

BIOLOGICAL 951

Chapter 951: The decoy battle (3)

"What's your name?" Amber asked, her tone firm but not unkind.

The blackguard glared at her, defiance flickering in his eyes.

"Why should I tell you anything?"

"Because your cooperation might just save your life."

"Ah! Fucking rebel scum! I won't tell you anything!"

But the truth was, the man hesitated, his eyes darted to the clone by the door before returning to Amber.

Usually, he would have a mask hiding his face and protecting his inner thoughts shown by his eyes, and his facial twitches. But he forgot the mask was not with him.

Amber noticed his hesitation and capitalized on that.

She looked at the defiant blackguard, her expression calm. "You know, the best thing for you right now would be to cooperate."

She gestured towards the clone, standing silently by the door.

"My friends here have not a lot of time to waste... So, it would be better to not make them mad because they lost time. Besides, I'd hate to ask them to persuade you."

The blackguard's eyes widened as he glanced at the clone. The man knew the white-dressed dude was able to make him suffer with a simple flick of his wrist.

At this point, the blackguard wasn't fearing death, but rather torture. The man swallowed hard, his bravado fading.

"I... I know nothing."

Amber leaned forward, her gaze piercing. "Let me be the judge of that."

"I swear! Since Caelora city, our procedure on intelligence has been extensively changed; we don't know a lot, I swear!"

"I find that hard to believe. You're a relatively high-ranking blackguard, which means you must have access to valuable information. "

The man shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "I... I can't. They'll kill me if I talk."

"And what do you think will happen if you don't?" Amber's voice hardened. "My friends here don't take kindly to disobedience."

The clone gripped the man's shoulder; his movements were slow, but the strength exerted made the blackguard wince in pain. The blackguard flinched, his eyes darting between Amber and the man behind him.

"Alright, alright!" he said. "I'll tell you what I know. "

Amber nodded, a small smile playing on her lips. "That's a wise decision. Now, tell me everything about your bases here in New Alexandria."

Erik dodged a barrage of attacks. A chaotic battle raged around him, with the rebels struggling to gain the upper hand against the well-equipped blackguards and Volkov's soldiers.

But they were holding their own and killed a lot of enemy soldiers.

There were few casualties on the blackguards' side, but Volkov's men and the rebels died in droves.

As Erik parried a rebel's strike, he noticed a troubling development: some of the enemy fighters, the blackguards, possessed two brain crystal powers.

Erik heard that some people with multiple powers appeared on the battlefield in these past days, but he had never seen them firsthand; besides, the blackguards didn't talk to him about that.

Most of these guys were blackguards who were reaping lives as farmers reaped wheat, but there were also some people within Volkov's army who had the same ability.

These were likely the most loyal of Volkov's officers. It couldn't be otherwise. Though Erik wondered why the blackguards gave people outside their organization such frightening abilities.

The situation had become even more precarious for the rebels. He had to make more clones to at least equalize the situation, but he also had to provide them with equipment.

Back at Liberty Watch, his people were working hard, making weapon after weapon, armor after armor, vehicles, and many more.

Liberty Watch was full of ores, and the area didn't lack trees and fangeds to exploit.

Erik dove behind a wrecked vehicle, taking a moment to catch his breath.

He could hear the thunderous exchange of fire and the cries of the wounded.

The man emerged from his cover and rejoined the fray, avoiding killing whenever possible and never drawing too much attention to himself.

It was at that moment that a tremendous explosion rattled the area.

Erik didn't know exactly what was happening as he was on another side of the battle, but whatever happened, the rebels must have received orders to retreat because they hurried back.

The blow to the rebel forces must have been significant, and Van Dyke decided to recall his troops. It could also be that Amber and the Chimaeric Demons completed their attack on the enlistment center.

If that was true, it meant there was no reason for the rebels to stay here any longer.

The rebels acted wisely. They decided to blow up the vehicles that, in theory, should have held the weapons the blackguards were moving to another site.

They knew the vehicles were empty, but they wanted to make the blackguards believe they didn't know it and that if they couldn't have those weapons, then no one could.

Erik crouched behind a damaged car, shielding himself from the blasts. The deafening sound and shockwave made his ears ring.

Debris rained down around him as the rebels pulled back, their retreat seeming frantic and disorganized.

While peering out from under his cover, Erik saw the blackguards scrambling to regroup and pursue the fleeing rebels.

Van Dyke's people had escaped the kill zone, leaving only the destroyed vehicles behind.

Erik's brow furrowed as he tried to make sense of the situation.

<I need to understand what is happening.>

Erik emerged from his hiding spot and rejoined his blackguard squad. Shatterfist approached him.

"We got orders to chase the rebels."

Erik didn't like that at all. The man knew Van Dyke, he felt the man expected this and likely made a trap to kill those who were going to chase the rebels.

Regardless, he nodded, keeping his expression neutral.

"What happened over there? What was that massive explosion?"

Shatterfist shook his head. "I got told a big shot joined the fray, but I don't know who the guy is."

Chapter 952: Rebel ambush

The streets of New Alexandria were littered with shattered buildings and rubble, providing the rebels with various hiding and assault points.

As the blackguards advanced deeper into the city, minor fights erupted here and there. These were mostly carried out by the rebels covering for the retreat.

The pursuit wound through minor roads and abandoned buildings. Erik pondered hard about what the rebels might do next exactly, but it was no wonder that Van Dyke planned an ambush.

It was no more than a hunch, of course. Van Dyke had a plan to achieve at least a minor victory. This entire operation was a distraction, albeit a huge one, but this didn't mean Van Dyke was going to let his men and women die like that.

Besides, the rebels appeared to be too calm and well-organized to be fleeing away.

The most puzzling thing was why the blackguards chased them despite the ambush being relatively obvious.

These guys chased the rebels to the bitter end until they reached a large, open plaza.

Erik had been there many times in the past. He still remembered the bright colors of the tents that covered stalls filled with exotic fruits, aromatic spices, and handcrafted products.

Merchants used to scream out their products, their voices mixing with children's laughter and consumers' bartering.

The booths remained, their bright textiles faded, and their merchandise scattered among the wreckage.

As they advanced, a chaotic maelstrom of attacks erupted from all directions.

Brain crystal rifle fire crackled, punctuated by the whistling of arrows and the eerie hum of unleashed powers.

Balls of fire whizzed past, leaving trails of smoke and singeing the edges of crumbling buildings.

Icy shards pierced the air, freezing puddles on impact and leaving a treacherous sheen on the broken pavement.

The very earth itself seemed to rise against the blackguards.

Rebels wielding earth-based powers tore open the ground, creating deep pits and fissures that swallowed unsuspecting soldiers.

Some used their powers to create makeshift barricades, while others manipulated the terrain to create vantage points for ranged fighters and ambushes.

The Blackguards found themselves slowed, while rebels zipped around with unnatural speed, dodging attacks and launching surprise strikes.

Some fighters used power that made their muscles bulging with unnatural strength as they tore through the ranks of their enemies. Most of those dying were Volkov's men.

The rebels' wreaked havoc on Volkov's forces, throwing them into disarray. However, the blackguards proved more resilient.

They adapted quickly to counter the rebels' attacks, and their superior training allowed them to exploit any openings.

"Formation Delta!" Shatterfist said. Erik snapped to attention beside his comrades, Brute Ape and Missing Air.

His mana surged, coalescing into a shimmering blade that extended from his right hand.

With a flick of his wrist, he deflected a bolt of energy that sizzled past his ear.

"Watch your left, Brute Ape!" he said, just as a rebel wielding earth magic attempted to ensnare the hulking man in a tangle of earth tendrils.

Brute Ape roared, his transformation into a hulking gorilla already underway.

