

BIOLOGICAL 271

Chapter 271: Spying (1)

Erik woke up early, feeling restless from the previous day's events. His mind raced as he tried to recall every detail of that day.

He had followed the plan perfectly and was sure no one had seen him. But the photo that Hais had shown him had shaken him to the core. He made a mistake, and if someone saw the mask, it would be easy to link him to the murders if someone happened to see him with it.

Then, Erik thought back to the letter he had written to Logan. He realized now that it was a foolish mistake. He had been angry at Logan and wanted to push him to follow him, and he had written the letter in a fit of rage. It would be possible that the investigator found out he was the killer through it.

The problem was that he didn't know where the letter was. Logan could have thrown it away or kept it stored somewhere. However, it was clear that if he had done the latter, the police would have already found it.

The young man then took a long shower, hoping to clear his head, but the memory of the interrogation still lingered. As he got dressed, he made a decision: he wouldn't let it get to him.

He had to focus on his training and his investigation of Achim, who was the only one who knew that Nathaniel wanted to kill him, and that could link him to the murder. Everything else would have to wait.

He walked to the cafeteria and grabbed a tray, scanning the options for breakfast. He decided on a bagel with cream cheese and a cup of coffee.

As he looked around the room, he noticed that it was almost empty. It was still early, and most students hadn't arrived yet.

Erik sat down at a table by himself and took a bite of his bagel. The cream cheese was thick and tangy, and the warm bread was satisfying. He sipped his coffee, which was hot and bitter.

As he ate, he thought about the day on which he killed the trio.

That was a complicated day, and from there, the thought quickly went to the farm and Mister Fox. It was hard physical labor, but seeing the plants grow made him feel at peace—something that made him forget about everything else. He wondered if he would be able to work the land again in the future and finally live a peaceful life.

Erik finished his breakfast, stood up, ready to face the day, and quickly headed to the Yellow Palace, where his training would start soon.

When Erik eventually got there, Master Rook, the bulky man who had examined him when he first arrived at the Red Palace, welcomed him as he stepped into the training room.

As Erik's eyes fell upon the towering figure, he couldn't help but be intimidated by the man's sheer size, despite seeing him every day for training.

The man stood at least 2 meters tall, making him the tallest person Erik had ever seen. His massive body seemed almost otherworldly, with very broad shoulders, arms that were insanely thick, and legs that looked like tree trunks; the man could be defined as a half-human, half-giant being.

The man's black hair was streaked with gray near his temples, a testament to the passage of time. His deep brown eyes had wrinkles all around them, which were signs of aging and years of experience. Everything about the man shouted for primitiveness, and his rude attitude only strengthened this belief.

Besides, Master Rook was known for his rigorous training methods, and Erik felt a twinge of nervousness as he approached him.

The room was large, with mats covering the floor and various training equipment scattered about.

"You are the first to arrive today," Master Rook said in his deep voice, a hint of displeasure playing on his lips.

"Let's wait for the others..." Master Rook's displeasure was evident; it was clear that Erik wasn't his favorite student. It was true that he improved a lot in such a short amount of time, but he still found him unsuited to be a member of the Red Palace.

Erik nodded with a determined look on his face. He had been training for months now, pushing himself to his limits, determined to become the best fighter he could be. He knew that if he was

going to survive in this dangerous world, he needed to be able to defend himself better than he could now.

Soon after, the other students started coming in and greeting their teacher. He watched them as they placed themselves in multiple rows before him.

Master Rook stepped onto the mat, his muscular arms bulging as he flexed. "Welcome, everybody. Today, I will teach you some moves," he said, taking a stance.

"Now, pay attention," Master Rook barked, "this move will knock your opponent off balance and give you the upper hand." He demonstrated a swift kick to the side and decided to practice on Erik, the first to arrive.

"Romano, step onto the mat."

"Yes, sir." Erik did as instructed and went into stance, but Rook immediately sprang to action. He hit Erik's left leg, causing him to stumble and leaving him without the possibility of defending himself.

"This is the first move; now, onto the second," he continued. "This will allow you to disarm your opponent and take control. Erik, take that wooden weapon there."

Erik did as instructed, and soon he went into stance. Rook demonstrated a quick twist of the arm, causing Erik to drop his training weapon again without the possibility of defending himself.

"Now I want you to start practicing..."

The other students began to pair up and practice the moves, with Master Rook walking around and giving advice and corrections where needed. "Make sure to focus on your form and technique, and don't be afraid to ask for help if you're struggling. Remember, practice makes perfect!" Rook said.

Erik found a partner and began to practice the moves he had just learned. He found it difficult at first, but with some help from Amber, who quickly understood the move, he soon began to get the hang of it.

As the training session came to a close, Master Rook approached Erik. "That's not right!" Master Rook said gruffly, "Come here; I guess there are some people that will only learn if you take them by their hands." Rook sighed.

"Let's have a simple spar. I want you to try to make the moves on me. I will do so that you will be facilitated in doing this. I think you will get the hang of the moves this way..." Erik placed himself on the mat in front of his master once again. He mirrored his position; his fists were clenched tightly.

The two men circled each other warily, with Erik looking for an opening. Suddenly, Master Rook lunged forward, aiming a punch at Erik's face.

Erik dodged to the side, performing the same move Master Rook tried to teach them. But master Rook easily blocked the move, but Erik followed up with a roundhouse kick that caught the man off guard.

The burly man stumbled back, a look of surprise on his face. "Not bad," he grunted, nodding his approval. "It looks like you are finally starting to understand how it is done...However, there is still room for improvement. Keep practicing, and you'll get even better."

Erik grinned, feeling a rush of excitement as he continued to spar with Master Rook. For the next ten minutes, the two men exchanged blows, with Erik trying to perform the new moves that Master Rook was trying to teach them.

Doing so, he was also showing the moves to the other students, who started catching up and performing them on their partners.

Finally, Master Rook called a halt to the training session. "Well done," he said. After a while, the lesson ended, and the students continued with their routine. Erik felt tired but also proud of himself for mastering the new techniques. He couldn't wait to practice them more and improve his skills even further.

Later, Erik stumbled into his room, sweat dripping down his forehead and his muscles aching from the brutal training session he had just endured. He fell onto his bed, groaning in pain and exhaustion. However, he still had a lot to do, so he quickly opened the biological supercomputer's interface and connected to Achim's security system through the internet.

Erik had already hacked into Achim's house security system, which gave him access to almost everything inside the house. He could see the security cameras and the alarms, and he could even hear the conversations that took place inside the house.

He knew that guy was the key to Nathaniel's death and the only person who could link him to the murder. Erik needed to find out everything he could about Achim to stay one step ahead of him.

For this reason, he tried to keep an eye on him to find out something useful he could use against him or to get a chance to get rid of him.

The young man hacked the security system and connected to the cameras; there, he found Achim talking to a girl and being very affectionate.

The two were kissing and caressing each other. It was clear what the two were going to do as things progressed.

Seeing the two kissing started arousing the 15-year-old kid, who had never been with a woman, and his hormones behaved erratically. The situation was going to turn out more interesting than he had expected.

Chapter 272: Spying (2)

Achim's room was a lavish haven of comfort and opulence. As his father owned many establishments inside New Alexandria, and he spared no expense in creating a private sanctuary that catered to his son's every desire. The room was exquisitely furnished with the finest pieces, showcasing Achim's impeccable taste and discerning eye for luxury.

The spacious room boasted high ceilings adorned with intricate crown molding, lending an air of grandeur to the space. The walls were painted in a rich, deep hue that added warmth and richness to the room, creating an inviting ambiance.

Large floor-to-ceiling windows adorned with plush curtains allowed abundant natural light to flood the room during the day while offering breathtaking views of their huge garden.

At the center of the room, a massive king-sized bed with a plush, comfortable mattress and silky soft linens beckoned for rest and relaxation. The bed was flanked by elegant nightstands adorned with crystal lamps that cast a warm glow, creating a serene atmosphere.

Achim's massive room also featured a spacious private bathroom that was a sanctuary of indulgence. It was adorned with marble tiles, a deep soaking tub, a walk-in shower with multiple jets, and a large vanity with his and hers sinks. The bathroom was stocked with premium toiletries and plush towels, providing a spa-like experience in the comfort of his own space.

Achim and his girlfriend sat on a couch, cuddling up under a cozy blanket. They had been watching a movie, but now the credits were rolling, and the room was quiet. Achim's girlfriend leaned in and placed a soft kiss on his lips.

The boy's heart skipped a beat as he felt her lips against his. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer, deepening the kiss. He felt a surge of emotion as he savored the taste of her lips and the warmth of her body pressing against his.

His girlfriend moaned softly as their lips parted, resting her head against his chest.

"Take off your clothes," the girl said.

Achim stroked her hair and breathed in the scent of her perfume, feeling a sense of peace and contentment wash over him. He had been stressed lately, with all the pressure from the military school, the danger of being involved in the criminal underworld, and Nathaniel's death, but being with his girlfriend made all those worries fade away.

For her part, Achim's girlfriend felt entirely at ease in his arms. She felt safe and protected, and her heart swelled with affection for him. She knew that he had a dangerous life, but at this moment, it was just the two of them, wrapped up in their own private world.

