

BIOLOGICAL 251

Chapter 251: Volkov

Banners and flags floated in the air; children had balloons and ice cream in their hands, and their parents were watching them closely to avoid losing them in the sea of people attending the annual parade.

It was a day of festivities in Fasard as they were celebrating the city's foundation 70 years before.

Compared to New Alexandria, Fasard was a much bigger city. This was because it was situated in a plain at the foot of the Karduan mountain range, which was relatively safe compared to a city like New Alexandria, which was instead placed in one of the most dangerous places of the area, where beasts roamed freely, and their sizes significantly differed.

The city was celebrating its founding, and, as usual, everyone was waiting for the main star to appear, Sinisa Volkov, the mayor himself.

This man was said to be as strong as Becker and the Fierce Lioness. He was a living legend. He was an extremely strong soldier and retained his vigor due to his intense daily training. He governed the city with a velvet glove, and all the people inside the city adored him. Despite his strength and military prowess, he was known for his kindness and compassion toward the people he governed.

His leadership was characterized by a perfect balance of power and empathy, making him a beloved figure in the city. All of this, at least on the surface, as the truth was that dark rumors, promptly suppressed by his government, went on about the man.

Sinisa Volkov was making his entrance. This year, the parade had a medieval theme: Volkov was going to enter through the city's door on a white horse and was followed by countless soldiers walking behind him.

It was a procession made more to show off the might of the city's ruler than to celebrate the city's founding. As soon as the sound of the fanfare rang, the city's door opened, and he entered on the top of his white horse. In front of the door, countless people were waiting for him, and this human sea went on for kilometers inside the city.

Volkov started waving his hands left and right, greeting the people and smiling radiantly at them.

Behind him, hundreds of the city's elite soldiers were following in black robes adorned with snake-like embroidery and purple patterns. Further behind, countless musicians played the traditional city's hymn, and people danced in rhythm.

After half an hour of walking among the crowds, Volkov finally arrived at the town hall. He went to the top of a huge podium and talked to the people. His speech could be heard on every city corner. Volkov thanked the people for their warm welcome.

"Ladies and gentlemen, It gives me great pleasure to stand before you today to celebrate the founding of our beloved city, Fasard. As you all know, it was exactly 70 years ago that our forefathers established this great city. They did so to create a community where people could live, work, and thrive together. Our city has come a long way since then.

What started as a small settlement has now grown into a thriving metropolis with over a million people..."

The man looked at the adoring crowd in front of him, who was now intently listening to the man's speech.

"...and I can't thank you enough for what you did during these countless years. After all, it is thanks to you and our ancestors that you were able to lay down the city's foundation and were able to create the walls still standing tall against the horrors roaming the earth in this age and place." Volkov said during his speech.

"Today is a joyous occasion, and I want you all to have fun, bring your children outside, and spend your time with whom you love."

The speech continued for a bit more, and once it ended, Volkov entered his villa. He started walking down a huge corridor connecting the multiple villa rooms and stopped in the middle of it. He went inside a particular room in which multiple tables and chairs could be seen. He was followed by several people, who were the ones who helped him manage the city.

Everyone sat on multiple chairs, and the servant brought them coffee, tea, and different beverages.

"This year went well too, your excellency," said one. "We were also able to implement several new policies that have benefited the citizens," added another.

"Yeah, and this year's particular theme was beautiful; it was truly a great idea," said another. The people surrounding him started bootlicking Volkov, but the latter grew impatient.

"Enough of this, Stella; bring me the best scotch we have in the house." It seemed like Volkov was not interested in receiving any more compliments, and he wanted to move on to a different topic of discussion. The group quickly fell silent as he requested scotch for Stella.

The head housemaid, Stella, brought a bottle of scotch that the staff had explicitly made to please Volkov, and she poured its contents into a red crystal cup. She then picked up the glass, holding it with a cloth, and offered it to his lord.

"Much better..." Volkov said.

A sinister grin spread across his face as Volkov took another sip of his scotch. The praise and flattery from his entourage had always been a source of amusement for him, but he craved something more than mere words of admiration. He wanted power, and he wanted it all for himself.

The way he yelled orders at Stella, the head housemaid, showed how little he cared for people less important than himself. He saw them as nothing more than mere servants meant to cater to his every whim. And as he sipped the scotch, he reveled in the fact that it had been explicitly prepared to please him.

"Now that the parade has ended, if I may ask your excellency, what do you plan to do?" a man in his forties asked.

"I'm making plans to head out to New Alexandria in the following months, as Becker asked for my help. That prick, he can't rule a city; how can he think he can rule a nation?" Volkov replied, showing his pure distaste for the man.

"New Alexandria? I heard the situation was bad and that there are still many thaid's near the city. Are you sure this is not dangerous?"

"There is no dangerous place for me on this earth... Oh, did I tell you that, apparently, behind the beast, tide hides an Heniate, and they asked me to help them find and kill it? It looks like they also want us to help them cull the monster population."

"This is indeed a great opportunity for you; we can raise your approval rating, and if the time comes, we could also get rid of Becker," someone said.

"You surely know that talking about this is akin to treason, am I right?" Volkov said.

"Yes, sir, forgive me for my words..." The man prostrated himself in front of him. Of course, Volkov didn't care what he said.

With his men all around him, Volkov sat at the head of a long table. They hung on his every word, waiting for him to speak. He took a sip of his scotch and cleared his throat.

"I wanted to inform you all that I have recently established some contacts in Etrium," he said, his voice filled with pride. "I have been poaching some crafters to bring the technology to use thaids brain crystals to make weapons and armor to Frant."

His retainers gasped in awe, clearly impressed by his ingenuity. "But sir, didn't Becker already announce the same thing?" A woman asked.

"No, he obtained the usual technology only, not the new one...Imagine the possibilities," Volkov continued, a sly smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "With these weapons and armor, we could conquer any foe and kill all thaids who dare to stand in our way. We could become the most powerful nation in the world." The retainers nodded in agreement, eager to curry favor with him.

"Of course," Volkov said, taking another sip of his scotch. "This technology is highly sensitive and must be kept under wraps. We can't let anyone else know about it or risk it getting out."

They all nodded fervently, their eyes shining with admiration for their lord.

"Now that a representative from Etrium will come in the following weeks, I need you to get the best deal possible. Am I clear?" Volkov said.

"Yes, sir, we will do our best," the men and women said.

Volkov nodded, pleased with their response.

"Good," he said. "And remember, the more successful we are in implementing this technology, the more power and influence we will get inside the city. We will become unstoppable."

The retainers nodded, their faces filled with reverence and awe. They knew this was the man to follow to become rich and gain power, as he was a man of great vision and ambition, and they were honored to work for him.

As the conversation continued, Volkov basked in the adoration of his retainers. He knew that he had their loyalty and that they would do anything to help him achieve his goals. And with his new contacts and technology coming his way, he knew he was one step closer to achieving his ultimate goal.

Chapter 252: Going out

After Erik finished his lessons, he quickly met with the others at the cafeteria. Aaron was in a bad mood but was starting to get back to his usual self, as he could do nothing but accept his father's death. The group decided to cheer Aaron up by planning a fun activity for the weekend. They hoped it would help him take his mind off things and bring some positivity back into his life.

"Hey, Aaron, do you want to play something at my house?" Anderson asked. "I have some new video games I wanted to show you..."

"Yeah," said Aaron, looking up from his coffee. He hadn't eaten much since his dad had died, and maybe playing some video games could really help him think about something else. All that training was good for destressing himself after all the things he'd been through lately, but the physical stress wasn't helping him cope with everything emotionally.

"That's a great idea!" Amber said. She knew Aaron needed help now, and this was a good activity.

"Do you want to come?" Anderson asked.

"Yeah, why not?" Floyd said.

"Sure," Benedict replied.

Immediately, everyone else decided to go and spend some time together. However, they quickly recalled that Erik couldn't get out of the Red Palace due to the Crystal Cross Gang.

"Do you mind if we go?" Anderson asked his friend. Erik shook his head and told them to go ahead without him, assuring them he would be fine.

"Not at all." The young man knew Aaron needed that change of scenery and time with his friends, and he didn't want to be the reason they canceled their plans. Plus, Erik had some work to catch up on and welcomed the alone time.

"Go and have fun for me, too, OK?" Erik said. Anderson and Mikey exchanged a glance, then nodded in agreement.

"Yes!" Mikey replied with a smile.

Like that, the others left the cafeteria while Erik headed back to his room. The truth was that the young man was now planning on disguising himself and heading out to the city to find information about Achim. He had been able to learn that he went to Thornton High School, so his best shot at finding the older man was to find information about him there.

So, Erik planned to head over there soon and see what he could dig up.

Erik quickly grabbed a casual pair of clothes and his mask, and after changing, he left the Red Palace. It was likely someone from the Red Palace spied on him. Otherwise, it would have been impossible for the Crystal Cross Gang members to discover him while he was in the forest. However, if someone was watching him, he could do nothing about him but try to lose him or her in the city.

