

BIOLOGICAL 301

Chapter 301: An urgent situation (1)

"SHIT, SHIT, SHIT, SHIT."

Erik immediately picked up his phone. He needed to tell the others to call their parents and check if they were ok, but he needed help, so he called Amber.

As the phone rang, Erik's hands shook with adrenaline. He couldn't afford to waste any time. He needed to warn the others and come up with a plan to save the hostages in case they got kidnapped.

"Answer! Amber, answer the phone!"

Finally, his girlfriend answered, and Erik wasted no time blurting out the urgent news.

"Amber!" he said, his voice urgent and filled with emotion. "The Mambas have kidnapped the families of our classmates from school, including our friend's parents. They're using them to lure us into a trap. We need to do something now!"

There was a brief silence on the other end of the line, mainly due to Erik's tone, and the young man could sense Amber's concern. He knew she might think he was overreacting or that it was some kind of prank, but he couldn't care less about that. He needed Amber to believe him.

"What?" Amber asked cautiously; her voice tinged with worry.

"I need you to tell the others; call Mikey and Anderson," Erik replied, his voice choked with emotion.

"Erik, you are scaring me; how do you know all of this?!" she asked.

"There is no time to explain! If you trust me, do as I say. Ask your father to prepare a team and to contact the Zamora and the Montgomery clans; they will surely confirm someone is missing!"

Amber remained silent for a moment, but Erik could imagine the look on her face as she processed the information. He knew he was sure she would believe him, just as she had before.

Finally, Amber spoke, her voice filled with determination. "Okay, Erik. I believe you. I will make a phone call and tell the others to spread the word."

Relief, even if momentary, flooded through Erik as he heard Amber's unwavering support. He knew he could count on her. "Thank you, Amber," Erik said. "I'll call Aaron now. Yours, Gwen's, and Floyd's parents should be at home. As much as I understood, they couldn't get to them, but the others weren't so lucky."

"

"All right, come to my room once you are done..." Amber said.

"Yes."

With a renewed sense of purpose, Erik hung up the phone and immediately called Aaron. He knew he had to do something to solve this situation; it was clear he likely generated this situation, and the risks were high. His concern for his friends didn't allow him to stand by and let their parents suffer at the hands of the Mambas.

He didn't really care about the others, but by making a plan, maybe they would be able to save even them all.

"Erik?"

"Aaron, there is no time to explain, but the Mambas are probably trying to kidnap your mother. Call and tell her to get out of the house NOW!"

"What?!"

"NOW, AARON!"

Aaron's heart pounded in his chest as he listened to Erik's frantic words through the phone. The urgency in Erik's voice sent shivers down his spine, and the young man's mind raced with fear and apprehension. He clutched the phone tightly, his knuckles turning white, as Erik's warning sank in.

Aaron's mind immediately went to his mother, who currently lived alone in their small apartment in the eastern district since he was now attending the Red Palace. She was his rock, his pillar of strength, and the thought of her being in danger sent a wave of panic coursing through him.

Without wasting a second, Aaron closed the phone and dialed his mother's number, his fingers fumbling with the keypad. In the meantime, Erik went to Amber's room while Aaron made his phone call.

Aaron's heart pounded in his ears as the phone rang, each second feeling like an eternity. Finally, his mother picked up the phone.

"Hello?" Her voice was calm, unaware of the impending danger.

"M-Mom," Aaron stammered, his voice choked with emotion. "It's me, Aaron."

He could hear his mother's concern as she immediately sensed something was wrong. "Honey, what's the matter? Why do you sound so scared?"

Tears welled up in Aaron's eyes as he struggled to find the right words. "Mom, listen to me carefully. Something bad is going to happen. You need to run out of the house now! Please, Mom, you have to be safe!"

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line, and Aaron's heart felt like it was about to burst with fear. Then, his mother spoke, her voice quivering with worry. She immediately understood that Aaron wasn't joking.

"Oh my god, Aaron, what's happening? What's going on?"

Her son's voice cracked as he tried to explain the situation to his mother, urging her to leave her home and go somewhere safe. He could hear the fear in his mother's voice, and it mirrored his own. It was at that moment that Aaron's mother saw some guys entering the building from the window.

They were masked and fully armed men, so it was clear that what Aaron had just said to the phone had to be true. She knew time was of the essence, and every passing moment increased the danger.

"I have to close the call, Aaron. Remember that I love you."

"What?! NO, MOM!"

His mother hung up. Aaron paced back and forth in his room, his mind racing with worst-case scenarios. He couldn't lose his mother; he couldn't bear the thought of anything happening to her, especially after what happened to his father. He clenched his fists, feeling powerless and overwhelmed with fear.

"I must go to Erik..." And with that, Aaron left the room.

As the awakener arrived at Amber's room, he saw his girlfriend waiting for him, her expression a mix of worry and determination. Without a word, they locked eyes, and Erik could see the anxiousness in her gaze.

"Anderson and Mikey called their parents. Anderson's mother and Mikey's father are ok, but the other two parents didn't reply. They tried to call on their home phone number, but even there, they didn't reply."

"Fuck... Did you call your father?" Erik asked his girlfriend.

"Yes, he said he would immediately contact the Zamora and the Montgomery clans and told his men to contact the other families. The problem is that assembling a team will take at least one hour."

"Fuck! This messes up everything!" Erik had two options here: one was to let Caiden, the Zamora, the Silverbend, and the Montgomery clan take care of the situation, and the other was for him to take matters into his own hands. The problem was that, depending on the situation, waiting for an hour for them to deploy some people may not be a great idea.

If he was lucky, they had enough time to wait for Caiden and the others to send the teams. Otherwise, he had to go. Moreover, he wondered why the hell a team would take as much as an hour to be deployed inside the city. Didn't Caiden have men to spare?

The truth was that most of the clans and many influential people's men were busy elsewhere. After all, the war against Hin wasn't done yet, and after learning about the recent attack on New Alexandria, the enemy forces were fighting back with great force.

Amber abruptly interrupted Erik's train of thought by asking, "But Erik, how did you know something like this was going to happen?"

The young man knew that by telling this to Amber, he would be forced to tell the others something too.

"After I learned that Natasha and Karl died, I had some suspicions; for this reason, I investigated a little bit and found out that this is all the work of Nathaniel's father..." Erik said.

"How?!" Why?!"

"I spied on him by paying someone with the spare money I saved in the past months."

"I get it..." Amber replied. She didn't ask further questions, as they weren't needed.

At that moment, Aaron, Mikey, Anderson, Floyd, Gwen, Martha, and Benedict arrived at Amber's room. They all got alerted to the situation and came here to find a way to rescue Mikey's, Anderson's, and the other's parents."

Aaron's mind instead was a whirlwind of worry and anxiety as he didn't know what happened to his mother. He tried to distract himself by pacing, taking deep breaths, and reminding himself to stay composed. But the fear was all-consuming, and he couldn't shake off the overwhelming sense of dread.

The air was thick with fear, and the others' faces were etched with worry and anxiety. They couldn't believe that someone kidnapped Anderson's, Mikey's, and probably Aaron's family, and the reality of the situation was sinking in, sending chills down their spines.

Anderson, usually the confident and calm one of the group, looked pale and shaken. His hands trembled as he clasped them tightly together, and his eyes darted around nervously as if expecting danger to burst through the door at any moment. He couldn't comprehend why his parents had been targeted, and the fear of the unknown gripped him tightly. Erik hadn't told him anything yet.

Mikey sat with a solemn expression, his usual smile nowhere to be found. His usually cheerful demeanor was replaced with a deep-seated anxiety that was palpable. He fidgeted nervously, unable

to sit still, and kept wringing his hands as if trying to ward off the overwhelming sense of helplessness.

It was at that moment that Floyd spoke up. "I understand that all of this came by Erik. Can you tell me how you found out about this?" he asked.

"As I told Amber, I hired a hacker to connect me to Nathaniel's father's office after investigating a little bit of Natasha's and Karl's deaths. It didn't take much time for him to pierce their security and do his job," Erik replied. Floyd didn't question this either, as he really didn't care what Erik did with his money, and he wasn't so judgmental as to say that doing so was wrong.

"But why Nathaniel's father? What did you find out?"

"It was luck, to be honest. I thought about the rumors surrounding him, found too many coincidences in Natasha's and Karl's deaths, and decided to hire the guy on a whim. I was luckily right; he was really the one behind their deaths. I stumbled upon a conversation in which he got told by someone they were currently kidnapping our and the other top twenty students' parents."

The room seemed to close in on them as they sat in silence, the tension palpable. The fear of the unknown and the uncertainty of their parents' safety loomed over them like a dark cloud. "I called my father," Floyd said. His father was the minister, Luca Valdez, so he always had guards at all times.

"When I did, he told me someone tried to kidnap him. He is a damn minister, and they still had the gall to attempt this shit..."

It was at that moment that a phone call arrived on Anderson's and Mikey's phones but not on Aaron's.

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The shrill sound cut through the silence, sending a shiver down everyone's spine. Anderson's hand reached out towards the phone, but he hesitated, fear etched on his face.

Erik observed the scene; he knew this was bound to happen. Mikey glanced at Floyd and noticed his eyes wide with apprehension.

"Answer the phone," Floyd said.

Anderson and Mikey exchanged anxious glances but nodded in agreement. They both picked up the receiver with trembling hands, and Mikey hovered close by, both of them steeling themselves for the unknown.

The voice on the other end of the line was distorted, and their hearts clenched with fear. They strained to listen; their breathing was shallow and rapid. The conversation quickly went on for both of them.

Anderson's grip on the phone tightened visibly, his knuckles turning white as he struggled to keep his voice steady. Rage was in his eyes. Mikey's eyes were wide with anxiety, and he instinctively moved closer to Aaron, seeking comfort in his friend's presence.

