

BIOLOGICAL 261

Chapter 261: Requesting a meeting

Private Investigator Hais sat in his dimly lit office, staring at the computer files before him. He had been working on the case about Conal's, Logan's, and Orson's disappearance, or, as he used to call it, the COLD case, for weeks now, and it seemed like the only possible explanation for the trio's disappearance was that Erik Romano, Frant's only awakener, did something to them.

Hais rested his eyes for a couple of minutes as he was straining them to look at his computer; after a while, he opened them and stared at the files once again. It was filled with witness statements and surveillance footage that cleared every single person he had doubts about.

His brain crystal power was in full gear, giving him the power to think so fast as to actually make a mental reconstruction of what could have happened. In his mind, there was no alternative.

It had to be Erik Romano who made the three disappear; he probably killed them. Everything pointed at him in his mind, but he didn't have proof. He decided to gather more information about the young man and his whereabouts during the time of the disappearance, hoping to find evidence that would confirm his suspicions.

In the past few days, the old man tried to find the awakener, but apparently, he never left the Red Palace, and even if he did, the investigator doubted someone would tell him.

He knew that he needed to speak to Erik himself to get to the bottom of this, but getting permission for a meeting was not easy. However, thanks to his perseverance, he was allowed to talk to someone there. Maybe they wanted to learn his purpose for going there and decide after they ascertained he wasn't dangerous.

The Red Palace was known for being a place for the rich, a place for the strong, and a place for the nation's future, but many people had unsavory characters, and he was well aware of that. Hais had never set foot inside the institution before, but he had heard enough stories to know that it was not a place for ordinary people.

As the time approached, Hais stood up from his chair, straightening his tie and taking a deep breath. He grabbed his jacket and headed out the door, making his way toward the part of the city where the Red Palace was located.

The man rapidly got to the street and called a cab, which rapidly came and landed in front of the old man. He entered. Hais nervously checked his watch, hoping he wasn't late for the meeting. As the cab driver weaved through traffic, Hais couldn't help but feel a sense of anticipation building up inside him.

He had been preparing for this meeting for weeks and knew that it could potentially change the course of his investigation.

"Bring me to the Red Palace," he said confidently. The driver looked at him incredulously, and there was no way someone who needed a cab to travel would be welcomed there. However, he inserted the address and quickly gave gas; the vehicle floated in the sky, and after a short while, it accelerated toward Hais's destination.

After a short while, the old man arrived and was determined to chat with Erik. As he approached the gate, the cameras scanned his face, and the gate opened. From there, the man had to walk and clearly appreciated the garden's beauty.

"Fucking show-offs..." Hais said. He did really hate the Red Palace and everything it represented inside the nation.

After he arrived in front of the door, it automatically opened, making some clicks and clanks. The old man stepped inside warily; he could feel his heart racing in his chest.

The inside of the Red Palace was even more pompous than the outside. It wasn't enough for these pricks, as Hais called them, to make several giant buildings in the middle of the city.

No, they also had to show off their wealth and connection to the government by showing off the place's grandeur. In the investigator's mind, it was like they were trying to further distinguish themselves from the poor masses as if they needed to establish they were better; they were elites.

Hais quickly saw a woman sitting at the only desk on the ground floor, and he assumed he had to talk to her. The old man went to the desk, but despite the woman's beauty, he didn't try to make a good impression; he was there to work, and he didn't have a good impression of her already.

"Hello," Hais said. The woman looked up and smiled politely, but her eyes betrayed a hint of annoyance.

"Good morning, I'm Amanda Smith; you should be Mr. Hais, am I right?" Miss Smith asked.

"Indeed, you already know who I am. Should I assume you are recording my stay here?" Hais inquired.

"Of course, we have several cameras and many people standing nearby if you do something you shouldn't. So, I would like to ask you to refrain from doing anything stupid. Given your profession and reputation, I'm certain nothing bad will happen," Miss Smith said.

"Of course, you know who I am, and surely you know what I do for a living... Well, whatever, I'm here to see a student," the investigator said without beating around the bush.

"Any contact with students must be authorized by the student in question, even if you are a family member. After that, there is the need to schedule an appointment. Security here is a big deal." Miss Smith said.

"I guessed, especially after what happened recently." Hais referred to the attack in the forest, in which Erik and his friends were the unfortunate targets.

"Your reputation is indeed well earned, Mr. Hais," Miss Smith said with an intrigued look. "So, who is the student you would like to talk to?" The woman asked.

"Erik Romano. I need to ask him some questions; it is for a case I'm working on, but I can't say anything more." Hais looked at the woman; he wanted to see her reaction. Did she know something? Was the kid here under their protection? He was open to any possibility.

To be honest, his thinking was spot on. Erik was really under the Red Palace's protection, but not entirely because of the Crystal Cross gang attack.

The fact that they targeted him was given; they were not stupid and knew they wanted him; however, they didn't know why and wrongly assumed it was because of his awakener status. The other reason was that General Becker was closely monitoring the kid's development. The young man was an asset in his eyes, and he needed him to grow enough to protect himself and later work for him.

After Miss Smith heard about Hais's request, despite being troubled, she didn't change her expression. She was a professional working for Frant's best institution, so she knew she could not

give reasons for the investigator to suspect anything. She didn't know what he was searching for, and it could be anything; it was better not to let the old man make wrong assumptions.

"To talk to the student, Erik Romano, as in every other case, we need to get his permission. After that, an appointment will be held under strict supervision inside the Red Palace. If you accept these conditions, there shouldn't be problems unless the student refuses," Miss Smith said.

"There is no problem."

"Good; we will soon contact the student in question about the meeting and get his consent. In the meantime, we require you to leave a phone number, and you will be contacted by us as soon as possible." Miss Smith assured the man there wouldn't be any issue as long as the conditions were met and the student agreed to attend the meeting.

The request for a phone number only ensured prompt communication with the concerned party.

"All right..." The man quickly gave his contacts to the woman, and after that, he left the building. However, not even half an hour later, he got a text message.

RP: The student, Erik Romano, agreed to meet you. The appointment has been scheduled for 19/08/3040 at 18:00.

Hais grinned. Finally, he could solve this crime.

[EARLIER]

Erik got a message from the Red Palace. He quickly read the message, and his expression changed.

"Fuck... A private investigator wants to talk to me..."

He was curious as to why this was happening. Did he mess up when he killed Nathaniel? Did someone find out about the biological supercomputer? Or was it because of Conal, Orson, and Logan?

The young man didn't know. However, he had a feeling that declining the meeting would lead to missing out on an opportunity that could potentially change his life, aside from making him look suspicious. He decided to take the risk and attend the meeting.

Maybe something happened, and he wanted to see if he knew something to which he was unrelated. He knew the police often interviewed many people when someone disappeared or got killed.

He quickly told the Red Palace that he was willing to meet the man; this way, he would learn what was happening and take countermeasures if needed.

Chapter 262: The Party (1)

Erik and his friends were gathered outside the Red Palace, dressed to the nines and waiting for the limo to arrive. They had all been invited to Amber's family's gala and were excited to see what lay ahead.

As they waited, Benedict, Martha, Anderson, Aaron, and Mikey chattered excitedly about the event.

"I can't believe we're going to Amber's house," Benedict said, running his hand over his suit.

"I've never been to anything like this before," he added.

"Me neither," Mikey agreed. "I can't wait to see what it's like."

"I heard that the Stone family will be there," Anderson said, adjusting his tie. "I've always been curious about them; I heard Emily is a beauty too." It was a weird remark coming from him, as he had always looked uninterested in romance.

"General Becker will be there too..." Aaron added with a serious tone.

Martha, who had been quiet up until now, suddenly said, "Seriously? I didn't know that..."

As they spoke, a sleek black limousine pulled up in front of them, its windows tinted dark. The driver left the vehicle and opened the door, gesturing for them to climb inside.

Erik led the way, followed by his friends; all but him, Gwen, and Floyd, were staring in awe at the plush leather seats and the mini-bar filled with drinks. As they settled in, the driver closed the door and pulled out into the busy streets of New Alexandria.

The ride was smooth and luxurious, and the group continued to chat excitedly as they made their way to Amber's house, which was already there since she was the host.

"I hope there's some good food," Benedict said, rubbing his stomach. "I'm starving."

"Me too," Martha agreed. "And I hope we get to meet some famous people."

"I just want to dance," Mikey said, grinning. "I heard they have a ballroom."

As the limo pulled up in front of Amber's house, Erik's friends couldn't help but feel a little nervous. This was a whole new world for them, and they weren't quite sure what to expect.

Honestly, it was a little strange that they had never visited her home. On the other hand, the awakener was annoyed; he really didn't like all these rich, arrogant, and obnoxious people and would have given everything to be at the Red Palace to train.

The students quickly stepped out of the car and onto the red carpet leading up to the entrance; they couldn't help but feel excited. Amber was there, the driver had previously contacted her, and she knew their friends had arrived.

"Welcome!" She said. Saying that she was stunning was an understatement. Her red hair had been straightened and freely swayed on her back. She wore a red, tight-fitting dress that showed off her curvaceous body and had a diamond necklace hanging on her neck.

"WOW!" Martha said to Amber, "You are stunning!"

