

BIOLOGICAL 931

Chapter 931: Northern Gate battle (2)

As the creature fell, he spun to block the claw of another creature.

The thaids came in an endless wave, flinging themselves at the city's defenders. The tactic used by the rebels was really ruthless.

Erik cut through monsters like the scythe of a reaper, deadly but unseen, unexpected. But Erik had to disguise his combat prowess as merely respectable to avoid the others understanding that, in fact, he was far more powerful than any of them.

Besides, with each thaid he killed, Erik gained new experience points. The fighting prowess he was displaying lent credibility to his assumed identity as "Ben Fink".

Much of the battle was a blur anyway—swinging, shouting, killing, and plowing through the mass of twisted creatures.

Erik's arms ached from the repeated motion, yet he pressed on.

A thaid wielding crude iron shards of claws slashed at Erik's face, but he deflected its attack, countering with a thrust to the creature's chest.

As it dropped dead, he spotted two blackguards struggling against an enormous bear thaid.

Erik rushed to assist, plunging his sword deep into the creature's side. It roared in fury and swiped at him with a massive paw.

Erik dropped and rolled between its legs, reappearing behind it. With a two-handed swing, he drove his mana sword into the base of its thick skull. The bear thaid toppled, crashing to the ground.

What he was doing didn't go unnoticed by the onlookers, though, precisely what Erik wanted to avoid.

"Who is that guy?"

"I don't know; he should be from the new batch of soldiers that arrived earlier."

"He knows how to fight. If all members of the new batch are like him, the rebels are going to be destroyed soon."

The blackguards heard the soldiers chit-chatting and eyed him, but Erik turned and plunged back into the fray without a word. He had maintained his cover—for now.

Though he realized he was slicing through thaids too quickly and easily, the strength he exerted shouldn't have been that of Ben Fink.

He needed to slow down and appear less competent in order to keep his disguise as an ordinary soldier.

The thaids, with their grotesque forms and gnashing teeth, were swarming the area.

Yet these creatures were nothing extraordinary to Erik. He was too strong, and the monsters were mere nuisances, not threats, to him.

It wasn't easy not to slice through them with a single attack or two if the situation truly demanded it.

One thaid lunged at him, its claws extended and eyes glowing with predatory malice.

Erik swung his mana sword with sluggishness, the blade humming as it cut through the air.

The sword cleaved through the thaid's torso, dark blood spraying out and staining the ground.

<Fuck... This was still too fast. >

He watched as the creature collapsed in a heap, its body twitching in its last moments.

These thaids were too slow for him not to avoid their attacks, and they were too stupid not to trick them into awkward positions he could take advantage of.

Around him, the blackguards were fighting fiercely, the flashes of mana weapons lighting up the area, and the acrid smell of burning flesh mingling with the metallic tang of blood.

Those guys were strong. Erik had to admit it.

Tightening his grip on his mana blade, Erik allowed the next few thaids to get closer before fighting them off.

He intentionally missed some of his swings and staggered back from their attacks as if wounded.

When a thaid swiped at his side, Erik twisted and clutched at the invisible wound, dropping one knee to the ground.

Though he continued slaying thaids, Erik altered his approach to appear less skilled and more strained. He swung his sword wildly in large arcs instead of his usual precise strikes.

When thrusting at approaching creatures, Erik left openings for their claws to slash his arms. He didn't heal them using the Hevadrin's brain crystal power.

The blackguards nearby seemed to buy his performance. They rushed past Erik, focusing their efforts on the thaids further out.

However, Erik feared some doubted his authenticity after witnessing his initial onslaught.

While slowing his movements even more, exaggerating each swing and breath, Erik forced himself to grit his teeth and roar with every thaid slain.

He staggered afterwards, as though exhausted. His arms truly ached from the deliberate awkwardness of his strikes.

Though the task frustrated him, Erik understood the necessity of hiding his true power.

He had allies depending on him within the city walls. To gather information was an important task for the resistance.

So Erik continued his performance, concealing his skill and strength behind the facade of a struggling soldier.

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Erik watched as the other soldiers and blackguards began collecting the bodies of the fallen thaids. The heavy skirmish had ended, but the cleanup remained.

While hefting the body of a bear thaid onto his shoulders, Erik carried it over to the growing pile outside the Northern Gate.

His mind was elsewhere. The battle had provided an opportunity to observe the blackguards' fighting strategies and responses, information that could prove useful in future operations.

In the meantime, a heavy silence settled over the battlefield. This attack claimed the lives of many soldiers.

All around him, soldiers worked in grim silence, lips tightened, and brows furrowed as they handled the twisted remains of the thaids and took away their comrades' bodies.

Blood stained their uniforms and spattered their faces, but none complained. They were accustomed to this grisly duty after battles.

Erik stoop and dragged a thaid's massive torso onto a nearby vehicle. He faked his arms were burning with fatigue, and kept doing the grueling work, remaining mindful of his cover.

Other soldiers and blackguards were hauling thaid corpses onto trucks that had arrived from inside the city.

The bodies would be taken for processing, with their materials repurposed to help fortify New Alexandria's defenses, producing armors and weapons for the soldiers.

Erik threw another thaid onto the truck, this time a twisted abomination composed of twigs and thorns.

Its barbs snagged against the side of the cart as he lifted it, tearing into his skin.

Erik bit his lip, reminding himself to show signs of pain here and there. Ben Fink wasn't strong. Pain and exhaustion were to be expected from him.

After emptying thaid bodies from a nearby section, Erik moved closer to the city gates.

Inside the gate, despite the area being heavily fortified and guarded, crowds of civilians had gathered to watch the attack's aftermath.

They were showing clear fear. The rebels were taking things too far lately.

After the area outside had been cleared, Erik climbed onto the back of the truck, hauling thaid corpses.

The driver revved the engine and started heading toward the gate.

Erik swayed as the truck navigated the uneven terrain outside the city walls, his eyes scanning the horizon for any further threats.

Chapter 932: Unexpected request

"You fought well out there, Fink," Markham said. "When did you learn to fight like that?"

Erik shrugged. "I was just mad, sergeant. When those beasts came charging at the gate, I wasn't thinking much."

Sergeant Markham eyed him. "Perhaps. But your strikes seemed practiced and efficient. I know rage when I see it, and that wasn't it."

Erik hesitated, but in the end, he doubled down on his previous statement. "I don't know, sir, but I was certainly enraged. I wasn't really thinking about what I was doing."

Sergeant Markham watched him a moment longer, then nodded, satisfied.

"Well, you held your own. That's all that matters."

He clasped Erik's shoulder. "You might get a promotion if you keep this up, Fink."

Erik nodded, giving a small smile. "Thank you, Sergeant."

With a last nod and squeeze of Erik's shoulder, Markham turned and moved away, continuing his inspection of the soldiers, hoping his team was still alive and well.

Erik let out a quiet sigh of relief as the man left. It seemed his performance had convinced the sergeant, at least for now.

He would need to be more careful from now on to avoid raising the man's suspicions. But, of course, Markham wasn't the only one he had to pay attention to.

Erik then headed to the walls. An officer directed him to stand guard on the walls for the rest of the day.

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As night fell, Erik still stood watch with his fellow soldiers. The hours had passed slowly, with little to occupy their minds besides scanning the landscape for signs of attack.

A soldier pulled out his ration bundle and began eating. Erik followed suit, opening up his own provisions.

"You fought well out there today," one of the men said to Erik. "I was terrified to die today, but thanks to you, I'm alive."

"Aye," another said. "The way you took down that big bear thing, I thought for sure it had you. Good to have you watching our backs."

Erik nodded. "Thanks," he said. "Glad I could help."

