

BIOLOGICAL 761

Chapter 761: Mercenary-Police Station (3)

Perched in the shadows of Latham's office, Matthias felt each minute stretch into eternity, his frustration mounting with every tick of the clock.

Latham spent the hours in endless phone conversations, none of which bore any relevance to Matthias's mission.

The incessant chatter, void of any mention of Matthias's target, grated on his nerves, amplifying his impatience.

It was as if Latham prided himself on his ability to avoid actual work, his voice a constant drone in the dimly lit room, punctuating the dullness of the wait.

<This is torture. Really, this is a fucking torture! >

Matthias lamented internally, the irony not lost on him that his stakeout had devolved into a test of endurance against the banality of Latham's workday.

The phone rang again, a sharp, intrusive sound that cut through the room's silence.

<AGAIN?! >

Latham picked it up, his stern expression softening into a smile as he recognized the voice on the other end.

"Ah, good to hear from you," he said. "How's Marsha doing these days? Still acing her piano lessons?"

Latham's tone was casual, the conversation shifting from business to personal.

"Yes, yes."

Hidden in the shadows, Matthias observed the exchange with detached interest.

"And how about Samuel?" Latham asked after a moment, his expression softening at the mention of the child.

Matthias's feline eyes narrowed. He was there for a mission, not to eavesdrop on Latham's personal life. He was so nervous he wanted to rip the man's head from his neck.

His tail twitched as he continued his silent vigil, his gaze never straying from Latham despite the turmoil brewing inside of him.

Any piece of information could be the key to unlocking Hartley's location.

And so he waited. The cat-like form he had adopted served him well in this situation.

"The prick?"

As he listened to the response, Latham's smile widened into a grin. The man chuckled, the sound rich and hearty. "He is hiding with his tail between his legs." The man laughed again, the sound echoing around the room.

Matthias pricked his ears, intrigued by the conversation. He watched Latham, trying to understand of who they were talking about.

"Remember when we met him at Xander's party?" Latham's eyes twinkled with mirth. "He was all high and mighty then. But now that they're targeting them, he fled."

Matthias's eyes narrowed. Who was Latham talking about? And who was the person on the other side of the phone?

"Yeah. I sent Hartley there."

The person on the other end of the line seemed to understand exactly to whom Latham was referring to. Hartley was Erik's target.

<This idiot, > Matthias thought as he heard the surname of the man he was searching for.

A grin spread across his face. Well, if a cat could be said to grin.

Matthias might not have all the pieces of the puzzle yet, but he had a clue, one that might lead him to the location of the safe house where the target was hiding.

"Yeah, we gave him a bunch of guards to keep him safe. He can't do much on his own besides hiding after all..."

Matthias's tail twitched with excitement. He settled down in his hiding spot, his eyes never leaving Latham as he continued his conversation.

The conversation went on until Latham closed the call. Then it was only a game of waiting. Latham had to leave the office.

After some time, the officer rose from his chair, the groan of the leather echoing in the silent room. He moved around his desk, his steps measured and unhurried.

The office was steeped in a silence that was as thick as molasses, broken only by the soft rustle of papers and the clinking of his keys as he gathered his belongings.

He switched off the lights. The only source of light was the moon outside, its pallid glow seeping through the blinds and casting long, spectral shadows across the room.

It was like a stage after the last act, the props and characters swallowed by the encroaching darkness, leaving behind an eerie tranquility.

However, there were still many people with night duties inside the station.

Matthias's eyes, adapted to the darkness, followed Latham's retreating figure until the door clicked shut, leaving him alone in the vast office.

Now alone, Matthias shifted back into his human form.

His transformation was swift and silent, his feline features melting away to reveal a man in his prime.

He stood in the center of the room, his naked form illuminated by the moonlight filtering through the blinds.

His first task was to search for any hidden hard disks that could contain information about Maximilian Hartley.

He glanced around the room, his gaze piercing the darkness. "Now... where are you hiding, my dear documents?"

Despite being an idiot, Latham was a careful man based on what Erik told him. But he started wondering if the information his creator got were accurate.

It could also be that Latham didn't really like Hartley for some reasons. Actually, Latham said something that hinted at Matthias's reasoning being correct.

However, it was clear he wouldn't leave such crucial information lying around openly despite being the very same idiot who talked about Hartley with a man on the phone. It would be hidden, tucked away in some inconspicuous corner.

The clone started his search at Latham's desk. His fingers trailed over the wood, exploring every inch of the desk with a feather-light touch.

He was searching for hidden compartments, the kind that were often found in such old, stately pieces.

Matthias resisted the urge to slam his hand on the desk out of frustration, knowing that any noise could alert the police to his presence.

Moving with silent urgency, he rifled through the papers and drawers, his eyes scanning for any clue that could lead him to what he sought, but it looked like Latham didn't hide what he was searching for at the desk.

"Latham..." he said, "Where on earth did you hide those documents?"

Chapter 762: Mercenary-Police station (4)

Following that, Matthias redirected his focus towards the bookshelves that were positioned along the walls. Each of these bookshelves was filled to the brim with an extensive collection of books and folders.

He pulled out each book slightly from the shelf, pushing it back in after conducting a quick yet thorough inspection, ensuring that no room was left for any oversight.

Amid the vast array of books, his keen eye detected an intriguing pattern. The shelves were filled with many volumes that contained information about police cases, their spines adorned with dates and enigmatic case numbers.

Interspersed among these were administrative documents, their covers decorated with the official seal of the witness protection program.

Matthias extracted these documents and read through them.

He was meticulous, searching for different papers tucked within the pages of these files, scrutinizing each document for any hidden information.

He even sifted through the pages of the books next to these files, suspecting that Latham may have concealed important papers within innocuous-looking volumes.

As Matthias went through the pile, he sorted the documents into different cases.

"Smith case...no, that's not it," he said, setting the document aside and picking up the next one. "Johnson case... no, not this one either."

His fingers rifled through the papers, picking out the next one. "WOW! the Thompson case!"

He paused. "I have NO idea what this is about!"

He continued in this manner, his voice an inaudible murmur in the otherwise silent room. "The Martinez case...no. Uh... Reynolds case... no. The Russo case... still no."

Hours passed in this manner, Matthias engrossed in his search. The office was silent save for the soft rustle of papers and the occasional creak of wood as he moved.

While he carried on with his search, the room became darker. Sometimes even the moonlight failed to brighten the location.

