

## **BIOLOGICAL 781**

### Chapter 781: Behind the scenes (2)

As the group ventured into the building, they navigated through a labyrinth of corridors and rooms, each with its distinct purpose.

Amber's eyes darted around, taking in the sights. Some rooms were designed for secure storage, while others had been transformed into functional offices.

A few had a distinct military vibe, equipped for strategic planning and operations.

Amber noticed the well-organized nature of the setup, yet something about it suggested the room was just recently made.

The arrangement of the rooms and their contents hinted at rapid adaptation rather than long-established tradition.

The building's layout and the activities within painted a clear picture of a bustling city hub.

This place was not just a simple military or administrative center; it was the beating heart of a vibrant and thriving community, bustling with life and activity, yet still finding its footing.

Amber noticed the scarcity of people in the large underground city while she came here, suggesting recent habitation.

Despite its vast capacity, easily fitting hundreds of times their current numbers of thousands of individuals, the city seemed scarcely populated.

The plants caught her attention, hinting at her friend's involvement in their cultivation.

The extent of his contributions to the city, however, remained uncertain. Ethan's earlier words echoed in her mind, adding to her puzzlement.

His references to Erik being a 'savior' made her even more confused.

<He talked about him as their savior. What did you do here, Erik? > That was the question she had in mind.

Five minutes of brisk walking through the maze of corridors led them to the vast conference room's entrance.

The space was expansive, its sheer size emphasized by the minimal furnishings within.

A small podium stood at the far end of the room, an island of authority in a sea of emptiness.

The podium's unassuming size contrasted with how big the room was, making it seem almost humble in its purpose.

Scattered around the room were several rows of chairs, arranged in a semi-circular fashion, facing the podium.

They were simple yet functional, designed more for utility than comfort.

The chairs were spaced out evenly, creating an orderly appearance that hinted at the serious nature of the discussions likely to take place here.

The room had minimal decoration on the walls, with only a few lights strategically positioned to illuminate the area and creating a tranquil atmosphere.

Even the ceiling was high, adding to the room's spacious feel, with a few discreet air vents ensuring a comfortable atmosphere.

As they entered, the echo of their footsteps filled the room.

However, despite how empty it looked like, it was full of people.

Amber recognized most of them. Her father, Richard Stone, Emily, Mikey's mother. But there were some she had never seen, and even a person covering his or her face.

There were also people Amber had never seen. Men and women with weapons and armors, but that wasn't the only oddity they had.

What puzzled Amber was the uniform they were wearing, white and green, the colors of nature, that hinted at them being mercenaries.

The mercenaries had an insignia she became familiar in the recent months.

"Nexthorn Vanguard Guild," Floyd said. "He really is connected to this place, then."

Amber looked at Floyd. Since they saw the mysterious masked man called Erik Kay perform in the guild's arena, they believed him to be Erik, their friend.

However, aside from the hilt of his Flyssa, he showed no other sign they were the same person, yet that hint was significant.

Until now, they had only speculated, unsure whether this masked individual called Erik Kay was indeed their friend.

What Ethan said first had nothing to do with the Nexthorn Vanguard Guild. Erik could have been there in the past, but not being tied to those mercenaries.

However, the hint he left in Etrium made it clear. Their friend left a hint he was alive only they could understand, a hint Ethan could not be aware of.

This realization brought a mix of emotions to Amber, especially relief at knowing Erik was alive.

"Wait here for the discussion to start," Samuel said.

"Everything will be clear as soon as he arrives."

"Who?" Martha asked.

"Noah. We don't know who he is. The man had never shown his face, but he is a very dangerous man. We only know he works for Erik. But he is cunning like no others, and very strong." Then he grinned.

"Not as much as me, though. In this room, there are only three people can contend with my strength."

"You must be sure of your skills, uncle," Benedict said. "Want to have a spar later?" A smile blossomed on his face.

"HAHAHAHAHAHA. Kids nowadays." But then he turned to look at Benedict. "Of course I will."

At that pivotal moment, the atmosphere in the room shifted. The doors swung open, and in strode a man whose presence commanded immediate attention.

He was a towering figure, his stature alone imposing, but it was his mask that drew the eyes of all present. It was a variation of the famous mask worn by Erik Kay.

Draped over his shoulders was a massive cape, trailing at least 20 centimeters behind him.

The cape billowed as he walked, creating a theatrical effect that seemed choreographed to enhance his entrance's theatrical.

Amber and the others became quite proficient at sensing mana during these past months.

There was no detectable aura emanating from this man, an anomaly that piqued their interest.

Either he possessed an extraordinary level of control over his mana, suggesting a massive number of neural links, or he had no mana at all. That was impossible, but it could be the only logical explanation.

The room's occupants exchanged wary glances, each trying to gauge the intentions of this new player on the stage.

"That is the man that should be very dangerous?" Amber asked Samuel.

"Impressive height, eh? The first time I saw him, I thought they put a cape over a giant banana."

Amber's chuckle broke the tension, a rare moment of levity amidst the grim circumstances.

The presence of Samuel, with his reassuring demeanor, provided a much-needed sense of comfort.

Their situation was dire, a truth Amber was aware of, especially after the events following Volkov's takeover of Frant.

In the aftermath of the parasitic attacks, Frant's stability had rapidly deteriorated.

Volkov's ascent to power had been swift and brutal, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake.

Key figures from her father's faction, as well as those aligned with Emily's father, had been eliminated.

Even Becker found himself in a precarious position, choosing flight over fight.

Caiden and Richard were alive only because they were too powerful to be killed, and that wasn't physical strength.

However, isolated and outnumbered, their ability to resist was hampered.

Becker, who should have been in a similar situation, found himself the target of a planned takedown.

Volkov, with months, perhaps years, of preparation, had fabricated enough evidence to issue a warrant for the arrest of the esteemed general.

In the meantime, the man walked onto the podium. The mercenaries from the Nexthorn Vanguard Guild positioned themselves in front of the podium.

Their presence was an explicit statement of protection, a human shield meant to deter any potential threats.

There were for sure some people here that could pose a threat to him, but it wasn't like these mercenaries could do anything. They were strong, but not as much as to be unkillable.

Then Amber looked at the people shielding the man. There was one person she recognized, Mira "Windwhisper" Flynn, the person said to be the lover and closest confidant of the mighty Erik Kay.

But if Erik Kay and Erik Romano were the same person, then it meant... As if sensing Amber's internal turmoil, Gwen spoke. "We will kick that bitch's ass."

Amber smiled. "Thank you, Gwen."

"May I have your attention?" The man on the podium spoke. Everyone became silent.

"My name is Noah. I'm the right-hand man of Erik Kay, guild-master and founder of the Nexthorn Vanguard Mercenary guild."

But that was clear to everyone. "You may wonder why I made everyone come here inside this room. Well, the reason is that we all have been played for a lot of time." Noah paused.

"I'm not talking of me, you," he said by looking at Caiden Joyce, "Or everyone else in this room. Well, aside from one person. But I mean the world."

Murmurs started spreading. "What is this guy talking about?" Benedict asked.

"I don't know, but it looks like he knows something we don't that may be related to this whole situation," Floyd said.

"But before I explain in details the results of our investigation, I would like to invite someone to talk. Maybe you will be more inclined to believe his words, rather than mine."

Noah turned to look at a hooded man behind Richard Stone and Caiden.

"General of Frantian Army, and Supreme Leader of the nation, Armand Becker." Everyone turned to look with incredulous eyes.

"May I ask you to explain what really happened in Frant?"

Chapter 782: Strategic Meeting (1)

"Quakestrike, can you hear me?" Those words came from Erik's helmets built-in radio device.

"Yes, sir."

"Where the hell are you?" Momentum said. It was clear he was enraged since Quakestrike left his position.

"Sorry, sir. I got words of people spotting the target nearby and went investigating."

"Are you out of your mind?! I told you not to act alone! That guy is extremely dangerous! You were in that room with the rest of us, yet you still think you can fight him alone?"

"It won't happen again, sir," Erik said, faking any hint of remorse. Yet, beneath his facade, he remained indifferent to the reprimand. He wasn't the real Quakestrike, after all.

Momentum let out a weary sigh, his frustration palpable even through the device. It was clear Quakestrike wasn't new to this kind of behavior.

"Nevermind, come back to the Villa. We are going to have a strategic meeting with those bastards from Etrium's mercenary guild. Don't be late."

"I'll be there soon, sir."

Things were turning well for Erik. There were many things he wanted to get by spying on the Blackguards, among which where was their base located, and what were their plans.

If he stole the identity of some high-profile person, he could send his clones to thwart whatever operation they were undergoing. Plus, he needed to find out who uncle Benjamin really was.

Erik didn't need to contact his clones. He already told them where and when to meet, so there weren't problems.

They could take care of themselves, and escaping from the city in a group would not be a tremendous problem for them.

For that reason, Erik ran back to the Villa where he killed Max.

Based on what the man on the phone just said, he was going to get some valuable intel soon.

Erik didn't wait and immediately started running through the streets, headed toward the villa.

As he did so, his presence did not go unnoticed.

Citizens paused in, their expressions morphing into ones of confusion and surprise.

They gazed at the figure of the Blackguard, an emblem of authority and power, moving with uncharacteristic haste and urgency among the city streets like a common citizen.

