

BIOLOGICAL 811

Chapter 811: Hunting for the Crystal Cross Gang

Erik and June set off for New Alexandria early the next morning. After having transformed into Galewing form, June carried them towards the city's outskirts.

However, June's appearance was sure to trigger the city's defenses, an encounter Erik was keen to avoid. Stealth was essential for their mission.

For this reason, they were currently walking through the forest, killing weak Thaidis here and there.

Their primary aim was to gather intelligence on the Crystal Cross Gang.

Erik was gonna completely shut them down: get rid of everyone, blow up their base, and take out their mysterious leader, Shade.

This shadowy figure, rumored to wield considerable influence across the criminal underworld of several nations. He was believed to be the mastermind behind the gangs across the world.

Erik knew that uncovering the reality of Shade's existence and determining his ties to the Crystal Cross Gang was going to be a big deal.

Also, since the Blackguards had him doing all sorts of things, he thought bumping him off and wiping out the criminal gangs would screw them over.

Erik believed that Shade could give valuable info on the Blackguards if he tracked him down. There were many questions still unresolved.

For example, who was the man's contact with the Blackguards? Was it Uncle Benjamin? And if he was, where was he?

The man seemed to have disappeared.

Such information might reveal vulnerabilities within their ranks or expose new leads to follow.

With this knowledge in hand, Erik's next step would be to locate the Blackguards' stronghold.

Identifying and infiltrating their base of operations would not only disrupt their activities but also offer a direct route to dismantling their power structure from the inside.

Erik and June then arrived in front of New Alexandria's entrance.

Though it was heavily guarded by a bunch of soldiers. They were all holding brain crystal rifles, but they didn't have that usual serious soldier vibe from Frant.

They were almost laid-back, always smirking and joking around about random stuff. Something was off. Though, their number was high.

"The Blackguards prepared Volkov really well. I hope the situation won't be as bad in Fasard."

"Should we try to enter?" June asked.

"No. There are too many guards. Not even I can get past that many rifles."

"Then, our only way to enter is..."

Erik understood well what June was referring to. "That is, if they didn't close it."

Erik and June then left the area, and after several hours, they arrived in front of a breach in the barrier.

"It has been a lot since I've been here."

Erik still vividly remembered using this secret passage to escape from New Alexandria and venture into the untamed wilderness where Thaid's roamed.

It was this exact passage that had granted him freedom and access to uncharted territory, a clandestine route known only to him.

"Let's go," Erik said.

"Yes, Master."

Together, they stepped through the breach, the barrier between the city's chaotic streets and the untamed wilds beyond.

It felt surreal walking this path again. The memories of when he got his revenge against Logan were still fresh in his mind. It looked like it had happened yesterday.

As Erik and June emerged through the breach, the sight that greeted them was different from what both remembered.

Where once wheat fields stretched out, offering concealment and a path less trodden, now lay a patchwork of destruction and neglect.

Half of the fields were charred, the remnants of fires that had once raged uncontrollably, consuming everything in their path.

The other parts were wild and untamed, overrun with weeds and signs of disuse.

Erik paused, taking in the desolate scene. It looked like a lot had happened when he left.

The people who had once tended these fields, who had labored under the sun to cultivate the wheat, were gone.

Whether they had fled, fallen victim to the infection, or succumbed to other fates, Erik could only guess.

If even people from the outskirts of the city died, it meant that many had the same fate within the densest part of the city.

"This is a problem. We won't be able to roam around undisturbed."

"Yeah," June said. "Besides, is the Crystal Cross Gang in New Alexandria still operating?"

"Who knows? But if they are, I bet they are taking advantage of the situation."

"Right. Let's hope it will be easy to find them."

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June and Erik made their way to the train station, a journey marked by the eerie quiet that had settled over the city.

Surprisingly, the public transportation system persevered amidst the chaos, like a faint pulse in a city that has seen brighter days.

As they walked, the absence of the usual clamor and crowd was easily noticeable.

The lively chatter and footfalls of commuters were replaced by silence, broken only by their own steps.

The station itself seemed abandoned at first glance. Shops that once teemed with travelers seeking last-minute purchases now stood shuttered, their interiors plundered, windows broken and displays empty.

Dust and debris littered the floor, untouched in the city's aftermath ordeal.

While boarding the train felt like stepping into a ghost of New Alexandria's past. The carriages were hauntingly vacant.

They chose their seats in a compartment where the only other presence was the echo of their movements. The train jerked into motion, its engine a lonely sound.

As the landscape of the city rolled by their window, Erik and June were presented with a visual testament to the devastation.

Buildings, once proud and tall, lay in ruins, their structures crumbled and exposed.

The bustling streets, usually filled with the energy of the city, were now congested with the wreckage of collapsed homes and businesses.

Amid the wreckage, glimmers of resilience could be seen. Among the wreckage, there was a constant hum of activity as machines and vehicles moved around.

Small groups of people worked to clear the debris. Cranes lifted heavy beams, and workers in hard hats and reflective vests navigated through the ruins, laying the groundwork for reconstruction.

As the train continued its journey, whisking them through the battered heart of New Alexandria, Erik and June remained silent, each lost in their thoughts.

Then they arrived at the next train station. There were more people there, and a lot of soldiers were patrolling the streets. If to search for someone or something, they didn't know.

Chapter 812: The officers

While leaving the train station, Erik and June stepped into the streets of New Alexandria, only to be met by a ghost city.

The vibrant life that once filled the city's avenues was now replaced by an unsettling quiet.

The attack of the Heniate's offspring, which had turned the inhabitants into mindless beasts, left deep scars not just on the infrastructure but on the community's soul.

"It looks like the city never recovered from the attack," June said, his voice carrying a somber tone.

Erik nodded, scanning the surroundings. "Volkov has his work cut out for him. Rebuilding this place won't be easy, especially with half the population gone or turned."

As they walked, the sparse population became apparent. The few civilians they encountered hurried along, casting cautious glances their way.

It wasn't long before they realized that most of the figures moving in the distance were not civilians, but soldiers and police officers, their eyes trained on Erik and June with a mix of suspicion and interest.

While feeling the weight of their stares, Erik said to June, "Something's not right."

Their suspicions were confirmed when a group of five officers approached them.