"Thank you!" Amber replied with a warm smile. Erik observed her, and he agreed that she was indeed beautiful; his heart skipped a beat, but he didn't say anything else. Everyone complimented her for her look, but she didn't receive the compliments she hoped for, especially from Erik, who didn't really say that much to her.

"Wow," Mikey said, staring up at the towering mansion. "This is going to be amazing."

Amber's pride swelled in her chest. And with that, they went inside, eager to see what the night had in store for them.

As soon as Erik and his friends walked through the grand front door of Amber's mansion, they were struck by how luxurious everything was. The walls were adorned with fine art, and the marble floors gleamed in the soft light of the chandeliers above.

As soon as they saw the ballroom, they were drawn to the massive chandelier in the middle that was hanging from the ceiling. It was easily the largest they had ever seen, made of glittering crystal and gold that reflected light in a dazzling display.

The ballroom itself was just as impressive, with towering pillars and intricate details that suggested no expense had been spared in its construction.

The room was filled with people, some of whom Erik recognized from the city's social scene, while others were clearly influential figures from outside the city. They were milling about, sipping champagne, and chatting amiably. And among them were some of the most notable figures in New Alexandria.

The mayor, Zayan Calvert, stood near the grand staircase with his wife and daughter, Scarlet. He was dressed in a sharp black suit, while his wife wore a shimmering gown that caught the light as she moved. The guests kept arriving one by one, and the room started being filled with the sound of chatter and laughter.

Over near the bar, Erik spotted Colonel Mirko Tiwana, the man who had led the defense against the Thaidis during the recent attack on the city. He was dressed in his formal military uniform, complete with a row of gleaming medals across his chest.

And nearby, Leslie Spark, the Minister of War, mingled with Jena Rose, the Minister of Defense. Leslie wore a fitted navy blue dress with a statement necklace, while Jena looked sharp in her tailored pantsuit.

As Erik and his friends made their way through the crowd, they spotted Captain Mary Lain, a hero during the attack, chatting with her comrade Emma Morin. They recognized her since she had been awarded a medal on national television, so they knew how she looked. Mary wore a stunning red gown, while Emma wore a sleek black suit.

Erik and his friends couldn't help but feel a little out of place among these distinguished guests, but they were determined to make the most of the night. And as they mingled and chatted among themselves, they couldn't help but feel like they were a part of something bigger than themselves, excluding Erik, who hated being there, especially as he noticed Amber's father staring at him.

However, something immediately caught the young man's attention. The Stone family. They were all waiting in front of a giant staircase leading to the upper floors; beside them was the host, Caiden Joyce, with his wife Luna, while his secondborn, Harry, was nowhere to be seen.

"Amber, shouldn't you go to your father, with you being the host's daughter?" Erik asked.

"Not tonight; I asked dad to let me be for today," the young woman replied.

"Good then, we will have more time to spend together," Erik said, making Amber blush.

As the awakener looked over to the Stone family, he couldn't help but notice Emily standing there, looking stunning as ever. Her dark hair cascaded down her back in loose curls, framing her delicate features. Her form-fitting dress highlighted her toned body and emerald green eyes, which sparkled in the light.

Emily's dress was a deep forest green, made of a delicate fabric that flowed around her as she moved. It had a plunging neckline that showed just enough of her ample bosom to leave a lasting impression on Erik and the other young men in attendance. The dress hugged her curves in all the right places, leaving little to the imagination.

Erik found himself mesmerized by Emily's beauty and elegance. He could feel his heart racing and his palms sweating as he tried to compose himself. And he wasn't the only one. He could see other young men staring at her in awe, their eyes lingering on her every move.

The awakener felt a light tap on his arm as he stood there, enamored with Emily's beauty. He turned to see Amber looking at him with an annoyed look.

"What?" the young man asked.

"Nothing..." Amber replied.

As Erik and his friends made their way through the mansion, they couldn't help but be in awe of its grandeur. The floors were made of sleek, polished marble, and the walls were adorned with elaborate paintings and sculptures. The chandeliers hanging from the ceiling sparkled in the dim light, casting a warm glow over the opulent furnishings.

The mansion was a true testament to the wealth and extravagance of its owner.

As they made their way around the room, Erik's gaze kept drifting back to Emily. She moved with a graceful confidence that commanded attention, and he couldn't help but feel drawn to her. He took in the way her dress hugged her curves and the way her hair fell in perfect waves around her.

However, as things progressed, silence fell in the ballroom. What Aaron said was indeed true. General Becker was going to attend the party. He came from the main entrance with some people in military dress in tow; Erik was surprised to see Uncle Benjamin among them, following the general's every move.

Becker's entrance was nothing short of awe-inspiring. His broad shoulders and muscular frame commanded respect from everyone in the room. Erik watched as he moved with purpose towards the Stone family and Amber's father in front of the staircase.

With every step Becker took, he exuded confidence and efficiency. His movements were deliberate and purposeful as if he knew exactly where he needed to be and how to get there. It was clear that this was a man who was used to being in charge and had earned the respect and admiration of those around him.

As he approached the staircase, Becker's eyes scanned the room, taking in every detail and sizing up the crowd. His long red hair was tied back in a sleek ponytail, and his sharp brown eyes seemed to pierce through the flickering lights.

When Becker finally reached the top of the stairs, he stopped momentarily and looked down at the crowd with a serious face. Then, with a powerful voice that echoed throughout the room, he began to speak.

Chapter 263: The party (2)

"Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed guests and friends," he said. "It is a great honor to be standing before you tonight." The man looked at the crowd with piercing eyes.

"I come to you tonight with a message of hope and resilience. As you know, our city has been under attack in the past week, and too many of our friends and loved ones have been lost. However, we were able to repel the thaids and are hunting down the remnants of the horde." The crowd cheered and applauded.

Erik actually noticed journalists and TV reporters were there recording the event; however, he could only notice how they often framed Emily.

"Unfortunately, it is with great displeasure that I must tell you that not all the news is reassuring." Becker paused a bit. "As we suspect, that behind the horde was a dangerous thaid known as the Heniate."

Murmurs and shocked faces appeared amidst the crowd. No one expected something like this. Heniate were notoriously powerful thaids, vicious, and highly intelligent. Erik was the most surprised of them; thanks to his knowledge, he knew what kind of beast this was and what it was capable of.

"What is an Heniate?" Benedict asked.

"How the hell can't you ignore what an Heniate is?" Erik whispered.

"Man, You know I don't like to study very much. Don't act like you don't know it."

Erik sighed. "An Heniate is a dangerous thaid with the ability to create parasites that control their host's brain and influence their decisions. If we take this into account, the attack on New Alexandria makes a lot more sense now," Erik said. However, Anderson was a sharp guy and immediately raised a question.

"But why did it attack New Alexandria? What could have possibly been gained from it? More zombies?" he asked.

"That is an interesting question," Erik said, "But I have no idea about it... The books I read did not explain their behavior properly, as they get killed as soon as they get found as they are too dangerous."

In the meantime, Becker's speech was going on. Erik watched as the crowd hung on Becker's every word. The room was silent, save for the occasional murmur of agreement or gasp of awe. It was clear that this man commanded respect and admiration from everyone in the room and that he was not to be taken lightly.

"But we will stand strong! And we will fight back! I am here to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that we have a plan and are doing all we can to find the beast and who was behind it and that our retribution will be strong once that is done. "

Erik and Anderson looked at each other. "They think someone is behind it?" Anderson asked. "But how? Isn't this a thaid? How could someone have pushed him to do something like this?"

Erik looked at Anderson with a solemn look. "I don't know," he said. The young man wasn't worried about Frant. Hell, if the nation got destroyed, he would start dancing. However, the prospect of someone having that much power over a thaid worried him. Besides, what would happen to his friends if something like that happened again, and he and they were required to fight?

After Becker's speech, the room erupted into applause and murmurs; they were all obviously worried about the situation. Becker walked off the stairs with his head held high, still radiating power and confidence with every step he took.

As the clapping died down, Caiden Joyce, Amber's father, stepped up to the microphone and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming tonight again. General Becker's words were certainly inspiring, but we're not here just to listen to speeches. We're here to have a good time!"

With that, the room exploded into cheers, and the sound of music filled the air. The press kept shooting photos and recording the event; the people began moving toward the dance floor, and the buffet table opened up, with servers serving delicious dishes to the guests.

As Erik and his friends made their way over to the food, Emily approached them, smiling. Of course, this left everyone except Erik, Gwen, Floyd, and Amber speechless. She was Emily Stone, a goddess among men, the first daughter of the second most important man in the whole nation.

"Hi, guys," she said to Amber and Erik. "Long time no see. How are you all doing?"

"Good, good," Erik replied, feeling a little tongue-tied in her presence.

"I'm so glad you could all make it," Emily said, glancing around the room. "It would be sad if I didn't know anyone here. It's nice to have some friendly faces," she said while looking at Amber.

"Yeah, it's pretty crazy," Benedict chimed in, staring at the lavish decorations adorning Emily's dress. "We've never been to anything like this before." Martha gave him an annoyed look and hit him to the side.

Emily laughed. "I know it can be overwhelming at first. But you get used to it," her smile was warm, but she didn't know the guy and felt uncomfortable because of his stare.

As they chatted, Erik couldn't help but notice how beautiful Emily looked, and Amber's jealousy increased. However, she said nothing.

