

BIOLOGICAL 141

Chapter 141: Bad News (1)

Major Fischer was walking along New Alexandria's hospital's corridors in search of room 584. He had been sent there to talk to a soldier who was recently attacked by a group of thaids.

The man lost consciousness as soon as he arrived back in the city, so he didn't have the time to report what happened. However, things were severe as his whole team had been killed.

As the man arrived, he found in front of him a man lying on a bed with a missing arm and various severe injuries. The soldier was waiting for a healing treatment. He hoped the army would have been kind enough to hire a healer to make his limb grow back.

The problem was that growing limbs back was arduous, and many healers asked for astronomical amounts of money to perform such a procedure. Besides, there weren't many people with enough power and expertise willing to do this, so getting his arm back wasn't simple. The army didn't want to spend a lot of money to regrow an arm when they could have simply given the man a cheap mechanical arm.

The treatment consisted in generating a second arm from a sample tissue taken from the patient, which was then attached to him. The process itself was very complex, and what the general public knew about it was that the arm was both attached and grown thanks to brain crystal powers.

"Soldier, Report," Major Fischer said once he saw him.

As soon as the man saw his superior, he made a military salute with the arm that he still had. "Ranger Smith reporting, sir..." the soldier replied with a sickly and pained voice.

Fischer raised an eyebrow before looking around carefully to see if anyone could hear them talking.

"Speak, soldier, what exactly happened to your squad?"

The group had been stationed outside the barrier to kill as many thaids as possible. In theory, this should have been easy since the strongest thaids had already been killed around the city. Yet, something was able to kill a group of well-trained soldiers. They weren't talking about the horde's thaids but the ones surrounding the city.

Ranger Smith looked down sadly while answering. "Well... sir, we had been attacked..." he explained.

He paused to take a deep breath before continuing.

"By Leylarhads!"

"Leylarhads?" the major said.

Unfortunately, attacks made by thaids out of their habitats often happened in the last month, and the HQ was trying to figure out why. Major Fischer was in charge of this particular task, and that's why he went so far as to personally interrogate the soldier.

Previously, Leylarhad attacks weren't just infrequent around the city; they were almost non-existent, as they lived far in the east.

"Describe it to me," Major Fischer asked resolutely.

"The pack was huge, sir, and they were taking advantage of other thaids," the soldier replied.

That was a common tactic of this beast. They were highly intelligent creatures and used tactics for hunting different creatures. Such a group of thaids around there was a problem since the city had to employ stronger soldiers around the borders, inevitably reducing the number of available soldiers near the horde.

The officer then discussed the encounter and the mission failure with the soldier and noted down what he said. He had to report to his superiors. After fifteen minutes of talking, the conversation ended, and the major left the man to rest.

"Thanks for your hard work, soldier," Major Fischer said and then quickly left the room after having wished ranger Smith a good rest and a quick recovery.

He had a thoughtful look, which also showed all his worry. It didn't matter that the city sent an extensive group of soldiers to cull the monster population. The number of creatures didn't want to decrease, and the situation was getting worse since many more thaids traveled west as time passed.

A car was waiting for the major to take him elsewhere, to a building situated in the western district. This was a very important place since a lot of the scientists studying thaids worked there.

As soon as he arrived, he jumped out of the car and walked inside a building. He was going toward lab 114. It took only five more minutes until he got there. As soon as he entered the laboratory, he noticed everything was quiet.

"Hello? Is anyone here?" No one answered. That was strange because typically someone was usually there. However, after searching a little bit more, the major found a man standing while examining a blood sample in the microscope. He was the guy that Fischer was searching for.

It was Professor Derr Xilion, an eminence in the thaid field in New Alexandria.

"Derr?" The major said.

"Oh, sorry, James, I didn't hear you!"

The doctor and thaid expert were tasked to understand what was happening around the city. Probably, there was a beast that was pushing the other thaids west, but only an expert could really understand what was going on.

"Sorry for coming to you this late, but I need to talk to you. Have you perhaps found out something?" Major Fischer asked.

"You don't have to worry, James. I understand your state of concern, and I'd rather say I'm starting to be concerned myself." Derr replied.

"What makes you say so?" the military man asked.

"Well, this blood sample you sent me and all the other body samples I examined throughout the month shows what I feared is coming true. There is an Heniate in the east," The doctor said.

"An Heniate?" Major Fischer said.

"Indeed..."

This thaid was a small worm with a brain crystal power that allowed it to birth mind-controlling insects. These insects made eggs and made their host develop a system to inject these eggs into the bloodstream of the victims they bit.

"I found out that all the thaids you brought here to the laboratory were full of parasite eggs, " he concluded with a huge sigh and then turned again to look at the blood sample he was examining.

"This doesn't explain why there has not been a decrease in the number of creatures this month," Major Fischer added.

"Indeed. I do not have an explanation for this. There is something else at work; are you sure these beasts don't come from Etrium?" The doctor asked.

"It could, to be honest, but we haven't found any evidence about it," Major Fischer said.

"In my opinion, the Heniate is what is mainly pushing the thaids out of their habitat. It is known to be a very aggressive and territorial beast, after all. However, it has already infected several thaids inside the horde, and I bet that it won't take long before the whole horde is infected. Besides, the contagion is also starting to affect the city's surroundings," The doctor concluded.

"And then..." He took out the blood sample from the machine, and inside of it were now clearly visible some little yellow-white eggs, almost as little as dust.

"And then what?" Major Fischer asked.

"It will attack the city. The beast's power relies on spreading its worms, so it will attack this place, hoping to infect us humans; we are a lot, after all. Can you imagine how much power it will gain if it manages to do so? However, this is not an if problem, but a when one.

Judging by the speed at which the Heniate infects other life forms, it is probably true that most of the horde has already been infected. So it is just a matter of time after all." Professor Derr said.

"So, what do we do now?" Fischer asked.

"Well, we must repel the thaids which had been pushed here by the Heniate. I suggest killing all the surrounding thaids, especially the infected ones. This is to prevent the further spreading of the contagion," Professor Derr said.

The conversation continued until both the men had nothing more to say. They were strangely in tune with each other and enjoyed the company. However, the major's face darkened as he talked to the professor, given what he told him. Since there wasn't anything else to say, Fischer decided it was time to head back to his office.

"Thanks for your hard work, Derr," Major Fischer said.

"You don't have to thank me, James. It's my work, after all," the doctor replied

"We are not done, though..." The doctor said. "There is something else I need to show you..."

Chapter 142: Bad News (2)

The Doctor and the Major went inside another lab. One much larger than the last. They were met by a woman wearing a white lab coat similar to Doctor Derr's but with many more straps and buckles on it. As they got closer to the lab, they started hearing something.

Echoes of inhuman screams thundered across a lab's white padded room; their source was a sickly-looking man. His skin had a strange red tint, full of cracks and warts that damaged it making it look like a monster spawned from hell. No one who saw him wanted even remotely to resemble how he did.

His muscle bulged as he tried to escape the shackles that were bridling him. Still, despite many attempts, he could not free himself, and the only thing he could do was give in to his most primal instinct, scream.

The scientists knew what happened to him. Apparently, this man went progressively mad in the two weeks following the incident he was involved in, which decimated his whole team, the red hawks.

Ranger Lakwosky became more savage as time went on. If initially he only had sporadic aggressive outbursts, they became more frequent until he couldn't reason any more. The only thing that the militaries and scientists could do was restrain him.

Major James Fischer was looking at him behind the glass. He knew this man; he was there when he returned from his mission, where monsters decimated all his team.

Professor Derr Xilion was the leading scientist in this project; he, with major Fischer, determined that the man's strange behavior was related to the Heniate.

Professor Derr, in fact, found out that the parasite did infect the ranger too, probably due to the Leylarhad bites he sustained.

