can see the future, to some extent; and me... well, I have plenty of experience on my side."

Mira wasn't wrong. Their help would be invaluable for a number of reasons. Even guarding the eggs was going to be helpful. Besides, Erik knew how Mira's insight was going to be useful. She had much more experience than him hunting thaids, and having been in a hunting party for a long time, she knew better than him how to fight in a group.

"Let them come, Master," June said.

Erik looked at his clone with a contemplative look. He wondered what was going through his mind and why he had made that suggestion.

He could read his mind, but he didn't want to, because he felt like he was going to violate him.

Besides, contrary to what many people could think, reading people's mind was exhausting, because more often than not, individuals had many dark thoughts in their minds.

Jealousy, hatred, contempt, and bloodlust were just some of the things he saw in people.

Those were just thoughts, but they said a lot about the people who had them.

Erik changed his opinion about many people before deciding not to use his instability brain crystal power on his friends and comrades.

June was the person he trusted the most, so, in the end, he conceded, but he didn't like the situation a bit.

"Very well," Erik said. "But you must do exactly as I say. Any risks you take endanger us all."

The women nodded. A heavy responsibility now lay upon them, and pride or passion could no longer rule their actions.

Erik turned his focus to Liberty Watch's exit. The other four, Mira, June, Amber, and Emily, followed suit.

Chapter 912: Three beautiful riders

"What do we do, Master?" June asked. "We can't fly any more to New Alexandria this way. The galewing form is not big enough to carry everyone."

"I know..."

"What are you talking about?" Mira asked.

"June can shapeshift like all the clones, as you know... We wanted to fly to New Alexandria."

"And I guess we can't do it anymore, right? Doesn't June have something to carry us all?"

"Just the form of a black wyvern, but that would be a stupid move."

Erik saw the shocked looks on the faces of Mira, Emily, and Amber at the mention of a black wyvern. He understood why they had it.

They learned from the other clones that, in order for them to be able to shapeshift, they had to drink the creature's blood.

That meant that Erik must either have killed one or found a dead one.

Both of them were highly unlikely, yet that June could turn into one was clear either of the two must have happened. They couldn't only understand which of the two options it was.

Emily spoke first, her emerald eyes searching Erik's brown ones. "You and June killed a black wyvern? Then that means..."

Erik held up a hand to pause her question. "No, we did not kill one. When we were scouting the forest some months ago, we came upon a dead one. The Cerulean bird I was talking about a week ago had slain it."

A sigh escaped Emily. For a second, she hoped he was strong enough to kill one, but her hopes had been crushed. Yet curiosity remained in her eyes.

"Then you and June... you drank its blood?"

Here, Erik nodded. "We did. I got its brain crystal power while June can now shapeshift into it. That form would be enough to carry us all, but it is also easily spotted. We were going to travel with June, taking a Galewing's form, but that won't be enough to carry us all."

Amber spoke now. "What other options do we have? We must reach New Alexandria swiftly to aid Emily's father."

With three additional companions, flying to New Alexandria was no longer a viable option with June alone, unless he turned into the Black Wyvern.

Of course, doing so was stupid, since it would mean telling Volkov he was coming.

"What do we do, Master?" June asked.

Erik sighed. "Go fetch three more clones. Be sure they are from the latest batch. We will be forced to travel on foot."

"So, we will take the form of Erendus?"

"Yes, it's better than nothing, and that form is relatively fast."

"All right."

Erik turned to look at Amber, Mira, and Emily.

"Traveling on top of Thaid's is not easy. Hold on tight and try not to fall off."

The women nodded their understanding, adjusting their gear in preparation.

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June came with three clones soon after. They were eager to serve Erik, and since they all liked Amber, Mira, and Emily, Well, that journey was going to have a bonus for them.

The three clones soon arrived before Erik, coming to stand at attention while June went to take his place at Erik's side.

"I am Mark, Master," said the first clone. "This is Hugo," he pointed at a clone with a serious demeanor. "And Xavier is the last one."

Erik nodded to each clone in turn. "Thank you for coming so swiftly. I know the notice was short." Turning to face them, Erik continued.

"The situation has become... complicated," he said, turning to look at the three women.

"These ladies here decided to come with me. Can you shapeshift into Erendus and bring them to New Alexandria?"

The clones bowed in unison. "It would be our honor," Mark said.

Everyone watched as the clones began their transformation into Erendus.

It never ceased to amaze him the fluidity with which his clones took on alternative forms.

Mark was the first to begin, his body swelling and elongating. Bones protruded from his skin as thick armor plating.

His face pushed out into a dolphin-like snout just as two short horns emerged from his brow.

Within moments, a large, four-legged, barrel-chested Erendu stood before them.

Hugo and Xavier followed suit, their shapeshifting swift and sure, followed by June.

Within moments, four massive Erendus stood before the group, snorting and pawing the ground as they tested their new forms.

Mira, Emily, and Amber glanced at the towering clones, but steeled themselves as Erik helped each woman mount their steed.

"Hold tight to their manes and try not to fall," he said.

Erik smirked as he helped Mira onto Hugo's back. She eyed the massive Erendu nervously.

"It's not what you expected when you decided to tag along, is it?" Erik asked.

Mira huffed out a laugh. "I certainly never thought I'd be riding a thaid. No offense," she said, patting Hugo's thick neck.

"They aren't thaid's," Erik corrected her.

"Of course, you're right. These are your clones." Mira flushed, chastened. "I didn't mean to imply-"

Erik waved away her apology. "Don't worry, I know you were joking."

Mira nodded and offered Erik a smile. "Thank you for bringing us along. And..." She patted Hugo again. "No offense meant, friend."

Hugo snorted amicably in response. Erik smiled. "Shall we be on our way?"

Taking Erik's offered hand, Mira settled onto Hugo's back as the others prepared for travel.

With a last glance over his shoulder to ensure all were settled, Erik's steely gaze swept across the group, his eyes lingering for a moment on each member.

Satisfied that they were ready, he raised his hand, signaling the order to depart.

The clones sprang into action, their muscular forms rippling beneath their thick plate armor as they broke into an easy lope.

All around them the sound of birdsong echoed, while the scent of wildflowers hung in the air, mingling with the earthy aroma of the forest floor. This journey would not be easy, but at least the surroundings were pretty, almost as much as his three new companions.

Chapter 913: Bestial clash (1)

After some time, Mira rode up next to Erik, her long braid whipping in the wind. "What is your plan once we reach New Alexandria?"

"First, we'll need to get in touch with Major Fischer. Last I heard, he was making preparations for a big attack against Volkov. But of course, they could all be dead by now."

