

New Eden 771

Chapter 771 Last Briefing Before The Hunt

Jack approached the teen, putting his large hand on his shoulder.

"Calm down, son. I will explain everything once we are left alone by the gentlemen that drove us here. You'll understand all at that moment."

Cory saw the ginormous man before him, whom he knew as OldGrizzly, and gulped.

'He's as big in real life as in New Eden... What a chad...' he thought.

He just nodded his empty head in response, making Jack smile.

"Good. Now, let us head inside, shall we?" he asked, looking at each of the awakened people here.

A couple of nods later, and Jack pointing toward the cabin, the ten people participating in the hunt walked inside the chalet as the drivers who brought them here all drove back out, heading to the village.

David walked over to Alex and Kary, smiling at them.

"Glad you guys managed to pull some more people in. This makes our chances better, and we might not have to bury anyone," he said, with his usual amount of cockiness.

Alex nodded silently, and Kary grimaced, appalled at his distasteful remark.

They walked in together and quickly realized that everyone present was either part of their guild or people they knew personally. The only oddball in the group was the young merc, Juan Alvares.

He was the only one who barely knew anyone there.

The only person he thought he recognized was Alexander, and he had only talked to him briefly once, making him even less than an acquaintance.

He was the only one confused, surrounded by strangers, with nary a clue about what he was doing there.

His boss, Colonel Lancaster, had been very vague about the mission he was being sent on, alone, by no fault of his own. This made him even more nervous than before on the ride there.

Seeing his nervousness rise, the other outlier, Clark, approached him.

"Hey, kid. My name's Clark. I take it you barely know anyone here as well, right?" he said, stretching his hand forward.

The merc looked at Clark with wariness for a second before shaking his hand.

Clark smiled as the kid shook his hand, noticing there was a powerful grip on him.

"Nice grip strength you got there, kid. Do you work out?"

The nonchalantness of the man took Juan aback, but it calmed his nerves a bit, and he mustered the courage to answer back.

"I do. It's part of my work. My name is Juan. Juan Alvares. A pleasure to meet you, sir."

Clark chuckled a bit, slapping the young man on the shoulder.

"Don't sir me, Juan. Just Clark is fine. I feel like we'll be working in such proximity in the next days that we might as well acquaint properly."

Juan smiled nervously, unsure he was ready to work with a team of people he had never met before. But he had already received his mission money, so he could hardly return home.

Jack watched as a few people started forming little groups, talking to each other and smiling.

'This is a good start,' he thought as his wife stood nearby.

"At least they won't be complete strangers going in," she commented, to which Jack nodded.

Jack waited for a moment before clapping his hands together loudly while standing in the middle of the open area chalet living room.

"Alright, folks. Gather round. The sooner we get this briefing on the road, the better."

The shuffling of feet echoed in the chalet as all eight of them scooted over closer, making a semi-circle before him and Margaret, who stood in the center.

"I know most of you are still wondering what we are doing here, and I will now tell you with as much detail as I can. Please be attentive, as I will not be repeating myself."

Seeing each of them nod, Jack nodded as well.

He started his briefing with an introduction to those who didn't know him and a round of introductions for them—just the names, to begin with. Their skills and powers could come later when they started strategizing the hunt.

Once everyone at least knew the names of the people they would be working with, the tension had already lowered by a magnitude, and Jack was satisfied with this.

He continued, naming the objective of their mission, staying vague about what they would hunt for now, only mentioning their targets required a specialized group and solution to be dealt with.

It was better to ease everyone in before dropping the M-bomb on them.

Once they all understood the assignment, Jack took a deep breath before pulling a smart stick from his pocket.

"Alexander, hit the lights for me, if you will."

Alex nodded, walked to the door since he was closest to it, and flipped the light switch off, dimming the room. The chalet windows were still covered, so barely any sunlight came in.

Once the light was turned off, Jack slid the stick into a projector installed on the living room's center table, and a hologram lit over it.

Gasps echoed around the room as the people who were still unaware of their hunting target saw the image.

On the hologram, Jack had put one wolf David had sketched out, the smaller one, and a human next to it for size comparison, which caused a few of them a shock.

"Let's not mince words anymore," Jack declared, stepping next to the hologram.

"This is our hunting target. But don't get comfortable yet, as it won't be alone. By our estimations, there should be a pack of thirty of these, which in itself will be a challenging hunt. But they are not alone."

Pressing a remote, the image downsized before another wolf appeared on display. The already worried eyes of a few of the people present turned wild.

"This is insane. Wolves don't get to this size on Earth..." Cory exclaimed, looking at the truck-sized beast on display.

"Yeah, this has to be a fake. Maybe the locals are trying to get tourists to come here?" Juan Alvares chimed in, disbelief overcoming him.

Jack sighed.

"Gentlemen, please. I assure you, this is no local prank. And the image alone barely does it justice. Let me show you more..." he said, pressing his remote again.

Alex, David, and Kary all wondered what more he could show.

And when they saw it, their faces became gloomy.

"I present you, the beast," Jack said, pointing to a new image.

Silence took hold of the room.

Chapter 772 Revealing New Info

The projection differed vastly from before. Instead of a 3D rendering of a wolf, the image seemed all too real this time.

Even David was taken aback by what he saw.

"No. This can't be right..." he muttered.

Jack heard his comment, and his heart skipped a beat. But he resumed his presentation.

"Yesterday, after learning what we might be up against, I contracted B&D Security to get some satellite imagery and a live feed of the region. We threw the net wide since we didn't know where the beasts would be and caught their trail quickly.

"Unfortunately, what it revealed was less than comforting..." Jack said, sighing.

On the projection, the pack could be seen roaming through the wilderness with the two massive wolves leading them. But something was odd about the much larger wolves.

"What is that on their head?" Juan Clark asked, since he was the least used to New Eden monsters.

And before Jack could answer, David cut in.

"Those are horns. They are catalysts to their newfound power... These are not ordinary wolves anymore. These are Raijū. And they are rare even within New Eden. They can only be found in a specific part of the Dwarven mountain ranges and usually stay hidden..." he said, a tinge of fear in his tone.

Jack looked at David with sternness, pissed he'd been interrupted, but at least the description fit with what they had seen on the live feed.

"We didn't know their name, but what Mr. Magnus has described sounds accurate. There seemed to be a constant onset of clouds above the pack, and we figured they were the ones affecting the weather.

