

BIOLOGICAL 921

Chapter 921: The Resistance's headquarters

Erik felt a surge of mixed emotions as the train station came into view.

He remembered every time he had to take the train just to reach Mr. Fox's farm or leaving it.

The place was different from what he remembered, but it was many times better than the last time he had been here.

While there weren't as many people as when he lived in New Alexandria, there were still more than when he came to destroy the Crystal Cross Gang.

Some of the flying tracks were still destroyed, but new ones were being built.

Erik slowed his pace as he approached, eyeing the travelers coming and going.

His eyes scanned the various shopfronts. Some reopened, and people looked at the goods from outside.

Contrary to what happened in the past, now there were many more people eyeing the weapon section, especially because, since Volkov arrived in New Alexandria, brain crystal weapons became somewhat more common within the nation.

Besides, since people learned how to make them, through time, the number of weapons flooding the market increased, lowering the price as there were many more crafters around.

Some of the shops had changed, but others were just as he remembered, albeit with new windows.

Erik shifted his gaze. A group of workers came into view, repairing part of the tracks that led to another part of the city.

Erik watched their progress as he waited, but then he thought about something.

<System, make me a ticket. I don't want people to ask questions. Also, check if the permit is still required to get out, in case you make some for me and the others. Also, create fake identities for them. >

[Wouldn't it be useless since many people know their faces?]

<Yes. I just want to be sure that if we are forced to get out together, they won't have the same problems I had the last time. If we are lucky, whoever asks us for a permit won't recognize her.>

[All right.]

He made his way through the concourse and waited for the train to arrive. After that, he boarded it.

It took little for Erik to arrive in the western district. The man then left the train station and started walking, keeping his head down.

The atmosphere in the district was charged with a sense of... surrender and urgency.

The townsfolk moved with a briskness that bordered on panic, their faces full of lines of worry and resignation to their fate, whatever it may be.

It was as if the very air they breathed was full of some miasma that made them on edge, as if they knew there was a poison around that would kill them but were unable not to breathe it.

Erik navigated through the streets, his keen eyes noting the hastily patched fissures that marred the facades of the aging brick buildings.

These were the silent testaments to the chaos that had reigned not too long ago.

As he moved, Erik's gaze fell upon a child's doll. It lay abandoned. Above, the sky loomed heavy; the clouds mirroring the somber mood below.

Erik turned into an alley and activated his Chameleon Veil, feeling his body ripple as the partial invisibility brain crystal power started taking effect.

He checked his invisibility in a puddle on the ground, confirming its effectiveness.

It wasn't really that much, but at least seeing him was going to be much harder.

Erik made his way across alleyways and side streets. After some time, the Red Palace came into view in the distance, still standing tall despite the damage from the parasite attack.

Erik saw construction crews working on repairs and scaffolding covering parts of the outer walls. It wasn't simple nor quick to fix such a massive building, but it looked like most of the repairs were done. Not like in the rest of the city.

Volkov was focused on spending the tax money to fund the military rather than reconstruction, but Erik couldn't really blame him. Thaidis were migrating west, because of the Blackguards, and rebels hid within the city.

"If nothing else, he can justify his decisions to the citizens. I wonder what kind of propaganda bullshit that piece of shit is spewing around."

The Red Palace's walls appeared partially rebuilt, and new windows replaced cracked panes.

People from the institution patrolled the gates, and some stood watch from the windows.

However, Erik noticed these people were younger than usual. Some were students, or likely people, that graduated from the institution.

"So... even the mighty Red Palace suffered because of the parasites... uh?"

Despite these thoughts, Erik didn't linger or stop to observe the Red Palace. Though, as he got closer to the massive red building, he also got closer to the resistance headquarters.

The sooner he reached the place, the better. He kept walking, taking side streets and alleyways until he reached his destination—an inconspicuous ten-story brick edifice that looked run down compared to the grandeur of the surrounding buildings.

Erik approached the front door, relieved to see no one else around, or better, to not see Volkov's people around.

"It looks like the resistance is still operating. That's good news."

However, Erik had to be careful. The last thing the resistance needed was members being seen coming in and out, drawing Volkov's attention to their headquarters.

He paused in front of the door, ensuring his Chameleon Veil cloaking was still fully operational, before turning his attention to the biological supercomputer.

<Can you open the door? >

[Yes.]

<Make it so the others will know it opened. >

The door clicked open. Given that the security system allowed those inside to see the door was ajar, he was certain that someone would arrive shortly.

In the meantime, Erik observed the place. Like the last time, the entrance was bare, save for a few chairs and a small table.

Fischer chose this as he wanted to make it look like the place had been abandoned after the parasite's attack.

Erik made his way over to a chair and sat, dismissing the Chameleon Veil.

"Now, we wait."

However, after ten minutes, there was no sight of people. No one came to greet him, or just to see who entered the building, or to apprehend a potential intruder. There was nothing but silence and dust here.

"This is weird..."

Indeed, it was. This place should be teeming with people, those he saved from the prison, and those who decided to join the resistance after that event.

Erik rose from the chair and began searching the building for any signs of people.

As he climbed each of the ten flights of stairs, he found evidence that the resistance had occupied the building recently—half-eaten food, rumpled blankets, maps with markings—but he did not find a single living soul.

"I don't like this..."

A sense of foreboding filled Erik. Becker had assured him the resistance was still active just weeks ago, yet there was no one to be found here now.

Had they come under attack after that period? Had they been forced to move in haste?

Regardless, the problem was that this meant he had to search for them too, and he didn't have this much time available.

Erik made his way to the top floor, his footsteps echoing in the empty stairwell. The top two floors appeared to be where the resistance had focused their activities, with a makeshift workroom and meeting area set up.

Papers and notebooks were strewn across tables, and chairs were pushed back at odd angles.

But still, nothing was there. Even rats weren't inside the building.

He stood in the middle of the room, hands clenched into fists. Something had gone wrong; the resistance had vanished without a trace or warning.

However, it was then that a light in the room was illuminated.

The light on top of the wall was big and red. It looked like the kind of light in emergency rooms.

When it turned on, it filled the room with a red light that blinked on and off.

It was made to be strong and to get your attention fast, telling you that something important was happening.

He knew well what it was, and what it did.

It was a light signifying the building's front door had been opened. The same one Erik hoped people saw when he arrived.

"Someone arrived... I wonder who it is."

But for sure, it had to be someone from the resistance, right? Who else could know about this place? Well, that was if Volkov didn't eradicate them.

"I better should go take a look."

Erik then turned on his Chameleon Veil brain crystal power and descended the stairs. It was better to be safe than sorry. When he arrived at the ground floor, he found someone—a woman, and he knew who she was.

Chapter 922: Emma

She moved with her usual graceful yet measured steps.

Erik knew she came here because of the alarm. Wherever she and the others went, they still had a connection to this place, so they would know if someone entered.

Regardless, he was glad to see someone he knew. Whatever happened here, there was someone alive.

Emma stood in the empty room, waiting. Erik deactivated his chameleon veil and stepped into the light, becoming fully visible.

Emma turned toward the sound, her expression betraying surprise.

"Emma," Erik said to her with a nod.

"Erik," she paused.

"We were sure you were going to come here. Becker told us you are ready to take care of Volkov."

Erik nodded.

"I am. But what happened here? Why is the base empty?" He went straight to the point. But then he asked an important question.

"Where is everyone?"

"Somewhere else," Emma just said.

"We had some problems in the past few months. When you left, carrying out attacks on Volkov became harder, and things got dangerous. We had to move, but I volunteered to stay behind in case another ally arrived."

Erik nodded. That was a good move, but a dangerous one. Emma was going to be alone, and she couldn't know who the person reaching this place could be. What if it was a blackguard?

Though, it was also true that her staying there made it possible for him to find the rest of the resistance.

"I'm glad you did. I would not have known if you were still alive, if not for that." He trailed off.

The woman nodded, then gave a quick glance behind.

"We better move. The Blackguards shouldn't have found this place yet, but for sure they will."

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Erik and Emma left the empty building, stepping out into the street.

"Where is the new base located?" Erik asked her.

"Before I tell you, we must go somewhere we can talk safely," Emma said. "The Blackguards could be listening."

"Is the situation this bad?"

"Yes," Emma said. "It's even worse than it looks like at a casual glance."

"Why? How can the Blackguards be listening?"

