

BIOLOGICAL 741

Chapter 741: Uninvited Owner (3)

June acted quickly. He lifted Terrence's lifeless body and carried it to the bathroom, laying it in the bathtub.

Erik followed him, his own steps echoing in the silent apartment.

"Are you going to do it?"

Erik, his cold brown eyes locked onto Terrence's lifeless form resting in the white porcelain of the bathtub, nodded.

His jaw was set in a firm line. "Yes. Do you want to go to the other room?"

June's gaze met Erik's, a silent understanding passing between them.

He shook his head, his hair falling into his eyes. "This does not differ from doing 'it' to Thaid's. I'll stay with you."

Erik nodded, a flicker of appreciation flashing in his eyes.

At that moment, Erik's hands moved with a practiced efficiency that belied the gruesome task he was undertaking.

With a swift, precise motion, he split open the head of the deceased man. The sound of cracking bone echoed through the sterile bathroom.

Inside the man's skull, nestled among the grey folds of his brain, was a glimmering crystal.

It was a small geometric structure, shimmering with an otherworldly light. The brain crystal was a sight that they had become all too familiar with.

Erik reached in, his gloved fingers wrapping around the cool surface of the crystal. With a tug, he extracted it from its fleshy cocoon. The crystal came free, leaving behind a hollow cavity in the man's brain.

Meanwhile, June had moved into position, a clear glass held steady in his hands.

As Erik worked on extracting the brain crystal, June was tasked with collecting the man's blood.

The crimson liquid flowed from the wound Erik had inflicted earlier, pooling around Terrence's body before spilling over the edge of the bathtub.

June positioned the glass under the steady stream of blood, watching as it filled up.

The blood was a dark, rich red, almost black in the dim light. It flowed into the glass steadily, each droplet creating a small ripple on the surface.

The air in the bathroom was heavy with an iron tang, a scent that was both familiar and disconcerting.

Erik stood there, a figure of grim determination, his bloodied hand clutching the glimmering brain crystal, the other holding the glass filled to the brim with dark, coagulating blood.

His eyes met June's. "This is just the first step." Erik's gaze never wavered from June's as he raised the glass to his lips.

The coppery scent of the blood filled his nostrils as he tipped the glass, allowing the viscous liquid to flow into his mouth. It was a taste he had become familiar with.

He swallowed, feeling the warm liquid slide down his throat, its metallic taste lingering on his tongue.

[TERRENCE'S DNA GAINED. STARTING THE ANALYSIS.]

[ANALYSIS COMPLETE.]

[100 DNA POINTS ARE REQUIRED TO EXTRACT THE DNA. 500 TO GET IT WITHOUT INCURRING PAIN AND LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS. 1000 DNA POINTS ARE REQUIRED TO ABSORB INSTANTLY THE MAN'S DNA.]

[25250 DNA POINTS DETECTED. STARTING EXTRACTION?]

"Yes, absorb it instantly," Erik said.

[BLOOD ABSORBED. DNA STORING PROCEDURE STARTED. PLEASE WAIT.]

[PROCEDURE COMPLETE.]

"I hate this and will always hate this. Swallowing the brain crystal is easier."

"I'm sorry to hear this, Master."

Once the glass was empty, Erik's attention shifted to the brain crystal cradled in his other hand.

The crystal glowed with an unearthly light in the dim bathroom. Its intricate facets captured and refracted the scant illumination, casting a spectral ballet of light and shadow that played across the immaculate white porcelain of the bathtub and the blood-smeared tiles.

The crystal was cool, offering a chilling touch that was strangely soothing after the warm, metallic taste of blood.

It was small, no larger than a quail's egg, but its significance was monumental.

Erik knew this man had a shapeshifting ability, but in order to get the same power Conal had, he had to merge many shapeshifting abilities.

Having a general shapeshifting ability was very rare. Most people could turn only into an animal and its humanized versions. This man was no different, as he could turn into a wolf.

Erik brought the crystal to his mouth. His fingers seemed alien due to the blood clinging to the glove.

Erik parted his lips, placing the brain crystal on his tongue. The cool surface of the crystal felt strange against the warmth of his mouth.

With a last glance at June, he swallowed. The sensation of the crystal journeying down his throat was peculiar, a blend of smooth coolness and disquieting pressure.

[TERRENCE'S BRAIN CRYSTAL GAINED. STARTING THE ANALYSIS.]

[ANALYSIS COMPLETE.]

[100 DNA POINTS ARE REQUIRED TO EXTRACT THE POWER. 500 TO GET IT WITHOUT INCURRING PAIN AND LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS. 1000 DNA POINTS ARE REQUIRED TO ABSORB INSTANTLY THE MAN'S BRAIN CRYSTAL.]

[24250 DNA POINTS DETECTED. STARTING THE EXTRACTION?]

"Yes. Do it instantly again."

[BRAIN CRYSTAL ABSORBED. POWER STORING PROCEDURE STARTED. PLEASE WAIT.]

[PROCEDURE COMPLETE.]

The act was done. The first step in their mission was complete. Erik set down the empty glass.

"Remember June, we will need to kill many people before the shapeshifting power could be of any use to us."

His gaze was serious, but June knew he didn't like the idea that much. Erik could kill in cold blood when needed, but he wasn't one to do so without a reason.

However, he still possessed some morality, albeit not that much, and killing indiscriminately didn't sit well with him.

June was the same, but his reluctance was higher.

<System, show me the status. >

The biological supercomputer didn't wait to show the man the fruits of his hard labor.

STATUS:

[Host Information]

NAME: Erik Romano

AGE: 18

POWER LEVEL: 507

SYSTEM LEVEL: 130

EXPERIENCE: 83967 657383.934

DNA POINTS: 23250

HEALTH: 11840/11840

MANA: 11770/11770

{Attributes}

STRENGTH: 190

INTELLIGENCE: 232

DEXTERITY: 170

ENERGY: 587

Available Attributes points: 0

{Powers}

[Biological Super Computer Powers]

-Brain Crystal Manipulation

Brain Crystal Power Extraction (Allows the absorption of the brain crystal, making the host able to gain the power contained within. Notice: the DNA must be changed in order to allow the body to use the power. See DNA extraction.)

Brain Crystal power Merging (Allows to merge two powers birthing a new one. It requires the merging of the DNA to work.)

Brain Crystal Power Analysis (Allows to analyse the target brain crystal without the need to know the creature.)

- (LOCKED)

- Brain Crystal Power Strengthening (Allows the gaining of the energy attribute points)

-(LOCKED)

-DNA Manipulation

DNA Extraction (Allows the absorption of foreign DNA, making the host able to replicate it inside his own body. Notice: Changing the DNA is a slow process, and it is required to use new brain crystal powers.)

DNA Merging (Allows to merge two DNAs, birthing a new one. Required to accommodate merged powers.)

DNA Analysis (Allows to analyse the enemy DNA from the distance for a better understanding of the target's stats.)

- (LOCKED)

DNA Strengthening (Allows the gaining of the Strength, Intelligence, and Dexterity attribute points)

-(LOCKED)

- Analysis (Gives the host information about his surroundings, plants, creatures, and ores.)

-Brain Information Injector (It allows the injection of information directly to the brain. Based on touch)

-Device Manipulation (Allows the Host to manipulate electrical and mana-driven devices. Based on touch)

[Host's Powers]

FORCE MANIPULATION: Bv1B-RANKED (Manipulate a mana-driven force to produce powerful shockwaves that can change in intensity, radius, speed, and power. It is also possible to use the power differently as to generate force shields.)

PARALLEL WILLS: Bv1C-RANKED (Allows the user to passively increase intelligence based on the number of neural links. It also allows the construction of a mana brain that allows independent thoughts and can be used for multiple purposes.)