Since a flying Thaid had been spotted inside the city, it wasn't so weird for a Blackguard to be spotted inside the city. However, that wasn't a common sight either.

Whispers and murmurs rippled through the crowds. People pointed and speculated, their eyes following his every move.

It was an unusual sight for many reasons. One was that Blackguards were known for their composed and imposing demeanor, not for dashing through the city like a fugitive.

It didn't take much for Erik to arrive at the location. The damage from the previous battle became clear as he got there.

The once-imposing structure now bore scars of conflict, its walls and rooftops punctuated with signs of struggle.

Erik also noticed additional guards who patrolled the grounds with heightened vigilance.

He entered from the main door. The guards didn't even check his identity. They just saw his attire, and for them that was enough to let the man pass.

Erik moved with confidence, his steps echoing the authority and power of a blackguard. He tried to be as similar to Quakestrike as possible, trying to copy his arrogant demeanor.

"Morning, sir." A guard tried to make an impression on him, but Erik didn't even look at him.

On the front porch, there was a woman waiting. She too had the same attire Erik was sporting, but it had the distinct features of the Blackguards' female uniform.

She was masked, as Erik was, and he didn't really know who the girl was.

"Early bird, huh? That's a new one for you," the woman said. Erik pictured her sporting a mocking grin. The man didn't really know how Quakestrike usually talked to her.

However, from what he observed, Quakestrike was quite the jerk. So he followed suit as best he could, trying to make the best impression he could come up with.

"Shut the fuck up, bitch."

"Polite as always," the woman said.

Despite the harsh words, she had the same tone as earlier. It was clear she was used to Quakestrike antics.

Then they rushed inside. "Momentum is mad at you. He said you went searching for Romano alone."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"Prick."

They entered another room of the Villa, a part of the building that hadn't been destroyed by the scuffle.

There, there were all the surviving Blackguards. He recognized them for the insignia on their chest. The woman who greeted him earlier had one showing the name 'Stickyfingers'

Among them were Momentum, Dreadnought, and many others he fought against but didn't kill.

But the ones without insignia remained a mystery. Then, his eyes lingered on the left.

There were many people he assumed were from the mercenary guild, but among them was Lyria Bannon.

The same woman who gave him quests related to the Blackguards, and who tasked him to find Catrina and Doran.

Seeing her there didn't surprise him, but he had to suppress himself from strangling the woman.

As soon as he stepped inside, Momentum stepped forward. "How many times did I tell you not to act alone, Quakestrike?"

On the communication device, Erik, unsure on how to reply, tried to be courteous with Momentum, but judging by Stickyfingers' reaction to him, it was clear the guy didn't care about this man that much.

It was also clear, based on the man's behavior, that he was the group's leader.

"No replies, uh? Well, let's see if you will talk when I report to our superiors."

"Do as you wish."

"Gentlemen, we are not here to fight among ourselves. We are here to share news about the target, Erik Romano." One of the Blackguards, without an insignia, said.

"Is there any news about him?" Phantom asked Lyria.

"None. However, Momentum said Quakestrike got some lead and went to investigate. Did you find anything, perhaps?" She turned to look at Erik.

"None. If he had been there, he had already left when I arrived. The prick..."

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

"For sure we will keep patrolling the area," Momentum said. "But I bet he already left the city."

"Was there any news from the exit gate?"

"None," Lyria said. "Judging from how he entered the city the first time, he should have made quite a stir if he tried, so I guess he is still in Caelora city."

"Don't be so sure about that. Did you forget he was able to find intel about Max easily?"

"Yes. Assuming that was made us able to ambush him here. But it's not that ability that worries me. For all we know, he may simply be or work with a skilled hacker. The problem is that he has shown multiple brain crystal power, just as we thought."

"Do we have something we can use against him?" an unnamed Blackguard turned to look at Lyria.

"All the members of his family died, and even his friends back in Frant are nowhere to be found. It looks like he has someone smart on his side that took care of the matter while we were searching for him."

It was then that Lyria turned to look at the same man. Based on his demeanor, he was the leader of the whole investigation team, likely over Momentum and any other person present.

He nodded, and Lyria understood what she had to do. With a wave of her hand, she gestured everyone else to leave the room. The man wanted to remain alone with the group. Quickly, only the Blackguards were inside the room.

"Can we use another family member as a hostage? A friend or lover, perhaps?" Phantom asked.

"As Lyria said, everyone disappeared. Besides, he has no other relatives aside from his father, who is being kept a prisoner in Frant by the Crystal Cross Gang and Volkov under our orders."

<WHAT?! > Erik almost shouted in a rage. Erik understood that was the reason he didn't return when he left the biological supercomputer to him.

"Should we let him know to bait him?"

"No," the man said. "Lucius Romano knows many things, and he is the only one who can bring us to 'that' place."

<Place? What place? >

"So? What do we do?" Momentum asked.

"There is not much we can do. However, I will tell the higher ups to send more squads to Frant and Etrium. We are bound to find something sooner or later. For now, let's focus on searching for him here in the city. As someone said already, I am of the same idea he is still here."

"Should I tell Lyria to increase the number of patrols?" Momentum asked.

"Yes, but it won't be easy to find him. We already know he can steal others' brain crystal powers. Based on how he took away Max's corpse, it is clear he can now also shapeshift. This also confirms he was the one behind the mass shapeshifters' death. This means not only he can turn into another person thanks to Max's powers, but also into animals."

"We need to reinforce security, then. If he can change his appearance, he may even be here, right now."

"Indeed. I will talk to the higher ups about this. We are all compromised here, so we should refrain from going back to Hin. If he infiltrates our base, we will be in huge trouble. From what I've read about him, he is a very vindictive person."

However, they didn't know Erik could also read their minds, and he got some info about the Blackguards' base in Hin.

Unfortunately, there was none inside this group of people who knew where the place was. Not the members of the team, and not even the leader of this operation.

#### Chapter 783: Strategic Meeting (2)

After the meeting ended, Erik didn't know how to process what he heard.

The Blackguards talked a lot about what to do to get him. However, they had more plans than just using his friends against him.

They discussed using drones, robots and even mech to find him. Erik wasn't worried about it.

Thanks to the biological supercomputer, he could easily bypass their systems and remain undetected, even by the most hidden camera.

He didn't fear people too. As with his shapeshifting powers, it would be hard to find him.

Yet Erik was in deep thoughts. The reason was simple: it was because of his father.

Two years prior, he came back and left him the biological supercomputer.

He didn't know if he knew what it was exactly, but it was clear it was something important, so much so that the Blackguards were doing whatever they could to get their hands on it.

They were so hell bent on finding whatever Lucius found that they hunted him. A man said to be on the same level as General Becker from Frant.

Lucius was being kept hostage by the crystal cross gang, but unfortunately, this team of blackguards didn't know where.

They were briefed about everything related to Erik, but not in such depth to allow Erik to find that information out and rush to his help.

The only people who knew where he was were his captors and the Blackguards' higher-ups.

Erik knew what the biological supercomputer would do, and he understood why the Blackguards were doing all they could to get their hands on it.

<Motherfu...>

As Erik was leaving the room, while his mind was a chaotic mess, someone called for him.

"Quakestrike!"

Erik turned. As he did, a woman approached him while the others left the room.

"What?"

Erik tried hard not to break character despite the inner turmoil, and the system didn't seem inclined to intervene to calm him down. Maybe he was not agitated enough to warrant its intervention.

The woman removed her helmet, revealing her features to who he assumed was Quakestrike. Her hair, a dark shade of brown, fell in a simple, utilitarian cut just above her shoulders.

Her face held no striking characteristics; it was a face one might overlook in a crowd. Her eyes, a hue of hazel, however, glanced towards Erik with a longing look.

"What, you say? Do you know how worried I was when I learned you went off chasing Erik Romano alone?"

<Ah... the couple, uh? These bastards, strangely, still have human emotions. > Erik almost sighed.  
<I stole the words fucking identity possible. >

"Ah... Sorry... about that," he tried looking and sounding apologetic, but the truth was he didn't give a shit.

"The stupid officer who told me they spotted him sweetened his words so much he convinced me we could capture him."

Somehow, Dreadnought seemed persuaded by his words. <Maybe this guy pulled stupid feats like this often. >

Then, to convince her even more, based on Quakestrike character, Erik said, "Don't worry, I got sure to punish the prick before leaving."

"Good. Those peasants need to learn their place. How could he make you waste time knowing how busy you are?"

The woman then got closer. Too close for Erik's taste, though, he couldn't break character.

It was clear the two were in a relationship or something of the sort, so he had to play along.

She took off Erik's helmet. Of course, under it there was Quakestrike's face.

Erik copied it down to the last detail and wasn't worried she would find something weird.

She put the helmet under Erik's arm, and with her free hand, she started drawing circles on his chest.

"You know, it's been a while since we had been alone. I wanted to spend some quality time alone before resuming the mission." Her hints were clear.

<Fuck. I need to decline somehow...>

Since Hais brain crystal power improved a lot his thought speed, Erik tried to find anything to say to refuse.

He couldn't lose time. After having heard everything he needed from these guys, he had the urge to rush to Noah and seek help to find his father.

Besides, Erik found the woman unattractive. It wasn't like she was ugly, but compared to the likes of Mira, Amber, or Emily, she wasn't even worth considering.

Maybe having Amber and Mira as lovers messed up his perception of people.

Though the only conclusion Erik came with was that he couldn't refuse.