The others, who were standing nearby, looked visibly shaken. Even Gwen was tense as the situation shattered her usual calm demeanor. She clenched her fists and jaw as she tried to keep her composure for her friends.

As the call ended, Anderson and Mikey both hung up the phone, their hands trembling uncontrollably.

"They told us to go to a club named the Red Lotus Lounge; they are keeping my parents there."

Anderson muttered, his voice barely above a whisper. "I got told the same thing. They also said not to alert the police or anyone else, as that would mean they would kill my parents, and said to go there in forty minutes or they would be killed."

"What do they want from us? Why is this happening?" Amber asked.

"Nathaniel's father wanted revenge for his son's death," Erik said.

"What?! But he has been killed by the thaidis!" Benedict replied.

"Yes, but he does think he has been assassinated. He is crazy and wants to kill us all," Erik added, clearly lying.

"What now?" Amber asked. "We can't let them do as they want," she added.

The awakener took a deep breath, trying to steady himself. "First, we need to stay calm and think rationally," he said, trying to mask his own apprehension. "We can't let fear control us. We need to come up with a plan to save your parents."

Amber then reminded the others, "I already contacted my father and told him about the situation. He said he was going to send a squad, but I don't know how good this will be, and it will take an hour at least to get them ready."

"If this is the situation, then we must go! We can't wait an hour if they are going to be killed in 40 minutes!" Mikey said.

"Guys, the problem is that we are their targets, not our parents. If we go there, we will be killed," Erik said.

"We can't stay here and wait for them to die!" Mikey replied back. Erik then turned to look at Aaron; he didn't receive the call.

"Aaron, any news from your mother?" he asked.

"Not yet."

Amelia's heart raced as she saw five men coming out of a black car and stopping in front of the building. They were armed to the teeth, and since Aaron had just called her to tell her to get out of the house, as soon as she saw the men, she immediately understood that the situation was dangerous. Her instincts kicked in, and she knew that something was terribly wrong.

Her mind raced as she realized that she had to leave and do it fast. She grabbed her phone, slipped it into her pocket, and hastily made her way to the door, trying to get out of the apartment as fast as possible.

As she stepped into the hallway, she could hear the men shouting, their voices filled with urgency. Her heart pounded in her chest as she silently slipped into the shadows, moving stealthily along the corridors, careful to avoid detection.

Amelia's adrenaline surged as she spotted a window at the end of the hallway. Without hesitating, she made a split-second decision and went for it. She swung the window open and climbed onto the ledge, her heart in her throat as she carefully balanced herself on the narrow ledge.

She moved cautiously, her eyes scanning her surroundings for any sign of the armed men. She saw them moving through the hallways, their guns at the ready, searching for something or someone.

Her mind raced as she tried to figure out what was happening. She found it weird that her son knew about this and wanted to know what was happening. However, she was now in a precarious situation and needed to be silent and get out of the building quickly.

Amelia felt her fear intensify with every step she took on the eaves. One wrong move could make her tumble down, and the consequences could be dire. But she had no other choice.

The woman moved swiftly, her body tense due to fear. She kept close to the building, using the bricks to her advantage and being careful not to make any noise that would draw attention to her. Her heart pounded in her ears as she tried to stay focused, her mind racing with thoughts of what could happen if she was caught.

As she made her way along the narrow ledge, Amelia's mind raced with questions. Who were these men? Why were they after her? What had she stumbled upon that had put her in such danger? But there was no time to dwell on the answers.

The woman noticed that the adjacent building was almost close enough to jump on it. If she managed to enter the premises, she could hide or at least run through the streets, maybe finding the police or someone else.

After what felt like an eternity, Amelia finally reached the end of the building. Her eyes widened in fear as she stared at the gap between the buildings. The ledge she was on ended abruptly, and she had no choice but to make the daring leap to the other side. Her heart pounded in her chest as she assessed the distance, her palms sweaty with anxiety.

The height was dizzying, and Amelia felt a wave of vertigo wash over her. She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself, but her legs felt like jelly. She couldn't afford to falter now, not with the armed men hot on her trail.

She looked over her shoulder and saw the armed men getting closer to her apartment, their shouts growing louder. Time was running out, and she had to make a decision. Taking another deep breath, Amelia summoned all her courage and gathered her strength.

With a leap of faith, Amelia pushed off the edge of the ledge, her heart in her mouth as she sailed through the air. For a brief moment, it felt like time had slowed down, and she could feel the rush of wind against her face as she crossed the gap.

Her heart skipped a beat as she reached the other building, her fingers grasping for purchase on the ledge. She landed with a thud but managed to steady herself and avoid making too much noise. Her knees wobbled with the impact, and she felt a surge of relief for having made it across.

The woman quickly scrambled to her feet, her breathing ragged as she searched for a way to hide. She spotted an open window and wasted no time diving inside, hoping it was empty. She found herself in a small apartment.

She pressed herself against the wall, her heart still hammering in her chest, as she listened for any signs of the armed men. They just arrived in front of her apartment's door and heard them busting the door open.

THUD

She could hear their voices outside and their footsteps waning inside her apartment. Amelia's mind raced as she tried to find the best thing to do. Stay inside or run out into the city's streets? If they noticed she walked on the ledge and came inside here, it was clear they would search this building too. So the best thing to do would be to get out unnoticed.

Amelia left the apartment, going out from the main door, and spotted a staircase leading down. Without hesitation, she began to descend, her steps as light as possible, trying to make no sound. She reached the ground floor and cautiously peered out into the corridor. It was clear.

She saw the building's open door at the end of the hall and quickly made her way toward it. She peeked outside and saw her opportunity to escape.

Amelia slipped out, keeping an eye on the armed men as they continued their search nearby.

She was now outside the building, but the danger was not over yet. She needed to find a way to get to safety and get help. She couldn't make a phone call now because she couldn't trust anyone around her.

Aaron's mother spotted a nearby alleyway and quickly made her way toward it, staying in the shadows with her senses on high alert. Her mind raced with fear and uncertainty but she refused to get caught. However, her mind wandered to Aaron; what was happening to him? How could he know she was in danger? Was he safe?

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"So, what do we do now?" Gwen asked.

"It's clear we can't leave the hostages there," Erik said. "As far as I know, we students are the real targets, not our families, so they should be safe for the time being; that, of course, if we go to the Red Lotus Lounge," Erik said, his voice low and calm.

"We can't just sit here and do nothing," Anderson said. "My father has been taken, and if Amber's father's team can't be ready before an hour, then..."

"I know, but you have to take into account that I doubt we are strong enough to face these people. The average New Alexandria citizen's rank is MI, and we are barely at the PI level," Erik said.

"Even taking into account our powers, we won't even the field that much," Erik was referring to the fact that rare and powerful powers, if used well, were able to marginalize the difference between ranks. Nathaniel's power was an example since it allowed the young man to basically jump two ranks in power despite him officially being only at the PI level, four ranks below.

"But what can we do?" Aaron asked, his voice wavering. "We're just kids in the end; our training is far from enough to fight people who went to the military."

"We're not just kids; we are Red Palace members," Anderson said firmly. "Besides, we're the only ones who know what's happening. We have to do something since we can't contact the police, and we took a huge risk by alerting Amber's father already," the young man said while looking at Aaron, but then he turned to look at Erik as to see if he did agree.

"It's not like I don't want to help you, Anderson, but we need to be realistic. If we go, some of us will die, and there is a high chance. I'm trying not to be pessimistic, but to be honest, I think we will all die. If we really want to do this, we must come up with a plan," the awakener added.

"What if we contact the police? Maybe they have men available now, and they could rush there to help your parents." Martha suggested.

Erik shook his head. "We can't. It's not just that they might mess up and kill the hostages. The problem is that we can't trust the police themselves. There might be moles, and judging by what Nathaniel's father has been able to do until now, I strongly believe there are," Erik said.

"Then what do we do?" Amber asked with a serious look on her face.

"We have to take matters into our own hands, as I've already said," Anderson chimed in. "We have to rescue the hostages." Erik was reluctant, but if that was what his friends wanted to do, he could only provide support to them.

"How?" Martha asked, her voice barely above a whisper. Luckily, her parents were in another city, so nothing happened to them; besides, they weren't even targets, so that she could rest easy.

However, her friends' parents had been kidnapped, and she wanted to help. Benedict had the same idea.

Erik took a deep breath, his mind racing with ideas. "The first thing would be to go to the Red Lotus Lounge. That's where they're keeping them."

"But how will we get in?" Aaron asked.

"I have some ideas," Erik said. "But it will inevitably involve fighting and probably murder, and we'll have to fight our way out with a 100% chance."

The group fell silent, the weight of Erik's words sinking in. They all knew what Erik was suggesting was dangerous and risky, but they also knew it was their only option.

However, what really surprised them was the prospect of killing other human beings. They knew they were bound to since they would join the army someday, but doing it so soon was a scary prospect.

"Murder?" Floyd asked. "I don't know, man. That's not something easy to do," he added, looking at Anderson. He was sorry for his old friend, but he was in a conflicting state of mind at the moment.

"I know, but what are the alternatives? Let our friends and family die?" Anderson said, his tone a little bit stern.

"Calm down, you guys..." Erik said.

"We have been lucky enough since most of our families had been left out of the Mambas' grasp, but Mikey's and mine families weren't so lucky. Besides, there are Britney's, Adam's, and all the other families there too. If we don't help them, they will have to go to the Red Lotus Lounge alone and probably be killed along with their families. We must do something."

"I know, but..."

"Enough, guys," Erik said. His imposing and commanding tone put everyone on notice, even Gwen. The young woman observed Erik and noticed how much he did change during these months; he was another person, no longer the shy and scared person he once was. He now had the aura of a leader.