His massive arms ripped through the stone, scattering dirt and debris as he charged towards the rebel.

His fist, now the size of a boulder, connected with a sickening crunch, sending the unfortunate rebel flying.

Missing Air flitted around the edges of the battle, her form flickering in and out of existence.

She harried the enemy, sending gusts of wind to disrupt their aim and suffocate them.

A well-placed gust sent a rebel tumbling from his perch atop a building.

"Shatterfist, incoming!" Erik spotted a trio of rebels closing in on their leader.

Shatterfist grinned. "Let them come!"

As the rebels lunged, Shatterfist unleashed a devastating shockwave as he punched, sending them sprawling across the shattered pavement.

One of the rebels staggered to her feet. She launched a volley of fireballs towards Shatterfist, but he simply shrugged them off.

"You're going to have to do better than that, little girl!" he said, advancing towards her.

"Leave her to me," Erik said, intercepting the fiery redhead. He parried her attacks with his mana blade.

"You're fast," the redhead acknowledged. "But can you keep up with this?"

Her body ignited, flames dancing across her skin as she charged towards Erik.

He raised his mana blade. The heat was intense, but Erik held his ground, his eyes locked on the fiery figure before him.

"Impressive," he said. "But fire alone won't be enough to stop me."

He lunged forward, his mana blade flashing in the fading sunlight.

He realized this woman was most likely a Red Palace member.

The redhead met his attack with a fiery blast, but Erik's speed and agility allowed him to evade the worst of it.

In a blindingly fast exchange, Erik's blade found its mark, severing the redhead's arm at the elbow.

The flames that had engulfed her body flickered and died, revealing a look of shock and pain on her face.

She stumbled back, clutching her wounded arm, as Erik lowered his blade, his expression grim.

But despite Erik winning, the situation wasn't turning out well for Volkov and the blackguards. Most of New Alexandria's soldiers had been killed by the rebels' trap.

The plaza resembled a slaughterhouse. The bodies of Volkov's soldiers lay scattered amongst the debris and craters.

Some were riddled with bullet holes; others bore the gruesome marks of elemental attacks—charred flesh, frozen limbs, or bodies twisted into unnatural shapes.

The cries of the wounded still echoed through the plaza. The rebels, emboldened by their success, pressed their advantage, picking off the remaining soldiers with ruthless efficiency.

Their eyes gleamed with a feral light. Van Dyke and Fischer's strategy worked.

"Retreat!" A voice from their communication device said. Only the blackguards remained, and they couldn't face so many rebels despite their prowess. Besides, some blackguards died during the attack.

But a ghost of a smile played on Erik's lips. The command was music to his ears.

Though he played the part of a loyal blackguard, he was still part of the rebels.

Every fallen soldier in uniform was a minor victory, but a victory nonetheless.

Chapter 953: Pyrrhic victory or utter defeat?

They were strong, but not to the point they could avoid laser bolts, bombs and brain crystal powers.

As the order came through their communication devices, Shatterfist let out a frustrated growl, but he knew better than to disobey.

If the command center decided to make them retreat, despite how humiliating that was, there was a good reason for it.

"Fall back! Regroup at the rendezvous point!"

Erik fell in step with his team, keeping his head down as they made their way through the devastated plaza.

While he was relieved to see Volkov's men and the blackguards retreat, he didn't like the overall situation at all.

The rebels luckily killed a lot of enemy soldiers, but their death toll was as high, especially considering the number of rebels was much lower than that of Volkov's army's and the blackguards'.

While they retreated, the soldiers all had ashen faces. Their morale had been clearly shaken, and their pride shattered. That wasn't only true for the blackguards, but even for Volkov's army.

This was an ambush, and yet, the rebels had been able to play a reverse card on them, making a counter ambush.

Even they had to admit that the rebels' move had been astute.

Erik spared a glance back. He and the others reached the edge of the plaza by now, and were almost on a side street that would lead the troops outside of the ambush site.

"Keep moving, Savage Blood!" Shatterfist said.

"Yes."

The rebels hadn't given up. They were chasing the enemy with relentless determination while killing them from behind.

<Van Dyke is taking things far...>

In Erik's opinion, the best thing to do would have been to retreat. The blackguards weren't so simple. Even if they retreated, no one could say with certainty they had no trick up their sleeves.

<They are fast.> The rebels were gaining ground. <Retreat, you idiots! You won!>

Just as Erik feared the rebels might catch up, a thunderous explosion rocked the area. He whirled around to see a team of blackguards descending upon the battlefield, their leader at the forefront.

"Dark Tendril," Erik said, recognizing Zakir among the fighters. Of course, he was the first to engage.

The elite blackguards moved with predatory grace. It was to the point even Erik was impressed by their theatrical entrance.

Of course, they weren't just trying to impress the others, because their brain-crystal powers were making quick work of the rebel forces.

<This is no normal strength. Zakir clearly has a lot of neural links. But how? How could have he made so many in just three years?>

Erik had an explanation for himself. He had the biological supercomputer, who made him techniques that made it much easier to make neural links. But Zakir? The blackguards either had a better technique, compared to the average citizen, or the man was simply talented, and insane at that.

Zakir used his tendrils to carve a path through the enemy throng; his tendrils' strikes were lightning-fast and devastating, often ending up in missing limbs and rolling heads.

Erik watched as the rebels were cut down one by one, or more at a time.

The rebels didn't expect this. They didn't expect someone to single-handedly kill them in droves in a matter of moments.

Caught off guard by this new threat, they struggled to mount an effective defense.

<How strong did this fucker become?>

"Move! Don't waste time anymore!" But Erik found himself frozen. That was a chance to kill Zakir and his team.

<Should I take it?>

He thought about it. It took no longer than a fraction of a second, of course, but the conclusion he reached was simple.

<It's better I don't.>

That wasn't the right thing to do. If Momentum was really behind Zakir, then Erik could take his chance to find and kill him.

But that wasn't the only reason. If he left and killed Zakir, all the work he had done to make Ben Fink a blackguard would be thrown away.

But that didn't mean he would not take his chance to do something. He gritted his teeth in frustration—he really wanted to kill the guy—and activated his instability brain crystal power, focusing his gaze on Zakir.

<Let's see where the prick will lead me to...>

As Erik's mind connected with Zakir's, a torrent of emotions and thoughts flooded his consciousness.

Bloodlust, carnage, and an insatiable thirst for destruction consumed Zakir's psyche.

There was no room for mercy or compassion, only a relentless drive to crush any opposition. There was nothing else there, not a shred of information about his mission, Momentum, or anything else useful Erik could use.

<I knew this guy wasn't normal.>

Erik recoiled, overwhelmed by the sheer intensity of Zakir's twisted mentality. It was the first time he felt something like this. Not even Thaid's, with their raw, primal and unbridled emotions, reached this man's, this monster's levels.

The man was a force of pure, unrestrained violence, fueled by a deep-seated hatred that knew no bounds.

Zakir's tendrils lashed out, cutting down rebel after rebel. The elite blackguard showed no guilt, no fear, no hesitation. There was only a twisted sense of satisfaction as he reveled in the carnage.

"All units. Take advantage of Team 89's attack and decimate the rebels. You won't have another chance."

<Ah... fuck... and here I thought I could finally get out of this messed-up situation.>

Zakir alone had been able to overturn the situation.

As the blackguards received new orders to capitalize on the chaos, Erik steeled himself. He could not afford to hesitate, lest his cover be blown.

While gripping his mana blade, Erik and all the other blackguards, including Volkov's men, turned on their heels and charged into the fray.

Erik didn't like this one bit, but he targeted rebels he did not recognize, using his Instability brain crystal power to avoid striking down any of the people he knew personally. There were many of them among the rebels.

Erik avoided a laser bolt.

