

BIOLOGICAL 941

Chapter 941: Blue Whale's team (2)

He tried to sound pleased, but the memory of his comrades' bodies strewn on the floor in pools of their own blood wasn't pleasing.

"Oh really? Do you have an idea about who stopped them?" the blackguard asked.

"No...? Why? Is that important?"

"Ah, not at all."

Erik narrowed his eyes behind his mask. Was there something he didn't know? Well, to be honest, he knew next to nothing, but there was something in the man's questions that gave him something to think about.

By using his instability brain crystal power, he delved into the blackguard's mind.

<Ah... That's why...>

The man suspected that the team sent to thwart the rebels' attack was Dark Tendrils' group.

The information he gleaned from the man's mind was both intriguing and concerning.

Based on what the man knew, Dark Tendrils' team was a relatively new formation within the Blackguards, but they had been making waves with their impressive accomplishments.

In less than three years, Dark Tendrils himself had risen to the rank of Warden, a remarkable feat that had sparked rumors and envy among the Blackguards.

Wardens were blackguards assigned to specific areas or groups, and they often led teams.

<He must have been assigned to New Alexandria. >

Erik's brow furrowed behind his mask. This Dark Tendrils and his group seemed to have gained respect even within the blackguards' higher-ups, and most of them were pompous pricks, so that in itself was a tremendous achievement.

Their swift ascension suggested they wielded significant power and influence within the Blackguard ranks, and for sure, important missions were given to them.

Otherwise, it wouldn't make sense to give the group the task of fighting the rebels. This wasn't a secondary battlefield, but an important one, albeit probably not the main one.

But other than the whispers about the group's extraordinary accomplishments, the blackguard Erik was reading the mind of knew next to nothing.

Their methods, motivations, and even the full extent of their abilities remained shrouded in mystery.

"I'm not certain, but I think the team that stopped the rebels was Dark Tendrils' group."

The blackguard's voice took on a pleased tone. "Is that so? That would make sense. Dark Tendrils and his team are quite impressive, aren't they?"

Erik nodded, trying to appear casual. "Yes, from what I've heard, they've accomplished a lot in a short amount of time." He kept his tone neutral, not wanting to give away too much interest.

The blackguard leaned back in his seat, a small smile playing on his lips, albeit hidden by his mask.

"Indeed. I have the utmost respect for their abilities. It's no wonder they were stationed here in New Alexandria."

Erik nodded in agreement. "Yeah, me too," Erik said. "But tell me, do you know who the team answers to?"

The blackguard eyed him for a moment, as if debating how much to share with the recruit.

"Well, since you're new, I suppose you wouldn't know. But it's rumored that Dark Tendrils answers to Momentum."

<Momentum? >

The blackguard leaned in slightly, lowering his voice. "Just between us. You didn't hear that from me, got it?"

At the word "Momentum," Erik remembered something.

That was a name he knew all too well—it was the codename used by the captain of the team that chased him within Caelora City.

He couldn't forget the man, even if he wanted to.

The ramifications rushed through his head. The issue may be even more troublesome than it seemed if Momentum was really the one leading Dark Tendrils and his elite group.

Momentum looked like a capable leader, after all, and most importantly, he fought against Erik.

This made Erik think that Dark Tendrils' actual job was to find him. Because what would be the reason to assign him to Momentum, within New Alexandria, his birth city?

Momentum already met and fought against Erik, so he knew better than anyone else, among the blackguards, what he was capable of.

Erik knew he had to be careful. He undoubtedly had to use a combat technique that his opponent was unaware of.

"I see. That's quite interesting. I will keep that to myself." Erik paused, then added, "Do you know anything about 'Momentum'? You know, I'm kind of new, so there is not much I know."

The blackguard shook his head. "Not much, I'm afraid. I only know he is an older member of the blackguards on the Enforcer rank, but they say he is a nightmare to fight against, and his team is no less strong."

He glanced around, as if worried they were being watched. "It's best not to ask too many questions, you understand? I wouldn't want to end hung up."

Erik nodded.

Erik considered the ramifications of this new knowledge while the auto carried on its patrol.

<Momentum's presence explains why Dark Tendril was so problematic for Fischer and the others. >

Erik's internal investigation was cut short by a sudden crackle over his communicator.

A barked order echoed through the air, shattering the tense silence.

"To all units nearby," the voice said, "a group of thaids breached the barrier. All available members must head to Sector 7342 and kill the monsters!"

A jolt of urgency surged through Erik. Thaids were not rebels; they targeted the citizens, and for sure, he didn't have problems killing them.

Every able-bodied patroller, including Erik and his team, scrambled into action. Adrenaline thrummed through their veins, replacing the lingering unease from the previous conversation.

The once silent streets became a hive of bustle. Wailing notes from sirens pierced the air as patrol team cars raced across the city, straight for Sector 7342.

While brief instructions sounded over their radios, urgent hand signals darted between the drivers. Other than a few stray cats running for safety, their eyes wide with terror, the sidewalks were empty.

Retailers closed their doors and slipped into the darkness as they drew down their shutters.

Chapter 942: Blue Whale's team (3)

The thaids' yells and screams filled the air.

With its tusks sparkling in the low light, a thaid shaped like a boar with the extended arms of an ape dashed through the humans and monsters alike.

There were soldiers there already, fighting the monsters and trying to contain the situation.

But the number of thaids was very high. Other than the few locals who had been unlucky enough to end up in this area, streets were uncannily deserted of people.

That was because of Volkov's tight curfew had kept most people safely inside their houses.

Volkov had no intention of keeping people inside because of their safety, but because he wanted to keep them in check.

However, safety reasons was the lie he gave them to keep them calm.

However, there had been some people outside. Those with the permit, or those who were working in the area.

A few unlucky people were now running away in panic, their screams resonating down the empty lanes.

Some had already fallen victim to the monsters, their bodies strewn throughout the streets.

Then the other patrol car already arrived. The soldiers already there were massacring the creatures.

Over a dead soldier, a thaid with a bull's head and a spider's body scurried, its many eyes gleaming with predatory desire.

Screams of the dying reverberated through the streets clogged with smoke as the city descended into a living nightmare.

Without hesitation, Erik leaped out of the car, joining the other blackguards as they rushed to engage the monstrous creatures.

The blackguard beside him, one of the two he came with, eyed him briefly.

"I heard you're pretty good with that sword," the blackguard shouted over the din of battle. "Time to prove it!"

Erik nodded, then dashed forward into the fray.

The thaids surged toward the blackguards. Erik gripped his sword and met the first creature head-on, his blade flashing as he cut deep into its flank.

The thaid roared in pain and turned its attention to him, swiping with claws the size of daggers.

Erik dodged the attack, then counterattacked, his sword carving a gash across the thaid's chest.

The creature staggered, black ichor oozing from its wounds, and Erik pressed his advantage, raining blows upon it until it collapsed, lifeless, at his feet.

Erik could kill the creatures easily, but he didn't want to stand out too much. This time, he had to be careful of what he did.

A hulking Blackguard swung a massive hammer, crushing the skull of a thaid with the head of a lizard and the body of a bear.

Sparks shot as a second Blackguard, brandishing two mana swords, fended off the snarling teeth of a hideous beast that looked like a cross between a scorpion and a wolf.

Another fired a brain crystal rifle, and every shot connected.

A gigantic Blackguard swung a huge hammer, crushing a thaid with the head of a lizard and the body of a bear.

Sparks shot as a second Blackguard, brandishing two mana swords, fended off the snarling teeth of a hideous beast that looked like a cross between a scorpion and a wolf.

One other fired with his brain crystal rifle, and every shot connected.

Burning body odor and guttural screams from Blackguards and Thaid alike.

Erik rejoined the fray, his mana sword a blur as he struck down one thaid after another.

The blackguards beside him eyed him with a hint of amusement. For sure, this guy was not wasted as a blackguard.

Despite not having a powerful brain crystal power, Savage Blood knew how to fight.

Maybe taking people with rather common powers was not that bad, after all, not if they fought like that.

Wasting no time, they increased their own effort, not wanting to appear poorly in front of the new guy, their weapons flashing as they tore into the horde of thaid.

Erik leaped into the melee, his sword a blur as he struck down one thaid after another.

A large, bear-like thaid charged him, its jaws gaping wide. Erik sidestepped the attack and brought his sword down in a savage arc, slicing through the creature's thick hide.

Blood sprayed as the thaid howled in pain and retreated.

Another thaid, this one resembling a giant scorpion, scuttled towards him, its venomous stinger poised to strike.

Erik dove under the attack and thrust his sword upwards, impaling the thaid through the underbelly. The creature thrashed and then went still.

In all of this, Erik was receiving a ton of notifications.

[THAID KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[THAID KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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[THAID KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[THAID KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[THAID KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. (...)]

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. (...)]

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. (...)]

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. (...)]

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. (...)]

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. (...)]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

[LEVEL UP.]