"When B&D Security sent in drones to capture the live feed, the wolves quickly shot them down. This is the only footage we got out of them."

Jack pressed his remote again, the projector switching to a video file with thirty seconds of recording.

The recording started, and the screen split into four squares with different camera angles. One was angled to the sky, recording the storm and its pitch-black clouds.

The sound of rumbling thunder echoed in the video.

Another drone had its camera angled toward the ground, recording the trail the wolves left behind and the carnage they were causing in the forest.

Crushed stones, uprooted trees, and burnt trunks were all that the drone was recording, and it was mildly terrifying, thinking they had done this just by being there.

The last two drones were recording the forest, trying to get an angle on their quarry, and soon found them. But as soon as they spotted the wolves, the two giant wolves also spotted them.

The enormous white wolves, with blue lightning patterns on their pelts, snapped their heads toward the two closing-in drones and snarled.

One of the two wolves' horns lit up in a bright blue, before a lightning bolt descended from the sky, hitting the horns and shooting toward the drone. The feed from that drone immediately went dark.

The next moment, the three remaining drones turned tails to run. It was easy to guess the order to save the machines came from the pilots' superiors.

But another blue flash across the screen occurred before another drone feed went dark.

The drones were fast little machines and covered quite a distance in a short amount of time. After ten seconds, they thought they were in the clear before something incredible happened.

Two orbs of blue lightning flashed past the drones, one on each, and the Raijū reappeared in their place. With two lightning-fast bites, the last two drone feeds went dark, and the video ended.

A heavy silence dawned on the room as the people realized what they were going up against.

"You can't possibly want us to fight something so dangerous, right? This is way beyond abnormal animals. How did such a thing even appear on Earth?" Clark asked, fear evident in his gaze.

When Alexander and Kary had told him about the hunt the previous day, he had thought they would just be fighting giant wolves. He was sure they could manage as long as they stayed regular animals with bigger bodies and slightly better physical capabilities.

But these were all but regular animals, anymore.

"I mean, lightning? These things are shooting lightning out of their bodies! Have you ever watched videos of what happens to humans when struck by a lightning bolt? It's almost guaranteed death!"

Panic was already taking hold of him as he realized the folly of his choice. He should have never agreed.

Alex put his hand on the trainer's shoulder.

"Clark, calm down. I know the stakes are high, but we still have a good chance of dealing with these. Also, consider the carnage these would do if they ever reach the city. Not many people can even dream of fighting against those yet. We have to do this."

Clark's eyes were wide with panic, like a deer in front of high beams, as he imagined himself getting carbonized by a lightning strike. And Alexander's words only stoked that panic.

"If so little people can fight this, all the more reason for me not to be here! I'm not a superhero, Alex! I might be able to take on stronger people now, but that doesn't mean I can fight a monster straight out of New Eden!"

His agitation made Juan nervous, as the young man also didn't think he was up to the task.

Behind Jack, Margaret looked at them and shook her head in disappointment.

'That's what I feared. They are just scared kids. How can I trust them with my life if we battle such monsters...'

Cory looked at the man throwing his tantrum, and he felt uneasy. This was a grave matter.

He also was shaking in his boots. But when he imagined these monsters rampaging in a city filled with innocent people, his mind refused to devolve into panic.

He couldn't let that happen. He wouldn't

David was still looking at the projected image, which was now just a black blob, and his mind was fumbling with thoughts.

'This changes everything. All those calculations are void... Even with all ten of us, our chances are meagre.'

Looking at Cory, he wondered how much of his avatar's powers the boy had on this side.

'Maybe with his help, we have a chance at not losing anyone, but grave injuries are bound to happen... If only I had formed my mana lobe already. I could pull out so much more undead. The world's mana is still too weak...'

Chapter 773 Weak World; A Double-Edged Sword

Jack didn't want to let the arguing go on for too long, but he also thought it was good for all those negative emotions to be laid bare before they were locked in life-or-death combat.

But someone he hadn't expected help from rapidly defused the situation.

"I think our chances are better this way, actually," Kary said, her face scrunched up.

This brought the arguing to a halt as everyone turned toward her.

"What?" Clark said, confused.

'Has she lost her mind after all this time around him?' David wondered, glancing at Alexander.

"Think about it," she said, stretching her hand toward Jack.

He understood what she wanted and handed her the remote.

Kary clicked a button on it, rewinding the footage to the first sighting of the Raijūs. His blue-streaked pattern was bright in it, lighting up on his fur.

"Look at his fur," she said, giving them a moment before forwarding the recording to the last seconds.

She paused as the wolves reappeared and zoomed in on the one to the left.

"Look at it now. Can't you see the difference?"

Look as they may, none could spot any noticeable difference—until David walked closer to the image.

His eyes lit up, a grin stretching on his lips.

"It seems the world is restraining them, just as it's restraining our progress. How did you even see this in the single second of the video?" he asked, turning toward Kary.

"I was focused on them. I guess my time in New Eden has sharpened my observation skills. But, the way I see things, that wolf drained much of its power to get rid of the drones. And I doubt it can recharge it fast."

David nodded his head, turning to the image again.

"Raijū usually live in areas high above the ground, where their proximity to the storm they generate allows them to gather the electric mana inside to refuel their powers.

"But the mana in this world is still too weak for them to do that. So, it has to use its power scarcely. It might still be in a weakened state as we speak!" he surmised.

Kary smiled.

'At least he's not just a meathead.'

"If we can get them to use their power early in the fight, while we are still at full power, I believe we can force them into weakened states and overpower them," she added, throwing the remote back to Jack.

Jack grinned at her.

'Just as I expected. This is her field of expertise.'

Behind him, Margaret was looking at Kary with a cocked eyebrow.

'She's much too smart to be playing games all day. This girl should have become an operative. Too bad the world is going to shit.'

Clark looked at Kary, his eyes still filled with uncertainty.

"And how do you propose we force them to use their power without killing us all? Did you see what they can do? This is a suicide mission."

Alex took the lead on answering that one, grinning from ear to ear.

"We brute force them into it."

He changed his hand into a wolverine claw; the claws gleaming in the room's low light, showing their sharpness.

Clark took a step back, seeing Alex use his power again. Images of him flying up the side of a building flashed in his mind, taking it off the mission, and he shivered.

"This settles the knowledge part of the briefing," Jack said, clapping his hands together.

"Now. How about we get to strategizing?" he added.

Clark and Juan were still reticent to participate in this, but one was choosing to trust Alex, and the other was thinking about the heavy bonus he would get for the completed mission.