Floyd spoke up first. "This is insane, Anderson. I don't want to offend you or the others, but how are we supposed to take on a mafia group?"

Benedict chimed in, "Yeah, we're just a bunch of 15-year-old kids, after all. We don't have any experience with this kind of thing without taking into account these guys' strengths."

Amber put a hand on Floyd's shoulder. "I know it's scary, but Anderson is right; we can't just sit around and do nothing. We have to try at least to save their parents."

Erik looked at his girlfriend with conflicting emotions as he heard her saying those words. If Amber decided to go, she would regardless of what he said, and he wasn't willing to let her go without him.

Since the majority of people wanted to go, Erik was forced to agree in the end. The awakener sighed and then nodded. "We will go then..."

Gwen added, "If we really want to help them, we need to be smart about this. We have to come up with a plan that will work."

Floyd let out a sigh. "I'm not a coward; I want to help... It's just that I don't want anyone else to get hurt. If these guys killed Karl and Natasha, Nathaniel's friends, without hesitation, why would we think they wouldn't be as ruthless with us?"

Benedict nodded in agreement. "Same here. We have to make sure we do everything we can to keep everyone safe."

Amber looked at Erik. "Do you have any ideas?"

Erik thought for a moment before responding. "We need to be strategic. We can't just rush in blindly. We need to gather as much information as we can about the location and the number of guards and then come up with a plan from there."

Floyd looked skeptical. "But how are we supposed to get that kind of information?"

Erik replied, "I still have the hacker I sent to spy on Matthew on my side. It won't take long."

"Can we trust him?" Anderson asked.

"If we pay him, we can," Erik replied. Of course, there was no hacker under his pay. He had simply spied on them through the biological supercomputer.

Benedict nodded. "Ok, that's a good idea. But we have to be careful not to get caught."

"Of course," Erik said. He looked at Mikey and Anderson with determination in his eyes and said, "We won't stay idle while our friends risk their lives."

"Thank you, Erik," Anderson said. The awakener replied with a nod.

"Ok, we all agree that we must help them and that we must come up with a plan and gather intel about the place," Gwen interjected. "But then?"

"That depends on the situation," Erik said.

"We need more than this if we really want to try and rescue them," Gwen replied.

"I know. Let me contact the guy and see what we can do. Wait for me."

Like that, Erik left the room and faked a phone call. Of course, he just needed to talk to the biological supercomputer.

<System, I need you to connect to the Red Lotus Lounge, take a picture of every room, find out how many people are at the nightclub, create a map of the place, and send everything to my smartphone!>

[UNDERSTOOD. CONNECTING TO THE RED LOTUS LOUNGE'S SECURITY SYSTEM. SCANNING THE PLACE, 71 PEOPLE WERE FOUND INSIDE; 21 APPEAR TO BE HOSTAGES. MAP OF THE PLACE, PHOTOS, AND VIDEOS OF THE UPLOADED TO THE HOST'S SMARTPHONE]

<It was fast.

Erik observed the footage and noticed that Aaron's mother wasn't among the kidnapped people. That was good news.

<I can't go there already with the information at hand; I will have to fake receiving it later.>

With that, Erik came back to where the others were.

"All right, I talked to the guy; he will send me everything in five minutes."

"Good," Floyd replied. "But we must tell the other students. I think they already received the phone call and will probably rush there to save their parents, but we can't allow it. If we really want to do this, we need as much help as possible."

"That was what I was thinking," Amber chimed in. The conversation ensued, and after five minutes went by, Erik faked receiving a notification.

"It looks like we already have what we need," he said. "The guy told me there are 50 people there plus 21 hostages, including Anderson's and Mikey's parents, but there is no trace of Aaron's mother."

The young man let out a sigh of relief, and the others nodded at him in assurance. However, Anderson and Mikey were visibly distressed; both their parents had been taken hostage.

"Don't worry; we will find a solution to all of this. Besides, since Amber contacted his father, a squad will surely come to help us sooner or later. However, we must move, as we must be there in an hour," Erik added.

"Now, based on the images I got, I can tell that we have a chance of saving the hostages."

The others looked at Erik with surprised eyes. "Really?" Mikey asked.

"Indeed. There is a door behind the club, and it is directly connected to a corridor that leads to the room where the hostages are kept. The problem is that there are four guards in front of the door. Based on the information I received, they are not that strong, and we should be able to take care of them if we play our cards well. What I fear is that they will alert the people inside."

"So, what do we do?" Benedict asked.

"I will take care of it," Erik said. "Now, this is what I thought: the plan is simple but effective. Since mine, Amber's, Floyd's, Gwen's, Benedict's, and Martha's parents didn't get kidnapped, the best thing to do would be for us to take care of the guards and save the hostages while the others and the rest of the top students will stall for time in the main room," Erik said.

"Why can't we simply all try to sneak in and save them?" Floyd asked.

"No, because if they spot us, we will have at least 50 people on us, and we wouldn't be able to escape. Things will be different if we have someone stalling them or simply distracting them," Erik replied.

"All right, but what if they kill us on the spot?" Anderson asked.

"That is a possibility," Erik said. "But I doubt that would be the likely outcome. You didn't see Matthew's state of mind; I did. He is not in good shape and will probably start ranting something before killing you, just to savor your death better."

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"If what you say is true, then we really have a chance," Anderson said while keeping his hand on his chin. "However, it is also true that the ones who will distract Matthew and his men will face great danger. What will we do once they start attacking us?" he then asked.

"You fight; there is no alternative. This means you must get ready to kill people," Erik resolutely said.

As Erik said that, he observed how a range of emotions consumed their friends. Fear and worry etched their faces, and their eyes darted nervously around the room.

Martha's voice shook with anxiety, and Amber's eyes were misty with tears. Aaron was determined but anxious, while Mikey was visibly shaken.

Gwen's face was tight with worry, and Anderson was quiet but clearly distressed. Floyd and Benedict wore expressions of deep concern, their apprehension palpable in their body language.

The gravity of the situation weighed heavily on all of them, and they knew the risks were high.

"I do not have problems doing that," Anderson suddenly replied, as if he had just made a decision. "If there weren't other people, I could have simply blown them all out," he added.

"Yeah, that could be something viable. If we manage to make everyone escape, then we could resort to that, but you will be put in grave danger, as I doubt you would be able to resist trained men for long," Erik replied.

"TSK..."

"However, if the plan goes as it should, the others and I should quickly arrive there. We would be forced to face 50 people, and I don't know if we will be able to save everyone, but at least some of us should be able to get out of there."

Erik looked at the others in the eyes. To be honest, he didn't really care about the other top students or hostages; he only cared about Anderson's and Mikey's families and their friends' safety.

However, if he said something like that, the others would for sure think he had something wrong.

"I will ask you this, guys," Erik said, "Are you really sure you want to do this? Again, the best option would be to wait for Caiden's team..."

"We have no options," Amber said. If we don't go now, the hostages will all die.

"All right, let's do this," Mikey suddenly said. "But as we have said earlier, we must contact the other students. We have to inform them of the situation and share our plan with them."

"Indeed."

The group was a mix of emotions, ranging from fear and worry to determination and anxiety. Anderson was ready to do whatever it took, but his distress was visible on his face.

As Erik spoke about the dangers they would face and the need to fight, the situation's gravity weighed heavily on them. Anderson's sudden comment about blowing everyone up showed how high the stakes were. The plan was risky, and they all knew it.

But they also knew that they had no other choice; despite the fear and uncertainty, they knew they had to take action quickly and decisively to save their loved ones.

Anderson's determination and call to action rallied the group, and they all agreed that they needed to contact the other students and share their plans. It was a small glimmer of hope in a dark and dangerous situation, but it was enough to give them the courage to move forward.

Amber and the others immediately got to work on making phone calls to the other top students. They knew that time was of the essence and that they needed to act quickly if they were going to have any chance of rescuing their loved ones.

Amber pulled out her phone and quickly dialed a number. After a few rings, someone answered.

The others did the same, and one by one, in the span of a couple of minutes, they told everyone to meet them here.

"Luisa is on her way here," Amber said.

"Same for Adam," Floyd added.

"Good. Amber, call some taxis as soon as possible so that we can all go to the Red Lotus Lounge in the shortest amount of time possible," Erik ordered.

"Can't we ask Dad?" The young woman asked.

"If we do, he would probably try to stop us."

"All right," his girlfriend replied, and immediately she started doing as instructed.

"In the meantime," Erik said while sending the images from the Red Lotus Lounge on their phones. "Look at the building's blueprints," he said, and the others picked up their phones.

"As you can see, the place is divided this way: there is a main room, which is the dance room, which is also the biggest place in the building; on the left is the kitchen; and from there and multiple other doors, it is possible to have access to a corridor where some other smaller rooms are located," Erik explained as he looked at the map.

"Based on the intel I've received, most of the rooms are VIP ones, but there are also offices, storage rooms, and others; this means that we can expect other people to be there, probably guards. On the other side of the dance room, there are five bigger VIP rooms, but they are empty at the moment. The exit is to the south of the building, while the back entrance is to the north.

Keep in mind the layout, as it is important to escape."

The others nodded as they put their faith in Erik's intel.

"The hostages are in this room here," Erik said while pointing at the place on the blueprints.

"The guards are here, and here, while the main force is in the dance room. Based on the footage, three guards are inside the hostage room, but we should be able to take care of them if we play it fast."

It was at that moment that a knock was heard at the apartment's door.

"It should be Luisa." Amber quickly stood up and went to open the door, and once she did, she found Luisa Zamora, Adam Bond, and Darragh Montgomery standing in front of the door together.