The blackguards fought with ruthless efficiency. Each one of them either had incredibly powerful brain crystal power, a ton of mana, or was a fighting genius.

Savage Blood was in between all of that. While his brain crystal power wasn't that good, he had a B-ranked brain crystal and was good with the sword.

While observing the blackguards, Erik matched their pace as he weaved through the battlefield, his sword claiming one thaid life after another.

A pack of smaller reptilian thaids converged on him, their jaws snapping. Erik whirled, his sword cutting a swathe through the creatures, their bodies falling in a heap at his feet.

The battle raged on, the air thick with the stench of blood and the cacophony of battle cries.

"Oi, you lot! Wanna see who can turn the most thaids into mincemeat?" a Blackguard said, brandishing his bloodied axe with a maniacal grin.

"Hah! You're on, you pea-brained oaf! I'll have you know, my kill count is the stuff of legends!"

A third Blackguard rolled her eyes, muttering, "Idiots. Both of you. Watch and learn how a real warrior deals with these pests. "

"Hey, no fair! She got a head start! "

The first Blackguard said, before chasing after the woman with a battle cry that sounded like a chicken squawk.

"Wait for me! "

<Fucking idiots, > Erik thought.

He was confronted by a colossal, horned creature, its massive presence causing the earth to tremble with every stride.

Erik braced himself, his sword held high, and as the creature lunged, he brought the blade down with all his might, cleaving the thaid's skull in two.

The blackguards paused for a moment, their gazes shifting to Erik in surprise.

"You see that? Even the new guy is doing better than you!"

With a thaid's severed claw dangling from his armor, the other man sputtered indignantly, "Ah?! He is doing better than you, too! You just got drool on your boot! "

The other blackguard inspected his boot with exaggerated disgust. "Shut up! That's not thaid drool, that's sweat from my mad skills! "

"You wish, you moron!"

The young man's abilities had astonished the veteran Blackguards, and their initial skepticism had given way to respect.

Erik was not interested in their commendation. He just wanted to kill as many thaids as possible in order to level up and grow stronger.

He had already gained five levels since the attack began

The tide of the fight began to shift as the thaids faltered, their ranks dwindling under the Blackguards' persistent onslaught.

The monsters suddenly halted, their eyes flickering with terror.

Erik and the rest of the blackguards sensed a chance and took it. The number of bodies piling up at their feet increased with staggering speed.

Erik dove between the snapping jaws of a thaid and slashing the creature's segmented abdomen.

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Erik stood amidst the carnage, his chest heaving as he surveyed the dead thaids around him. The other blackguards approached, their weapons still dripping with the creatures' blood.

"Damn, Savage Blood, I gotta hand it to you," one of the men said, clapping Erik on the back. "You really know how to handle that sword of yours."

Erik grinned behind his mask, feeling a surge of satisfaction. This was the kind of praise he had been hoping to receive from these guys. This was the impression he wanted to make.

The more the other blackguards were impressed by his skills, the more likely Silent Scream would take notice, and the better the chances of him becoming a blackguard were.

"Thanks," he said, keeping his tone casual. "I've had a lot of practice."

Another blackguard chimed in, "Practice, huh? Well, it's paid off. You fight like a veteran out there. Hell, you might even give Dark Tendrils a run for his money."

"Dark Tendrils? Shut up! That's not possible!"

"I just do what I can to get the job done," Erik said.

The blackguards nodded, their postures relaxing as the adrenaline of the battle faded.

Chapter 943: Bullets and Tunnels

The air around Van Dyke must not have been the most pleasant because the man he didn't have a very positive look on his face.

The man ran his calloused fingers along the rough-hewn walls, tracing the patterns etched into the stone by the workers.

These were maps, letters and numbers meant to identify the area in which he was.

Van Dyke looked around the big room. The ceiling was high, held up by large wooden beams. The sound of hammers and workers filled the air.

Even though the place wasn't finished, it looked strong. The walls were thick, and the design made sense.

Van Dyke could tell it would be safe and useful when it was done.

He turned his gaze to the team of engineers huddled around a set of blueprints, discussing the best course of action to make a section of the tunnel.

Nearby, a group of soldiers loaded crates onto a makeshift trolley. There were few people to spare to build this thing, but somehow they found enough to do it.

"... and if we reinforce the struts with this new alloy, we can increase the load-bearing capacity by at least twenty percent," one of the engineers said, gesturing towards the blueprint.

"But won't that compromise the flexibility of the structure?" another engineer asked. "We need to account for potential seismic activity in this region."

"I've already run the simulations. The alloy will provide enough support without sacrificing flexibility. It's the perfect solution."

As they continued their discussion, Van Dyke approached, his heavy footsteps echoing through the cavernous space.

The engineers fell silent as they saw him approaching.

"Gentlemen," Van Dyke greeted them, his voice deep and resonant. "I trust your work is progressing as planned?"

The workers gave him a respectful nod.

The lead engineer, a woman with graying hair tucked beneath a hard hat, stepped forward.

"Sir, we've completed just over a kilometer of tunneling so far," she said, gesturing to the expanse behind them. "But there's still a great deal of work to be done."

Van Dyke nodded, his gaze sweeping over the construction site. "And what of the concerns about the thaids?" he asked, recalling an earlier discussion about the monsters.

"That's the key challenge we're facing, sir, aside from some small things," the engineer said.

"These tunnels weren't designed to withstand thaid attacks. We did as you asked and made everything just to create a passage to the forest and to build everything fast. If we want to be safe from the monsters, the best thing to do would be to station guards at key points."

Van Dyke absorbed the information, his fingers stroking his chin. "I see. Keep me informed about your progress and let me know if you require any additional resources or support." His gaze swept over the bustling workers.

"Of course, sir," the engineer said, her posture straightening. "

Again nodding, Van Dyke's thoughts were already moving to the wider strategic ramifications of this subterranean network.

He was beginning to feel uneasy about the difficulties that lay ahead as he turned to go.

Van Dyke moved farther into the tunnel, stepping around a pool of muddy water and looking for any indications of weakness or vulnerability in the shadows.

He had to be sure this passage would make it easy and possible for Erik's team to deliver the brain crystal guns he promised to supply the resistance.

The resistance needed every advantage they could get, and these weapons could tip the scales in their favor, or at least make it less one sided.

Van Dyke considered the lives lost and the sacrifices they had already made in their fight for freedom. His lips clenched into a thin line. This tunnel had to be flawless.

Amber took aim while holding the sleek and lightweight rifle in her hands, the familiar weight of the weapon providing her with a sense of comfort as she did that.

There were a lot of enemy troops searching around for any sign of the rebels. She knew she could not use her gas control abilities because of these countless eyes watching her.

Too many people knew it would be her if she used it, and that meant learning Erik was here. That had to remain a secret.

Instead of that, she regulated her breathing and squeezed the trigger, which resulted in a surge of energy that slammed into the foe who was closest to her.

The woman stumbled, and her armor sparked. Amber quickly shifted her aim, and she was able to kill yet another target.

Despite this, the soldiers continued to advance with unrelenting resolve and discipline. Amber cursed under her breath, knowing she couldn't rely on her usual tactics. Using a rifle was definitely not a simple task for her, and even fighting melee was a strange experience for her.

Amber's heart raced as she crouched behind the jagged remnants of a crumbling wall.

The acrid smell of gunpowder hung in the air, mixing with the metallic tang of blood and the smell of sweat that fear gave to people.

Her fingers trembled as she slammed a fresh magazine into her rifle, the cold metal biting into her palm.

The sound of gunshots and explosions could be heard around, followed by the weird and diverse sounds made by the usage of various brain crystal powers across the battlefield.

Amber peered around the corner. Her eyes narrowed. There, just twenty meters away, stood another soldier.

His uniform was a patchwork of dirt and grime, the fabric clinging to his sweat-soaked skin. He was scared, and although she didn't want to kill him, she adjusted her grip on the rifle, her knuckles white, and lined up in the crosshairs.

Although most of the man's face was hidden by a tattered scarf, his eyes exhibited the weariness that came from having fought in a great number of battles.

As Amber pulled the trigger, time seemed to run more slowly. Her shoulder was bucked against by the rifle, and the soldier crumpled and collapsed like a marionette with its strings severed.

She continued her assault, driving the soldiers back with a barrage of bullets and laser bolts.

"Come on!"

As the conflict continued to rage, an increasing number of people arrived. That was the most significant advantage that Volkov possessed; he had many soldiers at his disposal.

Amber felt her stomach knotting up. She couldn't fight that many enemy soldiers at the same time, not without using her brain crystal power.

She had to move.

But as soon as she did, a man came out from a corner. The hulking man was pointing his rifle at her.

"Gotcha."

Amber reacted on instinct, knocking the rifle aside with a swift kick. Luckily, the man was close enough for her to react in time.

The soldier stumbled back, taken aback by the smaller woman's strength and reflexes. But he wasn't a pushover, and he lunged at her, his fists balled.