He didn't know that much about Quakestrike. What if he was a womanizer and never said no to her? A refusal may seem weird and make her suspect it wasn't really him.

For those reasons, Erik hugged Dreadnought and kissed her. Then he grinned.

"Let me just go talk to Momentum. I have something to ask him. Go to the room up-stair and wait for me there."

"Oh? You are so aroused you can't even wait to go back to the hotel? What if someone see us?"

She said that, but the look in her eyes made it clear she wasn't bothered that much by the thought.

"Who cares?" Erik grabbed her armored ass. "Let them watch if they want."

Then he put his helmet back on and left the room. There was something he wanted to find out. Lyria's location.

That bitch was the likely cause for the Blackguards finding out about his identity. She was the one who found him, the one who gave him quests on behalf of the organization and likely the one who gave them his information.

It wasn't like the two developed a friendship, but he didn't think she would have been someone that would easily back-stab people based on what he saw about her.

The reality was that she had a selfish nature and only cared about herself, like a snake with no regard for others.

Erik, maintaining his guise as Quakestrike, navigated the debris-strewn halls of the villa. His steps echoed in the hollowed-out corridors.

Each room he entered bore the scars of destruction, with walls partially crumbled and furniture reduced to splinters.

The place wasn't empty. Though in almost every room there were three or more people.

Some were talking to others and coordinating their search for him. Others were guarding the places, while others were even eating.

He checked each room, only to not find the person he needed to find. Frustration simmered beneath his calm exterior.

It suddenly dawned on him that the woman had already left the villa. For that reason, Erik decided to ask Momentum, as he said he was going to talk to the woman after the meeting.

While leaving the structure, he approached a nearby guard who stood vigil. The guard, recognizing the towering figure of Quakestrike, snapped to attention.

"Have you seen Momentum?" Erik's voice, altered to match Quakestrike's, boomed from within the confines of his helmet.

The guard hesitated for a moment before responding. "Sir, Momentum is outside, by the truck. He's discussing the operation with some of the others."

The truck was parked just outside the Villa, 20 meters from Erik's position. As soon as he saw it, he started walking toward it.

Several people were gathered around it, engaged in a heated discussion. Among them stood Momentum, easily identifiable by his distinct armor and authoritative stance.

While approaching the group, Erik's presence caused a momentary lull in their conversation. Momentum turned, his gaze meeting Erik's helmeted face.

"Quakestrike? What brings you here?"

"I'm looking for Lyria. Have you seen her?"

"She left for Caelora city mercenary guild hall. She needs to coordinate the search with those guys, so I sent her there. Is there a reason why you are searching for her?"

"I wanted to ask her some questions regarding the target. If I'm not wrong, she had direct contact with him in the past."

"Indeed, but I don't see how this information would benefit you. You just have to follow orders."

The man's unwillingness to cooperate was irritating Erik, so he employed his instability brain crystal power to make him more likely to answer questions.

"It's just that I want to be prepared for when we find him."

That was an unusual question for the muscle head known as Quakestrike.

Though, under the influence of Erik's instability brain crystal power, Momentum's guard was lowered, and he didn't think that was weird at all.

Momentum nodded, understanding Quakestrike's reasons. "I'll tell her to come back here as soon as she is done, then."

Erik didn't need that, though, he faked agreeing to him.

"Thanks, sir."

After saying that, Erik turned around and made his way back to the Villa. However, once he entered the building, he immediately made his way to the opposite side and exited through a window.

With the combined use of Nathaniel's power and the Xeridon Anteris, he was able to enhance his strength, to the extent that his agile leap from the area went unnoticed by everyone in the area.

## Chapter 784: Strategic Meeting (3)

Erik hastened his pace. His heart pounded with urgency, his mind a whirlwind of thoughts about his father and the Blackguards' intentions.

Quakestrike's heavy armor clanked as he went past the debris of the half-destroyed villa, making a sound that echoed through the ruins.

A Blackguard in full regalia running through the city streets was an odd sight.

The citizens' expressions mixed curiosity and concern. They didn't know if the Blackguards already took care of the flying Thaid, but based on the searches they were doing, it was clear there was more to the matter than they knew.

However, Erik paid them no heed. His focus was just one—to reach the park as soon as possible.

As he navigated the streets, a vibration in his pocket caught his attention. It came from a phone he stole.

Erik swiftly grabbed the phone without breaking stride, only to discover it was an unfamiliar number.

As he had instructed June and the rest to get phones for better communication, he assumed that one of them was the one calling him.

"Who is it?"

"It's June, Master. I just wanted to tell you we all got a phone each and are waiting for instructions."

"You called at the right moment. There's been a change of plan," he said. His voice, muffled by the helmet, had a deep, resonant quality that seemed to vibrate through the air, imbuing his words with an undeniable authority.

Even through the helmet, each syllable carried the weight of command, echoing as if spoken from the depths of a cavern.

"Head to the park immediately if you didn't already. We need to regroup. We're leaving the city soon." His words were firm. Though, June wasn't a mindless creature. He had questions.

"Why so, Master? Didn't you say you wanted to infiltrate the Blackguards to get some information out of them?"

"I did," Erik said. "However, there isn't much they can do to capture me. I can shapeshift even into animals, and unless they send 30 blackguards, I doubt they will be able to subdue me."

Erik was sure of that, but it wasn't because of arrogance he said those words.

"The issue is that they didn't really know what to do, so they started talking about other strategies to use against me. "

Since he was smart, June had an inkling of what they proposed, likely to use someone Erik cared about to get to him.

"Did they want to kidnap someone?"

"Worse. They already did."

"Who?"

"Dad."

June was flooded with a surge of Erik's memories. The man who had raised him until four years ago, his own father, the same person who had gifted him the biological supercomputer, had been kidnapped.

"That's why he didn't come back..." June said on the phone.

"Right. Based on what these bastards said, the Crystal Cross Gang has him captor in Frant."

"You want to leave and go save him?" June asked.

"Yes. But we need the others' help. For now, regroup at the park as planned but anticipate the meeting to half an hour from now. I will be there around that time."

"Where are you now, Master?"

"I just left the Villa. Why?"

"Based on your location, it should take you ten minutes to reach the park. Where are you planning to go?" June saw Erik's position, he wasn't heading toward the park. It was clear Erik wasn't done yet in Caelora City.

"Just to go pay a visit to an old friend."

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Dreadnought stormed out of the room where she and Quakestrike agreed to meet with furious steps.

Her face was a mask of anger, her eyes scanning the area for any sign of Quakestrike.

The villa echoed with the murmur of blackguards and the quieter voices of police guards stationed throughout.

"Where the fuck is that prick?" Her behavior was atypical, considering her usual demeanor of calmness and poise. The onlookers recognized she was not her usual self at that moment, yet hesitated to approach her due to her status as a blackguard.

As she navigated through the villa searching for Quakestrike, she went past Techmagnet and Stickyfingers.

The two women were sipping some tea in the kitchen and saw her rushed steps and reddened face.

"What's wrong with Olivia?" Stickyfingers asked.

"I don't know. Maybe she fought with Adrian?" Techmagnet said.

"Who the hell doesn't fight with Adrian?"

"Not her, usually. So, unless something big happened, that is the likely cause of her rage."

Unable to find Quakestrike, Dreadnought approached a guard. "Have you seen Quakestrike?" she asked.

"No ma'am, I'm sorry."

"AAAAH FUCK!"

While moving through the corridors, her boots crunching over debris, Dreadnought's anger simmered.

The guards avoided her gaze, sensing her anger. In the garden, she spotted another guard.

"HAVE YOU FUCKING SEEN QUAKESTRIKE?!"

The man was startled and scared. "Y-YES MAAM!" Finally, a guard offered a clue.

"I-I S-SAW HIM HEADING TO SPEAK WITH MOMENTUM M-MAAM!" He said as he pointed outside. With renewed purpose, Dreadnought headed towards the truck where Quakestrike was last seen.

Outside, the bright sun did little to ease the gloom that hung over the villa.

Dreadnought noticed Momentum, unmistakably attired in his Blackguard uniform, engaging in conversation with a few of the team members.

She made her way towards him and moved with a ponderous gait, her rage barely restrained.

"MARCUS, HAVE YOU SEEN ADRIAN?"

"Are you crazy telling our names like that?!" That was a taboo for the Blackguards.

Learning their real identities and not using their nicknames in public was dangerous, as people could target their families or target their assets.

"Shut up and tell me!"

Momentum turned, his expression one of mild surprise at the usually stoic Olivia's demeanor. He sighed.

"He was here earlier, asking about Lyria. I told him she was at the Caelora city mercenary guild hall. He should be back inside the building by now."

Dreadnought's face contorted with confusion and worry. Momentum couldn't see her face due to her helmet, but sensed something was amiss by how her shoulders slumped.

"He's not there. I've searched the entire villa. He promised he'd meet me, but he disappeared."

Momentum shrugged, a hint of annoyance in his demeanor.

"That's typical Quakestrike behavior. He often disappears without a word. Why are you worried about it? Based on how mad you are, it looks like you are going to rip him apart."

"That's... that's not like him..."

"Not like him? Are you sure we are talking about the same person?"

But Dreadnought's concern only deepened despite Momentum's words.

This disappearance was unusual, especially after their mutual agreement to meet privately to have some fun under the bedsheets.