Erik observed the scene with embarrassment as Achim's girlfriend was very pretty. She had long, curly blonde hair that fell in loose waves down her back and bright blue eyes that sparkled with mischief. Her skin was fair and had a healthy, sun-kissed glow. If that wasn't enough, the girl also had a slender yet curvy figure, with a graceful neck and shapely legs.

Her lips were full and rosy, often adorned with a touch of glossy lip color that added to her magnetic charm.

Her body was toned and fit, with gentle curves accentuating her feminine form. She moved with grace and confidence, every gesture exuding sensuality and allure. Her playful demeanor and confident attitude added to her irresistible appeal.

As they sat there, holding each other close, the only sounds in the room were their quiet breathing and the occasional blanket rustling. Achim's mind was free from worries as he basked in the love and affection of his girlfriend, and he felt truly alive.

The young man removed his clothes, and the girl did the same, exposing her breast. Achim couldn't wait to have a taste of her. As a result, they began making love; Achim grabbed her firmly, and the girl surrendered to the pleasures of the flesh.

She softly moaned each time Achim thrust, and sweat began pouring from both of them.

In the meantime, Erik was still connected to Achim's house's security system and was watching the scene. Frankly, he was stunned, doing all of that knowing there were cameras around, but he guessed that some people didn't really care about being seen. Maybe they got even more turned on at the thought of being seen.

He remained watching, hoping to learn some information that could help him enact his plan after this arousing scene ended, but the truth was that he was slightly aroused.

<Damn...> Erik thought, and with the embarrassment of an inexperienced fifteen-year-old, he kept watching until Achim and the girl were done.

The two lovers were gasping and moaning, but soon after Achim pulled himself out of her, the two sat on the couch. As Erik saw this, he couldn't help but think about Amber, which was surprisingly weird. Was that because she confessed? Did that change the view he had of her?

"Did you like it?" Achim asked.

"Yes, it was amazing, honey," she said, sliding her finger on his chest.

"But honestly, I was a little distracted because I'm worried about you. Since the past week, you seem... very... nervous..." the girl said.

Achim lay on the couch, and his girlfriend snuggled up beside him. They were both naked, their bodies still warm from their recent activities. Despite the pleasure he had just experienced, Achim's mind was elsewhere. He couldn't stop thinking about Nathaniel's death and how it had affected the Mambas.

"Is everything ok, honey?" his girlfriend asked, seeing his blank expression and running her fingers through his hair.

Achim let out a sigh. "Yeah, sorry. It's just that Nathaniel's death has weighed on my mind, and it has caused a lot of problems for us."

"What do you mean?" she asked, looking at him.

"Well, he was the son of the leader of the Mambas. His death messed up his father's head, and this is creating a lot of tension and infighting, and just a week passed since the incident."

"I'm sorry, babe," she said, placing a hand on his chest. "I know it is not easy for you."

Achim closed his eyes, remembering his last conversation with Nathaniel. He knew what led to his death; Nathaniel never stated who he wanted to kill, he only asked for some people to help him in the ordeal and told him that something happened with someone, but he had been vague about it.

However, he knew it must have been someone from the Red Palace, and if he had managed to kill Nathaniel, he could easily kill him. This made it so that he stopped going out, besides going to the military school, where it was unlikely he would get attacked.

His dislike for Nathaniel only grew since he ended up in this situation, and he didn't really like him before. He was arrogant, had a superiority complex, and had a nasty personality. Besides, the fact that he couldn't even tell the others what he did, as he would be considered the leading cause of Nathaniel's death, and he would end up being executed by the Mambas, made him nervous.

No, he had to keep everything under wraps.

"It's not. You are right," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "Nathaniel was my friend, you know? It's hard to believe he's gone," he lied. She knew he went out with him and some other people on weekends, but she didn't know what he thought about him.

His girlfriend leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. "I'm here for you," she said. "Whatever you need, I will give it to you."

Achim smiled weakly, grateful for her support. "Thanks," he said.

They lay in silence for a few moments; Achim's mind wandered, thinking about the future of the Mambas. He knew that things were going to get even more complicated in the coming weeks. The power struggle would only intensify, and he had to ensure he and his father came out on top.

As he tried focusing on what the two were saying and not on how he did imagine Amber's naked figure, Erik kept listening to their conversation; he didn't know who Achim was for Nathaniel, but hearing that they were friends was something good. He knew he was the one who found the other guys but didn't know much otherwise.

However, he was also talking openly about the Mambas, which was a lucky occurrence.

<System, can you record everything?> the young man asked.

[ANSWER: YES, DO YOU WANT ME TO RECORD NOW?]

<Yes, do it, and save the content on my phone,> Erik said in his mind.

[UNDERSTOOD. RECORDING STARTED.]

With that done, Erik was sure that if things turned out badly, he could use this footage to his advantage; besides, he didn't want any information to slip past him.

Achim sat there lost in thought, still thinking about the grim future, when his girlfriend suddenly spoke up.

"You know what? I think you need a break. Something to take your mind off things," she said, a glimmer of excitement in her eyes. "Let's go out tonight and have some fun."

Achim looked at her, surprised at the sudden suggestion. "Where do you want to go?" he asked, feeling a flicker of curiosity.

"I was thinking; we haven't been to the Red Lotus Lounge in a while, the one Nathaniel's father owns. We used to go there every week, remember?" she said, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. That was before Nathaniel started hanging out with him and the others. Achim never brought his girlfriend with him, scared that Nathaniel could make some claim on her.

The young man's eyes widened in surprise. He hadn't thought about that club in a long time.

"I don't know," he said hesitantly, unsure if he was ready to face the people going there or risk anything dangerous. What if they suspected something about him and killed him on the spot?

But his girlfriend was insistent. "Come on, honey. It'll be good for you to get out of your head and just have some fun for a night. And who knows, maybe it'll help you process everything that's been going on."

Chapter 273: Spying (3)

The girl looked happy as she began to speak. "So, are we going?" she asked, biting her lip.

Achim looked at her with mixed emotions. "Not this weekend..."

The girl's expression became annoyed: "Oh, c'mon, we stopped going there almost a month ago..."

"I can't go now..." Achim said.

"What about next week?" the girl asked.

The girl leaned in closer, her expression excited. "We will go, right?"

Achim sighed; he knew he couldn't say no to her anymore. "Why do you want to go there so badly?"

The girl shrugged with a mischievous smile on her face. "What do you mean, why? Everyone else is going. Besides, there is alcohol there, great music, and many people!"

Achim shook his head, a hint of disapproval in his voice. "I have alcohol in the cabinet over there if you want it..."

The girl pouted but quickly regained her composure. "Yeah, but we do not have the same freedom as there... Besides, I want to dance a little bit and just have fun," the girl said, smiling excitedly.

Erik watched their expressions closely. Achim seemed suspicious and guarded, while the girl appeared playful and mischievous. However, what was unfolding was good, as the woman was pushing Achim to go out, and that would be the right moment to strike. However, judging by Achim's expression, it was clear that he feared something or someone and that someone was probably him.

<This is getting interesting...> Erik said.

Achim hesitated for a moment longer but eventually nodded in agreement. Maybe she was right, and a night out was just what he needed to de-stress.

"Okay," he said, a small smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "Let's do it."

"You can't change your mind!" the girl said. "When will we go on Saturday?"

"Okay, but not this, the next weekend... I need to solve some problems before going out. Okay?"

"Sure, honey," the woman smiled.

"Listen," Achim said, sitting up suddenly. "I need to talk to my dad about the situation. See where we stand, you know?"

His girlfriend looked up at him; concern etched on her face. "Do you think that's a good idea? With everything that's going on?"

Achim shrugged. "I don't have a choice. We need to figure out what our next move is. And besides, I'm not afraid of a little conflict."

His girlfriend smiled weakly, knowing that he was right. Conflict was a part of life in the Mambas, and if Achim's family wanted to come out on top, they had to be willing to fight for it.

"I'll be here when you get back," she said, lying back on the couch. Achim nodded, leaning over to kiss her. "Thanks," he said before dressing up and heading out the door.

As he walked down the hallway towards the meeting room, his mind raced. He knew that the next few weeks were going to be tough, but he was determined to come out on top.

<This is getting more and more interesting...> Erik thought. He then made a mental calculation, if the two were going to Nathaniel's father's club next Saturday, that would be on the 29th, five days before the biological supercomputer would tell him the results of its research for a new and more efficient method to develop neural links.

If he did things well, he would put an end to this situation next week.

In the meantime, Achim went to his father, walking through the endless corridors of his grand villa, the sound of his footsteps echoing off the marble floors. The walls were adorned with priceless works of art, each painting and sculpture meticulously chosen to convey an air of elegance and sophistication. The grand chandelier above him glittered, casting a soft glow throughout the hallway.

As he walked, he passed by numerous rooms, each one grander than the last. One was a spacious ballroom, complete with a polished dance floor and crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. Another was a library lined from floor to ceiling with books, many rare and antique.

Further down the hall, he passed by a gallery displaying his father's extensive collection of antique weaponry: swords, spears, and guns, each with a story to tell and a place in history. Achim wanted to stop to admire a particularly ornate sword and its blade, etched with intricate designs and symbols and complex history behind it.

