

BIOLOGICAL 121

Chapter 121: Erik Versus Nathaniel (2)

His face paled as Erik felt the mana swirling around Nathaniel's fists.

<DAMN!>

His opponent started running toward him. However, his speed was several times higher than before.

<He is using his power on his legs!>

Indeed, Nathaniel's legs and feet were surrounded by mana. He was using his energy to create small bursts that propelled him forward, severely increasing his speed. Erik could barely jump to the side before Nathaniel punched, missing his target but creating a small explosion of energy in front of him.

SWOOOOOOOM

In a cone radius, the students closer to the ring were thrown several meters in the air. The adults didn't have particular problems since they all joined the militaries in the past or were currently inside the organization, meaning they were plenty strong to resist the attack. Still, their hair was at least disheveled by the wind the move released.

<HOLY MOLY!> Erik thought. That attack was devastating. It wasn't probably something life-threatening, but it was still powerful enough to break his bones. If he got hit even a single time, then that was the moment he would lose!

Nathaniel looked at Erik, who was still trying to stand up, and immediately rushed to him. The young man noticed, quickly stood on his feet, and started backing.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHA LOOK AT THE COWARD," a student from the crowd said.

"Yeah, he acted all mighty against Euan but now is running in front of Nathaniel," another added.

Amber, Gwen, and Floyd looked at the match with worried looks. Floyd told Erik not to embarrass himself. However, it was clear that the match for Erik was more challenging than they did imagine.

"No, no! Erik, what are you doing?!" Floyd shouted from the side.

Erik heard his friend, but at the moment, he was having problems avoiding Nathaniel's attacks. The young man punched, mainly the air, but his energy was enough to shake the ring. It was like he was releasing air cannons that were impossibly hard to evade, and Erik was trying to keep his distance from him.

BOOOM

Nathaniel punched the air again while Erik jumped on the ground to avoid the attack.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA, IS THIS ALL THE MIGHTY AWAKENER CAN DO?!" Nathaniel shouted.

"The awakener?" A person from the crowd said.

"Did I hear it correctly?" another asked.

The fact that there was an awakener inside the nation was something not many people knew. Most students, and probably their parents, were aware of this. Still, ordinary people and basically everyone aside from the students attending the matches knew this.

Nathaniel punched again from a two-meter distance, and Erik rolled to the side to avoid the attack.

"Hey Rosie," a father said to his daughter, "What is the Idor rank of the boy on the ground?" he asked.

"You mean Erik, the plant hugger? He should be a SIGMA2... What a loser!" It was common knowledge that most third-year students were at least on the RHO1.

Still, for someone being at the SIGMA2, that meant they were severely lacking, and yet, the man saw that, despite Erik being on the losing side, his strength, speed, and reflexes were insanely high, it was almost like he was a RHO2.

"The other boy called him the awakener; was he joking?" the man asked his daughter.

"No, he really is an awakener. He awakened a month ago..." Rosie replied.

"Why didn't you tell me anything about it?" the man asked his daughter.

"I didn't think it was important. Apparently, he couldn't improve his brain crystal that much, only to the E-rank, and the power he awakened was not even that good. Only at the D-rank," Rosie replied.

The man didn't say anything else, there was an awakener inside their nation, but he wasn't that strong. That was something unfortunate. However, if he was a SIGMA2-ranked student, how could he be strong enough to even stand against a RHO3 like Nathaniel?

The young man jumped on his feet again, and Nathaniel chased him. All over the ring, "STOP RUNNING AND FIGHT LIKE A MAN!" he said to Erik.

Nathaniel punched again, sending a bolt of energy in his opponent's direction. Erik was far enough to dodge the attack, but he could not close the distance with Nathaniel. Not only was he faster than him, but he also had ranged attacks. Erik could do nothing but evade in that situation.

Nathaniel dashed again at the young man and punched, releasing a huge burst of power that shook the ring once more. Erik avoided the attack again, but he basically had to dive down.

<How the fuck can I fight against him?> he thought.

The man quickly stood up, only for his opponent to try again.

"Hahahaha, look at the rat you are!" Nathaniel said.

At that moment, Erik rushed toward him, and his opponent did nothing. Erik unleashed a series of punches at the young man, but he avoided them all. Then the awakener tried to grab him, but as soon as he did, Nathaniel retreated several meters back with a jump.

"C'mon! Let me see what you can really do!"

Erik dashed again, and as before, Nathaniel didn't use his power. He was toying with Erik to show everyone how strong he was.

The awakener jumped high in an attempt to hit Nathaniel on the head, but the latter simply punched Erik in the stomach, stopping him mid-air and making him fall to the ground. Erik gasped in pain, he was having trouble breathing.

Clearly, the young man realized that he would lose the match, as there was nothing he could do against this monster. Even then, it would be hard to even land a hit on Nathaniel.

It was true that with his power, Erik stopped his opponent from attacking him with his bare body, yet that was hardly a drop inside a bucket.

However, Erik didn't want to lose the match so badly. He didn't want to surrender without even trying, so he decided to try one thing: tank Nathaniel's power to see if he could reach him.

Without hesitation, Erik started running toward his opponent, who grinned from ear to ear.

"Is this the best you can do?!" Nathaniel said with a scornful look. He channeled more mana and prepared an energy fist. Erik did the same; he channeled as much mana as possible on his arms and kept running toward Nathaniel.

"YOU ARE DONE FOR!"

Nathaniel punched, and a blast of energy shot from his fist, hitting Erik in full. However, the mana that Erik infused inside his arms with was much more than the one Nathaniel used for this current attack.

As soon as the energy hit his opponent, the now thicker coat of mana surrounding the young man's arms worked as a sort of small barrier.

Erik was able to protect his body, and thanks to his strength, he was able not to be thrown away by the blast; however, his left arm broke. He could still reach Nathaniel, and the young man slashed at his chest using his working arm, creating a severe wound.

"WHAT DID YOU DO?!" Nathaniel said, "YOU ARE DEAD!"

Everyone was surprised by Erik's attack. He had been able to injure the strongest fighter inside the school. However, everyone could tell how dangerous that attack was since, in a life-and-death situation, this was basically a game over for Erik. He would have been dead by now.

Nathaniel was too close for Erik to dodge, and since he used his power to increase his speed, he basically appeared in front of the young man.

POW!

Nathaniel punched him once, twice, and he kept doing so until Erik lost consciousness.

"I WILL KILL YOU, BASTARD!" Nathaniel shouted. The healers and the referee had to intervene since the young man kept beating the unconscious Erik.

"YOU STOP IMMEDIATELY, OR YOU WILL BE DISQUALIFIED!" the referee said. Nathaniel regained his clarity and immediately jumped off Erik, but inside he was seething with anger. The plant hugger dared to hurt him!

That was unacceptable! Karl and Natasha went inside the ring and stopped their friend from doing something he would regret. After some minutes, Nathaniel calmed himself and was escorted back to the gym.

"ERIK!" Floyd shouted, immediately running toward him. Gwen and Amber did the same.

"How is he?" Gwen asked the healer.

"He has a broken arm and several concussions, but its nothing life-threatening. A couple of hours and a little bit of our help, and he will be able to stand again," the healer said.

Then they treated the young man and brought him to the infirmary, where he remained for forty minutes.

Chapter 122: A New Resolve

As Erik opened his eyes, he saw a white ceiling again.

"Why are all our meetings like these?" a voice from the side said.

Erik turned to look who it was, and once he did, he saw Benjamin.

"Uncle Ben..." Erik was slightly confused. Waking up and being somewhere entirely different from where you last were was not easy to process.

"It looks like you got beaten up, eh?" Benjamin said.

The young man turned to look at his surroundings and immediately understood he was inside the infirmary.

"So it seems..." Erik said. "Did you see the match?" he asked.

"I did, but you didn't see me," Benjamin replied.

Erik didn't reply, but clearly, Benjamin understood the young man's mood.

"There is no shame in losing Erik. Sometimes it is just what we need to progress further," Benjamin said.

"So... I lost..."

"You did. You did well, though..."