The lead officer, a man with a stern expression, stopped them with a raised hand. "Do you have a permit to stay outside?"

<A permit? What the hell is this? >

"A permit? Sorry sir, we are from Fasard," Erik said. "We didn't know we needed a permit. We're here to visit a family member," he lied. Erik hoped the officers would buy the simple cover story.

"Weird. They should have told you this back at the entrance." The man observed them better.

"I'm afraid we'll need you to come with us to the station for further questioning."

June and Erik exchanged a glance, a silent agreement passing between them.

They knew compliance might lead them into a trap, but open defiance could escalate the situation.

Erik weighed their options and gave a slight nod of consent.

"Very well, officer. We'll follow you," Erik said, masking his reluctance with feigned cooperation.

That may have looked like a dangerous situation, but in truth, it presented an opportunity. He could ask questions to the officers.

As they were escorted through the eerily quiet streets, Erik took note of their surroundings, planning their next move.

He knew well that the trip to the station could be a pretext for something more sinister, especially with the Blackguards' influence permeating the city.

June, ever vigilant, remained alert to any sign of danger, ready to transform and take to the skies should the need arise.

He understood the importance of gathering intelligence on the Crystal Cross Gang, but not at the cost of falling into an obvious trap.

"Excuse me, sir, mind if I make some questions?" Erik asked.

"Depending on the question, I might not reply."

"Of course. You see, I've noticed there aren't many people around. Is this due to them not having a permit?"

"Yes, and no. After Volkov came to the city, to further avoid the spread of parasites that were not completely eradicated, he made a law to prevent people from going out unless they had a permit."

"Isn't that excessive? I mean, don't they need to buy groceries and other stuff?" June asked.

The police officers looked at each other. "If you are from Fasad, then you don't know the horrors we had to face here in New Alexandria. To kill your family members, your friends. That is not simple."

Erik didn't overlook the glance the officers exchanged. He observed the group more, and then he noticed something.

Small cufflinks he overlooked when the officers approached. However, the cufflinks had a pretty easily recognizable insignia.

<June, > Erik said telepathically to his clone, <These guys are Crystal Cross Gang members. >

It made sense. The Crystal Cross gang was linked to the Blackguards. Volkov worked for the Blackguards.

If Erik had to make a bet, the gang members were implemented into the military and police to bolster their numbers.

<They are likely not bringing us to the police station. >

<I noticed that, Master, this is not the way I remember would bring us there. >

Erik had a look of understanding and of grim resolve. <Let's play along for now. These guys are not pretty smart and are not a threat. >

The man had used his analysis power to find out that. They weren't even at the μ rank; they were pretty weak compared to him.

But they were in power and with no one around, they believed they could do anything to anyone, no matter how much weaker they were.

"Mind If I ask something else?" Erik said.

"Tell me," the officer said with an annoyed look. In his opinion, Erik was too talkative.

"I remember the city had some scum, the Crystal Cross Gang, or how it was called." The officer scowled at those words but paid attention not to be seen by Erik and June.

"What happened to them?"

"They all died during the parasite's attacks. It was a messed up situation. After all, there was little anyone could do to save themselves." The officers had dark looks on their faces.

Soon, they reached a small park, an oasis of calm in the otherwise bustling city now silenced by recent events.

The usual laughter of children and chatter of visitors were absent, replaced by the gentle rustle of leaves and the occasional chirp of a distant bird.

The benches, once popular spots for relaxation and conversation, stood empty, their weathered wood bearing witness to better days.

The echoes of play lingered in the playground, where swings and slides stood.

The place felt eerie and still, lacking people, which was a stark contrast to its once vibrant atmosphere.

Of course, there was no one there. No person, no witness.

There was no chance, at least in the officers' minds, someone could report what they were about to do to these two stupid guys that strangely looked alike.

A grin appeared on one of their faces.

Chapter 813: Police Station (1)

As the officers led Erik and June into the secluded park, the facade of official duty crumbled, revealing their true intentions.

The once stern and professional demeanor of the officers shifted, their expressions turning malicious.

"You know," the lead officer said, his tone laced with mockery, "it's rather peculiar that someone who supposedly passed through the entrance gate knows nothing about the permit system in place."

Another officer, with a smirk curling on his lips, chimed in, "Yes, and all those questions. Makes one think you're hiding something, doesn't it?"

The group halted, turning to face Erik and June directly.

Erik met their gaze, his previous act of compliance replaced by a steely resolve. "What exactly are you insinuating?"

The officers, with a shared understanding, exchanged glances that were filled with sneers, which only grew wider.

"Let's just say," the first officer continued, "that we have a knack for sniffing out lies. And you, my friends, reek of deception."

June, standing slightly behind Erik, tensed, ready to react at a moment's notice.

Despite their expectations of a confrontation, the officers' overt hostility showed that the situation was becoming more serious.

Erik sighed inwardly. He hoped to gather information quietly, without drawing attention.

Yet, here they were, standing before members of the Crystal Cross Gang masquerading as city officers, about to be unmasked themselves.

"Perhaps we should have a more... private conversation about your real purpose here in New Alexandria," another officer said, his hand resting on the hilt of his weapon.

It was then Erik's turn to grin. "Yeah. Let's do that." In a second, he decapitated all but one officer.

[HUMANS KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[0%...1%....5%...30%...70%...100%]

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

[3...2...1...0]

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 4000 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

The surviving officer's face was a mask of fear and disbelief.

The man who had moments ago carried an air of authority and menace was now visibly shaken, his confidence shattered by the demonstration of Erik's prowess.

Erik's voice was calm, yet there was an unmistakable edge to it as he addressed the officer, "Let's have that... private conversation, shall we?"

Recognizing the seriousness of his error, the officer could only nod in agreement. He had, without a doubt, underestimated the person he was dealing with.

The man was rendered almost speechless by the shock of seeing his comrades fall with such ease.

His earlier bravado evaporated, leaving behind a palpable sense of fear.

He realized now that Erik and June were not mere travelers caught unawares.

Erik motioned for the officer to lead the way, his demeanor suggesting patience but his eyes conveying a stern warning against any thoughts of escape or deceit.

June remained alert, his senses tuned to their surroundings, ready to intervene should the need arise.

