

BIOLOGICAL 981

Chapter 981: Two unexpected guests

They were almost at the exit, but the situation so far had been not simple at all.

The two had to avoid as many battles as they could, conserving their mana and stamina. Richard had an easier time compared to Erik, but also he had to use a ton of the precious resources to help Erik.

The difference was that compared to the younger man, he couldn't refill his mana through level ups. Of course, he didn't know Erik had this ability, and wondered how he was able to keep up with this pace, considering how much mana he was using.

Despite Erik's powers and the prowess he showed during his escape from prison, the continuous fighting was taking its toll on the young man. Not physically, and neither in terms of mana.

It was Erik's mind that was wearing thin. Though his self-healing powers mended his wounds, the continuous pain he had been subjected to was making it hard for him to think.

He pushed on, knowing that stopping meant Richard's death and, of course, him ending up on a research table.

Erik threw up another ice wall behind him and Richard. That was meant to slow down the blackguards chasing them.

But, of course, it wouldn't hold for long without a steady supply of mana repairing or reinforcing it.

In fact, despite the many attempts he made, the blackguards were giving steady chase.

"Erik, how much further until the exit?" Richard was panting at that point, glancing over his shoulder to see if the blackguards were behind.

"Not far," Erik said. But in truth, he didn't exactly know how far they were. "Just a bit more. We need to keep going."

A thunderous crash resounded behind them as the blackguards shattered the ice wall. The blackguards destroyed another ice wall.

"Fuck! We have to move faster," Erik said, grabbing Richard's arm and pulling him forward.

The two sprinted down the corridor. They rounded another corner and stopped to a halt as five blackguards blocked their way.

Erik didn't hesitate. He launched himself at them, his movements a blur.

His first strike shattered a blackguard's skull. He spun and drove his fist into another's chest; the force bastion's armor making the process much easier. Each attack resulted in death.

A third guard lunged with a blade, but Erik sidestepped and snapped the man's neck. The last two guards tried to flank him, but Erik was too quick for them to complete the manoeuvre.

He grabbed one by the throat, lifting him off the ground and throwing him into his comrade.

Both hit the ground hard, but Erik jumped on them the following second, shattering their heads with a cruel stomp.

Richard watched in awe and horror, unable to look away from Erik's ruthless efficiency.

When the last guard fell, he noticed the younger man's face; he was not okay. He didn't get wounded, but he was fighting a lot, and that must have put him under a lot of pressure. Maybe only adrenaline was keeping him going.

"Erik, are you alright?"

Erik wiped the sweat from his brow. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. It's just all this fighting. It's getting to me."

Before Richard could respond, Erik addressed the biological supercomputer. <How far to the exit?>

<You need to pass through three more corridors.> The supercomputer's voice was calm.

<However, be warned: from the camera feeds, I can tell there are approximately 200 blackguards ahead, and among them are Zakir and... Volkov.>

Erik's eyes widened in shock. "Volkov and Zakir? What the hell are they doing here?"

Richard's brow furrowed. "What?" Why Erik said that, Richard didn't know. Volkov, Richard knew. How couldn't he after the long torture sessions he had to endure under him?

But who Zakir was, Richard did not know.

"A high-ranking officer. Ruthless, just like Volkov," Erik said. The number of blackguards made it clear Volkov was there. From what Erik understood, the guy was arrogant with the weak and coward with the strong.

Now that he had the blackguards backing him, Erik could only imagine how arrogant he became. Likely, he felt untouchable.

"They were expecting us. The blackguards must have realized the city gate attack was a ruse. They knew the actual target was always to free you, Richard. This number of blackguards is too much, even for a place like the Grand Ducal Prison."

Richard swallowed hard. "Yeah... Volkov said he was expecting you here."

"Yeah, I kind of assumed he said something like this, but I also thought the preparations they made were not specifically for me. That he simply made your room a trap for whoever might have come in, not that the Blackguards understood our plan."

"Yeah... Volkov is a shrewd motherfucker. So, what do we do now?"

Erik's gaze hardened. "We must keep fighting our way through. There is no other way for us to get out of this place, and my troops are fighting at the northern gate. They can't come to help us."

"Can you keep going?" Richard asked. That was the most pressing matter, the most important one, because if Erik couldn't, they were doomed.

"I can... but I'm not at full mana capacity right now."

"I know that, after the blackguards you killed and the mana you used, I still can't understand how you endured so long."

Erik grinned. "That's a secret of mine. Regardless, the fight ahead is going to be problematic, and I'm not sure I will be able to protect you. There are 200 blackguards there. Until now, aside from when we got out of the elevator, we never fought against this many people at once. They were less than now.

This means I need you to lend me a hand. Keep as many blackguards as you can distracted, kill whoever you can."

Richard nodded, but then his face turned somber. "I know you are aware of this, Erik, but Volkov won't be your run-of-the-mill opponent. There is a reason the blackguards were eager to ally with him. His brain crystal power is as powerful as Becker's, and his mana is vast. He is stronger than most blackguards."

"Well... I mean, how strong can he be compared to me?"

"In terms of physical strength and speed? He is an ant based on what I've seen. But his brain has crystal power; it will make your speed useless against him."

"I'm not that informed. What kind of brain crystal power does he have?" Erik asked.

"An elemental one, ranged at that. It allows him to make and control lightning."

That was problematic. Electricity and lightning were the fastest and among the most devastating powers one could have.

Erik had to find a solution to make Volkov's attacks useless. "Becker was said to be stronger than Volkov. How did he fight against him and win if he could control lightning?"

Richard thought about the last time the two fought.

"Well... Armand's power is peculiar. He controls wind, but he can also turn into it physically and manifest it as if it were solid. What he did was use the wind, creating some small and controlled storms around him to channel the lightning. But it was hard even for him."

<System, can I do something similar?>

<You can... You too have wind powers and can achieve similar effects to Becker's brain crystal power, but you also have frost powers. You might be able to create something that will attract the lightning and waste much less mana.>

"All right... I'll see what I can do," Erik said to both Richard and the biological supercomputer.

Chapter 982: Northern Gate's situation

Volkov's soldier died, another casualty on the blood-soaked battlefield.

June's breath was heavy, his muscles straining from the combat. He wasn't that strong; he had been created when Erik was much weaker, and on this battlefield, everyone was at least as strong as he was back then.

But at least he didn't rely on mana; he relied on his stamina to use the powers he had, and a healer could fix that up quickly.

June was on the battlefield because the rebels and the Red Palace members were having trouble fighting New Alexandria's troop.

Van Dyke's students were strong; they were the best Frant could offer, but they were not that many.

Despite their superior training and vastly more powerful brain crystal powers compared to the rebels, the Red Palace students and teachers could not fight on equal terms against this many people.