Then Emily turned to Erik and smiled warmly. "Erik, it's so good to see you again," she said, her voice musical and pleasant to the ear.

Erik smiled at her, trying to be as charming and polite as possible. "Yeah, how have you been?" he asked smoothly, his confidence returning.

Emily nodded, her green eyes shining. "It's going well, but I'm always at home training and attending all these events with my dad. You know, the usual things..."

The conversation went on until Amber got approached by a servant and got told something she would have never believed to hear. General Becker wanted to see Erik. That was reasonable; her friend was an awakener, and she knew Becker had plans for him, but she didn't expect this now.

Amber interrupted Erik's and Emily's lively conversation and said, "Can I talk to you for a moment?" With a worried look.

"Sure," Erik replied, noticing Amber's face. The two walked a little bit further, and then the young woman dropped the bomb.

"My dad sent someone to tell me that Becker wants to talk to you..." Erik didn't reply; however, the news wasn't pleasant. Anyone else would have killed to talk to the nation's leader, but not him, as he blamed him for the state of things in the nation; he blamed him for his childhood, the bullying, and everything else. Besides, he knew he was seen as a tool by him and nothing else.

"Where is he?" Erik asked.

"That butler will bring you to him." Erik then observed the man, a distinguished gentleman in his early sixties with a stoic countenance and an air of refined elegance. He stood tall, his back straight, and his movements measured, always exuding an aura of professionalism and poise. His attire was immaculate; his suit was always perfectly tailored, and his white gloves were spotless.

His salt-and-pepper hair was neatly combed, and his mustache was impeccably trimmed. His keen eyes held a glint of wisdom and experience, as if he had seen it all and had learned from life's lessons.

"All right." Erik took a deep breath and started to follow the butler, who was leading him to a small side room inside the ballroom.

His heart pounded as he walked, wondering what could possibly be waiting for him on the other side of the door. He tried to shake off the feeling of anxiety that had taken hold of him, but it was no use.

The butler led Erik down a hallway, past several doors, until they finally reached a small room. The butler opened the door and gestured for Erik to enter. The awakener hesitated momentarily, but he gathered his courage and stepped inside.

When the young man entered, Caiden, Richard, and Becker were all present and standing side by side. They looked up as Erik entered, and the room was silent for a moment.

Erik's nerves were starting to get the best of him, but he tried to appear calm and collected as he looked around the room. He took in the serious expressions on the faces of the three men, and he couldn't help but wonder what they had called him here for.

"Good evening, Erik," Caiden said, breaking the silence. "Thank you for coming."

[WARNING. EXTREMELY DANGEROUS INDIVIDUAL SPOTTED. THE BIOLOGICAL SUPERCOMPUTER SUGGESTS THE HOST NOT TO USE ANY SYSTEM-RELATED POWER AS THE CHANCE THIS MAN CAN SENSE THE SUBTLE MANA FLUCTUATIONS THEY GENERATE IS VERY HIGH.]

Erik responded with a nod, choosing not to say anything further because what the system had said had deeply disturbed him. He knew that if the system was correct, he could be in great danger if he used any of his powers.

Becker stepped forward, and Erik couldn't help but notice how he towered over everyone else in the room. He looked even more imposing up close than he had from a distance. Erik felt a sudden pang of nervousness as Becker approached him, but he tried to maintain his composure and not show any signs of fear.

Chapter 264: The Party (3)

General Becker approached Erik, the man's imposing presence almost overwhelming the young awakener. Erik's heart raced as he stood at attention, his hand instinctively snapping up in a military salute.

Due to the man's innate power, which was evident in the massive amount of mana he was emitting, Erik experienced a slight fear. He had heard stories of Becker's prowess in battle and his ability to control and manipulate mana easily.

"You may be at ease, young man," Becker said, his voice deep and commanding. "I have asked Caiden to have his daughter bring you here, for I have heard of you from my men," the General said, making Erik's worst fear true.

The young man relaxed slightly but still felt a sense of unease in the presence of such a mighty man; besides, he detested him. He looked at Becker carefully, taking in his tall, muscular body and handsome face, and he wondered how much mana the man really had.

It was almost as if the soldier were a living well of power, his very presence imbued with the strength of the arcane substance known as mana.

Erik really wanted to analyze the man, but the system told him not to do so, and he refrained from it.

Erik couldn't help but feel a strange admiration for the General despite his hatred and fear for the man. He had heard stories of Becker's bravery and skill on the battlefield, his unwavering

dedication to his country and fellow soldiers, and his immense strength. And now, standing before the man himself, Erik could see why he was so revered.

"I understand that you are Frant's only awakener," Becker continued. "A rare and valuable gift... I believe that your talents could be of great use to our army in the fight against the thaids in the future, but it is clear you need more training and time, despite being at a very high level for your age," Becker said.

"Thank you, sir; it is a great honor to gain recognition from you..." Erik replied, lying. He didn't care a bit; worst of all, he didn't want that attention. "I will do whatever I can to help as soon as I am deemed worthy," Erik added, his voice steady despite the roiling emotions within him.

Becker nodded, his sharp gaze never leaving Erik's face. "I have high hopes for you, young man. I believe we could achieve great things together with your talents and the military school's guidance."

Erik took a deep breath, trying to calm the dread almost tangibly coursing through his veins. He could sense the power radiating off of Becker, and it made him feel small and insignificant. But he also knew he had to make the most of this situation.

"It's okay, sir," Erik said, his voice steady. "I'm honored to have been given a chance to meet you, and I can't wait to work with you, but I must ask, what is the reason why you called for me?" Erik asked.

Becker's face softened slightly, and Erik felt a sense of relief wash over him as he noticed it. Despite not liking this attention, especially from this man, this was a huge opportunity to understand what this man wanted to do with him in the future. From there, Erik could decide what to do.

In the meantime, Richard and Caiden looked at each other, surprised expressions on both their faces. The two men had been observing him closely now that he had come inside the room, and they could clearly see that he had grown significantly more powerful since they had last seen him, which was not that long ago in Caiden's case.

The mana around Erik thickened, and his muscles bulged as he flexed them involuntarily. They could feel the raw energy coursing through his veins. It was exponentially higher than before.

"I've asked you to come because I wanted to know you personally. After all, we will work side by side in the future," Becker said.

"Really, sir?" the awakener replied, faking eagerness.

"Indeed..."

The conversation went on, with Becker looking closely at Erik. He was astonished to see a fifteen-year-old kid being so strong. The amount of mana the young man radiated was average at best. Still, knowing how weak he previously was and having seen some old photos of the boy, he noticed the significant change his body had undergone.

Erik could feel the weight of the General's scrutiny, which made him feel apprehensive again.

"By the way, may I ask you how you were able to improve so much in such a short amount of time?" Becker asked Erik. "It's clear that you've been making some significant progress in a very short amount of time," Becker added in a measured tone. "I was curious if it had anything to do with your father. Did he teach you something particular?"

Erik hesitated for a moment before responding. He knew that Becker was well aware of who his father was, and he wasn't sure how much he wanted to reveal. His father taught him nothing; all he gained came from his efforts and the system, but that was a legitimate question due to his father's fame.

"My father gave me some pointers, but nothing that significant," Erik replied carefully. "However, all of my progress comes from my efforts."

Becker nodded, his expression thoughtful. "I see," he said. "Well, you are indeed doing a great job. By the way, I'm sorry about your father's disappearance. I can only imagine how difficult that must have been for you."

Erik forced a smile, trying to hide the bitterness he felt about his father. "It's been tough, but I'm managing," he said.

"By the way, sir, I know the army had sent my father away for a very important mission. It was apparently so hard that he died during his duty, but if you don't mind, may I ask you what he was sent to do?" the awakener asked.

Erik felt his heart pounding in his chest as he asked that question to the most important man in the nation.

"It was a classified mission," General Becker replied gravely. "One that only a handful of people knew about. Suffice it to say; it was of great importance to the security of our country and humankind's future."

Erik knew what his father had been sent to do; he himself told him when he came back from it, bringing the biological supercomputer. However, he wanted to hear what Becker had to say about it.

"But he didn't come back," Erik said, the words tasting bitter in his mouth. That was a real emotion. The young man was nervous because of the meeting and was enraged at the man in front of him, as he blamed him for everything this nation and its inhabitants did to him, but talking about his father was a sort of weak spot because, despite Erik's anger, he still loved him.

Lucius was his father, after all.

"I'm sorry to say he didn't," General Becker said softly. "We lost contact with his team shortly after they arrived at their destination. Despite our best efforts, we were never able to locate them. We declared them missing in action, but we aren't certain what happened to him."

Erik had the hunch Becker was lying. After all, soon after he got the biological supercomputer, his house was searched by someone, and his uncle Benjamin coincidentally came to visit him before that happened. The fact that Erik saw the man walking beside the General gave him further suspicions that they knew he had come back.

"I'm sorry," General Becker said, placing a comforting hand on Erik's shoulder. "We did everything we could to find him and bring him home."

Erik nodded numbly, not trusting himself to speak. He felt a wave of anger wash over him, directed not only at General Becker, the man standing in front of him but the military that had sent his father on this mission.

"I understand," Erik said finally, his voice rough with emotion. "Thank you for telling me." General Becker nodded sympathetically.