'Maybe I can ask Colonel Lancaster for a heavier bonus for the risk factor?' he thought.

As soon as everyone nodded, with or without enthusiasm, Kary took the spotlight, pulling out weather data for the surrounding forest and pointing to the zone they should be hunting in.

Then, removing the weather factor, she pulled out a topographic map of the area, studied the layout, and started assigning everyone roles.

She had to ask everyone about their combat method and think about the best use of their different skills and abilities, but this was where she had always shone.

She made this as quick as possible, as time was not their ally, and eventually fleshed out a solid plan, in her opinion. And Jack couldn't think of anything better to add.

As their frontline, there would be Alex, his inherent toughness higher than anyone else, given his melding ability, and Juan and Clark, who would act as off-tanks. Their classes and combat styles would make them perfect for the job.

They would offer cover to Alex if he slipped up, but stay as much as possible out of the attacks of the two Raijū, so they didn't get killed. They would also act as tanks against the horde of dire wolves to protect the rest of the team.

Acting as harassers would be Jonathan, as well as David's undead, and Margaret. They would attack everything they could while staying as mobile as possible.

Then, there would be Jack, Kary, Violette, Cory, and David acting as their back-line. David was to stay there to protect the back-line to the best of his ability in case some wolves charged at them.

As for the three other back-liners, their role was evident.

Dish out a maximum of damage.

The only issue they still had was arming everyone. Alex might not need a weapon with his abilities, but the others differed.

Kary had become proficient enough in mana control to no longer require a wand, so she was fine, and Violette assured the group she was fine as well. David still had his bident he had made before, which also covered him.

But the rest were still empty-handed. But before they started worrying, Jack hoped in.

"Actually, there is a reason we came with this many vehicles. I have been working with Mr. Magnus since the service tunnel incident and have something for all of you."

He walked over to one crate the soldiers had unloaded and unclasped the lid.

When the crate opened, David nodded in satisfaction.

'Now we're talking.'

Chapter 774 Gearing Up

Laying on a plush foam bed were a nice set of daggers, the blades a creamy white. It was evident at first sight that these were made of bone.

"Mr. Magnus was gracious enough to explain that the monsters that came into our world were a great resource and that we shouldn't shy away from using it. It took a bit of learning to use this special material, but our engineers were able to get results."

Pulling out the daggers, which were evidently made from large canines, Jack handed them to his wife, who grabbed them before twirling them around with an expert hand, checking their balance and weight.

"Hmm. These will do," she claimed, grabbing the sheaths Jack was handing her and stowing the blades.

Closing the crate, he then pointed to each crate, telling their new proprietors which one was theirs.

Clark pulled out a set of bone brass knuckles, which seemed to be made with actual rat paws, the claws on it polished and sharpened.

Juan pulled out an enormous axe, whose shaft was made of titanium but tied to an axe blade made of bone, seemingly from an enormous ilium bone. It had been sharpened expertly, and Juan could tell this was a good axe.

Jonathan received a pair of gauntlets that had two shining orbs on them. At first, he wondered what they might be, but Alex looked at them in awe.

"The rats dropped monster cores?! Those are chock full of mana! Lucky bastard!"

Jonathan's ability to sense mana was still very rudimentary on this side, so he had missed that detail. But with Alex telling them what they were, he smiled.

These were similar to his weapons in New Eden. He could fight at ease with these.

Cory pulled a mace from his crate, made with a larger paw than the ones on Clark's knuckles, and had a monster core embedded between the claws. The heft of the weapon alone was enough to tell him this could cause severe damage.

Jack pulled a long rifle from a crate, and David frowned at him.

"I thought I had told you that normal weapons wouldn't damage these beasts..." he said, his forehead creased.

"Oh, but this is all but a regular weapon, Mr. Magnus," Jack replied.

He pulled the stock off the rifle, and David saw a small monster core inside it. Then, he also noticed some etching along the body and barrel of the rifle and understood what Jack meant.

But it still wouldn't suffice.

"That can charge mana into the bullets, but only barely. This'll tickle them, at best," David said, grimacing.

"Ah, but that's where these come in, young man," Jack said with a grin.

He lifted the foam bed, which the rifle had been resting on, and revealed a dozen magazines filled to the brim with bullets.

"This rifle wasn't modified inside, meaning it still fires bullets like a regular rifle. But the bullets get a small mana charge from the etching and the monster core. But the bullets themselves are where the true magic happens.

"You see, my class in New Eden, Prowler, also uses guns. And I have learned that there is more to firing those in New Eden than just the weapon. The bullets also play a significant role. So I studied them in the game. And came up with a solution to our problem.

"These bullets were specially engineered with monster parts so that the mana contained in the corpse stays inside. This way, the bullets are just as dangerous to people as they are to beasts."

David's eyebrow cocked up as he lay his eyes back on the bullets. He could feel a faint trace of mana inside them, but it was so tiny.

He doubted they could even hurt the rats they were made from.

Until he noticed etching on them as well.

He was no etching master, but he could tell it matched the one on the gun, and his mind lit up.

'An activation sequence! The mana is locked inside until they get fired! How ingenious,' he thought, getting excited.

"I guess we'll see on the battlefield," he said, faking indifference.

David reeled as he turned away, looking at the other, still-unopened crates.

'This is not something I told him to do... They are using techniques that shouldn't be used yet. Just how much am I changing the timeline...'

Everyone was inspecting each other's new gear when Jack clapped his hands together again.

"The gifting isn't over. Gather 'round."

Their attention snapped back to him, smiles rising. Everything they received could significantly raise their chances of survival.

And who would say no to free stuff, right?

Once everyone was before him once more, Jack pulled forward another crate, this one bigger.

"We didn't just use the bones and cores. Since Mr. Magnus told us that every part can be used, we used as much as possible. Therefore, we could sew together some light armour made from the pelts of the rats.

"Rest easy; they were washed clean and fixed. There won't be any funny smell or unfortunate holes and tears in them.

"We made them to the sizes we knew, and for the ones we didn't know, we made various sizes, to be sure. Plenty of armours are available, so please pick out the ones with your names on them or one that fits if you can't find one tagged to your name."

The group huddled up around the crate, pulling out the leather armours one after another and putting them on.

It was an awkward experience for those who had never donned leather armour, but a few of them went around helping the others, as they were experienced.