If it wasn't for June and the Chimaeric Demons taking care of the blackguards, they would have been annihilated a long time ago.

June reached for his communicator, issuing orders to the Chimaeric Demons.

"Alpha squad, flank the eastern line. Engage their ranged units and take them out before they can coordinate their fire. Beta Squad, form a defensive perimeter around the southern side of the front line. Do not let them reinforce the area. Gamma Squad, push through the center. Break their formations and create chaos."

The responses came quickly, with the Chimaeric Demons acknowledging the orders.

June could see them moving into position and carving a path through the blackguards' ranks.

Then he spotted a soldier charging at him, the enemy's blade raised high. June dodged the first attack and blocked the second one by growing a metal spike from his shoulder.

With the momentum, the clone spun around and gave the soldier a swift kick, knocking the wind out of him.

The guy stumbled, and June went for his neck with a diagonal slash. The jerk tried to block, but June saw it coming and quickly changed his move, smashing the enemy's defense with a powerful sword swing.

June's blade landed on the man's shoulder, making him go wide-eyed in shock as blood squirted out.

With a grimace, the man tried to fight back, swinging his weapon with all his might. June dodged the swing and kned the guy in the ribs, hearing them crack.

Then he delivered the killer blow, stabbing the blackguard right in the chest, the sword going through armor and flesh. The man's eyes glazed over, his body going limp as he fell to the ground.

The clone scoped out the area, trying to determine how the situation was within the battlefield.

Everything would have been easier if he turned into a wyvern, but unfortunately, June couldn't reveal his wyvern form—Erik's orders were clear on that, as he wanted to keep it secret. Honestly, Erik didn't want June to fight at all, but only coordinate the attacks.

But he had been adamant about that. The reason was that June was starting to feel inferior, given the scale of the battlefield.

He wanted to prove that he had more to give than simply make a couple of plans.

Though Erik told him not to fight, not to turn into a thaid, also because it would only make him a larger target. Instead, despite fighting, he relied on his skills and the Chimaeric Demons' abilities.

Back then, when Erik made him, the young man was weaker. That was true, but for sure, he knew how to swing a sword, and that ability got carried on with June.

As he was cleaning his brow from the bloodstains, June spotted a group of blackguards trying to rally their forces to defend the center from being breached.

He quickly gave the orders.

"Delta squad, I need you to reinforce Gamma's push through the center. Echo squad, secure the western flank, and prevent any attempts at encirclement. We're creating a funnel; force them into a kill zone."

The Chimaeric Demons responded. They tore through the enemy lines, but still, the blackguards kept coming, their numbers an overwhelming hindrance.

June paused for a moment, catching his breath. He looked around the battlefield, assessing the situation.

The rebels were doing okay, but they were getting pushed back by the wave of enemy troops.

The Chimaeric Demons were doing their best, but even their supernatural prowess had limits.

"June, we've got a problem," a voice crackled through his communicator. It was Van Dyke.

"The blackguards are reinforcing their positions faster than we can break them. We're running out of time and soldiers."

"Fuck..."

June's mind raced. They needed a game-changer to give them the upper hand. The clone quickly came out with something, though.

"All squads, listen up," June said into his communicator, his voice firm and resolute.

"We're shifting focus. Delta and Gamma, continue your assault on the center, but be ready to pivot. Beta and Alpha, I need you to create a diversion on the northern front. Echo, you're with me. We're going to hit their command center. Take out their leaders, and we might just turn this around."

June's communicator was filled by Van Dyke's voice. "June, are you out of your mind? The command center is way behind enemy lines. Going there is suicide, even for you and the Chimaeric Demons!"

June's gaze hardened. All around him, the bodies of fallen blackguards and rebels littered the ground.

The Chimaeric Demons fought valiantly, but their advance was slow, and the number of dead rebels was increasing.

"Listen, Tom," June said. "You have said it yourself that the blackguards are reinforcing their positions faster than we can break them. We need to disrupt their command structure. If we can take out their leaders, we might just solve the problem."

"June, you know how dangerous that is. You're talking about going deep into enemy territory. It's too risky! Besides, are you sure the Chimaeric Demons will be able to do that? The blackguards have many dual wielders!"

That was the term they were now using to refer to the enemy soldiers with two brain-crystal powers.

"Trust me, I have an idea."

Before Van Dyke could say something, June cut the communication short and switched channels, contacting Amber. The line buzzed for a moment before her voice came through.

"June, what do you need? "

"Amber, we need to pull off something drastic. I'm taking a squad to hit the command center. Can you and Mira create a diversion for us?"

There was a pause on the other end. "Are you sure about this? It's risky, and I will end up without mana."

"Yes. The fog doesn't need to be lethal. Just make sure it will make us less visible and will distract the enemy."

"Understood. We'll start the diversion right away. Good luck."

The line went dead, leaving June with his thoughts. He turned to his squad, his voice cutting through the chaos.

"Alright, listen up. We're hitting the command center. This means we might not come back from this one..."

Chapter 983: Strategies

<Do you have any ideas?> he asked the biological supercomputer.

<Yes,> the supercomputer said. <You can use your frost and wind powers in combination to create conductive and re-directive barriers. Here are the options you have:>

Erik focused as the supercomputer gave him ideas.

<First, you can create ice paths or objects laced with moisture. Moisture-laden ice can conduct electricity, creating a pathway that would attract Volkov's lightning away from you and Richard.>

He nodded. To do that, he could slightly ice the walls so that the lightning was going to stay away from him. The problem was that he wasn't exactly sure how much time it would take for the walls to moisturize enough to attract the lightning.

The system said it would work, but how effective would it be? Would he need to stay close to the walls?

<Second, generate a wind vortex. A whirlwind can serve as a barrier to divert lightning strikes away from you and Richard. This wind barrier would redirect the electrical energy, offering a measure of protection. This is the same thing Becker did, more or less.>

That was another good idea, one Erik knew it would work based on what Richard said. Though he knew that doing that would be the hardest among the options he had available, and that was just because of its mana consumption.

The bigger, faster, and stronger the winds he made were, the higher the mana expenditure on his brain crystal. Wind wasn't easy to use to begin with and was the most unpredictable and hard to control of all the elements he had at his disposal.

<Third, combine ice and wind. Create a funnel of ice within a wind vortex. This combination will channel the lightning into the ice, where it can be safely conducted away.>

But of course, that presented the same problems as before, if even more, since he would have to mingle ice with wind.

<Fourth, use ice pillars as lightning rods. Erect some tall ice structures at key points. These pillars should be able to attract and absorb lightning strikes.>

<This is not a bad idea at all.> But it was also the one Erik had in mind from the beginning. The pillars of ice were going to stay there for a while after he created them, likely able to absorb two or three attacks before he had to make them again.

Lightnings produced a lot of heat, after all. The biological supercomputer was not done yet, though.

