

BIOLOGICAL 971

Chapter 971: The Clash at the Northern gate

There was another person he had to contact right now. He picked up his communication device and chose the channel leading him to June, while his fingers drummed a nervous rhythm on the table in front of him.

The line clicked, followed by a brief silence, and then a familiar voice filled his ear. "June? How is the situation?" Van Dyke's tone was curt.

"Tom... The situation is... intense, to say the least." June's voice crackled through the static, the sound of clashing steel and pained grunts echoing in the background.

"I can hear that, but I would like for you to clarify a little."

June sighed. In truth, there was a lot to say, so he needed to tell only the most important parts of it.

"Well... As we assumed, the blackguards and Volkov increased the number of soldiers at the northern gate. Middleton was really the spy. However, we still underestimated the scale of the number of troops. They really are hell bent on capturing the master."

"How bad is it?" Van Dyke asked.

"I think there are at least 10 thousand blackguards at this gate alone, and we are lucky the blackguards think they can get the master with only this number of people."

To those words, Van Dyke didn't really know how to reply but, at the same time, his heart sank.

He, Fischer, and Erik expected this kind of situation, but the number of blackguards was, in truth, astronomical.

"Can you hold the line?" he asked.

"For now," June said. "But we're losing ground. The Chimaeric Demons will have to act soon if we're to maintain the diversion."

"Understood," Van Dyke said. "Do what you must, June. But remember, our priority is to buy Erik time to rescue Richard. If he is as confident as he says, then Volkov will die soon."

"Don't worry about him. If he says he will be able to kill him, then he will."

The sounds of battle behind June intensified.

The line went dead, leaving Van Dyke alone with his thoughts. He stared out the window, his eyes staring in the northern gate's direction.

The sounds of fighting grew louder. He could hear it all the way from the Red Palace.

He turned back to the table, his gaze falling on the map spread out before him.

Red and blue markers showed the positions of the rebel and blackguard forces.

Van Dyke sighed. A sense of apprehension washed over him, because the reports he was receiving weren't good.

While June thought 10000 enemy were few, of course, he and the others thought the opposite. It was just that the faith Erik's clone had on his master was a lot, and that made him underestimate the severity of the situation.

What they could do now was only send the Chimaeric Demons. They would make an enormous difference on the battlefield, but how much Van Dyke didn't know.

What if their numbers were not enough to counter these overwhelming numbers?

However, the rebels would not be useless. The weapons Erik's people were constantly bringing made the rebels much stronger than they should have been.

They were going to make the melee soldiers safer, and their lethality was much higher than before.

"Let's hope things will go well."

* * *

June reached for his communicator with blood-soaked hands, frantically dialing the clone elite forces.

"It's your turn," he said. "The Blackguard numbers are over ten thousand, while we have less than five thousand rebels; there are a thousand of you clones in total. Can you do something?"

A grave voice responded. "How many Blackguards do we need to kill each to win?"

"If each of you takes out at least ten Blackguards, we'll have a chance," June said.

"What about Volkov's troops? They will be a problem," the Chimaeric Demon said.

"Focus on the Blackguards. The rebels will handle Volkov's soldiers."

"Understood. Then we might be able to make a show for you. Reinforcements are on their way."

June let out a sigh of relief. "I want a theatrical entrance. Strike terror in their hearts."

"We will." June clicked off the communicator and dove back into the fray.

Within minutes, hundreds of Chimaeric Demons began pouring out the forest.

"It's the white demons!"

"The white demons!"

June watched as Erik's army of Chimaeric Demons emerged from the forest and descended upon the Blackguard forces.

The clones were fast—much faster than any other single soldier on the battlefield.

They moved with a speed that could be considered supernatural, even for the blackguards.

Blood and limbs flew as the clones cut their way into the enemy ranks.

They were using nothing more than a flyssa to kill. Their brain crystals, though, were thrumming with energy, pumping the Xeridon Anteris brain crystal powers, gaining strength and speed.

The Blackguards were caught off guard, unprepared for the attack from these veritable monsters.

<Not as theatrical as I wanted, but hey, at least it is something.>

But they quickly regained their footing and began mounting a defense against the savage onslaught.

"Kill these fuckers!"

"Make them pay for having dared to attack us!"

Many kinds of brain crystal powers were used. All the soldiers on that battlefield were using brain-crystal rifles or ranged powers.

That was what made the Chimaeric Demons so weird in that situation, because they were fighting melee.

No one had been able to even land a single scratch on them, but contrary to that, the clones were killing dozens and dozens of soldiers each second.

"HELP ME! HELP M—!"

The woman's head fell, separated from her body, after a blade drew blood.

The clones moved as one unified entity, picking targets efficiently and covering each other's advances.

Their masks and movements instilled fear in even the most hardened blackguards.

No one could tell that, though, because the blackguards were wearing masks too.

But it was impossible not to think that, based on their reaction. Even the rebels, their own allies, were scared by these weird white-dressed guys.

Panic spread through Volkov's forces as they realized there was nothing they could do to kill these things.

Erik's army of clones continued their merciless assault, ripping through lines of Blackguards and shredding fortified positions.

Limbs and heads flew, and blood soaked the ground. Cannons were destroyed, and vehicles were cleaved in two.

The air was filled with screams, explosions, and the sickening sound of snapping bones.

More and more clones poured from the forest until they did no more. All 1000 clones were there, bringing terror.

June smiled as his brothers carried out their master's wish. But they were not ruthless enough. They weren't scary enough; there weren't enough bodies on the ground.

Chapter 972: Cell 385

<Cell 383.>

Erik walked further.

<Cell 384.>

He went further on.

<Cell 385. That's it.>

He finally arrived at cell 385, where Richard was meant to be held.

At least, that was what Van Dyke and Fischer told him.

The problem was that, unlike the other cells with their glowing aclaitrium ore bars and reinforced walls, this cell had a massive reinforced door that didn't allow to see what was inside.

<Peculiar choice of room...>

That wasn't the only problem. What was worse was that contrary to the other cells, which were made of Aclaitrium, this one was made of Terphine, the dark ore two ranks stronger than Aclaitrium.

This made it much harder to break. Not that it was a problem for Erik, breaking it and go in wasn't. It was the noise that he would make to bring it down.

Until now, Erik sneaked into the prison alerting no one or being seen. But to break this door, he would need to do quite the noise.

The dark metal of the door looked impenetrable, with no visible handles or locks.

Erik ran his hands over the door, feeling the smoothness of the surface that gave away no hints of weakness.

Above the door, a circular metal plate had been set into the wall. 385 was the number engraved on it.

He pondered whether he might circumvent the locking system with the help of the biological supercomputer.

Based on the situation, it looked like he had to, because there was no handle, and the only way to open this door was seemingly to break it or having some key card.

<That's Terphine for you. I must be sure to get my hands on it and bring it to Liberty Watch as soon as I can. I wonder what Jabir and the others would say once I bring it there.>

Erik pressed his ear against the door but could hear nothing from within the cell.