Erik then left the Red Palace in a hurry, and after having taken the Red Palace bus service, he dropped off the vehicle in Skyline Square.

Skyline Square was a bustling plaza located in the heart of the city. It was a popular destination for locals, attracting thousands of visitors daily. Towering skyscrapers encircled the square, creating a stunning urban backdrop.

At the center of the plaza was a large fountain, which served as a gathering place for people to relax and socialize. There were benches and plants all around the fountain, making it a quiet spot in the middle of the busy city.

In the square, there were a lot of shops and stalls selling a wide range of goods, from souvenirs to clothing to street food. The aroma of freshly cooked food wafted through the air, tempting passersby with its mouth-watering scent. The sound of street performers and musicians added to the lively atmosphere of the plaza, drawing even more people to come and enjoy the scene.

The fountain also provided a refreshing mist on hot summer days, making it a popular spot for families with children. The fountain was lit at night with bright lights, creating a magical atmosphere that drew people in and added to the plaza's charm.

Despite the constant hustle and bustle of the square, there was a lively energy and a sense of community among the people who frequented it. Musicians and street performers entertained crowds with their talents, adding to the vibrant atmosphere.

During peak hours, the square was packed with people of all ages, creating a lively and bustling scene. The chatter and laughter of families, friends, and strangers mixed together, creating a symphony of sound.

Erik dropped off the bus and quickly tried to go amidst the crowd to disappear from the eyes of whoever was keeping an eye on him. Erik was sure someone was on his tail already, and he was right. Two members of the Crystal Cross Gang were already there, searching for him.

The two saw him going off the bus and immediately ran toward him. Erik saw them and started running toward the crowd. The two gang members quickly ran toward the crowd, trying to reach Erik. He sprinted through the crowded streets of Skyline Square, his heart pounding in his chest as he weaved in and out of the throngs of people.

He could hear the footsteps of his pursuers pounding on the pavement behind him, their harsh breathing echoing in the air.

As he dodged around a street vendor's cart, Erik glanced over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of the two men who were chasing him. They were tall and muscular, with cold, hard expressions on their faces. Erik had never seen them before, but he knew they meant him harm as they were probably Crystal Cross Gang members.

His mind raced as he tried to think of a way out of this. Should he try to lose them in the maze of streets that made up Skyline Square? Or should he try to fight back?

He saw an opening in the crowd ahead and took it, darting between two women pushing strollers. The men behind him were getting closer, their footsteps becoming louder and more insistent. Erik felt a surge of coldness as he realized he might be unable to outrun them for much longer. Would he be forced to kill the two men in front of all these people? Would he be able to do it, to begin with?

The two men weren't very fast, though, so they couldn't catch up to him amidst the crowd.

"Hey! STOP!" One of the men shouted at him. Erik kept running, weaving through the people and dodging obstacles in his path. He knew he had to get away before they caught him.

A few pedestrians heard the commotion and turned around to see what had happened. Some even stopped to watch the spectacle unfold.

However, besides those few people, nobody seemed to care about the young man's situation, as they only observed without doing anything. No one offered assistance or called the police. People just watched and waited. They're all cowards, thought Erik bitterly.

Suddenly, he noticed a group of four teenagers sitting nearby. So, while still hidden from the thugs, the young man changed his hoodie for a white one and headed toward them. The kids' heads were down, and their shoulders slumped forward.

They wore hoodies and jeans, an attire that was similar to Erik's, so he took his chance, went to them while the two thugs were still searching for him, and he sat beside them.

"Hi," He said quietly.

"Who the fuck are you?" one of the kids asked.

"No one," Erik replied.

"Then what the fuck do you want?"

Erik then observed the two men get past him without noticing he was sitting amidst the kids. The two went away quickly, and Erik breathed a sigh of relief as he saw them going away. Now he could relax.

The young man smiled and looked at the boys. Both of them stared straight ahead, trying to understand what this guy was doing.

"I was just passing by," Erik said.

"Weirdo," one of the kids replied.

After hearing them laugh at him, Erik immediately left them to whatever they were doing. It didn't matter anyway. As long as he lost his pursuers, he would be fine.

At that moment, Erik donned his hood and white mask. While walking through the crowds with his head looking down, his gaze focused on the ground, but his vigilance was high. If anyone followed him, he'd notice it right away. And if someone came near him, he wouldn't hesitate to attack.

He walked, keeping his pace slow to avoid attracting attention, but he was determined to reach the destination. He needed to reach the school building and get Achim's information. Immediately, Erik went out of the crowd with his mask and hoodie on, making it hard for the members of the Crystal Cross gang to recognize him.

Like that, he took a large street where there were as many people as Skyline Square, heading towards the direction of the school. He kept his speed steady, observing everyone who passed him; however, he noticed many suspicious people along the way. The Crystal Cross Gang was now searching for him with all the available men.

All of this gave him proof that someone was spying on him inside the Red Palace.

Chapter 253: Back to school

The members of the Crystal Cross gang were looking everywhere for Erik as he continued to move through the crowd. At some point, he arrived at a place called 'Skyview,' which was located near a park. It was a vast plaza circled by skyscrapers that were placed to leave the sky unobstructed, hence the name.

Several small restaurants, fast food places, bars, and stores offered various things such as clothes, accessories, and even weapons. Some of these establishments were very popular with students because of their location close to school; in fact, Erik could see how many young people were there eating something and talking with their friends.

Erik walked cautiously through the crowded street, his eyes scanning the faces of the passersby, searching for any sign of danger. Many Crystal Cross gang members were around, and he had to pay attention.

He kept his head down and weaved in and out of the crowd, trying to keep a low profile. He avoided eye contact with anyone and kept his hands in his pockets. He could feel his heart racing with each passing second, as he was nervous about being caught by the gang members.

Erik saw a group of Crystal Cross members patrolling the area, looking for him. He dove into a nearby alleyway, leaned against the wall, trying to calm down, and waited for the patrol to get far away from him.

He knew he couldn't stay there for long, so he quickly took his chance to get back into the crowd again, where the patrol had already passed and where they wouldn't search for him.

"Where the hell did he go?" one of the gang members said.

"I don't know; I lost track of him." another answered. "We should split up!"

The two separated and searched for him. They were both wearing hoodies but weren't quite as skilled as Erik when it came to hiding themselves, and Erik kept observing them from afar. It would take them time to find him if they did it at all.

The young man quickly reached the park; there, hidden by the vegetation, it was unlikely the Crystal Cross gang would find him.

As soon as he entered the park, he started running toward the center, heading straight into the dense park forest. He knew that the place had a vast area full of trees, and he was counting on them to provide him with enough cover to make a getaway.

He went through trees and bushes and hid from the gang members, who were searching for him inside the park too. Few people were there, mostly couples holding hands while strolling along the grassy paths.

Erik felt relatively safe now. The only ones who could harm him were the Crystal Cross gang members, but they hadn't spotted him yet. He kept moving deeper, making sure not to leave any tracks that could lead the gang members to him.

As he kept moving further into the forest, he noticed that the trees were getting thicker and the foliage was becoming denser. He had to slow down and be more careful, as he didn't want to trip or make any noise that could give away his position.

He tried to remember the map of the park he had seen online and hoped that he was going in the right direction. He knew that if he could make it to the other side of the forest, he could reach a busy street, blend in with the crowd, and disappear again. After that, reaching the school was just a matter of time.

However, the awakener felt a shiver run down his spine as he heard footsteps approaching. He turned around and saw two Crystal Cross gang members walking toward him. He quickly ducked behind a large tree, hid within a bush big enough to cover him completely, and tried to make himself as small as possible. His heart was pounding in his chest, and he could feel the sweat on his forehead.

He tried to calm down and control his breathing, but it was difficult. Judging by the amount of mana these two released, they were powerful. Erik tried to suppress his mana output, hoping that wouldn't give him away, but he was having problems with that. He could hear the footsteps getting closer and closer, and he knew that he had to move quickly if he wanted to avoid being seen.

<System, can you hide the mana I naturally release?> Erik asked.

[ANSWER: THE SYSTEM CAN; DO YOU WANT ME TO DO IT?]

<YES!>

[UNDERSTOOD. GATHERING THE SURROUNDING MANA TO COVER THE USER]

The System finished before the gang members could notice him. The mana quickly shrouded him in such a way that it felt like he didn't even exist, and since he was well hidden, it was unlikely they would see him, but the risk was still there.

As they passed by, Erik held his breath, hoping they wouldn't notice him. He could hear their voices as they talked to each other, and he knew that they were close. He peeked out from behind the tree and saw them walking away; their backs turned to him.

Erik let out a sigh of relief, but he knew that he couldn't let his guard down. He stayed hidden behind the tree for a few more moments, waiting until he was sure that the gang members had moved on and couldn't hear him.

Finally, he stepped out from behind the bush and started running through the park. He could feel his heart racing as he ran, his eyes darting around, searching for any signs of danger.

He could hear the sound of footsteps around him, but luckily they were just ordinary people having a walk inside the park.