<Fifth, consider frost armor. Coat yourself and Richard in a layer of ice. While not providing complete immunity, this armor will help diffuse the electrical energy, reducing its damage.>

The idea might work, but he might still be damaged, and if he didn't use enough mana to offset the one Volkov would use into the lightnings, he would get a ton of damage.

All in all, this was the riskiest move of it all, and that was without considering that, since he and Richard would be the only ones with the armor, the lightnings would be attracted by them.

<Alright,> Erik said to himself, while weighing the options. <We need to move fast.>

Erik turned to Richard. "I'm going to make some pillars. I won't make anything else since it would be too taxing on my mana, and I don't know how to solve the situation outside easily, so be careful where you stay. I will make sure you have a place where to hide, but from here on, your survival depends on you. "

Richard nodded. He trusted Erik, especially after seeing what he had done until now, but of course, he was nervous. It wasn't every day he had to fight 200 blackguards and Sinisa Volkov at the same time.

Erik showed he could handle this number of people, but they both had to consider the circumstances. It was true Erik defeated a lot of blackguards until now, but never in such an open place, and always where Erik could use the surroundings to his advantage.

"Got it."

After a while, the three corridors ended. Erik and Richard were in front of the exit door, the same one the younger man used to come into the prison.

There was no one there; most likely, everyone was outside, waiting for him.

Erik then turned to look at Richard; there was a serious look on his face.

"We have little time; we need to kill Volkov and Zakir and then get the hell out of here. The blackguards within the base are likely coming here, so if we don't want to find ourselves surrounded, we better do this fast."

"I'll assist as I can; I won't spare any mana."

Erik raised his hands, channeling mana into his Frostwind Fire brain crystal powers's neural links.

He focused, and tall pillars of ice sprouted in front of the prison's courtyard. The pillars towered over the blackguards waiting outside.

The sudden appearance of the ice structures startled the present.

Among them stood Volkov, his eyes narrowing as he understood what Erik wanted to do, but wondering how he could create such ice pillar.

Though the Blackguards told him, he could get how many brain crystals he wanted, so he wasn't that surprised he could also control ice.

However, it made the situation harder than he and the blackguards initially assumed. Despite how crazy he was, he was not stupid. He knew those pillars had been thought to counter his brain crystal power.

But even knowing that the pillars would complicate his use of lightning, a confident look remained on his face.

He was not alone. Beside him was Zakir, Dark Tendrils, whose presence alone was enough to bolster his confidence.

They were also surrounded by 200 blackguards; it was impossible for Erik to come out of this situation victorious, and if they stalled them for enough time, the blackguards coming to the entrance were going to reach them.

Volkov raised his voice. "Erik Romano has reached the exit. We're going to make him pay for daring to come to this place!"

A chorus of shouts erupted from the blackguards. They positioned themselves for the imminent fight, weapons drawn and eyes fixed on the prison's doors.

Inside, Erik and Richard stood ready. Erik kept manipulating mana and creating ice pillars.

"Break them apart!" Volkov said, and the blackguards started doing just that.

But the sheer number of pillars Erik created was incredible. They filled the whole courtyard outside.

But as many as the pillars were, there were also many blackguards. Though Erik would not make the pillars easily breakable.

With a last gesture, the prison doors opened, revealing the imposing figures of the blackguards and their leaders waiting outside.

But Erik had one more trick up his sleeve.

Instead of rushing out to face their enemies, Erik told Richard to conjure up a tall stone wall in front of the exit. So that they could at least avoid the frontal assault they were going to receive.

The heavy stone rose quickly, blocking the blackguards' view.

"What the—?" One of the blackguards said, looking to Volkov for direction.

"Richard Stone... Attack!"

Chapter 984: Unexpected Strength

They went behind the stone wall, leaning their backs against it.

"I just need you to attack from afar and distract them," Erik said.

Richard struggled to hear amidst the barrage of attacks raining down on the wall.

"Do nothing dangerous, Richard, or the whole point of coming here to get you out would have been pointless!"

Richard nodded, and then Erik channeled mana into his Frostwind Fire tempest brain crystal power.

A dense cloud of vapor formed around him, spreading throughout the courtyard.

As the heavy mist settled, it created a shroud of obscurity that would make it challenging for the enemy to detect Richard.

Visibility dropped to nearly zero. "What the hell is this?" one of them shouted.

"I can't see a thing!"

Erik took a deep breath. "It's time."

Richard nodded.

Erik came out of the wall, though invisible this time. Since he had many people to kill, he couldn't hold himself. Besides, the sheer number of enemy blackguards required him to avoid taking damage as best as possible.

Volkov tried to flood the battlefield with his lightning, but they got absorbed by the pillars Erik made, and that some of the blackguards were trying to destroy. However, all of that pushed Erik to pump more mana into them, increasing his mana expenditure.

He created another ice pillar after one got destroyed.

Richard remained behind the wall, using all his mana to keep it up and killing any man or woman who tried to approach.

The cloud of vapor was working. The blackguards had to take aim to kill him, but he could simply unleash stone projectiles to kill someone. He didn't need to hide, because he knew he would hit someone.

Besides, the number of people combined with the thick vapor made it impossible for them to see what Richard did, and making it challenging to see Erik or spot any attack.

Erik found Volkov through the mist. Beside him, Zakir waited.

But despite being invisible and shrouded by the mist, the younger man and Volkov seemed to see him. "What the fuck?"

<Volkov is using his electricity to generate an electromagnetic field. He can perceive almost everything inside of it. >

<Yes, but why does Zakir seem to look at me too?>

<Based on what I can see, there is some small hair on the tendrils. They are able to perceive the wind moving, at least, and Volkov must be helping him with the field he created. I can't give you a detailed answer given the little information I collected through visual clues alone.>

<Would the analysis do the job?>

<I doubt.>

While grimacing, Erik unleashed a wind blade, directing it towards Volkov and Zakir.

The wind carried shards of ice, which killed some of the blackguards who were out of the blade trajectory. The attack was like using a sword and a shotgun at the same time.

Though these guys weren't weak, most of them fended off the attack.

Volkov reacted to the wind blade, raising his hand to summon lightning. But as the lightning crackled and arced through the air, it was drawn to the ice pillars Erik had placed.

The electricity clung to the moisture-laden ice, diverting away from him.

"Fuck!"

The man jumped and avoided the attack just at the right time. He would have been dead if not for his quick reflexes.

"That's a clever tactic, Erik! But I'm not some weak ass fighter!"

Zakir then ran toward him.

He stretched out his tendrils to gain crazy speed while moving and using the other blackguards as stepping stones. That was not just forward, but also straight upward.

At the same time, Erik lunged, closing the distance between him and Volkov. The difference was that Erik had to get past a myriad of blackguards.

Regardless, blood spilled.

