

## BIOLOGICAL 771

### Chapter 771: Ambush (3)

Riding high in the sky atop June, Erik's heart pounded like a drum.

"What in blazes just happened back there, Master?" June hollered over the roar of the wind, his voice a mixture of concern and confusion.

Erik wiped the sweat from his brow, his hand coming away slick with blood. He was panting. He fought against many people and many thaids, but never he had come so close to dying.

"Those bastards, the Blackguards, they ambushed me." When he said that, his voice was rough as gravel, and his breath was labored. "They caught me off guard just as I was about to finish the job."

He glanced back, his gaze falling on Max's lifeless body. The man was sprawled across June's back. A shudder ran down Erik's spine. The Blackguards were stronger than he expected.

"Master," June's voice cut through his thoughts, "I think you should absorb that brain crystal right now."

Erik raised an eyebrow at him. "Now? Up here?"

June shrugged, his wings flapping steadily beneath them. "Why not?" he said. "We're clear of those goons for now. We've got maybe half a minute head start."

Erik considered this, his gaze drifting back to Max's lifeless body. But up there, in the open sky, where everyone could see him? Was that the right thing to do?

"Alright," he said. Erik realized he may not have another chance at getting Max's Power. "Let's do this."

Erik grimaced as he extracted the brain crystal from Max's fractured skull. Blood oozed out, sticky and metallic-scented.

"Bottoms up." He brought the crystal to his lips and knocked it back like a shot of whiskey. It tasted like copper pennies.

With the crystal down the hatch, Erik cupped the pooling blood in his hands. No use letting it go to waste. He slurped it up greedily, the viscous liquid dripping down his chin.

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

[MAX'S BRAIN CRYSTAL ACQUIRED. 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 TO INSTANTLY ABSORB IT.]

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

[5150 DNA POINTS DETECTED. STARTING EXTRACTION?]

<Use 2000 DNA points and absorb both instantly! >

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

[PROCEDURE COMPLETE.]

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

[PROCEDURE COMPLETE.]

After a moment, the blood-rush faded, and Erik caught his breath. He flexed his hands—the new power thrummed just under the surface.

Erik bared his teeth in a savage grin. Oh yeah, he could get used to this. The Blackguards wouldn't know what hit 'em next time.

"What's our next move, Master?"

June asked, his feathered wings beating steadily through the clouds.

Erik gazed out across the skyline, eyes narrowed in thought. "We'll need to lie low for now. Head for the other clones' location."

He paused. "I ordered the clones to be ready to leave the city at any moment, right?" Erik asked. June nodded in his bird form. Then Erik's lips curled into a sly grin. "I've changed my mind. Let's have some fun with these pathetic blackguard bastards."

June banked, angling back toward the metropolis sprawling below.

As he descended from the clouds, panicked screams rang out from the streets. People scattered in terror at the sight of the massive flying Thaid plunging from the sky.

Those in flying cars gawked upward in disbelief before hastily slamming on autopilot, desperate to flee the beast's path.

It was utter chaos - vehicles swerved haphazardly, almost colliding in their haste to escape. Klaxons blared as emergency alerts flashed across digital billboards.

From June's back, Erik watched as the citizens fled like ants below him.

Erik's gaze fixed on the gleaming skyscraper ahead. "June! Aim for those floor-to-ceiling windows and crash right through them!"

"As you command, Master!" June folded his wings and dove, picking up tremendous speed.

The workers inside the office tower had only a split second to react before the massive beast shattered the glass.

June's bulky Thaid body smashed through the window frames like tissue paper, sending razor-sharp shards exploding inward.

Terrified office workers fled their cubicles in panic as June's hulking form skidded across the polished concrete floor, overturning desks and shredding office chairs.

The beast plowed through the office's sleek minimalist decor, reducing it to wreckage within seconds.

<Now June - morph to dog form! > Erik said to his clone through their telepathic link. All the other people already fled the scene.

June's body contorted, shrinking rapidly into a canine shape even as he continued sliding across the floor.

Finally he came to rest against the far wall, now in the form of a panting husky.

Erik did the same, changing his appearance to resemble one of the men that fled the room some seconds before.

The young mana focused his mana, feeling his body shift and morph. His slender frame expanded, muscles swelling.

Facial features blurred, reforming into the sharp-jawed visage of a businessman. Erik's posture changed as well, shoulders squaring as he adopted a brusque, impatient gait.

"Let's move!"

June bounded for the door, glass crunching under his paws.

They raced into the emergency stairwell, the fire alarm's shrill wail echoing off the concrete walls.

Down they fled, taking the steps two at a time as screams and chaos continued around them.

Erik's features shifted into the unfamiliar visage he had copied. June's dog form bounded ahead, nails clicking on concrete.

As they neared a landing, a group of shaken office workers came into view. It was the same people who had been in the room when June crashed through. Oblivious, they huddled together, stunned and disheveled.

June leaped past them in one smooth motion. They jumped back, pressed against the wall by the large canine blur. Erik followed close behind, face angled down.

Erik adjusted his gaze away from one man in particular - the one whose appearance he had replicated.

Just in case, he shielded his face as he breezed by. No need to risk the man noticing a mirror image rushing past.

The workers gaped, bewildered, as Erik and June raced on without pause.

Their footsteps soon faded down the stairwell, leaving the men and women staring at them in confusion.

Neither man nor dog was identifiable to the group.

At the lobby, Erik pulled his coat collar up and dipped his head lower, masking his profile. June stayed close at his heels, playing the part of a domesticated dog.

They wove through the crowd and slip out the revolving doors in a few quick strides.

Once outside, they disappeared seamlessly into the flow of pedestrians on the busy sidewalk.

Erik and June's escape was complete, their identities still safely concealed.

Chapter 772: Ambush (4)

Panic filled the atmosphere as Erik and June made their way through the labyrinth of city streets.

The people's faces were masks of terror. They didn't know what happened with the Blackguards, but seeing a flying Thaid into the city's sky was enough to alarm everyone.

"A flying Thaid," they said, their voices echoing off the towering buildings around them.

The very mention of the creature set hearts racing and sent a chill down the spine of everyone inside the city.

Erik observed as mothers clutched their children a little closer, their eyes wide and darting.

Men frantically tapped at their phones, their fingers a blur as they tried to reach out to loved ones.

The incessant ringing of unanswered calls formed a dissonant soundtrack to the unfolding chaos.

With trembling hands, the shopkeepers flipped their signs to 'closed' and hastily bolted their doors.

Restaurants, usually brimming with life, were now deserted, chairs left overturned in the rush.

The city was shedding its lively skin, revealing a scared skeleton underneath.

However, they knew well that all their attempts would be futile.

If a flying Thaid wanted to kill them, there wasn't a building that could prevent them from doing so.

The preferred course of action was to maintain a low profile and avoid attracting attention.

When the city witnessed the sight of a Thaid flying inside, it was thrown into a frenzy.  
Understandably.

Erik and June, maintaining their composed demeanor, scanned their surroundings, ensuring they avoided any mercenaries, police, or blackguards that could lurk around.

It seemed that their pursuers were unable to keep up with them and had lost their trail.

As they had been hoping for, they finally made it to the park, letting out a sigh of relief.

Guiding their steps through the verdant park, Erik and June navigated a network of sun-dappled pathways and lush trees.

Their destination was a pre-agreed meeting spot, nestled at the base of a towering statue at the center of the park.

The statue was a magnificent tribute to Solomon Judd.

Time and the elements had weathered the stone from which it was carved, softening the intricate details without diminishing its grandeur.

The statue, with its majestic stance, stood tall and proud against the backdrop of the clear azure sky as the warm rays of sunlight embraced its form.

His stone face, etched with lines of wisdom and tales of valor, watched over them with an expression that seemed both stern and comforting.

Upon their arrival, the clones, who had been waiting for them, quickly gathered around Erik.

The worried expressions on their faces seemed to reflect the bright rays of the sun, while the sound of their voices echoed and reverberated throughout the peaceful park.

"Master," one of them started, his voice shaky, "What happened?"

When June transformed into a Galewing, it was as if they were announcing their presence and powers to the world.

Of course, they understood it was them, and not a real flying Thaid that entered the city, meaning that something big happened.