<That's not a good sign.>

Richard could be simply asleep, but honestly, it was more likely he was already dead, like Emily predicted.

Straightening up, he stared at the door, deep in thought.

<The door is too different from the other ones. I bet this was made to keep the most dangerous or valuable of the prisoners confined.>

Aclatrium could be broken easily by Erik when he got much less strength point. A dangerous prisoner might be able to do the same, and that was why they opted to use a much more resisting material to create this door, and most likely, the entire room behind it.

<This smells like a trap.>

He took a few steps back, gazing at the door as he weighed his options.

<Should I go in?> Richard might be there or not, dead or alive. The problem is that this is an obvious trap.>

The empty cells and the particularity of the door showed that there was more to this situation.

<Let's see if there is someone nearby. Maybe I might glimpse into some thoughts that will give me an idea on how to move further from here.>

Erik channeled mana through his neural links and pumped his instability brain crystal power with it. Then the first people started entering his brain crystal power's range, and then more.

There were many people within the building—not as many as he expected, but they numbered the thousand, and that was just from his side of the building.

He couldn't fathom how many there were outside of his brain crystal power's range.

A mess of disjointed thoughts flooded his mind, swirling together in an incoherent mess. It had never been easy to read people's minds, especially not when there were this much around.

Snippets of conversations and dirty thoughts echoed across his consciousness. The latter were the most common ones.

Emotions flickered by—anger, happiness, boredom, frustration, fear, even.

Memories blended with goals, hopes with regrets.

Ideas unfinished, desires unfulfilled, worries unresolved. It was a disorienting tangle of thoughts from dozens, maybe hundreds, of minds across the prison.

Who were thinking, unaware there was someone that was prying inside their minds.

This made it difficult for Erik to have proof that all of this was a trap or not, because he couldn't understand if someone was close or not, and individually checking all those in range was going to take a lot of time, and he didn't have it available.

Erik tried to make sense of the chaotic storm, to find a meaning, a pattern that could help him in this situation.

But the harder he focused, the more the cacophony grew. He caught glimpses of faces, names, and plans, but they slipped away before he could grasp them. There were simply too many.

<Better focus on the inside of the room.>

With that, Erik pushed his mana through the door, and in truth, he found something.

There was one person within the room; his thoughts were muddled and filled with pain. It was obvious who the person was.

<Richard!>

Judging by the state of the man's thoughts, his condition had to be bad.

Erik tried pushing more mana through the door to get a better sense of Richard's condition.

But the pain and confusion the man felt were making things hard.

Erik picked up fragments of memories centered around torture and interrogation, mixed with moments of hopelessness and despair.

There seemed to be a periodic pattern to Richard's thoughts, showing he had been subjected to torture for an extended period. Basically, the entire period he had been kept a prisoner in Volkov's care.

<Volkov... that fucker...>

Erik clenched his fists in anger as he continued tapping into Richard's mind.

He picked up flashes of Volkov's face, hovering over the old man with a twisted smile while inflicting pain.

Richard's thoughts turned to his daughter Emily, imagining her face and then going to his wife, Lucy, his anchor, his column, his bastion.

However, these moments of joy were soon replaced with agony as Richard's pain pulled him back to the present.

Erik seethed with rage as he sensed the depths of Richard's suffering.

Beyond physical pain, there was a toll on Richard's mental state from prolonged isolation, uncertainty, and violation.

<That's it... He did it again. But this time, I'm here, and healers are nearby. Richard won't die.>

Erik then stopped for a moment.

<System... Open the door.>

There was no one inside the cell aside from Richard, so even if this was a trap, at least he wouldn't have to fight, and he could bring Richard outside of the cell relatively quickly.

<Are you sure? You know I'm aware of your thoughts, right? Honestly, even I think this is a trap.>

<Do it.>

<All right.> The system then connected to the door, or to whatever controlled it.

<Open.>

After a soft click, the door started opening alone. <It's automated. That's not good.>

Because that meant Volkov was likely going to trap him into the room. But if they thought that would be enough to keep him trapped, then they were mistaken.

Erik entered. It was only that what he had in front of him was much worse than he could have imagined, or that he could fathom by reading Richard's mind.

Chapter 973: The Trap Sprung

As soon as the door opened, he smelled blood, but there was something else: burned flesh.

Inside the room, there was a figure. Without a shred of doubt, it was Richard Stone.

The man was held up against the wall by chains, and his body was a horrible mess of raw muscle and sinew.

Erik had to stop for a moment because of how horrible what he saw was: Richard had been skinned while still alive.

But not to the point of killing him. Aside from his bloodied face, Richard was almost completely without skin.

Erik's stomach churned, but he pushed the nausea down. Weakness had no time to happen. He needed to get Richard out right away.

With quick steps, he crossed the room and kneeled next to the man.

"Richard! Richard, can you hear me?!"

Richard's eyes were wide open, and his head was leaning to the side. In theory, the man should have been able to see him, but his eyes were staring at the empty space.

For him, Erik could have been or not been there at all. His mind was a mess. Whatever thought he had was so strong as to pull him out of reality.

Whatever Volkov did to him, Richard was having trouble focusing on what happened in front of him, as if he wasn't there to begin with.

He croaked, "Erik," but his voice was barely audible. "You... you came..."

"Of course I did. I promised Emily I would have saved you. There is no way I'm leaving you here."

"No... This... you must leave... this..."

But Erik was already looking at Richard's chains and made a note of the complicated locks. They were unbreakable, or at least they were built to give the impression they were.

For Erik, that wasn't a problem, because he simply grabbed the chains and snapped them in two, freeing Richard in a matter of seconds.

"Erik," Richard said. "It's a trap... Volkov, he's watching. You must leave!"

Before he could react, an alarm blared. The alarm was blaring throughout the whole prison judging by how strong the sound was,.

If, until now, no one found him as he entered the prison, now everyone was aware.

Without even the time to blink, Erik felt a loud thud. The door from which he came closed alone, most likely closed remotely.

The floor beneath them jolted violently. Erik's stomach lurched as the entire room plummeted downward, like an elevator with its cables cut.

Erik could understand they were going fast, and a lot at that.

He braced himself and leaned against the wall, clutching Richard tightly to keep him from further injury, but each time he touched him, the man jolted in pain.

There was no skin on him, after all.

"Hang on."

The feeling of freefall was nauseating. Erik couldn't stop thinking about how bad it was for Richard, if it was this bad even for him.

Erik tried to calculate their speed and the distance they were falling. But he also had to figure out what awaited him and Richard as soon as they reached it.

He doubted Volkov was going to crush him in the room. Most likely, the room was going to be stopped at a certain point, so that the blackguards could kill or apprehend him later.

He doubted the pricks wanted him dead. He was much more valuable alive, at least in theory.

What they didn't know was that as soon as he died, he would turn into a biological supercomputer himself, and the one he got would leave his body.