[LEVEL UP.]

"Keep him distracted!" Volkov said.

Zakir moved with terrifying speed. At that point, he was at striking range.

The tendrils lashed out at Erik. Zakir was strong in close-quarter combat, but his real power was in middle range, and that was exactly where he remained.

"Fuck!"

Erik had to avoid a massive fire attack made by a blackguard, who wasn't even aiming at him but at Richard. If it wasn't for Force Bastion's armor, he would have been burned.

As Erik regained his footing, the tendrils attacked again, sending him crashing to the ground. There were too many people.

Erik sent another wind blade to the blackguards, who summoned a barrier as soon as they saw the wind blade manifesting.

Though the ones closest to Erik died, around 20 people.

[LEVEL UP.]

The guards crumpled to the ground in a pool of their own blood. The wind blade made it obvious where Erik was. Volkov already told them he was invisible, and as trained as they were, the blackguards started understanding what they had to do to kill him.

A blackguard lunged at where Zakir and Volkov told them to attack, and Erik responded with a rapid punch to the throat. The Force Bastion's force waves took care of the man's head.

Eighty blackguards died, until that point, also thanks to Richard, who was still killing the blackguards as he could and making the situation easier for Erik.

Then Zakir attacked again. Erik barely had time to avoid the strike as he jumped from the spot he was on.

His mana was draining. He had to keep the mist going, the pillars tall, the armor on at all times, and at the same time, attack and kill.

Besides, Zakir proved to be much better than Erik assumed.

"This is the difference between a human and a Thaid. They make their strength much deadlier than theirs when at the same level."

Unfortunately, it was rare for a person to reach such high levels. Otherwise, the Thaid's would have been all dead already.

Zakir kept chasing Erik all over the battlefield. "These fucking things are very problematic."

Erik gave a hateful look at the man's tendrils.

Then Erik looked around; if it wasn't for him having to avoid all these attacks, he would have already killed Zakir and Volkov.

Volkov was currently impaired by Erik's pillars, but what he couldn't do, he could tell the others to do. Each individual blackguard was too weak to even see Erik move. But with the man's ability, he could simply say, 'attack here, attack there, make a barrier'.

That was why Erik was still stuck in the prison courtyard.

At that point, though, Erik sensed more people coming from the base.

<Fuck!>

[LEVEL UP.]

More blood got to the ground.

Erik reached out to Richard with his instability brain crystal power.

<Richard.>

Chapter 985: Lightning and Tendrils

<I have telepathic abilities, Richard. Listen to me now. I will give you a chance; leave the battlefield. I can't keep fighting like this, and I can't completely unleash my power if I have to keep you safe.>

<If I do, all the attacks will be on you.> It was weird for Richard to talk to Erik this way, but regardless, he had to do it.

<Don't worry. Even if the situation is complicated, this is nothing I can't take care of. But that is only if 122 people fight. The problem is that I can tell that at least 300 blackguards are coming from the base. You must leave regardless.>

[LEVEL UP.]

Erik kept killing during the entire conversation.

Thought-conversations were much faster than normal ones. This whole discussion was happening in a couple of seconds.

Erik kept dashing around, but the fight was becoming harder since Volkov was figuring out how to counter the mist and Erik's invisibility.

<All right... How do you plan to give me the chance?>

<I will make copies of you and... take off my invisibility.>

Richard was seriously thinking Erik was crazy, especially because the illusions within the base were still keeping the blackguards inside away from here. Those thoughts, of course, went to him.

<I'm not crazy.>

<You heard it?>

<Just get the hell out of here, Richard.>

With that, Erik made the illusions and took off his invisibility, but the mist became much stronger than before.

The effect of Erik's invisibility dissipated, and he became fully visible to the blackguards. In an instant, pandemonium erupted on the battlefield.

"There he is!" Volkov said. His shout directed all the attention toward the man. Lightning crackled as Volkov summoned another bolt, aiming for Erik.

Erik's muscles tensed, and he leapt to the side. The lightning bolt struck the pillar of ice behind which Erik hid.

Zakir didn't wait, either. His tendrils lashed out. He wanted to snare Erik and get his revenge for the humiliation he faced three years before.

Erik dove low, rolling to avoid the grasping appendages. One tendril skimmed past his ear, and he twisted his body to dodge another that came sweeping in from the left.

Erik's senses heightened as he sidestepped a sword thrust, the blade whistling past his ribs. He pivoted, evading a heavy mace swing aimed at his head.

"Fuck, this is harder than I thought."

Volkov was growing impatient. It looked like Erik Romano was playing with them—123 blackguards and the most powerful man in Frant, him. "Surround the fucker!"

Erik's eyes darted around, assessing the situation. He had to keep moving and keep the pressure off Richard.

He spotted a group of blackguards converging from his right and dashed left, slipping between two attackers.

One swung a spear at his back, but he dropped to the ground, sliding beneath the weapon. Then he avoided a laser bolt.

The blackguards couldn't use them at this point since they would only kill their comrades if they did. That was also true for some kind of brain crystal powers.

Erik knew that, and he was taking advantage of that fact. But of course, the blackguards could always make it so that he ended up in a place where ranged attacks became possible.

A blackguard lunged at him with a dagger, but Erik spun on his heel, dodging the strike and delivering a swift kick to the guard's knee, making him fall.

He heard the crackle of lightning again and threw himself behind another ice pillar, which absorbed the strike meant for him.

In the meantime, Zakir attacked him, using his tendrils to move in impossible and weird ways and whip at him at the same time.

Erik jumped back as a tendril whipped past his face, then dove as another came from above. He rolled to the side, narrowly avoiding a third that aimed for his legs.

"He's too fast!" Volkov grimaced. "Destroy those fucking pillars, you morons!"

Erik glanced toward Richard's position, seeing his illusions in action. Multiple copies of the old man moved through the mist.

The real Richard moved among the crowd. But it wasn't easy for the older man. He still had to fend off those who saw him, and they weren't a few, nor were they weak.

Erik took a deep breath, focusing again on evading the swarm of attacks. A sword arced toward his neck, but he bent backward, the blade missing by a hair's breath.

He straightened, blocking a punch with his forearm and countering with a swift elbow to the attacker's jaw.

Volkov unleashed another surge of lightning. Erik created a quick ice barrier, but this time, the electricity split and arced around it, forcing Erik to dive to the ground.

He then rolled to his feet, sprinting toward a group of blackguards, using their bodies as shields against the lightning. He turned, seeing that the blackguards had destroyed many of the pillars.

"Fuck."

He channeled mana again, and then he made some new ones, but his mana dwindled. Volkov looked at him with fury blazing in his eyes.

Zakir lunged at him again, his tendrils extending.

Erik jumped, flipping over the tendrils, and landed in a crouch, hurrying to avoid the next attack.