Amber dodged, weaving under his wild swings. She retaliated with a kick to his belly, sending him sprawling.

He got back up but with renewed determination as rage was mixed with that feeling.

He charged again, but to Amber, this guy was amateurish at best. Even if he came from the army and got to the military academy.

His preparation couldn't compare to that given to her by the Red Palace.

There was a reason this was considered the best institution in Frant for training.

She met his charge head-on. Amber parried his blows, ducking and weaving with the grace of a dancer.

The soldier roared in frustration, throwing a punch that Amber easily evaded.

She countered with a palm strike to his throat, followed by a knee to his stomach. He doubled over, gasping for air.

Amber seized the opportunity. The fight had already taken too much time, and she needed to leave the area, as she was sure that this guy had already called reinforcement.

Aside from that, the enemy soldiers were already approaching her position. Amber quickly took her rifle and pointed it at the man's temple.

His skull exploded into tiny fragments of bone and brain matter. Brain's liquid mingled with blood over the ground. A lot of it also stained the man's already dirty uniform.

Amber didn't have time to celebrate her victory.

"THIS WAY!"

She heard a voice. More soldiers were closing in.

"Let's see how many more of you I can take," she said. These guys were too close, and before she could leave, she had to at least take care of some of them, or her retreat wouldn't be covered.

She came out of her cover and squeezed the trigger, sending a volley of laser bolts towards the soldiers.

They scattered, taking cover behind whatever debris they could find.

Amber moved, using the crumbling walls and piles of rubble as shields.

She fired in short bursts, conserving ammunition while maximizing her impact while she retreated.

Chapter 944: To the rally point

The crack of her rifle echoed through the area. Not all her shots found the mark, and that was why she had to change her position often.

The weight of the rifle in her hands was unfamiliar, but at least she wasn't having trouble carrying it because of her strength. The last thing she needed was to be slowed down because of the weight of the weapon.

All of this was already bad as it was.

"Fuck... Another missed shot."

Amber gritted her teeth and dove back behind a crumbling wall. She didn't know what made the wall in such a state, but based on the size, this must have been the wall of a building. The weird part of it was that the rest of the building was nowhere to be found.

The most likely explanation was that this place had been a construction site, and the workers removed most of the building already, but when the rebels appeared, they had to stop their work there.

Amber was focused, but tired. She basically got the toughest role.

With a practiced flick of her thumb, Amber activated the rifle's cooling system. A soft whirring sound filled the air as the heat bar on the weapons side shrank, its fiery red hue gradually fading to a cool blue.

As the heat dissipated, another bar on the opposite side of the rifle filled, its glow intensifying as it replenished the weapon's energy reserves. The bar went from red to green.

It was fast, because the energy cells within the weapon were imbued with mana from the brain crystal inserted within the rifle's chassis.

In mere seconds, the rifle was ready for another sustained barrage.

But that took some time, and the woman couldn't move while the weapon recharged because she got no cover.

Truth be told, Amber wasn't alone. There were a couple of other rebels scattered here and there, but this was a covert operation. Amber's task was to distract the enemy with a small group, while another took care of a target.

As she was hiding, unable to see it, a group of enemy soldiers searched for her.

One of the soldiers held up a hand, signaling for the others to stop. They crouched behind a toppled crate, peering through a shattered window.

"The last thermal ping was there." The man pointed to the other side of the window. Behind it was a half crumbled wall, riddled with what appeared to be bullet and laser holes.

Hearts hammered in their chests as they crept forward. The group didn't know who the person creating so many problems for them was, but he or she decimated hundreds of soldiers, including the rest of their squad.

What was puzzling, though, was that the higher-ups couldn't understand what the rebels' target was this time.

It made little sense. Why attack with less than fifty people an area so heavily guarded? There was no suitable target around these parts, no deposit from which to steal supplies, no officer worthy of being killed or captured. Nothing.

After rounding up a stack of rusted barrels, they saw the dreaded killer. A woman.

Their eyes widened in astonishment. She was young, barely more than a girl, with long, flowing red hair that cascaded over her shoulders like molten fire.

Her icy blue eyes, framed by delicate glasses, surveyed the area with a cool, unwavering gaze.

Her figure, clad in worn combat fatigues, was slender yet athletic, every movement radiating a dangerous grace.

For a moment, they were stunned, captivated by the unexpected beauty, her regal bearing.

Surprise flickered across the man's face, replaced by a steely glint as he recognized who the woman was.

This was the enemy, the elusive fighter who had been picking them off one by one.

A soldier raised his weapon, safety off. His finger hovered over the trigger, but before he could shoot, the woman turned to look at them.

The man wasn't sure, but he heard a scream coming from the woman. She didn't utter a sound, meaning the scream came from her communication device.

The man dreaded, because the woman likely had a sniper monitoring them.

Amber turned after receiving a warning and found three people on her right side, behind a window. She didn't see them coming.

<Fuck...>

Time seemed to slow as her mind raced, searching for a way out of this dire situation.

She knew she couldn't outrun them or avoid those weapons. These guys had their weapons pointed at her.

Just as the soldiers' fingers tightened on their triggers, a sudden crack echoed through the alley.

Amber watched in stunned silence as the soldiers collapsed, their bodies crumpling to the ground with bullets inside their heads.

The shock of seeing those guys basically behind her, the shock of not having been able to spot them before they got close, and the shock of not having reacted properly and on time, left her confused as these guys died.

But then she remembered who was covering her back, and relief warred within her as she scanned the rooftops.

She went to her comm. "Thanks, Emily, and sorry for having forced you to lend me a hand."

Yeah... Emily was among those undergoing this mission. She basically had the job of covering the back of the soldiers who were taking part in this mission.

But as the sniper of the group, she couldn't only protect Amber. She had to do the same for all those joining.

"Don't worry. But be sure not to mess up like this again."

By now, Emily was more or less used to killing. Amber and Mira decided to place her in the heart of a battle to make her learn that if she wanted to save her father, she had to dirty her hands.

This was a harsh world, and such a world required tough people. Emily had the capability to be devastating on the battlefield thanks to her powers, but the sheltered life she lived made her hesitant.

Emily didn't lack training, and her power allowed her to get an advantage over her opponents. She had to use it. However, her brain crystal power was not what really made her terrifying.

Strangely enough, for a woman her age and as beautiful and pampered as her, she liked video games, and she was insanely good at it.

Since most games were VR ones, they didn't differ that much from reality. In years, Emily became a deadly sniper.

Few knew about this, but Amber did, and of course, she told the rebels, who immediately gave her a sniper rifle, powered by a brain crystal, and sent her to fight.

However, they had to accept one condition: that she had to be sent with Amber and Mira fighting.

Amber knew Emily liked to play video games, and that she was good at it. But she didn't know how good she was or how that turned out to be utterly deadly with a gun in her hands.

For people like Emily, brain crystal rifles had been godsent.

In a fraction of a second, Emily neutralized three targets. Based on the sound of the gunshots she heard, she never left a single fighter outside of her scope, including Mira and Amber.

"Are you going to change your position?" Amber asked.

"Yes. So do nothing rush, because I can't help you right now."

There was a static silence for a second. Emily likely told the others that she had to change position.

Amber's grip on her rifle tightened, her knuckles turning white. She messed up.

Volkov's forces were still pressing in from the front.

However, it was Amber's comm's turn to crack to life. "Amber, the target is down." Mira's voice came through. "We did it."

Amber felt a surge of pride and relief, because they could finally leave that god forsaken area.

Van Dyke had tasked them with taking out an officer in Volkov's army.

The man wasn't really a high-ranking officer, but he was closely tied to the blackguards, and killing people related to them was paramount to disrupt the blackguards within New Alexandria.

With Mira's skills and Emily's sniper support, they had succeeded.

The strategy was simple. Amber and some others attracted enemy fire while Mira and a small group took care of the target.

Her power and her arrows were going to be a good combination for a stealthy kill.

As this happened, Emily was going to provide cover. And she did brilliantly at that.

"Great work, you two," Amber said. "Now we need to get out of here. The entire area is crawling with Volkov's men."

Amber peered around the wall, assessing the situation. Volkov's forces were still pressing in, and she knew they couldn't hold out much longer. They needed to retreat before they were overwhelmed.

"Mira and I will fall back to the rally point," Amber said. "Emily, please provide cover fire."

Without waiting for a response, Emily started taking out the enemy soldiers, leaving her spot had to wait.

Gunfire hammered into Amber's ears. Adrenaline surged, a white-hot jolt that banished fatigue and sharpened her senses.

She sprinted through a haze of dust and smoke, dodging fallen debris and the wild sprays of bullets that stitched the air. Reaching a corner, she skidded to a halt, gasping for breath.

There, tucked into a narrow alleyway, was Mira. Her face was etched with grim focus as she peered around the corner, her rifle held steady.