As they moved to a more secluded area of the park, the officer spoke, his voice unsteady.

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Unfortunately, the officer knew little. The man was undoubtedly a member of the Crystal Cross Gang, but he had never visited their headquarters.

He was just a small fish until he became part of the police department, and his situation didn't really improve that much.

However, he had to know someone having more information than him.

Erik made the question, and the man gave him a name: Zachary Cammish.

<Where have I heard this name? >

Was what Erik and June thought as the man revealed his name. Then Erik killed him.

"Do you remember a guy called Zachary?" Erik asked to his clone.

"I remember something, but I can't tell where and what it was about. However, it was linked to the Crystal Cross Gang, of that I'm sure."

"Yeah," Erik said. "I had the same thought." He paused for a second. "The guy said to go search for him at the police station nearby. Maybe this guy will have more information."

June looked below. The Officers' uniforms were stained with blood, so they couldn't use them.
"That's a shame."

"Yeah, taking their identity would have been easy. I guess we will have to stick to the old animal shapeshifting."

"It worked well until now, no?" June said.

"Yes."

The impracticality of using the officers' uniforms, marred by the violence, was a minor setback.

Their usual method of animal shapeshifting had served them well so far, offering them the stealth and agility needed to navigate every place undetected.

Eager to create some space between themselves and the site of the confrontation, they swiftly left.

The city, with its streets devoid of any signs of life and an unsettling silence that hung in the air, gave the impression that it had been ravaged by an apocalypse.

Their approach to the police station would need to be cautious.

With the gang's influence pervading the city's law enforcement, every step closer to Zachary was a step deeper into enemy territory.

After traversing the silent streets of New Alexandria, Erik and June arrived at the police station.

Despite the desolation that surrounded the city, the station stood tall, a shining example of activity, though it carried the visible reminders of the chaos that had unfolded.

Sections of its walls had caved in, and windows lay shattered, evidence of the turmoil that had swept through the city.

Yet, the ruin did not deter the hustle and bustle within; officers, or Crystal Cross Gang Members, moved about, their steps echoing in the damaged corridors.

Erik and June, remaining unseen, observed the scene.

It didn't take long for them to notice a common detail among the individuals bustling in and out of the station: cufflinks bearing the insignia of the Crystal Cross Gang.

This small piece of jewelry confirmed their suspicions about the gang's deep infiltration into the city's law enforcement.

The presence of the gang's symbol on every officer clarified they had indeed found a place where they could gather information. The what was the real problem.

Yet, it was in this place, the lion's den, that they would discover the answers they were looking for, beginning with who was Zachary.

The only thing they had to do was to search for this guy.

Chapter 814: Police Station (2)

"Ok. You stay here," Erik said to June.

"I need you to keep an eye on what happens outside and let me know. In the meantime, I will sneak in. I doubt they will find me while in a fly form. These guys are not the mercenary guild, and especially they are not the Blackguards."

"Yes, Master," June said.

"Let's keep a mental channel open, then."

"Yes."

With that, Erik undressed and gave his clothes to June. Then he turned into a fly and headed toward the police station's main entrance.

As Erik, now in the inconspicuous form of a fly, buzzed towards the main entrance of the police station, he slipped through the doors unnoticed amidst the comings and goings of the officers.

Inside, the station's façade of normalcy unraveled. The once orderly interior was now marred by a sense of disarray that spoke volumes of its new occupants' true nature.

Desks and offices, meant for the city's protectors, were cluttered with weapons and contraband, highlighting the criminal underbelly that had overtaken the establishment.

Officers, or rather gang members, sprawled across chairs with their feet on desks, their laughter echoing off the walls.

They shared tales of close calls and successful heists, their conversations peppered with a mix of arrogance and casual cruelty.

The insignias of the Crystal Cross Gang were omnipresent, adorning walls and uniforms alike.

The conversion was extensive. The gang took over every inch of the space, transforming a once-respected institution into a den of crime.

Erik ventured deeper, moving towards the heart of the station where the most sensitive operations were conducted.

Here, in the private quarters, the façade of police work was discarded even more than in the other rooms.

The place buzzed with the activity of high-ranking gang members orchestrating their schemes.

Detailed maps of New Alexandria and its surroundings were spread across tables marked with territories under gang control and potential targets.

Amidst the clutter of stolen goods and contraband, plans were being laid out for expansions, heists, and ways to tighten their grip on the city.

<This is fucking ridiculous... > Erik was flabbergasted.

However, he kept searching around. Though he realized he couldn't find this guy, Zachary, if he didn't ask where he was.

The man earlier said he was at the police station, but what if he left? In that case, Erik would waste time there.

It was then that Erik entered a changing room. There was a guy there that had just taken a shower and was drying himself.

<Perfect... >

Erik then morphed into a human again, behind the man. He grabbed his head and pushed it against the wall. The man lost consciousness.

<There is no reason to smear blood everywhere, right? >

Erik then copied his face, hid him in a corner of the room, under a pile of dirty clothes, and wore his uniform.

<I may take a liking to this. >

Erik left the room and headed down the corridor. He needed to ask the other officers where Zachary was. As he walked down, another officer approached him.

"Boris, you took your time under that shower!"

<What a bother. > Erik put up a smile and then said,

"Yeah! I had to wash my ass throughly since the last time I took a shit I didn't clean it!"

The officer's expression changed from amusement to shock. It was a weird reaction, to be honest. "Jeez man, I'm joking, I'm joking."

<What's with that reaction?>

The man sighed. Erik didn't know if it was because of relief or for some other reasons.

Like, these two weren't a couple, right? Because, based on the man's reaction, a pretty dark thought crossed his mind.

"G-Gerard is searching for you. You better go before he gets mad."

"Sure," Erik said. He then faked having recalled something.

"Oh, do you know where Zachary is? I forgot to tell him something earlier."

"Earlier?" the other officer said. <That's it, these guys are a couple... I bet he is thinking they met in the shower. >

"Yeah, I received a call from a patrol outside saying they got attacked, but I forgot to tell him about the suspect."

"Attacked? That's weird."

"Right?"

The other guard thought about it for a while, relieved the two didn't talk into the changing room.

"He should be in his office."