His instability brain crystal power flared because he heard the thoughts of a blackguard coming from the inside of the prison.

<They are almost here.>

That distracted him a little, because a blackguard he didn't notice swung an axe at him, and he ducked, the heavy blade burying itself in the ground. Though, he almost got hit.

<Fuck, I can't get distracted.>

Erik then sidestepped a spear thrust, then kicked the weapon from the guard's hand. A tendril whipped toward his face, and he leaned back, feeling the rush of air as it missed him.

<C'mon, Richard!>

<I'm almost there!>

Erik's heart pounded as he evaded another lightning strike, then spun to avoid a pair of blackguards who tried to flank him.

He kicked one in the chest, sending him crashing into his comrades.

"GET HIIIM!"

Erik turned to look at Richard. He was having too much trouble getting out.

"Shit!" Erik channeled mana again and increased the amount of mist inside the courtyard. Visibility was almost zero at that point.

He heard a frustrated roar from Volkov as another lightning strike was absorbed by an ice pillar the man didn't see.

<I'M OUT!>

"FINALLY!"

Chapter 986: Point Blank Wind Blade

"No, man... It's you who won't escape this!"

Erik channeled mana once again into his Frostwind Fire Tempest brain crystal power's neural links.

His eyes were filled with resolve and murderous intent as he felt the familiar surge of power building within him and simultaneously avoided the myriad of attacks raining down on him from all directions.

He knew he had to make the next move count. With Richard out of prison, it was time to go all out. He didn't know if his mana was going to be enough to kill all the blackguards here, but if he killed enough, he would level up, and that would replenish his mana, making another attack possible.

He smirked.

"Now, it's my turn, Volkov!"

The blackguards tightened their circle around Erik. Zakir's tendrils got ready for whatever his opponent was planning to do.

Erik didn't waste a single moment and started channeling mana into his Frostwind Fire tempest brain crystal power's neural links, feeling the energy streaming from the brain crystal to the rest of the body.

Erik leapt back, narrowly avoiding a lightning bolt that split the air where he had stood, and where he created a thick pillar of ice to protect himself.

At the same time, Zakir's tendrils lashed out, but Erik moved with blinding speed, powered by his Force Bastion brain crystal power, giving him the edge he needed to avoid the opponent's mana powered strikes.

The Blackguards closed in, but Erik danced between them, avoiding their attacks and killing people at the same time.

He couldn't allow the blackguards to understand his strategy, otherwise the attack would be rendered useless. Erik needed to keep them in the dark to exploit the biological supercomputer's ability to restore his mana with each level up, and that required casualties.

Erik's plan required nearly all of his mana reserves. This was the only way to eliminate as many blackguards as possible, especially those with defensive or semi-defensive powers who could otherwise thwart his attack.

The defense would be even more effective, considering there were at least 20 people with defensive or semi-defensive powers.

"He's charging up something big!" Volkov said. His voice was tinged with panic. "Don't let him finish!"

The courtyard buzzed with the crackle of electricity and the clash of weapons hitting weapons. Erik kept killing blackguards, but not so fast as to get out of that place. Not that he wanted, not yet at least.

Zakir lunged, his tendrils slashing through the mist, but Erik sidestepped the attack, channeling even more mana into his power. But it was too late.

Finally, Erik was ready. He released a massive explosion; the fire fanned by the wind.

Chaos erupted from him as scorching flames engulfed the courtyard and the blackguards within it.

Blackguards screamed in surprise and terror as the explosion tore through their ranks. Many were caught off guard, unable to react in time.

But Volkov's scream made many react. Protective barriers shimmered, some, but very few, shattered, and buildings crumbled under the force of the blast.

[LEVEL UP.]

The prison's entrance and the courtyard in front of it were almost destroyed, but that was good, because it would make it harder for those inside the prison to get out.

As the dust settled, Erik surveyed the devastation. Bodies lay scattered, but at least half of the blackguards, along with Volkov and Zakir, shielded themselves from the worst of the explosion.

Volkov's face was a mask of shock and fury. "You... How did you...?"

Zakir's tendrils twitched, but there was uncertainty in his eyes. "He's exhausted himself. Now's our chance!"

Erik's lips almost curled into a smirk. They thought he was weakened. Little did they know, the leveling up from his attack had replenished his mana reserves.

<Think again.>

"Attack! Finish him now!"

The remaining blackguards charged, sure that their comrades inside were rushing outside the building.

It was just a matter of minutes before they reached the courtyard, and at that point, no matter how powerful Erik Romano was, He would not get out of this.

Erik knew the blackguards thought he was done for and that he exhausted his mana, and tried to capitalize on this knowledge.

He slowed down his movements because he knew, based on Zakir's and Volkov's personalities, that they were going to jump into the first line, just to have the honor of beating him up.

A blackguard swung at him with a mace, but Erik dove under the blow and delivered a powerful uppercut, shattering the blackguards' heads.

But he refrained from using mana now, aside from keeping the ice pillars up. Volkov's brain crystal power was still dangerous. That was the reason he was slowly trying to get closer to him.

That was what Erik had in mind. He wanted to clear the view enough to get a shot at killing Volkov. If he did, the man would die.

Zakir was the first to approach him, though, as he was the craziest of the two, and that was honestly quite an achievement, considering how mad Volkov was.

<Now, I have to take care of him.>

Tendrils whipped toward Erik, but he sidestepped. Zakir roared in frustration, unleashing his other tendrils.

But no matter how he tried, Erik avoided them. The Force Bastion was still on, after all, making Erik stronger, but most importantly, faster. However, there was a limit to what his physical strength could do.

Volkov summoned another bolt of lightning, but Erik anticipated the move, creating an ice barrier that absorbed the strike.

Then, there was a fraction of a second in which there was no one standing between him and Volkov. That wasn't an accident. Erik did his best to let his opponents move as he wanted.

There was also a clear line between them, and that was enough for him.

<You will pay for this error dearly, Volkov!>

Erik channeled a small but fast wind blade. The power was not a lot, but it was going to be fast enough for the attack to reach Volkov without defenses put up.

The wind blade traveled and found its mark. The blade severed Volkov's head from his body. At that point.

[SINISA VOLKOV KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING CONVERTING PROCEDURE.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 22759 EXPERIENCE POINTS AND 227.6 DNA POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

Zakir's eyes widened. "No. This isn't possible."

Chapter 987: Revenge's taste

Erik unleashed another wind blade point blank. It was fast, small, and utterly unavoidable for the man.

[ZAKIR NGUYEN KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY ABSORBED, STARTING THE CONVERSION PROCEDURE.]

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

[MANA SUCCESSFULLY CONVERTED INTO EXPERIENCE. 22464 EXPERIENCE POINTS AND 224.65 DNA POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

"I did it... I finally did it."