"You do not look confident in their abilities." Mira said.

"It's not that I'm not, but Volkov has the blackguards, and the blackguards... well, there is no need to tell you how problematic they are. Besides, all of this is without considering brain crystal weapons or double or triple brain crystal powers. It's a mess."

Mira nodded, having heard rumors of growing unrest in the city. "Do you think they will be good allies?"

"Hard to say," Erik said. In all honesty, not even he was certain of that, but having more hands on deck will be useful.

"But regardless, they will give us a place to stay, an information network, and the like. You don't know this since you are from Etrium, but the people we are going to meet are all in the army. They know what they are doing."

For Mira, it was weird, because there wasn't an army in the traditional sense in Etrium, only mercenaries.

"Well, as you say, knowing what they are doing doesn't mean being able to."

"That's true..." Erik paused a second.

"Anyway, the first thing we have to do is establish a base of operations within the city, a place where we can safely make more clones. After that, it's all about gathering intelligence. There is nothing that a good, old investigation can't solve."

Mira pondered this. "The usual, right?"

Erik nodded. "The usual..."

Their conversation was interrupted then as Hugo crested a rise, shaking his massive head and making a snort.

Hugo's snort pulled Erik from his thoughts, drawing his attention ahead. Through the trees, a partial clearing came into view where the forest had been damaged.

Erik shielded his eyes from the sun as Hugo approached the area.

Scattered tree trunks and snapped branches littered the ground, partially obstructing their path.

As they drew nearer, Erik spotted streaks of darkened earth between the debris.

The smell of disturbed soil mingled with something acrid that hung heavily in the air.

He dismounted and picked his way closer for a better look.

Deep gouges marked the terrain as if enormous claws had torn through the soft ground.

Erik ran his fingers along one such groove, feeling its ragged edges.

He glanced at the trees, noticing strips of bark shredded from their bases to the lowest branches.

There was a big hole in the ground in the middle of the clearing. The edges had strange, misshapen lumps that might've been tree roots.

Whatever violent encounter happened here was not an ordinary struggle.

He could only imagine what kind of creature was capable of such wanton destruction.

"Look at this," Amber said. "Something must have fought around here."

Mira joined her in surveying the destruction. "But what?" she asked, glancing back at Erik.

"Any thoughts on what could have done this?"

While surveying the scale of the battle's aftermath, Erik knew that whatever fought here was no ordinary creature.

Only one with considerable strength could have wrought such devastation.

"Judging by the size of the area and the damage, I think this was made by thaidi with more than twenty-three neural links at least," he said.

"Something like this should not be around here."

These thaids posed grave dangers; not only could their battles reach Liberty Watch, endangering innocent lives, but their presence also disrupted the ecosystems upon which the people relied.

If the thaids drove away or consumed all other prey in the surrounding wilderness, food problems may soon follow for Liberty Watch, since they relied also on meat.

Erik's people had always lived in a precarious balance with the land, being this deep in the forest. He remembered when he first arrived in what was, back then, a village. People were starving, and he made the city safe by using his powers.

But with forces as powerful as these thaids rampaging unchecked, that balance threatened to collapse.

If all the monsters that came from the Eldraith mountain range were at the Hevadrin's same level, Erik doubted the clones could kill them.

"Should we hunt them?" Emily asked. Erik turned to look at her.

"It depends. For sure, they pose a threat to Liberty Watch since we are still very close to it. But the scale of this destruction suggests the thaids are not weak ones, as I've already said. To have twenty-three neural links is not that much; honestly, the problem is that whatever did fight here has more. I can't explain the destruction otherwise.

Besides, when I fought with the Hevadrin, we didn't make the same mess as here, and yet that thing was powerful."

What Erik was trying to say was that stronger beasts didn't automatically equate to bigger messes. But they were still needed to make a chaos like this.

Erik thought back to when he started this weird journey. The thought of killing a flying thaid was harrowing back then.

Of course, for him, that became easy. What baffled him was that there were people who could do the same a long time ago but never did.

The blackguards had the power to kill flying thaids; otherwise, they wouldn't even stand a chance against him back in Caelora City.

Yet they did nothing. The same could be said for Shade and his men.

When he fought them, even he had to be careful. This meant that humanity was stronger than what the average person thought, but they still lived in fear. Why?

Now Erik had to kill Volkov and destroy their men, yet he had to be careful.

It was weird considering that not long ago; he thought he should have been strong enough to destroy New Alexandria alone.

Of course, that was because of brain crystal weapons and Doran's research; otherwise...

<Otherwise, Volkov would have had his day counted. >

The real question was, were things changing too fast, or did the world's governments lie about humanity's strength?

Erik was inclined to think it was the second.

"We can't possibly leave whatever was here around," Amber said.

"She is right," Mira interjected. "Do you think you can hunt this thing?"

Erik looked at her with an amused smile. "Of course I am!"

Chapter 914: Bestial clash (2)

The group nodded before venturing off to follow the traces of the battle.

They began surveying the area, taking in every detail that may provide clues about the thaids' identities.

The trees showed more than just claw marks after some point; several trunks and lower branches were charred black, with wisps of smoke still drifting from some.

Erik ran his hand along one scorched patch, feeling the deep grooves left by the intense heat.

Some type of fire had been involved in the fight, but it was a peculiar one, which reduced the number of possible thaids who could have fought here.

While moving further into the clearing, the scorch marks increased in frequency and size.

Entire sections of grass and undergrowth had been burned away, leaving large patches of scorched earth.

Erik crouched low, running his fingers over the hot soil. The fire had occurred recently, within a day at most.

"They are not far," Erik said.

"Is this fresh?" Mira asked.

"Yes. The soil is still hot."

Erik and the others kept following the trails, quickly going closer to the edge of the clearing. Apparently, the battle went further into the forest.

"They passed through here. Are you sure you want to kill them?" Erik asked.

"Yes... There is no danger, right?" Amber asked.

"Not if you stay on top of the clones. They will be fast enough to run away from any danger, so be sure to grip them well..."

The three women nodded, and the group kept following the trails until they found something. In front of them, at the base of an enormous tree, lay a thaid's corpse.

Erik dismounted from June and approached the fallen creature. Its fur was now matted with blood.

The women remained atop their mounts, observing but keeping their distance because of Erik's advice.

The man inspected the thaid's wounds and found out it had thousands of holes riddled in its thick hide, each puncture oozing blood.

They were hundreds, several inches deep, and riddled the bear's body.

Its sides were almost completely punctured, and Erik suspected internal organs had been turned to pulp.

Its limbs were splayed at unnatural angles, and the bones within were shattered by some immense force.