"It was pathetic. I couldn't do anything. He was simply too strong," Erik said.

"That's precisely why I'm telling you did well. I doubt anyone else in your situation would have been able to get the same result you did."

"What result? I did lose..." Erik said.

"Indeed, but you were able to at least hit him once... Besides, that move was dangerous but well thought out. Just don't do it again once you are in the military."

Erik then looked at his surroundings; Amber, Gwen, and Floyd were not in the room. He felt slightly angry but didn't want to jump to conclusions.

"Where are my friends?" He asked.

"They were here until fifteen minutes ago. They went to the ring as soon as the other match ended, and the pretty girl, Amber said her name was, began her fight 6 or 7 minutes ago. You should go see the match." Benjamin said.

"What about you?"

"I came to see yours, but since it had already ended, there is no more reason for me to stay."

"All right. We should hang out sometimes..." Erik said.

"We will. As soon as I can, I will contact you."

"Ok..."

"Stay strong, Erik," Benjamin said.

"Yes, uncle Ben. You too."

Benjamin then left the room while Erik remained for five more minutes on the bed.

However, the fight between Amber and Aaron could be heard from his room, and the young man decided it was better to see how his friend was doing.

He had no doubts that she was going to win. However, Aaron was not an easy fight. He could create a slimy corrosive substance, which he had many problems using correctly as a weapon.

However, he recently learned how to eject with great force the slime, basically using it as a projectile. Aaron's power was dangerous, the slime's corrosive properties were much more potent than Amber's gas, but the power was not as easy to use as hers.

Erik quickly left the room and headed out of the building, passing in front of the principal's office, who watched him run through the corridors. The young man didn't notice, but the principal had a massive smile on his face. After all, Erik could qualify to join the Red Palace, which was precisely the principal's goal.

The awakener soon arrived at the ring, where he found Amber releasing her poisonous mist. Aaron was doing his best to avoid the gas while simultaneously shooting slime projectiles from his pores, clearly aiming at Amber.

The young woman evaded each and every attack, but Aaron was relentless. However, the young man was slowly losing the space to fight as the fog was dangerously getting close to him.

"SHIT..." Aaron said. He had to find a solution to his predicament. The problem was that, contrary to Brittney, the young man couldn't dissipate the fog, which quickly spread inside the ring.

Aaron kept shooting slime at Amber, who effortlessly avoided it by jumping left and right. She looked like a butterfly dancing in the air.

This was bad news for Aaron. If the fog kept getting closer to him, he would lose the match. Judging by the speed at which the poisonous gas traveled, only a couple of minutes remained until the whole ring was covered by the miasma.

"Surrender, Aaron. I don't want to inflict you unnecessary pain!" Amber shouted.

However, Aaron kept shooting, and Amber evaded. After two minutes really passed, the fog enveloped the whole ring and the young man with it.

"That's it..." Aaron said. His skin was burning hot.

"I SURRENDER!" the young man said, his skin sizzling under the toxic fumes.

"YOU HEARD HIM, RIGHT? CONGRATULATIONS, AMBER, YOU WON!" the announcer said.

Amber smiled happily. "Thank you very much, sir," and she quickly called the fog back.

She turned around to look at the audience and saw Gwen and Floyd near the ring while Erik was slightly behind.

Both contestants quickly went down the ring and joined her friends.

Aaron reached Mikey and Anderson.

"You fought well, Aaron," Mikey said.

"Thank you, bro, appreciate it..."

Amber, instead, went quickly to Gwen, and the two embraced. "Congratulations!" The tall woman said.

"Thank you, Gwen!"

"You kicked his ass, Amber!" Floyd chimed in. Then Erik arrived where the others were.
"Congratulations, Amber..."

As Erik approached the three, he was quickly noticed by Amber.

"Erik, you are awake!" the young woman replied.

"Yes..."

Erik didn't want to ruin the atmosphere. It was true that he lost against Nathaniel, but Amber did win, and it would be selfish for him to talk about his loss.

However, the three noticed Erik's sour mood and tried to lighten the atmosphere.

"We should celebrate; we all managed to win the spot to join the Red Palace!" Amber said.

"I'm sorry guys, I can't. I need to go to work..."

"Oh... c'mon!" Gwen replied.

"No, really, I have to go..."

Amber tried to convince him to stay. It was indeed true that he lost against Nathaniel, but he still qualified to join the Red Palace, and he should have been at least happy about it. Yet, he didn't listen.

"All right, then," Amber said. Shushing Gwen, who was going to complain again.

"We will see each other at home, all right? I will wait for you..." she added.

"Yes... I won't be late."

Erik then left the school while the three friends decided to take something fresh to drink.

"Why is he so moody? Didn't we tell him he was going to lose? You shouldn't feel bad for things you can't control..." Gwen said.

"Maybe he really did believe he could do it..." Floyd said, leaving Amber and Gwen surprised by his comment.

The truth was that Floyd could understand Erik. He did lose against Nathaniel, and since he was also eliminated by Anderson, what went through Erik's mind was easy to guess.

Erik, instead, was enraged. He knew he would have been able to beat Nathaniel if he could have used his other powers or if he had higher stats. He was ashamed that he hadn't gotten a better result despite having the opportunity to prove he was strong in front of so many people.

Erik was unhealthily obsessed with other people's opinions as if that would define him.

The young man later arrived at the train station, where he took the train to bring him to the breach and where he could farm Thaid's to increase his strength.

Erik swore that would be the last time he lost against someone, but to really do that. He needed to get more brain crystal powers, increase his stats, and gain battle knowledge.

After a short while, the train arrived at his destination, the northern district. Erik started walking through the unpaved road, and after fifteen minutes, he arrived in front of the wheat field that was hiding the breach. Today he would take his time hunting Thaid's.

Chapter 123: Forest hunt

A decrepit creature could be seen hundreds of kilometers east of the city. The creature was at least three meters tall. It had a bulky black body resembling the one of a gorilla and had grey fur. Its whole body was excreting a nauseating green substance from its pores.

Around it, everything started to decay rapidly. Trees became skeletal stumps or were stripped bare by a foul-smelling fog. Bushes withered into dead twigs that fell over one another, and the decay spread to the surroundings like ripples in water.

The air grew fetid with rot as the animal released the substance and left behind a weird goo made off the corpses of the creatures that were unfortunate enough to die inside the fog.

The Thaid's paws ended in talons that tore apart any object they touched. Even steel lost under its touch.

The thing staggered along at a leisurely pace through the forest until it reached what looked like a clearance. But even there, everything started to rot rapidly.

As if there was a disease with some blighting rot, the grass grew thin on its surface, then disappeared entirely under the trampling feet of this strange creature who came down out of nowhere like an apparition conjured up by nightmare.

The creature was on a hunt.

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In another location, a group of soldiers was clearing out a cave infested by Nogiths, insect-like creatures that could only be described as a wingless mosquitoes. With six legs, a long trunk, and a sand coloration, the beast was thin but tall and preyed on other creatures. Although they were not exceptionally powerful, the Nogiths possessed excellent reproductive capabilities.

They were not as large as other species, and their carapace was not as sturdy as that of others. However, their power did come from their large numbers.

The soldiers mainly used their rifles to thin the number of creatures down, but some of the Thaid's were too strong and required the use of brain crystal powers. Some fell the creatures with their mana weapons, while others used their elemental powers to do the deed.

The strongest among the soldiers, mainly the ones with defensive powers or insanely high strength, were tanking hordes of insects while the others attacked from afar.

"Attack!" someone shouted from behind.

The sheer number of Thaid's pushed the group of soldiers to their utmost limit.

"Throw all the explosives you can!" Shouted another.

The soldiers had been sent so far in the east to thin out the population of Thaid that could potentially join the vast horde that was migrating to the west. Whatever was affecting the other Thaid's to move west was scary enough to make the weaker thaid's run away regardless of the dangers ahead.

The Nogith was a thaid species that was usually in high numbers. However, recently the population spiked dramatically, and the soldiers were forced to cull their numbers to avoid problems later.