The men returned to eating in comfortable silence; the compliments easing some of the tedium of their watch. Erik nibbled at his food, his mind only partially on the meal since he was considering the day's events.

As Erik finished his meal, two blackguards approached the group of soldiers.

"Who is Ben Fink?" one asked.

The other soldiers turned to look at Erik, who froze, his mind racing.

"That would be me," Erik said, rising to his feet and making a military salute.

The first blackguard eyed him. "You must come with us," he said.

"What? Why?"

"That's classified."

Erik, at that point, could only nod. Erik was already thinking of killing the two blackguards and steal another dude's identity. For that reason, he followed the two men, but once they were alone, the two turned to look at him.

"You are not in trouble, young man. Our superior wants to talk to you. We couldn't say it in front of the others, but we can't tell you why."

<Ah... fuck... That's a surprise. >

Erik nodded again, following the blackguards as they left the wall. As they walked through the garrison grounds, Erik remained calm while considering what the fuck was happening.

The blackguards led him to a small office, where a man sat waiting.

The captain sat behind a large wooden desk that was stacked with papers and reports. He was a middle-aged man based on the voice, but his face was hidden by the blackguards' usual mask.

As Erik entered, the captain looked up and scrutinized him through narrowed eyes, but Erik couldn't see it. After a long moment, he gestured to the chair across from the desk.

"Sit," he said in a stern tone.

Erik moved towards the chair and sat. The captain studied him for a few beats more before speaking again.

"I understand you fought well outside the gates today," he said. "Sergeant Markham commended your skills, even."

Erik nodded and sat up straighter as the captain spoke.

"My men have seen you fight on multiple occasions over the past month. It is no small feat to impress a blackguard, yet you have done so multiple times." The captain paused, fixing his gaze on Erik. "Would you consider joining our ranks?"

<What?!>

That was unexpected. Erik stole the identity of Ben Fink to gather intelligence primarily about Volkov's men and then about the blackguards.

But if he joined the dreaded black-clad guys, the amount of information he was going to gather was bound to be even better than whatever he would have learned from Volkov's soldiers.

On the inside, Erik felt a surge of triumph. Outwardly, he remained calm and collected as he responded. "I would be honored to join your ranks and serve the blackguards."

The captain nodded. "Good. I expect grand things from you, soldier. Report to the barracks tomorrow at dawn for you to fill some paperwork and get briefed about the situation, and, most importantly, to get your black suit. Since for now you will be stationed here in New Alexandria, what you are going to do won't be different from what you did until now.

The only difference will be from whom you will take your orders."

The man paused. "Don't be late; you will have a lot of papers to sign."

"I will be there, sir," Erik said.

The conversation continued afterward until the captain dismissed him and Erik left the office.

As he walked across the garrison grounds toward the wall where he had been posted, Erik allowed a small smile to appear.

Things were falling into place better than he planned. Now inside the blackguard organization, the information he was going to provide to the rebels would be of high quality.

If he played it well, Ben Fink was going to be someone who would stay among the blackguards for a long, long time.

Erik returned to his post on the wall, acting the part of a dutiful soldier while his mind spun with the possibilities that had just opened up.

Chapter 933: Enlistment center (1)

In addition, he wore a sleeveless jacket that reached his waist. Brown boots completed the ensemble.

With his uniform in place, Erik left the barracks and made his way to the Blackguards' flying car parked outside.

The vehicle was sleek and menacing, painted a glossy black that seemed to absorb the dim light of the pre-dawn sky.

The driver waiting for him was not as imposing. This man was likely a random blackguards' employee.

There was no way those pompous pricks would allow a talented fighter to work as a driver.

"Good morning," the man said. The driver was working for the blackguards for years. This meant he knew that if he had to pick up this guy, Erik, it meant he had been selected to join the blackguards.

If he really did, that depended on him, but for sure, he had the qualities they were searching for.

The driver was also in front of the military barracks, meaning that Erik was lucky. If the recruit belonged to the military, in fact, more often than not, the recruitment process, or better, the evaluation period, was faster because there was no basic training to provide.

"Good morning," Erik said. He jumped into the car.

As the vehicle lifted off the ground, Erik took in the view of New Alexandria below. The city was a mix of destruction and renewal.

Many buildings lay in ruins, their exterior pockmarked by gunfire and explosions.

<I bet it was frustrating for the workers who patched up those buildings to have the rebels destroy them. >

Indeed, it was. Many people and construction workers were mad at the rebels.

However, new structures emerged from the ashes, supported by the massive presence of guards patrolling the streets.

The flying car soared over the city, its engines humming. There weren't yet many vehicles in New Alexandria. Many people died, after all, and many more got enlisted, so most of the vehicles were military ones.

Erik watched as the people below looked at the sleek black car moving as it passed above them, their expressions a mix of respect and wariness for what the crest adorning the sides of the vehicle meant.

Order. Power.

After a brief journey, the car touched down at the Blackguards' enlisting center, a sprawling complex in the heart of New Alexandria.

There were many of such buildings within the city, and all of them were symbols of respect.

The enlistment centers were not only in New Alexandria, of course, as there were places like this in every city, but the one in New Alexandria was surprisingly big.

The building was imposing, its black walls looming over the surrounding streets.

Guards stood sentry at the entrance. Most of them were normal people; a blackguard couldn't do degrading guard jobs.

Erik disembarked from the car and walked inside. <Let's see how these fuckers' enlisting machine works.>

The doors closed behind Erik. The first thing he saw once inside was a brightly lit interior, with the walls adorned with portraits of past blackguard leaders and depictions of their victories.

Everything about the place exuded opulence. It couldn't be different. But in that opulence, there was an air of authority. Everything screamed power.

A woman rushed out to meet him, her uniform immaculate. It was still black, like most of the stuff around here. But it wasn't a blackguard uniform. At least not the classic one.

The woman was tall and slender, with short hair that framed her face. Her eyes were a striking shade of blue, so piercing that it captivated anyone who looked into them.

She also had a small smile on her face.

That made Erik suspect, again, it was unlikely the woman was a blackguard. These guys weren't polite, didn't smile and, most importantly, they wore uniforms and masks she didn't have on.

However, if Erik had to give a reason about why he thought she wasn't a blackguard, it was because of the smile alone. This was likely a common woman who worked at the enlistment center.

"Welcome, Private Fink," she said, extending her hand. "I've been briefed about your arrival. I was told you've been selected to join the blackguards."

As Erik reached out and took her hand, he couldn't help but notice the strong sense of respect emanating from her warm greeting.

To join the Blackguards was no small feat, and those who were unable to do so often viewed those who could with a tinge of envy.

"Thank you... Yes, apparently I was."

"I've been tasked with helping you with the enlisting procedure," she said. "We're glad to have you here, Private Fink. You're going to make a great addition to the blackguards' ranks. I have no doubts about that."

"Thank you," Erik said, but he knew little about what he had to do. The man raised an eyebrow, curious. "Excuse me, miss."

Erik's politeness left the woman feeling quite surprised. It was a rare occurrence for the blackguards to choose someone who didn't possess the characteristic of being an arrogant prick.

"What specific steps do I need to take to become a member of the Blackguards? What is the procedure?" he asked.

"You would need to sign some papers first," the woman said. "In theory, you should have had to take some training, but since you belong to the military, most of it won't be needed."

She stopped for a second. "Also, the circumstances of your enlistment are... peculiar. You will need to keep working here in New Alexandria, this time under the blackguards, but you won't be one of them. Not yet, at least. Most likely, the higher ups will assign a mentor to you.

During this period, he will monitor you. Most likely they will transfer you to another post within the city." The woman smiled at Erik.