Despite being known by only a select few, their relationship was characterized by intensity and passion, at least in her perception.

However, the reality was that Quakestrike was truly a womanizer, often exploiting his authority as a Blackguard to coerce individuals into sleeping with him.

Unaware of this, she found his sudden absence concerning and uncharacteristic, especially considering his typically high libido. Based on what they learned about Erik Romano, there could be the chance he could steal brain crystal powers. What if he stole Max's? That would explain why he targeted the shapeshifters.

"What?" Momentum asked.

Dreadnought paced restlessly, her mind abuzz with many potential outcomes.

Could something have happened to Quakestrike? Was there an alternative explanation for his abrupt disappearance?

"Something's not right," she said to herself.

The relationship between Dreadnought and him, although intricate, was built on a mutual understanding.

The sudden disappearance contradicted the behaviors she observed in him.

She turned away from Momentum, her mind churning with thoughts.

Quakestrike's absence, in that particular situation, with the shadows of Erik' Romano's presence, was more than just odd—it was alarming.

Despite her knowledge of the man's tendency to leave the temporary barracks for recreational purposes, this particular occurrence felt different, straying from the typical routine and causing alarm in her thoughts.

"Where are you going?!" Momentum asked as Dreadnought left, but the woman didn't reply.

"Dreadnought!"

Her steps took her back inside the villa, each stride heavy with concern.

Maybe she had overlooked some place, maybe she didn't see him, or maybe he reached the room as soon as she got out.

The place was enormous after all, and you couldn't tell what was happening on the other side of the Villa if you were in the opposite halls.

She moved through the halls, her eyes searching, hoping for a glimpse of Quakestrike, but finding none.

He was not in the bathrooms, not in the bedrooms, not in the kitchens or the garden. He was nowhere to be found.

The woman paused her search for a moment. To calm the storm of thoughts, she closed her eyes. Without delay, she hurried to the kitchen and found Techmagnet and Stickyfingers.

Out of their squad, those two had the strongest bond with her. Although there were no close bonds among them, since competition among the highly skilled Blackguards was intense, she thought she could at least ask her for help in searching for the man.

As soon as she reached the kitchen, she saw the two chatting. She took off her helmet, her worried look no in front of the two women.

"What happened?" Stickyfingers asked.

"Adrian went missing. I think this time is not like the others. Something is wrong."

"Are you sure? It's not the first time he does things like that."

"No. This is serious. We agreed to meet in a bedroom. You may understand why knowing him, but he is nowhere to be found."

It was then the two understood the situation was indeed serious. That was really out of character for Quakestrike.

#### Chapter 785: Lyria (1)

Erik moved through the busy streets of Caelora city, wearing the armor of the Blackguards. His presence inspired both respect and fear among the city's residents.

The infamous reputation of the Blackguards as ruthless upholders of law was clear in the wide berth and apprehensive glances he received from passersby.

Despite the reactions, Erik's mind was not occupied with his current disguise or the wary eyes that followed his every step.

His thoughts were fixed on his destination—the mercenary guild hall—and the person he intended to confront, Lyria.

He had to make the woman pay for what she did. Erik and Lyria collaborated a lot during the past year, not only to complete quests for the Blackguards, but even for matters of different natures that required his particular set of skills.

It wasn't like he expected her not to do something like this. After all, the woman showed herself to be very ruthless on some occasions.

Yet the revelation that she had colluded with the Blackguards and exposed his true identity as Erik Romano, the sole Awakener of Frant, irked him to no end.

The city of Caelora was in chaos at that moment. The Flying Thaid was still roaming around, in the citizen's opinion, and the Blackguards were searching people.

No one understood what was happening or why the Blackguards were searching people despite a dangerous monster entered the city.

However, there was something they knew for certain. They were in danger.

This meant that, around Erik, everyone were rushing toward home or safe places, and when they saw Erik, in his Quakestrike disguise, they hurried their steps to avoid being seen.

<The Blackguards are a menace to the citizens as much as the flying Thaid, uh? >

Erik's identity as Quakestrike afforded him control and safety, yet it was a role that he played with an increasing sense of disquiet.

It wouldn't take much for the other Blackguards to find out Quakestrike died, and that he was an impostor.

As he navigated the streets and winding alleys, the guild hall loomed closer.

Memories of Lyria flooded his mind. The trust they had built, albeit purely work related, now seemed like a distant dream now, shattered by the reality of her betrayal.

Erik pondered the reasons that could have driven Lyria to such actions. Was it fear, ambition, or something more that aligned her with the Blackguards?

He learned this organization wasn't as good as it tried to show, and Lyria likely knew this.

How come she was more willing to side with them, and not with him, knowing he was likely the only one with enough power to confront them?

<I bet she likes the situation. She feels threatened I could destroy the status quo. >

Upon reaching the guildhall, his appearance did not go unnoticed, as mercenaries and guild members alike cast curious glances towards the armored figure.

However, Erik remained focused and strode confidently inside.

As he entered the guildhall, the clamor of the outside world faded into a hushed silence. Eyes followed him as he moved through the hall, his armor clanking with each step.

The people were looking at him as if an executioner had just arrived, and were scared that their words could attract his ire. They feared finding an untimely death.

The guild, though, was a den of warriors, a place where tales of bravery and treachery were as common as the weapons that adorned its walls.

That spoke volumes about the power this organization held, and how strong their members were.

Erik strode towards the guild hall's counter, his armor echoing with each step.

The very air around him seemed to thicken with intimidation, his presence an embodiment of the feared reputation that the Blackguards carried.

As he neared, the clerk behind the counter, a young man with a nervous disposition, caught sight of the approaching figure. His eyes widened in a mix of respect and palpable fear.

As Erik closed the distance, the clerk's initial unease transformed into outright panic. A sheen of sweat glistened on his forehead, betraying his anxiety.

His hands, trembling, fumbled with the papers strewn across the counter.

He tried to compose himself, but the effort was strained.

His breathing became shallow and rapid, a clear sign of his distress at the presence of a Blackguard in such proximity.

"I need to talk to Lyria Bannon." Erik's firm voice cut through the tense air.

The clerk, startled by the directness, stuttered a response. "He- Hello, sir! Let me quickly c-check on the computer if Miss Bannon is here!"

His voice cracked slightly, the words tumbling out in a rush. His fingers, slick with sweat, slipped as he tried to operate the computer, his movements hurried and erratic.

"Make haste, I don't have time to lose."

"Y-yes, sir." The clerk tapped on the holographic keys, his eyes darting between the screen and the imposing figure in front of him.

He had never seen a Blackguard up close, let alone talked to one of them.

Every tap on the keyboard seemed to echo in his ears, amplifying his nervousness.

The clerk's usual routine task, which he performed countless times a day, now seemed like an insurmountable challenge.

His mind raced, thoughts jumbled by the overwhelming presence of the Blackguard.

He swallowed hard, trying to quell the dryness in his throat, his Adam's apple bobbing.

Erik observed the clerk's obvious discomfort, an unavoidable consequence of his current disguise.

The dread the Blackguards instilled in the common folk was a tool he had to use, albeit reluctantly, in his quest for truth.

The clerk's demeanor shifted as he confirmed Lyria's presence. "It looks like she is here!"

His statement was louder than it should have been. The words were laced with a peculiar energy.

It was almost as though he found relief in delivering good news to the figure before him.

The very thought of having to inform a Blackguard of a wasted journey, or an error, seemed to terrify him.

This fear was reflected in his physical state; his forehead now glistened with sweat that had doubled in quantity, droplets forming and sliding down the sides of his face.

"Where?"

"Room 412, fourth floor, sir. Should I tell her you are here, s-sir?"

The clerk's voice quivered, each word tinged with anxiety. His fingers were intertwined, knuckles whitening as he sought some form of self-comfort amid his trepidation.

"No." Erik said. He had to prevent Lyria from becoming suspicious of a sudden visit by a blackguard, Quakestrike no less, and possibly fleeing.

He was sure the clerk would not tell Lyria of his presence.

After all, there was going to be only an outcome if he defied his orders. The clerk knew that well.

<Jeez. They act like justice's paladins, but look at people's reaction! This is not respect, this is fear!  
>

With a nod of acknowledgement, Erik turned and made his way toward the back of the guildhall.

As he passed through the door leading to the private quarters, he could feel the eyes of those around him following his every move, their gazes a mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

A hushed silence enveloped the space. The usual hum of conversation and activity that animated the guild halls seemed to pause, silenced by his imposing presence and commanding aura.

Everyone in that room knew that if a blackguard got offended, he or she would make hell break loose.

They were upholder of justice, but it was clear their power and reputation made them arrogant.

The only sounds were the soft clinks of his armor and his measured footsteps, which resonated in the silent room.

The onlookers had their gazes fixed on him, and kept mum, silent spectators, to this unusual spectacle. Their curiosity and apprehension grew stronger, but was unvoiced.

Erik disappeared from their sight after the doors closed. Some of the people looked at each other. They wondered what the guy was doing here.

"Maybe he came here to arrest someone."

"Who did he ask about?" someone asked.

"A certain Lyria Bannon. You know who she is?"

"She is someone from Testrovsc's Rest if I'm not wrong."

"Why is she here, then? Hasn't she duties in her city?"

"You know nothing about what is happening in the city?"

"About the flying Thaid?"