As he walked away, Erik couldn't help but feel a sense of relief mixed with fear. He was aware that the Crystal Cross gang members had narrowly missed catching him, and he questioned how much longer he could continue before they caught up with him.

With these thoughts in mind, Erik emerged on the other side after a few minutes of navigating through the dense forest. He looked around, trying to get his bearings, and realized that he was now a few blocks away from school, but there were still many Crystal Cross gang members around.

Erik started to feel worried. He had hoped there weren't so many members from this side, but the truth was that these motherfuckers were doing all they could to get him.

Erik quickened his pace, determined to put as much distance between himself and the park as possible. He kept moving, so he walked through the busy street, trying not to gather attention and putting as much distance between himself and the Crystal Cross gang members as possible.

He kept his head down and walked furtively but without rest, avoiding eye contact with anyone and trying to blend in with the crowd of people, which was growing sparser as he got closer to the school, but so did the Crystal Cross gang members.

After a short while and a couple more streets, Erik finally managed to reach his destination, Thornton High School's building, relieved that he had lost the Crystal Cross gang members that had been hot on his trail. The giant metal structure looked imposing, but the unique shape of the walls gave it a particular attractiveness.

The gate was tall and imposing, as always, and many students were still around the place. Some students were seen training on the school's outdoor training grounds, honing their skills with their brain crystal powers.

Some were talking to their friends, laughing and joking around, while others were spending time with their love partners, enjoying each other's company, and enjoying the many activities and opportunities that the school had to offer. The atmosphere was lively and energetic, and it was clear that the students were passionate about their studies and their abilities.

"I finally got here..." The young man said to himself. He took a deep breath as he started to feel anxious as he observed the scene around him. He quickly realized only bad memories were tied to this place, and even after some time passed, the wounds on his soul were still fresh.

<System, deactivate all cameras!> He whispered to himself, determined to erase any evidence of his presence.

He then sped toward the gate and went past it, as he knew the system did as instructed, quickly glancing to his left and seeing a corner of the training grounds with a group of students practicing hand-to-hand combat, sparring against each other in pairs.

They moved quickly, their bodies rough and unclassy as they exchanged blows. He then quickly entered the building. The sight of the students brought back memories of his own training, but he quickly pushed them aside and focused on his mission. He knew he had to find the file before anyone saw him.

As he walked across the usual corridors, he marveled again at the natural light that flooded them through the massive skylight on top of the building. It was a particularly impressive feature. He had always admired the architecture of the building, and the skylight was just one of its many impressive features.

The air inside was fresh and crisp, and he could feel the slight temperature difference between the outdoors and indoors, as it was fresher compared to the summer temperatures.

The long corridors seemed to go on forever, and he couldn't help but feel a little lost, despite having walked through them for several years. He then went toward the Principal's office while avoiding the students that were still inside the building.

Chapter 254: New pricks

<System, did you deactivate the cameras inside the school?> Erik asked.

[ANSWER: YES.] The system replied.

<Good,> the young man thought.

As Erik stepped into the school, he took a deep breath. The smell of the building reminded him of his time here, a time in which he dreaded meeting people. He walked down the hallway, trying to avoid eye contact with anyone. The memories flooded back, making him feel like he was back in his old shoes again.

Erik walked down the long hallway, and as the familiar feeling of horror rose in his chest, he realized he was still too affected by his past. He tried to focus on the task at hand, finding the principal's office, but memories of his past kept flooding his mind.

He thought about Conal, Orson, and Logan, the three boys who had made his life a living hell for years. They teased him relentlessly, calling him names, pushing him around, stealing from him, and beating him daily in the indifference of teachers and students alike.

Erik had never understood why they targeted him, but it didn't matter now, as he had already taken his revenge on them, though the wounds were still fresh and the damage had already been done.

He also thought about the years he spent at this school, always looking over his shoulder, trying to avoid the trio of bullies. It was exhausting and had taken a toll on his mental health for a long time. However, despite the old emotions surging again inside his mind, he was also a different person, not anymore scared of fighting, not anymore scared of confrontations.

Quickly, he began walking through the corridors with a sense of confidence he didn't have when he studied here.

As he passed by the lockers, Erik noticed a group of students huddled together, their voices echoing off the walls. He immediately hid behind a corner; they were just laughing and chatting, nothing more, but Erik couldn't afford to be seen, so his heartbeat sped up a little. The young man let out a sigh of relief when the students got past him without noticing his presence.

<Why are there so many students today?> Erik asked himself. It was weird. Usually, around 300–400 students should have been here, but apparently, today, there were at least twice as many. Was this the result of the tournament the principal announced some months ago? Did the opportunity to join the Red Palace push the students to train and strive for greatness?

Casting these thoughts aside, he walked under the skylight that so much characterized this building, the warm sun shining down on him; he felt a sense of strength.

He looked around, scanning the hallway for any sign of trouble, in other words, students or teachers. The next corridor seemed clear, but he knew better than to let his guard down.

He started walking down the corridor, constantly scanning for people inside the classrooms. The school was huge, and it would take him at least ten minutes to reach the principal's office if he didn't have trouble.

As the young man went down the corridor and turned the corner, he saw a group of students approaching him. He could do nothing to avoid them, and they had already spotted him but apparently didn't recognize him despite his appearance in many newspapers. The young man put his hood on and kept looking at the ground while walking. He could hear their voices, laughing and joking around.

"Hey, look at that guy!" one of the students said. Erik quickened his pace, hoping to get away from the group of students before they realized who he was.

"Hahahaha, he looks like a loser; why is he using a hood with this heat?" another asked. It was at that moment that they decided they wanted to have a chat with Erik.

As the young man kept walking through the corridor, he could hear the sound of footsteps getting closer.

<Oh god... They are coming here...>

He briefly looked up to see a group of four students approaching him. They were walking with a swagger and confidence that made Erik cringe. They were probably the new school's main bullies, filling the void left by Conal, Orson, and Logan.

The group's largest member, a muscular boy with a buzz cut, said, "Hey, loser. What are you doing here all by yourself?"

Erik tried to ignore them and keep walking, but the group blocked his path. Erik took a deep breath and tried to stay calm.

"Aw, come on, don't be shy," said another one with dyed purple hair. "It is not polite to ignore people who are talking to you."

Erik was really annoyed by the situation. He had dealt with bullies before and knew that these students were looking for trouble. Flashes of his past came to him again, but this time he was a different person. Besides, now that he got into the Red Palace, it was like he had become more "adult," and bullying was just something stupid and petty that kids did who knew why.

"Leave me alone," he muttered, trying to push past them and trying not to hurt them to avoid more problems. But they continued to block his way and taunt him. Erik took a deep breath.

The group laughed, and one of them shoved him hard, but he remained firm on his ground. "Hey, we're just trying to have some fun," said the buzz-cut boy. "You don't have to be so uptight."

Erik felt a wave of anger wash over him. He barely escaped that shit, and now some prick was trying to do the same to him again. He was tired of these things happening, of being pushed around; he wondered if he had a target for bullies on his back. At that moment, he decided to take a stand.

"I won't say this again. Don't touch me again, and get the fuck off my face." Erik's face was ashen this time, and he was filled with rage. He stepped back, his fists clenched, and a look of pure hatred was on his face.

"OOOOH, THE LITTLE BOY HAS SOME BALLS! GUYS, LET US SHOW HIM WHAT HAPPENS TO PEOPLE WITH BALLS!" the leader said.

"You won't learn unless I show you, huh?" the young man said while keeping his face hidden.

Erik then focused on his neural links; he knew he couldn't use the sharpening or the plant growing powers, so he resorted to using one that no one, aside from dead people, saw him using. He decided to summon the astral wolf.

Suddenly, a giant wolf's head made of pure mana and with poison dripping from its fangs appeared next to Erik, its eyes glowing with a fierce light. The group of bullies gasped in shock and stumbled back as they saw the head dripping saliva.

Erik calmly stepped forward and said, "This is your last warning. Leave now or face the consequences." The bullies hesitated for a moment.

The astral wolf growled and bared its teeth, standing protectively before Erik. The bullies looked terrified and backed away slowly. Erik quickly realized that these pricks, or bullies in general, were the most cowardly of them all once someone showed who really was the boss. The astral wolf's presence made Erik feel empowered and confident.

The wolf's head faked a bite attempt at one of the four guys, who believed he had avoided the attack by an air breath. He was left terrified. "You're crazy," he said, his voice shaking. Erik chuckled, feeling satisfied as the four guys retreated from him in fear.

However, he didn't say a word. He simply walked past the group of bullies, his head held high and the astral wolf's head at his side. The bullies didn't try to stop him or insult him anymore; they were too scared of this unknown guy's brain crystal power.

They just watched in silence as he disappeared down the corridor and started escaping the scene as soon as they could.

However, as soon as he turned the corner, he started to run. If the pricks reported him to the teachers, that would spell trouble.

As he sped through the building, he felt a sense of pride and determination. He was no longer the weak, scared boy he had been. Erik's encounter with the thaids had transformed him into a more cautious and alert person, which was evident in his current nervousness. The system also played a role in shaping his behavior, making him warier of potential dangers.