"That's a Luminaclaw bear."

"A what?"

"A Luminaclaw bear," Erik said again.

"It is a kind of nocturnal bear-like thaid that can cast a sort of fire that grows stronger during the night."

The bear's face bore the worst of it—it was a colander of torn flesh and shattered bone.

<It must have died quickly from blood loss and organ failure, > Erik thought, <but not without immense suffering. >

The Luminaclaw's eyes stared emptily at the sky.

Its maw, or whatever remained of it, was agape, as if caught in a silent scream.

Who or what could have done this? He had seen many dead thaids, but none in such a brutalized state. Erik looked at the creature's rear.

"It's a female."

"Poor girl," Amber said.

"That's a thaid you are talking about. They eat people."

"It's still pitiful."

As Erik examined the corpse, his thoughts turned to what creature was capable of such savage violence.

Erik studied the surroundings. Beyond the signs of the brutal battle, he noticed multiple tracks in the soil.

There were paw prints of varying sizes, some overlapping, as if multiple creatures had wandered here recently.

"It seems this Luminaclaw bear was not alone," Erik said. "These tracks show at least two other sizable thaids were present. I think she was here with her mate. "

Erik collected the blood and the brain crystal and placed them in his backpack. The others looked at him with disgust.

He kneeled by the fallen bear and examined its wounds once more. Erik brought his fingers to its torn flesh and licked away a sample of blood. It was warm, which told him this creature had only just died.

While rising, Erik turned to the three women watching from atop the clones.

"We're close to finding the others. Stay close and follow me."

He leapt back onto June's back and then the group continued along the trail of prints and signs of struggle, heading deeper into the forest at a measured pace.

Erik kept his senses alert, scanning for any new clues or hints of the direction the remaining thaids had taken when fleeing the bloody scene.

It wasn't long before tracks led the group toward the sounds of battle: vicious roars and the crash of trees.

While urging the clones into a swift gallop, Erik and the group broke into a small clearing nestled within the forest, but that wasn't natural; it had been made by the two creatures fighting, exactly like the previous one they found. The difference was that this was still under the making, as the battle between the creatures was going on.

There, before them, raged a brutal fight between two massive thaids.

One was a hulking Metalfur bear, whose pelt transformed into jagged metal. The other was a Luminaclaw bear, its fur alight with a fiery glow that illuminated the space.

The Metalfur swiped with its claws, and the fur on it turned into metal.

"That's why the female Luminaclaw bear had all those holes."

The swipe gouged chunks from its opponent but was unable to penetrate deep.

Only the fur did, but the Luminaclaw minimized the damage by beck-stepping.

It also retaliated by belching gouts of starry flame, scorching the earth but glancing harmlessly off the steel hide.

It was day now, and it was at that moment that the creature's power was weaker.

Both creatures were wounded, leaking blood, and torn by gashes. The Metalfur bear was in a worse state; it fought against two opponents, after all. How it killed one in such a state was a mystery.

Their primal fury kept them locked in combat, dealing blow after punishing blow with no sign of tiring.

Erik took in the scene, analyzing strengths and weaknesses. This fight had been raging for some time and would see both thaids destroy each other, given their current state.

Chapter 915: Bestial clash (3)

The metalfur bear swung its armored claws with brutal force, but the Luminaclaw bear met each blow with spurts of its fiery attack.

After several long moments, it was clear to Erik they were matched—neither thaid showed signs of tiring, yet both were not in their best state. Blood stained the forest floor as their roars shook the trees.

Beside him, Mira followed the battle with contemplative eyes. Those beasts were out of her league.

She occasionally glanced at Amber and Emily to gauge their state, and they shared the same sentiment, especially Emily, who couldn't understand who or what could kill such creatures. The three clones stood steadily under them.

All were silent, save for the clashing thaids. Erik sensed the others deferred to his judgment in this. If he decided not to leave, it meant he was confident he could kill them.

This time, Erik decided not to risk it and analyzed the creatures using the biological supercomputer.

After having learned that not only the wyverns could pose a challenge to him, he decided to play it safe whenever he found a thaid that could have come from the Eldraith mountain range, which was the case for these two bears.

<Analysis. >

Two windows appeared in front of him.

Metalfur Bear

Physical Characteristics:

The Metalfur bear has thick, earth-toned fur with streaks of granite gray and a massive frame, resembling a living boulder. It also has four short, sturdy legs built for stability, which end in enormous clawed paws that are used to dig earth and tear flesh.

Brain Crystal Power: Metal Fur

The Metalfur Bear can turn its fur into a metal like substance. It is both an offensive and defensive power simultaneously.

Ecology:

The Metalfur bear thrives in mountainous regions and rocky caves. It is usually active at dawn and dusk. It is carnivorous and highly territorial.

Attributes:

STRENGTH: 186

INTELLIGENCE: 4

DEXTERITY: 143

ENERGY: 648

Power Level: 333

Estimated Experience: 8424 EXP per kill.

Neural Links: 37

Luminaclaw Bear

Physical Characteristics:

The Luminaclaw Bear is covered in thick, iridescent fur that shimmers like moonlight during the night. It has a muscular build, meant for strength and endurance. The creature is large, with eyes that help it pierce through darkness. It uses long, curved claws designed to fight, and it has sturdy legs and a powerful tail for stability.

Brain Crystal Power: Starlight Fire

The Luminaclaw Bear can channel its energy to create a shimmering starlight firebolt. The strength of the bolt increases as more mana is used, but it is multiplied in potency as the light from the stars increases.

Ecology:

Inhabits ancient forests where moonlight filters through dense foliage. Commonly found near the Eldraith Mountain range. Primarily nocturnal, it roams silently, taking advantage of the stars' effects on its powers. Feeds on berries, nuts, and the occasional prey.

Attributes:

STRENGTH: 196

INTELLIGENCE: 4

DEXTERITY: 133

ENERGY: 876

Power Level: 333

Estimated Experience: 8991 EXP per kill

Neural Links: 37

<Weird...>

The two creatures were active at different times. One was nocturnal, while the other was active at dusk.

<I bet they are active at this time due to the migration. I wonder what the hell is happening in the Eldraith mountain range. >

But Erik had no way to know that. Regardless, the two creatures almost had 200 points in strength and 37 neural links. It was a lot.

Erik weighed each factor. For now, he chose to observe—any move risked disrupting a stalemate, for better or worse. The fight would play out as nature intended, unless one gained the upper hand.

Of course, for sure, he would kill the creatures, but even if they killed each other, he was still within range of absorption.