Alex was one of them, as he had learned how to don his armour without the equip function in New Eden, simply for the fun of immersion. The other was David, surprisingly.

But his experience came from elsewhere.

Once everyone was geared up, they all looked like a small tribe of old getting ready to hunt a mammoth or something. It was almost comical.

"Alright, then! Seems like we're ready. Let's get going," Jack called out, heading for the door.

'Let the hunt begin,' Alex thought, grinning nervously.

Chapter 775 Taunting The Raijū

Walking out of the chalet, Alex took the front, looking at the sky, to orient himself toward the black storm in the distance. By his estimation, the eye of the storm was about a three hours' trek away.

This would be one hell of a walk, but they should be fine. At worst, they could take brief breaks on their way there.

Heading northwest, they could already see the small mountain range ahead where the wolves were nesting. It wasn't a vast mountain range, but their height was impressive for such small mountains.

During the strategizing part of the briefing, Kary had pulled out topographical maps, and they saw that the mountains reached a bit over four hundred meters high.

This explained why the Raijū had taken a liking to the place, as it was one of the highest mountains in the region and, therefore, was the closest to the sky.

David also surmised the breach they came in through might be pretty close, meaning they had a small influx of mana available to them nearby.

After hunting the wolves, they would have to find the breach and ensure it was sealed shut. They wouldn't want another group to go through it and waste their efforts.

On the way toward the mountain, the group stopped often, cracking in the woods, putting them on high alert, or howling in the distance, making them wary. This made the trip take longer and much more nerve-wracking than planned.

This also meant they would get to their planned ambush site and feel much more on edge. Which could either keep them on top of their game or unnecessarily tire them out.

Only time would tell which one it turned out to be.

They also had to stop midway to eat, as it was already noon.

Jack had ensured they all carried protein bars with no odour coming from them, which also meant they had little to no flavour. It was like chewing on a cardboard bar.

But it would keep them fed and reduce the risk of getting spotted preemptively, which was all that mattered to him.

After a long four-hour trek, they were finally where they intended to fight the wolves.

Kary had picked a small valley, niche'd in between the three mountains that composed the mountain range. It had only two entrances and little to no cornices for the wolves to attack them from.

This was especially important for the two Raijū they would fight, as they possessed range capabilities. The dire wolves were less of a risk for this.

Of course, they could still use the cronies to ambush them, but Kary had no intention of letting them. They would be the ones doing the ambushing today.

They took a position as they had discussed earlier, with the back-line starting on the few outcroppings on the hillside, from where they could attack from a safe place.

Jack had one such place, as did Violette. They would be most useful to have on high ground.

As for Cory, he would be best used on the ground, where he could heal them if something happened.

Kary was also fine attacking from the ground, as her control allowed her to arc her attacks at will, making terrain a non-issue for her.

David was only in the back-line to protect them, in the first place, so he would start hidden, like the harassers.

Jonathan, Margaret, and the undead that David had summoned along the way started hiding between cragged rocks, or broken trees, ready to jump out and get to work.

Next, Clark and Juan stood near the northern crack that led into this valley and waited for their sign to attack.

It had already been decided that Alex would be the bait. Aside from Jonathan, he was their fastest runner and had a higher chance of making it out of the fire alive.

So, once everyone was in position, he nodded at Kary and bolted into the opening. He was about to become a massive pain in those wolves' asses.

He quickly reached the area that the drones had flown over before getting wrecked, as testified by the half-fried plastic shell of a drone he found as he ran. This meant he was near his targets.

Alex could have gone in and ham-fisted his way into their bad graces. But he chose a different approach.

'Alright, White. You ready?' Alex asked in his mind.

'Yes, Master.'

'Then give me your best alpha howl,' he said, grinning.

Melding with White, Alex felt his primal urge for dominance rise. White could feel the presence of the Raijū, and his alpha instincts kicked in.

AAWWWWOOOOOOO!

The howl echoed in the mountain range, reaching even back to their chalet, where the soldiers had already returned.

When they heard it, a shiver ran down their spines, their bodies reacting instinctively.

"I hope their fight doesn't drag down here. I have a bad feeling..." the merc that drove Alex and Kary said, rubbing away the goosebumps on his arms.

Soon, a second and third howl followed, vibrating the air in the mountain range as static crackled in the air. Alex knew his plan had worked.

"Come on. Come get me, you electric dog. I know you feel challenged," Alex muttered.

He lowered his stance, ready to run. He still had to mark himself as a threat in the eyes of the pack, so his job wasn't entirely done.

Seconds later, Alex felt the ground under his feet start to rumble. He could feel his heart palpitate nervously as the rumbling grew.

As soon as the first signs of white peeked over the hill before him, Alex dashed forward, his claws open and his arms extended outward.

The first wolf to cross the lip was a dire wolf, and it almost jumped in fright when a tiny wolf-looking human appeared before it.

But it didn't get the time to react in any other fashion, as Alex's claws flashed before him, and a head flew.

Blood splattered everywhere, making the pack of wolves halt in their tracks.

The Raijū jumped over the pack, landing near Alex, and saw the bloodied human, along with the corpse of its pack member. A low growl escaped its maw.

"That's right! I did this! And I'll do the same to your entire pack! So come get me, you dog!" Alex shouted, thumping his chest with his bloodied fist.

The Raijū howled again, its horn starting to light up, and that was Alex's queue to get out of there.

As soon as the head lifted and the maw opened, Alex turned on his heels and bolted away. He used his utmost speed to get out of lightning range from the Raijū before arcing his way toward the valley.

"Game on!" he shouted.

Chapter 776 The Valley Becomes Lively

Running away as fast as he could, Alex heard lightning crack behind him, followed by a loud explosion, which he felt blasting past his shoulder. The heat and pressure signalled it had blown up very close, and he gulped.

'Lightning moves too fast for me even to detect it before it's too late. I can't afford to get hit...' he thought.

A cacophony of howls resounded behind him as the ground started rumbling again.

Turning his head slightly to the left, Alex could see the pack of dire wolves had given chase, and he snickered.

"Yeah! Come get me, you dumb dogs!" he taunted them.

He didn't know if they could understand him, but he reckoned they did, judging by the angry snarls and vicious growls escaping their maws.

He rushed toward the valley where the rest of the team awaited him and quickly bolted past the entrance, yelling at the top of his lungs.

"Now, Violette! Split them!"

Grinding to a halt, Alex spun around, looking toward the gap, awaiting anything that got here too fast.