Erik's face was a mask of cool composure, yet his eyes blazed like steel. "We were ambushed," he said.

His jaw clenched, the muscles rippling. "The Blackguards have sneaked into the city under our noses. It seems Lyria's little get-together at the mercenary guild was just a smokescreen to lure me into the open. She likely knew I was watching, or at least suspected that."

"But how did they communicate? If she suspect you can hack into devices and have the means to listen to private conversation, there wasn't a safe way for her to coordinate with the Blackguards."

Erik thought about it for a second. "They likely organized this before coming here. If I don't know where they are, I can't possibly learn what they plan."

Erik, feeling restless, started pacing back and forth, his footsteps resonating with a sharpness that resembled cracks of thunder.

The furrowing of his brows created a striking effect, enveloping his eyes in an ominous darkness. He was mad. "They caught me blindsided, like a fool. I should have known it was a trap."

The air was filled with a sense of heaviness as Erik's words resonated.

Uneasy glances were shared among the clones as their faces darkened, resembling a storm that was about to unleash.

"These mad dogs... They've caught the scent of power and are tracking me like hounds on a fox hunt." His lips peeled back from his teeth in a vicious sneer.

"All they needed was just a whiff of what I could do, to where I was, and they came. I just hope they don't know all of this was made on purpose."

Erik abruptly halted his movement and shifted his focus towards the clones, causing his coat to swirl around his figure.

"I've endured enough of their meddling. They likely sent the Crystal Cross Gang back in Frant to hunt me. They likely asked uncle Benjamin to bring me out of the house to search the place."

He whirled to face the others, his coat flaring out like a hawk's wings. "But no more. Now we go on the hunt. We'll smoke those rats out of whatever fetid holes they're hiding in and crush them underfoot." Erik's lip curled in a fearsome snarl.



As the clones imagined the upcoming battle, their eyes sparkled with a chilling determination.

Finally, one clone stepped forward, fists clenched. "We will make them pay, Master."

The other clones murmured their assent. "We will hunt them to the ends of the earth if need be," another said, his face set in grim determination.

The clone who had first spoken met Erik's gaze unwaveringly. "Command us, and we shall obey. We live only to serve your will."

Around him, the other clones nodded, their postures radiating readiness. As one, they turned to Erik, awaiting his orders. Their loyalty and resolve was absolute.

Erik's eyes gleamed with feral satisfaction, seeing the eagerness of his warriors. His lip curled in a ruthless smile. "Good."

"The Blackguards want a war. We'll give them one. We'll rain down hellfire on their heads until there's nothing left but ashes." His eyes blazed with cold fury, as merciless as a winter storm.

Chapter 773: No more non-lethal approaches

The silence in the flawless conference room was tense, like the hush that falls over a forest before thunder cracks the sky.

The polished mahogany table sat solemn and silent, its gleaming surface reflecting the grim faces gathered around it.

The plush leather chairs, normally so inviting, now seemed hard as the team perched tensely on the edges of their seats.

Along the wood-paneled walls, the gilded mirrors and paintings gazed down sternly, as if chastising the group for their failure.

The very air felt heavy, weighed down by disappointment and dread.

A man paced back and forth, his footsteps muffled by the plush carpet. His face flushed an angry red as he clenched and unclenched his hands at his sides.

"Would someone care to explain how we let Erik Romano slip through our fingers yet again?" A man's voice echoed off the soundproofed walls.

The assembled team sat tensely around the polished marble table, avoiding his piercing gaze.

Quakestrike and Dreadnought exchanged an uneasy glance, while Techmagnet stared at the table. No one dared to speak.

After a long, tense moment, Techmagnet broke the silence. "Hey, it wasn't our fault this time," she said. Her voice shrilled in the hushed room.

"Those guys were supposed to have our backs." She jabbed a finger toward the five people seated across the table.

One of them, a young man, let out a derisive snort, not even bothering to look up from examining his nails.

"Uh, keeping tabs on the target was our only job, honey," he said. "Jumping into the fight wasn't on our orders."

"Yeah, and there were what, ten of you meatheads going after the guy?"

A woman said with a sly smirk, her voice echoing off the vaulted ceiling.

"Don't see how one dude took you all down and killed two people. You should be ashamed of your incompetency."

Quakestrike rolled his eyes. "Ha ha, aren't you just hilarious?" His voice dripped with sarcasm, but it was clear he was enraged.

An old man, the leader of the mission, pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing heavily. "That's enough. All this bickering is getting us nowhere."

He turned to Momentum, the man who led the attack on Erik and the captain of this Blackguards' team. "What are your thoughts on our target?" he asked. "We clearly underestimated him."

Momentum furrowed his brow, looking troubled. "To be frank, I'm flabbergasted. This is the first time we've seen a single individual take on ten blackguards, kill two, and escape unscathed. Damn, he was controlling a flying Thaid. Have you ever seen someone do that?"

"Indeed."

"Our intelligence suggested Erik Romano had more than the three powers he showed until now. It was already incredible he had three, and not two, but he didn't use a single one of them today, at least that we know of. This suggests he is hiding more."

Shadowstalker nodded. "If I may, sir," he said in a respectful tone. "I examined the mana traces at the scene during the fight." A sliver of curiosity slipped through.

"Two distinct mana traces were coming from the target. Neither of which seemed to be the brain crystal powers we knew the target possessed. So we can confirm there are at least two more abilities we haven't identified yet."

The Man crossed his arms, looking concerned. "Are you sure about that, Shadowstalker?"

"Indeed, sir." The man nodded. "This technology may be new, but we tested it extensively. There is no room for error."

The Man didn't want to believe what he had just heard. Erik Romano, possessing more than two brain crystal powers, went against everything they knew about Awakeners, but having three or more? It defied logic.

The Man wracked his brain, grasping for some other explanation. "Could the target have gotten hold of Brain Crystal equipment somehow?" He said.

That technology allowed wielding extra abilities. That idea was feasible.

Shadowstalker shook his head. "Brain Crystal gear leaves distinct mana traces from the Thaid source," he then tapped his temple. "Erik Romano's energies were identical, suggesting the powers are his."

The Man's eyes widened in alarm. He stepped closer to Shadowstalker, arms spread questioningly. Shadowstalker met his gaze and gave a single, grim nod.

The Man raked a hand through his hair, spinning away. Erik Romano's powers were his own. This confirmed what they were suspecting from a long time.

"Then it's worse than I thought."

The man resumed pacing over the ornate rug, his footsteps muffled once more. His crew watched him warily from around the gleaming table, the atmosphere thick with tension.

Momentum stepped forward, brow furrowed in thought. "Can we track him using those mana traces?" he asked Shadowstalker.

The man shook his head. "Not exactly," he said. "At the current state of technology, we are not able to distinguish signatures between humans. We can only infer if the mana traces people release are human-like or Thaid-like."

He tapped the sleek device on his wrist. "Besides, when I used the device inside the mansion, I only set it to scan Erik. If I scanned the room, I wouldn't have been able to tell who was doing what. There's no way to pick out his traces in a crowd."

Stickyfingers scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest. "Is there some use to this gadget, then?"

Shadowstalker bristled, his eyes flashing. "We can use it to get more intel on his powers."

"If we find him again," Stickyfingers shot back, her lip curling.

Before Shadowstalker could respond, the young man who had spoken out earlier chimed in arrogantly. "Oh, we'll find him alright," he said, smirking.

"Thirty teams are already scouring the city. He and that Thaid were spotted entering the Verdant Skyscraper." The youth's eyes glinted with excitement. "They're questioning everyone who left the building since. It's only a matter of time before they track him."

The Man turned back, a glimmer of hope on his face. "Good, cut off all escape routes. I want all footage from security feeds and traffic cameras reviewed as well. I want as many guards and vehicles stationed at the city's exit. Damn, you can even employ mech."

"What about brain crystal guns?" He asked. "Should we go lethal?"

"If things get too complicated. Having his body will still be better than having nothing."

"Are you sure, sir?" Momentum asked. "Isn't he your best friend's son?"

"I tried every non lethal approach. If Erik keeps displaying this aggression. My hands are tied. Now move," Benjamin said to his men.

Zakir grinned and pumped his fist. "Yes, sir!" He spun on his heel and dashed from the room, eager to relay the orders.