Compelled by necessity, Matthias often gravitated towards the window, seeking the moon's scant illumination to aid his reading.

The dim, silvery light, though minimal, sufficed to his needs, allowing him to persist in his search.

Under the moon's watchful eye, Matthias sifted through the documents, his resolve undimmed by the lack of light.

Despite his growing frustration, there was something oddly calming about the scene.

It was at this moment that he found something. A nondescript document tucked away in a corner. Its title - 'Greyson Case' - gave the impression of yet another investigation file not related to what he was searching for.

Upon opening the document, Matthias discovered its contents were unexpected.

Without a clear sign of its purpose, the paper revealed a lengthy list of addresses, numbering at least three hundred.

Although it wasn't explicitly stated, Matthias had a sense that this could be the list he had been seeking. The addresses of the safe houses.

Yet, the chance lingered that those places might serve a different function altogether.

The ambiguity of the document left him pondering its true significance.

However, after having searched all the documents, folders and books in this damn room, he suspected this was what he was searching for. This was the only list detailing addresses.

"Let's hope I'm right."

Regardless of the reason these addresses were used, it was now clear why Latham had hidden this list within an unrelated folder.

The man and his higher ups knew that whoever was hunting the shapeshifters had tremendous hacking skills or contacts who could breach the mercenary guilds' computers.

Thus, it made sense for Latham to keep a physical copy of this crucial list.

However, a thought crossed Matthias's mind: why hadn't Latham kept the document on his person? But he quickly dismissed it.

There were many obvious reasons for that. For starters, Latham had no emotional attachment to those under police protection. Besides, carrying such a vital document could make him a target.

If not for those searching for their targets, at least for street thugs willing to sell this information at the best price.

Last, Latham had obviously considered this place safe enough to store such sensitive information.

The place was full of people, or better, of mercenary-police officers, whose average rank was the v level.

Most citizens were nowhere near a threat to the mercenary-police force patrolling the area.

The likelihood of someone stronger than the v level, having any reason to come here and search for this list, or any other document, was stupid in itself, as people over this level were usually rich and with a lot of power over people. Besides, they were rare.

However, Latham and his fellow officers failed to consider Erik, Matthias's master, in their calculations.

Erik had risen to rank among the world's top 1000 strongest individuals, a list that included only those whose abilities were publicly recognized.

Of course, Matthias' master wasn't officially on that list, but his clones didn't question him about being there.

Besides, his clones, including Matthias, surpassed the capabilities of any typical mercenary in strength and skill.

This meant that Matthias' very presence defied all odds. Someone as strong as he shouldn't have been there.

Matthias sat and leaned back in Latham's chair, the list of addresses in his hand catching the moonlight.

A sense of satisfaction washed over him as he gazed at the list. After hours of searching, he had found what he was looking for.

The only thing the clone wanted to do now was to get out of that damn place and go to Erik.

The moonlight seemed brighter now, casting a triumphant glow on his face.

Matthias's smile broadened as he secured the list. This discovery not only brought him satisfaction but also the anticipation of delivering it to Erik heightened his sense of achievement.

The prospect of contributing to their cause rendered the moment particularly fulfilling.

"Huh, who would've thought? Delivering a list of addresses could make me feel like a hero in a spy movie."

The moonlight highlighted his amused expression, casting an almost triumphant glow on his face. Despite the long and tiring search, his spirits were high.

He was one step closer to fulfilling his mission, and that made everything worth it.

Chapter 763: Finding Max (8)

Erik had nothing more to do there at that point. Whatever the two would say, text, see, or hear, he would know.

The young man, still in his fly form, left the car flying out of the window.

In his minute fly form, a gust of wind that was a mere breeze to his human form, but a tempest in his current state swept him around. The sheer force of the elements caught his tiny body, now devoid of its usual weight and size, off guard.

For a few disorienting seconds, the powerful gusts tossed him about in the air, causing his gossamer-like wings to flutter frantically. His world became a tumultuous whirlwind, his senses overwhelmed by the sudden onslaught.

The world around him transformed into a dizzying blur of motion and noise as he wrestled to regain control.

Buffeted by the wind's unpredictable whims, his minute body spun wildly in the air.

The sensation was akin to being a tiny speck of dust, lost and tossed about in a turbulent sea, at the mercy of relentless elements.

With a concerted effort, he stabilized himself. He adjusted the angle of his wings, using the wind's force to his advantage rather than resisting it.

His frantic flapping developed into a steady rhythm. He ascended, soaring higher into the sky. The exhilarating sensation of flight replaced his initial struggle.

<Phew! That was scary! > He then turned around and assessed his position. <Let's go back to the apartment now. >

Erik flapped his wing and flew through the city. As he navigated his way back to the clandestine apartment he shared with his clones, he took a moment to observe the cityscape spread beneath him.

The city was a hive of activity, its inhabitants going about their day, oblivious to the machinations unfolding behind the scenes. From his vantage point, he could see the people walking by, their faces etched with the mundane worries of daily life.

<It's weird. They walk around thinking they're safe and that they can trust their government to protect them. But they do not know what's truly going on in their city. They're living in a bubble, > he thought.

After a while of flying over the city, Erik arrived at the apartment. Without missing a beat, he maneuvered towards an open window - a precaution he had taken before leaving.

He slipped through the narrow opening, his compact form fitting through the gap.

<This really is a convenient form. In and out through the window in my fly form. It's discreet, it's quick, and it doesn't draw attention. I just hope there won't be birds trying to kill me. >

That thought crossed Erik frequently while in this form. The thought of having to face a gigantic crow wasn't really the most appalling of the ideas. No, it would be a scary encounter.

Once inside, he took a moment to survey his surroundings, ensuring everything was as he had left it. He quickly saw June seated on the couch watching TV.

< I need to make some rules about TV later. >

Upon Erik's entrance, June sensed his master's return. Rising from the couch, he turned to face the fly.

He looked apologetic, his normally steady eyes tinged with an apologetic look. There was a hint of shame for being found in such a state - lounging on the couch when there was critical work to be done.

He seemed to have let his usual vigilance slip, as a moment of mundane relaxation replaced it amidst the chaos they were embroiled in.

"Sorry Master!"

Erik began his transformation back into his human form. His tiny body expanded, the delicate wings disappeared, and within moments, he stood in the apartment in his full human form and completely naked.

"Don't bother," Erik said. "Any news?"