"Aside from receiving mentorship and being observed," the woman said, her voice steady but slightly muffled by the clamor of the bustling hallways, "you will have to study and learn the blackguards' standard procedures, their rules, their code."

She walked with purpose, and Erik matched her pace.

"When you feel ready, you can come to the enlistment center to take the exam. If you succeed," she went on, leading him up a winding staircase, "you will be given the rank of an Initiate, the blackguards' lowest rank, but you will still have a mentor."

The staircase creaked under their weight. Erik adjusted the collar of his uniform, feeling the rough fabric chafe against his neck.

"The higher-ups will give you three chances to take the exam," she said. "After that, if you fail three times, you won't be able to join. You will have to give back the uniform, and you will be sent back to your previous post."

All of that made Erik think.

"I find it somewhat strange that the blackguards are sending me into combat without providing me with specialized training."

It was indeed weird. Before receiving a rank, a soldier would expect to receive training, at least one specific for the blackguards, given this peculiar situation. But in Erik's case, there was no team or scenario training.

"It certainly is," the woman said.

She sighed. "Since you received basic training at the military school and also after you joined the military," she said.

"A lot of the basic procedure has already been taught to you. You were an active soldier, and during the observation period, things won't be different from that. You will most likely do the same things as when you weren't under scrutiny. At least until you get a higher rank, but that will take time. There is no doubt about that."

"If you get a higher rank, then yes, you will receive specialized training. More often than not, you will be assigned to a team, and kept being monitored by your mentor, or the one of one of your team members."

The woman said. In the meantime, she and Erik kept walking.

"But if I were in your shoes, I would focus on the protocol and procedure tests you will have to take. There is no room for dumb people within the blackguards, and a lot of your chances in the future depend on the score you perform here. Consider it this way: the observation period serves as a rigorous test of your skills and abilities. From the Initiate rank, the genuine stuff will start."

Erik nodded. "Thank you for your help," he said.

The woman smiled. "Of course, Private Fink." She paused.

"We're heading toward the administration center to make this part of the process as smooth as possible for you. Welcome to the blackguards; try not to get kicked out."

With that, the two arrived at their destination. They found themselves in an office where a lone individual was engrossed in reading material on a holographic computer.

Chapter 934: Enlistment Center (2)

As the lady spoke with fervor, her eyes gleaming with zeal, Erik couldn't help but feel a sense of unease creeping over him. He maintained a composed face, concealing the perplexity swirling within him.

Observing her fired-up demeanor, he couldn't shake off the nagging thought that she should have been aware of the true nature of the Blackguards.

Erik found it puzzling, even disconcerting, that someone could be so enthusiastic about an organization he knew harbored dark goals.

Yet, he kept his thoughts to himself, offering only a neutral nod in response. In the end, he had no proof she knew what he knew.

"There is a lot to sign; I'm warning you." A smile, bright with enthusiasm, spread across her face.

Erik nodded at her. "Thanks," he said, grossed out by the situation, and then entered the office.

He walked into the spacious room, lined with floor-to-ceiling windows that offered a magnificent view of the city.

There was a holographic computer on a wooden desk, projecting colorful, three-dimensional graphs and diagrams that a serious-looking man in a military uniform was studying.

There were also lists of names, and other information Erik didn't really care about since it was for sure about other under scrutiny candidates.

When Erik approached, the man raised his head. "You must be our recruit," he said, gesturing to a chair opposite him. "Have a seat."

He sat down while the gentleman consulted a tablet on his desk.

"Let's get the enlisting process started, shall we? I'm Marshall Caldwell, head of recruiting. We can begin with some paperwork. I need your full name, date of birth, and previous military experience."

It wasn't like they didn't already have this information. But they wanted to see what "Ben Fink" was going to say. Was he going to lie? Was he going to overestimate or underestimate himself?

From Erik's answer, a lot of things might change.

Erik took a moment to plan a response. His only thoughts were about the fact that the man in front of him was a Marshall from New Alexandria's army.

This man, a Marshall, served as a deskman for the blackguards. It made little sense, and how could he accept that degrading role? He was a fucking Marshall!

"Ben Fink, sir," he said.

"Well, private Fink, this is the situation."

The Marshall began explaining the various forms Erik would need to fill out regarding duties, payroll, and administrative details.

He listened while also studying the Marshall's demeanor. He was having trouble understanding how such a high-ranking person within a nation's army could do administrative work for the blackguards.

Of course, with duty came different kinds of jobs, yet the situation didn't sit well with Erik, as it only showed the power that the scoundrels had over this country.

<Motherfuckers...>

Caldwell's tone was firm, yet not unkind, as he addressed Erik. "All right, Ben," he began, his voice carrying a sense of authority tempered with a hint of reassurance. "As a potential new Initiate, you are now in a probationary period during which you'll be evaluated."

Erik observed a slight furrow forming between Caldwell's brows, indicating a seriousness underlying his words. It was evident that Caldwell took his role seriously, his demeanor reflecting a sense of duty to uphold the standards of the Blackguards.

"A veteran blackguard will mentor you," Caldwell continued, his expression softening slightly with a hint of encouragement, "ensuring you understand our procedures and show potential for advancement, but you will also be required to study independently."

Erik noticed a subtle shift in Caldwell's demeanor, a faint tightening of his jaw suggesting a measure of expectation placed upon Erik.

<Oh... fuck. This man is another fanatic...>

"The mentor's task is not only to evaluate you," Caldwell added, his voice taking on a more contemplative tone, "but also to give you hints and tips. However, keep in mind that depends on the mentor."

"What you are going to do depends on your mentor. He will assign you duties depending on what he or she wants to evaluate. So you might end up on guarding shifts, patrols, investigations. Whatever the situation needs. But you will have a Blackguards' armor on.

Mind this, it is an Initiate uniform, but you will have to give it back if you don't pass the evaluation period and the test you will have to take here." Erik nodded, trying to look enthusiastic about the situation.

Of course he was, but for an alternative reason. By assuming the role of Ben Fink, he might gain a wealth of inside knowledge about the Blackguards. Maybe finding the team that was creating so many troubles for Major Fischer wouldn't be so hard anymore.

The situation was good for two reasons: one was that he will get in contact with people that might know things he needed. His instability brain crystal power was bound to play a crucial role here.

The other reason was that, if problems arose, Erik could steal the identity of a high-ranking blackguards' officer.

But he didn't plan on resorting to this. While this might have looked like the best situation for him, it wasn't because if Ben Fink disappeared, it would be an enormous problem.

The blackguards might search for him, and since they knew he, Erik Romano, could shapeshift, the first thing they would think about is that Ben Fink was, in fact, Erik Romano.

This would put everyone on alert, and he couldn't allow that. Based on Erik's estimations, the only way to clear someone's name was to find a body. But Ben Fink's body was already rotting from some time. So, he couldn't use it.

Erik could have stolen someone else's identity instead of that of Ben Fink. But spying the blackguards wasn't really what he was aiming at the beginning.

What he needed were information about Volkov, about the state of his military, because that was the rebels' major enemy. The blackguards were devastating, that was for sure, but they weren't the greatest problem. A war couldn't be won without people, and most of them were from Frant.

Besides, the blackguards employed many tactics to avoid having their identities stolen. Most of the times they were in a group. If Erik killed one, he had to kill all of them. If he did so, the blackguards were going to search for multiple people, not one.

Until the clones hatched and became operative, there was no way for Erik spying the blackguards. But Ben Fink's situation changed everything, because now he was inside, and even if he didn't have access to information, he could still meet people who had them.