The Luminaclaw bear began gathering its mana for a powerful attack. Its fur glowed as it amassed its mana. With a roar, it released its starlight fireball at its metalfur bear.

The super-heated flames engulfed the metalfur bear, melting through its armor-like coat.

Golden light bathed the forest as the fireball exploded on impact, searing flesh from bone.

When the light faded, a massive patch of the metalfur's side had been burned away, leaving scorched muscle and ribs exposed.

Yet still, it fought on, impervious to pain. While taking advantage of the opening, the male Luminaclaw bear moved in for the attack.

Its claws raked across the wound, eliciting a guttural growl from its opponent. Crimson blood flowed, matting the metalfur bear's metallic fur. It thrashed and flailed as the wounds took their toll.

Erik watched the toppled thaid with careful eyes as the Luminaclaw moved to attack again.

Though gravely injured, its foe was far from dead and could still pose a threat. One wrong move from the apparent victor could leave an opening. All it took was a single, well-placed swipe to end the battle.

Erik watched as the Luminaclaw bear moved in for the killing blow. One last attack was all the bear needed to end the fight and avenge its mate.

But Erik moved, deciding to take the kill himself, but not to kill the Metalfur bear. A flyssa made of hardened slime formed in his hands as he dashed towards the creatures with inhuman speed.

As the Luminaclaw bear was going to deliver the finishing blow, almost to the point of avenging its mate, Erik swung his sword in a wide arc.

A blade of wind extended from the flyssa, slicing through fur, bones, and flesh.

The Luminaclaw bear's head went tumbling, severed from its neck in a single powerful blow. A fountain of blood erupted from the lifeless corpse, painting the forest floor a vivid red.

Within moments, one of the two creatures had been eliminated.

[LUMINACLAW BEAR 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. 8991 EXPERIENCE POINTS AND 89.91 DNA POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

The other creature, though, was still alive and kicking.

Chapter 916: Bestial clash (4)

Their eyes met, and for a moment, a silent understanding passed between the hunter and the prey.

The Metalfur bear's injuries were grave, and it knew there would be no escape if it chose to fight.

So instead, it turned and began limping hastily away into the foliage, but it was still fast. Mira, Emily, and Amber could do nothing to reach it; it was too fast for them.

Blood stained its matted fur from many gashes as it fled, seeking survival.

Erik looked at the creature as it fled. He considered giving chase and finishing what he had started.

The kill would grant him experience and mana, strengthening him further. For a second, the creature's pitiful state made him feel sorry, but there was no way that he would have left the creature roaming around the forest. It was too strong.

The metalfur bear disappeared into the forest, fleeing from the one who had ended the life of its opponent.

"Stay here," Erik said to Mira, Amber, and Emily. "I will take care of it." The three women nodded.

<June, please collect the blood and the brain crystal.>

<Yes, master. >

With that, June turned into a human and started collecting the blood and brain crystals. He was naked, of course. While Mira and Amber didn't have problems with that, despite being jealous that the others could see June, who so closely resembled Erik, naked, Emily was blushing.

June and Erik were amused, but aside from that, they didn't care. Being seen naked was the least of their problems.

Erik started running after the injured metalfur bear, following the trail of blood and broken vegetation it left behind.

His feet flew over the forest floor as he dodged trees and jumped over roots and fallen logs.

The bear's head-start and injuries prevented it from moving fast, but he was still not slow. The trail, though, was already growing faint.

Erik focused on his surroundings, scanning for any signs that would reveal the bear's location.

He saw splashes of blood on top of the trunk of an oak tree, showing the bear had passed through there.

He sped up and spotted more breaks in the foliage ahead, the bear's bulk having crushed branches in its passage.

Erik kept searching. He saw where the metalfur bear had slipped on wet leaves, leaving huge claw marks gouged in the trunk of another tree.

The blood trail was growing thicker now. The bear's injuries were taking their toll, and Erik was closer to the target.

Erik found the beast after some time on the forest floor. He crept forward and came across the bear lying behind a fallen log.

Its sides heaved with labored breaths as blood continued to ooze from several deep wounds.

While seeing its pitiful state, Erik almost felt sorry for it again. The bear had been trying to escape and survive, but its injuries were too severe.

As he approached, the bear's blinking yellow eyes met his, and Erik could see the fear and defiance in its gaze.

Erik maintained eye contact with the wounded creature for a moment.

The bear let out a low growl as Erik stepped closer.

As he raised his weapon, the bear sprang to its feet with a fierce roar, slashing out at Erik with its claws.

Erik threw himself back, avoiding the claws covered by metallic fur, so sharp that they could pierce even Mernium, the second-strongest and hardest material on the planet.

The claw sliced through the air where Erik had stood just moments before. Erik rolled to his feet and produced a hardened slime flyssa, pointing it at the injured beast.

The metalfur bear bellowed in rage and charged, swiping its huge paws at Erik's head.

He dove low and thrust upward with his blade, sinking it into the beast's belly.

The bear roared in pain and almost slammed its body into Erik. If he got it, the man would have been knocked to the ground. But he was too fast to let that happen.

Erik rolled out of the way as the bear's jaws snapped shut mere inches from his face.

He regained his footing and sprinted behind a tree, placing it between himself and the enraged metalfur bear.

The creature slammed full force into the tree trunk, but Erik was ready. As the bear reared back, stunned by the impact, Erik rushed forward and plunged his blade deep into the beast's throat.

Scarlet blood sprayed over Erik's face and clothes as the metalfur bear collapsed to the ground with a final wheezing breath.

Erik cleaned the blood from his eyes and watched as the beast's yellow eyes slowly clouded over in death.

Erik didn't use that much mana; he didn't know what he could meet inside the forest now that the thaids from the Eldraith mountain range were rushing out of it, and he didn't want to risk as much as he did with the Hevadrin.

He played it purely on physical terms.

[METALFUR BEAR 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. 8424 EXPERIENCE POINTS AND 84.24 DNA POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

Erik observed the huge metalfur bear lying lifeless at his feet. Its ferocity was now gone, leaving behind only a bloody carcass.

Erik kneeled down beside it. He slipped his backpack off and opened it, pulling out an empty vial.

He found an artery in the bear's neck and drained its blood into the glass container.

Next, Erik used his hardened-slime flyssa. With a simple motion, he split open the bear's skull.

The bone gave way with a sickening crunch, exposing the brain crystal at the center of the creature's brain.

The source of its power glowed with a subtle light that flickered as Erik pried it loose.

Chapter 917: Arrival

Erik placed the brain crystal into a padded cloth and wrapped it before putting it into his backpack along with the vial of blood.