Stickyfingers watched him go, shaking her head disdainfully. "Overeager pup."

Benjamin resumed pacing, his mind churning once more. Perhaps they could still salvage this operation. But he knew capturing Erik would be no simple task now.

Shadowstalker stood silently, contemplating the readings on his scanner. What other secrets did their target possess? The mysteries surrounding this man seemed to multiply endlessly.

Chapter 774: Noah's schemes

Becker's lungs burned as he sprinted through the forest, boots pounding against the leaf-strewn ground.

The roar of engines echoed behind him as his pursuers wove between the trees in their military-grade vehicles.

He risked a glance back—at least a hundred soldiers, hellbent on capturing their 'traitorous' ex-general.

Becker grimaced. Even one-on-one, these lackeys were no match for his air manipulation powers.

But a hundred at once? His mana reserves teetered dangerously low after hours of battling these goons.

Tires squealed as a jeep pulled up alongside him. Becker dove right as laser rifles and brain crystal powers shredded the underbrush. He tumbled to his feet and kept running, cursing under his breath.

<I Have to lose them, and soon. >

Becker whipped around, his exhaustion momentarily forgotten as he prepared his counterattack.

Raising his right hand, he focused his power, feeling the air molecules respond to his will. The invisible gases condensed and warped thanks to his mana, spinning as they compressed into solid form.

Within seconds, the air had transformed into a deadly javelin, its crystalline point glinting in the dappled sunlight.

Becker gripped the shaft, the weapon's weight feeling natural in his palm. mana thrummed through the condensed air, resonating with his power.

Becker's eyes narrowed, zeroing in on one approaching jeep.

With a grunt, he hurled the javelin with superhuman force, his arm extending fully as the weapon left his hand.

The spear rocketed forward, slicing through the air like a missile. Becker watched its trajectory, confident in the imminent impact.

He hurled it at the nearest SUV. The spear impaled the driver and passenger behind before they could react.

The javelin also pierced the jeep's hood in a spray of metal, spearing through the engine block. The force of the impact stopped the vehicle dead in its tracks, severing it in half.

The two severed chunks of the jeep crashed to the ground with an earsplitting metallic screech.

Flames erupted from the ruined engine and licked up the chassis. Soldiers spilled from the wreckage, thrown from the vehicle like rag dolls.

The javelin had sliced through the SUV as easily as a hot knife through butter, leaving the pursuing soldiers scattered helplessly across the forest floor.

Becker allowed himself a grim smile at the devastation before sprinting onward with the other vehicles on his tail.

"GET HIM!"

Becker allowed himself a grim smile before sprinting on. The forest blurred around him, branches whipping against his face. His lungs seared, protesting the prolonged exertion.

Up ahead, a river cut through the trees. Becker made for it, hoping the water might deter his pursuers.

He burst from the treeline and splashed into the rushing current. Icy water swirled around his knees, soaking his fatigues.

On the opposite bank, soldiers piled from their vehicles, weapons trained on Becker.

Their commander's voice boomed over a megaphone. "Surrender, traitor! You're surrounded!"

Becker tensed, eying the figures lining the riverbanks. He might be able to take down a few more, but not all of them.

"Surrender, Becker!" the captain said through his megaphone. "You're surrounded with nowhere to run. Make this easy on yourself."

Becker turned to face the soldiers lining the riverbanks, weapons trained on him. He took a deep breath.

"How can you do this?" Becker called out, anger creeping into his tone. "After everything I've done for Frant, you turned against me so easily?"

The captain scoffed. "Save your lies, you bastard! We have plenty of evidence proving your involvement with the Crystal Cross Gang."

Becker's hands curled into fists. "More false claims fabricated by Volkov to undermine me," he shot back.

"That snake was always jealous of my position. He sowed discord at every turn."

The soldiers shuffled in unease, but kept their sights steadied. The captain's eyes narrowed.

"Last chance, Becker," he said. "Surrender immediately or we will execute you where you stand."

Desperation clawed at Becker's mind. Had his decades of loyal service to the nation meant nothing?

Were his people so quick to discard him over baseless accusations? Didn't anyone remember all he'd sacrificed for Frant?

Jaw clenched, Becker began gathering the last wisps of mana in his weary body.

If this was to be his end, he wouldn't go quietly. He'd take down as many turncoats as he could before they overwhelmed him.

Becker tensed, ready to transform into air and evade the imminent hail of gunfire.

He drew the mana from his brain crystal, feeling it swirl and crackle within his cells.

"Let's see what you can—"



Suddenly, armed figures burst from the treeline, descending on the soldiers' flank. They didn't look like soldiers from Frant, but they were trained and strong.

<Ah... right. I'm in their territories after all...>

Gunshots and screams erupted as the ambushers cut down the surprised troops with ruthless efficiency. In seconds, the riverbanks were strewn with bodies.

A remaining soldier fired off a panicked shot. Becker dissolved into the air, letting the bullet pass harmlessly through his swirling form.

The process of re-coalescing took less than two seconds, but when he was fully formed again, he found out that the only things around him were dead bodies.

<Fuck...>

Heavy footsteps approached, and Becker turned to find himself encircled by stern-faced warriors bearing the insignia of Liberty Watch's Village.

Becker's shoulders slumped. This was it. The consequences of his actions came full circle.

He tried for years to get the neural link training technique from these people, but he always failed.

Last, around a year ago, they disappeared from the face of the earth, puzzling everyone in Frant who knew about them.

The lead warrior stepped forward, face impassive. Becker stood motionless as the man raised his curved blade.

<I suppose I deserve this... >

The suffering he had inflicted on these people was reason enough for that fate to come. He had his reasons, but he knew it was wrong.

The warriors kept their spears leveled at Becker as a tall, cloaked figure approached.

His mask obscured all facial features, leaving his identity a mystery.

Clearly he held authority here, though Becker had never encountered this man before.

"Armand Becker," the stranger said, his voice low.

"It is surprising to find you in Liberty's forests after the destruction you wreaked."

Becker bit back a retort, sizing up the situation. He was in no shape to fight, his mana almost depleted. Perhaps silence was the wisest course for now.

The masked man circled him slowly. "The esteemed general reduced to a bedraggled fugitive. How amusing. I wonder, what would your loyal men think if they saw you now?"

Becker's jaw clenched at the taunt. He fixed the man with a defiant stare. "If you plan on killing me, then get on with it. I'm in no mood for games."

The stranger chuckled. "Kill you? Now why would I do that when you may yet prove useful?" He leaned in close, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "I think you and I could accomplish great things together."

Becker frowned, suspicions rising. This was no tribal warrior. "Who are you?"

"Let's just say my master deemed you useful for his cause." The man straightened. "As for my name, it's Noah."

Chapter 775: Retaliation (1)

Erik slunk through the dark alleys of Caelora city, sticking to the shadows as he scanned the city streets for any sign of the blackguards.

He knew they were out there somewhere, lurking amongst the citizens like wolves in sheep's clothing.

Erik had to be careful - the city was crawling not only with those bastards, but even with mercenaries and police officers, all on high alert ever since word got out that the shapeshifters killer had been found but on the loose.

As Erik peered around a corner, he spotted a group of armed mercenaries patrolling up ahead.

They wore the usual mismatched armor that marked most sold swords, but Erik noticed they all had the same insignia - the mark of the city guard.

These mercenaries were on the city's payroll, which meant the Blackguards were controlling them to catch him.

Erik melted back into the shadows before they could spot him, but the sun was high, and moving unseen was not easy. Erik could morph into animals, change his face or hide with the Chameleon Veil.

The problem was that the previous battle consumed a huge chunk of mana, so he kept a minimal transformation and just changed his face, as it was less strenuous than hiding his body.

While using the Chameleon Veil was going to be a last resort move. He couldn't waste mana, as his opponents had at least doubled what he had.

He continued navigating the back alleys, ducking behind dumpsters and pressing himself against walls whenever he heard footsteps approaching.

Up ahead, Erik spotted the warm glow of the city square. Erik crept to the edge of the alley and peered around the corner, scanning the crowd.

His eyes locked onto a group of police officers chatting near the central fountain. No blackguards. Erik cursed under his breath.