<That was close.>

Thanks to his Instability brain crystal power, he knew who was targeting him.

He saw the rebel who launched the attack and dove toward him. It took him less than a second to reach the guy, and of course, Erik decapitated him.

<I'm going to fast.>

Erik tuned down his speed, and then turned. There was a cluster of rebels targeting Shatterfist.

They were going to kill him if he didn't act.

<It's not his time yet.>

He launched against the rebels and started chopping them down.

The situation quickly turned. The blackguards, after a defeat that ended in retreat, were now killing all the rebels.

At this point, though, Frant's regular army was in shambles. Only the blackguards were on that battlefield.

Erik weaved through the melee, his blade flashing as he cut down one rebel after another.

Zakir's tendrils continued to wreak havoc, with the elite blackguard reveling in the destruction.

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The echoes of battle faded, leaving a chilling silence in their wake. Erik sat atop a crumbling wall overlooking the ravaged plaza.

Smoke still curled from smoldering craters, the stench of blood and burnt flesh in the air.

This battle had been a rollercoaster. First, the blackguards ambushed the rebels, or at least they thought that. Then the rebels ambushed the blackguards after having faked a retreat.

Then Zakir intervened and changed the battle's outcome.

If it wasn't for him, the rebels would have achieved a staggering victory.

The rebels' trap had been brutally crushed by a man alone. The plaza was littered with the corpses of Volkov's soldiers, their uniforms stained crimson.

The battle, though, had been so brutal that even some blackguards had fallen. That was the only silver lining.

The rebels, too, had suffered heavy losses. Most of them escaped after Zakir's stunt, but the price of their diversionary tactic had been steep.

Erik's eyes scanned the convoy, or what remained of it. Half the vehicles lay in ruins, their cargo bays empty.

This battle had been a Pyrrhic victory at best, for the rebels at least.

In truth, even the blackguards should consider it this way. It was weird. Even Erik was having trouble understanding if this was a victory or a loss, and for who.

In a sense, both organizations met their goal.

The rebels killed a lot of soldiers and diverted their attention here, while Amber, Mira, June, and Emily took care of the enlistment center.

The blackguards, instead, had few casualties on their side and killed many rebels.

Only Volkov's army, or better, Frant's army, could be proclaimed a complete loser.

That was because Volkov's troops' casualties were high, and for sure, the kills they made couldn't be attributed to them.

The funny thing was that the blackguards and Volkov measured achievement based on the number of lives they claimed compared to those they lost.

Today, only the blackguards could say they balanced out death and kills.

"Savage Blood," a gruff voice called out. Erik turned to see Shatterfist approaching, his mask hiding his expression, but Erik could sense the underlying satisfaction in his voice.

"It looks like our plan worked. The rebels are scattered, and they failed their attack."

"Indeed," Erik tried to sound as neutral as possible, as if he wasn't affected by the rebels seemingly defeat at all.

While he masked himself behind stoicism, the man couldn't wait to call Van Dyke and June to find out what happened with the real attack, as for now, it looked like the blackguards didn't know it happened.

Chapter 954: The tunnel

His soldiers told him the tunnel was finally complete. The hidden route was going to connect them to the outside world, but most importantly, to Erik's people.

As an experienced veteran with a proper dose of practicality, Van Dyke always wanted to see things for himself, hence why he was there again, amidst the mud and dirt.

There was the earthy smell of just excavated soil hanging to the walls, the air wet and cold, but despite being a home used to live in luxury, he didn't dislike it.

Van Dyke strolled, his boots echoing in the mostly silent space. He knew it must have not been easy to make the tunnel in these conditions, especially because too much noise could've attracted the blackguards.

His fingertips traced the chilly, moist surface of the tunnel walls. Though uneven, the work appeared solid.

They had performed admirably, his guys. Pausing, he listened to the surrounding sounds.

Based on it, Van Dyke could tell the tunnel had been built near a water source, since there was the trickling sound of water.

However, the tunnel was also close, or rather beneath, the city, because the rumbling of the metropolis above could be heard, even if it was in the distance.

That was a reassuring sound, a sign that most of the noise they would make here was going to be drowned by those above.

A larger cavern with a roof supported by robust wooden beams emerged as he descended farther.

A bunch of proud-looking people waited. They were, of course, part of the resistance.

Among them were several known names to Van Dyke: workers, miners, and engineers who had put in endless hours on this covert endeavor.

A young engineer went up and said, "Principal Van Dyke," his voice resonating over the large room.

"We finally made it." It was clear the man was happy.

"Yeah..." the old man said. But a smile crept on his face. The engineer's happiness was infectious. But then Van Dyke's face turned serious. There were many things to know, even more to do, and not nearly enough time to make it all.

"Tell me the situation."

"Yes, sir," the young engineer said with a pride filled voice.

"This tunnel links directly to the forest. It leads to an exit placed at a safe distance from the city's walls and prying eyes. We've concealed the entrance with natural camouflage, making sure it would stay hidden from Volkov's forces."

He gestured towards a map carved onto the wall at different intervals while pointing a light to it.

"As you can see, sir, we've taken a winding route to avoid any existing infrastructure above or patrol routes. The tunnel itself is reinforced with metal supports and lined with stone to prevent collapse. We've also installed ventilation shafts to ensure a constant flow of fresh air."

The engineer pointed to a series of recesses carved into the tunnel walls.

"These are storage areas for supplies, weapons, and medical equipment. We can easily stockpile enough resources to sustain a prolonged siege if necessary, and to hide our resources in case the headquarters are found out."

Van Dyke listened, nodding in approval as the engineer explained the tunnel's features. He was impressed by the meticulous planning and execution.

Van Dyke looked around the tunnel and nodded. He looked at the ventilation shafts, the storage spaces, and the robust barriers built to keep the entry secure.

Everything looked fine made.

"Excellent work. You all performed incredibly well. This tunnel will help our cause a lot. I can't stress enough how important the result you achieved is. Of course, I don't need to remind you how confidential this place is, right? Don't talk to anyone about this."

"Of course, sir. It's the bare minimum."

With a handshake, Van Dyke thanked and encouraged everyone of them. He understood this tunnel represented hope and a lifeline for a community trying to escape the bonds of oppression.

The man then headed to the tunnel entrance, but that sight had made him feel optimistic about the situation. This was a tremendous advancement, evidence that the resistance was gathering steam.

Though he understood the path ahead would be difficult, but most importantly, that it depended on how many resources Erik could pour into the rebels.

To know they depended on a single man wasn't exactly reassuring, but what Erik did for the rebels was a lot and for this reason, he was grateful.

With the tunnels, getting weapons was bound to be much easier. Erik said he could also provide various types of potions, meaning that at least soldiers who needed immediate care would avoid death.

The soldiers could carry one or two vials of healing potions, and could prolong a battle, or gain the strength to escape from it.

The tunnel was also big enough to let the rebels bring vehicles in and out of the city.

The problem was that they were too big to be concealed, so bringing them inside the city would not be ideal, despite being possible.

<But I guess what we do would depend on how the situation will unfold from now on.>

The only problem now was to keep the tunnel a secret. Van Dyke was searching for potential spies since Erik told him. This obviously meant they were keeping the tunnel secret.

Only those working on it, and 3 people from the Red Palace and Fischer's people knew about it.

Unfortunately, spy searching wasn't progressing well. The rebels found nothing, but he was sure Erik was right and that a spy was really within them.

Since they weren't making any progress, Van Dyke was contemplating the idea to ask for Erik's help, even in this circumstance, but he was reluctant to do it.

In the end, the Red Palace's principal emerged from the tunnel's hidden entrance, and reached for his communication device.

"June," he said, his voice low and urgent.