June's face fell. "No useful information, I'm afraid," he said. "But your message on TV... it's created quite a stir. People are talking about it everywhere."

Erik nodded. That was exactly what he was hoping for. While they didn't have any concrete leads yet, at least they had shaken things up. It was a start.

The only problem was that Time was running out for Erik. Despite his formidable strength and the myriad of abilities at his disposal, there was a persistent feeling of unease gnawing at him.

He knew that luring the Blackguards here had been hazardous, but this was also the only way for him to get some information. Even if it wasn't about uncle Benjamin, or their base of operation, or simply what they wanted from him, he had to get that.

Besides, Erik knew the Blackguards were aware of how strong he was, or at least knew a fraction of his strength.

If they linked him to his Awakener's identity, the fact he used a different brain crystal power altogether, while in Etrium, it meant they also knew something was wrong with him.

Erik was uncertain whether their curiosity was about his potential to possess more than two brain crystal powers or if he was an exceptional case of an awakener with three brain crystal powers.

Their reasons might have been unclear, but their intentions were not. They were determined to understand how he could do that.

The problem was that based on what they made Doran and Catrina do, meant a grim fate for Erik if captured. They were itching to get their hands on him and turn him into a lab rat.

"What are people saying about it?"

Erik thought for a second before giving an answer to his creator.

"Some say that the Crystal Cross Gang has lost their minds, at least those who are familiar with them," June said.

"However, there are others who did not know what the Crystal Cross Gang even is. Some do not even know who Max is, but those are few."

June paused for a moment before continuing, "And interestingly, there were a few who reacted rather peculiarly. Whenever they heard people talking about that, they appeared... confused. But there was something else in their eyes too - a hint of recognition, perhaps. It's almost as if they were in some way connected to the Crystal Cross Gang."

"Did they say something?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Some simply left, others listened to the rumors."

It was at that moment that the apartment door opened. Another clone had come back.

Chapter 764: Finding Max (9)

One by one, the clones made their way back to the apartment.

Some clones, still in their human forms, had adopted elaborate disguises.

They wore a variety of attire, from the casual garb of a street vendor to the more formal dress of a business executive.

They concealed their faces with hats, sunglasses, and even theatrical masks, all intended to blend in with the city's varied population.

Meanwhile, others had chosen a more unconventional route.

They had transformed into cats and dogs. Some sauntered in as graceful Siamese cats, their sapphire eyes shimmering with intelligence.

Others trotted in as boisterous Beagles or languid Labradors.

With his eyes filled with amusement, Erik watched each return. The apartment, now teeming with his disguised clones, had taken on the appearance of a bustling animal shelter.

Yet among the returning clones, Matthias was absent.

Erik had entrusted him with the most critical mission - a task that held the key to their next move.

While waiting, Erik made use of the biological supercomputer. He hoped to see if there were news from Lyria's and July's side.

<System, locate Lyria's and July's devices using the virus. Search all available data for any information on the Blackguards in Caelora City on the devices the Virus infected, and I also want to know what they are doing. >

[SEARCH INITIATED. VIRUS PROLIFERATION UNDERWAY ACROSS MULTIPLE DEVICES. DATA EXTRACTION IN PROGRESS.]

However, it wasn't long before the supercomputer found something of interest.

It had extracted something from July's phone that concerned the Blackguards.

[INFORMATION FOUND ON JULY'S DEVICE RELATED TO BLACKGUARDS. PREPARING TO INJECT DATA.]

Then Erik felt the information being 'injected' into his brain.

The data streamed in like a relentless torrent of knowledge, a flood of information that threatened to overwhelm his senses.

It was as though he was standing amid a storm, with facts, figures, and images about the Blackguards swirling around him.

The information wasn't really detailed and expansive. July left little on her devices, but occasionally received orders through messages with some files attached.

However, Erik was far from disappointed. The data injection had yielded some information that could be useful.

According to the data, there was going to be an operation soon.

The Blackguards were scheduled to depart from Khunelerp and head towards Caelora City the following day. It was a flight journey that would take a full day.

One of the messages said that a guy named 'Momentum' was going to lead the team for whatever mission they had to perform in Caelora City.

Of course, it was obvious what kind of quest they were going to perform. However, not much was said aside from this.

The text was only meant to inform July to retreat as soon as the Blackguards' team arrived.

Based on the name alone, this 'Momentum' was not a simple adversary.

To lead a team of Blackguards, this meant the man was experience and cunning, someone who knew how to navigate the complex world of covert operations.

The Blackguards had crafted a meticulous plan, intending to launch their assault on him right in the apartment he was currently occupying.

Indeed, they had located him. This was clear from a file Erik had discovered on July's phone. Attached was a photograph of him, caught in a fleeting moment. He was gazing out of the apartment window while walking toward the couch.

The individual who had taken that photo was not only incredibly lucky, but also audacious.

They had captured the image in a moment so transient, so fleeting, it lasted only a single heartbeat.

Yet, they had seized that moment with an uncanny precision that spoke of either sheer luck or exceptional skill.

That was the most logical move, of course, as there was a huge bounty on Erik's head.

<This is shitty luck...>

However, what was done was done.

According to the information Erik uncovered, the Blackguards had been exceedingly careful not to alert him to their presence.

They had woven a veil of deception operating in the shadows to avoid triggering any of Erik's suspicions.

However, his decision to remain within the city's boundaries had left them somewhat perplexed.

However, there were notes attached to the file explaining how they suspected he had something to do with local criminal organizations.

This assumption was entirely baseless, rooted in speculation rather than fact.

There was no tangible evidence they could have gathered to support such a claim, but that didn't mean they couldn't manufacture it.

Erik surmised that this was likely their strategy. They were planning to weave a tale so convincing, so filled with deceit and intrigue, that it would serve as a plausible explanation for their assault on him.

This fabricated narrative was their shield, their justification to present to the public eye, a smokescreen to hide the true nature of their attack.

Essentially, they were putting up an incredibly complicated and realistic play.

A knot of concern appeared in Erik's mind and refused to loosen.

<This means we have a day to search for Max... This is a problem. > His fingers drummed an uneasy rhythm on the table, the realization settling in like an unwelcome guest.

"What's the matter, master?" June asked.

"Uh? Ah... The blackguards are bound to arrive in a day."

"So soon?" June asked. "Didn't you say they had to arrive in 3 days?"