"Ah, thanks!"

With that, Erik turned around, and instead of going to that guy, Gerard, as the officer told him, he went the other way around. However, the officer called for him again.

"Where are you going?"

<Fuck... the office is not in this direction. > However, the changing room was.

"Ah, I forgot something in the locker room," Erik smiled.

<Well, at least now I know the direction I have to go in. >

Erik faked going to the locker room to retrieve something and waited for the officer to get the fuck out of there.

Then he started roaming around the station, sometimes changing his face to match that of people that left the area.

At least, that way, they couldn't suspect there was one of them roaming around.

His search was methodical, leaving no stone unturned, no door unopened.

Finally, he stood before the last unexplored room, culminating his search.

With a subtle knock, he announced his presence, and the response from within stirred something deep within him.

The voice from the other side was early familiar, but Erik couldn't recall where he heard it.

As he entered the room, his eyes locked onto the figure seated behind the desk.

The sight of the man sparked a torrent of memories, each one fueling the growing storm of rage within Erik.

The room seemed to shrink and a wave of murderous intent enveloped Erik.

He remembered who he was, where he heard the name Zachary, and why his name was familiar.

If a look could kill, Erik's gaze should have been able to do that easily.

In front of the man, there was a target stating the man's name and rank.

Zachary looked up to meet Erik's eyes, unaware that he was staring into the abyss.

The moment was frozen, a prelude to the inevitable confrontation, as Erik stood poised on the edge of vengeance.

Chapter 815: Police Station (3)

Zachary. Now everything clicked. He was one of the guys that attacked him in the forest when he went on an outing with the Red Palace.

No, it wasn't just that. He was one of the guys he wanted to kill and that he was eager to find.

<Maybe I can take advantage of this twist. >

"Excuse me, sir," Erik said. "I came here to inform you a patrol of five had been killed."

Zachary's ears perked. He raised his head as he was looking at his computer. "A patrol was killed, you say? Why didn't I get words of this sooner?"

Zachary sighed.

"I'm sorry, sir, we just got words of it."

"Where?"

"At the park nearby, sir."

Zachary's expression darkened as he processed the news.

Frustration and concern flickered across his features, overshadowed by a growing sense of pressure.

"How could have this happen?" he said under his breath, the question more to himself than to Erik.

His mind raced. The park was supposed to be secure, a safe zone within their controlled territory.

That such a bold assault had occurred there was a grave sign, one that demanded immediate attention.

"Howell won't like it. There had been many attacks already and we don't have that many men."

<Howell? Attacks? > It was clear something was going on inside New Alexandria.

"Sorry If I ask you this, sir, but do you have an idea why they are attacking us?" Erik didn't have a magical hat, he couldn't know the reason all of this was happening to them, he had to ask.

That question surprised Zachary. "Shouldn't you know? What have you been doing until now, hiding your head in the ground?"

<Mother fucker... > Erik then tried to put up his best poker face.

"No, sir, it's just that I don't understand fully what is happening."

"No wonder you are a moron."

Erik's face darkened. "S—sorry, sir. I will try to do better."

<Especially after I rip your face off...>

"The reason is simple, really. Volkov is too pushy. It was already bad with the permit required to leave the house, but public beatings? The fact you guys can't keep your hands in your pocket is also another concern. Why are you all so itchy to beat people up?"

"Cause it's fun?" Erik said.

"Yeah, I figured that was the reason you lot had." Zachary wasn't happy.

His journey with the Crystal Cross Gang began in his youth, driven by necessity rather than choice.

As an orphan, his options were limited, leading him to a life of petty thefts and occasional, more serious crimes.

That went on while inside the Crystal Cross Gang. To kill or kidnap people was an uncommon occurrence for Zachary, and in general, it was much less than now inside the gang.

However, as time passed, he observed a disturbing shift within the gang. The newer members exhibited a level of brutality that went far beyond the gang's original ethos of survival, engaging in violence and crimes that Zachary found increasingly disgraceful.

The turning point in his life came with Greg's death. His partner, albeit a simpleton, knew how to do stuff when required.

He wasn't a prick nor overbearing. He was a tremendous help and made their weird line of work less overbearing.

Zachary also had a sort of change of heart. In an unexpected twist, Howell informed Zachary of Volkov's directive to integrate gang members into the city's police force.

He was an opportunity to exert some control and curb the gang's escalating violence. Zachary stepped forward to lead the initiative.

He wanted to keep his men under control, but it turned out to be impossible since it was Volkov's policies that were causing the trouble.

Yet, he was unaware of the deeper manipulation at play.

The decision to co-opt the gang into law enforcement wasn't Volkov's; it stemmed from Shade acting under the Blackguards' commands.

Howell just had to obey. No one had concrete proof Shade existed, only Howell and the Blackguards knew something.

"Do me a favor, just shut up," Zachary said. He was clearly irked by Erik's reply.

"I'm sorry, sir."

Zachary sighed. "We've been under constant pressure since the new policies were enforced."

Erik nodded, pretending to absorb the information. "Is there anything I can do to help?" he said, seeing an opportunity to gather more intel from within.

Zachary studied Erik for a moment, considering his options. "Go to the place of the murder and investigate. We can't afford any more attacks."

"Yes, sir. I'll make sure to stay vigilant."

Zachary, already on edge from the unsettling news, waved dismissively, expecting the officer to leave.

However, the man lingered, his posture suggesting a mind teeming with further inquiries.

This unexpected hesitation baffled Zachary, sending his already low opinion of the officer plummeting.

The room, thick with tension, seemed to contract around them as Zachary's patience wore thin.

It was clear he saw the officer's continued presence not just as an annoyance, but as a failure to grasp basic instructions.

To Zachary, this wasn't just incompetence; it was a blatant disregard for his authority.

"Is there something more?" He asked.

"Uh... yes. Can I ask you something else, sir?"

"Sure." Zachary turned to his computer again, but he was clearly annoyed.

"I heard you attacked some guys from the Red Palace once. Is that true?"

Zachary raised his head. "Who told you that?"

"These are just some rumors. So, is it true?"

"I'm not allowed to talk about this." Zachary grew restless.

"I heard you wasn't alone. There was also a guy who could induce pain, and one that could erase the surrounding sounds."