Their strategy was to lure the monsters out of the cave they were hiding in by sprinkling food all over the place and then bomb them with weapons and brain crystal powers.

As soon as the food was placed, the bugs started rushing out as if taken by a frenzy. Most of the beasts didn't probably eat for a long time.

The soldiers couldn't fight there for long, as the bloodbath would attract other Thaidis, wanting to feast on the corpses left behind by the monstrous bugs.

The number of creatures left from the team's bombing didn't decrease much. Thousands were amassed in that cave, and the number of creatures killed outside was just a drop in the bucket.

"We must kill the bugs!" said someone.

"They won't end, the fuckers won't end!" shouted a soldier.

The situation was unsalvageable, mana was running out, and the melee fighters were almost exhausted. It was at that moment that the team's captain took a decision.

"Collapse the cave! Bomb that shit hole they consider home!" the captain said.

A surge of mana started swirling through the air as the ranged fighters prepared their brain crystal powers. In contrast, the others used bombs and rocket launchers to do the deed. After they finished channeling mana, a massive number of powers flew toward the cave entrance together with bombs, rockets, and other explosives.

BOOOOOOM

As the explosion dust settled down, the squad members observed the collapsed cave. They couldn't kill enough Nogith, but at least they would stop them from migrating anytime soon.

"This is all we can do," the captain said.

The mission was not fully completed, but at least they could come back here with more troops and weapons to kill all the remaining creatures. However, collapsing the cave killed more damn bugs; they just hoped they were a lot.

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After finishing the few creatures outside the cave, the group started packing their things and treating the wounded.

"Next time, we will exterminate them all," a soldier said to his companions. The situation with the migrating thaid was a worrisome one. Most of the species inhabiting the east of the nation were moving west, toward the city, and whatever the reason, it was affecting every thaid species.

"Indeed, we'll do, soldier," the captain said.

Suddenly, a huge roar thundered through the air.

"What the fuck was that?" a soldier asked.

"I don't know but prepare yourself. This thing is coming here!" the team's captain said.

The beast probably heard the battle's commotion and ran toward it, searching for prey.

"Incoming!" shouted the captain. "Form a defensive perimeter!" he shouted again.

Immediately, the beast appeared on the battlefield. His huge black and grey gorilla body and dog's head scared the soldiers.

"What the hell is that?!" a soldier shouted.

"I don't know, record this encounter!" the captain said. "Send this to the higher-ups!"

Many powers were unleashed by the soldiers. The attacks rained and fell on the creature. Fire, water, and even laser from the rifles landed on the creature. A cloud of dust rose due to the attacks,

and silence spread on the battlefield soon after. The soldiers looked at the dust from the bout with bathed breaths. Was the beast dead, or was it still alive?

Then, the Thaid came out madly dashing toward the soldiers from the cloud. It was directly running toward the soldiers but abruptly changed direction. Contrary to everyone's expectations, it did not charge right into them but went to the left and started circling the group.

"STOP IT!" the captain shouted. He could see that the beast had released a strange fog, but he didn't know what that was. The truth was that the captain had a vague idea what that creature was, a Blirdoth. However, the beast was insanely bigger than usual Blirdoths, and its head started rotting.

A toxic green fog spread all around the team. The soldiers were trapped and didn't know what to do.

These creatures were known for the gasses they released from their pores thanks to their brain crystal power, but it only served to scare predators away.

Blirdoths gasses were slightly corrosive, but as much as the captain was seeing, this creature could even melt trees. This thing was similar to Blirdoths, but the captain didn't want to believe it. Something must have happened to it.

Survival was now the most pressing matter for the squad. If the soldiers left their defensive perimeter, they would be killed by the beast's maws. If they didn't, the fog would slowly make its way toward them, killing them regardless.

"AAAAH AAAAH!!!" someone screamed with all his strength. His face was burning in pain.

"Joffrey!" one shouted. However, it was too late for the young man, as he started to lose the ability to see, and after a couple of seconds, he dropped dead on the floor.

After a few moments, nothing remained of him but a puddle of green-brown goo staining the ground.

"Don't let the fog get to you!!!" the captain shouted once he saw his companion, or what remained of him, on the ground. "CLOSE THE RAN..."

A colossal hand descended on the captain. The Blirdoth grabbed him, bit his head off, and then threw the body toward the other soldiers.

They had to scam to avoid the body falling on them. The team tried to calm down to get out of that predicament, but it was too late, as they were all surrounded by the fog and many soldiers started coughing badly.

The Blirdorth then dashed inside the fog it spread and disappeared from the soldiers' sight, but the truth was that the creature was killing the soldiers one by one.

The fog was too much; it limited the visibility. Someone tried to use their brain crystal powers to disperse it. Still, it was too much, and there were too few people capable of doing it. The creature was too powerful.

"Try to get away from the fog!" A soldier shouted, and then he started running, trying to escape the poisonous miasma.

As soon as he got out of the fog, the giant creature appeared in front of him, ready to smash its paws onto the soldier's head. And so it did.

The team, without its captain, could do nothing but succumb, and after ten minutes, it did so. Silence ensued in the forest. There was no human around anymore.

Chapter 124: Thousand bugs

Erik didn't waste time and quickly headed inside the forest. The young man knew the area surrounding the breach well. For this reason, he quickly headed where the Lomalins usually resided: a clearing not too far from the breach where an ancient and tall tree stood.

The massive plant was coated with moss and appeared to be something taken from a fantasy novel or movie.

Next to the tree, an enormous boulder, measuring at least four to six meters across, stood erect against the ground. The boulder was surrounded by smaller rocks that formed a circle around it. In the spaces between the larger stones grew lilies of a deep purple hue among the green leaves of other plants.

As usual, in the middle of the vast clearing, several groups of Lomalins skittered around.

<Their number is greater than usual,> Erik thought. <Could it perhaps be due to other Thaid's invading their territory?>

Erik didn't have a proper answer to that, but he concluded it was the only reasonable explanation. First, the Leylarhad cub, then the Criculs. It looked like something was forcing these beasts, who usually lived in the far east, to move west.

<The militaries didn't say anything about all of this...> It was clear that they were hiding the truth, but why they did something like that was unknown.

However, Erik was sure that they did it not to spread panic, meaning that something huge was going to happen. Maybe in a couple of days, maybe later.

There were at least a thousand Lomalins in the middle of the clearance. Usually, only one or two scout groups of five members each were around these parts, so seeing so many of them was a huge surprise.

However, Erik was excited; for the first time, he could test how much he had improved and could train to fight against multiple Thaid's.

The Lomalins were the perfect opponents, as they were not powerful Thaid's, and since Erik had grown a lot during the past month, he thought he could manage them.

Erik focused on a small group of Lomalins, which was relatively far from the main group. He decided to slowly cull their numbers and group by group to see how many Lomalins he could kill.

"Let's see what these guys can do. System, analyze them!"

One by one, the young man saw what these Thaid's were capable of. Among the Lomalins, some were as weak as the first ones he previously killed, but Erik noticed something.

Most of them were at least at power level 11, two levels higher than the average Lomalin he killed. That was pretty weird because it was like all the elite members of the colony went out of their hiding places and gathered together.

For sure, the situation piqued Erik's interest. Was there really something that was scaring the Lomalins? Why did even the strongest members of their colony go out of hiding?

Erik's eyes landed on the last Lomalin of the group, and its status appeared in his eyes.

- Species: Lomalin.

- Brain crystal power: Mana Hardened Exoskeleton.

-Dimension: Approximately seventy centimeters tall and fifty long.

-Description: The beast resembles a maggot with many legs; it has a black head and a hardened exoskeleton. The host is advised not to be bitten by the creature since it appears it is its main weapon.

-Power Level: 11

-Approximate Strength: 5

-Approximate Intelligence: 1

-Approximate Dexterity: 4

-Approximate Energy: 20

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<I wonder how much experience I will be able to gain this time,> Erik thought. He then started channeling mana through his neural links powering the sharpening and Conal's power. He shapeshifted his hands into lion ones, obtaining ten razor-sharp claws. He made them deadlier by creating a thin mana coat characteristic of his sharpening power.