STRENGTH ENHANCER: Bp2D-RANKED (Depending on the amount of mana used, the amount of strength increases)

PLANT MASTER: Bπ1B-RANKED (Allows to grow and control plant based organism. The usage depends on the plant and the user's will.)

CHAMELEON VEIL: Bπ2C-RANKED (Allows to turn totally transparent and to project what is behind you, making it almost impossible to be seen. The user can move while using this Brain Crystal power. However, notice that the ripples in light the power creates while moving decrease the power's hiding abilities, increasing the chance of being seen.)

CHIMERIC BIOMETAL SOLDIER: Bo2A-RANKED (This power allows the user to create a human-worms hybrid with 50% of the user's physical stats. The clones are permanent, but to make them, a lot of mana is necessary; they can't use brain crystal powers. The clone is born from an egg, and it takes a month for them to reach maturity after having hatched two weeks after the eggs were made.

Before that, their physical stats are lower than 50% of the original's body. The clones are half as intelligent as the main body, but know everything the main body knows when he created them. They also have several biological abilities.)

EXOSHIELD: Bσ1C-RANKED (Allow creating a mana exoskeleton.)

SOLID FROSTWIND: Bσ1A-RANKED (Allow to imbue an item with wind and frost elements. The Wind element is stronger than the frost one and allows control over the element itself. The power allows to create solidified slime weapons.)

INSTABILITY: Bσ1A-RANKED (Allows to perceive, understand and mess with the emotions of the surrounding targets and to read their minds.)

ASTRAL WOLF: Bσ1B-RANKED (Create A full-bodied mana wolf with venomous fangs [the venom has various effects.])

SHAPESHIFTING: WOLF: Bσ1D-RANKED (Allows to partially or totally shapeshift into a wolf and humanized versions.)

{Skills}

Kyokar hand-to-hand style (ADVANCED) (A military fighting style developed in Frant)

Crypt of the Desert Style (ADVANCED) (Flyssa fighting style developed by Master Nieminen)

Etrium's sword style (INTERMEDIATE) (Basic Sword Style developed in Etrium.)

Chapter 742: New Eggs

As dawn broke, a semblance of normalcy replaced the grim tableau of the previous night.

June and Erik cleaned the bathroom and disposed of Terrence's body. They returned the apartment to its original state.

Erik and June found themselves in the kitchen, their bodies craving sustenance after the arduous task.

The fridge was a sad representation of the life Terrence lived. Terrence had filled it with alcohol and had little food within.

It seemed the man preferred liquid sustenance over solid meals. They scrounged up enough food to sate their hunger.

They feasted on leftover pasta, cold cuts, and a few slices of stale bread. The meal was far from gourmet, but after the grueling night, it tasted like a feast.

Erik reached for a bottle of whiskey, his hand pausing mid-air. He glanced at June, who shrugged in response. With a sigh, Erik grabbed the bottle and poured two glasses.

The amber liquid sloshed into the glasses, the powerful scent filling the kitchen.

Erik didn't really like alcohol, but the recent events made him consider trying again.

They raised their glasses in a silent toast before downing the fiery liquid.

It burned its way down their throats, igniting a warmth that spread through their bodies.

Erik swirled the remnants of the whiskey in his glass, his face twisting into a grimace.

"I did the right thing by avoiding this shit. I never understood people who drink this."

With a swift motion, he tossed the remaining liquid into the sink; the droplets splattering against the stainless steel. The sharp scent of the whiskey lingering in the air.

June, however, was looking at his own glass with a contemplative expression.

He took another slow sip, savoring the burn of the whiskey as it slid down his throat. "I think it's an acquired taste," he said, his voice thoughtful.

Erik raised an eyebrow at him, a hint of surprise flashing in his eyes. "You actually like it?"

June shrugged, a small smile playing on his lips. "Maybe." He took another sip of the fiery liquid. "It's not so bad once you get past the initial burn."

Erik shook his head, a small chuckle escaping his lips. Despite being clones, they were indeed different in their own ways. And it looked like their taste in beverages was one of those differences.

With their bellies full and their bodies weary, Erik and June retreated to their respective rooms.

The plush beds were a welcome sight after the hard floor they'd been accustomed to. They sank into the soft mattresses, their bodies instantly relaxing.

Erik closed his eyes, his mind replaying the events of the night. Despite the gruesome task, there was a sense of accomplishment. They were one step closer to their goal. With that thought, he drifted off to sleep.

June, too, found sleep, claiming him quickly. His body was tired, but his mind was at ease. They'd done what they had to do. And they would continue to do so until their mission was complete.

When they woke up the next day, they felt rested and rejuvenated. The grim task of the previous night seemed like a distant memory as they moved around the apartment, preparing for the day ahead.

Erik was in a silent corner, his attention absorbed by the task at hand.

Spread out before him were thirty eggs, each one a delicate, soon-to-be life. These were no breakfast ingredients but the results of his brain crystal powers over the table.

June observed from a distance, his eyes following Erik's movements. The sight was both fascinating and unsettling.

"Are you sure it's okay to make clones here?" The clone's tone revealed his unease. "That means we'd need to stay in the city for a month and a half, at least."

Erik paused, his hands stilling over the eggs. He turned to face June, his expression serious but calm.

"It's okay. We have a lot of ground to cover, many people to find. In the meantime, we can stir up some trouble with the local mercenary guild and even the Crystal Cross Gang."

At the mention of the gang, June's eyebrows furrowed.

"Do you think they're here, too?"

Erik nodded, his gaze returning to the eggs before him. "It's likely," he said.

"Since both the mercenary guild and the Crystal Cross Gang work for the Blackguards, it is likely. "

June's gaze hardened. His hands clenched at his sides, knuckles turning white.

He remained silent for a few heartbeats. "If you're sure about this," he said, his voice steady but carrying an undertone of worry, "then I have no right to object to our stay."

Erik simply gave him a small nod of appreciation, his expression unreadable.

His attention returned to the eggs laid out before him, his hands resuming their meticulous work. "Once the eggs hatch, though," he said, "I'll need you to take care of them."

"You want me to manage thirty kids at once?" The tone of his voice reflected the hard task Erik was assigning him.

Erik's look was apologetic. "I'm afraid so. It's important that you keep them quiet and explain to them why."

June tilted his head, a frown creasing his forehead. "I don't know if I can do that. They will listen to you, but me? I don't think so. Shouldn't you tell them that?"

Erik sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I will tell them something, but I can't make sure they will do so. You have to make sure they do. Their kid phase won't last long."

Erik turned again to look at the clone, his gaze meeting his. "The clones will mature rapidly and they'll be as smart as us in no time. They'll need to understand the situation they're in, and why they must remain silent."

June took a deep breath. It was a lot to take in, a lot to do. He nodded after a moment, determination replacing the surprise in his eyes.

"Alright," he said, his voice firm. "I'll do it."

Chapter 743: New Hunt

Erik's gaze lingered on June for a moment longer before he rose to his feet, dusting off his hands. "Stay here and protect the eggs." His tone carried an undercurrent of urgency. "I need to go out and hunt for my next target."

June's eyes narrowed. He didn't think his master would start hunting the following day of their coming. He wondered how Erik could have the mental strength to never rest.

"Who's the target?" he asked. His gaze followed Erik, tracing his silhouette as he moved towards the door.

Erik paused, his hand hovering over the knob. He turned back to face June. "A bitch... Another mercenary."

He paused, a grimace pulling at his features, causing lines of tension to etch themselves on his forehead.

"Like Terrence, our previous target, she's been accused of killing random party members she's taken quests with. The guild has proof but did nothing again."

"Why?" he asked, his voice laced with confusion.

Erik sighed, a weary sound that seemed to echo around the room. He ran a hand through his hair; the strands slipping through his fingers like silken threads.

"She's the daughter of a very influential person in Caelora," he said. "The guild can't afford to act against her, but she is not that much."