But Violette was ready for him and was already casting her spell.

A wall of water rose from the ground before him, forming an inverted T at the mouth of the pass before turning to ice in a single moment.

The wolves rushing behind Alex were now forced to split in two directions, the path too narrow and their momentum too fast for them to stop. From the valley walls, Jack and Violette smiled.

Immediately, a loud bang of gunfire echoed through the valley as one of the dire wolves dropped dead.

Pulling the bolt on his rifle as the bullet casing flew out the side, Jack grinned.

"One down. Twenty-eight to go."

He wasn't expecting to kill every wolf with one bullet, as they now were aware of his presence. But this first kill was satisfying to him.

The wolves finally started pouring into the valley, where Clark, on one side, and Juan, on the other, greeted them with open arms.

The ice walls did not fool the following Raijū, and they quickly bounded up, bouncing off the pass walls, and landed directly in the middle of the valley, where Alex was waiting for them.

As they landed, he was already bolting toward them, claws out, hoping to get in a few preemptive strikes. But the Raijū were much faster than him and managed to side-step out of his attacks, trying to lunge at his back.

The maws got extremely close to Alex before two blurs shot past them, minor cuts appearing under the Raijū's jaws, their head snapping upward.

They turned their heads to follow the movements of their assailants but were forced to look away before they could get a glance, as a small army of undead was suddenly nipping at their heels.

David had sent his order, and now his undead would fight the Raijū until they dropped.

Jonathan and Margaret swung around the small valley, hitting the dire wolves as they passed near them, ensuring every movement wasn't wasted. Of course, flybys like these were far from accurate, at least for Jonathan.

He may be used to going this fast in New Eden, but even the slightest mistake could prove deadly out here. So, he was much more cautious.

As for Margaret, well, she could fight these mutts with her eyes closed, she believed.

Her only actual threat lay in the lightning attacks of the two Raijū, who were now aware of their existence.

Margaret also kept an eye out for her grandson, Jonathan. She had raised that boy for years and had no intention of watching him die. She had already lost her son, his father, and wasn't ready for another loss.

Both Raijū quickly realized they had stepped into an ambush and suddenly became cautious. They could already hear the death throes of their pack as the group's back-line tried making quick work of them.

This angered them, and they howled loudly, making Alex, David, and Kary shiver instinctively.

Kary was the first to react to this.

"Regroup! The dire wolves are about to rampage!" she shouted.

Immediately after, she focused on her mana, pushing as much as she could without knocking herself out, and formed a thick wall of flames between the dire wolves and the Raijū. She wanted to prevent them from regrouping, as well.

Clark and Juan darted backward, trying to force their way back to the group, but a Raijū suddenly appeared behind the berserker.

Juan felt a shiver down his spine as a shadow loomed over him. Before he could understand what was happening, a powerful force slammed into him, pushing him sideways.

But a lightning-fast claw swipe ripped into his arm, making him almost drop his weapon.

Slamming into the valley wall, Juan howled in pain.

Margaret saw this and used her speed to her advantage.

The massive zombie bear that had pushed Juan aside was already tangled with the Raijū, but it wouldn't last long.

She dashed toward the young merc and grabbed him by his armour. Using her momentum and newfound strength as an awakened, she threw him toward the healer kid.

She could afford to dance with the Raijū for a few moments as long as Alex came in to help her quickly enough.

But another issue arose.

Even though Alex was meant to keep their attention, the Raijū ignored him in favour of taking out some of the nuisances to their pack. This meant another person was suddenly in danger.

Jack's hair rose all over his body, and he reacted off instinct alone, jumping down from his perch.

The next moment, a ball of lightning appeared before it, as the second Raijū clamped its jaw on the now empty air where he had been. But it wasn't done.

It lunged downward, setting its paws on the wall, trying to get its prey.

A column of ice grew out of the valley wall, slamming into the Raijū's body, sending it tumbling back toward the ground as Violette reacted to the threat.

But Jack was still falling to the ground.

He might have a solid body, but the hundred-foot drop would not spare him.

Jonathan saw his grandfather fall, and the image of his dying parents in a burning car flashed in his mind. The fear of losing a loved one gripped his heart, freezing his movements.

Things were beginning to devolve too fast for anyone to react.

Chapter 777 A Bump In Their Plan

Alex saw the two Raijū transform into balls of lightning and snickered.

'Yes. Use up your power,' he thought.

But he only thought that because he imagined they would use their powers to get rid of him.

Seeing them dart left and right, his heart skipped a beat.

'Fuck!'

He wasn't fast enough to follow them and could only watch in horror as he watched them go for his allies.

He froze momentarily, time crawling forward around him as he imagined the worst.

Juan almost getting clawed in half. Jack falling from his perch.

He saw it all happen and knew he was too slow to react.

Jack was getting closer to the ground, where he would assuredly suffer grave injuries in the best-case scenario. He would never get there in time.

Juan, flying sideways through the air, was about to fall to Cory's feet. There was nothing he could do to help him.

'Did we bite off more than we could chew?' he wondered, his heart beating fast.

"Snap out of it, wolfy!" he heard from behind him.

Something flew past his head blazingly fast, going toward the wall where Jack was falling. With a resounding twang sound, David's bident embedded itself in the rock under Jack, giving him something to grab onto and slow down his fall.

Jack heard the noise below him and only had a moment to react. But his reflexes were much quicker than your regular old fart, and he managed to twist his body awkwardly to spin toward the ground.

As he did, he passed the bident and grabbed it with his left hand, holding his rifle in the other.

His downward speed was high, and it forced him into a spin around the shaft he held firmly in his hand. When he finally stopped spinning, he kicked at the wall, pulling himself away and the weapon as he fell the last ten feet to the ground.

Landing with a superhero pose, Jack quickly lunged forward.

He was still in a dangerous spot and couldn't stay static.

He shot the bident toward the back-line, knowing whose weapon this was, and stowed his rifle away, going for a sidearm instead. Pulling out a dagger from his belt, similar to his wife's daggers, he lunged through the enraged dire wolves.

"Thanks, asshole!" Jack shouted.

David did not mind the insult; he knew now was no time for arguing. He jumped up, catching his weapon in mid-air, and spun around as he landed.

Alex finally snapped out of his daze, realizing he was burdening the others, and dashed toward the Raijū, who was reaching the ground after getting struck by the ice pillar.

He had to lock at least one down, or else he would have failed his one task.