Streaks of grime smeared her otherwise flawless skin, and a dark stain bloomed across her sleeve. Both of them reached the rally point, but there were still many people that had to come.

"Emily, we're clear. What about the others?."

"They are retreating. Do not shoot and stay safe. I will make sure they'll be able to reach the rally point safely."

The mission had been a success, but far from easy, and what the group found out was unsettling. The team had a lot to report to their superiors.

Erik had predicted this situation for a while, and his warnings finally came true.

Volkov's soldiers finally got them. During this battle, some of them used more than one brain crystal power.

This development was concerning and required immediate attention from higher command.

Erik's brain crystal rifles were going to level the playing field, but to what degree, Amber didn't know.

At the same time, if more enemies with more than one brain crystal power appeared, the help Erik was going to give was going to be less effective considering these people also had the same weapons.

Chapter 945: Strategic meeting (1)

Despite his calculated but restrained display of competence, his keen mind and tactical acumen did not go unnoticed.

Honestly, though, it was not that he said something particularly smart, but rather that people couldn't think as he did and couldn't remember things as he did.

Not that Erik spoke in riddles or used complex jargon, but rather that his mind operated on a different plane.

He saw patterns and connections where others saw chaos, found solutions where others saw obstacles.

It also helped that most of the achievements Erik made were earned thanks to the information he got from Fischer and Van Dyke.

Everything was staged, after all.

The man often struggled to understand why others couldn't see it.

It wasn't even a matter of intelligence, but rather a difference in perspective.

He had an uncanny knack for remembering minor details and putting them together to make a web of knowledge that helped him make decisions.

People among the blackguards were sure Savage Blood would be accepted into the blackguards, and that he would not fail the test he was asked to take, which he did, passing it brilliantly.

After that, he became a blackguard, getting the Initiate rank. Of course, his mentor was still Silent Scream, but what changed was that Erik, or rather, Ben Fink, was now officially a blackguard.

The amount of information he received also increased, and that information he gave to the rebels.

Of course, he had to pay attention to what he said to them, and if the rebels planned attacks, they had to be careful as to not let the blackguards understand there was someone within them working for the rebels.

Though Erik had it easier than a classic spy, because by reading the people's mind, he could gain information without exposing himself.

The problem was that the blackguards were very serious about security. They never shared too much, more often than not, they gave information to their members only regarding the jobs they had to take.

However, everything paid off, because the rebels attacks became much more deadly, much more safe and far more remunerative.

Of course, Van Dyke also decided it would be better to help Erik gain trust and ascend the ranks of the blackguards by purposefully loose some battles.

That would look like a stupid waste of lives, and it was, really, but aside from making Erik learn merits, it was also a way to keep the blackguards unaware of the actual situation and to make it possible to stage attacks that would be much more devastating than the losses they had.

Most of the intelligence Erik shared was about where troops were stationed.

Van Dyke often used distraction tactics, making Volkov and the blackguards focus on battles Van Dyke and Fischer didn't really care about, while they sent specialized agents to attack less guarded places or assassinate targets.

Since Erik arrived, even Dark Tendrils' group interferences became less problematic.

The higher-ups had taken a special interest in Erik's progress after the breach in Sector 7342, where Erik's efficiency during the thaid breach had earned him commendations.

However, now, he was often assigned to tasks that demanded more than just brute strength, providing him with the perfect cover to gather intelligence.

Especially because he had been assigned to a team.

Erik stood in the dimly lit briefing room of Barrack A3, the fortified building for the Blackguard soldiers.

The walls were full of maps and tactical displays, casting glows across the masked blackguards' faces.

Silent Scream had gone on another assignment, leaving Erik and his teammates to take care of a quest they received alone.

Those guys had the same rank and were put together under Silent Scream's surveillance to train a new team of blackguards. That was customary for the blackguards.

It was the same that happened to Momentum's team. Initially, it was a team just like Erik's, with no rank and being under scrutiny. But through time, they ascended the ranks, to the point they were considered among the best within the blackguards.

The people joining him were a guy under the alias of Shatterfist, a very promising initiate who became a blackguard two months earlier and came from Khunelerp. He was also the nominal leader of the group.

Next to him stood two individuals: a woman known by the alias Missing Air and a man referred to as Brute Ape.

Erik stood at the periphery of the room, listening as Shatterfist spoke. His voice, muffled by the mask, was deep and commanding.

"Recent intelligence suggests increased rebel activity near several strategic locations. Our focus must be on reinforcing the key outposts assigned to our team, particularly deposit 89 in Sector 458."

Brute Ape, standing to Shatterfist's right, nodded in agreement.

"The rebels have become bolder," he said, "and their tactics are getting more refined. But I do not agree with the deposit 89 part."

His gloved hand gestured emphatically, "In my opinion, I think we need to ensure that deposit 234 is defended as well."

The only problem was, he and the others knew they didn't have enough resources to do that.

"The rebels target places where brain crystal rifles can be found, and that deposit stores those things. Only Dark Tendrils prevented some attacks, but he can't be everywhere."

Since the rebels' attack intensified, Dark Tendrils' team became famous among the blackguards.

They were efficient, ruthless and rapid. There was no better team within New Alexandria, at least officially.

Even that was Fischer and Van Dyke's work. Since they couldn't get rid of Dark Tendrils' group, the best thing to do was to stage attacks against targets the group would try to defend. It worked, because that forced Dark Tendrils' group to get out and stop them, and that was used to study and observe them.

The only problem was that the rebels never understood where they went, or when they appeared.

Even if they knew the group was coming, they never ambushed them, and Erik couldn't help because of his duties within the blackguards.

The tactic worked because Dark Tendril was no longer a ghost for the rebels, and they found out all their brain crystal powers.

Erik activated his Instability brain crystal power again, tuning into Brute Ape's thoughts.

The man was considering doubling the guard and installing additional automated defenses in deposit 234.

"I don't know if we have enough resources to power up both locations quickly enough," Shatterfist said.

"We must choose what to focus on."

Erik shifted his focus to Shatterfist's mind. He knew the man was giving priority to deposit 89.

Basically, the two wanted to defend only one place with the people they were given.

Both were right, but Shatterfist was slightly more right than Brute Ape.

Deposit 89 was a heavy artillery-mana-powered depot, a critical asset in the defense of New Alexandria.

Brute Ape, however, preferred to defend a deposit holding brain crystal rifles. Both locations held valuable equipment, but there were significant differences.

Then Missing air turned to Shatterfist. "Explain your prioritization of Sector 458."

Shatterfist turned to her.

"The heavy artillery in deposit 89 is crucial for our city's defense. Mana-powered cannons can decimate large groups of thaids or rebels from a distance, providing us with a strategic advantage."

He paused, his gaze sweeping across the room. "If the rebels were to gain control of this depot, they could use the artillery to breach the gates or to attack strategic locations without the need to employ men and women."

The woman nodded, seeing the logic in Shatterfist's words. "True, but we must consider all assets."

"The brain crystal rifles stored in Deposit 234 are equally critical," Brute Ape said.

Brute Ape tapped his gloved finger on the table. "These rifles are not only powerful but versatile. They can enhance a soldier's abilities, making soldiers deadly regardless of their brain crystal power." He paused, his posture rigid. "Do you really think a mass attack wouldn't lead to a breach within a gate?"

He leaned forward. "If the rebels gain these, they could drastically improve their combat effectiveness, and that across the entire board. You are already seeing the result on the battlefield from those they already stole." His breath rasped through the mask.

The rebels hadn't yet finished building the tunnel, but a lot of deposits had been attacked, and the rebels got their hands on a lot of interesting things, among them brain crystal rifles.

"These weapons are lightweight, portable, and capable of being used in various tactical scenarios, making them ideal for guerilla warfare, which is what the rebels are using most of the time. Don't forget, their goal is to kill us all."

"Both arguments have merit," Missing Air said.

Shatterfist pressed forward. "We must reinforce deposit 89, I say. The mana-powered artillery can control the battlefield. The artillery's destructive power cannot be left in their hands."

Brute Ape countered, "But the rifles allow for stealth and precision. They're easier to move and conceal, making them perfect for covert operations. If the rebels get their hands on these rifles, they could wage a war of attrition."

Chapter 946: Strategic meeting (2)

"We must protect both assets. Diversify our defenses and deploy additional troops to both sectors. We cannot afford to lose either the heavy artillery or the brain-crystal rifles."

"Doing so will make our defenses ineffective," Shatterfist said, his voice muffled slightly by the mask. "What if they attack one location and we don't have enough people to defend it?"

He paused. "What if they attack both and we lose them?"

"We must make an impression on the higher-ups, especially on Silent Scream," he continued. "Even if we lose one deposit, it doesn't mean we won't prove to him we know what we are doing."

"Sometimes, we must sacrifice something for the greater good. We must show Silent Scream we are able to make decisions in tough times."