Emma grimaced. It looked like she wanted to say a lot, but refrained. "I can only say that, after you left, we felt your absence. Those ideas you had, the strategies you used. They were much better than you gave them credit. When you left, we lost a fine mind that day, but that wasn't the only factor."

She paused. "Volkov must have been annoyed by the situation, and he asked for the Blackguards' support. They sent at least a thousand members here, and as you can imagine, dealing with those motherfuckers is not simple."

Emma led the way, walking through the winding streets. Erik followed, scanning their surroundings for any signs of danger.

After several minutes, the woman turned into an alley and stopped in front of a nondescript three-story brick building.

The walls faded and cracked with age, and the windows were covered in dust. The door hung at an angle on its hinges.

Emma tried the door, and it opened with a loud creak. She motioned for Erik to follow her inside. After they went through a small corridor, there was another door, this time reinforced and with some security measures being implemented.

But it wasn't that much. At best, it could deter normal people from entering, for sure it wouldn't deter a blackguard.

The building was dimly lit and sparsely furnished. A few rickety chairs and tables were scattered throughout the place.

Emma waved Erik over to one of the tables in the corner.

"We should be able to talk here without being overheard," she said as they sat down facing each other.

Erik sat down at the rickety table across from Emma, eyeing her. "Can you tell me what happened now?" he asked. "Why did you have to relocate the base?"

"Well... part of it is because of what I told you earlier: the blackguards massively increased their presence within the city. Then it was because of the new weapons Volkov's bootlickers got. Aside from that, we weren't prepared or smart enough to face their generals. It's like those guys read our minds."

Emma explained everything to Erik. What the young man found out was a complex situation. But that was nowhere near enough to let him understand the situation in full, and he needed to do that to maximize the help he was going to provide.

Honestly speaking, Erik didn't care if he was used as a soldier, a general, or a spy.

All he wanted was to rescue Richard and kill Volkov. But there were many things to keep into account.

Mainly that, if he didn't save Richard first, he couldn't kill Volkov.

Then Emma started talking about a particular event.

Emma let out a long sigh. "It started a couple of weeks ago."

She paused.

"Our scouts reported the Blackguards were becoming more active in the city, making arrests and carrying out searches more aggressively. Volkov also made many attacks on secondary locations, and we feared they might close in on our primary base's location soon."

Erik listened as Emma continued the story. "So we decided to move to a new safe house. We escaped without detection and set up base there."

She paused, glancing outside the window. Erik did the same; there was only one place where the resistance could have gone based on where she was looking.

"We had been in contact with those guys for a while after you left. We needed to get reliable soldiers and efficient thinkers. However," Emma said, her tone becoming more hopeful, "I would say we got the best of it."

Erik nodded. "Well, your new base is in the Red Palace. Was it worth it? Did they join you? Those guys are not the best people around, from what I remember."

"I know that, and yes, they joined," Emma said with a shrug.

"Unexpectedly, they helped us a lot. Few of their people died during the parasite attack, and thanks to that, their fighting prowess remained intact. They also have a vast information network, and that helped us a lot."

She folded her hands on the table. "What about you? We learned you found Shade. That's pretty impressive, considering that most people thought he was a legend. Even I didn't believe in his existence. Imagine how surprised I was when I learned you found him.

It was a man, right?"

Erik considered the question for a moment. "He was the brother of a very efficient investigator from New Alexandria. But to be honest, I couldn't have found him without the band of giants' help. I was lucky to know some of them."

"Yeah, those guys are strong..."

That was a well-established fact. Emma paused again, seemingly thinking about something else.

"I also heard about what happened in Fasard. The fact Becker joined the attack was on the news."

Erik shook his head. "It wasn't me who attacked Fasard," he said. "That was my friends and clones. I wasn't there."

Emma's eyes widened. "Your clones?" She echoed in surprise. "June is not the only one?"

Emma and the others thought Erik could only make a few clones. When he was here in New Alexandria, he was only with June. That he could make more of them came as a surprise.

Erik nodded. "It's a long story. But yeah, I have more clones than June alone. Strong ones at that."

"That's... incredible," Emma said, still grappling with this new information. If what Erik said was true, and he really could make clones, the resistance might get their hands on an army of Erik Romanos.

He paused, then asked, "What are the people saying about Becker? I imagine his survival came as quite a shock."

"They had mixed reactions based on what I heard," Emma said.

"Some believed he was guilty of what Volkov accused him of, but many others saw how Volkov was acting in New Alexandria and across the nation. So, they were relieved when they learned Becker was alive and hoped he could take back the government."

"I see," Erik said, deep in thought. Emma looked back up at Erik.

"Well, whatever happened in the past, Becker stirring people's will to fight can only be an excellent thing. We need all the allies we can get against Volkov and the Blackguards."

"I agree."

"That's why I came here today," Erik said.

"To offer whatever help I can provide to the resistance, but there is something you must help me with."

"What?"

Emma stuck out her hand.

"Richard Stone had been kidnapped; I guess Becker told you."

"He did," the woman said. "You came here to free him?"

"That's just one of the reasons; I mainly came here to kill Volkov."

"That's even better; the mother fucker must die. That's for sure."

Chapter 923: The situation

"The authorities are still expecting the citizens to have a permit to leave their homes," she said.

Erik frowned. "That's unacceptable," he said. "People deserve their freedom, but I guess Volkov is not someone willing to leave it to people."

But that wasn't surprising. Volkov was a well known ruthless and remorseless piece of shit, deriving joy from torturing others.

His methods were designed to break people mentally and physically. Stories of his horrific practices abounded, detailing how he inflicted pain with zest, watching his victims squirm and beg for a mercy that he never granted.

His father ended up on the receiving end of this. Even the Blackguards hadn't been so cruel against him, despite the beef that went on between them for years. When Lucius told this to his son, Erik was horrified.

One prominent incident concerned a journalist who spoke out against him. Volkov shackled the journalist for weeks, feeding him only enough to survive.

Every day, he would slice new wounds into the journalist's skin, laughing at his pain.

When he was finished, Volkov discarded his victims without hesitation.

This was the horrible nature of the man who now ruled an entire nation.

"I agree," Emma said. "That's why the resistance is fighting."

Erik nodded.

"I'm not alone this time. Richard Stone's daughter, Caiden Joyce's daughter, and a mercenary from my guild are with me, along with four of my clones, including June."

"Is June with you?"

"He is."

Emma looked briefly surprised, but then nodded. "Any allies against Volkov are welcome," she said. "Their help could make a difference, especially considering strong June is. If the other clones are like him, taking care of Volkov will be a matter of time. As for the three women, we already know two of them will be a tremendous help."

"Yes, but there is a problem," Erik said. "They are too easy to recognize."

Given Amber and Emily's status in New Alexandria, Erik was aware of the possibility that they would be recognized.

"Amber helped many during the parasites' attack as much as I know, which made her famous," Erik said.

"In the meantime, Emily's beauty is well known all throughout the country. Given that they are also the daughters of powerful families, their looks will inevitably attract attention. "

Emma nodded in agreement. "We'll have to be cautious then. I can make them reach the Red Palace through some secret tunnels, but bringing them to the entrance will be on you."

"Where is the entrance?" Erik asked.

"In the eastern district, near the slums. There is an abandoned hospital in the eastern district," she said.

"Just outside the train station there. Make your way past the overgrown courtyard to the front doors to access the building. In room 318, which is on the third level, there is a false wall that conceals the entrance to the tunnel. "

Erik committed the directions to memory.

"Because the tunnels follow the layout of the city, you will have to walk quite a bit. You will be able to lead your friends to the Red Palace from there. However, you must be careful because there are guards present. It would be best to let the higher-ups know you are in the city and that you are going to them."

"That's a convenient place," Erik said. He knew the slums well and understood what hospital she was talking about.

"I will bring them to the Red Palace safely," Erik said. But there were many things swirling in the man's mind. The resistance could have a lot of information, and he needed those.

"What about Richard Stone? Any idea where he could be kept prisoner?"

Emma didn't know everything; there were a lot of things the others didn't tell her, and there were a lot of things the resistance didn't know.

"We've received word that the high-priority prisoners are being held in the Grande Ducal prison," Emma said. "But security has been intensified since the stunt in Fasard."

"Yeah, that is clear."

"Grand Ducal Prison," Erik said, making a note of it. "We will need to find out if he really is there."

"I bet he is. That place is a fortress. There is no better place for Richard to be kept prisoner. If he is here in New Alexandria, I must be there."