"No, not that. Apparently, a very dangerous man came here. Erik Kay. He is the guild leader of a growing guild in Testrovsc's Rest. The guild responsible for making the new brain stimulating serum."

"Really? Such a big shot is here? But wasn't he considered the Fierce Lioness successor? Like, didn't people want him to work for them desperately?"

"Yes, but apparently he did something. I know little about it, but the Blackguards are searching for him all over the city."

"Shouldn't they take care of the flying thaid?"

"Shhhhhh... Are you crazy?"

Erik, at that point, found the elevator and stepped inside, the doors closing with a soft hiss behind him.

His finger pressed against the button for the fourth floor, the light illuminating with his touch.

As the elevator began its ascent, the hum of its machinery was the only sound accompanying him in the confined space.

The numbers above the door changed, each ding marking his progress towards the imminent confrontation.

Thoughts and strategies were swirling around in Erik's mind, creating a whirlwind.

Even though he appeared confident on the outside, he was secretly getting ready for every outcome of the upcoming encounter.

Chapter 786: Lyria (2)

Erik stepped out of the elevator reached the fourth floor.

He navigated the hallway, but it took little time before he reached the room where Lyria should have been.

With a deep breath, he pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The room greeted him with a stillness, punctuated only by the faint rustling of papers, like leaves in a gentle breeze.

Lyria, seated behind her desk, was engrossed in her work until his entrance. As she looked up, her expression shifted.

Her eyes widened in surprise. The appearance of a Blackguard, particularly someone as infamous as Quakestrike, evoked intense primal emotions in her, as she knew him well.

"Why are you here?" Lyria's voice, usually composed, wavered slightly.

"I came to ask you some questions."

"Questions? Couldn't you ask Momentum?"

By knowing how Quakestrike would have reacted if someone he deemed beneath him replied like that, Erik replied with a threat.

"You should know what happens if you talk like this to a Blackguard. Right?"

Lyria shivered, and reluctance appeared on her face. "I'm sorry, sir. How can I assist you?"

"I need to know more about our target." Erik's voice was steady, threatening even.

Lyria leaned back in her chair, her gaze analyzing the man before her. She found it weird for someone like Quakestrike, who tried to hunt Erik alone, to ask a question like those.

He had never been someone keen on asking quest details, especially considering he thought he would never lose in a battle. However, her reply didn't come late.

"Erik Kay... he is cunning. You all got surprised by the fact someone barely 20 years old was able to battle against you all at the same time. However, that didn't surprise me in the slightest. If there is something he can do that terrifies me, is his ability to go everywhere he wants without no one noticing."

Quakestrike shifted, the armor creaking slightly. "Does he have any vulnerabilities? Relationships we could exploit?" Erik asked.

To those words, Lyria's eyes narrowed.

"He's close to the Fierce Lioness's daughter. But surely, you know, tangling with her daughter could stir a hornet's nest. The Fierce Lioness isn't someone you should cross lightly."

The Fierce Lioness's guild was on another level compared to the other mercenary guilds, to the point they were as strong as the blackguards, but with less influence and people on their side.

"We already have problems keeping her at bay. Such a provocation may warrant a war, and you should know she doesn't like the Blackguards a lot."

<Umm? This is pretty useful. I may take advantage of this...>

He nodded slowly. "Thank you, Lyria." As he spoke, Lyria's gaze lingered on him, her eyes betraying a flicker of confusion.

Then a wave of panic swept across her features. Quakestrike was known for his unpredictability, a trait that now seemed to loom large in the room.

Her face contorted because of apprehension. Her eyes darted nervously, reflecting a mind racing with thoughts of what this unpredictable man might do next.

"Sir, you surely aren't considering..." Lyria's voice trailed off, the fear clear.

"What might I be considering?" He smirked, the corners of his mouth turning up in a way that almost reached his eyes.

Closing the gap between them, Erik moved closer to Lyria. She shuddered, visibly scared by his proximity.

Erik then lifted his helmet off. When he took off the helmet, Lyria saw that the man underneath bore no resemblance to Quakestrike.

As the woman gazed upon his unveiled face, a surge of fear, even greater than that she had for Quakestrike, engulfed her.

Her eyes widened in alarm, while her pupils dilated in response to the adrenaline now coursing through her veins.

"You!"

"Surprised?"

Erik's tone was nonchalant, almost playful. "How did you—?"

Her voice caught as she pieced it together. "You killed Quakestrike!"

"That's right. Is that a problem?"

"The Blackguards won't let this slide," Lyria said, trying to muster a threatening tone.

Erik laughed, a cold, humorless sound. "I've already faced some of them and killed some. Do you really think I fear them?"

As Lyria edged away, Erik's grin widened, a predatory gleam in his eyes.

"Planning to run?"

"It seems prudent to at least try..." Lyria said.

"I wouldn't if I were you."

The woman looked Erik in the eyes. She knew why he came here for, but still voiced her questions.

"What do you want from me?"

"I just need to know if you were the one who told the Blackguards about me," Erik said.

"I assumed you knew that already."

"I wanted to hear it from you. Yes or no?"

"Why does it matter?" Lyria said.

Lyria's and Erik's relationship had been purely professional, devoid of personal ties. She found it weird for him to ask that question.

"I work for the mercenary guild, and the guild serves them. That was all the reason I needed. We were nothing more than colleagues. Why would I risk my position... no, my life, for you?"

Erik held her gaze, searching for something hidden beneath the surface. He saw fear, but also a spark of defiance, a subtle challenge in the depths of her eyes.

The room seemed to shrink around them, or at least that was for Lyria.

"What about the guild? What did you do to them?" Erik asked. It was clear he was worried about his friends and comrades.

"They told you nothing?"

"Just that you tried suppressing them," Erik said.

"That's a simple way to say we did everything we could to make your guild go bankrupt."

Lyria said that truthfully. She knew lying or trying to underplay what they did was only going to be more dangerous.

"You tried to prevent them from taking quests, but they got private ones. You tried preventing them from selling our products, but they ended up on the Blackmarket."

"And then they fled the city when we directly tried to get your brain stimulating serum's formula," Lyria added. "Yeah. You got smart people under your guild's banner. Congratulation." Erik smiled.

"The question is, will you be able to protect them once the Blackguards will start actively hunting them?"

Erik confidently looked at the woman. "They don't need my protection anymore."

The woman looked into Erik's eyes. There was no shred of doubt in his gaze.

"You may be strong enough to fight the blackguards, but your people aren't."

"I'm confident they will be soon. Besides, I have some ideas to strengthen them in a short amount of time."

Then silence ensued. Slowly, Lyria went to her desk. There was a communication device there, Erik noticed it as soon as he entered.

"What are you planning to do now?"

She asked while walking backward, hoping to take the device and contact Momentum.

The woman clicked the button to start the call, but she realized the device wasn't working.

Fear and panic surged through her at unprecedented speed.

"You wanted to know how I was able to get everywhere I wanted. That's your explanation."

Erik looked at the device Lyria was trying to activate.

The woman picked up the device and looked at it. It was still off. "How can you control it like this?"

"Doesn't the blackguards know I have many powers? What difference can an additional one make?"

"So, that was it? One of your powers allows you to control electrical devices?"

Erik nodded. "You could say it like that..."

"Piece of..."

"Listen, now that I've done everything I had to do, I think we can wrap things up, don't you agree?"

Lyria's fear manifested in an array of physical reactions. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead, the product of her escalating anxiety.

"You came here just to... ask those stupid questions and then... what?"

They trickled down her temples, leaving faint, glistening trails on her skin. Her hands, once steady and confident, now trembled slightly, betraying her composure.

She clasped them together, perhaps in a subconscious effort to still their shaking, but the tremors persisted, small yet telling.

"I came here to look at you in the eyes while killing you. The questions were just for amusement."

Lyria's breathing became shallow and uneven, each inhale shorter than the last, as if she were struggling to find air in a constricting space.

Her eyes darted around the room, seeking an escape that wasn't there.

The muscles in her neck tensed visibly, and every so often, she swallowed hard, an attempt to compose herself that only highlighted her growing distress.

Despite her efforts to maintain a facade of defiance, these involuntary reactions painted a clear picture of her inner turmoil.

It was then that she started begging. "Please, I will do anything you want. Let me go."

"You had your chance, Lyria. The Blackguards' dominion is going to end soon, and mine will be the scythe claiming their heads."

"No, please, n—!"

In a mere fraction of a second, Erik drew his Flyssa, the blade gleaming with a cold, merciless light.

The unmistakable sound of steel cutting through the air echoed inside the room. With a fluid motion, Erik brought the Flyssa down in a swift arc.

The blade met Lyria's neck with a chilling efficiency, severing it from her body.

The suddenness of the act left no time for screams or more pleas, only the finality of a life cut off.

Blood spurted from the wound in a gruesome spectacle, painting the walls and floor in a stark crimson hue.

Lyria's body slumped to the ground, an inert reminder of the brutal reality they had both been part of.

Her head lay a short distance away, her eyes wide open in a final, unseeing gaze.

The silence that followed was heavy, filled with the weight of the deed just committed.

It was at that moment that he picked up his phone and called June.

"Master!" the clone said to the phone. "Are you done with your task?"

"Yes. I'm coming there. Wait for me. We are going to leave the city as soon as I get there."

Chapter 787: Escape (1)

"No words from Quakestrike yet?"

"No, sir."