June's lips thinned into a line, pressing together as if holding back a flood of words. These were the kind of people June and Erik hated the most. They were always filled with a sense of superiority, always using their power to get anything they wanted. It didn't matter if they trampled on other to satisfy their greed.

"So Etrium isn't so different from Frant after all." A bitter edge pervaded his voice. His hands clenched into fists at his sides, knuckles turning white. "They are powerless against the influential."

The clone was right. When he came here for the first time here in Etrium, he expected this place to be many times better than Frant. Though he was mistaken. Etrium had exactly the same shadows Frant had. The only difference was that the government wasn't stupid.

However, there was also a difference. Etrium was a mercenary nation, made by mercenaries for the mercenaries. Frant, instead, was filled with criminals a few years after its foundation. Erik suspected there was more to this than the eye could see.

Besides, doing the mercenary was at least a little profitable. Between choosing an outlaw occupation, and one that held the potential to make anyone rich without going against the law, choosing was easy.

"Yeah... but at least it is not so blatant..."

Erik gave June a final, lingering look before he turned away. He channeled mana through his neural links and activated his Chameleon Veil Brain Crystal Power. His body shimmered for a moment before blending with the surroundings, rendering him almost undetectable.

He turned the door handle, and the door opened and closed with barely a sound, leaving June alone with the eggs and his thoughts. Erik stepped into the hallway, making his way to the elevator at the end.

The elevator dinged as it arrived. The doors sliding open to reveal an empty cabin. He stepped inside, pressing the button for the ground floor.

The elevator came to a halt with a soft jolt; the doors sliding open to reveal the building's lobby. Erik stepped out, blending in with the bustling crowd of tenants coming and going. He slipped out of the building unnoticed.

He couldn't take a cab or any other vehicle. That would mean deactivating the Chameleon Veil, and he couldn't afford the risk of being spotted.

So, he ran. He moved through the city streets with purpose, his eyes taking in everything yet focusing on nothing for too long. He remained wary of the guards and mercenaries, though.

He passed by a bustling plaza, its cobblestone surface gleaming under the afternoon sun. The plaza was alive with activity - vendors hawking their wares, children playing under the watchful eyes of their parents, lovers strolling hand-in-hand.

A large fountain stood at the center of the plaza, its water dancing under the sunlight, casting shimmering reflections on the surrounding buildings.

Tall trees lined the edges of the plaza, their leaves rustling in the breeze. Their branches provided shelter for many birds, their songs adding to the symphony of sounds that filled the place. Food stalls were set up under their shade, their mouth-watering aromas wafting through the air.

Erik continued through the plaza, his invisible form brushing past people without them even realizing it. His focus remained on his destination - the woman's apartment building.

As he left the vibrant life of the plaza behind, the surrounding buildings changed. They grew taller and more imposing, their designs more modern and sleek. He was entering the wealthier part of the city now - where his target lived.

Erik stood before her apartment building - a towering structure of glass and steel that seemed to pierce the sky. He had no way of knowing if the woman was there. This was just the first place to check.

<I wonder if this place has a security system. > Erik scanned the exterior of the building, his eyes searching for any signs of security cameras or sensors.

He was in a wealthy part of the city, where affluence was as common as the air they breathed. He could see it by how people dressed or carried themselves around here. It was unlikely that such a place wouldn't have a comprehensive security system in place.

<They must record everything that happens around here, > Erik's gaze narrowed as he studied the building.

<And inside too, at least in the common areas. >

But when it came to the woman's apartment, he was in uncharted territory. He had no way of knowing if she had additional security measures within her personal space. The thought made him pause, a frown creasing his forehead.

<Whatever... It's not like I can't solve the problem. >

After having shaken off his trepidation, Erik squared his shoulders, steeling himself for what lay ahead. <Let's check this out. System: check for the presence of a security system. > Erik said to the Biological Supercomputer.

[PROCESS STARTED. SCANNING FOR NETWORK ACCESS POINTS.]

In a short amount of time, the Biological Supercomputer gave a positive response.

[ACCESS POINT DETECTED. ESTABLISHING CONNECTION.]

Chapter 744: A lead

[ACCESS POINT DETECTED. ESTABLISHING CONNECTION.]

The process was completed after some moments, and the response from the system was instantaneous.

Erik felt a slight buzz in his mind, a telltale sign the supercomputer was interfacing with an external system. He waited.

[CONNECTION ESTABLISHED. LIVE FEED INCOMING.]

Erik's mind was filled with a succession of images resembling scenes from a movie unfolding on a screen.

The feed provided him with a view of the apartment building's interior.

Indeed, the place was fortified with a security system, just as he had suspected. There were cameras placed throughout the building, their lenses capturing every angle, every corner.

His view encompassed the lobby, the hallways, and the elevator, giving him a comprehensive perspective of the surroundings. The entire place was kept under constant surveillance at all times.

<Check for cameras inside the woman's apartment. >

[PROCESS STARTED. SCANNING FOR TARGET APARTMENT.]

The images in Erik's mind shifted, the view moving upwards as the supercomputer worked to show the woman's apartment.

[TARGET APARTMENT LOCATED. SCANNING FOR SURVEILLANCE DEVICES.]

The feed flickers apartment.

[TARGET APARTMENT LOCATED. SCANNING FOR SURVEILLANCE DEVICES.]

The feed flickered again, this time focusing on the woman's apartment. The view was from outside the door, but Erik could see the high-tech security pad next to it, its screen glowing with a soft blue light.

[SURVEILLANCE DEVICES INSIDE THE APARTMENT DETECTED. ESTABLISHING CONNECTION TO CAMERAS.]

Erik felt another buzz in his mind as the supercomputer interfaced with the cameras.

The feed shifted again, this time showing him various angles of the woman's apartment.

Adorned with modern art pieces and plush furniture, the living room was both spacious and elegant.

The kitchen was sleek and high-tech, with state-of-the-art appliances glistening under the overhead lights.

The bedroom was a sanctuary of comfort and luxury, with a king-sized bed and floor-to-ceiling windows offering a breathtaking view of the city.

But what caught Erik's attention was the absence of life. The apartment was empty. It was devoid of any signs of recent activity. The woman was not there, and it looked like she hadn't been in a while.

[APARTMENT IS CURRENTLY UNOCCUPIED.]

The supercomputer's mechanical voice resonated in Erik's mind, its tone devoid of any emotional inflection.

"Damn it."

Erik hoped to find the woman at home and avoid useless searches through the city that could lead the mercenaries to find him. But the apartment's emptiness threw a wrench in his plans.

<Scan for anything we could use to track her down. >

There had to be something in the apartment. Even if the woman hadn't been there for a while, maybe she left a device connected to her accounts, from which he could infer her general location.

<I need to at least narrow down the area. >

[STARTING SCAN.]

The images in Erik's mind changed, the supercomputer shifting its focus from the overall view of the apartment to specific items. It scanned the living room, the kitchen, and the bedroom, each time coming up empty.

In the end, the feed focused on a small device sitting on a table by the window.

A tablet-like device sat on a table by the window, but it was turned off, the screen dark and unresponsive.

[DEVICE DETECTED. CURRENT STATE: INACTIVE. MANUAL INTERVENTION REQUIRED FOR ACTIVATION.]

A bitter laugh escaped Erik's lips. "Better than nothing, I suppose."

That was just what he needed to start the day at the right pace.

<Why does everything have to start the wrong way? >

Erik sighed. It wasn't like he could avoid that. At least he knew the system could deactivate the surveillance system and no one would be able to see him.

Still cloaked in his Chameleon Veil, Erik approached the towering apartment building.

His footsteps were silent, his form almost indistinguishable from the surroundings.

He slipped past the security cameras unnoticed, their lenses capturing nothing but empty space.

He made his way to the elevator, his movements swift and precise. The elevator sprang to life when Erik pressed the button, and after a brief wait, he arrived on the right floor.