There were going to be two biological supercomputers at that point.

The room hurtled downward for what felt like an eternity. Erik's grip on Richard tightened. The older man's breathing became weaker and weaker.

Seconds stretched into what felt like hours, the room's descent a harrowing plunge into the unknown.

<System, stop this thing!>

<Understood. >

After thirty agonizing seconds, the room slowed. The abrupt deceleration threw Erik off balance, but he kept on his feet.

With a final shudder, the room-free fall stopped.

<Thanks...>

<You are welcome.>

Erik paused to think. <Where are we?>

<Based on the prison's internal server, we are 10 floors underground. This is a secret part of the prison.>

<How do I get out?>

<Well, you—>

Erik couldn't even complete the phrase because the door slid open with a clang.

A torrent of black-clad figures, faces obscured by black masks, poured into the room.

"Blackguards."

Based on how they moved, it was clear they were not acting as if just an intruder was here. Rather, they expected Erik and prepared accordingly.

<That was a trap, as I assumed.>

Erik's pulse quickened, and his body coiled like a spring, ready to be unleashed.

The first blackguard lunged at him, a gleaming mana dagger aimed at Erik's throat.

The latter sidestepped, grabbing the assailant's wrist and twisting it sharply, disarming him.

Of course, Erik wasn't going to only disarm the guy. With the strength of a dinosaur, Erik pulled, ripping the blackguard's arm off its body.

Blood poured over the ground, a crimson torrent that splattered across Erik's boots and pooled on the metal floor.

The blackguard seemed surprised. Most likely, he couldn't even register what was happening.

But those around him could, in fact, the primal fear they were feeling was echoing in Erik's mind.

The blackguard made a guttural, animalistic scream and died.

[ENEMY HUMAN 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. 9000 EXPERIENCE POINTS AND 90 DNA POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

Erik barely had time to register the gruesome victory before the next blackguard charged at him.

This one conjured a swirling vortex of flames in his hands, the heat radiating towards Erik like a furnace blast.

<Fuck, Richard!>

Erik sidestepped the initial burst of fire while using the Frostwindfire Tempest to conjure up an ice barrier for Richard.

But Erik remained outside of the dome; he had blackguards to kill.

While feeling the searing heat graze his skin, he seized a nearby piece of the fallen blackguard's armor and hurled it at the flame-wielder, disrupting his concentration.

In truth, Erik sent hurtling the object at such a speed he almost killed the guy, but given the situation, he couldn't aim at him well, and managed to miss the killing blow.

Though, the attack had an effect, because the guy's flames flickered and spewed all around the room while Erik closed the distance.

Chapter 974: Lights in the tunnel

The blackguard's eyes bulged in shock, and Erik felt a brief satisfaction before tightening his grip and crushing the man's windpipe.

[ENEMY HUMAN 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. 9000 EXPERIENCE POINTS AND 90 DNA POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

The body went limp, sliding to the floor as Erik released it. But there were many more blackguards inside that room now.

In the meantime, the ice barrier protecting Richard was still up. The cold would at least make his pain go numb a little, and would offset the higher temperature.

Another group of blackguards entered these armed with brain-crystal rifles. But they used not only these weapons.

They also used brain crystal powers, among which were telekinesis, enhanced speed, and energy manipulation.

That was, at least, based on what Erik could see through his analysis.

<They are better than I assumed.>

Erik had difficulty fighting them because these guys really knew what they were doing. But of course, they were blackguards, expecting less from them was stupid.

A first blackguard darted in with superhuman speed, aiming a precise strike at Erik's heart. The man blocked it with a forearm; the impact reverberating through his bones, but whatever damage the man inflicted, the wound instantly closed.

Erik thought back to when he got the Hevadrin's brain crystal power. That had been a very smart decision.

He responded with a powerful punch to the man's chest, launching him backwards. The problem, for the blackguard, of course, was that he instantly died, since the chest was basically destroyed.

Erik must have crushed the man's lungs, aside from his bones, and most likely stopped his heart from beating.

[ENEMY HUMAN 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. 9000 EXPERIENCE POINTS AND 90 DNA POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

There wasn't even the need for him to use brain crystal powers. He was simply too strong, and he was currently using the frostwind fire tempest just to protect Richard.

The only difficulty was in countering their fighting tactics, especially considering how complex the situation was given where he was fighting.

But if attacking powers were redundant, Instability was pumping up mana.

There was nothing that the blackguards could do, despite how good they were, because every time they thought, he listened, and once he listened, he acted.

The telekinetic blackguard levitated several metal shards, hurling them towards Erik. Without the Instability brain crystal power, Erik would have been injured, but thanks to it, he knew the attack was coming.

The man dodged each shard one by one. A step left, a step right, a jump back. It was like Erik could see the future; at least that was what the blackguards thought.

Though, when he was clear from the shards, he dashed, without leaving time to the others to attack, and kicked the man in the sternum, killing him on the spot.

The energy manipulator was next. This power was simple; it was just a sort of mana cannon. But it was strong.

Erik knew he had to act quickly because the attack was dangerous and could kill Richard.

He lunged forward, closing the gap before the blackguard could release the blast. The man, though, used the brain crystal rifle and unleashed several blasts at Erik while he kept pumping mana into his brain crystal power.

Then, what happened within the room was not clear; Erik moved too fast; the man couldn't even take aim.

But Erik arrived in front of the man and drove his knee into the blackguard's gut, doubling him over.

"That was a bad idea, man."

He followed up with an elbow strike to the back of the neck, dropping the attacker to the ground. He broke his neck.

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

Erik glanced back at the ice barrier protecting Richard and then dismissed it. The old man was slumped on the floor, barely alive. His body was a mess of raw, exposed muscle and sinew. The skinning Volkov made was unsettling. He couldn't even understand how someone could do something like this to another human.

Granted, Erik knew the rebels used similar methods back in the Red Palace, but this was too much, even for them.

His eyes, half-lidded and glazed with pain, barely focused as Erik approached.

"I got you. Don't worry."

Erik hoisted Richard onto his shoulder and left the room in which Richard had been kept prisoner. However, he wasn't in Sector G anymore.

There was no sight of the corridor from which he came. Instead, he found himself in a distinct part of the prison, but he didn't know where.

In front of him was a tunnel that stretched out for a while. On the other side, there was a door, but where it led, Erik didn't know.

However, from the area, he could infer something. The walls were metallic and glowing with blue light.

"Aclaitrium."

The glow didn't leave space for anything else. It must have been aclaitrium.

"Pretty overkill..." Erik said, glancing around the glowing tunnel. He then turned his mind to the biological supercomputer.

<System, find us an exit, and tell me where we are.>

The supercomputer responded almost as Erik was done thinking.