Shatterfist wasn't wrong. But regardless, Erik didn't give a fuck about impressing Silent Scream or whoever it was that pulled the strings of this organization, No. What Erik was really thinking about was how he could take advantage of the situation.

Erik weighed the pros and cons of the alternatives presented. The heavy artillery's sheer destructive force made it a high-value target; Van Dyke would surely drool, knowing that he had a chance of getting his hands on them.

However, their size and lack of mobility meant it would be hard to use them.

The brain crystal rifles, instead, while less powerful, offered flexibility and enhancement to individual soldiers' capabilities. The only problem was that he was going to provide them to the rebels sooner or later.

In a sense, it was a waste to focus their efforts and lose lives to get something they would have, regardless.

Shatterfist turned his gaze toward Erik. "Savage Blood, you've been unusually silent today. What do you think about the situation? How would you recommend we proceed?"

Erik maintained his facade of a dedicated Blackguard. He made a dramatic pause and brought a hand to his masked chin as to fake he was thinking.

In truth, Erik already knew how to move and how to exploit the situation to his and the rebels' advantage.

"Given the rebels' recent activities, I agree with the need to fortify deposit 89."

"See?" Shatterfist turned to Brute Ape, who instead turned to Erik.

"Why?"

"It's not like I do not agree with your assessment, Brute Ape," Erik said, "but you are forgetting something."

"And what would I be forgetting?" The man asked.

"Easy. Brain crystal rifles are easily carried. That's true, but that is not only for the rebels. It is even for us, so... There would be something else we could do, instead of simply defending."

"Are you suggesting moving everything to one location? I don't think it will be that easy, and we could risk getting attacked during transport. We must also consider that not everything might fit inside deposit 89."

Erik shook his head.

"No, what I'm suggesting is that we might also consider misdirection," Erik said. "If the rebels are watching us regardless of what we do, then let's give them something to see, and let's make it big."

It was at that moment that Erik started pumping mana through his instability brain crystal power. The ability not only allowed Erik to read minds, but also to influence other people's emotions.

What Erik was going to do right now was to make his party members inclined to follow and believe what he said.

He wanted to make them keen to do as he said, while still leaving the final decision to Shatterfist.

This way, he wouldn't be blamed if things went badly.

Erik leaned forward. "Increase visible security at one location while secretly strengthening another, or let them think we are moving the rifles when, in truth, we aren't."

"If the rebels attack the fake, seemingly unguarded place, they will die," he said, a hint of grim satisfaction in his tone, which, of course, was fake. "If they attack the fake convoy, they won't gain anything, even if they defeat us, but we will ambush them, killing many members."

Erik's eyes narrowed behind the mask as he finished, "After that, it doesn't matter what happens, since we won't be stationed here anymore, and the duty to manage the area will fall to someone else."

The other remained silent, thinking about the situation. Of course, Erik was influencing them. In truth, what Erik was thinking about was to take the convoy route.

It was simple. If they somehow failed, there wouldn't be any blame on them, on him... Besides, it would make it easier for the rebels to escape if things went south, because the battlefield would be in the open.

"Yes, but what will those who will come after us say? That we left the situation a mess?" Shatterfist said.

"They won't, because we will have fortified a place, while the other will be as when we found it, and nothing would have changed. At the same time, and as you said, we will show them we decided to sacrifice the rifles, since it is certainly the lesser evil here."

There was something Erik wanted to achieve with this: gaining merit. If the others accepted his proposal, which they would, he was going to ask Van Dyke to stage a huge attack on Erik's group and the convoy. The rebels would then retreat.

However, that wasn't the only thing Erik aimed to accomplish. The man wanted to take two birds with one stone.

The rebels were going planning a huge attack on one of Volkov's buildings.

The problem was that for the rebels to do so; they needed to create some distractions.

They needed to lure the blackguards out of the area, because if they aided Volkov's troops, it would be a problem. But to lure out the blackguards, what would be great if not staging another attack?

Depending on the situation, the target might even shift from Volkov's stuff to the blackguards' ones.

<Yes... it might work.>

It was then that Erik redoubled his efforts with his Instability brain crystal power. They needed to choose to make a convoy.

<The Instability brain crystal power has been a huge blessing.>

Erik was using extensively since he had it, but it was really shining here within the blackguards, because he was influencing the others more and more frequently to be liked by the blackguards.

Shatterfist seemed to ponder Erik's suggestion. "An interesting proposal. Diversion has its merits."

"Yeah, I agree," Brute Ape said. Missing Air nodded.

"Then, as planned, we'll strengthen deposit 89 and pretend to transfer our items from Deposit 234 to deposit 89. Does everyone agree?"

Brute Ape nodded with a glint of approval in his eyes. Despite preferring to safeguard another place, Erik's plan had its merit, and regardless, it would shift the rebels' attention from deposit 234 to somewhere else. In a sense, it was a win-win. "That could work."

Missing Air nodded again.

As the meeting concluded, Shatterfist gave the last orders. "Brute Ape, handle the reinforcements for Sector 458. Missing Air, increase patrols, and set up the misdirection for Deposit 234. Savage Blood, you'll coordinate with both and report to me as well. Take care of organizing the convoy that will fake bringing stuff out of deposit 89. The idea was yours, after all."

Erik nodded, keeping his thoughts guarded. "Understood."

The group left the room and dispersed, each heading to their respective tasks. Erik lingered for a moment, but then went to a secluded area.

The man then connected to a device within the building and contacted Van Dyke. The old man's voice crackled through.

"Is there any news?"

"Yes. I've got critical intelligence," Erik said.

"The Blackguards are fortifying deposit 89 in Sector 458. The place has heavy, mana powered artillery. They're also setting up a diversion to depart from Deposit 234 in the same sector to deposit 89. We are going to fake moving everything to Sector 458. We can use this to our advantage."

Van Dyke paused, processing the information. "What were you thinking about?" Van Dyke asked.

"Easy," Erik said.

"Attack the diversion heading to deposit 89. Make your troops retreat after some time. I will gain merit within the blackguards this way, and we might use the chance to distract these guys from another target."

"We were going to attack a weapon production facility under Volkov's care. Isn't it a waste if we move so many people to fake an attack to have a better chance at the production facility? It is not that well guarded."

"You are right," Erik said. "But I wasn't planning on attacking that place. I had another place in mind, the blackguards' enlistment center, within New Alexandria."

"Ah, that's an interesting idea. We might be able to get a lot of information from the prisoners we take there, but, of course, that is, if we succeed in the attack, and I have a lot of doubts about that."

"Indeed," Erik said. "But we can pull this off with them... Just make sure not to mess up. You might coordinate with June to avoid problems."

"That's what I will do. Who do you think I am, brat? I didn't create the Red Palace by messing up."

Erik nodded. "Aside from that, Is there any news about Richard?"

"Richard? Well, yes, more or less. We confirmed he is indeed in the grand ducal prison, but until we take care of a couple of things, we can't do anything."

Chapter 947: The decoy battle (1)

Hidden behind some buildings, Erik lay in wait with his team members.

The sun wasn't high, but it was enough to give great visibility to the blackguards, who were hidden here and there waiting for the rebels to show themselves.

Erik and the others had to choose the right moment to let the convoy leave, as to make everything much harder for the rebels. At least in theory.

Shatterfist, the captain of the team, signaled for silence as they observed the convoy's approach.

"What if they won't come?" Missing Air asked.

"They will." Shatterfist was sure about that. The others didn't know why he was so sure about that.

Maybe it was because they had circulated the rumor that the blackguards were moving precious cargo, hoping to lure the rebels into a trap.

But the rebels weren't stupid, and they could easily understand that was a rumor the blackguards circulated themselves to make the rebels come out.

Though Erik knew they would really come. It was already agreed upon, after all.

When Silent Scream, their mentor, heard about their plan, he had been so impressed by the strategy the group made in the following days he had escalated the operation.

Now, it wasn't just Erik and his team joining this operation. The higher-ups had committed additional forces, making this a much larger engagement than originally planned.

Even what they were going to move changed. In fact, based on the rumors they circulated, within the convoy were heavy artillery, weapons and even mechas and not simple brain crystal weapons.

Of course, all of this helped Erik's plan, because by making the target more alluring, he could justify better the rebels coming.

The blackguards were starting to employ this advanced technology more and more extensively.

To the point that the entire organization got batches of more and more powerful war's tool every day.

Of course, great strides were made toward progress, because more and more weapons were starting to get powered by brain crystals.

Artillery weapons became deadlier, capable of bypassing the Thaid's natural mana barrier. Mechas' became more durable and their weapons more efficient. To the point, one might ask what was the point in making neural links given this whole technology.

It wasn't easy to do all of this, but the blackguards were basically coordinating different countries to produce them.

At that point, the blackguards didn't really care anymore about keeping the appearance, or better.

They exaggerated the situation in Frant with the public and asked the cooperation of all the countries to "free" Frant from the rebel forces.