He needed to find one of them, but they were probably scattered throughout the city to search for him.

As Erik turned to leave, a commotion at the far end of the square caught his attention.

A ripple went through the crowd as people shuffled aside. Erik spotted the police officers stiffening, hands drifting toward their weapons.

A squad of armored mercenaries marched through the crowd, parting the citizens before them.

As they neared the fountain, the leader signaled, and the squad fanned out, beginning to accost random citizens.

A young man was grabbed roughly by the shoulder and spun around, coming face-to-face with a mercenary's helmet.

"State your name!" the mercenary said. The young man stammered, holding his hands up in frightened compliance as the mercenary grabbed him.

"W-wait, what are you—" he tried to say, but he was interrupted.

"Quiet!" the mercenary interrupted him. "State your name. I won't repeat myself twice."

"I'm just h-heading home from work. My name is Derik."

"Search him for weapons," the mercenary said, ignoring his protests as he patted him down. Derik squeezed his eyes shut, face pale.

After a tense moment, the mercenary found nothing. He shoved Derik back into the crowd. "Get out of here."

Derik staggered, then retreated into the mass of concerned citizens. As he hurried away, he glanced back at the confrontational mercenaries with a mix of relief and unease.

Nearby, a young man cried out as his bag was ripped from his grasp. "You can't take that!" he said as the mercenary dumped out the contents.

Since he only found everyday items, the mercenary shoved the bag back into the young man's arms and moved on, leaving him to take his stuff back from the ground.

Another young man was grabbed, his arms spread wide as a mercenary patted him down.

The mercenary grunted, doing a cursory check, before pushing the young man back into the crowd.

It was clear they were profiling and only searching for the young men who potentially matched Erik's appearance.

One by one, the citizens were searched and interrogated, the mercenaries on edge as they hunted for any sign of Erik.

But their actions were fruitless, Erik observed. These mercenaries were fools if they thought he would be caught so easily.

Then he noticed some mercenaries erect glowing energy barriers at key intersections, funneling all traffic through security checkpoints. Erik could smell the blackguards making their move, preparing their trap around these checkpoints.

They were trying to prevent him from reaching the city's exit, but they didn't know he had no intention of going out of the city yet. However, there was still no Blackguard in sight.

Observing from afar, Erik activated his Instability brain crystal power, reaching out with his mind. He established a mental link with June.

"June, what's your status?"

"No sign of Blackguards here yet. Just a bunch of mercenaries and police searching the crowd."

June was near another blockade on the far side of the square. More armored mercenaries were accosting citizens, grabbing young men at random to search and interrogate.

The mercenaries' armors glinted in the sun, their faces obscured by helmets.

The Citizens shrunk away, fearful expressions on their faces as the imposing mercenaries shouted orders and shoved people aside.

June lingered in a narrow alley off the square, half-hidden in shadow. He peered around the edge of a brick building, watching the scene.

The alley was damp and strewn with trash, but it allowed June a concealed vantage point.

As the armored mercenaries marched past his alley, June pressed himself back against the wall, blending into the darkness.

He was dressed in nondescript clothing - faded shirt, pants and boots - nothing to draw attention.

Though the mercenaries were distracted by their search, June knew he needed to be cautious. One suspicious move could blow his cover.

So he waited, still as a statue, scanning the blockade for any sign of the blackguards' presence. Once he was certain the area was secure, he would move on.

"Stay alert. The Blackguards can't be far."

"Will do. Watch your back over there too, Master."

Erik nodded to himself as the mental link faded. He trusted his clones to find one of the Blackguards as soon as they could.

They were strong, smart, and knew what to do. For now, Erik just had to remain patient and vigilant. The prey would show themselves soon enough.

Chapter 776: Retaliation (2)

Alexander peered through his binoculars, perched high atop a skyscraper overlooking Caelora.

Flying cars buzzed by, searchlights sweeping the city below as the manhunt for Erik intensified.

But Alexander just grinned, enjoying the view as the clueless authorities scoured the streets.

Little did they know the man they sought had already changed his face, blending seamlessly into the crowds.

And Erik wasn't alone - he had an army of clones ready to aid him, 31 brothers scattered throughout the city in various disguises.

Though Alexander could not see them from his vantage point atop the skyscraper, he knew they were around, searching for the Blackguards.

They were Erik's eyes and ears, scattered throughout the streets.

As a flying patrol car passed disturbingly close, Alexander ducked down, pressing himself flat against the room's wall.

He didn't dare use his binoculars now - the glint of lenses would give him away. But he didn't need them to picture the scene below.

He had memorized the area earlier, identifying choke points, defensible positions, potential traps - anything that could prove useful to Erik.

Soon the patrol car moved on, fading into the distance. Alexander raised his head, peering over the window once more.

On the ground, the blockade was a hive of frenzied activity as mercenaries and police searched the crowd for any sign of Erik.

They manhandled the young men, throwing them against walls to frisk them, ignoring their protests.

One officer wrenched a man's arms behind his back, making him cry out in pain as they interrogated him. Another mercenary shoved a boy to the pavement, kicking him as he tried to crawl away.

Panic was spreading through the penned-in citizens, their fear palpable. Some screamed and sobbed as heavy boots and rifle butts struck them.

"These guys are shameless..." Alexander said in disgust.

Suddenly, he noticed some movement behind the cluster of mercenaries and police.

While gripping his binoculars, Alexander peered at the buildings behind the blockade. "What's happening back there?"

After a few moments, he saw a large figure emerge from a doorway, clad entirely in black.

The man wore a black helmet with dark visors, obscuring his face.

His frame, though, was massive, with broad shoulders and a barrel chest.

He moved with surprising grace for his size, slipping through the occupied mercenaries who parted to make him move and with faces of reverence.

"Bingo!"

\*\*\*

As Quakestrike made his way towards the barricade, his heavy black boots created a loud crunching sound with every step as they trampled over shattered glass and scattered debris.

The mercenaries were dwarfed by the immense figure of the Blackguard, who wore a suit of dark armor that seemed to consume every bit of light in its surroundings. A long energy rifle was slung over his massive shoulder.

The mercenary captain stood at attention, back rigid. His uniform was coated in a fine layer of dust from the rubble, and his face glistened with sweat.

"Any progress on locating Erik Romano?" Quakestrike asked. He tilted his helmet down towards the captain. His voice was a low, mechanical rumble from within the black helmet.



"No, sir." The captain stood up straighter and looking at Quakestrike's opaque visor. He shook his head. "My men have searched everywhere in this sector, top to bottom. But no sign of Romano yet."

The captain gestured around them at the rubble and burning fires, his shoulders slumping in disappointment.

Quakestrike crossed his arms, the servos in his armor whirring. "I expected as much. Romano is far too cunning to be caught so easily."

The captain nodded. "We'll keep at it, sir," he said, balling one hand into a fist. "But we will leave no stone unturned until we find him."

Quakestrike pointed one thick, armored finger at the captain. "See that you do. Romano is a priority. Consider him extremely dangerous."

"We'll get him, sir. You have my word." The captain saluted Quakestrike, holding his fist to his chest as a sign of respect.

Quakestrike gave a slight nod, then turned and strode away, his cloak swirling around him.

The captain shouted orders for his men to continue the search as Quakestrike disappeared into the smoke-filled streets.

<Motherfucker... > Quakestrike shook his head as he strode away from the captain. <This guy is making me waste a lot of time. >

He clenched his fist in frustration. The servos in his armor whirled from the pressure. <Romano is still out there somewhere... >

Quakestrike's thoughts wandered back to the intense battle that had taken place at the mansion. Romano's strength caught him off guard.

<How the hell did he get more than two brain crystal powers? > Quakestrike wondered.

<That should be impossible... > He had seen nothing like Romano's abilities before.

Quakestrike was eager to capture Erik and interrogate him. He needed to understand the source of the man's uncanny strength. What was his secret?

The number of questions posed exceeded the amount of answers provided. Quakestrike hastened his pace, causing his cloak to billow behind him.

Without warning, a beeping noise came from his helmet communicator, alerting him to an incoming call. Quakestrike, with a swift motion, pressed the side of his helmet to answer the call.

"Report," came the stern voice of Momentum, leader of the Blackguard squad, tasked with capturing Erik.