After many undisturbed twists and turns, Erik finally reached the Principal's door. The awakener stood outside Principal Harris' office, taking deep breaths to calm his nerves. He wasn't sure if someone was inside, and he had to find out quickly.

He looked around the hallway, but there was no one in sight. He even peeked inside the psychologist's office, and it was empty. It was weird, considering how busy the school was today. Aside from the reason, it was time for Erik to find out who this Achim was.

Chapter 255: The address

< System, can you connect to the Principal's computer?> Erik asked.

[YES, I CAN. DO YOU WANT ME TO CONNECT TO IT?]

<Yes! Immediately!> Erik said in his mind.

[CONNECTION TO THE DEVICE: PRINCIPAL'S HARRIS WORK COMPUTER, COMPLETE.]

Erik stood in the hallway, his brain receiving information from the biological supercomputer as the images of the Principal's computer's screen appeared in front of him. He had managed to hack into the PC using the biological supercomputer and was now searching for information about Achim.

As he scrolled through Principal Harris' computer, Erik felt nervousness building within him. There was a high chance that this guy knew that Nathaniel had died because of him, and he had to get rid of him if he wanted to avoid problems in the future.

Recently, he learned that Achim came to this school, so it was likely that his address and some information about his personality could be found in the archives.

The young man scrolled through the PC's content until he found what he was searching for.

Achim's file was filled with disciplinary reports and notes from his teachers about his tendency to cause trouble at school. One time he beat a fellow student for some minor matter. In another one, he was caught stealing from another guy. That was a common trait of all pricks, especially considering that Achim was rich and he clearly didn't need money.

He was basically the classic bully Erik had seen countless times. But what caught Erik's attention was a report from the school nurse about an incident involving Achim and a female student. They were caught having sex in one of the bathrooms, which led to their suspension. This was not common.

Erik discovered as he read that, despite being considered an asshole by many, the girls at school liked him reasonably well because of his attractive appearance and long hair, and many teachers reported how some female students even entered the class and confessed to him in front of everyone else. That was a psycho level of madness.

<This nation is really fucked up if they like people like him,> the young man thought.

It was clear, from Erik's evaluation of this guy's character, that he had all the traits associated with the pompous young masters he often read about in the novels he read. He could see how some traits came directly from his family, which Erik connected to the Mambas, thanks to the information he got through Nathaniel's phone. Things started to click even more in the young man's mind.

As he continued to sift through Achim's file, Erik's eyes landed on a photo of the boy; he was much younger than the last photo he saw of him, which was taken at a party. Despite his troublesome reputation, he seemed to have it all and had a massive smile on his face while standing with two other friends.

<Where the hell is his address?> Erik asked himself. The young man had been in front of the Principal's door for many minutes but couldn't stay any longer.

He kept scrolling for a couple more minutes; his anxiety kept increasing. Finally, he found the information he was searching for.

<75001 Rue de la Liberté, New Alexandria, Frant. BINGO!>

Erik quickly connected to his phone through the System and looked at his phone to understand where he had to go. As he typed the address inside the app, the route there appeared; Erik recognized where it led him and where he had to go.

<This is Amber's neighborhood...> the young man thought after remembering he had seen a similar address previously and the map showed many villas.

That was a problem, as the place was full of technological defenses, cameras, and many other things. If things were this way, he could at least scout ahead and take a look at the place. Maybe he could infiltrate.

However, the safest thing would be to connect to their security system, which he was sure they had since Amber had it, like most of the wealthy people in Frant, and spy on them from his cozy bed at the Red Palace.

The young man quickly darted away from there, walking back from where he came. No one should have been around, as not so much time did pass; however, it was still a possibility.

As he ran down the nearly deserted hallways of the school, his footsteps echoed loudly off the walls. Most students had already gone home, leaving only a few stragglers behind.

Erik kept his head down, and his eyes focused on the ground. He knew that he had to avoid any trouble, especially with the recent events involving the Crystal Cross Gang.

As he was almost at the exit, he suddenly heard the sound of footsteps approaching from around the corner. Erik quickly entered an empty classroom and closed the door behind him, holding his breath as the footsteps grew louder.

He peeked through the crack in the door and saw a female teacher walking past. Erik waited until she was out of sight before opening the door and continuing on his way with silent steps and a stealthy approach.

Finally, he reached the exit and pushed open the heavy metal door. A rush of warm air hit him in the face, and he took a deep breath. He had made it out safely, but he knew that the danger was still out there.

Soon after, Erik stepped out of the school gates and into the bustling streets of New Alexandria. The sun was shining brightly overhead but was starting to set, and the sounds of traffic and chatter filled the air. But Erik couldn't enjoy the beauty of the day - he knew that the members of the Crystal Cross Gang were out there, somewhere, looking for him.

He was right; two shady figures were looking around across the street, probably for him.

Erik now had a different appearance from the one he had once he came out of the Red Palace, so he could maybe go past them without problems. However, he didn't want to take chances, so he quickly went to his right and changed roads.

As he got far enough, walking, trying not to alert anyone, he started running at full speed until he finally reached a very crowded street where he could hide. The young man immediately went inside the sea of people, keeping his head down and trying to blend in with the crowds. But it was hard to avoid the Crystal Cross gang members' invasive presence; they were everywhere.

Erik knew that he had to stay alert if he wanted to avoid them. He kept his eyes peeled for any signs of danger as he weaved his way through the crowds.

Suddenly, he saw them. A group of gang members was gathered on the other side of the street, their eyes scanning the crowd. Erik froze, his heart pounding in his chest, hoping they didn't find him.

However, the system quickly went to work. It injected the calming substance into his bloodstream, giving the young man the mental state required to carefully take his next step, and he managed to behave calmly enough so as not to raise suspicions against him. He quickly went past the gang members, and after a while, he ended up on another road with no fewer people than the other.

However, that had been a close call; the gang members were starting to block the streets since they couldn't find the young man inside the throngs of people.

Without thinking, and as he couldn't see any more Crystal Cross gang members, Erik turned and ran down the street, dodging past pedestrians and pushing his way through the crowds. After a short while, Erik arrived at the train station.

The young man scanned the bustling place nervously, his heart racing as he tried to blend in with the crowds of commuters rushing to and fro, as he noticed that even that place was full of Crystal Cross gang members searching for him. Any wrong move could put him in danger.

The gang members all had their trademark tattoos and clothing, scanning the crowd with fierceness and intensity. Erik sat on a bench behind a group of people waiting for their train while standing, hoping to avoid their attention.

He knew what train to take, so he waited, hiding inside a shop as soon as he could, faking being there to shop, until the hour came, and the train arrived.

Erik calmly walked onto the platform as the train approached the tracks, scanning for any signs of the gang members. He saw one of them approaching him from the corner of his eye and quickly slipped into a crowd of people boarding the train.

Erik breathed a sigh of relief as he walked inside the train, and the doors closed, leaving the gang members outside. He found an empty seat and settled in, his heart still pounding in his chest.

The train began to move, slowly at first but then picking up speed as it headed toward Erik's destination. He couldn't believe he had managed to escape the crystal cross gang again and make it onto the train unnoticed.

As the train chugged along, Erik's nerves began to calm down. He knew that he had to stay alert, but for the moment, he was safe. The train was silent as usual, but the sound of the wind hitting it could be heard; it lulled him into a drowsy state, and he began to relax. Erik closed his eyes momentarily, taking deep breaths to calm himself down.

He knew that the next few hours would be crucial, and he needed to conserve his energy for whatever lay ahead.

Erik closed his eyes, his mind drifting off to thoughts of his next move. He knew that he couldn't let his guard down, not even for a moment. But for now, he was just grateful to be on his way to safety.

Chapter 256: Arriving somewhere

As the train was going at full throttle toward the eastern district. Erik leaned against the window of the sky train, his eyes glued to the view outside. As the vehicle sped towards the eastern district, passing through the vast, tall skyscrapers that characterized New Alexandria, he watched the scenery change.

The once towering skyscrapers gave way to smaller buildings: from three to four stories, to even six and seven-story buildings in some cases, and ended up to the not-so-small villas and mansions that could be seen from afar.

The change in scenery made Erik wonder about the stark contrast between the rich and poor neighborhoods in the city, and he couldn't help but ponder on the issues of inequality and social justice in which this nation basked in.

Of course, from there, Erik could also see the other parts of the city; the average person's housing was simply made up of four- or five-story buildings and was not that large compared to the rich men's and women's houses.

Erik could, however, also see the destruction the thaids had wrought, particularly in this area of the city where they had entered. Buildings that had fallen down and neighborhoods that had been left empty were everywhere, showing that the city had been in chaos for the past few days. Cars were upturned, and buildings were destroyed.

Only the wealthy people's houses were still safe, thanks to the many defenses placed around them.

But even amidst the destruction, life had returned to a semblance of normalcy. People bustled about on the streets below, going about their daily lives as if the chaos had never happened, avoiding the places where it was clear there were still humans, and thaid remains to stain the ground.