A moment of static went on, then June's voice crackled through the speaker. "Van Dyke, what's the situation?"

"The tunnel is complete," the old man said, a hint of satisfaction in his voice. "It's a direct route to the forest, well-concealed and secure."

"That's excellent news," June said. "If things are like this, I'll contact the others and arrange for the first batch of supplies to be delivered within the week."

But the man had more to say.

"Yes, thank you," Van Dyke said, his voice hardening. "The situation here is getting more complicated. The blackguards and Volkov's soldiers are displaying multiple brain crystal powers. Erik was already an anomaly from this point of view, but at least he was on our side. But now our enemies have similar abilities. We are losing... June."

"I understand. Then I'll tell the others to prioritize the delivery of weapons and healing potions. The master mentioned something about experimental enhancements potions as well. We might need to consider those if the situation continues to deteriorate too much."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," Van Dyke said, a note of weariness creeping into his voice. "But we need to be prepared for anything."

"We will be." June paused for a second.

"I'll update you as soon as we have a delivery schedule. In the meantime, stay safe, Principal."

Van Dyke nodded, even though June couldn't see him. "You too. And tell Erik we appreciate his help. We couldn't have done this without him."

He ended the call and stepped out of the tunnel, back into the heart of New Alexandria.

Water drops stuck to Emily's skin like glittering diamonds.

She was briefly hidden by the steam coming from the shower's hot water as it evaporated into the room's chilly air. She opened the shower's door and headed out.

Emily was present at the Blackguards' enlistment center two days before, but despite the time having passed, she was still mentally worn out.

The mayhem of the struggle remained in her thoughts long after it had ended. She had never seen so much death in a single and short time.

She could still hear the panicked shouts of the injured and the loud crackle of gunfire. They were enemies, but they were still humans.

She felt exhausted and emotionally sensitive as the scenes of the havoc, the vicious fights between Erik's clones and the blackguards, kept playing over in her head.

Emily bundled up a fluffy towel and shivered a little when the chilly air hit her wet skin.

While stepping up to the vanity, she padded the luxurious carpet with her bare feet.

She went to the mirror and saw a tired young woman with vivid green eyes. But she was not the same as usual.

Her hair, usually styled impeccably, now hung in damp strands around her face. The woman tried to cut them, but she made a mess.

Though, she couldn't go search for a hair stylist or the likes like she often did back at home.

She let out a long, tired sigh that sounded to mirror the weariness in her soul.

Despite her and the others having done nothing physically demanding, she was a psychological mess.

Since she wasn't as used to fights and kills like the others, she felt all that was happening much more than them.

Even the toughest fighters needed time to recover, so it was clear she needed time, too.

Chapter 955: Emily's vision

A weight landed on her chest, and a shiver of discomfort pricked her skin.

Emily was well aware of this feeling; she was going to have a vision and that meant she was going to lose consciousness.

"Damn..."

She got out of the chair and headed for her bed, her steps lethargic and weighty.

As she got to the edge of the bed and lay down, the room appeared to tremble and tilt.

The world disappeared and was replaced by the whirling blackness of oblivion the instant her head contacted the cushion.

She felt herself vanishing as the darkness descended, drawn into the recesses of her mind, or wherever her brain crystal power brought her, and where fate and time were entwined in a jumbled mess.

She understood that knowledge of the future—a peek at the uncertain road ahead—would weigh heavily on her when she awakened.

Whatever she was going to see, to glimpse at, it wouldn't be something easy to digest.

Even if she didn't really like when she had vision, she could only give in to its pull for the time being, though, and hope that whatever it showed would be worth the price it was going to cost her.

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The darkness receded, replaced by a white room. Well, most of it.

In truth, most of the room was stained with the blood's redness. This amount should have been only found on a battlefield, but this room was so full of it that if it wasn't for the ceilings and some white spots around, she would have thought this room had been red to begin with. This wasn't a battlefield, and yet...

Emily's vision slowly focused, and a gasp slipped from her mouth.

There, chained to a wall, was her father, Richard Stone. His once-proud form was slumped and broken, and his clothes were torn and stained with blood.

His long beard was a mess, with short spots and long ones stained with blood, spit and snot. Parts of the beard started growing white, despite Richard still having full, dark hair.

The young woman immediately understood he was not ok. No, saying those weren't the right words to put it.

His face, normally so full of life and warmth, was gaunt and pale, full of lines of pain and exhaustion.

His father was dying.

Standing before Richard was a figure Emily knew all too well: Volkov, the tyrannical ruler of Frant.

The look on his face didn't make a mystery what the man was feeling: rage. He looked angry, so angry that Emily could swear she never saw a look so angry and scary on anyone's face.

The veins on his neck throbbed visibly, as if straining to break free. His jaw was clenched so tightly that it seemed the very bones might crack under the pressure.

His nostrils flared with each rapid, heated breath, and his lips were drawn back into a thin, menacing line.

<What...> Emily struggled to fully comprehend what was happening, what had led to this situation, but it was clear Volkov tortured his father, for how long, or how many times, the woman didn't know.

What was certain was that Emily was seeing one of those torture sessions.

Volkov leaned in close to Richard, his lips twisting into a cruel smirk. "I'm sick of you, Richard Stone."

WHACK

"GAH!"

Volkov whipped at Richard. The sound it came out wasn't even similar to that a whip had to make. It was more akin to using a gun.

"GIVE IT TO ME!"

The sound of the whip echoed again.

"GIVE ME ERIK ROMANO'S LOCATION!"

The sound of the whip cracked like a thunderclap once again, piercing the silence of the room. Only Volkov's voice broke it, when the whip was not in action.

Sometimes, they happened at the same time, and the whip was much louder than Volkov's voice, despite the man shouting at the top of his lungs.

The whip moved.

Again.

And again.

And again.

And again.

"Go fuck yourself," Richard said, not without several degrees of difficulty.

Volkov laughed. "HAHAHAHAHAHAHAH."

That seemed to Emily like a terrifying growl before a predator killed its prey, a precursor to unimaginable misery rather than a chuckle.

"Your attempts to resist me are admirable, but ultimately futile," he said.

"You cannot escape your fate. So, why don't we make things easier? You tell me where Erik Romano is, where his base is located, and who his people are, and I'll give you a quick, painless death."

Richard spoke in jerky bursts, each one a battle. On the first syllable, his voice faltered, as though the air itself opposed him.

His lips quivering with each letter, he stammered, "Didn't y—you hear m—me?"

Something solid and unmoving seemed to be choking his words as if bits of something were stuck in his throat, or as if the very air was absent from his lungs.

Emily grimaced. Volkov smiled.

"Go f—fuck yourself," he said. But there weren't curses that could affect Volkov. Everything Richard said lost its impact in the halting delivery.

With the effort, his face twisted, his neck veins protruding, his eyes wide with desperation. Every word seemed like a fight he was just barely winning, and that made Volkov smile more.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAH. WELL, WELL, THEN HAVE IT YOUR WAY!"

Volkov went to a table laden with an array of instruments—whips, knives, and other tools of torture.

Emily watched in horror as Volkov selected a long, wicked-looking whip ending with multiple urchins.

She had never seen something like that, and honestly, she didn't even expect someone being so sinister and cruel as to make something like that.

But the whip was there, she was looking at it, and what Volkov was going to do was not going to be good for her father.

The general raised it above his head, the muscles in his arm tensing. Richard braced himself, his eyes filled with a mixture of pain and defiance.

"DAD!"

The sinister crack of the whip echoed once more, but this time, the barbed tips sank mercilessly into Richards' back, ripping through flesh and sending a cascade of crimson rivulets streaming down his spine.

"TALK!"

Again.

"TELL ME!"

Emily watched in horror as Volkov brought the wicked whip down again and again on her father's battered body.