Still, the urgency of the situation and his bad mood prompted him to go faster to his father.

Finally, he reached Markus's office. The door was made of heavy wood, intricately carved with designs of dragons and mythical creatures. Achim pushed it open, revealing a spacious room filled with plush armchairs and a large oak desk. The walls were lined with bookshelves, filled to the brim with leather-bound tomes.

His father, Markus Werner, sat behind the desk, his sharp eyes scanning through documents. Achim could see the worry etched on his face—stress lines creasing his forehead.

"Achim, is something wrong? You don't usually come to my office..." Markus said

"Yes, Dad. I came to you to talk about something important..."

Achim took a seat across from his father; he couldn't help but feel grateful for the grand villa that had been passed down through their family. It was a place of luxury, a sanctuary where he could retreat from the troubles of the world. But even here, he knew, the world had a way of creeping in, and they had to face the problems that lay ahead.

Erik was watching everything unfold with rapt attention, at the same time recording.

"What's on your mind, son?" Markus asked, taking off his glasses and setting them down on the desk.

"It's about the Mambas," Achim began, leaning against the desk. His father immediately understood what he wanted to talk about.

"I was thinking about what you told me a couple of days ago. Since Nathaniel's death has caused a lot of problems in the group, I'm being a little bit restless. The ongoing power struggle is weighing on my mind, and I think we need to figure out which side we're on."

Markus raised an eyebrow. "Why are you so interested in this? I'm usually the one who takes care of these things. I already know the situation is worrying, but it is my job to figure it out. I think you should calm down."

The situation in the Mambas at the moment was chaotic. Since Nathaniel's death, there have been some internal struggles within the group. Some people wanted to keep things the way they were, with Nathaniel's father as the leader, but others wanted a change in leadership.

Matthew had been the revered leader of the notorious criminal organization known as the Mambas for years. Under his ruthless and cunning leadership, the Mambas had established a formidable presence in the underworld, with lucrative operations spanning across the city.

Now, dissent and disagreements festered among the ranks, with different factions vying for control and influence. Some of the more ambitious members of the organization had grown restless and dissatisfied with Matthew's leadership in the past already, which had been exacerbated by Nathaniel's death.

Markus nodded thoughtfully. "I know that. Maxine and her group stirred up a lot of trouble lately. Barely a week has passed since Nathaniel's death and Matthew's sudden situation, and she is already planning how to take over the group."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," Achim said. "I mean, Nathaniel's father has always been good to us, and we've been loyal to him for a long time. But with everything that's been going on, I'm unsure if it's the right move to stay with him. He couldn't even solve the dispute between Maria and Ricardo."

The power struggle often spilled over into minor scuffles and skirmishes among the various internal groups. Rival factions clashed in clandestine meetings, backroom brawls, and even street fights as they jostled for control and influence.

In one incident, a group internal to the Mambas and loyal to a high-ranking lieutenant named Ricardo clashed with a rival faction led by a cunning strategist named Maria.

The dispute arose over control of a lucrative smuggling operation, and tensions quickly escalated into a heated confrontation.

Fists flew, weapons were drawn, and threats were exchanged. Other organization members eventually broke up the scuffle, but the animosity between the two groups simmered beneath the surface, fueling further distrust and tension within the Mambas.

That greatly surprised Erik. The whole conversation was a revelation, to begin with, but the fact that Achim didn't know where his loyalty should lie was a surplus.

Markus leaned back in his chair, stroking his chin. "It's a tough call, son. On the one hand, loyalty is important, but on the other, I'm aware we have to think about our own interests as well."

"Yeah," Achim agreed. "And I think we need to decide soon before things escalate even further."

Markus nodded again. "Agreed. We'll have to weigh our options carefully and see which side will be best for us. But one thing's certain: we can't afford to stay on the sidelines. However, as I said, these are things I must figure out. Don't worry."

Achim nodded in agreement, but he was also restless. "Dad, there is something I must tell you..."

"What, son?" he asked with a curious look.

"It's about Nathaniel's death. I may know something the others don't..."

Markus's face suddenly got serious. If someone learned about this, trouble would come to their family.

The man stood up and put a hand on his son's shoulder. "Tell me everything you know..." Erik was now devoting his full attention to the two men.

Chapter 274: Trouble ahead

Inside a lab, Fischer just received a call from one of his men.

"Xilion, can you wait for me a couple of minutes? I have to make an urgent call," Fischer said.

"Yes, but be quick; I need your help for the next step," the doctor said.

"Yes, yes." The Major replied.

Fischer then left the lab and the professor to his work. The duo managed to decrypt the waves through which the parasite communicated with its minion, so they tried to create a device to track it. The Major quickly changed rooms and went into a nearby one where he could talk without the machinery noise.

Fischer then took his phone and dialed a number. The phone started ringing.

"Hello, this is Major Fischer. I need to talk to General Becker," the man said to the person on the other side of the phone. Then he waited for the big guy to answer. It took three minutes for the general to do so.

"Here is General Becker."

"Good morning, sir; I'm Major Fischer," The military man spoke professionally and respectfully. "I have some reports regarding the task you gave me, sir."

"Tell me, Major."

Fischer spent the next ten minutes reporting to General Becker. He told him how they would complete the device and how they were close to starting to produce the vaccine. Everything was going well for once, putting Becker in a good mood.

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"And that's all, sir."

"You have indeed proven your worth, Major; call me again next week to keep me updated with the production and let me know when your men will start the search. This is of the utmost importance; I have the hunch that we are going in the right direction," the general concluded.

"Yes, sir."

The duo closed the communication, and Fischer returned the phone to his pocket. He started walking toward the lab and arrived in front of the room's door.

He typed a passcode onto the keypad at the right of the door, and it opened. Fischer then entered in and soon heard inhuman screams.

Ranger Lakwosky, the subject of some experiments, made them. He was screaming, screeching, and trying to trash everything. He was fortunately tied, but the strength he exerted was formidable, so much so that the higher-ups were thinking of killing the poor soldier.

He would have already been dead if it weren't for Xilion and Fischer's intervention, who wanted to use him in some experiments.

If the device worked well, they would be able to find the parasites, which meant also finding infected people, which allowed them to potentially find the Heniate. Still, Xilion could not figure out why Lakwosky was having that reaction to the device, especially considering that he didn't have parasites anymore; he had just mutated.

Lakwosky emitted strange sounds every time Xilion turned the device on. Initially, the ranger's sounds began with a low, guttural growl that resonated with raw power. It was a deep, rumbling roar that seemed to originate from the depths of his massive chest. The sound was primal and instinctual, sending shivers down Xilion's spine.

Then, they shifted to a series of sharp snarls and snorts, like a wild animal on the hunt. His teeth gnashed together with a menacing click, and his jaws snapped open and closed with a menacing ferocity. The noises were unpredictable and chaotic and conveyed Lawkowsky's untamed nature.

Next, the ranger transformed his snarls into a series of piercing shrieks and screeches. They were high-pitched, ear-piercing wails that echoed throughout the room, causing Xilion to cover his ears in discomfort. It was creepy and strange at the same time.

Xilion thought that this was due to the fact that the parasites changed the DNA of their hosts. Essentially, the thaid brought forward further mutations inside the host body. Given that Lakwosky

was previously a simple human, the effects brought by the mutation were more significant than in other thaid's.

"I don't get it; why does he react this way whenever I turn the device on? He is the only one! We are full of parasitized beasts here, and yet he is the only one who does it," Xilion said.

"I don't know..." Fischer replied, pausing a little. "So, what do you need me to do?" he then asked.

"I need you to input some mana into this device. After that, the real experiment can start."

"All right..."

Simone entered Matthew's study, his footsteps silenced by the advanced sound-absorbing carpet that lined the floor. Smart LED panels on the walls cast a soft, ambient glow throughout the space, giving it a futuristic, otherworldly feel.

Matthew was seated at his massive oak desk, which was equipped with holographic displays and integrated touch controls, emitting a faint blue glow. His hands were tightly gripping the edges of the desk, and his face was flushed with anger, his eyes displaying a frenzied intensity that was heightened by the augmented reality lenses he wore.

The study was adorned with sleek, minimalist decor featuring a combination of advanced composite materials and polished metal finishes. The walls were lined with interactive smart screens, displaying a plethora of virtual awards and accolades that rotated and changed with each passing moment, showcasing Matthew's status and achievements in a cutting-edge manner.

Despite the futuristic aesthetic, the room was not immune to the aftermath of Matthew's rage. Papers were strewn across the desk, some even floating mid-air in a state of digital disarray, as Matthew's gestures and movements had triggered the projection of various virtual interfaces in his fit of anger.

Apparently, some people didn't like his recent behavior and didn't care about Nathaniel's death, which further enraged him. He had just finished a meeting with some of his top lieutenants, discussing plans for the upcoming week, when Simone, one of his most trusted enforcers, entered the room.

Matthew turned to face him, noting the serious expression on his face.

"What's the report?" he asked, his voice tight with anticipation but nervous about the information he was going to receive.

Simone took a deep breath before speaking. "Sir, according to our investigation, we found out Nathaniel had some trouble at Thornton High School, not only at the Red Palace," he said, his voice steady but solemn. "A sort of rivalry had been born, but things intensified, and some fights even broke out in the past."