<System: access the apartment security systems and unlock the door. >

[ACCESSING APARTMENT SECURITY SYSTEMS... DOOR UNLOCKED.]

A soft click echoed through the hallway as the door unlocked. Erik approached it cautiously. The last thing he wanted was for someone finding out he was there.

With caution, he nuzzled the door open, ensuring that no noise would be made to potentially alert the neighbors.

With a gentle swing, the door opened and exposed the woman's apartment, which was adorned with luxury and elegance.

As Erik stepped inside the room, he immediately began scanning every corner with his eyes. His gaze landed on the device.

<Found you. >

Erik picked it up and pressed the power button, but the screen remained dark.

<Just what I needed...>

He then started rummaging through the apartment for the charger. After having gone through a series of drawer he found one. He connected the cable to the device and started charging it.

The device hummed to life, a small light blinking on its side. Erik set it down on the table, watching as the light blinked faster and faster.

After what felt like an eternity, the device finally powered on, its screen glowing with life.

However, after the device turned on, it required a password.

<Seriously... System, unlock this fucking thing. >

[ACCESSING DEVICE... SECURITY PROTOCOLS BYPASSED.]

The screen flickered, then cleared to reveal the device's home screen. Erik could see several messaging apps, their icons bright and colorful against the dark background.

<Scan messages for recent activity. >

[SCANNING MESSAGES... RECENT ACTIVITY DETECTED.]

The messages were thoroughly sorted by the supercomputer, which boasted an unparalleled processing speed.

Following a brief pause, it conveyed the results of its investigation.

[TARGET IS CURRENTLY MEETING A FRIEND AT ASTERION BOULEVARD, CAELORA CITY.]

Erik's face slowly lit up with a smile. This was what he needed. He had a location, a lead to follow. His mission was back on track. "Perfect," he said to himself, his eyes gleaming with anticipation.

Chapter 745: An awkward situation

Erik left the apartment as swiftly as he had entered. The woman was meeting someone right now, and he didn't know how long she would stay at her current location. He had to make haste.

As he navigated the bustling streets, Erik's eyes were drawn to a massive structure. It was a colossal mall, an architectural marvel that dwarfed the surrounding buildings.

Its exterior was a spectacle of glass and steel, shimmering under the city lights.

The mall's name, "The Empyrean," was displayed in bold letters across its facade, illuminated by bright white lights despite the early hour.

Even from the outside, Erik could see the flurry of activity within. However, he didn't spare the mall more than a passing glance. He had a mission to complete, and getting distracted wasn't an option.

As he ventured further from the city center, the streets became quieter.

As the towering skyscrapers receded, they made room for smaller buildings that exuded a more traditional and homely charm, almost resembling mini mountains in their design.

Erik arrived at Asterion Boulevard.

<Where are you, little bee? >

Erik paused at the entrance of Asterion Boulevard, taking in the serene atmosphere.

<Find the target's location. >

[PROCESSING... TARGET LOCATION FOUND. BUILDING NUMBER 47.]

<Building 47, uh? >

With the digits echoing in his mind, he began his search. Each house in the neighborhood was a mirror image of the next, creating a beautiful maze of identical houses, only interrupted by the unique touches of their inhabitants - a colorful garden here, a unique door there.

Along Asterion Boulevard, the houses formed a neat row, resembling a string of pearls, each one distinct yet perfectly aligned.

Their facades, painted in an array of soft pastels, basked in the golden glow of the morning sun.

The sunlight played on their surfaces, casting a warm, inviting sheen over the street.

Windows shimmered like jewels, mirroring the clear blue sky. Flower boxes adorned with vibrant blooms added bursts of color, enhancing the picturesque charm of the neighborhood.

With a determined stride, Erik made his way down the cobblestone path, scanning each house's number while his eyes moved.

After several minutes, the young man found the place - Building 47. It was tucked away at the end of a cul-de-sac, its facade no different from its neighbors. Small buildings, compared to the skyscrapers, at most 2 or 3 stories tall.

Yet, it was here that his target was at the moment. He paused, taking in the house's sight, before moving towards it.

The building was a typical middle-class home, complete with a small front garden. The place was well-tended, with blooming flowers adding a splash of color to the otherwise plain exterior.

<Do I really need to tell you what to do? >

[SCANNING... SURVEILLANCE DEVICES DETECTED AND DISABLED.]

Since the surveillance systems were no longer a threat, Erik had the freedom to continue with no obstacles.

He glanced at the rooftop and cautiously stepped back. Gathering his strength, he dashed forward.

With his powerful legs, he leaped into the air, showing impressive agility and force.

His quick sprint transformed into a soaring jump as he propelled himself over the rooftop, landing on top of it. His landing was as silent as a whisper.

<Where is she? > From his position, Erik couldn't see her. She was somewhere behind the closed windows. The only way for him to know her position was to enter the house. But he wanted to avoid that chore.

The system didn't wait a second before replying.

[SECOND FLOOR. BEDROOM. 4 WINDOW ON THE TOP MOST RIGHT.]

He tiptoed across the rooftop, making sure each step was silent. His focus was on not alerting the woman below. The simplicity of his movement contrasted with the intensity of his purpose, as he kept his presence unnoticed.

He approached the window, which was slightly ajar, and curiously peered inside. The sight that he witnessed made him stop abruptly, unable to move.

Erik had chased the woman the whole morning, and now, there she was, her naked form entangled with a man in the luxurious embrace of a four-poster bed.

The room, bathed in the subdued illumination from bedside lamps, held an air of privacy and intimacy.

Shadows danced along the walls, mirroring the rhythmic movements of the woman and the man beneath her.

The dim lighting crafted an atmosphere of seclusion, with the shifting shadows playing a silent, suggestive ballet that echoed the couple's entwined motions.

Erik withdrew from the window, his mind spinning like a top. Of all the scenarios he'd played out in his head, stumbling upon her mid-romp was not one of them. He stifled a chuckle, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Well, that's one way to welcome a guy." A wry grin spread across his face. He didn't expect to find the woman right in the act. "Not exactly the 'open door' policy I was expecting."

He leaned against the rooftop, taking a moment to collect his thoughts and suppress his laughter. This hunt was turning out to be more entertaining than he'd expected.

"Alright, Erik," he said to himself. Then a chuckle escaped his lips. The situation was very amusing.

"Focus. You've got a job to do, even if it feels like you've walked onto the set of a red light film."

Erik's mind whirled, a vortex of thoughts spinning within the depths of his consciousness.

However, his initial amusement, sparked by the unexpected view before him, morphed into a cold, steely sense of purpose.

The situation, as unanticipated as it was, presented an unforeseen advantage. With the element of surprise now in his hands, he felt a sense of power and control.

He could act swiftly, like a falcon swooping down on unsuspecting prey. The two lovers, engrossed in their intimate moment, were oblivious to his presence.

With their attention elsewhere, their defenses were down and they were left exposed. This was an opportunity Erik knew he could exploit the situation and neutralize them both in one fell swoop.

The mission parameters were clear: be swift, efficient, and leaving no trace behind. This unexpected scenario fit within those boundaries.

Chapter 746: This is just the beginning

Erik's gaze hardened. Despite the comical and unexpected nature of the situation, this mission was far from a laughing matter. He needed the woman's power, a shapeshifting ability.

It was true he could enter everywhere undetected with his Chameleon Veil, but he needed something that allowed him to interact with people.

A brain crystal power that allowed him to shapeshift into a person was the best thing to accomplish that, but they were hard to find. Besides, he needed the power to have similar effects as those he got when he had Conal's.

When he gave the power to his clones, he didn't know what he was giving up. Conal's power was very rare. He didn't understand why it was classified at such a low rank in Frant, but it was clear it was much more useful than it was given credit.

Now, at best, the only way for him to get something similar was to get a large pool of Shapeshifting brain crystal powers and merge them.