Many companies worked hard to clean the city, but there were so many places in those awful conditions that they weren't enough to erase the thaid's remnants from the pavements.

Even though the companies worked hard to erase those stains, the people's memories of the terrible attack stayed with them like permanent ink. This made them feel uneasy and scared every day. Rich people kept fortifying their homes, while poor people worked hard to rebuild what they had lost.

Erik's attention was drawn to the mansions and villas that dot the landscape as the train neared the wealthiest part of the eastern district. They stood in stark contrast to the small, average people's houses he had seen earlier. The streets were lined with trees and manicured lawns, and the air smelled of freshly cut grass.

Erik couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy at the sight. He had grown up in a small apartment with barely anything to eat. His life has been challenging, while all these owners' lives have been as easy as possible. Take Achim, for example: born into a wealthy family with many connections, look, and opportunities. However, despite all that, he wasn't a great fighter.

Sure, he was above the average person his age, thanks to all the money his father spent on his training and education, but he was still much weaker than the average Red Palace student.

<It's true... People can't properly use the opportunities they are given...> Erik thought.

After a short while, the train stopped at the station, and Erik stepped off. Despite essentially being in another world, he remained focused now that he was on the ground again.

After he got off the train, the awakener observed that no member of the Crystal Cross gang was there, probably because they didn't want to mess up with the city's higher-ups. He then walked down the platform towards the elevator, but as he did so, he observed his surroundings, searching for potential threats nearby. It was better to be safe than sorry.

The train station was bustling with people, but there was a sense of calm in the air, unlike the chaos of the city center. He could see the usual shops scattered around the station, but they were more high-end than those in the other districts. He quickly arrived at the elevator and waited for it to arrive.

The walls were decorated with beautiful murals depicting the history of the city. The floor was made of polished marble, and the ceiling was high with intricate designs etched into it. As he stepped into the elevator, he couldn't help but feel a sense of awe at the station's grandeur.

When the elevator arrived, Erik stepped in and pressed the button for the ground floor. As the machine descended, he couldn't stop thinking about what he would find in front of Achim's house.

Then he quickly left the station and started walking toward the guy's house, following his map app through the biological supercomputer.

Erik quickly stepped into the wealthiest neighborhood of the eastern district. His eyes constantly scanning the area for any sign of danger. The mansions and villas were grand, with sprawling gardens and swimming pools. It was a world away from the cramped apartments and crowded streets of the rest of the city. The streets were quiet, with only the occasional car flying above.

Erik walked with measured and controlled steps down the clean streets of the wealthy neighborhood. The villas and mansions towered above him, casting long shadows in the sun despite the star almost down the horizon. Although the beauty of the surroundings was a lot, the atmosphere was tense and ominous, and Erik couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched.

That was true, as many cameras were currently looking at him. Still, he couldn't turn them all off since they were probably tied to defensive systems and alarms that would make all the guards stationed around to investigate the matter, putting him at risk of being found out. However, he had to do something.

<System, deactivate all the cameras that will frame my face.> Erik was still wearing his mask, so there was no risk he would be recognized. However, reducing the odds was essential. The idea was only to deactivate some of the cameras so that, at best, the guards would think of a faulty device or some minor problems.

[UNDERSTOOD. START SCANNING THE AREA. TRIANGULATING. CONNECTING. DO YOU WANT TO TURN OFF NOTIFICATIONS?]

<Only the ones relative to the connection, disconnection, and deactivations of the devices.>

[UNDERSTOOD. TASK COMPLETE.]

As he walked, it didn't take much time for Erik's thoughts to wander to the immense wealth and power that lay hidden behind the high walls and guarded gates around him, and he was aware his target was hidden somewhere in this area, among all the wealth and luxury, and he was headed there.

The awakener kept his head up, and his eyes peeled for any signs of danger, but Erik remained calm and focused despite everything. He knew that he had to keep his wits if he wanted to gather the information he needed. He carefully walked past each mansion, taking note of any details that could prove useful in his future endeavor.

The young man kept walking until he finally found himself at the foot of the mansion he had been searching for, Achim's house.

Erik continued walking down the street while his eyes were fixed on the huge villa at the end of the road. Towering metal fences with barbed wire coiling along the top encircled the mansion. The security cameras mounted on the walls swiveled, scanning the area for potential threats.

Erik could see the automatic weapons strewn across the perimeter, their barrels pointing at anyone approaching uninvited.

Erik could see the sprawling garden beyond the fence as he got closer. It was immaculately maintained, with rows of neatly trimmed hedges and fountains spraying water into the air. There were even peacocks strutting about, their iridescent feathers glinting in the setting sun.

<Truly a show of opulence,> the young man thought.

But as beautiful as the garden was, it was clear that its primary purpose was to serve as a barrier. The garden was too big to walk through, and the fences and cameras ensured no one could get in without being invited. More defenses were probably placed in the ground, as in the Red Palace. Erik knew that he had to be careful not to enter their aim.

He couldn't afford to be recognized by the cameras, or else he would have risked alerting the security guards or, worse, Achim. At the same time, he couldn't turn off the surveillance system through the biological supercomputer, as that would alert the guards too. He continued to walk down the street, trying to keep his movements casual as he carefully observed the villa.

However, he could connect to the cameras inside to see what was happening.

<System, connect to the surveillance cameras, and find all the people inside.>

[UNDERSTOOD, CONNECTING TO THE VILLA'S SURVEILLANCE SYSTEM.
COMPLETED]

Multiple images appeared on the screen, displaying the different parts of the mansion. He carefully observed the live feed from the cameras and noticed that there were more guards inside than he had anticipated. He also saw Achim's father talking to someone on the phone in the study room.

His mother was getting ready in her dressing room, probably for some fancy dinner they would attend later, while many butlers were doing their work. However, there was no sign of Achim.

Erik furrowed his eyebrows and continued to scan through the cameras in the villa. He searched through the ones showing the interior rooms, even the ones showing the garden, hoping to catch a glimpse of the guy who helped Nathaniel.

But, to Erik's disappointment, there was no trace of the guy. He searched through every corner of the garden, but all he saw were the lush greenery, exotic plants, and a few mansions while circling the place.

Frustrated, Erik leaned back on a wall and pondered his next move. He couldn't afford to leave empty-handed, but he also couldn't risk getting caught. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and tried to think of any other way to get something out of this trip.

<System, can you scan this place's defenses, cameras, and rooms? I want a complete map of the place.>

[ANSWER: YES. DO YOU WISH ME TO DO IT RIGHT NOW?]

<Indeed.>

[PROCESS STARTING. 3...2...1... PROCESS COMPLETE. SENDING INFORMATION TO THE BRAIN THROUGH THE BRAIN INFORMATION INJECTOR.]

Chapter 257: Trouble ahead

Matthew had been anxiously waiting for Simone's report for days. He knew that sending him to investigate Nathaniel's death was the right decision. However, he was distraught, as he couldn't shake the feeling of guilt that had been gnawing at him since his son's passing.

As Simone walked into his office, Matthew tried to keep his emotions in check, but his hands trembled slightly as he observed the men coming inside for the report. However, he kept a stoic face.

"Hello, sir," Simone said. "I'm done with my preliminary investigation."

"I could guess from our last conversation. Tell me, Simone," Matthew said, his voice hoarse. "What did you find out?"

Simone took a deep breath before speaking. "I've been able to gather some information, Mr. McConnell. It seems Nathaniel was kicked out of the Red Palace the day before the attack on the city. Apparently, he tried to kill a fellow student during an official fight under the eyes of cameras and healers. According to what the institution said, he was delirious, aggressive, and wouldn't calm down.

After some tests, it came out he suffered from ASPD, so they had no choice but to remove him from the premises and expel him."

Matthew felt his stomach churn. He had always known that Nathaniel had some problems, but he had hoped that he would be able to get over them eventually. Now, he realized that his son's behavior was not normal. Most of the time, since he himself did some despicable things, he didn't care much when Nathaniel did the same or had weird behavior; however, this changed everything.

He wondered what would have happened if he had learned sooner of this problem and what would have happened if he had managed to help him keep his emotions and rage in check. Would he still be alive?

"And what about Thornton High? I remember he had some beef with many students." Matthew asked, his voice shaking slightly. "Could there be someone with enough reasons to kill him? Did you find out anything about Nathaniel's altercations with people from the school?"

Simone nodded grimly. "Yes, sir. It seems that Nathaniel had gotten into several fights with other students. Some of them were just verbal altercations, but others were physical. I've talked to some

of the witnesses, and they all said the same thing. Nathaniel was angry and aggressive and seemed to be looking for trouble.

Most of these happened with the top students at school and probably went on as they went to the Red Palace with him."

Matthew closed his eyes, feeling a wave of grief wash over him. He was sure that someone had killed him, and he was enraged. The first reason was that they killed his only son, but the second was that, by killing him, they went directly against him, the Mambas' leader. That was clear disrespect.

"Thank you, Simone," he said quietly. "You've done a good job. I want you to find out who these top students are and investigate as much as you can about them. Now leave me alone; I'll need some time to process this information. Give me some privacy."