Matthew's blood boiled as he listened to his words. "I knew nothing about this; why didn't Nathaniel say anything?" he asked Simone.

"Maybe he got embarrassed, sir?"

"Embarrassed? He was not the type. Maybe he already solved things and didn't say anything for this reason," Matthew said.

"It could be, after all, months did pass since the last altercation. However, I can't shrug off the feeling that everything is connected, sir."

"Connected? In what way?" he demanded, his voice low and dangerous.

Simone hesitated, clearly uncomfortable with the situation. "He got into a fight with some of the students," Simone said. "The Red Palace kicked him out. My opinion is that all of this was a ploy, and he got killed by one of the kids."

Matthew's anger flared, and he stood up from his desk, his hands balled into fists. "This is preposterous!" he snarled. He tried to recollect himself for a second and sighed, then asked, "Do you have proof things are as you said?"

Simone took a step back, his eyes widening in fear. "No, sir, but after many years in this field, I can do 2+2," he said quickly. "Some of the problems with the students were very bad, and they probably went on even during his stay at the Red Palace since the students in question went there with him."

Matthew shook his head in disbelief. This was precisely the kind of thing he had warned his son to avoid repeatedly.

"All right, I will trust your judgment," he said finally, his voice cold and hard. "Now. I want a list of these people, and I want you to assemble some teams to get rid of them."

"Are you sure, sir? They are just kids, some with powerful connections..."

"I don't care. I only want them dead. Killing them all will ensure that the culprit gets what they deserve. Since we can't prove who killed him, this is the next best thing. Who are the kids, by the way?"

"Here, sir, this is a list of names."

Matthew's eyes narrowed as he scanned the list of names that Simone had handed him. The anger that had been simmering inside him since Nathaniel's death threatened to boil over. He looked up at Simone; his voice was cold and hard.

"Where are they now?" he demanded, his voice low and dangerous.

Simone hesitated for a moment before answering. "At the Red Palace, probably, sir," he said.

Matthew gritted his teeth in frustration. Nathaniel had always been impulsive, and this death was just further proof of that. He looked back down at the list of names, his eyes scanning the page.

"Get the word out," he said finally, his voice hard. "I want these kids' heads as soon as possible."

Simone nodded quickly, his eyes fixed on Matthew's. "Understood," he said, his voice low.

Matthew leaned back in his chair, his eyes fixed on the list of names. He knew that finding these kids would not be easy, but he was determined to get to the bottom of this. The Mambas were not just a gang; they were an organization and would not tolerate any threats or disrespect.

Chapter 275: We need to talk (1)

"Well... this is a problem," Erik said. Achim and his father had just ended their conversation, and the things he had learned about the situation were plenty. For starters, he, Nathaniel, and two other

guys went to a club sometime before, where Matthew's son asked him something regarding hacking some devices.

Apparently, Nathaniel wanted to know how easy it was to find someone with such skills but didn't specify why. That meant that aside from him blaming Erik for being the cause of his expulsion, he also suspected him of the leaks on his and Natasha's private photos.

<He was less stupid than I assumed...> Erik thought.

After that, he asked some bizarre questions about what they would do if someone unleashed some threats upon him and his friends.

They quickly replied, and Nathaniel seemed to agree. Achim had the impression that Matthew's son was implied in the attack on the Red Palace students some time ago and that he probably got targeted because of this. Still, there wasn't anything sure since Matthew's son didn't say anything clearly and avoided answering questions.

The Red Palace tried to keep things under wraps regarding the incident, never stating who was attacked or who attacked.

<That was reasonable, especially considering that Becker is keeping an eye on me. If words got out that he wasn't even able to protect the nation's only awakener, things would have turned awkward.>

Achim later told his father how Nathaniel called him, telling him to find some men to kill this guy that Nathaniel was very angry with, but he never stated who the person was. That was at least good news for Erik, but now that even Achim's father knew about the matter, he assumed that he would have several guards following him from now on.

He could see that Achim was visibly scared while he told everything to his father, his body tense and his eyes wide with fear. Achim's confident and jovial demeanor, portrayed by the data Erik found about him on the internet, had been replaced by a palpable sense of unease, and Erik could see the way Achim's hands trembled slightly as he spoke.

On the other hand, his father had a very serious look on his face, his brows furrowed and his jaw set in a determined expression. Erik saw the lines of worry etched on Achim's father's forehead, a clear indication of the gravity of the situation at hand.

The conversation went on, and Achim explained how Matthew's son frequently talked about this guy to them, always keeping his identity a mystery and only talking about what the guy did or said.

Achim wondered why he hid this crucial information. Knowing the kid, the young man knew that it was only because Nathaniel was spiteful, arrogant, and had a weird superiority complex.

However, that was weird, to be honest. If Nathaniel thought of being so good, especially compared to this guy, why was he so obsessed with this guy he stated several times was a waste of oxygen?

However, many critical points remained.

It was clear that, based on what Nathaniel said, this guy studied at the Red Palace; this meant it would be just a matter of time to figure out who he was if they asked the right people. Erik wasn't worried about the Red Palace itself but about the students. It was clear they would answer if asked, especially under threats.

As the awakener saw things, he assumed that Achim's involvement in Nathaniel's death and his father would lean toward the rebellious side of the Mambas. Markus told his son he would think about the matter but didn't say anything else.

With that, Erik learned what he needed. He had a day to act; he knew his identity was safe for the moment, so things were going well. It was now late, but Erik still had some energy to train and make new neural links.

He sat cross-legged on his bedroom floor, his eyes closed in concentration as he focused on his breathing. He had already established neural links in the past and was well aware of the process, but he also knew that as the links increased, making new ones became increasingly difficult.

Erik quickly focused on his brain and on the crystal that resided within; he reached for it, feeling the power within waiting to be harnessed. He took a deep breath and began to channel mana through it and his brain.

The training lasted for some hours; it was easy at first. He had done this before and knew how to make a neural link. But as he continued to channel mana, he felt the strain begin to build. Sweat broke out on his forehead, and he gritted his teeth in concentration.

He could feel the neural link beginning to form, the crystal acting as a conduit and storage of mana. But he knew he needed greater effort if he wanted to do one more link.

He continued meditating, forcing more mana through the crystal and into his brain. The strain was high now, and he could feel himself beginning to lose concentration, but he endured, knowing he was now close to making a new link.

He had practiced for months with the technique, but he still found the process difficult and exhausting.

As he concentrated, he felt a surge of mana flow through his body, and he pictured it as a shimmering, golden bridge stretching out from his brain to the crystal in front of him.

He took a deep breath and began to visualize the brain crystal and his brain, linking them with some slim threads which he extended outward to connect the crystal and the brain with them.

At first, it felt like trying to thread a needle with a rope. His thoughts were scattered and unfocused, and he struggled to keep them in check. But as he breathed and concentrated, the bridge began to take shape.

He could feel the energy pulsing through them, each strand of mana weaving together to create a robust and resilient bond between his mind and the crystal.

But then, suddenly, he felt it. A spark of connection, a faint glimmer of light in the darkness of his mind. He reached for it eagerly, grasping at the connection and pulling it towards him. It was a rush of sensation, a flood of emotions and thoughts that washed over him like a tidal wave.

It was a weird sensation, like a jolt of electricity running through his body. He could feel the neural link responding to his thoughts, its surface rippling with the mana flow as he established the connection.

The bridge grew stronger as he continued to focus, and he could feel the crystal's mana flow into his brain. It was like tapping into a well of energy, and he could feel his own abilities expanding and strengthening with each passing moment.

For a time, Erik lost himself in the process, the world around him fading away as he delved deeper into his mind. It was like stepping into a new dimension where he was entirely in control of his abilities. It was exhilarating and terrifying all at once.

Eventually, he opened his eyes, feeling a sense of satisfaction wash over him. The connection was established, and he knew that he could now control his power better. It didn't take much before Erik realized what neural link he had established. The poisonous Astral Wolf bite. He couldn't test it now that he was inside the Red Palace, but he would as soon as possible.

With this new link established, he knew that he was one step closer to really becoming powerful and gaining his freedom.

Now there was only one thing that weighed on his mind, Amber. Only a couple of days had passed since they had shared that kiss, and he still had to let her know what he had decided.

When Erik saw Amber for the first time, he was mesmerized by her beauty, charm, elegance, and intelligence, but he was too shy to say this to her. However, as time passed and he felt more confident in himself, he met Emily, and his attention quickly shifted from Amber to her.

He understood that was an insensitive move and that he had not been fair with her, especially considering what she had done for him in the past. However, he was still conflicted, as he really wanted to pursue Emily but felt a deep connection with Amber, who was by any means uglier than her friend.

The young man decided that the best thing to do would be to take things into his own hands and confront Amber.

If the spark ignited, then good. Otherwise, he would tell Amber that he was sorry but that he couldn't reciprocate her feelings, hoping this wouldn't destroy their friendship.

The young man quickly took out his phone and sent a text message to the girl.

E: Can we talk?

A: Sure, what's the matter?

E: Not by text. I need to meet you now. Come to my room; Benedict is still in the cafeteria, and we can talk without interruption.