"Is there anything else you want to ask me?" General Becker said gently.

Erik shook his head. "No, that's all. Thank you, General." It was clear the man wouldn't tell him anything meaningful. Asking questions was pointless.

General Becker stood up and offered Erik a salute. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Erik. Your father was a great man, and I do not doubt you will follow in his footsteps."

Erik returned the salute, feeling a sense of disgust swell within him as he was having trouble keeping the facade going any longer.

"Thank you, General," he said, and with that, Erik left the room. As he did so, a conversation between Becker, Caiden, and Richard started.

"I must say. Wow, I couldn't believe he only had a single neural link three months ago," Becker remarked with a thoughtful look.

Caiden and Richard exchanged a quick glance before Caiden spoke up. "Yes, he's made quite the progress in the past few months. Significantly so in the past weeks."

"Weeks?" Becker asked.

"Indeed." Caiden said, "The last time I saw him, at the hospital after the Crystal Cross Gang attack, he wasn't this strong. It's like he used some drug to increase his strength."

"Is there proof for this claim?"

"No, sir," the man replied.

"Well, whatever the young man did, it's okay; maybe he is just talented." Becker nodded as he said that, a small smile forming on his lips.

"But his brain crystal is weak," Richard interjected. "That might limit his abilities in the long run."

Becker looked at Richard, his eyes piercing. "Richard, don't underestimate the power of someone who can awaken. We've been searching for someone like him for a long time, and I have a feeling that Erik will prove to be more useful than we ever imagined."

Caiden and Richard exchanged another look, both sensing the underlying intentions in Becker's voice. With that, the conversation ended, and Becker took his leave. Caiden and Richard were left deep in thought, realizing the weight and the role that Erik may play in their future.

Chapter 265: The party (4)

As Erik left the room, his mind swirled with all that had happened. He had always known that his father's two-year absence was tied to the military, but to hear it confirmed by the man himself was jarring. Besides, Becker made it very clear that he intended to use him somehow, greatly making him fear for his future.

As he walked back towards the ballroom, he couldn't help but feel a sense of unease. The power and authority that General Becker exuded were intimidating and still lingered in his mind.

He knew that if the General wanted, he could even take him out of the Red Palace tomorrow and send him to some heavily controlled location with no way out to train and be brainwashed.

Erik never wanted to be involved with Frant's military, and that was exacerbated as he learned what would await him once he was told he was an awakener.

Walking through the ballroom, he quickly scanned the place for his friends, specifically for Emily. He spotted her sitting at a table with the others, laughing elegantly and chatting with Amber. He couldn't help but smile at the sight of her and made his way over to her.

"Hey," he said, boldly sliding into the seat next to her. Despite not being an expert in the romance field and not having great social skills, Erik decided it was worth going out of his comfort zone after all he went through in these past months.

"What are you guys talking about?" he asked.

"Oh, just reminiscing about old times," Emily said, smiling up at him. "I was just recalling how Amber and I got lost in the woods on a camping trip some years ago."

Erik couldn't help but laugh. "Hahaha, really? And then?" he asked. "Dad sent a whole squad of men to search for us; they found us in two hours," Emily interjected.

"Well, I'm glad you made it back in one piece," Erik said, looking Emily in the eyes.

Emily felt a warm flush spread through her cheeks at his gaze on her. Erik was in the same situation; he was way out of his comfort zone, and the only thing he could think about during the whole conversation to ease his embarrassment was dead thaid's.

During this whole exchange, Amber had a concerned look on her face. She knew that Erik had gone away to talk to Becker but refrained from saying anything, not to spoil the mood. However, her worries increased, and many thoughts started spreading in her mind.

The group chatted for a while longer, catching up on each other's lives and reminiscing about old times. However, it was clear to all, especially Gwen, that Amber was unhappy. Erik and Emily spent much time talking, ignoring everyone else. As the night wore on, Emily stood to go to the restroom.

"Amber, do you mind coming with me?" she asked her friend.

However, Gwen replied before Amber could. "I will come with you if you don't mind..." she said, as she wanted to give her best friend, an opportunity to talk to Erik.

"Sure, no problem," a smile blossomed on Emily's face.

Lost in thought, the awakener barely noticed Amber looking at him. However, after a short while, Amber stared; the awakener turned to look at her and saw her doing so.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

Amber hesitated for a moment, unsure of what to say. Her heart was beating strongly inside her chest.

"I have to talk to you..."

"Now?" Erik asked.

"Yes."

Erik and Amber stepped out of the ballroom into the cool night air. The garden was lit by soft, warm lights that created a magical atmosphere—the sound of crickets and the rustle of leaves added to the ambiance.

Amber led Erik to a quiet corner of the garden, surrounded by fragrant flowers and tall hedges that shielded them from view. She turned to face him, her eyes searching his face.

"Erik," she said, her voice trembling slightly. "I have something to tell you." Erik looked at her curiously; his eyebrows raised in anticipation.

"What? Is it because of Becker?"

"No. It's something else." The truth was that Amber saw how Erik and Emily developed feelings for each other. Maybe it was love at first sight; she didn't know. However, the young girl didn't like it.

"I know we've been friends for some time now," Amber continued her voice barely above a whisper. "But I've realized that my feelings for you have grown into something more."

Erik's face turned red with surprise as he realized what Amber was saying. He was initially attracted to her, like everyone else at school, but after seeing Emily, everything changed, and he started seeing her as a friend only, someone he could rely on and confide in. She quickly became not only her best friend but also her first; it was weird for her to show these feelings now.

Amber took a deep breath and stepped closer to him. She looked up at him with shining eyes and reached up to cup his face in her hands.

"Erik, I like you," she said, her voice trembling as she surprisingly feared rejection. Erik was stunned and confused, unsure of what to do.

"I don't know what to say," he stammered, looking down at her with a mixture of surprise and confusion.

Amber's heart sank as she saw the confusion on Erik's face, but she expected it. She had hoped that by opening her heart, there was the chance he would say he reciprocated despite knowing he very much liked Emily and that she probably felt the same.

"Erik, I understand if you don't feel the same way. I saw how you look at Emily," she said, stepping back from him. "I just had to tell you how I feel."

Erik looked at her, his mind racing with thoughts and emotions. He realized that he had been blind to Amber's feelings all this time, probably due to the fact that he was inexperienced, now that she said that he wasn't sure how he felt about her. Amber showed great affection for him, going so far as to make him stay at her house when he was in need.

She fought for him inside the forest and often worried about him.

"Amber, I need some time to think," he said finally, looking down at her with a serious expression. "I don't want to hurt you or lead you on, but I need to think about this."

Amber nodded, her eyes downcast. That was the first time someone had refused her, as many people would have died to have a date with her. She also knew confessing her feelings was a risk, but she had to try.

"Take all the time you need," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

She stepped forward firmly but at the same time gently grabbed Erik's head and placed a kiss on his lips.

As Amber pulled away from the kiss, Erik's mind raced with emotions. It was a lot to take in, and Erik wasn't sure how to react.

On the one hand, he felt guilty for not realizing Amber's feelings earlier. She had always been there for him, supporting and cheering him on. She was beautiful, kind, and funny; he admired her in many ways. However, his feelings for Emily were there, too; it was a truth he had to consider. But on the other hand, he couldn't help but feel a tingle of excitement from the kiss.

It was unexpected, but he found himself enjoying it.

Erik's mind raced as he tried to sort out his feelings. He looked at Amber, taking in her beauty in a way he had never seen before, and his heart skipped a beat. Her long, red hair was tousled by the gentle breeze, framing her face in a fiery halo.

Her glasses perched on the bridge of her nose, adding an air of sophistication to her already captivating presence. She wore a long red dress that hugged her curves, accentuating her slender figure in all the right places.

Amber's beauty was breathtaking. Her icy blue eyes, so striking against the backdrop of her red hair, held a depth and intensity that seemed to draw Erik in. Her lips, painted a soft shade of pink, curled into a shy smile as she looked at him.

Erik couldn't help but be captivated by her every move. The way her hair swayed as she turned her head, the way her dress clung to her as she moved—it was all so mesmerizing. He felt a warmth spread through his chest, and he couldn't deny his attraction toward her.

Her eyes sparkled with emotion, and her lips remained slightly parted from the kiss. He could see the love in her gaze, making his heart skip a beat.

He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. He was still processing what had just happened. Amber looked up at him with an embarrassed expression, her eyes unable to focus on him. Erik could see the blush rising on her cheeks as she realized what she had just done.

Then Amber smiled softly, taking his hand. The awakener looked at her, still speechless. Lost in his thoughts, Erik's gaze lingered on her, soaking in every detail of her beauty. Her long red hair, captivating eyes, and curves accentuated by the red dress—she was a vision that stole his breath away.

With that, the young woman left and returned to the ballroom, leaving Erik confused and with a thumping heart.

Chapter 266: The Party (5)

Erik leaned against the stone wall, his head spinning. Amber had kissed him. It had been brief, just a brush of her lips against his—but it had felt like an electric shock. He could still feel the warmth of her breath on his skin and the softness and sweetness of her lips on his.

He was left in a state of pure bliss and felt a warmth spreading through his body—a sense of satisfaction and contentment that he had never felt before. It had been a moment of pure connection, a spark that had ignited something deep within him.