He stood up, shouldered his bag, and looked once more at the metalfur bear's corpse.

Erik turned and began walking back the way he had come, leaving the bear's body behind. He got what he needed. He then walked back to where the others were waiting. When he reached them, Mira approached him.

"Did you kill it?" she asked, eying his bloodstained clothes.

Erik nodded. "We need to move, we can't waste more time than we already did."

Mira, Amber, and Emily climbed onto the backs of the clones. June handed Erik the brain crystal and vial of blood he had collected from the Luminaclaw bear.

Erik took them and thanked June. His clone then shapeshifted into an Erendu, crouching low so that his master could climb onto his back easily.

Once Erik was seated, June stood up, and the group began moving again, setting off at a fast pace along the forest path.

The women held onto the Erendus clones tightly as they picked up speed, jostling with each stride of the massive beasts. But they understood the urgency of reaching New Alexandria as soon as possible.

Erik leaned forward, giving June directions as they traveled. There was still a long way to go, and time was short.

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Erik rode on June's back as they made their way through the forest. Two weeks had passed since they set out from Liberty Watch City. Much had happened during that time.

The only man in the group woke up early each day and focused on increasing the neural links for his self-healing brain crystal power.

Years of practice and experience, combined with the technique the biological supercomputer developed, allowed him to progress quickly.

He gained six neural links in the span of these two weeks. It was good—not one of the best results he got—but it was still incredible how fast the technique allowed him to make neural links if he focused on a single brain crystal power.

Erik decided not to improve the Chimaeric Demon brain crystal power because each time he merged it with some other powers, the number of neural links went to 0.

There was also another problem: since this was an X-ranked brain crystal power, the number of DNA points needed to merge it with other powers was very high. That's why Erik decided to give only three powers to the Chimaeric Demon.

The Skraylash brain crystal power that gave the new clones impressive sight during the day, the Luminaclaw bear's brain crystal power to let them have a way to attack from a distance, and the Metalfur bear's brain crystal power to give them a better defense and increase their hand-to-hand damage. It would be for the clones to choose the brain crystal they wanted to focus on.

The rest of each day, as the group went toward New Alexandria, Erik hunted thaids, decreasing the number of dangerous monsters around Liberty Watch.

He wanted to absorb as many new brain crystal powers as possible to empower his clones, but the problem was that the amount of DNA points he got was not enough to merge them all, and besides, few of those powers were useful.

Since the clones would have to focus on one or two at best, he wanted to provide them with powers that were really going to be useful.

Since they didn't have many now, he merged the three powers he gained recently. But those powers weren't really strong.

He merged them just because the clones needed at least something. What was surprising, though, was to learn that after the merging, the brain crystal power did not lose neural links.

Erik asked this to the biological supercomputer, who told him that X-ranked powers, being superior, allowed the biological supercomputer not to erase the neural links. It was simple and complicated at the same time.

That was a wonderful thing, since Erik would be able to increase its neural links. He would not lose time doing that.

All of that made Erik track down myriad thaids across the forest. Erik killed each one.

This resulted in his level rising. Within two weeks, he had reached level 171. His strength and mana pool had grown a lot.

Erik observed as Mira, Amber, and Emily focused on increasing the neural links for their respective brain crystal powers.

However, after two weeks of practice, none of them had gained a single neural link. They didn't have his technique, despite having the improved version of Liberty Watch's technique that the system made.

For this reason, Erik began teaching them the neural link technique he was using, though they struggled to comprehend the complex method in such a short time.

The technique involved several nuanced steps. The technique was different from those they had. It wasn't similar to building something, but rather weaving.

Still, the women showed dedication and improvement over the two weeks.

Though frustrated by their lack of quantifiable progress, the three refused to be disheartened.

They took hope in the minor improvements they made and the fact that they were going to learn a better technique soon.

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"We are here."

The group arrived. New Alexandria was in front of them.

Erik looked out at the city. The thick walls and shimmering mana barriers were still there.

However, the dangers had only increased since Erik's and the others' last visit, as many additional defenses now covered the area.

Mercenaries from Etrium lined the stone battlements, soldiers from the New Alexandria barracks patrolled along the parapets, and even small groups of blackguards watched from guard towers.

A line of turrets stood ready to fire beyond the city gates, where cobbled streets normally bustled with people.

Those were different from the usual; it looked like they had been enhanced with brain crystals. Erik shuddered at the thought of how much destruction they could cause.

Erik glanced at Mira, Amber, and Emily. He could tell from their faces that they shared his unease at the sight of so many blackguards within the city and the new defenses they had to get past to enter their home.

Amber turned to look at Erik. She looked worried.

"What do we do?"

The woman had trouble seeing themselves entering the city with that much surveillance.

"Don't worry about the entering. There's a passage no one knows. We take that, if we can get there unseen, we can slip past the defenses."

Amber nodded. "Lead the way," she said.

Erik turned to Mira and Emily. "Follow close behind me and try to remain hidden," he said.

Chapter 918: Entering the city yet again

The forest was dense but dimly lit by the sun's rays piercing through the canopy.

Erik let his hand trail the rough bark of an old oak as they passed, remembering simpler times spent hunting thaids around here.

But now the forest felt strange and watched, as if the very trees were listening for intruders.

They moved in haste, worried to be found by the guards littering New Alexandria's surroundings. The clones' paws barely cracking fallen twigs on the forest floor.

As the clones strode through the forest, Erik's mind wandered back to the night when he had fled the city.

The memory was still vivid: the deafening explosions, smoke filling the club, bodies littering the floor.

Back then, he escaped a massacre at the Red Lotus Lounge, after having helped many people and saved many other ones.

He remembered the chase that followed leaving the club. He remembered his fight to death with Nathaniel's father's goons.

Erik knew that Nathaniel's father's criminal empire had likely been destroyed with the elimination of the Crystal Cross Gang.

It could have happened even before that.

Erik got told by Amber and the others that Matthew McConnel ended up in prison. After all he did, those guys still brought him there instead of executing him.

The man wasn't sure the prison had been enough to prevent Matthew from controlling his people.

Someone must have escaped, many likely joined the crystal cross gang, to which they were already affiliated through Matthew's organization.

But after he destroyed the Crystal Cross Gang, there would be no one left to call the shots.

Erik placed the last stone on the underworld's tomb when he killed Shade. If before there could have been someone still having control on the reins, after that, there would be no organization holding the crime lords together.

The problem was whether Matthew was still there. Volkov would for sure have jumped at the chance to have him released, especially after the Crystal Cross Gang ceased to exist because of Erik.

A noise caught Mira's attention.