A: All right, see you soon.

Chapter 276: We need to talk (2)

Erik paced back and forth in his room, his mind racing with thoughts of Amber and Emily. He still couldn't believe that Amber had confessed her feelings to him, but at the same time, he couldn't ignore the fact that he had a crush on Emily. It was love at first sight for him, or so he believed.

However, despite the Emily's constant thoughts about Emily in his mind, he couldn't deny the fact that Amber was beautiful, smart, and kind, and he enjoyed spending time with her.

They had shared many laughs and deep conversations over the past months, and he knew that she had a genuine affection for him. Something that probably no one ever had for him. That meant a lot to him.

But then there was Emily, with her emerald green eyes, a fiery spirit, and sharp wit. What he felt when he was with her was something he had never felt before. He felt things that no one else had made him feel, and he found himself drawn to her in a way he couldn't explain.

As he waited for Amber to arrive, he struggled with what to say to her. So, he thought and tried to come up with a decision. However, he knew that regardless of what his decision was, he couldn't lead her on anymore, even if he didn't understand what he had done to produce this weird outcome. At the same time, he didn't want to hurt her feelings.

As the minutes ticked by, he found himself lost in thought, his mind swirling with conflicting emotions. Despite knowing he couldn't continue to keep his feet in different shoes, he couldn't bring himself to make a decision.

Finally, there was a knock on the door, and Erik took a deep breath before opening it. Amber stood before him, her eyes bright and eager to be there, but a slight tint of anxiousness could be clearly seen in them.

"Hey," she said, smiling. "I'm sorry I'm late."

"It's okay," Erik said, his voice hoarse. "Come on in," he added.

There was currently no one aside from them in the small apartment the Red Palace provided them so that they could talk without distractions.

However, staying inside the shared rooms was no good idea since Benedict could come back soon, and he didn't want to create embarrassing moments or make him see her cry. Amber stepped inside, and Erik closed the door behind her.

They stood there for a moment, neither of them saying anything. "Let's go to my room; we won't be disturbed there," Erik suddenly said.

"All right," the young woman said with shining but slightly embarrassed eyes. As soon as the two entered the room, Erik closed the door again, and they remained alone.

Erik could feel the tension building inside him, but he gathered his courage and finally said: "Amber, I did think about what you told me," he said, his voice barely above a whisper and trembling. Amber looked up at him, her eyes searching his face.

"Is it good or bad?" she asked, her voice filled with concern. Erik took a deep breath before speaking.

"I...I don't know how to say this, but... I'm torn. I don't know what I want." Amber's expression softened a bit, but she didn't take that very well.

"Is it because of Emily?" she asked, her voice gentle. Erik nodded, feeling a lump form in his throat. "I don't know what to do. I care about you, Amber; I really do. But I also have feelings for Emily, and I can't ignore that."

Amber looked down at the floor; her face was clouded with emotion. "I understand," she said softly. "But Erik, you barely know her; you've interacted with her a few times. I did a lot for you in these past months."

To be honest, I think this is unfair since I showed you with my actions how much I really care about you..." Amber said, pouring all her heart into her words. Erik took a step closer to her, feeling a surge of emotion wash over him, especially guilt since he knew she was right.

He reached out and took her hand, squeezing it gently. As he took her hand into his, he felt the softness of her skin and the scent of her whole body emanate.

"I know," he said, his voice filled with regret.

"You know... but...?" Amber nodded, tears glistening in her eyes. Erik didn't reply; he kept silent, his thoughts to himself. It was at that moment that Amber looked him in the eyes and then said, "I understand."

"I just wish... I wish that it could be different. That we could be together. I've never felt this way for someone; you are the first, and regardless of your choice, you will always have a special place in my heart."

Erik felt a pang of guilt and uncertainty listening to her tell all these things, and he also couldn't bear the thought of hurting her.

As they stood there, hand in hand, Erik felt more confused than ever. He didn't know what the future held, but he knew he had to decide now. He couldn't continue to put Amber in this situation.

Erik stood there, watching as her tears fell down her face, as she understood clearly, that he preferred pursuing Emily, which she knew reciprocated the feeling. A mixture of sadness and guilt washed over him as he saw the girl, his best friend, crying.

However, as he held her hand and looked at her, he couldn't help but notice once again how beautiful she looked, even with tears in her eyes. The red hair gently swaying and fluttering every time she moved; those big, bright eyes that could pierce his soul; her soft cherry lips; and the glasses she had—everything Erik saw made his heart beat like a drum.

Her tears made his heart ache for her, and he felt a deep sense of compassion and empathy for her pain, but something else started to slowly make its way into his mind. Before he knew what he was doing, he leaned in and pressed his lips to hers.

To his surprise, Amber responded eagerly, wrapping her arms around his neck and deepening the kiss. Erik's mind was a jumble of conflicting emotions as they shared that moment. He had feelings for Emily, yes, but at the same time, he couldn't deny the attraction he felt for Amber.

That was what really confused him because he liked them both. At the same time, he felt a sense of peace and contentment wash over him as the girl embraced him, and for a second, he forgot about his troubles and lost himself in the moment.

Erik quickly grabbed the girl by the waist and picked her up. The kiss slowly turned deeper and wetter until their tongues started twisting on each other. Erik gently placed the girl on his bed, and she started unbuttoning her uniform.

The young man did the same until both were left bare-chested. The awakener observed Amber's breast; it was big and plump, and it had a slight pink tint on the sides. It was at that moment that Erik lost all inhibitions and started kissing her on the breast, and the girl started moaning.

Everything snowballed from there, and the two shared their first time in each other's embrace.

...

...

...

"So... I must take... all of this as you changing your mind...?" Amber asked.

Erik did think about it for a second. I remembered the time spent training together, the tips the girl taught him to fight better, his time at her house, and the help she gave him. The love she showed, and at that moment, he took his decision.

"Yes..." Amber's eyes started shining, and still naked, she hugged Erik tight, and the young man reciprocated. Erik kissed the girl on the head and started stroking her hair.

Amber felt a sense of comfort and safety in Erik's arms, and she knew that she could trust him completely. The world outside seemed to fade away as they held each other, leaving only the two of them in their own private moment.

"Should we tell the others?" Amber asked. However, that was another problem. Erik wanted to say yes, but he knew that was problematic. The Crystal Cross gang and whoever was targeting him in the shadows would put a bigger target on her. She already had one because she was his friend, but if word got out that they were together, then things would get worse for her, and he didn't want to risk that.

"Better avoid it; there is the Crystal Cross Gang I have to take into account. Besides, I think your father doesn't really like me that much..."

KNOCK KNOCK

At that moment, someone knocked on the door of Erik's room. "Hey Erik, are you still awake?" Benedict asked. He and Amber looked at each other in the eyes. The young man ran to the door to avoid his roommate entering while Amber started dressing up.

Chapter 277: We need to talk (3)

"YES, Ben!" he shouted. "Oh, god," he added in a muffled voice. "Give me a second!"

Erik's heart was pounding in his chest as he stood before his closed bedroom door, his hand firmly pressed against the handle.

"Do you wanna hang out?" Benedict asked, his tone becoming more casual with each passing second.

Erik took a deep breath, trying to steady himself. He knew he had to keep Benedict out of the room at all costs to prevent him from seeing Amber in a state of undress. Besides, they just decided they would keep their just-established relationship a secret; letting Benedict and his large mouth know that meant everyone would.

"Yes, just give me a minute, Benedict," Erik said, "I need to finish something up."

Benedict nodded, still looking a bit suspicious but ultimately deciding to let it go. Erik could hear his friend sigh on the other side of the door. "Alright, man, take your time."

Erik could hear Benedict stepping away. Until the sound of the bathroom door being closed rang throughout the apartment.

Amber was still naked. Her breast was exposed to Erik's eyes, but she was already picking up her uniform from the ground and putting on her underwear.

"C'mon!" Erik whispered.

"Yes, Yes!"

The young woman put on her bra and, lastly, her shirt. "Okay, now's our chance; Benedict is in the bathroom," Erik whispered, gesturing for Amber to follow him. "Just be quiet, and try to be as silent as possible."

Amber nodded nervously and tiptoed behind Erik as he made his way to the door. He could feel her breath on his neck as they crept closer and closer to their escape, and that turned him on again.

Now that he had accepted not only her feelings but also his own, he saw the young woman in a different light.

As they reached the door, Erik could hear Benedict humming to himself in the bathroom, utterly oblivious to the fact that Amber had been there for hours.

The awakener slowly turned the doorknob, trying to keep it as quiet as possible. The door creaked softly as it opened, and he held his breath, waiting for Benedict to emerge from the bathroom.

But there was no sign of him. Amber let out a soft sigh of relief as Erik motioned for her to go ahead and slip out the door.

As she stepped out into the hallway, Erik, too, breathed a sigh of relief. They had done it. They had managed to get her out of there without Benedict even noticing.

"We will talk through the phone," Erik said to Amber, her eyes shining and with a soft and gentle look.

"All right, I will text you as soon as I'm in my room."

The two didn't kiss or say anything else. There were cameras inside the hallways, so it was better to avoid further attention. Amber quickly went away, and Erik closed the door behind him.