"I wouldn't be that sure if I were you. Volkov is shrewd, and so are the blackguards. I bet they are keeping him somewhere easy to reach to lure me out. They know I'm going to rescue him; they are not stupid. Maybe they kidnapped him for this exact reason."

Erik then stopped. He looked out the window at the Red Palace. He remembered the last time he had been there. With a pensive look, Erik then turned back to Emma.

The best thing to do would be to enter the Red Palace and talk to Major Fischer or the Red Palace's leader, Principal Van Dyke. These guys would not let him lead this campaign.

It wasn't Major Fischer who gave Erik worries. When Erik was here, collaborating with him and the others, he basically did whatever he wanted. He showed his tactical acumen and intelligence more than once, and Fischer learned to trust him in this regard.

But the Red Palace, albeit having joined the resistance, was made by the elite. They were arrogant and thought they knew everything. It was hard to think they would leave the helm to him, even if Becker did.

"Would it be possible for you to bring me to the Red Palace? I want to talk to the resistance higher-ups."

Emma hesitated. It's not like she didn't want to, but the situation within the Red Palace was complicated. Those guys joined the resistance, but it was also clear they thought they were superior to them, despite the resistance mainly being made up by soldiers.

"I would need to get permission first."

Erik nodded in understanding. "Of course. Please do what you think is necessary."

"I will contact the person in charge and explain the situation," Emma said. "Given your history of helping the resistance, I think they will be happy to meet with you. But we must proceed with caution."

Erik nodded.

"Don't worry. The last thing I want is to cause trouble. Just let me know what they say."

Emma agreed. The two fell into a brief silence as the woman seemed to contemplate how to proceed.

Erik wondered who was in charge of the Red Palace now and what help they could offer against Volkov and the Blackguards. However, despite everything, the most likely thing was that the Red Palace leader was still him: Tom Van Dyke.

Before the era of the two legends: Armand Becker and the Fierce Lioness — there was just one name that resounded across the world. Tom Van Dyke.

The man was basically a legend, at least here in Frant. Erik didn't know if there were stronger people around in the other countries. Maybe there were and were simply hidden.

Though it was impossible to deny the strength this man held in his youth.

The thaid he had killed were many, his services to the country were even more.

When Erik fled from the Red Palace because of the Blirdoth's attack, Van Dyke joined the fight.

If it wasn't for him, he would have died that day, along with hundreds of other people. Yet, the old man was far from being as strong as he was in the past. After all, the guy was 81 years old this year.

There was also something else to consider. The Red Palace's members who survived the parasite were some of the most gifted fighters in the entire nation.

The Red Palace was a place that took people from all over Frant, if they showed potential, and turned them into deadly killing machines.

Based on what he understood, many remained within the establishment, but it was clear there were also a lot of them who decided to join Volkov.

This was a double-sided problem, because those who remained might have been arrogant pricks with a superiority complex. Those who left were going to help Volkov.

"I will contact them now and get back to you," Emma said, pulling out a communication device. "Why don't you wait here? It shouldn't take long to get an answer either way."

"Very well. Please let me know as soon as they give you a reply. There is not time to waste."

He watched as Emma gave him a curt nod before leaving the room and disappearing around the door.

Erik sat back, lost in thought, as he considered what the Red Palace's help would bring him in fighting Volkov and the Blackguards.

Besides, the Red Palace had its own agenda, whatever it was, and aligning with them might come with strings attached. Yet, with Volkov's ruthless grip tightening and the Blackguards growing bolder, Erik knew he needed every ally he could muster.

Chapter 924: Return to the Red Palace (1)

It must have been a delicate discussion, given how long she had been there.

The woman came back to the room with a calm look on her face, though, meaning that everything went well.

"I spoke with Captain Lain. She has agreed to let you come to the Red Palace."

Erik felt relief upon hearing those words. His eyes widened with gratitude as he processed the news. His eyes sparkled, and a small smile played on his lips.

"Thank you, Emma. This means a lot," Erik said. "Without the resistance's help, our fight against Volkov and the Blackguards will be much harder."

Emma nodded. "Captain Lain understands the importance of working together. You showed us what you are capable of. She knows you'll be a valuable player. But she told me to warn you about the Red Palace. They are not so eager to have you there.

She requested your discretion upon your arrival. The elite still have some reservations about outsiders. Even if it's you."

That left Erik confused, but only up to a certain point. Erik had been a member of the Red Palace, meaning he was, in fact, an elite himself. He was stronger than Becker, for fuck's sake.

Everyone knew the blackguards and Volkov wanted to capture him. That alone should have told them how valuable his help would be.

But at the same time, Erik didn't stay there for a long time.

He didn't earn trust among the Red Palace's members, meaning that even if he had been there, they didn't think of him like one of his own.

Even if that wasn't true, the higher ups within the Red Palace, so used to have control, power and prestige, would never leave decision-making positions to him, who, in their opinion, was a nobody.

Though he showed his bewilderment to Emma. "But I was a member of the Red Palace once."

"Don't ask me why they are so guarded. I do not know, but I honestly think they fear you."

Erik sighed. "I never had the intention of undermining them. But I want to at least make this clear with you, Emma," Erik said. "I don't need neither the resistance, and the Red Palace. I'm completely

capable of killing Volkov and freeing Richard on my own. The reason I came here was mostly to share intel and to speed up the process.

Honestly speaking, if we work together, it would be all to your advantage."

"That's a little sad to hear this from my point of view," Emma laughed. But she knew he was right, and that, the old resistance members knew.

"Sorry."

Erik smiled. There was then a brief pause.

"Regardless of the situation, I think you are smart enough to play this well and to understand why those guys are behaving like this. So, just keep calm. We need your support, and since most of the power is held by Van Dyke and his people, we are not completely free to act. So, do this as a personal favor and do everything you can to let you join them."

"Ok..."

"Very well," Emma said. "Wait here, and I will bring you to the Red Palace. Captain Lain is expecting us."

"Thank you again."

Emma gave him a smile. "Let's hope your visit leads to progress against our common enemies."

With that, Emma turned and left the room once more to prepare for their departure.

Erik felt relieved that Captain Lain had agreed to meet with him.

Now, hopefully, they could begin finding a way to free Richard Stone and counter Volkov's influence within New Alexandria.

Erik followed Emma out of the safe house and into the streets of New Alexandria. The woman walked with brisk steps while remaining alert to their surroundings.

Erik kept his head low to avoid being recognized as he matched her pace.

He changed his face to that of someone else. He even scared Emma, as she suddenly was followed by someone else dressed like Erik.

But his face would be easily recognizable otherwise, even more than Amber's and Emily's.

As they walked, Erik took in the signs of Volkov's influence over the city. Propaganda posters warned of the dangers of the resistance while extolling Volkov's "protection".

How the man could talk so blatantly about protection was behind Erik, and most likely beyond all the resistance's members.

But that was exactly the word Volkov used the most. That wasn't the only thing he was doing.

He was blaming most of the nations' problems for the resistance, saying that if it wasn't for them, they would have more men to protect the city from Thaid's.

Yet, he failed to explain that the reason why the Thaid's started migrating to begin with, was because of Volkov's little friends, the blackguards.

It was because of them tragedy was befalling New Alexandria once again. The situation was so dire that people started believing the city was cursed, and that so was Frant.

Besides, the city was full of Soldiers in black uniforms patrolling the streets, their gazes suspicious and harsh. Most of them were what remained of the criminal organizations that once littered the nation.

Just by using these people, it was absurd to talk about protection. From who the citizens needed protection, from those that should defend them to begin with?

While walking, Erik noticed that the few civilians outside hurried past, avoiding eye contact and keeping their heads down.

Erik didn't even need to wonder what they were going through, since the first thing that happened to him once he came to New Alexandria the last time was to get into a fight with some policemen.

Besides, Erik noticed many businesses had closed, leaving only those affiliated with Volkov open.

What protection was Volkov talking about?

Based on what Emma said, the Red Palace was maybe the only place that was not full of Volkov's guards. Even if these guys weren't as strong as the blackguards, their members were still on a par with them. The only difference was that there were few Red Palace's members than blackguards.

After about 10 minutes of winding their way through the district, the Red Palace came into full view again.

The old resistance's base was not far, but the safe house was far, so the two had to walk for a bit.

As they approached the main gates, Erik saw people standing guard.

They all had Red Palace's uniforms, but Erik knew some of them, and they were Fischer's men.