Running to it, he reached inside him, touching Morpheus' soul.

'I know I never brought out on this side and that the mana here is weak. But I need you. Please help me. Help them,' he pleaded.

The soul pulsed lightly, responding to his call.

Alex felt an immense amount of mana siphon out of his body, a sign that Morpheus was being summoned to his side.

'I never realized how little mana I had on this side. I barely feel it when I summon them in New Eden anymore...'

The pitch-black bat suddenly shot out of his, starting at regular size before ballooning to the size it had in New Eden. With a high-pitched shriek, it announced its presence on the battlefield.

The wolves and Raijū jerked from the shriek, their sensitive hearing making it painful.

"Get rid of the dire wolves!" Alex shouted to it.

Morpheus started looping the sky above the valley, visible pulses leaving its mouth, hitting the dire wolves in the face. And with every pulse, the pain on their faces replaced the rage, and their frothing snarls turned to whimpering cries.

Meanwhile, David took it upon himself to busy up the second Raijū.

Slapping his hands together, a cloud of black smoke rose from them as he slammed them into the ground.

"Come out, death knight! Take care of that dog for me!" he shouted as a slim hand burst through the compacted mud, looking like a bad zombie movie scene.

As soon as the death knight pulled itself out of the ground, it summoned its halberd and charged at the Raijū. It mattered not if it could win.

The orders of its master were absolute, and he would fight until he dropped if so ordered.

With both Raijū suddenly pinned down again, panting and exhausted, evidently from using their powers, the battle reset itself to a normal pace.

This gave time to Cory, who had just received Juan like a hundred and eighty pound bag of potatoes, thrown at him stupidly hard. It had sent both of them tumbling to the ground.

But as soon as he saw the blood on the man's arm, Cory forgot he was about to complain, and his healer instincts kicked in.

With Kary containing most of the dire wolves, Morpheus raining pain on them, and Violette doing the same, the rest of the party regrouped to get new instructions.

Jonathan was still in a daze, although he joined up with them, and Margaret was harassing the Raijū along with the undead that had just joined her.

Jack had cleared the stray dire wolves out, making them semi-safe outside the flame wall. But Kary couldn't hold it for much longer.

Her face was covered in sweat, and her skin was pale.

"I can't hold this wall for long. When it goes down, you will all need to use everything you have to kill the pack. Only then will we be able to deal properly with the two threats."

Heads nodded all around, even from Juan, who was still getting patched up. It had been a shock to him to see the deep gouges in his limb suddenly start closing as a faint golden light emanated from Cory's hand.

Everyone here was extraordinary somehow, and he still had difficulty wrapping his head around it. They were making superheroes look dull in comparison.

"Alright! Get ready, I'm dropping the wall!" Kary shouted, her legs wobbling.

As soon as she dropped it, all hell broke loose once more.

Chapter 778 Desperate Raijū

Only eight wolves were left when the Firewall extinguished, but they had red eyes and frothing mouths. They all lunged together as soon as they saw a person near them.

Sadly, the poor sap getting assaulted like that was Alexander, who was locked in a heated exchange of claw swipes with a Raijū and had little to no manoeuvring space.

But before they could reach him, a torrent of undead came charging in, a mix of animals that the dire wolves had fed on, and released their vindictive energy on the wolves. Behind them, Clark, Jonathan, and the freshly healed Juan dashed at the dire wolves.

Violette had never stopped attacking the wolves from her little outcropping of rock on the side of the valley, but she was starting to feel tired. The ice wall at the start of their ambush had already drained a lot from her.

So pushing out a powerful ice pillar from the opposite side of the valley to save Jack had left her running on fumes.

But she pushed through, knowing she was one of their only mages in a favourable position.

She had seen how tired Kary looked from afar and knew the woman was in the same position as her. They couldn't keep this up for too long.

But the group made quick work of the dire wolves as Clark charged back against one of the Raijū, the one already getting swarmed by Margaret, his help no longer needed on the pack.

The Raijū quickly noticed their pack was decimated and that their chances of winning this had nearly bottomed out. With a loud howl that shook the air, sending the people half-kneeling as they held their ears, the Raijū regrouped.

Lightning appeared around their horns as they looked at the group with hatred and malice.

David's face paled.

"Don't get hit by those attacks! Disperse and hide!" he shouted, lunging for the nearest set of rocks to cover his body.

He knew this attack. He had fought Raijū in his past life, and this attack could one-shot a tank player.

Anyone taking this would instantly be vaporized.

Everyone that was near the Raijū suddenly scrambled to hide. But the hiding spots were very few.

There was a reason they picked this valley for their ambush.

Cory was left spinning his head like a panicked animal, not finding anything to hide behind, as was Violette, whose position didn't allow her to hide at all.

In the instant before the attack finally left the Raijū's horns, Alex noticed the two stragglers. He hadn't hidden yet, in case this would happen, and now he didn't know who to help.

"Help Violette!" he heard before lightning cracked.

"Thousand Thoughts!" Alex shouted, time almost stopping around him.

As he felt his mind accelerate, Alex delved into Solomon's ring.

"Asmodeus! Come out!" he shouted, reaching the white room where Solomon was.

The old man looked at him with worry. The kid rarely came here in his human form.

This could only mean something terrible was happening.

But the demon wasn't responding.

"Asmodeus! Come out right this instant!" Alex screamed, a tinge of despair in his voice.

Solomon didn't know why the demon wasn't responding to the kid, but he decided to help him. Snapping his fingers, he forced the demon to appear, making the latter click his tongue in annoyance.

Seeing him, Alex ran up to him.

"Meld with me right now! I need your powers!"

Alex was in a hurry and tried touching the demon king to accelerate the process. But Asmodeus teleported a few feet away.

"No. I don't want to. Your world is boring. Every time you use my powers, nothing fun happens. Don't call on me for trivialities."

Solomon frowned.

It was rare for demons to be obedient; that much he knew. But the ring should have forced him to obey.

'Is the seal I put on them weakening? Is it because the kid is too weak still?'

Asmodeus was about to teleport away when Alex suddenly flashed before him. A hand clamped on the demon's throat, locking him in place.

"You don't get to say no to me!" Alex growled, his voice suddenly doubling out.

One of his eyes had gone black, his iris turning red, and his canines suddenly seemed sharper.

"You are melding with me, or I will devour your essence and feed on it, reducing you to nothing."

Asmodeus chuckled at the threat. He highly doubted the human part of his new 'Master' could achieve this. But something was telling him the kid was no longer simply human.