While saying bullshit about the fact that Volkov was a great leader and that it was the people who chose him, stating that the rebels were against freedom and democracy. Of course, all of this was bullshit. Volkov wasn't elected, and for sure no one wanted him there.

Officially, they convinced Etrium to share their technology, not only to sell it, but the truth was they always had control over it.

Erik crouched low. He glanced at Shatterfist, who gave him a nod of approval. They were ready.

The convoy's lead vehicle came into view, followed by several others, each heavily armed and guarded.

The blackguards had made it appear like an extraordinary operation, but Erik knew better. This was bait, and the rebels would soon bite.

But of course, the rebels knew everything was a bait. But that wasn't the point of the operation. The target lay elsewhere, but for that attack to work, they needed to pay the convoy a visit.

Minutes passed like hours. The blackguards were impatiently waiting for the rebels, eager to kill as many of them as they could.

Erik could feel his heartbeat in his ears, the adrenaline coursing through his veins. But the reason was different from for his comrades.

He had to kill the rebels, many of which he, June, Amber, Emily and Mira knew.

That wasn't something easy to do, and despite having done it several times since when he came to the city, he didn't still get used to it.

<Luckily I have my mask on, otherwise everyone would have seen my face every time I killed someone.>

Because that was not a positive face. It wasn't the face of someone taking glee from the situation, as it was almost expected from each single blackguard.

Suddenly, a distant sound broke the silence: the unmistakable roar of explosions detonating and engines running.

<They came.>

Erik and his team watched as a large group of rebel vehicles appeared on the horizon, speeding toward the convoy while attacking the groups of soldiers that were making routine patrols along the way and that Volkov and the blackguards scattered here and there.

Erik knew the plan, or better, the original one. As for the new and bigger one made by the blackguards, he had a general idea about what was going to happen and where people were going to hide, because the higher ups takeover of the operation.

But what he didn't know, he theorized it, and told this information to the rebels.

Of course, his predictions were spot on, because the rebels were already killing a lot of enemy soldiers, decreasing the number of patrol scattered here and there.

Aside from their opponents' deaths, what was great was that they couldn't even trace all of that to him, since he didn't officially know where those guys were hiding.

The trap was about to be sprung. A high-ranking blackguards' officer gave the signal, and the blackguards sprang into action.

But the blackguards didn't come unprepared. Hidden soldiers took up positions.

Some were snipers, with brain crystal guns pointed at the rebels, others were people with ranged powers.

All of them were looking through their scopes and binoculars, waiting for the right moment to bring hell to the rebels.

Thousands of insurgents in vehicles and on foot surged forward, their weapons blazing as they closed in on the blackguards' positions. Their brain crystal powers flaring with life.

The blackguards' convoy had already taken a beating, with several armored vehicles rendered useless and left behind.

Erik knew the rebels made the blackguards think they were aiming to steal those damaged assets, adding them to their own arsenal.

As the rebel forces drew nearer, Erik could make out the faces of his secret allies.

He knew that, to make his act believable, he had to kill a lot of them.

The rebel assault intensified, with explosions rocking the convoy as they launched attacks from a distance.

Erik watched as Volkov's soldiers protected the convoy as best as they could. Many dying trying.

In Erik's original plan, the situation should have been much smaller than what it currently was, but the higher-ups decided to do something else.

The convoy was in truth heavily guarded, but not apparently, since the blackguards had to make it look like there were few guards protecting the convoy.

Or better, that there was a normal amount of soldiers involved.

Once the rebels got in the right position, the blackguards were going to attack.

Shatterfist's voice crackled over the radio, "Sir, the rebels are closing in. When are we going to spring the trap?"

There was a moment of static before Silent Scream's cool, calculated voice responded, "Hold your position for now. Wait until the rebels have committed fully to the attack. I'll give you the order when the higher ups will think the time is right."

"Understood, sir. My team is ready to strike at your command."

The rebel assault continued, with explosions rocking the convoy, but not yet in position.

Erik could see the blackguards' soldiers moving here and there, hidden from sight. On buildings, behind rubbles, even in the middle of streets behind some half collapsed walls. Of course, with them, more men from Volkov's army were present.

The rebels got closer.

<C'mon... let's start this...>

Erik couldn't wait anymore.

Explosions rocked the convoy, and he could see Volkov's soldiers scrambling to defend their precious cargo.

The rebels were relentless, their attacks becoming more and more intense as they closed the distance.

As the rebels neared the ambush point, Erik's radio crackled to life again. "The time is now. To all units, spring the trap!"

The blackguards emerged from their hiding spots. Explosions rocked the area as the two sides clashed, the deafening sound echoing through the streets.

Erik rushed forward, ending up in the streets with the others. He immediately engaged a group of rebels. He had to fake being weaker than he was, but of course, he was still much stronger than anyone else on the battlefield.

Erik turned and saw a blackguard whose code name he didn't know doing something weird. On one hand, the guy had a mana sword, but on the other, he launched a fireball.

That was when he understood. The Blackguards decided to use people with multiple brain crystal powers during this attack. They wanted to decimate the rebels.

But he had no time to dwell on that. He had a job to do.

"Forgive me." Erik said as he chopped off a rebel's head.

The decoy battle finally started.

Chapter 948: The real attack (1)

In front of them, there was a large building. It had a lot of windows, which tinted black and prevented to see what was going on inside. Like the windows most of the building was black, as were its owners' attires.

The rebels's true target was the blackguards' enlisting center, the one where Erik went to join the blackguards.

Without Erik's information, there was no way the rebels would have found where the place was, because there were thousands of such buildings scattered in New Alexandria.

When the rebels arrived, the blackguards painted black most of the places, just to throw off the rebels.

Besides, most of these buildings were filled with people, some totally unrelated to the blackguards. The people were just bait, put in just to make it looks like there were blackguards inside.

Of course, the organization also had secret places. Underground tunnels or bases were the norm. It was only that the rebels could not find them.

Not even Erik had been able to get this information, because those he interacted with, and that he had the possibility to read the mind of, didn't even know about their existence.

There was a reason Fischer and Van Dyke decided to target the blackguards rather than Volkov, and why this place, of all places.

This building was teeming with valuable information and medium-high-ranking officers.

This meant that attacking here would not be simple, and it would not be a minor attack.

This was an important target. This attack would not cripple the blackguards' operation, but it was for sure going to create problems, and that would give the rebels a lot of what they wanted to know.

It looked like, among the blackguards, information were strictly guarded. Every member only had little information at their disposal. This meant that to have a bigger general picture, one had to interrogate many people.

The issue was that the rebels required two specific things to launch an assault on this location.

The first was to lure most of the enemy troops away, because this was still a blackguard controlled outpost, and as that, it was heavily guarded.

That was the reason that prompted Erik and the rebels to stage the convoy attack, knowing they would gain nothing from it aside from killing some people and, of course, knowing they would lose even more than their opponents.

The second thing they needed were people strong enough to carry out this attack.

Fighting Volkov's and the blackguards was possible for the rebels if they planned it well and used guerrilla warfare that reduced their losses, but it was next to impossible to make a frontal assault. Luckily, Erik gave the rebels the right solution.

Beside Amber, Mira, Emily, and June were the Chimaeric Demons, Erik's clones.

Their gaze swept over the building before them, and their masks lent them a monstrous appearance.

They were all silent because Erik and June told them to be. The Chimaeric Demons had to look like the elite they were, and they wanted to increase the fearsome aura they projected.

These guys had to look like machines, behemoths forged in the fires of war.

They needed to exude an aura of raw, primal power, like apex predators ready to unleash a torrent of violence upon their prey: the blackguards.

What Erik wanted to do was to send a message. That the blackguards had their days numbered.

The clones were all dressed in white clothing. That was made on purpose to make them oppose the dark blackguards' attire. They had to look like their natural enemy, they had to appear like rays of light.

And what did light do? It dispelled darkness.

Amber knew this was Erik's idea — but aside from what he said to justify all of this, she believed the man wanted his enemies to see his clones bathed in the blood of their foes.

That would, for sure, strike terror into those who dared to oppose him.

<Erik is becoming more and more theatrical.>

That made the woman smile a little, because at the beginning, Erik was a shy little kid, slightly overweight since he could only afford junk food and couldn't even train, since it was useless.

Yet, somehow, what happened to him turned the young shy kid into a force to be reckoned with.

Someone that alone, as a single person, was keeping afloat a whole rebellion, saved a city from destruction and starving, and was making an army.

<Who would've thought the shy kid with a penchant for potato chips would become such a...force of nature?>

Amber looked at the Chimaeric Demons, who were all identical to Erik underneath the mask. About that, the mask was going to add to the finishing touch, concealing their identity and, at the same time, masking their emotions.

But the mask itself. Amber didn't know who designed it, but whoever did made a great job.

The mask was a demon's visage, forged from Terphine ore, a dark metal that shimmered with an oily sheen.