They were people Fischer recruited along the way when Erik was still there. Since they weren't taken from the prison, even Volkov wasn't aware of them. Not that it would make a difference, though.

Most of them had been ordinary citizens before joining the resistance, and whoever didn't join the army usually didn't focus on training, and often they didn't even have great brain crystal powers to begin with.

They saluted Emma as she strode forward, Erik following behind.

The soldiers eyed Erik with suspicion but said nothing.

They didn't know Erik could shapeshift. That was something the blackguards and the resistance higher-ups kept to themselves.

Even so, the idea that he was Erik Romano in disguise would not immediately occur to them.

That level of suspicion would be akin to paranoia, because Erik could be everyone.

Emma led the man into the Red Palace's expansive gardens. They walked along stone pathways, passing fountains and statues.

Finally, they arrived at a side entrance guarded by more people. When they saw Emma, the guards opened the doors to let the duo in.

They stepped inside the cool interior of the Red Palace.

Erik felt a surge of nostalgia as memories came flooding back.

This place held an important part of his past, good and bad.

Erik turned around, and there at the reception desk stood Amanda Smith, the Red Palace receptionist.

She remained as beautiful as the last time Erik had seen her, yet her dark skin now bore many scars.

It looked like the parasite attack, or Volkov's reign of terror, had affected her, though she was an elite. She would not let these things affect her.

The woman looked at him with an inquisitive stare, though she failed to recognize him given the face he now wore.

Erik wondered how many other familiar faces within the Red Palace would not recognize him in his current guise and wondered who was still alive.

<I wonder if Master Nieminen is ok. >

Erik hadn't seen the woman who taught him the sword in a long time. Among the Red Palace members, she was the only one he really cared about.

Emma paused, then turned to Erik.

"Captain Lain awaits us. Stay close, and don't speak unless spoken to first. These guys here are... weird."

Erik nodded. "I know. I lived here for months in the past. By the way, thank you again for bringing me here, Emma. I appreciate the chance."

Emma gave him a small smile, then turned and went deeper into the depths of the Red Palace, Erik following in her wake.

Chapter 925: Return to the Red Palace (2)

The intricate carvings on the wood hinted at the importance the room held.

Emma turned to him with a serious expression. "Captain Lain is waiting for you inside, but I don't think she will be alone. And I can't come with you."

Erik looked at the woman for a second.

"Who do you think will be inside?" The young man asked.

"I think you might know that already."

Tom Van Dyke. It was likely that the Red Palace's principal wanted to see with his own eyes who Erik Romano was and what he was capable of. If Erik were in the man's shoes, he would have done the same.

Erik nodded. "All right..."

He gave her a grateful smile. "Thank you for everything, Emma."

"Don't worry about it," she said. "Now, go. They're waiting for you."

Erik took a deep breath and placed his hand on the doorknob.

Opening the door, Erik stepped into the room. The first person he saw was Captain Lain, standing in front of him with two other people at her side. Truth be told, she was a little bit behind the other two people.

At her immediate right was Major Fischer, who was grinning ear to ear as he looked at Erik. The two became friends during the months in which Erik helped the resistance set foot within the city and basically created the resistance.

There was also a third person in the room, a man that Erik recognized: Tom Van Dyke, the 81-year-old Red Palace principal. He was right in assuming the old man was going to be here.

Erik had only met him once before, when the Blirldoth attacked, and he left an impression. His brain crystal power was insanely strong.

This man was a legend within the city walls and beyond. Becker and the Fierce Lioness wouldn't hold a candle to him if he were as strong as when he was in his prime.

His powers were terrifying, and his prowess was even more scary than his brain-crystal power. His fighting technique was nearly perfect; many said it was flawless, and maybe they were right.

His battle acumen was also high, and he had a great mind.

And yet, he needed the Fierce Lioness' help to kill the Blirldoth. However, no one would have said that was because of weakness; it was because of age. Against that, strength and power could do nothing.

Erik stood frozen for a moment, but was not surprised at the sight a bit.

Major Fischer broke the silence. "Erik, welcome."

His voice was strong and clear, clearly belonging to a man who spent his life in the military.

"Sorry for coming at such short notice."

"That's not a problem at all." Fischer said. The man then smiled as if he had just seen his kid.

"Emma should have told you the reason I came here."

"She did," Captain Lain said. "We didn't expect you to come back so soon, though. We thought that finding Shade was going to be a lot harder than you made it look."

Erik smiled. "It wasn't easy by any means. I had to ask for the Fierce Lioness's help to find the guy. Damn, for her help, she asked me to marry her daughter!"

Erik knew that was not the Fierce Lioness's real intention, but he said it to make it look like even the most powerful woman on the planet wanted ties to him. Fischer and Lain already knew how powerful and valuable he was, but Van Dyke didn't. It was his duty to make the man understand that.

The Red Palace's principal knew Erik had been a member of his institution, but he left after a short while.

Back then, Erik didn't amount to much compared to the giants Van Dyke and the Red Palace's teachers were or how strong the upper-ranked students were.

Besides, despite him not being weak, the teachers said he didn't have technique and that he entered the Red Palace just because he was strangely stronger than people his age and level.

That was not a lie. Erik had no formal training prior to his assignment to Master Nieminen. She was the one who taught him a proper technique.

Even when he became a top student at school, he learned something comparable to what the sword master taught him.

This meant Van Dyke underestimated Erik. Fischer and Lain must have told him Becker now worked for him.

They must have told him he was responsible for the destruction of the Crystal Cross gang, that he was the one who freed them from prison, and that he was the reason the resistance could exist.

The problem was that Van Dyke was still one of the elite. Even if they were under Becker on paper, it didn't mean they did what he said.

There were a lot of things at play: power, money, status, and knowledge. They had a lot of those things in the Red Palace, which made them arrogant.

Most of the wealthy people in the city belonged to ancient families and had deep roots in Frant. They were used to doing things their own way, and they would not take orders from an upstart like Erik.

But it was also true that the old principal was smart; he couldn't be otherwise since he created the most renowned training place within the entire nation, a place whose talents even the Blackguards wanted to snatch away.

But that also meant Erik was a valuable asset, one he knew he had to keep close, or better yet, leashed.

Leashed—that was the right word for a wild card like Erik, especially if he was as strong as Lain and Fischer said.

He didn't believe what the others said about what Erik was capable of. For sure, he didn't trust him, and frankly speaking, the tales about him seemed far-fetched.

Erik stood before the Red Palace's principal, recognizing the legendary man's distrustful gaze. Van Dyke turned towards Erik and spoke.

"Greetings, young man. I've heard quite a bit about you." Van Dyke's tone was formal but guarded, and there was a hint of suspicion within it.

"You've certainly made quite an impact in just three years."

Erik nodded. "Good morning, sir. I'm honored to meet you again."

"Oh? When did we meet?"

Naturally, Van Dyke was aware of Erik's identity; during Becker's tenure as general, he assigned the elderly man to monitor Erik and provide updates on his advancements. He also knew how fast Erik was ascending the Red Palace's ranks; it caused quite a stir back then, after all.

Erik paused for a second. "It was when the Blirldoth attacked around here, sir. You came to the rescue of a group of students, and I was one of them."

Van Dyke studied Erik for a moment. The young man was certainly athletic, had a fierce look, and seemed smart. Yet, what he heard about him seemed far from what he was seeing.

Fischer and Lain, on the other hand, told him he had multiple powers. Of course, the Blackguards, or Volkov, didn't disclose that information to the public, but since Erik stopped caring, he made the resistance aware of it at a certain point.

"Fischer and Lain speak highly of you. They believe you'll be a powerful ally in our battle against the dictator, Volkov."

The man paused. "But to be honest, I'm not sure that a single person will be able to help us. You see... Even if Fischer and Lain talk highly of you, I struggle to believe that you alone did everything they said. I think most of it is fake, a simple lie to push me to accept your request for help."

Erik sighed. "Sorry for me being impolite, sir, but you understood nothing. I didn't come here to ask for your help. I came here to offer mine."

Erik said it without batting an eye. It might have looked arrogant for him to say something like that to a living old legend. Yet Erik knew this guy, and the elite in general, needed to have fear.

It wasn't because of loyalty that they obeyed Becker, but because of fear. The general was too strong, and his army was strong enough to give him time to kill most of the Red Palace's higher-ups if something went wrong.