Zachary looked at Erik with suspicious eyes. His hands quickly went to his Panabas.

"There is no need to go on the defensive," Erik said.

He started channeling mana into his Instability brain crystal power's neural links and started affecting Zachary to make him calmer and keen to talk.

Zachary felt dizzy, that were the effects of the foreign mana.

The man was now many times weaker than Erik, and the mana he had could do nothing against the amount Erik held, which was now at least twice than his, so he couldn't even resist him.

The more time passed, the more Zachary felt weird.

"Sorry. It's just an old habit of mine," Zachary said in a subdued tone. "Well... yes, we were tasked to kidnap Erik Romano, the awakener..." the man didn't know why, but he felt like the officer in front of him was really trusting.

Chapter 816: Police Station (4)

"Oh? Really, Erik Romano? I heard he died."

Now Zachary hadn't been informed by the Blackguards about Erik's fate.

Of course, they told Howell, but he couldn't spread that information, at least not for now, and especially not in Frant.

Those close to Becker knew what he wanted to do with him.

To say that Erik Romano, the awakener, was alive, could ignite something they weren't keen on seeing burning.

"Died? I don't know. I refuse to think that guy is dead," Zachary said.

"Why so?" Erik asked with interest.

Zachary felt something was wrong, but he couldn't quite understand what it was.

He thought he should have been less inclined to talk about this, but there was a sort of eagerness that prevented him from stopping.

"Well, you see. He wasn't really strong. Hell, everyone thought he was basically useless. Damn, I also went to his house to search for... I don't know what, honestly. He was poor, so fucking poor he didn't even have a room and likely slept on the couch."

<What? > Erik was confused. Did this guy just say he had been to his house? <Is this one of the guys that trashed my house? >

"However, despite people saying his brain crystal power was useless, he used it in a way that actually prevented us from capturing him. He hurled gigantic trees at us!"

"That must have been scary!" Erik said.

"Not really. But the guy was smart. That was his best trait. He created a situation that allowed the Red Palace's teacher to help him. We lost powerful members that day."

Zachary's thoughts went to Greg then, but Erik was really inclined to listen to something else.

"But why did you go to his house? You mentioned you had to find something?" Erik asked.

Zachary thought for a bit, battling with the unsettling feeling he was having.

"We got told the guy might have something a client was searching for, but we weren't told what. Our orders were to retrieve anything electrical that could store information, like PCs and the likes. In the end we got his PC, but I don't know if they found what they were searching for."

Those words confirmed two things. The first was that the Blackguards weren't exactly sure what his father retrieved from the Mur continent.

The problem was that what Erik got was pretty clear to them now, something that allowed him to have more than one brain crystal power.

The second was that it was indeed the Crystal Cross Gang that searched his house, at least one of the two times.

However, Zachary also talked about a client. He or she could have been anyone, but Erik had the hunch it really were the Blackguards.

At that point, Erik noticed Zachary was really struggling. It was clear he was trying his best to sort out what the hell was happening, and why he was so eager to talk to this man.

However, Erik wasn't done. He didn't come here to ask Zachary about the time he and those other men attacked him, but to find out where the Crystal Cross Gang's headquarters were.

"Who were the others with you when you attacked Erik Romano?"

He asked, doubling the amount of mana he injected into his Instability brain crystal power.

That question served a dual purpose: one to have the names of those he wanted to get his revenge on. The second was to lead to another question.

"Laser, Greg, Slice and Death."

"Death? He was there too?" Erik faked knowing who he was talking about, but he really did not know who he was among the four.

"Yeah. That shadow hopper bastard abandoned us mid mission, and we failed because of him."

That was what Zachary liked to think. However, Erik realized who Zachary was talking about. It was the guy who fought the Crombo.

"Death, ah. I always wanted to meet him," Erik said.

"It's not like you are losing something by not doing so."

Here, Erik had to be careful. Something too direct would mess up the delicate balance the two reached.

Zachary seemed to be eager to talk about anything Erik asked, but the truth was that the younger man couldn't ask things that were too direct or that he was really unwilling to talk about. Luckily, he could read his mind.

"Still, he is a legend inside the organization. Is there a way for me to meet him?" Here Erik pumped more mana.

The young man observed Zachary's struggle. The older man still felt he shouldn't talk about that, yet he couldn't refrain.

"He is at... the HQ, I guess."

"Ah... it's a pity I've never seen him there," Erik said. That left Zachary confused. This time, though, there was no sign of a struggle in his eyes. Zachary wanted to know.

"You had been to the HQ?"

"Yeah, sometimes. But then I got moved here and got no chance anymore. I didn't expect it to be there."

Erik pumped even more mana. He needed Zachary to be trusting now.

Zachary had to think the officer had really been there already to make him more keen on talking about it.

"Yeah, the fact it is close to the park... its... also..."

Then Zachary realized. He said too much. It wasn't just that he had no proof the man in front of him had really been there, but also because there could be someone spying on him right now, and he just gave a precious information about the place's headquarters.

His eyes then sort of regained clarity. His mind unclouded, and Erik realized he couldn't influence the man anymore.

For that reason, he stopped using his Instability brain crystal power.

Then Zachary looked at the man with a murderous gaze.

Not because he realized what Erik did, but because Erik was grinning, and he wasn't using Max's power anymore.

In front of Zachary, now there was Erik Romano's face. One he couldn't forget, even if he tried.

Chapter 817: Police Station (5)

Zachary's voice carried a mix of shock and disbelief as he saw Erik.

His gaze locked onto the younger man's face with an intensity that seemed to pierce through him.

"You," he said, his tone laced with incredulity.

"Are you surprised?"

For a moment, Zachary's expression faltered, revealing a flicker of uncertainty. "How did you?"

"It's just a trick."

Zachary wasn't stupid. That was not, by any means, a simple trick. He understood what Erik did. What he didn't understand was how that was possible.

Zachary's confusion deepened, his brow furrowing as he tried to understand.

Erik's presence should have been impossible for many reasons. For starters, he should have been dead, and last, he shouldn't have been able to enter the police station.

"I guess your boss kept you in the dark, huh? Did he send you here on your request, or was it more about him wanting to wash his hands of you?"