The eyes were twin pits of shadow and seemed to bore into her soul, while the jagged teeth, bared in a perpetual snarl, promised unspeakable violence.

Intricate horns curved upwards from the forehead, like the twisted branches of a twisted tree, and the entire mask was adorned with swirling patterns that seemed to writhe and shift before her very eyes.

It was a terrifying thing of beauty. <It's giving me the creeps. Better stop thinking about useless things.>

Amber gripped her weapon tightly, her knuckles turning white. She knew one of the riskiest things she ever did was going to start right now.

The first strike against such a highly significant hub of operation for the blackguards.

The Chimaeric Demons were going to ensure victory for the rebels. There was no doubt about that.

She knew they outmatched whoever was inside that building.

The problem was that they needed prisoners, not dead bodies.

Restraining all these people and moving them out of the building would not be easy.

Mira glanced at Amber, her own mask betraying no hint of fear. Ironically, the mask she was wearing was the same as the one the clones had on.

"It's time," she said, her voice muffled by the mask.

"Are you ready?" Mira's voice broke the silence, her eyes meeting Amber's.

The younger woman nodded, her resolve hardening. "Let's do this."

They all took a deep breath and stepped out from behind the wall, the clones following behind her.

They moved with a predatory stance, but made by them, it was full of charm and grace.

Their white clothing clung to them like shrouds, ethereal and otherworldly, giving to the three women the ghostly aura of vengeful spirits.

Yet, beneath the spectral front, the glimmers of youthful beauty and regal bearing remained.

As if death had merely paused the lives of these banshees, preserving them in an eternal display of elegance and power.

It was then that the situation changed.

"Attack! We are under attack!"

Amber could feel the eyes of the Blackguards upon them.

Although this was an open attack against them, many of the blackguards were looking at these people dressed in white, wearing a mask as if they were looking at some clowns.

However, those with better-discerning eyes knew the attackers were a threat, and reacted differently.

The young woman welcomed both. They were here to fight, to show the Blackguards they could bleed and they could lose.

The Blackguards emerged from the building, their weapons drawn and their faces hidden behind masks.

Amber and the clones did not hesitate, their own weapons raised and ready.

The battle kicked off with weapons clashing and attacks flying. But it quickly took a dangerous turn for the blackguards.

They couldn't handle the overwhelming strength of Erik's clones. Their brain crystal powers were remarkably strong, and they had two of them.

One pumped their strength, even if not that much for now, and one helped their reflexes and their thinking speed.

Contrary to what Erik hoped would happen. Something opposite came true.

The streets, pavement, and windows were the only things stained with blood, as not even a drop landed on the pristine white uniforms of his clones. They remained immaculate.

Inside the building, the atmosphere shifted from just being tense to sheer panic.

Those who were once confident in the blackguards' imminent victory now stood frozen, their expressions filled with fear and confusion, witnessing the tragic downfall of their beloved Paladins.

Wide eyes darted towards the windows, where the silhouettes of the attacking soldiers, moving with predatory grace, were visible against the backdrop.

Near the entrance, a woman grasped her chest, struggling to breathe with quick, shallow gasps.

A wordless scream left her as she stared intensely at the unfolding scene outside.

A man beside her dropped his clipboard, papers scattering around his feet, forgotten. His mouth dropped open in astonishment, his face displaying disbelief in every wrinkle.

"They killed... they killed the entrance guards!"

The loud shout echoed throughout the building, causing everyone to suddenly start moving in a chaotic frenzy.

Some ran for cover, ducking behind desks and equipment. Others stood frozen, their minds struggling to process the sudden shift from calm to calamity.

But most of those who had a military background and the blackguards still inside rushed to the entrance. But by the time they got there, the enemy was already indoors.

Chapter 949: The decoy battle (2)

Erik was not having a wonderful time since he was killing rebels left and right.

He did his best to not kill too many, but it wasn't like he could kill no one.

So, reluctantly, here and there, he decapitated a rebel, so that at least that person wouldn't suffer more than he should.

<Fuck...>

Around him, the blackguards and Volkov's soldiers were doing the same, but it wasn't only the rebels who were dying.

Casualties among the blackguards were rare and scarce, but Volkov's men died in droves.

But Erik didn't care about that. He wasn't here to make a race about who killed more of who. While he wasn't saddened by the death of those who, even if unwillingly followed Volkov, it wasn't like he liked so many people die.

It was weird for Erik to think this despite the personal grudge he had with New Alexandria and the blackguards, but the real enemy were the thaids.

All these people would have made a huge difference against them, and considering how technology improved during these years, humanity now had a very consistent chance of killing them all, and to free the continent from their presence.

It was a pity, really.

"Forgive me," he said again and again as he killed rebels, his voice lost in the battle's din.

Shatterfist moved beside him. "Keep up this pace, Savage Blood! We need to kill them all! We need to make a good impression."

"Yeah... yeah... don't worry."

Erik saw the rebels being mowed down by the blackguards' superior firepower and advanced weaponry.

The sight twisted his stomach, but he forced himself to stay focused.

The battle continued, and despite the tremendous differences in firepower, the situation wasn't exactly in the blackguards' favor.

That was because the rebels used a sizeable chunk of their forces to make this attack. Mostly because soon more of Erik's clones were going to join the rebels' ranks.

As much as Fischer and Van Dyke didn't like using people as cannon fodder, it wasn't like they had another alternative.

Diverting Volkov's and the Blackguards' attention from the enlistment center was paramount.

The information held there was going to give the rebels an unprecedented advantage.

A burst of energy exploded close to Erik, sending him sprawling to the ground.

He rolled to his feet.

"Fuck..."

A blackguard with ranged brain crystal powers stood over him, offering a hand.

"Are you injured?"

Judging by the insignia on the man's armor, this guy must have been a warden; hence, he was three ranks over him. "Yes, sir! Thanks for having asked!"

Erik took the man's hands. Luckily, the blackguard couldn't see his face, since Erik was masked. Because if he would, he would have seen the contempt, no, the hatred burning in Erik's eyes.

"Get back in the fight, Savage Blood!" Shatterfist said before turning to attack the rebels.

Erik didn't see what was happening on the other side of the battlefield. There were too many buildings and explosions rocking around, but judging by the situation, the rebels were making a fierce attack.

What surprised Erik, though, was that the rebels were playing all of this well.

Already, half the convoy had been stopped. For a moment, it seemed the rebels were going to succeed. It would have been fantastic if there really was something to steal in those trucks. Sadly, all of this was a ruse.

<A ruse within the ruse... Pretty ironic.>

The blackguards must have taken this rebels' advantage really badly, because they started making more decisive attacks.

Erik's gaze, in fact, was drawn to a flurry of motion on the periphery of the battle.

Turning his head, he spotted five blackguards rushing towards a dense cluster of rebels. Something about their movements seemed off—too efficient, too coordinated.

As he observed them engage the rebels, Erik noticed a curious detail.

Four of the blackguards were using their brain crystal powers, unleashing devastating attacks.

But in the fifth, his movements were distinct. This blackguard fought solely with his fists, yet each strike felled a rebel with brutal efficiency.

Erik wondered why the guy was so focused on not using his or her brain crystal power. That was a life or death battle. Not using it was simply stupid.

His eyes narrowed behind the mask, because some details didn't escape him.

The team had a lot of power and the discipline they were showing was clearly beyond those of the average blackguards' members.

As the group dispatched rebel after rebel, the man, most likely the team's leader, was suddenly jumped by twenty rebels.

They were desperate, but for sure, that desperate move was going to make the man regret not having used his brain crystal powers. Or so Erik thought.

Yes, a thought, because as soon as the rebels moved, four black tendrils erupted from the mysterious blackguard's back, whipping through the air with a serpentine grace.

Erik's eyes widened behind his mask as he saw the man ripping to shred the rebels. It wasn't that he had never seen that much gore, or that he hadn't seen comrades dying during these months.

No, the reason he was shocked was because he had seen those tendrils before—it happened years ago, during the school tournament.

Besides, wasn't he searching for a group led by a guy called Dark Tendrils?

<Dark Tendrils, why didn't I think about it?>

Because it was unlikely. How many chances were there that someone from his school would become a blackguard?

How many chances there could be that said student was the very same one giving most of the problems to the rebels?

Almost none, and yet. Those tendrils made it clear who this Dark Tendrils was.

<Zakir Nguyen.> A mix of shock and disbelief coursed through Erik as he realized this simple fact as he watched the scene unfold.

<Should I go kill him?>

That was a proper chance. Finding Zakir had been an exhausting affair. Maybe Erik wouldn't have a chance like this anymore in the future.

But Erik turned to look around. He couldn't, unless he wanted to throw away his chance at peacefully gathering information for the rebels.

It was true that Fischer and Van Dyke asked him to find and kill Dark Tendrils' group.

But doing so at the cost of losing this enormous advantage he gained made little sense.

"Savage Blood! Get back in the fight!"