Another goal Erik was trying to achieve was to find Dark Tendrils' group, but they were like ghosts. Not only was there not a single file online that discussed them, but even local servers provided no information about them.

They received their missions either through oral orders or written documents.

Those were the only cases in which the biological supercomputer was useless. Even though these were rare.

Caldwell pulled up a document on the tablet. "This outlines our rules and code of conduct. I recommend familiarizing yourself with it."

Erik nodded.

"You'll report directly to Advocate Silent Scream for duty assignments. He will be your mentor, so be respectful to him, as your recruitment depends on the man." Caldwell continued. "Any questions so far?"

"No, it all sounds straightforward."

"Good." Caldwell typed a few notes into the system. "Once you've settled in, if you have questions, your mentor can assist you."

After a few more minutes of paperwork and explanations, the Marshall closed Erik's file.

The man gave Erik some documents to read and sign. He did, under Ben Fink's alias, of course.

"That covers the basics," he said, standing up and extending his hand. "Welcome to the blackguards, soldier. Report to barracks A3 tomorrow at 0600. You will meet with your mentor, so do not be late. He doesn't like people who don't value time, and don't forget to study hard for the test."

Erik rose and shook the Marshall's hand. "Thank you, sir. I won't let you down."

"Best of luck."

With that, Erik left the office, his mind racing with what he had gleaned from the man's mind.

These guys did next to nothing. The only things he was aware of were procedures and information about some of the mentors. Mainly what they liked, how they were, how they carried themselves.

From what Erik saw, the blackguards enforced very strict measure to make it so that no one could reveal anything worthwhile. Only the higher ups and the strongest among the blackguards were going to have more information.

Ben Fink's identity suddenly became too significant to ignore. He needed to get a respectable rank within the organization and do it fast if he wanted to find what he was searching for.

When Erik left, he found again the woman who had let him in.

"Have you finished with the enlisting process?"

"Yes, I was just talking to Marshall Caldwell."

The woman looked pleased. "That's wonderful news! I'm so happy for you. The Marshall only meets with the most promising new recruits."

Erik fought back a scowl. "Thank you. Did you perhaps have been waiting here this whole time?"

The woman nodded. "It's my responsibility to assist any new members. The Blackguards take such exceptional care of their members, right? They truly value each individual and want to provide the support needed for all to succeed."

Erik held back a derisive laugh. The effects of propaganda were strong on this woman.

"That's good to hear."

"It is, right? Well, let me know if you have any questions," the woman told him. "I'm happy to help."

"Thank you; I appreciate it."

"This way now..."

Erik started following the woman. He didn't know where she was bringing him. In the meantime, he thought about her words and gave a slight shake of his head.

The nonsense the woman spouted about the Blackguards made him cringing. Though he supposed it was expected from someone so deeply under their spell.

"Where are we going, exactly?"

"I need to show you where you will take your assessment."

"Ah... Thanks, I guess."

After some time, the two arrived in a small room. There was a single desk with a chair and a computer.

"That's the device you will need to use to pass the test. Whenever you feel ready to take the test, come here, find me, and let me know."

"Understood."

Chapter 935: Back to the Northern gate

Her empty platitudes about the Blackguards' supposed virtues ringed hollow in his ears.

He had played the part of the eager recruit well, but the truth was, he felt nothing but disgust towards this corrupt organization.

Once outside, he noticed the same car that had brought him here waiting in front of the entrance.

Honestly, there were many cars like that, which was why the driver got out of the vehicle. Ben Fink had to find him easily, after all. Who knew if, one day, he would become a high-ranking blackguard?

As he approached the sleek black car, the driver greeted him. "Time to head back to your post at the Northern Gate, Mr. Fink," the man said.

Erik nodded and climbed into the vehicle, the driver's words confirming he had indeed waited here for some time.

The car lifted off the ground and soared over New Alexandria's damaged cityscape.

Erik peered out the window, observing the ongoing reconstruction efforts amidst the remnants of the parasite's destruction.

The driver navigated the car skillfully, weaving between the towering buildings and the other cars, mostly military and blackguards' ones.

Erik remained silent, using the time to reflect on what he had gathered so far and plan his next moves. For sure, he was going to contact the resistance as soon as he was alone.

The Blackguards' enlistment had been a fortuitous event, bordering on the bizarre because of how suddenly it came.

It also revealed the extent of their indoctrination methods, as well as what the people working for them thought about the organization.

<Disgusting...>

Soon, the car descended towards the Northern Gate, with the walls and watchful soldiers in view.

Erik tensed, knowing he would have to maintain his charade a little longer.

But he was also happy, since this was a real chance to get inside the Blackguards and find out everything he had to know about them.

He was going to find the party of blackguards that were making trouble for the resistance soon.

"Here we are, Mr. Fink," the driver said, bringing the vehicle to a smooth landing.

"Good luck out there and congratulations."

"Thank you," Erik said, opening the door and stepping out onto the familiar ground.

He could see the other soldiers he had fought alongside in the past months rushing inside the gate. Many soldiers were wounded.

Based on the scene before him, It was clear there had been a massive battle that morning, and the situation hadn't been managed that well judging by the wounded soldiers being rushed inside and the bodies being carried in, covered by white blankets.

The defenders had clearly taken heavy casualties, and Erik couldn't help but wonder about the scale and intensity of the clash with the thaid horde.

The rebels shouldn't have attacked this gate again based on what he knew, so this was a thaid's natural attack.

As he made his way towards the gate, Erik spotted Sergeant Markham barking orders amidst the pandemonium.

A mix of exhaustion and rage etched the sergeant's face. Erik approached him.

"Sergeant, what happened here?" He asked, feigning concern.

Markham turned to him, his expression never changing. "Private Fink! You are back! That's great news!"

The man turned and looked at the soldier in front of him. "A damn thaid attack! It was massive; we would have been breached if it weren't for the blackguards! They came at us in waves, like nothing I've ever seen since the Heniate's attack. We fought them off, but not without paying a heavy price." He gestured towards the covered bodies.

Erik nodded solemnly, faking his heart sink at the sight of the dead men and women, but in truth, he didn't care one bit. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

The sergeant considered it for a moment. "Yeah, actually. We need all hands on deck to secure the gate and clear the battlefield. Get in there and lend a hand."

"Yes, sir," Erik said. "But there is something I must tell you."

The marshal working for the blackguards told him what to say to his friends and superiors once back.

Everyone got told he had been reassigned but not where, which was to keep his identity as a blackguard hidden.

"What?"

"I've been reassigned, sir! In Fasard."

"I received a briefing about this matter in the morning, Fink. However, until tomorrow, you are mine, so get your ass outside!"

"Yes, sir!" Erik said while saluting and hurrying towards the gate.

Erik joined the other soldiers in the grim task of clearing the battlefield.

He worked alongside them, handling the twisted, lifeless forms of the thaids with a mix of efficiency and reverence.

The bodies were loaded onto trucks, their materials were going to be used in fortifying the city's defenses.

As he toiled under the sun, Erik's mind raced, trying to piece together the events of the battle.

The sheer scale of the thaid assault suggested that, as the sergeant said, the gate would have been breached if it weren't for the Blackguards.

"Mother fuckers..."

Erik was obviously referring to the blackguards. Erik believed that during the Heniate attack, they did not take any action to save New Alexandria, but of course, this was because Volkov was involved.

However, the soldiers nearby heard those words.

"Yeah, these fucking thaids. The higher-ups are still trying to figure out why this new mass migration is happening. However, many people say it is only going to worsen."

Erik was slightly embarrassed by the situation. He wasn't talking to this soldier; he didn't even know who he was. Yet he replied as if he were really talking to him.

"Yeah, it's a mess. Some people say it's because of something happening within the Eldraith mountain range."