Zachary's stance stiffened. "What do you want?" he asked, his voice betraying a hint of apprehension.

Erik's reply was calm, almost nonchalant. "What do I want? I've already taken what I came for."

At that moment, Zachary's eyes widened in understanding. "You wanted to know where the HQ was," he said. That was the natural conclusion anyone would have arrived.

The idea Erik had extracted such critical information right under his nose was a bitter pill to swallow, igniting a mix of anger and, surprisingly, grudging respect within him.

Erik's laughter filled the room, carrying a note of triumph. "Bingo!"

The younger man's eyes sparkled. With his Instability brain crystal power it wasn't hard to get this kind of information, but the idea he got it from Zachary, and that he was aware, made him feel ecstatic. It was a petty revenge for him.

"But, you see, I had to nudge you a little, get you to talk without you even realizing it."

Zachary's response was a mix of defiance and skepticism, his face etching into a mask of challenge.

"And just how do you plan to pinpoint the location? I didn't exactly hand you a map."

Erik's grin only widened at the question, his confidence undimmed.

"True, you didn't give me an address. But you overlooked one thing—New Alexandria isn't exactly overflowing with parks, is it?"

His logic was sound, and the implications were clear. The realization dawned on Zachary, his defiance faltering as the implications of Erik's words became clear.

"I'm willing to search every building. One at a time, if necessary."

Of course, Erik got that information already. When Zachary thought about the place, the young man saw it. He was only saying those words to provoke Zachary.

"That's if I allow you to do that."

To those words, Erik laughed even more. Zachary wasn't aware of how stronger Erik was, and he didn't clearly know he was the famed Erik Kay from Etrium.

In his mind, despite him being an awakener, he should still have been much weaker than him.

And how could he think differently? To get neural links required years on average.

Amber and the others were able to make more just because they were rich and went to the Red Palace.

The brain stimulating serums weren't so pricey without a reason.

Zachary reached for his Panabas, Erik allowed him to do so, and the man noticed.

"You know. When I heard there was a guy named Zachary from the Crystal Cross Gang here, I didn't understand it was you. After all, I only heard your name once when you attacked me. Can you imagine the twist when I found out it was you?"

Zachary then stood from his chair. "You talk as if you have already killed me."

The man clearly understood what Erik had in mind. Vengeance was why he came here for, it was also the reason he asked for the HQ location. He wanted to destroy the Crystal Cross Gang.

"You are not well informed, Zachary, at least about me. I guess you would have been if your boss told you who I am."

"What's there to know? You are Erik Romano, the awakener. If you think I'm scared by you, then you are mistaken. You can't have possibly reached my level in a so short time frame."

Zachary said with confidence. Erik didn't even use a brain crystal power. He took the ordinary sword the police officer wore with his uniform.

Zachary's confidence evaporated in an instant. Before he could even process Erik's movement, the blade of the ordinary sword was already in motion.

There was no time for Zachary to react, no moment for him to grasp the severity of his situation. Erik's movements were too swift, too silent.

The cold steel met his neck, and in one clean, precise stroke, Erik decapitated him.

Zachary didn't see Erik move; he didn't have the chance to defend himself or even register shock.

[ZACHARY 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. 4374 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

It was over in the blink of an eye. It left the room in a stunned silence, punctuated only by the sound of the sword slicing through the air and of Zachary's head falling to the ground.

"Ah... That felt good."

Zachary was one of those Erik wanted to kill, a target of his revenge. But he wasn't the only one.

The guy called Death, the one that fought the Crombo back when Erik was attacked by the Crystal Cross Gang, was on his list. Though all the members of the gang were. He wasn't the only one remaining on that list.

Then Erik opened the door of the room and turned into a fly again, leaving the officer's clothes on the ground.

He quickly left the building. Someone found Zachary's body, because then alarms rang and people rushed in and out of the place. June must have noticed that, as he hid away from where Erik left him.

<Where are you? > Erik asked his clone through the telepathic link.

<I'm close. Did you find Zachary? >

<I did, > Erik said.

<Judging from what is happening, you must have killed him, right? >

<Yes. He was one of the guys that attacked me during the Red Palace's outing. > Then understanding dawned on June. It was there he heard about his name.

<June, I left Zachary's body in the open because I'm planning something. If it works, we will destroy the Crystal Cross Gang in one fell swoop. >

Chapter 818: The headquarters (1)

Erik and June, having left the chaos of the police station behind, hastened towards the park on the city's opposite side.

As they maneuvered through the streets, Erik shared with June the intel he had extracted from Zachary.

Although Zachary had remained tight-lipped about the headquarters' exact location, Erik's ability to read his mind during their conversation had revealed the crucial details needed to pinpoint the gang's lair.

"The place is near a park, on the other side of the city," Erik said, his pace brisk and determined.

But that wasn't the only thing he told June, as he also explained what he planned to destroy the criminal organization.

While June kept up with Erik's brisk pace, his mind raced. His Master's plan was very easy, and it all depended on Erik's fighting prowess, but if it worked, it would allow them to destroy the Crystal Cross Gang in one fell swoop.

The duo then arrived at the park. Once there, Erik's gaze swept the area.

He was searching for a building he had seen through Zachary's memories—a nondescript ten-story structure.

The park itself was quiet, with only a few people milling about, unaware of the significance of the nearby building.

It stood among a row of similar structures, each designed with a uniformity that made them blend seamlessly into the urban landscape.

The gang's headquarters looked just like any other building in the line, its white painted walls and brick construction offering no hint of the danger that lurked inside.

Yet there was something about this particular building that set it apart in Erik's mind.

Perhaps it was the way its windows were slightly narrower than those of its neighbors, or the subtle differences in how the entrance was framed.

These were details Erik had caught from Zachary's thoughts—minor architectural nuances that a casual observer would overlook but were unmistakable to someone who knew what to look for.

"This is it," Erik said to June, nodding towards the building.

"It looks innocent enough, but this is where the Crystal Cross Gang operates from."

June surveyed the building, noting its strategic position near the park. It afforded the gang both visibility and a quick escape route in case they needed it.

Erik took a moment to assess their approach. "We need to be careful. When Zachary thought about this place, he thought about guards. We can't just barge in."