This also meant that it was just a matter of time before the parasite would get a hold of the thaids around the city since Leylarhad were extremely powerful thaids among the low-ranked ones, the most prominent around the city.

"He was infected two weeks ago, more or less, by Leylarhads," Professor Derr said.

"I know. I interviewed him when he came back," Fischer said. "This means that we already have infected humans here... The Leylarhads injured many soldiers, and these probably had intercourse with their spouses and partners. So, we must do something about it."

"I'm already working on a vaccine. However, it won't be easy to make it. Heniates have a special brain crystal power. They can birth living organisms, which they control through mana. This, in turn, gives commands to the host, making them do what the Heniate wants. However, each Heniate has a particular mana frequency.

To disrupt the signal it sends to the worms inside the hosts and to kill its spawn, I must find this frequency first. They die as soon as the mana is cut off from the worms, and so do their eggs, and..."

Professor Derr said, he looked at Major Fischer with a solemn look in his eyes.

"And what?" Fischer asked.

"Listen, the worst thing is that the Heniate's parasite can modify its victims' DNA, making them more suitable to accommodate the eggs. A stronger and mindless host is better for reproduction. The thaid induces mutations inside the hosts' bodies, making them stronger and faster."

Professor Derr looked the man in the eyes and then replied, "If we kill the Heniate, and the host is too far into mutations, as soon as the thaid dies, and the insects it controls die with it, even the hosts will perish..."

The situation was becoming worse and worse for the major. He knew that if the parasites spread further, they might wipe out the city entirely. It would take decades before the nation could recover from such a disaster.

"Do you have any clue where this beast could be?" Professor Derr asked.

"No," Fischer replied. "We knew that something was pushing the thaids to migrate, but we only knew it was to the east. We didn't have much time to search for it because of the horde, and all the soldiers we sent to search for what I now assume is the Heniate are missing in action." Major Fischer said.

"It could have been the beast itself or something else for all that matters. Or maybe they found something and were attacked by powerful thaids. We lost contact with several squads, so nothing is certain."

"Remember, this is not a simple migration," Professor Derr said. "There is a parasite behind it."

The two then turned to look in the ranger's direction. Lakwosky's restrictions were a necessity since it was highly likely that he would have assaulted multiple people if they were not present.

The most pressing problem was that the same symptoms the ranger showed were also present in other people. Mostly soldiers that had been sent to cull the monster's population, raising the need to restrict their freedom, as there was no cure for it yet.

Fischer stood behind Doctor Derr, watching Ranger Lakwosky struggle to free himself from the restraints imprisoning him. The ranger was a superhuman, so a mixture of strong ores was used to restrain him.

"What a pity, a brave warrior such as him reduced to a mindless human-killing machine, incapable of distinguishing between friends and foes," Said the major.

A blood sample taken from the ranger did show that he was affected by the same parasites the other beasts had. Since this particular thaid, the Heniate could change the DNA structure of the creatures

it infected. The situation made it so that Ranger Lakwosky had mutated, making him a sort of human-thaid.

Professor Derr removed the parasite bugs from his body. Still, it was unfortunately impossible to make the man return the way he was, as it was too late to intervene. His DNA changed too much, and the man simply ceased to be.

"We're doing everything we can," Professor Derr replied. "But I fear we still need to wait until we have more data."

"Unfortunately, the Heniate's bugs proliferate quickly. Only a bite is needed to infect other organisms and transform them into murder machines," the doctor replied.

"I see..." Fischer turned to look again at the screaming soldier. His shrieks and screams were so inhumane that the major broke into a cold sweat in fear of ending up like this man.

The major wandered in his thoughts while looking at the restrained men inside the white padded room, with only a transparent reinforced glass to shield him from the mutant.

He felt bad for the unfortunate ones destined to become monsters, unable to escape that nightmare. But then, he remembered he had a job to do. He had to be strong for the sake of the city, no, the sake of the nation.

"Ranger Lakwosky's mutation gave him not only improved physical strength and agility. The problem is that we don't know if he developed some other mutations along with the ones we found out. Moreover, he naturally created several neural links in the span of these two weeks," the doctor said, breaking the silence.

"He went from being an OMICRON2 soldier to an MI3," he said, leaving the Major speechless.

However, he had another thought: "Is it possible to transform this mutation into something we can use?" He asked.

"It is possible, but we need a lot of time, and I'm not sure we will have it in the foreseeable future," the doctor replied.

"But aside from this, we have more pressing matters. As I've said, If the horde is under the Heniate's control, it is probably coordinating them to attack the unaffected thaid's population, and then it will be our turn," Professor Derr added.

Major Fischer was listening carefully. He was bothered by the professor's theory, but it hardly made any difference since the thaid's were already marching west toward the city.

"Are you certain it will attack us?" the major asked.

"A hundred percent sure. It is its nature, after all," Professor Derr said. "It will target us."

Fischer turned to look again at the restrained monstrosity behind the glass, thinking that this hypothesis was not farfetched.

"We will do all we can to stop the monsters from coming here," Major Fischer said. "In the meantime, keep developing a vaccine."

"I will. Don't worry, James."

The two spent the next hour talking about the situation. The major got more information from doctor Derr and then decided it was time to leave the building. He had a lot of work to do.

Chapter 143: A wild Blirdoth appeared (1)

"Echo, this is Delta. We reached the cave. Over."

"Copy, Delta. Search the place for hints. We need to understand what happened. Over."

Two squads had been sent to the east to investigate the disappearance of a squad. They had been sent to care for a Nogith colony with a high risk of migrating to the west and toward the city if whatever was affecting the ecosystem pushed them to do so. It was of the utmost importance to cull their numbers.

The last known communication of the team said that the quest was partially clear, as the team collapsed the cave where the Nogith colony hid. However, more than six days had passed since that communication, and no trace of the squad remained from that moment. However, the team previously sent here, the Charlie squad, was an elite one.

Their reputation made it hard, even among those who knew little about the military, to believe they might be killed off like that. The only thing plausible for their disappearance was that some powerful creature attacked the team without warning or provocation, killing every member. So, two more squads were sent there to investigate, Echo and Delta squads.

These were two high-profile teams with countless accomplishments under their belt. Delta approached the collapsed cave entrance with cautious steps. The place was littered with small craters, and the earth was scorched.

"It looks like this is the place, Delta team's captain said."

It was clear that a battle happened here.

"Spread out and search for clues," The captain said.

Soon after, the squad members searched the surroundings, and the first thing they noticed was that all the plants nearby had withered. There was no single leaf on the trees or a single flower around. It looked almost as though someone had turned off the sun. This part of the forest was utterly dead; even the grass surrounding the area was dead.

"This isn't good, Captain. Something has affected the environment," a soldier said. "There aren't many things that can do so," he added.

"There is something here," a female soldier said. "Look! There are claw marks on the cave entrance. Something apparently tried to go inside," she added.

The captain looked at the two with contemplative looks. First, the surrounding vegetation, then the claw marks. What the hell did happen here? Of course, it was clear that a beast attacked the squad, but what could have wiped out a group of trained soldiers in the Mannard continent, and how could it devastate the surroundings like that?

A soldier, a couple of meters further, was searching on the ground for something useful to understand the situation.

"Sir, I found something," he called out over his comlink when he saw something glinting on a rock near him. He picked up the object and found it to be a wedding band ring. "This looks familiar..."

A woman approached the soldier and gave a look at the ring. "This is Rick's wedding ring," she said. She recognized it because the marriage date had been etched inside the ring, and since she knew Charlie's squad members, she knew who it belonged to.

"Sir, come to have a look at this!" One soldier said while pointing at the ground.

"Ah... fuck..." the captain said, clearly frustrated. He approached the soldier and saw a trail of weird footprints that led away from the site. They seemed at least a week old, although it was difficult to tell because most of the dirt and mud was dry.

"Whatever these footprints belong to, it must have been massive," The captain remarked.

"Indeed, sir, but it is weird, they are very similar to a thaid I know... but are too big..."