<Alright, Erik. Based on the data from the surrounding infrastructure, you're deep in the underground section of the Grand Ducal Prison. This area is fortified, given the use of aclaitrium ore, and there are many guards based on the camera feed. >

<Tell me something I don't know.>

<Right,> the AI said. <To find an exit, I'll connect to the prison's security network. Give me a moment.>

Erik felt a faint hum in his mind as the supercomputer interfaced with the prison's systems. After a few seconds, it spoke again.

<Got it. There's a maintenance tunnel about 500 meters ahead that branches off to the right. Follow it until you reach a service elevator. It should take you up to some levels above.>

But the biological supercomputer paused again.

<Be cautious, Erik. The security system shows a high number of personnel moving in your direction.>

Erik nodded, even though the system couldn't see the gesture. He tightened his grip on Richard, adjusting his weight. <Thanks. Let's get out of here.>

He set off down the tunnel, his steps quick and purposeful, the faint glow of the Aclaitrium ore lighting his way.

Chapter 975: A-Rank Brain Crystal

He adjusted Richard on his shoulder, and after a few moments, he reached the door on the other side.

<Be careful; the camera feed shows at least 100 blackguards on the other side.>

<A hundred? How the hell do they fit here?>

<The other side is not a corridor like this. It's an open space built underground. Be careful; there is a chasm below.>

<Ah, right, with 100 blackguards around, the chasm is the problem.>

<The threat level for the chasm is higher than the blackguards'.>

<That's reassuring.>

Erik then started conjuring illusions while making himself invisible.

When he merged Shade's power with the Chameleon Veil, the latter didn't improve.

It made the chameleon veil better, but the illusion weaver itself didn't get that much stronger than before.

"Stay with me, Richard, okay?" But the man didn't reply.

Erik created a large ice shield, big enough to cover him and Richard, and then opened the door.

He and his illusions rushed out. The moment Erik emerged from the corridor, he slammed the ice shield into the ground, creating an impromptu barrier.

A blinding barrage of laser fire erupted from the surrounding guards, each bolt sizzling against the ice and sending shards flying.

Erik poured mana into the shield, reinforcing it as the assault continued.

The shield held strong, but it had only been made to create confusion and prevent Erik from being shot as he got out of the corridor.

Erik's illusions were copies of himself carrying Richard, which were meant to further the enemy's confusion.

After they got outside, they all burst from behind the icy barrier.

The guards hesitated, their aim faltering as they saw these myriad copies of their targets.

Erik darted with the illusions, carrying Richard's limp body and sprinting towards the exit the system had shown.

Chaos erupted in the corridor as the guards opened fire again, the laser bolts crisscrossing the air.

Erik weaved through the onslaught. His movements were simply too quick for the guards to follow, as those of his illusions were.

The man sprinted across the underground space, dodging a hail of laser fire and the occasional telekinetic projectile.

Despite their numbers, the blackguards were unable to handle the myriad of Erik illusions, with their attacks missing and being directed at the wrong targets.

As Erik drew closer to the maintenance tunnel, the exit promised by the system materialized, but so did the blackguards. In fact, weapons pointed at him, they barred his way to the exit.

There was no time for subtlety, no room for hesitation here.

With Richard's unconscious body draped over his shoulder, Erik needed a swift and decisive solution for the current situation.

He raised his hand, his fingers tracing a horizontal line. Mana surged around him, coalescing into a shimmering vortex.

Erik unleashed his attack. From where Erik traced the line, a massive wind blade, a swirling crescent of frigid air and razor-sharp ice, appeared.

Some of the blackguards reacted quickly, conjuring mana barriers or elemental shields, but the wind blade ripped through their defenses like tissue paper.

The blade slammed into the blackguard formation. Bodies were flung aside, armor shattered, but no scream filled the air because the blade decapitated each single blackguard standing in Erik's way.

"Get the fuck out!"

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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...

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[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMAN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

With the path to the maintenance tunnel cleared, Erik didn't spare a second glance for the fallen blackguards.

His focus was one and one alone: escape. He sprinted towards the tunnel entrance.

<System, allocate all available attribute points into energy.>

<Sure will do.>

As he ran, a surge of power coursed through him. The system must have given him the points.

But the confirmation was immediately followed by a powerful feeling.

The release of Erik's mana was like a tidal wave, engulfing everything in its path with an overwhelming force.

It was almost tangible... and visible.

"Great!"

It wasn't the first time Erik had that feeling. A massive energy spike meant only one thing, and that was that he was exceeding his rank.

His brain crystal was getting bigger and stronger. He just reached the A-rank threshold on the Ferebitz scale.

Erik skidded to a halt, the sheer force of the mana outburst nearly knocking him off his feet.

He grinned, a feral glint in his eyes. A-rank. He had reached a level of power that few could even dream of.

<Congratulations,> the system said.

<Thanks... Now let's get the hell out of here.> That happened, but Erik never stopped running.

Erik plunged into the maintenance tunnel. The passageway was slick with condensation.

He moved fast, but despite this and the bouncing Richard was subject to, he didn't show signs of waking up.

He was still unconscious and remained slung over his shoulder like a potato sack.

The tunnel was straight, but there was a maze of pipes and conduits above.

They reached the end of the tunnel. A steel door emblazoned with a warning symbol stood in their way.

Erik kicked it open, the hinges screeching in protest. On the other side, a cramped service elevator awaited.

<Is this another trap?>

<How would I know? I could only if I could read minds, and I remind you, I can't.>

<Ok, but can you tell me something?>

<Not much. The elevator reaches the 5th floor; from there, you must take another elevator.>

<I feel like the cell where Richard was had been a ticket to hell,> Erik said.

<Yeah. It could go way down to the -50 floor. Quite literally, a ticket to hell.>

Erik stepped inside, lowering Richard to the floor. He pressed the call button, and the doors slid shut with a metallic clang.

The elevator ascended slowly, while Erik leaned against the wall, his eyes closed, catching his breath.

<We're approaching the highest level we can take from here,> the system said.

<What should I expect there? Another open space?>

<Another corridor, this time a maintenance one. Then, yes, there is another open space. The chasm is still there; don't forget to avoid to fall down.>

To the system's words, Erik nodded, his eyes snapping open. He looked down at Richard, the man's face still pale and drawn.

<We are almost there, Richard,> he said. <Just a little bit further, and we are out.>

The elevator shuddered to a halt; the doors creaking open. Erik stepped out into a storage room filled with crates and discarded equipment.

He hoisted Richard back onto his shoulder and scanned the room for an exit.

A narrow door, obscured by a stack of boxes, caught his eye. Erik moved towards it, pushing the boxes aside.

He tried the handle, but it was locked.

<Let me take care of that,> the system said. A moment later, a click echoed through the room as the lock disengaged.

Chapter 976: Path of Carnage

<There are multiple hostiles detected on the other side of the corridor. It looks like they're setting up another ambush.>

<They never learn, do they?> Erik said.

<Apparently not. It's like they have a collective brain cell, and it's on vacation.>

Erik chuckled. He reached the end of the corridor, a heavy metal door barring his way.