Simone nodded and left the room, leaving Matthew alone with his thoughts. He felt a sense of despair wash over him as he realized he had failed as a father. Nathaniel's death was a tragedy that could have been prevented, and he knew he would have to live with that guilt for the rest of his life.

At the same time, in a massive plaza inside New Alexandria, Private Investigator Hais sat on a bench, sipping coffee and staring blankly at the fountain in the center. He had been working on the case of Logan's, Conal's, and Orson's disappearance for months now, trying to uncover any leads that could help him find the kids who had all disappeared without a trace.

Hais couldn't help but feel frustrated with the lack of progress in the case, and he wondered if he would ever be able to bring closure to the families of the missing children.

But no matter how much he searched, he always returned to a single path, leading him to Erik Romano, Frant's only awakener. The detective knew he had to dig deeper into Erik's story and investigate the possibility of his involvement in the disappearance of the three kids, and so he did.

During his investigation, he discovered that Erik went to the hospital the day before the three kids disappeared. From the police's reports, it appears the young man said a gang assaulted him.

He also checked his alibi for that day, but besides having been at school during the day and having returned around 18:00, no one knew what he did during that window of time. However, he was suspicious: what if the masked kid was Erik? He probably killed the three kids and then went to work, later going to school again.

If only he could talk to Erik's late employer, he could understand when Erik arrived at work and see if there was a window of time in which he could have committed the murders. Too bad he was dead. Hais had reached the conclusion that Erik, now a student at the Red Palace, definitely had something to do with their disappearance.

The evidence was circumstantial, and most of it was only speculation, but it all seemed to point in his direction; besides, the kid didn't have an alibi yet.

Hais had decided that he needed to confront Erik and get some answers, but before doing this, he needed to get some information about him, and he planned on doing so. So, he was there, in a place very frequented by the Red Palace's students, searching for some of them to ask them questions.

Sitting there, he noticed a group of young men walking by. They were all dressed in uniform, which Hais recognized immediately as the Red Palace's; they had to be members of the institution. Their haughty behavior and the way they regarded everyone else served as additional evidence of that. They behaved like gods walking among ants.

He quickly got up and approached them, trying not to appear threatening or suspicious. The students were going to a local bar to drink something and pass the time, flaunting their uniform, which made the others pay a sort of respect to them.

Hais took a deep breath and approached them in the bar, trying to look confident and in control. As he made his way through the crowd, Hais approached the table and hoped he would get something from it.

"Hello, guys," he said, keeping his voice steady. "I'm Investigator Hais; I need to ask you some questions. Do you have five minutes?" He said this while pulling out his investigator ID and showing it to the group of Red Palace students standing near the entrance.

They looked at the ID suspiciously but eventually relaxed when they saw it was authentic. However, the students looked at each other nervously before nodding their heads in agreement. Hais asked them if they knew Erik, the student from the Red Palace. The young men nodded, and one of them spoke up.

"Yeah, we know him. He's the awakener," the student said, a note of admiration in his voice. "He's everyone's talk right now due to how he soared through the Red Palace's inner ranks and how he battled the thaids during the attack on the city."

Hais listened intently, trying to glean any helpful information from the student's words. "What can you tell me about him?" he asked.

The student hesitated for a moment before continuing. "Well, he's a bit of a mysterious guy, as he doesn't really mingle with many people and doesn't like to show off. However, he has some friends he is really attached to, especially a girl. But he's definitely respected and admired by many people there."

Another student chimed in. "Yeah, and he was the reason why Nathaniel was kicked out of the Red Palace," she said, her voice tinged with excitement. Hais raised an eyebrow at that statement.

<It seems like there might be some drama surrounding this guy and his relationships with others. I wonder what exactly happened with this guy Nathaniel,> he thought.

"Nathaniel? Who's that?" Hais naturally asked.

The students exchanged glances before one of them spoke up. "Nathaniel was a student at the Red Palace. He was one of the most talented fighters in the Red Palace's first year, at least in the peasant rank, and was on track to climb the ladder and reach the squire rank.

But he got into some kind of problem with Erik; Nathaniel apparently tried to kill him during a fight, and he was kicked out consequently."

"You don't say?" Hais said, with surprise clearly evident in his voice. He made a mental note of this information. "Is there a way I can contact this Nathaniel?" Hais asked.

"You can't. Apparently, he got killed by some thaids during the attack on the city. That's all we know..."

That clearly, sparked something inside the investigator. That was too coincidental.

Chapter 258: Dion (1)

Erik took a deep breath as he finished his final lesson of the day at the Red Palace. He had been training for months, and he could feel himself growing stronger with every passing day. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and took a swig of water from his canteen.

After some time, he noticed Benedict sitting at the bench where he usually took his breaks, and he was there, looking deep in thought. Benedict quickly became one of Erik's closest friends at the Palace, and they had been through a lot together already due to the attack perpetrated by the Crystal Cross Gang. Erik took a seat next to him, and they exchanged greetings.

Benedict turned to Erik and said, "I heard you're going to have a new fight again today. Are you ready?" He had a huge grin on his face; Benedict was like that, a very enthusiastic person who loved to compete and fight.

Erik shrugged. "I'm ok; honestly, I don't think there is anyone at the peasant rank who can beat me at this point. Maybe, Anderson, but I wouldn't be so sure about it either..."

"Yeah, man, even I have to say that your growth was remarkable. Anderson told me how you were a couple of months ago. I can't believe you couldn't even throw a punch before coming here," Benedict remarked.

"I did the best I could..." Erik replied. "But I also have to give credit to the trainers here. They really pushed me beyond my limits and helped me develop my skills," Erik added with a smile of gratitude.

Benedict nodded. "Yeah, I know. I myself have seen the same improvements since I came here." They shared a moment of silence, and then Benedict asked, "By the way, what do you know about your next opponent?"

Erik shook his head. "Not much. I've seen him around, but I've never fought him before. I'm not even sure what his name is."

Benedict leaned forward. "Well, that's not necessarily a bad thing. You'll be able to go into the fight without any preconceptions, which could work to your advantage." Benedict just said something weirdly sharp for his usual self.

Erik nodded. He didn't feel threatened at all, and he just wanted to get this over with, as he couldn't learn anything from the fights he was currently having.

Benedict grinned. "Anytime, my friend. Just remember, you've got this. You are now the best fighter at the peasant rank. Damn, you probably surpassed Amber and Anderson, and I know how strong they are!"

Erik smiled, feeling a surge of pride. He stood up from the bench, ready to head to the Blue Palace to have his fight.

"Thanks, Benedict. I'll see you after the fight," he said before turning and walking away.

"Have fun!" Benedict said.

Erik quickly left the Yellow Palace and headed to the bus that would bring him to the Blue One. The awakener stepped onto the vehicle with a calm look; after all, he had been through so much that he felt nothing when he had to fight.

The bus was packed with students heading to the same destination, hoping to win the fight that would propel them higher, and Erik had to squeeze his way past several passengers before he found a seat. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, visualizing the fight ahead. He was calm and knew he would win, but he wasn't stupid.

Erik's mind wandered as the bus trundled through the Red Palace's garden. He thought about his opponent, wondering who they would be. He hoped it wouldn't be someone annoying or with a nasty personality, as he was sick of arrogant people believing themselves to be the boss while, in truth, they were only as significant as a tiny, scurrying ant.

However, he was still a relative newcomer to the Red Palace's fight scene, and he knew he had a lot of climbing to do before he reached the top.

Suddenly, the bus lurched to a stop, and Erik opened his eyes. He was at the Blue Palace. He got up and went to the entrance, where he received the customary notification.

ERIK ROMANO (RANK 370, FIRST YEAR) VERSUS DION TUCK (RANK 270, SECOND YEAR)

ROOM 823, EIGHTH FLOOR.

HEALER: MARTIN MIDDLETON.

Erik quickly glanced at the healer's name.

<It is still him; I wonder if they are assigning him to me on purpose...> the young man thought. As for the fighter, Erik didn't really know who the guy was, but having seen him around, he had a couple of information about him.

He was one of the best peasant-rank fighters, had a reputation for being ruthless, and had knocked out many opponents in the past but could not beat the other top fighters and was stuck at rank 270.

From this general information he knew, he judged the man to be a skilled fighter, but despite knowing this, he wasn't worried at all. He beat Nathaniel, who was destined to go to the squire rank in the following month at least.

Erik quickly made his way to the elevator, and then, once he arrived, he reached room 823 on the eighth floor. As soon as he entered, Martin, the healer, greeted Erik.

"Good evening, young man. How are you?" he asked.

The two exchanged pleasantries, and after five minutes, the door to the place opened; Dion had just arrived. Erik couldn't help but be impressed by the man's athletic physique. Standing tall at 1.9 meters, Dion had a powerful build that hinted at his dedication to his training.

His broad shoulders and chiseled chest were accentuated by the tight-fitting shirt he wore, and his strong arms and legs looked like they could lift and carry heavy weights with ease.