Each crack of the urchin-tipped lash elicited a gut-wrenching cry from Richard.

His opposition wavered, his breath coming in ragged gasps. Hesitation briefly flickered within his eyes, but then the man remembered what would happen if he talked, how many people would die, what the blackguards and Volkov were going to do if they found Liberty Watch.

He refused. Richard could not betray Becker. He could not make Erik, end up in the blackguards hands after what he and the others did to save Lucius. He didn't have the heart to separate father and son, but he didn't know Lucius had died already.

But even if he knew, then he would have had no reason to give up and give Volkov satisfaction.

Lucius was not the only one with unwavering will. He, Caiden, Becker. They were fighting a battle for years, and there was no amount of torture that could make him talk.

His thoughts wandered to his wife and daughter once again. Their faces, their smiles, were giving him the strength he needed to resist.

"TALK!" Volkov said, his face twisted with rage.

Another savage blow landed, and Richard's body convulsed, the chains rattling as he slumped forward, no longer able to hold himself upright.

Emily felt as though a war drum was hammering in her ears with every beat of her heart.

The hot tears welling up and spilling over distorted her vision as she watched her father writhe in agony.

To breathe became hard, to the point each inhale came in irregular gasps, and each exhale came short.

A wave of helplessness swept over her, threatening to drag her under. Richard's suffering left her shivering and immobile.

But then, as if her soul wanted to come out, she shouted.

"DAD!"

Though she knew he couldn't hear her, she was in a vision. Despite this being something that was going to happen in the future, the vision itself wasn't real.

She wasn't there with her father.

But she could see. Volkov's cruel laughter echoed through the room. Her rage simmered.

The whipping continued, each strike more brutal than the last.

At some point, Richard couldn't take it anymore. Emily watched in horror as his body went limp, his head hanging limply.

The chains separating his body from the ground.

Not even by losing consciousness, he could have a little bit of rest.

Volkov paused, a twisted grin spreading across his face, but some disappointment was clear.

"Look at you. The great Richard Stone can't handle a small and friendly talk. What a disappointment."

The man tossed the bloodied whip aside. He approached Richard's motionless form, pressing a finger against his neck.

Emily held her breath, her hands clenched into trembling fists. Volkov's expression darkened, and he let out a frustrated growl. This was going to make him lose a lot of time.

But then he smiled again, because he knew that exactly like it happened in Fasard, Erik Romano, or at least his people, were going to come and rescue Richard.

And then he was going to strike.

Emily's vision began to blur and distort. The surrounding room faded, and a sense of vertigo overwhelmed her.

She blinked, struggling to maintain her focus, but the scene before her was dissolving.

"DAD!"

"DAAAAAAD!"

With a gasp, Emily found herself back in the Red Palace.

"No," she said, her voice trembling. "NO!"

What Emily saw scared her. Her father had his days numbered. She had to warn the others and rescue her father before it was too late.

Chapter 956: Shadows of retribution (1)

"Yeah, most likely, but things must be done carefully," Erik said.

"This is dangerous, Erik," Fischer said. "It's dangerous, even for you."

Erik's jaw tightened. "I didn't chase those fuckers for two weeks to not take this chance, James." A flicker of anger flashed across Erik's face.

The younger man's blood boiled at the very thought of the blackguards. The mere idea of their existence, their actions, and the harm they had caused fueled a fire within him that was difficult to contain.

"To find out Dark Tendril's team's number was already a blessing, since that was essentially what made it possible for me to track them down. But it is not him, Zakir, that worries me, but the guy coordinating his team."

"You mean momentum?" Fischer asked.

"Yeah," Erik said. "Zakir... Dark Tendril is not a smart guy. Or better, he is not as smart as Momentum. It's true that the guy made waves among the blackguards, but he became much deadlier when he got under Momentum's care."

This was clear from the fact that while Zakir was indeed strong, it was Momentum who directed him to the locations where he could be most effective. Most likely, Momentum also taught Zakir and his team tactics and strategies, which significantly facilitated Zakir's rise as a young blackguard. This guidance he got from Momentum was what truly made Zakir the man he was today.

At least based on Erik's opinion.

Of course, he had no proof that what he thought was true, and yet, based on what he knew about Zakir Nguyen, from their school days, that was the only logical thing

Fischer sighed, rubbing his temples. "You want to kill the guy just to settle a score, Erik," he said, not without a tint of exasperation in his voice. It was widely known that Erik had a personal vendetta against Momentum.

The fact he had been chased all over Caelora city by the blackguards was known to all, and since he was hell-bent on killing the guy, it wasn't hard to understand who led the blackguards' teams back then.

"But you are actually planning on attacking one of the blackguards' most important buildings within the city. That place doesn't have your run-of-the-mills blackguard. There are many high-ranking officers there. You said yourself that Momentum is an enforcer, and you said yourself how high this rank is and what does it means for his powers."

"You think I can't pull it off? That I will end up killing him? Didn't I say I wanted to capture him?"

Fischer stared at the wall, trying to think about what he could say to the young man on the other side of the phone.

"I'm not saying that, Erik, but that's certainly a concern. You are plenty strong to kill him and the many other blackguards there. The problem is that we can't. To attack the base, we need a lot of manpower. Your clones are not enough to attack a place where the average rank of the blackguard is that of an advocate."

"James..." Erik paused for a second. He had no intention of missing this opportunity.

Erik had this intense expression on his face, eyes filled with resolve. He was thinking so much, and was so mad, that the lines around his mouth, set in a hard grimace, looked like furrows etched on a rocky Cliffside.

"The only reason I couldn't locate Zakir's team until now is because Momentum is behind it. It is not only that, but the guy is a key figure within the blackguards. If we take him, we will win this war. Zakir won't be able to hide anymore. He can certainly run; he knows how to strike, but that's only because of momentum."

Fischer stopped to think for a second. The guy tried to come up with something, anything really, to make Erik change his mind about going down this risky road. Yet, as he sifted through his thoughts, he realized he couldn't find any, and even if he did, he doubted Erik would listen to him. There was nothing Fischer could say or do that would make him change his mind.

He placed his phone on the desk and looked at it for some more time before picking it up again.

"All right. Be aware that I don't like this but... What do we have to do?"

"June will take care of most of it with the clones and will make the plan. You just need to provide him with what he needs. In essence, what we need to do is to attack the place. Since I got told I will be stationed in that area in the next few days, I already know that when you guys are going to attack, I will be called there.

"How can you be so sure about that? What if they do not call you?"

Fischer's face showed he was really worried. He seemed hesitant and worried about Erik's plan. The man was worried about the risks, especially with the big shots at the blackguards' hideout. He was even more unsure because Erik's optimism seemed to ignore the real dangers.

"I've spent enough time among the blackguards to know this will happen. Once there, I will take advantage of the chaos and get momentum. The clones will assist me in bringing him outside, while others will eliminate any opponent that stands in my way, if any exist. I won't be seen, I won't be noticed, and I won't be missed on the battlefield. Afterwards, I'll return to my post. It's this easy."

"What if they notice you are missing despite what you are saying?" Fischer wasn't convinced of Erik's idea. He was too optimistic. However, he didn't know he could turn into a fly or become almost invisible.

If he did, he would be inclined to think things were going to work. Erik had no intention of doing so, though, of telling the others about them. There were a couple of brain crystal powers he was keeping silent about.

Chapter 957: Shadows of Retribution (2)

In addition to the critical information he was withholding, Erik also kept his presence within the resistance a guarded secret.

Only a few folks knew he was in New Alexandria, and even fewer knew he was spying on the blackguards. He didn't want anyone to find out to keep the mission and resistance safe.

Besides, that he made his mind-reading power known to some was already a risk in itself. No one ensured the blackguards didn't get word about it.