There were other factors, primarily interests, at play. Becker gave a lot of money to Van Dyke; after all, he needed to create something that would produce people he could use to fight the blackguards.

He chose to use the elite and not common people, who would be much more loyal to him than those pompous rich guys, only because their wealth would make it simple for them to get stronger.

It worked, because in not a lot of time, the Red Palace became an even bigger institution than it previously was.

That reply shocked Van Dyke, but not Lain and Fischer. The latter was smiling like an idiot. It looked like he was worried about nothing.

Chapter 926: Return to the Red Palace (3)

"You look very sure about yourself, young man. But do not be mistaken. To me, your words are just those of an arrogant brat."

Erik smiled.

"My words may look like those of an arrogant brat, that's for sure."

"But they are backed by something," he paused to increase the emphasis on his next words "Power."

Van Dyke looked at Erik with a humorless snort.

"Power, you say? We'll see about that, boy."

He grinned, and Erik did the same. Then the older man rose and ran toward the younger man.

He was fast, and a lot at that.

Erik dodged out of the way as Van Dyke swung his war hammer in a wide arc, aiming for Erik's torso.

The Red Palace's principal surged forward again, his hammer swinging in a programmed pattern devised to test Erik's agility and reflexes.

Erik dodged each swing, anticipating Van Dyke's movements with a precise analysis of the older man's battle stance, muscle contractions, and trajectories of his attacks.

Erik dodged each swing, anticipating Van Dyke's movements with a precise analysis of the older man's battle stance, muscle contractions, and trajectories of his attacks.

Van Dyke swung his war hammer in a wide arc, aiming for Erik's head.

Erik ducked low, the wind whistling past his ear as the weapon smashed into the stone floor with a deafening clang. Van Dyke bellowed in frustration, but Erik was already moving.

He pivoted on the balls of his feet, slipping past a follow-up swing aimed at his legs.

The hammer whooshed past him, sending a tremor through the ground.

Van Dyke wasn't done yet. He spun on his heel, the war hammer a deadly blur in his grip.

Erik anticipated the attack, sidestepping just as the weapon whistled where his head had been a moment before.

While gritting his teeth, Van Dyke launched another assault, a flurry of powerful blows that rained down on Erik.

But the younger man was a whirlwind of controlled movement.

He weaved, bobbed, and dipped, turning Van Dyke's own momentum against him.

Each swing of the hammer missed its mark, the older man's frustration growing with every clang against the unforgiving floor.

Erik showed no aggression of his own, content to only evade and prove his point to the older man.

Who instead was growing more and more angry. Most likely, he didn't expect Erik to be really that good.

However, Erik also knew Van Dyke sought to assess his skills, not cause genuine harm.

Apparently, though, Fischer and Lain were unaware of this, as shown by their expressions of fear and shock.

They knew Erik was strong, but they didn't think he was strong enough to evade all of Van Dykes' attacks and make it look like it was easy.

But there he was, doing exactly that.

At the same time, it became clear to Erik that the man in front of him was strong. How he could have had trouble against the Blirldoth was totally out of understanding.

That beast must have been much stronger than he imagined back then. If that was true, back then Erik had not simply been lucky. He had been blessed.

Erik knew Van Dyke was much stronger than now in his youth and wondered how strong he was.

However, on physical stats alone, he could have never surpassed Erik. If people only fought using strength, he would always win. There would be no one strong enough to oppose him.

And yet, the situation was different, and that was because a single brain crystal power could still kill him.

Van Dyke eyed Erik, grudging respect and doubt, etched his weathered features. But there was also... surprise, maybe hope.

Hope that what Fischer and Lain said was true. Hope that Erik Romano, once a member of his prestigious organization, could really free this country.

The skills he was showing were incredible, on a par with the best students in the Red Palace. No, it was more than that.

Erik was showing skills on par with many teachers, and that was talking about skills alone.

There was much more to him than the eye could see. Speed, strength, he had them all, and Van Dyke was sure that Erik was still hiding a lot of strength.

"You've got some skill, boy," he said.

"That's what I was talking about," Erik said, his voice laced with a mixture of confidence and challenge.

"Power," Erik grinned.

Van Dyke studied the younger man for a long moment as he circled around him.

Finally, he grunted and slammed the butt of his war hammer onto the floor, the resonant boom echoing through the room.

"We'll see how much that power of your will help you."

Erik started circling Van Dyke, as much as the older man was doing with him.

They moved so fast that inside the room, a circle appeared.

Lain and Fischer weren't able to see what was happening; they only saw a giant blurred image in which it was impossible to understand what was happening.

"That's something I would have never thought to say to someone your age, old man. In a battle, emotions are your greatest enemy. They cloud your thoughts and make you predictable. And a predictable opponent is easily defeated."

Van Dyke growled as his grip tightened around his war hammer. "Emotions? What emotions are you talking about, young man? There is none on my face. Beside in my lifetime, I've faced countless enemies, including brats like you who overestimated their skills. I've emerged victorious every single time."

"Then this will be your first defeat against an arrogant brat, old man."

Van Dyke's face flushed with anger. With an uncontrollable fury, he raised his hammer once more.

Erik knew that this time there would be no holding back, but he still teased.

"Here they are your emotions!"

With reflexes honed to perfection, Erik dodged the hammer's deadly arc.

He felt the wind whistle past his ear as the weapon crashed against the ground, sending a shower of sparks flying.

In that split second, he saw an opening, his mind calculating the angle, the force, and the precise moment to strike. He was going to punch the old man.

He couldn't use brain crystal powers, or he would die though.

The air crackled with energy as he delivered a lightning-fast punch, aiming for Van Dyke's solar plexus.

The impact was like a thunderclap. Van Dyke doubled over, his breath knocked out of him.

He stumbled backward, clutching his chest in agony. Erik didn't pursue him. Instead, he stood tall, his eyes unwavering and cold.

"Do you still think mine were just words?" Erik said, his voice echoing in the silence. Van Dyke raised his head and looked at the younger man.

"What Fischer and Captain Lain told you weren't just some stories."

Van Dyke's eyes were filled with a mixture of anger, defeat, and something else: grudging respect.

"Even if that strength is real, how can you take charge of the whole resistance? You may be strong, but you are inexperienced."

"You misunderstood. I do not need to take charge of the resistance. What I wanted was to take advantage of your buildings, your safe routes, and your information network. In return, I was going to provide a powerful army."

Van dyke remained silent. It looked like he really misunderstood the young man.

"I told you Becker is now working with him, old man," Major Fischer said. "He is the reason we survived until now."

<Great assist Fischer! >

Those words made it more plausible for Erik to have an army.

"So, what are you going to do? Will you work with me to kill Volkov, or will you stubbornly cling to your status?"

Erik watched as Van Dyke stood up from the ground, setting aside his war hammer. To Erik's surprise, the old warrior smiled.

"To that proposition, I can agree," Van Dyke said, extending his hand. "Any enemy of Volkov is a friend of mine."

Erik eyed him for a moment before stepping forward and shaking his hand. Van Dyke's grip was still strong, despite his age.

The tension in the room dissipated, and Lain and Fischer visibly relaxed, sighing with relief.

It seemed they had feared a confrontation between Erik and Van Dyke could complicate the situation. To the point, they would lose the Red Palace's support.

Luckily, nothing like that happened, and since Van Dyke agreed to Erik's proposal, there was nothing holding back Fischer and Lain anymore.

"You'll have access to whatever resources you need," Lain said. "Our network is at your disposal."

Fischer nodded. "And any intelligence we gather that could be useful to you will be sent."

Van Dyke gazed at Erik. "You fight well for one so young."

"Thanks, I had outstanding teachers," Erik said, bootlicking the man a little. The Red Palace's teachers were those who taught him, after all.

Chapter 927: Return to the Red Palace (4)

"First, tell me about the current situation in the city," Erik said. "How is the situation Volkov's forces are?"

Principal Van Dyke stroked his chin. "Volkov's power seems secure for now," he said.

"He controls the government, the military, and the city guard. But beneath the surface, there's a simmering discontent. "

"How did he consolidate his power despite your presence? "

Van Dyke sighed. The man did a lot, but for sure most of his success was because of the blackguards.

"Volkov used a combination of tactics. He silenced any dissenting voices in the media, labeling them traitors and fear-mongers. Public gatherings were banned, and anyone caught speaking out against the regime faced harsh consequences—imprisonment, exile, even worse, knowing his taste.
"

"He choked the life out of free speech," Erik said. That was what most dictators did. History was full of examples.