However, as he did so, there was a sudden burst of noise from the bathroom. Erik froze; he knew what that sound was. And then, to his horror, he heard Benedict's voice calling out from the bathroom. From his mouth came words Erik hoped he would never hear in his life.

"Hey, Erik, you got any toilet paper in there? I'm all out!"

Erik cursed under his breath. "Uh, yeah, hang on a sec!" Erik called back. He quickly went to search for the toilet paper, and then he spotted a roll sitting on a counter and grabbed it. Benedict opened a little bit of the door, a small chink from which the light and the mephitic gasses started spreading into the other rooms.

<OH GOD!>

The stench hit him like a ton of bricks, causing his eyes to water and his stomach to churn.

"Benedict," he called out, his voice strained. "Take this now..." he said with difficulty.

He could hear Benedict grunting and groaning on the other side of the door, clearly in the midst of some severe distress.

"Here you go," he said, trying to keep his voice steady despite the overwhelming smell. "Just be careful not to dirty anything, okay?"

Benedict snatched the toilet paper from Erik's hand and quickly slammed the door shut, leaving Erik standing there in a cloud of toxic gas. The awakener handed the roll of toilet paper to Benedict, trying to hold his breath as he did so.

His friend thanked him and closed the door, leaving Erik alone with his thoughts. He couldn't believe his luck or lack thereof. At the same time, Benedict made a mental note to always double-check the toilet paper supply before settling in.

Erik gagged and stumbled backward into the living room; he collapsed onto the couch. He could still smell the bathroom stench lingering in his nostrils, and he knew it would be a long time before he could forget this horrifying experience.

Then Benedict's voice came through the bathroom door. "Thanks, man!"

"You are welcome..." Erik replied.

[FOUR DAYS LATER]

Erik woke up to the sound of his phone buzzing on the nightstand beside him. As he reached over to grab it, he noticed a system notification out of the corner of his eye.

Curiosity piqued, he quickly willed the biological supercomputer to show him what it was about, heart racing with anticipation as he had a clue. After all, he had been waiting for months for the system to finish the task he had given it, to find a way to fasten his progress in establishing neural links.

That was much needed since he had multiple brain crystal powers and needed to power them up. He hoped it would allow him to train better and more efficiently and establish neural links faster.

As he opened the notification, he saw the words he had been waiting so long to see.

[TASK COMPLETE. NEURAL LINK-ESTABLISHING PROCESS IMPROVED. DO YOU WANT TO INJECT THE METHOD?]

Erik felt a wave of elation washes over him, a huge grin spreading across his face. He had waited a lot for this to happen and for this project to be successful, and finally, the time came.

<Do it,> Erik said to the biological supercomputer.

[UNDERSTOOD. PROCESS STARTING. ESTIMATED COMPLETION TIME: 10 SECONDS.
10...9...]

As the system worked its magic, Erik slowly started gaining knowledge of the process, and as the information poured into his brain, he grew astonished.

[3...2...1... PROCEDURE COMPLETE.]

All the information was injected into his brain at that moment, and he got a clear picture of the situation.

<What the fu...?>

Erik had been left speechless; what the system came up with was astonishing. The biological supercomputer optimized the procedure to establish the neural links, making the process much faster than before. It also found a way to train multiple brain crystal powers simultaneously.

That was something unprecedented, mainly because there was basically no one with multiple powers, aside from past awakeners, who simply had to train two powers. This breakthrough could revolutionize the way humans approach establishing new neural links and could pave the way for a new era of human evolution.

With this method, which the system stated could keep improving, Erik was able to train an infinite number of powers at the same time; however, everything depended on the available mana he had, and with the amount he currently possessed, he could train two powers at the same time at best. However, the system explained how he could increase this number if he improved his energy points.

That was groundbreaking, and if he shared the technique, he would gain unprecedented fame. However, doing so meant he would also run the risk of giving knowledge that could be used against him in the future. So, it was better to avoid doing this for now. Maybe in the future, he could share this one once he gained an improved version of the technique and was stronger.

The fake awakener couldn't help but feel like he had accomplished something truly extraordinary. The system had pushed the limits of what he thought was possible and had made him obtain something that the world believed to be impossible.

He knew that there was still much work to be done and that he had just scratched the surface of the system's capabilities, but here he was. But for now, at this moment, he allowed himself to bask in the glow of this success.

Erik first tried to use the technique to see how different things were, and as he did, he was left flabbergasted.

It was true that the technique was better, but it was also harder to use and train with. It required weaving the mana and controlling it in particular ways that he hadn't even thought about it in the past.

He was making it move in some ways, going through some body parts before others, and so on. However, he could feel the benefits as he was learning to use the technique, even by imperfectly applying it.

He couldn't believe how much he had missed out on before discovering this technique and was excited to explore all the possibilities it could offer. As he continued experimenting, he felt a newfound sense of empowerment and confidence in his abilities.

<This is incredible,> the young man thought.

Chapter 278: Training

As he continued to experiment with the new technique, Erik found himself becoming more and more immersed in its intricacies. He began to understand the subtle nuances of manipulating the mana, weaving it in and out of his body in precise patterns.

It was challenging but also incredibly rewarding. He felt his powers growing stronger and more refined with each passing moment.

And then, something unexpected happened. As he focused his thoughts on the technique, he felt something shift within him. It was as if a door had been opened, and a flood of new possibilities had rushed in.

Erik began to realize the true potential of the technique. With the ability to train multiple powers at the same time, he could become unstoppable. He could master multiple powers and their abilities in very short amounts of time, becoming a true force to be reckoned with in this world of oppression and violence.

Erik continued to try the new technique for what felt like hours, despite only ten minutes going by; the sweat pouring down his face as he concentrated on weaving the mana in the precise ways the system had taught him.

As Erik dove deeper into his mana training, he began to see the energy as a sort of fluid, constantly flowing and shifting. It was like a river, winding and weaving through the landscape, moving around obstacles effortlessly.

In his mind, he saw the mana intertwining with his body like the branches of a tree reaching out to touch the water's edge. He quickly learned to sense the ebb and flow of the energy inside his body, recognizing the subtle currents and eddies that made it up. The mana could, in a sense, also be described as a piece of clay, and he was the sculptor molding it slowly.

He carefully shaped and molded the mana, shaping it into a form that suited his needs. Just as sculptors were used to taking great care to mold and shape their creations, Erik focused on manipulating the mana to achieve the desired effect. The mana seemed to come alive with each movement, flowing and bending at his will.

Despite the difficulty, he found himself unable to stop. He was driven by a sense of excitement and possibility, fueled by the knowledge that he had just unlocked.

But eventually, Erik realized that he had been training for too long. He had almost lost track of time and needed to get ready for his meeting with his friends in the cafeteria. With a sigh, he stood up from the bed, stretched his stiff limbs, feeling the tension accumulated due to the posture, and eased out his muscles.

As he left the training room and headed into the apartment's main living area, he saw that Benedict was still asleep but on the couch. Erik smiled wryly; his friend had always been a heavy sleeper, but it was weird for him not to be in his bed.

"Hey, Ben," Erik said, nudging his friend's shoulder. "Wake up, man. We gotta go!"

Benedict groaned and rubbed his eyes, sitting up and yawning widely. "What time is it?" he asked, his voice groggy.

"It's late. We must go have breakfast before the lessons start. Let's go!" Erik replied, gesturing towards the door. Benedict nodded, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Right, right. Let me just get changed real quick."

As Benedict headed towards his room to get ready, Erik wandered into his room and grabbed a bottle of water from his backpack, taking a long drink.

Benedict quickly got dressed and gathered his belongings. He grabbed his bag and slung it over his shoulder before walking out of the room with Erik. The two of them made their way through the halls and corridors, weaving their way through the crowds of students heading to the cafeteria in a hurry.

As they walked, Benedict checked his phone for any messages, but there were none. He sighed and slipped it back into his pocket, feeling a bit disappointed. It had been a while since he had heard from his family, and he missed them terribly.

"I swear, sometimes it looks like they don't give a shit about me!" Benedict said. Erik knew what was going on in Benedict's mind, as he had talked to him about this in the past.

"Man, I bet they are simply busy... Don't worry too much..."

"Yeah, but I mean, a phone call is too much to ask?" Benedict said, leaving Erik sighing deeply.

The two kept walking for a little bit, but then Benedict's look started to grow serious until he asked Erik a question: "I wanted to ask you this, Erik, but are you really sure about challenging Anderson for your next inner-ranking fight?"

Erik did expect that question from Benedict or his friends for all that mattered, but it was clear that someone was going to ask it sooner or later. The awakener looked back at Benedict and replied confidently, "Yes, I'm sure. Anderson agreed to it; besides, we want to see who's stronger now. There won't be any problems."

Benedict nodded slowly, still looking concerned. "I know you've been training hard, but Anderson is no pushover. He's one of the best in our class, and he's been working just as hard as you have. Are you ready for this?"

Erik nodded back and said, "I know what I'm getting into. And I'm confident that I can win."

Benedict sighed, "Well, I hope you're right. I don't want to see one of you get hurt."

Erik patted Benedict on the shoulder and said, "Don't worry, I'll be fine. Besides, it's just a fight; it's not like it's a life or death fight."