"What beast are you referring to, soldier?" the captain asked.

"It should be a Blirdoth, sir, but as I've said, they are too big to belong to it." The captain looked at the soldier through his visor and noticed that he had a severe look on his face.

"These thaids are usually no taller than a meter, so it is weird for them to be this big. Judging by the footprints, this beast is at least two meters tall," the soldier added.

The captain then thought about what to do and turned to look at a soldier.

"Nico!"

"Yes, sir?" the man replied.

"Contact the HQ and tell them what we did find. Make sure to take photos of everything around here, including the wedding ring, the footprints, the claw marks, and flora."

"Yes, sir."

The captain then picked up his radio. "Echo, here is Delta. Do you copy? Over."

But no reply came from the device.

"Echo, here is Delta. Do you copy? Over."

Silence.

The captain immediately understood that something was going on.

"All right, guys, we are leaving!" the man said.

"Sir, there is still much to investigate here... just there, I found a Nog..."

"Shut up and do as I say. Let's go!"

A sound in the distance caught Nico's attention. A strange noise, almost resembling a roar.

"Did you hear that?" Nico asked.

"What are you talking about?"

However, the captain heard it too.

"TO THE CAR. NOW!"

Since there were multiple flying Thaidi around the forest, using a flying car was akin to suicide unless they traveled at high altitudes. However, since they had to find where the Charlie squad had disappeared, they had to take a land car. This was still dangerous, but not as much as having to deal with flying thaidi, which were usually stronger than land ones.

The five people ran to the car, and soon they started the engine and left the cave entrance. The captain heaved a sigh of relief once they were safely away from the place.

"I hate this fucking job..." a soldier said as tension could be almost felt to the touch.

The captain, however, had other things on his mind. Echo didn't reply to the call, and he strongly felt they were already dead. What he didn't understand was what could have possibly killed a whole squad of trained soldiers without leaving them the possibility to even ask for help. He glanced back at the direction they took off towards and noticed an anomaly among the trees.

It appeared to be a giant creature speeding in their direction at an insanely fast speed.

"What the fuck is that?" a soldier shouted.

"What?"

"Look, there!" he said while pointing to the back of the car. The captain saw the speeding creature and shouted, "SPEED UP THIS SHIT!"

RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAWRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM

A flying tree crashed just a couple of meters behind the car.

"THIS THING IS THROWING TREES AT US!" Nico said.

"FASTER, GO FASTER!" the captain said.

"I can't, sir. If I accelerate, we will crash against a tree!"

"We will crash against a tree if you don't do so!"

As the car sped through the forest, the beast got closer to the car, showing an impressive speed no normal thaid should have had. Suddenly, it jumped into the air and landed next to the vehicle. The soldiers kept their composure, but it was clear they were scared. Then, the beast opened its mouth wide and roared again.

RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAWR

Suddenly, Nico started channeling mana and prepared his power. The soldier's full name was Nico Montgomery. He belonged to the Montgomery family, and like every member of that family, he could control the earth.

The first thing the young man did once he saw the beast beside the car was to control the earth below it, hoping he would slow the beast down. Indeed he was successful, as the Blirboth stumbled and crashed against a tree.

BOOOOM

"It really is a giant Blirboth!" the soldier who identified the creature said.

"Attack the beast; we must kill it!" the captain shouted.

"Sir, I doubt we can injure it with that thick amount of mana surrounding its body, and we don't have ranged powers. Only Nico can stop him!" a soldier said.

"I don't care, we may not be able to kill it, but at least we will slow it down! Use that damn laser rifles!" the captain said.

Chapter 144: A wild Blirboth appeared (2)

As soon as the captain ended the phrase, the Blirboth jumped out of a bush on the side of the car and slammed its body into it, almost toppling it.

"SHIT! DO SOMETHING, NICO!"

"I'M TRYING!"

The other three free squad members started shooting the thaid with their laser rifles; however, there were two problems.

The first one was that since mana started interacting with creatures, their bodies were entirely changed by it, making them stronger and more resistant.

Most of the thaids had very durable skins, which could resist attacks that would have killed any other creature in the past.

The second problem was that mana was naturally released by their bodies, creating a sort of protection that rendered most conventional attacks useless. Only mana-based attacks were truly efficient against thaids unless they were low leveled ones, as they had much less mana coming out of their pores.

This meant that the laser rifles, despite having been destructive weapons in the past, were now basically useless and were used mainly to avoid soldiers wasting mana.

Some Thaids' species belonged to a grey area where conventional weapons were still effective but not as much as on low-leveled thaids. The captain hoped that the beast was in such a grey area.

PEW

PEW

PEW

PEW

The three soldiers, including the captain, started shooting at the beast, which shrugged the laser rifles as if they were nothing. Though, they could scratch the beast's skin here and there, making the lasers annoying for the thaid.

"IT DOESN'T WORK!" a soldier shouted.

"IT DOESN'T MATTER. KEEP SHOOTING!"

At that moment, the Blirdoth was going to ram the car again. However, Nico reacted in time and created an earth wall that stopped the creature from doing so. Though the thaid crushed the wall as if it was made of sand and almost hit the car. Luckily, the wall slowed the beast down enough for the vehicle to avoid the attack.

"What do we do, captain?"

"We can't go on like this! We must stop it!"

The captain kept firing at the beast, hoping to hit it in the eye or something like that, but at the same time, he thought of a way to stop the creature. Then, he had an idea; what he was going to propose was a risky move, but one that would get rid of the trees in front, making it so that the car could go faster and they would escape the monster.

"Nico, can you create a ramp and bring us over the trees?"

The young man looked at his captain like he was a madman. Even if he could do that, they would surely be seen by flying thaids, and escaping those beasts was much more challenging than escaping the Blirdoth. However, as things progressed, only certain death awaited the five men if they didn't try. At least that way, they had a chance.

"I can..." Nico said.

"LOOK!" one of the soldiers said, pointing at the Blirdoth. "It is releasing something in the air!"

They all turned to look at the chasing beast, but once they did, they were horrified at the view. The trees behind the running beasts started to wither when they got in contact with the fog it released. Some plants even started liquefying.

"MAKE THESE DAMN RAMPS NICO!"

The young man immediately started channeling mana while the team kept firing at the thaid.

"USE THE ROCKET LAUNCHER!" the captain shouted.

One of the soldiers went to the back of the car and picked up the weapon. There were only two rockets in that car, as they were thought to destroy caves and things like that mainly. They weren't that powerful, so the captain doubted it would have been that efficient. Yet, they would have at least created some vision impairment.

The soldier quickly pointed the weapon to the Blirdoth, and after having prepared to shoot, he did so, making the rocket travel through the air.

SWOOOOOSH

BOOOM

The sound of an explosion reverberated through the forest. The soldier hit the Blirdoth right in the face, making the Blirdoth roar in pain and rage. However, the rocket did nothing more than slow it down a little.

It was apparent that its eyesight wasn't affected by whatever the rocket produced because otherwise, it wouldn't have been able to see them. As such, the beast charged forward, trying to crush the car with its massive body.

"Its power is too little! We need stronger weapons!"

"We don't have those. We must do with what we have!"

"Nico, how much time do you need?" the captain asked.

"Sir, it's not easy to control the earth at this speed and distance!"

As the soldier said those words, the Blirdoth almost caught up with the car. Behind it, a giant cloud of gas spread out. It destroyed everything it touched, leaving decayed plants and liquefied creatures around.

Clearly, the car would be able to last a little bit longer if the gas hit it; however, the captain wasn't sure about what would happen to them if they got inside that fog.

Then the Blirdoth flanked the car and started slamming its body on its side, raising its left wheels from the ground.

"NICO! DO SOMETHING," one of the soldiers shouted while he kept shooting at the beast.