"The Eldraith mountain range?" Another soldier said.

"What could occur within the Eldraith mountain range that would force them to travel all the way here?"

"I don't know," Erik said. "Maybe a powerful monster pushed all the others away?"

Chapter 936: A new name

Barrack A3 was like Erik imagined. A heavily fortified building that housed elite soldiers in Frant.

Erik observed the scene; his disguise as the soldier "Ben Fink" was what allowed him to be there.

He took note of the patrol patterns, the number of guards, and any potential entry points.

This information would be critical for his plans. When his clones were ready, attacking this place was just one of the things he would do.

Erik entered the imposing black structure. His heart was calm, despite knowing he was about to meet the person who would be his mentor: Silent Scream.

<These guys are obsessed with names, uh? >

As he stepped through the threshold, the interior was just as fortified as the exterior.

Disciplined blackguards moved with purpose, hiding behind masks and black attire.

Erik was the only one without a mask, but that was obvious. He wasn't a blackguard yet, just a potential Initiate, the lowest rank within the blackguards.

While outsiders would have treated him with respect regardless of his rank, among the blackguards, an initiate was just a mule to exploit.

Though everyone there already knew who he was, Ben Fink, the new soldier under observation.

New potential blackguards were not that common, after all, and it was only natural that a potential recruit would attract many people's attention.

He made his way through the main hall, where there were some people waiting. Suddenly, one of them rose from its chair; it was a man, of course, hidden behind a mask.

"You must be Ben Fink," a low, raspy voice said. "I've been expecting you."

Erik tensed, but maintained his composure. "That's me. Are you my mentor, perhaps?"

The man nodded. "Yes. I'm Silent Scream. Now come, we have much to discuss." They turned and gestured for Erik to follow.

Erik trailed behind the mysterious individual. The man led him to a secluded office; the door shutting behind them with a soft click. Erik surveyed the room, taking in the sparse furnishings and the single, unadorned desk at its center.

"Have a seat," the hooded figure said, motioning to a chair.

Erik complied, his eyes never leaving the figure as they moved to the other side of the desk and settled into a chair.

"As I said, I'm Silent Scream," the figure said. "I've been tasked with overseeing your integration into our ranks. I also have the duty to evaluate your progress and potential."

Erik maintained a neutral expression. "I'm honored," he said, his voice level and controlled. "I'm ready to prove my worth."

For a moment, Silent Scream studied him; his gaze was intense. "We shall see, Ben Fink. We shall see."

Silent Scream stood up and retrieved something from a box behind him. It was a blackguard initiate's attire, complete with a mask.

"Put it on."

"Must I do it here in front of you?"

The man teased, "Are you embarrassed?"

Erik said, "I'm not." Like that, he donned both the attire and the black mask.

The uniform felt strange on Erik's body, with the mask obscuring his features, but it wasn't like he never wore one.

When he stole Quakestrike's attire, he did the same. Although the armor-like uniform was different from the one he was currently wearing, there were some similarities. Mainly in the black color and the various embroidery on it.

Silent Scream observed him. The mask concealed his features.

"Good. You will need to get used to wearing this. As a potential blackguard initiate, it will be your armor and your shield."

Erik nodded, adjusting the mask slightly. "I understand."

"Now," Silent Scream continued, "let us discuss your duties and expectations."

Erik stood in front of Silent Scream, the unfamiliar blackguard uniform and mask, feeling strange but necessary. He listened as his new mentor outlined his duties and expectations.

"We will head to the eastern district to search for rebels," Silent Scream said. "But first, did you retrieve the study materials they provided at the enlistment center?"

Erik nodded. "Yes, they were sent to my phone. I've already been reviewing the content."

What Erik didn't reveal was that he had already absorbed the knowledge through his biological supercomputer shortly after he got back to the gate.

He had no intention of wasting time studying things. It would take him 10 seconds to learn.

Besides, having a firm grasp on this information would make things easier for Erik, since he would need and anticipate what the blackguards were going to do when he faced them.

The supercomputer had allowed him to process and integrate the study materials, granting him a comprehensive understanding without the need for extensive review.

"Good," Silent Scream said.

"It's important you familiarize yourself with our protocols and tactics. We can't make any mistakes out in the field. Since you already received basic training at the military school and advanced training within the army, you went past most of the hardest stuff. You had been lucky. Most individuals do not enjoy such privileges.

People from the army usually stay in their mediocre roles for the rest of their lives."

Erik maintained his composure. "I know that, sir. Thank you for the opportunity..."

"There is one other important thing I need to tell you," Silent Scream said, his masked face giving away no emotion.

"What is it, sir?" Erik asked, keeping his tone respectful.

"Your new name," Silent Scream said. "From this day forward, you will be known as 'Savage Blood.'"

Erik raised an eyebrow beneath his own mask. "Savage Blood?"

"Yes. That is the nickname the other Blackguards have given you after observing your skill in the last battle against the thaids. The higher-ups liked it, and so that will be your name from now on."

Erik mulled over the name, not dissatisfied by it. "Savage Blood," he said. It had a certain ring about it—fierce and unyielding.

"Wear it with pride," Silent Scream said, a hint of approval in his tone. "You have shown potential, and this name reflects the ferocity we value in our ranks, and what we expect from you. Do not shame this name, private."

Erik nodded, accepting the new moniker. "I understand, sir. Savage Blood it is."

Chapter 937: First mission

"We've received intel that the rebels are planning to raid a deposit in the eastern district," Silent Scream said.

"We need to intercept them before they can cause any damage."

Erik's mind whirled, processing what the man was saying. He knew what the man was saying was true—that the raid was really planned by the resistance, his own people.

He knew that because he was present when Fischer and Van Dyke talked about the matter and planned the attack, and Fischer kept him updated regarding this and many other matters.

There was a problem, though. If he accompanied the Blackguards, he would be forced to confront and kill his own allies. If he didn't, his disguise as Ben Fink would cease to exist.

He would lose the opportunity he had been waiting for—a chance to gather intelligence on the Blackguard team that had been thwarting the resistance's efforts for so long, and that even the biological supercomputer could do nothing to find.

To abandon this chance could jeopardize the rescue of Richard Stone and the resistance's overall plans, especially because a single but precious fact.

The blackguards knew Erik got the ability to get more brain crystal powers, how that worked wasn't really known by them, but they suspected it had to do with getting powers from others.

To the blackguards, that would explain why he stole Max's body back in Caelora City.

Reasonably, Erik could now shapeshift. This meant that if Ben Fink acted way out of character, the blackguards would suspect the man wasn't who he claimed to be.

At the same time, if he disappeared and changed identity, the disappearance could lead the blackguards to think something weird happened if they didn't find a body.

"Understood, sir," Erik said, his voice steady despite the turmoil within. "When do we depart?"

"Immediately," Silent Scream said.

"Grab your gear and meet me at the transport. We can't afford to let the rebels slip through our fingers."

Erik nodded. He would have to be careful from now on, aiding the resistance without blowing his cover, but for sure, he needed to contact Fischer and Van Dyke to at least learn what they had in mind, and to have suggestions or tips on how to move.

Erik joined Silent Scream in the transport, and faked being under heavy contemplation, but in truth, he was calling Van Dyke while the transport soared through the air.

Erik used the biological supercomputer to connect to the soldier's phone and dialed Van Dyke's number. The older man's voice soon filled his mind.

"Who is this?" Van Dyke asked.

Erik used his biological supercomputer to transmit his own voice. "It's Erik. I have little time, so you need to listen carefully."

"Erik? What's going on?" Erik's tone was urgent, and that left Van Dyke confused.