There were no words to express what Erik felt. Volkov, the man who tortured his father to death, was now on the ground, without his head, and Zakir Nguyen, Dark Tendrils, he was dead as well.

Erik felt a strange mix of emotions washing over him. The taste of revenge was bittersweet.

Killing Volkov had been his goal, his single-minded obsession, since his father died, that he had hardly allowed himself to think about what would come after.

Winning felt great, but something was missing. Now that he had gotten his revenge, he didn't know what to do next.

He felt like he had been chasing a ghost through a long tunnel, and now that he had caught it, he was standing alone in the light, feeling confused and disoriented.

Richard was safe, and both Zakir and Volkov were finally dealt with.

But Erik didn't know what was going to happen now that the dictator was dead. The only certain thing was that Volkov's death would cripple the blackguards' operations in Frant, at least to a certain extent.

The dust was still around him, but then it settled on the ground.

Erik's eyes darted to the holes in the prison walls. The blackguards inside finally reached the exit, but since the door got blasted, they could only come out from the wall breaches.

Erik did what he had to, but the blackguards' target was still there in front of them. They couldn't hide, they couldn't retreat.

However, their presence meant that Erik's odds at winning had just tipped overwhelmingly against him.

Even with his replenished energy, the number of opponents was too great for him to handle alone.

With Zakir and Volkov out of the picture, the largest problem had been removed. Richard escaped, and now it was Erik's turn to leave.

The blackguards still in the courtyard were stunned by the sight that met their eyes. Volkov was dead. Erik Romano was alive amidst a bloody carnage.

Erik seized his chance and began carving a path through the blackguards in front of him.

He channeled most of his mana into his Force Bastion brain crystal power's neural links, which boosted his speed and defence.

Each step he took sent a blackguard dead on the ground. There was nothing they could do to stop him. Of course, that was because the blackguards in front of him were few. Those behind, well, they were much more.

[LEVEL UP.]

Erik charged through their ranks and picked up Volkov's head along the way.

<This will be useful.>

Erik held Volkov's head between his arms, the man's eyes wide and unseeing, his mouth frozen in a silent scream.

The young man glanced at the lifeless head. The sight gave him cold satisfaction.

"You won't be missed," Erik said with a smile. Then he got out of the cluster of opponents surrounding him.

He sprinted towards the courtyard's outskirts. The blackguards came out of the prison rushing like ants, but they could do nothing to reach him. He was too far now.

He vaulted over a crumbling low wall, then turned to look at the remaining men and women chasing him, while some attacked him from a distance.

"Next time, hire better guards!" Erik said.

Reaching the edge of the prison complex, Erik jumped over the wall and landed on the other side.

There was a narrow alleyway in front of him. It was dark, so Erik took his chance and went through it.

<I need to find Richard now.>

The man had escaped, but the chances of him being chased by a blackguard or intercepted by patrols were a genuine concern for Erik.

Erik channeled mana through his Instability brain crystal power's neural links, reading the minds of those around him to see if someone saw him.

Snippets of fear and confusion flooded his mind. It was obvious considering the huge fight that took place so close to these citizens' homes.

<I told him to go to the Red Palace. If he did what I said, then there is only one route that would have made him reach the institution fast enough for him to escape the blackguards.>

Erik decided to follow the same route Richard would have taken. With his superior speed, it wouldn't take long for him to catch up.

The problem was that the blackguards were chasing him, and since they couldn't match his pace on foot, Erik knew they would soon resort to vehicles.

Erik went through the alley and later emerged onto a broader street, scanning the area before darting into another side street.

<I've got to hurry,> he thought, his legs pumping harder as he picked up speed.

After having turned a corner, Erik spotted a figure running, but not nearly as fast as him. It was Richard. Relief washed over Erik as he closed the distance between them.

"Richard!"

Richard turned, his face lighting up. "Erik! You made it!"

"Of course."

"What happened? Where is Volkov?" But then the man looked at the head in Erik's hands.

"You killed him?"

"I did..."

"But why did you bring his head?" Not knowing how his powers worked, Richard got the wrong idea.

"Do you want to prove you killed him?"

"Yes..."

The two remained silent for a few seconds.

Then Richard nodded. "Let's go."

...

The two of them moved. The sound of engines grew louder behind them.

"They took the cars?"

"You are underestimating how much the blackguards want to put their hands on me."

Erik knew the city well. He guided Richard through a maze of alleys and backstreets, but the older man was having trouble keeping up with him.

Erik glanced at Richard and noticed the sweat glistening on his face. His eyes looked strained.

"Are you ok?"

"Ah... yes... It's just that I spent a lot of mana and fought a lot. I have little energy left."

"As soon as we get to safety, you will have your chance to rest."

Then Richard turned to look at Erik. "How are Emily and Lucy?"

The man's thoughts turned to his family. Now that he was so close to go back to them, he couldn't stop it.

"They are safe," Erik said. "Lucy is still at Liberty Watch; Emily is here in New Alexandria."

Richard's eyes widened in surprise when he heard where Emily was. "Did you just say Emily is in New Alexandria?"

He wasn't thrilled by the idea of Emily being at the heart of the conflict.

"She basically forced me!"

Chapter 988: On the Run

That also created an awkward tension between the two, who remained silent for a while.

As that silence stretched out, they kept sprinting through New Alexandria's streets and alleys.

Apparently, the blackguards didn't find them yet. But it was just a matter of time given they were using flying cars, and they were bound to spot them from above sooner or later.

Erik, in truth, had an easy way to get out of this predicament. He could simply turn into a fly after having absorbed Volkov's brain crystal and DNA.

The problem was that Richard couldn't. Erik was scared, and sure, of course, that if he left the man alone, he would be captured again.

Richard was strong and for sure knew how to fight, but he could not fight against five blackguards at the same time, even less if they were more, and that was likely to happen if they found him.

As if on cue, engines roared above them. Erik and Richard stopped, snapping their heads up to find the source of the noise.

That's when they saw them. Flying cars were hovering above them, and based on how they were moving, it looked like they spotted them.

"Fuck..."

Five sleek black cars descended from the sky, blocking the crossroads at the end of the street. Two seconds later, from each car came out five blackguards with brain-crystal rifles in their hands.

"Get to cover!" Erik said, tossing Volkov's head to Richard.

The man fumbled with the head, almost dropping it twice before finally getting a firm grasp on it.

With a graceless leap, he dove behind a nearby building wall, landing in a heap just as the blackguards opened fire.

"Great timing," he said.

At that point, one could have said someone threw fireworks into the street because it lit up like a Christmas tree.

But the lights weren't regular bulbs, they were blazing lasers.

Erik's movements became a blur at that point. He had much more space to move, compared to when he was in front of the prison courtyard, clearly because there were fewer people, and thanks to that and his Force Bastion brain crystal power, he dodged each laser easily.