That demonization wasn't coming from any demon in the ring. It could only mean one thing.

"So you've finally become corrupted. Now THAT is interesting," the demon said, his eyes gleaming with curiosity.

"Fine. I'll meld with you; I want to meet that new demon birthing in you. That'll make my time worthwhile."

Solomon's heart skipped a beat at the words. He was about to call out to Alexander when Asmodeus vanished, and Alex followed suit.

"Wait!" he shouted.

But he was already alone.

"Was it a mistake to give him access to the ring?" he muttered, his face suddenly grave.

As Alexander's surroundings returned to the valley, he noticed the Thousand Thoughts spell was still in effect. He could see the lightning had travelled much more than he was comfortable with, but it wasn't too late.

Around Cory, a golden bubble had appeared, and he could tell nothing would get through it. But how weak the kid would be after that was left to be seen.

As for Violette, her face was stuck in a mask of fear as the lightning bolt was getting dangerously close to her.

He teleported in front of her, the movement instantaneous, and stood before the lightning bolt.

Reaching inside himself, he tapped into his newly formed mana lobe, and drained it completely, using a spell he had only recently learned in New Eden.

A thick blue barrier appeared between him and the lightning bolt, containing all of Alex's mana. He could only hope it was enough.

The added power from Asmodeus might be strong, but he could barely tap into it as a human. This meant that aside from teleportation, Asmodeus' power was inaccessible to him.

After forming the barrier, he teleported once more to get closer to Violette and grabbed her in his arms, acting as a human shield.

His Thousand Thoughts ended, and lightning flashed across the valley, causing two explosions.

Everything turned white for a few seconds, and everyone's ears rang loudly, their eardrums not blown out but in awful shape.

"Is everyone ok?!" Kary shouted, trying to assess the damage.

The silence was her response.

Chapter 779 Counting Members

Kary imagined the worst momentarily until she faintly heard some coughing through the ringing of her ears.

"They probably can't hear me... Let's hope the Raijū are gone..."

She waited for the ringing to calm down before calling out to her team again. And this time, there were answers.

"I'm okay!" *Cough cough*

This voice came from near her, and she saw Jack getting out from behind a shattered tree, which he had most likely been hiding behind until the attack vaporized it.

He was covered with pieces of blown-out wood of various sizes, and his face had a few cuts on it as well.

Other replies came soon after, coming from around the valley, and Kary mentally counted them.

She got to seven, including herself, and her heart froze.

"Where are Cory, Alex and Violette?! Has anyone seen them?!"

The dust was settling back in the valley, and Kary finally saw the aftermath of the two Raijū's attacks. And it was terrifying.

In a straight line toward where Cory had been standing, nothing remained. What little grass had been there amidst the overturned dirt was gone.

The dirt itself had calcified, and the rock under it was exposed.

Only a single circle, no larger than a few feet wide, was left intact, and in its center, the crumpled body of Cory.

"Cory!" Kary screamed in panic.

She ran toward him, as much as her exhausted body allowed her, and dropped to his side.

Leaning close to him, she could hear breathing and exhaled in relief.

The others reached her, and she nodded her head.

"He's ok. Just unconscious. He must have used a powerful protection spell to keep himself safe and drained all his mana."

She felt a part of the tension release around her as the others sighed in relief.

Their worst fear was to lose someone on this mission, after all.

"Now, where are Alex and Violette? I'm sure they are safe somewhere. Have you seen them?" she asked, her heart feeling lighter.

But then she noticed Jack's dark gaze as he looked upward past her. Margaret was also looking there before looking at Kary, her eyes heavy with empathy.

Kary turned her head toward where Jack was looking, and her heart dropped.

Where there once had been a cornice, from which Violette had rained death upon the wolves, was now a crater extending to the top of the valley. The top was still molten, indicating the extreme force that had destroyed the rock.

"No..." Kary said, her eyes suddenly filling with tears.

Her body filled with adrenaline as her fears ate at her mind.

She was already seeing flashes of finding Violette and Alex's corpses, half incinerated, with looks of terror on their faces.

"No... No, no, no, no!" she shouted in despair, jumping up and running to the wall.

Her inhuman body carried her up the valley wall faster than anything she had ever climbed, and she reached where the crater began. There were no signs of anyone there.

Snapping her head in every direction, Kary tried to find a clue of what might have happened. Maybe they managed to escape the blast.

But try as she may, all she saw was molten rock, already eating at the soles of her shoes.

Jack managed to climb there second, as he was the least tired, and looked at the devastation. He sighed heavily.

But as his head drooped, shaking it, he noticed something at his feet.

A part of a leather armour was burning up on the ground in the molten rock. But the edges of it were fine, like it had been torn, not burnt off.

He angled himself in the approximate direction of the lightning bolt and stood before the piece of armour. The angle made him lift his head, and he could clearly see the sky.

"Get up, young woman. Don't give in to despair yet," Jack said, walking past her and up the crater.

"I believe they escaped a part of the blast. I doubt he died that easily."

Kary's eyes lit up with hope.

"I doubt that," David said, landing near them.

"I've seen what that attack can do. Not even a full tank class, at level seventy, could take this on and live. At best, he survived the initial blast and was flung away, where he bled out."

Kary's hope was replaced with anger, and her hands lit on fire.

"Shut up! Why are you always so negative?! I should burn your face off just for talking about him like this!" she shouted, the flames on her hands becoming brighter.

They flashed blue briefly before she winced in pain, releasing the spell. Her hands were seared.

"You can't even control your power correctly yet. What makes you believe he can? I know he's strong in New Eden. But that's not enough. Those monsters were dangerous."

"I wasn't even sure they could use that attack, given how weakened they were supposed to be. Had I known they could, I would have asked that we gather more people. Villagers be damned if they chose to stay. You don't realize what they are capable of."

"Enough!" Jack scolded.

"If you are right, then there is still a chance that he is alive. Now stop tormenting her and get to searching!"

"Tch!"

David gave up on convincing them and figured showing them a corpse would be better. He hated to think about it, as he had grown to appreciate Alexander, but life was never fair.

Kary spat at David's feet before spinning on her heels and climbing out of the crater.

The others were still taking a breather in the valley, and no one could blame them.

As she reached the valley's top, she noticed the storm had shifted further north, and the lightning was still intense.

'They're still alive... I hope we didn't lose people in vain...'