"I've been selected to join a Blackguard team that's going to be keeping watch over a deposit in the eastern district," Erik said. "I think it's the same one you were planning to raid."

Of course, Erik already told the resistance that his acting within the military made the blackguards set their eyes on him and that he joined the group. He wasn't an initiate yet, but he knew he was going to be,

So, everyone was aware of the situation and knew how valuable it was. Since Erik was also their most important spy at that point, whatever he told them was really important.

He could almost hear the gears turning in Van Dyke's mind. "I see. This is certainly an interesting development."

"I wanted to warn you," Erik said. "I don't want to blow my cover, but I also can't let you walk into a trap. Can you hold off on the raid until I can get more information?"

Van Dyke paused again. "That's a complicated proposition, Erik. But I trust your judgment." Van Dyke remained silent for a while.

"All right," he said. "We'll hold off for now, but keep me updated." Van Dyke was going to close the call. Maybe Erik didn't call at the right moment, as van Dyke looked like he was in a hurry.

"This is not the only problem, Tom." Van Dyke remained silent.

"Yeah, I think I know what the other problem is." The two didn't talk about this particular matter yet, but it was pressing over Erik's mind.

"I haven't been assigned to a faraway place. It looks like the blackguards are having problems and have assigned me here within the city."

"Yeah, I know..."

"This means that..."

Van Dyke sighed. "You have to fight against us to keep your cover up."

"Yeah," Erik said.

"I'm honestly unable to decide what to do. I know what the best thing would be, but..."

Erik knew the best thing was to stay within the blackguards and act like one of them. The problem was a moral one. He knew many of the rebels; some came from prison, and he was the one who saved them. Besides, Fischer, Lain, Amber, Mira, Emily, June and his clones.

He didn't want to fight them, knowing what would happen if they did.

Either they died because of him or ended up in prison again, likely tortured by Volkov's men or the blackguards.

Honestly speaking, death was many times better than torture, knowing what Volkov did.

Of course, Erik was ready to blow up his cover if someone really close to him risked his life. For sure he would not kill them, but some he knew, but not so well as to make him throw everything in the trash. That was a different story.

Van Dyke was old. He had a lot of experience, and he himself went through some of the things Erik was going through right now. He understood what was going on in Erik's mind.

"Do it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, don't worry about anything. I will make sure that you won't have to fight anyone you know or anyone who knows too much. Just go easy on Fischer's guys, all right?"

"Yeah..." Van Dyke was going to close the call again, when Erik stopped him.

"There is something else."

"I'm all ears," the old man said, not without a hint of annoyance.

"My mentor, the man assigned to evaluate me, said they got told the rebels were going to attack. You know what that means, right?"

"We might have a spy." Erik couldn't see it, but there was a grim look on Van Dyke's face.

"Yeah. I'm not entirely sure if this is true. I read the man's mind, and he didn't know, as he was referring to having received that information from his superiors."

Erik's brow furrowed, a crease forming between his eyes as he processed the weight of the information. Van Dyke had a similar expression. His lips pressed into a thin line, reflecting his concern.

"Still, at this point, it is not something we can rule out with certainty, and I'm going to be inclined to think there is really someone spying on you."

Van Dyke's expression darkened even more, but Erik couldn't see it.

"The question is, does this person know the headquarters are inside the Red Palace? Because if he or she does, the blackguards are waiting for something before attacking you guys."

Van Dyke's voice took on a pensive tone. Following a lengthy sigh, his expression became one of resolution.

"Understood. We'll need to rework how we recruit people then and make a search for potential spies. Thank you for the warning, Erik. Stay safe out there."

The line went silent, and Erik refocused his attention as the transport neared its destination.

Beside him, Silent Scream sat quietly, his masked face betraying no emotion. But most likely, knowing the blackguards, Silent Scream had none.

Erik, though, was calmer since Van Dyke decided to avoid the attack.

It wasn't tactically good to perform since there was going to be resistance from the blackguards, and that Erik, basically a killing machine, was among them.

As the transport landed, Erik followed Silent Scream and the other soldiers out onto the streets of the eastern district. The only blackguards there were him and his mentor.

The area was relatively quiet, save for the distant rumble of activity. Erik scanned the surroundings, searching for any sign of the rebels.

There were none luckily, but it was still too soon. The building was full of New Alexandria's soldiers, Volkov's men and women.

They were all waiting for the two blackguards to come, knowing every decision was going to be taken by them. It wasn't unusual, but there was a chain of command in Volkov's army. A blackguard intervened only when the situation was serious or complicated, when there was something valuable to defend or a valuable person to save.

Silent Scream turned to address the group. "Intel shows the rebels will strike this deposit. We're to secure the perimeter and eliminate any hostiles. Savage Blood, you'll take point with me. The rest of our men will fan out and maintain positions."

Erik nodded, falling in step beside his mentor as the soldiers from Volkov's army dispersed to their assigned posts.

Chapter 938: To kill is the order

The structure was an imposing, fortified complex, surrounded by high walls and guarded by an array of soldiers.

Armored vehicles patrolled the perimeter, their heavy cannons scanning the area for any signs of trouble.

Watchtowers dotted the walls, manned by snipers ready to engage any threats.

The entrance was a heavily reinforced gate, with a squad of elite soldiers standing vigilant.

Erik took in the scene, his eyes appraising the defenses and looking for any weaknesses.

Even if the rebels would not attack today, they, for sure, were going to do it in the future. Any information Erik could gather about the place would be a tremendous help.

Silent Scream turned to Erik. Even though Erik couldn't see Silent Scream's face, he felt the weight of a silent assessment.

"Have you ever gotten command over troops?"

Erik hesitated. "No, sir. I served in the regular army. I was the one getting the orders. "

Silent Scream let out a humorless scoff. "Remember this, Savage Blood. The hardest part about commanding troops isn't the fighting. It's knowing when to throw expendable bodies at a problem and when to pull back. You learn to value your own pack, 'cause replacements are scarce out here. "

His gaze, though unseen, seemed to pierce Erik, judging his resolve. "Now, show me what the army taught you. "

Erik nodded, falling into step beside his mentor as they made their way towards the northern flank.

As they reached their assigned position, Erik was calm since he knew the resistance would not attack.

As Sebastian, known to Silent Scream as Savage Blood, kept his gaze focused ahead, scanning the area for potential weak points in the defenses, Silent Scream turned to him with a commanding tone.

"Tell me," Silent Scream said, "What exactly were your duties within the army? What is it you think you are truly good at?"

"Shouldn't you know already, sir?"

"What I know is what the others said about you. I know nothing about what you think about yourself."

Erik thought about what to say. "Mostly guard duties, sir," he said crisply. "But sometimes I found myself in the thick of it, especially when thaids attacked the gates. I never backed down from a fight."

Silent Scream nodded, his demeanor softened slightly by Erik's respect. "So, you say that fighting is what you feel more confident about, right?"

"Yes, sir."

Erik hesitated for a moment, then posed a question of his own. "And what about you, sir? What do you believe you excel at?"

Silent Scream's gaze hardened, a hint of darkness lurking in his eyes. "The best thing I can do," he said with chilling calmness, "is to kill."

<Somehow this doesn't surprise me at all...>

Then a long silence ensued. Erik then turned to Silent Scream.

"Sir, I was wondering. What should we do in case the rebels attack? What is the chain of command?"

Silent Scream observed him for a moment, the mask obscuring any hint of expression.

"The Blackguards answer to a higher authority than the military, Savage Blood. We have protocols in place that supersede their operations."

"This facility is one of the most heavily guarded in the city, protected by the finest soldiers, us, and the technology we possess." He gestured toward the imposing structure.