Erik sighed. "That was what Lyria told to the man at the guild's headquarters. But there is a Blackguard already in the city, and she has different information. I wonder if Lyria is aware of that, or June is hiding this from her."

"Not that it makes any difference," June said. "But Master, since we only have a day left, given all of us came back empty-handed. If Matthias found nothing, we should simply leave."

"Yeah. You are right, we would risk our lives for nothing. I got almost everything I needed from this city, anyway. Even if I can't take Max's brain crystal power, at least we won't leave empty-handed."

Chapter 765: Finding Max (10)

Erik stood as solid and unyielding as steel, his mind navigating the labyrinth of the situation. Yet his pulse maintained its steady rhythm.

As the apartment door creaked open to reveal Matthias, Erik's composed exterior remained unbroken.

His clone's entrance served as a subtle shift in the room's atmosphere, a ripple in the otherwise placid pond of Erik's focus.

However, it was clear Matthias' arrival was good. Soon they would know if they had to leave, or if there still was hope of finding their target.

He looked at his clone with unwavering focus. Matthias moved into the room with a servile grace while he greeted the others.

The other clones cast their gazes upon him. Their eyes reflecting the hope that his mission had been successful.

A palpable silence filled the room, as they all waited with bated breath for him to break it with his words.

"Master," he said, his tone one of deference. "I have returned from my mission, and I am pleased to report success."

A grin unfurled across Erik's face in response. Matthias had found the address they were searching for.

Erik's gaze remained steady on Matthias, his grin still lingering as he asked, "Did you get the address?"

The clone straightened up, meeting Erik's gaze with a determined look in his eyes. "Not an address, but multiple ones. It is the list of the city's safe houses, or so I think. I'm not entirely certain of that."

Upon hearing Matthias' report, a collective grin spread across the faces of the other 30 clones in the room.

But there was also unease. Erik and the others had to check the buildings to find out if these places were the safe houses, and had to see if Max was in one of them.

They didn't already have that much time. They had to make haste.

"Matthias, hand me the list." Without a moment's hesitation, Matthias reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper.

The paper was relatively new. Likely written recently, and only because of Erik. So it had only a month at best.

A myriad of addresses were scrawled across it in a hurried, almost frantic handwriting.

Erik's eyes danced over the jumble of words and numbers, scanning each address as Matthias gave him the paper.

While recognizing the enormity of their task, Erik swiftly passed the list around to the clones. "We've got 300 addresses and 30 of you. That's 10 each."

Erik looked at the clones one by one.

"June will stay by my side," Erik said. "His unique ability to morph into a Flying Thaid gives me an advantage. I will have him close, so we may take our fight to the skies, or escape in case something bad happens."

The clones responded in a chorus, their voices merging into a single entity. "As you command, Master."

Erik's gaze swept over them, his voice echoing in the stillness. "We are racing against time itself. Split these locations amongst yourselves. We must start our search for these safe houses without delay."

The clones didn't wait. They looked at the list one by one, and then they shapeshifted, their human forms dissolving into the lithe bodies of cats.

But why cats of all the possibilities, Erik didn't know that. However, it was cool to see, plus they were cute.

Then, with a synchronicity that was both eerie and awe-inspiring, they moved.

A sea of feline forms, flowing like a river of liquid shadow, poured out of the apartment.

As night unfurled its inky cloak over the city, the clones, now in their feline guises, dispersed into the labyrinth of streets and alleys.

Their singular purpose was as clear as the moon above: find Max. Each address on their list was a potential breadcrumb in the maze, leading to their target.

While moving with the stealth and grace of their adopted forms, the clones navigated this intricate maze, their eyes observing each location, their senses attuned to every whisper of activity within.

Some addresses led them to hollow shells of buildings, their emptiness echoing with the spectral silence of emptiness.

Other places were notorious for harboring criminals who not only betrayed their comrades but also had to escape from their own cities to avoid abduction.

There were some places that provided a safe house for individuals who were trying to escape from their troubled pasts.

Innocents seeking refuge from vengeful ex-lovers lived in fear and caution, their wide-eyed surprise reflected in the windows as they noticed the feline shadows.

Each encounter was a silent tale, a tableau of the city's nocturnal life. The clones were but observers, silent and invisible, gathering information without interference.

Throughout the duration of the lengthy night, the clones displayed remarkable perseverance, searching for every address they came across.

As the hours passed, the city's secrets unraveled before them, one address at a time. Until they finally found what they were searching for.

As the clones approached, the sight of Max leisurely smoking a cigar by the window of a sprawling building came into view.

This grandeur didn't catch them off guard; it was well known that the police favored him, allotting him accommodations that screamed of luxury and privilege.

The opulent setting contrasted with the city's otherwise grim and dire circumstances, highlighting the special treatment Max received, especially compared to others who received the bare minimum.

The clones couldn't understand how a man with a child, fleeing from an abusive partner, had to receive a two-bedroom apartment in a shitty rundown complex, while this guy, with all his money and guards could live in such a lavish place.

The building stood out too much, its architecture more refined and grandiose than its surroundings, with Max appearing almost regal against the backdrop of a city struggling under the weight of unrest and corruption.

Above all, it was clear the man had no intention of hiding. That was weird, to be honest. It appeared he was daring whoever was after him to come and test their luck. But was this all?

Chapter 766: Attack (1)

The safe house was not just a building. It was a monument to luxury and power.

A grand edifice that rose majestically against the city skyline, its elegant facade gleaming in the moonlight.

Its architecture was a harmonious blend of classic and modern design, with towering columns and sweeping arches framing vast expanses of glass.

The lush gardens surrounding it were a riot of colors, even under the moon's silver glow, and the soft murmur of a nearby fountain added to its serene ambiance.

Within these opulent surroundings, a clone found Max.

He was an important figure in the city's hierarchy, so it was no surprise that he hid in such a lavish place.

Alexander, the clone that found the place in his feline form, moved unseen around the mansion.

His feline eyes observed Max from the shadows.

With his mission accomplished, Alexander began his stealthy retreat from the mansion.

His destination was the park near Erik's apartment, as per the young man's instructions.

As Alexander, in his feline guise, slipped through its iron-wrought gates, the familiar aroma of dew-kissed grass and ancient trees filled his senses.

As Alexander inched closer to the radius of Erik's telepathic power, he felt an almost immediate connection, like a switch being flipped on.

Erik's thoughts, as familiar to him as his own, echoed in his mind.