But about that, he couldn't worry, only about the rebels. The band of giants knew he could do that.

He was sure Rebecca kept silent about it, at worst, telling it to her mother, but there was no way to know if Camille and Ramon remained silent about it with other people.

Given Erik's multiple brain crystal powers was already weird enough, but reading minds was even more. The ability was a subject that could easily pique interest and provoke discussion.

Camille and Ramon, like many others, found it intriguing to delve into unusual topics. It was human nature, and it was no changing that.

His mind-reading ability was too of a powerful and rare power, something out of the ordinary even in a world where people could fly.

This could have led them to discuss it, even if just out of curiosity or fascination, thus potentially revealing Erik's secret.

Plus, there were ways to stop mind reading, among these the presence of some brain crystal powers. Mana shielding was also possible, albeit not simple.

Besides, if one knew he could have his mind read, he would put up some defenses. It was how his instability brain crystal power worked. Its mind reading worked through mana, and mana could stop it.

Even being emotionally guarded made his instability brain crystal power harder to use, and there was nothing Erik could do about it.

And yet, he had to say he could to some people: Fischer and Capitan Lain, for example, but didn't tell it to people like colonel Middleton, despite him having a pretty big role within the resistance.

"I already explained the situation to June. Just talk to him, and he will explain the plan in detail. He said he was already working on it."

After a brief silence, Fischer spoke again. "All right. So, just to be clear, we only assist June?"

"Yes."

"If you are so sure about it, then I have nothing else to say."

"Thanks, James."

"Don't worry. Focus only on the mission and nothing else. Let us know if something interesting comes up."

"I will. Say hi to Mary for me."

"I will. Be safe, Erik."

"You too, James."

With that, the conversation ended.

Erik stopped for a moment, making everything super quiet. He zoned out, like he was looking at something far away.

"Fuck, this has been a hell of a month."

After the convoy battle, Erik had been terribly busy. The blackguards constantly sent him here and there to suppress the rebels, and this put Erik in a complex situation: having to juggle between a myriad of tasks.

First, he had to complete whatever job the blackguards gave him, while not wreaking complete havoc for the rebels and while gaining enough merit among the blackguards.

Second, he constantly had to read minds. Even a simple glimpse into someone's mind could give him precious information.

By doing this, Erik averted many important attacks on the rebels, but to do that, he had to find the right people, and that meant reading even more minds. It was extenuating.

Of course, he couldn't tell everything he found out to Van Dyke, because otherwise, it would be the blackguards' turn to suspect spies within the organization, which was unprecedented.

If the blackguards' opponent thwarted all their plans, all their attacks, what would they think?

That someone was telling the rebels about these plans and attacks, especially considering how information traveled within the blackguards.

It was impossible for a hacker to enter their servers, especially considering no one knew where they were located.

This led to death, of course, and the weakening of the rebels, but it wasn't a complete loss, because new people kept joining them, and the number of Erik's Chimaeric Demons increased by the day.

Regardless, this was not the only things he did during this time. He also had to search for Zakir's team and for Momentum.

The problem was that his instability brain crystal power allowed Erik to read what the target was thinking.

If he wanted them to think about something specific, he had to ask. He had to be careful about what he asked and that was super exhausting. Eventually, Erik found Momentum and figured out where Zakir always went after each mission.

Momentum was hiding out in a building in New Alexandria, acting as the blackguards' backup HQ.

Erik believed that this place, even though it was called secondary, was actually the primary spot where the blackguards made decisions about the country.

Zakir would regularly come here after the mission, most likely to debrief and report. But the building wasn't used as a barracks, so Zakir must have had another place to go after his reports.

<People really say a lot of shit inside their minds.>

It was thanks to that he found the information he sought. Of course, he used the biological supercomputer to check the place. Momentum was there, but he never left the place.

<I wonder why...>

Though, this wasn't the only things had to do.

Chapter 958: Permutations, and Plenty of DNA Points

But he managed. The number of eggs reached the two thousand, and a lot of Chimaeric Demons matured in the meantime.

All that training also got him 18 neural links divided among the Chimaeric Demon's, the Self Healing's and the Instability's brain crystal powers.

Erik focused on them a lot, but the most important one was going to be the Instability brain crystal power.

It would make easier for him to influence others and to read their mind, it would lessen his mana expenditures. It was a must power up.

Erik was thrilled about his progress, especially with the increased neural links and the boost to his powers.

<System, show me the status.>

The same old semi-transparent screen, in its bluish and white glory, appeared out of thin air. The screen, only seen by Erik, floated in the air with all the info he wanted.

— [Host Information]

NAME: Erik Romano AGE: 18 POWER LEVEL: 885 SYSTEM LEVEL: 180 EXPERIENCE: 309496 DNA POINTS: 56772.95 HEALTH: 16840 MANA: 16770

{Attributes} STRENGTH: 348 INTELLIGENCE: 280 DEXTERITY: 328 ENERGY: 837 Available Attributes points: 0

{Powers} [Biological SuperComputer Powers] Brain Crystal Manipulation -Brain Crystal Power Extraction -Brain Crystal power Merging -Brain Crystal Power Analysis -Brain Crystal Power Editing

-Brain Crystal Power Strengthening -(LOCKED)

DNA Manipulation -DNA Extraction -DNA Merging -DNA Analysis -DNA Editing -DNA Strengthening -(LOCKED)

-Analysis -Brain Information Injector -Device Manipulation

[Host's Powers] FORCE MANIPULATION: Bλ1B-RANKED ILLUSION WEAVER: Bσ1B-RANKED CHIMAERIC DEMON: Bν1X-RANKED SELF HEALING: Bμ1A-RANKED WYVERN'S FLAMES: Bσ1A-RANKED PLANT MASTER: Bι3B-RANKED CHAMELEON VEIL: Bξ2C-RANKED VIBRATION BURST: Bπ3A-RANKED INSTABILITY: Bλ2B-RANKED SOLID FROSTWIND: Bο2A-RANKED EXOSHIELD: Bσ1B-RANKED HUMAN SHAPESHIFTING: Bπ3C-RANKED BEAST SHAPESHIFTING: Bπ3C-RANKED SWORD CONJURING: Bσ1D-RANKED

{Skills} Kyokar hand-to-hand style (MASTER) Etrium's sword style (ADVANCED) Crypt of the Desert Style (MASTER) —

<These are too many...>

One thing Erik never got rid of during these three years was his uncertainty.

Even after thinking about it a lot, Erik still wasn't sure which powers to combine.

He thought about it a lot and found some combinations that could pack a punch.

But he was always afraid of messing up and getting worse. The unknown outcomes made him feel stuck and unable to decide.

What if he irrevocably messed up, forever altering the powers he had gained and nurtured, getting something that would not be as useful as they were now?

In the past, the powers were simple and weak. To lose them, or getting something unpredictable, was not a problem. But now it was different, because these powers were not only strong, but were very useful.

<I got enough DNA points to merge the powers. I should really decide what to do. At least to prepare for the upcoming attack.>

He paused. <Let's see.>

<Force Manipulation and Exoshield... now that's a combination. But I do not know what the result would be. Hopefully something similar to Gwen's armor but with Nathaniel's destructiveness.>

He thought about this for a while. <Maybe I should ask the biological supercomputer to make it so that's exactly the combination that must come out, but the usage of DNA points will increase.>

He spent a lot of time going through all the brain crystal powers in his collection.

He was thorough, dedicating ample time to evaluate the specifics of each power, reflecting on their individual merits and drawbacks, and brainstorming on how these could result if he merged them.