Erik noticed that even his posture conveyed a sense of strength and confidence. As he walked across the room, Dion's movements were fluid and controlled, his steps landing with a quiet grace that spoke to his athletic prowess.

His dark hair was neatly trimmed, and an uneven light stubble framed his angular face. His piercing blue eyes scanned the room with a focused gaze, and his serious look seemed to put everyone in their place.

Erik was, however, unbothered by the young man. "Let's do this..."

The two went directly into the middle of the room, and Martin headed to the control room, closing the door behind him and activating the barrier.

Erik looked across the room, directly at his opponent, who didn't say anything at all, and saw Dion staring back at him, his face unperturbed.

"You can start the fight; you know the rules."

Like that, the fight started. For the first few minutes, Erik and Dion circled each other warily, trading blows but not making any real headway. Erik could feel Dion's power with each punch; he was strong, but not as much as he was.

Even though Dion was one of the best fighters at the Red Palace's peasant rank, with years of experience and a reputation as a strong fighter, the young man knew immediately that he would win.

Erik moved quickly, throwing jabs and uppercuts with precision and not even putting that much effort into avoiding Dion's. His speed and strength made his opponent seem taken aback, but he quickly regained his composure and began to fight back.

Erik noticed again Dion's experience and skill as they circled each other in the ring, as the fighter tried to find weaknesses to exploit in order to win the challenger. Erik tried to stay one step ahead, but Dion was smart and didn't really allow him. The awakener could see that he was trying to lead him to make a mistake, waiting for an opening to strike, but Erik didn't fall for it.

"Why aren't you using your blade?" Dion asked, clearly annoyed by the lack of respect Erik showed to him.

"There is no need..." the awakener replied.

"We will see..." Dion's anger grew as he watched Erik's arrogant attitude.

At that moment, the man channeled mana and transformed into a human-tiger hybrid. His strength and speed severely increased.

Despite this, Erik stayed focused but calm and used his sharp senses to anticipate Dion's moves. Dion tried to land several powerful blows on Erik. Still, he failed again, despite his increased strength and speed, and this gravely affected Dion's mood, who started to understand the disparity between him and Erik. However, he refused to back down and surrender; he thought he had a chance.

However, as the fight continued, Erik saw the subtle hints that Dion was already growing tired; keeping up with his speed wasn't simple for the young man. Erik, on the other hand, was still full of energy; he knew he had an advantage in terms of strength and stamina, and he wanted to take full advantage of it.

Erik seized his opportunity, as Dion had problems keeping up with the fight, unleashing a flurry of punches that caught his opponent off guard. He stumbled, and Erik landed a mighty blow that sent Dion tumbling to the ground.

Erik observed him for a bit, doing nothing. He realized his superiority in full and started feeling a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment.

Dion struggled to get up, growling angrily as he turned to Erik. "You think this is a game? You're not taking me seriously!" he roared.

Erik stood tall, staring down at Dion with a calm expression. "I take every opponent seriously," he replied, his voice firm and steady.

Dion snarled, his eyes glowing with fury. "Then fight me like a man!" he shouted.

Erik shrugged. "I'm doing what I need to do to win," he simply said. "And I don't need that much against you; I'm sorry if this upsets you." He added. To be honest, Erik himself was weirded out by his words; they sounded more arrogant than he intended. But he was telling the truth; there was no need for him to give his all in this fight.

Dion gritted his teeth, his claws digging into the ground. "I'll show you what happens when you don't take me seriously!" he yelled, lunging forward to attack again.

Chapter 259: Dion (2)

Erik and Dion circled each other again. Dion looked at Erik warily but with a slight tint of rage in his eyes. Their eyes met and locked in a fierce stare-down. Dion was breathing heavily, sweat dripping down his face, but Erik was fine.

However, it was clear that Dion's rank and reputation were well-earned. He was a skilled fighter whose movements were smooth and fluid as he darted in and out of Erik's range. The awakener, for his part, had devilish strength and speed compared to his peers, which made up for his relative lack of experience.

Even from that point of view, Erik was much stronger than before. His coordination was better, and his moves were more refined. He was finally a fine warrior.

Dion sent a flurry of blows against Erik, their fists and feet striking each other with brutal force, but the awakener only blocked his moves, as he didn't really care about what the man attempted to do. Dion was quick and agile, despite his size severely increasing due to his brain crystal power, and his blows came from all directions. Meanwhile, Erik relied on his raw speed to avoid Dion's moves.

Despite his speed and agility, Dion was having a hard time keeping up with Erik's speed. He could feel the impact of Erik's steps resonating through the ground. He was scared of what he could do with all that strength. If he decided to hit him, they would for sure break his bones and shatter his defenses, and Erik wasn't even trying, further enraging Dion.

But Erik's opponent was no pushover. He fought back with equal ferocity, his own fists threatening to strike Erik's face twice. The two men were locked in a vicious dance, their bodies moving with precision as Dion attacked and Erik avoided, treating everything as a bother.

"STOP MAKING FUN OF ME!" Dion said, his rage further increasing. Erik smirked, "I'm not making fun of you; I'm just showing you how weak you are." Dion's anger boiled over.

Erik was aware that he was behaving like a prick, but the feeling of being much stronger than his opponent was incredible and made him feel good. In addition, not even five minutes passed, so he didn't lose that much time, which significantly boosted his ego.

As the fight went on, Dion could feel his energy flagging. His muscles burned with exhaustion, his breath coming in ragged gasps. But he refused to give up, determined to see this fight through to the

end despite the difference in strength. He had a reputation to preserve; he couldn't make this fight go on like this, with Erik toying with him.

However, as time passed, Dion grew increasingly desperate. Erik seemed to be unconcerned about him as if he were an ant he only had to crush. Dion knew he had to devise a new strategy that would catch Erik off guard and turn the tables in his favor. He had to resort to his higher experience and higher martial skills to do that.

The two men circled each other once more, with Dion trying to find the right opportunity to strike. Then, with a fierce cry, he launched himself at Erik again, his clawed fist traveling out with deadly force.

Dion swung his massive fists at Erik, who stepped to the side and avoided the move. The awakener didn't even fight back, but even he was starting to lose interest in the fight and felt sorry for his opponent.

Finally, Erik stepped forward to throw a punch, and Dion saw his opportunity. By pushing his body and concentrating all his strength in one leg, with lightning speed, he sidestepped Erik's attack and moved in close, his clawed fist cocked and ready to strike.

Erik was caught off guard and almost stumbled backward but narrowly avoided the full force of Dion's punch.

The man seized his chance again as Erik was having trouble regaining his balance. He thought that if a single attack landed, he would win against Erik. So he rained down a series of rapid punches. After having recuperated from the surprise, Erik blocked the blows and put himself back in his stance; however, a few attacks almost got past his defenses as Dion misled him with nasty tactics.

He had had enough this time. Despite Dion almost having landed some hits on him, thanks to his experience and skills, it was clear to the awakener that the young man couldn't give him the challenge he needed to grow and that, despite his opponent's attempts, he was bound to lose.

"All right, I'm sick of this..."

When Erik's opponent heard the words, his heart sank. Despite his years of experience, Dion found himself struggling to keep up with Erik's natural talent and raw strength. The awakener seemed to anticipate his every move, dodging and swerving with ease. The only thing that prevented him from losing was Erik's lack of interest in the fight and the fact that he avoided attacking him.

Was he messing with him? Making fun of him?

Dion gritted his teeth and dug deep, drawing on all of his training and experience to stay in the fight. However, Erik decided to end the fight once and for all. He darted in with lightning-fast speed and delivered a powerful punch to Dion's side. The blow landed with a sickening thud, and Dion stumbled backward, his face contorted in pain and several ribs crushed.

Erik didn't let up. He pressed his advantage, unleashing a flurry of kicks and punches that landed with crushing force. Dion tried to fight back, but he was too weakened and slow. As Erik continued his assault, Dion's vision began to blur, and he felt himself losing consciousness.

Finally, with a last blow, Erik secured his victory, as Dion finally tapped the ground in surrender. The room was silent, and the healer watched in shock. He had already seen the awakener's prowess but couldn't understand how much stronger he was compared to his peers. That also spoke volumes about how strong Nathaniel was.

Dion lay there, gasping for breath and clutching his side in agony. Erik stood over him, his chest heaving with exertion. Dion realized that his opponent was not just a skilled fighter but a ruthless one who would stop at nothing to achieve his goals.

For a moment, the two men locked eyes. There was no animosity on Erik's side, but Dion was seething with anger as he felt disrespected. Besides, he had just lost despite giving all he could, making him extremely sad.

Martin, the healer, rushed into the room, and it was clear who the winner was. Again, Erik showed how incredible he was and how much he grew stronger during his stay at the Red Palace. All of this, not even in months.

Martin walked up to Erik with a broad grin on his face and said, "Congratulations, young man! You won the fight!"

Erik beamed with pride as Martin continued, "And not only that, you've just jumped up to rank 270 in the inner rankings! That's quite an achievement for someone who's only been training here for a couple of months!"