Erik started channeling mana through his neural links. His body responded instantly, a tingling sensation coursing through his veins as mana flowed from his core and into his neural links.

His hand extended outwards, his fingers curling around a hilt.

A sword of hardened slime formed in his grip. A frosty aura enveloped the blade, while a gentle wind swirled around it, adding to its otherworldly appearance.

Erik gripped the hilt, feeling the cool touch of the hardened slime against his skin. The sword felt solid and balanced in his hand, its weight familiar and comforting.

With a swift, fluid motion, Erik swung the sword. His muscles moved with practiced ease, the power of his swing harnessed and controlled to create a deadly, precise arc.

The blade sliced through the air, its passage marked by a soft whistling sound that was eerily melodious amidst the silence.

The blade itself was a spectacle to behold. As it cut through the air, it left a trail of frost in its wake.

The window bore the brunt of Erik's attack. Upon impact, the glass shattered, exploding in a shower of razor-sharp shards that glittered like diamonds as they scattered across the room.

The force of Erik's swing sent a gust of icy wind into the room, causing the curtains to billow and the remaining shards of glass to shiver in their frames.

The lovers on the bed, caught in the throes of their passion, had barely a moment to comprehend the danger.

Their world shattered in an instant, their blissful oblivion replaced by sheer panic.

Their eyes widened in shock, their mouths opening to let out surprised gasps that were abruptly cut short.

The wind blade found its mark with ruthless efficiency. It sliced through them with a chilling ease, a guillotine that left no room for escape or mercy.

The surrounding air crackled with energy, the temperature dropping as the frost took hold.

Their bodies went limp almost instantly. Their eyes stared blankly at the ceiling, their expressions frozen in a tableau of shock and fear.

Their lives were snuffed out in a single, swift stroke.

[HUMANS 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 1936 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

Erik expected little experience from these two guys, but it was a pleasant surprise. He knew he needed all the help he could get to accomplish his goal.

The two lovers' blood stained the bed sheets. An eerie silence filled the room, with only the soft hum of city life outside and the occasional tinkle of glass shards settling on the floor.

Erik's face was a mask of impassivity as he observed the lifeless bodies crumple onto the bed.

His eyes were as cold and unreadable as a frozen lake. There was no trace of emotion in his gaze, no hint of remorse or satisfaction.

He felt no joy in their deaths, no thrill of victory that one might expect from a successful hunt. There was only a hollow emptiness, a void that even the most brutal of kills could not fill.

His heart remained unmoved, his conscience untroubled. The lives he had taken were merely numbers added to an already long list.

With a thought, he retracted the sword. With a thought, he retracted the sword, causing the frost-wind-imbued blade to shimmer before dissolving into thin air.

It left no trace behind, no evidence of its lethal power. Like its wielder, it was a ghost, a phantom that struck without warning and disappeared without a trace.

Erik vaulted through the shattered window and into the room. The air inside got replaced by the warmer air lingering outside.

His gaze fell on the woman's lifeless form. With practiced ease, he reached out and extracted her brain crystal from her head.

Next, he turned his attention to the woman's blood. Freshly spilled, it was still warm, a stark contrast to the cold, lifeless body it had once animated. He collected it using a small bottle.

Once he had completed its task, Erik brought it to his lips. The blood was warm and metallic, a taste he had long grown accustomed to.

[HUMAN DNA GAINED. STARTING THE ANALYSIS.]

[ANALYSIS COMPLETE.]

[100 DNA POINTS ARE REQUIRED TO EXTRACT THE DNA. 500 TO GET IT WITHOUT INCURRING PAIN AND LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS. 1000 DNA POINTS ARE REQUIRED TO ABSORB INSTANTLY THE MAN'S DNA.]

[23250 DNA POINTS DETECTED. STARTING EXTRACTION?]

"Yes, absorb it instantly."

[BLOOD ABSORBED. DNA STORING PROCEDURE STARTED. PLEASE WAIT.]

[PROCEDURE COMPLETE.]

It took a little time before Erik swallowed the woman's brain crystal. He spent another 1000 DNA points, and got the woman's power, which allowed her to shapeshift into a bear this time.

<Well, it won't be useful as I wanted, but it's still something... >

Erik looked around and sighed.

<I Still have much more to do... >

This was just the beginning. Erik needed more powers to create something similar to what Conal had.

<System, show me the status. >

[Host Information]

NAME: Erik Romano

AGE: 18

POWER LEVEL: 507

SYSTEM LEVEL: 130

EXPERIENCE: 85903/657383.934

DNA POINTS: 21250

HEALTH: 11840/11840

MANA: 11770/11770

{Attributes}

STRENGTH: 190

INTELLIGENCE: 232

DEXTERITY: 170

ENERGY: 587

Available Attributes points: 0

{Powers}

[Biological Super Computer Powers]

-Brain Crystal Manipulation

Brain Crystal Power Extraction (Allows the absorption of the brain crystal, making the host able to gain the power contained within. Notice: the DNA must be changed in order to allow the body to use the power. See DNA extraction.)

Brain Crystal power Merging (Allows to merge two powers birthing a new one. It requires the merging of the DNA to work.)

Brain Crystal Power Analysis (Allows to analyse the target brain crystal without the need to know the creature.)

- (LOCKED)

- Brain Crystal Power Strengthening (Allows the gaining of the energy attribute points)

-(LOCKED)

-DNA Manipulation

DNA Extraction (Allows the absorption of foreign DNA, making the host able to replicate it inside his own body. Notice: Changing the DNA is a slow process, and it is required to use new brain crystal powers.)

DNA Merging (Allows to merge two DNAs, birthing a new one. Required to accommodate merged powers.)

DNA Analysis (Allows to analyse the enemy DNA from the distance for a better understanding of the target's stats.)

- (LOCKED)

DNA Strengthening (Allows the gaining of the Strength, Intelligence, and Dexterity attribute points)

-(LOCKED)

- Analysis (Gives the host information about his surroundings, plants, creatures, and ores.)

-Brain Information Injector (It allows the injection of information directly to the brain. Based on touch)

-Device Manipulation (Allows the Host to manipulate electrical and mana-driven devices. Based on touch)

[Host's Powers]

FORCE MANIPULATION: Bv1B-RANKED (Manipulate a mana-driven force to produce powerful shockwaves that can change in intensity, radius, speed, and power. It is also possible to use the power differently as to generate force shields.)

PARALLEL WILLS: Bv1C-RANKED (Allows the user to passively increase intelligence based on the number of neural links. It also allows the construction of a mana brain that allows independent thoughts and can be used for multiple purposes.)

STRENGTH ENHANCER: Bp2D-RANKED (Depending on the amount of mana used, the amount of strength increases)

PLANT MASTER: Bπ1B-RANKED (Allows to grow and control plant based organism. The usage depends on the plant and the user's will.)

CHAMELEON VEIL: Bπ2C-RANKED (Allows to turn totally transparent and to project what is behind you, making it almost impossible to be seen. The user can move while using this Brain Crystal power. However, notice that the ripples in light the power creates while moving decrease the power's hiding abilities, increasing the chance of being seen.)

CHIMERIC BIOMETAL SOLDIER: Bo2A-RANKED (This power allows the user to create a human-worms hybrid with 50% of the user's physical stats. The clones are permanent, but to make them, a lot of mana is necessary; they can't use brain crystal powers. The clone is born from an egg, and it takes a month for them to reach maturity after having hatched two weeks after the eggs were made.

Before that, their physical stats are lower than 50% of the original's body. The clones are half as intelligent as the main body, but know everything the main body knows when he created them. They also have several biological abilities.)

EXOSHIELD: Bσ1C-RANKED (Allow creating a mana exoskeleton.)