"Quick, hide!"

Erik crouched lower behind the thick trunk of an old oak tree as Mira's warning carried through the forest.

The clones shapeshifted into human form, hiding within the underbrush.

Amber and Emily dove behind a fallen log and June scrambled up a nearby pine, blending in with its dark boughs.

Mira slid down next to Erik, her back pressed against the oak's ridged bark. In the distance, the sound of voices floated nearer.

Boots crunched leaves and twigs, accompanied by the jingle of armor and equipment.

A patrol of city guards came into view, four men marching abreast, scanning their surroundings vigilantly.

One pointed to a set of large paw prints in the damp earth. In their opinion, a group of large thaids was roaming around. The problem was that they knew the prints belonged to Erendus.

Though they weren't surprised. New Alexandria knew certainly that the monsters from the Eldraith mountain range were moving, and that this pushed all the other thaids outside of their territories. An Erendu here, or a pack, wasn't unthinkable.

While Erik had already thought about this, which was confirmed by the patrols' looks, Mira and the others didn't.

"What do we do?" Mira asked in hushed tones.

"Stay still. If they find us, they will call for reinforcements. If they die, no one will reply to the comm, and reinforcements will arrive. They will learn there are intruders' either way, and we can't allow that."

But Erik had many thoughts in mind. This patrol was awfully close to the barrier's breach. What if Volkov found it and closed it?

If that happened, Mira and the others would have no way to enter the city. He would be forced to go in alone and find a way to make them enter.

But that would not be easy. The question itself was IF it was possible to make them enter. Maybe Fischer had a secret passage that they could use, but what if they didn't?

They had the last time they arrived, but what if it had been found?

The group observed as the patrol started searching around, moving further away from Erik and the others.

<Well, at least luck is still on our side. >

Once the voices faded into the forest, Erik risked a peek around the tree's wide trunk.

Seeing no one, he gestured for the group to reassemble. The clones turned into Erendus once more, kneeling to allow Erik and the girls to mount once more.

Their journey continued onward, more cautiously this time. Mira glanced back in the patrol's direction, wondering how often such groups went out and how long they would need to avoid them.

But for now, they pressed on deeper into the forest, keeping their distance from New Alexandria's looming walls and shimmering barrier.

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After hours of weaving among the trees and avoiding patrols, Erik spotted the shimmering barrier—a semi-transparent wall that separated the outskirts of the city from the deep woods.

There was a small space where a tree had fallen to the ground. The breach was there, but the tree shouldn't have been.

The only problem was that for Erik to find the breach, he had to feel the barrier with his hands.

He jumped down from June and approached the barrier, using his hands to check whether the barrier was still there.

He reached out, his hands moving through the air, tapping and feeling for the unseen wall.

His fingers stretched wide, trying to touch something, anything that might give away the barrier's presence, or better, to touch the empty air.

But there was nothing—not yet, at least.

Erik gave a quick glance behind the barrier. He could see the sprawling camps behind it; they were the same.

The scorched earth had already healed a lot since the last time he had been here. New plants took the place of the old ones, but they weren't as tall as the wheat fields that sprawled around here years before he left the city.

After having touched the barrier for a while, Erik finally found the breach. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"It's here," Erik said.

"Did you use this to escape the city back then?" Amber asked.

"I used this also to sneak out of the city and hunt thaids before and after going to work."

"You went hunting thaids when you were 16?" Amber asked.

"Of course I did; you know how the biological supercomputer works."

He waved the others forward and slipped through the barrier one by one, Mira, Amber, and Emily following close behind, and last, the clones. They were still naked, the girls now used to it. Even Emily was used to seeing them naked now.

"Dress up; we can't let people see you naked. If there are any, of course."

The last thing they wanted was to attract unwanted attention. Not that they wouldn't get it if someone saw them. Emily, Amber and Mira were too beautiful, and the first two were even famous in New Alexandria.

As for him, Erik was sure the city was plastered with posters showing his photo here and there around the city.

The three girls handed clothes to the four clones, and they dressed up.

The group observed the sprawling farming camps laid out before them.

Most of the land had once been flattened or scorched by battle, but now fresh growth was flourishing.

Wheat stalks swayed in the breeze, having reclaimed much of the earth. Young crops dotted patches of freshly tilled soil.

In the distance, Erik could make out roads snaking their way through the landscape.

Those roads had led him to and from Mr. Fox's farm, where he had worked for the past few years. Yet now, he had returned with a singular purpose.

Erik's eyes scanned the camps for any signs of movement. All remained still and silent; nothing stirred among the slowly regrowing vegetation.

Peaceful green, dotted with yellow flowers, stretched as far as he could see.

His companions waited behind him, watching Erik survey the land before them. Emily spoke up first.

"It looks so green again. Do you think the people will return?" She knew what happened here. The Heniates' parasites ravaged the city, reaching the outskirts.

Erik pondered her question but did not answer. He didn't have an answer for that.

For sure, Volkov seized most of the Stone's family assets, and they had most of the farming sites within the nation, so at least someone was tending to the underground fields and replenishing the city with food.

But as for the smaller farmers, Erik did not know. Were they still alive to begin with?

Instead, he focused his gaze on the dirt roads in the distance.

Erik turned to the others. "This way," he said.

"Stay close." They set off down the camps, walking through the foliage as they began making their way deeper into the city.

Chapter 919: Back to the farm

What was surprising, in truth, was how Thaid's didn't find it after all those years. But the answer, despite the weird problem, was that it wasn't easy.

The barrier was invisible. It could be occasionally seen shimmering, but that was it. For the thaid's to get past it, they had to be very lucky, being at the right place, no, the right spot.

Though Erik noticed something as they headed toward the breach, there weren't thaid's around. It was weird considering that another mass migration was taking place. But even this had simple explanations.

Either something devoured them all, or New Alexandria's troops killed them all. Regardless, thaid's died, and in both cases, the perpetrator left nothing behind.

A thaid would have eaten everything, humans simply used the corpses to make armors and weapons.

"Where are we going?" Amber asked. Mira also looked at him, waiting for an answer.

"We're going to my old workplace," Erik said. "Mr. Fox's farm. The owner has passed away, but the house should still be empty and big enough to accommodate all of us. We won't even have to search for food since I can grow whatever we need."

"A farm seems perfect for hiding while you make new clones," Mira said. Amber nodded in agreement.

"But we also need to search for information. You said you wanted to contact the resistance here. How do we move for that?"

Erik remained silent for a second. "I will go. The last time I was here, there was the need to have a permit to roam around. I don't know what happened after I destroyed the Crystal Cross Gang and helped the resistance set foot in the city, but I don't think things went well due to how many guards there were outside. Still, it's the best thing to do."