"Come in," she said as soon as she saw them, and the students did as she said. As soon as they settled in, they observed the tension inside.

It was the same feeling of pressure they were having—the same fear that their loved ones were going to die if they didn't go to the Red Lotus Lounge, but also the fear that, if they did as instructed, they were going to die with no assurance their parents and family members would live.

"So, what the hell is happening? Does anyone know?" Darragh asked, visibly shaken.

"Yeah, I got told to go to the Red Lotus Lounge by someone on the phone, stating that my Mother had been kidnapped and was going to die if I didn't comply," Luisa added. "I tried calling home, but my brother said my mother wasn't home, and she didn't reply on his phone."

"It is as they said," Erik replied. "Anderson's and Mikey's parents got kidnapped too, along with several other people from the top student class at Thornton High School," Erik replied.

Luisa, Adam, and Darragh observed Erik with surprise. "I didn't ask you, plant hugger!" Luisa replied with a serious and slightly angry look.

She knew that Erik was much stronger than before, but the stigma he earned during high school was still fully present inside of her, as she didn't really follow the Red Palace's inner ranking and didn't know that Erik was, in fact, the strongest among them.

"If I were you, I wouldn't talk to him that way, Luisa," Anderson said.

"What? Why? Besides, what the hell is he doing here, to begin with? What help could he provide?" The young woman replied.

"He is the strongest among us," Amber suddenly said.

"What?" the girl shouted. "Are you joking, right?"

"Not at all. He beat Anderson in an inner-ranking fight and got his place. He is the strongest and even the highest-ranked among the presents here."

The three didn't want to believe what they were saying, but based on Amber's and Anderson's words, on how everyone looked at him, and on the awakener's aura, they started taking him seriously.

However, Luisa was still pissed. Erik Romano was the plant hugger, a useless member of society who got lucky once and was nurtured by the school because of a status he wasn't worthy to have. Someone who got his place in the Red Palace because the school set him up in such a way that he would have ended up here at the Red Palace without question.

"All right, then, tell me what the hell is going on!" Luisa suddenly shouted.

Erik took a deep breath and began to explain the situation in detail. He recounted how Matthew kidnapped their group's parents, including Anderson's and Mikey's, to exact revenge for his son's death.

Matthew had no idea who had killed Nathaniel, but he was determined to make his son's enemies or rivals pay for it in the doubt.

Luisa, Adam, and Darragh listened with growing horror as Erik spoke. They couldn't believe something like this could happen to them and their families. The gravity of the situation weighed heavily on all of them, and they knew that they had to act quickly if they were going to save the hostages.

"So what's the plan?" Adam asked, his voice laced with urgency.

"We will talk about this after everyone has arrived here," Erik replied.

Chapter 305: An Urgent Situation (5)

As they waited, they heard a knock at the door. Anderson got up from his seat and made his way to the door.

As he swung it open, the group saw their old friends standing outside, looking anxious and worried. Charley and Brittney were holding hands tightly while Patricia had tears in her eyes.

Jacob and Stefan were fidgeting nervously, and Serena, Enya, and Stella were huddled together for support, their faces pale with shock and worry.

They immediately entered the room and didn't lose time.

"What the hell is going on?" Charley demanded, his eyes scanning the room for answers. "Why was our family kidnapped?" he asked.

"Hello," Erik said as he stepped forward, his voice firm. "Let me explain everything to you."

Erik began recounting what had happened and explaining Nathaniel's father's role in the situation.

The group stood in stunned silence, their expressions shifting between worry, fear, and rage. Charley's face contorted with worry, and his brows furrowed as he tried to make sense of the situation.

Brittney's eyes widened with fear at the prospect of her or her parents dying, and she clutched her hands tightly in her lap.

Patricia's face was in no better situation; she had a mask of rage, her jaw set, her fists clenched, and her nostrils flaring as she listened intently.

The newcomers exchanged worried glances, their hearts sinking at the news. "But how did you all know about it so quickly?" Patricia asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I was investigating Natasha's and Karl's deaths and found this out; the problem was that it was too late, as they had already sent their men to kidnap your families," Erik explained.

"Now we are trying to find a solution, and we have come up with a plan. However, we also alerted Amber's father, who is preparing a team for a rescue mission." Aaron added.

"Good! Then they can take care of it, right?" Patricia asked.

Jacob nodded, understanding dawning on his face. "Yeah, we are just going to wait for them, right?"

Erik took a deep breath, his eyes scanning the group. "Unfortunately, not in the time they gave you. We must go there before they kill all the hostages." Erik said. "That's why we have decided to take action, but I will be honest with you, there is a high chance we won't be able to come back after this. I'm confident we can free the hostages, but not for the following."

"But if what you said is true and we are their targets, what makes you think they won't kill us on the spot if we go there?" Brittney asked.

"As I've already said previously, I do not think Matthew will do it. You haven't seen him, but I did. He is currently all messed up," Erik replied.

Stefan cleared his throat, his voice low and steady. "Ok, so what does your plan of attack consist of? How will we rescue our families, and why do you think we won't make it?" Erik nodded, appreciating Stefan's question.

"We have been monitoring their movements thanks to a friend of mine, and we know where they are currently holding the hostages. The plan is simple: while one team distracts the kidnappers, another will rescue them. The problem is that these guys likely went to the military and are at least three levels above us on average.

I'm not aware of your current level, but most of us are at the PI level currently, so this is the situation. If we manage to hold on until Caiden's men arrive, then we shouldn't have problems surviving, that if you will be skilled enough to prevent your death until their arrival." The young man then solemnly looked into the newcomer's eyes.

"I will ask you guys again, are you sure you want to do this?"

Enya looked Erik in the eyes, saying, " We have little choice. If we do not go, our family will die, but we will risk our lives if we go. However, I couldn't live with myself knowing that I could have helped them, and I didn't, so I want to go."

"Yeah," Stefan replied. "I agree."

Erik nodded, and then he explained the rescue plan in detail, outlining each step and contingency. As he spoke, the group's expressions shifted from worry and fear to determination and hope.

Charley nodded thoughtfully, his eyes gleaming with a newfound sense of purpose. Brittney's grip on his hand tightened, her gaze steady and unwavering. Patricia's rage started to wane as a steely resolve took its place. She leaned forward, her fists still clenched, but her expression was more determined than angry.

After Erik was done, the others were more or less convinced. They still feared losing their lives but couldn't do much about that.

However, they couldn't leave their family in Matthew's hands; they had to take things into their own hands.

Jacob's face was set in a grim expression, but his eyes were determined. "Let's do this," he said.

Erik smiled, impressed with their bravery. "Good."

Patricia and Stella exchanged a quick glance, their expressions solemn but resolute. "We're with you," Serena said, her voice steady. She took a deep breath, her eyes shining with determination. "Let's bring our families home."

"All right, let's take your weapons and meet at the gate in ten minutes. We've already made transportation arrangements, so we'll leave as soon as possible."

"All right," everyone replied.

As the group stood up, ready to put the plan into action, their faces were no longer filled with worry, fear, or rage. Instead, they were united in their resolve to save their loved ones, and their expressions were filled with determination and hope.

The group quickly gathered their things and made their way outside. It didn't take even five minutes for them to rush to their rooms, pick up their weapons, and head to the Red Palace's entrance.

However, Erik had to sneak out alone again since he had the hunch that people were keeping an eye on him, and if he got out of the Red Palace, they would probably send someone to stop him from doing so.

Erik thought about telling the authorities or the Red Palace what was happening, but the problem was that he could jeopardize the rescue if he did.

The only way for them to save the parents was if he hijacked the security system and shielded the rescue team; he could do that from the Red Palace, but that would mean that he had to reveal his ability since finding someone with that kind of skillset was hard for average citizens like him.

The situation was too delicate for him not to rush to help the hostages. However, realistically speaking, Erik knew they didn't have much of a chance, and their only path to survival was if the parents helped them fight. If the hostages, who were 21, fought with them, who were 17 in total, they would be able to manage to get out of there.

Once there, they saw four cabs waiting for them at the entrance. Armed to the teeth, the group of students quickly hopped on the vehicles and told the drivers to bring them near the Red Lotus Lounge.

As they drove toward the compound, the tension in the air was palpable. Each member of the group was lost in their own thoughts, praying that they would be able to rescue their loved ones unharmed.

As they neared the place, Erik gave a final briefing on the plan of attack. The group nodded, their faces set with determination.

The vehicles quickly arrived, quickly descended and left them a block away from the place. They couldn't allow the guards to see the second group, or that would foil the plan.

The teams emerged from the vehicles with weapons strapped to their belts.

"All right, we will go our separate ways here. Remember, you must stall them for as much time as possible," Erik said.

"Anderson, if things go south, I will count on you." His friend nodded and said, "Don't worry."

"Good, let's go."

With that, Erik, Benedict, Martha, Amber, Aaron, Floyd, and Gwen had separated from the rest of the group.

They were all critical targets for the Crystal Cross gang, so they had to be careful not to get spotted, and since the criminal organization had men at every corner, they had to sneak their way to the Red Lotus Lounge.

They moved swiftly, keeping to the crowded streets where they could blend in with the crowds of people.

The first thing they did as they left the place where the cabs brought them was duck into a narrow alleyway, cutting through backstreets to avoid roads where too many gang members were known to patrol. They moved as one, keeping their heads down and their movements fluid, not drawing attention to themselves.

At one point, they were forced to leave the alleys and head toward a crowd of people since they had to go to the other side of the street.

They huddled together, moving as a unit, letting the bodies around them conceal their movements. They wove in and out of the crowd, and after having reached a small plaza, they took a side street that directly brought them to the back of the Red Lotus Lounge.