<Alexander, have you located Max? > Erik's telepathic voice reverberated within the confines of his mind, a hint of impatience subtly woven into his mental tone.

<The others have returned with empty hands, > Erik said.

<Yes, > Alexander said, his thoughts as clear and decisive as a crystal stream.

<Max has holed up in a mansion. It seems he couldn't resist the siren song of luxury even while on the run. >

He then gave the address to Erik.

Erik's mind fell into a contemplative silence as he processed this new piece of information.

The revelation of Max's hideout sparked no surprise in Erik. Known for his penchant for opulence, Max never saw luxury as mere excess; to him, it was a necessity.

His preference for grandeur over modesty was well-documented, a testament to his belief that true power and status were best reflected in the lavishness of one's surroundings.

This inclination towards extravagance, though often criticized, was undeniably a core aspect of his character, shaping not just his personal lifestyle but also his choices in secrecy and security.

Then, like the soft rustling of leaves before a storm, Erik's thoughts stirred again, this time reaching out to all the clones.

<Gather supplies and scatter, > Erik said.

<The blackguards found out about the apartment. We can't stay there anymore. Besides, I don't plan on staying in Caelora city for long. After I got the power and got some information from the blackguards, we will leave. I will join June on this last mission. >

The message was as clear as a bell tolling at dawn. Their mission was inching towards its endgame.

<Do not get caught. >

With Erik's telepathic command still echoing in their minds, the clones, all but June, scattered.

They made their way back to the apartment that had served as their base in the city.

They gathered supplies - food, clothing, medical kits, and a myriad of tools that were essential for survival.

In the meantime, Erik and June were akin to two arrows released from a taut bowstring, their forms blurring with the speed of their motion.

Their strides devoured the distance to the mansion, much like a ravenous wolf closing in on its prey.

Erik's stride quickened, urgency threading through his voice as he spoke. His eyes, usually a well of calm determination, now mirrored the tumult of his thoughts, hard and unyielding, yet betrayed by the faint line of worry etched between his brows. He felt the weight of the moment, the critical juncture at which they stood, where every second counted.

"We must hurry." Erik said that more to himself than to his companion, as if the words could propel them faster towards their destination.

June, in contrast, was calm, his steps measured and steady. He met Erik's gaze squarely, his own eyes a bastion of assurance in the face of his creator's growing apprehension.

"We are on time, Master. Don't worry."

However, Erik couldn't shake off his anxiety. He wanted to wrap this up quick, before the Blackguards showed up. Not that he feared fighting them, but he wanted to know what he was up against first.

Confronting them, given the terrifying tales of their might, unsettled him. Erik needed to know what he was up against before engaging in any battle.

His hand clenched around his weapon, betraying a momentary flicker of apprehension that danced across his features. Yet, he inhaled deeply, releasing the grip that had momentarily tightened around his heart.

With that exhale, he straightened his stance, determination steeling his resolve.

The sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon, casting long shadows that danced and flickered in the early morning light.

Time was of the essence. This was their last day, the last opportunity to secure Max's brain crystal power.

The city was slowly waking up; the streets coming alive with the hustle and bustle of early morning activity.

Vendors were busy at work, laying out their goods in anticipation of the day's trade, while the early risers, with determined strides, made their way to their places of work.

Stray cats, the silent witnesses of the night, navigated the alleys with practiced ease, disappearing into the shadows or lounging atop sun-warmed stones.

Amid this burgeoning life, Erik and June moved with singular focus. The world around them, with its routine awakenings and the promise of the day ahead, felt almost surreal, as if they were passing through a dream from which they could not wake.

Their minds were fixed on the task at hand, the mansion that loomed in the distance, and the subtle light of the rising sun that heralded a new day.

As they advanced, the contours of the cityscape shifted, the familiar becoming foreign, every step bringing them closer to the climax of their mission.

The air was charged with anticipation, a tension that seemed to resonate with the very heartbeat of the city.

Chapter 767: Attack (2)

Ahead, the mansion stood, a behemoth in the gentle embrace of the morning light.

Erik and June halted their advance, eyes riveted to the imposing edifice that was their aim.

The mansion, with its proud columns reaching skyward and arches sweeping like the wings of a grand bird, was a fortress in its own right.

The grounds were not without their defenses. The landscape had been molded by hands that understood the value of a high vantage point.

Guard posts were placed strategically around the property, their eyes commanding a bird's-eye view of the surroundings, ready to spot any intruders daring enough to breach this citadel of power.

Erik's eyes scanned the premises, his gaze sharp and discerning. "See them?" he said to June.

"They're not just gardeners tending to the flowers or butlers attending to the mansion's upkeep. They're guards, every single one of them."

His hand moved, pointing out the figures scattered around the property.

They were dressed in plain sight, their uniforms designed to blend in with their surroundings.

Some were garbed as gardeners, their hands busy with the flora that adorned the mansion grounds.

Others were dressed as butlers, their attire crisp and formal, a stark contrast to the casual nature of their true profession.

"And up there." Erik's gaze shifted to the balconies that adorned the mansion. "Five more, pretending to enjoy the morning air."

There were fifteen guards outside, a great force for anyone daring enough to breach this fortress of power.

June turned to Erik, his eyes reflecting the apprehension he felt now. "Master, what approach must we take?"

Erik turned towards him, his gaze steady. A moment of silence stretched between them before a slow grin spread across Erik's face.

"We knock on the door," Erik said.

The audacity of the plan was enough to startle a chuckle out of June.

With a shared nod of understanding, Erik and June began their march towards the mansion. There was no attempt to move stealthily or to blend into the shadows.

Instead, they strode forward openly, their steps confident and unhurried.

The guards spotted them almost immediately. Shouts of alarm rang out across the property, echoing off the towering columns and grand arches of the mansion.

"Halt! Stop right there!"

The guards warned Erik and June, their voices filled with authority, but the two didn't desist, and that made them anxious.

Erik and June continued their forward march, their faces hidden behind masks, their identities a mystery. The sight of these two figures, walking so boldly towards the mansion, set the guards into a frenzy.

Weapons were drawn as the guards rushed towards the entrance, their movements hurried and frantic.

The tranquil morning was shattered by the sudden flurry of activity. The mansion's serene facade was disrupted by the impending confrontation.

"Stop or we will attack!"

"Then try."

The guards sprung into action, their powers manifesting in a dazzling display of force. Some wielded ranged brain crystal powers.