Erik's strength and speed were vastly superior to the Lomalin's, so he had no doubt he would be able to kill them. However, he had to be careful since Lomalin's strength lay in their numbers. Once the awakener was ready, he darted toward the lone group of Lomalins. He swung his lion paw, quickly killing the five.

[MULTIPLE HOSTILE CREATURES 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. 30 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

<Good.> With that notification, Erik estimated he got around 6 experience points per kill, meaning he needed around 363 more to level up. Clearly, if they gave him all the same average experience.

However, things were going to become more challenging since by killing this first group of Lomalins, the thousands inside the clearance started becoming agitated. After a short while, they even found the intruder who killed their kind.

Immediately, a mad rush to kill this dangerous creature began, and Erik quickly found himself surrounded by the creatures.

[MULTIPLE HOSTILE CREATURES 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. 110 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

Another bluish-white screen appeared in front of the young man's eyes as he killed three more Lomalins.

"Not now, damn it! System, disable the notifications relative to the mana gained until I leave this place!"

[UNDERSTOOD. NOTIFICATIONS TURNED OFF.]

The Lomalins rushed in droves at the young man. Still, Erik made quick work of whatever approaching enemy and quickly started gaining kills.

The young man swung his paws left, killing a Lomalin, then one of the beasts rushed at him, but Erik destroyed the creature's brain by stomping on it.

However, the number of monsters surrounding Erik quickly became unmanageable, so the young man decided to retreat a little bit and kill the Lomalins chasing him one at a time. That would be slower, but the results would have been ensured.

With every step back the young man took, he swung his paw, and a Thaid died. The number of corpses left behind by Erik quickly increased, quickly becoming 358.

<Only five more, and I should level up!> Erik thought.

A Lomalin almost bit his shin when Erik kicked it and sent it amidst the other chasing Thaid with a broken head.

< FOUR MORE...>

Erik swung his paw, killing two Lomalins in a quick motion.

<JUST TWO!>

The young man jumped when two beasts were almost on him and crushed their heads with his feet.

[LEVEL UP!]

"LET'S GO, WHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO"

[MULTIPLE HOSTILE CREATURES 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. 2178 EXPERIENCE POINTS AWARDED TO THE HOST.]

At that moment, Erik channeled mana again to flee from the Lomalin's swarm. He used his shapeshifting power to turn into a Cricul.

Immediately, Erik felt his strength increase a lot, but moving with that kind of body was a bit weird. The speed that the young man gained and the four massively strong legs allowed him to quickly run away from the horde. After losing them, Erik quickly returned to his human form and left the forest.

Later, the young man reached the farm, and after having worked and having received his pay, he went back to the train station headed to the eastern district. It took Erik half an hour to reach that part of the city.

Initially, the streets were full of people, but once the young man reached the wealthiest part of the city, things started to change.

Once he arrived at Amber's house, the young man asked her to open the door. After spending a little time with his friend and eating dinner, the young man went to his room.

Chapter 125: Tournament ranks

As Erik entered the room, he immediately jumped onto the bed and lay for a little bit. The young man was disheartened because of his defeat by Nathaniel's hands and could do nothing but think about it. From there, his thoughts quickly trailed on what to do to improve his strength.

It was clear that he needed to train and spar more, but he also needed to hunt more thaids and get more neural links.

This last point was an especially concerning one because if he went to military school by only being SIGMA2, things would be much harder for him.

They would probably force him to train even at night, or worse, they would make his enlisting longer to make him gain more brain crystals.

His thoughts went to his journey. He remembered how he had gained the system, killed his first Thaid, and even leveled up the first time.

Things were not so bad from this perspective. After all, he was somewhat as strong as most of the school's top students, so he could say that he had improved a lot during this month.

The fight he had against the Lomalins during the evening was proof of that. He remembered how hard it was to kill even one and how battling three simultaneously was complicated. Today, though, Erik killed almost 400 of them without even batting an eye.

Then, Erik remembered he still had something to do. After all, he leveled up today, so he still had to distribute his five attribute points.

<System, show me the status...>

[Host Information]

NAME: Erik Romano

AGE: 16

SYSTEM LEVEL: 13

POWER LEVEL: 51

EXPERIENCE: 6.825/2709

DNA POINTS: 1660

HEALTH: 840/840

MANA: 770 /770

{Attributes}

STRENGTH: 19

INTELLIGENCE: 10

DEXTERITY: 20

ENERGY: 37

Available Attributes point: 5

[Powers]

{Biological Super Computer Powers}

{Host's Powers}

{Skills}

<Mhmm... things are like that. I feel like my physical stats are already high enough for me to compete inside the Red Palace. Besides, I'm still SIGMA2 on Idor, and my strength is abnormal enough to arouse suspicions. I can blame it on my fake awakening unless I bring my physical stats to higher levels.

There is also the problem of my brain crystal; if I keep increasing my energy, my rank will jump to D sooner or later. I don't know if I can give a proper explanation then. However, it is not like I can't increase my stats. I'm forced to do so if I want to leave this damn country...>

Would people believe him if he said his mana increase was due to his awakening? Would they believe that the process didn't stop a month ago?

In the end, Erik decided to keep doing what he was doing but fake having less strength than he really did. However, now it was imperative to increase his dexterity, for it was the most inconspicuous stat of them all, and that would help him learn to fight faster. Lastly, he decided to increase his other stats by mainly making neural links.

He could partially attribute his strength to his double neural links, but he had to be careful. From now on, he was going to try and make them much more than he was currently doing.

The young man then picked up his phone and bought new furniture for his house, so he went on a shopping website dealing with any kind of product. After selecting them, he spent 3000 new dollars on them.

Luckily he had the money he stole from Logan and company so he could afford that much. The furniture was going to arrive in two days, so he had to be there when they did.

After that, Erik went to train. He needed to make as many neural links as possible and decided to sleep a little less during the night and train more. When he finished training, the young man went to back, and the day passed.

In the following days, the tournament went on. Erik went with his friends to watch the matches and cheer Amber and Gwen during their fights.

The next day there were only four matches, Anderson Versus Karl, who saw the first one win without much trouble.

Anderson dominated the match but wasn't as aggressive as when he fought against Floyd. The following match was Natasha Versus Gwen. It saw the latter win by sending Natasha KO, her whip could do nothing about the young woman's armor, so the match ended relatively quickly.

The following two matches saw Nathaniel and Amber win against their respective opponents, with them easily winning the fight and Nathaniel even toying with his opponent.

The following day there were two matches, Anderson Versus Gwen, who saw the first win again by actually using Jacob's tactic, and Nathaniel Versus Amber.

The young woman was better than Nathaniel in terms of martial might, but his power could easily disperse Amber's, so he won the fight in the end. Lastly, the next day, the last match occurred, it was fought between Anderson and Nathaniel.

The match was incredible; Anderson was able to fight equally against Nathaniel until he didn't use his power, but once he did, the difference between the two appeared clear.

Many people wondered how the match would have ended if Anderson could have used his power, yet he didn't; for this reason, he lost.

Then, the other participants had to fight again, Erik included, in order to make a rank. Amber had to fight against Gwen for third place, while the others had to fight against multiple opponents. In the end, Floyd managed to get the fifteenth place, while Erik got the eleventh. It was a surprising result, yet there was no foul play involved.

Erik was at his house. The furniture he did buy arrived two days before, and once they did, he profusely thanked Amber and her family and went back to his home. He started sleeping there the previous day when the workers finished setting up the kitchen.

Of course, the young man was already missing Amber's chef cooking, and starting the daily chores again was a bother. That was also the first morning he ate breakfast alone since he wasn't a guest anymore at Amber's house, and he felt a little bit sad.

"At least I can use all my powers in peace..." the young man said to himself.

That morning, Erik woke up early to train. He spent the whole morning training his neural links and even understood how to train selected ones.

He didn't have to risk anymore other powers randomly improving while his main two stagnated. However, he was far from achieving results and he needed to wait more than a month before the biological super computer completed the research about the neural links and gave him a way to train faster.