Erik felt a rush of excitement at the thought of what he might be able to accomplish with more training and experience, what he could achieve if he didn't have to fear the Crystal Cross Gang or lay low because of the government.

Erik took a moment to reflect on the fight. He knew that Dion had put up a good fight and respected him for that.

But in the end, it was his own skill and determination that had won the day. And as he walked out of the room, his head held high and his heart full of pride for what he had accomplished, for what he gained due to his effort and that bit of luck he got when he obtained the biological supercomputer. Erik knew that he had found his calling. He was a fighter, and he was determined to be the best.

Erik watched Dion leave the room without saying a word, his defeat weighing heavily on him. The young man could not help but feel a tinge of pity for his opponent, having experienced defeat himself in the past.

But he quickly shook the feeling off and left the room himself, heading towards the first floor of the Blue Palace. As he walked down the hallway, he couldn't help but feel a sense of accomplishment. He had won another fight and did it with style.

As he reached the first floor, he spotted a vending machine and decided to grab a bottle of water. He fished a few coins out of his pocket and inserted them into the machine, waiting for the bottle to drop. As he twisted the cap off the bottle, he heard someone call out his name.

He turned around to see Martin, the healer, approaching him, and he followed the young man to the ground floor with a broad smile on his face.

"Congratulations, Erik!" Martin exclaimed. "That was an amazing fight! You truly are a natural fighter." Erik smiled at the compliment, feeling a sense of pride welling up inside him. He had worked hard to get to where he was and was grateful for the recognition.

Chapter 260: After the match

"Thank you, Mister Middleton," Erik replied with a half-embarrassed smile. "It wasn't an easy fight, but I managed to pull it off in the end."

"It wasn't an easy fight? Hahahaha, Erik, there is no need to be humble with me; I've seen many students here at the Red Palace through the years, and I know when someone is holding back his strength!"

Erik smiled awkwardly. He wasn't used to such compliments.

"I was watching from the sidelines, and I have to say, you handled yourself very well," Martin complimented. "You've come a long way since your first day here. Your growth was remarkable," the healer added.

Erik nodded, feeling proud of his progress. "I've been training hard, trying to improve every day."

"I can see that," Martin said with a smile. "Oh, Erik, I also wanted to apologize for what happened with Nathaniel the last time; it was my duty to stop him."

Erik's expression grew somber. He appreciated Martin's apology, but the incident with Nathaniel had nothing to do with him. He nodded his head in acknowledgment of Martin's apology.

"I appreciate your concern, Mister Middleton," Erik said. "However, I must clarify that Nathaniel's behavior was not your responsibility. Besides, everything went well in the end, so there is no need to apologize." He added.

Martin nodded understandingly. "All right. Now, I have some matters to attend to. Take care!" the man said.

Erik smiled gratefully. "Thanks, Mister Middleton. Have a nice day!" Erik waved goodbye and continued walking towards his destination, grateful for what the man had just said.

As the man left, Erik went back to browsing the vending machine. He finally decided on a bottle of water and inserted the coins.

"Well, I should be getting back to my room," Erik said, grabbing the bottle from the machine.

After sipping some water, the young man left the building, walking briskly towards the bus stop to head to the Red Palace. He and the others decided to meet at the cafeteria to have dinner together, but he needed to meet Amber first since she told him she had to talk to him. Then he took a sip from the bottle and realized that it was warm and tasted strange.

Erik sighed and thought he should have gone for the soda instead.

He hopped onto the bus, swiped his card, and sat down. After a few minutes, the bus pulled up to the Red Palace's stop. Erik stepped out and walked towards the entrance, scanning his ID card to enter. He went to the elevator and pressed the button for the first floor.

Erik stepped out into the familiar hallway leading to the student's apartments as the doors opened. He quickly pulled out his phone and sent a text message to Amber, letting her know he had arrived.

Just as he was putting his phone away, he heard a voice calling his name. He turned to see Amber walking towards him; her red hair had grown significantly longer during these months and swayed as she walked, but he only noticed this now.

"Hey!" Erik said. "It's great to see you again," he added with a smile.

"Hey!" Amber replied, but she wasn't that happy for some unknown reason.

"Were you waiting for me?" Erik asked.

"Yes, actually. There is something I must talk to you about," she said with a slightly angry tone.

Erik noticed this and immediately asked, "What?"

"You know it well, Erik," the girl said sternly.

"Seriously, I don't know what I did that upset you so much..." Erik replied, trying to sound as innocent as possible. "Can you please tell me what's bothering you so we can work it out together?"

Amber frowned but then looked Erik in the eye and said, "You left the Red Palace yesterday!"

Then, Erik understood what was the problem. However, he couldn't tell the others that he was going out because of the Crystal Cross gang, as they would have for sure asked to go with him, and that wasn't possible. Besides, what would he have told them? That he went out to search for information about a guy he planned to kill?

"What were you thinking?!" she said, her tone stern. "You can't just leave like that, Erik. You know the risks, or did you forget what the Crystal Cross gang tried to do to you?"

Erik facepalmed and wondered how Amber had learned he had left the Red Palace. He knew he had to devise a convincing excuse, but he couldn't think of anything that would satisfy Amber's curiosity. He took a deep breath and tried to compose himself before answering her.

"I had to take care of something," Erik said defensively. Amber raised an eyebrow and gave him a skeptical look. "Something more important than your safety?" she asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

"What was so important that you had to leave the Red Palace alone? You should have told someone," Amber said, her voice rising. "We could have helped you."

"I know you would," Erik said, but he wasn't regretful for what he did. "I'm sorry, Amber. I didn't mean to worry you, but I couldn't ask you all to come with me, not after everything that happened. This is my problem," the young man added. However, this worry was a little bit weird, and he took a mental note of it.

"This is not your problem alone, Erik; this became ours once they tried to kill us all inside the forest!" Amber said, shaking her head. She then sighed, "But I'm just glad you're okay." Looking at Erik in the eyes worriedly, she said, "Promise me you won't do something like that again."

"I promise," Erik said, but he wasn't sincere, as he knew that he had to take care of this matter, Achim's matter. "I'll make sure to let everyone know next time..." He didn't want to lie to her, but he had.

Amber let out a deep breath, the tension in her shoulders easing. "Good," she said, smiling at him. "Now, let's go grab something to eat. The others are already waiting..."

Erik smiled back at her, grateful for her concern. "Sure thing," he said, and they walked toward the cafeteria together.

Along the way, Amber came up with another question. "So, have you already found a tuxedo for Tuesday's party?"

Erik paled. He totally forgot he promised Amber to go with her to the party her family was throwing on the 18th. He didn't have anything to wear.

"Ah..." Erik could only say.

"What. Don't tell me you forgot..."

Erik shook his head. "I didn't forget," Erik lied. "It's just that I haven't had the chance to look for one yet. Do you have any recommendations?"

"You forgot!"

"NO! Seriously, let me expl-"

"You forgot."

Erik sighed; there was no reason to keep lying. "Guilty," he said in the end. Amber facepalmed, then looked at her friend and said, "So, you have nothing to wear?"

"No..." Erik said it awkwardly. Amber rolled her eyes and said, "Typical guy." Amber sighed. Her friend was an idiot.

"But to be honest, it wasn't my fault! I had a lot of things to do during the past week, and it totally slipped my mind!" The young man tried to defend himself but unsuccessfully.

"I will handle your formal attire. Just do not forget about the party! My dad will send a car to take us all," Amber said. The young man nodded, feeling grateful for Amber's help. Honestly, he couldn't wait to see her in her formal attire at the party.

"The others are coming too?" Erik asked.

"Yes, did you believe I would only tell you?" Amber was slightly surprised and hoped he asked that because he wanted to go alone with her. Her stomach fluttered a little bit as she thought this.

"Right, right... Well, at least I will have someone to talk to..."

That evening went on like that. Erik and his friends spent a lot of time eating at the cafeteria. All the physical exertions they did during the day needed a lot of energy, so they were forced to eat a lot to keep their bodies in tip-top shape.

However, they spent a lot of time chatting; Amber didn't tell the others he had left the Red Palace the previous day, and Erik and his friends had a lovely evening. It was a rare moment for the awakener; before the biological supercomputer, he was alone, with no friends and family, and he was bullied and beaten.

However, he now had many friends who cared about him a lot and even risked their lives to protect him.

It didn't matter that they only became his friends after he obtained the system, and he wasn't so picky as to abandon them because of this. They probably had their reasons to stay away from him previously.

As for Aaron, his friend didn't really get better after what happened to his father, and to be honest, the others were a little bit worried as he started behaving strangely. Not only was he increasing his training time a lot and spending less and less time with them, but Anderson said he heard him muttering something worrisome, something related to a guy named Grimes.

Erik's friend hadn't connected the dots yet, but it wasn't hard to figure out who this Grimes guy was. Allan's father and New Alexandria's chief of police. Erik hadn't seen Allan since they came to the Red Palace and didn't know how he was doing there.

However, judging by the fact that he had a rare power that allowed him to manifest electricity through his spear, things weren't probably going wrong for him.