<Another one...>

This time, he would not play it subtle. He channeled his mana, the A-rank brain crystal was pumping mana like never before.

<Ah, this is what it feels like. It's much more easy.>

<Right... There was a reason why people despise weak brain crystals.>

Erik directed the mana towards the Frostwind Fire Tempest's neural links.

"Time for some fireworks."

The air crackled with frost and flame, and the temperature fluctuated wildly.

A miniature sun seemed to form in his palm, its heat radiating outward. Then he launched the ball to the door.

The metal door buckled and flew off its hinges, a fiery vortex spewing into the open space beyond, mingling with chilling temperatures that released an immense cloud of hot vapor that not only prevented everyone from seeing but also cooked alive all those around him.

The Blackguards were caught in the blast, their armor melting and their screams drowned out by the inferno.

[ENEMY HUMANS KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 1260000 EXPERIENCE POINTS AND 12600 DNA POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

Those who survived scrambled for cover, their laser rifles aimed at the fiery entrance.

<Great! How many people did I kill?>

<Approximately 84.>

<Ah, great! These guys truly are filled with mana.>

Erik emerged from the door. The explosion set part of the surroundings on fire, which illuminated everything, but the vapor made it hard to see.

Richard was still on his shoulder, unconscious. But that was a lucky event, since Richard would have been in a ton of pain otherwise.

Erik didn't waste a second. "Come and get me," he said.

The blackguards heard him, and charged, but most of them didn't even have the time to swing their arm or press the trigger that they ended up dead on the floor.

He didn't wait for the vapor to dissipate; instead, he used it as a cover while reducing the temperature in his immediate surroundings to protect both him and Richard.

The chamber was full of bodies scattered amongst smoldering debris. But the few remaining blackguards, though shaken, were not defeated. Instead, they had a mad glint in their eyes.

The system's voice was grim. <The remaining blackguards all have multiple brain crystal powers. Their threat level increased significantly.>

Erik's grin widened, a predator's thrill coursing through him. "Excellent," he said. "Let's see what you've got from Doran's research."

The surviving blackguards attacked, plunging deep within the vapor. "Foolish."

Erik vanished, turning invisible within the mist.

The blackguards did not know that happened. Then, from the heart of the vapor, an illusion of Erik materialized.

The blackguard attacked, but that went through it. A wind blade arrived from the opposite side.

The blackguard reacted, creating a mana shield that got destroyed. Another blackguard fell.

"Where is he?"

"I don't know?!"

"Find hi—"

Erik slit the man's throat.

He reappeared behind another blackguard, his movements silent and swift. Before the man could react, Erik's hand was around his throat.

The man pumped mana into his brain, increasing his strength at least three times, but it wasn't yet enough to break Erik's grip.

"Try as you want. You die today."

He snapped the blackguard's neck, his body crumpling to the ground.

Another illusion flickered into existence. A blackguard tried to attack him by using fire brain crystal power. But the illusion went through it.

Erik had enough. He conjured a series of wind blades. They sliced through the vapor, and after each second, thuds echoed across the area.

More and more bodies slumped on the ground, heads missing.

[LEVEL UP.]

"Even two brain crystal powers can't save you."

<You are acting dramatic. I want to remind you that this situation was possible only because the cramped space prevented them from mass-attacking you, and the vapor prevented the few remaining to see you.>

<Yeah, but individually, they can't still do anything. Besides, the vapor was my doing. Tactical acumen is also part of someone's fighting ability>

The system did the equivalent of rolling its eyes up. In the meantime, Erik killed more blackguards.

The last few tried to flee. But Erik didn't let them go. He hunted them down, one by one. It took some time, though, because the fuckers went into a panic and scattered. Erik did all that while holding Richard on his shoulders.

When the vapor finally cleared, Erik stood alone amidst the carnage, his clothes untarnished and his breath even. The area was silent; the only sound was the crackling of the dying fire.

"We're almost out of here," he said, turning to Richard.

With the man still draped over his shoulder, Erik surveyed the area. He needed a way out, and he needed it fast. <System, where to now?>

<There's another elevator behind that door,> the system said, sending an image of the door to Erik. <It should take you directly to ground level.>

<Something tells me it won't be this simple this time. > Erik raised an eyebrow.

<No, it's not. You'll have to pass through a series of administrative offices to get there. And based on the security feeds, the blackguard presence is much higher in that area.>

Erik's grip on Richard tightened. <More blackguards, huh? Just what we need.>

<I'm afraid so. But don't worry; I'll guide you every step of the way.>

<All right. Just keep in mind that Richard is with us. Oh, and tell me beforehand where the fuckers are. I want to play with them a little.>

Chapter 977: Illusions and Ice

<By the way, System, how many people are in that area, and how big is the area itself?>

<The area covers the entire floor, aside from the part you are in now. It is approximately 2000 meters in diameter. There are around 300 blackguards patrolling and setting up defensive positions. Everyone knows you are here now. I think they are trying to exhaust your mana. Their information about your strength is not up-to-date.>

Erik cursed under his breath. <Damn it, that's a small army. Is there a way to bypass them?>

<You could turn them invisible and bypass them easily,> the system said. <But Richard is a problem.>

Erik glanced at his friend's unconscious father. <Yeah, I can't just leave him behind. Any other suggestions?>

<You could create chaos using illusions to fool the blackguards, as you did earlier. Remember, you can generate up to 20 illusions at a time.>

Erik nodded. <True, but even with 20 illusions, that's a lot of ground to cover and a lot of enemies to fool.>

<You'll have to make do with what you have, Erik.>

The man sighed, shaking his head. <Right, I always knew I'd end up in a situation where I'd have to play hide and seek with a battalion of brain-crystal-powered murder maniacs.>

With a deep breath, he steeled himself, adjusting his grip on Richard. "Alright, let's give these guys a run for their money."

The heavy metal door was in front of him at that point. "Ready or not, here I come," he said with a smirk.

Then he created 20 illusions of himself carrying Richard and made them dash through the door. Then, the sound of a huge fight started.

<What the...? How many people were at that door?>

<50.>

"Crazy..."

<They were less than the ones in front of the previous door. Did you forget you killed 80? I can't say if you are being lucky or not today.>

Erik didn't reply, but pushed open the door and stepped into the administrative offices.

The area was a sprawling labyrinth of cubicles and meeting rooms, all bathed in the eerie glow of Aclatrium lighting and the bright lamps above.

The Blackguards were basically unleashing hell, trying to kill the illusions, but being unable to. They couldn't even understand if their target was real or not.

The group of 50 was in front of Erik, trying to kill his fake selves. Erik grinned.

"Time for some fireworks," he said.

He channeled mana through his Frostwind Fire Tempest's neural links. Erik planned on making a colossal mess. Since the tactic had worked before, and he needed to ensure Richard's safety, he decided to make vapor again.