The club seemed to have a commanding presence of its own. It was almost as if the building itself was alive and pulsing with energy. However, they knew well that they couldn't let themselves be drawn by the club's fancy exterior, as that was a place of death for them.

Erik had already been there, so he already knew what to expect from the place. However, the others didn't; they looked at the building intently. They noticed the faded red brick exterior that was weathered and worn as if it had been standing for decades.

The brickwork was accented with deep grooves and crevices, giving the building an aged and rustic appearance. Despite its somewhat rough exterior, the club's facade had been spruced up with sleek, modern lighting fixtures and a polished steel entrance.

They couldn't see it from their position. Still, on the front of the building was a large, glowing red lotus flower symbol surrounded by intricate, geometric patterns mounted prominently just above the main entrance.

Until that point, they had been lucky since no one spotted them, which was in itself great; however, they couldn't rest as time was of the essence.

As they approached the back of the building, Anderson, Mikey and the others were already in front of the club, waiting for Erik to give them the signal they needed.

Erik picked up his phone and quickly called Anderson.

"Hey, we are here; how are the others?" Erik asked.

"They are nervous but overall in good spirits. Do we have to go?" Anderson asked.

"Yeah, as soon as you enter, we will move. I can already spot the four guards ahead. As soon as you enter, we will neutralize them."

Anderson nodded and said, "Thank you, Erik, for everything. We wouldn't have had this chance if it wasn't for you."

"You can thank me after we have rescued the hostages and got you out of that place."

"I will..."

Chapter 306: The Red Lotus Lounge (1)

"Ok, you can enter when you want," Erik said to Anderson.

"All right, I wish you luck, Erik."

"Yeah, I wish you luck too."

With that, Erik closed the conversation and turned to look at his friends.

"All right, guys, they are going in; we must wait a few minutes before going into action." The others nodded.

Erik crouched low behind the dumpster, his eyes scanning the back door of the Red Lotus Lounge. Contrary to the last time he was here, the place was deadly silent. However, there were much more guards than usual. The awakener's and the others' attention was fixed on the four stationed outside, in front of the back door leading to the club.

They were all burly men with shaved heads and tattoos covering their thick arms. Erik had seen their type before; they were muscle-for-hire, paid to keep unwanted guests out, but they were here for a different reason today.

Amber peered over Erik's shoulder, her hands tightly gripping her knife. "When do we go?" she asked, whispering.

"Soon," Erik replied. "But before going, I wanted to be sure about something with you guys. To enter, we need to at least knock the guards out, but it is clear that the most likely thing we will do is kill them. Do you feel ready?" he asked.

"I don't think I will ever be ready," Amber replied.

"But we must..." Aaron added with a determined look. He knew well that the fact that his mother wasn't among the hostages was a God-sent gift. However, he still got no news from her, so he was worried.

Benedict cracked his knuckles with a sly grin on his face. "I'm always ready to take on a challenge; don't worry."

Gwen kept her usual composure: "We will have to, sooner or later, once inside the military, so it doesn't make that much of a difference for me."

With a deep breath, they all nodded in unison and took their positions. They moved with precision and purpose, working together as a team to navigate the obstacles and reach their target.

The guards stood in a loose circle, smoking cigarettes and chatting. They seemed relaxed, but Erik knew better. They were always on high alert, ready to pounce at the first sign of trouble.

Suddenly, one of the guards stiffened, his head cocked to the side as if listening for something. The others followed suit, their eyes scanning the shadows. Erik held his breath, willing them not to discover their hiding place.

<System, hack their communications device, hijack all the cameras inside and outside, and send loop videos. Prevent any recording too.>

[UNDERSTOOD. CONNECTING TO THE DEVICES. CONNECTION COMPLETE. DEVICES HACKED.]

With that, Erik was sure that aside from the ones seeing them directly, no one would find them. The group kept heading toward the door by moving behind objects, but soon they met a short wall.

"What do we do now? There is too much space between us and the guards; we won't be able to attack them on time," Gwen said.

"I sent a message to my hacker. He already got rid of their communication devices, so we should gain a couple of moments before attacking. However, they could still physically go inside and warn the others by voice," Erik said with cold eyes.

The others observed this side of him they had never seen; it was like he was another person altogether. Sure, Erik did change a lot during these past months; he became quite confident in himself, but that was too much. He was too calm in front of a life-or-death situation; he too calmly talked about murder. It was almost like he was used to it, and that frightened them a little.

"Amber," he said while looking at her. "I need you to make your gas now; it will give us some additional time but will also cover our advance. Just make sure it is not that corrosive, or we will waste a lot of mana to counter it."

"All right," the young woman said.

"You can do that," Gwen added while placing her hand on Amber's shoulder. At that moment, the young woman started releasing the corrosive gas. She moved it toward the guards, who didn't immediately notice the substance as it was semi-transparent and accumulated slowly around them.

However, they started itching. Initially, it wasn't that much, but it soon increased in intensity.

Then one of the guards spotted something out of the corner of his eye. He spun around, his hand reaching for his weapon. Erik sprang into action, reaching the man in a couple of seconds and plunging his Flyssa into the man's neck. Everything happened in a hairbreadth.

[HOSTILE INDIVIDUAL KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 900 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

The other guards reacted quickly, drawing their weapons and charging angrily at Erik, swinging them wildly toward him. However, Benedict, Aaron, Floyd, and Gwen leaped forward with their weapons in hand while Martha protected Amber and attacked from a distance as she produced the fog that shielded them from unwanted sight.

The back alley was soon filled with chaos and violence; one of the guards was dead, but the other three were alive and kicking.

Erik parried a blow from the first guard and countered with a swift strike. The guard staggered back but quickly regained his footing and lunged forward again.

Gwen summoned her mana armor, its shimmering blue energy deflecting the second guard's sword. She focused her energy and sent a fast punch towards him, but the man managed to dodge at the last moment, but Floyd prevented him from attacking thanks to his power.

Aaron conjured up a ball of corrosive slime and hurled it at the third guard who was currently fighting Benedict; the guard deflected it with his sword, throwing it to the ground. He lunged forward, his blade whistling through the air toward his opponent.

Erik blocked the first guard's sword attack again. He gritted his teeth and swung his sword again, this time managing to land a glancing blow.

Gwen and Floyd worked together, their attacks complementing each other. Gwen launched a flurry of attacks, each causing the guard to play defensive, but it was clear he was physically stronger than them; the only thing that kept the two alive was their superior fighting techniques and skills.

Aaron's corrosive slime burned through the guards' clothing, making them more vulnerable to their attacks and burning their feet, which at least gave them some advantage that evened the field.

However, it was clear that this wasn't going to be an easy fight without Amber and Martha.

The fight continued, with each of the students' teams facing off against their respective opponents. Erik charged forward, his movements graceful and precise.

The first guard swung his sword at Erik, but he parried the blow with ease despite feeling the weight of the move. The awakener had to reinforce his bones to sustain the blow. The awakener then swung his sword in a wide arc, but the guard avoided the blow.

<They are weaker than I assumed, but the guards are still at least a rank higher than me,> Erik thought. He had the idea that the Mambas employed stronger people, at least over the MI rank, but luckily, he was wrong as the guy he was fighting was at most two ranks higher only.

"We must contact the others!" One of the guards shouted.

<Shit...>

As Amber and Martha heard those words, Erik's girlfriend immediately stopped producing the fog, and they joined the fray. Martha, charged at Benedict's opponent while Amber tried to help Erik.

"No, I can manage him; go help, Gwen!" Erik shouted, and Amber did as instructed.

"Are you sure you can be so arrogant, young man?" The guard asked as he swung his weapon again at the Red Palace student.

At that moment, Amber joined the fray, and with her fast, precise, and skillful movements, she, Floyd, and Gwen started winning against the guard, who, despite being stronger than them, was having problems with their top-notch skills, number advantage, and nasty powers.

He attacked Gwen several times, but her armor shielded her from harm; at the same time, he was burned by Amber's fog, which also shielded them from his sight.

Meanwhile, the other guard was facing Martha, Aaron, and Benedict. Thanks to their powers, they were not having particular problems, especially considering that Aaron and Martha had restraining powers.

The fight continued, and thanks to the student's numerical advantage, the guards began to falter after what seemed like an eternity. Amber's and Gwen's target fell to the ground, unconscious, as Erik's girlfriend managed to land a devastating blow on his head.

Benedict's weapon pierced the other, and he fell to the ground, losing copious amounts of blood. The third guard continued to fight against Erik, and the bout appeared to be at a stalemate.

To be honest, Erik had to use multiple powers to avoid being wounded, and his mana reserves took a heavy toll. It wasn't easy to fight against someone with several ranks over him. He was lucky that he was stronger than he should have been, thanks to the System. However, it was imperative for him to kill this guy as he sensed Erik had been using multiple powers due to the mana shifts.

At that moment, the others rushed toward the guard, who could do nothing to defend himself against these many opponents, despite them being weaker.

Erik seized the opportunity that moment of distraction gave him and lunged forward, his sword plunging into the guard's chest. The man let out a choked gasp and crumpled to the ground.

The students stood panting, their energy spent. This was a fight that any other person would have lost. It was all thanks to them being elite and being able to fight against people with higher ranks than theirs that they managed to survive that encounter.

[MULTIPLE HOSTILE INDIVIDUALS KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 2700 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

[LEVEL UP.]

Chapter 307: The Red Lotus Lounge (2)

"Are you all okay?" Erik asked. The others were panting due to the exertion. The guards were not that much stronger compared to the average adult in New Alexandria, and they had been lucky to have killed one of them as soon as the fight started, but the fight was hard, and they won mainly thanks to their numerical advantage.

"I'm okay," Amber said.

"Yeah, me too," Floyd replied.

The others nodded as they were uninjured. However, it was clear from their faces that they were not mentally okay.