SOLID FROSTWIND: Bσ1A-RANKED (Allow to imbue an item with wind and frost elements. The Wind element is stronger than the frost one and allows control over the element itself. The power allows to create solidified slime weapons.)

INSTABILITY: Bσ1A-RANKED (Allows to perceive, understand and mess with the emotions of the surrounding targets and to read their minds.)

ASTRAL WOLF: Bσ1B-RANKED (Create A full-bodied mana wolf with Venomous fangs [the venom has various effects.])

SHAPESHIFTING: WOLF: Bσ1D-RANKED (Allows to partially or totally shapeshift into a wolf and humanized versions.)

SHAPESHIFTING: BEAR: Bσ1D-RANKED (Allows to partially or totally shapeshift into a bear and humanized versions.)

{Skills}

Kyokar hand-to-hand style (MASTER) (A military fighting style developed in Frant)

Crypt of the Desert Style (ADVANCED) (Flyssa fighting style developed by Master Nieminen)

Etrium's sword style (ADVANCED) (Basic Sword Style developed in Etrium.)

Chapter 747: The hunt begins

Over the course of the following weeks, Erik embarked on a hunt. His targets were people with shapeshifting brain crystal powers.

One by one, he tracked them down, neutralized them, and absorbed their powers. Eleven, each one a different piece of the puzzle he was assembling.

The result of his efforts was a new power that allowed him to shapeshift into animals. But animals only.

It was a fascinating ability. It offered a plethora of strategic options, but it was different from Conal's power - Erik couldn't gain more transformations by drinking blood.

Each new form resulted from merging the powers he had absorbed from the guys he killed to get an ability that could transform them all.

His repertoire of animal forms was diverse, and each had its own unique advantages. Some were combat-oriented, like the gorilla or the panther.

Others were more mundane but no less useful, like the inconspicuous forms of a cat or a dog. He could also transform into birds like crows and owls, offering him aerial surveillance and mobility.

These transformations gave Erik an edge, providing him with a variety of tricks to spy and find people or disappear when chased.

However, the most intriguing forms were those of a fly and a beetle. These forms allowed him to infiltrate any location undetected, bypassing even the most stringent security measures.

Who would suspect a fly to be a spy or an assassin? This transformation, despite not being suited to fight, was very useful.

With this new array of abilities at his disposal, Erik was certain he would be able to find out what was happening and why the Mercenary guild was searching for him.

However, Erik's goal was to gain the ability to shapeshift into humans. For that, he needed a specific power, one that was rare and coveted. Within the city, there was only one person known to possess such an ability - Maximilian Hartley.

Max was a man of considerable influence in the city. He held the position of Chief Security Officer, overseeing the city's defenses and intelligence operations.

His job was vital, his decisions affecting the lives of thousands. To the public, he was a dedicated official with an unblemished record.

Since he could transform into anyone he saw, strict regulations governed his power. It was a dangerous.

However, this ability made Max an invaluable asset for the country, since before doing his current job, he was a spy.

He could blend into any crowd, adopt any identity, and infiltrate any organization. It was exactly what Erik needed.

However, he had left Max alone until now. The man was no ordinary target, and Erik knew he would need every advantage he could get.

However, the string of killings targeting individuals with shapeshifting abilities had sent ripples of fear and uncertainty through the city, as that was a common power.

As the grim news of the shapeshifter killings circulated, it spread through the city like a ferocious wildfire, leaving a trail of fear and unease in its wake. The shapeshifters now found themselves the targets of an unseen predator.

Every whisper of another fallen shapeshifter, every rumor about the hunter, stoked the flames of panic. These people now looked over their shoulders, their eyes filled with paranoia and fear.

Many fled, their fear overpowering their ties to the city. They disappeared into the cloak of night. This terrifying threat uprooted families, severed friendships, and altered lives.

Max Hartley was no exception. As the news of the killings reached him, he became cautious.

Being a high-profile figure with a unique ability, he knew he was a prime target.

He ramped up his security, surrounding himself with a group of trained guards and mercenaries. He fortified his residence and workplace, equipping them with state-of-the-art security systems.

His movements became unpredictable, his routines changing to throw off potential attackers.

He traveled in armored vehicles and was always surrounded by guards. Every public appearance was planned and executed under heavy security cover.

Erik's situation had become quite complex. The threat had amplified the man's cautious nature, making him even more elusive. Erik's usual tactic of striking was hampered. The element of surprise, often his greatest ally, was now a dwindling resource.

As if this wasn't enough, the mass exodus of shapeshifters from the city added to another layer of complexity.

The once abundant pool of abilities was drying up, getting additional powers a harder task.

The city's streets were now desolate. This not only limited his options for increasing his abilities but also made his actions more noticeable.

However, Erik didn't need more transformations. His primary aim had always been to create the most potent power possible through the merging process, so that once he got Max's power, he would create one he hoped was going to be like Conal's.

As he observed the streets, Erik grinned. If someone knew what he did, he would have said the man was crazy.

Why would have someone made it so the people fled the city? Yeah. That was a reasonable thought. However, if they knew what Erik's true aim was, they would have not only thought he was crazy but also told him.

Erik was trying to stir troubles. That for the only goal of luring the Blackguards to Caelora city.

What Erik was doing was sending a message. 'I'm targeting the shapeshifters, and the guild can't do anything to stop me. What will you do?'

If luck was on his side, he would bait them, leading to their arrival in the city. Otherwise, he had to go search for them, but he was sure his tactic was going to work.

But how could they not take the bait? Erik was killing people that were close to them. They had to come, if not because they didn't care about them, at least to save face.

The young man walked through the lobby of Terrence's apartment building and then took the elevator. After a while, he arrived at the apartment where he and June stayed for the past weeks. However, they weren't the only two staying there now. With them, there were 30 more clones ready to serve him.

Chapter 748: Erik's threats

Erik stood surrounded by thirty-one clones. An eerie silence filled the space in Terrence's apartment, only interrupted by the occasional shuffle of feet or the soft, rhythmic hum of the city outside.

"Drink this," Erik said, his voice echoing in the quiet room.

He held out several bottles filled with a dark, viscous liquid - human blood. His fingers clasped around the glass containers.

"This will allow you to turn into humans."

He handed over the bottles and observed as the clones reached out.

One by one, they uncapped the containers, filling the air with the metallic scent of blood.

Then they raised the bottles to their lips and drank. The dark, viscous liquid disappeared down their throats.

Their expressions remained impassive. They had Erik's same memories and knew what to expect from the blood.

Erik's lips curled into a smile. The clones were going to be a tremendous help to his plans.

The clones already knew the gist of the situation based on what June had told them in the past month. But Erik felt the need to tell them about the recent developments.

"Our target has gone dark." Erik's brows furrowed in frustration, a slight crease forming between them. He began pacing the room with measured steps, the heels of his boots echoing against the floor.

"I expected the target would notice the commotion inside the city. It wasn't hard, though. Someone was going left and right killing shapeshifters, after all."

His gaze hardened, reflecting the seriousness of the situation.

"Being an important figure here, it wasn't hard for him to disappear. Your task is to search for him. Use your abilities wisely. Blend in with the humans, infiltrate their circles, and gather information. Turn into animals and go to places where access is restricted or prohibited. Do whatever you can to accomplish this task."

He paused for a moment, letting his words sink in. The clones watched him silently, their faces stoic and unyielding.

"We need to find Max Hartley."

"Sorry for asking this, Master, but why can't you use the biological supercomputer to find him?" he asked.

He remembered how Erik had done it several times in the past thanks to the memories he got from him. Locating targets thanks to the biological supercomputer wasn't a hard endeavor.

Erik paused, his eyes turning to meet Alexander's gaze. A flicker of annoyance passed over his face, but not because of the question but for the situation itself.

"They figured out I'm able to do something like that, more or less, and are keeping the man away from any technological device, or at least are refraining from sharing digital information about him."