"No sign of the target yet," Quakestrike said. "The search continues."

"Be on high alert," Momentum warned. "Alone, you are no match for Romano."

The insinuation made Quakestrike's hackles rise, yet he couldn't ignore the fact that it held a certain amount of truth. Quakestrike was considered a genius when he was younger, and it couldn't be different to enter the black guards.

People respected and feared Quakestrike because of his link to the organization.

Never had he lost a duel, except to his fellow Blackguards.

He was unaccustomed to defeat, but savored it for the first time against a kid at least ten years younger than him.

Erik had proven unpredictable and powerful. If Quakestrike faced him alone again, the outcome was certain and he would die. He would need to be cautious and stick to the squad's plan.

"I will be ready when we find him," Quakestrike assured Momentum. Failure was not an option with the higher-ups demanding results. They had to get Erik and learn his secret.

Chapter 777: Retaliation (3)

<Master, > Alexander said through his telepathic link to Erik. <I've found one of the Blackguards. What would you like me to do? >

<Where? >

<On the blockade in Harmony Square. The police and mercenary are basically beating everyone there. There is a lot of chaos you can take advantage of. >

<Good. I will manage things from here. You contact the others and tell them to disperse. We will meet at the park around 21. If I'm not there by that hour, disperse and come again the following day. However, tell the others to buy or steal phones.

We need to stay in contact without me being acting as a proxy. I think it won't take much for me to sort this out. >

<Understood, sir. >

With that, Erik turned on his heels. Harmony square wasn't far from his position, so he didn't think it would take much for him to reach the place.

With his face still turned into that of a random person, Erik walked through the streets. He was being careful of not attracting anyone's attention.

The problem was that, to reach his target, he needed to approach the police block. However, if he did so by taking the identity of a civilian, he would be for sure stopped.

Erik could either lure the man, but prompting a massive manhunt, with his target calling for reinforce, or take someone else identity and back stab him.

However, in that case, he would find himself amidst enemies. Though, the latter seemed like the best option, as it was hard for average people to pose a threat to him.

The major problem was if more Blackguards reached him. With his decision taken, Erik increased his pace.

Erik navigated through the bustling streets, his steps measured and discreet as he approached Harmony Square. Melded into the crowd, he was just another face among many, his appearance altered by the power of his brain crystal power.

He had chosen the guise of an unremarkable man, one easily overlooked in the sea of diverse faces.

Erik moved with the flow of pedestrians. Many were fleeing the scene, going in the opposite direction of Harmony Square and heading home. His eyes scanned the surroundings without lingering on anyone point for too long.

Mercenaries and police officers were a common sight, their presence heavy and foreboding.

They moved in pairs, scrutinizing each passerby with keen, suspicious eyes. Their fingers rested near their holstered weapons, ready to act at a moment's notice. Erik kept his gaze averted, his posture relaxed yet alert.

Erik stepped into Harmony Square, engulfed by a scene of tumult and disorder. The expansive area had transformed into a zone of chaos.

Dense crowds of people jostled and pushed against one another, their faces etched with anxiety and fear.

Police officers and mercenaries swarmed the area, their presence not just heavy but oppressive.

Temporary police outposts, erected and manned, dotted the perimeter of the square. Officers barked orders and herded the civilians like cattle.

Mercenaries patrolled the area, their eyes scanning the crowd with a predatory gaze.

They stopped individuals at random, roughly handling them as they conducted their searches.

Erik witnessed a young man being pushed against a wall, his arms wrenched behind his back as an officer frisked him.

The young man, maintaining his disguised appearance, navigated through the throng. He kept his head down, avoiding direct eye contact with the officers and mercenaries.

He witnessed a group of officers converge around a small cluster of people. They were checking IDs, their faces stern and unyielding.

A mercenary kicked a boy who was trying to crawl away from the turmoil, his boot connecting with a sickening thud.

Amidst the bedlam, Erik plotted his path. He needed to cross the square, but every step seemed fraught with danger.

He watched as a mercenary grabbed a man by the collar, shoving him against the temporary outpost with brute force. Erik tensed, ready to react if confronted.

As he edged closer to the other side of the square, the shouts and cries of the crowd mixed with the stern commands of the police increased.

<I need to find someone suited for me to approach. But I can't take a random person. > He thought. <A police officer, maybe? > He scanned the crowd to see if there was someone worth taking. <But who?

>

There were some people that would be suitable for the task, a captain and some others. However, they were too far into the cluster of officers.

It was then that the young man noticed an older police officer overseeing the blockade but from a distance. The officer, bearing the insignia of a Chief Inspector, exuded an air of authority and experience.

His uniform, though slightly worn, was neat and well-maintained, adorned with various badges and commendations that spoke of a long career in law enforcement.

His hair, peppered with gray, was cut short and neat, matching his groomed mustache.

Despite his age, his posture was erect and commanding, his gaze sharp as he scanned the area.

The Chief Inspector's eyes moved with vigilance, missing nothing as they swept over the crowd.

In his hand, he held a walkie-talkie, occasionally barking orders into it, his voice firm and decisive.

He seemed to be the one orchestrating the operation, directing officers and mercenaries.

<System. Connect to the police servers and search for information about that guy. >

[UNDERSTOOD. CONNECTING TO THE POLICE SERVERS THROUGH THE PUBLIC INTERNET CONNECTION. CONNECTION COMPLETE. SEARCHING FOR DATA. DATA FOUND. THE MAN IS SAMUEL HAWTHORNE.

HE'S BEEN IN THE FORCE FOR OVER 35 YEARS AND CURRENTLY HOLDS THE POSITION OF CHIEF INSPECTOR. THIS HIGH RANK MEANS HE HAS SIGNIFICANT AUTHORITY AND ACCESS TO CLASSIFIED INFORMATION. HAWTHORNE IS AN EXPERT IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND COUNTER-TERRORISM. HE'S KNOWN AMONG HIS COLLEAGUES FOR HIS CALMNESS UNDER PRESSURE AND STRATEGIC THINKING. EMULATING THESE TRAITS WILL HELP MAINTAIN A CONVINCING DEMEANOR.

HE'S HIGHLY RESPECTED AND SEEN AS A MENTOR BY MANY IN THE FORCE. LEVERAGING HIS REPUTATION COULD OPEN DOORS AND REDUCE SUSPICION. AS CHIEF INSPECTOR, HE OVERSEES MAJOR OPERATIONS AND COORDINATES WITH OTHER AGENCIES, OFFERING STRATEGIC INSIGHTS INTO POLICE MOVEMENTS AND PROTOCOLS. HE'S KNOWN FOR A FIRM BUT FAIR ATTITUDE IN HIS INTERACTIONS.

IT'S IMPORTANT TO MIMIC THIS TO ALIGN WITH HIS KNOWN BEHAVIOR.]

However, Erik also got more information through injection.

<Well. This is certainly good information. >

Erik walked toward the man, who was still giving orders. He observed him, trying to absorb as much information as possible to give a convincing performance when he stole his identity.

The officer pointed in a direction as he gave orders to some people. Then Erik got close enough to talk to the man. However, his face morphed from one of stoicism to that of desperation and fear.

His heart started beating faster as the young man tried to appear as distressed as possible. Tears started coming down his face, adding more spice to his performance.

"Officer! Officer! Please, I need your help!"

The man turned. "What?! What happened?!"

"My son! I can't find my son! It was with me a moment ago, but now..." Erik was putting on a show.

Knowing the man had a weak spot for kids, he created that story. Based on the man's reaction, and the sudden shift in his demeanor. Erik was right about his decision.

"Where have you seen your son for the last time?"

Erik almost smirked and blew his cover. "It was here! Follow me, please!"

The two ran. For all the police officers knew, a kid's life was on a thread. He could have been kidnapped. It took little for Erik to bring the officer into an alley.

"It's here you last saw him?"

Erik turned, his disguise nowhere to be seen, a calm face instead of the distraught one.

"No. But it will be the last place where I see you."

As soon as the man saw Erik, he recognized him. After all, it was him they were searching for. He made no effort whatsoever to contact the others, opting instead to escape. However, Erik was already on him.