"Time to practice my martial arts..." the young man said to himself and quickly went to work. After an hour, the usual notification rang inside Erik's mind.

[QUEST COMPLETE.]

The young man was training hard since the following day, he and the others who qualified had to go for the first time to the Red Palace.

Erik didn't know what to expect from the place nor what kind of people he would meet. One thing was sure, though, the place was going to be competitive.

Erik did his research about the place, and there was something that he figured out. First and foremost, thousands of members came from the whole nation. Every person joining the Red Palace got assigned an entry rank, the Peasant one. The full ranks were as follows:

1) EMPEROR

2) KING

3) DUKE

4) MARQUEES

5) EARL

6) VISCOUNT

7) BARON

8) KNIGHT

9) SQUIRE

10) PEASANT

Erik suspected that the ranks were named just to create a disparity between the members, as being a peasant fighter was worse than being an Emperor. He believed it was a choice to humiliate the lower-ranked individuals and push them to climb the power-ranking ladder.

Chapter 126: A second meeting

To rank up, the individual was tasked to fight against a student of higher rank, selected by the teachers. After proving he was strong enough after winning the match, a quest was assigned to the member in question, and only if he completed it would he or she get a better rank.

Besides, there was an internal hierarchy between each rank. Basically, a number was assigned to each member of the dojo. The smaller the number and the stronger the individual was.

To increase the internal hierarchy, members had to challenge each other. If the high-ranked individual won against a lower leveled one, nothing happened, while if the lower-ranked one won against the higher-ranked, the two would swap places.

Once reaching level one, the member could ask his teachers to get promoted, and if he managed to win the match and complete the quest, he or she would take the position of the member of the higher rank he defeated, with him or her jumping down one rank.

Besides, each rank-up meant better resources or accommodations if one was going to stay at one of the many buildings owned by the institutions.

This meant that the competition inside the Dojo was going to be high since members could lose their position at any given time and could also lose their privileges. Hence, they were always on guard for possible challengers.

However, It seemed that such a system made people more eager than ever to train hard because there might come a day when they'd have no choice but to go up against someone who could possibly steal his or her rank.

Erik knew he was going to live that hellish life soon. The problem was that the challenges wouldn't end even when he went into the military.

Whenever a challenge was issued, he would be forced to participate, and clearly, at the same time, he could issue a challenge. However, he would still be able to gain rewards while inside the military.

That evening, Amber and Erik were going to meet since they decided to train together from that day onward. Since the following day, they were going to the Red Palace for the first time and needed to be evaluated, they were spending each day training.

Erik was still slightly mad about what Amber told him not even a week ago, but since they treated him well and proved to be good friends, he decided not to end their friendship.

After Erik trained, he decided to go to Amber's house, but before that, he washed quickly. After all, he couldn't go to her house smelling bad. So, the young man quickly left the house and went to the train station. Soon after, he entered the carriage and later arrived in the wealthy part of the eastern district, where Amber's house was located.

The place was massive, as usual. In addition, security personnel were posted at various points around the home's exterior, and once they spotted Erik, they started looking at him.

Then, one of the guards said something to his radio, and then, while he walked in front of the main gate. A car arrived in front of the gate from the massive driveway, and once it arrived, the gate opened.

Erik observed the well-maintained lawn and marveled at the topiary sculptures strewn across the property.

The vehicle drove Erik in front of the entrance door, and different butlers welcomed the young man. "The young miss is waiting for you, Mister Romano. There is a gym on the left wing; I will escort you there," one of the butlers said.

He then led the young man there, and once he arrived, he saw Amber already training. She just performed a high kick with extreme precision. It was a perfectly executed move that left Erik flabbergasted.

Amber smiled upon seeing the young man arrive. Then, she greeted him: "You took your time, eh?"

Erik replied back with a smile, too, "Yeah, sorry, I just finished training," he said.

At that moment, Erik noticed another person was in the gym training with Amber. He didn't notice her at the beginning since the door blocked his view, but he saw her once he stepped inside the room.

Long black hair energetically swayed whenever she threw a punch; her skin was as white as the first winter's snow and glistened to the sun rays from the gym's windows.

Her emerald green eyes reflected the sun as jewels. It was Emily. The young woman apparently was at Amber's house, and she, too, was training hard. Erik took a second to look at her figure; she had a slim waist and was well-proportionate. Still, judging from her physical appearance, she was no stranger to exercising.

Erik was mesmerized by the young woman. She exuded elegance, gracefulness, beauty, and charm with every single movement she made, even if that were movements used to kill.

The young woman was currently wearing a pair of black leggings that outlined her curves, a white sports bra, and a pair of white shoes with the logo of a famous brand.

Amber noticed how Erik looked at her friend, and conflicting emotions arose inside her. It was the first time she felt that way. She quickly approached the young man and then whispered to his ears. "Yeah, she does that effect..." perfectly knowing that Emily was a beauty.

The young man tried to recompose himself, but it was clear that Amber saw him gawking at Emily. Erik blushed but refrained from saying anything that could increase the embarrassment further.

"Hey Emily, we've got visits!" Amber shouted.

"What?"

The young woman turned to look behind her and saw Erik there. She was surprised by the young man's presence but being the polite lady of a wealthy family, she contained her reaction pretty well.

"Hey! You are the guy from the party!" She said, "Erik was your name, right?"

"Yes, it's me. You are Emily if I'm not mistaken..." Of course, the young man knew well who she was.

"Oh yeah." Emily answered, "I am glad you remember me..."

She looked at the young man with her sparkling green eyes.

It was then that Amber noticed Emily's weird reaction. She was never this friendly with other people, especially males her age. Usually, she ignored them without even glancing at them, but now she was trying to talk to him. She frowned a little bit but didn't say anything.

The two had a brief conversation interrupted only by Amber coughing after ten minutes.

"Cough... Cough... Guys, shouldn't we be training?"

"Yeah, right..." Erik said.

After a few minutes, Emily resumed her training while Erik changed to more fitting clothes and started sparring with Amber. Clearly, the young man couldn't land a hit on her, yet, it was clear that he was improving a lot.

Emily observed the two sparrings. Based on what she knew, Erik started training not even a month ago, so reaching this level in such a short amount of time was impressive. Yet, she could see many flaws in the young man's fighting style.

As the young woman watched the two sparrings, a weird feeling started spreading inside her mind. It was attraction toward the young man. She didn't know why she felt that way nor understood what kind of feelings those were.

Something inside her knew she had to get on friendly terms with this young man. Later, Amber, Emily, and Erik trained for four hours until the sun began setting.

"Well, I guess that is all for today," Amber announced. "We can do this again another time if you want..."

"Yeah, why not?" Emily said. Even surprising Amber.

"That's ok for me..." Erik replied.

Chapter 127: The Red Palace (1)

After a short shower, Erik, Amber, and Emily went to the living room, where the trio conversed while waiting for dinner.

"Why don't you sleep here tonight?" Amber asked Erik. "Since we need to go to the same place and you are already here, you can simply stay," She added.

"I don't know," the young man said. "I already abused your and your parents' hospitality by staying at your house this past week...."

"Oh, don't worry about that, we have many empty rooms. It won't be a problem!" Amber said.

Emily was looking at Amber with a slightly pissed-off look. It wasn't really appropriate for Erik to stay at a young woman's house and the thought of Erik staying there irked her.

However, she was a little bit conflicted by these emotions. After all, she didn't really know Erik that much so she shouldn't have problems with him staying at Amber's house.

"All right then..." the young man said. Emily's heart thumped a little bit when she heard the young man say that, but she couldn't say anything about it.

"Where is it that you have to both go tomorrow?" Emily asked.

"The Red Palace," Erik said.

"Ah... I get it. Is it the first day?" Emily asked.

"Indeed, but I'm a little bit worried if I have to be honest."

"Why?" Emily asked again.

"Because as much as I've understood, things won't be simple there. The ranks will be based on fighting prowess, and there will be much stronger individuals than I am."