"What about us?"

Emily, Amber, and Mira didn't like the idea of staying behind and doing nothing.

"I will find a way to make you able to roam around. Maybe making fake permits or the like. The city was basically empty the last time I was here. I don't know if it is because many people died when the parasites attacked or because they were hiding inside their houses. But for you, roaming around now will be impossible.

If there had been more people, you could have at least blended in, but based on the current situation, it would just be risky."

The group made their way through the streets in silence. As they walked, Erik recalled his time working at Mr. Fox's farm, taking care of the crops and animals. It had been a quiet, peaceful job, different from his current life, full of threats and difficulties.

It looked like he wasn't the only one thinking about him having worked there. It was natural, considering they were heading to the farm.

"How long did you work at the farm?" Amber asked.

"Almost two years," Erik said. "It was a good experience. Ah, the only one. To be honest, no one wanted me back then."

He fell silent, not wanting to say more. His memories of that time were often painful, but at least they were just distant memories. A lot of time passed since then, and he changed a lot. Power was just the last thing he got during these years.

After about an hour of walking, Erik spotted the roof of the farmhouse in the distance.

"We're almost there," he said to the group. They picked up their pace, eager to rest in a safe place after their long journey.

As Erik and the group approached the farmhouse, a wave of nostalgia washed over him.

He had many fond memories of working here, tending the crops and animals with a soothing simplicity. He had far less fond memories of Mr. Fox.

But as they neared, Erik saw the farm was in a state of disrepair, but it wasn't surprising since Mr. Fox didn't have heirs.

The grass and weeds around the house and barn had grown knee high, obscuring the stone path that led up to the porch.

Vines crept up the walls, snaking through open windows. Dust covered every surface outside the house.

What was once a comfortable home now was dilapidated and forgotten.

Erik led them inside the empty farmhouse. Though it was dusty, it still provided shelter from the elements.

Mira looked out a window at the vast fields surrounding the property. Most of it was full of weeds, debris, and now rusty machines.

Erik went to the window and looked out. Upon seeing the machines in that state, he remembered when Mr. Fox bought them. Of course, it was all thanks to Erik's work there.

He sighed, then left the window and turned to Emily and Amber, but Mira was listening.

"We can lie low here for a while," Erik said. The others nodded in agreement, grateful to have arrived.

"This place hasn't been lived in for a long time," Amber said, running her finger through the dust on a table.

Mira walked over to Erik, who was again staring out a window, this time not simply to see how the outside was, but to check for the presence of other people. "Are you okay?" she asked.

Erik nodded. "It's just that... this farm held a lot of great memories for me. This was the first place anyone really accepted me." He fell silent for a moment.

"What happened to Mr. Fox?" Emily asked. Erik remained silent for a bit. "He got killed by the Crystal Cross Gang."

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

"Don't worry. He was a piece of shit."

Indeed, he was, but not a complete one. Honestly speaking, Mr. Fox was much better than most people in New Alexandria.

Thinking back at those times, he couldn't stop resenting Becker for the city's state, or rather the citizens' mentality.

However, based on what Erik knew now, it was entirely possible the situation didn't depend on Becker at all.

Sure, he pressed people to get stronger. Frant wasn't in a healthy situation.

After all, especially because of the rampant criminal gangs around, Becker needed a powerful army. He needed loyal people.

Startled by Erik's reply, Emily sat on a chair after clearing it from dust.

"But enough of that. We have more pressing matters to attend to. Let's tidy up this place. This much dust will be bad for our health, and since we are going to risk a lot every day, adding another reason to fear for our condition won't be good."

The three women and four clones nodded. The clones were looking at the area in person for the first time. June went to where Erik found Mr. Fox's body. His master's memory was vivid in his mind.

Over the next few hours, Erik and the others set about clearing the space they would need for resting and working.

They dusted furniture, swept floors, and removed debris that had made its way inside during the years of abandonment. Luckily, water was still running, and electricity was ok.

Erik cleared a stray cobweb from a windowsill, his mind wandering back to when Mr. Fox had shown him how to care for the vast acreage. Those lessons would prove useful again, it seemed.

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As dusk approached, the group had reclaimed several rooms and planned their next steps.

"I've cleared a room for you to make the clones," Amber said. "It's on the second floor. There, you can keep the eggs safe."

"Thanks."

Erik sighed in relief as he sat down on Mr. Fox's old couch. Finally, they had a moment to relax and rest their weary bodies.

Mira and Amber sat down next to him while Emily chose an armchair. The three clones decided to stand nearby.

"We did well to get here," Erik said.

"This place will serve us well for now." The girls nodded in agreement. They were all tired from the long journey, but felt safe within the walls of the old farmhouse.

Mira looked out the dirty window at the overgrown fields. "It's peaceful here. I can see why you valued working on this farm."

Erik smiled. "It was a quieter time then."

A brief silence ensued, only to be broken by June.

"Should we eat something?" June said.

"Yeah... I'm hungry too."

The group got up and set about finding something to eat in the old kitchen. Though dust covered a lot of things, Erik located some cans of peaches and other preserved foods Mr. Fox left. They shared a meager but nourishing meal together, while talking about this and that, but mostly about their future plans.

Most of the initial work had to be made by Erik. To make the clones, to find the resistance, to find a way to let his comrades roam the city. However, he knew that once the second of these two tasks were completed, most of the problems would be solved.

What Mira, Amber, and Emily were going to do, then, depended on them and on Major Fischer. Erik was going to search for news about Richard, and of course, Volkov.

The predicament was quite challenging. Attacking Volkov directly could cause Richard's death. Rescuing Richard would essentially reveal his presence to Volkov. And if the man escaped, Erik would have to begin his search from scratch.

The best thing to do would be to rescue Richard and kill Volkov simultaneously, but for that, he needed allies... and clones.

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After eating, the women found bedrooms to claim for the night. Erik likewise chose a dusty room, glad to lay his head on an actual bed once more.

June and the clones kept watch from the porch, allowing the others some needed respite, but they were going to rest soon too.

Chapter 920: A short rest

He emerged from his room the next morning, his mind already fully operational. After weeks of travel and sleeping outside, doing so on a bed looked like a dream.

"That was great," the man said.

He made his way downstairs to grab something to eat and found June and the other clones standing watch around the house.

"Did you stand guard all night?"

June turned to face him. "Yes, we wanted to make sure you were all safe while you slept. We are in enemy territory; we couldn't leave the place unguarded."