"If the rebels dare to attack, they will be met with overwhelming force. Our orders are simple: eliminate any and all threats. We have full authority over the operation, so don't worry." Silent Scream's voice hardened.

"The soldiers will do as we say. The Blackguards answer to no one but our own command structure."

Erik nodded, his thoughts swirling with a mixture of disbelief and frustration.

<This fucker... > he thought, incredulous at the arrogance of the blackguards.

It seemed absurd that they could believe they had the power to control the army of an entire country.

Yet, as unsettling as it was, this was the harsh reality of the situation.

"For you," Silent Scream said. "It means you only answer to me. Is this clear?"

"Yes, sir."

Erik kept his eyes vigilant as he stood guard with Silent Scream, scanning the area for any signs of an attack he knew would never take place.

However, he also thought he had messed up. How many chances were there that just when he arrived, the blackguards' intelligence might be incorrect? Maybe the best thing should have been to make the rebels attack the place.

The Blackguards had received intelligence about a rebel raid on this vital deposit, and the fortifications had been strengthened in preparation.

However, as the hours ticked by, no assault materialized. Erik faked remaining alert, but in truth, he was minding his own business. The mask helped hiding his facial features, so Silent Scream did not know what the look on Erik's face was.

The only sounds were the occasional shuffling of boots and the distant hum of machinery.

Eventually, Silent Scream turned to Erik, his tone betraying a hint of confusion.

"Something's not right," the Blackguard said. "Our information network is rarely wrong. Yet, there's been no sign of the rebels."

"Maybe they've reconsidered their plans," he said. It made sense. After all, this was no simple place to attack.

"Perhaps," Silent Scream said, though his tone suggested he was not convinced.

"Or maybe they've discovered our preparations and decided to hold off for now. Regardless, this isn't good."

The Blackguard commander fell silent, his gaze sweeping the area once more.

"Should we send someone to scout around?" Erik asked, projecting an air of concern he didn't have by any means.

Silent Scream considered the suggestion for a moment. "No, not yet. We'll maintain our current positions and keep a close watch. If the rebels attempt an attack, I don't want to risk us ending up with fewer soldiers than we need. Regardless, we'll decide what to do later based on the situation."

The atmosphere became increasingly tense as the day progressed. Silent Scream's uneasiness was clear, and Erik could tell the other soldiers were becoming restless as well.

Erik said nothing else to his mentor and waited. Until it was Silent Scream himself who approached him.

"Something's not right here," the masked Blackguard said, his voice low. "The rebels should have struck by now, but there's been no sign of them."

Erik remained silent, allowing his mentor to voice his concerns.

"We should let the higher ups know this, sir. Maybe the fact they were going to attack here was just a rumor they shared, only for them to attack another place en masse." Erik said.

"Well thought, Savage Blood. However, I trust our superiors enough to know the information they got was not a rumor. If the higher ups say the rebels were going to attack this place, than they really wanted to do so. If they didn't, it means something happened."

That was a slightly weird thing. How could Silent Scream trust the higher ups so much? That question prompted Erik to use his instability brain crystal power to have an answer about the many questions swirling in Erik's mind.

But try as he might, Erik found nothing of significance in the man's thoughts.

It seemed Silent Scream truly didn't know how the higher-ups had gotten their information, leaving Erik feeling more uneasy than ever before.

Within the city, a group of five people moved purposefully, their identities hidden behind black armor and masks.

They moved efficiently through the overcrowded streets. When they arrived at the train station, they examined the area for the intended target.

"The information was accurate. It should happen at any moment now."

The man could see some suspicious people at different corners of the train station. They were rebels. But if they could see them, the same wasn't true for the rebels.

These guys knew how to stay hidden from sight.

"Fucking rebels. I can't wait until we kill them all."

"Kill them? I know for certain the higher-ups will take them as monkeys in their homes."

"Yeah, they are a bunch of fucking animals."

Not everyone was joining the discussion. Among them, a man remained silent throughout the entire conversation, as if it was beneath him. His posture was relaxed amidst the tense atmosphere.

One of the blackguards nudged him with an elbow. "What do we do, boss? Should we kill them now?"

Before the man could respond, a deafening explosion erupted in the distance, shaking the platform.

The ground trembled beneath their feet, causing the Blackguards to stagger momentarily. Hands flew to their weapons, the metallic clinks of swords being drawn echoing in the air.

From their vantage point, they could see the chaos unfolding below. Buildings crumbled under the force of the explosion, sending rubble flying in all directions. People ran in panic, their screams drowned out by the roar of flames.

"Kill'em all."

The order rang out, cold and unforgiving, from behind the masked man.

But it was the face behind the mask that told the true story—one that the man's team members couldn't see, making them believe all of that was beneath the man.

A smirk full of bloodlust twisted the features, eyes gleaming with savage anticipation.

Chapter 939: A not so good situation for the rebels

The two received orders to get there and put the situation under control.

The rebels' attack had been taken care of by another group of blackguards, but that was the only thing Silent Scream told him.

It was clear he didn't trust the newbie with this kind of information.

Erik once again probed the man's mind and quickly found out the man said nothing simply because he did not know who took care of the rebels. It looked like the flow of information within blackguards had been reduced to the bare bones.

The scene that greeted them was one of utter chaos. One of the floating train tracks had been destroyed, crashing down onto a series of buildings below, reducing them to rubble.

Erik was unsure if that resulted from what the rebels did or if it was made by the blackguards.

The train station itself was in shambles, with debris and bodies strewn across the platform. All of them belonged to resistance members he met.

Erik's eyes scanned the destruction, and his mind processed the devastation.

Smoke billowed from the collapsed buildings, and the acrid smell of burned materials filled the air.

Screams and cries for help echoed all around, adding to the cacophony.

Silent Scream sprang into action, barking orders to the soldiers under him, meaning all of them. Those guys arrived on the scene earlier than them.

"Secure the perimeter! I want a full report on what happened here and the extent of the damage."

The soldiers snapped to attention, fanning out to carry out their orders.

Observing the commander's effective management of the situation, Erik followed Silent Scream closely.

Although everything was in a state of chaos, Silent Scream kept a level head and remain composed.

"Sir."

"What?" Silent scream said.

"What happened here?" Erik asked.

Silent Scream paused, turning to face Erik. "This is the work of the rebels, but we had a team take care of them."

Erik nodded. That much should have been clear to anyone. "What do you think their target was?"

"Based on the damage, it seems they were aiming to disrupt transportation and communication within the city," Silent Scream said. "A strategic move, but that was only a ruse."

"A ruse, sir?"

Erik observed Silent Scream as he surveyed the destruction that had taken place all around them.

The mask on his face makes it impossible for Erik to see his face. But there was no doubt he was grinning at how many rebels had died.

"We don't know what their actual target was," Silent Scream said. "But we're certain this attack on the train station was just a ruse. There was no reason for them to destroy this place."

Erik nodded.

From the rebels' perspective, attacking the train station seemed like an odd choice.

While the station was active during the day, it was primarily used as a civilian transportation hub.

Its destruction would cause chaos and inconvenience for the local inhabitants, but it would not significantly damage the Blackguards' military or strategic infrastructure.

Experienced observers could see that the rebels were aiming for a more strategic target, using the train station attack to draw attention away from their actual goals.

Besides, Erik knew the truth. The rebels were not targeting the train station but rather a person. A man, a high-ranking official within Volkov's army, who coincidentally was taking the train today.

Erik examined the scene, his heart full of contradictory emotions. The rebels' bodies were strewn across the ground, their features frozen in desperation and defiance.

He recognized some of the men and women who had previously walked the streets with him.