Erik hesitated for a moment; his gaze was still fixed on Zakir and his team.

<Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! >

Despite the reluctance, Erik turned and rejoined the battle, his mind racing with questions about the group.

As he reentered the fray, Erik's thoughts drifted to the information he had gleaned from the Blackguards.

The mention of Momentum, an enforcer of exceptional prestige, and how he was related to Dark Tendrils.

<It makes sense. Momentum had once tried to capture me. I killed many of his team members in the process. But how curious is it they made him work with someone who came from my same school and with whom I fought once.??>

Maybe that wasn't curious at all, maybe that was intentional.

Zakir had never been happy about his defeat at the school tournament. That was common knowledge inside the school.

Many times, he vowed to get his revenge. Too bad both he and Erik left the school that same year, and Erik was often outside the walls hunting thaids.

<He must have been really frustrated...>

Since he was a crazy psycho, it was no wonder he had been assigned, or maybe volunteered, to get him.

This also meant something else; the blackguards suspected Erik worked with the rebels.

It was unclear they thought he was here now, or sent him here just to get him when Erik arrived.

That also explained Zakir's presence. Why would they send him and Momentum here if it wasn't to get him?

Momentum would be wasted here. Besides, it was too much of a coincidence that two people who fought against him and likely knew a lot about him were here in the city, and fighting the rebels at that.

The rebels were strong, but not to the point of being a problem so big for the blackguards.

In fact, when Erik left the city after having freed Fischer and the others, the rebels's situation worsened. This showed how the blackguards could crush the rebels if they wanted.

Only with his new intervention did things change. In truth, this sparked even more questions within Erik, because if that was true, then why was the rebellion still going on?

But there was an obvious answer to that. It was because they wanted him. The rebels were nothing more than a lure to get Erik in New Alexandria.

Regardless, Erik wondered how a psycho kid like Zakir had turned after having joined the blackguards.

For a second, he hoped they would have fixed him somehow. But he didn't count on that a lot, since the blackguards were even crazier psychos than Zakir was.

Chapter 950: The real attack (2)

The Chimaeric Demons, Erik's clones, had made quick work of their enemy.

It had been so fast that those present there, and not being Erik's clones, were shivering a little.

What was even more surprising was that despite the insane battle that transpired within this building, the clones' white uniforms remained pristine, with not a single drop of blood staining the fabric.

It was an eerie sight, one that sent a shiver down Amber's spine.

Mira, Emily, and June stood nearby. They had barely lifted a finger; the Chimaeric Demons had handled everything with an efficiency that was both terrifying and impressive and was also the reason everyone felt dread.

Amber glanced at her teammates, seeing the same thoughts were swirling through their heads. They realized; they finally understood the true extent of Erik's power, and it was far greater than they had imagined.

Only June was having a somewhat neutral face, but even he, one of Erik's oldest and most trusted clones, had a weird look on his face, albeit just a slight tint.

Amber couldn't help but think about the implications of all this power. Erik alone was already a monster, someone who could have easily destroyed a city if it weren't for the new weapons now littering the world.

But with his ability to create such powerful clones, his potential seemed limitless.

Given time and preparation, he could conquer nations and continents. Even reclaiming the Mur continent, a dream once considered impossible by any human on the planet, now seemed within reach.

The world was changing, the balance of power shifting in ways no one could have predicted. And at the center of it all stood Erik, a man whose potential seemed to know no bounds.

Amber had always believed in him, even when he was just a skinny kid with a love for junk food and a shy personality.

But now, witnessing the fruits of his labor, the sheer scale of his power, she couldn't help but wonder where this path would lead.

The woman had to push those thoughts aside for now and focused on the task at hand.

She walked toward a room where the captives the clones subjugated were held; the door guarded by a pair of Chimaeric Demons. They stepped aside as she approached, allowing her to enter.

Inside, a group of people under the blackguards sat on the ground together, their faces full of fear and uncertainty.

They were surrounded by more Chimaeric Demons, who stood like statues, almost waiting for these people to do something stupid so that they could beat some common sense into them.

At the same time, the mask obscured their faces, their expressions were unreadable behind their masks, and that made them even scarier, because they really looked like statues. Or better, they were like gargoyles.

Amber's gaze swept over the captives, assessing their condition. They were mostly unharmed, but shaken by what transpired within this building and the outcome that has been reached in a matter of ten minutes.

She stepped forward, her voice calm but firm. "You're all prisoners of the rebel forces now. Cooperate, and you won't be harmed."

One of them, a man with a stern face and a defiant glare, looked at her with hatred. "What do you want from us?"

Amber met his gaze steadily, but hers was hidden behind her mask.

"Information. We need everything you know about the blackguards. Your cooperation will determine your treatment. I don't need to remind you what these guys can do, right?"

She pointed at Erik's white-dressed clones.

The man hesitated, glancing at his comrades, before nodding reluctantly. "Alright. We'll cooperate."

It looked like even the others had the man's same sentiment. Besides, it wasn't like they knew what was going on within the organization.

They had some information. Those regarding what the blackguards were doing mostly came from rumors. The rest, and the majority of the information they had, were the names of some blackguards and the various procedures needed for the enlistment.

However, knowing who the blackguards really were was a major information.

The mask was kept on them for privacy reasons, because enemies could target family members. That information alone was going to be priceless, especially considering there had been a lot of recruitments within New Alexandria in the recent times.

Amber didn't know this, but the man she was talking to was Marshall Caldwell, the man to which Erik talked when he came to the enlistment center.

The man wasn't stupid, nor weak, for all that mattered. However, the Chimaeric demons subdued him with ease, and with even more ease, they took care of the blackguards.

That left a deep impression on the man, who understood almost immediately he had to do what these guys told him. There was no way out alive for him if he did something different.

What was more unsettling, though, wasn't that these white-dressed guys had been able to keep most of the blackguards alive.

It was as incredible as it was scary, because to do so it meant they had to be stronger than the blackguards, and after years and years of brainwashing, of thinking that the blackguards were the creme of the creme of humanity, finding someone even stronger than them was reality shattering.

It meant someone had the power to really antagonize them, and the man, a loyal pawn believing the blackguards were justice's paladins, didn't like that.

Amber nodded, satisfied. She turned to the Chimaeric demons. "Keep an eye on them. Make sure they stay put."

She was going to interrogate these people later. Now her priority was elsewhere.

The clones nodded in unison. Amber felt a chill run down her spine again because of their weird synchronicity, and she left the room. There was still work to be done.

Outside, she found Mira, Emily, and June waiting for her. "The captives are secure. We need to bring them there," she said, "and then regroup with the others."

Mira nodded. "The control room is secure. We have access to the building's systems. We should start by disabling any remaining defenses and locating any other blackguards still inside."

"Good idea, but also download any data that could be useful." Amber agreed. "Emily, June, head to the control room with the clones and start working on that. Mira and I will stay here and monitor the prisoners."

Amber and Mira moved to another room, their steps echoing through the now-silent building.

The air was thick with the smell of blood, and the lingering tension of battle was still within all the individuals who got on the losing side.

They arrived at a larger room where more Chimaeric Demons stood guard over a group of captives.

These prisoners were all blackguards. Not those poor men and women working for them, thinking they were part of something bigger and better, unaware they were just pawns into a machine far scarier than they thought.

All these men and women had been stripped of their masks, revealing faces that were a mix of fear, defiance, and bewilderment.

They had all been defeated, a reality almost unheard of for blackguards.

These elite soldiers, trained to be the epitome of strength and discipline, rarely faced defeat.

Yet here they were, subdued and stripped of their intimidating masks.

Amber took in the scene, her eyes lingering on the injured blackguards. Erik's clones had subdued them but ensured they were still alive.

It was the first time Amber had seen a blackguard without their mask, and the sight was unsettling.

The mystique and intimidation that the masks provided were stripped away, leaving only vulnerable humans behind.

She sighed and turned to one of the Chimaeric demons. "Pick one of the blackguards and bring him or her to another room. I need to ask some questions."

The clone nodded without a word. He stepped forward, selecting a blackguard with a steely gaze and a clenched jaw.

This guy was likely the only one with a defiant look on his face, and that was why he was selected. The Chimaeric demons wanted to bend him.

As if on cue, the man tried to resist, his body tensing and squirming as he tried to pull away, but the clone's grip was unyielding.

"Let go of me!" The blackguard growled, struggling against the clone's ironclad hold.

The Chimaeric Demon didn't respond and remained silent. As if even the act of replying to the blackguard was a waste of time, or something that would kill his brain cells.

Instead, he tightened his grip and dragged the man toward the designated room.

The man screamed in pain. The two women couldn't imagine the strength exerted by the clone, but it had to be very high to make a blackguards squirm like a worm and scream like a bitch.

Amber and Mira followed, their eyes scanning the surroundings for any signs of further resistance. But it was clear the clone's show of strength broke these people's will to fight.