"Don't worry, Erik, I will help you train. Besides, at the current speed you are progressing, I don't think you will have any issues in the long run!" Amber said.

"I wish..."

Immediately a waiter arrived at the room where the three were talking and gestured to Amber.

"It seems like our food is ready. Let us eat in the dining hall," Amber suggested. They left the living room and entered the hallway. Amber quickly made way toward the dining hall, and once there, they found Caiden, his wife, and their youngest children.

"You finally arrived!" Caiden said.

"Hello, mister Joyce," Erik said while Emily made a curtsy.

"And hello, Erik, Emily. How are you doing?"

"I'm fine," Erik answered.

"Me too!" Emily replied.

After that, the six ate dinner while chatting about this and that. Clearly, Caiden asked Erik several questions to understand the young man better. He also inquired whether he felt confident enough to fight against the other students.

Erik replied truthfully, saying he didn't know since he wasn't aware of the other students' strengths and that Amber's was probably his threshold. Caiden and his daughter gave him some advice to improve himself during training. Still, ultimately, everything depended on how much Erik was going to train.

After dinner, Emily was brought back to the Stone's mansion, and Erik went to his room to train. He needed to speed up the development of the neural links, or he would be in huge trouble at the Red Palace Dojo.

Unfortunately, he wasn't able to make new neural links that night, and he simply went to bed. The following day they were going to meet with Professor McAllister and the other students to reach the Red Palace. That was going to be a very important day, and he didn't want to mess up.

The following day, Erik woke up and quickly washed his face. After having dressed up, Erik checked his daily quests.

[Quests List]

{Daily}

<Eating Habits:>

-Rewards for completion: Ten Experience, ten DNA points

-Failure Penalty: None

(Eat a healthy meal)

<Physical training:>

-Rewards for completion: Ten Experience, ten DNA points

-Failure Penalty: None

(Train for at least an hour. The Host may choose whatever exercise to complete the quest.)

After accepting them, Erik went to the dining room, where he met Amber and her family. After breakfast, the two friends took the car and were brought to school.

At the main entrance, some students who qualified to join the Red Palace were waiting with professor McAllister.

Once Amber and Erik arrived, only Anderson, Aaron, and Mikey went to say hi. Erik actually observed Nathaniel smirk while Karl looked at him scornfully.

"Hello, guys," Anderson said.

"Hi!" Erik answered.

"Aren't you excited? We are going to enter the Red Palace!" Anderson asked.

"Yeah, I guess... What about you?" Erik said.

"Oh yeah, me too. I couldn't wait for this day to come!" Anderson replied enthusiastically. "I bet we will improve a lot there."

Erik didn't know since he didn't talk to Anderson often, but the young man was a training enthusiast, and joining the Red Palace was like a dream that came true for him.

They chatted a little bit, and then when the last person arrived, Allan, Gwen, Darragh, and Floyd, Professor McAllister called out, "Okay, everyone, let's head inside the bus!"

"Yes, sir!" the students shouted in unison. One by one, they went inside the vehicle, and once everyone boarded it, they started traveling toward the western district.

Erik didn't know what he was going to find. He often heard about the place, the Red Palace, and even saw a couple images on the internet. However, no image could have prepared him for the real deal.

During the travel, Erik saw many buildings. Skyscrapers so tall as to reach the clouds over the city. However, there was a building that was different from all the others. Initially, Erik could only see a red skyscraper. However, as he got closer to the building, his amazement grew.

The building was much taller than the average skyscraper, and its width was astonishing. As they drew near, Erik realized that the whole area around the structure was filled with smaller structures placed inside a huge garden, but he couldn't see them well from his position.

Once Erik arrived in the building's vicinities, he marveled at this place's opulence. Basically, there was a huge garden, probably several kilometers long, with countless multiple small buildings probably used for different purposes, and full of flowers, trees, and bushes.

Erik noticed a small hospital, different training grounds, obstacle courses, and the like. But what really amazed the young man was the Red Palace itself.

The skyscraper was the tallest building he had ever seen. It was entirely covered with red stone, and its size was imposing. Countless giant windows showed the city below. It seemed like a fortress, but unlike any fortification, Erik knew. The architecture was simple, yet it exuded wealth.

"Wow..." Erik whispered.

Once they got close to the main gate, the students realized that the building was surrounded by high walls topped off with towers and turrets. Multiple guards, security posts, and cameras were scattered here and there, and nothing could get past these people.

The students entered through the gates, and they arrived in front of the building's main door after five more minutes.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" Anderson asked, not without irking Floyd.

"Yeah..." Erik replied, marveling at the structure. Professor McAllister then interrupted his thoughts.

"Come on, everybody, follow me!" he ordered. They did so and soon reached a large door made of wood, with the carving of a huge tower in the middle.

The door opened automatically when they approached, and soon after, a woman came out to greet the students.

"Welcome, young boys and girls. I'm Amanda Smith. My job," she explained, "is to guide your journey here, help you settle down, answer questions, etcetera. Now, I need you to fill out some papers, so follow me to the reception!"

"Thank you very much, Miss Smith," Professor McAllister said. "C'mon guys, let's go..."

Chapter 128: The Red Palace (2)

One by one, the students registered at the Red palace under Amanda Smith's and Professor McAllister's supervision. After they were done, Miss Smith's smile bloomed.

"Well done, guys, you are now proud members of the Red Palace Dojo. I don't think I have to explain what kind of honor this is, but I will actually do it for the ones who don't know much about this institution," the woman said.

Professor McAllister nodded at that with a faint smile on his lips as well. "The Red Palace was founded in 2993 by Michael Reid; you may know him by another name, though, Red Heart." Those who didn't know this fact stared blankly at Miss Smith.

Red Heart was one of the strongest generals that Frant ever had. He led the nation's armies against countless Thaid invasions and protected the borders from Hin and Etrium during the border war between 2950 and 2960. It could be argued he single-handedly saved Frant's from being wiped out from known maps.

She smiled and continued: "He started out teaching only a few people here and then later welcomed others, who became the institution's first teachers."

"Nowadays, only the nation's strongest can teach here. The instructors provide specialized and specific training regimes to our students. Now, I suggest you read the email we just sent you to the address you provided. You will find all the other rules, courses, lessons, and teachers there. And there is a detailed section explaining each of their specializations," the woman said.

"As an institution dedicated to training young people to fight Thaid and repel the bordering nations, you will find everything you need here. Resources, knowledge, weapons—we've got 'em all," she said, putting great emphasis on her words, "and we'll train you until you are strong enough to face any enemy."

Clearly, the education here is complementary to the military one, so be sure to put effort also there!"

She then explained the place's history, its contributions to the nation, and the like. She explained the multiple agreements the Red Palace had with the government and what this did mean for them.

"The students are required to join missions issued by the Red Palace; of course, you will receive some compensation. You must fight at least once a week against students challenging you, and if you receive none, you must challenge someone yourself," the woman said. "Each one of you will be assigned the Peasant rank, and you will be further graded internally after a short evaluation."

She then started explaining the rules of the institution. Most of them were simple: do not steal, do not fight outside of the designated moments and places, and so on.

She finished her speech with an emphatic gesture toward Professor McAllister's face. She gave a quick nod before looking down at the papers on which the students' names had been written.

"Now follow me..."

Then she turned away and began walking toward the elevator, followed closely by Professor McAllister and the rest of the students. Their footsteps echoed hollowly through the empty halls and passages of the ground level where no student lived or studied. Then they stopped again when they reached the elevator and stepped into it. The woman quickly pressed the first button.

Once they arrived at the first floor, the woman started to talk again.

"You will all stay here on this floor. Remember, the first ten floors are reserved for peasant-rank students, while the others are reserved for higher ranks. You are not allowed to go higher than the tenth floor. Here you can find gyms and dormitories" —she pointed at two doors on either side of the hallway. "Study areas, and such. There is also a cafeteria somewhere along this corridor.

If you have questions regarding anything related to food or shelter, ask the staff." She then continued.