The blackguards observed the scene with utter shock, their eyes wide and mouths agape. They didn't see Erik fight back at the prison.

At that point, they weren't even trying to aim at Erik. Instead, their laser rifles were shooting light in all directions to hit their target. Their struggles failed.

Erik was a blur, an afterimage that moved from place to place in a matter of seconds.

His speed and agility made it impossible for them to aim at him, let alone hit him. The blackguards saw him undoubtedly getting closer.

"SHOOT! SHOOT!"

"KILL HIM!"

"I CAN'T AIM AT HIM! HE IS TOO FAST!"

Erik closed the gap between him and the blackguards with one last push. He reached them before they were able to react.

Then he moved as the first blackguard raised his rifle at him. He dodged the beam of energy aimed at him and punched the man's gut.

The force bastion was at work, and Erik was using it to create spiked gauntlets.

This made it easy for him to kill his opponent. Erik then spun and threw a sharp elbow to the back of the blackguard's behind, breaking its neck.

"HELP! HELP ME!"

Shouts and grunts reverberated through the streets, but none of them came from Erik, who was remaining in zealous silence while he killed the blackguards one by one.

Erik dove behind one of the blackguards. The guy was trying to kill him with a sword.

At that point, it became awkward for him to look at the blackguards attempt to fight him. It became the same for the blackguards, though it was also dreadfully embarrassing for them.

Erik made a lightning-fast strike at the man's head, making it explode.

Then he yanked the gun barrel of a nearby blackguard to the side, kicked the man, breaking his legs, and used the rifle to fire a series of wild shots that always found their marks in the middle of any blackguard's head.

One of his opponents tried to stop him, only to end up with his head blown.

Four and five blackguards, in the remaining seconds they had before Erik set his aim on them, fired together. Erik jumped to the side between the beams and fired his weapon.

After seeing his allies fall, the last blackguard tried to flee, but Erik turned to him and shot him in the back of the head. Then silence fell over the battlefield.

"Richard, it's safe now!"

The older man left his hiding place, seeing Erik standing in the middle of a bloodied street.

Bodies were everywhere. Richard wasn't surprised by such sights anymore at that point and went toward him.

He gave a nod to Erik and gave him back Volkov's head.

"Can you drive one of these?" Erik asked, pointing to a car.

Richard nodded.

"Yes, I can."

Erik quickly stooped to grab three brain crystal rifles from the ground. He then went to the car and checked the dashboard from the driver's seat to see if the keys were still there.

Thankfully, they were. He quickly threw the brain crystal rifles onto the back seat, their metallic bodies clattering against the car's interior.

"You drive then."

They quickly got in the car. Erik sat beside Richard, who was in the driving seat, and who turned the engines on. The car lifted off the ground and flew into the air.

They saw New Alexandria's maze of buildings and streets below them. There were a lot of blackguards around and converging to their positions.

"Where to now?" Richard asked.

"We must go somewhere where we will be able to split up. I will grab the blackguards' attention; in the meantime, you must reach this place. Erik then showed Richard an address on his phone. "

"All right then."

Chapter 989: A tasty candy

However, Erik had to tell Richard something. It was imperative that the man brought the brain crystal rifles with him, because it would make Richard's survival chances much higher.

Besides, it would make him consume mana slower. The man could focus only on creating walls and constructs to defend himself rather than attack, which would make it simpler for him to kill his opponents.

"Those brain crystal rifles are for you," Erik said, breaking the silence. He gestured to the back seat, where the rifles lay.

"Use them if the blackguards find you when we split up."

Richard glanced at the weapons, then back at Erik. "I will, but are you sure about this plan? You think you can draw them away?"

"I'll make sure of it. They won't be able to resist chasing me; I'm the most wanted man on the planet, and they have some special reasons for wanting to apprehend me. If we split up, you'll have a better chance of reaching the Red Palace."

Richard nodded, his jaw set.

"Then I'll trust your judgment. If Noah had been able to plan that well for the attack on Fasard, since he says you are much smarter than him, then I bet you will do even better than you just said."

Erik nodded back. They didn't stop flying; the city lights became blurry streaks as they headed to their destination.

<Erik, you've got some notifications you haven't seen.>

<Is this really the right time?> Erik asked.

<Yes.>

<Show me then...>

[ENEMY HUMANS KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMANS KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

[ENEMY HUMANS KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

...

[ENEMY HUMANS KILLED: MANA ABSORBING PROCESS STARTING.]

There were 25 notifications like this. It was nothing Erik had already seen a lot during that day.

But there was another, a more significant one, among them.

[LEVEL UP.]

Erik was disappointed. These were not special notifications. He wondered why the system wanted him to see them.

<Why did you point these notifications out?>

<Because you have 115 stat points to allocate, Erik. You leveled quite a lot today.>

<Right, then allocate them all to energy, and then let me see the status.>

<All right then.>

—

[Host Information]

NAME: Erik Romano

AGE: 18

POWER LEVEL: 947

SYSTEM LEVEL: 220

EXPERIENCE: 77649/537840.96

DNA POINTS: 190075.18

HEALTH: 20840/20840

MANA: 18567/20770

{Attributes}

STRENGTH: 354

INTELLIGENCE: 286

DEXTERITY: 334

ENERGY: 1037

Available Attributes points: 0

{Powers}

[Biological Super Computer 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]

-Plant Master: A₁3B-RANKED

-Vibration Burst: A_π3A-RANKED

-Chimaeric Demon: A_v1X-RANKED

-Self-Healing: A_μ1A-RANKED

-Instability: A_λ2B-RANKED

-Sword Conjuring: A_σ1D-RANKED

-Replication: A_σ1A-RANKED

-Phantom Veil: A_π1A-RANKED

-Frostwind Fire Tempest: A_σ1A-RANKED

-Force Bastion: A_σ1B-RANKED

-Mend Wounds: A_σ1B-RANKED

{Skills}

-Kyokar hand-to-hand style (MASTER)

-Etrium's sword style (ADVANCED)

-Crypt of the Desert Style (MASTER)

—

<That's good. Being A-rank and all of that.>

<Right, but since you have the weird taste of battling hundreds of people at the same time, it's not like it makes a difference for you. What you are usually trying to do is kill hundreds of people with the same energy as a single person.>

<Right, it's not like they left me a choice, right?>

<Indeed,> the biological supercomputer said. <But it's not like you do the smartest of the things: run away. You fight them.>

At that, Erik remained silent. <By the way, I suggest you take Volkov's DNA and brain crystal. It would be better for you to get rid of the head as soon as possible.>

<Richard is here; I can't do it in front of him.>

Then, the system did something that was the equivalent of looking at Erik with a confused face.

Well, that was considering there wasn't really a face the system could make, but the AI was very good at conveying his confusion.