Van Dyke nodded. "Exactly. He also cracked down on education, rewriting history books to glorify his rise to power and demonize his opponents, Becker. Children are being indoctrinated from a young age to revere him as a savior. "

"And the elections?" Erik said.

"Weren't there supposed to be elections after Becker had been chased away? I knew Volkov said he was only going to be there temporary until someone was found to replace Becker. "

"A sham," Van Dyke said.

"The opposition candidates were disqualified on flimsy pretenses or mysteriously disappeared. The public was left with only one choice—Volkov."

A heavy silence descended upon the room. The picture Van Dyke painted was bleak. Volkov had dismantled the checks and balances of a healthy nation, replacing them with absolute control.

He controlled the flow of information, stifled dissent, and manipulated the younger generation to ensure his grip on power.

Not that New Alexandria and Frant in general were in a healthy situation, but still... this was too much.

"What about you? How is the situation?"

"Our forces are spread thin," Major Fischer said, not beating around the bush.

"We try to conduct minor acts of sabotage where we can. You know, assassinations, destruction of infrastructure. Our fighters slip in and out of the city thanks to secret tunnels and breaches within the barrier. But there are too many guards around, and the Blackguards' presence is problematic."

Captain Lain nodded. "Volkov's men keep a close watch on the citizens. Curfews and travel permissions are enforced, so we can't even receive help from them. Propaganda fills the airwaves, portraying Volkov as our savior and lord."

Erik took in this information. Volkov's regime appeared to require significant force for its overthrow. His powers and clone army alone would not suffice.

Or better, Erik could kill Volkov. He only had to pay attention to the blackguards, but if he rushed with a gigantic army, there wouldn't be problems to do that.

To kill a single opponent wasn't hard, but multiple ones were a problem. He wasn't a thaïd; he didn't have a natural mana barrier like them, and more often than not, whatever defensive power he got turned out to only be a liability which sucked him dry of mana.

"There is also another problem," Fischer said. "There is a particular group of blackguards that is creating a lot of problems."

That wasn't surprising at all. The blackguards were generally problematic.

"That's interesting... What did they do?"

"That particular group of Blackguards has been responsible for the deaths of many resistance members," Fischer said.

"They appear to have prior knowledge of our operations and plans. This particular team has thwarted many of our attacks targeting important locations or Volkov's men."

Erik frowned. "They must have an informant within our ranks," he said.

"Or else they have someone with divination powers or something like that."

"That's what we fear," Fischer said. "The problem is, if there is a traitor, we don't know who he or she could be." He sighed. "It's made us paranoid and distrustful of each other."

"We need more intelligence about this group," Erik said. "Do we know anything about their tactics or methods of operation?"

Fischer shook his head. "Very little. They strike swiftly and silently, then disappear without a trace. The only thing we are aware of is that their captain has a brain crystal power that allows him to

create tendrils. It is not even that good of a power, but this guy is lethal with it. We also know his code name: Dark Tendrils."

"That's even more interesting," Erik said. "We'll have to find other ways to gather information."

"Actually, I wanted to ask you to take care of them," Major Fischer said. "Our troops can't fight the blackguards; we got our hands on brain crystal rifles, but it's not like we have enough to use them on any battlefield, and we don't have the capabilities to make them."

"I can take care of it, of course. Of both your problems. I will search for information about the blackguard's team, and I can also supply weapons to you. What I need is for you to create a supply line, something that would make it possible for me to deliver the stuff you need."

"We might make a tunnel the Blackguards won't be able to find, but that will require months."

Captain Lain chimed in. "Let us not rush into drastic measures. Also, keep in mind that to send Erik to deal with those guys might not be the ideal solution. There could be more pressing situations for him and June to be in. We should discuss that first."

Van Dyke nodded in agreement. "You're right." The principal paused for a second.

"You were talking about an army before. James and Mary told me you can make clones. Were you referring to an army of clones earlier?"

"I was," Erik said.

"Then, is there a way for you to send the clones to monitor the Blackguards' movements and report any patterns we observe? In time, a weakness that we can exploit may reveal itself."

Fischer smiled. "That would be an excellent start, Erik. Every little of information helps. We'll do the same on our end."

Erik paused for a second. "I can certainly do that, but I need at least three months to prepare a sufficient batch of clones. They need some time to develop and mature."

"That's too bad."

"Yes, but I have four clones with me right now, as well as three more people. We can take care of this, but with the number of people we have, I think the best thing would be to take care of the blackguards' team, as Fischer suggested. At least we will be able to solve a significant problem."

"Good," Van Dyke said. "Given this, we can focus on searching for information."

Erik agreed to Van Dyke's suggestion. Lain didn't look entirely convinced, though she didn't object.

"Aside from killing Volkov, there was another reason I came here," Erik said. "What would that be?" Van Dyke asked.

"To save Richard Stone. When my people attacked Fasard, the blackguards took him prisoner. His daughter is with me."

That made everyone happy. Emily Stone had powerful divination abilities, and if she saw an important event in the future, she might be able to prevent catastrophic events from occurring.

The only problem was that her powers were unpredictable, as they were powerful.

Lain glanced at Fischer and Van Dyke. "General Becker made us aware of this already." Lain took a moment.

"Based on the situation, we believe they have taken Richard to the Grand Ducal Prison." Lain paused, weighing her next words. "All signs show that this is the most likely location in which Volkov would detain a high-profile individual like him."

Erik nodded.

"The Grand Ducal Prison," Erik said. "That makes sense. It's New Alexandria's most fortified prison, after all. I remember it being a place shrouded in rumor and dread."

"The Grand Ducal Prison. It's not like any prison most of us know. It was built centuries ago, and it's a labyrinth of cold stone and mana enhanced metal bars deep beneath the city. They call it 'the Maw' for a reason. People go in, but never get out."

"Fear-mongering," Van Dyke said. "It's probably just a regular old prison with a fancy name."

Fischer shook his head. "There's truth to the whispers, I'm afraid. Volkov renovated the Grand Ducal Prison after his rise to power. Torture chambers were added, isolation cells designed to break even the strongest wills. It's become a symbol of his brutality, a place where dissenters are silenced and opposition crushed. At least the high-profile ones."

"regardless of the place, I need to get him out."

Lain studied Erik for a moment. "Rescuing Richard from that prison would not be easy. Even your powers may not be enough."

"Did you forget I saved your ass from the eastern prison?" Erik said.

"Yes, but the number of blackguards is simply too large there. Besides, they are not those weak guards that worked where we were kept prisoner."

In essence, the Grand Ducal Prison was a fortress.

"I have to try. Richard helped me save my father. I owe him."

"We'll help in any way we can. The resistance has been searching for an opportunity to strike at the Grand Ducal Prison and save some high-profile prisoners for a long time. We just lacked people, and strong ones at that."

Erik turned to Van Dyke. "Principal, what do you think? Is rescuing Richard Stone possible?"

Before responding, Van Dyke thought about it in silence.

"It would require careful planning and coordination between our forces. But yes, I believe with your abilities, Erik, and if your clones are really as strong as Mary and James claim them to be, we could rescue Richard from that place."

He looked Erik in the eye. "I will help you do this. We shall free your friend."

Erik nodded, a small smile forming. "Thank you." In his mind, the beginnings of a plan started to come together. First, he would need to gather more information, and to do that, he already had a great idea in mind.

And with that, the meeting drew to a close.

Chapter 928: Roles

As he moved through the streets of New Alexandria toward the train station, his thoughts turned to Mira, Emily, Amber, and June, waiting for him at Mr. Fox's farm.

There was a lot to discuss with them—the details of his meeting with the Resistance, any new discoveries they had made in his absence, and his plan to rescue Richard Stone.

He also needs to replenish his supply of clone eggs.

Erik altered his appearance as he got out of the building, transforming his face and features just enough to be unrecognizable to any onlookers.

When he arrived at the train station, he moved with purpose but without drawing attention, sticking to the edges of the platforms and boarding the first train that would take him to the farm fields.

His mind was already miles away, seeing the farm that had now become his group's base of operations.

As the train pulled out of the station, Erik wondered if he would be able to save Richard, knowing that would not be easy.

The Grand Ducal Prison was Volkov's den, heavily guarded and rigged with defenses of all kinds.

However, the intelligence and help the resistance was going to provide gave Erik hope they could pull this off soon. If they coordinated their efforts well, they could succeed.