"Every morning, you must join the hand-to-hand training session taught by Master Rook, who will teach you the Kyokar training style. Most of you already know it, but I assure you that you will have a lot to learn from him," The woman said.

"Then you will need to perform weapon training. The teachers will explain why to you. Be it learning how to wield a sword, a spear, and many other weapons. However, you won't be free to choose what to learn since the masters will do this for you. After that, you will have weightlifting and an obstacle course training, then you will be free to do whatever you want.

Lastly, the neural link training will be on you. "

The woman then handed the students some papers indicating the rooms they had to sleep in. She then looked over each of them in turn. However, when she looked at the man beside her, she suddenly became more at ease. Her voice grew softer as she spoke.

"It's good to see you, Sean," she said.

Since professor McAllister brought new students every year, it was clear he knew who miss Smith was.

"Glad to meet you too, Amanda," he said.

The two then started a conversation, but then Miss Smith suddenly said.

"You can all go to your rooms now. They are all on this floor..."

Professor McAllister looked at the students before they left the hall.

"Don't do anything stupid, guys..." the teacher said.

After that, the students each went to their rooms. Erik was assigned room 214, almost at the end of the corridor. The room was rather spacious and much nicer than his actual house.

A bathroom and two rooms were placed in front of each other with a bed, a desk, and a wardrobe. It was like a mini apartment but without a kitchen. Erik guessed that wasn't a problem since there was a cafeteria on each floor.

"Well... let's get unpacked, shall we?" Erik said aloud and then went toward the room on his right. However, he found another person sleeping on the bed once he opened the door.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Erik said as he saw the young man wake up due to Erik's intrusion.

"Who are you?" The unknown young man asked with a foggy mind.

"I think I'm your roommate. I just got assigned this room by Miss Smith."

The young man stood from his bed and came to the door to greet Erik. "Welcome, I'm Benedict!" The young man said.

"Hi, Benedict. A pleasure to meet you."

"Did you just arrive?" Benedict asked.

"Yeah..." Erik said. "And had to listen to an impossibly long speech by Miss Smith..." he added.

"Yeah, I went through it too when I came..." benedict replied.

"Sorry if I ask you, but how come you came here before me?" Erik asked.

"Well, I came from Xanta, and since I had to travel for many hours to come to New Alexandria, I decided to come here early," Benedict said.

"Xanta?" The city was located south of New Alexandria, and it was a large industrial city, one of the biggest ones in the nation.

Xanta's main export was gold, but it was also full of natural gasses, making its economy very good. However, the city was located in a region where Thaid's were insanely strong, so the city was also one of the main weapons providers of the nation.

"What about you? Where did you come from?" Benedict asked.

Erik replied in earnest, "I'm from New Alexandria," he said.

"Did you take the room on the right?" Erik finally asked.

"Yeah, I guessed it wasn't a problem, but we can change rooms if you want..." Benedict suggested.

"There is no need," Erik said.

He took his backpack and placed it on the desk in the left room. Seven pairs of the Red Palace uniform were already inside, folded neatly and put aside on the bed. All he needed to do was take them out and hang them up in the wardrobes.

"Did you already read the email the Red Palace did send?" Benedict asked.

"Not yet," Erik said.

"Well, then I suggest you do it. The lessons will start tomorrow. Before starting the training, we barely have enough time to get accustomed to the place. Take a look at the email; there is also a map of the campus."

"Thank you very much, Benedict," Erik said.

"I already gave a quick look around. Do you want me to show you the place?"

"If you don't mind..." Erik said.

"Let's go then."

Chapter 129: The Red Palace (3)

Before going out, Benedict advised him to put on the Red Palace uniform. The clothes were made of red pants with some golden stripes on the sides and a jacket embroidered with the golden Red Palace Dojo's logo on the back. Both the new members of the Dojo put on the uniform and later went out of the room.

They entered a corridor whose carpet was red like that of the entrance hall, and the walls were painted in golden hues. A few steps ahead lay another door leading into another room, and so on and so forth for the whole corridor.

"Ok," Benedict said, "In the email they sent us, it has been explained how the whole building is structured. There are 163 floors in this building, which is 828 meters tall. The floors are layered the same, but with each rank, you go up, and the better the resources and the equipment are. Floors 1-10 are for the peasants, 21-30 for squires, and so on.

From the viscount rank, they need more floors since the rooms are assigned for each student," Benedict said while speeding through the corridor.

"If you come this way, take a left turn here, and then a right here, you will arrive at the floor's cafeteria. Here you can order whatever you want; coffee, meat, vegetables, drinks, and the like. The best part is that everything is free since this is a government-funded institution." Once Erik and Benedict arrived in front of the cafeteria door, they peeked inside the room.

Clearly, the establishment was vast, capable of accommodating thousands of people. There was a huge counter stretching from the beginning to the end of the frontal wall, and behind it were

kitchens. The counter had multiple types of food on display and spread out numerous tables covered with a red tablecloth in front of it.

The place was massive, to say the least, and a lot of people were already having breakfast.

"Impressive, eh?" Benedict said.

"Indeed, it's much bigger than my high school cafeteria."

"Yeah, mine too, and the food is better! I already tried it." Benedict replied. "Now, follow me; there is the gym to see and then a little surprise."

The young man then quickly dashed through the corridors, and after a couple of minutes of walking, they arrived at the gym doors. When they entered, Erik was pleasantly surprised. The gym was entirely covered in black trauma flooring, and the number of weights and machinery was unbelievable.

Treadmills, stationary bikes, dumbbells, barbells, benches, medicine balls, kettlebells, and ropes... It seemed as though every training tool imaginable could be found in this enormous room. However, the giant fighting ring on the side of the room caught his attention. It was bigger than the one used at school for the tournament.

Beside it was a screen showing images of martial arts techniques for all to see.

"This is amazing!" Erik exclaimed when he saw the ring. "I would have never imagined that a place like this existed in New Alexandria!" he said.

"And you have seen nothing! According to a senior of mine, the equipment is even better on the higher floors since they even have intrity weights! He also said that from viscount rank, they also have gravity chambers, but it is rumored that they have one for each student on the emperor floors! Can you imagine it?" Benedict said with an excited face.

"I was already hooked up when you talked about intrity weights, but Gravity Chambers, are you serious?!" Erik asked incredulously.

Intrity weights were a new piece of technology that many gyms coveted but were expensive. They were tools that could change their weight. Nothing too fancy, but the technology behind it involved gravity control.

The so-called gravity chambers, instead, were rooms in which gravity was incremented. They allowed people to train harder and were particularly effective if paired with intrity weights. However, to use such rooms, one needed to have enough neural links as there was a need for the body to be able to manage such increased levels of gravity.

If one entered without the proper strength inside such chambers, there was a high chance of incurring injuries. Even clothes could wound you at high levels of gravity, walking could be as worse as falling from meters high, and even the blood flow would have problems working.

"Now, there is one last thing I want you to see. I don't know if you are into this kind of stuff, but if you are like me, you will like it. Come." Benedict said.

Erik took his time to observe the young but friendly man as they walked. Benedict was around 1.7 meters tall with short chestnut hair and chocolate-brown eyes. He had a pretty rectangular face and a mole on his right cheek.

Despite being a fighter, he wasn't that muscular, but he had notably bulky arms and a significantly developed back. His body was a little bit disproportionate in terms of muscles, but it was clear that there was a reason for that.

The duo walked for ten minutes before arriving in front of a guarded door. In front of it was a masked man with a rifle in his hands. Benedict and Erik went to walk through the door, but the guard stopped them and asked the duo to identify themselves.

"I'm Erik Romano."

"And I'm Benedict Goldstein."

The two said.

"Show me your IDs," the guard said.

"The IDs?" Erik asked.

At that point, Benedict came near Erik's ear. "It is on the email!" he said.

"Ah, thanks..."

Erik took his phone and quickly found the email; there was a sort of QR code that he identified as his ID immediately.

"Here!" he said. The guard scanned the device, and the door opened after he got the two students' identities.

Once they entered, Erik remained flabbergasted by the view. Countless weapons were hung on the walls in all shapes and dimensions.

