

BIOLOGICAL 71

Chapter 71: Shade

Situated sixty kilometers from the northwestern coastline of the Mannard continent's southern region, under human dominion, New Alexandria was a sprawling metropolis.

Established in 2940 by a group of survivors, it emerged as a response to the chaotic era known as "the criminal phase." People fled other cities, hoping to avoid conflict, which, though, followed them there.

This 130-year period saw rampant misuse of human powers, leading to the rise of many criminal factions, some of which continued to operate clandestinely to these days, wary of the blackguards' pursuit.

The city witnessed a significant population influx during the economic surge of the 50s, drawing the attention of various criminal entities within the nascent nation of Frant.

As a result, New Alexandria transformed into a hotbed for illicit activities. Local gang leaders capitalized on this opportunity, amassing wealth and erecting lavish structures like palaces, skyscrapers, and villas within the urban landscape. Some even developed entire districts, accruing substantial fortunes.

Spanning over 95,304 square kilometers, New Alexandria stood as the planet's largest city. It boasted a vast network of roads, originally designed to accommodate the daily flow of millions of vehicles traversing its expanse.

New Alexandria, despite its vastness, featured ample sidewalks to accommodate the daily throng of pedestrians.

As flying cars and vehicles gained popularity, these streets evolved into pedestrian-only zones, enhancing the city's accessibility and charm.

The city was a haven for shoppers and food enthusiasts, boasting an array of stores that catered to every imaginable clothing preference.

Restaurants dotted the landscape, offering a diverse range of cuisines, each dish crafted from recipes spanning the globe.

Book lovers found solace in bookstores overflowing with works by Frantian authors. Music halls resonated with a variety of melodies, ranging from classical symphonies to jazz tunes, played on specially imported instruments. Art galleries showcased masterpieces by some of history's most renowned painters, making the city a cultural hub.

Yet, despite its allure, New Alexandria was not without its shadows. Under the grip of corrupt officials and criminal syndicates, it presented a dichotomy of splendor and vice.

The ascension of General Armand Becker marked the beginning of a transformative era. Prior to his rule, crime was rampant, gangs dominated, police corruption was widespread, and even the military was not immune to illicit influence.

However, Becker's leadership started a drastic change that was still undergoing.

His regime launched extensive manhunts throughout the city, leading to the capture and summary execution of thousands of criminals, bypassing the formalities of trial and due process.

Those unable to afford bail languished in prison, awaiting further notice. The guilty, adjudicated by judges appointed by the new government, faced either laborious penance in camps or execution by firing squad, depending on the severity of their offenses.

Amid a city healing from the wounds of corruption, a figure known only as Shade navigated the underbelly of society. Elusive and enigmatic, details about him remained scarce, yet his dominion over the criminal world was undeniable despite not being certain.

In the underworld, it was rumored that countless had attempted to challenge his authority, yet all met with failure.

Shade emerged as the go-to contact for those seeking to resolve their illicit affairs, from eliminating rival factions to unraveling hidden secrets.

His services were highly sought after, commanding generous compensation from those willing to employ his expertise.

Whether it was orchestrating the downfall of a competing gang, orchestrating the elimination of a particular nuisance, or unveiling clandestine information, Shade's capabilities knew no bounds.

His influence wasn't confined to the city limits; it spilled over into neighboring nations, cementing his untouchable status. In a realm where defiance often spelled doom, his name commanded both respect and fear.

Amidst these operations, Shade withdrew his phone from his pocket, answering a persistent call. No sooner had he held the device to his ear, the voice on the other end spoke, foregoing any formalities.

"Knowing what kind of person you are, I should assume you are already aware of the awakener that appeared in New Alexandria..." the man on the other side of the phone said.

A subtle tension permeated the air. Shade's voice was steady, betraying no emotion.

"Ah... yes..." Shade's voice was calm, yet there was an edge of curiosity.

"Yes, exactly," the voice on the other end replied, a hint of impatience seeping through.

"Why are you perhaps interested in him?"

"He has received something I want."

"Something you want? That's an interesting way to phrase they sent you to retrieve a bone," Shade said.

"You know I'm not allowed to tell you anything, don't even ask... But remember, they own you as much as they own me," the man on the phone said. "Shouldn't you help a fellow prisoner?"

Shade leaned back in his chair, a slight smirk playing at the corners of his mouth. "So, what do you require of me?"

"I need you to shadow the awakener. Find where he's stashed what I'm after," the man asked.

"You can't find the men to do this simple task?" Shade was left flabbergasted.