For a moment, the young man's mind wandered to the idea of ending the guy's life. However, he was moved by the sincere compassion the officer exhibited towards the fake disappearing child. All in all, this guy was a good one. So Erik dropped him unconscious.

In a swift motion, Erik lifted him up, mimicking the action of picking up a potato sack.

He forced an alley's door and placed the man there. After removing his clothes, he left the man unconscious on the ground in his underwear only before putting them on himself.

<All done. Now the last part. >

Erik stared into the man's eyes, using his newfound brain crystal power to mirror his facial and physical features. In a matter of seconds, the mana transformed Erik into an older individual with almost completely white hair.

Chapter 778: Retaliation (4)

After hiding the unconscious police officer, Erik left the building.

<All done. Now I need to approach the target. If I play this well, I can lure him elsewhere. >

The goal that Erik had in mind was straightforward. To achieve his aim, he had to go as far as stealing the man's identity, infiltrating the Blackguards, securing vital information.

Maybe carrying out targeted assassinations and effectively thwarting their plans.

However, Erik didn't know if everything would go according to plan.

The Blackguard was surrounded by police and mercenary in a middle of Harmony square.

There were civilians, animals. Bystanders that would die during the confrontation.



Based on what he saw, the Blackguards didn't care about casualties. Besides, they would surely blame him for their deaths by using their propaganda tools.

<How do I lure him...? >

However, it took little for the young man to come up with some ideas. With everything settled, Erik started walking toward the Blackguard.

In the shadowed alley of Harmony Square, Erik adjusted his posture, embodying the guise of the seasoned police officer.

His strides were measured and firm, each step showing years of experience and authority. He blended among his fellow enforcers of the law.

As he made his way, the surrounding scene was chaotic. Police and mercenaries, in a frenzied effort to locate him, were still searching the crowd.

Civilians were being roughly handled, their protests and cries echoing through the square.

Erik observed the tumult, his expression stoic and unyielding, befitting the role he played.

While navigating through the swarm of officers and mercenaries, Erik maintained a steady pace.

His eyes, keen and vigilant, scanned the surroundings, all while avoiding any action that might draw undue attention to himself.

As he looked on, he saw an officer twisting a man's arms behind his back, while another officer pushed a young boy to the ground.

Erik moved with purpose and maintained his approach, shortening the distance from the Blackguard.

A cluster of officers and mercenaries formed a circle around the man, their faces reflecting a combination of respect and fear.

Erik maneuvered through the crowd, and with careful consideration, he positioned himself in the Blackguard's vicinity, making sure he was close enough to reach him but not directly in the spotlight.

<Now comes the hardest part. >

With a determined stride, Erik made his way towards the man.

"Excuse me, sir. Urgent news!"

Quakestrike's gaze upon Erik was the epitome of arrogance. His head tilted, an air of superiority emanating from every angle of his posture.

The slight upward curl of his lips conveyed a dismissive sneer, as if the old man in front of him was nothing more than an insignificant speck in his world.

Quakestrike's eyes narrowed as he looked at Erik from head to toe.

With his head held high and an air of unwavering confidence, Erik realized the man believed himself to be above everyone else in the vicinity.

"Who are you? Nevermind, I don't care. What's the matter?" Quakestrike looked at the surrounding chaos.

At that moment, Erik channeled mana through the neural links in his body.

More specifically, he was directing it through the ones connected to his Instability brain crystal power.

This power gave him not only the ability to gain insight into the mind of his target but also to tamper with their emotions, and it was this very capability that Erik sought to exploit right now.

Erik influenced the man's brain by implanting a mixture of self-satisfaction and anger into his thoughts. He needed him to be keen to follow him, so that he could kill him and steal his identity.

"I received news from the HQ. They said Erik Romano has been spotted around the 23rd street."

Quakestrike turned to look at the man. "Really? Why no one told me then?" It was weird for his comrades not telling him such important information.

"Sir. We are not sure about this and didn't want to bother the Blackguards until we were certain."

Erik kept pumping mana into the man's brain, who remained oblivious to everything.

"And yet you told me. Why?"

"It's just that I was thinking, sir."

"About what?" Quakestrike asked.

"If it really was Erik Romano. Despite being a rumor, it would be better for you to know about it. After all, someone of your caliber is with us. How could we possibly fail apprehending him?"

In every other circumstance, Quakestrike wouldn't have given credit to his words.

However, now, under the influence of Erik's brain crystal power, pumping his self-esteem, he was inclined to listen to sugarcoated words.

"You indeed thought well. You have made the right choice telling me this. However, I need to warn the others. I can't move alone."

Erik put in a lot of effort to make his face appear disappointed, doing his utmost to convey his emotions.

It caught Quakestrike's attention, and he found it quite irritating.

"What?!"

"Nothing... sir."

"No, tell me now." Quakestrike's temper flared.

Under Erik's subtle influence, the signs of Quakestrike's escalating temper were etched across his face.

His eyebrows knitted together in a fierce scowl, the lines deepening with his growing fury.

His eyes blazed with a fiery intensity, reflecting the storm of rage brewing within.

The muscles in his jaw clenched, a visible testament to his struggle to contain the boiling anger.

Veins on his temples throbbed, pulsating with each surge of his quickening heartbeat.

Quakestrike's prideful nature, a product of his Blackguard status, made him view others as mere insects, trivial beings he could crush.

This inflated sense of superiority and a propensity for rage already teetered him on the edge of instability.

Erik noticed this precarious balance and manipulated Quakestrike's volatile temperament.

By raising his self-esteem and fueling his innate anger with his power, Erik destabilized the already unsteady man.

This strategic psychological push exploited Quakestrike's flaws, tipping him over the brink.

However, to make his performance more believable, Erik became humble all of a sudden.

"No, sir, it's just that... If I may... this would be a... an enormous opportunity for you..." If Erik only said that, it would have been weird. "And for us... if we could... capture the man by ourselves."

"Ah... So, you didn't have altruistic reasons," Quakestrike said. "But what can you do against such a monster as Erik Romano? Didn't you read the reports? Not even all these men banding together," he said, pointing at the other officers, "Could put a scratch on him."

"Oh, sir. That must surely be exaggerations. How could a man like him, unknown to everyone until recent, be stronger than someone such as yourself, a Blackguard?"

Quakestrike smirked. "You surely know how to use your words. Yet, I don't get why are you doing this."

"You know, sir," Erik said. "I just need a single big break and I'm going to get a promotion." the old man grinned.

"I'm old, and I didn't relish my life until now. An increase in my pension would be much appreciated."

"Ah... Money." A grin spread on Quakestrike's face.

"With someone like you... I thought I could have a chance."

Erik knew he needed to handle the situation with Quakestrike to avoid suspicion.

To create an impression of partnership, he presented a proposition that seemed mutually beneficial.

This tactic was crucial in building a sense of trust, even if not definitive. It was also crucial for lowering Quakestrike's guard.

In the intricate hierarchy of their operation, direct orders from the Blackguards' HQ were sacred.

If they deviated from these commands to apprehend Erik, it would be a blatant disregard for protocol.

Yet, most of the Blackguards bent those rules to serve personal interests.

Erik didn't know that was the case, but based on the man's demeanor, he could at least try.

He understood that if he could manipulate the situation, Quakestrike, driven by the prospect of an enormous achievement, might act impulsively.

Erik intended to manipulate the situation so that the officer he was impersonating would appear to have blatantly disregarded direct orders, leaving him open to accusation and blame.

This deliberate act of insubordination signaled to Quakestrike that the man was taking considerable risks, suggesting a level of seriousness and commitment.

Erik's strategy was to exploit this perceived vulnerability, using Quakestrike's own ambition as a lever to shift the dynamics in his favor.

"When was he last spotted?"

"5 minutes ago," Erik said, lying.

"All right. Bring me there."

Quakestrike couldn't see him, but there was a huge grin on Erik's disguised face. His instability power worked wonders.

Disguised as the seasoned Chief Inspector Samuel Hawthorne, Erik led Quakestrike through the teeming streets of the city.

The old officer's guise was meticulously maintained, from the slight hunch in his back to the practiced, authoritative stride.

Quakestrike walked beside him, a giant among men, exuding an aura of confidence and power.

As they navigated the bustling square, Erik kept a watchful eye on the surrounding chaos. Officers and mercenaries were still searching the crowd for him.