Others brandished melee powers, their bodies becoming deadly instruments of combat. They surged towards Erik and June, intent on halting their advance.

One guard, a burly man with a cruel sneer, lunged at Erik with a mana-imbued blade.

As he charged at Erik, his blade shimmered with a menacing blue glow, signaling the deadly mana coursing through its edge.

But Erik effortlessly sidestepped. Behind the mask that concealed his features, a sly grin played across his lips, a silent taunt to his adversary.

The guard, caught off balance by Erik's swift evasion, barely had a moment to register surprise before Erik struck.

With a swift motion, Erik's fist landed on the guard's chest. The impact was thunderous, resonating through the garden, and the force behind the blow was catastrophic.

It extinguished the guard's life force as abruptly as snuffing out a candle, leaving his body to crumple to the ground.

The guard's body crumpled to the ground, leaving the others in stunned silence.

As the woman locked her gaze on June, her intentions clear, she summoned a swirling fireball.

Its creation was accompanied by a hissing roar that reverberated through the garden, illuminating the surroundings with its incandescent glow.

But June, while not possessing Erik's strength, was not an easy target. His own speed rendered him a blur to those who dared challenge him.

At the moment the fireball tore through the air towards him, June executed a maneuver of such swiftness that it appeared he danced with the lights themselves.

He sidestepped the fiery projectile, its heat grazing past him, leaving no mark but the memory of its passage.

Then he surged forward, the distance between him and the guard evaporating as if it were nothing.

The guard barely had time to register the failure of her attack before June's fist was upon her.

The force behind his punch was monumental enough to ensure that the confrontation ended there and then.

With a grim finality, the guard's body went limp, her life extinguished in the same instant her aggression had been met with June's unyielding counterattack.

The remaining guards could only watch in shock as their comrades fell, their confidence giving way to fear in the face of Erik's and June's strength.

As the two approached the mansion, the splendor of the gardens enveloping the estate unfurled before them.

The break of dawn cast a soft glow on the myriad of hues, the colors seemingly muted, yet the magnificence of the place was indubitable. It stood as a bastion of wealth and dominion, a stronghold for the city's wealthy.

However, within this refuge, a macabre ballet was being performed.

A guard, emboldened by duty, charged at Erik from his flank, only to be met with a swift reprisal that sent him sprawling lifelessly onto the manicured grass.

Another attempted to ambush June from the rear, but a rapid pivot and a decisive blow left the assailant motionless on the lush carpet of green.

The gentle gurgle of a nearby fountain was intermittently punctuated by the dull thud of a body succumbing to its fatal injuries, creating a stark dissonance in the otherwise tranquil soundscape.

The serene garden had been transformed into a theater of war, its beauty now tainted by the grim spectacle of battle.

Amidst the surrounding pandemonium, Erik and June pressed on, their gaze ever vigilant for more guards or hidden traps.

Chapter 768: Attack (3)

"Let's go in," Erik said.

"Yes, Master."

With that, the two stepped inside the mansion's grand entrance. More guards were pouring down from the stairs and coming out of the rooms nearby.

"I'll take those on the left. You take those on the right." Erik and June dispatched their foes with the same ease of using a hot knife to slice butter.

As the last guard crumpled, a haunting silence descended upon the area. The two took a couple of seconds to look around.

The mansion's grandeur was clear in its towering marble columns, opulent chandeliers casting warm glows over silk-draped furniture, and floors of polished stone that mirrored the art-adorned walls.

June and Erik looked at each other. "This should be a safe house? What the hell?"

The vast expanse of the entrance hall quickly swallowed the echoes of their boots against the polished marble floor.

"This is really shameful."

"Indeed, Master."

Their eyes swept over their surroundings one last time before they delved deeper into the heart of the mansion, leaving behind the fallen guards and the morning's eerie calm.

"Search the right wing," Erik said. "I'll take the left." With a nod of agreement, they split up, each disappearing down a separate corridor.

Erik moved through the mansion with focused eyes and a tint of rage in his steps. He arrived to a living room.

The spacious and airy room bathed in the soft, diffuse glow of the lighting fixtures secured on the ceiling.

A large, plush sofa, upholstered in soft gray fabric, dominated the room, inviting anyone who entered to sink into its comforting embrace.

A sleek glass coffee table stood in front of it, its surface gleaming under the soft light.

On one side of the room, the wall held a modern fireplace with a few logs inside, ready to crackle and fill the room with warmth when needed.

The room's tranquility was shattered as five guards burst through the door. Their eyes were cold and determined, their bodies radiating a deadly intent. Their only purpose was to kill the intruder that dared to come here.

Each held a weapon that shimmered with an ethereal glow, the air around it humming with the potent energy of mana.

"Oh my god, they are worse than cockroaches."

However, Erik would not underestimate them. Oddly, the guards stationed outside didn't have brain crystal rifles, a detail that piqued his curiosity.

Yet, the same wasn't true for those guarding the interior.

Without a word, they launched themselves at Erik. Without a word, they filled the room with the sound of crackling mana and the sharp whizz of weapons slicing through the air.

A rain of shots fell inside the room. Yet Erik remained calm. His eyes were sharp, his body relaxed. He used Hais's brain crystal power to increase his awareness and reflexes and avoided the shots.

While the others shot, a guard rushed at him. That was an idiotic move, but Erik guessed the guard didn't know how strong he really was, and thought attacking him while he was under heavy fire would be an excellent strategy. He was mistaken.

With an effortless sidestep, Erik evaded the attack, the man's deadly weapon missing him by mere inches.

The second and third guards attacked simultaneously, their weapons tracing a deadly arc toward Erik.

But he was already in motion, his body bending and twisting in a display of incredible agility and grace.

He ducked under the second guard's swing and sidestepped the third thrust, leaving them to stumble forward from their own momentum.

The last two guards charged at him together, but Erik was ready.

With a swift pivot on his heel, he spun away from their attack, their weapons clashing together in a burst of vibrant mana sparks.

Then, before the guards could recover, Erik moved. He closed the distance between them in an instant. His fist pulled back and then shot forward like a cannonball.

The punch landed on the first guard's chest, sending him flying backward and causing him to crash into his companions, who sprawled on the floor.

Then Erik rushed at them and killed the guards. The room fell into silence once more.

Erik then made his way to a bedroom, and it was there that he finally found his target.