It didn't take long for the guild to understand that the dead shapeshifters were people who had been previously investigated. Since the targets were people, the guild already had their eyes on.

It was natural to assume someone stole that information and used it to find the best targets. They weren't certain it was Erik, but it was a possibility.

The killings coincided with Erik's arrival in the city. Although there was no evidence confirming its truth, it was clear he was the one responsible.

Erik explained that to the clones, who nodded in understanding. If that was the situation, it was clear their creator needed more men to find his target.

The biological supercomputer could do nothing much about it.

Not having the chance to rely on the biological supercomputer was a problem. It was weird, to be honest. The once reliable network of information was now a barren wasteland, devoid of any useful data. However, we couldn't do anything about it.

Strangely enough, Erik's face changed. His lips curled into a smile, as if that wasn't a problem at all.

"However, if that was a setback for me from one point of view, it was also a blessing from another."

He knew humans all too well - their habits, their tendencies, their flaws. They often talked too much, blind to the consequences of their words.

"You only need to figure out where the man is. That will not be easy, but there are several ways to find out." Erik was talking as if he knew with certainty that was possible, and it was true.

After all, there was a reason he made the killings obvious.

His plan was to provoke turmoil, sparking conversations about the murders and making the targets easily identifiable, thus turning the citizens into unwitting informants.

Some people might have considered killing Max earlier, but the issue was that an unknown person would have drawn less attention.

He had to draw the Blackguards here and get a straightforward response to a critical question. Did they actually have a hand in all of this, or not?

His gaze never wavered from his clones, challenging them to rise to the task.

"After you found him, me and June will take care of him." Erik's eyes hardened and his resolve fueled.

However, the clones had many questions. One of them, Alexander, turned to Erik. He furrowed his brows and locked his gaze on Erik.

"What do we need to do, exactly?"

Erik already know the answer to that question. The plan had been brewing within his mind for some time now.

"We need to infiltrate the mercenary guild. But keep in mind, mercenaries are not likely to talk about the situation inside the guild."

Erik looked at the clones with intensity.

"The best chance to get some information is elsewhere. Bars, restaurants, shops. These are the likely places where people will lower their guards and talk about the target."

The mercenary guild headquarters within the city was their most obvious starting point.

Since mercenaries would likely take care of security themselves, it was likely that they would discover valuable information there.

Yet Erik understood it was insufficient. His team had to be present elsewhere, attentive to all conversations, and diligent in gathering every clue.

June voiced his concern politely. "Master," he began, his tone respectful yet questioning, "it seems unlikely that they would openly discuss such matters. Why would they? It's not like the average person would care about this man."

"I already made my move about that," he said. The corners of his lips curling up into a confident smirk. A spark of anticipation flickered in his brown eyes.

"Did you think this morning I got out early without a reason?"

Then the clones broke into the same grin their master was showing.

"Wha... what the hell?" Max's voice trailed off, a note of disbelief lacing his words as the morning news broadcast on the flat-screen TV abruptly shifted.

His eyes widened in shock as the screen flickered before settling on a video that had no business being on a morning news segment.

His posture stiffened, a clear sign of his surprise and growing concern. His coffee sat forgotten on the low table in front of him, the aroma wafting up and mixing with the tense air.

Max's eyes narrowed as the Crystal Cross Gang's logo filled the screen.

He recognized it instantly, a symbol he'd become all too familiar with in recent years.

His superiors had entangled him with this notorious group, forcing him to work alongside them. He didn't understand why, and frankly, he didn't care to.

He had seen the logo many times, with it stamped on documents he'd been compelled to sign.

He often found the sign on vehicles his superiors ordered to ignore, and he noticed it tattooed on the bodies of men he'd been told to protect.

It was a symbol that represented the unsavory tasks he was now regularly involved with.

Despite his personal feelings towards the group and their questionable activities, Max was a professional.

He understood orders were orders, even if they meant covering up for the nasty stuff these guys did.

It was a bitter pill to swallow, but his duty was to follow orders, not question them.

So, he did what he had to, swallowing his objections and burying his doubts deep inside.

A muffled voice spoke from the TV, its tone provocative and chilling.

The voice targeted Max. Taunts and threats filled the room, echoing off the walls and sending a wave of tension through everyone present.

"It's useless to hide from us, Max." The voice's tone saturated with malicious delight. "We will find you."

Max sat frozen in place, his eyes usually so calm and collected, now wide with an emotion that resembled fear.

He locked his gaze onto the screen, a mix of shock and disbelief etched across his face.

His skin had lost its usual warm hue, replaced by a pallor that made the lines on his forehead stand out.

His jaw clenched tight, muscles twitching in his cheek.

He was rigid, muscles poised for action. His fingers clenched into white-knuckled fists. Each breath he took echoed in the deafening silence.

Everyone turned their anxious eyes towards Max. They watched him closely, their reactions mirroring his shock and fear.

Inside the man's mind, thoughts were racing. He felt an icy dread seeping into his bones, a sense of impending danger that he couldn't shake off. That because he knew what the Crystal Cross Gang was able to do. These were people not to trifle with.

"What is the meaning of this?"

Max, despite the fear, was no stranger to threats, but this one felt different - it was personal, it was direct, and it was terrifyingly real.

He felt his fear change into anger, simmering within him, accompanied by a sense of helplessness that he wasn't used to.

But there was also determination. He wouldn't let this threat intimidate him.

Chapter 749: Finding Max (1)

Erik explained in details where and when he wanted the clones to go. He also told them what to do if they found some useful information and what not to do.

"Go now, we can't waste anymore time."

The clones rose to their feet in unison. June and Alexander exchanged a glance before turning to follow the others towards the exit. The room emptied, leaving Erik alone with his thoughts.

In the past, he was always the one who had to do every heavy lifting, but since he now had the clones, he could at least give the most boring tasks to the clones.

Erik didn't want to stay days in bars and cafes drinking or eating just for the sake of finding some info he may or he may not find.

Back in Testrovsc's Rest he often gave the task to people from his guild, occasionally to the clones, but there were still personal quests he did on his own. He couldn't create many clones back there, since where he found those powerful people would be the question on everyone's mind.

But now Erik had enough. He had enough of having to restrain himself; he had enough of having to hide. Since the Guild was so hellbent on capturing him, and the Blackguards already had the inkling there was something weird with him, there was almost no reason to lie low.

Arhythmic pattern started resounding through the stairs of the apartment building. 31 clones rushed down the stairs to complete the task.

June and Alexander led the way, their eyes locked onto the path ahead. Behind them, the rest of the clones followed suit.

Before long, they reached the atrium. Sunlight streamed in, casting long shadows on the polished marble floor. They moved too fast for the early risers in the building to register their presence.

Almost as swiftly as they had descended the stairs, they were out of the building. The cool morning air hit them like a shockwave, causing a few of them to close their eyes in response.

Before them lay a sprawling cityscape.

Despite the early hour, the city was awakening. Cars zipped by through the skies, pedestrians walked along the sidewalks, their breath visible in the crisp air.

Then, as if on cue, the clones dispersed. Merging into the sparse crowd, disappearing from sight. June and Alexander gave each other a nod before parting ways.

They set off in different directions, each with a destination in mind. Based on what Erik told them to do, they went where they could find drunk mercenaries. They were bound to say something about Max, especially considering what Erik said he did to bring light to the matter, Max's hunt.

June veered left. His knowledge of the city was extensive since he scouted a lot during the past weeks, every alleyway and hidden corner mapped out in his mind.

His target was a grimy bar nestled in a less reputable part of town. Known only to those who lived life on the edge, it was a refuge for hardened individuals seeking comfort at the bottom of a glass after facing life-threatening dangers.

June moved with a swift, purposeful stride, his silhouette merging into the sparse morning crowd.

<Where are you? > He thought, his mind echoing with the question like a mantra.