It would help him also hide from the blackguards, while at the same time killing a few and clearing the way, and of course, creating chaos.

The explosion blasted the entrance area.

The wave engulfed the blackguards. The temperature fluctuated wildly, freezing and burning everything in its path.

The blackguards at the entrance were killed immediately, burning and freezing, and then shattering for the extreme changes in temperature.

[ENEMY HUMANS KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 750000 EXPERIENCE POINTS AND 7500 DNA POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

[LEVEL UP.]

Screams of agony echoed through the office, quickly drowned out by the sounds of brain crystal rifles and brain crystal powers within the area.

<Good. Where do I go now?>

<Move forward 30 meters, then turn right.>

Erik walked as the system instructed and reached the 30-meter mark. He turned right, only to find himself face-to-face with twenty blackguards chasing an illusion.

"Guess I can't avoid them," Erik said. Summoning his mana, he conjured up an ice flyssa, the blade shimmering with frost.

The blackguards noticed him and turned, but Erik would not give them a chance to react.

He lunged forward with Richard still on his shoulder.

The first blackguard swung a sword, spewing lightning, but Erik dove beneath the blow, slashing upward with his blade.

The weapon sliced through armor and flesh. The frost froze the man, turning him into a statue. He then fell, clutching his throat, and his body shattered into countless pieces.

Erik spun, blocking a swing from another attacker with the flat of his blade. He kicked out, catching the blackguard in the chest and sending him sprawling.

A third blackguard charged, his fists glowing with mana. The man unleashed a sort of shockwave.

Erik sidestepped, jumped on a wall and pushed himself toward the man, slicing through the blackguard's arm. The blade quickly froze the man, who shattered into countless pieces and died.

A blackguard with fire abilities launched a barrage of flames at Erik. He created a wall of ice to block the attack, the flames hissing as they met the frost.

Erik stepped through the dissipating steam, his blade flashing.

Two blackguards tried to flank him. Erik dodged one blow, then another.

He feinted left, then struck right. Limbs flew, heads fell. Erik pivoted, decapitating another blackguard with an upward sweep.

What followed was a brutal scene. A hypnotic yet macabre dance of death.

Erik parried blows, his blade creating clangs and clinks, people dying in masked terror.

In the end, only he and Richard remained there, his breath steady. He shifted Richard's weight on his shoulder, making sure Emily's father was secure.

As much as the corridor was free of people, there were still at least 230 people in that area. So Erik had to move.

<System, where to now?> Despite the increasingly dangerous situation, Erik was still calm.

<Move forward another 50 meters, then take the second left.>

Erik nodded, his grip on the Flyssa tightening. "This is going to take a lot, right?" Erik stepped over the bodies and started moving away.

<Did you forget the area is around 2000 meters wide? Of course, this is going to take some time.>

<Right...>

Chapter 978: A Thousand Blackguards

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

"God, that was harder than I thought."

Erik basically killed everyone on that floor. 300 blackguards—a ton of juicy experience.

Luckily, the system replenished him with fresh energy every time he leveled up. From where it took that energy, Erik didn't know. Regardless, he was as good as new.

At this moment, he stood in front of the elevator. According to the system's information, this elevator should transport him to the ground floor.

However, he noticed that the area above was significantly more spacious than the rooms he had encountered thus far.

But at least he had already gotten through it when he arrived at the prison, because that was the ground floor from which he came.

<System, check how the situation above is. What should I expect once the elevator's doors' open?>

The system didn't reply, not immediately at least.

It was likely analyzing the feed from the security cameras above.

<Based on the cameras, there are at least a thousand blackguards on the ground floor. They seem to be preparing for your arrival.>

"A thousand blackguards? That's pushing it, even for me."

Up until now, Erik had survived by using his illusions to reduce the number of opponents he had to fight at the same time.

But against a thousand enemies, that strategy would not work.

<System, is there any way to avoid a direct confrontation? Can we find another exit? C'mon, until now, I had to work my ass off! Make things easier for me.>

<The ground floor is the only viable exit. The prison's layout funnels all pathways to that area. While the ventilation system could provide a hiding spot, it wouldn't get you and Richard out.>

Erik sighed. <Alright, system, let's think. Can we create enough chaos to slip past them?>

<It's possible, but risky. You would need to use all available illusions and brain crystal powers to create maximum confusion. Invisibility will help, but they will still see Richard floating. That will be, for sure, weird. The blackguards' response times are fast, and they're heavily armed; I don't honestly think you can get out unscathed. Maybe you have to leave Richard behind.>

<But this is going to defeat the entire purpose of coming here.>

<Yes. But it's clear that Richard doesn't hold the same value as you.>

<That's also true.>

Erik considered the options. His mana reserves were a lot, but not enough to kill a thousand blackguards without risking dying. His recent level-ups had granted him more power, and he got his mana refueled.

He glanced at Richard, unconscious on his shoulder.

<Didn't you say there was a healer among the blackguards on this floor?>

<Yes, but you killed her.>

<Well... Richard doesn't seem to want to wake up, and I don't honestly know if he would survive with things progressing like this. Besides, I can't keep fighting while carrying him.>

<The healer is 200 meters behind.> The biological supercomputer sent him an image of where he had to go, since it understood what Erik wanted to do.

Erik left Richard in front of the elevator and then went back to retrieve brain crystal and blood from the woman.

<Absorb them instantly.>

[HUMAN'S DNA ACQUIRED. STARTING THE ANALYSIS.]

[ANALYSIS COMPLETE.]

[1000 DNA POINTS USED TO ABSORB INSTANTLY THE DNA. PROCEDURE COMPLETE.]

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

[ANALYSIS COMPLETE.]

[1000 DNA POINTS USED TO ABSORB INSTANTLY THE BRAIN CRYSTAL. PROCEDURE COMPLETE.]

Feeling a rush of mana coursing through him, Erik realized he had finally gained healing brain crystal power. He was going to use it to heal Richard.

<How is this called?>

<Mend wounds. Pretty basic, right?> The system seemed embarrassed.

<Yeah. Is it you who named the brain crystal powers?>

<Yes. > It said.

<Aren't you ashamed of yourself?>

<What have I to do? Healing powers are very similar to each other. How should I have called it Hyper Mega gigatonic healing super duper power?>

<Even that would have been better.> Erik said with a smirk on his face.

<Yeah... yeah... Don't waste time anymore now.>

Erik made his way back to the elevator where Richard lay. He crouched beside the unconscious man.

He then started channeling mana through his new brain's crystal power's neural links.

He could feel the raw energy coursing through him.

The younger man felt the mana flow from his brain crystal, threading through the neural links as if they were roads.

His hands hovered over Richard's injuries, and he transferred the energy the brain crystal produced, or contained, to Richard.

A glow enveloped the older man's body. The wounds that marred his flesh closed, knitting together with miraculous speed.

Torn skin regenerated, bruises faded, and the ragged breathing evened out.