Max, a middle-aged man with styled brown hair, wore a simple pajama. His face was a mask of surprise and fear as he took in the sight of Erik. However, countless years of fighting, training and spying led him to regain his composure quickly.

He studied the masked man in front of him.

"You've been quite theatrical," Max said. The man's voice trembled slightly.

"There would be no point in killing you without a bit of a charade," Erik's voice was as cold as ice.

"Do you work for the Crystal Cross gang?" Max asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

"No," Erik said. "On the contrary, they are my enemies."

"Then why did you send the TV message stating it was the Crystal Cross gang that was after me?"

"It was only to stir trouble." Erik grinned, but the man couldn't see that.

Max was visibly confused and scared. "Why are you doing all of this?"

"I have a goal."

"And does this goal require me to die?" Max asked. The man's voice was barely audible. He didn't even have the strength to talk, as his fear prevented him.

"Yes."

Max looked down at the ground, his heart pounding in his chest. Desperation washed over him like a tidal wave.

His mind raced with thoughts of escape, of bargaining, of pleading for his life.

But he knew it was futile. His shoulders slumped in resignation, his breath hitched in his throat.

The room seemed to close in on him; the walls pressing against him.

His life, with all its ups and downs, seemed to flash before his eyes. He couldn't find a way out of that predicament.

He felt a lump in his throat, a sinking feeling in his stomach. He was going to die, and there was nothing he could do about it.

The realization was cold and harsh, a bitter pill that he had no choice but to swallow.

Chapter 769: Ambush (1)

Erik's intimidating silhouette loomed over Max, casting an ominous shadow that seemed to swallow up the trembling man. "Any last words?" The chilling indifference in Erik's voice sent a shiver down Max's spine.

The man's voice quivered. "Please. Tell me at least why. Why are you doing this?" His eyes, wide with terror, sought answers in Erik's face - a desperate attempt to comprehend the dire predicament he was in.

Erik's face remained an unreadable mask, offering no insight into his thoughts or motivations. He walked towards Max, each footstep reverberating ominously within the expansive room.

Max was conscious of the impending doom that hung over him. His mind was a whirlwind of panic, cursing his shapeshifting ability - an asset that was now utterly useless.

He knew he couldn't morph and flee; the masked man before him wouldn't hesitate to eliminate anyone within the mansion's confines.

Fear seized Max, his heart pounding against his ribcage like a frenzied drummer before a battle, his body shivering, akin to a lone leaf caught in a tempest's merciless grip.

Desperation gnawed at him, his mind screaming at him to act, to do something.

But he was well aware of the futility of it all.

He was trapped, cornered by a predator as formidable as a tidal wave crashing against a fragile sandcastle. His fate was, without question, as sealed as a letter bound by the unbreakable wax of destiny.

Then a deafening explosion reverberated through the room. The place shook, as if caught in the grip of an invisible beast.

As the grand chandeliers swayed in a mesmerizing motion, the crystals adorning them collided, creating a cacophonous symphony that filled the air with a sense of impending doom.

The ceiling groaned under the strain, the agonizing sound of something cracking echoed throughout the room as it splintered and shattered.

Then an enormous hole appeared in the middle of the ceiling. Now a gaping maw was present in the mansion's fabric.

Debris rained down like a deadly hailstorm, chunks of plaster and shards of glass cascading in a lethal downpour.

Max, frozen in his spot, was caught in the merciless shower. A large chunk of rubble plummeted towards him. The sound of breaking bones and squished meat resounded through the room as the debris extinguishing his life in an instant.

Erik instead rolled away from the falling debris, avoiding the deadly rain with an uncanny precision.

However, he had no time to breathe. His instability brain crystal power flared, alerting him to the lethal intent of at least ten individuals.

Their emotions were a maelstrom of excitement mixed with a hint of fear. The shadowy figures, cloaked in black and masked, jumped down from the roof and charged at him.

Erik's senses were on high alert, his instability brain crystal power acting like an internal radar, perceiving the intentions of his attackers with uncanny precision.

Two figures launched a simultaneous attack within a matter of milliseconds. The first flickered in and out of existence.

In those fleeting moments she was there, Erik noticed it was a woman. She was phasing like a specter as she launched a punch aimed straight at Erik's heart.

At the same time, the second figure made a sudden lunge, transforming his hands into mysterious, amorphous forms that moved erratically, resembling the unpredictable flow of ink spreading in water.

Time seemed to slow as Erik's crystal power pulsed. He perceived the dual threats and, in a consequential motion; he acted.

When the first attacker moved towards him, Erik twisted his body to the side in order to evade the punch that seemed to come from nowhere.

The momentum generated by his evasion maneuver caused him to roll out of the trajectory of the second attacker, whose ink-blades were slicing through the air exactly where Erik had been standing just a blink ago.

Erik was so surprised that he couldn't find the words to speak. The attackers displayed an astonishing level of speed, surpassing anything he had ever encountered, leaving him in awe.

Two more figures moved in the span of a few milliseconds. One created a confusing array of reflections, her mirrored selves darting around Erik.

At the same time, the other figure launched a series of ripples in the air, the space around his fists vibrating as he aimed powerful ranged attacks.

The attackers were unyielding in their efforts, strategically coordinating their strikes to ensure that Erik was unable to catch a break.

The remaining eight figures bided their time, which was only a few seconds, anyway.

They were waiting for the perfect moment to strike against the masked young man.

<What the fuck?! >

The first thing Erik did was activate Hais's brain crystal power. His intelligence surged and the two powers worked in tandem.

Instability told Erik the attackers' intentions, while Hais's power made him keen for any movement around him.

"Anomalous surge of mana from the target!" one of the attackers said.

Amidst the confusing array of reflections, Erik focused on the intent and the subtle difference in their bodies. He could sense a clear, singular intention among the myriad clones, illusions or whatever they were.

Using this insight, he pinpointed the real person amidst the reflections.

With a swift movement, he lunged towards her, his fist connecting with her chest. The impact was lethal - a single punch, and she crumpled to the ground, lifeless.

At the same time, though, he had to deal with the other attacker. The man was launching a powerful vibration burst, so strong it distorted the surrounding air.

Erik could feel the waves of force rippling towards him. With a swift aerial maneuver, he dodged the attack.

The air where he had just been standing rippled violently, and the surroundings were destroyed.

<Master, what is happening? > June reached out to Erik thanks to the link the Instability power provided.