BOOOOM

The thaid slammed the car again, but then, seeing that it was useless, it decided to use his poisonous fog and sped up, trying to go in front of the car.

"NICO!"

As the Blirdoth almost went in front of the vehicle, soon, a huge ramp appeared in front of it. The group quickly went over the trees, losing sight of the Blirdoth.

However, Nico was in serious trouble; it wasn't easy to maintain all that earth and sustain the car's weight with the mana he had available. The young man's reserves were not limitless. Still, luckily he was relatively high ranked on the Idor scale, so he could sustain that mana expenditure for a bit compared to when he was younger.

"GOOD JOB, NICO!" one of the soldiers said.

"Yeah, well-done, soldier!" the captain added.

However, they saw the man sweating a lot and starting to pale.

"Keep going on, boy!" the captain said.

As they traveled over the trees, with an earth road constantly generating in front of them, the group could finally speed up enough to lose the thaid. However, as they were up there, they saw countless flying thaids roaming around.

"We can't stay out here for long..." the captain said.

"Yeah, besides, I can't keep going on forever. We should go down!" Nico said.

"Good, make a ramp again, and let's hide from these monsters..." the captain said.

Then Nico did as instructed, bringing the team to ground level after a short while.

"Good job, guys, we made it!" the captain said.

As the car traveled, the captain checked the map continuously to see where they were, occasionally indicating the way to the driver.

The captain then contacted the HQ. He had to tell a lot to them. Probably Echo squad was dead, killed by the beast, which was also probably responsible for team Charlie's disappearance. After that, the car kept speeding through the forest until they reached a nearby camp.

The people there monitored the horde, meaning they traveled at least 600 kilometers from the cave.

As the car stopped in front of the camp, a couple of soldiers rushed out to receive team Delta. From there, after having helped Nico, who almost exhausted his mana, the team's captain reported to the camp leader, explaining how dangerous the beast in the east was.

"Are you sure that was a Blirdoth?"

"Yes, sir," the captain said.

"Understood; I will contact the higher-ups to find a way to fight this creature. They will probably send Higher ranked soldiers, I think. Thank you for your job, captain."

After that, the man went to rest with the others members of his squad. This was a very stressful day, and he couldn't wait to return home to his family.

Chapter 145: A week later

A week passed since Erik enrolled at the Red Palace, and things were progressing smoothly. Most of the training was in the morning, and he liked his training time with master Nieminen.

The Flyssa was a great sword, suitable for slashing but also for stabbing, and it complimented his power quite well. It was definitely better than using random branches he picked randomly from the forest.

Erik also noted that the sharpness he provided with his power added to the blade, which meant that whenever he acquired a superior weapon, he would be even more powerful than before.

As for his Flyssa, Master Nieminen actually asked him to give it a name. Erik thought about a name for almost a week as he wanted to give the blade a name fitting for his purpose but also wanted it to strike fear. In the end, he decided to call it Heartseeker. It seemed appropriate for a weapon that was going to kill thajids.

Erik was training with Master Nieminen as he had already followed Master Rook's martial art class. The two were using real blades in order to get accustomed to it.

"You must keep your arms up!" Master Nieminen said.

Erik then slashed, trying to follow his master's instructions.

"Not like that! Stop for a second. I will show it to you again..."

Master Nieminen then went into stance and performed a vertical slash. The move was beautiful yet imposing, reflecting a vicious fighting style that his teacher created herself. It was called Crypt of the desert style. As its creator intended, the style had minimal movements, as it tried to mimic the stillness and peace that a crypt actually had.

Its only movement was when one raised an arm forward to attack, making the whole thing seem like a statue moving slightly.

"Now, watch how my hands move." Master Nieminen started by slowly extending her left hand while holding her Flyssa, which became a blur within seconds.

"Now, do it."

Erik tried to repeat what the teacher just showed. Still, it was clear that wouldn't be easy despite having that much dexterity already. The young man couldn't cheat his way out as he did with martial arts; he had to sweat here. As Erik continued practicing, he started getting frustrated that his movements were not as fast or as precise as his master's.

However, despite his feelings, the young man kept exercising, and soon the sparring resumed.

"Good! Now rotate your wrists!"

Erik did as instructed, and he was able to disarm his master. Of course, she let him do that for the sake of learning.

She explained that rotating the wrist properly meant that there was no need to twist the elbow too far back. With proper rotation, all the force could go directly through the palm. This allowed the sword wielder to control where he or she wanted the opponent's weapon to go.

"There is another important detail when executing this move..." said Master Nieminen, "and that has to do with the grip. You have to hold the handle firmly between your thumb and index finger, but make sure that you don't squeeze too hard so that your fingers won't lose flexibility," the woman said.

"Ok, I got it..." Erik said, and like that, this second lecture ended. However, Master Nieminen wasn't done with the young man. As the awakener was putting his sword away, Master Nieminen suddenly addressed him.

"Erik."

"Yes, Master?"

"A week already went by as you joined the Red Palace, and as you know, we left you alone this week to give you time to get used to this place. However, starting by this week, you will have to start fighting for the inner-ranking positions," Master Nieminen said.

"Yes, I'm aware..."

"And you should also be aware that your match is tomorrow, am I right?" the master asked.

"Yes, I am..."

"Good. Do you feel ready?"

"I guess... I don't think I will be able to use my weapon, but I will try it nonetheless. What really worries me is that I won't know who my opponent will be until tomorrow," Erik said.

"Yeah, fighting unknown enemies is nerve-wracking. I know that feeling well," she said while looking at her student behind her glasses. Erik was surprised by that statement; however, it was clear that despite being a Red Palace master today, she had to be a newbie just like him in her youth.

"You too, Master?"

"Of course, I wasn't born knowing how to handle a sword, and my power is not as good as the others may say..."

"If it is not too much, mind sharing what your power does?" Erik asked his teacher.

"Yeah, it is not that big of a deal. I can simply manipulate weight. This isn't that useful in many situations. Still, it is an A-ranked power on the Jorm scale since, by decreasing my weight, I can improve my speed a lot, and by increasing it, I can boost the damage I deal in the same way."

"It looks like a cool power to me," Erik said.

"It is, but I actually needed a weapon to inflict serious damage. What I could do at most was to make other creatures so heavy as to stop them from moving, but that was the best I could do at the time. It is different now, obviously, but I had my share of hardships in the past."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Erik said.

"Nevermind, it's in the past now. Ok, let me give you a word of advice: if you want to win against someone stronger than yourself" —she paused for a moment—"don't fight head-on. Instead, search for any opening they may have. During the test with Master Walker you didn't exploit even a single one..." the teacher said.

"Sorry, master, but it is not that easy for me to notice them..."

"I know, but try to pay attention to them. During this week, I tried to train you in doing so, and sometimes you could take advantage of them."

"All right, I will do my best..."

"Good, now you should go to the weightlifting class... Don't be late."

"Yes, master."

With that, the young man left the Yellow Palace and headed to the Red one. As usual, he had to take the bus to get there, and as he did so, he found all his friends already on board.

"You took your time..." Amber said to her friend.

"Yeah, sorry, I had a chat with Master Nieminen and was a little bit late," Erik replied.

"You are very lucky to be the sole student of Master Nieminen. I'm just the fifth with mine," Floyd said.

"Who is your master?" Erik asked.

"Viktor Hartwin, spear master."

"How is he?"

"Meh... He is good with the spear but not that much good at teaching. Professor McAllister was better, to be honest," Floyd replied.

"If I were you, I would refrain from badmouthing your own master," Gwen said.

"Yeah... Yeah. Don't worry, bro," Floyd said, addressing Gwen like a male.

After a short trip, the group finally arrived at the Red Palace, and one by one, they took the elevator to reach the first floor and headed to the gym. Everyone remembered where to go to reach the place by now, so they didn't have particular problems going there.

However, as soon as they stepped inside the room, they saw countless students training. There were at least three hundred people inside the gym, but since each year had its own schedule, it wasn't hard to find a spot to train.