Erik appreciated his clones for what they did and nodded. "You've done well. But go rest now; I'll keep watch until the others wake up."

The clones' eyes showed visible exhaustion, but they were firm and focused. In fact, there was also a bit of reluctance. Now that was weird, especially since June.

When Erik and his clone were alone, June didn't think twice about jumping on an opportunity like that to rest. But now he didn't want to; maybe the reason were the three beautiful women within the house.

"That's an order, June. All of you, go get some rest. I'll wake you up if anything happens."

June hesitated, then finally nodded. "Thank you, master. We could use some rest." That's what he said, but he was also a little annoyed. Though, for no reason in the world, he wouldn't obey Erik's orders.

The clones followed June upstairs to the room they would share. Erik could hear them dropping onto the beds. Barely 2 minutes later, a snoring sound could be heard throughout the house, followed by their labored breathing.

"Fucking idiots..."

Erik sighed and went to sit on the porch. He completely forgot to eat because of his stupid clones.

He took in the overgrown fields and cloud-painted skies. The air was stale, robbed of movement by the long abandonment of the farm. Yet, bird songs still carried across the land, untroubled by human affairs.

Erik sat in silence, keeping a steady gaze across the land as his clones rested. For now, this was peace, one Erik knew would not last for long. There was a lot to do and a lot to find out.

While sitting and observing the overgrown fields spread out before him, Erik remained silent.

A lone scarecrow stood guard at the edge of the cornfield, its tattered clothes flapping in the breeze.

Erik wondered if it ever felt lonely, too—standing there day after day, watching over the crops. He also remembered when Mr. Fox built it.

A smile tugged at Erik's lips as he drifted back to that summer afternoon. Mr. Fox asked Erik's help to make the scarecrow.

Erik had been tasked with stuffing the scarecrow's body with hay. Mr. Fox had gotten a little too enthusiastic with the hayfork, sending a billowing cloud of hay skyward.

Erik, caught in the explosion, emerged coughing and spluttering, looking more like a scarecrow himself than the thing they were working on.

Mr. Fox acted as if nothing happened. Then they fashioned a rather lopsided but undeniably cheerful scarecrow.

The peacefulness of the old farm was interrupted only by birdsong carrying across the land.

It was at that moment that Amber came downstairs and saw Erik's lonely form.

"Hey..." she said, and Erik turned to look at her.

"Hey..."

Amber slowly approached Erik and then sat down beside him on the porch. For a while, they remained silent, taking in the farm's beauty even in its current state of disrepair. Then Amber spoke.

"It's beautiful," she said. Erik nodded, his eyes still fixed ahead, toward a place where he had been taken advantage of but where he still had an opportunity.

Erik always wondered why Mr. Fox decided to take him in. Was it pity? Most likely, yes, given the state Erik was living in back then.

"You had to see it when there were people working here. Mr. Fox gave work to many people. They tended these fields," he said. "I wonder what became of them, if any are still alive."

Amber's hand, warm and slightly calloused, rested on Erik's shoulder. She leaned in, her lips brushing against his cheek.

The kiss was soft, a fleeting connection that held years of shared memories. The kiss lingered for a beat too long. Mira rounded the corner of the house and froze. Her eyes darted between them, taking in the kiss's intimacy and Amber's lingering hand on Erik's arm.

"I bet they are."

At that moment, Mira walked onto the porch. She saw Amber and Erik, but said nothing.

But Erik knew there was something in her. A flicker of something - hurt, anger, surprise? - crossed her face for a second. It was instantly schooled into a mask of indifference.

She pursed her lips slightly, the only telltale sign of the storm brewing beneath the calm exterior.

Erik knew she had seen them, for he could read her mind. However, he quickly stopped doing that, since it would be disrespectful to her.

Though he wondered what she was thinking exactly, hoping it wasn't anything bad. But that had to remain something for Mira alone to know.

Mira had no intention of letting Amber alone with Erik since she was being very aggressive.

They sat in silence for a time, listening to the breeze through the tall grasses and the birdsong that filled the air. For now, there was peace.

"Should we eat something?" Mira said, breaking the silence.

"Yeah, that would be good," Erik said.

Erik watched as Mira strode into the kitchen. Amber rose and followed her. It was clear the two went there to talk rather than prepare breakfast because Erik knew there was nothing that could be cooked inside the kitchen, aside from the rations the group brought with them, and those had already been cooked.

The two women remained inside the kitchen for some time. Erik's eyes drifted to the overgrown fields once more.

He couldn't think of anything else right now, and adding these futile problems to the many he already had would not help. Whatever Amber and Mira decided to do, he would be okay with it.

Before long, Mira and Amber returned with plates of food; where they found them, Erik did not know. They sat down beside Erik and handed him his share.

Emily soon joined them, still bleary-eyed from sleep but roused by the aroma of breakfast.

The four ate in comfortable silence, enjoying the simple pleasure of a hot meal and each other's company after weeks of restless traveling.

Erik savored each bite, thankful for this respite, however brief it may be. As they finished eating, he spoke up.

"I must go into the city," he said. "I need to contact our allies and gather news of the resistance."

The women nodded in understanding. Before they could set foot in the city, they needed to find a way to do so.

The members of the resistance were notorious, and yet they found a way to move within the city undisturbed. This meant there was a way for them to do the same, at least in theory.

"Where are you planning to go, exactly?"

Erik paused for a second. "The last time I saw the resistance members, they hid inside a building near the Red Palace. So, I will go there first."

"What if they are not there? What if they have all been killed?" Mira said. It was a reasonable assumption, considering the situation.

"I doubt it. Their leader, Major Fischer, is not a simple man. He knew what he was doing."

The three women didn't reply. Amber was worried; Mira was pensive; but Emily was in distress.

Her father was being held captive somewhere within the city, but the group wasn't even sure about that.

Volkov and his weird taste for torture were well known, and she was scared that they would be late to save him. Erik's acting the day after they arrived was good for her.

Erik rose from the worn wooden chair, his expression resolute. After weeks on the road, it was time to take action.

Amber, Mira, and Emily sat up as he entered, sensing his purposeful stride.

"I'm leaving for the city now," Erik said. "I will go alone."

"Wouldn't it be better to bring the clones?" Amber asked.

Erik shook his head. "They stood guard the whole night; let them rest. Besides, it is not like I need protection."

The women exchanged wary glances, but nodded in understanding. Amber rose and reached for Erik's hand. "Be careful," she said.

Erik squeezed her hand reassuringly. "I will."

He turned and left the room. His mind was focused on the task ahead, altering his facial features using his brain crystal powers to mask his identity.

Minutes later, he began the trek towards the train station.