But the moment she thought this, lightning flashed in the distance, thunder rumbling, followed by an ungodly screech that pulled at their chest, like something was rending their souls from their bodies.

"What in the name of god made that sound?" Jack asked, turning to David.

He was the most knowledgeable about monsters, so he should know.

"I... I have no idea..." David dropped, holding his chest.

He'd never heard such a screech. And he wasn't even sure he wanted to find out what it was.

The trio kept looking for a few minutes, constantly going further from the crater and plateau as they started going uphill a bit.

"Violette!" Kary suddenly screamed.

She ran forward, throwing herself to her knees, and picked up the little girl, whose hair was singed but otherwise unharmed. She looked like she had passed out and was slowly waking up.

"Where's Alex?" Kary asked, hope reigniting in her heart.

The girl's eyelids fluttered for a moment before tears filled them.

"Alex..."

Kary looked at her, her eyes turning back to panic.

"Where is he? Was he with you?"

"He's *Sob* Alex's... he's gone..." Violette said, starting to cry.

Chapter 780 Is This Death?

The moment the lightning struck

Alex could feel the lightning's power pushing against his barrier. He could already tell the barrier wouldn't be powerful enough to contain it entirely.

He had already used all his mana and was fighting to stay conscious. If he fainted now, nothing would protect Violette.

And he had sworn to her mother he would bring her back intact. He couldn't fail to uphold his promise.

When the barrier broke, the lightning crashed into his back, pushing him and Violette into the rock wall before the sheer power of it pushed them through, sending them barreling through the air.

After a few seconds of flight, holding onto Violette and covering her as best he could with his arms, he felt the cold, hard surface of the mountain slam against him as he crash-landed on the plateau, bouncing a few times.

He felt something break in his lower back, and suddenly, his legs went numb.

Then he cracked his head on a passing stone, and his sight blurred.

As his eyes were closing, his body started feeling light. All his worries vanished as he remembered all the good times in his life.

The trips to the amusement park with his parents as a kid.

The times he fooled around with his dad, as his mother scolded them both for being clowns.

The wonderful breakfasts his mother would make every weekend.

And more recently, when he realized he had fallen in love.

The week of taking care of Violette, making her discover pizza and poutine.

The smiles, the laughs.

'Is this what it feels like to die?' he wondered as he slipped out of consciousness.

'It wasn't an awful life. I wish I could have done more. As long as Violette is safe...'

He could hear her panicked cries next to him, as she shook loose from his grip. Then he heard her terrified cries as a low growl reached his ears.

But it was ever so faintly.

'They decided to finish us off... So, I failed in the end... I'm sorry, Violette. I'm sorry, Katherine and Richard... Sorry I fell short at the moment it mattered most... I hope to repent in my next life if reincarnation is real...'

His eyes closed, and he felt himself turn weightless.

A second later, his eyes opened again in a familiar white room. The room still had the strange blue markings all over the walls and the bright orb in its center, caged in the red glyphs.

"Inside my soul? Is this where I'll be judged? How strange..." Alex commented.

"No, you idiot! You aren't dead yet! And you can't die! If you die, we die!" a small, angry voice shouted at him.

At his feet, the imp representing his corruption was fuming angrily.

And not far from him, a childish version of Geminae was pacing.

"This is a terrible idea, I'm telling you! If we do this, and we can't control the body properly, we could kill ourselves!" he scolded, his hands swishing over his head.

The imp turned to him and growled.

"Then would you prefer we just die? Simple like that? Are you stupid?! If we try, at least we have a chance of surviving. It's also not my fault this colossal idiot put himself in front of a sure kill attack," the imp replied, kicking Alex's foot.

"It's madness!" Geminae shot back, stopping his pacing.

"Uh... What is?" Alex asked.

He thought fate was cruel for forcing him to endure a fight between these two as his last moments before judgment.

"It doesn't matter what. We shouldn't even be thinking this!"

Alex shrugged, uncaring. He was dead anyway.

What did it matter if they were panicking?

The imp at his feet gasped.

"His feet! They're disappearing! We have to act now, angel boy! If we don't, we'll die too!"

Geminae's head snapped toward Alex, and he saw that he was slowly disappearing.

"By the gods... We can't... It's not natural..." Geminae said, his eyes going wide.

"Fuck you! I'm not dying!" the imp screamed.

He jumped up Alex's body and grabbed his head between his hands.

"Sorry, big guy, but this isn't going to be fun. You'll thank me later if we survive."

Alex's eyes went wide as the imp shoved himself into his mouth, turning to smoke. Alex could feel the smoke claw inside his throat, trying to reach his stomach.

"No! Stop!" Geminae shouted.

He ran to Alex, who was now kneeling on the ground, holding his throat, feeling like he was choking.

"Sorry, but I can't let him control the body alone. You'll have to trust that I'll force him back if we succeed."

After saying this, Geminae pierced his hand inside Alex's chest, similar to what he did to the demons when he wanted to touch their souls the first time, and turned to a bright golden light.

Alex writhed in pain as his body suddenly contained two more souls fighting to control it.

"AARRGGHH!!!" he screamed as his throat finally cleared.

"Get out of me! You're hurting me!"

He got no reply from either of the entities, and shortly after, he fainted from the pain.

Outside his soul, time had barely moved as he was having this conversation, and he had just released his last breath.

Violette was in fear that she would die now that Alex was dead, and both Raijū were before her, snarling. Their pelts were faded white, with the blue patterns barely visible, but they still had the energy to move.

They sauntered their way forward, hunger in their eyes, as they stared at Violette. Tears rolled off her cheeks as fear overcame her.

But just as they reached a few feet before her, a powerful wave of wind and energy blasted them away, originating from Alex's corpse.

Violette was also pushed away, the sudden burst knocking the air out of her lungs and knocking her unconscious. She hit the ground a hundred feet away, down a small hill, her eyes already rolled back in her head.

Alex's body stood up as his bones cracked back into place. His face changed as the left half turned red, his mouth going into a maniacal grin, and the right half turned delicate, with tears flowing down the eye.

A white wing tore out of his back on the right side, followed by a darkened bat-ish-looking wing on the left, splashing blood on the ground as they ripped his skin open.

The Raijū felt immense pressure from this thing, and lightning cracked above them, hitting their horns.

Some of that energy went into their bodies, making the blue patterns glow again.

Alex's deformed body screeched loudly in response, accepting their challenge, and lunged at them.

It had devolved into a monster-against-monster battle.