The group of friends decided to exercise together. Since Anderson, Erik, Aaron, and Mikey were going to train their back and shoulders, they decided to work out together. The others, in turn, did their own training separately.

Chapter 146: Becker's idea

Erik immediately went to a nearby bench with Aaron, Mikey, and Anderson in tow. They all took a seat nearby, and after having each picked a dumbbell, they started their shoulder training.

"So, how is it going?" Aaron asked Erik.

"Not bad, Master Nieminen is an excellent teacher, and even master Rook knows how to do his job. There is nothing to complain about the Red Palace."

"Yeah, and the facilities are also top-notch," Mikey added. "The room they gave me here is even bigger than the one I have at home!"

Aaron, Mikey, and Anderson were not rich guys. They belonged to the middle class, meaning they mostly had everything they needed at home, but could not live the lavish lifestyle that Gwen, Floyd, and Amber lived.

That was also one of the reasons why they didn't mingle with the three rich friends before the Red Palace. However, now things were different. Here, the competition was going to be hard, and they were also inside a new environment, so grouping was the best thing they could have done.

"Your room? Damn, it's almost bigger than my entire house!" said Erik as he lifted a weight above his head. The other three followed suit. It wasn't like there weren't any machines available, but lifting weights by hand felt more natural when working out. At least, that's what Erik thought.

At that moment, Anderson chimed in, "Hey Erik, I heard your father is Lucius Romano. Is that true?"

The young man was a little bit reluctant to answer this question. However, he decided to answer not to appear rude.

"Indeed..."

"Whoa, you should be pretty proud then. My father read about him a lot in the newspaper a couple of years ago. Wasn't he the one that went into that laboratory on the Mur continent? I heard that they found a lot of interesting stuff there..."

Erik was perfectly aware of how famous his father was and how significant his achievements were. He was an AKAPPA3C ranger, part of 'The Phantoms', one of the nation's most potent and most accomplished military teams.

Their deeds were often on the front page of many newspapers, and Frant's higher-ups regarded them highly. Lucius himself was a powerful fighter. Although his power was only ranked C on the Jorm scale, he took full advantage of it, soon becoming one of the best soldiers in the country.

However, the truth was that he was the worst possible parent. Not only was he emotionally detached from his son, but he even left him two years prior, only to appear in front of him a month ago to ask him for a favor.

Erik didn't reply, and the other three quickly changed topics, sensing the young man's reluctance to talk about him.

"Can you give me that dumbbell?" Anderson asked Erik, and he quickly gave it to him.

Like that, the training quickly continued until only one class remained on the obstacle course.

"Any news from Etrium?" General Becker asked.

"Yes, sir, our spies reported the introduction of a groundbreaking technology inside the nation. Apparently, they found a way to use brain crystals extracted from thaids' bodies," a man said to the general. Becker looked at the man with a concerned look.

"What do we know about this technology?"

"Well, apparently, they couldn't use them to power complex machines or make rifles out of them but were able to create several weapons capable of unleashing the monster's powers," the man said.

"As you know, Etrium has advanced knowledge of the thaid's field. The nation was already able to use materials acquired from them very efficiently. Still, if they manage even to use their brain crystals, things will turn complicated for us," the man said.

And he was right. Etrium was a nation bordering Frant, with similar levels of technology to the first nation, but that had to deal with far fewer criminal activities compared to general Becker's country. They had more time, people, and resources to study thaids and develop the technology.

Since it became apparent many years ago that most thaids species were immune to conventional weapons due to the coat of mana surrounding their bodies, Etrium spent a lot of resources finding a way to use thaid's body parts to produce items.

Initially, they could use mostly their bones, fangs, and the like. Still, later, they developed ways to deal with skin, organs, scales, and many more: producing armor, weapons, and different tools.

However, they didn't keep this technology a secret. They shared it with the population, quickly becoming known as the so-called blacksmith nation.

In fact, this place had many artisans who could use this technology to create artifacts that were later sold to mercenaries. Contrary to Frant, who was mainly militaristic and whose thaid's affairs were handled by soldiers, Etrium had a totally different approach.

They let the citizens deal with the thaids by setting up legislation that allowed them to create mercenary organizations and which resulted in a flourishing environment where anyone could earn a fortune by hunting thaids.

The monster's body parts were then sold to the city, to researchers, to artisans, and the like to produce goods, creating a sort of mix between modern and ancient. Everyone benefitted from this approach, from the most humble citizen to the wealthiest merchant.

Initially, Frant didn't mind this since creating this kind of weapon to hunt thaids was not much better than using brain crystal powers. However, this new technology was a problem since it allowed to effective use of Thaids BCPs. Though, this wasn't the only concerning news. Apparently, if an armorsmith used the brain crystal and the other body parts from the same thaid to make armor.

This would start releasing mana, meaning that each soldier could gain immunity against conventional weapons exactly as thaids did.

Despite having a lot of power, humans were not immune to bullets or lasers, so gaining this advantage was bound to tilt the continent's power scale.

Moreover, Frant was currently at war with Hin. If Etrium decided to attack the nation, the country led by general Becker would have a hard time.

"I see..." the general said. "Is there anything else?"

"Yes," another man said. "We received a concerning report from Major Fischer. He recently met with Professor Derr Xilion, who said he has strong reasons to believe that an Heniate is behind the thaids migration."

"Heniate? Isn't this a parasitic beast?" Becker asked.

"Indeed, probably the horde traveling here has already been infected. The Major also reports cases of contagion inside the city; many soldiers mutated under the thaid's powers, and he is currently purging them and their families."

"Is the situation so serious?" Becker asked.

"Indeed, sir, we are currently in need of your expertise..." the man said.

Becker thought about it for a little bit until he had a brilliant idea.

"I want you to redirect most of the troops around the east gate to cull the horde population," Becker said.

"But sir, then our defenses will thin down..."

"Not at all; we can ask the Red Palace and the military school for help. Let the kids gain experience by killing thaids."

"Sir, you suggest using untrained underaged people to protect the borders?"

"Yes and no. The teachers will be present to help them in case they mess up. For the ones still not part of the military school, they will be able to see how the outside world is. We will let them handle weak thaids. As for the older ones, who are already in military school, they will take care of stronger. This will all be part of their training.

It is the best thing to do since we have a lot of students; the red palace only has at least fifty thousand members, while the military school has millions."

Not many people liked General Becker's idea. However, his words were absolute, and they couldn't defy him.

"As you wish, sir."

Chapter 147: Inner-ranking fight (1)

The following day Erik woke up early. This was going to be a very important day, with most of the students having their first inner-ranking fight, and the young man was one of them.

He still didn't know whom he had to fight. However, since this person was going to be part of the Red Palace, he didn't dare underestimate him or her by any means.

So, Erik decided to go to the cafeteria for his first daily quest and then head to the Yellow Palace to start his training. Of course, he couldn't go without Benedict, so Erik knocked on the young man's door and woke him up.

"Benedict, wake up!" Erik said.

"Hmm...? What...? Who...?"

"It's me! Get your ass out of bed, and let's have breakfast."

"What time is it?" Benedict asked with a foggy mind; he was basically half asleep.

"It's 6:30 in the morning."

"Why did you wake me up so early...?" Benedict lamented, throwing his pillow at Erik.

"Man, I will leave you here unless you get your ass up!" Erik replied in annoyance. Then Benedict stood up from the bed, grumbling something unintelligible under his breath. He quickly dressed and followed Erik out of the room.

"Finally," Erik said. "Let's go..."

"Yeah... yeah..."

After that, the two went to eat together as usual. It seemed like they were becoming more comfortable around each other, which made Benedict particularly happy. As for Erik, he was still a little bit awkward around others, so he didn't know what to do. After arriving at the cafeteria, the two began eating.

Later, after finishing off the last piece of bread and completing his quest, Erik stood up, quickly followed by Benedict.