On the right side of the room, there were swords, pikes, spears, daggers, axes, hammers, maces, and even tridents. They were all melee weapons. On the left side, instead, there were ranged weapons, starting from bows and crossbows and ending with rifles and pistols. A lot of these items were made of steel. Below the hung weapon, small holographic screens showed the weapon's parameters.

"Wow..." Erik whispered.

Benedict nodded. "That's just the crust. Go look at the weapon's screens," the young man said with a grin. As Erik did, he immediately understood why Benedict was grinning. From these devices, it was possible to personalize every weapon. There was the possibility to choose between different kinds of materials, colors, shapes, and other characteristics of the weapons.

"Can we take a weapon?" Erik asked.

"God no... Not now, at least. We need a teacher's supervision for this." Benedict replied.

"How do you know all this stuff? Didn't you come here yesterday?" Erik asked.

"It is all on the email!" Benedict replied with a smile.

"All right, all right!" Erik then observed the screens a little more, and after a while, he asked Benedict.

"I get that we can choose the weapon's colors and material, but is it so simple? We come here, we press a button, and that's it? We can choose whatever we want?"

Benedict shook his head. "We only have access to entry-level material for the weapon, currently. To get better weapons, we need the approval of our teachers. However, we can choose the colors and other small details," he then said.

"So, we can't take anything now, right?"

"No, but we can at least see what we have available!"

The two young men scrolled down the material list, the available serigraphs, incisions, and the like. They could even customize their weapons.

"Can we take whatever we want?" Erik asked.

"We can, but better listen to the teachers. They will recommend us the weapon that better compliments our strengths." Benedict replied.

At that moment, a notification appeared on Erik's phone.

ERIK ROMANO, YOU MUST REACH THE GROUND FLOOR TO BE TESTED. COME TO ROOM NUMBER 5.

"It looks like I must go to room number five," Erik said after having read the message.

"They didn't test you yet?" Benedict asked.

"No, I came to the room as soon as Miss Smith dismissed us."

"Ah, I get it. Let's go, then. Better not make them wait."

Chapter 130: The tests (1)

Erik and Benedict ran to the elevator, but it took them ten minutes to reach it. Once there, the two took the elevator down and arrived at the first floor.

"We must go to room number 5," Erik said.

"I know. It is the room where they tested me yesterday," Benedict replied.

"About that, what is this test about?"

"Well, it is explained in the email, but since you didn't read it yet, I will explain it to you. The first thing they will do is test your strength, speed, and reflexes. After that, they will test your fighting skills. There is no need to test your brain crystal's mana capacity since this is already tested at age four."

Erik nodded. He too, had been tested at age four and was deemed an almost manaless F trash on Ferebitz. Then he was also tested at school a month and a half ago, and they assessed he was an E-ranked. Since the system still described his mana capacity as being at the E level, it was clear that he was still in this rank.

"The strength test is simple; you will have to punch a machine with all your strength, and you will get a result. As for the speed test, you simply have to run on a treadmill where they will measure your max speed and how much time you can maintain it. Things get complicated on the third test, where you will have to avoid some projectiles being shot at you by a device.

The speed at which these will be shot will increase until you get hit for the first time. Don't worry; it is not painful. The last test is the hardest; you will have to fight a teacher, and he or she will judge your fighting skills," Benedict concluded. "Pretty simple, eh?"

However, Erik wasn't so calm. He knew he would get good scores on the physical tests, but it would be different on the martial art test. After all, he started training a month and a half ago only.

"Yeah..." he said to Benedict, who looked at him with a huge smile.

After a while, they arrived in front of room number five, where all the other students from New Alexandria's high school arrived. Obviously, they saw Amber, Floyd, and Gwen.

"Hey, Erik!" Amber shouted, waving at the young man.

The awakener replied in kind by waiving his hand. The trio quickly noticed that there was a person beside Erik and wondered who he was. At the same time, Benedict carefully observed the three in front of him. However, his heart skipped a beat once his eyes landed on the red-haired woman. He could swear she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen in his life.

His mind went blank when he realized she was looking at him.

"Who is the guy with you?" Floyd asked his friend.

"Ah, right. He is Benedict, my roommate; we just came from a tour of the first floor," Erik said. However, Benedict wasn't saying anything, and once he turned to look at him, he noticed he was gawking at Amber. The awakener gave him a light nudge on the side, and the young man snapped out of his stupor.

"Ehm... Yes... I'm Benedict Goldstein, a pleasure to meet you!" he said with his face blooming in the warmest smile Erik had ever seen.

"Yo bro, I'm Floyd. Nice to meet you!"

"Gwen."

"Hi," Amber said smiling, "I'm Amber!" She too, smiled.

Benedict could not reply further, so he only proceeded to make a series of discombobulated sounds and laugh like a fool. Erik watched this man make a fool of himself, only for him to then wonder if he was like him the first time he saw her or, worst, the first time he saw Emily.

"Have you also been called to take the tests?" Erik asked.

"Yes," Gwen replied.

"Good, because Benedict took the tests yesterday and told me what they consisted of..."

The young man then explained to their friends how the tests were meant to see how strong, fast, reactive, and good at fighting they were. Obviously, they grew concerned for Erik since it was clear that his fighting skills were not that refined. In a match where he and his opponent had equal strength, the young man was too inexperienced to win.

"Don't worry about me," Erik said, looking at his friends' faces. "Whatever the test result will be, I will still be part of the Red Palace."

With that words, Erik ensured his friends relaxed a bit. Amber was surprised by Erik's sudden change of attitude. When he lost against Nathaniel, he was furious, and in general, his behavior had never been very stable. So, seeing him like that was a good thing.

"Let's go in," the young man said.

"Yes," Gwen said, and with that, the five students entered in. Once there, they saw a small desk and a man working on some papers while the students already in were, one by one, filling in some documents.

Amber, Gwen, Erik, and Floyd quickly approached the desk and stood in line. As they did, they observed the other students take the tests.

The strength test was the fastest, with many having already taken it. However, at the second, the treadmill, things started to slow down since it was also a sort of endurance test.

Nathaniel was currently on the treadmill. He had been running at an insane speed for over ten minutes without any sign of stopping. Behind him was Anderson waiting. The young man glanced in Erik's direction and winked at him. The awakener replied, nodding, and then they each minded their business.

As the crowd progressed, more and more students began taking the test. Soon enough, Nathaniel started fighting against the teacher, and once the fight ended, the teacher he fought with said something.

"Mhmm... you are already a good fighter at such a young age, I think that number 373 would be an appropriate number for you. Hey Dano!" he said, turning to the man at the desk. "Update the rank!"

Dano nodded, and a notification appeared on Nathaniel's phone. However, the young man was displeased. He was used to being the best everywhere he went, so he didn't accept this low score.

"With all due respect, sir, I don't think that's an appropriate number..."

The man looked at Nathaniel with a curious look. "Why do you think so, young man?" the man asked.

"Well, sir, given my performance, I think that 373 is a very low score. Shouldn't I have at least gained, I don't know, a thousand points at least?" Nathaniel asked, trying to sound as humble as possible, only for the people hearing him saying those words to be embarrassed by his blatant boasting.

"HA!" the teacher replied.

"Ha?"

"Yes. HA! You understood nothing, kid. Here at the Red Palace, the inner ranks work in descending order, meaning that the lower the number and the better the rank is. Me giving you 373 means that I gave you rank 373. If you work hard, you could jump up to the Squire rank in a month.

That would be the fastest rank up of the entire Red Palace history," the teacher said. However, he looked again at Dano, only for him to say, "DANO, I WANT TO CORRECT MYSELF GIVE HIM RANK 500 FOR HAVING QUESTIONED MY JUDGMENT!"

"WHAT?!" Nathaniel said, "BUT SIR?!"

"Are you still talking?!" the man yelled, but Nathaniel didn't reply. He just lost a bunch of positions because of this stupid prick here.

"NEXT!"

It was now Anderson's turn to fight against the teacher, and everyone but the people coming here as spectators knew that the young man would get a fantastic score.