Gwen and Aaron stood panting and sweating, their faces etched with exhaustion after finishing the brutal fight against the guards.

The adrenaline rush had started to wear off, and they were now feeling the full impact of their actions. The others were in a similar situation.

Gwen was leaning against the wall, her eyes wide and darting around the room as if expecting another attack. Her breathing was ragged, and her shoulders were heaving as she tried to catch her breath.

She looked pale; her face was drained of all color, and her normally cunning eyes were now dark and haunted. It was weird for Erik to see her in that state, as she was usually calm and composed.

On the other hand, Aaron was surprisingly calm; maybe that had to do with his father's recent death and the kidnapping attempt on his mother; however, he was still showing some anxiety signs since he was rubbing his hands together nervously. His breathing was labored, and his face was slick with sweat due to the exertion.

Erik himself was standing in front of the guard he had been fighting until now, his sword still in hand. He felt a sense of relief that the fight was over, but his heart was still pounding in his chest.

That had been a hard fight, and he would have lost if it wasn't for his friends. His eyes were darting around the space, assessing potential threats, and he was hyper-aware of every sound and movement.

"We still have some work to do. We must go inside and free the hostages, then quickly head to the others to help them."

"Yeah," Aaron said.

However, they suddenly heard a female voice: "We just... killed someone..." It was Martha. She was a soft person, so she didn't take it very well despite knowing what they were probably going to do.

"Calm down, Martha," Benedict said. "It was basically self-defense; they would have killed us if we didn't fight back!" the young man added. Too bad it was they who attacked first.

Erik walked in front of his friend, and with cold eyes, he looked at her.

"Martha, we had to do it. Remember, our friends are inside this building, probably fighting for their lives. Now we are just wasting time thinking about some criminals' deaths. Get a hold of yourself."

"Erik!" Amber almost shouted. "There is no need to say such things!"

"Yeah, Erik, relax a little!" Floyd chimed in. Benedict then hugged Martha.

"Don't worry, everything will be all right," he whispered to her ears.

"Maybe," Erik replied, "but we need to get inside now and rescue the hostages. There is no time to lose."

The others looked at Erik with confused looks. How come he was that calm?

< System, send me the security camera's footage. I want to know where the guards are.>

[UNDERSTOOD. SENDING LIVE STREAM TO THE USER'S BRAIN]

With that, Erik had a clear view of what was happening inside but focused on his part of the job.

Entering the door in front of them forced them to walk to some run-down parts of the buildings, but after a turn left and one right, they could enter the corridor he was in the last time he came to the Red Lotus Lounge.

It also appeared that all the guards beside the three inside the hostage room were in the main room, the one with the dancefloor, so they could go there unobstructed.

"All right, the way is clear; we should be able to head to the hostage room undisturbed. Let's go." Despite their reluctance, Erik and the others slipped inside the Red Lotus Lounge, moving quickly and quietly through the darkened corridors.

They could hear the distant sound of voices talking from the main room, where Matthew was probably having a meltdown and talking to Anderson, but the hallways behind the dance room were deserted.

As Erik and his companions made their way through the darkened corridors of the Red Lotus Lounge, the air was thick with the scent of exotic spices and the low murmur of voices.

Then they finally arrived at the corridor leading them to the hostage room; the decor became more opulent and lavish once they went there.

The walls were draped in rich, velvety curtains of deep scarlet red, giving the space a rather sophisticated feel.

The flooring beneath their feet was made of red carpet with golden accents woven throughout.

The corridor was currently dimly lit, with subtle lighting emanating from ornate lamps and chandeliers hanging overhead. The soft, golden light cast an ethereal glow over everything in its path, including the row of intricately carved wooden doors that lined the walls.

Despite the lavish surroundings, Erik and his friends were keenly aware of the danger that lurked around every corner. Their senses were heightened, their muscles tense and ready for action, as they moved forward into the unknown, unsure of what lay ahead.

"This place is ridiculous," Aaron muttered, his eyes wide with disbelief.

Despite the situation, Floyd was still optimistic and eagerly replied, "I kind of like it. It's like we're walking through a palace."

Erik didn't respond. He was too focused on the task at hand while constantly keeping an eye on the surrounding cameras through the biological supercomputer. They had to get to the room where the hostages were being held and prepare themselves for another fight.

They continued down the corridor, passing by rooms filled with silence, as the place was devoid of any of the drunken patrons Erik had seen the last time he had been here. But they still had to move carefully, sticking to the shadows and avoiding any confrontation until they saved the hostages. Eventually, they came to a split in the hallway.

"This way," Erik whispered, gesturing to the left.

They crept down the hall, their footsteps silent on the plush carpet. As they turned a corner, Erik's heart skipped a beat. They had arrived at a door made of dark, polished, reinforced wood, and there were no visible hinges or locks; that was the place where the hostages were being held.

"That is the place," Erik said softly, pointing at the door. The others immediately stood to attention and sheathed their weapons.

"How many people are inside?" Aaron asked, his voice filled with nervousness.

"Just three aside from the hostages; they wouldn't be weaker than the ones outside, so pay attention," he said to reassure his friends. "Do you feel ready?"

They nodded, feeling a surge of adrenaline. "The door can only be opened digitally, so I will have to ask my friend to step in." Then Erik faked sending a message telling the fake guy to open the door while, in fact, he was asking the System to do the deed while giving him the room's footage.

< System, are you still jamming their communication devices?>

[I WILL AS SOON AS YOU STEP IN. IF I DID SO BEFOREHAND, THE GUARDS WOULD BE ON HIGH ALERT.]

<Good job; now open the door and keep sending the live footage. I need to kill one of the guards before he can react. That way, we would gain some advantage.>

Erik then turned to look at his friends. "All right, guys, this is what we must do; there are three guards. I will rush into the front and deal with the one opening the door; you will need to get past me and rapidly kill the other two guys. Restrain them, erode them, slash them, whatever you want. Just be quick and silent.

If they shout or scream, we are done; if they call for help, we are done; if they fight back, we MAY be done. Do not let our previous win make you think we are strong; we were just lucky those guys were third-rate fighters."

"All right," Aaron said.

"Yes," Gwen replied.

With that settled, the only thing that they needed to do was wait for the door to open, their weapon in hand. The seconds felt like an eternity as they waited, their hearts pounding in their chests.

Amber shifted her weight from foot to foot, her eyes darting between the door and her friends. She was a bundle of nerves, her body tense with anticipation. Her grip tightened around her daggers, and she swallowed hard, trying to calm the knot in her stomach.

Aaron stood rigid, his fists clenched, and his eyes locked onto the door. His mind raced with thoughts of what might be waiting for them on the other side. His palms were slick with sweat, and he took a deep breath, trying to steady himself.

Erik was calm and collected as he stood with his sword at the ready, his eyes fixed on the door. Despite his outward composure, his heart was racing just as fast as his companions. He knew they were about to face dangerous opponents, and the stakes were high.

As the door finally creaked open, the trio held their breath, ready to spring into action. Their anxiety reached a fever pitch as they caught sight of their enemy and leaped forward, ready to engage in a fierce battle.

Chapter 308: The Red Lotus Lounge (3)

"Who is it?" One of the guards asked. As soon as he heard the clicking sound of the door opening, he immediately went toward it to see who was behind it. Still, as soon as he did so, he found his throat pierced by a blade; without the possibility of even shouting, he fell to the ground, blood pouring out of his wound.

[HOSTILE INDIVIDUAL KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 900 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

"What the-" one of the guards said, but immediately, as Erik fell to the ground over the guard he had just killed, Gwen, Amber, and the others rushed inside by jumping over him and immediately attacked the guards.

Benedict decided to tank one of the two, brandishing his mana weapon. Gwen did the same with the other guard, totally enveloped by her mana armor.

The others followed suit and immediately circled the men and attacked simultaneously.

Aaron helped Gwen and Amber by using his slime to prevent the guard from moving while the other two attacked.

Gwen used her martial arts prowess to knock him out. However, Erik's girlfriend was brandishing her daggers, as she knew she was the one who had to deal the finishing blow.

Amber's heart was pounding so hard that it felt like it was about to burst out of her chest.

She had never been in a situation like this before today, and the weight of it all began to bear down on her. She knew what to do, but that didn't make it any easier.

As she stood facing her opponent, she couldn't help but feel a sense of guilt wash over her.

She didn't want to hurt anyone, but she knew this was the only way to protect herself and the people she cared about.

The man in front of her was stronger than all of them and was in the middle of swinging his weapon at Gwen, aiming for her neck.

She knew she couldn't hold back, lest her hesitation cost her friend's life, and that she needed to deliver a blow that would kill him. But every fiber of her being was resisting the urge to harm another human being.

This was a situation that was completely different compared to when they fought the Crystal Cross Gang; in that case, they were defending themselves, and even if they tried, it was hard for them to actually injure the assassins. Now, this was definitely within the scope of their abilities.

She took a deep breath, steeling herself for what she had to do. As she raised her weapon, she closed her eyes and prayed that this would be over soon. Immediately, she plunged the blade inside the man's neck, and he fell to the ground while his life left his body.

At the same time, Benedict, Floyd, and Martha were attacking the other guard. Martha restrained the man with her thorny vines, but it was only partially successful since the thug was currently stronger than her and was trying to move.

However, Benedict swung his weapon down while Floyd further restrained his movements with his energy negation power.

Benedict's weapon quickly plunged the blade left shoulder, traversing his body until it stopped at the middle of his chest.

The man died with a gaping wound on his body and slumped to the ground the next moment. All of that took place in the span of fifteen seconds.

The guards didn't even have time to call for help or shout to gather attention.

[MULTIPLE HOSTILE INDIVIDUALS KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 1800 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

[QUEST COMPLETE.]