Momentum had a contemplative face under his mask. He didn't really think something happened to him, yet Dreadnought's insistence made him doubt.

Momentum was surprised to learn about the relationship between the two, whatever it may be.

Some members of their team, mostly the female ones, knew about it, but as for the males, the thought of Dreadnought having a relationship felt alien.

The woman was always calm and composed, thinking about orders first and everything else second.

As she thought, Dreadnought paced back and forth. She wanted to go out there and search for her man, but Momentum ordered her to stay there.

The woman was worried that something bad might have happened to the man.

Considering the day's events, he didn't show any abnormalities in his demeanor, at least not anything unusual at large.

However, a small, inexplicable oddity lingered in her mind, unsettling her deeply.

The man had disappeared. He was under strict instructions to stay in the villa and wait for further orders.

While his tendency to defy orders was known, his complete disappearance with no communication was unusual, even for him.

This sudden deviation from his usual behavior was strange and left the woman feeling concerned and deep in thought.

"I HAVE HAD ENOUGH OF WAITING!" she turned to look at Momentum.

"Your orders are to stay here and wait, Dreadnought. This is the last time I tell you this. One more word from you and I will report you for insubordination!"

Amid silence from the woman, Momentum, the team captain, directed his gaze toward one of the guild's men, sent to help them in their search.

Quakestrike's tracking device had been deactivated, adding another oddity to the already perplexing behavior.

Momentum mulled over this situation, the gears in his mind turning.

Quakestrike's deactivation of his tracking device, though, made Momentum keen to believe to Dreadnought's assumption about Quakestrike's fate.

The possibility that he had met his end seemed increasingly plausible, a thought that hung in Momentum's contemplative silence.

"Did you find him?"

"No, sir. Until he was here, the tracking device in his suit worked fine. He turned it off when he left the place."

Momentum had a hunch. "Show me Quakestrike movements of the last days."

"Yes, sir."

Upon pressing a series of buttons, the man brought to life a vivid holographic map, which materialized before the onlookers.

This three-dimensional representation showcased the city in intricate detail.

Many orange dots illuminated the map, representing every place Quakestrike had visited.

The map unfurled a digital trail across the city's grid, pinpointing his past locations with remarkable precision.

Each marker provided a glimpse into his journey, mapping out his movements and shedding light on his intentions and destinations.

"This is from yesterday, when we fought Romano here at the Villa."

There were some dots starting from when the city entrance to the Villa.

"This is from today, when we sent him to Harmony Square to search for the target. But this..."

Quakestrike left the square after reportedly getting a lead on Erik Romano. The analysis of his captured movements showed a fast pace.

For several minutes, he dashed through the streets until he reached a secluded alley where his rapid footsteps came to a halt.

Then Momentum turned to look at the mercenary.

"How much did he stay in that alley?"

"The log shows no more than five minutes, sir."

"Mhmmmm... Contact the closest squads, send them to that location, and search around. Leave no stone unturned."

"Yes, sir."

The moment called for immediate action, and the mercenary wasted no time.

With practiced efficiency, the mercenary tapped into the communication network, his voice calm yet commanding as he relayed orders.

He coordinated the movements of various teams, each directive ensuring that all available operatives within proximity to the destination were mobilized with precision.

Dreadnought approached Momentum. "Did you find something out?"

"Did I not tell you to shut the fuck up?"

"Please! I need to know," Dreadnought said.

Momentum made a low, pensive hum. Then he sighed. "There has been suspicious movements from Quakestrike this morning."

"Yes, he left his post to chase Erik Romano. Do you think something happened to him during that time?"

"I'm sure he is just in a tavern chugging down alcohol, yet I don't want to rule out the possibility something really happened."

Apprehension caused Dreadnought to shiver.

"Don't sweat it, I'm probably just overthinking things."

However, after only five minutes, an urgent call reached the Blackguards' headquarter.

"Urgent communication, sir!" The assistant's voice was filled with urgency and concern, breaking the room's focused silence.

"Transfer it to my device." Despite the tone, Momentum was calm, yet with an underlying tint of unease.

After a couple of seconds, a voice spoke. "Sir, we found a dead body at the location you provided us!"

"Who is it?" Momentum asked.

"The man doesn't appear on our systems."

That made Momentum understand.

"Send me a photo of his face."

"Yes, sir."

In just seconds, Momentum had the photo on the device in his hands.

Right away, he knew that the man in the photo was unquestionably deceased. Worse, it was Quakestrike.

His complex expression turned to face Dreadnought as he swiftly turned, shaken. Unsure of how to deliver this message to the woman, he ultimately opted for a direct approach.

"What?!"

"They found Quakestrike. He is dead, presumably since this morning."

In that instant, Dreadnought let out a heartbreaking scream that affected everyone there.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Despair consumed the woman, causing her body to shake amidst uncontrollable sobs.

Tears streamed down her cheeks in relentless torrents, her breath hitching in her throat with each heart-wrenching cry.

Her swollen, red eyes mirrored the anguish in her soul.

She clutched at her chest, as if to hold together a heart breaking into a thousand pieces. However, the anguish started turning into rage.

"ERIK ROMANOOOOO!"

\*\*\*

Erik darted through the bustling city streets, his heart racing with a mix of excitement and urgency.

He sought revenge on Lyria while simultaneously neutralizing a highly dangerous person.

Lyria was smart, cunning and resourceful, and he was sure she would have been a real thorn in his side if he didn't take care of her.

He maneuvered through the throngs of people, his eyes set on the distant greenery of the park.

As the concrete jungle gave way to nature's haven, he slowed his pace, his eyes scanning the surroundings for his clones.

But they were nowhere in sight.

With a flick of his wrist, Erik pulled out his phone and dialed June's number. The phone rang briefly before June's voice answered from the other end.

"I'm at the park. Where are you?"

"We're in front of the park statue."

"Wait for me there."

Erik quickened his pace once more, his boots thudding against the paved path of the park.

In no time, he arrived at the designated meeting point, where his thirty-one clones stood in a disciplined formation.

June stepped forward, his gaze piercing through Erik.

"Did you take care of all your matters?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Was it Lyria?" June asked.

"Yeah. That she helped the Blackguards didn't sit well with me and I went to pay her a visit."

"Is she dead?" Alexander asked.

"She is a headless corpse." Then Erik turned back to June.

June had been given an important task, and Erik was eager to know if he had completed it.

Erik's intense gaze revealed the significance of the matter as he anxiously awaited June's response.

"Did you bring the two rifles we stole at the gate the last time?"

"Yes, Master." He pointed at two clones, each one holding two huge briefcases. "We put them there to ensure they didn't get damaged."

"You did well. Is there something you should report?" Erik asked.

"No, sir. The enemy doesn't know there are more than two people here besides me and you, and I didn't have particular problems escaping their search." June's tone was matter of fact.

"Good."

"Shall we leave, master?"

"Yes. I can't stand staying in this city any longer. Let's head for the city's exit. Once outside, we will fly to Noah and the others. About that, is there any news about them?" Erik asked.

"Yes. They are in Liberty Watch Village. The whole guild moved there. Amber and the others are there."

"All right."

However, Erik was a little unsettled. If the entire guild and Amber were present, then it would imply that she should have already met Mira. He wondered what they would say once he got back.

Before departing, he looked at the group, his eyes lingering on each clone.

"Be warned, guys, they have laser weapons that can kill thaids. Stay alert, or you might not make it."

The clones, unfazed by the danger, nodded in unison. June's expression softened. "We wouldn't mind dying for you," he said.

"I know, but I would like to avoid that..."

With a last nod, he turned, leading the way out of the city, his clones following behind him.

Chapter 788: Escape (2)

"Did you understand the plan?" Erik asked.

"Yes, Master," the clones said in unison.

They arrived at the exit gate after some time wandering the streets.

"Let's go then." With Erik's words spoken, they separated in two.

Fifteen clones went with Erik and hid nearby, while the rest approached the main entrance.

The group approached the gate when a group of guards rushed to them.

"The exit to the city is off limit. We are currently in an emergency. Turn back."

The clones looked at each other. Then a grin spread across their faces. It was at that moment that they dispatched the guards around.

"Hey you! What are you doing?"

A guard reached for his communication device and contacted the headquarters, but was killed soon after.

The clones's goal was to create the chaos Erik and the others needed.

As the fifteen clones held their position near the side of the entrance, more guards, alerted by the disturbance, rushed towards them.

The guards, armed with batons and shields, moved in a coordinated manner, trying to overpower the clones with sheer numbers.

However, the clones met their assailants with equal force.

They were stronger than the average fighter, so they didn't have problems engaging with the guards.

Of course, the battle became deadly, with the clones killing as many mercenaries as possible.

The sound of metal clashing against metal echoed through the area as the two forces collided.

The clones were aggressive and made a lot of chaos. After all, that was their goal.

In the meantime, as soon as the side entrance was free of people, Erik and the rest of the clones dashed toward the door.

"Take care of those guards."

The clones did as Erik instructed and killed the guards with rapid strikes.

"All done, Master."

"Good. Now we need to let the others enter."

Simultaneously, the battle outside the building was going forward.

The clones were still battling the guards, but there were hundreds of them now.

To them, the fifteen individuals who attacked the gate looked like demons.

They were killing mercenaries left and right, and they could do nothing to stop them.

The problem was that most of the brain crystal rifles were inside the building.