<DON'T COME HERE, JUNE! SEE HOW IS THE SITUATION OUTSIDE AND IF IT IS COMPLICATED TRANSFORM INTO A GALEWING AND GET YOUR ASS HERE WHEN I TELL YOU!>

<MASTER, WHAT IS HAPPENING?! > the clone asked again.

<THE BLACKGUARDS ARE HERE! >

Chapter 770: Ambush (2)

"WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING QUAKESTRIKE?!"

"SHUT UP MOMENTUM!"

"Dreadnought, help the others!" Momentum said.

Dreadnought charged at Erik like a human tank, her body as hard as a diamond, yet moving with surprising agility.

"Stickyfingers, do your job!"

Stickyfingers touched the ground, and in response, sticky tendrils sprouted from the floor around Erik. They moved like serpents in the grass, slithering and coiling, seeking to ensnare him in their grasp.

However, he jumped, avoiding the first batch of attacks.

Dreadnought was still charging. "Gotcha!"

Though Erik nimbly sidestepped the attack, leaving Dreadnought confused. However, the battlefield was far from clear.

Stickyfingers was at work again, her touch causing tendrils to sprout from the ground, seeking to trap Erik in their adhesive grasp.

Inkblade joined the fray, his ink swirling into existence, forming additional tendrils that lunged towards Erik with lethal intent.

Erik's eyes darted to the inky tendrils springing up from the ground, their pointed ends gleaming with deadly intent.

With a burst of adrenaline, he sprang into action. His body twisted and turned, weaving through the maze of lethal ink with deft agility, but he was having trouble.

The Blackguards had a ton of mana, not even with his massive stats. He couldn't avoid every single attack they had made.

This, coupled with the number of people attacking him, pushed him in a pretty serious situation.

Each tendril that shot up was met with a dodge, a swift sidestep, or a timely leap that was possible only thanks to Hais's brain crystal power.

At the same time, Phantom phased through the tumultuous chaos. She zeroed in on Erik, her foot swinging in a precise arc aimed at him.

Erik parried the kick, but the force of the blow sent him hurtling backward towards a wall.

Mid-flight, Quakestrike seized his chance. He generated a powerful vibration that rippled through the air, creating an invisible shockwave that slammed into Erik from behind. Then it stopped him from crashing into the wall. However, Quakestrike's vibration was far from not harmful.

"UGH! Fuck!"

Despite the pain, Erik harnessed the energy sent by Quakestrike, propelling him, flipping his body to land on his feet.

"What the fuck is this guy made of?" Quakestrike asked in shock.

This was the first time someone survived one of his attacks. Erik had tanked them as if they were nothing, and even used the energy to land on his feet again.

"Less talk!" Momentum said.

As soon as he landed, Erik dodged another of Dreadnought's charges, his senses strained to their limits.

He retaliated, his target - Stickyfingers. But as he attacked, he was met with an unexpected resistance.

He felt the ripples of mana and turned to look at the source. It came from the guy the others called 'Momentum', who was also obviously the leader.

Then came the ominous call from the same person, "Flexblade, your turn!". It was at that moment that one of the few people that didn't attack yet moved.

The man responded, his hand morphing into a giant mallet with a strange elastic quality.

As Erik grappled with the altered inertia, Momentum's power, capable of making each movement akin to battling a powerful current, the mallet found its mark.

The impact reverberated through Erik's bones, a grimace twisting his features as he fought against Momentum's power.

Stickyfingers, her eyes wide with anticipation, couldn't contain her reaction. "He's done," she said, her voice echoing in the tense silence.

Her words carried a note of finality, a cruel satisfaction curling her lips into a smirk.

Erik had to do something. He had been too arrogant to think there weren't people capable of rendering his statistics useless.

Damn, these guys were making the Instability and Hais's brain crystal powers useless. He couldn't simply keep up with the number of attacks. These guys had too much mana.

Despite the inability to exert his full strength due to Momentum's power, he intercepted the mallet and protected his vital organs. The sound of impact ringing out like a bell in a silent church.

Seizing the moment like a predator snatching its prey, he clasped Flexblade's mallet-hand and gave a forceful pull despite the pain. Then he activated the Xeridon Anteris' brain crystal power. But he had to be careful. To battle against these monsters, he was using a lot of mana.

Flexblade was yanked off balance, drawn towards Erik.

"FUUUUCK!"

The young man met him with a punch to the chest, powerful and unyielding as a battering ram.

The impact was cataclysmic, creating a gaping hole in Flexblade akin to the crater left by a meteor strike, extinguishing his life in an instant.

"MOTHERFUCKER!"

The others were visibly shocked. But Momentum quickly recovered.

"ATTACK!"

Erik, however, was already in motion. In two audacious leaps, he retrieved Max's corpse, then, with the raw power of a launched rocket, he propelled himself upwards, shattering the mansion's ceiling as if it were made of brittle glass and escaped the mansion's confines, leaving a trail of debris in his wake.

Almost simultaneously, June, having morphed into a Galewing, erupted from a hidden corner of the mansion, his emergence as sudden and striking as a comet streaking across the night sky.

Stickyfingers' eyes widened as she caught sight of June's shadow through the gaping hole in the ceiling flying toward Erik. Her voice, usually brimming with arrogance, faltered. "What in the world is that?"

Momentum, his gaze following Stickyfingers, recognized the shadow instantly. A sense of urgency replaced his initial shock, and he sprang into action, his movements fluid and determined. "He is controlling a Thaid!"

Without wasting another moment, he lunged towards the destroyed ceiling, scaling the debris with an agility born of desperation.

His companions, spurred by his sudden movement, followed suit, their expressions mirroring his mix of fear and awe.

With a grace that belied his monstrous form, June swooped down, his talons extended in an embrace. Erik was snatched up, a knight claimed by his steed, and together they fled the scene.

Below, their opponents could only gape in stunned silence, the spectacle unfolding before them more fantastical than any tale spun by the most imaginative minstrel.

High above, Erik and June surveyed the scene unfolding below them.

From their aerial vantage point, they could see a sea of figures amassing outside the mansion's grounds. There were at least a hundred of them.

Only 15 were dressed in black, their attire as somber as a moonless night. Masks obscured their faces, lending an air of anonymity and an unsettling uniformity to the crowd. They were Blackguards.

Among the five who had remained motionless during Erik's battle, one sprang into action. He reached for a communication device, his fingers dancing over its surface.

"Get aviation on the line," he said, his voice laced with urgency. "We've got a situation."