These were not hardened criminals, but everyday people pushed to such extremes by Volkov's tyrannical regime.

Erik forced himself to remain impassive, knowing that any show of sympathy could jeopardize his cover.

As Silent Scream continued barking orders, Erik stooped to examine the wounds of a dead rebel.

The injuries were clean, suggesting skilled fighters.

<For sure, this was the work of the blackguards. Mother fuckers...>

These guys, whoever they were, had been efficient, ruthless killers. But that was not uncommon among the blackguards.

He then turned to see who had survived. Basically, everyone on the Blackguards' side.

He feared seeing a face, and it was right in front of him. The guy the resistance intended to assassinate, the true target of this strike, was alive and unharmed by the rebels' attack.

Erik had a burst of frustration. The rebels had failed in their mission, and those who had died here had done so for nothing.

"Should I do something about it?"

Maybe killing him now would make those deaths not vain.

However, Erik dismissed the idea. To kill the officer would draw unwanted attention to him, and he couldn't risk compromising his cover. It was much more important than the death of a comrade, since the information he could provide were going to save many more lives later.

If someone could sneak past the Blackguards' defenses, it would raise unpleasant concerns about who that person was, and since there weren't many, the blackguards may suspect he, Erik Romano, was in the city because he was one of the few who could slip past the blackguards unobserved.

While turning back to Silent Scream, Erik remained silent, contemplating the situation. From the blackguards point of view, they had thwarted the rebels' plans, but the true target remained unknown to them.

That was at least what the blackguards ought to think. However, in Erik's opinion, Van Dyke had underestimated the Blackguards' intelligence network. That was especially true if there was a spy within the rebels.

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Silent Scream quickly solved everything. The fires had been stopped; the bodies taken away.

"Let's go now; there is nothing else for us to do here."

Erik followed Silent Scream. His mentor's steps were brisk and purposeful. For sure, he was happy about the many rebels' deaths.

The man didn't even spare a glance back at the devastation.

"Are you sure we should leave everything like this, sir?"

"Other squads will take over the watch. We should return to the barracks."

Erik kept his composure.

The rebels were clearly outmatched, and their attack was met with brutal efficiency by the Blackguards. Their real target had slipped through the net.

However, all of this was making Erik think. Fischer asked him to locate a group of blackguards who often prevented their attacks.

Was it possible that those who did this here at the train station were the very same people he was looking for?

Chapter 940: Blue Whale's team (1)

A week had passed since the attack at the train station, and in that time Erik and Silent Scream had been busy suppressing rebel uprisings across New Alexandria.

Unfortunately, Erik had been forced to join the fights, killing many former comrades in the process.

Only a few people knew he had successfully infiltrated the organization and this meant that whoever met him under Savage Blood persona, tried to kill him. Of course, the very notion of injuring him was ridiculous.

Though it hurt him, he knew Van Dyke and Fischer were right—they could not afford to lose this opportunity for him to send insider information from the blackguards.

Still, each life he took weighed on his conscience. He tried to apprehend rebels where possible, but most fought to the death against the Blackguard, and in the end, he was forced to kill them.

Erik soon learned to identify rebel tactics, formations, and the people, or better, he faked having reached this realization to deceive Silent Scream.

The man seemed pleased with his progress, brutality, and efficiency in battle.

After each encounter, Erik relayed what he had learned to Fischer and Van Dyke, hoping to minimize casualties during future clashes.

This was working, but Fischer and Van Dyke had to be careful, because if they thwarted most of the blackguards' attacks on their forces, they might understand something weird was going on and ruin Erik's job.

Though heartbroken at being forced to kill his allies, Erik consoled himself, knowing that he stayed behind as a spy to help the resistance.

"I've been called back," Silent Scream said. "I must head back to the headquarters in New Alexandria and will be out for the day. This means you are free to do what you want today."

Erik paused, faking he didn't know what to do, but in truth, he had something in mind.

Silent Scream was a high-ranking blackguard. Not everyone could act as a mentor, after all. But that also meant that he was as tight-lipped as one could be.

He basically said nothing important to Erik. That wasn't the only problem; the main one was that Silent Scream really knew little. He was kept in the dark for most of the stuff.

That was a clever way to counter his mind-reading powers. But the question remained: was this intentionally made to create problems for him, Erik Romano, or was this just a safety measure within the blackguards?

Regardless, he was hoping maybe someone else, someone younger or arrogant, might have some information; even rumors would be good. That was what Erik wanted to find out. Until now, most of the times, he and Silent Scream had been alone, or with Volkov's soldiers, and they knew nothing.

Joining a blackguard patrol team would give him a chance.

"I was thinking about joining one of the patrols in the city. With some luck, we might even find some rebels."

Silent Scream seemed pleased with Erik's enthusiasm. "Good idea. I'll arrange for you to join Blue Whale's patrol." He moved away, pulling out his phone to make the call.

Erik felt a small sense of accomplishment at fooling the man. Silent Scream believed Erik wanted to hunt down rebels.

After Silent Scream was done, he came back, saying everything had been arranged.

He left the barracks, taking a black car. Erik did the same. Silent Scream didn't tell him where Erik would be sent exactly, giving more hints about the fact that all this secrecy was made just as a safety measure. He only said he was going to be sent to Blue Whale's team, and he did not know who this guy was.

While climbing into the awaiting military vehicle, Erik joined the driver for the drive across New Alexandria.

The man didn't talk, and so did he.

Erik arrived at the outpost as the military vehicles drove into a small, fortified compound.

Concrete blast walls rose up, surrounding a series of low-slung prefabricated buildings.

Solar panels topped many of the structures, gleaming in the afternoon sun.

Armed guards manned the gate, eyeing Erik and the others with impassive expressions.

Erik exited the vehicle and made his way inside. He passed rooms filled with ammunition, communication equipment, and bunks for off-duty soldiers from Volkov's army.

In the center of the compound, there was an open courtyard where the other blackguards had gathered.

The five figures were masked and dressed in identical black armor, buckling on equipment belts and checking their weapons.

Erik joined them.

"Savage Blood is awaiting duty."

One of the blackguards glanced his way before returning his attention to his tasks. "If you are ready, just follow us."

"These guys knew Erik was new. Only newbies were that pompous with them. Another Blackguard would have never talked that way, at least most of them."

Shortly afterwards, Erik and the other blackguards fell into formation behind an army officer as they left the compound.

He led them to a row of all-terrain vehicles parked outside the walls.

They split into two groups, with Erik joining two blackguards in one vehicle.

They climbed aboard and soon were driving out into the city streets.

Weirdly enough, this was a land vehicle.

The vehicle rode in silence as they patrolled the streets of New Alexandria.

Erik observed civilians going about their daily lives from behind his mask.

"Look at these sheep just wandering around," one blackguard said. "They do not know what's really going on."

The others laughed. "They're like ants, just scurrying about," he agreed.

Erik listened silently as the two soldiers continued ridiculing the citizens, insulting their intelligence, and mocking their routines.

The vehicle slowed as they passed a woman walking on the sidewalk, and the second blackguard sneered. "See that cow? I'd love to take her for a ride."

<Weren't these fuckers remaining silent until now? They are getting on my nerves. >

The first blackguard chuckled. "Maybe we will ride her after our patrol."

Erik felt a surge of anger at their callous words but hid it carefully, remembering his role as Ben Fink.

Instead, he focused on memorizing the blackguards' identities and mannerisms, information that could prove useful.

"Hey," one of the men said to Erik.

"What?"

"I heard you had been assigned to clean up the mess at the train station."

"I was last week. Why?"

"I was just curious."

But that couldn't only be curiosity.

"What was the situation there?" the man asked.