Few of the guards were using them right at that moment, and the ones who did were quickly dispatched by the clones, who then used the weapons for their advantage.

More and more guards were dying under the clones' assault.

While the defenders were unaware of the real purpose of the attack.

"Did you contact the Blackguards?" A guard asked.

"Yes, sir! They are on their way!"

"Let's pray we will be alive by the time they arrive."

In the meantime, Erik and the others ran through the building and headed toward the side exit.

They needed to open the door with no one noticing, so that the other clones could safely leave the city.

"How much before we reach the exit?" Erik asked.

"200 meters," June said.

"Good. Tell the others to set off the explosives and move toward the target location."

"Understood."

June did as he said. Of course, not having sophisticated communication devices, they resorted to phones.

Erik couldn't waste mana for now, as he was sure there were going to be battles to fight soon, as the Blackguards were bound to arrive.

"Set off the explosives," June said. With that order, the clones outside retreated, leaving the guards baffled. Carnage around them.

The clones, with a clear aim in mind, started their second phase of the diversion.

They threw some makeshift bombs they made, and within moments, the area around the front of the building erupted into a cacophony of controlled chaos.

BOOM

BOOM

BOOM

BOOM

BOOM

The bombs released thick clouds of obscuring fog and dust, enveloping the surroundings in a dense haze.

The explosives unleashed a series of thunderous booms, resonating through the air and shaking the very ground beneath.

The blasts were timed with precision, each explosion thrown to increase the radius of the debris meant to cover them.

As smoke billowed, and the noise echoed, the guards scrambled in confusion. Alarms blared in response to the explosions.

Amidst the confusion, the clones communicated through subtle nods and gestures, confirming the success of their diversion.

Their faces remained calm, betraying no hint of satisfaction at the pandemonium they had created. But for some of the guards, it was another story.

"AHHHH!"

"MY LEG! I CAN'T FEEL MY LEG!"

"MOM, HELP ME!"

With that, the clones, covered by the smoke, rushed toward the secondary entrance.

In the meantime, Erik and the others reached the door, and with a powerful kick, they blasted it open. They found the other clones in front of the door.

"Is everyone ok?" Erik asked.

"Yes, Master, it was a simple job," a clone said.

"Good, because things are going to get complicated from now on. Expect more brain crystal rifles. Let's go now."

Upon entering the building, Erik and his group found themselves engulfed in a labyrinth of corridors and rooms.

Each turn and doorway hid unseen dangers. The building's interior was a maze, with long, winding hallways that branched off in multiple directions, and rooms that varied in size and purpose.

Erik took the lead, relying on his previous experiences in the same facility and using the biological supercomputer to get a map of the building.

The guards inside were few since they were still outside searching for the clones, not knowing they were already inside.

The group moved with haste, as Erik knew that since the last time he and June had been there, additional security measures had surely been implemented.

He was right. Erik could see it thanks to the biological supercomputer.

There were motion sensors on the ceiling. Which Erik promptly deactivated, thanks to the mighty system.

Surveillance cameras, mounted at strategic intervals along the corridors, posed another challenge, but since Erik didn't really care about the enemy finding out about his ability to mess up with the electronic devices, he deactivated them, too.

Erik's understanding of the building allowed him to guide the group through the edifice.

"This doesn't look that hard," Alexander said.

"Yeah, because we are less restrained than the last time," June said as a response to Alexander's remark.

As they advanced, Erik's group encountered a corridor guarded by armed guards with brain crystal rifles. They started shooting at them.

"Can't we avoid them?" June asked.

"No. That's the only way to go to the elevator," Erik said.

"Fuck."

Erik had largely disabled the base's security systems, but the guards who saw the group rushing inside used radio communication, and alerted the others about the incursion without moving to engage. They waited at a few strategic locations.

Thanks to that, they got enough people to block the intruder's only route to the elevator.

If they wanted to reach a higher floor and get out of the city, they had to go past them.

"What do we do?" Alexander asked.

"I will mess with their brains. There will only be a short time frame in which they will be confused enough to be defenseless. You have to take care of them at that time."

"Are you sure we can pull this off?"

"Seriously? You are almost as strong as Samuel from Liberty Watch village!" Erik said.

"Yes, but those rifles basically put them on our level!"

"Just do as I said. I will tell you when to go. Don't hesitate."

"YES, MASTER."

Erik started channeling mana from his brain crystal through his neural links.

He tapped into his instability brain crystal power and then focused on his opponents.

There were around ten guards, so messing with their brains was possible.

What Erik wanted to do was to instill a fear so deep inside of them as to make them lose the ability to think.

However, to do so required a massive amount of mana, so he couldn't make that mental state last for long. A couple of seconds at best.

His power worked subtly at first, seeping into their consciousness. Then, with a sudden surge, he triggered their deepest, most primal fears.

The guards' eyes widened in terror as their minds were flooded with horrifying self-induced images—nightmarish visions that were so vivid and overwhelming that they momentarily lost all sense of reality.

Within this brief window, the guards were completely vulnerable, their ability to think and react crippled by the terrifying they saw.

Seizing this critical moment, Erik's thirty-one clones sprang into action.

With the guards disoriented and defenseless, the clones moved with lethal efficiency.

They rushed into the corridor, taking full advantage of the guards' temporary incapacitation.

In the span of those few, crucial seconds, the clones neutralized the guards.

The entire skirmish was over almost as quickly as it had begun, with the guards overwhelmed before they could regain their composure.

[MULTIPLE GUARDS 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. 72917 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

With the threat neutralized, Erik ceased the flow of mana, allowing the eerie calm of the aftermath to settle. The corridor was now secure, the elevator just at a few steps in front of them.

"Let's go. We already wasted a lot of time."

"Yes, Master!" the clones said in unison. They were almost out of the city.

### Chapter 789: Escape (3)

Erik and his clones pressed on through the building's corridors, moving towards the exit gate that connected Caelora city to the outside world.

However, the journey wasn't without problems. As they navigated the maze-like interior, they encountered ten more groups of guards, each comprising about ten members, strategically positioned to thwart their escape.

Battling those guys wasn't easy at all, due to those damned brain crystal powered laser rifles, and those guards seemed to be stronger than usual, making easier for them to aim due to their enhanced reflexes.

These weapons leveled the playing field, making each skirmish a time-consuming and dangerous endeavor that Erik and the clones could get past only thanks to his ability to affect their minds.

Erik, tapping into his instability brain crystal power, manipulated the guards' minds, inducing overwhelming fear to create openings for his clones to strike. Exactly as he did the first time.

The process, however, was taxing. It drained a considerable amount of mana and demanded intense concentration, especially when dealing with so many people.

Those guys were smart, and it wasn't simple for him to breach their minds. Yet it was Erik's most effective strategy to neutralize the guards without sustaining casualties.

The guards had around 25 neural links each and were almost as strong as Erik's clone.

There was, of course, still a difference in pure statistics between them, but, again, the laser rifles made everything complex.

Having seen what these weapons could do, Erik surmised that brain crystal powers were going to be outshined.

It was weird to think that the only thing that allowed humans to survive until now was going to be replaced as this technology spread.

Despite facing armed opponents, the clones capitalized on the brief moments of vulnerability Erik created.

Each skirmish followed a similar pattern: Erik would incapacitate the guards, and the clones would then rush in to eliminate the threat. Erik even leveled up.

However, the continuous battles against armed groups took a toll on their progress. Time was slipping away with each confrontation, and Erik grew increasingly aware of the urgency of their situation.

As they cleared each group of guards, Erik and the clones moved closer to their goal.

The building's complex layout, combined with the continuous engagements, made their journey feel endless.

The corridors seemed to stretch on, each turn leading to another guarded checkpoint.

After what seemed like hours of relentless fighting and navigation, they approached the last stretch leading to the exit gate.

"We made it!" Alexander said.

Erik glanced back at his group, a mix of satisfaction and exhaustion on his face.

However, he noticed someone behind them, and he realized the time they had lost to face those guards had been enough for those guys to reach them.

It was at that moment that Dreadnought rushed in, followed by the other Blackguards.

"INCOMING!"

The other clones turned to see what was happening, though they were too late.

Dreadnought used her power. Based on what Erik learned, her power allowed her to change her density.

Though the same ability could have different outcomes. In Dreadnought's case, she could either increase her resistance to attacks, or increase her strength.

The woman used a mix of both. She hardened her fist so much, and gained so much strength, that Alexander had no means to resist the attack.

In a second, his head exploded to bits under the woman's demonic force.

"ALEX!"

But that wasn't all. Dreadnought wasn't the only one that jumped into the fray and took advantage of the situation to wreak havoc. The other blackguards did the same.

Phantom came out of a wall phasing through it and grabbing the heart of another clone and squishing it into her palm. The clone died without having a chance to retaliate.

Inkblade channeled his mana. A structure materialized. It was an iron maiden, but unlike any other—it was formed from ink, a creation of Inkblade's powerful brain crystal power.

The iron maiden, dark and foreboding, seemed to flow and solidify. A clone found himself in its path. Before he could react, the iron maiden enveloped him in a swift motion.

As the iron maiden sealed shut, the clone was left in darkness, ensnared in a prison not of metal, but of ink and mana.

Then, Inkblade clenched his fist, and then the clone screamed. Blood poured out of the ink construct.

Nine more clones had a similar fate. They were killed by the other Blackguards, taking advantage of the situation.