Chapter 779: Retaliation (5)

The civilians, caught in the middle of this frantic manhunt, were being handled roughly, their protests echoing through the square.

"These people doesn't know what's the best for them," Quakestrike said.

Erik, maintaining his role as Samuel, projected a facade of stoicism, avoiding any action that would draw attention to himself.

"Indeed, sir. They should bow their head and do as we say. And yet..."

Quakestrike, wrapped in his arrogance, spoke.

"Our? You mean the Blackguards' ..."

"Yes, sir. Obviously."

Quakestrike turned to Erik, his voice carrying a hint of impatience. "How many people are on the scene?"

"Few," Erik said, maintaining his composure. "Just a handful of trusted men. We didn't want to make too much noise about it."

They were heading towards an alley that was completely isolated and far removed from the busy streets. In the dimly lit narrow passageway, the dancing shadows of the nearby buildings added an enchanting ambiance.

A hushed environment characterized the atmosphere in the surroundings, with the noises of the city being dampened by the towering buildings.

Erik led the way with a confidence that belied his true intentions.

Quakestrike followed, his heavy boots echoing on the cobblestone. The alley twisted and turned, leading them away from the prying eyes of the public.

"Where are those men?"

"Just a little further. We actually saw the target entering a building. So..."

"Yeah. Nevermind."

As they delved deeper into the alley, the atmosphere grew tense. The shadows seemed to close in around them, and the air felt thick.

The alley opened up into a small clearing surrounded by high walls. The spot stood completely deserted, which made it the perfect location for what Erik had in mind.

He stopped and turned to face Quakestrike, his expression unreadable behind the mask of Samuel Hawthorne.

Quakestrike glanced around, taking in his surroundings with narrowed eyes as he assessed the area.

"Was he spotted here?" Quakestrike asked, glancing around and assessing the area with narrowed eyes.

"This is the place where you will see him..."

Erik did two things at the same time. Intending to intimidate the person in front of him, he started the release of mana from his body.

The problem was that Quakestrike had almost double his mana reserves.

---

-Name: Unknown. People call him Quakestrike. Further information is required.

-Brain crystal Power: Vibration Burst.



-Age: Unknown.

-Personality: Quakestrike has exhibited an energetic and bold personality. His combat style is characterized by its dynamism, employing vibration bursts to disorient adversaries prior to executing forceful strikes. Outside of the battlefield, he displayed an arrogant and unapproachable demeanor.

-Physical Characteristics: Approximately two meters tall. Broad shoulders and a muscular build characterize his frame. The armor's presence prevents further comments as it covers his body.

{Attributes}

STRENGTH: 177.0

INTELLIGENCE: 60.0

DEXTERITY: 150.0

ENERGY: 1000

{Others}

Power Level: 587

Estimated Experience: 8628 (EXP per kill)

Neural Links: A1δA-level

---

Quakestrike noticed the mana amount and smirked.

"What the fuck are you do—?"

Erik, no longer disguised, revealed his true face to Quakestrike. The Blackguard, having seen a photograph of Erik at sixteen, recognized him.

As realization dawned, Quakestrike gathered his mana, bolstered by the false sense of confidence instilled by Erik's instability power.

Upon realizing Quakestrike's aggressive intent, Erik reacted with lightning speed.

In a swift motion, Erik became a blur, his movements creating an afterimage as he closed the gap between them.

Quakestrike's gaze, fixed ahead, plummeted. He found Erik crouched right below him, poised to strike.

His maneuver was executed so unexpectedly and swiftly that Quakestrike was caught off guard, leaving him vulnerable and with no chance of defending himself.

Quakestrike, caught in a vulnerable position, could only watch as Erik prepared to deliver his blow. The awakener delivered a powerful punch to the man's guts.

"UGH!"

Quakestrike's breath halted, sweat pouring down his face as panic seized him.

As he fell to the ground, Erik stood in front of him, casting a disdainful gaze upon the Blackguard as if he were nothing more than a low insect.

Quakestrike, overwhelmed by Erik's powerful strike, was plunged into a state of disarray, his ability to process thoughts obliterated.

As Erik watched, he employed his instability power to probe the depths of Quakestrike's psyche.

He observed that the Blackguard's mind was engulfed in a maelstrom of pain, rendering him incapable of coherent thought.

But then, a subtle shift occurred. Amidst the fog of agony, fragments of clear thought resurfaced within Quakestrike's mind.

It took some time, but eventually, his mental faculties were able to reassemble themselves.

With great interest, Erik observed this change and quickly realized that the Blackguard was slowly regaining consciousness.

The alley was filled with the sound of Quakestrike's pained gasps echoing off the walls.

"How did you find out I was Erik Romano?"

Quakestrike didn't reply.

"Was Ms. Bannon in cahoot with you in all of this?"

Quakestrike was still having trouble breathing.

"What are your intentions after you have captured me?"

A series of questions were made by Erik. Despite this, once Quakestrike regained his strength, he defiantly spat on the ground.

"If you think I will tell you anything, you are mistaken."

"But you replied to my questions."

<Uh? > Quakestrike thought.

"You are confused now? You, a mighty Blackguard?"

<I need to get away from this motherfucker. For some fucking twisted reason he didn't kill me, I will slowly open the radio and send my location to the higher ups so that...>

"I think you should reconsider," Erik said.

"Uh? Reconsider what?"

Then Quakestrike noticed the police uniform on Erik. It was the same one the man who brought him here had on.

"It seems you realized it."

Indeed. Quakestrike's face was filled with pure terror, a sight that Erik couldn't witness due to the mask obstructing his view.

"You... How did you—"

"Is that really important?"

However, Erik saw the man's thoughts. "Ah... It is really that important. But you don't know why."

Quakestrike couldn't stand it anymore. He had to run. It was indeed true Erik had multiple brain crystal powers, and judging by what he just did, he could steal them.

After all, he got the same power as Max, the spy, the power that allowed him to shapeshift.

The Blackguard, overtaken by fear, turned to run. The problem was that a gigantic bluish and white wolf with two tails and two vampire tusks barred his way.

<Is this...? >

"A mana made giant Leylarhad, or as I call him, the Astral Wolf. Beautiful, isn't it?" Erik said.

With no escape routes available, Quakestrike found himself trapped in that location.

"I need to avoid staining the uniform."

In a sudden, terrifying moment, Erik unleashed a handful of seeds at the Blackguard's feet. As they hit the ground, the Blackguard's eyes widened in pure horror.

Within seconds, the seeds burst into life, sprouting sinister vines that writhed like serpents. The vines coiled around Quakestrike, who stood frozen, aghast.

His shock soon turned to a desperate struggle for freedom, but the vines were relentless.

They constricted him in an unyielding embrace, binding his arms and legs, creeping over his horrified face.

The Blackguard's muffled cries of terror filled the air as the vines tightened, trapping him in their merciless grasp.

He realized all too late that there was no escape from the living snare that had ensnared him in its ghastly grip.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH GRHIGUEHEGIRUHEGERG..."

The vines infiltrated Quakestrike's body through multiple entry points, including his mouth, ears, and eyes.

Despite his efforts, there was nothing he could do to prevent them.

The vines pierced through the throat, causing perforations.

[QUAKESTRIKE 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. 8628 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

Erik observed his work. The uniform was pristine. He then took off the Quakestrike's mask and observed his face.

"Ah... that's how you are made."

Erik tapped into Max's brain crystal power. In just a matter of moments, he underwent a complete transformation and took on the appearance of Quakestrike, replicating not only his facial features and build but also his unique voice.

Erik's careful attention to detail allowed him to gain extensive knowledge of Quakestrike's mannerisms, guaranteeing that his disguise would be flawless.

Once the transformation was complete, Erik undressed the dead man, stripping him of his blackguard uniform.

He donned the armor himself, each piece fitting snugly as if tailored for him. The process took only five minutes.

With the disguise in place, Erik turned his attention to the fallen blackguard.

He extracted the brain crystal. Next, he drank Quakestrike's blood.

<System. Absorb everything right now. I need the power if I want to enter the Blackguards' ranks. >

[UNDERSTOOD. 2000 DNA POINTS ARE REQUIRED TO INSTANTLY ABSORB DNA AND BRAIN CRYSTAL POWER. DO YOU WANT TO START?]