"You know it's not that. I've got an identity here in Frant. I can't blow my cover and risk getting caught. Did you forget what Becker did to those he found?"

"Yeah. Officially, they were executed. The truth was, he got them tortured to get more names."

"Yeah. That fucker is brutal," the man on the phone said.

Shade's expression hardened. "If you expect results, I'll need more to go on."

"Don't act like you have no information. You're well aware of who he is, Norman. Just get it done. I'll pay as always."

A flash of annoyance crossed Shade's face. "My usual fee, then double it. If this gets back to the militaries, it's not just a job on the line."

"Double? That's steep," the man's voice faltered.

Shade's tone was unwavering. "Take it or leave it. My involvement comes with risks, and I'm already taking a lot of them by supplying that scientist of yours."

There was a brief silence before the man on the phone agreed. "Fine. Double it is. But make sure you deliver."

As the call ended, Shade's gaze lingered on the phone, his mind already thinking of the perfect men to do the job.

The atmosphere was one of camaraderie mixed with a hint of competition as Erik emerged from the shower to join Floyd, Gwen, and Amber.

Floyd leaned against the wall, his smile wide and impressed. "Erik, I gotta say you've got some serious guts. Standing up to Amber like that? Respect," he said, giving a nod of acknowledgment.

Erik, toweling off his hair, gave a modest shrug. "Honestly, I've got a long way to go. Amber's in a league of her own," he said, glancing towards her. She stood there with a self-assured grin, her arms crossed, amused by the whole discussion.

Gwen, with her arms folded, offered her critique with a thoughtful frown. "You're raw, Erik. Predictable patterns, over-reliance on brute force. You've got potential, but you need to sharpen your tactics."

"Appreciate the feedback," Erik said, meeting Gwen's gaze. Gwen looked away, a subtle unease in her posture. She still felt guilty for what she said to him the other day.

Amber chimed in, her voice firm yet encouraging. "Erik's got the makings of a fighter, no doubt about it. He just needs more ring time to iron out the basics. We all started somewhere, right? Let's not rush the process."

The conversation took on a more serious tone as Gwen, her brow furrowed with concern, voiced her doubts. "The tournament's in five days. Erik's progress is remarkable, but the time crunch... It's a steep hill to climb."

"I wouldn't underestimate him. He couldn't even throw a kick two weeks ago. Now? He's sparring. That's a leap if you ask me. He's got potential, and time's never been a barrier to true talent."

"True, his progress is undeniable. But it's going to be grueling days. Non-stop training, no shortcuts."

Amber turned her gaze towards Erik, her eyes wide and inquisitive, a hint of curiosity in her stance. She blinked before asking, "Erik, do you think you could pull it off?"

Erik, caught off-guard by the direct question, hesitated before replying with cautious optimism. "Well... I mean... Yeah, I'll give it everything I've got."

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Upon arriving home, Erik felt the weight of exhaustion, yet a reserve of energy lingered within him, just enough to engage in some neural link training.

Recently, he had established a link with the sharpening power, a development that significantly eased his ability to direct mana for its use.

This new proficiency also led to a marginal increase in mana efficiency, though the change was modest. Yet Erik found he could enhance sharpness to levels previously unattainable, a modest but valuable improvement.

Without delay, Erik settled onto his couch, diving straight into his training.

Despite completing his training, Erik resisted the urge to sleep right away. The wealth accumulated through his biological supercomputer's aid had so far been untouched, as his rigorous training and caution kept him from indulging in shopping sprees. Now, with school out of the way and time on his hands, he pondered over what to buy.

At the forefront of his mind was the desire for a new home, a secure haven hidden from prying eyes.

Purchasing it under a false identity was workable, yet living there posed challenges. His current home had been under scrutiny, hinting at the likelihood that he was being watched. A sudden change in his living situation would raise suspicions.

A car was out of the question. Beyond his inability to drive, hiring a driver brought its own set of complexities.

How would a driver react to picking him up from a rundown building? Besides, he risked being perceived as an unprotected, affluent target, an invitation for trouble.

While the biological supercomputer could operate a vehicle, it would only invite questions about his sudden acquisition, exactly as it was for the house.

Similarly, buying a company seemed redundant. His financial investments, managed by the supercomputer, required no active involvement or operational costs.

<But maybe a safe house or equipment are viable...>They seemed like viable options, yet he needed to ensure their discreet acquisition.

<For now, I will only get a new computer and a phone. >

He started small - with these purchases. The other considerations, he resolved, could wait. Exhaustion was setting in, and Erik deferred further decisions to a later time. For now, rest was paramount.