"So, today we are going to fight, eh?" Benedict said.

"Yes..." Since Benedict had much more knowledge than him about fighting, Erik asked him a question, "What do you think about my chances of winning?" Erik replied with an anxious tone.

"Well, I don't really know how you will perform. Judging by your stats, you shouldn't have particular problems with people around your rank, but it will be difficult on higher ones. However,

don't worry too much about it. The people we are going to fight will be around our rank," Benedict replied, trying to ease the young man's anxiousness.

The boy smiled weakly at his roommate, relieved that he thought so.

After walking through the corridors, the pair arrived at the elevator. They quickly left the floor and headed to the main entrance, where the usual bus was waiting for the students to come. After that, the day went fast; with Erik completing his daily training and quest, it was time to fight.

The place Erik and the others were currently headed was called the Blue Palace, maintaining the establishment's sense of naming. This was essentially a place with multiple rooms where the students could fight without repercussion. They were built with durable materials that could sustain even the strongest of the powers, making it so that the students didn't have to worry about their surroundings.

The blue palace was very similar to the yellow one. It was a huge rectangular building at least 20 floors high with no windows and just one door on one of the short sides. The building was probably made of metal and was entirely painted blue.

To reach this place, the students had to take the bus, meaning that hundreds of such vehicles were traveling there, with occasionally some heading there by foot.

Once the students arrived, a huge crowd of people was amassed by the door, but they quickly entered it. As soon as they did, a notification appeared on their phones, Erik included.

ERIK ROMANO (RANK 3543-FIRST YEAR) VERSUS ALISSA KERR (RANK 3492-FIRST YEAR)

ROOM 764, SEVENTH FLOOR.

HEALER: DACRE HOLLAND

"It looks like my opponent will be a girl, uh?" Erik said to himself. He then turned to look at his friends as he was curious about whom they would fight.

"Who is your opponent?" the young man asked.

"It's a third-year guy in my case, Christopher House," Amber said.

"Maddie Nash, second year," Gwen replied.

Soon all of their friends told them whom they would fight; Amber and Anderson got third-year students, while the others were second-year ones. Only Erik got to fight with someone in the same year. It was a little bit depressing, but to be honest, Erik was starting to care less and less about these things, so he wasn't that bothered.

Besides, every time he had to fight, a thrilling excitement filled his body. He was anticipating his next fight a little bit.

Then Erik observed his surroundings. At first glance, the interior looked quite normal. There were doors leading into different areas inside a large hall. Several benches lined the wall over the room, and couches were scattered here and there. In addition, there were vending machines lined along the walls near the entrance, selling drinks and snacks.

"Better get going," Floyd said.

"Yeah!" Benedict replied. "I can't wait to fight!" he added, with all the others rolling their eyes back. During this week in the Red Palace, they started to know Benedict, and saying he was a battle junkie was an understatement.

Like that, the students entered one of the many doors leading to different corridors, and each took an elevator to go to their respective floors. Once on the seventh, Erik quickly found room 764, and once there, he saw that there was already a person inside.

"You should be Erik Romano," the man in front of him said; he looked around his thirties.

"And you should be Mister Holland," Erik replied.

"Indeed, I am."

As the two men bowed respectfully toward each other, Alissa Kerr walked inside the room and looked at her surroundings.

"The last one came, finally. Shall we start?" the healer said.

"That's good for me," Erik said.

"Me too," Alissa Ker replied.

Suddenly the metallic door behind the young woman closed, and the three remained inside the room. To be honest, the healer went inside another door and disappeared behind it, probably to avoid getting injured during the two students' confrontation.

At that, the healer's voice came out from some speakers into the wall. "Ok, guys, just a couple of things before we start. No Fatal moves, you can use your powers and weapons, and you can even set rules to win this competition differently, such as restricting fighting with only martial arts or weapons and the like. If you want to quit, say that you surrender or tap the ground five times.

Is Everything clear?"

"YES."

"YES."

"Good. If there is nothing more, then start the match."

As soon as the healer said this, a sort of barrier appeared all around the walls, it was transparent with a slightly yellow tint, and Erik immediately recognized it as the same kind of barrier surrounding the city. The barrier acted as a protection for the building and for the people in the other rooms.

The two students were immediately surprised by the technology, but after that, they turned to look at their opponent.

"Good luck, then..." Alissa said.

"Likewise..." Erik replied, going into a fighting stance.

The young man was slightly surprised by his opponent's politeness, though not enough to make him think she might have been a nice girl. People were fundamentally pieces of shit floating in a toilet full of piss.

After a couple of seconds, both the students started channeling mana. Erik didn't pick up his weapon and simply started circulating mana through his arm, creating the usual thin coat of mana that made it possible to cut through anything.

However, Alissa summoned a huge claymore sword. It had an ethereal blue tint, at least 140 centimeters long, and a slightly bent forward guard that made the sword look like a cross.

Chapter 148: Inner-ranking fight (2)

Alissa immediately charged at Erik as soon as she summoned her sword. Erik did the same once his mana entirely surrounded his arms. He had no plan of underestimating his opponent, so he went all out as soon as the match started.

In the meantime, Erik thought to himself, <Analysis,> almost instantly, a blue and white screen materialized before him, occupying a little portion of his peripheral vision.

- Name: Alissa Kerr.

- Brain Crystal Power: Claymore summoning (Common)

-Race: Human

-Physical traits: Approximately 1.60 centimeters tall. Slender build but bulky arms and shoulders. Approximate weight 60 kilograms.

-Personality and Characteristics: Nothing is known about her aside from the fact that she showed sportsmanship and politeness.

-Power level: 49

-Approximate Strength: 18

-Approximate Intelligence: 13

-Approximate Dexterity: 14

-Approximate Energy: 80

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...

Erik was able to assess his opponent's power level because the biological supercomputer granted him the analysis power. Alissa was clearly inferior to Erik, but her swordsmanship was very refined. He could clearly understand that by observing how she held the sword.

As he observed the screen, Alissa came to him vertically slashing her claymore down, clearly having the reach advantage. She attempted to strike Erik on the shoulder by bringing the blade to his right side. The young woman wanted to cause as much damage as possible in the shortest amount of time.

The reason was that Alissa was among the students who saw Erik perform his entry tests, and she knew the young man was much stronger than her in terms of physical might.

Despite her being a dangerous move, who could potentially kill her opponent, she knew that if she didn't give her all, she would lose the fight and drop her rank.

Allison was quick, and judging by the move, she was, for sure, a fantastic fighter. Since Erik started training with Master Nieminen, he started appreciating more weapon-conjuring brain crystals as he knew that the amount of exercise required to effectively wield them was no joke. Besides, there was a sort of elegance in sword training, which was obviously exuded by the young woman too.

However, Erik was no stranger to fighting and training and immediately understood what the young woman was trying to do. He evaded the strike and counterattacked with a move of his own now that Alissa was open.

Erik punched with all his strength at the young woman. However, her reflexes were good enough to see the attack, and her strength was barely enough to parry the attack with her sword.

Allison barely managed to resist the attack. It was basically a punch with a sort of piercing power, and that was all thanks to Erik's mana, which created a semi-weapon out of his arms. As a result, her hands suffered a little pain, almost forcing her to drop her sword.

However, Erik wasn't done because he punched again at the woman, who could only avoid the attack. She tilted her head slightly, making the young man miss his target. She then lifted her sword with great speed and tried to stab at the young man from close quarters.

Erik, sensing the danger, immediately tilted to the side. However, he was too close, and avoiding the move was difficult. At that moment, Erik understood how better a weapon was compared to martial art fighting and how important it was to learn the flyssa.

His reach was significantly shorter than his opponent's, and Erik could avoid her swings only because of his stats. Erik would have already lost if it wasn't for the unfair advantages brought by the biological supercomputer.