With each step he took, June's thoughts became more focused, more determined.

Meanwhile, Alexander charted his course towards a notorious inn on the other side of the city. The place provided shelter to mercenaries and served as a hub where tales of dangerous quests were traded over pints of cheap ale and plates of stale bread.

It wasn't frequented by the wealthiest of the people, and usually its hosts were low leveled citizens. But they were also the ones who spoke the most.

Being at the edge of society, these guys were bound to have a lot of resentment and envy toward the luckiest ones, those that, instead than a cheap and old tavern ate at the most luxurious of the restaurants, and slept on the most comfy beds, likely accompanied by women whose elegance and beauty matched the opulence of their surroundings.

These privileged few reveled in lavishness, their nights filled with the company of charming and sophisticated companions, contrasting starkly with the rough, solitary existence of those on society's fringes.

This stark disparity fueled a simmering resentment among the less fortunate, who could only dream of such luxuries and companionship as they languished in their humble, forgotten corners of the city.

<I won't disappoint the Master. >

Alexander's promise echoed in his head. He was a newborn; he didn't have that much experience, but his loyalty to the Master was unwavering, as much as the other clones. Though, a particular spark was present in him, as if his sole purpose was to please his creator.

As he navigated through the crowd, his eyes caught sight of a group of mercenary guards.

They were scanning the crowd, their eyes darting from one face to another.

Their postures were tense, their hands resting on the hilts of their swords. They were on high alert, searching for anything out of the ordinary. These guys were likely searching for Erik.

Alexander kept his pace steady, his expression neutral. He was just another city dweller going about his day. He adjusted his course, moving away from the guards' line of sight.

<Get ready to die, Max. > His thoughts turned darker, a reflection of the mission's goal. There was no room for doubt or hesitation. He knew what he had to do, and he was prepared to do it.

From the apartment, Erik watched as his clones departed from the building. He observed their movements, their purposeful strides, and their seamless blending into the crowd. It was only a matter of time now before they found their target.

Erik had every confidence in his clones, knowing their capabilities mirrored his own. They were his creations, extensions of himself. They didn't have the system, that was true, but all the time Erik spent doing missions for the guild taught him a lot, and they too had this information.

Turning away from the window, Erik surveyed the room one last time.

"Well, let's go to work."

Erik then turned on his heel and strode towards the exit. His footsteps were steady, his posture exuding an air of calm determination.

As he left the building, he was ready to play his part in the unfolding drama. His clones were on the move, and now it was his turn.

Chapter 750: Finding Max (2)

Alexander reached the notorious inn, a place that bore the stains of countless past encounters.

The inn was a hodgepodge of crooked beams and weathered wood, its facade scarred by time and neglect. Its dimly lit interior was filled with a motley crew of patrons that were there since the previous night, each one more rough looking than the last.

The air was thick with the scent of stale ale already this early, unwashed bodies, and a hint of danger.

Walking in, Alexander made his way to the counter. He slid onto a worn-out stool, its leather cover cracked and faded from years of use.

The bartender, a gruff man with a scar running down his face, grunted in acknowledgment of his order. A plate of greasy eggs and a mug of a cheap beverage were soon placed in front of him.

As he ate, Alexander tuned into the surrounding conversations. The inn was abuzz with whispers and murmurs, stories being exchanged over half-empty mugs. One conversation, in particular, caught his attention.

A group of mercenaries huddled in a corner were talking about recent killings. Alexander was confident his master knew what he was doing and what he said.

Luckily, what Erik did was true. People talked about the killings. It was natural that was scaring everyone there, with people wondering when the killer would start targeting other powers.

Their voices were low, their expressions grim as they spoke of victims with shapeshifting brain crystal powers.

"Have you heard?" One of the mercenaries, a burly man with a grizzled beard, leaned in closer to his companions. His voice was a low growl, barely audible over the din of the inn.

"Heard what?" Another mercenary, a woman with icy eyes, asked, her tone indifferent.

"About the killings," the first mercenary said, his gaze darting around the room as if expecting danger to materialize at any moment.

The woman raised an eyebrow, her interest piqued. "The shapeshifters' killings?"

"Yeah, I heard they stopped for the moment." The man's voice dropped lower, "but I think this is only temporary. Whoever is doing this must be a psycho. I bet they will resume soon."

As the man's words filtered through the low hum of conversation, a surge of anger welled up within Alexander. His grip on the mug tightened, the knuckles turning white. The comment, so casually thrown, was a gross oversimplification of the complex situation at hand. Besides, he didn't like they talked badly about Erik.

<Psycho? > He thought, his mind seething at the label. It was far from the truth, and it stung more than he cared to admit.

But Alexander knew better than to react. He kept his face impassive, his eyes focused on the remnants of his breakfast. He took a slow sip of his beverage, using the moment to rein in his emotions. His mission required discretion, not an outburst.

A third mercenary, a lean man with a hawk-like gaze, scoffed. "Nah. I don't think the killer will do this for long."

"You are too naïve then," the first mercenary said, shaking his head. "If you do these things, you must have a knack for it. Otherwise it makes little sense." A ripple of unease spread through the group.

"Who's doing it?" The woman asked, her voice barely a whisper.

The first mercenary shrugged, his face grim. "No one knows. But whoever they are, they're dangerous, and the guards can't really find out."

Everyone knew that those with such abilities were common, and their sudden deaths were a cause for concern, as many people could be targets.

Alexander continued to eat, his expression nonchalant as he listened. He knew that every piece of information could be vital.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the city, June found himself in a different place. This was another gathering place for mercenaries, but the atmosphere here was different.

This establishment, a bustling tavern with a polished facade, was frequented by a different breed of mercenaries. They were not criminals or outlaws, but individuals who lived by their skills and wits, simply doing their job under the city's harsh realities.

They weren't rolling in riches, but at least they could spring for a meal in a place where the décor didn't scream 'inspired by the atmosphere of a public restroom.'

The tavern was alive with the sound of clinking glasses and hearty laughter. The patrons were a diverse mix of individuals, from grizzled veterans sharing war stories to young hopefuls eager to make their mark.

Despite their varied backgrounds, they all shared a common trait: they liked to drink.

June made his way through the crowd, his presence barely causing a ripple. He was just another face in the crowd, another mercenary starting his day. He approached the counter, where a friendly barmaid with a warm smile greeted him.

"Morning," she said, her voice carrying over the din. "What can I get you?"

"Bread and cheese, please," June said, his tone polite. He ordered that, along with a mug of hot tea. Not the most appropriate combination, but June loved tea and cheese.

As he waited for his food, he scanned the room, his eyes taking in the scene.

Like Alexander, June knew how useful listening to the drunken was. He listened to the surrounding conversations, his ears picking up on the subtle nuances and undertones.

Although he was in a distinct part of the city, he was still playing the same dangerous game as the other clones.

Amidst the chatter, a particular discussion caught his attention. A group of mercenaries were talking about an unusual incident that had occurred earlier in the morning.

"Did you see it?" One of the mercenaries, a man with a weathered face and piercing eyes, asked his friends. His voice held an edge of unease.

"See what?" Another mercenary, a young woman with fiery red hair, said.

"The message," the first mercenary explained, "All TV shows and programs got interrupted this morning. There was this weird logo, and a muffled voice..."

He trailed off, his brow furrowed in confusion. The others leaned in closer, their interest piqued.

"The voice mentioned someone named Max. It said he won't be able to hide for long. That 'they' were coming for him."

"Who's Max?" the woman asked, her eyes wide with curiosity.

"And who are 'they'?" Another mercenary chimed in, his tone skeptical.

The first mercenary shrugged. "Wish I knew. But whoever they are, they've got the entire city on edge."

June listened to the conversation, his mind working overtime.

<'That was a really genius move, Master. >

Erik made sure everyone knew what was going on, and who the target was to make people compelled to talk about this.