<Chimaeric Demon and Self-Healing... an army of me, each one able to heal and keep fighting. Overwhelming odds with sheer numbers, a tempting strategy. The problem is, I would be left without the Self-Healing power. The best thing would be to get a healing brain crystal power, and merge it with the Chimaeric Demons, so that I could get as many healers as I want. >

He thought about it for a second. That was the best thing he could do.

<I can't delay this any longer.> He was hit hard when his dad died. That event seriously messed him up. He really didn't want to go through the pain of losing someone else.

The thought was so unbearable that he desperately wanted to avoid it, and killing a healer to get his or her brain crystal power seemed the only thing he could do.

<I can 'lend' a clone to Mira, Emily, Amber and June, so that, if they get into troubles, they will survive, at least.>

Erik knew he had to get that brain crystal power, but that would have had to wait. Right now, he needed to decide on the brain crystal powers to merge.

So, he kept going through the list and found two brain crystal powers that would work fine together.

<Wyvern's Flames and Solid Frostwind... If I ask the biological supercomputer to steer the merging to give the Solid Frostwind fire powers, then it should work.>

He went on in the list.

<Human and Beast Shapeshifting... That's a no brain... but...>

Erik wasn't able to decide between some combinations.

<Illusion Weaver and Chameleon Veil... The first might make the second make me completely invisible. But there were other alternatives, for example, Illusion Weaver and Instability could also be viable.>

Erik's ability to influence the others might become formidable. Illusion Weaver was a good power, one that allowed him to fool the blackguards whenever he had to leave to make clones.

Bringing the powers of Instability and Illusion Weaver together might lead to entirely new opportunities.

Enhancing the Instability brain crystal power could change how it affected other people and open up fresh possibilities for mind reading.

This combination might let Erik to create visions and hallucinations in the heads of his opponents.

In a fight, this might be a very effective weapon even if the Illusion Weaver by itself was effective for this purpose.

What Erik really wanted from a possible combination was to make people consider particular facts or concepts without directly posing questions meant to do so, so improving and hiding his mind-reading skills.

The actual results might differ from these hypotheses, though.

Still, the best results would be to keep the illusion weaver able to produce illusions in real life or acquire invisibility abilities.

<An alternative could be to merge the result of the shapeshifting abilities with the Chameleon Veil.>

But somehow, that didn't sound good to Erik. The shapeshifting ability had nothing to do with 'concealment' in a strict sense.

It morphed Erik physically. It was great to infiltrate and fool people, but the shapeshifters he'd got these powers from didn't use their abilities for disguise. Well, not everyone, at least.

They weaponized their transformations, partially shapeshifting into the creatures, and gain their strength.

Some could be able to fly, some got a strength multiplier. Most could increase their senses.

<I have to make a choice.>

Erik stopped to think for a second. Then he decided.

<All right, I've reached a conclusion. System, I want you to merge the following powers: Force Manipulation and Exoshield, Wyvern's Flames and Solid Frostwind, Illusion Weaver and Chameleon Veil, Human and Beast Shapeshifting.

Now, while merging them, use the editing ability to steer the merging into this direction: Exoshield and Force Manipulation must create something similar to Gwen's armor, but with Nathaniel's destructiveness. Illusion Weaver and Chameleon Veil must be merged, but choose yourself in what direction they must go. I will trust your judgment. Then, merge Human and beast shapeshifting.

I want something that makes me shapeshift in whatever I want. Don't be stingy with the DNA points. The last, well, you can understand what I want with Wyvern's flames and Solid frostwind.>

<You took your time with this, uh? And here I thought everything I forced you to do made you more firm.>

<Yeah... thanks for having reminded me how cruel you are!>

<Oh, you are welcome, of course!>

Erik paused for a second. <How much DNA points do you think I will need to spend?>

The biological supercomputer didn't immediately reply.

<Let me make a quick computation.>

Erik nodded. <Take your time.>

With that, the biological supercomputer's gears started spinning. It took little for the AI to come up with a result, despite it having to not only find out how to merge and modify the powers, find a balance, achieve the best result, and last, computing the requirements.

And with that the complex structures of the biological supercomputer spun. Though the artificial intelligence was unfazed, despite how difficult the nature of its job was.

The challenge was enormous because the AI not only had to find a way to combine and alter the current brain crystalpowers but also to find a careful balance and get the best result, one that was suitable for Erik and his requests.

Apart from this, the AI also had to calculate what was needed for successful implementation of its master's ideas.

<All of them, and you have enough.>

<Ah... fuck... this means I will have to grind again, right?>

<Yes.>

Chapter 959: The Chimaeric Demons' rampage

<772.95,> the system said.

<Ah... fuck.>

<What are my new powers?>

—

Replication: B01A-RANKED (Based on sight. Complete Shapeshifting: The user can shapeshift into both human and animal forms, as well as hybrids. Adaptive Mimicry: The user can adapt their form to any situation, combining human intelligence with animal instincts and abilities. Versatile Transformation: The user can switch forms rapidly and with great precision.

Enhanced Physical Capabilities: Both human and animal forms benefit from improved physical traits. Non-living beings cannot be replicated.)

Phantom Veil: B01A-RANKED (Illusory Invisibility: The user can turn invisible while simultaneously projecting illusions in a different location. Holo-Cloak: The user can create up to 20 realistic illusions that include environmental mimicry, making it hard to distinguish between reality and illusion.

Dynamic Camouflage: The user's invisibility adapts dynamically to the surroundings, making them extremely hard to detect while also being able to project misleading visual and auditory cues. Enhanced Stealth: The user and their illusions can move without creating visual ripples, ensuring seamless blending with the environment.)

Frostwind Fire tempest: B01A-RANKED (Elemental Mastery: The user can control fire, wind, and frost elements, either separately or in combination. Constructs: The user can create solid constructs and weapons from a blend of fire, wind, and frost (i.e., wind blades, ice lances.). The material is no longer hardened slime but solidified elements.

Temperature Control: The user can manipulate the temperature to create areas of intense heat or cold. Wind Fuel: The user can enhance attacks with wind for increased range and intensity.)

Force Bastion: B01B-RANKED (Integrated Force Exoskeleton: The user gains an exoskeleton that provides both physical protection and the ability to generate powerful force fields. Shockwave Armor: The exoskeleton can emit shockwaves to repel attackers. Dynamic Shielding: The force fields can adapt to various threats and provide layered defense.

Enhanced Strength and Agility: The exoskeleton boosts the user's physical capabilities.)

—

<That's a lot to digest.>

...

...

...

June crept through the shadows, stalking alongside the others. Amber, Mira, and Emily were with him, along with at least 3000 rebels. Five hundred Chimaeric Demons, Erik's powerful clones.

"How much until we arrive?"

"5 minutes."

"That's not a lot," Amber said. She was thinking about the situation, and she was scared. The rebels planned to assault a significant Blackguard outpost inside the city. The one where Momentum was. Erik gave them this information, but it was only one of many they received following their assault on the enlistment facility.

All that information allowed the rebels to create chaos, and since the rebels got a lot of prisoners, Erik could have been a little more forgiving with the information he kept from them since they could blame this information on them.

Ahead, the towering blackguard headquarters loomed, its spartan design a representation of the repressive government they were trying to topple.

June knew Erik was nearby, and he couldn't help but worry about his well-being despite knowing it would be extremely hard for something to happen to him.

As they approached, June spotted a patrolling group of blackguards.

"Kill them," June said. With a silent nod, the Chimaeric Demons sprang into action.

Within moments, the guards lay dead at their feet.

"Good job, guys."

The group encountered several more patrols, each one taken care of by the Chimaeric Demons who made it look like child's play.

As they neared the entrance, June could feel the tension rising. This was the moment they had been preparing for. The most important thing he was hoping for to happen was that the plan he made up proved successful.