However, the awakener took his opportunity to kick at the young woman. He hit her on the side, making her bend slightly for a second. The kick was powerful and sent Alissa out of balance.

The girl, though, now had an idea about the person she was battling against: someone who was physically strong and knew how to use his body effectively. She could see inexperience inside of him, but his body more than made up for it in a way she couldn't overcome.

Even Erik, though, started to appreciate the young woman's skill. As soon as she regained her posture, she slashed again at the young man. Erik jumped back several meters, avoiding the attack. However, Alissa was relentless and started chasing Erik around the room.

She attacked him like a beast while keeping up with his movements. The young woman kept slashing the empty air as she chased Erik, who wasn't having a hard time fighting against her, thanks to his stats. Again, the system gave him the strength to fight such opponents.

In fact, Allisa was fast, very fast, even faster than most people her age. This made the boy realize that maybe the best way to win against such opponents was to stay away from their range until they ran out of stamina or knock her out at the right moment.

As Erik kept thinking about how to win against the girl, he looked up and saw his adversary charging toward him, but he didn't panic as when he did with Zakir. Since he intensified his training, the young man learned a lot about combat. He became aware of how to effectively protect himself against such kinds of attacks.

After a few seconds, Allisa was on him, and she attempted to slash at Erik once more. However, the awakener wasn't an easy target.

He tilted again to the side several times, avoiding multiple slashes, and finally, he could free himself from the young woman's assault.

It was then that Erik slashed at her with his arm creating a wound on her chest and exposing part of her breast. However, Erik wasn't a pervert; he knew that something like this was bound to happen sooner or later and that this actually happened to a lot of people.

Though, there was something that made the young man's heart skip a beat. It was the smell of blood that started spreading through the room as he slashed at his opponent.

He felt it again, that thrill inside him, that strange feeling he got whenever he fought or killed another being. A sensation he couldn't understand nor explain. Alissa wasn't someone he should kill. However, his eyes revealed nothing, neither fear, anger, sadness... Nothing. Just bloodlust.

The young man tried to suppress that feeling, and with much difficulty, he could do so.

However, Alissa saw the look in his eyes and took a defensive stance. The fight for her became much more complicated, the wound was severe, and she was bleeding profusely. Besides, she was also a little tired due to the chase and the wild swinging she made.

Now that things were like that, Erik had a moment of respite. Alissa could no longer attack him so ruthlessly, and she could try and go into attack.

This time, Erik moved forward, Alissa tried to escape the young man, but he was faster, and his stride was longer than hers. The young woman slashed again, trying to keep Erik at bay. However, the awakener avoided the attack and quickly punched the girl, creating a hole in her right shoulder.

Alissa was taken by surprise by the move. It was unavoidable, and she was unable to defend herself.

"It's over," the healer said. It was clear who the strongest of the two was. However, the man was a little bit bittersweet since it was clear that Erik lacked a lot in terms of fighting prowess. He also came out of that fight without a scratch, so he wasn't that bad.

The young woman knew that things were taking an ugly turn; however, there wasn't much she could do at that point. Her chest wound was bleeding, and she had trouble raising her sword.

"Surrender," Erik said.

The young woman lowered her gaze, and after having thought about it for a couple of seconds, she said, "I surrender."

Chapter 149: Homicide

Immediately, the barrier surrounding the room disappeared, and the healer left his room. He first did heal Alissa; after doing so, he helped her stand. He then turned to look at Erik and congratulated him.

"Well done, you are the winner," he said, shaking Erik's hand. "Of course," he continued, looking at the young woman, "he will take your rank, and you will take his."

This was good for Erik since he was going to jump to rank 3492 while she was going to rank 3543. It was a harsh system, yet it was used for many years and helped many people grow.

"Yeah, I know..." Alissa said with a dejected tone.

"Good..." the healer said, then a notification arrived on both students' phones.

ERIK ROMANO VERSUS ALISSA KERR

WINNER OF THE MATCH: ERIK ROMANO

THE WINNER JUMPS TO RANK 3492; THE LOSER RECEDES TO RANK 3543

Erik looked at the notification with a satisfied look which didn't go unnoticed by the healer.

"Remember, this is just the first fight. Things will become much more complicated as you progress through the ranks," the healer warned. "Don't get conceited just because of this small victory..."

"Yes, sir."

The man then spent some words in favor of Alissa, who clearly was very sad about her loss. He complimented her fighting style and the precision with which she fought. Having worked in the Red Palace for years, he could distinguish a good fighter from a bad one, and she was the first. She was just unlucky today.

Afterward, the students left the room and headed to the ground floor. Alissa quickly left the building, but Erik waited for the others to come.

He was the first one to go out of their room. Soon, the others came out; the first was Anderson, followed by Amber, Gwen, Benedict, Floyd, Martha, Mikey, and lastly, Aaron, which had the most brutal fight of the lot.

Fortunately, they all won their matches, so there wasn't any unnecessary drama.

"Hey guys, I'm going to hang out in the cafeteria a bit. I want to take something fresh to drink. Do you want to come?" Benedict said, and the others promptly agreed. All but Erik.

"Sorry, I have to go to work; I will be back soon, though," he said.

"All right then, see you later."

The young man quickly left the building and headed to the train station. Since he joined the Red Palace, he received a student discount to buy tickets and other things, considerably reducing the money he had to spend to travel back and forth to the establishment.

As he waited for the train to arrive, Erik looked at his system panel, specifically the power section, where he could read about his new power.

-Brain Crystal power Merging

(Allows to merge two powers birthing a new one. It requires the merging of the DNA to work)

-DNA Merging

(Allows to merge two DNAs, birthing a new one. Required to accommodate merged powers.)

This new biological supercomputer's power was self-explanatory. He could merge two powers and make a new one, but during the past week, he didn't have the time to test it. However, he asked the system about it and got some helpful information.

First, once two powers merged, a new one with similarities to the merged ones would come out.

Second, in some extreme cases, and if there was enough synergy between the two powers, an improved version of both powers could be born, but this was rare. In this case, a single power could do exactly what the merged ones could, but with some new perks.

Third, It wasn't guaranteed that the power would move up to a new rank, especially when the powers were too similar.

Fourth, the merging power needed energy to work, meaning DNA points.

Fifth, the system would have complete control over the outcome of the merging when Erik unlocked some other system's powers. However, this wasn't directly stated by the biological supercomputer, but it was what the young man assumed by what it said. Though the system at the moment could estimate the result of the merging fairly efficiently.

The train later arrived, and he boarded it. Later, Erik arrived at his destination and started walking toward the farm.

However, as the young man walked down the station's stairs, he noticed that the buildings that were under construction a couple of weeks ago had now been completed, modifying the scenery a little bit.

After ten minutes of walking, the young man finally arrived at mister Fox's farm, but as he got closer to the main gate, he found it busted open.

<Why did Mister Fox leave it open?> the young man asked himself; that was not something he usually did. However, as he went inside the property, the young man found no one. There should have been at least a dozen workers tending the fields and feeding the animals, but there was no one currently.

<This is weird...>

Erik knew that Mister Fox was alone only in one circumstance when the Crystal Cross gang members came to visit him. The young man knew about them because the old man couldn't bother to hide their relationship from a desperate 15 years-old, especially when only the two of them worked on the farm, but with the grown-up men he hired, he couldn't risk it.

The young man quickly approached the house door, only to find it busted open. He entered the building with cautious steps.

"Mister Fox?"

"Mister Fox, are you here?" Erik said, but there was no reply.

The first thing that the young man noticed was that the whole house was a mess. Open drawers, broken furniture, and all sorts of stuff scattered everywhere. "What the hell did happen here!?"

Erik searched the whole house for clues about what had happened, but once he reached the kitchen, he saw a massive trail of blood leading to the back door.

"What the...?"

Erik immediately ran toward the back door, only to find Mister Fox's body in front of it.