With that thought, Erik gazed out the train window as the city faded into the distance.

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Erik walked through the farmhouse door, weary from his journey. Amber turned from the kitchen counter to greet him.

"Erik, you're back!" she said with a smile.

"Yes, I am."

"Did you find them?"

Erik nodded. "I did. The resistance is currently operating from within the Red Palace."

Amber's smile dropped into a look of surprise. "The Red Palace? Are you serious right now?"

"Yes. Weird, isn't it?"

"I went to the place where the resistance headquarters should have been. I met an acquaintance who led me to the Red Palace there. The resistance went into hiding there."

Amber shook her head in wonder. "I would have never guessed."

"Is Mira here? And Emily?" Erik asked. "There's a lot we need to discuss."

"Of course," Amber said. "They're upstairs. I'll go get them." She turned and hurried up the staircase, calling Mira's and Emily's names.

Erik went to a kitchen chair and sat heavily, closing his eyes for a moment and thinking about the situation and what he learned.

Rescuing Richard Stone from the most secure prison in New Alexandria would require precision, coordination, and more than a little luck. But that wasn't the only thing worrying him. Fischer and Van Dyke's request about the Blackguards' team was one of the most weighty.

There was something weird about what they told him. Maybe the best way to describe what Erik was feeling was... unnerving. But he couldn't quite understand why it was.

A moment later, Erik heard Mira and Emily's voices on the stairs. He opened his eyes as they entered the kitchen. Mira spoke first. "Welcome back. Did you learn anything useful?"

Erik stood. "More than you imagine," he said with a weary smile. He began recounting the details of his meeting with the resistance fighters within the Red Palace.

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Erik explained the situation to Amber, Mira, and Emily. Though hopeful at learning her father was alive, Emily was worried about the dangers involved in rescuing him.

"So, what do you intend to do now?"

"The first thing we need to do is neutralize that Blackguards' team the resistance told me about," Erik said.

Without them interfering, our chances of breaking Richard out of prison increase significantly. Based on what the resistance leader told me about them, these guys are thwarting all major operations. "

Mira frowned. "Attacking a Blackguards' team directly seems risky. Why not have the clones gather information on their routines and weaknesses first?"

"We don't have time or clones. Aside from that, I don't think it will be easy for them to even find information, or Fischer would have already done so. He described them as phantoms," Erik said.

Amber shook her head. "I agree with Mira, though; information would be invaluable. A covert approach using the clones may yield the best results with the least risk."

Erik remained silent for a moment. "You both make valuable points. But as for this team of blackguards, I think its better if I take care of this on my own."

"And what about us?"

"Yes. I need the clone to keep an eye on the Chimaeric Demons' eggs. This is an important part of our plan. If we increase our numbers, it will be unlikely we will lose this war. Also, I need June to act as my bridge with the resistance regarding a particular thing. I promised the resistance to supply brain crystal rifles to them.

So, the first thing June needs to do is to head back to Liberty watch and explain the situation, then manage the supply chain. About that, Van Dyke told me he is going to prepare something that would allow us to give them what they need without trouble. The Red Palace is going to build a tunnel to make this possible."

June nodded. "Consider it done, master."

Erik turned to Emily. "Once we have a plan for dealing with the Blackguards, the resistance will assist us in breaking your father out of prison. I don't know how much it will take, but the sooner we act, the higher are the resistance chances to find something about Richard. About that, I need you to work with them. They will tell you what they need from you."

Emily smiled, hope returning to her eyes. "Thank you, Erik. I knew coming to you for help was the right decision."

Erik returned her smile. "We're in this together. Richard will be free soon; I promise you that." He looked at each of his companions in turn.

"Where do you plan to start searching for this Blackguard team?" Amber asked.

Erik pondered the question.

"I was actually thinking about infiltrating the army, but I will need to select my target carefully, so, a trip to the town hall is mandatory."

"The town hall has plenty of guards and patrols surrounding it," Amber said.

"Wouldn't it be better to assassinate Volkov if you have to go there?" Mira asked.

Erik shook his head.

"Assassinating Volkov would likely be the simplest way to deal a blow to the Blackguards, and I would get my revenge," Erik said.

"However, his forces would still search for someone to blame. It is likely they would execute Richard and other prisoners to show retribution."

Emily shuddered. Erik glanced at her. "Gathering intelligence on the Blackguards and neutralizing them reduces Richard's risk. We must make this look like as we are not involved in all of this."

Erik turned back to Mira and Amber. "Once we free Richard, taking care of Volkov will become much easier, since we will be able to move freely."

Chapter 929: Ben Fink

Dust motes danced in the shaft of sunlight that shone through a tall window, highlighting his new face, that of Ben Fink, a soldier from whom he stole the identity.

Erik handpicked the potential candidates he could impersonate, and this guy looked the best option he had available.

The man was a gruff, jaded soldier, not very good-looking. His face's sharp angles and eyes were no longer the same.

But Erik didn't care. What he cared about was finding information about Richard, but most importantly, about the team. The resistance asked him to hunt.

The problem was that finding those guys was too difficult, while they always found the resistance. Well, not always, but it was quite close to that.

Erik's eyes looked blankly across the communal area of the barracks in which he was stationed.

The true treasure, however, was the talk going on around him. Sergeant Markham, a slab of a guy with a jaw clinched so tightly that his beard seemed permanently trapped, slammed his mug on the table.

The guy was usually chatty and provided a ton of information.

"I heard they hit the northern supply depot again."

A young soldier, just out of his teens, whistled. "Clean operation, they claim. Took the entire shipment and vanished like ghosts." Sergeant Markham snorted.

"Ghosts with damn good intel." His voice was a mixture of fury and grudging respect.

"Something has changed with these rebels. It used to employ cowardly tactics before; they could even be described as amateurish. Now they're hitting hard targets and disappearing before reinforcements arrive."

"Maybe they are just lucky," said another soldier, Private Davies, a wiry man with persistently concerned eyes.

"Lucky, my ass," Markham said.

"This type of coordinated effort... requires strategy and someone feeding them excellent information."

He ran his eyes throughout the room, focusing on Erik, or rather, Ben. Erik returned his stare unflinchingly, forcing a neutral expression on his face. He couldn't afford to seem worried.

The suspense persisted, punctuated only by the repetitive clang of a hammer from somewhere deeper within the base.

Markham sighed, and the air left him in a sluggish whoosh. "The higher-ups are looking for a traitor. They are already accusing half the damn soldiers of sympathizing with the rebels."

A shudder went down Private Davies' spine. "Sympathizing? Well, it's not like we do not."

"You ever wonder, sergeant?" Davies asked. "What would life be like with General Becker still in charge?"

"No killing innocent people, no quotas to meet, and no damn fear of the blackguards."

Erik's pulse quickened. It was unexpected. Was this gruff soldier, a part of the very machine he was attempting to dismantle, questioning the system?

Well, truth be told, few people liked Volkov. They were simply afraid of him and, for sure, didn't want to antagonize the blackguards.

How Volkov convinced them to help him was beyond most of the people who didn't know the truth about Volkov's rise in power.

Sergeant Markham squirmed in his seat. "Private, don't talk foolishness. Everyone understands what those rebels are like. Savages who supported a murderer and turned against their country!"

Davies gave a gruff laugh. "Savages? I don't think Becker did what he was accused of, Sergeant. He was not the type, just like us."

Their chat was cut short by Captain Alcott's booming voice from the doorway.

The room jolted to attention. Alcott, a man with sharp angles and steely gray eyes, examined the room, briefly focusing on Erik before moving on.

"Attention, soldiers! There have been developments. Another rebel attack, this time at the Northern Gate. The casualties were limited, but the fuckers also lured thaids at the gates."

Erik struggled not to smile upon hearing those words.

Alcott paced the room, his boots thudding against the wooden floor. "The higher-ups requested all teams get ready to defend the northern gate. We must stop the spread of this cancer!"

He locked his sight on Sergeant Markham, his voice a hoarse snarl.

"Markham, you and your teammates will head there as soon as possible! Kill as many thaids as you can!"

Erik felt nauseous. It looked like, although many didn't like Volkov, some still did. If they believed what they were doing was right or simply had a sick taste for killing, he didn't know.

"Dismissed!" Alcott said, causing the room to erupt in a cacophony of scraping chairs and whispering curses.