<You did it in front of Amber, Mira, and Emily; what is the difference now?>

<Well, for starters, I went to bed with all three, and, you know, they saw me in pretty awkward situations before. Besides, because they are young, they have an open mind, which Richard, because of his age, might not have...>

<Just do it, Erik. What's the worst he can do, trying to kill you? You already have a long list of people who want to kill you. Besides, Richard won't say anything; he would be too disgusted to even talk.>

<If you say so... Then I will trust your judgment...>

Erik leaned back, trying to steady his mind and hoping Richard wouldn't freak out while driving. He reached into the back seat and grabbed Volkov's bloody head.

Richard's eyes widened slightly as Erik casually split the head in half over his mouth, letting the blood pour into his mouth.

[SINISA VOLKOV'S DNA ACQUIRED. STARTING THE ANALYSIS.]

[ANALYSIS COMPLETE.]

[500 DNA POINTS ARE REQUIRED TO EXTRACT THE DNA. 1500 TO GET IT WITHOUT INCURRING PAIN AND LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS.]

In the meantime, Richard had a shocked and disgusted look on his face.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!"

It wasn't just the act of drinking a man's blood and brain matter that was the problem; what was jarring was the sheer nonchalance with which Erik did it.

It was almost as if he had done it many times already. In truth, the man wasn't wrong to think so.

Erik turned to look at the man, the mix of blood and brain matter still dripping down his chin. "Keep driving, Richard," he said with a blank face.

Then Erik extracted the brain crystal from Volkov's head and ate it.

[SINISA VOLKOV'S BRAIN CRYSTAL ACQUIRED. STARTING THE ANALYSIS.]

[ANALYSIS COMPLETE.]

[500 DNA POINTS ARE REQUIRED TO EXTRACT THE POWER. 1500 TO GET IT WITHOUT INCURRING PAIN AND LOSS OF CONSCIOUSNESS.]

<System, absorb them both.>

<All righty.>

Chapter 990: Erik's Broadcast

"Pay attention to the road, Richard!"

"So-sorry."

But then Richard thought about the situation, and not much later, he connected the dots.

That was how Erik was able to get brain crystal powers. That was further proved when Erik started producing lightning between his fingers, almost as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Richard shook his head. "Is this how...?"

Erik smirked. "Yes."

They continued their flight in silence for a few moments. The distant sounds of explosions and fights started becoming clearer.

Erik didn't know what was happening at the northern gate, but the battle seemed to have ended up inside the city.

<System, send a message to Van Dyke through my phone, and tell them that Richard is heading to the tunnel. Tell him to send personnel to pick him up, and most importantly, to not shoot him in the head once they see him.>

<All right.>

Then Erik turned to Richard.

"Listen, Richard." The younger man's tone became serious.

"When we split up, focus on defense if the blackguards find you; create walls, construct anything to keep them off your back. But try not to grab their attention. The location I'm sending you can be reached through the park, so stick to the trees and don't go anywhere near the buildings. Also, hide inside bushes."

"Who have you taken me for?"

"Right..."

Richard's grip on the controls relaxed slightly. "You too, make sure not to get killed."

Erik gave a confident nod. "Don't worry about me. I've got a few tricks up my sleeve."

"I've seen that..."

Finally, Richard and Erik reached the park. From there, Erik was going to walk around and later head for the northern gate.

Of course, he was going to lure the blackguards as best as he could. Actually, he had a pretty funny idea about how to do that.

Richard glanced at Erik one last time. "This is it, then."

Erik nodded. The hardest part of all of this had already been made, saving private Richard. And yet, the most important one of the entire mission had yet to be carried out.

The most important one wasn't necessarily the hardest one. Indeed, it wasn't because Erik was going to be alone.

"Richard."

"Yes?"

"Don't die. It would have made all of this really futile."

With that, they descended toward a secluded area near the park. Erik jumped out of the car and left Richard behind.

The older man also got out, after having parked, but contrary to Erik, who went toward the streets, Richard walked inside the park and disappeared behind the trees.

<System, are there cameras nearby?>

<Yes. What are you thinking about?>

<You will see.>

New Alexandria's streets were mostly silent, but there were people within, half-emptied, so not that silent, but nothing compared to how it was before Volkov came.

Most of the people were the tyrant's soldiers, blackguards, and a few scattered citizens milling about.

The soldiers were tense; they received words of the attack on the prison and got told the blackguards were having troubles, but not much was known. The blackguards kept all information in check.

At the same time, the attack at the northern gate escalated, and the rebels somehow breached the gate and flooded the city.

Besides, words that what could only be defined as demons appeared on the battlefield spread among the soldiers. The blackguards kept them at bay, but only up to a certain point.

The rebels also did something really daring while still outside, and they basically destroyed the command center at the northern gate. After that, the situation plunged into chaos.

Inside the city, the situation was still relatively calm, but it would not last for long.

The rebels were gaining ground. It was to the point that Volkov's soldiers started employing mechas and vehicles to kill them, of course, all powered up by brain crystals. But even that had not been enough to kill the demons.

Suddenly, the tranquility of the area got shattered. Every building's screen and projector flickered, and the usual stream of commercials and advertisements got abruptly cut off.

In their place appeared Erik, his figure large, holding something in his right hand. But it was not easy to see what it was.

He cleared his throat theatrically. "Is this mic on?" he asked. Of course, there was no microphone in his hand. That was just a humorous gesture to seize everyone's attention.

After a moment of fake awkward coughing, Erik brought Volkov's head into view. Again, faking it was a mistake, but placing it right in front of the camera.

"Good evening, citizens of New Alexandria," he said. "I'm speaking to the honest ones among you and to those still loyal to Armand Becker. I bring news—your tyrant, Sinisa Volkov, is dead. And with him, many of the blackguards who oppressed you. They are at the Grand Ducal Prison if you want to check if what I'm saying is true."

A ripple of shock spread through the streets as people stopped to watch the broadcast. The soldiers and the blackguards had grim faces on them, but the citizens, well, they were happy.

Then Erik got closer to the screen, taking the heads out of view. Though everyone saw it, Erik had been careful enough to squish the head open but to leave the face intact so everyone could see the man's death face.

Erik's face, instead, got really close to the camera, to the point where it covered everything. Right at that moment, his face filled every screen within the city.

"Do you know who killed him?" he asked, a grin spreading across his face. "Oh, right, it was me!"

Erik's grin widened. "To the blackguards watching this, I have a message for you. I'm heading to the northern gate. If you want a shot at revenge, come and get me. Just keep in mind, I killed a thousand of you fuckers alone. I don't think you make that much of a difference, but I will be happy to give you a warm welcome, might you decide to commit suicide."

Then the screens returned to their usual programming as Erik's image disappeared. The entire city became silent.