"Mister Fox! Mister Fox!" Erik said, but there was no reply from the old man. The fake awakener tried to see if the man was still breathing, but unfortunately, it appeared he wasn't. The old man was dead. He had a lot of cuts all over his body, as if someone had stabbed him several times. His nails were missing, and even parts of his skin.

It looked like he was tortured.

"What the fuck did happen here?"

"Shit..."

The old man did miss his prosthetic mechanical arm and appeared to have crawled toward the back door. The place was a mess. The knives were all scattered over the floor; some windows were even broken. And on the table where they used to eat, there was an empty bottle of whiskey, half full. It appeared that Mister Fox was having his usual day before he got killed.

<But why? And who could have done something like this?> Immediately, Erik thought of the Crystal Cross gang. Since no people were working, and they were dangerous dudes, it was the only

possible reason. Mister Fox wasn't the best person around, but he wasn't that hated for his neighbors to kill him.

Erik could do nothing but pick his phone up and call the police. After fifteen minutes, they arrived at the crime scene.

There were three cars with three agents each for a total of nine officers. An ambulance also showed there, and there was also a black VAN which Erik guessed was from the scientific department.

Erik was in front of the main door when they arrived. While the other officers went inside to see what the hell happened, one stopped to talk to Erik.

"Are you the one who called?"

"Yes, sir, indeed."

"Can you show me your ID?" the police officer asked.

"Yes, sir." Erik then picked up the ID from his backpack and handed it to the cop.

"Ok, mister... Romano, can you tell me what you were doing here?" the police officer asked while looking at his ID.

"I work here, sir," he explained.

The police officer asked many questions to the young man. When did he find the body, what was he doing, if he touched anything, and so on.

However, the police quickly found out that the young man was innocent since they conducted quick research about him and it had been easily proved that he had been at the Red Palace the whole day. Since the man died this morning, it was impossible for Erik even to be a suspect.

After a couple of hours of questions, the young man left the farm and headed back to the Red Palace. He didn't have a job anymore.

Chapter 150: First Merging (1)

"What?" Boss Howell howled. "He knew nothing?!"

The man was furious. He did send Greg and Zachary again to extort information about Erik from the old man he worked with. Still, apparently, he knew nothing, so the duo was forced to kill him.

"It's not our fault, boss!" Greg said.

"Yeah, we even tortured him! But it didn't work."

Boss Howell sighed deeply before speaking in a calmer tone than usual: "We can get someone else then... Someone who knows more..." Greg said. "He has many friends; we could do something about it! If the old man knew nothing, their friends probably will!" he added.

Howell looked up at his men. They both nodded solemnly at each other as a sign of reassurance and as they waited for their leader to decide.

The men could tell by the way he kept looking down on them that their failure would be met with punishment. They were both terrified of getting punished when all this was over.

The man was already enraged because they found nothing on the young man's computer. However, they were able to understand what kind of person Erik was.

There was a lot of rage in him, and he was very interested in the war. Still, aside from that, there was nothing about a secret device, information, and stuff like that.

The only way for them to find out what they were paid for was to kidnap the young man. The problem was that he spent most of the time at the Red Palace and got out only to work, but now that the two pricks killed his employer, it was clear he wasn't going to the farm anymore.

Howell sighed again, thinking hard. Finally, he spoke: "There is still a chance for you to redeem yourselves..." he said with a grim smile. His eyes narrowed; Greg swallowed nervously, and Zachary remained silent.

"It has come to my attention that the military is planning a big event outside of the city, and the Red Palace and the military school are involved..." the man said quietly. Greg gulped loudly while Zachary tried desperately not to show any fear whatsoever.

"Apparently, they will bring the students to hunt thaids, and if things go as they should, our little Erik Romano should be among them... Well, that's what my informant told me..."

After knowing who the kid was, Howell was surprised. He knew an awakener had appeared in New Alexandria, but he didn't know who he was.

He learned about his identity after a newspaper talked about the local school's tournament. The young man's name appeared again, and he made 2+2.

Obviously, trying to kidnap the awakener was risky since the military kept an eye on him. However, the pricks couldn't do anything about Howell's organization for a long time, so he didn't think this would make a difference. However, the operation itself was going to be risky.

If everything went according to the plan he just brewed, the team sent to capture the young man would have no trouble doing so.

"Look... this is what you are going to do..."

Erik arrived at the Red Palace after a while but wasn't in the best state of mind; he was in a conflict. On the one hand, his employer, the only person who gave him a job these past two years, died, and he was sad about this.

Despite not everything being the best with the old man, he remembered genuinely good moments at the farm with pleasure.

On the other hand, a greedy person died, someone who took advantage of him for a long time and paid him a pittance that barely allowed him to survive for two years.

Only recently, since Erik got the system, things improved, with the old man at least paying him a decent salary. However, Mister Fox's past behavior made the young man think that he kind of deserved what happened to him.

It was with these conflicting emotions that Erik went to his room. Once he opened the door, there was still no one.

Benedict was probably with the others doing who knew what; for this reason, the young man decided to head to his room and finally test the merging power; to stop thinking about the murder.

Erik sat on his bed and quickly studied his status. There were many combinations he could do.

For example, he could merge the bone manipulation power with the mana exoskeleton and combine the first with the metallization power.

He could also try to merge the mana exoskeleton with the astral wolf or the poisonous mana spikes to see what would happen.

This was because these last powers were more on ethereal aspect. Unfortunately, he couldn't merge the sharpening power with the metallization one since this would mean changing the power he was most known for, which would be a problem.

For this reason, Erik decided that the best thing was to merge the powers he used less so that he wouldn't lose that much, even if the result was a bad power.

Metallization was a big nono since it helped reinforce his weapons. The poisonous mana darts power was his only ranged one, so he decided to keep it.

Ultimately, he decided that the best thing to do would be to merge the astral wolf bite and the poisonous mana spikes and see what happened.

According to the system, a new power with the previous characteristics had to be born. The system estimated what could come out, yet the effects were random, and an entirely different one could be born.

So, Erik said to the system, <Will some effects could be seen from the outside while I merge the powers?>

It was important for the young man to understand if there was a visible effect that took place and that could potentially endanger him.

[ANSWER: THE MERGING POWER WILL TAKE PLACE INSIDE THE HOST BODY, NOTHING WILL BE ABLE TO BE SEEN OR NOTICED FROM THE OUTSIDE.]

<Is everything you said valid for the DNA merging, too?>

[ANSWER: CORRECT] the system replied.

<Good. Then how much does it cost to merge two powers and two DNAs?>

[ANSWER: TWO HUNDRED DNA POINTS FOR THE DNA MERGING AND TWO HUNDRED FOR THE POWER MERGING. IN TOTAL, IT WILL BE FOUR HUNDRED DNA POINTS.]

<This is costly...> Erik thought. However, there was nothing that could stop him from trying.

<How much time will it be required for the whole procedure to be completed?> Erik asked the system. The biological supercomputer promptly replied to the young man.

[ANSWER: THREE HOURS.]

<Good, then start... merge the Astral Wolf Bite and the Poisonous mana spikes DNAs, then the powers!>

[UNDERSTOOD 1940 DNA POINTS DETECTED. TWO HUNDRED DNA POINTS USED. DNA MERGING PROCEDURE BEGINNING. THE USER IS RECOMMENDED TO LAY ON A BED.]

As Erik did expect, he started feeling a ravaging pain inside his body. This was probably because the system was changing his whole DNA to accommodate the combination of the other two.

It started with an incredibly sharp pain in his head, as though someone had stabbed a knife into the center of it.

Erik's vision blurred at that point; all he saw was white. In fact, he didn't feel anything else besides that. It was at that moment that the young man started feeling something else. It was like he was losing his connection with the two powers he was merging.

Erik swore that he felt something snap when the two DNAs started merging. After a short while, he understood what it was. The neural links belonging to the two powers disappeared.