But he couldn't let himself get too caught up in the moment. He had feelings for Amber, but so did he for Emily, and he didn't want to hurt his friend. Initially, he was very attracted to her, but that feeling became a pure friendship after some time. But now, after the kiss, he wasn't so sure anymore.

Maybe there was something more there that he had been overlooking all this time. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to sort out his thoughts and understand what he wanted to do.

But his mind was a jumbled mess of emotions, and he couldn't seem to make sense of anything. He felt guilty for even considering Amber when he had feelings for Emily, but at the same time, he couldn't deny the spark he had felt when she kissed him and how happy he felt about it.

Just as he was about to give up on trying to sort out his feelings, he heard a familiar voice behind him. However, he didn't know what to think about the owner anymore. The voice's owner suddenly put his hand on Erik's shoulder, and the young man turned to see who it was. He was right; that was Uncle Benjamin.

He felt a knot form in his stomach at the sight of the man, whom he suspected had been keeping an eye on him for Becker, and that probably lured him out of his home, with lunch as an excuse, as soon as he got the system.

As he turned, Erik observed the man he so much loved, as a son could love his father. Benjamin was a man in his mid-thirties with dark skin and a smooth and rich complexion that reflected his heritage. He was about 1 meter and 70 centimeters tall and had a slim, athletic build, which was a sign that he was active.

He had a neatly trimmed goatee on his face, which drew attention to his chiseled jawline and made him look rough and tough.

Benjamin's most striking feature was his long, black hair, which fell in a thick, lustrous mane, reaching down to his mid-back. He often kept it tied in a sleek ponytail, which gave him a distinctive and sophisticated look.

His hair had a natural wave to it, and it framed his face, drawing attention to his expressive, almond-shaped eyes that were a deep, warm brown, and seemed to hold a certain wisdom and intensity. His military attire and his many medals gave the man a respectful aura, which Erik, though, couldn't stand anymore.

"Hey, Erik!" Benjamin greeted him with a friendly smile.

"Uncle Ben..." Erik said, "How are you?" The two exchanged pleasantries.

"I'm fine," the man said. "How are things going?" Benjamin asked.

Erik hesitated for a moment before answering. "They're going well, thank you..."

Benjamin looked at him with concern. "You seem a bit tense. Is something bothering you?"

Erik forced a smile. "No, everything's fine. But I have something on my mind." Erik referred to his suspicions about him, but the man misinterpreted.

Benjamin nodded understandingly. "Is it because of the girl that just kissed you?" Benjamin asked.

"Did you see that?"

"Yes..." Benjamin said, "Is she your girlfriend?"

Erik shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He didn't want to talk to Benjamin, not when he was still suspicious of him.

"I don't know," Erik replied.

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"I've not taken a decision yet, she just confessed to me, but I've not given her an answer."

Benjamin then sighed. "Look, Erik, you must take a decision soon. It is not okay to play with other people's emotions. Give her closure if you can, whether a good or a bad one..."

"I know that..." Benjamin sighed. He knew love problems weren't easy to solve, especially at that age.

"If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask me," the man added.

"I appreciate your concern, but I'm fine, really," Erik said, trying to sound convincing.

Benjamin studied him for a moment before speaking again. "Erik, I know we haven't always seen eye to eye, but I want you to know I care about you. Your father was like a brother to me, and I would do anything to help you."

Erik's resolve wavered at the sincerity in Benjamin's voice. He really hoped he was wrong about him; after all, he didn't have proof he asked him to go to lunch only to keep him away from his home. However, the possibility was there, and he didn't want to take any chances.

It was painful to think that the only person who had cared about him in the past and had been his only human contact for years could do something like that to him.

"Thanks, Benjamin. I appreciate it," Erik said.

Benjamin smiled. "Anytime, my boy."

The two chatted a little bit, catching up on what had happened to them in the last period, but after a while, Benjamin was called by some people and had to leave. Benjamin walked away, leaving Erik with a heavy heart and even more confusion than he had before they met. After that, the awakener returned to the ballroom to spend the rest of the night with his friends and enjoy life for once.

Erik took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to push away the thoughts of Amber and Benjamin. He needed to focus on the present.

He heard their laughter and chatter growing louder as he approached the room. He grinned to himself, content to be around such good people. They had been there for him through thick and thin, always supporting him when needed.

As he approached, his friends noticed him and greeted him warmly.

"Hey, where have you been until now?" Floyd asked.

"I just had some stuff to take care of. A lot of people wanted to talk to me tonight," Erik replied.

"Where they serious talks or...?" Erik shrugged, not wanting to bring the mood down with his own problems.

He then turned to his left and saw Amber talking to Gwen, who had a hand on her back and was probably trying to console her. She put on a tough facade in front of the others, but it was clear she was not okay.

"We will talk about that later..." Floyd whispered in Erik's ear as he saw him looking at Amber.

"Yeah..."

He then looked to his right and saw Emily talking to Martha. He really wanted to go to her, but at the same time, he wanted to go to Amber. In the end, he decided to stick with the boys since there was nothing he could do about the situation.

Erik and the others then threw themselves into the night, dancing and joking with each other. They took silly photos together and shared inside jokes. They ate and talked to many interesting people.

For a few hours, Erik forgot about his worries and let himself be carried away by the laughter and joy of his friends. He felt alive and carefree, like he could finally let go of his troubles and just be in the moment.

As the night wore on and the party started to wind down, Erik felt a sense of contentment settle over him. He knew that the problems he faced wouldn't disappear overnight, but he felt better equipped to deal with them now. He had the support of his friends, and he knew they would be there for him no matter what.

As they left the party and stepped into the limousine, Amber arranged for them to bring them back to the Red Palace. Erik couldn't help but feel a sense of relief, even though Amber was with them, riding in the car and heading back to their temporary home. He had enjoyed himself but was ready to return to his own world.

He settled into the plush leather seats and let out a deep sigh as the car pulled away from the mansion.

As they drove through the city, Erik gazed out the tinted windows and watched the scenery change around him. They left behind the sprawling mansions and villas, the quiet streets, and the tree-lined boulevards and entered the city's heart. The buildings grew taller and taller until a forest of towering skyscrapers surrounded them.

The city was alive with light and movement. Neon signs glowed in every rainbow color, casting a kaleidoscope of light onto the sidewalks below. People hurried through the streets, the glow of their smartphones illuminating their faces. Cars honked, and engines roared as they raced through the crowded skies.

Erik watched his surroundings as the limousine weaved its way above the bustling city. It was a vibrant, living organism pulsing with energy and life.

As they approached the Red Palace, Erik stopped to observe it becoming bigger and bigger. The building was the tallest in the city, a gleaming steel tower and red glass stretching up to the clouds. It was an awe-inspiring sight, and Erik couldn't help but feel a sense of pride as he gazed up at it.

The limousine pulled up to the entrance of the Red Palace, and Erik and his friends stepped out onto the garden, and like that, the day ended. However, tomorrow would be a difficult day since a man was coming to find him.

Chapter 267: Inside the Lab

Two people were talking inside a lab in the western district. They were Professor Derr Xilion and Major Fischer. They were inside Lab 67, a pristine, well-organized space filled with an array of scientific equipment and tools.

Bright overhead lights that cast a sterile glow throughout the space highlighted the clinical white color of the walls. The lab benches were made of stainless steel, polished to a gleaming shine, and lined with an assortment of glassware, beakers, and test tubes.

There were several lab stations, each manned by diligent scientists in white lab coats, diligently working on their experiments. The air was filled with a sense of focused activity as researchers meticulously measured, mixed, and analyzed various substances.

The hum of the ventilation system provided a constant background noise, along with the occasional beep of monitoring equipment.

Shelves lined with neatly labeled bottles of chemicals and reagents stood against one wall, while another wall was adorned with a whiteboard covered in formulas, diagrams, and sketches.

A computer station in the corner of the lab was abuzz with data analysis and experiment simulations.

The two spent the last week finalizing the plan required to perform their tasks: to cure every person injured by the parasitized monsters and to arrange the search for the parasite itself.

To do this, he planned to create several task forces with specialized hunters and Elite soldiers leading them.

The reason for this set-up was that Major Fischer believed that the creature was hiding in some cave in the east, and by using hunters to track the infected thaids and the rest of the soldiers to keep track of every cave and hole inside the forest, they would have been able to find the creature's hiding place.

All of this was, though, like searching for a needle in a haystack, and it required a massive usage of the city's resources to be accomplished.

"We also need to mass-produce the anti-parasitic serum," the Major said to Professor Xilion.

"You want to cure everyone in a month, no?" the doctor asked.

"Indeed."

"Well, I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but we can't possibly create enough of the medicine in a month."

"Why not?" the Major asked.

"Because we do not have enough material, and I doubt there are enough people to go find them." The Major looked at the professor with downcast eyes. It was indeed as he was saying.

"May I speak?" asked the professor.

"Yes."

"I suggest that we prioritize the high-ranked people, regardless of their occupation; in this way, we can avoid the parasite getting a hold on strong people, lessening the burden in case something bad happens, and trust me, it will happen."

Fischer's heart sank hearing Xilion's idea, but by thinking about the pros and the cons, he also concluded that it was the best thing they could do. "You are right," he said.