<But if Noah had been able to plan the attack on Fasard, why wouldn't my plan work?>

He glanced at Amber, Mira, and Emily. They were mirroring his same sentiment.

The attack was too important because here they could find out where to find Zakir. But that would not be the only thing they would learn.

The rebels knew where Richard was, but until now they couldn't attack the place because they didn't have the right equipment, they didn't have enough people, and most importantly, those they had were too weak.

But with Erik's supplies and his Chimaeric Demons, Now that became possible. They had to try, though, to see if they could take a place this well defended. Should the operation be successful, they could assault the jail and free Richard.

Of course, that was if things kept going like this. The problem was, since the whole situation involved the blackguards, there was no way to say they wouldn't change so drastically to force them to act differently.

Regardless, once Richard had been rescued, Erik would have free rein. He could kill Volkov and decimate the blackguards within the city, while his clones were on his side.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes," Fischer said. The rebels around nodded.

"We are," Mira, Amber, and Emily said, looking focused. The Chimaeric Demons didn't talk.

June raised his hand, and the clones surged forward.

Erik's most trusted clone watched as the Chimaeric Demons surged forward. The rebels followed behind, brandishing an array of weapons and brain-crystal powers, but of course, different brain crystal weapons and armors were with them.

As the Chimaeric Demons reached the entrance, they encountered the first wave of blackguards.

One Chimaeric Demon barrelled towards a group of Blackguards. It moved with blinding speed, its muscular limbs blurring as it struck. The Blackguards raised their weapons, but the Chimaeric Demon was faster.

Its fists smashed armor and sent the Blackguards flying with every blow. The blackguards at the entrance were not much to them.

One tried to retaliate, but the Chimaeric Demon batted the attack aside and continued its killing spree.

The same scene was repeating all over the area, with the Chimaeric Demons killing the blackguards as if they were just some random thugs from the streets and not the utterly deadly and efficient soldiers they were.

In turn, the rebels were struggling. To the Chimaeric Demons, these guys were nothing, but to the rebels, even the low-ranking blackguards were a mortal danger.

The blackguards, caught off guard by the sudden assault, struggled to mount an effective defense in quick time.

Their confusion was visible, as they had not anticipated such a bold attack on their heavily fortified building.

A Chimaeric demon tore a group of blackguards apart, spilling blood on the ground. Another launched a massive boulder at the entrance, destroying it.

"WE ARE UNDER ATTACK!"

It took some time for the blackguards to realize the situation and react, but in the end, they did. The blackguards sounded the alarm, and that was what Erik was waiting for.

Chapter 960: When demons strike

He and his team members, Shatterfist, Missing Air, and Brute Ape, were patrolling an area near the place where the rebels were carrying out their attack.

Of course, Erik knew that was going to happen, and that was why he decided to carry out the attack that day.

The man was nervous, but not because he didn't have faith in the plan June came up with, but because he was itching to get into action.

But he had to wait since these were the most important parts of the game, the times the blackguard soldiers got their orders. The orders to join in the defense.

"Those rebels are getting too problematic," Brute Ape said. "The other day, they nearly blew up the weapons depot in Sector 8."

"They got lucky. Our security was lacking at that depot. The higher-ups should have been aware of the weak points."

Shatterfist nodded. "Regardless of how they managed it, they inflicted heavy casualties on Volkov's forces." The man paused. "What about the attack on the northern district? Have you heard about it?"

"Yes. I still don't understand why they needed to target a food deposit this time."

"They couldn't get it, so they burned it in retaliation," Brute Ape said. "It's a typical rebel tactic nowadays. Hit and run. They don't stand a chance in a head-on fight against us, and they don't have that many troops to begin with, and they resort to cowardly tactics for this reason."

"That may be. But regardless, we must remain on guard. They have been mounting more coordinated attacks, and I don't like the situation at all." He paused, scanning the surrounding area. "Let's continue our patrol. We—"

A sudden, piercing beep showed a forthcoming message coming from Erik's and the others' masks. Erik grinned behind the mask. Luckily, no one could see that.

<They took their time, uh? Pretty unusual for these bastards.>

The man raised a gloved hand to his ear, activating the built-in communication device. A voice crackled through the speaker.

"All available personnel, respond immediately! A blackguards' building in your area is under attack. We need all available troops to head there. I repeat, we need all available troops to head there! We will send you the coordinates."

Erik's grin widened as he saw the coordinates on the small screen to the side of his mask.

"It looks like we've got a party to crash," Brute Ape said. He cracked his knuckles and twisted his neck.

"Let's move," Shatterfist said. "We need to get there fast. Have you all heard the coordinates?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Then let's go."

...

...

...

As Erik and his team sped towards the coordinates, the sounds of explosions and gunfire grew steadily louder.

"I don't like this," the team's leader said.

"You would be a weirdo if you did!"

While rounding the last corner, the scene that appeared before their eyes made everyone's but Erik's stomach sink.

Most of the guards stationed outside the targeted building lay dead on the ground; their black masks were stained red.

"What the fu—" Shatterfist couldn't help but let out a swear as he saw the carnage. Brute Ape was uncharacteristically silent in shock.

Such a high number of casualties hinted at exceptional combat capability on the attackers' side, the rebels's side, and that was not good. It was a power they never showed—well, maybe just once, and it was clearly enough to make the rebels' threat level skyrocket.

News about the attack on the enlistment center was scarce and conflicting and few people knew about it, or had enough information to get an idea of the situation.

Erik ensured no surveillance video remained there or on the blackguards' servers. So, no one knew what exactly happened there.

In a sense, this was going to be the first official battle in which his Chimaeric Demons appeared.

Erik meticulously tuned his voice to be one of rage and disgust at the rebels.

"These fuckers... We will kill them all."

"Well said, Savage Blood. We will," Brute Ape said.

They moved. Erik and his team approached the battle scene.

The air was full of the sounds of explosions, and who knew what else. Most likely brain crystal powers.

Many blackguards were engaging the rebels attacking the building. Several blackguard vehicles were burning nearby, suggesting the initial surprise of the rebel attack went well, and that they target the vehicles to prevent anyone from fleeing.

But despite the overwhelming numbers of blackguards around, the situation looked grim for them. The others didn't like it, but Erik did.

Unfortunately, as they got closer, he saw the blackguards had formed a defensive line in front of the building's entrance, which had a massive boulder stuck in it.

The Chimaeric Demons might have rushed inside to capture Momentum, but that would have been problematic for the rebels, because they would have had to fight the blackguards outside alone.

The clones had to kill, but they had to protect at the same time.

But that was still slow, based on what Erik thought his clone would have done.

<It looks like June decided to tell the clones to slow down a bit.>

Erik, though, soon understood why by considering the circumstances and what June, Fischer, and the others knew.

The man might not have got the chance to enter the building if the rebels had. The blackguards would have been stopped from entering by the rebels standing in front of the door.

The others had to wait until Erik got there, though, if he was to enter without raising any suspicions.

Using his Instability brain crystal power, Erik sent a mental communication to June. Finding him among the many people in the vicinity was difficult, but he did.

<June.>

<Master.>

<I'm here. I will tell you when I'm inside the building. As soon as I do, you break the enemy lines and carry out the plan.>

<Understood, master.>

The situation was a chaotic mess. The blackguards were firing at the rebels, who were trying to rush through their positions, trying to keep them far from the entrance.

June orchestrated everything well because he made the troops retreat as soon as the bigger cluster of blackguards rushed out of the building, giving the illusion that the new manpower pushed the rebels back.

The only problem was that Momentum could have left the area or joined the defenses, and Erik didn't like it.

The rebels incurred some deaths; a lot were injured on the ground, but a dedicated group continued to press the attack, and that group comprised Erik's Chimaeric Demons.