Benedict gave a weak smile, "Yeah, I guess you're right. Let's just hope it doesn't end up like last time," the young man said sarcastically.

Erik grinned, "Anderson's last name is not McConnel."

"Hahahaha, you are right!"

The two friends continued walking towards the cafeteria, discussing their upcoming fights and other things on their minds, until they finally reached the place. They were actually late and noticed how their friends were already eating their breakfast.

"Hey, you didn't wait for us!" Benedict said.

"Hey, don't blame us for your snooze button addiction; you're the one who wants to start each day in a coma!" Floyd suddenly remarked.

"Just shut up..." Anderson said but with a half smile on his face. Erik and Benedict quickly sat, and the awakener briefly glanced at Amber. Both smiled a little bit, and no one noticed—all but Gwen. She had keen eyesight and wits and was too smart not to notice those smiles, so she immediately started thinking about what was happening between the two, with one of her eyebrows raised.

Things went well between Amber and Erik in these past four days; the two kept their relationship a secret, which was frankly exciting. Besides, the two were exploring sex together, and this was something only the two of them shared.

But it wasn't all sex for the two; Amber had been in love with Erik for a long time, and although the young man had accepted her feelings only recently, he quickly learned that he had them in him all along; they hadn't just surfaced yet. The two couldn't often meet due to their training, but they managed to spend some time alone to be together and do what all couples their age did.

During the brief wait, Gwen started a conversation that Benedict and Erik continued after placing their order.

"So, did you really decide to have your fight today?" the young woman asked.

"Indeed," Anderson said.

"But why? It doesn't make sense. You will only lose your rank..."

Benedict looked over at Erik and shook his head. "I told Erik it was stupid," he said.

Anderson chuckled. "It's not stupid; it's just a friendly competition. We both want to improve and test our skills. We have a mutual understanding that our goal is to grow and learn from each other without any ulterior motives or expectations beyond that. Nothing more..."

Erik nodded in agreement. "Yeah, besides, it's not like we are that far apart in ranking. It's a good opportunity to see who's stronger now. I think it's important to approach this with a growth mindset and focus on improving our skills rather than just winning or losing."

Gwen added, "Yeah, but you could have done it by simply sparring."

Floyd chimed in, "Oh, c'mon, leave them to do what they want..."

Amber didn't say anything but was looking at Erik with shining eyes; Gwen's suspicions grew. Gwen wondered why Amber was looking at Erik like that and if there was something going on between them. She decided to keep a closer eye on their interactions from now on.

As the conversation continued, Benedict and Erik's food still hadn't arrived, causing Benedict to grumble about the slow service.

"How long till breakfast arrives?" Benedict said.

"Stop complaining, you bottomless pit!" Floyd replied.

Soon after, the food arrived, and Benedict thanked the gods. The circle of friends quickly ended their breakfast, and like that, they left the Red Palace to go attend their classes as usual. However, both Erik and Anderson were on hyperdrive, the two eager to finally fight, as they never did.

Chapter 279: A friendly match (1)

Erik wiped the sweat from his brow as he stepped out of the training arena in the Yellow Palace, his muscles throbbing with exhaustion.

He had just completed his daily regimen of rigorous physical and mental exercises, pushing himself to the limit in order to hone his skills as a warrior.

Today he felt like it was the culmination of months of hard work and dedication, and Erik was satisfied with the progress he had made.

However, he was going to put everything to the test against Anderson. The young man was a war machine; not only was he insanely talented in martial arts, but he was even really good at making neural links, and he had a lot.

Recently, Anderson managed to get to the PI3 rank; essentially, he was as strong as the top-ranked Squires, but he was only at the Peasant one.

This basically meant that Anderson was almost as strong as Nathaniel, but the key difference was that he didn't use his power. If he did, that was another thing altogether, and Erik knew he had nothing that could protect him from that. Besides, as much as Erik was known, Anderson was known for his unbeatable record in the ring, and many believed he was invincible.

Many people inside the Red Palace highly anticipated the upcoming match, and the two students didn't know that they even attracted the attention of some of the teachers. Everyone was curious to see if the young man could defeat the undefeated champion.

Due to Anderson's handicap, the two decided earlier that they were going to fight without powers.

From this point of view, Erik was at an advantage since he was a lot stronger than he should have been based on his neural links alone; he was in a position where he was comparable to an OMICRON-1 ranked fighter; however, the difference between him and Anderson was that he was insanely skilled in martial arts, and that offset the odds.

It wasn't only thanks to his many years of experience, it was his way of thinking, always outside the schemes, and he had a natural talent for finding his opponent's weak spot. So, this was going to be a very difficult fight, one which he wasn't sure of winning without his many powers.

Erik walked towards the elevator that would take him to the ground floor; his mind was absorbed with thoughts of the upcoming battle. He knew he had to stay focused and calm if he wanted to stand a chance against his opponent.

As Erik stepped into the elevator and pressed the button for the ground floor, he felt a mix of nervousness and excitement coursing through his veins. His heart pounded in his chest, and his mind raced with anticipation. He had trained tirelessly in the past few days and was determined to give it his all.

Erik looked at his reflection in the polished metal walls as the elevator descended. He saw a determined man staring back at him, his eyes blazing with resolve.

This was more than just a simple competition for Erik. It was a chance for him to prove to himself and others that he was another man and that he had indeed changed. This fight represented his way of proving to himself that he wasn't that pitiful, weak kid anymore. He had to win. He owed it to himself.

The elevator doors opened, and Erik stepped out onto the ground floor. From there, he quickly went out of the building and took the bus to reach the Blue Palace, where the fight was going to be held as usual.

As soon as he arrived, he got the usual notification he received whenever he had a fight—a notification that arrived on his phone but that he saw through his biological supercomputer.

ERIK ROMANO (RANK 270, FIRST YEAR) VERSUS ANDERSON WORTHINGTON (RANK 190, FIRST YEAR)

ROOM 323, THIRD FLOOR.

HEALER: MARTIN MIDDLETON.

"He got really assigned to me, uh?" Erik said once he saw that the Healer for the upcoming match was Martin Middleton again. Was the Red Palace now actively keeping an eye on him? But why show it so blatantly by always giving him the same Healer?

<Well, at least I can rest easy knowing that if anything goes wrong, Martin will be there to heal us,> the young man thought.

That was not a smart move, to be honest. Erik went to the elevator and pressed the third button, as his fight was going to be held there; after a couple of moments, he arrived.

His heart pounded in his chest as he stepped out of the elevator onto the third floor. His mind raced with anticipation as he walked down the brightly lit corridors, following the signs that pointed towards the room where his long-awaited fight with his friend Anderson was about to begin.

He had been training for months now and had come a long way since he started; he was determined to win, but as he approached the door, he couldn't help but feel a twinge of nervousness.

As he approached the room, Erik's excitement grew. Taking a deep breath, Erik pressed the button, and the heavy metal door slid into the wall and gave Erik a view of the room; he found Anderson already standing in the center, waiting for him.

The awakener's breath caught in his throat as he took in Anderson's appearance. The man was tall, towering over Erik by at least twenty centimeters, with a muscular build that spoke of his dedication to physical training and martial arts.

His black hair was slicked back, giving him a sleek and confident look. But it was Anderson's piercing blue eyes that caught Erik's attention the most. They held a fierce intensity, a reflection of the man's confidence in himself.

Erik couldn't help but acknowledge Anderson's handsomeness. He saw the man every day, but seeing him now, at this moment, in this situation, made him feel a little bit self-conscious.

<Ah, the classic tall and handsome cliché,> Erik thought to himself as he approached Anderson.

The man's chiseled jawline, high cheekbones, and muscular physique made him a magnet for girls and boys alike.

As the two men locked eyes, the atmosphere in the room crackled with anticipation. The air was thick with tension, and Erik could feel the moment's weight pressing down on him.

"I'm here..." Erik said, sighing. He took a deep breath and tried to steady his nerves.

"Good, let's start; I want to really see how much the plant hugger did improve in these past months," Anderson said with a smile.

"Hey, that's cheap!" Erik rebutted as Anderson used that nickname, one he had stopped hearing months ago.

Martin Middleton quickly entered the room and asked if they remembered the rules.

"Yes."

"Yes."

Both the contestants said, "However, we would like to add a rule for today's match, no brain crystal powers are allowed, and we will compete purely on the basis of physical prowess and martial might," Erik said.

"A very honorable thing to do, I must say. All right, if you both agree with this, then we can start."

"I do agree," Anderson said.

"Me too," Erik added.

"All right." Martin entered the other room, and once he was there, he said, "Let the match begin!"

Erik squared his shoulders, his muscles tensing in preparation for the fight.

"Ready to do this?" Anderson's voice was cold, devoid of the warmth that Erik used to feel from his words. His friend was clearly taking Erik seriously—something he deemed impossible at high school.

Erik clenched his fists, his determination hardening. "I'm ready," he replied, his voice steady.

"Good," a slight smile appeared on Anderson's face, and then he shot forward.

However, before Erik did anything else, he asked the system to show him Anderson's stats, which he had done only the first time he got the biological supercomputer.

- Name: Anderson Worthington.

- Brain crystal power: Mana Explosion-Atomic Annie (RARE)

-Race: Human.