June nodded in agreement. "Sorry, Master, but why did you leave Zachary's body in the open? You could have morphed into him."

"There was no need," Erik said. "I can simply shapeshift into a fly and enter. I don't even need subterfuges since I can read their mind."

"Then why did you need Max's power?" June asked.

"To wreak havoc, but it wasn't needed for now. It will come handy later."

June then thought. "Then what do we do?"

"I will enter and then change my face to learn where their leader is. Then just a couple questions and then I kill him. After that, I have a couple of ideas in mind."

"What about me?" June asked.

"You must tell me if you see someone entering. Let me know if it is Death or someone else. I also need to know if someone like Volkov or the likes enter. While I'm in, I won't know what happens outside."

"The usual, then."

"Yes. Sorry if I don't give you a chance to join."

With that, Erik and June split up. June went to the park and sat on a bench facing the building, observing the comings and goings, noting any peculiar behavior that might indicate the presence of gang members.

Erik circled the building to have an idea of its layout.

After reconvening, Erik and June compared notes. "There are a few disguised guards near the front entrance, and I spotted cameras on the corners of the building," June said.

Erik nodded, his mind already planning a strategy. "We'll need a diversion. Something to draw the guards away while I slip inside."

"I will take care of that," June said.

"All right." It was then that Erik undressed and gave his equipment to June. After that, he turned into a fly.

At that moment, after having collected Erik's belonging June approached the building. The guards nearby immediately approached him.

They weren't guards in the classical sense, as they were faking being passerby or people resting.

For example, one of them was seated on a bench, while another was leaning on a wall that faced the entrance.

"Excuse me!" June said. The guards focused their attention on him. At the same time, Erik went toward the door. He flew through the door's gaps and entered.

This was it—the moment they had been working towards.

The destruction of the Crystal Cross Gang was within reach, and with it, a significant blow to the Blackguards' operations in New Alexandria.

As Erik, still in his fly form, stealthily made his way inside the building, he was greeted by a short corridor bustling with activity.

Guards were strategically positioned throughout.

Erik zipped through the corridor, bypassing Crystal Cross Gang members who were milling around, unaware of his presence.

Reaching the end of the corridor, Erik spotted an elevator.

He buzzed along the corridor, skillfully avoiding detection.

The gang members, immersed in their own worlds, paid no mind to the inconspicuous fly navigating their midst.

Their attention was elsewhere, on the screens of their phones or lost in conversation, providing Erik with the perfect cover to proceed unnoticed.

Erik arrived at the elevator. He hovered momentarily before the elevator's panel, timing his approach to precision. In a daring feat, he pressed the button with his tiny body.

The elevator arrived with a soft chime, its doors sliding open to reveal an empty interior.

Erik darted inside, taking refuge in a corner where he would remain unseen by any casual observers.

As the doors closed and the elevator began its descent, Erik was enveloped in the mechanical hum of its operation, a sound that signaled the transition from the known to the unknown.

Chapter 819: The headquarters (2)

Erik hovered as the elevator doors parted, revealing an underground expanse that defied his expectations.

The chamber that lay before him was vast and windowless, a hidden world beneath the unassuming facade of the building above.

Its size alone was a marvel. Erik couldn't believe his eyes when he discovered that a massive space was tucked away under a building that seemed way smaller than this room.

The inside was dark, but full of action and had everything you'd expect, ranging from a bar to even some shops, just for a different kind of crowd.

The room sprawled out, filled with a mix of stools, tables, and chairs, all arranged haphazardly around barrels full of who knew what.

The bar had a massive counter and a signboard having the words "Coffee House" written on it, which was totally misleading since they likely didn't serve coffee.

Erik couldn't help but notice the irony of the sign - the place was practically a black market for booze, drugs, and weapons.

To the far right, a grand board caught Erik's attention. The nicknames of the gang members were there, each with a number that Erik guessed was their rank.

The scoreboard showed how competitive the gang was, with members trying to outdo each other by completing all sorts of assignments.

The points system probably determined how important gang members were and affected their access to resources and missions.

At least based on the quest board he saw below. Some missions could be accessed only if a certain amount of points had been earned.

However, the board itself didn't have many quests right now, and most missions were about helping the police.

There weren't many people in New Alexandria now, so theft and murder quests were very few.

At the apex of this list was a name represented by the initials N.H. Erik didn't know who this guy was, nor he heard about these initials. However, it was clear this guy must have been very good at his job to be at the top of the list.

Below, Erik spotted another name. This time, he knew who it referred to. Death. The guy was tenth on the list.

<There are 9 people stronger than him in this shithole? >

When Erik saw what was going on below the streets of New Alexandria, he was totally amazed and slightly disturbed.

The Crystal Cross Gang had carved out a vast, well-organized stronghold in the city's underbelly, which underscored the severity of the threat they posed.

It also made it clear the gang was backed by the Blackguards. A place like this needed a lot of funds to be maintained.

Here, in the shadows, the gang thrived, untouched by law and beyond the reach of those who sought to dismantle their network.

<Now, I need to take on someone's identity. I need to ask questions. >

For this reason, Erik searched for bathrooms or stuff like that.

The Crystal Cross Gang members were in huge numbers. Erik surmised there were at least 5000 members in this place alone.

<These mother fuckers holed up here when the parasites attacked, uh? >

That was the only plausible reason for this many number of people.

That or originally, their numbers were much higher than now.

Regardless, this was basically an army, but judging by the people Erik analyzed, they weren't that strong.

<Ok. The bathrooms, where are the bathrooms? Someone must get up to puke or take a shit, right? It's impossible they won't with so many people here. >

After searching for a while, Erik arrived at his destination.

He hovered over the stalls, and then he found two people taking a piss.

The smell inside that bathroom made him revolt. He couldn't even understand how they could use those stalls.

The stench of urine and feces was so bad Erik almost puked.

The Nexthorn Vanguard guild leader waited for one of the two members getting out.

As soon as the man did, Erik morphed and knocked out the other.

He then brought him inside the stall and stripped him from his clothes, of course, not putting on the man's underwear.

Then Erik decapitated him and sliced off his face.

[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. 1000 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

In order to prevent any blood from staining the surroundings, he placed the body inside the toilet to allow the blood to flow inside.