"How much time do you think the first batch of medicine will need to be ready?" the Major asked.

"Well, I can provide you with an initial batch in a week, but keep in mind that a lot of time has already passed since the attack, and as time goes on, people will start having symptoms.

I don't know why Lakwosky mutated in such a short amount of time, but the soldiers who had been infected a month ago mutated in around a month and a half, so I think we should have the first problems around the 20th of September." Xilion said.

"The problem is that the serum we will be able to create will be enough to cure about two-thirds of the infected, and we only have a month available to heal them all before the mutations start. Here, we must make a choice. Will we cure the kids that got infected in front of the shelter, or will we heal the stronger citizens?

Unfortunately, we will not have enough time to provide a cure to everyone," he added.

"Are you sure? Can we not prepare another batch and try to heal them? Can't we do something?" the Major asked.

"No, the serum we can make will not be enough; we must make a choice now."

"Damn..." The man thought about the situation for a little bit and then decided. The kids had to die; he couldn't risk the lives of all the citizens for a bunch of kids. "We will heal the others..." Fischer said.

"All right," Xilion replied. Then he asked the Major, "What about the parasite itself? I hope you can bring his body to me once you find it."

Fischer personally chose the members of the three squads that he selected to be the leading teams in the search for the monster who attacked the city. The teams were comprised of the highest-ranked soldiers available, as Fischer wanted to eliminate any chance for failure.

There was no room for another attack on the city, hence why they sent such powerful soldiers to investigate the Heniate's whereabouts.

"Yes... I will send investigative teams starting on the 26th, the same day you will start the production. I only hope that our people will find the creature before it can prepare another monster army".

Then Professor Xilion turned to look at his computer, where he looked at the list of soldiers who had received injuries in the city's ordeal.

"We need to schedule the appointments to heal the people as fast as possible, or panic will spread. They all know what Heniates are and what it means to be bitten," Xilion said.

Fischer looked at him with a thoughtful look. He didn't really know what to say to the population.

"We will just tell them the serum is being produced but won't say anything about the ones who will be left out," the Major replied.

"All right," Xilion replied. Then Fischer sighed loudly.

"What's the matter?" Xilion asked.

"I have to call General Becker. I must update him on the situation and tell him what we have decided regarding the serum..."

"Good luck then."

Fischer took his phone and made the call. The phone rang, and after a short while, someone replied. After five more minutes, he was redirected to Becker's office number.

"This is Fischer talking. Good morning, sir."

The conversation between the two went on. "Everything is ready regarding the investigative teams, sir. Next week we will send them around Etrium's borders in search of the Heniate."

...

"Yes."

...

"Sir, I need to tell you something," Fischer said.

...

"Yes... Yes, sir... We won't be able to provide the cure soon, but not to everyone..."

...

After half an hour of conversation, Fischer hung up the phone. "It was that bad?" the professor asked.

"Yes, he wanted to know how our situation was, and I told him the problem we were having. He wasn't happy about the serum's situation..."

"And? What did he say?"

"He said that aside from the complications, we have nothing to worry about and to do what we can to go on with the plan. The ones who won't be healed will be executed, apparently."

"That's a shame..." the professor replied.

Major Fischer then turned to look behind the glass panel inside the giant lab room. There, he saw a bridled Ranger Lakwosky trying to free himself and shouting out loud.

He and Professor Xilion could not hear his inhuman screams, as every sound had been blocked from and into the room, but Fischer could not stop getting goosebumps by looking at how the man ended up.

Professor Der Xilion and Major Fischer stood in front of the glass-walled observation room, watching the mutated ranger Lakwosky struggle against the restraints that held him in place.

The man's appearance was horrifying; his skin was a sickly shade of red with deep cracks and warts that made him look like a monster spawned from hell. He was the result of the Heniate parasitizing humans.

Lakwosky's muscles bulged as he tried to break free from his shackles, his screams echoing through the observation room. The sight of him was enough to turn anyone's stomach, but Derr and Fischer had seen worse in their years working for the military.

Despite his horrific appearance, the two men couldn't help but feel a sense of pity for Lakwosky. They knew that he had been a ranger—a man who had dedicated his life to protecting his country. Now he was nothing more than a lab experiment, a monster no one wanted to see.

Fischer spoke first, breaking the silence that had settled in the room. "What are we going to do with him, Derr?"

Professor Xilion shook his head. "I don't know. Reversing the process is not possible, unfortunately. His DNA has been heavily altered."

Fischer sighed, his gaze never leaving Lakwosky. "He didn't deserve this."

"I know," Derr agreed. "But we have to focus on finding a way to prevent this from happening again. We can't let anyone else suffer as Lakwosky has."

Fischer nodded in agreement, but his eyes remained fixed on the mutated ranger. He couldn't help but wonder what was going on in Lakwosky's mind and if he was even aware of what had happened to him. He was a shell of the man he had once been, and it was heartbreaking to watch.

As they watched Lakwosky continue to struggle against his restraints, Derr and Fischer realized they had to be fast, as they could not allow other people to become like him.

"Did you find out why he turned so fast?" the Major asked.

"Not at all. I think it was something related to his DNA. However, we got the serum from him at least," Xilion replied.

Chapter 268: The Meeting (1)

Private Investigator Hais sat at his desk, his mind racing with thoughts of the missing trio. Logan, Conal, and Orson had disappeared without a trace, and their families had hired Hais to find out what had happened to them. His investigation had led him to Erik, a student at the Red Palace, and today he was finally going to meet the man in question.

The investigator stood up from his desk and left the building. He had received permission from the Red Palace to interrogate Erik, and he knew he had to move quickly before any more time passed. He hailed a cab and got in, giving the driver the address of the Red Palace.

As the cab moved through the busy streets of New Alexandria, the scenery began to change. The towering skyscrapers gave way to more modest commercial buildings and offices until they eventually stopped in front of the Red Palace, the tallest building in the city.

The Red Palace was a stunning sight, made entirely of red glass that gleamed in the sunlight. There was a sizable garden all around it with trees, flowers, and smaller structures. The palace was a symbol of power and wealth, and only the most important figures were allowed to enter its premises.

As Hais got out of the cab and approached the entrance, he couldn't help but feel in awe, but that feeling soon gave way to disgust for the people who were working and studying there.

A stern-looking guard greeted him and requested his identification. Hais presented his credentials, and the guard checked them before allowing him to enter the palace.

Hais couldn't help but be astounded by the facility's opulence as he made his way through the halls. The floors were made of polished marble, and the walls were adorned with paintings and tapestries. The palace was filled with students, each engrossed in their studies, and Hais couldn't help but feel a sense of envy for the education and opportunities that they had.

<They don't deserve all of this,> he thought.

Hais was lost in thought when he felt a gentle tap on his shoulder. He turned around to see Amanda Smith, the Red Palace receptionist, standing behind him with a professional look.

"Welcome, Mr. Hais; I've been asked to bring you to the room where the interview will take place. Before going, I must ask you: Do you have any weapons on you?" Amanda asked with a polite smile.

"I don't," Hais replied. Amanda nodded understandingly and changed the subject, not wanting to make Hais uncomfortable. She knew it was important to respect his boundaries.

"Good. Then follow me, please."

Hais followed Amanda as she led him through a series of corridors, the primary color of which was red. He couldn't help but notice the grandeur of the palace and the sense of history and tradition that seemed to emanate from every stone and tile. It was incredible how much money these guys wasted on simple corridors.

As they walked, Amanda turned to Hais and asked, "May I ask what brings you to the Red Palace and why you want to talk with Mr. Romano?"

Hais hesitated for a moment before responding, "I'm here on a private matter. I didn't think you would be so bold as to actually ask a citizen's private matter."

Amanda's expression shifted slightly, and Hais could tell she was not entirely pleased with his response.

"I didn't want to offend you, Mr. Hais. I understand the need for privacy," Amanda said carefully. "But please be aware that the Red Palace values transparency and honesty. If there is anything that you can tell us, we would appreciate it. In the end, the truth will come out, and the Red Palace will find out."

Hais nodded, acknowledging Amanda's warning. He couldn't help but wonder what the Red Palace knew or suspected anything about Erik. Probably they didn't care, as the three kids were not that important, and they probably didn't even know who they were.

As they reached the small room, Hais took a deep breath and prepared to speak with Erik, knowing that he had to tread carefully in this hallowed institution. He entered and sat before a desk, waiting for Erik to come, to the sound of a clock ticking at regular intervals.

Erik sat nervously on the edge of his bed, tying his shoelaces and trying to calm his racing thoughts.

He didn't know why he had been summoned to meet with a private investigator, but he couldn't shake the feeling that it had something to do with the deaths of Logan, Conal, Orson, or Nathaniel; after all, that was the only reason why someone like a private investigator would have wanted to talk to him.

He had thought he had been careful and had covered his tracks, but now the fear of being found out was gnawing at him.

He had gone to great lengths to ensure that no one suspected him of having anything to do with the deaths of the three boys. He had disposed of the bodies, erased all evidence of his involvement, and even planted false leads to throw off anyone who might come looking for him.

But now, as he thought about the meeting with the private investigator, he couldn't help but worry that he had missed something, that somehow he had left a trace of himself behind. He tried to calm himself down, reminding himself that he had covered his tracks meticulously, but the fear of being caught gnawed at him like a persistent itch.