-Physical characteristics: Approximately 1.90 centimeters tall. Very muscular. Estimated weight 105 kilograms of pure muscles. Blue Eyes, Black hair. Very good looking.

-Personality and traits: At first glance, he appears as a loyal and dedicated friend, always going the extra mile to ensure the well-being of those he cares about. His compassion shines through in his actions, as he is always there to offer support and comfort to those in need.

Anderson's sense of justice is unwavering, and he is known for taking a stand against injustice and fighting for fairness and equality, and his strong moral compass guides his actions. He generally maintains a regal demeanor, exuding an air of formality and distance. He may appear reserved and distant, often keeping his emotions and thoughts to himself.

He carefully chooses his words and speaks with authority, commanding respect from those around him. Anderson's reserved and regal demeanor may make it challenging for others to understand him fully. However, those who truly know him understand that beneath his stoic exterior lies a fiercely loyal and compassionate heart, always willing to stand up for his friends and fight for justice.

-Power Level: 120

-Approximate Strength: 40

-Approximate Intelligence: 16

-Approximate Dexterity: 25

-Approximate Energy: 789

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Chapter 280: A friendly match (2)

Erik and Anderson faced each other in the room, their eyes locked in a determined gaze. The tension between them was palpable, but there was no animosity. They had been friends for a long time, and this fight was simply a test of strength and a friendly challenge to see who was better. The rank Erik would eventually gain if he won was just a surplus.

Erik, thanks to his physical prowess and speed, was confident in his abilities. He had trained rigorously in martial arts, honing his skills and pushing his body to its limits. On the other hand, Anderson had years of experience in the arts and was renowned for his fighting genius. He had a strategic mind and a deep understanding of the intricacies of combat.

"I won't go easy on you," Anderson said.

"I'm counting on that," Erik replied. Both smirked.

Suddenly, both men moved with lightning speed against each other, their movements fluid and precise. Erik launched a flurry of punches, aiming for Anderson's midsection, but his opponent countered with a swift block followed by a roundhouse kick that grazed Erik's shoulder.

Erik retaliated with a spinning kick, but Anderson evaded it with a quick sidestep, his years of experience evident in his impeccable footwork.

The two fighters traded blows, their movements a blur of fists and feet. Erik's strength gave him an advantage in raw power, but Anderson's technique and strategy allowed him to counter Erik's attacks with calculated precision. They danced around each other, dodging and weaving, constantly assessing each other's movements and adjusting their strategies on as the fight progressed.

The match had just started, but the two were already going full throttle.

The exchange of blows went on. Erik tried to punch Anderson in the face, but his opponent could see his intentions from his body language. He quickly sidestepped, avoiding Erik's attack, and then counter-attacked with a punch of his own. However, the awakener's monster reflexes made it so that he anticipated the move and avoided it.

"The praises they sing for you are well-earned," Erik said.

"Thank you; I appreciate that," Anderson replied with a confident smirk. He was having fun.

Anderson's mastery of martial arts then shone through as he executed a series of intricate combinations, his strikes coming from unexpected angles. Erik's reflexes and speed allowed him to dodge most of the blows, but a few found their mark, leaving him with bruises and cuts.

Erik, in turn, responded with his powerful punches and kicks, each delivered with incredible force. Still, Anderson's defensive maneuvers were equally impressive, deflecting or evading most of the attacks and minimizing the damage to the bare minimum.

Their fight intensified, and the room echoed with the sound of their grunts and the thud of their blows. They were evenly matched, each pushing the other to their limits. Sweat poured down their faces, and their breath came in ragged gasps, but neither showed any signs of backing down.

Martin observed the fight with rapt attention. This was a confrontation worthy of being shared with others for many reasons.

First, seeing Anderson fight was a pleasure to the eyes since he was what any martial artist had to aspire to be; second, Erik's aggressive style made him look like a savage beast who fought mainly by instinct, creating an amazing show for anyone seeing him doing that; and third, because of the sportsmanship between the two, who were clearly fighting for the sake of improvement.

They were not aiming for dangerous spots, were not using weapons, and were respectful of one another. This was a great fight, and it just began five minutes ago.

"These two will grow to impressive heights in the future," Martin said to himself as he watched them fight.

The bout continued for what felt like an eternity, with the two fighters locked in a fierce battle of skill and determination. They pushed themselves to their physical and mental limits, testing each other's abilities to the fullest.

Their movements became more and more resolute as time passed, more ferocious even, but never crossed the line. However, both sought to find a weakness in each other's defenses.

Anderson's mastery of martial arts allowed him to find openings in Erik's defenses pretty easily, but hitting him was anything but easy, as his speed made up for his lack of experience.

Sometimes, Anderson managed to land precise strikes, but every time he did, it was like he hit a wall. Instead, Erik's sheer power and speed forced Anderson to rely on his evasive maneuvers and counterattacks quite often. It wasn't easy for Anderson to avoid those blows; he managed to do it, up to that point, mostly because of his experience.

The fight was a true spectacle, a showcase of the two young men's respective strengths and talents.

As the fight went on, Erik and Anderson were battered and bruised, their bodies covered in sweat and some blood trickling. However, Anderson was in much better shape than his opponent. The fight was not going in Erik's favor at the moment since his friend used his experience and flawless technique to keep him at bay and gain an advantage.

<What the hell?> Erik thought as Anderson avoided another attack.

The two kept fighting, and neither of them was willing to concede defeat. They stood facing each other, circling warily, searching for an opportunity to deliver the decisive blow.

Erik then charged forward, his fists flying in a flurry of punches and his legs performing movements worthy of a dance. Anderson met his attacks head-on, deflecting the blows with expert precision. He countered with a swift knee strike to Erik's abdomen, but the awakener countered with a powerful uppercut that sent Anderson stumbling back.

That was Erik's first powerful attack that landed on his friend.

Anderson regained his balance and launched a spinning kick, but Erik ducked under it and retaliated with a devastating roundhouse kick that almost connected with Anderson's side. The two quickly backed away after this exchange.

The two stood in the room, their eyes locked in determination. Erik fully realized that Anderson was a formidable opponent. His friend moved with precision, his years of martial arts experience evident in his fluid movements and calculated strikes. He lacked Anderson's finesse and technique and was slightly jealous.

They restarted their bout again with cautious jabs and kicks, testing each other's defenses again, knowing that any broad movement could spell their defeat.

"Are you scared?" Erik asked his friend with a smirk.

"Not at all, but it would be foolish to underestimate you..." Anderson replied. Then the young man dashed toward Erik, and their fight intensified.

BOOM

BOOM

BOOM

The room echoed with their grunts and the impact of their blows again—a cacophony of sounds, a testament to their respect for each other and their efforts. Erik unleashed a barrage of punches, but Anderson blocked or evaded most of them.

"Damn, how can you evade my attacks?" Erik asked.

"You show too much of your intentions," Anderson replied.

Erik's determination fueled his adrenaline. He briefly stepped back and used his massive strength to perform an inhuman feat; he burst forth in a very short amount of space and aimed with a flying knee, aiming for his friend's chin.

Anderson blocked the dangerous move, threw Erik in the air, and countered with a spinning kick that caught Erik's back, sending him crashing to the mat. Erik quickly rolled to his feet, but he could feel the sting of Anderson's strike.

"That was a reckless move," Anderson said.

"But if it worked, you would be on the ground now," the awakener replied. Both contestants laughed. Then Anderson charged again, and they continued to trade blows, their movements a dance of power and technique.

Erik's strength gave him an advantage in raw power, but Anderson's precision and skill kept him on his toes. They started moving across the training room, circling each other once again, searching for openings, and Anderson quickly found one. Erik was not performing well in his footsteps; it showed that he was still inexperienced in martial arts. Anderson took advantage of that.

He executed a well-timed sweep, taking Erik off his feet. Erik grunted as he hit the mat again but quickly rolled away to avoid Anderson's follow-up attack. He sprang to his feet but was only met with a swift kick to the chest, sending him staggering backward.

Anderson pressed his advantage, landing a series of fast strikes that forced Erik onto the defensive. Erik relied on his instincts, blocking and dodging as best he could. He countered with his own strikes, but Anderson's defenses held firm.

They continued to battle, their bodies glistening with sweat and their breath coming in ragged gasps. However, as the fight went on, fatigue started to set in, especially for Anderson, who was doing his best to keep up with Erik's monstrous speed and strength, but that was now becoming unable to.

Their movements became slightly slower. Erik dug deep, summoning every ounce of his strength to deliver a powerful uppercut that sent his friend reeling. Anderson, however, recovered quickly and countered with a spinning back fist that caught Erik off-guard, sending him stumbling.

<Damn, this is the third time!>

They paused momentarily, sweat dripping from their foreheads, as they locked eyes again. There was no animosity between them, only mutual respect and admiration for each other's fighting prowess. They knew they were overall evenly matched and had pushed each other to their limits.

"I must compliment you, Erik; you didn't waste your time coming here," Anderson said.

"Neither did you..." he replied with a smile on his face.

Soon after, the training room became a blur of fists and feet once again, their movements blending into a seamless display of skill and athleticism. They traded blow for blow, their bodies growing weary but their spirits unwavering.