After ripping the face apart, he threw the fragmented pieces into the toilet, and without hesitation, he pressed the flush button.

In order to carry out his plan of stealing the man's identity, he couldn't allow him to wake up.

He went as far as disfiguring him to ensure that the criminals would not be able to identify him. After everything was ready, Erik got out of the stall.

<Now, let's blend in for a little. Let's see if this place has something good to eat. >

Erik made his way through the dimly lit chamber to the 'Coffee House,' taking a seat on one of the stools at the counter.

The man behind it, burly and imposing, bore a massive scar that stretched across his face.

"Orange juice," Erik said. He was trying to maintain a low profile among the denizens of this underground world.

The man behind the counter raised an eyebrow, the scar stretching with the movement.

"We only serve alcohol here, and some food," His voice was rough like gravel.

There was a hint of amusement in his tone, as if the request for something as innocuous as orange juice was out of place in a setting like this.

Erik grimaced at the response. He wasn't here to draw attention or to get drunk.

"Fine, give me a beer then," he said in a resigned tone, placing some coins on the counter.

The bartender nodded, turning away to grab a bottle from the shelves behind him.

He poured the beer into a mug with a practiced hand, sliding it across the counter to Erik.

Erik took the mug, his gaze wandering over the 'Coffee House' that only served alcohol.

Chapter 820: The headquarters (3)

Erik used his instability power to figure out what the bartender was thinking.

The man found it weird that he asked for juice instead of alcohol, but aside from that, he found nothing else weird.

"So, is there some new quest worth taking?" Erik asked.

"There is not much. Most quest ask to join the police or the patrol teams. There aren't quests about stealing or killing."

"Nothing too exciting, uh?"

"You bet," the bartender said. "Nothing you can take, anyway."

The bartender clearly recognized the man Erik had stolen the identity of.

The man's words made it clear. Yet, Erik examined his thoughts and uncovered the opinions of the bartender, no, of everyone regarding him.

It looked like the man was a low leveled hoodlum, but still of rank high enough to come here to the headquarters.

This guy, known for his alcoholism, couldn't secure an important task even if he tried to pay for it.

While he excelled at thieving, murder wasn't his forte, but he could still handle a less complex task.

Of course, he was still many times better than those who didn't have the chance to enter the HQ.

His problem was that the quests to join the police or the patrol teams, for those in the HQ, were to take key positions.

This meant they required some level of thinking, something that the drunkard Erik took the identity of clearly couldn't do.

"Do you know if the boss is here?" The bartender raised his head.

That was a weird question. Not many could talk to the boss, especially not those with the drunkard's reputation and rank inside the organization.

"Why?"

"Nothing in particular. Just pure curiosity," Erik said.

The bartender raised his eyebrows. "You don't drink?" The man noticed that Erik didn't even take a sip from his beer. Of course, the young man noticed that and started drinking.

<I hate this shit. >

For the next ten minutes, Erik remained there at the counter, drinking beer, with very much displeasure, and talking about this and that with the bartender, who avoided his initial question.

"You know, everything was much funnier before the parasites attacked," Erik said.

"There were many jobs available. I didn't have to stay stuck here for so long with nothing to do."

"Yeah," the bartender said, "I feel you. Since the others joined the police, there aren't that many clients here at the bar."

"Well, at least there is more beer for me!" Then Erik saw a slight commotion, then June's voice spread through his mind.

<Master, someone is entering the building. >

<Any idea who they are? > Erik asked.

<No, but he looks stronger than average. >

<That is not something that should scare us. > Erik said.

After five minutes, an entourage of people came from the elevator and walked toward what he assumed were the private quarters of the Crystal Cross Gang headquarters.

Erik wanted to ask who the man at the helm was, but the bartender's eyes made it clear. He was one of Volkov's men, Gus Ridley.

The man had been sent here by Volkov to facilitate cooperation. He was one of the very few who could meet the boss.

<Exactly the kind of guy I could take advantage of. >

Erik quickly singled out Gus Ridley among the crowd. Standing tall, Gus's broad shoulders cut into an imposing figure, his skin weathered from years of exposure to harsh conditions, suggesting a life of hard graft.

His hair, a tangled mass of dark curls, framed a face marked by a life of determination and survival.

Deep-set eyes, underlined by dark shadows, scanned the room with a vigilance that spoke of his allegiance to Volkov.

A rugged beard covered his strong jawline, adding to his formidable appearance.

Even in the dim light of the gigantic room, Gus exuded an aura of authority and danger.

Erik had a simple idea in mind. If he wanted to destroy the Crystal Cross Gang in the least time possible, he had to kill the Crystal Cross Gang's leader without the others finding that out.

However, to do that, he needed to get rid of the body, with no one suspecting anything.

For that reason, he decided to take the identity of this Gus Ridley, kill the Crystal Cross Gang's leader and then swap the bodies.

He would then take the leader's identity and say the body belonged to this Gus guy, while instead was the leader's.

<It should work. If not, I will have to find another way. >

Erik had a couple of ideas in mind. The last one he wanted to use was to make June eat him. Erik knew that if he asked, the clone would comply, but it was still something he wasn't keen on asking him.

As Erik pondered this grim option, he couldn't help but hope for a better solution, one that wouldn't require him to cross that last line.

<If it comes to that, I'll have to ask June, > he thought, albeit reluctantly. <But let's hope it doesn't. >

After that, while assuming the leader's identity, he would call all the Crystal Cross Gang members in Frant to New Alexandria and kill them all.

It would for sure take time, but it didn't matter, and it was still faster than any other idea. He would use that time to find more information about Volkov, Fasard and the Blackguards.

Besides, he had to see if the man had some information about uncle Benjamin.

Erik was keen to uncover any links the man might have to the unfolding events, hoping for clues that could shed light on his role inside the organization.

However, to do that, he needed to ask the Crystal Cross Gang's leader. He couldn't blindly search the entire base, he needed a lead.

"What?" the bartender asked as Erik observed this Gus guy.

"Oh, nothing." Erik downed his beer in one long gulp, aiming to project the image of a seasoned drinker.

His gaze followed as Gus made his way toward the private quarters, vanishing from sight.

<Let's hope the guy won't take long. >