[WARNING: STRESS LEVELS HIGH. THE HOST IS ADVISED TO CALM DOWN OR THE SYSTEM WILL BE FORCED TO INTERVENE.]

"I know that!"

As he slipped on his Red Palace uniform, Erik took a deep breath and tried to calm his racing heart. He knew he had to keep his cool and appear calm and collected in front of the investigator. He couldn't let on that he had anything to hide and couldn't give away any clues that might lead the investigator to suspect him.

With a final glance in the mirror, Erik took a deep breath once again and headed out of his dorm room, steeling himself for whatever lay ahead.

Erik stepped into the elevator and hit the button for the ground floor, his mind racing with thoughts of what he might say to the private investigator. He ran through all the possible scenarios in his head, trying to anticipate the questions he might be asked and how he would answer them.

He knew he couldn't lie about certain things but couldn't reveal the truth. Moreover, his story needed to be consistent with what happened during the murders. He had to find a way to skirt around the edges and give just enough information to satisfy the investigator's curiosity without giving away too much.

As the elevator doors slid open and he stepped out into the hallway, Erik could feel his heart pounding in his chest. He had never been so nervous in his life, not even when he faced the Ferele, as he had at least a certain degree of control in that case. He took a deep breath, and with a resolute face, he stepped into the hall and headed toward the meeting room.

After a short walk, Erik finally arrived in front of the room. He pushed open the door and stepped into the room with a confident look. The walk had been beneficial, since he was now calm enough to have his conversation with the man.

There, he saw the private investigator sitting at a small table, his back to the door. The man was tall and lanky, with long arms and legs that seemed disproportionate to the rest of his body. He was older than Erik had expected, with a scruffy beard and a mop of curly gray hair that hung over his ears.

As Erik approached, the investigator turned to face him, and Erik saw the man's face for the first time. He had deep-set eyes that seemed to bore into his soul. He wore a faded brown suit that looked like it had seen better days and a pair of scuffed-up boots that had seen more than their fair share of pavement.

Erik wondered how he could dress this way despite being in summer. The man's unkempt appearance and disheveled hair basically suggested that he might be homeless or down on his luck.

But despite his scruffy appearance, there was an air of authority and wittedness about the man that made Erik sit up a little straighter. He could tell that this was someone who had seen his fair share of issues and knew how to get to the bottom of things.

"Mr. Romano, I presume?" the investigator said, his voice deep and gravelly.

Erik nodded, but the situation was a little bit weird and unsettling. He had never been interrogated before, and the sight of this seasoned investigator was making him feel uneasy.

"Please, have a seat," the investigator said, gesturing to the chair across from him. "I'm Private Investigator Hais. I've been hired by the families of Logan, Conal, and Orson to find out what happened to their children. And from what I understand, you had a long history with the three kids."

Erik swallowed hard as he immediately understood that this was going to be a long, difficult meeting.

Chapter 269: The Meeting (2)

Erik's heart started racing as he stepped into the room and saw the private investigator sitting at the table, his piercing gaze fixed upon him. He felt a bead of sweat trickle down his forehead as he sat down across from the man.

"Mr. Romano, I presume," the investigator said in a deep, gravelly voice. Erik nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

"I'm Private Investigator Hais. I've been hired to look into the disappearances of Logan Reid, Conal Price, and Orson Smyth. And I believe you may have some information that could help us."

Erik's mouth went dry. He remained calm on the outside, but his mind was racing. His worst fear just came true, and the man was there because he was investigating the three motherfuckers disappearance. Luckily he managed to keep his composure enough to avoid the system calming him down forcefully, but the fact that the situation was a mess remained.

"Good morning, Private Investigator Hais," Erik said. "Everything I can do to help you, I will," the young man said, making a fake smile.

Hais nodded and said, "Thank you very much. It is not a lot, really. I just need to ask you some questions."

"Let's hear then," Erik said.

"From my investigation, it became clear you had a weird but strong history with the three. Care to tell me what it consisted of? Do you know anything about their disappearance?" the investigator asked. He wanted to see if Erik was going to tell him everything.

"We weren't friends, if this is what you are implying, and I'm afraid I don't know anything about their disappearances," Erik said, keeping his voice steady.

Hais leaned forward, his eyes locked on Erik's. "I don't doubt you know nothing about their disappearance, but anything can help," Hais said, clearly lying since he firmly believed Erik killed them.

"For example, when was the last time you saw them?" He asked, his tone making it clear that he wasn't buying Erik's story.

Erik knew he had to be careful with his words. "I'm pretty sure you already know what Conal, Logan, and Orson did to me. I mean, it is impossible that you came here without having asked anyone about it," he said.

Hais raised an eyebrow. "Well, that is true. I know they did you a lot of bad things; this is also why I'm here. I'm trying to understand if you had anything to do with their deaths."

Erik was greatly surprised by Hais's honesty, but what he said meant he suspected him. His mind frantically tried to think of an alibi that would hold up under the investigator's scrutiny. Hais leaned back in his chair, studying Erik intently, but he appeared calm on the surface.

"So, I will ask my question again: Do you know what they did the day of their disappearance? Did you see them at school or elsewhere?"

Erik sighed, "I saw them at the entrance around 08:30, but I hurried to my class, so I don't know what they did later." He said his voice firm but his soul trembling. Hais looked at him for a few more moments before nodding slowly and writing something down in his notebook.

"Very well, Mr. Romano. But I must warn you: If I find out you're lying or withholding information, it won't bode well for you. And believe me, I will find out the truth. The Red Palace may be a closed institution, but no one is above the law."

Private Investigator Hais cleared his throat before asking his next question. "Given the nature of your relationship with the three kids, can you tell me if you ever had any altercations with Logan, Conal, or Orson before their disappearance?"

Erik nodded his head; there was no point in lying since a lot of people saw him fight against them at the cafeteria. "One time. I bet you already learned about it, but there has been a fight at the cafeteria once. As you are aware, the three usually bullied me, but I never fought back prior to that day."

Hais scribbled something in his notebook again. "Can you tell me what they did do? How did they bully you? Of course, we can talk about something else if you don't feel like it."

"No, no... I want to help you," Erik said. He faked a troubled look and then focused on the desk, saying, "They would make fun of me, push me around, and sometimes even steal my things. What they did the most, however, was beat me up. It wasn't a pleasant experience."

Hais nodded. "I see. Did you ever tell anyone about the bullying?"

Erik hesitated before answering. "The other students knew; they were often there when that happened. But I said nothing to the teachers, as I thought it would only make things worse."

Hais raised an eyebrow. "So, you kept it to yourself?" Erik nodded. "Yes, I did."

Hais made another note in his notebook. "Was there a certain time when you wanted to make them pay?" That was a weird question in Erik's mind. It was clear that any person would have wanted to make them pay in one way or another, so he knew that if he said no, that would be suspicious, and he decided to tell the truth about this.

Erik shook his head. "Of course, like all the other kids who suffered the same fate as me. There are many at school; you can talk to them. However, I may have been bullied, but I never harbored any feelings of vengeance toward them. If this is what you are asking me."

There was no point, as what they did to me had already been done, and they stopped harassing me after our fight at the cafeteria," Erik lied once again.

Hais leaned forward. "Are you telling me the truth, Erik?"

Erik looked Hais straight in the eye. "Yes, I am. I know what you are thinking, but I didn't have anything to do with their disappearance."

"All right," the old man said without keeping his eyes off Erik. Private Investigator Hais leaned forward in his chair again and then asked. "Can you tell me what you did after school ended the day the three kids disappeared?"

Erik swallowed hard, as he knew this was the question he had been dreading, the one that could make or break him, as he didn't have an alibi for the window of time before he arrived at Mister Fox's house, and even in that time, there was no one who could testify he was there, as his old employer was dead. "I went to Mister Fox's farm to work as usual," he replied, keeping his voice steady.

Hais raised an eyebrow. "And what time did you arrive there?"

"Around 14:00," Erik said. "I took a cab." Erik knew he couldn't say he was at the train station. Around that period, Erik didn't know the system well, and he wasn't used to taking advantage of the machine, so he didn't ask the biological supercomputer to turn off the station's cameras, meaning that if he said he was there, Hais could check the station's recordings.

"Do you remember what identification number it had?" Hais asked.

"No. I was in a rush to go to work, so once it arrived, I jumped in without looking at the number."

Hais nodded slowly, but Erik could tell he wasn't satisfied and that he still had some doubts. The investigator's eyes bore into Erik's, and the awakened man felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead. Did Hais think he killed them? Did he know what really happened to the three kids?

Erik tried to keep his breathing steady as he looked back at Hais, trying to gauge his reaction. But the investigator's face was mysterious, and Erik couldn't tell if the man was getting closer to the truth or not.

Hais took a deep breath and leaned forward, his piercing gaze locking onto Erik's eyes. "Now, Erik," he said firmly, "I need to ask you a few more questions. After you finished working at the farm, what did you do next?"

"I caught the train back to school," he said. "I had to be back at school by 18:00 for training." Hais raised an eyebrow. "And what time did you leave the farm?"

"I left around 17:00," Erik replied.