The mana Erik poured seemed to disappear into a pit, meaning that the extent of Richard's injuries must have been severe.

<Keep going, Erik. He's stabilizing.>

<This requires much more mana than I thought. Now I can see why healers were so pricey.>

Erik pressed on. Richard's wounds continued to mend, the healing working flawlessly. The skin on his body grew back, covering the raw, exposed flesh with new, unblemished tissue.

<He's almost there, just a little more.>

The light around Richard intensified for a moment before fading, leaving his body whole and unscarred.

Erik sighed in relief, but his thoughts went to his father. If he had had this ability before, he could have been alive.

<That was a lot of mana,> Erik said. <Yes. His injuries were extensive. He needed that much. But he's stable now; you saved him.>

Erik looked at Richard's peaceful face, hoping he was going to wake up soon. <C'mon, Richard. Wake up.>

Some time passed, and then, as if on cue, Richard stirred, his eyelids fluttering. He groaned, but at least he was regaining consciousness.

"Erik...?" Richard's voice was weak.

"Yeah, it's me," Erik said. "Welcome back to the land of the living."

Richard blinked, trying to focus on the young man's face. "What... what happened? Why are you here? Did you...?"

"I came here to save your ass. It was the bare minimum since you are in this situation because of me," Erik said, helping Richard sit up.

"How did you enter? How did you go past the blackguards?" But then Richard turned around and saw what the man had done.

This place was a graveyard. There were no other words to describe the carnage surrounding them.

Emily's father started understanding the real scale of Erik Romano's powers.

"It's a long story. But the short version is that we're not out of the woods yet. We've still got a thousand blackguards between us and freedom."

"A thousand?" Richard looked at him. "And you've been carrying me through this?"

If Erik really did that while carrying him around, that was insane.

"Pretty much," Erik said with a shrug. "But now that you're awake, things should get easier. Can you walk?"

Richard nodded, though he still looked weak. "I think so. Thanks, Erik. You saved my life."

"Don't thank me yet. A thousand blackguards above, did you forget?"

"No... Sorry."

<System, any updates on the situation on the ground floor?>

<The blackguards are still preparing. It's going to be a tough fight.>

Erik nodded. "Alright, Richard. Ready for a round?"

Richard gave a determined nod, but of course, he wasn't in that good of a situation. "Let's do this."

Erik grinned. "That's the spirit. Stay close, and follow my lead."

They stood before the elevator. The doors slid open, and Erik stepped forward. Richard followed.

Chapter 979: Ice shrapnel

His eyes were alert, as if he expected someone to come attack him at any moment. That was because of what Volkov did to him, in truth, but it wasn't also that different from their situation.

Blackguards could come at him at any moment, after all.

"What exactly is the situation, Erik?" Richard asked, looking at the younger man's back.

Erik kept running. "Aside from the thousand blackguards? Maybe traps, but I'm not sure about it."

Richard's eyes widened. "How are we supposed to get past a thousand blackguards? That's insane."

Erik shrugged, a smirk playing on his lips. "Yeah, it's a lot. But I've got some tricks up my sleeve. Plus, now that you're awake, I can go all out without worrying about you."

Richard looked at Erik. There was a mix of fear and disbelief in his eyes.

He knew Erik was strong, but fighting 1,000 people alone? Blackguards at that.

In his opinion, Erik was insane, not because he might not be able to do that, based on what he saw on the lower floor, he might be able to do that, but it was his willingness to do it that left him confused.

Shouldn't people's first reaction to such a situation to try a way to avoid the fight? Then why did Erik look so eager? The truth was that Richard knew nothing.

"It sounds impossible to escape with 1000 blackguards, Erik, even considering your tricks."

Erik chuckled. "Impossible? Nah. Just a bit challenging." Of course, the situation was tough.

He actually couldn't kill a thousand blackguards, so the thing here was to exploit two things: the first was to decrease the number of people attacking him as much as possible using his illusions, and the second was to kill. Simple as that.

Reducing the number of people around would make it possible for him and Richard to escape.

What Erik also wanted to do was gain experience points and level up after having created the most havoc.

Each level up would replenish his mana reserves, which could be used to kill more or heal himself and Richard if the need arose.

Of course, as they did this, they had to get out of the building. Erik's plan was going to work, yes, but not indefinitely.

"I've got a few ideas. And as long as you stay behind me, we've got a fighting chance."

Richard shook his head, a nervous laugh escaping his lips. "You're crazy, you know that?"

"Maybe a little," Erik said. "But being daring, or crazy, as you say, is what's kept me alive so far. I would have achieved nothing if I didn't push myself to the limit. Again, just stick close to me, and we'll get through this."

The elevator continued its steady climb; the tension mounting over Richard with every passing second. Though Erik's confidence was infectious, and it clashed with Richard's fear.

"Alright," Richard said, taking a deep breath to steady his nerves. "I'll follow your lead."

"Good."

The elevator was almost on the ground floor.

Erik glanced at Richard, his expression serious now. "Ready?"

Richard nodded, his grip tightening on the small knife he had held onto. "Ready as I'll ever be."

The elevator slowed to a stop, a soft ding echoing in the confined space.

In this fraction of a second, two things happened. The first was that Erik made the 20 illusions get out of the door.

Of course, those who saw them getting through the door knew they were illusions, but those who didn't do it started shooting at them or chasing them around the area.

This meant the number of people behind the door was reduced, if even a little.

"Alright, then. Let's show them what we're made of."

The elevator doors slid open, revealing the chaos that awaited them on the ground floor.

Erik stepped forward, and Richard followed close behind.

The second thing Erik did while the doors were opening was to make up an ice shield to protect both himself and Richard from attacks.

He was right at that, because as soon as the doors opened, a barrage of them rained down on the two—bullets, energy blasts, and many kinds of brain crystal powers hurtling through the air.

But that wasn't all he did. Until now, he had never used it, but there was a power he got by merging Nathaniel's power and the Exoshield brain crystal power, Force Bastion.

This ability granted him an integrated exoskeleton, which provided both physical protection and the ability to generate powerful force fields.

That came from Nathaniel's extremely powerful brain crystal power, which was now insanely better than before.

The exoskeleton encased him in protective layers. Erik looked like a cyborg ninja.

The armor was just a plus, but it was going to provide ample defense. Given the number of people, he wasn't so naïve as to think he could avoid every single attack, even with his instability brain crystal power.

Though, what Erik planned to use more was the enhanced strength and agility this brain crystal power was going to provide. He knew how much he needed them.

Even if Erik had 150–200 strength points more than the blackguards, their mana was a lot taken individually, and this meant a lot of power was going to be behind their attacks. With that, speed was bound to come.

However, that speed would not be as slow as physical speed.

Brain crystal powers were like weapons. There were fast people, but no matter how fast they were, they couldn't compete with the speeds reached by guns.

Well, of course, unless one prevented them from aiming at him or her.