<New quest: Kill Matthew>

-Rewards for completion: 2000 experience points; 500 DNA points if the mission is completed.

-Failure Penalty: Depending on the situation, Death, Imprisonment, or Nothing.

-Description: Matthew dared to come against you. Make him pay!

Erik's friends were trembling. They had just taken other lives; it wasn't something easy for them to accept, as they had lived until now pampered, sheltered, and with everything served on a plate.

However, the adrenaline coursing through their veins gave them the strength to look around themselves, and it was at that moment that they saw it.

All 21 hostages lay unconscious on the ground, their bodies sprawled in various positions as if they had been drugged, and then they were dropped unceremoniously to the floor.

Amber's heart sank as she saw the scene before her eyes. The hostages' faces were slack and peaceful, with no hint of the terror and fear they had likely felt, not even an hour ago.

The room was silent except for the soft rustling of clothing and the shallow breathing of the hostages.

The dim, bright light from multiple neon lamps immediately made Erik and his friends see who was inside that room and made the unconscious figures look even more vulnerable and helpless; they had been drugged and left on the ground like rag dolls.

The room itself was small and cramped, with no windows or natural light. The walls were painted a drab beige with no decorations or adornments. The hostages were dressed in various clothing, from business suits to casual wear.

Their belongings, such as wallets and purses, were scattered around the room, indicating that they had been taken by surprise and that they had been searched and stripped of their belongings.

He knew that they needed medical attention as soon as possible. Erik and his team quickly scanned the room, checking for anything useful.

The room was bare except for the unconscious hostages and the few pieces of furniture scattered around. However, Gwen quickly noticed a bag with something written on it.

"Ah, I get it. They had been drugged."

"Why do you say so, Gwen?" Benedict asked, albeit being clear that was the case since they were unconscious.

"Because there is a bag full of flumazenil," she said while looking inside the bag.

"This substance is commonly used to reverse the effects of anesthesia and allow patients to wake up after surgery. It is a medication that belongs to a class of drugs known as benzodiazepine receptor antagonists, which work by binding to and blocking the effects of the receptors in the brain responsible for the sedative effects of anesthesia," she quickly added.

"So, we just need to give this to them to wake them up, right?" Erik asked.

"Yes, I think," Gwen replied.

"All right, let's check them out to see if they are injured," Amber said.

Erik and his team carefully checked each of the hostages for injuries or any other signs of harm. They found nothing serious aside from the effects of the anesthesia.

The kidnappers wanted the hostages alive and unharmed. At that moment, though, Amber recognized Anderson's father among the hostages.

He lay on the ground, unconscious and bound with ropes. He was a middle-aged man with short, graying hair and a neatly trimmed beard. His face was lined with wrinkles, indicating a life filled with both joy and hardship.

Despite the ropes binding him, his clothes were still well-kept and stylish, suggesting a man who took pride in his appearance.

His eyes were closed, and his breathing was slow and steady, indicating that he had been drugged with a powerful sedative.

There were no particular signs of physical harm on his body, but his expression was tense, as if he were caught in a nightmare. His hands were clenched into fists, and his brow was furrowed, suggesting that he fought the Mambas before being kidnapped.

Then Gwen recognized a woman; she was Mikey's mother. She was a small woman with delicate features and soft, curly brown hair.

Her face was angular and elegant, with high cheekbones and a slender nose. Despite her petite stature, there was a quiet strength and resilience about her that was evident even in her unconscious state.

As she lay on the ground in the hostage room, her breathing was shallow and steady, and her chest rose and fell rhythmically.

Her skin was pale, with a faint flush of color in her cheeks. Despite the situation, she looked peaceful, as if she were simply sleeping.

"Why do you think they had been anesthetized?" Martha asked.

"Simple, there was no way they could restrain them with their money or technology. That is something only the government and wealthy institutions can do. One thing is to buy buildings and decorate them lavishly; another is to buy government-protected technology or barrier masters," Erik said.

"It makes sense," Floyd added.

Erik then turned to look at the bag; Matthew's men were probably prepared to wake up the hostages, and then he asked. "Can someone administer the medications?"

"I can," Martha said. "I often had to give injections to my mother since she is ill."

"Good, then give them the shots and get the hell out of here."

Martha takes charge of injecting the medication into the hostages, grabbing the vials of flumazenil, and preparing the syringes.

She carefully checks the dosage and expiration date of the medication to ensure that it is safe for use.

The room was filled with a sense of urgency and tension as everyone worked together to revive the unconscious hostages.

The sound of needles piercing skin and the quiet hiss of the medication being injected filled the air. Despite the seriousness of the situation, there was a sense of hope and relief that permeated the room as the hostages began to stir.

Throughout the wait for the medicine to take effect, Martha remained focused and attentive, making sure that the hostages were safe.

She worked closely with the rest of the rescue team to ensure that each hostage received the care and attention they needed to wake up.

Chapter 309: The Red Lotus Lounge (4)

As Erik and the others sat in tense silence, they watched as the hostages slowly began to stir.

Their bodies shifted, and their eyes started fluttering open, taking in their surroundings with confusion and fear etched on their faces.

Some groaned and tried to sit up, while others remained still, taking stock of the situation.

As the hostages slowly regained consciousness, they were disoriented and confused. They looked around, trying to get their bearings, and then at each other as if unsure what the situation was.

However, something was clear to everyone: they had been attacked, and now, waking up in that unfamiliar place, it was clear they had been kidnapped.

The first hostage to fully wake up was an older woman with white hair. She blinked a few times and looked around, her eyes wide with apprehension.

When she saw Erik and the others, she almost let out a scream, but Erik quickly prevented her from doing so, placing his hand on her mouth and telling her to shut up.

Erik put a hand on her shoulder.

"Shh, calm down," he said in a low voice. The awakener removed his hand from her face, and then the old woman said, "Please, don't hurt me!" she cried.

"We're not going to hurt you. We came here to rescue you," Erik replied.

The woman nodded, still shaking with fear. The other hostages began to wake up as well, one by one. They all looked scared and confused, but none of them tried to struggle against their bonds.

Erik watched them closely, looking for any signs of wounds. But the hostages seemed to be okay.

"What is happening?" Asked one of the parents, a woman, as she recognized Erik, Amber, Floyd, Gwen, and Aaron from Thornton high school tournament.

"You were kidnapped," Erik said as he and the others proceeded to unbind them.

"I guessed that much, but why?" the woman asked.

"It's complicated," Erik replied, unwilling to lose much time explaining the situation.

"However, know that all your sons, daughters, brothers, and sisters are in the other room and will probably fight to death soon. We need to be silent, or we won't be able to get you out of here, and we will probably complicate the others' situation."

Erik and the others watched the hostages closely, making sure they were okay. They had all been worried about what condition the hostages would be in when they found them, but they seemed relatively unharmed.

One of the hostages, a small kid, started to panic, her breathing quickening and her eyes darting around the room.

"It's okay," Amber said, stepping forward. "You're safe now. We're here to help you."

She was around eight years old and was scared a lot. The kid looked at her, eyes widening in recognition. "You're Amber," she said, her voice almost too loud.

Amber nodded. "Yes, I am, and I'm here to save you. Can you tell me your name?" she said, smiling.

The woman took a deep breath, visibly calming down. "My name is Zoe Robinson," she said, looking around at her surroundings. The other hostages slowly stood up and took stock of their situation.

It was at that moment that Anderson's father spoke. "Is Anderson in the other room?" he asked Aaron, a long-time friend of his son.

"Yes," he replied. "It wasn't easy to rescue you, and he is currently helping us by earning some time," he said, gesturing to the three bodies on the floor.

The man quickly noticed the three guards' corpses but wasn't as surprised as any of the other people in that room.

They had all been in the military for years before living a civilian life, so they had already seen their share of dead people. However, Zoe, Stella's younger sister, was scared.

Anderson's father remained calm and composed throughout the entire ordeal. As much as he understood, his son was in the other room with dangerous criminals.

He knew that Anderson was probably worried sick about him. Still, he also knew that he was in good hands with Erik and the other rescuers if they had been able to save them from this situation despite being underage and not having received military training.

Instead, he focused his attention on the dead bodies, making sure that they were really dead.

The man calmly walked over to the corpses, examining them with a trained eye. He had seen plenty of death during his time in the military, and the sight of the three criminals' bodies did not faze him. He noted their wounds and the positions they were in, silently taking mental notes.

As soon as he laid his eyes on the bodies, he observed them with attention. The three bodies were lying on the ground.

The first had a deep cut on the neck. Anderson's father could tell it was a quick, clean kill, probably from a dagger.

The second had a wound in the throat, indicating that the killer had aimed for the jugular vein by using something long and made to pierce rather than slash.

The third body had a long gash that ran from the left shoulder to the chest; the wound suggested a heavy weapon. Anderson's father could see the muscles and bones exposed through the wound.

The man kept examining the bodies closely. It was clear that they had been killed in a short amount of time; it was almost like they didn't even have the chance to defend themselves, with the wounds suggesting the use of sharp weapons.

Erik could see that Anderson's father was experienced in the matter. The scene was gruesome, but the man remained focused on the bodies.

As he finished his examination, he glanced over at the rescuers. "You did all of this?" he asked. Erik nodded in confirmation.

Anderson's father didn't let his thoughts show on his face as he made his way back over to the other hostages, taking a seat among them.

"How were you able to win against them?" he said with a tint of suspicion in his eyes.

"We fought together," Erik replied without hesitation. "Martha and Aaron have brain crystal powers which are useful to restrain their opponents. So, we managed," he added.

"I get it," Anderson's father said.

Erik suddenly turned to look at the other hostages, apprehension in his eyes, as Mikey and Anderson were in the other room. "We must get out of here soon, as we need to go help the others."