"Fuck! GET OUT, YOU ALL GET OUT!"

Erik was determined to reduce his losses. The physical strength of his clones was on par with that of the Blackguards, yet their overall capabilities fell short in comparison.

Unlike the Blackguards, whose powers were mana-based, the clones' abilities stemmed from the biological attributes they gained when Erik merged the cloning ability with all the other various brain crystal powers.

This distinction made them effective in combat against regular opponents, but significantly less so against people on the Blackguards' level.

The main reason was the Blackguards' high levels of mana.

While the biological armor of Erik's clones could withstand attacks from most foes, it proved ineffective against adversaries wielding such immense mana reserves.

The situation was akin to pitting a metal wall against varying degrees of firepower: while it could hold up against standard bullets; it stood no chance against the overwhelming force of tank shells.

Similarly, the clones' armor could repel attacks up to a certain point, but was vulnerable to the powerful assaults launched by the mana-rich Blackguards.

"MASTER! WE CAN'T LEAVE YOU HERE!" June said.

"SHUT UP AND DO AS I SAY. I WILL NEED YOUR HELP IN THE FUTURE, STOP COMPLAINING."

In the meantime, Erik dashed toward Dreadnought. He created a Flyssa with his solid frost wind brain crystal power and conjured a wind blade.

Dreadnought was the first to notice. She swapped all her concentration in increasing the overall density of her body, increasing the resistance against attacks.

Not only she could use at least double Erik's mana, but the young man also depleted a lot of his reserves. That meant the attack had little power behind.

Dreadnought tanked the attack and protected the other Blackguards. At the same time, Phantom went past Dreadnought by going through her. She appeared before Erik, poised to strike.

"I WILL KILL YOU, MONSTER!"

Erik, despite being caught off guard, still had many tricks up his sleeves at his disposal.

He was only having trouble using them because of the enemy numbers.

His strength and speed were almost twice that of his opponents. He dodged Phantom's assault, but before he could launch a counterattack, Stickyfingers intervened.

She hurled spheres that opened, revealing a net which the woman turned sticky before the battle. It ensnared Erik, immobilizing him.

At that moment, Shadowstalker emerged from a shadow behind Erik. Trapped in the net, the young man found himself unable to dodge the impending onslaught he had anticipated.

Shadowstalker's ability, though limited to shadow jumping, came with a significant advantage: he could amplify his speed by jumping.

This meant that each of his punches would deliver a substantially more powerful impact.

Using this tactic, the man leaped through shadows, gaining momentum with each jump.

He emerged from his shadowy realm thirty times in rapid succession, striking Erik repeatedly in the face with enhanced force.

The speed and intensity of the attack left Erik reeling, each punch landing with increased ferocity due to Shadowstalker's clever use of his unique ability.

"Mother fucking Blackguards!"

Erik used his monstrous strength to get the sticky net out of the way, but as soon as he did, Dreadnought came crashing like a tsunami.

She summoned all her strength and used a lot of mana, ramming her shoulder into Erik's midsection.

The impact lifted him off his feet, sending him crashing onto the floor several meters behind.

"Bitch!"

"YOU ARE DEAD, ERIK ROMANO!"

The force of the blow left Erik struggling to catch his breath, but he knew he couldn't stay on the ground any longer.

<These motherfuckers found a way to fight me by using their numbers as an advantage. >

Erik quickly rebounded to his feet, executing a nimble somersault to regain his balance.

But the Blackguards were relentless, giving him no opportunity to counter.

In an instant, Techmagnet unleashed a massive electromagnetic pulse.

The force of it hit Erik with the might of a freight train, propelling him at an impressive distance of about 30 meters.

He was sent hurtling through the air until he collided with a wall; the impact echoing the sheer power of Techmagnet's attack.

"UGH!"

Erik started feeling apprehension. It looked like the Blackguards analyzed his fighting style, and albeit not having seen all his powers, they found a way to counter him.

That was by using their numbers and some of their members' powers to attack him without giving the young man a chance to retaliate.

That was a difficult situation, even for him. It was the first time in a lot of time that he was put on the defensive.

That showed how dangerous brain crystal powers were and how physical statistics could only help up to a certain point.

These guys had many more times his mana. This meant they could make their defenses strong enough to resist Erik's attacks, and strong enough to bypass any of Erik's ones.

Though Erik wasn't done. No, he didn't even start yet.

Chapter 790: Escape (4)

<I need to get out of this mess. >

As soon as Erik got on his feet again, Inkblade's inky iron maiden sprouted again.

Erik barely had the time to avoid being trapped into the deadly construct. by diving on his left.

Then Dreadnought came like a freight train and tried to punch the young man.

Erik already got his back at the wall, but he ducked and punched Dreadnought in her midsection, making her fly 20 meters back.

Stickyfingers, trying to take advantage of Erik's precarious stance, threw again the net-balls after having placed the same sticky substance her brain crystal power produced onto it.

She was hoping to trap Erik again and this time gain an advantage.

However, the young man activated both Hais' and the instability brain crystal powers.

The second allowed him to sense not only what Stickyfingers was trying to do but also that Momentum, the team's leader, was channeling mana in order to reverse his inertia.

If Erik planned on moving forward, Momentum's brain crystal power would make him move backward.

It was a weird power, not very easy to use, but very problematic in a fight.

If Erik's movements were disrupted, his situation would only grow direr.

However, knowing this, instead of going forward, the young man tried to move left, but as a result, he ended up going right.

That allowed him to avoid not only the net but also take advantage of Momentum's power to get out of his predicament.

Though, Shadowstalker was already hopping through the shadows and was going to attack Erik.

The young man knew that thanks to his powers. Hais brain crystal power allowed him to see the battlefield more clearly, and noticing the subtle hints of movement, his instability power didn't allow him to see.

Since his thought speed increased a lot, he quickly realized that, to take advantage of the situation, he had to disrupt Momentum's power.

For that reason, he conjured another wind blade. Erik then turned behind, knowing Momentum's power was still in effect.

By taking advantage of it, Erik slashed at the wall in front of the man, knowing the wind blade would travel in the opposite direction.

As he unleashed the blade, Momentum got scared. Dreadnought jumped in front of him to shield the man from the attack, but the blackguard lost his concentration and the effect of his brain crystal power wore off.

All of this happened in a fraction of seconds, in which Erik, now free from his constraints, turned just in time to see Shadowstalker hopping out of a shadow to attack him.

However, thanks to the instability brain crystal power and Hais's one, he made in time to swing his sword, decapitating Shadowstalker with a single fluid motion.

[ENEMY HUMAN 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. 19920 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

Erik also had time to look around thanks to Hais's brain crystal power.

He noticed that all his remaining clones, June included, left the building. He assumed they were already outside.

"MALIK!"

Inkblade made an anguished shout. The two were friends.

Inkblade tried to attack Erik, but since there was no one who could stop him at that moment, Erik activated his Xeridon Anteris brain crystal power, enhancing his strength, and as a result, his speed. He darted out of the corridor and entered the elevator.

"Phew... that was close. These bastards are really strong!"

However, the Blackguards didn't stay idle.

"FAST! CHASE HIM!"

As they arrived at the elevator, they noticed that was the only way to go up.

Dreadnought went forward and increased her density and strength.

She tore open the elevator's doors and all the Blackguards started climbing through the shaft while the elevator itself brought Erik on the upper and last floor. It was the floor leading to the exit.

<June, where are you? > Erik reached for his clone thanks to his powers.

<We are outside. There are no guards nearby and those inside we dealt with them. How is the situation at your end? >

<I got to the elevator and killed a blackguard, but they are likely chasing me. The problem is that I heard the elevator's door below being forcefully opened. You need to shapeshift into Galewings and leave. Head for Liberty Watch's village. Though, while the others go, you wait for me at the first line of trees. We will leave as soon as I get there.

>

June nodded. <Alright, Master. I will tell the others. I will wait for you in front of the forest. Make haste. >

When the elevator stopped and the doors opened, Erik dashed through the labyrinth of corridors, heading for the exit.

At the same time, the Blackguards reached the same floor and began their pursuit toward the exit.

Both parties, Erik and the Blackguards, navigated the building at a breakneck speed, but Erik was faster.

A grim scene unfolded before their eyes as they both went through the corridors.

The hallways were littered with the bodies of guards, casualties in the clones' escape.

The guards were strewn haphazardly across the floor, a testifying a battle that went on in the background as Erik faced the Blackguards.

The clones had overcome significant resistance, leaving behind a trail of death that now lay in the path of both Erik and his pursuers.

The young man eventually arrived at the exit door, the gateway to the colossal structure he went through the first time he entered the city.

It bore a striking resemblance to the other similar gates across the country, especially so for that in Testrovs's Rest.

Crossing the threshold, he found himself amid an arsenal of combat vehicles and artillery weapons—typical equipment for mercenaries embarking on their hunting expeditions.

However, he had the inkling those vehicles and artillery were brain crystal weapons.

Erik didn't let himself get distracted by what he was seeing.

He maneuvered through the mechanical labyrinth, with the nimbleness of a monkey swinging through a forest canopy.

After traversing this maze of warfare machinery, Erik emerged into the open.

He had reached the outside, leaving behind the confines and dangers of the guarded structure.

However, he wasn't done. He needed to reach June to escape from that damned city, as the Blackguards were on his tail, and based on what they showed, they were capable of killing him.