That was what Erik did most of the time, move so fast as to prevent them from setting their sight on him.

But that Erik was going to be surrounded by enemies didn't make things easier.

There was something else he had to be wary of. That his mana was going to be depleted fast because of the huge disparity in numbers.

<The best thing to do at this point is to focus my mana on protective powers and take care of the blackguards with my body alone.>

Richard's eyes widened as he saw the transformation and the attacks bombarding the elevator, making it almost impossible for Erik to hear.

"What the hell, Erik?"

"No time to explain," Erik said. "Get ready to run. I'm going to carve a path now!"

Then Erik activated the force bastion. He released an energy pulse, a force that shattered his ice shield into countless fragments, which were then propelled outward with tremendous speed towards their opponents.

The ice shards shot out of the elevator, slicing through the blackguards and clearing the way in a spectacular display of power.

Richard was left shocked.

[ENEMY HUMANS KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 750000 EXPERIENCE POINTS AND 15000 DNA POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

Erik's attack left a path of destruction in its wake. The blackguards in front of them were incapacitated or killed by the barrage of icy shrapnel.

Chapter 980: Carving a path

But there were still many people in front of them, made by those that weren't killed by the ice shards Erik made.

The young man took his chance, leaving ice shields behind to protect Richard while he killed those in front of him.

"Stay behind the shields!" Erik said to the man, who nodded, eyes wide with a mixture of fear and awe.

Richard was both awestruck and terrified as he watched her daughter's friend fight. No, fight wasn't even an accurate word to use.

Erik was cutting through the blackguards like a hot knife through butter, or more like a blade through a heart.

He was unstoppable, a demon in human form.

Where Erik moved, death followed, leaving a trail of bodies in his wake.

The blackguards scrambled in panic, their formations slowly crumbling before this whirlwind of steel and fury.

What was scarier was that Erik showed no signs of tiring. His eyes were devoid of mercy or hesitation.

Each blackguard was killed with brutal efficiency. Erik was unstoppable, cruel, unyielding.

This man had a power that left Richard feeling small. Incredibly so at that, because he knew no one, and certainly not him, could hope to replicate something like that.

In the meantime, Erik killed and killed and killed.

Each movement was amplified by the enhanced strength that the Force Bastion brain crystal power gave him.

Blackguards flew back from the force of his attacks, which they couldn't even see coming.

However, attacks landed on Erik, which were absorbed and by the mana armor he was wearing, keeping Erik safe while Richard remained behind the ice walls that the younger man was conjuring up one by one.

But Richard wasn't staying idle. As more ice walls were made, the more distance they traveled through the building.

Erik didn't kill everyone. There were some people that he had to leave alive because he had to focus on someone else. That was where Richard came into play as he started killing all those that were unconscious on the ground or clutching at their wounds.

[LEVEL UP.]

Erik felt the familiar rush of energy as he leveled up.

His mana reserves were replenished, his stamina surged. He used his healing powers to mend any injuries he got, and that the force bastion couldn't prevent, but ensuring he remained in peak condition.

The attacks on him came. They never stopped, and they were painful.

"UGH! FUCK! FUCK!"

The Blackguards fell in waves, and as they did, both Richard and Erik advanced toward the exit.

<You must turn right now!>

The biological supercomputer said.

"To the right, Richard!"

"Yes."

The older man remained close, using his own brain crystal power to support where he could, but Erik was the driving force behind their improbable and daring escape.

"This kid is a juggernaut."

Erik knew he had to keep the momentum. The goal was to kill as many blackguards as possible, leveling up and replenishing his mana to continue the fight, but that would only be required to get out of the building, to fight longer before they got to the exit.

Erik and Richard moved forward, with the younger man carving a path through bodies.

Each swing of Erik's arm, augmented by the armor's enhanced strength, killed blackguards.

The shockwaves from his armor created brief moments of chaos because the enemy couldn't understand how their comrades died, with Erik not hitting them.

They were even uncertain about their ability to create a protective barrier.

[ENEMY HUMANS KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[0%...1%... 5%, 30%, 70%, 100%] [MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 1500000 EXPERIENCE POINTS AND 15000 DNA POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

"Stay close!"

Richard nodded, keeping a pace behind the ice walls Erik conjured.

A blackguard lunged at Erik, but he sidestepped, driving his fist into the attacker's gut.

The armor's power sent the blackguard sprawling. Erik followed up with a quick strike to the neck, breaking it and killing his foe.

Another enemy rushed in from the side, slashing with a blade. Erik blocked with a force field, which now was much easier to use compared to when it was made only by Nathaniel's powers.

Then countered with a devastating kick that broke the attacker's ribs. The blackguard crumpled to the ground, clutching his side.

"Richard, keep moving!"

The man obeyed, staying behind the safety of the ice shields. He watched in awe as Erik fought.

Erik's force shields absorbed the incoming attacks, redirecting the energy back at his opponents.

The sound of laser rifles being fired echoed through the hall. Erik conjured another ice wall, the laser dissipating against it.

He retaliated with a blast of ice shards, taking down the shooters. He felt a mana powered laser graze his arm, but he quickly healed the wound with his brain crystal powers.

"Fuck!"

Erik said as the pain flared, then dissipated as the healing kicked in.

Another wave of blackguards charged at Erik. He created a wall of ice, then shattered it with a shockwave, sending shards flying.

The blackguards could not defend themselves. Their charge faltering as they were bombarded by icy fragments.

[LEVEL UP.]

Erik felt the surge of energy, his mana reserves replenishing. He pressed on, each kill bringing him closer to full strength.

A large blackguard stepped forward, swinging a massive axe. The man foolishly thought he could at least slow down Erik.

The younger man dove under the swing, driving his elbow into the man's ribs.

Erik's strength was simply too much for the man's body to handle.

The blow was lethal; the blackguard fell to the ground. But Erik wasn't there anymore; he had already ripped out the arm of another blackguard from his body.

A fountain of blood pooled at the man's feet.

Richard watched, unable to mutter a word.

"Insane... simply insane," he said, unable to divert his eyes, staying behind the ice shields and killing off injured blackguards.

"Erik, to the right!" The biological supercomputer said.

Erik nodded, turning to clear the path. He blasted another group of blackguards, then lunged forward and created another ice wall to protect Richard.

A blackguard attacked Erik with a spear. Erik dodged, grabbed the shaft, and broke it in half with a flick of his wrist.

With lightning speed, Erik knocked the attacker into his comrades, lifeless this time.

Another blackguard came at Erik from the side, swinging a heavy mace.

Erik dove under the attack, then drove his fist upward into the man's chin. Once again, the punch was lethal, and the blackguard fell to the ground while blood poured out of his eyes and ears.

Erik felt a presence behind him and spun around just in time to block a sword strike with his armored forearm.

The force shield he conjured at the last second absorbed the impact, and Erik countered with a swift kick to the attacker's knee, shattering it.

The blackguard screamed and fell, clutching his leg.