Erik rose, his head lowered, and his motions were measured. He needed to tell Fischer and the others about this new batch of soldiers that were going to guard the northern gate, and he had to be fast.

Though that he was going to end up at the northern gate would not be a bad thing, He would get to know the soldiers' patrol shifts and where and when attacking was going to be optimal.

There was a simple reason the rebels were targeting the gates. They wanted thaids to rush inside the city.

Since the monsters from the Eldraith mountain range started migrating west, the thaids that lived far from the mountain range started doing the same. This inevitably led them toward New Alexandria.

While attacking the gates and luring thaid's was dangerous for the citizens, the rebels knew that was the best thing they could do to whittle Volkov's and the blackguards' forces. If not that, even forcing them to fight and chip at their stamina would work.

They had to force the blackguards and the soldiers to fight, and if the gates were breached, fighting was bound to be much harder.

As the soldiers streamed out, Erik collided with Private Davies, who was hurrying by. Dust billowed around their boots, and the clamor of the departing troops filled the air, their uniforms a blur of motion against the stark barracks backdrop.

"Be careful, Fink," Davies said. "I don't like how the situation is turning."

Erik growled a noncommittal response and moved past him.

Chapter 930: Northern Gate battle (1)

As he left, he saw a convoy of military vehicles preparing to depart for the gate.

A line of olive drab troop carriers, their paint dulled by years of service, sat idling with hatches propped open.

Soldiers clad in camo that seemed to almost melt into the concrete loading area bustled about with efficiency.

One group, faces grim under their helmets, wrestled a massive, tarp-covered crate onto the back of a flatbed, the winch straining with a metallic shriek.

Another soldier, a young woman, double-checked the straps securing a stack of metal containers on another truck, her hand brushing away a stray wisp of hair escaping her tightly-bunned ponytail.

The air crackled with a low hum of activity, the only sounds breaking the tense silence, the rhythmic shouts of commands and the metallic clang of equipment.

Erik walked toward the convoy, acting natural and focused.

"MOVE! GO, GO, GO!" Erik climbed up, hauling himself into the soldier filled truck.

The vehicle rumbled out of the base and sped towards the northern gate. Erik sat apart from the other soldiers, keeping his head down.

Conversations buzzed around him, but he didn't join in.

He was going to kill those soldiers in the future and talking to them would only make things more complicated.

But he observed them in case he needed to change identities.

Besides, once at the gate, he needed to learn the soldiers' patrols and security protocols, as they would be for sure helpful information for the resistance's plans.

To ask this information, rather than snooping around, was many times better.

However, even if Erik had no intention of being friendly with the other soldiers, there was still something he had to do. With discretion, at that.

Erik used his biological supercomputer to hack into the truck driver's phone.

Once he gained access, Erik composed a message to June, explaining the situation. He could have called, but he needed to pay attention now so, he avoided doing anything that would break his focus.

In that message, Erik detailed that Sergeant Markham's squad was being deployed to the northern gate in response to a rebel attack on the eastern gate.

June and Erik exchanged several messages.

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"You need to avoid attacking the northern gate until I'm there. As soon as I'm going to get new information about the place layout, the guard shifts, the defenses, and the weak points, I will take another identity and leave."

"The Northern Gate is not our next target, master. The target is a small team of blackguards stationed on the south gate."

Erik read June's reply and almost nodded.

<Fuck... I must be careful. >

Luckily, June told him the northern gate was not their true target. Erik didn't contact the rebels for some time now, so he wasn't that informed about the overall situation. Then he wrote a reply.

"Understood. I will stay with the forces moving to the northern gate to gain insight into their capabilities. This may prove useful when Fischer attacks the northern gate. If we breach it, we will have a lot of opportunities to wreak havoc."

But then Erik sent another message to June as the truck bounced along the uneven road.

"Is there any news about the clones? The first batch should have hatched by now."

June's reply came soon. "The first batch has, Master. They look identical to you."

Erik sighed. Identical clones would make things awkward.

Still, the Chimaeric Demons would be powerful soldiers once they matured. Tomorrow, a new batch of clones is going to hatch, and so will the others during the following days.

As the military truck rumbled towards the northern gate, Erik focused on his biological supercomputer, analyzing the surrounding soldiers.

Most were low-level fighters with few neural links, but there were others who were not weak at all.

However, two stood out: a sergeant in the front and another dressed as an officer in the back.

Any confrontation with these soldiers would be hazardous for the rebels.

Erik felt the truck slow down and turn towards the gate.

He saw the walls had been damaged by the recent rebel assault and the ongoing thaid attack didn't make things better.

Soldiers were stationed around the perimeter, firing at targets Erik could not see from his position.

The gate itself was an imposing metal structure rising high above the city walls. It was currently closed, and the barrier was active.

Erik spotted guard towers dotting the walls, manned by soldiers observing the area outside.

The truck rumbled to a stop in front of the gate. Erik left the vehicle with the soldiers and listened as Sergeant Markham detailed their squad's duties.

He was still connected to the truck driver's phone.

"Davies, Cooper, join the guards patrolling this side of the gate. Richards, Parker—you're on the towers. Make sure to kill as many fuckers as possible and keep your eyes open for any thaid trying to sneak past." Markham turned to Erik.

"Fink, Check the perimeter for breaches and report back in 10 minutes. After that, we will send you where you are needed."

Erik sent June a quick message through the biological supercomputer.

"June, I have been assigned to scout the perimeter. I will let you know about any breaches or weaknesses."

"Understood, Master. Proceed with caution and report back if you encounter any problems."

"Don't worry. These soldiers are no match for me, and no one suspects I'm not the real Fink."

"Do not underestimate them, master."

Erik closed the connection and burned the truck driver's phone. Just to piss him off.

Since the sergeant divided the soldiers into groups and assigned them positions around the gate, everyone started doing their job, but since Fink had a melee brain crystal power it was likely he was going to end up on the other side of the gate once his first duty was done.

Erik then began searching around the perimeter of the Northern Gate. He wasn't the only one, but that was an important job, because thaids could have slipped up somehow.

He kept his guard up as he walked, but despite being a spy, he was doing his duty faithfully so as not to attract attention.

All seemed silent as he made his way around the inner wall, checking for any breaches or weak spots.

The wall towered high above, lined with lights to illuminate any intruders, which, in this case, were thaids.

The battle outside must have been very chaotic judging by the sounds outside. Artillery and explosions from brain crystal powers could be heard at kilometers.

Before long, Erik returned to Sergeant Markham.

"The perimeter is safe, Sergeant," Erik said. "I saw no signs of damage or breaches along the wall. I briefly talked to the other soldiers, who confirmed it."

"Good work, soldier," Sergeant Markham said. Then the man paused. "More people have been tasked with joining the front lines. It looks like the thaids are pushing really hard. You will join them. Do not return without at least a hundred kills."

Is it clear?"

"Yes, Sergeant." Erik joined the soldiers, who got the same orders and got out of the gate.

The scene before him could only be described as utterly insane carnage.

Artillery shells rained down from the walls, exploding among clusters of thaids.

Brain crystal rifles fired without pause, their mana-powered bullets tearing into the snarling creatures charging the wall.

Erik brought up his mana sword and joined the soldiers, engaging a pack of hulking beasts.

Their undersized brains held little more than instinctual rage, though.

Erik slashed at one, severing two of its clawed arms.

Another swiped at him, but he rolled past and took off its leg with a sweeping attack.

He could kill those things easily, but he couldn't over perform the original Ben Fink. But was not that simple.

The thaids kept coming—waves of them throwing themselves at the city's defenses.

Erik fought mechanically, conserving his energy. The creatures were many, but individually weak, at least for him.

The other soldiers, including the blackguards, weren't having that great of a time.

Erik faced them with efficient, almost lazy swings of his swords. A bear-like thaid burst through the melee, knocking soldiers aside.

It fixed its glowing eyes on Erik and charged. As it reared up on its hind legs to maul him, Erik plunged his swords into its mouth and up into its brain. The creature shuddered and collapsed.

Erik pulled his swords free and dove back into the fray.

Their numbers, a seemingly endless swarm moments ago, were a suffocating press around the soldiers now.

Each fallen thaid was replaced by two more chitinous carapaces, blood-soaked fur, mandibles snapping and claws outstretched were around them.

Blood splattered against the soldiers' military armor. Sweat beaded on their brows, stinging his eyes as they fought.

Erik steeled himself for the long battle ahead. Though carnage surrounded him, cool calculation guided his every action.