<Yes. Take everything and do it quickly. >

[2000 DNA POINTS DEBITED. STARTING PROCEDURE. 5... 4... 3... 2... 1... PROCEDURE COMPLETE.]

<Let's show these fuckers what happens if they mess with me. >

Chapter 780: Behind the scenes (1)

For those who had never heard of it, Liberty Watch Village remained a mystery, leaving many in a state of confusion when they heard about it.

"Have you ever heard of this place?" Benedict asked.

"No. Never," Amber said.

"Shouldn't you be the ones knowing about it since you are from New Alexandria?"

"Yeah, but I already said I know nothing about it."

Amber, Floyd, Gwen, Mikey, Aaron, Benedict, and Martha were inside the vast cave that now housed Liberty Watch Village.

There, deep below the surface, in a place hidden from the world above, lied an underground city they had never even heard of prior to a couple days earlier.

Within the immense cave, the city extended in all its subterranean splendor, nestled within its walls.

The cavern's ceiling, towering and expansive, was supported by a network of skyscrapers, each one intricately designed to bear the weight of the world above.

These structures, crafted from durable materials, rose high, their tops caressing the rocky canopy overhead.

"Why do you think they brought us here?"

"I don't know. But dad said Richard Stone is working with someone from here and they wanted us here. All of us."

"All of us?" Gwen asked.

"Yeah. They even mentioned our names. I think all of this may be related to Erik," Amber said.

"Perhaps."

Everyone turned to look above.

The city was illuminated by an array of luminescent minerals embedded in the cave walls and ceiling, Aclaitrium. These natural ores bathed the city in hues of gentle blues, greens, and purples.

The light they emitted was not harsh but soothing, creating a peaceful ambiance throughout the underground expanse.

However, even the flora down there thrived in a remarkable abundance. The city was filled with vibrant and green vegetation.

The massive trees, with their thick trunks and broad leaves, seemed to stretch upwards zealously, as if they were yearning for a sun that had never graced their presence.

Within the cave, there were certain plants that had the ability to produce heat, emitting warmth from their leaves and creating a pleasant atmosphere.

The warmth combined with the coolness of the underground created a harmonious blend that provided an ideal environment for the growth of plants as well as the well-being of the residents.

"Well, I don't exactly know how Erik's power work, but this may be something he did," Floyd said as he looked at the surrounding plants.

The city was adorned with streets and pathways that meandered in various directions, accompanied by lush green patches and quaint parks, serving as gathering spots for residents to unwind, socialize, and escape the subterranean ambiance.



From a distance, Amber noticed some people walking toward them. They had already been greeted by these people, guards, or messengers.

However, they left with the adults, Richard, Caiden, Lucy, Luna, Amelia, Lucas and the others. Save for Benedict's and Martha's, all their parents were there.

The approaching figures, emerging from the buildings below, steadily came closer.

The person we are referring to was a young man with a height of 6 feet, a slim and well-sculpted physique, and an unruly mane of chestnut brown hair.

His mesmerizing hazel eyes seemed to sparkle with a mischievous charm. He was accompanied by an older and even bigger man.

"You are Erik's friends?" the man said as he arrived in front of them.

The group exchanged puzzled glances as they processed the man's words.

"Erik's friends?" Gwen said. Her brows knitted together in confusion.

"Yes, Erik." The young man's eyes sparkled as he spoke about Erik.

"I knew I was right."

"How do you know him?" Gwen asked.

"Everyone knows him here in Liberty Watch Village. He is our savior."

Amber, standing a step behind Gwen, leaned forward, her curiosity piqued. "Your savior?"

"You don't know it? Well, what was I expecting? Noah said you wouldn't know." That left the other even more confused. Who was Noah?

"Noah?" Amber asked. She uncrossed her arms, her stance relaxing.

"You will understand later. He will probably want to talk to you."

Aaron, who had been silent until now, stepped forward. "And why should we want to talk with him?" he asked.

Ethan straightened his posture, and his previously relaxed expression quickly transformed into one of seriousness. "Oh. It's in your best interests to listen to him. It was Noah who specifically requested your presence here. If it weren't for him, you would still be stuck in your rotten city."

Gwen stepped forward, her gaze piercing as she scrutinized the man. "You talk like you know a lot. Who are you?" she asked.

The man's grin returned, now tinged with a sense of mischief. "Name is Ethan," he said, puffing out his chest. "Erik's best friend!"

"What?" Benedict's neck veins bulged. "That's a bold statement!"

Ethan, unfazed, shrugged, his expression nonchalant, as if stating an obvious fact.

"It is what it is..."

Amber's patience was wearing thin. Her eyebrows furrowed, and a look of exasperation crossed her face.

"Why are you here, Ethan?" she asked. However, her voice was full of irritation. She didn't want to listen to this guy's nonsense anymore.

Ethan's response was immediate, but his demeanor remained casual, almost dismissive.

"The others asked for you. Noah said you have to join the discussion," Ethan didn't hesitate.

Amber's frustration grew. "Discussion about what?"

Ethan looked at Amber, his expression turning sly. "They told you nothing, uh?"

It was then that Samuel stepped forward, his face showing a mix of annoyance and understanding. "C'mon, Ethan. Stop teasing them."

Ethan's face fell, and he looked at Samuel with an apologetic expression. "Sorry, Samuel," he said.

Samuel addressed the group in a more serious tone, his face earnest. "I apologize on Ethan's behalf. He knows how to be annoying. Listen..." he said.

"We apologize, but no explanation we provide will meet your satisfaction. In all honesty, we are also unaware of many things. My suggestion is that you have a conversation with Noah. He is the one having all the answers you are searching for and he will explain everything in details. It was quite surprising to me when I found out that he actually works for Erik."

However, now it was Amber's time to say something the others didn't expect.

"Did he say something about Erik's powers?"

"Powers?" Ethan asked. "What are you talking about?"

Samuel, although a bit confused, chose not to express his confusion openly, unlike Ethan.

He comprehended that there were certain aspects in which these young men and women surpassed him and others in terms of awareness.

"It doesn't matter, Ethan," he said, dismissing the younger man's confusion.

"Who is the best friend now?" Benedict said. To that, Samuel burst out laughing.

"It looks like Erik told you something even we are not aware of."

"Indeed." Amber's face showed a hint of satisfaction at having caught Samuel and Ethan off guard.

Samuel, with a smile that stretched across his face, warmly extended an invitation to the group, his expression radiating a welcoming and open demeanor. "Follow me," he said, leading the way.

Surrounded by the hustle and bustle of the underground city, Amber and her companions weaved through the busy streets, their eyes drawn to the magnificent sight of towering skyscrapers.

As Amber and her friends were walking, they couldn't help but notice the extensive construction works that were taking place nearby.

The workers were fully occupied with their tasks as they maneuvered around a structure that closely resembled an alchemical lab, featuring intricate designs and peculiar installations.

Despite their efforts, they were unable to determine the specific purpose of the building by relying solely on their observations.

Then their attention was diverted due to a commotion that occurred nearby. A group of workers were carrying a case.

"Jabir, where should we put this case of potions?" A voice rang out.

A response came from a man directing the workers, his tone authoritative. "Over there, by the storage area. Be careful with it!" Jabir said, pointing towards a designated spot.

"Jabir? I already heard this name somewhere," Mikey said.

"Me too." Aaron wasn't sure, but he had doubts.

As the bustling activity of the construction site faded into the distance, the group continued on their journey without hesitation.

They continued their journey for a short while until they finally arrived at a colossal military building, a structure so massive that it completely dominated the surrounding landscape.

With its fortified walls and the solemn atmosphere it exuded, the structure possessed a commanding presence.

After a momentary pause, Amber and her companions stood still, captivated by the impressive sight of the military edifice in front of them.

The striking difference in atmosphere between the grandeur and seriousness of this place, and the vibrant ambiance of the city streets, created a noticeable and meaningful shift.

This was a site synonymous with authority and power, and likely, something important was going to be said there today.

"I swear. I need an explanation for all of this. "

"You are not the only one," Gwen said.

"It is clear Erik has something to do about this. "

"Yeah. But what?"