"Who is in the other room?" Mikey's mother asked.

"I don't know who they are to the others, but I can all say they are related to them and go to the Red Palace, a son, a granddaughter, a brother, whatever. If we don't act now, they will die," Erik said.

"Where do we have to go?" a man asked.

"Out of here, there is a corridor; we will escort you out of the building, and from there, you should call the police. We already alerted someone of the situation, and they are on their way, but since the kidnappers were going to kill you all if we didn't come in forty minutes, we had to come here to earn some time," Aaron immediately said.

"Can you tell us what happened?" Another woman asked, "Why have we been kidnapped? What are these guys trying to accomplish?"

"The situation is complicated, but basically, there was a guy called Nathaniel McConnel among us at the Red Palace. During the attack on the city, he was killed by thaids, but his father, Matthew, thinks someone among us killed him.

Since he didn't know who it was, he decided to kill us all, who in some way all had some problems with him at one point," Erik stated, observing the looks of pure rage on these people's faces.

"But it doesn't make sense. Besides, the men who attacked me were professionals; how could they have found these people? I had been in the military, for fuck sake; I'm not some random dude picked on the streets," another man said.

"Matthew is probably the Mambas' leader," Erik said. "He had tons of men and money at his disposal; even this place is owned by him. It wasn't hard for him to do all of this," the awakener replied.

"The Mambas leader? What the hell?" Mikey's mother said in disbelief.

As Erik explained what exactly led to their kidnapping, he could see the expressions on the hostages' faces. Some were enraged; their eyes began filling with anger and disbelief.

Some of them were scared, their faces pale and their hands trembling, mostly Zoe, the little kid, and the old woman who woke up first.

Most of them looked nervous as their children were in the other room with mad criminals and cutthroats. They were fidgeting with their clothes or tapping their feet on the ground.

Anderson's father could feel the tension in the air as Erik spoke, and he knew that some of the hostages were struggling to come to terms with the reality of their situation. It was clear that they were all in shock, and it would take some time for them to process what had happened to them.

He watched as Erik continued to speak, his voice calm and measured, trying to reassure the hostages that they would be safe as long as they cooperated with them and explained how they were going to help their friends.

However, as he looked around the room, Anderson's father could sense the fear and uncertainty in the air, especially in Amber and the other faces, and he knew that it was up to him and the other adults to stay strong and work together to find a way out of this situation and rescue their children. That was no kids' job.

Chapter 310: The Red Lotus Lounge (5)

Anderson and his friends stood before the Red Lotus Lounge, their eyes fixed on the faded red brick exterior. The weathered brickwork had seen better days and gave the building an aged and rustic appearance.

Deep grooves and crevices gave the structure character and charm as if it had been standing for decades.

Despite the building's rough exterior, modern lighting fixtures and a polished steel entrance gave it a sleek and contemporary feel.

As they approached the front of the building, they noticed a large, glowing red lotus flower symbol surrounded by intricate geometric patterns mounted above the main entrance. It was a striking and unique feature that made the club stand out from the surrounding buildings.

Although they couldn't see it from their current position, Anderson and the others knew that Matthew and his men were inside, with their parents restrained in some other room. Time was of the essence, and they couldn't afford to waste a single moment.

Anderson cautiously led the others toward the Red Lotus Lounge's entrance. They approached the door, their hearts pounding, knowing the danger ahead.

There was no guard in front of the building, and the young man slowly turned the handle and pushed the door open, his eyes scanning the room ahead. The entrance was dark, as the lights had been turned off, though far inside the room, they were brightly lit, some of the curtains drawn to block out the sun.

The walls were painted a deep red, with intricate golden designs etched into them. The lighting was subdued, with small lamps casting a warm glow over the room. Anderson's footsteps echoed across the polished marble floor as he made his way toward the main room.

Behind the bar, shelves lined with bottles of every shape and size stretched up toward the ceiling.

The bar's counter itself was made of polished wood, with a gleaming brass rail running along its edge. Even though the club was closed, the air was still infused with the scent of alcohol and perfume.

Anderson could imagine the sound of music and the murmur of voices filling the space, and he wondered what it would be like to experience the Red Lotus Lounge in full swing and in other circumstances.

But for now, it was just him, his friends, and Matthew's men waiting for the meeting to begin.

As they finally arrived at the main room. Anderson and the others looked at the center of the dance floor ahead as they heard someone talking. They froze in their tracks and listened, their hearts pounding with fear as they saw Matthew and his men standing in the center, their weapons ready, all dressed in black suits.

There were 44 of them in total, and each one of them looked like a hardened criminal.

One man caught Anderson's eye, as he had a distinctive facial scar that ran from his left eye down to his jawline. He stood with his arms crossed, a menacing scowl etched on his face.

Another man had a strange physical quirk; his right arm was noticeably shorter than his left. He kept it tucked behind his back, and Anderson could only imagine the damage he had incurred in the past.

A woman stood off to the side, her piercing blue eyes scanning the group. Her blond hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail, and her muscular build suggested she was not to be underestimated.

But what stood out the most were their weapons. They were all armed to the teeth, with knives, swords, and other deadly instruments at the ready. Anderson and the other students exchanged nervous glances.

The young man and his friends knew they most likely didn't have any chance at surviving as the men and women in front of them were much stronger than them and in higher numbers, but they refused to back down, as their family's fate lay on their hands.

They stood their ground, their eyes locked on Matthew and his men.

The room was silent for a few tense moments, and then Matthew spoke.

"Well, well, well. Look who decided to join us," he said, his voice cold and menacing.

Anderson stepped forward, his voice steady but his heart racing. "We're here to take our parents back," he said firmly.

Matthew laughed cruelly. "You're here to take your parents back? That's rich. You think you can just waltz in here and do what the hell you want?"

Anderson stood firm, refusing to be intimidated. The tension in the room was palpable, and they could feel their nerves starting to fray.

"We did nothing to you," Anderson replied. "So, there is no reason for you not to give our parents back safely," the young man added.

"Hahahaha, seriously? You did nothing?"

"We did nothing, and honestly, we are still trying to understand why this charade has been put up," Anderson said, clearly looking into Matthew's eyes. "What is the reason why you are doing all of this?" he asked Matthew.

"I like your attitude, young man, and judging by your look and the fact you are taking charge. I assume you should be Anderson Worthington, am I right?"

"I am; you should be Nathaniel's father," Anderson replied.

"Yes," the man replied with a grin on his face.

"So, again, what is the meaning of this?" Anderson asked again. It wasn't like he didn't trust Erik, but he wanted to know if what he said was really the truth, and he was trying to stall for time.

"It is really simple; you messed up with the wrong people," Matthew said.

"Messed up?" Anderson replied, "We messed up with no one."

At that moment, Matthew's rage surged. "Don't play dumb with me!" he said.

"Play dumb? You kidnapped our families. Do you really think we have time to mess up with you?" Anderson replied.

"Hahahahahahah!" Matthew started to laugh out loud. "I know it, I know. One of you bastards killed Nathaniel!" the Mambas' leader shouted. "Do you know who you messed with? Are you aware of what you have done?"

"We did nothing; thaid's had killed your son due to his own negligence and stupidity!" Anderson replied.

Matthew's face contorted in anger as he listened to Anderson's words. His eyes narrowed, and his lips twisted into a snarl as he slammed his fist onto a table before him.

"I wouldn't be so bold if I were you, Anderson." Matthew's voice boomed through the room, his rage palpable. His face had turned a deep shade of red, and the veins in his neck bulged as he struggled to control his anger.

Anderson could see the fury burning in Matthew's eyes, and he knew that he was in trouble. He tried to remain calm, but Matthew's emotions were overwhelming.

"Or what? You kill us?" Anderson said, openly defying the older man. Matthew's eyes blazed with fury as he stood up from his seat, towering over Anderson.

"Oh, I will certainly do that, but here is the thing, I can do much more than just kill you," he roared.

As the situation became tense, the students' anxiety built up as the minutes ticked by. Anderson checked his watch, wondering how much longer the rescue team would need.

Mikey noticed his restlessness and leaned over to whisper in his ear. "They'll be here soon. Just relax and stay calm."

Anderson took a deep breath, trying to calm his nerves. He knew they had to be careful, but he also knew he couldn't let rage control him. This whole situation was crazy; even he, who was usually calm and collected, was enraged.

This man kidnapped his father, planned to kill them all, and still had the gall to think he was right with what he was doing.

But then he thought the best thing to do would be to de-escalate the situation and try calming down the man.

For this reason, he looked Matthew in the eyes and then said: "Listen to me, Matthew," Anderson said, his voice low and steady. "I understand that you're hurt. I understand that you're angry. But I promise you; we had nothing to do with your son's death. Blaming us, killing us or our parents won't bring him back."

Matthew's face contorted in anger as he heard those words, and his jaw clenched so tightly that the muscles stood out in sharp relief. He didn't want anyone's pity. He was the Mambas' leader, after all. He pounded his fist on the table in front of him again, causing the glasses and bottles to rattle.

"I won't be so stupid as to believe your lies!" the man replied. "Nathaniel would have never been so crazy as to leave our mansion without a reason! He had been led there by one of you; I'm certain of this. Listen, Anderson, I don't know if you really know who killed him, but I can promise you this: I will find out after today's event." Matthew replied, his voice rising.

Anderson could feel the weight of Matthew's anger bearing down on him.

"So, you kidnapped our family to have some revenge against some kids? It's really unbelievable of you, the Mambas' leader!" Anderson replied, his voice laced with sarcasm.

"So you are aware?!" the man shouted. "Well, that will give us more time. If you know who I am, then you should know today's outcome isn't going to be good for you."