"Can anyone confirm that you were at school for training that evening?" Hais asked, his eyes never leaving Erik's.

"Yes," Erik replied, feeling a flicker of hope. "My teacher and my training partners can vouch for me. We had a rigorous training session, and everyone was there."

Hais nodded thoughtfully. "I see. And did you have any contact with the three missing kids after training that day?"

Erik shook his head. "No, I didn't. I went straight home after the training ended; as I've said, I only saw them briefly in the morning before the lessons started. I didn't see them or hear from them at all after that moment."

Hais then took out a photo from his pocket and placed it in front of Erik. The photo showed Logan, Conal, and Orson coming out of the train's station elevator, facing a masked kid wearing a Thornton High School uniform.

"Do you recognize this kid with the mask?" Hais asked, his eyes fixed on Erik's face.

Erik studied the photo for a few seconds before shaking his head. "I'm sorry, I don't know who that is. I've never seen him before." However, he was internally panicking. Hais was, of course, already in possession of the train's station recordings, so his previous lie basically saved him a lot of trouble.

He was aware that forgetting to turn off the camera had been a rookie mistake, something that could put him in serious trouble, but in his defense, he wasn't so used to the system yet and didn't think about it.

[WARNING: HOST HAS CROSSED THE SET THRESHOLD FOR HEARTBEAT RATE, AND STRESS LEVELS. RELEASING CALMING SUBSTANCE.]

A cool sensation washed inside of Erik, and he regained his bearings. <I need to stay calm...> Erik thought to himself, if he let his emotions get the best of him, that would be a problem. With that thought in mind, he quickly focused on the conversation again.

Hais nodded, his expression unreadable. "Is there anyone you can think of who might know who he is? Anyone who might have seen him with Logan, Conal, or Orson?"

Erik faked thinking for a moment before shaking his head again. "I can't think of anyone off the top of my head. But I can ask around and see if anyone knows anything."

Hais nodded again and scribbled something down in his notebook before looking back up at Erik. The conversation wasn't going to finish soon.

Chapter 270: The Meeting (3)

There were many things the investigator wanted to know, but regarding Conal, Logan, and Orson, he had nothing else about this matter to ask Erik. Now he only had to find the proof that what the young man said was true; if it weren't, it would be clear what would happen.

The investigator sat across from Erik, his eyes scanning his face as he took in every detail and every expression.

"I also heard you had some problems with a guy named Nathaniel lately..." Hais said.

Erik was taken aback. "Ah... yes..." he said.

"Care to share the story with me?" Hais asked.

"Well, there is not much to say. We were having our inner-rank fight, and he got mad that he was losing and tried to kill me. Luckily, I was strong enough to protect myself. Otherwise, I don't know what would have happened..." Erik said.

"This guy looks worse than even Logan, Conal, and Orson. Tell me about him," Hais said.

Erik shifted uncomfortably in his seat; the man probably suspected he had something to do with Nathaniel's death, or at least that was what he concluded. Due to the question, memories of his encounter with Nathaniel flooded back. The system intervention made him calm enough to answer the following question without problems, but the man knew too much.

"Nathaniel was a troubled person," Erik began. "He was obsessed with power and control."

Hais leaned forward, his eyes locked on Erik's. "Do you have any idea why he targeted you specifically?"

Erik hesitated for a moment, considering his response carefully. "I think he tried to kill me because he couldn't accept that I became better than him..." he finally said. "There were also rumors stating that Nathaniel was involved in some shady dealings, that his father is the Mambas' leader, and things like that."

Hais nodded, jotting down notes in a small notebook. "And what happened after he tried to kill you?"

Erik let out a sigh. "I won the fight and left the room. There are many recordings of that day, I guess. Nathaniel disappeared after that, but I learned he got kicked out of the Red Palace by Principal Van Dyke."

Hais leaned back in his chair. His fingers steepled in front of him. "Are you aware he died?" he asked. "Yes, apparently killed by thaids," Erik replied.

"Apparently..." Hais said. "His phone was destroyed... Don't you find it weird?" he asked.

"Weird, sir?"

"Yes, weird. Why would a bunch of thaids destroy his cell phone?"

"I don't know... Maybe by accident?" Erik asked, faking ignorance.

"Perhaps... Are you aware that Nathaniel was with some other people when he died? At least this is what the police think," Hais said.

Erik widened his eyes in an attempt to fake ignorance once again as the investigator revealed this information. "I had never heard of this... I'm really sorry... But what made you think he was with other people?" he asked.

"The remnants of a battle and clothes for five kids had been found. They should have been at least five."

"Really, this is new to me; why haven't I heard anything about it?" Erik asked.

"It was kept under wraps by the police, and only a few people were informed about it. There wasn't that much of the kids' remains that allowed investigators to determine who they were, as their bodies were almost completely eaten, not that far from Nathaniel's body, with their phones destroyed. Their clothes ripped apart," Hais said. "Another weird coincidence..." he said, studying Erik's expression.

The awakener shook his head, faking disbelief. "That's horrific..." he said, also faking a shiver run down his spine. "Does the police know what thaids killed them?"

Hais shrugged. "Not for sure, as there were many thaids' bodies there, the result of the kids' attempt to survive," he said.

At the same time, Erik's mind was racing with thoughts, and he couldn't help but wonder if he was able to convince the investigator he had nothing to do with their deaths. However, he was astounded by what Hais knew about the situation despite not being a police officer and probably not having all the data or proof against him.

"Why do you think Nathaniel and these other guys were outside the shelter? I mean, there should have been a reason, no?" he asked.

Hais raised an eyebrow. "That's what I'm trying to understand and also the reason why I came here to you," he said.

Now it was Erik's turn to raise an eyebrow. "Why should I know the reason?" he asked.

"C'mon, Erik, I thought you were smarter than this..." Hais said.

"No, seriously, I know nothing about this... Nathaniel and I weren't friends..."

"That's exactly the reason..." Hais then stood up and started walking around the room.

"In my opinion, even based on what you confirmed earlier, it's possible that Nathaniel and the others were trying to get to you for some reason. Probably out of revenge or something like that, and that's what led them outside."

Erik shook his head slowly. "Well, I mean, it would have really been messed up to go out of a shelter to get to me... What would they have hoped to accomplish—kill me in front of hundreds of people?" he said.

"But you weren't inside the shelter yourself, am I right, Erik?" Hais suddenly said, leaving Erik slightly surprised.

"That... As you probably know, it was not by my choice..." Erik said as he realized Hais also knew what happened outside the Red Palace. "Besides, they wouldn't have known this. How many possibilities were there that the Blirboth would have attacked the Yellow Palace and that a faulty ventilation system would have led to the following situation?"

Hais nodded, making a note in his notebook. "I know. I'm not here to accuse you of anything; it's just that things do not add up..." he said. "Regardless, it's important to figure out what happened that day and why those kids were outside the shelter."

Erik leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. "I can tell you that I had nothing to do with it," he said firmly. "And I can't think of any reason why they would have done something like that... Nathaniel was notorious for being a very erratic individual."

Hais studied Erik for a moment, then nodded slowly. "I believe you," he lied.

"Well, it seems like I got what I wanted to know. Thank you for your time, Mr. Romano..." Hais said.

"You are welcome, sir... Please let me know if there is anything else I can assist you with."

"I will," Hais replied.

With that, the investigator stood up and left the room, leaving Erik to ponder the strange and unsettling turn of events. He had a feeling that the man didn't believe what he was saying. He probably already had suspicions about him, and that was why he came all the way here.

Besides, the problem was that he probably suspected him not only for Logan's, Conal's, and Orson's deaths but even Nathaniel's one.

As Private Investigator Hais made his way back to his office, he couldn't help but ponder over the interrogation with Erik. The young man had been calm, collected, and had played his cards well, but Hais couldn't shake the feeling that he was somehow involved in the deaths of the four kids.

He didn't have any concrete evidence, but the puzzle pieces were starting to fall into place. Nathaniel had been kicked out of the Red Palace, and shortly after, he and around five other kids were found dead, their bodies ripped apart and eaten by thaids. Erik had had a run-in with Nathaniel, and there were rumors that Nathaniel was involved in shady dealings.

Hais knew he had to be careful, though. He couldn't just accuse Erik without any evidence. He needed to gather more information, talk to other people who knew him, and see if there were any holes in his story, something he could find out only if he interrogated Erik once more.

The man quickly arrived at his offices and sat at his desk, reviewing the notes from the interrogation; he couldn't help but feel a sinking feeling in his stomach. He had been doing this job for a long time and knew when someone was lying to him. And Erik, despite his calm demeanor, was lying.

Hais rubbed his tired eyes and sighed. This case was starting to weigh on him. He had seen his fair share of horrific crimes, but the deaths of these kids were especially gruesome. He couldn't imagine what kind of monster would do something like that.

But he was a private investigator, and it was his job to determine who was responsible. He pulled up Erik's file on his computer and went through it again. There were no criminal records, and he seemed like a normal kid, but Hais knew that appearances could be deceiving.

He leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling, lost in thought. He needed to find a way to get to Erik, to make him slip up and reveal something incriminating. He knew it wouldn't be easy, but he was determined to do whatever it took to uncover the truth and bring justice to the victims' families. Perhaps he could use Erik's ego against him or find a weakness in his alibi.